

Video Bible School Trains Indigenous Leaders Worldwide

Nearly 250,000 Christian converts in 140 nations have completed the International School of Ministry's curriculum



[] A California-based ministry is spurring church growth around the globe thanks to its video-based Bible schools that are used in more than 140 nations.

Started a decade ago by Good Shepherd Ministries International in Redlands, Calif., the International School of Ministry (ISOM) offers indigenous church leaders instruction from such well-known pastors and teachers as Jack Hayford, Joyce Meyer, Reinhard Bonnke, A.R. Bernard, John Bevere, Marilyn Hickey and T.L. Osborn.

Founder Berin Gilfillan, a former pastor and television producer, developed ISOM after experimenting with grass-roots academies in Nigeria in 1992 and 1993. When he returned to the U.S., Gilfillan persuaded prominent ministers to let him film teachings for the curriculum.

"I shared the vision and our heart, wanting to reach the underground church," Gilfillan said. "I said, 'If you want royalties, I don't want you on the program.'"

Today Good Shepherd estimates that at least 250,000 students in 141 nations have completed the ISOM classes, which are divided into five trimesters of 32 lessons each. The videos have been translated into 65 languages.

In the last four years, Reuben Ramirez's church has tripled in size, with more than 110 people now attending Iglesia Gethsemani in Matamoras, Mexico. He said the material helped train leaders to work alongside him, such as the women

overseeing the children's department and women's ministries.

"Before that time I was alone, trying to do it all," said Ramirez, also the president of an ISOM regional center in Mexico. "Through the school, our students have heard the voice of the Lord. He has called many into ministry."

In 2006 the ministry launched "Women of the World," a separate, 33-lesson course reviewing social and spiritual issues. Nearly 200 churches have used it so far, with a second volume expected to release next year. After learning about the series, Canadian pastor Cheryl Koop and her husband, Dave, sensed it was the key to helping women in their church grow by equipping them with sound teaching.

"The response and the results still astound me," said Cheryl Koop, associate pastor at Coastal Church in Vancouver, British Columbia. "The women that attend are from many nations, and knowing that the DVDs we're receiving could be shown in their country is encouraging as well as unifying."

Gilfillan's passion is helping fulfill the Great Commission, which he says will occur by training people to share and teach the gospel in native environments. And though ISOM doesn't track numbers, Gilfillan can rattle off nations where graduates have started more churches than the number in their class. Despite its successes, the ministry maintains a low profile because 60 percent of its schools operate in Islamic or other nations where Christians face persecution.

However, missionaries from places free to talk about ISOM say it is bringing a soundness and depth to Christianity in many regions. J.C. Sterley, director of a regional center in the Philippines, said a lack of theological training following an evangelistic explosion in the 1970s and 1980s led to considerable error creeping into Filipino churches.

"A lot of doctrines are being corrected," Sterley said. "Students can read and study the Bible in a clearer way. Real

character building is taking place.”

They also learn about miracles. In one area so lawless it had been dubbed the “killing fields,” pastors at a nearby school would study for a week, then go there to practice what they learned. “It totally changed the atmosphere in that area,” Sterley said.

In Russia, missionary Steve Wildman forged links with ISOM after seeing a need for curriculum because he couldn’t respond to all the requests he received to lead conferences. Today there are several thousand students in at least 150 schools there, including two at the church Wildman co-pastors in Russia’s third-largest city.

“It gives them a vision,” said Wildman, an Oral Roberts University graduate who has been in Russia for 15 years. “We see normal Russian people coming in with a basic survival mentality and they [learn] they have a purpose. God has called them to reach their nation and the world.”

Rather than aiming to impart deep theological truths, ISOM’s founder said the classes offer practical, Spirit-filled application, which he hopes will promote the Word of God and move the church away from a personality-driven ethic.

“The kingdom [of God] is built on process, discipleship, leadership and character formation in the lives of God’s people,” Gilfillan said. “The star mentality in the church is not accomplishing the job in the neediest places.” **—Ken Walker**