



EfM ONLINE – HOW IT WORKS

BACKGROUND

Every baptized person is called to ministry. EfM is a worldwide program developed by the School of Theology of the University of the South. It holds before us that the foundation for bringing Christ to the world lies in a Church empowered by an active, theologically articulate laity.

All Christians need a Christian education which supports their faith and which prepares them to express that faith in daily life. The Education for Ministry (EfM) program is a wonderful program of study and reflection that provides people from all walks of life with the education to grow in Christian faith and to carry out their ministries.

The EfM Web site (<http://efm.sewanee.edu>) and prospectus (available on the Web site) provide a wealth of information on the program, its mission, and an outline of the course of study for all four years. EfM Online offers those who cannot attend a weekly face-to-face group an opportunity to participate in this course of study.

The purpose of this document is to give an overview of how the EfM Online program works and each person's responsibilities.

MATERIALS

Tuition pays for the course and a set of materials to support the work for the year in which each participant is enrolled. The materials provided include the EfM *Reading and Reflection Guide*, containing the assignments for each of the 36 weeks of study; text(s) for the assigned readings in the Christian Tradition, according to which year of the sequence in which you are enrolled; and two “interlude” texts, common reading for the whole group. Participants provide their own Bible.

Since this is an online course, each participant will need a computer and access to the internet. High-speed internet access is preferred. A dial up modem is sufficient but not recommended as it may react more slowly during live classroom discussions. Access via tablets and smartphones may also be available. (Check your device’s app store.) No additional hardware or software is required.

Participants should expect to spend two and one half to five hours per week on the Internet as a result of time in the weekly meeting and time in other parts of the course. The system, both the weekly meetings and the discussion board, are accessed through a Web site provided by the University of the South in Sewanee. Each participant will be assigned a screen name and password to allow access to the system and their course. Only registered class members have access to their course.

THE COURSE OF STUDY

The course consists of three kinds of activities: individual reading and study, related work in the discussion board, and attendance at the weekly seminar. Each type of activity is discussed below.

Reading and Study

Each week during the year is tabbed in the course materials. Each week's work follows the Read, Focus, Respond, and Practice sequence in the *Reading and Reflection Guide*.

The mentor may post a question on the discussion board about each week's work. Participants are encouraged to start their own discussions, ask any questions they wish to ask, and respond to any other questions posted.

Discussion Board

Participants may access the discussion board via the same Web site used for the weekly seminar. It is available any time of day or night. Each week, after the weekly seminar, the mentor may post a general question for all the members of the group. Participants are expected to complete the work assigned in that forum by the next weekly seminar. The discussion board is not a live site like the classroom for the weekly seminar. It is simply a bulletin board where participants can post their input and read the input of other participants.

When the discussion board is opened, the latest items will be displayed at the top and previous week's work listed below. Typically, the first item on the list will be the mentor's question followed by replies by the participants based on their year of work. So one might see Year One and the comment from that participant. Every comment is there from every participant and every participant is expected to read them all. Participants are also free to comment on, take exception to, and make other comments as they see fit on any entry into the discussion board.

There is also a blog board available. Participants who learn best by summarizing their readings are free to use the blog to post their comments and insights. Participants are free to read others' blogs as well and post comments or questions to the blogger.

Groups also discuss books, movies, etc., from time to time and the mentor will post those questions. As the group moves through the nine months of work, all 36 weeks of questions and comments will be displayed and participants may go back and review any of them.

Weekly Seminar

Each group will decide on the time and day of the week to meet online. Participants try to log in about 15 minutes early to make sure the connection works and to let the others know who will be in the session.

Each session will begin with a short social time, perhaps a few minutes, where everyone gathers and catches up on the events of the week. Since time is so precious to some members, mentors try very hard to limit this discussion and to start on time.

The next item of business is the opening prayer. Each participant is assigned dates during the course year to prepare the opening prayer, an On-Board question or a Theological Reflection starter, and the closing prayer.

Once opening prayers are done there may be a short discussion of the On-Board question. This is also prepared by the participant assigned for the week. The real purpose of the On-Board is to let everyone know where everyone else is in their lives at that moment. The mentors will assist the participant who prepares the On-Board in leading the other participants through the discussion.

Once the On-Board is complete, the group moves to the theological reflection (TR). For those not familiar with theological reflections, they will be covered in one of the very early sessions. The most important and effective comments on a subject probably come from your heart and how you really feel.

The final phase of the weekly seminar will be the closing prayer, prepared by the assigned participant. At the end of that prayer, participants can all add their intercessions with or without comments or details. When prayers are complete, the seminar is finished. The weekly seminar lasts one and one half hours.

The mentor will archive the entire session. That archive is available in its entirety at the Web site. If a participant misses a session, loses the connection, or is interrupted in some unavoidable way, they can still keep track of what happened during any particular weekly seminar.

TIME REQUIREMENTS

A common question is, how much time will this take? The traditional group meets for two and a half to three hours per week. Online groups meet for an hour and a half. Participants are expected to spend the additional time needed to keep up with the discussion board. Reading the course book, the Bible and other works, doing the exercises, etc., will take some more hours. The first year is the most time-consuming, with the Old Testament readings sometimes being quite long. What each participant takes away from EFM probably is most dependent on how much time and energy they are willing to devote to the course. It is rare for a the work to consume more than seven hours, with five hours being a more realistic estimate.

MENTORS

The course is led by a mentor or a pair of co-mentors. Mentors are trained and accredited by the University of the South in Sewanee. Mentors are retrained every 18 months. The mentor's job is to just be a mentor/facilitator. They are not the experts, not the teachers, and not the disciplinarians. Mentors do participate in the discussions just like the other members of the class. Mentors will ask questions to lead the discussion toward an end point, and from time to time will ask what the class thinks is the central point of what is being discussed.

This is an adult education forum. There are no tests, no grades, and no college credits. There are continuing education credits available upon completion of each year of the four-year course.

Keep in mind there are no "right" answers. Don't try to guess what the mentor wants to hear. Be ready to disagree, be challenged by other participants, and to challenge others. Groups must keep the disagreements to the subject at hand without involving personalities in the comments. One of the first sessions will be to establish a set of group norms that will guide the group in their discussions.

Be prepared for a wide range of beliefs, traditions, interpretations, and opinions on the various subjects discussed. There will be some very conservative and some very liberal thinking members of the class (if we are lucky). The best discussions include a wide range of opinions. Listen to classmates, think about what they say and compare it with what you believe and think about why you believe what you do. The object is not to change anyone's basic beliefs, but to appreciate the fact that there is diversity in opinions on the material we study and try to gain a perspective of how others think about these subjects.

The mentor may also be an EfM participant. The mentor is not an expert. What mentors know how to do is lead a discussion which will ideally bring each participant to an insight and appreciation of the subject being discussed.

RETREATS

Some Online groups conduct retreats at the beginning and other times during the class year. These are a welcome opportunity to meet the other class members and the mentors for worship, discussion, problem solving, and to complete some of the requirements, such as spiritual autobiographies. Retreats are not a requirement. Whether a particular group has retreats or not will depend on the location of the participants.

SCHEDULE

Groups meet weekly for nine months out of each year with summers off and a break for the Christmas holidays. Groups may start any time except June, July, and August.

COST

The cost of a year's study including the materials discussed above is \$375, the same for online as the face-to-face groups. Some dioceses pay part of that cost. Some dioceses and parishes have scholarship money available to support EfM participants.