



Local Church Campus

The establishment of local church Bible schools has been a remarkable development over the past four decades. They are far more than an expansion of a mid-week Bible Study. They are designed to provide their students with a true Bible College experience, without the need to enrol full-time in a college campus, often far away from the students' homes.

These new local church colleges sprang up because of the shortcomings of correspondence courses, which are excellent if there is no alternative, but they lack the dynamic learning environment and the motivation to succeed that a class room setting provides.

Several organisations around the world are providing local churches with the materials to set up such colleges in their own buildings, along with varying levels of ongoing advice and assistance. Some are locked within a single denomination, others work across denominational boundaries. They all provide an extraordinary opportunity for a local church to establish a serious teaching programme that will meet the needs of the most earnest student of scripture.

advantages

One great advantage gained by a local church when it sets up such a programme is the retention in its fellowship of excellent people who might otherwise leave. Many pastors have lamented the loss of some of their best members, who have felt a need to pack up and head off to a Bible College or seminary somewhere. Those people seldom return to their home church, and they are a serious loss to the church.

Of course, for some people, the best choice is indeed to study full time in a central campus; but for many, a well-structured local church school can provide all the training they need.

Some of these local church programmes are fully accredited by government educational authorities, others are not. The accredited schools can offer awards that are fully recognised world-wide, but at the cost of sundry restraints imposed upon them by government. Schools that spurn accreditation can operate with greater freedom, but their awards lack credibility outside a narrow church environment. Each has its place in the economy of God, and potential students must be free to make their own choice.

vision colleges

One of the largest of the local church training organisations is Vision College International, which has an office in Sydney, and its international headquarters in Ramona, California. Founded in 1974, in Launceston, Tasmania, by Dr and Mrs Ken Chant, the college now operates in 150 countries, with 100,000 students, and some 5,000 satellite campuses in local churches. While it embraces a conservative, evangelical, and Pentecostal theology, the school has students from nearly every Christian denomination. Vision operates several different colleges – local church campuses; correspondence courses; online internet schools; and a campus in Ramona.

The success enjoyed by Vision has been amazing. It began with a brave motto just 40 years ago, *The Whole Word to the Whole World*, and has since gone on to straddle the globe. Since its inception, probably more than one million students have graduated from one or more of its courses.

In Australia, Vision is fully accredited to an advanced graduate diploma award. In other countries, its accreditation varies from certificate level all the way to a doctorate in any of several disciplines.

church leaders

“Do your best,” says Paul, *“to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.”* (1 Ti 2:15, ESV). That injunction that is just as important for church leaders as for senior pastors, or priests. Hence many churches urge their leadership teams (pastors, elders, deacons, and so on) to enrol in their local campus. Whether those leaders complete a one year certificate programme, or a full three-year diploma, the church will gain rich benefit from their studies. The team will be more stable theologically, more enriched spiritually, and better equipped to serve God and the church. Also, any good local church programme will include, not just theology but courses in counselling, pastoral theology, community involvement. Those and similar studies can only assist its leadership team to *“do the best they can”* in fulfilling the call of God in their lives.

church members

In a time when a multitude of cults are propagating false doctrine, when the secular world is constantly attacking religion, when the media gives prominent space to the voices and ideas of atheists, and when the church everywhere finds its beliefs and the Bible being ridiculed, sound teaching has never been more needed. As well, people have to cope with sundry cults knocking on their doors, and trying to persuade them to abandon their faith and embrace some new dogma. Paul warned about this, when he wrote, *“The time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions”* (2 Ti 4:3, ESV).

In this environment, the church has a great responsibility to heed scripture and to teach its people well. *“If the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle?”* demands Paul (1 Co 14:8). But unless the people do indeed know their Bibles, and how to recognise sound doctrine from false, their voices will be faltering, and they will be unfit to *“fight the good fight of faith”!* (1 Ti 6:12)

Busy pastors, however, often find that they lack the time and perhaps the skills to prepare systematic Bible studies in depth. But set up a local church campus, and the problem is solved. Through the campus they can well satisfy the apostle’s several admonitions to give attention to sound doctrine, and to pass on to others what they have themselves learned (1 Ti 6:3; 2 Ti 1:13; 2:2).

In my opinion, every local church should establish a local church campus. The benefits are enormous. Only a well-taught church, a church strong in sound doctrine and in true faith, will be able to withstand the ever-increasing assaults from its sundry foes. We are engaged in war (Ep 6:13), and our chief weapon is *“the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God”* (vs. 17). Let us then do all that we can to ensure that in every local church the pastors, the leaders, the people, are all well-armed!