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Building Community and Facilitating Formation in Seminary Distance Education

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Sasse (1998) set out the principal objection many have to seminary distance education when he wrote,

> Our discussion is about what the *model* (his) of education should be. The model should be embodied, fully human education, where there is personal contact between teacher and student. Distance learning is solitary learning. Proponents of computers and planes can talk about students phoning teachers all that they want; the reality is that teachers and students who are in the same place can eat together, walk together, and talk together. This is the ideal context for truly human education, and it should be our model.(p.)

Based upon this description, distance learning is obviously lacking in community. Since the community of scholars has a salutary effect upon student learning and growth, and distance learning doesn't have it, it is by this description inferior to traditional forms of learning best exemplified in the traditional on-campus, classroom-based seminary experience. Whitaker (1998), lecturer in Old Testament and library information/computer specialist at Princeton Theological Seminary, expressed a similar sentiment when he observed that,

> A crucial component of education is the live, physical exchange between students with each other and with faculty. We do not want to get away from that. Therefore, any technology we implement here is for in-class, on-campus use. None of our regular classes will be offered as distance-learning classes.

If physical presence is required for legitimate or high quality learning to occur, then, again, distance learning comes off as inferior and consequently not desirable. If technologies are to be used, they should be limited to use in traditional on-campus classroom environments to enhance and improve classroom instruction and course delivery. Both of these educators reflect in their

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comments the belief that face-to-face, physical presence in a classroom is the ideal that seminary education should strive to create as effectively as possible. That is, some form of physical community should be created in which students and faculty interact in the give-and-take of lecture, discussion, debate, deliberation, and dialogue. As Sasse (1998) indicates, "Distance learning is solitary learning" and this is the fundamental problem with it, as far as he and others are concerned. But is this an accurate depiction of distance learning and is its counterpart (traditional classroom instruction) devoid of solitude?

All forms of learning fall along a continuum from solitary to social. No one learning experience falls neatly along this continuum and certainly cannot be viewed as separate from all other nuances represented by the continuum. A typical classroom learning experience, which Sasse and others view as the ideal seminary-learning environment, includes a combination of solitary and social learning elements. I think most traditional seminary professors would frown upon collaborative research papers unless structured that way in the assignment. Unless stated otherwise, one typically assumes that when a student hands in a research paper that he or she *alone* has done all of the work, except for possibly the actual typing of the paper. When assigned reading is stipulated, again the assumption is that students read the textbooks in *solitude* and provide some form of reaction or response to the professor that they *alone* have written. When the final exam for the course is taken, we expect the *solitary* student to write the exam unaided by other students or even supplemental. But all of this solitary learning is taking place in the social setting of the traditional seminary classroom.

On the other hand, students in a distance-learning course are often *required* to participate in a cohort group for study and collaborative fulfillment of requirements. They are often *required* to participate in "chat groups" for the purpose of discussing and debating the pros and

cons of a given required text. Distance education students are often *required* to make contact with the professor (by email, phone or even in person) a set number of times during the course of the semester or learning experience. In some cases, distance-learning students are *required* to make contact with fellow either by phone, fax or email. How often are these more socially oriented requirements overtly stipulated in the traditional seminary classroom? I would venture to guess, not often.

All learning partakes of solitary elements that are essential if anything of significance is to be contributed when more social dimensions of the learning experience predominate. Thoughtful reflection often can best be done in solitude. However, "iron sharpens iron" and the interchange of ideas and viewpoints often promotes clearer thinking and more measured positions. Distance learning is not unique in regard to the characteristic of solitude. Even if one posits the scenario of a solitary student in a distant place learning theology from audiocassettes and textbooks, the learning still cannot be considered purely solitary. A person produced the audiotapes and is entering into a learning relationship with the student who is listening to them. Someone else wrote the textbooks and is engaging the student in dialogue in the process of reading. Another person designed and wrote the syllabus that is guiding the students learning. A tutor or instructor must evaluate what the student produces. This is hardly learning in solitude. It is impossible for anyone to truly learn anything in solitude since other persons produce all the media for instruction. Learning takes place in an interactive manner involving a wide variety of experiences all contributing varying amounts to the overall learning outcome. To characterize distance learning as "solitary learning" reflects a misunderstanding of both distance education and the learning process. Eastmond (1995) made this observation regarding the debate about the

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individualistic nature of distance learning as it pertains to various forms of computer-mediated distance learning,

> Being active in distance learning is much more of a social enterprise than it would appear. First, many of these students told me how they negotiated with their spouses, families, and friends for support in working on a distance degree. Second, these students have contact with their advisor and the professor teaching the course---more or less depending on the individual---in working through the assignments for the course. Third, fellow workers, friends, and extended family members are often involved with these students as they discuss course concepts and seek application of them in their lives. Fourth, several students related how important it was to them to be able to obtain feedback from other students about course assignments and activities---a new dimension added to their distance education through the implementation of computer conferencing (p.106).

The other objection regularly leveled against seminary distance education is linked to the lack of community argument. Distance learning approaches are not up to the task of providing environments that are conducive to promoting spiritual formation in students. Freeman (n.d.) of Fuller Seminary puts the issue squarely,

> Technology makes possible asynchronous education-- like email communication, you don't need to be working at the same time as your professors or other students for that matter. Of course immediately, this brings up the question of spiritual formation and so we must talk about how this important aspect of theological education is sustained in this new paradigm. All of us would admit that it is not just the number of leaders, nor just the knowledge of

leaders, but also the spiritual maturity of those leaders that counts--and how can you do that at a distance?

