

Evaluating the Efficacy of the Webinar Modality for Lifelong Learning in Ministry

GLENN MELVILLE

The educational use of webinars experienced exponential growth in the twenty-first century, reflecting a global trend towards digitalization that has transformed the way in which “education is designed, delivered, and implemented” (Gegenfurtner and Ebner 2019, 2). The Covid pandemic in 2020 further accelerated a shift to online learning modalities for professional development due to its flexible access and affordability. This chapter presents an argument that webinars are well suited as a learning modality for continuing ministerial development. Existing in the ecotone of lifelong learning for ministry, webinars bridge the gap between the academy and the church, taking theological education into the workplaces and homes of pastors and lay church leaders and equipping them to stay current in their ministry thinking and practice.

This argument is supported by the findings of a survey of participants in the Carey Centre (The Centre) for Lifelong Learning webinar program in 2025. The Centre was established in 2017 as a department of Carey Baptist College located in Auckland, New Zealand, to support the continuing ministerial development of church and mission

leaders. Most people engaging with The Centre are associated with the Baptist Union of New Zealand. These include pastors, ministry leaders, church elders and deacons, and small group leaders. Learning resources include webinars, in-person workshops, on-demand video based teaching, and small group studies.

The chapter presents key characteristics that moderated the effectiveness of these webinars, the benefits of the webinar modality, and its limitations. The chapter concludes with recommendations for how program directors can best utilise webinars as part of a lifelong learning in ministry curriculum.

Webinar Development

Webinars are “web-based seminars, in which participants and facilitators communicate live over the Internet across distant geographical locations” through synchronous sharing of audio and video streams for the purpose of education” (Gegenfurtner and Ebner 2019, 1). From 2019 to 2025, The Centre delivered 251 hours of webinar content. In 2024, The Centre administered a survey to gauge the level of interest in a list of 17 proposed topics for the following year. Based on the feedback, The Centre offered 11 webinar series, consisting of two to four 60-minute webinars each. To present the webinars, The Centre recruited leading academics and practitioners in their fields, including local and internationally based presenters.

The pedagogical approach of the webinars largely reflects teacher-centered learning, which positions the teacher as the expert who imparts knowledge to the students. Presenters were instructed to prepare a 45-minute lecture and allow for 15 minutes of discussion. However, some presenters utilised a blend of teacher-centered and student-centered learning styles, facilitating collaborative learning with learners to understand and apply concepts. Presenters utilised slide shows in most of the webinars, and participants interacted with the presenters through a chat function, cameras, and microphones. However, instructors rarely used other interactive features, such as break out rooms, polls, and whiteboards. After each webinar, registrants received a link to a recording of the webinar, slide show presentation, and any additional resources and homework exercises.

Evaluating Webinar Effectiveness

To determine the effectiveness of webinars in equipping church leaders to stay current in their ministry thinking and practice, The Centre conducted a participant survey in 2025.¹ At the time of the survey, nine of the eleven webinar series had been completed. Of 198 webinar registrants, 54 completed the survey, resulting in a 27.3% response rate. Most attended a majority of the live sessions (52%, $n = 28$), many engaged with a roughly equal mix of live sessions and recordings (39%, $n = 21$), and a few mostly watched the recordings (9%, $n = 5$). The Centre achieved high attendance rates by sending reminders 24 hours and one hour before each webinar episode.

The survey captured self-reported ratings for the effectiveness of each webinar series in equipping respondents to stay current in their ministry thinking and practice (Table 1). Responses were rated using a five-point Likert scale from very poor (1) to very good (5). Respondents were asked to provide rationale for their ratings, which were coded and analysed thematically (Braun and Clarke 2006). Respondents reported an average rating of 4.4 and 4.2 out of 5, for the ability of the webinars to help them stay current in ministry thinking and practice, respectively. The highest ratings across both measures were awarded to *It Takes a Church*, *Climate Crisis*, and *Singing and Praying the Psalms*. Conversely, the lowest rating was awarded to *The Gospel and Discipleship*. In most cases, webinars received slightly higher ratings for increasing knowledge than practical application.

Staying Current in Ministry Thinking

The ability of webinars to help church leaders stay current in their thinking is seen as a major benefit of this modality of learning (24 responses). The most frequently mentioned reasons for rating webinars highly to help church leaders stay current in their ministry thinking is that the content was informative, engaging, practical, and relevant as the following two comments illustrate:

There were many helpful concepts and ideas that the speaker shared . . . I think the big picture idea of equipping church leaders to manage their staff and volunteers is incredibly important in the context of today's world, so would strongly encourage this to be held again in the future.

