BEST PRACTICES FOR ONLINE THEOLOGICAL MINISTRY PREPARATION: A DELPHI METHOD STUDY

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by

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To my wife, Kristen, who does not know or care about mixed-method or Delphi studies.

Without your love, support, and sacrifice, a work such as this is simply impossible.

You are the epitome of what it means to be a godly wife and mother.

You have done more work than I to make this possible.

I love you!

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PREFACE

Of the many fine people at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, none has been more instrumental in the completion of this research than Dr. Timothy Paul Jones. His classroom instruction has been a pleasant balance of useful information and refreshing authenticity. He also served as a wonderful program mentor, guiding me through the process of research. Beyond that, he has mastered the art of promptly answering email. And while this detail seems silly to some, anyone who has completed a degree from a distance will understand just how important that is!

I would also like to thank Liberty University for giving me the opportunity to pursue this course of study. Liberty is committed to training champions for Christ and allowing its faculty to become better equipped for that task is something to which the school is equally dedicated. In particular, I am indebted to my boss and friend, Dr. Gabriel Etzel. His friendship and leadership along with his interest in this research has been a steady encouragement along the way.

Delphi Studies are possible only with a willing group of anonymous participants. These are not educators who are just beginning to "dip their toes in the waters" of online theological ministry training; they have been doing this for years as professors, administrators, and published authors. So, to the seventeen practitioners of online theological ministry training who spent hours answering my questions, completing my surveys, and encouraging me along the way, thank you!

Lastly, I would like to thank some of the most important people in my life. First, my wife deserves gratitude and praise for enduring the doctoral process over the last couple years. She often bore a burden left by me as I attended to my studies, and she

did it without complaint. I could not have completed this process without her help. Thank you, Kristen! Next, I would like to thank our four children. They are young and do not understand what I am doing, but have never held my time away from them against me. Thank you, Olivia, Chase, Ethan, and Asher! Finally, I owe everything that I am to Jesus and the process of doctoral research is no exception. Thank you, Lord!

This research began in my very first doctoral seminar with a list of possible thesis topics from which I was to choose. Even though I had no idea how unusual it was to have a research topic so early in my program, I was delighted that the subject of online learning was among those elected topics. What began as an opportunity for secondary income six years ago, the area of online theological education has grown into an area of passion for me. I truly believe that when done well, online theological ministry training offers a unique opportunity that is the perfect blend of theoretical instruction and real-time application of that instruction in a church setting.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

A casual scan of the educational landscape seems to indicate that nearly all educational institutions have embraced online learning in recent years and Christian universities and theological seminaries are certainly no exception. A recent study by the Babson Survey Research and Quahog Research Group stated that the number of students taking an online course grew by 570,000 in 2012 to 6.7 million.[1] Among these 6.7 million students are some noteworthy demographics: 67 percent are female, 85 percent are over twenty-four, and 30 percent are enrolled in graduate programs.[2]

Despite tremendous growth in online learning even among theological institutions, casual observation suggests that the decision to offer online programs may not always have been rooted in deep pedagogical or theological reflection. Instead, this choice seems to have been driven by pragmatic considerations. Schools, even theological schools, compete for a share of the growing market of students that see online learning as a viable option to meet their educational goals. However, in this quest, has serious thought been given to the uniqueness of the online learning environment and the potential impact of those differences to how ministry training is accomplished? There is a strong likelihood that schools with residential programs simply repackage these degree

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[1]I. Elaine Allen and Jeff Seaman, "Changing Course: Ten Years of Tracking Online Education in the United States," 4, accessed January 9, 2013, http://www.onlinelearningsurvey.com/reports/changingcourse.pdf.

[2]Noel-Levitz, "2011 Research Report: National Online Learners Priorities Report," 5, accessed January 9, 2013, https://www.noellevitz.com/upload/Papers_and_Research/2011/PSOL_report%202011.pdf. The conventional age range for college students is considered 18 to 24.

programs to be offered on the internet rather than in the classroom, changing only what must be changed in order to allow students to take the class online instead of in person.

This thesis surveyed and synthesized the most recent literature related to online and theological education. Much has been written regarding the best practices for online education.[3] Literature on the topic of theological ministry training is also readily available. There is even literature that brings together the two topics of best practices for online education in theological institutions.[4] However, what research exists that establishes some consensus among experts on the best practices for theological ministry training in an online learning environment? Much is taking place in the name of theological ministry training, but how much consideration has been given to the pedagogical differences

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[3]Arthur W. Bangert, "The Seven Principles of Good Practice: A Framework for Evaluating On-Line Teaching," *Internet and Higher Education* 7, no. 3 (2004): 217-32; Arthur W. Chickering and Zelda F Gamson, "Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education," *Biochemical Education* 17, no. 3 (1989): 140-41; Charles Graham et al., "Seven Principles of Effective Teaching: A Practical Lens for Evaluating Online Courses," *Technology Source* (January 2001), accessed September 19, 2013, http://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ629854; Morris Keeton, "Best Online Instructional Practices: Report of Phase I of an Ongoing Study | The Sloan Consortium," *The Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks* 8, no. 2 (2004): 75-100; Mark A. Maddix, James R. Estep, and Mary E. Lowe, *Best Practices of Online Education: A Guide for Christian Higher Education* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age, 2012); Michael G. Moore and William G. Anderson, *Handbook of Distance Education* (Mahwah, NJ: L. Erlbaum, 2003); Joan Thormann, *The Complete Step-by-Step Guide to Designing and Teaching Online Courses / Joan Thormann, Isa Kaftal Zimmerman* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2012); Marjorie Vai, *Essentials of Online Course Design: A Standards-Based Guide* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Nichole Vasser, "Instructional Design Processes and Traditional Colleges," *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration* 13, no. 4 (December 15, 2010), accessed September 24, 2013, http://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdla/winter134/vasser134.html; Commission on Colleges Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, "Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs," accessed September 19, 2013, www.sacscoc.org/pdf/commadap.pdf.

