

2007

# The Resource Page

... creative and practical ideas

Brought to you this month  
by Kim Siegenthaler



## Church leadership training via cyberspace

Sunday school teachers, small group leaders, children's workers, youth workers, mission trip teams, ministry teams and other groups need training to be better equipped for their ministries. If you have ever attempted to schedule a training session when all group members can attend, you recognize the futility of such efforts. Group members consult palm pilots already packed with job and family responsibilities and a multitude of other activities. At best you manage to identify a time when about half of the group thinks they can attend — as long as nothing else comes up between now and then. You conduct the training session as scheduled with only a small portion of the group in attendance. Now you are faced with the question of what to do with the non-attenders.

Do you schedule other training sessions until everyone has been able to attend? Do you mail handouts to the absentees? Do you allow persons to participate without the training? You might want to consider online training sessions as an option.

Almost every industry has tapped into the communication and organizational tools provided through the Internet. Some of the tools are too expensive for the average church. Some also require extensive technological resources and expertise. Over the past couple of years, however, two Web-based resources geared specifically for congregations have become available: The Online Connection and Caleb's Café. Both are offered to churches at no cost and have minimal technological requirements.

The Online Connection is made available by the School of Christian Ministry of Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond. Through The Online Connection congregations gain access to the course management system, Blackboard™, which is used by many academic institutions. Blackboard™ functions as a highly sophisticated e-mail system that

Feature	The Online Connection	Caleb's Cafe
Cost	Free	Free*
Private password-protected site	Yes	Yes
E-mail capability	Yes	Yes
Messages auto-emailed to all members	No	Yes
Accommodates variety of documents	Yes	Yes
Accommodates graphics	Yes	Yes
Accommodates video streaming	Yes	No
Accommodates sound	Yes	No
System login required to participate in discussion	Yes	No
Login required to access materials	Yes	Yes
Requires administrative assistance to set up	Yes	No
Provides technical assistance	Yes	Yes
Maintains the system	Yes	Yes
Archives discussion postings	Yes	Yes
Capability to upload files	Leader only	All members
Anytime/anywhere access	Yes	Yes
Equipment requirements	Computer, Internet connection and browser	Computer, Internet connection and browser

*\*Basic plan is free. Silver and gold subscription plans are available for a monthly fee.*

accommodates documents, sound and video clips, and interaction among participants. Online, self-paced tutorials guide leaders and participants through the process of using the system.

Caleb's Café, available through Smyth & Helwys Publishing, is a Web-based communication system specifically designed to support the needs of small groups in congregations. The system includes a combination of Blog-like features and an advanced messaging system. Caleb's Café is less complicated to use than The Online Connection's Blackboard™ system, but offers fewer features. Additional features, including Bible study content and additional storage space, are provided with an upgrade to the silver or gold subscription level for a nominal monthly fee.

These online environments provide a repository for training materials, resources and

To view a sample course in

The Online Connection:

<http://blackboard.btsr.edu>

Login

Username = guest1

Password = guest

My Courses

scmbbc: The Online Connection Demo

For more information on the

School of Christian Ministry:

(888) 339-2877

[SCMinfo@btsr.edu](mailto:SCMinfo@btsr.edu)

To set up a group in Caleb's Café:

<http://www.calebscafe.com>

Start your FREE group now!

See Resources page 23 >

**THE RESOURCE PAGE** is provided by the Congregational Life office of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in partnership with *Baptists Today* and for those dedicated lay leaders working in the educational ministries of local churches. This month's page was written by Kim Siegenthaler, program coordinator of the School of Christian Ministry at Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond. Resource Page Archives now available at <http://www.thefellowship.info/CL/FF/CMResources/BTResourcePages.htm>

## ➤ Resources from page 22

discussion interactions. Group members can access materials and participate in the discussion whenever it is convenient for them.

Regardless of when they choose to participate, they can fully engage in the ongoing discussion by reading and responding to comments that might have been posted several hours or days earlier.

You may be thinking the convenience of online training sounds pretty good, but you really want the group to bond as a ministry team and grow in their faith. Maybe you are convinced the online environment is helpful for transmitting knowledge, but you are not so sure about how well it supports the relational goals you have for the training.

I often hear people express the concern that online learning lacks the potential for relationship building and that this limits its usefulness in the church. They have difficulty envisioning how it can offer the same quality of interaction as occurs in a face-to-face setting. Certainly we lose the nuances of nonverbal communication in the online environment, but enriching and meaningful conversations do occur. Often, after participating in a well-facilitated online learning

experience, even those who expressed a strong preference for face-to-face settings were impressed with the depth of discussion and how well they came to know other participants through their online interactions.

When we consider how we interact via e-mail, text messaging and chat rooms, we recognize that relationships can be developed in cyberspace. If we think back a few generations, we remember that the handwritten letter was a primary method of maintaining relationships with distant friends and family members. The online environment does not replace face-to-face interactions, but it is not without the potential to build and strengthen relationships.

Now, perhaps you are thinking you might like to give online learning a shot, but wondering how you make the transition from face to face to the online environment. Let's suppose you have a group of new small group facilitators. In a face-to-face training session, you planned to address techniques for working with difficult small group members, do some role-playing of challenging interactions with small group leaders and lead a discussion. Conducting this training session online requires modification in the manner of presentation, but not in the content.

Any handouts you are planning to use in

the face-to-face setting can be uploaded to the online site. Rather than asking group members to engage in role playing, you might upload case studies or a video of challenging interactions with small group leaders. The discussion questions are presented online. With appropriate structure and prompting from the leader, the online discussion can encourage practical application of training materials and challenge participants to think theologically about their roles as small group leaders.

An advantage of online discussion is that it provides the time and space for all group members to participate fully, not just the ones who have a ready answer. Just as in the face-to-face environment, the quality of the discussion is determined to a great extent by the leader's expertise as a facilitator. Carefully phrased open-ended questions are critical to helping participants move beyond a superficial response. Follow-up questions that challenge participants to expand or explain their response are as effective in an online discussion as they are in a face-to-face setting.

If you are ready to take the next step, explore the possibilities available through The Online Connection and Caleb's Cafe. The table on page 22 provides a comparison of their respective features. **BT**

## GEORGETOWN COLLEGE

# *Parks Baptist Scholars Program*

***Now accepting applications for Fall 2007***

*The Parks Baptist Scholarship, offering full tuition, room and board, is the most prestigious scholarship offered by Georgetown College. Established in 1994 to pay tribute to former trustee Dr. Paul Parks '43 and his late wife, Phyllis, the Parks Baptist Scholarship recognizes highly qualified Baptist students who pursue an undergraduate degree at Georgetown College in preparation for lifelong learning, teaching, and Christian service.*

For more information, or to receive an application for the  
Fall 2007 Parks Baptist Scholars Program, contact:  
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