Table 1
Survey Results Regarding Effectiveness of Each of The Centre’s 2025 Webinars

		MINISTRY THINKING			MINISTRY PRACTICE	
WEBINAR	NO. OF RESPONSES	MEAN	SD	NO. OF RESPONSES	MEAN	SD
Being the Family of God: A Spirit Constituted Reality	13	4.5	0.93	11	4.2	0.57
Effective Leadership of Church Staff, Volunteers, and Team Management	22	4.1	0.76	19	4.0	1.02
Holy Spirit Led Ministry	15	4.0	0.73	15	4.2	0.75
How can the Church Respond to the Climate Crisis?	6	4.7	0.75	6	5.0	0.00
It takes a Church to Raise a Parent	12	4.7	0.62	12	4.5	0.65
Kingdom Leaders - Shifts that lead to multiplication	9	4.0	0.82	8	3.5	0.87
Singing and Praying the Psalms in Aotearoa	5	5.0	0.00	5	5.0	0.00
The Gospel and Discipleship: Unpacking the Riches of the Gospel of Mark	9	3.9	0.99	9	3.7	0.94
What has Grace to do with Economics?	5	4.4	0.49	5	3.8	0.75
		Average 4.4			Average 4.2	

Note: N = 49 (5 responses were deemed invalid)

The content of both series selected was highly engaging and extended my current thinking on Christ centered gathering and gave an additional encouragement to think beyond financial giving as we encourage generosity and teach “whole” life mission including financial life.

Another reason the webinars were deemed effective is that they provided new insights and provoked new thinking about various aspects of ministry (7 responses). One participant commented:

I really enjoy this form of learning for helping me to think more deeply about my area of ministry but also general leadership and theology. I try to choose a range of topics each year, across all 3 of these areas. It’s a great way to engage with experts and Carey lecturers.

Higher ratings were also given to webinars when the presenters were thought to be knowledgeable and engaging in their presentation style (9 responses). One person stated, “[the presenter] is so on point for ministry leaders in both the intergenerational and parenting for faith space. She is engaging and practical and was able to answer questions really well.” Respondents also commented on how they found the Q&A helpful (5 responses) and especially appreciated the opportunity to turn their cameras on. As one person commented, “I marked up those [webinars] who had the most time shared where we were all on-screen, rather than a ‘lecture.’” Conversely, lower ratings were given when people perceived that the content was not new and lacked relevancy to their ministry (7 responses). Some also noted poor delivery: “a lot of the presentation is just reading through what’s on the slides and not super easy to engage with.”

Staying Current in Ministry Practice

While webinars can be effective in increasing participants’ knowledge, church leaders perceive webinars as slightly less effective in helping them stay current in their ministry practice. The main reason was the perceived lack of application or relevance (8 responses): “The webinars did everything that this mode could do to support application, but this mode isn’t as effective as apprenticeship, mentoring, or shared implementation, when it comes to application.” Conversely, the most significant factor was the perceived ability of presenters to provide ideas that were readily applicable to their ministry (21 responses): “The examples used were so good that I could have basically used them the

next week in our worship gathering.” Higher ratings were given for content perceived to be relevant to a church leader’s ministry context (9 responses). Another factor is the usefulness of additional resources to aid the application of webinar content (4 responses), for example, “The worksheets for reflection and the content helped with application in my work context.”

Characteristics that Moderate Webinar Effectiveness

While the above qualitative insights help explain the variation in ratings for webinars to help church leaders stay current in their ministry thinking and practice, additional insights were gleaned by asking respondents to rate The Centre’s webinars on characteristics that are known to moderate webinar effectiveness (Table 2). Each item was assessed on a five-point scale: ranging from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (5). The characteristics that respondents agreed had the greatest impact on webinar effectiveness were relevant ministry topics (4.4), providing ongoing access to the recordings (4.6), and recruiting competent speakers (4.5).

Table 2
Survey Results Regarding Characteristics that Moderate Webinar Effectiveness

WEBINAR CHARACTERISTIC	MEAN	SD
The topic(s) were relevant to my ministry context	4.4	0.65
Competent speakers with effective communication skills	4.5	0.69
The content was delivered at an appropriate pace	4.0	0.88
The length of the webinar series was appropriate for the topic(s).	4.1	0.79
Use of visuals (slideshow presentation, videos, websites)	4.2	0.78
Interactive Q&A	3.9	1.02
Additional resources provided or suggested via post webinar email (articles, books, websites)	4.1	1.00
Course homework/application tasks between webinars	3.5	0.94
Providing ongoing access to the recordings	4.6	0.76

Note: N = 54

Slightly less effective were the pacing of content (4.0) and length of series appropriate for the topic (4.1). Significantly, participants perceived some presenters as providing too much content: “the amount of material was probably more than could effectively be covered in the time available, so the pace was faster than ideal.” Participants suggested either reducing the content or spreading it out over more sessions (6 responses).

