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Taking the Conference Online

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A record-setting ice storm may have forced Chicago resident Joyce Donahue to stay home earlier this month, but it didn't keep her from attending an annual conference at the University of Dayton.

Donahue and about two dozen others became the first to use the University's Virtual Conference Center, a new Web conferencing program developed by the University's Learning Teaching Center and UDit. From computers around the country and as far away as the Caribbean, guests participated virtually in the Virtual Learning Community for Faith Formation (VLCFF) annual

conference Feb. 3-4.

"I had planned on attending the event, as I have for the past three years, but the weather in the Chicago area had other ideas this year," said Donahue, catechetical associate for the Diocese of Joliet in Illinois. "Except for missing out on the great food, participating through the VCC was almost like being there."

In many ways, the conference center is similar to a Webinar or virtual meeting, but it goes beyond these common applications by recording the sessions and conversations and making them accessible to participants after the conference has concluded.

"People can go back and review the material and have conversations about it after the fact," said David Wright, UDit's director of curriculum innovation and e-learning. "This is a means for people to stay in touch with each other and continue the work they began at the conference.

The center connects online users to the on-site conference through the use of live video and sound and PowerPoint slides. Online participants interact with the conference through a live chat room —facilitated by someone on-site — Twitter feeds, and an option to call a 1-800 number to speak live to both online and on-site attendees.

Jeanne Jakubowski, associate director of programs for catechetical services at the Diocese of Dallas, could not attend the conference in person this year because of budget pressures.

"I felt as if I was really a part of the meeting," she said. "I was able to have my voice heard at the conference, as well as dialog with other partners."

Wright and his team created the Virtual Conference Center by adapting the University's online education program called Isidore, which is based on the open source Sakai software. Its simple design and option to watch video in low, medium or high quality and in color or black and white have low technology demands. This allows users who lack high-speed Internet connections or who have outdated equipment to participate.

Sister Angela Ann Zukowski, M.H.S.H., director of the University's Institute for Pastoral Initiatives, initiated development of the conference center for use with the annual VLCFF conference, but the goal is to make the technology available to anyone on campus and eventually within the Dayton community.

"Conferences are important to the ongoing learning process, but with the recent downturn in the economy, it has become more difficult for people to travel to conferences, especially for those in Catholic dioceses and our international partners," Zukowski said, adding that several VLCFF events will be sponsored through the virtual conference center.

The VCC also represents the University's commitment to its Marianist mission, which emphasizes community, faith formation and adaptation to change, Zukowski said.

The University's Virtual Learning Community for Faith Formation is an online program that offers adult religious education and faith formation training to anyone with access to the Internet. It serves catechetical leaders in 50 U.S. Catholic dioceses and more than 40 countries, Zukowski said.

The VLCFF offers more than 400 options to e-learners in a variety of subjects, such as catechesis, Catholic doctrine, church history, communication, ecclesiology, liturgy, sacraments, prayer, Marianist studies, morality, scripture, social justice or world

religions. The program also offers certificates in five areas: catechesis, adult faith formation, lay ecclesial ministry, digital catechesis and media education.

For more information, contact Cameron Fullam, assistant director of media relations, at 937-229-3256 or fullam@udayton.edu.