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Send out your light and your truth! Let them guide me. Psalm 43:3

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### A Summary of the Findings of the Study: Assessing the Impact of Online Courses on the Spiritual Formation of Adult Students

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## **A summary of the findings of the study: Assessing the Impact of Online Courses on the Spiritual Formation of Adult Students**

### **Overview**

The purpose of the study was to examine whether or to what extent spiritual formation occurs in online theological education from the perspective of maturing faith. The research instrument used was based on the Faith Maturity Scale (FMS) developed by Benson et al. (1993). Roehlkepartain (1993) concluded that spiritual maturity involves a relationship between God and humans (vertical) as well as a social component in the relationship between humans (horizontal). He stated that the synthesis of these two dimensions combine to form a foundation for measuring integrated faith in order to identify the extent to which spiritual maturity can be evidenced. The resulting data indicated that a minority of church-going adults display an integrated faith. The findings also revealed that church-going adults reflect a greater degree of horizontal faith than vertical faith. Roehlkepartain wrote,

Viewed from another perspective, two-thirds of adults in the churches have a faith that lacks either a horizontal or vertical dimension, or both. For most, faith is one-dimensional—either a personal piety without any social dimension, or a social activism without any sense of a personal relationship with God. (p. 38)

Understandably, one theological course alone cannot account for the development of spiritual formation. Similarly, faith development of students who take an online course is impacted by one's community, both online and face-to-face. Online students are not isolated from community; conversely, it cannot be assumed that students who study in a face-to-face classroom are not necessarily experiencing formative opportunities simply by physical proximity to faculty and peers.

Cannell (1999), in her review of the literature concerning distance education, noted, “Community is formed in the interaction of persons with common interests and values” (p. 20). She pointed out that community is not necessarily formed within physical proximity, but rather one must make the formation process an intentional development. Cannell stated, “The fact of a classroom does not guarantee community any more than a distance learning chat room will” (p. 21).

Spiritual formation, as understood from an integrated perspective, is a synthesis of a number of factors. The content covered in a theological course, however, or the interaction between peers and faculty may provide a window into the assessment of spiritual formation in an online environment. The findings from this study highlight the extent to which online course participants reported nurtured faith as viewed from an integration of social and theological dimensions of spirituality.

### **Measures of Spiritual Formation**

Spiritual formation in theological education has benefited from work done in quantitative measurements and assessments. Many these measures began in 1971 with Moberg’s work in spiritual well-being and further heightened with qualitative studies (as cited in Lynn et al., 2001). A number of instruments purportedly measure spirituality. These measures include Fowler’s Faith Development Interview Guide, the Religious Status Interview, the Religious Orientation Scale, Quest, the Spiritual Well-Being Scale, and the Spiritual Assessment Inventory (Hancock, Bufford, Lau, & Ninteman, 2005). Lynn et al. conducted a study using the Faith Maturity Scale (FMS) as a way of assessing spiritual development in college students attending a Christian institution. The researchers studied 264 students enrolled in business classes at the school. They chose the FMS due to its psychometric qualities as well as the soundness of the scale’s

theological and biblical foundation.

Other researchers support the idea that spirituality has some form of measurable content. Slater, Hall, and Edwards (2001) observed that a number of measures and instruments have been produced that are designed to reflect not only the theoretical foundations of spirituality, but also the observable, empirical traits. These measures continue to grow as conceptual and quantifiable problems continue in the field of spirituality. Slater et al. reviewed four indices that were designed to measure some component of faith or spirituality. One such measurement was the FMS, which was designed to describe the observable as well as attitudinal outcomes of life-changing faith. Slater et al. concluded, “The FMS is a promising measure of spiritual maturity with national norms. It has good psychometric properties” (p. 13).

One resource that is available to provide measures of religiosity is a work compiled by P. C. Hill and Hood (1999), who stated, “Many researchers would include religious variables in their studies if they knew that measures were readily available” (p. 3). The authors affirmed the current practice and acceptance of religious measurement through reviews of 125 scales and measures.

