



## Reflections on Implementing a Competency-Based Theological Education MDiv Program

A report prepared by

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## Table of Contents

Preface .....	4
Introduction .....	5
Background .....	5
Introduction of a Disruptive Model: Concerns .....	6
Faculty .....	6
<i>Becoming a Generalist vs. Specialist</i> .....	6
<i>Timeframe of Instruction</i> .....	7
<i>Intellectual Formation</i> .....	7
<i>Loss of Academic Control</i> .....	7
<i>Team Approach to Evaluation</i> .....	7
<i>Varying Standards</i> .....	8
<i>New Evaluation Methods</i> .....	8
<i>Personal Impact</i> .....	8
<i>Institutional Credibility</i> .....	9
Staff .....	9
<i>No Example to Follow</i> .....	9
<i>Availability of Technology</i> .....	9
<i>Training Churches, Mentors and Students</i> .....	10
<i>Grading and Records Keeping</i> .....	10
<i>Transferability</i> .....	10
<i>New Systems</i> .....	10
Leadership .....	10
<i>Institutional Humility</i> .....	11
<i>Partnered Champions</i> .....	11
<i>Aligning Learning Cultures</i> .....	11
<i>Valuing the Academic Role</i> .....	11
<i>New Financial Model</i> .....	11
Encouraging Outcomes and Ongoing Concerns .....	12
Encouraging Outcomes .....	12
<i>Combined Theory and Applied</i> .....	12
<i>Engaging Students at Depth</i> .....	12
<i>Mentoring Team Partnerships</i> .....	12
<i>Direct Connection to Churches</i> .....	12
<i>Direct Connection to Denominational Pastors</i> .....	13
<i>Re-established Trust</i> .....	13
<i>ATS Accreditation</i> .....	13
<i>Validation and Adoption by Others</i> .....	13
<i>Affirmed Relevance</i> .....	13
<i>Seeing Students Develop</i> .....	14
<i>Strong Leadership</i> .....	14
<i>Seamless Transitions</i> .....	14
<i>Worth the Gain</i> .....	14

Ongoing Concerns .....	14
<i>Parallel Systems and Programs</i> .....	15
<i>Faculty Load</i> .....	15
<i>Faculty Role</i> .....	15
<i>Balance Between Self-directed and Classroom Learning</i> .....	15
<i>Growing Mentor Network</i> .....	15
<i>Balancing Ministry and Intellectual Formation</i> .....	15
<i>Defined Educational Values</i> .....	16
<i>Long Term Results and Credibility</i> .....	16
<i>Sustained Partnership</i> .....	16
Advice to Schools Considering CBTE .....	17
Start Wisely.....	17
<i>Get Leadership Support</i> .....	17
<i>Work Closely with Partner/Stakeholders</i> .....	17
<i>Identify Program Champions</i> .....	17
<i>Initiate CBTE as a Parallel, Separate Program</i> .....	17
<i>Build on the Work of Others</i> .....	17
Communicate .....	18
<i>Widely</i> .....	18
<i>Frequently</i> .....	18
<i>Clearly</i> .....	18
Re-think Program Design.....	18
<i>Distinguish Between the CBTE Philosophy and Program Model/Content</i> .....	18
<i>Collaborate on Curriculum Development</i> .....	18
<i>Design for Simplicity</i> .....	18
<i>Re-think the Candidacy Process</i> .....	19
Plan Carefully.....	19
<i>Know the Systems You Need</i> .....	19
<i>Choose Technology Carefully</i> .....	19
<i>Clarify the Financial Model</i> .....	19
<i>Train &amp; Equip Mentors</i> .....	19
<i>Establish Supports</i> .....	20
<i>Evaluate and Iterate Often</i> .....	20
Supporting and Preparing Faculty for a CBTE Program .....	20
Present the Concept with Forethought.....	20
Consider Faculty Needs .....	20
<i>Personal and Professional</i> .....	20
<i>Supporting Evidence</i> .....	21
<i>Opportunity for Growth</i> .....	21
<i>Voice and Encouragement</i> .....	21
Offer Professional Development .....	21
In Conclusion.....	22

## Preface

This report is the result of a project funded in part by an ATS Educational Models and Practices Innovation Grant. The purpose of the project was to distill lessons learned from the development and implementation of Northwest Baptist Seminary's *Immerse* program and develop resources to support other schools making a similar transition. Its goals were to:

- Provide an opportunity for faculty and administration to reflect on the initial development and delivery of *Immerse*, including the driving force behind it, processes and systems used to implement and support it, and knowledge gained throughout
- Identify challenges and resulting opportunities that the program presented to faculty
- Develop a strategic resource to offer to other schools looking to engage in a similar transitional process
- Vision pathways of professional development for other faculty facing a similar transition

This report is offered as a resource to any school considering implementation of a graduate-level competency-based theological education (CBTE) program. It is our desire that the learnings, reflections, and recommendations it contains will help you see a path to move forward with your own CBTE program. The field of CBTE is still in its infancy and we view ourselves as co-adventurers with others exploring this innovation. As such, we welcome and encourage comments, questions, or feedback on the ideas in this report, as well as any opportunity to journey together.

Ruth McGillivray, on behalf of  
The Faculty, Staff and Leadership of  
Northwest Baptist Seminary  
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## Introduction

In March 2018, past and present members of Northwest Baptist Seminary faculty, staff and leadership met to reflect on their eight-year journey to develop, launch and graduate students from the first direct assessment, competency-based theological education Master of Divinity program approved by the Association of Theological Schools (ATS).

