



# Mission News

*Mission Activities of the Canadian Reformed Churches*

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## International Reformed Theological College

### How It's Done

Since 2001 the International Reformed Theological College (IRTC) has been providing biblical education by means of the Internet, post-secondary education in Portuguese that is true to the Reformed faith. Sometimes people are curious about how we do this. Can a student really become a good minister just by reading materials online? How can he become a good preacher this way? Doesn't he have to preach sermons and get good critiques from a professor? Don't theology students have to do other practical assignments in evangelism and pastoral counselling? What about mentoring, where students have informal conversations with their professors and receive wise counsel that addresses their specific, personal needs and concerns? In the Bible the leaders were formed by learning from the example of Jesus and, later, of Paul and the other apostles. How can one really do justice to this biblical approach when distance education is used and the students never meet their instructors personally? Let me give you some more perspective on how our education is done.

Our training is not the best answer for everyone, but traditional seminary education isn't either. Is it not true that those who graduate from such seminaries may also be lacking in some areas, especially in pastoral practice? Both

Internet learning and the seminary training we are all familiar with continue to search for ways to become more effective in forming pastors.

The IRTC is addressing the needs of churches with students that, for a number of reasons, are unable to follow classroom lectures in schools with face-to-face teaching. We are not promoting the idea that all theological training should now be done online. We help those who, otherwise, are unable to take courses or can do so only with much difficulty.



### The role of the local church

Hebrews 5:14 teaches us that more difficult theological subjects are for those who have their sense of discernment trained by making use of the simpler doctrine they already know. This suggests that a person is better trained in theology if he is actively using what he knows. It is good for a Christian to be teaching and evangelizing the Word in a local congregation and community before and while he studies theology. Difficult concepts are best learned when a person is working to apply them to spiritual concerns real people have – the way the apostles did. The development of Christian character and learning of theology should go hand in hand.



From Ephesians 4 we learn that all the saints receive a measure of gifts and all need to be equipped for the work of service. We grow to maturity as all the members of the body supply what is needed for the body to grow. Thus it would seem that theology students are helped in their growth to maturity by participating in the life of the congregation. This would be by both receiving from and giving to other members of the body. The methods adopted by the IRTC keep students active in their local churches and permit their local pastors and elders to shepherd them on a regular basis.

It is interesting to note parallels between biblical methods of training and ones that today's distance education promotes. In most cases Paul went to where the learners were and did not uproot them from the calling in which they were at the time. Learning involved learning to do by doing, and disciples working in their own towns received support from Paul by means of letters and occasional visits. The IRTC has a worldwide campus and the instructors do not occasionally visit the students. She applies the other concepts, while looking to local pastors to carry out face-to-face guidance.

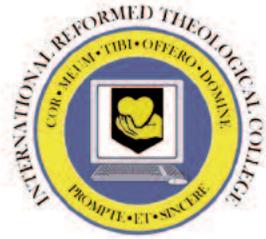
The IRTC is a servant of Christ's churches. The local office bearers take the lead in seeing to the training of members of their churches. They work with students who teach, evangelize, counsel, and present sermons in the presence of local brothers who guide and correct them. The IRTC helps out by providing quality teaching for students to use in their congregations and for their shepherds to discuss with them. We do not become responsible for the confessional views of the students. Their local churches provide the necessary mentorship for them to develop and grow. We only provide academic teaching that most local churches cannot supply adequately. Nevertheless, they can contribute significantly to the student's assimilation of the material we give.

## **Local mentors and study centres**

When enrolling in our courses, students must provide the name and contact information of a local mentor. It is expected that this brother will orient the student in following his studies and will do so according to the direction of his local church. The mentor can access the teaching in the same way as the student and can read everything the student reads and prepares. A church that takes a keen interest in its students can be involved very closely with their education, while well qualified professors provide instruction and assignments from a distance.

The IRTC is committed to the Reformed faith and all the instructors subscribe to either the Three Forms of Unity or the Westminster Standards. Local mentors and elders may, of course, wish to give perspectives to their students that are different from or that complement some of the thoughts expressed by the IRTC instructors. Because the mentor has access to all materials and close contact with the student, this arrangement can be worked out effectively. Although we would not be surprised if many mentors do not involve themselves all that much in the training, the possibility is there and we urge them to maintain this kind of enriching communion with the students.