There seems to be an unspoken assumption in any discussion of spiritual formation in seminary education. That is, in order for spiritual formation to be fostered in students, there must be a physical community in which the student interacts with other students, staff, and faculty. Since distance education does not offer this kind of community, how can it possibly further one of the central spiritual outcomes of seminary education? Further, if distance learning cannot help achieve this critical outcome of seminary education, why should it be considered as a desirable adjunct to the seminary experience? Since seminary education includes a formational component and formation requires a campus community then isn't this outcome "antithetical to education at a distance" (Patterson, 1996)?

Anyone advocating the use of distance education, in any form and to any degree in the seminary experience, must be willing to confront these two major challenges and provide satisfactory and well-reasoned responses. What follows are my perceptions, based upon several years of serving students in theological distance education, and reflecting upon those experiences in light of the present debate about distance education.

Defining Community

So often we use terminology and language in the erroneous assumption that everyone knows what we mean when we use it. In order to avoid that false assumption, we wish to be explicit about what we mean by the term "community" and how the concept of community is undergoing adaptation and change in response to the implementation of modern communication technologies.

Banks (1994) of Fuller Seminary has provided what we think is one of the best treatments concerning the biblical notion of community. He offered the following definition of community by stating "a group of people who seek to develop a Christianly informed "common" life, through regular verbal and nonverbal "communication," leading to the development of real "communion" with one another and God (p.19). What strikes us about this definition is that it does not require face-to-face encounters in order for it to be created and experienced. Assuming the validity of this biblical scholar's definition of community, most forms of distance learning would encompass the critical ingredients of this definition.

The late Kraus (1979), an articulate and insightful Mennonite Bible scholar, discussed the concept of "authentic community" and provided this definition by stating, "Community, then, is a group of people who have formed a pattern of interdependent and reciprocal relationships which aim at enhancing the personal quality of the group itself" (p. 121). Again, assuming the validity of Kraus' definition of community, it does not, by definition, eliminate the possibility of community formation in distance education. The critical ingredient, as far as Kraus is concerned, is the relationships that are formed when groups of people join themselves to one another for a common purpose. Interestingly, in the portion of his book where he defines and describes "authentic community" from a biblical perspective, he uses the traditional classroom to emphasize his assertion that "not all groups are communities." He writes in part,

> An audience in a lecture hall is not a community even though it has met for a common experience. Even students in a class that meets over a span of time are not necessarily a community . . . *a community is defined by the special quality of relationships which are formed in it* (p. 120).

He makes an important point that traditional educators often overlook in discussions of community. Simply because persons are physically proximate to each other does not mean that community, as defined above, will necessarily or automatically be created. Cannell (1999) makes this point when she writes "The fact of a classroom does not guarantee community any more than a distance learning chat room will" (p.20). Traditional, on-campus, classroom-learning experiences do not possess an inherent advantage in community building over distance education alternatives. Whitaker (1991), writing from a different field and vantage point, comes to the same conclusion in an article all traditional educators, who trumpet the axiomatic notion of community in campus-based education, should read. Whitaker, a longtime leader in the field of experiential education and former colleague of the late Malcolm Knowles, lays to rest the mythology surrounding the so-called "community of scholars" and the traditional requirement of on-campus residency. The ideal of a "community of scholars" tucked away in a cloistered monastery for a three or four-year stint producing a well-grounded and well-rounded graduate rarely happened in the past and almost never happens in the present. The reality is closer to Whitaker's description:

> Students hurry from the bus or car (in a distant parking place) to the classroom, arriving just as the session starts, and speed away afterward (or a few minutes early in order not to be late to work). They hardly notice the other members, faculty or students, in the briefly-visited "community of scholars." The professor is often on a similar schedule, getting to campus either on Tuesday-Thursday or Monday-Wednesday-Friday to conduct a class and to meet some short, mandatory office hours (that are more than occasionally violated) (p. 23).

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The seminary I serve is a commuter institution. 90% of our student population drives a considerable distance to our campus and only a handful of students (mostly internationals) live in the community; none reside on campus in housing provided by the seminary. Since we utilize block scheduling, as an accommodation to the distance students must drive, most of the time on campus is filled with attending class and visiting the library before students run off to their families and churches. During my first year, I was shocked at how few opportunities I had to interact with students outside of the classroom. I was surprised at how empty the seminary building was most of the time during the school year. The only scheduled opportunities for contact with students outside the classroom were chapel services held three times per week and Koinonia Groups that met during the chapel time about once per month. But even chapel, which was held from 11:00 to 12:00 afforded limited opportunities for "authentic community" to be experienced. As soon as chapel was over, students needed to gobble down a quick lunch in order to get to their afternoon class that started at1:00.

Consequently, I began to incorporate opportunities for fellowship and more informal interaction with students during my regular class time. Since our home was only two blocks from the seminary, I would often invite students to enjoy a brunch or afternoon snack (depending upon the class meeting time) in our home. When I first proposed the idea to students at the beginning of the semester, I was informed that if I wanted to offer this kind of opportunity, it would have to be done during class time. Otherwise students would not be able to attend because returning to the campus for an evening meal or party would be too inconvenient and few would attend. So, there is much demythologizing to be done with the common belief that simply because students attend class on a campus they are more prone to or are more likely to participate in a community of scholars that enhances their learning and produces desirable educational outcomes.