Tenelshof and Furrow (2000) conducted a study on spiritual maturity among seminary students to examine the role of attachment theory and object relations theory as applied to spiritual maturity. They surmised that understanding attachment in relationships as well as how one views one’s self in relation to others can lead to greater awareness of spiritual maturity. Tenelshof and Furrow posited, “The relational aspects of spiritual maturity can be explained and understood through attachment and object relations theories” (p. 101). Spiritual maturity from this point of view is an integration of one’s relationship to God with one’s relationship to humans. Spiritual formation is primarily relational in character.

## Findings

Inherent to the understanding of spiritual formation from the view of this study is the notion of whole-person development. While this study primarily investigates the spiritual dimension of the person, the assumption made is that one cannot separate the spiritual from the other dimensions including physical, intellectual, emotional, social, and moral. Therefore, correlations can be made between intellectual and spiritual growth in that the development of the cognitive element can positively influence the spiritual dimension.

The study revealed that the following were consistent with presuppositions that spiritual formation occur in online courses: (a) enhanced spiritual formation as a result of increased knowledge, community development, and personal growth; (b) positively impacted spiritual development in light of peer and faculty relationships; and (c) assimilation of social and spiritual dimensions through course content and practical application.

Spiritual formation as influenced by online social interaction was noted by a third of the study's participants. They self-reported that interaction with fellow students positively impacted spiritual formation and reflected a sense of fulfillment for the participants. Similarly, participants reported that their personal relationship with God had been positively impacted, not only through social interaction but also by intellectual development. They reported that their relationship with God was deepened as a result of increased knowledge about Him, they developed a stronger walk with God, and they had an enhanced focus and self-discipline in maintaining fellowship with God. This is not an uncommon finding among Protestant groups as observed by Greenman and Siew (2001) who concluded that members of mainline churches understand spirituality to be a strengthening of one's relationship to God.

Participants used terms such as *growth*, *stages of faith*, and *progression* to describe their

relationship to God as a result of completing an online course. Observations made included increased knowledge and information about God, an awareness of stages (which generally indicates forward progression), and a deeper connection in terms of one's relationship to God forged through understanding and application. Judging from the expressed relationship between the active reflection in matters related to theology in the online course and spiritual formation, one can certainly find a correlation between online course completion and a nurtured faith. Fowler's (1981) work on stage theory of faith is perhaps the most well-known in this area. According to Fowler (1981), faith is the result of human search for meaning, and everyone essentially has faith. In this sense, then, his theory asserted that all humans progress through stages of faith, much like progression in other realms of humanness. His stage theory was influenced by the human development work of Piaget, Kohlberg, and Erickson, whose theories offered Fowler a way of making meaning of his stages of faith theory. Fowler (1981) noted, "Stage theories . . . gain their great power by describing predictable changes in human thought and adaptation in largely formal terms" (p. 89). Like human development, faith progresses through a series of natural, predictable changes.

The question of whether courses taken at a distance can enhance one's faith might be subjective, but the purpose of this study was to determine what participants believed about their experiences. One of the goals of the 2001 Pew Internet and American Life Project (Larsen, 2001) was to determine if the Internet can significantly affect the religious life of individuals. Larsen concluded that of those they termed *religious surfers*, 27% experienced at least a modest degree of improvement to their spiritual lives. To isolate the variable of the Internet or online course from other variables in spiritual formation is misleading. Understandably media alone do not enhance one's faith. However, certain conditions inherent to an online course could contribute to

spiritual formation.

The other issue related to the relationship of an enhanced faith and online delivery was made evident through comments about a greater degree of self-awareness. The participants found that because of the use of this particular medium, they were forced to be more intentional about their approach to matters of faith and learning. Some commented that they had to examine their previously held notions about comfort zones and how these impacted their relationship to God. This new delivery mode required a greater degree of trust and reliance in God to help overcome struggles and weaknesses. One of the outcomes of this new form of course delivery was the issue of disorientation, in which the discomfort felt by participants led to the development of new skills, experiences, and self-awareness. Spiritual formation is partially the result of the integration between the human and divine (God) and, as such, was evident in the responses to this question.