Over the course of three days, the group reflected on:

- Introduction of a disruptive model: what concerned them, what convinced them, what still concerns them
- Advice to other schools considering implementing CBTE programs
- How to support and prepare faculty for introduction of a CBTE program

## Background

Northwest Baptist Seminary (Northwest) was established in 1934 as a ministry training center for pastors in Western Canada and is now the official theological education and leadership development agency of the Fellowship of Evangelical Baptist Churches in British Columbia and the Yukon (Fellowship Pacific), as well as Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and the Territories (Fellowship Prairies). In 1985, Northwest co-founded the Associated Canadian Theological Schools of Trinity Western University (ACTS), a multi-denominational consortium of four Protestant Christian seminaries in Canada. ACTS partners with Trinity Western University to jointly grant master and doctoral degrees in biblical studies, theology, ministry, linguistics, chaplaincy and marriage and family therapy.

By 2009, it had become clear to the leadership of Northwest and Fellowship Pacific that the traditional seminary education model being used to train pastors was not producing the results needed. The denomination had stopped sending students to the school, and its churches were not hiring school graduates. This led to some difficult conversations. Northwest had to face the reality that its graduates did not have the skills and competencies Fellowship churches needed, and the denomination was looking elsewhere to find pastors.

In response, Northwest and Fellowship Pacific, under the leadership of Kenton Anderson and David Horita, undertook a joint project in 2010 to reverse-engineer the Master of Divinity (MDiv) program, by starting with the end in mind. Together, they identified the competencies they believed 21<sup>st</sup> century pastors needed to be effective in ministry. At the same time, they re-evaluated the school's educational approach to training pastors and adopted a competency-based, direct assessment, in-context delivery model that would be offered by Northwest in addition to the traditional programs offered in partnership with the ACTS consortium.

In 2012, Northwest and Fellowship Pacific launched *Immerse*, the first ATS-accredited direct assessment, competency-based theological education (CBTE) MDiv program. Northwest faculty continued to teach in the ACTS programs, but also took on academic mentoring responsibilities in *Immerse*.

*Immerse* challenged many traditional practices in higher education:

- Northwest would no longer train Fellowship Pacific pastors primarily in classrooms. Rather, *Immerse* students would work in a ministry role under the guidance of a three-person mentorship team that included a Northwest faculty member, Fellowship Pacific leader, and practicing pastor.
- Students would develop competency through assigned readings, seminars, assignments and applied projects, and program credit would be granted as students demonstrated mastery—as defined by rubrics—in each of the 27 program competencies.
- Evaluation and grading were no longer performed by a single professor on a discrete subject, but rather by the whole mentor team, on holistic and integrated program outcomes. In addition, equal value for grading would be placed on theory and applied work in-context.
- Faculty members would mentor and guide a student in the field to mastery in all program subjects over multiple years, instead of teaching and grading students in a classroom on a single subject for a semester.

While the *Immerse* CBTE program promised an innovative way for Northwest and Fellowship Pacific to raise a new generation of proven leaders trained in the knowledge, skills, and character traits needed to prosper in their callings, implementing the new educational approach required a paradigm shift for Northwest's faculty, staff, leadership, students, churches, and ministry networks.

## Introduction of a Disruptive Model: Concerns

Northwest understood and accepted the need for change. Faculty, Staff and Leadership saw the benefit of making applied outcomes integral to the program, yet still had apprehension and concerns about the proposed new direction.

### Faculty

Teaching within this new educational approach was completely new for Northwest's faculty. None had prior experience with competency-based education and *Immerse* challenged or changed every aspect of what was familiar. It required flexibility, an open mind, and patience with ambiguity as processes evolved. When asked to reflect on what concerned them most at the outset, Northwest faculty highlighted the following.

#### *Becoming a Generalist vs. Specialist*

Faculty members were highly specialized in their disciplines and taught mainly in their area of expertise. As *Immerse* academic mentors, they became responsible for the academic development of their students across all theological disciplines (e.g., New Testament, Old Testament, Theology, Exegesis, Hermeneutics, Applied Ministry, etc.). On one hand, this offered professors opportunity to broaden their knowledge base, but on the other, it raised concern for students who would lose out the opportunity to receive intensive instruction from a wide range of specialists.

In response, the *Immerse* program was expanded to add a series of two-day seminars taught by faculty in their specialized disciplines. This gave students a chance to hear professors instruct in their area of expertise, while ceding direct assessment of learning on those subjects to individual mentor teams. Professors would only guide development and assess learning with the students they directly mentored.

### *Timeframe of Instruction*

In the course/semester model, faculty were accustomed to spending several hours per week with a class of students for 12 weeks, then moving on to a new group. The benefit to them was they could get to know students quickly, and the challenge of guiding more difficult students was shared across many instructors, one semester at a time.

In the *Immerse* program, faculty spent a few hours per month with the same student for up to five years. For some students, this was a joy, and for others, it was more difficult. With less frequent contact, relationships took longer to develop, though once developed, they were significantly deeper. With long-term relationships in place, faculty mentors could challenge student development on the basis of personal experience and historical evidence.

### *Intellectual Formation*

Some students expected a competency-based, in-context program to have a lower academic standard and were drawn to it for that reason. Others came in as adult learners without undergraduate degrees and had not yet developed the skills to produce graduate-level work. Without the benefit of a classroom, it was harder for faculty to help them rise to graduate-level critical thinking and writing skills. Also, if a professor had a student who repeatedly struggled to demonstrate deep thinking and integration of learning, the workload to guide that student to mastery for the entire program duration was significantly higher.