Both of these definitions are broad enough to encompass the variation on community that distance education inevitably provides. Limiting one's conception of community to only those situations in which persons are physically present with one another places an unwarranted delimitation upon our notions of community.

One of the major limiting perceptions in all of the discussion of distance education compared to traditional education is the assumption that traditional, classroom learning is the preferred and ideal setting for education to take place.

A Theology of Community

Biblical notions of community, informed by Christian theology, highlight the spiritual quality of our relationships to one another. The bonds of unity that embrace us through the outstretched arms of our Lord are not restricted by time and place. St. Paul informs us that we posses a unity with other Christians that must be "maintained." This unity transcends ethnicity, gender, social status, and distance. It is possible for Christians to create community, "authentic community," without being physically present with one another. The cosmic dimensions of the "new creation," so majestically enumerated by the author of the Book of Ephesians, prevent us from placing any geographic or spatial boundaries on where community can be created and experienced as Christians (Eph 1:7-10, 22; 2:6; 3:10). Barth (1969) notes this important theological construct when he writes,

> To the elements uniquely emphasized in Ephesians belongs its doctrine on the church. Ephesians speaks more--and more clearly--than the rest of the Pauline epistles about the one, holy, apostolic, and catholic church. It counteracts any wildly congregationalist interpretation or exploitation, for example, of the epistles to the Corinthians. What is said in this epistle about the origin, essence, unity, purpose of the church can certainly be

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stated, but never simply explained, in the categories and with the criteria of psychology and sociology (p. 80).

The church possesses a spiritual unity and connectedness that should not and cannot be limited to physical and face-to-face encounters. Although such encounters do take place does not mean that we are limited to them as our only means of creating and experiencing communion with one another. To argue so, seems to us to place human limitations upon the work of the Spirit of God, whom John likened to "the wind" that "blows wherever it pleases" (3:8). How can one determine for God what an ideal setting is for him? Who are we to say that God can only create community among us when we are in each other's presence, on a campus or in a church? If we affirm this, what does it say about our pneumatology and more importantly about our theology?

Contrary to much modern American (Western) thought, the Bible strikes a balance between individualism and communalism. The authentic form of humanity in the Bible is the individual-in-community. In the Book of Genesis, the created human is in community with God and eventually with other humans. Some have argued that the original sin was in one respect a rejection of that ideal community with the Deity. The covenant community of Israel functioned as the corporate witness to the world and as a "nation of priests" whose parish was universal in scope.

In the New Testament, the universality of this community is given greater emphasis in the mission of Jesus who invited his followers to "be [his] witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and unto the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Later, reflecting theologically upon the significance of the person and work of Christ, Paul sets out a cosmic view of the community created "in Christ" that transcends all possible human barriers. The biblical idea of community involves a people called through grace into a unique relationship with God and one another that

unites them in a mysterious bond of fellowship. This community, although manifested when the church "gathers together" is not limited to this physical expression. The unity created in Christ Jesus can cross ethnic, racial, gender, and geographic boundaries. It can be experienced at any time "where two or three are gathered together in my name." It is this cosmic connectedness that enables the church as the new covenant community to "pray for one another" without the necessity of physical presence. Our prayers for one another, no matter where we are geographically, contribute to our sense of community. When we engage in the tasks of ministry across the globe, we serve as "co-laborers" with one another and with Christ. Paul could extend the "right hand of fellowship" across hundreds of miles and invite co-participation (*koinonia*) in the spread of the gospel.

Another characteristic of community proposed by Banks is that it makes possible "communion with one another." Communion in our mind describes a more intimate and deeper level of communication. In the New Testament the word translated "communion" is usually *koinonia*. The essential meaning of *koinonia* and its cognates (*koinonos, koinonein, koinonia*) and compounds (*sygkoinonos, sygkoinonein*) is "participation in something" (A&G, 440) with the "something" being supplied by the context in which the word is found. Since the Apostle Paul uses the language of *koinonia* more frequently than any other New Testament writer, it is a peculiarly Pauline word that expresses abstractly and concretely his understanding of the unique relationship that exists between the church and Christ and among Christians. George Panikulam's exhaustive study (*Koinonia in the New Testament: A Dynamic Expression of Christian Life*, Rome, Biblical Institute Press, 1979) concluded from his analysis of the Pauline usage of the word that

It is always used for someone's sharing in Christ with others. This leads, to the conclusion that *koinonia* in Paul has a strict communitarian sense . . . Fellowship with Christ is for him salvation, and fellowship with one another in Christ is for him the ideal Christian community (5).

This "koinonia community" cannot be restricted to physical presence since Paul says we enjoy this fellowship with Christ now (I Cor 1:9). Further, he insists that when the church celebrates "Communion" we experience a *koinonia* with Christ even though he is not physically present (I Cor 10:16). Even among those who view the presence of Christ as "real" in the celebration of Eucharist do not insist that Jesus can be physically observed. Although Christ is not physically present with us, we still enjoy communion with him in a very real sense. There is no indication in the New Testament that the fellowship the church enjoys with Christ now is somehow inferior to the fellowship the church will enjoy with him in the Kingdom of God when we will be in his presence forever. The word is also used to describe our relationship to the Holy Spirit with whom we enjoy a *koinonia* (II Cor 13:14). Again, physical, face-to-face community cannot be required since we are dealing with a "Spirit" who enjoys no corporeal manifestation. If we expand beyond the Pauline usage of the terms under consideration, especially the Johannine use of *koinonia*, we encounter John's unique use of the word in reference to our relationship with God (I John 1:3, 6). But obviously, no physical encounter with God is required for this fellowship to be viewed as authentic or real. There seems to be no warrant for supposing some gradation of community from physical to spiritual. Those who were privileged to experience the real presence of Jesus or who enjoyed a direct encounter with God are never said to have a superior or even "ideal" experience from the rest of us who enjoy the presence of Christ and God in mediated dimensions.

