

Phillips Theological Seminary finds quick success with new multimedia studio

BY KURT GWARTNEY

The creation of a new multimedia studio at Phillips Theological Seminary is already helping the standalone institution provide high quality video and audio productions for its faculty while also supporting the school's advancement, denominational, and community partners.

In late 2019, the communications department at the Tulsa, Oklahoma seminary had plans to turn one of the spaces in its suite of offices into a studio because of increasing demand for videos.

"The office we were hoping to convert was 13-by-17 feet. It would have been a decent space but it had some problems, including its small size and noise from a nearby classroom and an adjacent exit," said Joseph Edwards, media manager for the seminary.

The room also had several large east-facing windows and did not have its own entrance, requiring moving through two occupied offices to get into the would-be studio.

"As an adjunct instructor, I taught digital media classes several years ago in what had been a computer lab in a larger classroom off a back hallway that had no windows and did not see a lot of traffic," said Kurt Gwartney, senior director of communications and instructor in the Center for Ministry and Lay Training at Phillips.



The large green screen wall allows creativity for productions in the Phillips multimedia studio. Lisa Dellinger, Annie Lockhart-Gilroy, and Anne Carter Walker prepare to record a conversation for use in a seminary course.

Gwartney and Edwards decided to ask the administration if they could have the larger and more remote space for their studio. The "Yes" answer was the first step in the creation of a multimedia studio with room for a large green-screen wall, a four-person podcast recording area, and a "faculty corner" dedicated to professors needing a quiet and well-lit space to record videos for class or to participate in remote conferences.

"Joseph and Kurt both worked in broadcast media before coming to Phillips, so I trusted their judgment and vision for what a studio could bring to us," said President Nancy Claire Pittman. "When the pandemic hit, it didn't take long to realize a dedicated space to create high-quality content would be very useful."

While the pandemic dramatically increased the need for video work, it also significantly slowed the project because of a lack of building materials and COVID-19



Before the studio was completed, Phillips used equipment purchased for the project to record videos in other spaces, including the office of Gary Peluso-Verdend, director of the Center for Religion in Public Life and President Emeritus. Setting up and removing the gear added significant time to each production.

outbreaks among the builders. What was originally an eight-week timeline increased to nearly seven months.

“We were fortunate that we started ordering the gear we wanted in the studio before pandemic-related shortages hit the electronics market,” Gwartney said. “Having 4K cameras, new microphones, a video switcher, lights, and an audio mixer ahead of time allowed us to use other spaces in the seminary for production while construction work was delayed.”

One of those productions was a Worship Kit, a ready-to-stream worship service made available to any congregation that wanted to use it. This idea from the Phillips advancement office was so popular that a second Worship Kit was created a few months later, with hundreds of downloads for each.

“Having the quality cameras and lighting made it possible for us to create a quality service even though we didn’t have our own space,” Edwards said. “We were able to turn our chapel into a studio for a few days to get the footage we needed.”

The equipment was also used for faculty who were invited to present at the increasing number of online conferences or participating remotely in panel discussions because of the pandemic. The video switcher Phillips

purchased allowed for smooth transitions between the person on camera and presentation slides, avoiding the screen sharing challenge that is typical of many online meeting applications.

With the completion of the studio, two faculty members, Annie Lockhart-Gilroy and Lisa Dellinger, started recording what they called “Weekly Conversations” in front of the green screen wall for a course they were teaching.

“Before taping in the studio, we recorded these conversations on Zoom,” Lockhart-Gilroy said. “Working with the studio produced far better production quality; that impacts learning. Students not only learned from our words, but from the images on the green screen that we often commented and reflected on.”

Both professors said recording the talks in the studio allowed them to have a real conversation rather than staring at each other through a Zoom screen, modeling how their two fields of study—Womanist Theory and Indigenous Theology—are and could be in conversation with each other.



Phillips Theological Seminary faculty members Lisa Dellinger and Annie Lockhart-Gilroy say recording conversations for their class in the new studio allows them to focus on each other and not the technology. They also like the way backgrounds can be changed to fit each session, as seen on the video production screens.

"The studio is not only convenient, it also allowed us to embody the curriculum we presented by utilizing the womanist context of gathering around a 'kitchen table' for tea," Dellinger said. "Likewise, hospitality and sharing a meal is a traditional practice in Native American cultures when discussing important matters within a community."

Audio production also improved with new, dedicated podcast recording gear and extensive acoustic treatment in the studio. Edwards, working with the advancement

office, produced a daily podcast of Advent devotionals written by seminary alums, staff, and faculty.

With more than 3,000 downloads through the Advent season, adding the podcast to the printed version Phillips already mails created another way to engage the seminary's core audience.

"I've been pleased to see how our community comprehends the creative potential of the new studio," Gwartney said. "I can't wait to see what we come up with next."



Kurt Gwartney is senior director of communications at Phillips Theological Seminary in Tulsa, Oklahoma.



Phillips Theological Seminary unveiled a new logo to its board of trustees on May 20 in a video produced in the new multimedia studio. Click the image to watch the finished product!