[4]Richard S. Ascough, "Designing for Online Distance Education: Putting Pedagogy before Technology," *Teaching Theology & Religion* 5, no. 1 (2002): 17-29; Steve Delamarter, "A Typology of the Use of Technology in Theological Education," *Teaching Theology & Religion* 7, no. 3 (2004): 134-40; Steve Delamarter, "Strategic Planning to Enhance Teaching and Learning with Technology," *Teaching Theology & Religion* 9, no. 1 (2006): 9-23; Stephen Lowe, "Building Community and Facilitating Formation in Seminary Distance Education," *Christian Perspectives in Education* 4, no. 1 (2010), accessed September 18, 2013, http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cpe/vol4/iss1/2; Stephen Lowe and Mary Lowe, "Spiritual Formation in Theological Distance Education an Ecosystems Model as a Paradigm," *Christian Education Journal* 7, no. 1 (2010): 85-102; Matthew Ogilvie, "Teaching Theology Online," *Australian EJournal of Theology*, no. 13 (January 1, 2009), accessed September 18, 2013, http://researchonline.nd.edu.au/theo_article/66.

found in the online learning environment? Additionally, questions have been raised about the actual possibility of providing theological ministry training for students without direct face-to-face interaction.[5]

This study intended to provide a clear vision of best practices in the area of theological ministry training at the graduate level by consulting experts in the field. One benefit of this research is that it may serve as a basis for self-evaluation by online theological institutions so as to discover whether or not they are implementing best theological and pedagogical practices. Best practices in the field of theological ministry training were generally be defined as those practices that have taken into account the unique nature of online programs for theological ministry training, which should be the standard for self-assessment by these theological institutions. Additionally, seminaries and graduate schools that consider offering online ministry training degree programs may find this research beneficial as a guide.

Presentation of Research Problem

It seems apparent from the data that online education is here to stay. All indicators are that online education will continue to grow even if it is not at the same rate.[6] Many individuals are able to access undergraduate and graduate programs of study

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[5]Daniel O. Aleshire, "The Future of Theological Education: A Speculative Glimpse at 2032," *A Journal of Theology* 50, no. 4 (Winter 2011): 380-85; Jackson W. Carroll, *Being There: Culture and Formation in Two Theological Schools*, Religion in America Series (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Steve Delamarter, "Theological Educators and Their Concerns about Technology," *Teaching Theology & Religion* 8, no. 3 (2005): 131-43; Alfred P. Rovai, Jason D. Baker, and William F. Cox, "How Christianly Is Christian Distance Higher Education?" *Christian Higher Education* 7, no. 1 (2008): 1-22.

[6]I. Elaine Allen and Jeff Seaman, "Sizing the Opportunity: The Quality and Extent of Online Education in the United States, 2002 and 2003," accessed September 15, 2013, http://sloanconsortium.org/publications/surveys; idem, "Entering the Mainstream: The Quality and Extent of Online Education in the United States, 2003 and 2004," accessed September 15, 2013, http://sloanconsortium.org/publications/surveys; idem, "Growing by Degrees: Online Education in the United States," accessed September 15, 2013, http://sloanconsortium.org/publications/surveys; idem, "Making the Grade: Online Education in the United States, 2006," accessed September 15, 2013, http://sloanconsortium.org/publications/surveys; idem, "Online Nation: Five Years of Growth in Online Learning," accessed September 15, 2013, http://sloanconsortium.org/publications/surveys; idem, "Staying The Course: Online Education in the United States, 2008," accessed September 15, 2013, http://sloanconsortium.org/publications/surveys; idem,

that were simply inaccessible before. The inability to access an education may be due to life circumstances, be it full-time employment that does not allow for attendance in class that runs by a set schedule or not being geographically located near an educational institution that offers the desired program. As a matter of fact, convenience, flexible pacing, and work schedule rank high as enrollment factors for online learners.[7] Online programs allow students to pursue educational goals without quitting their jobs or moving. Those benefits can be a tremendous advantage, for example, when ministers who desire to complete a seminary degree no longer have to resign, uproot their families, and leave their faith communities in order to go back to school.

Theological institutions, therefore, must make a conscious decision as to whether or not they will offer online programs. Casual observation suggests that accredited schools that have yet to offer online programs, or at least online courses, are most likely in the minority. Some schools may only offer degree programs that are partially online. On the other hand, other institutions that offer theological training have chosen to offer fully online degree programs.

Whether a school already offers online degree programs for theological ministry training, or is simply exploring the possibility, what collective research-based conventional wisdom exists on the best practices for online theological training? Do schools that already offer such programs have an entirely pragmatic approach or has there been a thoughtful reflection on the best way to train ministers of the gospel? Can a school that is considering introducing online programs of theological training consult

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"Learning on Demand: Online Education in the United States, 2009," accessed September 15, 2013, http://sloanconsortium.org/publications/surveys; idem, "Class Differences: Online Education in the United States, 2010," accessed September 15, 2013, http://sloanconsortium.org/publications/surveys; idem, "Going the Distance: Online Education in the United States, 2011," accessed September 15, 2013, http://sloanconsortium.org/publications/surveys; idem, "Changing Course."

[7]Noel-Levitz, "National Online Learners Priorities Report," accessed September 15, 2013, https://www.noellevitz.com/upload/Papers_and_Research/2011/PSOL_report%202011.pdf (), 11.

existing research to discern how best to approach that undertaking as is the case for online education in general?[8] According to the literature, no such contribution by a panel of experts in the field exists.

Collaboration among experts could produce a collection of best practices for online theological ministry training and increase the level of quality and consistency in the training students receive at various institutions. If this could be achieved students would be better served, not to mention the churches and various ministries to which these students are called to minister. Beyond this, online education is unique and presents its own set of challenges compared to the traditional classroom. Online theological training is no exception to this reality and a guide that establishes best practices for online theological ministry training would be a tremendous contribution to the existing research.

Current Status of Research Problem

A survey of the literature demonstrated a void that necessitated this research. On one hand, there is a wealth of literature on the general topic of online learning. A number of formative and foundational works exist that are used by accrediting agencies in order to evaluate the effectiveness of online learning programs. Several articles, some of which are written from the perspective of theological education, have aimed at answering the question, "What are the best practices for online education?"[9] Others focus on tackling potential problems created by the distance of online education.[10] There

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[8]Scott L. Howell and Katherine Baker, "Good (Best) Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs: A 10-Year Retrospect," *Distance Learning* 3, no. 1 (2006): 41-47.

[9]Stephen Paul Raybon, "An Evaluation of Best Practices in Online Continuing Theological Education" (Ed.D. diss.,The University of North Carolina at Charlotte, 2012); Arthur Chickering and Zelda Gamson, "Implementing the Seven Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education: Technology as Lever," *Accounting Education News* (Spring 2001): 9-10; Howell and Baker, "Good (Best) Practices"; Sorel Reisman, John Flores, and Denzil Edge*, Electronic Learning Communities: Current Issues and Best Practices* (Greenwich, CT, Information Age, 2003); Glen C. J. Byer et al., "Generative Neo-Cyberculture in the Modern Seminary," *Teaching Theology & Religion* 5, no. 2 (2002): 113-17.