### *Loss of Academic Control*

In traditional higher education, the professor decides what to teach in a course, how to teach it, and how to evaluate learning. In that controlled environment, the professor can see exactly how a student responds to direct instruction and integrates learning through participation in the classroom and performance on assignments.

In *Immerse*, the elements of education are deconstructed and aggregated in the field. There are no traditional courses. The program outcomes are prescribed, learning is acquired and applied outside the classroom, and holistic assignments are designed to help the student develop and demonstrate a defined standard of competence. The two-day seminars faculty deliver on their specific disciplines are primarily a one-way exchange of information, with no required assignments. Faculty found it difficult to understand how to assess students for established core skills without courses and relevant testing.

### *Team Approach to Evaluation*

Student evaluation was no longer at the sole discretion of the professor. “Grading” now required consensus across a three-person mentor team and differing scholastic standards and individual

priorities had to be moderated. Faculty sometimes felt pressure from other team members to lower standards for critical thinking and written assignments, particularly if a student excelled in ministry.

### *Varying Standards*

When the performance standard for an outcome lacked precision, it left room for interpretation between mentor team members, and risked inconsistency in assessment from one mentor team to the next. In a small program, the risk could be mitigated through discussion between faculty mentors, but as the program and mentoring network grew, faculty wondered how adjunct faculty mentors would be selected, trained and managed to ensure consistency and reliability of student outcomes.

### *New Evaluation Methods*

In the classroom, professors gave and graded assignments, fractionalizing performance within percentage points. Assignments in *Immerse*, however, were given to students for two purposes—development of competence, or demonstration of mastery. Development assignments were not graded; only feedback was given. If an assignment was not yielding the desired developmental result, the student had opportunity to re-work or revise it as needed.

Also, assignments were no longer assigned, completed, or guided within the controlled environment of a classroom. Faculty had to embrace new ways of evaluating. Applied ministry projects were now included in the overall assessment plan, and they had to learn how to select, assign, and assess projects or tasks in consensus with a three-person mentor team.

### *Personal Impact*

The Northwest faculty members were all individuals who had enjoyed and benefited from traditional higher education in their own lives, ministry, and work. All had progressed through academic ranks to earn doctorates, conduct research, publish, and become full-time professors. It was difficult for them to let go of a model that had served them well personally, and embrace a new, unfamiliar and unproven approach. They were concerned that in the haste to persuade others to adopt the new model, due care would not be given to the evaluative process. They knew change was needed to better-serve their constituent churches, but at the same time, they did not want to lose the best of what had been achieved through traditional seminary education.

In addition, the new model required faculty to give up much of what they loved most in their job—sharing their specialized knowledge and insights in the classroom and interacting with students as a cohort. They wondered how the “generalist” role of the academic mentor might affect their work as scholars and feared the time commitment needed for *Immerse* might force them to sacrifice academic interests.

However, Northwest faculty continued to teach seminary courses for ACTS while participating in *Immerse* as faculty mentors. This permitted them to support an experimental program with minimal risk or loss to their current career direction and goals.



### *Institutional Credibility*

The ACTS consortium schools had always delivered programs jointly. Since 1985, no single school had delivered a program or sought ATS accreditation separate from the consortium. Northwest's partner seminaries and colleagues were skeptical—even openly opposed—to Northwest offering its own CBTE MDiv, and faculty experienced varying degrees of alienation from their peers.

For faculty who had spent their lives and careers in higher education, personal integrity was inextricably linked to the academic integrity and reputation of the school they served. From an academic perspective, the receipt of ATS accreditation of *Immerse* validated the model and quieted most objections, but lingering concerns remained for the institution and its students:

- Would the CBTE degree or partial credits be respected and recognized at face value by receiving institutions? How would it be perceived by the broader public?
- How would other schools interpret a transcript based on competencies instead of courses?
- Would students who wished to earn a higher-level degree have to “top up” before being accepted to an MTS, MTh, or PhD program?

There were also concerns for how Northwest's *Immerse* initiative would affect its partnership with the ACTS consortium programs, including fears of depleted enrollment and loss of “market share” for ACTS. However, as the program grew, it became clear Northwest was tapping into a new population of students who would not likely have attended seminary were it not for a program like *Immerse*.

## Staff

The new MDiv program model was a paradigm shift for Northwest staff as well. The prospect of running two educational models side-by-side presented some daunting administrative challenges, particularly since there were no existing CBTE programs to copy or learn from.

### *No Example to Follow*

It was 2010. Use of the competency-based education (CBE) model was rare in university programs, there were no other ATS seminaries exploring its application in theological education, and resources like the Competency-Based Education Network would not be formed until years later (2014). The Northwest team had to imagine and design the minutia of a functional *Immerse* program and then build it from scratch. Everyone had different pictures in their heads of how the model would work; much effort and many meetings were required to develop a common vision and plan.

### *Availability of Technology*

There were no systems available to support tracking student achievement by competency instead of by course. Much investigation was done to explore existing products, but no suitable solution was found. The closest option they found did not provide all the functionality needed, and the cost was prohibitive. In the end, Northwest created their own solution through advanced, iterative customization of the WordPress platform. The custom tool served them well but had limitations that would prevent it from being a sustainable long-term solution.