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In addition to the koinonia terminology, the Apostle employs a cluster of terms that all seek to reflect his understanding of the "new" (*kainos*) community. Two of the most prominent are the Pauline *syn*-compounds (see Carl B. Hoch, "The Significance of the Syn-Compounds for Jew-Gentile Relationships in the Body of Christ*," Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 25:2:1982) and his use of the *allelon* reciprocal pronouns ("one another"). Both of these terms express a deep communion among Christians manifested in a variety of ways that are designed to enhance community among a diverse Body.

One of the explosive and controversial tenets of Paul's thought, derived from Jesus, was the significance and implication of the time of new things inaugurated in the incarnation of our Lord (see *The Concept of Newness in the New Testament*, Roy A. Harrisville, Augsburg, 1960 *and All Things New: The Significance of Newness for Biblical Theology*, Carl B. Hoch, Jr., Baker, 1995). Paul apparently envisioned two distinct redemptive-historical periods: one old and one new. The "old" age was dominated by the First Adam and brought all of the misery and sin evident in the created order. The Second Adam who offers release and redemption from all that is old and debilitating dominates the "new" age. Part of the "old" age included a focus on buildings (tabernacles and temples) and tangible manifestations of piety (circumcision and fasting) as well as specific times and places where God could be worshipped. Jesus highlighted the difference between these two ages in his parables of the new wine in old wineskins and new patch on an old garment (Luke 5:36-39). I. Howard Marshall (*Commentary on Luke*, Eerdmans, 1978) notes that the point of both parables is to highlight the "radically new" nature of the gospel in contrast to traditional Judaism. The universal dimensions of the "new teachings" (Mark 1:27) could no longer be contained within the old wineskins of Judaism. A central sanctuary in a specific geographical location with set times for worship was too constricting for a movement

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that spilled over into all levels of society in the Greco-Roman world and across all national boundaries to embrace "the ends of the earth." In Second Temple Judaism, ten males were required for the formation of a new synagogue (Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 2d ed., Eerdmans, 1993). No such limitations were placed on the formation of early churches. The simple promise of our Lord was that "where two or three are gathered together in my name" (Matt 18:20) a church was formed and had God's blessing manifested by the mysterious presence of Jesus himself. Interestingly, the Greek word translated "gathered together" is from the same root for "synagogue" (*synagoge*). Barclay (*The Gospel of Luke*, Westminster, 1966) draws some practical application from these two parables contrasting the old with the new. He makes the point that our reluctance to embrace anything new is often constrained by our "passion for the old" (64). He goes on to remind us that

> We should never be afraid of new methods. That a thing has *always* (his) been done may very well be the best reason for stopping doing it. That a thing has *never* (his) been done may very well be the best reason for trying it. No business could exist on outworn methods--and yet the Church tries to . . . . There is a wise and unwise conservatism. Let us have a care that in thought and in action we are not hidebound reactionaries when we ought, as Christians, to be gallant adventurers" (65-66).

Although Barclay certainly did not have in mind our present discussion of the place of distance education in theological studies, the principle he elucidates is quite apropos. As people of the "new creation" we must remain open to new ways of doing things. Certainly, careful thought and consideration must be given. But when we automatically reject a new approach simply because it is different from what we have done in the past, we are not giving due consideration to the new proposal and are certainly not being consistent with our status as members of the "new covenant"

community. There is something disturbingly inconsistent with those who identify themselves with the new creation and yet resist anything new! The newness of Christ brings with it openness to the Spirit of God that allows us to consider, thoughtfully and prudently, how new ways of doing the business of the Kingdom can be envisioned and incorporated into existing strategies and structures.

Creating and Experiencing Community in Distance Education

We are often amused at some of the arguments made against seminary distance education. Many of them sound like those making the arguments have never practiced distance education and so cannot know firsthand whether such a community can be created in practice or not. However, both of us have worked in theological distance education settings and know from our own experience and from the experience of others that in fact "authentic community" can be created in distant settings and that they can produce beneficial spiritual effects upon participants.

Creating community in distance education is not an inferior form of what can be created on campus. We must disabuse ourselves of the notion that somehow distance education, to be accepted and legitimate, must somehow mirror or seek to reproduce the classroom. Traditional classroom education and distant education are two distinct modes of education with their own sets of strengths, weaknesses, and appropriate uses. I know of no one among distance education advocates who insist that distance learning take over as the primary mode of delivery in any educational or institutional setting. The use of a particular mode of delivery is determined not by faddish enticements of the technology but by intentional learning outcomes, preferably negotiated by students, faculty, and administrators. Whether or not an institution or a particular class should utilize distance-learning strategies and delivery options should not be automatic. Simply because a large number of theological institutions are incorporating distance learning

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approaches into their curriculum does not necessarily mean that every institution should.