[10]E. C. Boling et al., "Cutting the Distance in Distance Education: Perspectives on What Promotes Positive, Online Learning Experiences," *The Internet and Higher Education* 15, no. 2 (March

is also literature on best practices specifically aimed at assessing online programs.[11]

As the literature review revealed, there is a healthy amount of research on both topics of online learning and theological education. Beyond the existence of a variety of literature regarding online learning in general as well as theological education, there is also a literature base that specifically addresses online learning within the context of theological training. Some of the literature discusses the pedagogy of online theological training.[12] Other research is designed as a means of expressing concerns with attempting theological training in an online environment.[13] Beyond the potential struggle in keeping up with the technology, faculty do have some serious philosophical and theological concerns. One of the most exhaustive works explores the concern of whether or not distance between the student and teacher hinders relational dynamics crucial to a high-quality education.[14] This was a quantitative study and the research indicated a strong sense of teacher-student interaction. This is particularly noteworthy in that a lack of

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2012): 118-26.

[11]Qi Wang, "Quality Assurance-Best Practices for Assessing Online Programs," *International Journal on ELearning* 5, no. 2 (2006): 265-74.

[12]Ascough, "Designing for Online Distance Education," 17-29; Steve Delamarter et al., "Technology, Pedagogy, and Transformation in Theological Education: Five Case Studies," *Teaching Theology & Religion* 10, no. 2 (2007): 64-79; John Gresham, "The Divine Pedagogy as a Model for Online Education," *Teaching Theology & Religion* 9, no. 1 (2006): 24-28.

[13]Delamarter, "Theological Educators and Their Concerns," 131-43; Paul Potai Eng, "The Perceptions of Administrators, Faculty and Students on Web-Based Distance Education in Seminaries" (Ph.D., diss., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2004); Alan C. Hueth, "E-Learning and Christian Higher Education: A War of the Worlds, or Lessons in Reductionism?" *Christian Scholar's Review* 33, no. 4 (Summer 2004): 527-46.

[14]Mark Heinemann, "Teacher-Student Interaction and Learning in On-Line Theological Education, Part I: Concepts and Concerns," *Christian Higher Education* 4, no. 3 (2005): 183-209; idem, "Teacher-Student Interaction and Learning In Online Theological Education, Part II: Additional Theoretical Frameworks," *Christian Higher Education* 4, no. 4 (2005): 277-97; idem, "Teacher-Student Interaction and Learning in On-Line Theological Education, Part III: Methodological Approach," *Christian Higher Education* 5, no. 2 (2006): 161-82; idem, "Teacher-Student Interaction and Learning in Online Theological Education, Part IV: Findings and Conclusions," *Christian Higher Education* 6, no. 3 (2007): 185-206.

student-teacher interaction seems to be a criticism of online learning. Oddly enough however, some literature that discusses theological training of the future, despite being produced by one of the leading accrediting associations for theological schools, fails to even recognize online learning as a significant influence.[15]

Online education for theological ministry training degree programs involves at least three unique features that require special consideration for educational institutions. The first and most obvious of these unique features is the "online" element itself and that is the technological learning platform. When learning moves from a traditional bricks and mortar classroom to the internet, the entire mode of instruction changes. Online learning has generally transitioned from a lecture-driven environment to a learning experience that is highly self-directed. In an online learning environment, the potential weakness of theological education being content-rich, but poor in the areas of educational and developmental theory, is more easily exposed.

The second unique feature of online theological ministry training is the aspect of theological training. In the arena of theological ministry training, the presence of community and spiritual formation are regularly included. Facilitating community and spiritual formation in an online program presents a unique challenge. Another concern relates to whether or not an online degree program is in a position to judge a student's "capacity for ministerial and public leadership" given that the instructors may never interact face-to-face with students.[16] Of course, these questions could probably be raised about residential learning environment too, but the issues of community, spiritual formation, and capacity for ministerial leadership are definite concerns in online learning.

A third unique feature for online learning involvement is the demographic of

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[15]Aleshire, "The Future of Theological Education," 380-85.

[16]The Association of Theological Schools: The Commission on Accrediting, "Section Eight: Guidelines for Evaluating Theological Learning," *Handbook of Accreditation,* accessed September 3, 2013, http://www.ats.edu/accrediting/handbook-accreditation.

the average online student. As mentioned earlier, the online student is generally older than the residential student, which is also true of graduate students. There is a significant literature base for adult learning theory. Additionally, there is a strong case for online learning, based on the demographics of online students, to take an approach that better accounts for the ways adults learn.[17] Students are choosing online learning for reasons of flexibility and convenience. Schools should not ignore these motivating factors, but rather they should acknowledge and factor them into the way in which degree programs and coursework are designed. The danger in this, of course, is that programs can fall prey to pragmatism while the objectives of a ministry degree program are compromised.

In summary, the three unique features of online education for theological ministry training degree programs are the technological nature of online learning, the challenges related to theological training in an online environment, and the typical age of the online learner. Given these unique features, there seemed to be a warrant for research that collaborated with experts in the field in order to establish consensus on the best practices for online theological training. These best practices were aimed at addressing the challenges associated with fulfilling the learning outcomes of ministry training degree programs in a fully online mode of delivery.

Research Question

After surveying and synthesizing the most recent literature related to theological and online education, a void emerged that exposed a lack of clarity on how to meet the challenges of online theological ministry training. No research establishes consensus among experts on the best way forward in training students for ministry in a

[17]Kathleen Yoshino Gustafson, "Assessment of Self-directed Learning in an Online Context in the Community College Setting" (Ed.D. diss.,University of California, San Diego and California State University, San Marcos, 2010). Tzipora Katz, "Adult Online Learning: A Study of Attitude, Motivation, and Engagement" (Ph.D. diss., Capella University, 2010); Rosemary Han Kim, "Self-Directed Learning Management System: Enabling Competency and Self-Efficacy in Online Learning Environments" (Ph.D. diss., The Claremont Graduate University, 2010).

fully online degree program.

By consulting experts in the field, this thesis aimed to discover the consensus regarding the best way forward in the field of online theological ministry training. A major benefit to the research is the establishment of a basis for evaluating online theological institutions as to whether or not they are implementing best theological and pedagogical practices.[18]

This study intended to provide a clear vision of best practices in the area of theological ministry training at the graduate level by consulting experts in the field. The research question that was answered is, "What are the best practices for ministry preparation in online theological education?"

[18]Sharon Bauer Colton, "Developing an Instrument to Analyze the Application of Adult Learning Principles to World Wide Web Distance Education Courses Using the Delphi Technique" (Ed.D. diss., University of Louisville, 2002). Colton developed an excellent instrument for measuring whether or not adult learning principles were being applied to online degree programs.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

What are the best practices for ministry preparation in online theological education? In order to answer that question, a survey and synthesis was conducted regarding the most recent literature concerning the subject. Upon consideration of the research question, two primary and unique categories immediately emerged. The first category was that of online learning. The second category, as one might anticipate, was that of theological education. The first deals with the mode of delivery. The latter involves the subject matter and purpose. In order to demonstrate the need for research that addresses the opening question, an exploration of the literature for both categories needed to be conducted.