### *Training Churches, Mentors and Students*

If the new training model was challenging for Northwest faculty, staff and leadership to conceptualize and implement, it was even more so for those in the field. Northwest staff were living and working with the model daily, but there was not enough clarity of process or frequency of communication for church mentors and students to clearly understand what was expected of them. As a result, some early students did not succeed.

### *Grading and Records Keeping*

*Immerse* assignments are not graded according to a traditional grading scale. Development assignments are purely for developing competency in the student. They are either accepted by the mentor team as complete or returned for revision. Demonstration of mastery assignments are not graded either. Either the student has met or exceeded the requirements for mastery, or not. If not, the student re-works the assignment until mastery criteria are met.

Staff had to create a new kind of evaluation grid that would enable the production of a student for an entire competency to be evaluated and processed in a way appropriate to CBTE. Rubrics were created to define mastery criteria for each *Immerse* competency so there would be consistency in grading across mentor team members and from one mentor team to the next. Letter grades and corresponding grade point averages were assigned to each competency when mastery had been achieved or exceeded. Mentor teams and students had to be trained on how to use the rubrics, and no grades were assigned until a student had achieved mastery. The lowest mark an *Immerse* student could earn was a B+.

### *Transferability*

The CBTE model of learning was not suited to everyone. Some *Immerse* students left the program and wanted to transfer the credits they'd earned to another school or program. This presented a challenge because post-secondary institutions recognize and transfer credit based on courses, not competencies. The Northwest staff had to examine the work completed by each student, equate it to equivalent courses, record the mapping rationale, and issue a parallel transcript for the student. It was labor-intensive and complex.

### *New Systems*

From an administration perspective, *Immerse* required changes to every supporting system, including student onboarding, financial models, records-keeping, program evaluation, etc. In many cases, new systems or processes had to be initiated while the program was launching, like building a car as it drove down the road. While the new systems and processes met immediate needs, many had to be revised as the program grew. The first year of operation required much patience on the part of students, staff, mentors and leadership.

## Leadership

Even though the *Immerse* program was initiated by Northwest's leadership, they understood faculty and staff concerns, shared some of them, and had others unique to their leadership roles.

### *Institutional Humility*

As a Seminary with a long history of educational achievements and success, it was difficult to relinquish full control of the MDiv program and share ownership of academic, curriculum and methodology decisions with the Fellowship Pacific denominational leadership. It required what President Kent Anderson referred to as “institutional humility”, to step back, acknowledge that the school existed to serve the churches, and accept the need for disruptive change. As they negotiated the *Immerse* program model, both leadership teams wrestled with what was okay to let go and where they needed to stand firm.

### *Partnered Champions*

Launching the *Immerse* program required a committed partnership between Northwest and Fellowship Pacific. Leaders in both organizations had to work hard, commit to resolving differences, heal wounds, and stand aligned to champion *Immerse* to their respective constituencies, Boards and stakeholders. Unified and unflinching commitment was needed to provide stability through tumultuous waters and enable the program to move forward.

### *Aligning Learning Cultures*

Establishing a collaborative partnership for *Immerse* meant finding alignment in diverse learning cultures and preconceptions. Network and ministry mentors tended to value results over theoretical concepts, whereas faculty mentors saw knowledge and theory as foundational to effective action. Many students were not accustomed to critical analysis of their beliefs, but leadership knew they needed deep knowledge and critical thinking skills to grapple with issues challenging Christians today. The perceived role and relevance of the seminary was very different depending on the lens of the viewer.

### *Valuing the Academic Role*

In traditional seminary education, schools focus primarily on academics and what happens in the classroom, and leadership’s role is to support the faculty in maintaining academic standards. With *Immerse*, the classroom moved outside the school to the ministry context and students were assessed by mentor teams comprised of a denominational leader, ministry practitioner, and Northwest faculty member. On the positive side, faculty mentors were forced to balance ministry with academic outcomes in assessment. However, if non-faculty mentors stressed ministry over academic outcomes, faculty mentors were put in the difficult position of defending academic standards and being labelled the “academic bad guy”.

### *New Financial Model*

Like most post-secondary institutions, Northwest’s financial model was based on courses and credits, so eliminating courses and basing program completion on mastery versus time required a new approach. To minimize economic risk, leadership wanted a model that would be self-sustaining with five or less students in the program. The solution was to implement an annual subscription model for *Immerse* that was roughly half the price of a year’s tuition in a traditional program. Students working in Fellowship Pacific churches received an annual bursary from the denomination

of half the subscription fee, and churches were challenged to support their students by covering the other half and helping with living expenses.

## Encouraging Outcomes and Ongoing Concerns

Despite the concerns and challenges faced by Northwest faculty, staff and leadership, there are many positive outcomes from *Immerse* that have convinced them to support the CBTE model. Some concerns remain, but consensus is that the positive results to-date warrant the effort needed to overcome them.

### Encouraging Outcomes

#### *Combined Theory and Applied*

Prior to *Immerse*, faculty members engaged with students in the classroom but rarely had opportunity to guide how learning was applied. This was recognized as a long-standing problem with no obvious solution. With *Immerse*, faculty mentors could engage students to develop knowledge and skills, and then guide their application in ministry. Faculty reported that it was immensely satisfying to witness life change and ministry empowerment as it developed in their students.

#### *Engaging Students at Depth*

Faculty mentors also found it “very satisfying” to engage with students at depth and witness their development over multiple years as opposed to sporadic semesters in a classroom. They reported developing “life-long friendships” with students and missed the regular interactions once a student graduated. They talked about their students with evident joy and pride, commenting how personal and emotional each student’s graduation was for them. One faculty member described his experience as an *Immerse* mentor versus classroom professor as the difference between watching a student develop through a “photo album” of classroom shots versus a “movie” of sustained relationship on the theme of education and ministry in life.