Sometimes several students can be brought together in a local study centre organized by their church and not by the IRTC. In some cases a centre can be set up in a specific location with several computers and a library so that students come together on a daily basis. In others, the students have computers at home and they meet as frequently as appropriate. A minimum of once a week is recommended. In all cases, there should be a mentor who encourages the students and gives spiritual guidance. The group regularly discusses topics being studied and stimulates the members to stay on schedule – one of the biggest difficulties in distance education.



Churches can use our programs very flexibly. They can teach some courses themselves, so that the students do not take these particular courses from the IRTC. They can also give their students courses not offered by us. The ideal is that churches be in control of the training of their own leaders. As their servant, the IRTC seeks to make available courses that are usually taught in traditional seminaries and churches can use them as they see fit.

### **Practical application**

How, then, can our students get good training in public speaking and preaching? They are required to have a group of people willing to listen to their speeches or sermons and critique them. Some work with a Sunday school class they are teaching. Others assemble some family members and friends. Of course, the mentor should be present. When the IRTC instructor gives an assignment, he also gives instructions for what the audience needs to be looking for. The student passes this on to the audience and asks them to give a critique that particularly speaks to these points. The student then sends the results of the audience critique to his instructor. The mentor may wish to send an e-mail himself with his observations. The student also sends his outlines to the professor and recorded speeches are evaluated by the instructor, as well.

In our counselling course, students are required to work out biblical principles and recommended counselling practices in their own lives (together with spouses where applicable) and this with the counsel of their local pastor or mentor. To do this, an assignment is given with each lesson that gives direction for what the student is to be working on in his own life or that of his family. The steps that a pastor takes to give counsel to people with problems, the student

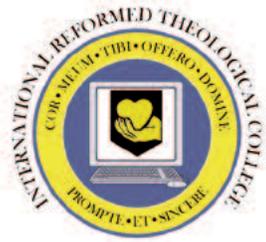
must first take for himself. He or his pastor can consult the instructor for advice regarding anything that may come up. In addition to this practical experience, in their written assignments, the students also work through quite a number of hypothetical counselling cases, such as situations of anger, depression, anxiety, addiction, and marital distress.

In other courses, the distance instructors also give practical assignments. For example, church history often requires the writing of a paper of good academic quality. In addition to this, the students may be assigned to rework this material (or part of it) with the purpose of sharing it in some way with members in their church, community, or family. The instructor can then evaluate how effectively the student can communicate what he is learning to people who are seeking less complicated teaching. Of course, the student's pastor or one of the elders of the church will also want to see how well he does this kind of teaching.

Hopefully, I have been able to answer some questions that people ask when they hear about our work. Let me emphasize the importance of the local church. Our way of educating works particularly well when the student's church is much involved. When several students can get together with a pastor on a regular basis, and when the pastor counsels and encourages them in evangelism, teaching, sermon preparation, and confessional perspective, this training can be most effective. It is not always used well, but it certainly can be. By the Lord's grace, the IRTC can be a great help for churches with students that cannot attend regular seminaries and churches that do not have enough funds or professors to set up a complete training program.

### **Update**

With several additional instructors, our programs continue to grow in 2008. Last year we



had thirty-four students register for at least one of our courses. They were from Brazil, Canada, the USA, Belgium, Italy, and Senegal. Our financial receipts last year totalled US \$17,339.41, which was less than half of our budget. At the time of this writing, we are working on the budget for 2008. It will probably be a little over US \$60,000.00, including past shortfall of more than US \$20,000.00. This is still a rather modest amount for an institution of our scope. Our instructors and staff labour as volunteers, with the understanding that gratuities are paid when funds are available. Our student body is far too small to fund the institution at levels of remuneration that are appropriate for Brazil (much lower than in North America). For this reason we look to churches and individual brothers and sisters to contribute to this educational ministry in the Lord's kingdom. Would you join us in building this project?

By the time your read this, our financial report for 2007 and budget for 2008 will be available on our English language website at [www.pro-rege.net](http://www.pro-rege.net) on a page called "Support Us." Contributions can be made online or you can send a cheque in the name of the International Reformed Theological College to the address provided below. We can give charitable donation receipts for the United States, but not yet for Canada or other countries.

May the Lord grant all of you the grace to grow where he has planted you, just as the IRTC helps Portuguese-speaking students to grow where they live.

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