Another area identified for improvement was the provision of additional resources (4.1). This was in the form of resources and/or homework between sessions to aid learning and application (4 responses). As one person commented:

I think having something to engage with in between session[s] would have helped me to stay more aligned with thought and practice during the course of the webinar. It felt a bit disjointed coming back to something that we had had 1hr long discussion on a week in the past without prompts to reflect in between.

There was also a lack of agreement that Q&A aided the effectiveness of the webinars (3.9), even though most of the webinars offered Q&A via the chat function and cameras/microphones. One of the most frequent suggestions for improving webinars was for more interaction (5 responses). This could include utilising break-out rooms, the lecturer providing discussion questions rather than relying on attendees to ask questions and forming cohorts who meet to view a webinar and then discuss.

The webinars with the highest ratings provide further evidence that increasing the level of interaction increases the effectiveness of webinars. These webinars provided the opportunity for people to introduce themselves and engage with the lecturer throughout the content delivery. As various people commented, “The presenter . . . was engaging, informative, and drew people out—it was interactive,” and “Outstanding content, great questions for discussion, immediately applicable to my context.”

The course homework and application between sessions received the lowest level of agreement in terms of effectiveness (3.5), likely reflecting the variation in approaches from The Centre’s webinar presenters, with only a small number providing homework. Several people thought some form of accountability or follow up would also be beneficial (3 responses). As one person commented:

The other thing is that I always feel like webinars lack the context for accountability, so if there was a structure for identifying the next practical step following the completion of a webinar and then some follow up to see how we were doing with what we had committed to, this might be helpful to solidify the learning in our lived-out realities.

The Centre's survey respondents named the accessibility of webinars as one of the key benefits of this modality of learning (29 responses). Specifically, respondents mentioned how webinar technology gave them access to quality teaching locally and globally. Additionally, they mentioned how the ability to access from anywhere saved them time, and how ongoing access to recordings enabled the opportunity for further study and growth. Respondents also mentioned the flexibility of webinars to fit into their busy schedules (9 responses). Less frequently mentioned benefits included: the short length of webinars providing a manageable learning commitment (3 responses) and the opportunity for peer learning provided through webinars (5 responses).

Limitations of Webinars Versus Other Forms of Learning

Detailed feedback on two in-person workshops illustrates the limitations of the webinar modality. Both workshops featured a blend of teacher-centered and student-centered learning styles.

An in-person preaching workshop was offered in 2025. This was a full day workshop that was co-presented. The pedagogical approach involved collaborative learning where students worked together to share ideas, solve problems, and actively engage in group discussions. To facilitate discussions students were organised into groups of 4–5 around tables. Using the same rating scale as the webinars, participants ($N = 7$) rated the in-person workshop slightly higher for content (4.8) and relevance (4.8) than the average for webinars (4.4 and 4.2). Participants also rated this workshop highly because of the co-leadership model of teaching, mix of theory, practical application, comprehensive and in-depth teaching, and the pacing of the sessions.

A second in-person workshop examined how emotional systems impact the functioning of a congregation. Over three days at a retreat centre, coaches facilitated student-centered learning through case

study work in peer learning groups of four. Each participant had the opportunity to share and reflect on two critical incidents from their ministry through the lens of Bowen Family Systems Theory. High rating for the usefulness of the cohort sessions to apply family systems theory is indicative of the effectiveness of student-centered learning facilitated in-person: the most frequently mentioned reason for rating the cohort sessions so highly was the relational aspect of the cohort. One respondent stated, “The openness and vulnerability of the participants were commendable, and it helped in the understanding of the practicality of ministry life and its challenges.” Similarly, another stated, “This is where the main learning took place for me. Applying the teaching to our own lived experiences. And helping others process their experiences.” Clearly, participants appreciated the relational aspects of this in-person workshop, which survey respondents deemed a major limitation of webinars.

The most frequently mentioned limitation of webinars was the lack of personal connection with others (16 responses). Relating to this, participants commented on the lack of opportunity for group discussion (10 responses). This was due to the limited timeframe of each webinar (1 hour), and the nature of being online versus in-person. As one participant commented, “[The Webinar] never really feels like a substitute for sitting down with a group of people and fleshing things out together.” Other respondents found it challenging to ask questions in the online format (3 responses). The reasons for this included not being able to “read the room” and finding it difficult to multitask, which includes listening, reflecting, and writing questions in the chat. Less frequently mentioned limitations included: the self-motivation required for online learning to be effective (2 responses); it is easy to become distracted during online learning (3 respondents); and the lack of accountability for applying learnings (2 respondents).

