

LETTERS

Learning from a distance

I was interested to read Lawrence Wood's article "Face-to-screen learning" (Feb. 20). I teach Old Testament both online and residually at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary. We are the only seminary in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to offer a comprehensive distance education program accredited by the Association of Theological Schools.

Since I started teaching online five years ago, I've fallen in love with it. My students have as well. I believe distance education is equal, if not superior, to residential education. My reasons have less to do with achieving lofty goals and more with human practicalities. Here are some examples.

First, all students have moments when they lose track of what the professor is saying. In a residential classroom, such a student is lost. In an online classroom, the student can rewind the lecture with a click of a mouse, listening again to what was said.

Second, as Wood noted, discussions in residential classes work well for only a small portion of the students and professors: extroverts who can think and speak very quickly and articulately. Many of us need time to sit with ideas, a few moments to mull things over or a couple of attempts at articulating our thoughts. Online discussion boards give students and professors these luxuries. Too often with residential learning, we think of great things to say only after the moment has passed.

Third, online learning recognizes that not every student is young, single and able to relocate. Residential learning places great burdens not only on students but also on their families. Many of us are unable to move across the country. We may have elderly parents nearby or children in great schools with great friends. Or we have spouses who love their jobs. Online education allows people both to learn and to do what's best for their families.



deep friendships among students. In addition to online interactions, our distance students gather on campus for two weeks every August and January. During that time, the students embody a remarkable Christian community. They create relationships they can draw on the rest of their lives.

To be sure, distance learning has challenges. For example, if I say the wrong word in an online lecture, students don't raise their hands and ask for clarification. Yet such problems are not insurmountable. (Residential learning certainly has its share of analogous challenges—like students who show up late and disrupt the class.) We professors are still learning, inventing and refining how it works.

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Wood's article about virtual seminary was interesting, but let me offer a contrary view as someone who has been a minister and for the past ten years a college teacher. More and more of my students yearn for face-to-face dialogue in a real classroom, not in their own room facing a monitor.

There are some real values in using online methods. I do so, but as a way of communicating between classes. That's called hybrid learning, and it can be very effective.

But we are losing the ability to communicate in real time by looking at one another—what Martin Buber called "I and thou," not I and my monitor. Alas, I even see real-time classrooms these days where students sit in darkness watching a screen, while a teacher watches with them. We might as well put computer chips in our students (and our parishioners) while we sit at home watching videos of teachers or preachers.

John C. Morgan
Reading, Pa.

Failing seminaries . . .

I couldn't agree more with William Willimon ("Making ministry difficult," Feb. 20) that our seminaries are failing both their students and the church as a whole. When I gather with other presbytery executives, we often bemoan what we see as the lack of training in organizational change, in how to create new communities of faith and in leadership development. It saddens me that the seminary presidents with whom I have talked do not see these things as priorities or their responsibility. And the church is often no better.

Our ministers and our churches would be far better served if we required Spanish rather than Hebrew or Greek.

In spite of the lack of training by seminaries and hurdles put up by the church, I am nonetheless heartened by the 20- and 30-year-olds who have stuck with it and often sought useful training outside of the church—as well as being willing to question and shake the termite-infested foundations of the church.

Peter Nord
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Adapting to change . . .

Was there a sociologist at the "Adaptive faith" roundtable (Feb. 20)? Sociologists conceive of social order as a normative or moral order. The Judeo-Christian tradition makes it an acutely *conscious* and *intentional* moral order—one that centers in a conception of and passion for social justice and in an expectation that perfect justice will eventually prevail. That this will come about in a process of dying and rising with Jesus Christ (Gal. 2:19–20) is quite consistent with the successive cycles of innovation, growth and obsolescence in biological evolution.

The vigorous growth of a species population with a more fit adaptation to changed or changing conditions involves the decline and usually the extinction of the less fit. Identification with the dying and rising Christ could well be regarded as the creative cultural mutation that accounts for the vigorous growth of

and that could encourage the expectation of a surprise great awakening in our time of globalization and global threat to the survival of humankind.

Both pro- and antireligion evolutionists are in the same social justice tradition. Dawkins might enjoy as I do Jesus' penetrating vignette of the Pharisee going to the temple to pray and pushing himself up while pushing the publican down (Luke 18:9–14). We need to translate the Christian gospel from the theoretical language of an ancient world to the scientific language of a modern worldview.

*F. Mervin Baker
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Educating about guns . . .

I find your gospel-filled magazine very educational. Let me return the favor by offering a brief education about guns, as your editorial ("Of guns and neighbors," Feb. 6) has some simple errors that would quickly cause those knowledgeable about guns to ignore the rest of the editorial.

bullets that gun clips can hold." Clips are metal sleeves that hold bullets in a group for speed-loading magazines. Magazines are the squarish metal containers, containing a spring mechanism, that lock into a gun and push the bullets one by one into the firing chamber. What you want to limit is the number of bullets that go into a magazine.

You refer to a "reinstatement of the ban on assault weapons." That ban was arguably a ban just on weapons that look like they are assault weapons. While they look alike, there is a substantial difference between the AR-15 semiautomatic rifle that is sold to civilians and the fully automatic M-16 military assault rifle used only by the military. Semiautomatic weapons fire one bullet per trigger pull. Fully automatic weapons keep firing bullets until the trigger is released. The AR-15 limited to a ten-round magazine is no more dangerous than the average semiautomatic wood hunting rifle with a ten-round magazine.

*Jim Wire
St. Louis, Mo.*