The following literature review begins by exploring the category of online learning. Within this category, several sub-categories were explored: statistics related to online learning, adult learning theory and its relationship to online learning, and best practices for online learning. After the literature of online learning was surveyed and synthesized, the category of theological education was explored. Within this category, two main areas of literature emerged: the purpose of theological education as expressed by established organizations and the literature that has been written on the subject of theological education in an online context. As the second half of the category of theological education indicates, the literature review moved from broad categories to a more specific category of literature that relates to the focus of this study, namely theological ministry training in an online degree context.

Best Practices for Online Learning

The topic of ministry preparation in an online theological education context is one that finds itself in the much broader conversation of online learning. Thus, if the literature review was to be a survey that works from general to specific, the review needed to begin with online learning. Given that entire dissertations and books have been written on the topic of online learning, some limitations needed be set for this review. For the purposes of this research, a review of the literature of online learning focused on statistics and demographics related to online learning and learners, and the established best practices of online learning.

Statistics and Demographics of Online Learning

The Sloan Consortium (Sloan-C) "is the leading professional online learning society devoted to advancing quality e-Education learning into the mainstream of education through its community."[1] Since 1992, this non-profit has been "fueling the development of online learning in American higher education."[2] One of the strengths of the Sloan Consortium is its research. From the *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks* to its Survey Reports, Sloan-C is a leader in producing key research on the subject of online learning.[3] In 2003, Sloan-C produced its first comprehensive look at online education in the United States.[4] In the fall of 2002, research showed that 1.6 million students took at least one online course. This represented about 2.6% of all

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[1]The Sloan Consortium, "About Sloan-C," accessed September 24, 2013, http://sloanconsortium.org/aboutus.

[2]Ibid.

[3]The Sloan Consortium, "Research and Publications," accessed September 24, 2013, http://sloanconsortium.org/sloanc_publications ().

[4]I. Elaine Allen and Jeff Seaman, *Entering the Mainstream: The Quality and Extent of Online Education in the United States, 2003 and 2004* (Needham, MA: Babson Survey Research Group, 2004).

enrolled students.[5] Since this initial report, Sloan-C has produced similar annual reports.[6] The most recent release of the Sloan Consortium gives comprehensive data for the past ten years of online education. Despite the fact that overall enrollment in residential higher education declined in 2011 by 0.1% (or 22,013 students) the number of students taking at least one online course grew by over 570,000.[7] Since, the fall of 2002, the number of students taking at least one online course has grown from 1.6 million (9.6% of all enrolled students) to over 6.7 million (32% of all enrolled students) in the fall of 2011. Even in 2002, when Sloan-C first began its research, 28.3% of higher education institutions had no online offerings. In the most recent research, that number is down to 13.5%.[8] Additionally, the percentage of schools offering complete online programs has grown from 34.5% to 62.4%.[9] All of this contributes to the well-established notion that online learning is experiencing undeniable growth. There is no reason to believe that online learning will not continue to grow, which makes research in the area of best practices that much more important. Once one considers the growth rate of online

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[5]Ibid., 17-19.

[6]I. Elaine Allen and Jeff Seaman, *Sizing the Opportunity: The Quality and Extent of Online Education in the United States, 2002 and 2003* (Needham, MA: Babson Survey Research Group, 2003); Allen and Seaman, *Entering the Mainstream*; idem, *Growing by Degrees: Online Education in the United States, 2005* (Needham, MA: Babson Survey Research Group, 2005); idem, *Making the Grade Cover Making the Grade: Online Education in the United States, 2006* (Needham, MA: Babson Survey Research Group, 2006); idem, *Online Nation: Five Years of Growth in Online Learning | The Sloan Consortium* (Needham, MA: Babson Survey Research Group, 2007); idem, *Staying The Course: Online Education in the United States, 2008 | The Sloan Consortium* (Needham, MA: Babson Survey Research Group, 2008); idem, *Learning on Demand: Online Education in the United States, 2009 | The Sloan Consortium* (Needham, MA: Babson Survey Research Group, 2009); idem, *Class Differences: Online Education in the United States, 2010* (Needham, MA: Babson Survey Research Group, 2010); idem, *Going the Distance: Online Education in the United States, 2011* (Needham, MA: Babson Survey Research Group, 2011); idem, *Changing Course: Ten Years of Tracking Online Education in the United States* (Needham, MA: Babson Survey Research Group, 2013).

[7]Allen and Seaman, *Changing Course*, 17.

[8]Ibid., 20.

[9]Ibid.

learning compared to its traditional counterpart, the case for the research becomes even clearer.

Who are these nearly 7 million students enrolled in online learning? The Noel-Levitz National Online Learners Priorities Report gives some helpful information in answering this question: 67% of online students are female, 87% are primarily online students (versus primarily residential students taking an online course), 30% are at the graduate level, and 85% are twenty-five years of age or older.[10] The three highest enrollment factors for online students, in order of importance, are convenience, flexible pacing for completing a program, and work schedule.[11] These factors are typical for adult learners, as is discussed later in the literature review.

The data available on the growth of online learning both in undergraduate and graduate programs helped to validate the necessity of the research. The question of best practices for online learning in the context of theological ministry preparation is made more urgent by understanding how many students are choosing to pursue their degrees online.

Best Practices for Online Learning

When considering the broad category for best practices in online learning, at least three questions needed to be asked. First, what impact should knowledge of the online learner have on the development of best practices for online learning? Second, what are the identifiable best practices for online learning? Third, how do policies and regulations in the area of accreditation fit into best practices? In one sense, accreditation policies are also considered best practices in that they are important enough to be required by accrediting agencies. In another sense, they should be viewed as a baseline

[10]Noel-Levitz, "2011 Research Report: National Online Learners Priorities Report," accessed January 9, 2013, https://www.noellevitz.com/upload/Papers_and_Research/2011/PSOL_report%202011.pdf, 5.

[11]Ibid., 11.

in that they do not address more pedagogically relevant concerns.

Online practices and adult learning theory. What impact should knowledge of the online learner have on the development of best practices for online learning? Based on research already reviewed, it is known that the average age of the undergraduate online learner is thirty-four.[12] If the average age of the undergraduate online learner is thirty-four, it stands to reason that the average age of the graduate online learner is older. But even if the average age is the same, the conclusion still applies in that online graduate learners are older than typical college students.