#### *Mentoring Team Partnerships*

Despite sometimes having to negotiate competing priorities between mentor team members, faculty valued “co-educating” with their colleagues to help guide students in all aspects of their ministry. “There was no us and them,” they said, only collaborative partnership and integration of skill sets. In some cases, mentor teams functioned so well that they advocated to be kept together as a unit for new *Immerse* students entering the program.

#### *Direct Connection to Churches*

Partnering with Fellowship Pacific leaders and pastors to train future pastors enabled Northwest faculty, leadership and staff to create and sustain strong, direct relationships with churches; something that had become increasingly difficult over the years. It was heartening to witness the deep investment of churches in their future leaders, as evidenced by the hundreds of members who would show up to celebrate their student’s graduation.

### *Direct Connection to Denominational Pastors*

The number of future Fellowship Pacific pastors enrolled in Northwest's previous MDiv program had been declining and sometimes there were very few in the program. Those students attended combined classes with students from the other three schools in the ACTS consortium, so Northwest faculty seldom knew which students in their classes were from their constituent denomination. They felt they had lost contact with and visibility of the students they were hired to train. With *Immerse*, enrollment of Fellowship Pacific pastors sharply increased and even though the classroom was eliminated, faculty could meet and interact three times a year with all Fellowship students in the two-day focused seminars. Several expressed satisfaction at being able to develop long-term, meaningful relationships with future pastors in their home denomination.

### *Re-established Trust*

Despite the risks, concerns, and challenges that came with pioneering *Immerse*, Northwest and Fellowship Pacific chose to trust one another and commit to navigating uncharted territory together. One faculty member, reflecting on the process, described "the joy of trusting a holistic approach, believing God would provide what was needed, watching for it, and identifying it." Other faculty members agreed that apprehension over "de-siloing" seminary education was a fear that had proven misplaced. They recognized that giving up full control of seminary education and sharing it with the churches resulted in broader, more integrated outcomes for students.

### *ATS Accreditation*

ATS accreditation of *Immerse* was critical for Northwest as a school, and even more so for the faculty. Their professional integrity would not permit them to support a degree program that could not be accredited, so having ATS endorsement allowed them to keep an open mind without compromising personal and institutional credibility.

### *Validation and Adoption by Others*

*Immerse* was the first accredited direct assessment, competency-based MDiv program in North America. Northwest was blazing a new trail and did not know if others would follow. As the word spread and early results exceeded expectations, interest in the model grew. The ACTS consortium and other church networks came on board. Some joined *Immerse* and others adapted their own programs to the CBTE model. ATS created a working group to explore CBTE and recommend new accreditation standards for it, and awarded a grant to Northwest to organize the first International Conference on CBTE. As a result, seminary leaders from across North America have reached out to Northwest to learn how to set up their own CBTE programs.

### *Affirmed Relevance*

One of the other networks that adopted *Immerse* was Fellowship International, the missions agency for the Fellowship of Evangelical Baptist Churches in Canada. Fellowship International had moved away from using academic institutions to train personnel because the people willing to do the work were not always able to go to seminary, and when they did, the training they received did not meet their needs in the field. A customized *Immerse* program has now enabled them to train their people with a laser focus on the contextualization skills they require when serving cross-culturally.

### *Seeing Students Develop*

The most compelling aspect of *Immerse* for Northwest faculty, staff and leadership was being able to watch students grow and develop over time. One faculty member received a video from a student that showed her baptizing the Israeli tour guide she had led to Christ in the Jordan River. Others watched students guide churches through difficult experiences, and many guided their own students through painful personal trials. Some of the faculty and leadership had personal connections to students as parents, in-laws or congregation members, and saw first-hand the results of *Immerse* in contrast with traditional pastoral training.

### *Strong Leadership*

The core leaders at Northwest and Fellowship Pacific demonstrated unfailing, unified commitment to realizing the *Immerse* vision. They understood the institutional pain for both organizations and continued to “beat the drum”. Respect and support for them as individuals and leaders kept faculty and staff moving forward and working through obstacles.

### *Seamless Transitions*

At the time of this report, the *Immerse* program had graduated 21 students. Faculty, staff and leadership unanimously agreed they were confident each one was well-equipped for ministry, more so than if they had been trained in a traditional MDiv program. By graduating from *Immerse*, each student had already demonstrated mastery of the competencies needed to be successful in their chosen ministry, because they had developed and demonstrated those skills in context, on the job. Perhaps the strongest attestation to the readiness of *Immerse* graduates for ministry is their post-graduation placement rate—95%.

Further, by receiving training and developing skills in-context under the guidance of veteran servants, the students established strong connections and working relationships. By the time their studies were completed, they were already part of the “team”, with an established identity and support network.

### *Worth the Gain*

While all Northwest faculty, staff and leadership could cite ongoing concerns with *Immerse* and areas for improvement, there was consensus that the program had breathed fresh life and purpose into the school and early returns were encouraging. One faculty member had been at Northwest over 40 years serving as professor, Academic Dean, President, and now part-time Program Director. His comments resonated with the whole group: “I’ve seen it from both ends, and what I think we’ve seen with *Immerse* is better than what we’d regard as the traditional MDiv process. We are doing something that is special, and worth pursuing in spite of its challenges.”

