

2007

The Resource Page

... creative and practical ideas

Brought to you this month
by Stephanie Nash



No adult left behind: Creating a lay seminary

As a lay leader in our church's education ministry for more than 20 years, I found I was constantly hungry to know more. I secretly envied those with seminary degrees. My time for such in-depth study was so fragmented and short on resources that simply putting together next Sunday's lesson was all I could manage. But when I joined our church's pastoral staff as education minister, I saw an opportunity to encourage deeper faith formation for adult Christians. We started our own lay seminary.

This program would extend over five years and provide seminary-type classes for lay people taught by volunteer seminary graduates in our congregation, framed around seminary-level textbooks and requiring regular class attendance. Textbooks would be reasonably priced, and there would be no tuition fee.

Each fall and spring semester since September 2003, we have offered 2-3 different courses typical of seminary course offerings (see sidebar). Class registration begins a few weeks prior to the start of the semester and is advertised in the local newspaper (class participation is open to the community). Most courses are offered on Wednesday nights following our weekly fellowship meal, with at least one course offered on Sunday afternoons or evenings to meet the needs of choir members and teachers of children and youth.

Our faculty is made up of 6-8 members of our church who hold seminary or other religious graduate degrees, including our senior pastor and another member of our staff. These faculty members teach courses of their own design, but without the heavy burdens of papers and tests. They hand out syllabi during the first class session of each semester that includes textbook reading assignments or questions to ponder for class discussion. No grades or credits are given in any official form,

but we do issue certificates of completion to celebrate those who finish each course, and we track each student's progress to recognize those who complete the entire five-year course of study.

We have also utilized community leaders in various fields. For example, twice we have invited representatives from our local synagogue to teach courses on the history of Judaism or the Pentateuch, and a local hospital chaplain has taught a course in pastoral care. These "visiting theologians" had a wonderful experience with our members, and a couple have even returned to teach a second time.

Over the past four years, our Second B Seminary classes have seated 300+ students who have enrolled in 28 semester-length courses. More than a dozen of those students have taken six or seven different classes. Our lay seminary also has provided a training ministry to the community and sister churches, enrolling several students who read about the seminary in the local newspaper or attended a class at the invitation of a friend.

Our local religious bookstore has ordered books for us at a discount, which we then make available for purchase on Sundays and Wednesdays. We mark the books up a dollar or two from the discounted price in order to provide appreciation gift cards to our faculty at the end of each semester, since no other remuneration is offered. This monetary reserve can also be used as a scholarship fund to provide texts for persons unable to afford them.

Adults *do* love to learn, no matter their ages. Our newest Christians enjoy the challenge of learning more about their budding faith in a safe and familiar atmosphere where all questions are honored. By offering this opportunity as a lay-friendly approach to in-depth learning about faith and scripture, even our senior adults realize that they, too, can learn something new about God. **BT**

Benefits of a lay seminary

- Provides opportunities for lay persons to participate in faith and Bible study instruction at a deeper level than in Sunday school.
- Develops a growing pool of well-read and well-trained Sunday school teachers for all levels of the Christian education ministry.
- Encourages the building of personal libraries and quality study resources for life-long study and maturation in the faith.
- Extends opportunities for deepened lay Christian education throughout the local community.
- More fully utilizes the gifts and training of church members who hold advanced degrees in theology or religion.

Suggested courses

- Introduction to the Bible
- Survey of the Old Testament
- Survey of the New Testament
- Introduction to Church History
- The Baptist Heritage
- Systematic Theology
- Christian Ethics
- Christian Spirituality
- The Life and Teachings of Christ
- World Religions
- Philosophy of Religion
- Pastoral Care for Lay Ministers

Elective courses

- Pauline Theology
- The Synoptic Gospels
- Christian Marriage in History
- Women in the World of Jesus
- Judaism
- The Ethics of Peace and Justice
- Missions and Evangelism
- Theology and Sexuality
- Christianity and the Arts
- The Theology of Worship

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 Stephanie Nash, pastor for education and outreach at Second Baptist Church in Lubbock, Texas. **Resource Page Archives now available at http://www.thefellowship.info/resources/for_your_church/baptists_today.icm**