Since the 1920s, the question of how adults learn has been a focus of scholars.[13] Eventually, "andragogy" became the term people used to describe how adults learn. Malcolm Knowles describes the arrival at this term as something that he picked up from European adult educators and then coined in an article in the mid-1960s.[14] There are several works of Malcolm Knowles that speak extensively to his study on the topic of andragogy.[15] Merriam gives five assumptions that underlie andragogy; all of which are relevant to the best practices of online learning:

> The five assumptions underlying andragogy describe the adult learner as someone who (1) has an independent self-concept and who can direct his or her own learning, (2) has accumulated a reservoir of life experiences that is a rich resource for learning, (3) has learning needs closely related to changing social roles, (4) is problem-centered and interested in immediate application of knowledge, and (5) is

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[12]Classes and Careers, "Student Demographics," accessed January 10, 2013, http://www.classesandcareers.com/education/infographics/student-demographics-infographic/.

[13]Sharan B. Merriam, "Andragogy and Self-Directed Learning: Pillars of Adult Learning Theory," *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 2001, no. 89 (2001): 3.

[14]Malcolm Shepherd Knowles, *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: From Pedagogy to Andragogy*, rev. and updated ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Cambridge Adult Education, 1980), 42.

[15]Malcolm Shepherd Knowles, *Self-Directed Learning: A Guide for Learners and Teachers* (Chicago: Association Press, 1975); Malcolm S. Knowles, *The Adult Learner: The Definitive Classic in Adult Education and Human Resource Development*, 6th ed. (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2005); Malcolm Shepherd Knowles, *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: Andragogy in Action*, The Jossey-Bass Management Series (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1984).

motivated to learn by internal rather than external factors.[16]

Suffice it to say that there are differences between children and adults (generally speaking) when it comes to how they learn. Given what is known of the average age of the online learner, this should directly impact the best practices for online learning, and it has.[17] With an understanding of the typical online learner, and based on existing adult learning theory, Frey and Alman offer ten extensive recommendations for those who develop and teach online courses:

1. State clear expectations:
   Provide detailed syllabus with schedule, grading criteria, assignments, number of postings per week, deadlines, office hours.
   Avoid changing aspects of the course once it begins.
   State contingency plans for when the technology fails.
2. Incorporate multiple forms of feedback into course:
   Use specific, consistent feedback from both learners and instructor.
   Grade assignments with specific, stated criteria.
   Provide both general and specific feedback to individuals, teams, and the whole class.
3. Provide regular communication to individual learners and the group:
   Respond to email within 24 hours.
   Personalize the class setting.
   Use friendly, informal writing style.
   Make weekly announcements or updates.
   Establish weekly online office hours.
   Assure learners that discussion board postings are being read.

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[16]Merriam, "Andragogy and Self-Directed Learning," 5.

[17]D. Billington, "Seven Characteristics of Highly Effective Adult Learning Programs," *New Horizons for Learning*, 1996, accessed January 1, 2013, http://www.newhorizons.org/lifelong/workplace/billington.htm; Ralph Brockett, "Is It Time to Move On? Reflections on a Research Agenda for Self-Directed Learning in the 21st Century" (paper presented at the Proceedings of the 41st Annual Adult Education Research Conference, Vancouver, BC, 2000), accessed January 1, 2013, http://www.adulterc.org/Proceedings/2000/brockettr1-final.pdf; Ralph G. Brockett et al., "Two Decades of Literature on Self-Directed Learning: A Content Analysis" (February 4, 2000), accessed January 1, 2013, http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED449348; Stephen Brookfield, "Self-Directed Learning, Political Clarity, and the Critical Practice of Adult Education," *Adult Education Quarterly* 43, no. 4 (December 1, 1993): 227-42; Sharon Bauer Colton, "Developing an Instrument to Analyze the Application of Adult Learning Principles to World Wide Web Distance Education Courses Using the Delphi Technique" (Ed.D. diss., University of Louisville, 2002); Barbara A. Frey and Susan Webreck Alman, "Applying Adult Learning Theory to the Online Classroom," *New Horizons in Adult Education and Human Resource Development* 17, no. 1 (2003); Lucy Madsen Guglielmino, "Development of the Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale" (Ed.D. diss., University of Georgia, 1977); Merriam, "Andragogy and Self-Directed Learning"; Liyan Song and Janette Hill, "A Conceptual Model for Understanding Self-directed Learning in Online Environments," *Journal of Interactive Online Learning* 6, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 27-42.

Provide information for telephone, fax, and U.S. post mail.
Limit class size to allow for effective management.
Consider using TA to monitor discussion board or team discussions.
Be clear and succinct.
Prepare students for working in small groups or team by providing objectives, assigning roles.
Require regular participation for credit.
Encourage students to respond as well as post.

4. Provide learner flexibility and control:
   Use asynchronous email and discussion board for anytime/anyplace participation.
   Chunk learning into small manageable units or subunits that can be completed in relatively short amounts of time (learners will constantly be coming and going into the course - they need logical stopping/ starting points).
   Allow learner choice of assignments, projects, or research topics (consider learning contract).
   Incorporate text "signals" such as "this is a long unit," "this is a very important concept", "proceed to Lesson 6."
   Allow students early access to the course and mail the syllabus several weeks before the course begins.

5. Incorporate motivational strategies to encourage students:
   Tell why topic or link is important.
   Provide practical info with examples.
   Link new topics to what has already been discussed or read.

6. Offer a variety of forms of learner support:
   Consider a cohort group that completes program as a group.
   Provide technical support.
   Provide learning skills support.
   Provide cohort support.
   Provide departmental support.

7. Maintain the focus of content within units:
   Provide objectives and an outline at the beginning of each unit.
   Limit hyperlinks to only a few of the very best.
   Place additional links at the end of units for enrichment.
   Summarize key points of units and discussions for closure – debrief, then re-focus on next topic.

8. Provide consistency among courses:
   Maintain same format throughout program (i.e., all assignments found under the same course heading).
   Create pdf printable files for long articles.
   Use the same headings throughout units (perhaps objectives, introduction, content or lecture notes, readings, activities, optional resources, conclusion).

9. Consider limitations of adults:
   Maintain large, easy to read fonts.
   Use clear, bold colors.
   Use a variety of graphics, images, tables.
   Consider different learning styles.
   Be aware of ADA compliance guidelines.

10. Respect learner roles and life experiences:
    Assume role of facilitator more than "expert."

Recognize diverse backgrounds of adults.
Apply concepts to tasks or problems.
Use a friendly, first person style of writing.
Ask for introductions that include professional background and some personal information (also provide this type of introduction).[18]

Much of the above recommendations are repeated in the literature on best practices, as will be seen later in this literature review. In her 2002 Ed.D. dissertation, Sharon Colton developed an instrument that is designed to analyze the application of adult learning principles in online courses.[19] This Delphi study used existing adult learning principles to develop the Adult Learning Instrument and is a useful tool for self-assessment with regard to adult learning in online courses.

What is known of the typical online learner, adults in their 30s, should directly impact best practices for online learning. This knowledge serves as a baseline for an understanding of the identifiable best practices for online learning.