Finally, the issue of one's relationship to God from a comparative view can be seen from terms such as *deeper, stronger, broader, and more in love with God*, which participants used to describe the way in which their relationship with God was different than before they took the course. Mulholland (1993) made the point that encountering God leads to a life-altering and transformed self. Participants indicated that they learned more about God, themselves, and others.

### **Faith nurtured through interaction online**

From the view that spiritual formation is an integration of the social and spiritual dimensions of persons, it stands to reason that an informed view of God and others would lead to a difference in faith maturity. Participants reported that personal religious faith had been nurtured as a result of interaction with others online. The online course provided opportunities for

participants to communicate with fellow students, faculty, and a peer mentor. Based on self-reports, participants believed that relationships with others in the online class was positively influenced. The importance of peer relationships in an online community cannot be underestimated. Palloff and Pratt (1999) maintained, “In distance education, attention needs to be paid to the developing sense of community within the group of participants in order for the learning process to be successful” (p. 29). The community of learners is also the vehicle by which formation is nurtured. With respect to spiritual formation, the role of the community has tremendous influence (Benson et al., 1993).

The issue of community in much of the literature was defined broadly to include influences such as one’s immediate physical community (family, church, and civic organizations) and those found online (religious, academia, and social). A number of components within the learning community, such as family, faculty, and fellow learners, relate to the issue of forming learners spiritually. Participants in the study were all connected to a family, had interaction with faculty in the online courses, and interfaced with other students enrolled in the program. Some of the ways in which interaction with peers enhanced the spiritual component of the course included increased awareness of online community, greater diversity of theological views, the development of new relationships with fellow believers, and supportive encouragement during difficult times. A number of participants used terms to describe the affective dimension such as *uplifting*, *prayer*, *support*, *encouragement*, and *reinforcement*.

The importance of faculty in the spiritual formation and development of seminary students is a critical element. There is a clear relationship between formational opportunities and the spirituality of the faculty. Spiritual formation as seen from the intellectual and social components through interaction with faculty members was positively impacted. A majority of



participants expressed a sense of encouragement, compassion, and support from the faculty in their participation within the online course. Forty percent of the comments addressed the relational aspect between the online course and the faculty members with whom they interacted. Nearly a fourth of the comments indicated an integrated view of spiritual formation and faculty interaction. Participants noted that because of the course content and discussions with faculty, one's spiritual dimension was positively impacted. Faculty members were indeed a significant component of the spiritual formation process; in light of the fact that in most courses faculty were directly involved in the interaction, formational opportunities were not only available, but also actively promoted and realized. Intentionality was a critical component of positive outcomes between faculty interaction and faith maturity of students; it was apparent that in those courses for the study that had little or no faculty initiative or constancy of presence, participants indicated fewer positive remarks to this issue.

Whether faculty members share the same geography as students is not as relevant an issue as whether they intentionally encourage development of spiritual formation in course development, the quality of their interactions with students, and their own alignment with faith and learning. The comments participants made reflected this point. They claimed to have grown closer to God; developed deeper relationships to other students; and expanded their horizons with respect to worship, spiritual disciplines, and course content as a result of faculty intentionality.

What this does suggest is that previously held notions of geographical location as a primary influence on spirituality may not be as significant an issue. If researchers ascribe validity to the perceptions and perspectives of online course participants, then they should be willing to reframe old notions of theological education and spiritual formation and understand that