Distance education has its place among a constellation of possible, appropriate, and desirable

learning options. The more flexibility and the more choices we can provide students, the better it

is for them educationally and the more apt we are to attract and retain them. In addition, the

more likely we are as an institution to re-capture their interest in another degree program.

One of the descriptors offered by Banks (1994) in his definition of community involved

both "verbal and nonverbal communication." With the advent of newer technologies the

interactive dimension of distance education has been greatly enhanced. Older forms of distance

learning such as correspondence study had interaction but it was primarily nonverbal, taking the

form of written "correspondence" between student and tutor or faculty member. Even with the

advent of technologies such as the tape player, which incorporated verbal communication

between teacher and student, the level of interactivity was nonexistent or minimal. The British

Open University, which offers all of its courses and degrees at a distance, for example, did

experiment with the use of tape-recorded communications between tutors and students.

However, this is a cumbersome mode of communication and is woefully lacking in spontaneity

and speed.

Today, we have a limitless array of potentially useful technologies in distance education

that can facilitate verbal and nonverbal communication and dialogue in a highly interactive

environment that is not constrained by distance (it may be somewhat constrained by time,

depending upon where the participants live). For instance, videophones offer a relatively

inexpensive way to offer two-way communication that allows for both verbal and nonverbal cues

to be observed and interpreted. Although the video image is somewhat delayed due to the

bandwidth of the phone lines, it is better than the use of audio phone conferencing. However,

even this simple technology can be used quite effectively to compensate for distance as well as costs. I have been privileged to bring many guests speakers into my courses over the years that otherwise would never have been exposed to my students were it not for the use of the simple telephone. A speakerphone built into a telephone or an add-on unit enables a faculty member to introduce important thinkers and writers to his/her students at an extremely low cost and with very meager technological skills. Most of us already know how to use the telephone. The speakerphone is only a slightly different application of a technology that we have already mastered. It's much easier than programming a VCR! This past semester, I was able to conduct phone interviews with two of the three authors of the three required texts for my course in Ministry to Youth and Their Families. This next year, we will begin to use the videophone and move a step up the technology ladder. For a nominal investment of about $1500, a campus bound phone of higher quality can be purchased along with a lower cost and less sophisticated version that will be shipped to the off-campus location.

Computer mediated delivery allows for a wide range of verbal and nonverbal communication to take place between persons. From keyboarding to two-way audio and video, computer mediated delivery provides educators with a highly interactive learning environment. Digital and satellite technologies allow participants to exchange verbal and nonverbal cues with the kind of exchange and interaction that would take place in any face-to-face encounter.

With the advent of these newer communication technologies comes a need to re-think our outmoded ideas of community that are limited by the requirement of physical presence. Boyce (1998) of Luther Seminary in St. Paul made this point in an interview for *In Trust* magazine when he said, "Community is no longer dictated by geography. People can get together through interactive video and the Internet. Consequently, we have to start being creative about ways to

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build community by not necessarily bringing people together physically" (p.12). In the same article, a profile of seminary student Laurie Line was highlighted. She enrolled in the Program in Adult College Education (PACE), offered by Bethel College in St. Paul and completed her B.A.. She is now working toward a master of divinity degree from Bethel Seminary while living in San Diego and commuting to extension sites near her home. The issue of community in the context of her life as a primarily distance learning student surfaced. The writer asked,

> What community shapes Line spiritually? Several, actually, by her testimony: her home congregation of St. Andrew's Lutheran Church, San Diego; Lemon Grove Lutheran Church, San Diego, where she'll serve as an intern during 1999; San Diego's weekly Lutheran pastor's text study group, which convenes to explore the appointed Sunday Bible readings; two of her professors at Bethel to whom she feels particularly close; and her ongoing work with the Lutheran chaplain at the Marine Corps Recruit Depot in San Diego (p. 12).

This distant student is certainly not isolated and cut off from community. She lives in what Daniel Aleshire calls an "ecology of faith." Having studied family ecology, a subset of the field of human ecology, I appreciate the significance of Aleshire's language. The social sciences have borrowed the term from the physical sciences as a way to explain the complex web of relationships and living arrangements that constitute modern life. We are connected in a myriad of ways with a host of people and institutions and services that influence and shape us in profound and deeply personal ways. Not all of these connecting links today are made "in person." Often, we make these connections through the vast array of technological touchstones available to us on the cusp of the 21st century. These different communities of faith all have varying degrees of influence upon the participants at distinct times across the life cycle. To

delimit the discussion of community and formation to the seminary campus and classroom produces a myopic vision of the formative influences on our students and prevents us from grasping the specific role the seminary learning experience plays in forming our students spiritually. How we are to understand the formation process and whether or not this can be sustained in a distance-learning environment is the subject of the next section of our deliberations.

The Problem of Formation in Distance Education

One of the central tenets of theological education is that the community of faith on a seminary campus, gathered together for the common purpose of learning, can have a salutary effect on the spiritual formation of its students. In fact, ATS accrediting standards require member schools to address the issue of spiritual formation within the tradition and context of their own history and theology. There is a great deal of debate and discussion in theological education communities about what exactly does one mean by spiritual formation, how can it be achieved, what role should the seminary play in this process, and what form should the seminary's role take? Should there be a formal program or is a more informal and less structured approach best? In the midst of this ongoing discussion, we raise the question of whether or not student formation can or should take place in a distance-learning venue. We return to Freeman's question mentioned earlier, how could one do spiritual formation at a distance?