Online best practices that incorporate adult learning theory. What are the identifiable best practices for online learning? Given an understanding of the adult online learner, best practices for online learning should combine the worlds of online instruction with adult learning theory.

A foundational work in the area of good practice for education is that of Chickering and Gamson.[20] Because of their popularity, their seven principles have become a benchmark for online programs as well.[21] The seven principles are that good practice (1) encourages student-faculty contact, (2) encourages cooperation among

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[18]Frey and Alman, "Applying Adult Learning Theory," 10-11.

[19]Colton, "Developing an Instrument."

[20]Arthur W Chickering and Zelda F Gamson, "Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education," *Biochemical Education* 17, no. 3 (1989): 140-41.

[21]Charles Graham et al., "Seven Principles of Effective Teaching: A Practical Lens for Evaluating Online Courses.," *Technology Source* (January 2001), accessed January 1, 2013, http://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ629854; The Institute for Higher Education Policy, "Quality on the Line, Benchmarks for Success in Internet-Based Education," *Tribal College* 13, no. 3 (March 31, 2002): 50.

students, (3) encourages active learning, (4) gives prompt feedback, (5) emphasizes time on task, (6) communicates high expectations, and (7) respects diverse talents and ways of learning.[22] In 2004, Morris Keeton compared best practices for online courses to that of face-to-face instruction.[23] His article, through extensive research, developed eight principles for adult education. These principles partially overlap Chickering and Gamson's seven practices. The aim of the article was to determine in what ways best practices of online instruction are the same or different from face-to-face instruction. One of the most useful outcomes of the research was the development of an instructional practices inventory. Each of the eight principles for adult education is expanded, giving the instructional designer a map for more effective course creation:

> (1) Make learning goals and one or more paths to them clear. (2) Use extensive and deliberate practice. (3) Provide prompt and constructive feedback. (4) Provide an optimal balance of challenge and support that is tailored to the individual student's readiness and potential. (5) Elicit active and critical reflection by learners on their growing experience base. (6) Link inquiries to genuine problems or issues of high interest to the learners (thus enhancing motivation and accelerating their learning). (7) Develop learners' effectiveness as learners early in their education. (8) Create an institutional environment that supports and encourages inquiry.[24]

Bangert used the seven principles of Chickering and Gamson to develop an online teaching evaluation instrument.[25] Student evaluations are not unusual, but Bangert argues that typical evaluations designed to give instructors feedback do not address these seven principles of good practice. Seven helpful hints are given in a 2005 article on the research of how to teach online:

> (1) Provide helpful resources on the course site. (2) Let students have control over the pace at which they move through the course. (3) Have lots of discussions. (4)

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[22]Chickering and Gamson, "Seven Principles for Good Practice," 140-41.

[23]Morris Keeton, "Best Online Instructional Practices: Report of Phase I of an Ongoing Study | The Sloan Consortium," *The Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks* 8, no. 2 (April 2004): 75-100.

[24]Ibid., 96-98.

[25]Arthur W. Bangert, "The Seven Principles of Good Practice: A Framework for Evaluating On-Line Teaching," *Internet and Higher Education* 7, no. 3 (January 2004): 217-32.

> Provide timely feedback to students about their performance. (5) Provide technical support for students. (6) Online study aids and step-by-step presentation may not make much difference in achievement. (7) Evaluation can be enhanced in online courses.[26]

Although the concept of theological ministry training in an online context is a matter to be discussed later in the literature review, it is worth noting that there is at least one work on the subject of best-practices for online learning in Christian Education.[27] While the value of the book lies primarily in the section on theological foundations for online education, it also addresses much of what has already been discussed with regard to best practices. Although this section is present in the book, it does not significantly advance the discussion.

The literature on the best practices for online learning generally falls into two categories. First, there are those identified as addressing course design. In addition to what has already been mentioned, there are some other key resources specifically for the design of online courses.[28] The second primary category is quality of instruction. Much of what falls into this category has already been highlighted; however, when the course design is already in place the role of the professor falls mainly to the areas of quality of feedback on assignments, weekly announcements, prompt responses to email, and facilitation of group discussion. The best practices for online learning are those that factor in principles of adult learning theory, instructional design, and quality of instruction. However, there is another category to review in relation to best practices for online learning: policies and regulations for accreditation.

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[26]Mary K. Tallent-Runnels et al., "How to Teach Online: What the Research Says," *Distance Learning* 2, no. 1 (2005): 21-27.

[27]Mark A. Maddix, James R. Estep, and Mary E. Lowe, *Best Practices of Online Education: a Guide for Christian Higher Education* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age, 2012).

[28]Joan Thormann, *The Complete Step-by-Step Guide to Designing and Teaching Online Courses* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2012); Marjorie Vai, *Essentials of Online Course Design: A Standards-based Guide* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Nichole Vasser, "Instructional Design Processes and Traditional Colleges," *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration* 13, no. 4 (December 15, 2010), accessed January 1, 2013, http://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdla/winter134/vasser134.html.

Online practices and accrediting agencies. How do policies and regulations in the area of accreditation fit into best practices? Within this category of best practices, there are a few accrediting agencies worth exploring that address policies and regulatory procedures. In the requirements of affiliation and standards for accreditation, the Middle States Commission on Higher Education makes certain stipulations that go beyond general learning theories, instructional design, or quality of instruction best-practice recommendations. Lists such as these from established accrediting agencies, with regard to program and course integrity, are worth noting. The Middle States Commission on Higher Education gives a summary of their expectations with regard to "fundamental elements of distance education, distributed learning, and correspondence education."[29] Distance courses must meet institution-wide standards for quality with regard to instruction, student learning, rigor, and effectiveness with comparability to residential counterparts when applicable. Courses must be consistent with the school's mission. Distance programs must be thought through in all legal aspects. Distance programs must clearly identify and communicate appropriate program learning outcomes. Distance courses must be offered often enough to allow students to finish their programs in a stated timeframe. Beyond specifics of courses and programs, the guidelines also stipulate standards with regard to cheating prevention, learning resources (such as an online library), faculty training, infrastructural support, and resource analysis.[30]

In a 2012 policy statement by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, similar guidelines are given. The need is communicated for schools to be able to verify that students who register are indeed the students taking the courses. A general statement is made that distance education should

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[29]Middle States Commission on Higher Education, *Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education: Requirements of Affiliation and Standards for Accreditation* (Philadelphia: Middle States Commission on Higher Education, 2011), 58.

