



# THE LIVING CHURCH FOUNDATION

S E R V I N G   E P I S C O P A L I A N S   s i n c e   1 8 7 8

## **E-Seminary**

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When he moved to the Diocese of Iowa in 2003, bishop-elect Alan Scarfe brought with him a passion and belief that ongoing education is critical not only for clergy, but for all baptized members of The Episcopal Church.

In listening to his new flock discuss local issues, and as he pondered the makeup of the diocese, what he encountered was 57,000 square miles. That's the sizable area that comprises the Diocese of Iowa. The far-flung corners of this prairie state of 99 counties prohibit easy or frequent gathering of members for various events.

An immediate challenge was to make theological education accessible to all. It involved creating programs through the diocese for enhancing and developing a formation process for ministry, for both ordained and lay persons.

While preparation for ordination by attending residential seminaries is the norm for Iowa, Bishop Scarfe saw the need to develop and deliver an innovative and creative process for providing formation for all the baptized. Under the leadership of the Rev. Thomas Gehlsen, deployment officer and educational formation director, the "E-Seminary: Iowa School for Life-Long Theological Education" was developed and implemented.

Fr. Gehlsen took on the challenge to develop a cost-effective theological education and formation program that would be accessible to all. Visiting with members of parishes throughout Iowa, he examined the local processes that lead to ordination, commissioning, licensing and ministry development. He believes that a new direction is needed for a greater awareness of calls to ministry.

The purpose of the E-Seminary is to offer the opportunity for all baptized

persons to further their visions and knowledge in theological education. It is anticipated that the opportunity will lead more people to hear the call of their baptism to be ministers of Christ and take up leadership in the church.

Fr. Gehlsen tapped into a contemporary tool in the unique Iowa Communications Network (ICN) — a fiber optic network established by the state for linking all counties electronically — that fulfills the goal of reaching out to all for education and formation. The ICN consists of a total of 800 sites across the state.

Courses can originate from any of the sites and be transmitted audibly and visually to any or all of the other sites. These long-distance courses can also be downloaded and rebroadcast across the country.

Iowa's E-Seminary went live on Jan. 10, 2006. Between January and May, more than 50 students have participated in a variety of classes, each taught by seminary-trained faculty. Neither the students nor the faculty need to leave their communities to participate. Class offerings for the past semester and for 2006-7 include: How to Think Theologically; Pastoral Theology: Bottoms-Up Theology; Baptismal Covenant Ministry; Pastoral Theology: Ministry Development; Spirituality & Spiritual Formation; Introduction to the Old Testament; Theology of Creation; Introduction to the New Testament; Morality & Ethics; Church History: Ancient, Middle Ages, Modern; Pastoral Care: Sacraments & Liturgy.

Evaluations by participants have been enthusiastic. They believe the E-Seminary has fulfilled the need for ongoing education and formation.

This venture also offers the opportunity to earn Continuing Education Units (CEUs). The Diocese of Iowa has entered into an agreement and working relationship with Episcopal Divinity School (EDS) in Cambridge, Mass., to have these CEUs granted through the seminary back to the students of the E-Seminary. Other collaborative efforts are being investigated.

As the E-Seminary grows, the diocese will refine the technology with ICN. It also intends to create an advisory board for the "seminary without walls" concept.

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