technology does not undermine or replace faith development. The intentionality of faculty, regardless of the medium, is a critical component to the growth and development of seminary students. Palka (2004) summarized the results of a study conducted at Concordia Seminary suggesting that the primary impetus for spiritual formation in seminary students may not be the seminary but rather the community in which the student lives and works. Palka noted, “Spiritual development activities are also seen by students as taking place predominantly outside the seminary community” (p. 2). Palka added, “In the current study, however, seminarians identified the classroom context as only the third major community setting in which their spiritual formation takes place” (p. 5). The primary influence on a student’s spiritual formation was the local congregation in which the student was involved. Palka’s assertion was that the resistance by educators to theological distance education was due in part by the perception that a sense of community was absent from the educational process. He countered this concern by noting the inaccurate assumptions upon which these perceptions were based. Palka observed, “Personal communities have expanded beyond spatial boundaries and include people who live far apart” (p. 1). He pointed out that although the seminary community was at one time defined by physical proximity and relational closeness, this is now a thing of the past with seminarians who live and work far from the main campus. Patterson (1996) substantiated this view by noting that although remoteness characterizes distance education, the reality is that most seminaries no longer maintain a relationship with students outside the classroom and beyond the walls of the campus. Patterson maintained, “There are at least as many external variables that influence the development of students as there are campus ones, and we need to acknowledge these variables and design education in a way that utilizes rather than ignores them” (p. 71).

### Implications

It would be difficult to argue that the technological revolution has not significantly impacted culture and the global world. Technology and specifically computer-mediated communication have significantly impacted the political, educational, and social arenas. Thus, it should not come as a surprise that spiritual needs of seminary students can be met online theological courses. Cobb (1998) suggested that the exclusion of computer technology from our spiritual, intellectual, and emotional lives allows for the perpetuation of what she called Western dualisms, those divisions between self and others. The divide between the sacred and the digital is the source of her work. The sacred component of life envelopes and includes all aspects, including the scientific realm of digital technology. Cobb's notion of *cybergrace* included an awareness of God working through cyberspace to accomplish His divine will. Her basic assumption was that cyberspace can play a pivotal role in the development of our spiritual growth in communion with others. Moreover, Gallup (2000) asserted, "Americans are seeking ways to reestablish a connection to vital faith" (p. 35). The results of studies conducted by the Gallup Institute indicated that approximately 40% of Americans have encountered a life-altering faith experiences (Gallup, 2000). These studies suggest that spiritual formation is occurring in American culture despite technology. This information underscores Cobb's notions that the Internet can serve a vital function in what is already occurring nationally.

Cyberspace also may be a venue for other forms of growth and development. Cox (1999) suggested, "When computer communication is used for the development of interior consciousness, researchers can intimately study personal expressions observing the writing, imagery, thinking, and feeling of a subject" (p. 288). In her study, Cox was able to cull information about the subjects' feelings and thoughts concerning personal awareness, faith, and

other issues by the printed electronic record. The developmental changes that occurred during her study were observable by virtue of the written record. She recommended further research be conducted to determine any impact an intentional virtual community can have in enhancing personal and interpersonal experiences. Cox observed, “Cyberspace is being shown to have the capacity to change the way people think, feel, explore new identities, and create communities” (p. 289).

### **Implications for institutions**

Concerns about the legitimacy of some online courses and formational opportunities are certainly valid, but the debate is no longer centered on whether technology should be an integral part of the theological classroom. Seminaries are as influenced by technology as other institutions of higher education and the culture at large. The issue at hand is more about the quality of theological distance education and the ways in which online courses can promote and support opportunities for spiritual formation. Since distributive learning has become a part of the landscape of theological education, the focus should be reframed and considered from the view of the positive gains that found in virtual interaction. The focus of theological institutions must be on how to formulate a learning environment that embraces the reality of computer-mediated communication and how to prepare students for ministry in a world revolutionized by technology.

Students are coming to seminary in part out of a growing interest in and desire to grow spiritually. The issue of spirituality is gaining momentum within the church and academic institutions. There is evidence that supports the importance of defining, nurturing, and assessing spiritual formation; therefore, it would stand to reason that the academy needs to take seriously its role in the formational process of students. Additionally, there is support for the role of

technology in the process of spiritual formation. In light of these realities, faculty, administrations, boards, and denominational entities must be intentional about technology and spiritual formation.