[30]Ibid., 58-59.

adhere to *The Principles of Accreditation*, which is essentially their manual for accreditation.[31] After this general statement, however, more specific policies are developed with regard to issues uniquely characteristic of distance education. Similar to the Middle States Commission on Higher Education they deal with faculty oversight, use of technology, support services, program length, and compatibility with the school's mission. One area that appears to be unique is the requirement that the school determine a sound practice for determining equivalence to a residential semester hour.[32]

In an effort to view accreditation that is specifically relevant to theological education, it is worth noting that the Association of Theological Schools has given specific guidance with regard to distance learning in part five of their *Handbook of Accreditation*.[33] First, as with the others, there is a sense in which all standards that apply to residential courses and programs also apply to distance though from a different perspective. Next, there are other areas already seen such as the need to verify that students who register are also students who do the course work, compatibility with the school's mission, faculty development and credentials, etc. [34] There are two other standards that are mentioned, however, that stand out as unique to the others. First, the Association of Theological Schools is concerned specifically about the standard of

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[31]Southern Association of Colleges and Schools: Commission on Colleges, "Distance and Correspondence Education: Policy Statement," accessed September 3, 2013, http://sacscoc.org/pdf/Distance%20and%20correspondence%20policy%20final.pdf (), 1-2. This policy statement is intended to supplement "The Principles of Accreditation" by specifically addressing distance learning policies. Idem, "The Principles of Accreditation: Foundations for Quality Enhancement," accessed September 3, 2013, http://www.sacscoc.org/principles.asp. This manual is an extensive guide on accreditation procedures.

[32]Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, "Distance and Correspondence Education," 2.

[33]The Association of Theological Schools: The Commission on Accrediting, "Section Five: Using the Commission Standards of Accreditation in Institutional Evaluation," in *Handbook of Accreditation,* accessed September 3, 2013, http://www.ats.edu/accrediting/handbook-accreditation.

[34]Ibid., 16-17.

theological curriculum,[35] which will be elaborated on later in the literature review. Sufficient for now is the identity of this policy with regard to distance education as something unique from other accrediting agencies. A second unique feature is a statement of concern that appears to prohibit distance courses from constituting "a significant portion of a degree program."[36] It is worth mentioning at this point, that The Association of Theological Schools is beginning to allow for full online graduate programs. There are even some schools that have been granted an exception which allows them to offer a fully online Master of Divinity program.[37] The idea that seminaries and graduate schools may be granted exceptions that allow for fully online Master of Divinity programs makes this best practices research timely. Neither of the other accrediting agencies reviewed seemed to indicate any kind of limitation as to whether or not an entire program can exist online.

A review of the literature on best practices for online learning comprises one of two major sections in this literature review. In order to understand online learning, online learners must be studied. The demographic statistics help the researcher understand that online learning is growing steadily and is made up largely of adults that are older than the conventional age for college (eighteen to twenty-four). Given that the average age of the online learner is thirty-four, theories related to how adults learn are highly relevant to any discussion on best practices for online learning. Beyond answering the question, "Who is the online learner?" best practices for online learning can be seen as that which builds on the already-established best practices for conventional learning. Literature that deals with best practices for online learning tends to build on what is already established by

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[35]Ibid., 17.

[36]Ibid.

[37]John Dart, "Seminaries Expand Online Options," *The Christian Century*, September 12, 2013, accessed July 30, 2014, http://www.christiancentury.org/article/2013-09/seminaries-expand-online-options.

speaking to that which is unique to the world of online instruction, namely research on the instructional design of courses and quality of instruction in online courses. Lastly, it is important to remember the critical voice of accrediting agencies that speak to matters of policy and procedure guarding the integrity of academic programs by ensuring comparability between residential and online programs, guarding against cheating, establishing rigor, and requiring assessment that reviews courses and programs to ensure that outcomes are being met.

It is apparent from a review of the literature that the best practices for online learning are well-established.[38] But what are the best practices for ministry preparation in online theological education? In order to answer this question, a review must be conducted of the literature on theological ministry training.

Theological Ministry Training

Now that the broader category of best practices for online learning has been reviewed, the narrower category of theological ministry training can be explored. Within the category of theological ministry training, two main areas of literature emerge. The first of these two categories is the purpose of theological education as expressed by established organizations such as theological seminaries. The second of these two categories is the literature that has been written on the subject of theological education in an online context. As the second half of the category of theological education indicates, the literature review moves from broad categories of theological ministry training to a more specific category of literature of online theological ministry training that relates to

[38]Morris Keeton, "Best Online Instructional Practices: Report of Phase I of an Ongoing Study | The Sloan Consortium," *The Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks* 8, no. 2 (April 2004): 75-100; Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, "Best Practices For Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs"; *Best Practices of Online Education: A Guide for Christian Higher Education* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age, 2012); Marjorie Vai, *Essentials of Online Course Design: A Standards-Based Guide* (New York: Routledge, 2011); "Quality on the Line, Benchmarks for Success in Internet-Based Education," *Tribal College* 13, no. 3 (March 31, 2002): 50; Charles Graham et al., "Seven Principles of Effective Teaching: A Practical Lens for Evaluating Online Courses," *Technology Source*, January 2001, accessed September 19, 2013, http://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ629854.

the focus of this study.

The Purpose of Theological Education

In order to discuss the narrower subject of theological training in an online learning environment, the broader context of theological training in general needs to be explored. For sake of definition, this literature review will be examining theological education at the seminary or graduate level. This is simply because that is the focus of the research population. The simple question for which an answer is sought is "What are the aims or purposes of theological ministry training?" Or, as it might be more technically articulated, "What are the learning outcomes that theological seminaries seek to produce in students?"

It seems logical to begin with the Association of Theological Schools (ATS). ATS is comprised of more than 270 graduate schools of theology. These schools represent nearly 74,500 students and 7,200 faculty members.[39] If an organization this large, whose mission is "to promote the improvement and enhancement of theological schools to the benefit of communities of faith and the broader public" has anything to say about the aims or purposes of theological ministry training, it should be noted.[40] ATS also oversees The Commission on Accrediting and their *Handbook of Accreditation* gives a very specific guide for evaluating theological learning in section eight.[41] First, it should be noted that ATS is similar to other accrediting bodies in rightfully noting that every school should be able to "demonstrate the extent to which students have met the various

[39]The Association of Theological Schools, "About ATS," accessed September 25, 2013, http://www.ats.edu/about/overview.

[40]Ibid.

