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By Ken Camp

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ARLINGTON-Leaders of the B.H. Carroll Institute see their institution as filling a distinctive niche in seminary education.

“Our distinctive is formation for ministry within the context of the local church,” said Carroll Institute President Bruce Corley. “It's a seminary without walls. Students do not come to us. We go to them.”

But that doesn't mean the institute is an online school or correspondence school, he added.

“The heart of the structure is a nexus of teaching churches,” he explained. Currently, the institute has seven teaching churches in the Houston, Dallas/Fort Worth, Bryan/College Station and San Antonio areas, and its leaders plan to add another five soon.

"The teaching church provides the opportunity for face-to-face classroom instruction. It's a mix ... of intensive interpersonal instruction with online support," Corley said.

In some respects, the institute offers a "back-to-the-future model" of theological education, he added.

"In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, theological education was initiated by pastors among their protégées," Corley said.

The institute believes it can bridge the "widening gap between the seminary campus and the local church" through its teaching church approach, he added. Residential seminary campuses try-not always successfully-to recreate the sense of community and fellowship that already exists in local churches and that is essential for spiritual formation, Corley said.

"Spiritual formation should be done in the congregation," he said. "We've embedded education in the ongoing life of the church. We've never believed you could do formation for ministry online. But neither do we believe it can be done effectively in a seminary by a professor who has been out of day-to-day church life for five years or more."

The institute capitalizes on a wealth of untapped resources, Corley observed, saying 60 percent of church facilities go unused most of the time during the week, and half of the qualified theological educators are not teaching.

Online resources supplement the instruction provided by pastors and other ministers in teaching churches.

"We are building the best theological e-library in the world," Corley said. Eventually, the institute will make available tens of thousands of digitized theological reference works on the Internet.

But the institute has no plans to build a residential campus, he added.

"We are targeting people who will not relocate to a residential campus and dislocate their families-people who want to stay on the job and learn to minister through those jobs in the context of the community where they are," he said.

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