## Ongoing Concerns

While the Northwest team has seen enough positive outcomes from *Immerse* to remain committed to its growth, ongoing questions and concerns remain.

### *Parallel Systems and Programs*

Northwest runs parallel operations to support both CBTE and traditional program models. Some of these systems are automated and run efficiently, while others remain labor-intensive. Staff wonder how long they can or should continue running separate systems to support both program types, and if a point is coming when one may be phased out. However, the prospect of phasing out either model would have far-reaching implications for the organization and at this time it is expected both will run in perpetuity.

### *Faculty Load*

Northwest faculty are currently working in a hybrid environment. They maintain their teaching responsibilities in the ACTS consortium programs and take on *Immerse* students as overload responsibilities, which is not sustainable long-term. Faculty contracts will need to be revised to factor in expectations for load, promotion, and expected scholarship in a CBTE model.

### *Faculty Role*

The current Northwest faculty were hired to teach in a traditional seminary education model, with emphasis on teaching, writing and research. While they continue to teach traditional programs through ACTS, their role as academic mentors in *Immerse* utilizes a very different set of skills. If their roles shift more toward mentoring than teaching, writing and research, the division of effort could interfere with personal callings to scholarship. There may be some, in the longer term, who decide not to stay.

There are some Northwest faculty members who are approaching retirement. As Northwest grows its CBTE programs, leadership wonders what skills the next generation of Northwest faculty will need.

### *Balance Between Self-directed and Classroom Learning*

Even though the in-person seminars mandatory to *Immerse* create opportunity for direct instruction, faculty still wonder if core skills in theology and biblical exegesis can be developed without the concentrated focus and relevant testing provided in the classroom.

### *Growing Mentor Network*

As the network of *Immerse* mentors grows, the challenge of consistency in assessment rises. This requires a two-pronged approach: further precision in the definition of mastery to reduce subjectivity in assessment; and, ensuring mentors are well-trained in how to apply competency standards in assessment. Northwest is currently developing a mentor certification program that will ensure mentors know how to interpret and apply mastery definitions, and facilitate consistency across mentor teams.

### *Balancing Ministry and Intellectual Formation*

Churches may experience unintended consequences if the emphasis in pastoral training becomes disproportionately weighted toward ministry development versus intellectual formation. The ability to develop and implement a project requires technical skills, but the lead pastoral role also requires



the ability to understand theory and apply it in creative, strategic ways. If the lead pastor is the primary spiritual guide for the congregation, deep thinking is needed to help them move forward on difficult issues like gender diversity, gay marriage, and what it means to be a Christian in today's world. Pastors need first to be exegetically and theologically wise thinkers as well as good communicators.

### *Defined Educational Values*

Further definition is required in the educational values that shape the curriculum. Articulated program values like contextual learning, partnered investment, mastery model, mentoring by consensus and integrated outcomes drive how the program is delivered, but do not embody educational values such as developing the mind or spiritual formation. These educational values also need to be defined and articulated as part of the core *Immerse* program.

### *Long Term Results and Credibility*

Some faculty members likened *Immerse* to a sapling. It has grown well from the seeds planted in 2010 but will require another ten years of husbandry to nurture it into a self-sustaining, fruit-yielding tree. Early returns are encouraging, but there are not yet enough graduates to do an objective self-assessment and program evaluation.

Faculty harbor lingering concerns for the institution and its students that will only be allayed with time:

- Will the CBTE degree or partial credits be respected and recognized at face value by receiving institutions?
- How will other schools receiving Northwest graduates interpret a transcript based on competencies instead of courses?
- Can the mastery model compete with academic standards that were, and still are, critical to the way a degree is perceived by the broader public? Will it be transferable and respected?
- Will students who wished to earn a higher-level degree have to “top up” before being accepted to an MTS, MTh, or PhD program?

ATS review of the program is pending in 2019. Continued endorsement and renewal of accreditation will be critical to program credibility and Northwest's reputation as a respected graduate school.

### *Sustained Partnership*

The strength of *Immerse* grew out of unified leadership from Northwest and Fellowship Pacific, frequent communication, mutual respect, and collaboration to resolve issues. Now that the program is running well, the intensity and frequency of collaboration has diminished and there is risk that small changes in partner trajectories could lead to untenable gaps. If *Immerse* is a train, Northwest and Fellowship Pacific are each a rail on the track. The smallest misalignment, however well-intentioned, could derail the program.



## Advice to Schools Considering CBTE

When asked what advice they would offer to other schools considering implementation of CBTE programs, Northwest faculty, staff and leadership offered the following.

### Start Wisely

#### *Get Leadership Support*

Make sure you have a high level of sustained buy-in, commitment and support from leadership, both in your school and your constituency, for developing and maintaining a CBTE program. Make sure the metrics of success are understood and clearly articulated.

#### *Work Closely with Partner/Stakeholders*

Ministry partnerships are critical to the success of a CBTE program. The strength of the model comes from in-context learning and mentored mastery, and you will depend on your ministry partners for both. Include them in the program development and competency-definition process as they are the employers who will be hiring your graduates. Also include representatives from key partners in your program administration and oversight committees so they gain insight and appreciation for ongoing issues, and can share in problem-solving as well as victories. Communicate with them frequently and clearly to stay aligned on the program focus and goals.

#### *Identify Program Champions*

Secure and nurture buy-in from faculty, leadership and administration influencers. Their support will help achieve qualified buy-in, or at least openness to the new program, from other faculty and staff.