One way to view the role of the seminary in the transformation of the student is to view the institution as part of the larger macro system of the student. Students engage in a variety of systems that contribute to their faith, including their house of worship, family, and community. It is clear that the seminary is not the only contributor to the student's spiritual formation. Viewing the seminary experience from a systems perspective helps increase understanding that a number of elements in the seminary environment conspire to influence student development positively or negatively. Among these influences are the courses taken by students in a variety of delivery options, such as the face-to-face or online classroom. To argue that distance education courses contribute little or nothing to student formation is to misunderstand the dynamics of the system that exists in seminary communities.

### **Implications for students**

The community aspect of spiritual formation was addressed throughout the study. One of the characteristics of spiritual formation is the issue of relational and communal development. This is supported by Kraus's (1998) view: "Christian spirituality lives in and is nurtured by a community of believers. It is inherently a social spirituality" (p. 86). Individualism, which permeates much of Christianity, cannot coexist with the realities of spiritual formation. Self-reliance is seemingly a byproduct of America life. That rugged individualism puts Americans at odds with spiritual and psychological well-being. Based on discussions earlier in the study, online communities are comprised of humans and are essentially social constructs; as such, the participation in and interaction with these people groups can help one find belonging and

spiritual connectedness.

Putnam (2000) wrote about the value of social networks and the impact they have on modern lives. He noted that people embrace myths that national heroes operated from an individualism that superseded collective and communal efforts. As with most myths, that is not the whole story. American revolutionary heroes like Paul Revere, western film icons, and historical leaders like Abraham Lincoln were all part of a community. They did not exist in autonomous structures. The media may have portrayed a lopsided view of individualism, but there is another perspective that is sometimes overlooked (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985). Bellah et al. commented that individualism defines American identity, whether from a religious, social, or personal point of view. It is at the heart of who we are and what we do. However, there is also a greater community within which Americans engage and eagerly seek. Bellah et al. stated,

The salience of these needs for personal intimacy in American religious life suggests why the local church, like other voluntary communities, indeed like the contemporary family, is so fragile, requires so much energy to keep it going, and has so faint a hold on commitment when such needs are not met. (p. 232)

Understandably, terms like *spiritual formation* may mean different things to different people, given various denominational or religious affiliations. Bracken (n.d.) observed, “Language can also limit and constrain the research, especially where perceptions and meanings differ among participants.” Gobbell (1980) similarly asserted that much of the language surrounding the topic of spiritual formation lacks clarity and agreement. Schneiders (1989) made it clear that the term is unavoidably ambiguous. Within the broad range of definition and understanding of spiritual formation, however, a need remains to continue addressing the matter

in order to integrate praxis and theory. The issue of spiritual formation may not have reached its peak in the literature or in academic disciplines, but it is quickly becoming part of the landscape in theological education. A greater degree of prominence is being given to this subject in seminary curricula across the country. Despite the variation in language or use of the terminology, there is no less of a need to highlight the importance of application and assessment of spiritual formation within the theological community.

### **Conclusions**

The findings from the study suggest that theological education is providing ways in which students can, at the very least, encounter opportunities for spiritual formation. The literature also suggests a cultural shift in the seminary demonstrating the beginning stages of the electronic age. Bedell (1999) noted that the spiritual identity of those in theological education continues to be influenced by interaction in cyberspace. Formation is being influenced by the electronic environment, and thus it is crucial that theological educators not only include technology in the classroom, but also address this issue in the way in which theological education is delivered. Bedell noted, “Because increasingly Americans are being formed spiritually in an electronic environment, it is essential for theological educators to bring the benefit of their training and research to the task of interpreting their academic disciplines in the electronic culture.”

The findings presented in the study suggest that spiritual formation is not only an integration of the social and spiritual dimensions of personhood but includes other dimensions. As theological distance education expands to include online community, understanding of how spiritual formation can be nurtured through the virtual community is likely to increase. The goal of theological distance education is to remain viable in a world in which the innovations of

technology will continue to impact whole persons.



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