In summary, the major limitation of webinars is that they cannot replicate the level of human interaction enabled by in-person events, which generally results in deeper learning and application. Despite the use of interactive online tools, there is a lack of energy and dynamism integral to in-person presentations and events (Arruda 2020). This lack of human connection is amplified as the number of participants increases. For example, if there are many people on the webinar the use of the chat box for discussion is not effective as messages move up quickly, and it is easy to miss messages (Inal et al. 2023). Additionally, the short duration of webinars limits the

ability to build student-lecturer relationships, peer-to-peer community, learner agency, and personalisation of the learning process.

Effective Webinar Design

How then can webinars be utilised effectively for ongoing ministry education? To maximize effectiveness, webinar design should be informed by established educational principles of teaching and learning “that apply to online and blended learning environments” (Reyna et al. 2020, 265). To utilise webinars effectively for ongoing education, webinar design should adopt a blended pedagogical approach involving teacher and student-centered learning. Program directors should consult with a wide variety of stakeholders to identify relevant topic ideas, then test the level of interest in these ideas via surveys. Program directors would also do well to recruit competent speakers with effective communication skills who can collaborate with students in the digital space. In this regard, webinar presenters should be equipped to utilise all the interactive tools at their disposal to maximise learning. Webinar content should be carefully curated based on webinar length, allowing time for collaboration. Providing opportunities for ongoing learning post the live webinar is also beneficial in reinforcing learning. Finally, employing methods for continual evaluation enables constant refining of webinar effectiveness.

Adopt a Blended Pedagogical Approach

One of the distinctives of all three webinars that received the highest ratings was utilising a blend of teacher-centered and learner-centered pedagogical approaches. For example, *It Takes a Church* dedicated a whole episode for group discussion of questions raised in the first 2 episodes. *Praying the Psalms* facilitated collaborative learning where participants worked through a psalm together with the presenter playing the role of a guide. *Climate Crisis* sought to understand participants’ contexts, reasons for attending, and questions, and then molded the content accordingly. Adopting a blended pedagogical approach is therefore considered more effective than a traditional teacher-centered approach alone, implemented as follows.

Identify Relevant Ministry Topics

Adopting a student-centered approach requires choosing topics that are perceived to be relevant to pastors' ministry contexts. This characteristic significantly impacts webinar effectiveness for ongoing education, as shown by the data above. To achieve this end, consultation with a wide variety of stakeholders is recommended, including denominational leadership, academic faculty, regional leadership, pastors, and lay ministry leaders. Additionally, lifelong learning program directors would benefit from establishing a network with other lifelong learning providers to share resources and topic ideas. To refine a potential list of topics, surveys are particularly helpful. In The Centre's experience, the level of interest in potential topics identified through surveys consistently corresponds to actual registrations.

Recruit Competent Speakers

One of the strengths of webinars is that their accessibility enables the opportunity to recruit well-known and respected speakers from all corners of the globe. The findings indicated that recruiting competent speakers with effective communication skills had a significant influence on the effectiveness of webinars. This finding is consistent with wider webinar research that considers it best practice to recruit known, respected guest speakers with effective communication skills (Inal et al. 2023; Zoumenou et al. 2015). However, effective learning also requires "teachers who are well-versed in leveraging technologies to support practices that are learner-centered, engaging, and motivating" (Archambault et al. 2022, 178). Therefore, well-known and respected speakers should be recruited who can operate in the digital space.

In The Centre's experience, recruiting leading academics and practitioners in their fields has received an overwhelmingly favourable response, despite the fact The Centre is in New Zealand, a small island nation located in the southwestern Pacific Ocean. The generosity of the global academic community is also demonstrated through accepting lower honoraria than normal and in some cases giving their time pro bono. However, emphasis needs to be placed on recruiting presenters and/or equipping presenters who can adopt a student-centered approach.

Incorporate Interactive Elements

To facilitate greater engagement in learning and to aid application, interactive elements should be incorporated in the webinar design (Reyna et al. 2020; Al-Naabi 2023). This technique includes the strategic use of cameras and microphones, breakout rooms, polls, Q&A sessions, and collaboration through whiteboards. Increasing the effectiveness of Q&A deserves particular focus. One of the challenges of synchronous communication is that it does not allow time for reflection (LaPointe and Reissetter 2008). Consequently, webinar attendees are often reluctant to ask questions. In The Centre's experience, there is greater engagement when the presenter provides specific discussion questions, rather than simply asking "does anyone have a question or feedback?" It is also considered best practice to deliver Q&A throughout the delivery of content, rather than at the end of a webinar alone (Zoumenou et al. 2015).

