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Send out your light and your truth! Let them guide me. Psalm 43:3

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Special Edition: Editors' Introduction

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Christian distance education is a phrase that frequently provokes a quizzical response. Tertullian asked what Athens had to do with Jerusalem, while some today ask what the Internet has to do with the Church or what distance learning has to do with theologically-minded education. Christian schools and colleges have answered this question by harnessing the power of the Internet to extend their educational reach and equip the saints to do the work of ministry. Hundreds of degree programs are currently being offered online by Christian institutions, ranging from online homeschooling programs through accredited undergraduate and graduate degrees.

Lest one dismiss this as the latest educational fad, Christian distance education has a rich history. Over one hundred years ago, the Moody Bible Institute became a pioneer in Christian distance education by offering independent study correspondence courses in Bible and theology. While that made Moody a pioneer in the field of distance education, it merely continued a trend of using technology to extend the reach of the Gospel that started in the earliest days of the Church. The Apostle Paul sent letters that were circulated around and read aloud to the gathering of believers, in order to encourage and equip the fledgling churches.

Forty years ago, ACCESS: The Association for Christian distance education began at a conference in Chicago to celebrate the 70th anniversary of Moody Correspondence School. The twenty-six delegates present declared that they had enjoyed the fellowship, profited from the sessions, and requested that a committee be appointed which would provide another similar conference the following year. In the years that followed, similar conferences were convened and the Christian Correspondence School Association, which developed into ACCESS, emerged as the leading professional organization to support quality Christian distance education.

In that capacity, ACCESS organized this special theme issue of *Christian Perspectives on Education* to address issues related to Christian distance education. The issue features seven articles from ACCESS members that blend theory and practice toward the goal of promoting effective Christian distance education.

In “Building Community and Facilitating Formation in Seminary Distance Education,” Stephen Lowe addresses the central question facing Christian distance educators: Can real spiritual formation occur when students don’t live together on campus? Lowe offers a theology of community and an ecology of personal formation based on the work of Urie Bronfenbrenner to answer this fundamental question. Mary Lowe then continues the theme by sharing the results of research that measured spiritual formation in online courses by way of the Faith Maturity Scale. Her findings include implications for institutions and students alike on how to promote Christian growth in online learning contexts.

Three articles offer research-based perspectives on the online learning experience. Jason Baker draws from the communication concepts of instructor immediacy and group cohesiveness and considers the relationship among these and learning from the perspective of the learners themselves. Online course developer Michael Freeman then

puts theory into practice in "Vygotsky and the Virtual Classroom." In this article, he draws from the sociocultural theory of Lev Vygotsky to help online instructors and designers conceptualize learners and learning in a virtual environment. Amanda Rockinson-Szapkiw compares students' actual and perceived learning when students use different types of technologies in their online courses.

The special issue concludes with two case studies that consider the practical implementation of Christian online learning. Rick Smith and Beth Snodderly share the development and delivery of "Foundations of the World Christian Movement," an online course jointly developed by a mission agency and small university. Building on open source course management software and best practices in online learning, the resulting course has become a successful model of effective instruction in an online, multicultural context. In a similar vein, Ernest Manges and Mark Morgenstern present the case of EFCA ReachGlobal using online learning to train missionaries and develop itself into a learning organization.

Speaking on behalf of ACCESS, we hope that this special issue brings increased attention to the unique role of Christian distance and online learning. We invite anyone interested in this topic to consider joining us at the 40th Annual ACCESS Conference on March 9-11, 2011. We're gathering in Chicago, Illinois at the Moody Bible Institute to celebrate 40 years of God's faithfulness at the very location ACCESS began. As is usual for ACCESS conferences, there will be a blend of theory and praxis as well as scholarship and application, within the context of Christian fellowship. You can learn more about the 2011 Conference and ACCESS: The Association of Christian Distance Education at http://www.accessed.org.

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