The Outcome of Student Formation

The old adage goes: "if you don't know what you're aiming at, you'll hit it every time." This is certainly appropriate advice to anyone considering institutional or learning outcomes. If those of us, who construct and create the learning environments of theological education, do not know exactly what kind of student we intend to produce, we have no basis for subsequent

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evaluation and any clear process or sequence of experiences that we can recommend to our students. We do not think there need be universal agreement among theological educators as to what constitutes the ideal seminary graduate. But each institution would certainly be advised to give this matter serious deliberation. Every theological school would be wise to construct its own model or schema that seeks to elucidate its understanding of the spiritual formation process and what experiences contribute to the fulfillment of spiritual maturity. The model we propose could certainly be incorporated into an existing educational community but the best models are those that are homegrown, indigenous to the fertile soil of a particular place with its own history, traditions, patriarchs and matriarchs, and theological milieu. The model we propose does not require physical presence in order for the institution to have a positive influence on the spiritual well being of its students.

An Ecology of Student Formation

Bronfenbrenner (1979) proposed an ecological model of human development that has much to commend it as a guiding construct for theological educators to consider. Although there are always weaknesses to any model, theoretically, conceptually, and with its application to real life situations, this should not inhibit an institution from designing its own understanding of the formative influences inherent in theological education. His model has two complementary dimensions: a personal ecology and a global one. The personal ecology is nested within the larger context representing all the fragmented dimensions of our lives. It is wise to see the student within the larger framework of where they live and what they do because all of these experiences have varying degrees of influence on their formation as persons. Piaget and other developmentalists have demonstrated that humans grow through the interaction that takes place between the person and all of these various components of her/his life and culture. Although

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Whitlock (1960) does not use the term ecology to represent his understanding of the biblical view of the human, he does describe the dynamics of our model when he writes,

> The life of man is an organic whole. His total interests belong together. His spiritual, social, physical, economic, political, or so-called secular interests are simply different aspects of man's relationship to a complex world. Hence, man's problem is not only his relatedness to himself, but also his relatedness to his world (p. 13).

The Ecology of Personal Formation

This portion of the model emphasizes the internal formation that takes place individually in each student. But even this process partakes of ecological characteristics since all of these various aspects of our personhood work synergistically to form a whole person. We would not insist that these are the only aspects of one's personhood but they are representative of those that have been well researched and documented in the literature of human development over the last thirty to forty years. This whole person focus on the student has value in that it prevents us from atomizing the whole student to a brain or an intellect that needs to be cultivated and informed. When we realize that we touch much more than our student's minds as they progress through a degree program, we will begin to enhance our ability to form our students as whole persons rather than as students who need to be filled with our knowledge and wisdom. The late Friere (1983) cogently demonstrated the dehumanizing tendency of the traditional "banking system" of education that thought of students as empty vessels to fill. Instead, theological educators will seek to facilitate full human development that includes a necessary emphasis on the intellectual dimension but not an exclusive one.

It is difficult to avoid using the language I am accustomed to using when discussing these matters: spiritual formation, spiritual development, or spiritual maturity. The problem with this

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language, as appropriate and helpful as it may be, is that it suffers from the tendency to compartmentalize persons and consequently to concentrate on that one compartmentalized aspect to the neglect or exclusion of the others. This is the observation Hall (1998) made in response to an article on spiritual formation written by George Lindbeck in the same issue. In his critique of Lindbeck's use of the term "spiritual formation," Hall noted that his term "character formation" was to be preferred over Linbeck's term because ". . . it is broader, and it does not at once suggest, as does the former category, the dichotomy of spirit and matter, soul and body, sacred and secular, religious and worldly, the chapel and the basketball court" (p. 54). Although his point is well intentioned, even his term has similar limitations since it focuses our attention on "character," which some would argue is a discreet aspect of our person not the sum total of who we are. We will end up in a labyrinth if we do not concede that all of the descriptors we employ are flawed and fail to express at some point the reality we seek to describe. Our purpose in choosing the language we did was to convey our sense that the Scriptures present a holistic conception of persons and that this view of humanity needs to be represented in the language we use to describe them.

 Ward (1995) provided additional insight into our understanding of the personal dimension of this ecology of faith represented in our diagram. He wrote:

> . . . ecology refers to the interdependence of each component in the creation with respect to each other component. The basic presupposition is that everything functions within an integrated whole--no individual component or system exists without reference to what exists around it. By extension, the concept suggests that any organism or system within the universe is internally interrelated--every part is joined together in such a way as to affect each other for mutual better or worse (p. 14).