#### *Initiate CBTE as a Parallel, Separate Program*

Run your initial CBTE program like a “skunk works” project running parallel to the school’s traditional programs. New ideas are vulnerable to a dominant existing culture and need protected space to flourish to their potential.

Empower a small, nimble team to develop and implement the initial program alongside, yet separate, from current programs and structures. This will allow you to:

- Present CBTE as an optional versus competing path, particularly during proof of concept
- Remain flexible and make operational adjustments quickly and easily
- Settle the program into stable patterns and processes
- Reduce obstruction from skeptics
- Minimize disruption to existing roles, systems and processes

#### *Build on the Work of Others*

There is no need to re-invent the wheel of CBTE. Several schools have implemented a variety of models and there is no longer a need to start from scratch. Research and benefit from the work of others before starting to build and launch your own program. Seek advice on how to best sequence decisions and activities.

## Communicate

### *Widely*

Include every part of your school team in your communications, including your Board, leadership, stakeholders, denomination, faculty, students and administration. Do not forget to include personnel from Finance, IT, Library, Admissions and the Registrar's office in initial communications. Overlooking key administrative needs at the start can result in significant obstacles down the road.

### *Frequently*

Do not expect team members and stakeholders to grasp CBTE program concepts and changes from one-time or sporadic written or verbal communications. Deep understanding requires repetition, reflection, and discussion. Assume there will be challenges from faculty and staff; help them understand the theory and philosophy behind CBTE.

### *Clearly*

Clarify key concepts and terms in writing, even to the point of providing a glossary. Avoid acronyms in communications; disambiguate wherever possible.

Talk openly and deeply with faculty and staff. Listen to their questions and concerns; evaluate and discuss them carefully so they know they have been heard and understood.

## Re-think Program Design

### *Distinguish Between the CBTE Philosophy and Program Model/Content*

CBTE is a different philosophy of education from the traditional model used most often in higher education. In traditional education, time is fixed and the level of competence attained in that time is variable, whereas in CBTE, the level of competence is fixed and the time it takes to achieve it can vary. The CBTE core values—strategic partnerships, integrated curriculum, mentored mastery and context-based learning—are the chassis on which your program model and content ride.

### *Collaborate on Curriculum Development*

Use a cross-functional team to develop the program curriculum. Include representation from faculty, institutional leadership, and denominational or network leadership. Know what you need from the program, and help your stakeholders clarify and articulate the program competencies and accepted evidence of their achievement.

### *Design for Simplicity*

Minimize (or eliminate) program tracks or majors and keep the program competencies and performance standards content-neutral wherever possible. Northwest initially tried to build different tracks into *Immerse*, but soon realized it created redundancy. The competencies required for ministry were common across multiple tracks, and specialization could come from the contextual ministry environment.

### *Re-think the Candidacy Process*

Consider carefully the application requirements for a CBTE program and how candidates will be approved. Not all students will have the self-discipline, maturity or motivation to work independently and complete a multi-year program. Also consider the program requirements for a student's ministry setting and how students are placed. In the case of *Immerse*, applicants undergo a stringent interview and candidacy process, and must come to the program with a confirmed and committed ministry setting.

## Plan Carefully

### *Know the Systems You Need*

CBTE programs have substantially different needs from traditional course-based programs. Understand which systems you need to implement and/or modify to launch and run your selected CBTE program model. For example:

- Finances – how to support parallel subscription and semester models, if required
- Portfolio – how student portfolios will be assembled and evaluated
- Assessment – who will perform assessments and how grades will be assigned
- Curriculum – what the new curriculum framework will be; how and where it will be documented
- Registrar – how credits will be transferred to and from your institution
- Applications – how forms and processes change based on new candidacy requirements
- Digital Record of Learning – how this will be created and made available to students and mentors, both short- and long-term
- Faculty Interaction – how evidence of frequent and substantial faculty interaction will be tracked
- Program Evaluation – how CBTE programs will be evaluated and criteria for success

### *Choose Technology Carefully*

Choose a competency and assignment tracking system that is intuitive and easy for faculty, staff and mentors to use. Examine your options carefully, as traditional learning management systems do not serve the needs of a competency-based program well, if at all.

### *Clarify the Financial Model*

Make sure the funding model for your CBTE program is clear and communicated well. If your CBTE and course-based programs are running in parallel, it provides security for faculty and staff to understand the financial sustainability plan for each.

### *Train & Equip Mentors*

Clearly define mentor roles and provide training on assessment processes and school expectations. Nurture and recognize the value of each mentor role and reinforce it through ongoing training and mentor moderation. Provide opportunities for mentors to share and learn from each other's experiences.

### *Establish Supports*

Establish supports for faculty, mentors, and students. Each will need orientation to online library resources and the competency-tracking system, and someone to contact when they have problems or questions. They will also need to understand the program structure, assessment criteria and mentor expectations, as well as the appeal or mediation process when problems arise.

CBTE programs are fully self-directed and self-sequenced. While this is one of the strengths of the model, some students find it overwhelming to know where to start. Consider helping students map out their individual pathway several months at a time, particularly in the first year. Teach them how to take ownership of their program.

### *Evaluate and Iterate Often*

No matter how much planning and preparation is done before launch, obstacles will present, and mid-stream changes will be needed. Expect to work toward continuous improvement, not to have your program perfect from day one. Evaluate frequently, especially at the start, and revise accordingly.