Curate Content for Webinar Length

Content needs to be carefully curated to fit the webinar length and allow time for more collaboration. According to the surveys, the effectiveness of webinars was negatively impacted when presenters were too teacher-centric, evidenced by delivering too much content within too few sessions. Therefore, careful consideration needs to be given to match the length of the webinar series with the chosen topic (Reyna et al. 2020; Inal et al. 2023). Program directors should also work with presenters on the focus for each webinar to ensure that the content can be delivered at an appropriate pace, allowing time for collaboration.

Provide Opportunities for Ongoing Learning

To encourage ongoing learning, additional resources, course homework, and ongoing access to recordings should be provided.

Continual Evaluation

Finally, methods for continual evaluation of the effectiveness of webinars should be employed. In this regard, The Centre's webinar host regularly provides feedback to presenters immediately after each webinar episode. The Centre also utilises feedback surveys.

Conclusion

The experience of the Carey Centre for Lifelong Learning suggests that webinars are well suited as a learning modality in the ecotone of lifelong learning for ministry. Webinars help equip church leaders to stay current in their ministry thinking and practice by minimizing the barriers to theological education and providing access to leading academics and practitioners from around the world. The webinar modality for continuing ministerial development is valuable in equipping church leaders to stay current in their ministry thinking and practice, across a broad range of topics. Because of their accessibility, webinars remove barriers to theological education so that more people can access the training that they need. However, due to the limitation of a lack of personal connection, webinars should be used strategically alongside other forms of learning as part of a lifelong learning curriculum. Webinars can be used effectively, in a relatively short time, to disseminate information to increase church leaders' knowledge and offer practical examples applied to ministry contexts—whereas skill development and formational work is deemed more effective via in-person training such as workshops.

References

- Al-Naabi, Ishaq Salim. 2023. "A Phenomenographic Exploration of the Factors Influencing Teacher Social Presence in Professional Development Webinars." *Journal of Education and Learning* 12 (6): 18–27. <https://doi.org/10.5539/jel.v12n6p18>.
- Archambault, Leanna, Heather Leary, and Kerry Rice. 2022. "Pillars of Online Pedagogy: A Framework for Teaching in Online Learning Environments." *Educational Psychologist* 57 (3): 178–91. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520.2022.2051513>.
- Arruda, William. 2020. "The History of the Webinar and Why the Webinar Should Be History." *Forbes*, December 29. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/williamarruda/2021/12/29/the-history-of-the-webinar-and-why-the-webinar-should-be-history/>.
- Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. 2006. "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3 (2): 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>.
- Gegenfurtner, Andreas, and Christian Ebner. 2019. "Webinars in Higher Education and Professional Training: A Meta-Analysis and Systematic Review of Randomized Controlled Trials." *Educational Research Review* 28 (November): 100293. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2019.100293>.
- Inal, Sevim, Oya Tunaboğlu, and Semin Kazazoglu. 2023. "The Rise of Webinars as Professional Development Modality: Investigating the Opinions of Teacher Educators of English." *Shanlax International Journal of Education* 12 (1): 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.34293/education.v12i1.6870>.
- LaPointe, Loralee, and Marcy Reisetter. 2008. "Belonging Online: Students' Perceptions of the Value and Efficacy of an Online Learning Community." *International Journal on E-Learning* 7 (4) (October): 641–65. <https://www.learntechlib.org/primary/p/24419/>.
- Reyna, Jorge, Brett Todd, and Jose Hanham. 2020. "A Practical Framework to Design Educational Webinars in the Age of COVID-19." In *Proceedings of EdMedia + Innovate Learning*, edited by Theo Bastiaens. Association for the Advancement

of Computing in Education (ACE). <https://www.learntechlib.org/p/217312>.

Zoumenou, Virginie, Madeleine Sigman-Grant, Gayle Coleman, Fatemeh Malekian, Julia M.K. Zee, Brent J. Fountain, Akela Marsh. 2015. "Identifying Best Practices for an Interactive Webinar." *Journal of Family and Consumer Sciences* 107 (2) (Spring): 62–69.

Notes

- 1 The study received ethical approval from the Carey Baptist College Ethics Committee on 16 July 2025. All subjects provided informed consent to participate in the research. Responses reported in this chapter are de-identified to protect anonymity. Two limitations of the study need to be noted. First, instead of using a survey, semi-structured interviews should be considered for future research to yield richer research data. Second, the survey responses for some webinars were low, raising the issue of non-response bias.