He then identifies what he calls a "useful taxonomy" of human capacities or aspects that are not offered as exhaustive but representative of the unity-in-diversity that characterizes the person created in God's image and likeness. The five dimensions of personhood are represented in the illustration of a hand. One should observe that the "spiritual" sits at the palm and center of the hand. It is purposely imbedded among the other aspects (fingers of the hand) of who we are because this is the reality of the ecological model. The spiritual aspect of our personhood, made alive in our regeneration and renewal in Christ, interacts with, acts upon, and is acted upon by all the other capacities that shape us as whole persons. There is not the luxury of expanding in great detail upon this model but suffice it to say that this view of the person squares with my understanding of the biblical teaching on holiness as wholeness. Hoekema (1986) lays out the biblical evidence from both the Old and New Testaments for understanding the person as a "psychosomatic unity" (even though this term is constrained by a duality he accepts and a dualism he rejects). He summarizes his findings by observing that the person is viewed "in his or her totality, not as a composite of different 'parts'" (p. 216). It is also consistent with the Pauline understanding of maturity in which the community seeks to form individuals to "the measure of all the fullness of God" (Eph 3:19) and the "the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Eph 4:13). This same view of maturity as human wholeness is expressed quite vividly by the Apostle when he prays that the Thessalonians be sanctified "through and through" including their "whole spirit, soul and body" (I Thess 5:23). Hoekema, commenting on this text noted that,

> The totality of the sanctification prayed for is expressed in the text by two Greek words. The first, *holoteleis*, is derived from *holos*, meaning whole, and *telos*, meaning end or goal; the word means "whole in such a way as to reach the goal." The second word, *holokleron*,

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derived from *holos* and *kleros*, portion or part, means "complete in all its parts." It is

interesting to note that in the second half of the passage both the adjective *holokleron* and

the verb *teretheie* ("may be preserved or kept") are in the singular, indicating that the

emphasis of the text is on the whole person (p. 208).

This picture of human wholeness as the measure of what it means to be spiritually mature is also

evident in the Pauline criteria for church leaders given to Timothy (I Tim 3:1-7). A close

examination of the separate criterion enumerated in this text, makes it evident that spiritual

maturity was seen in a much broader perspective than traditional notions of spirituality. The full

breadth of human wholeness is represented in the list as it appears in our canon.

If this analysis is accurate, then any experience that facilitates the full formation of

persons after the likeness of Jesus, who represents and demonstrates completed humanity can be

said to be advancing the ultimate outcomes of theological education. Can a whole person

orientation be constructed in a distance-learning environment? Does one need to have physical

presence with another in order for all aspects of one's person to be touched and affected by the

educational experience? We think the answer to the first question is "yes" and to the second

question, "no." Even the social dimension does not require physical presence in order for it to be

affected by distance learning. The social construct of various forms of interactive technologies

allows for this dimension to be included in the learning experience. Eye contact or a visual

component is not essential for social intercourse to take place, otherwise the blind or other sight-

impaired persons are automatically exempt from consideration. How can one argue that a Helen

Keller was somehow adversely affected in her social development simply because she could not

see? I have had the privilege of knowing several visually handicapped persons over the years.

One I remember fondly was a traveling evangelist who was a guest in our home on several

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occasions when I was growing up. Every time he visited us, my entire family was captivated by his winsome personality and sense of humor. After dinner, he would often entertain us by singing and playing his guitar. I have never known anyone that could warm up to strangers faster than Bob and turn them into lifelong friends. He could carry on quite animated conversations with anyone and never seemed to be impaired by his inability to process visual cues. In the same way, those communicating at a distance are not necessarily hampered in their ability to carry on a dialogue with those they cannot see or receive visual cues from. The social interaction, characteristic of any form of human interaction, is mirrored in most forms of distance communication, especially those supported by newer technologies such as computer mediated instruction as well as satellite or digital transmissions of various sorts.

A Global Ecology

Beyond, yet vitally connected, to the personal dimension of this ecological framework, is a global network of interconnecting relationships and communities that exert a profound influence on the development of persons-in-community. Consider, for example, the powerful effect of the family on the formation of persons. This would include the natural family of origin, the existing family unit produced by the marital union, and the wider extended family that includes grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, nieces and nephews. Although all of the other representative communities are influential factors in human development, none exerts the kind or strength of influence to be found in our families. This is especially true when focusing on the distinctly spiritual aspect of our formation as persons. Anderson and Guernsey (1985) make the point that,

> The relationships that place demands upon our own life through daily and domestic
> proximity determine to a large extent our spiritual formation, either negatively or

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positively. Children who live with parents experience the primary structure of spiritual formation in that relation. Husbands and wives also are necessarily linked in a relationship that involves negative or positive spiritual formation. Neither formal religious education nor spiritual exercises, either individually or corporate, can effectively replace or even overcome the lack of positive growth in these relations (pp. 123-24).

To neglect this powerful influence for potential benefit to a person spiritually, even while she/he is enrolled in a seminary degree program, is to ignore the most potent force on developmental processes in a student's life. Students who function in the role of parent, spouse, adult son or daughter, aunt or uncle, or in an increasing number of cases, grandparent, experience a set of relationships that continue to have a profound affect on their development as persons.

What part does the seminary play in facilitating the formation of its students while they are enrolled in a course of study? The answer to this question was at the heart of the ethnographic study which findings have been widely reported in the work by Carroll, Wheeler, Aleshire, & Marler (1997). Although this study provides us with rich description and minute detail of two contrasting seminary cultures, it was not by nature a comparative study that sought to determine how the influence of the seminary on student formation compared with that offered by other experiences that make up the ecology of each student. I think when this kind of study is done, and it should be, we would find that the influence of the seminary experience is minor in comparison to that of the family and the church. We can deduce this conclusion from the limited number of studies that have been undertaken that include self-reports of what influences one's spiritual formation in particular. Often at the top of the list are various family members, and then references to church provided experiences such as worship, education, and various kinds of fellowship or service opportunities. In fact, the Search Institute study of Christian Education

Effectiveness found that spiritual maturity (as defined by the researchers informed by theologians and biblical scholars) was highly correlated with participation in church education activities.