## Supporting and Preparing Faculty for a CBTE Program

Northwest faculty were asked to reflect, in hindsight, how they would suggest supporting and preparing faculty in other schools for the introduction of a CBTE program. Recognizing that every school and faculty team is different, they offered the following suggestions based on their experience with *Immerse*.

### Present the Concept with Forethought

When you present the idea of introducing a CBTE program to faculty:

- Be clear on what you are asking of them. Are you asking for permission, or informing them of a decision already made? Are you asking for implementation advice?
- Expect and prepare for their reaction
- Procure ownership from key influencers. In a large faculty, secure support from five or six key people and let the rest of the team work through it at their own pace
- Provide a parallel pathway for those who are not involved in the initial program development or launch

### Consider Faculty Needs

#### *Personal and Professional*

Recognize the personal and professional needs of your faculty and anticipate that they will have concerns regarding the new program model, both for the institution, the constituency, and themselves personally and professionally. Understand and anticipate the potential conflict for them in a professional versus academic focus. Give opportunity for them to express those concerns and address them upfront.

Faculty members have made a significant investment in the traditional model of theological education, both professionally and personally. They have invested time and money in their own training and shaped an understanding of their own role based on that model. As a result, it is important not to present the two models in a combative light or disparage the traditional approach. Instead, help faculty connect CBTE to the original calling and motivation that led to their involvement in theological education in the first place. As one Northwest faculty member put it, “It wasn’t about being a lecturer or a professor; it was about furnishing leaders in every way that is required.”

### *Supporting Evidence*

Provide research results on CBTE from other programs. At this time, most results are still anecdotal, but there are some schools that have been running programs long enough to start reporting. Contact schools with existing programs and ask for their results.

Talk through the CBTE approach with your faculty from a theological perspective. CBTE values resonate with the earliest values of theological education, including:

- The Incarnation – embodied truth, not just knowledge or theory.
- The life of the mind vs. life of the people – classroom versus practice
- Mission of the Church – disciple-making and mentorship
- Jesus’ own model of instruction with his disciples
- Hebrew wisdom – not just about knowing, but knowing what to do

### *Opportunity for Growth*

Present the CBTE program as an opportunity to develop expertise in a new and emerging discipline. Encourage them to see it as a natural process of academic and educational change.

### *Voice and Encouragement*

The CBTE program can feel like a competitive program if it is run alongside traditional programs. Make sure faculty understand their voice in the program and where they remain empowered.

Provide opportunities for leadership to hear and respond to concerns about how the program will work. Think through the logistics with them and provide encouragement. Provide avenues to share day-to-day input, ask questions and provide feedback.

## Offer Professional Development

Train faculty on:

- The CBTE philosophy
- The CBTE program model, core values and processes
- Faculty roles in curriculum development, academic mentoring, and how to manage the shared educational process with other mentors
- How to use the supporting system software
- How to use performance standards to assess for mastery

- How to build efficiencies into the model

## In Conclusion

The purpose of this report was to provide a resource that would give other institutions a firsthand glimpse into the challenges that Northwest faculty, staff and leadership faced in the development and launch of the *Immerse* CBTE program, share reflections eight years into the program, and offer advice to other schools considering CBTE programs.

Many of the challenges and concerns experienced by Northwest will be common to those experienced in other schools. The CBTE model is new and disruptive to theological education. It challenges norms in every aspect of seminary operation, including program design, content delivery, admissions, assignments, assessment, faculty roles, technology, tuition structure, transcripts, scheduling, and graduation requirements. For this reason, its success requires strong, unflinching leadership commitment and support, not only from the school, but also its strategic partners.

Without partnership with the churches through Fellowship Pacific, it would have been much more difficult—even impossible—for *Immerse* to succeed. Endorsement and support of the program at the denominational level was key to identifying homegrown program candidates, turning their ministry setting into the learning environment, and securing invested ministry mentors.

One key to Northwest's success was launching *Immerse* as a parallel, separate stream to its regular programs so there was minimal disruption to existing roles and processes, and the changes only affected those who signed up for them. Another was to secure the internal support of respected champions in every department. These individuals could listen and discuss the logistics of change with their peers and relay potential obstacles or concerns back to the project team. Even though Northwest is a small school, *Immerse* would not have succeeded without implementing these strategies.

After eight years of working with *Immerse* and six years of program operation, ongoing concerns linger but they are mostly related to logistics and refinements. No one is questioning or challenging the positive outcomes, rewards or benefits of the program, and none of the Northwest faculty, staff or leadership indicate any desire to scale back or discontinue *Immerse*. In fact, the reverse is true. Northwest is actively planning a return to offering undergrad programs in the CBTE format in 2019, and will host the first ever International Conference on Competency-Based Theological Education in Vancouver, BC, Canada on November 5-6, 2018.

At the same time, Northwest recognizes that CBTE is one of many educational approaches. It is not suited to every student and there are individuals and organizations who are better served by traditional course-based programs. For this reason, Northwest intends to continue offering both streams of programs for the foreseeable future.

CBTE is a disruptive innovation, but the world we serve is changing. Seminaries must be willing to disrupt and innovate to stay relevant and prepare ministry leaders for effective service within it. Introducing CBTE presented many challenges for Northwest, especially for those who had little appetite for change, but clear rationale, communication and mutual trust were the wheels that moved it forward. The early results are promising, and there is unanimous agreement among

faculty, staff and leadership that the opportunity to partner with churches and ministry organizations to provide mentored, theological education in-context has breathed new life, energy, and excitement into the school.