The *Being There* (Carroll, Wheeler, Aleshire, & Marler, 1997) study does provide some insight into the various aspects of seminary life that seem to have a beneficial effect on student formation (broadly conceived) and in particular on spiritual formation (also broadly conceived). The fact is that any long-term residential environment, whether religious or secular, is going to partake of certain structural similarities and have similar effects on the persons who are members of that community. This is not unique to seminary. Secular communities can also have a positive influence on the formation of its members. Living in close proximity and sharing a common space all conspire to build a sense of bonding that can change people for the better. They can also have negative effects, but that is not the focus of our concern here. So what is it in the seminary culture that promotes formation? What mechanisms, experiences, triggers, events, rituals facilitate formation? The language used by the researchers in *Being There* is reminiscent of developmentalists who argue that it isn't so much some magic ingredient that facilitates development but rather the interaction of the organism with its various environments, its ecology. I found a remarkable similarity in language between the researchers in the *Being There* study and typical developmental theorists such as Piaget, Kohlberg and Perry. In their summary of the seminary's culture and its influence on students, the researchers used terms such as "interaction," "engagement," "adaptation," "exchanges, "negotiate," "constructing," and "exposure" (Carroll, Wheeler, Aleshire, & Marler, 1997, p. 268). This is the language of "assimilation and accommodation" that frequently appears in the developmentalist's literature. It refers to the interaction, the synergy that is forged between students and that part of their ecology

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in which they happen to be at any given moment. What the researchers observed was the different ways in which the two seminaries interacted with its students over time. What the researchers described as taking place in the two seminaries under consideration is not unique to seminaries. They admitted the same in their discussion of theoretical models that guided their ethnographic research. They borrowed models from other disciplines, which had been used to observe similar dynamics at work in different institutional settings. The key ingredient was the "interaction" that took place between the student and the environment of the seminary (which the researchers described as "worldviews, beliefs, ritual practices, ceremonies, art and architecture, language, and patterns of everyday interaction," p. 268). Any fairly equivalent set of circumstances and interactions could have produced similar if not identical results in the formation of students. In fact, one may argue that the kinds of "interactions" that take place in distance learning environments could be shown, and have been shown, to produce equivalent formative gains in students. The critical ingredient is not, as the *Being There* researchers mistakenly concluded, being a part of a physical campus setting where students and faculty engage each other in face-to-face encounters in class, chapel, meetings, and informal get-togethers. Rather, the critical ingredient is the nature of the ongoing exchange between students and students, students and faculty, as well as students and course materials. If this kind of exchange and interaction is not taking place on a campus, then the influence of that experience on student formation is going to be lessened. Likewise, a reputable distance learning experience that intentionally designs a variety of these interactive exchanges and utilizes a variety of technologies to support them will have a significant influence on student formation.

I have been involved in distance learning experiences in which significant relationships were established, regular discussions and communications were facilitated, and appropriate

feedback was delivered, all without face-to-face encounters. Student personalities emerge in a distant environment just like they do in a classroom. An affective bond is created between participants online just like it does in other social encounters where physical presence is required. I've observed special relationships emerge among students as they studied and learned together in a cohort group. They contact one another outside of online "classroom" just like students might do in a campus-based classroom. The culture and ethos of an institution is conveyed in distant settings in ways that mirror the dynamics reported in the *Being There* study. Actual physical presence, although a plus, is not a requirement for all of the ingredients necessary for the facilitation of student formation. I have engaged in collaborative research and writing for the last two years with a colleague at the University of North Texas without ever meeting in person. It would be nice to know what the other person looks like, but it will not change our ability to cooperate and create community for the purpose of accomplishing a shared outcome or objective. Humans are designed to accommodate themselves to a variety of ecological circumstances without jeopardizing our ability to communicate, commune, and be formed in the totality of our personhood. Physical presence certainly adds different ingredients but these are not determinative or exclusive. The various segments of our respective ecologies as well as the corporate ecologies that emerge when persons choose to voluntarily associate with one another all have differing degrees of influence on our formation as persons. Some segments could be totally eliminated and not adversely affect our formation as persons permanently. God has made us to be extremely resilient and pliable. Therefore, we need to know how to better cooperate with the plasticity with which the Creator endowed us and be comfortable with different nested sets of the ecology exerting a positive influence on our formation as persons.

Space does not permit the luxury of exploring these other aspects of the global ecology, each of which exerts varying amounts of influence on the formation of our students. Suffice it to say, that we must not ignore nor dismiss these other competing segments of our student's lives. To do so, is to make us appear to be hopelessly out of step with the course of our student's lives. We have all observed students who often get overwhelmed during the course of their graduate school experience. Not so much by the shear volume of work required to complete the degree. Rather, by the insidious influence of competing responsibilities and duties that pull our students in a multitude of directions, leading to a growing sense of fragmentation leading to disintegration. It did not surprise the reader that in the midst of the *Being There* report, is the story of one seminary student, Lu, who took her own life just as she was about to complete her course of study. When we fail to see the whole picture which is the ecology of our students, then we fail to give them the resources they desperately need to cope adequately and successfully with the myriad demands placed upon them as father, mother, son, daughter, brother, sister, pastor, employee, citizen, and oh yes, by the way, student.

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