[41]The Association of Theological Schools: The Commission on Accrediting, "Section Eight: Guidelines for Evaluating Theological Learning," in *Handbook of Accreditation,* accessed September 3, 2013, http://www.ats.edu/accrediting/handbook-accreditation.

goals of the degree program."[42] ATS chooses to highlight and focus on the Master of Divinity (M.Div.) program "since that program is offered by virtually all Commission-accredited schools."[43] ATS stipulates that the M.Div. student be educated in four areas: (1) religious heritage, (2) cultural context, (3) personal and spiritual formation, and (4) capacity for ministerial and public leadership.[44] Expanded statements on each of these four areas follow:

1. *Religious heritage:* The program shall provide structured opportunities to develop a comprehensive and discriminating understanding of the religious heritage.
2. *Cultural context:* The program shall provide opportunities to develop a critical understanding of and creative engagement with the cultural realities and structures within which the church lives and carries out its mission.
3. *Personal and spiritual formation:* The program shall provide opportunities through which the student may grow in personal faith, emotional maturity, moral integrity, and public witness. Ministerial preparation includes concern with the development of capacities—intellectual and affective, individual and corporate, ecclesial and public—that are requisite to a life of pastoral leadership.
4. *Capacity for ministerial and public leadership:* The program shall provide theological reflection on and education for the practice of ministry. These activities should cultivate the capacity for leadership in both ecclesial and public contexts.[45]

ATS further explains that due to these four areas it is the very nature and design of the M.Div. program to make specific stipulations as to the location of the learning environment. More specifically, "At least one year of full-time academic study or its equivalent shall be completed at the main campus of the school awarding the degree or at an extension site of the institution that has been approved for M.Div. degree-granting status."[46] ATS does not suggest that every school must have the exact same

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[42]Ibid.

[43]Ibid., 2.

[44]Association of Theological Schools, "General Institutional Standards," in *Handbook of Accreditation* (Pittsburgh: Association of Theological Schools, 2012), G40–G42. Each of these four outcomes are elaborated upon in great detail.

[45]Ibid.

[46]Ibid., G–41. As mentioned previously, ATS stipulates that exceptions may be granted and at

outcomes. The outcomes might be different in wording, emphasis, and even content; however, these four broad areas must be present.[47] For each of the four categories, ATS does indeed dictate specific areas. For example, under religious heritage, the sub-categories of Scripture, faith community (theological/social), and Christian history are listed.[48] How might a seminary articulate the M.Div. program outcomes in order to cover these four areas? One example is the list of M.Div. learning outcomes for The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary:

> Students will be able to demonstrate a growing, Christlike character and a sense of God's calling to ministry.
>
> Students will be able to understand the Christian worldview and have a global vision for fulfilling the Great Commission.
>
> Students will be able to demonstrate significant knowledge of the Bible, interpret Scripture's original meaning, and apply Scripture to contemporary situations.
>
> Students will be able to integrate systematic and historical theology into a larger biblical framework.
>
> Students will be able to display a biblical vision for ministry and lead with humble authority.
>
> Students will be able to preach/ teach Scripture clearly and passionately so as to engage the mind and move the heart.[49]

Another example is the M.Div. Student Learning Goals of Westminster Theological Seminary:

1. Exhibit a deep love for the triune God, his word, his truth and his church and a Christ-like humility in relation to others.
2. Be able to exegete the text of scripture as given in the original languages.
3. Be able to understand and articulate the system of doctrine contained in the Westminster Standards and its importance for biblical, systematic, and practical theology, and integrate this system of doctrine into life and ministry.

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least six ATS schools have been permitted to offer fully online M.Div. programs.

[47]The Association of Theological Schools, "Section Eight," 5.

[48]Ibid., 6.

[49]The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, "Master of Divinity," accessed September 25, 2013, http://www.sbts.edu/theology/degree-programs/mdiv/.

4. Be able to understand the particularity of cultural context and apply God's eternal word to a changing world and to particular individuals and congregations.
5. Understand the biblical principles of leadership and demonstrate potential for becoming a future leader in the church.[50]

Each of these two M.Div. programs, accredited by ATS, has a different way articulating the four required areas, and each has its own areas of emphasis.

It is not the purpose of this review to offer a theological or pedagogical critique of various seminaries, but to show, by way of comparison, the various approaches that a seminary might take with regard to theological ministry training. The dilemma facing ATS and online programs is one of its own creation in that it has established the four areas that must be thoroughly addressed by the member schools' M.Div. programs.[51] Legitimate questions are raised about the nature of theological education in an online context. The question is not so much, can theology be taught in an online setting, but is more along the lines of how an online program can sufficiently address areas such as personal and spiritual formation. Since these areas are seen by many as essential to theological ministry training, the question of whether or not fully online M.Div. programs can adequately equip and evaluate students according to the guidelines seems to remain in the minds of many.

Theological Training in an Online Context

Although there is no research that demonstrates best practices for online theological ministry preparation, there is significant research on the topic of online theological education. In a 2006 address at the June ATS Biennial Meeting, Daniel Aleshire spoke about the future of accreditation with regard to theological education. His

[50]Westminster Theological Seminary, "6.4 Master of Divinity," accessed September 25, 2013, http://www.wts.edu/academics/programs/divinity.html.

[51]It is worth noting here that while M.Div. programs may serve as an example for sake of discussion in this research, the research is not delimited strictly to the M.Div. program. Rather, the research aims to address a variety of seminary or graduate theological ministry preparation degrees.

address was not overtly about online education but he did make several references that are worth mentioning. While discussing professors at seminaries, he noted that part-time and adjunct faculty are growing faster than full-time faculty.[52] He also discussed the residential requirements in the M.Div. programs and how that has changed over the years to accommodate distance learning.[53] At that time, one year of resident education was still required, but it raises the issue of the changing landscape of theological education. This was in reference to new models of online education that keep smaller numbers of full-time employees and make use of adjuncts. In a similar, more recent address, Aleshire spoke of the arrival of the future as something much sooner than expected and how this changing landscape demands that theological schools also change.[54] Various items of change are discussed with a very small part being devoted to educational practices.[55] Some may find it difficult to believe, but an article on changing theological education that was written by the leader of the Association of Theological Schools within the last three years made no direct statement about online education. That omission in this article is truly out of sync with the literature as entire literature reviews have been written on the subject.[56] This is noteworthy because there is disagreement as well as concern in the world of theological education when it comes to online theological training.[57]

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[52]Daniel Aleshire, "Thinking Out Loud about the Unknowable: The Future of Accreditation in Support of Theological Education," June 2006, 5, accessed January 1, 2013, http://www.yumpu.com/en/document/view/11315719/thinking-out-loud-about-the-unknowable-the-future-of-.

[53]Ibid., 7.

[54]Daniel Aleshire, "The Future Has Arrived: Changing Theological Education in a Changed World.," 2010, 1, accessed January 1, 2013, http://theologicaleducation.net/articles/view.htm?id=120#sthash.Ujdnx9uU.dpuf.

[55]Ibid., 5.

[56]Linda Cannell, "A Review of Literature on Distance Education," *Theological Education* 36, no. 1 (1999): 1-72.

[57]Steve Delamarter, "Theological Educators and Their Concerns About Technology," *Teaching Theology & Religion* 8, no. 3 (2005): 131-43.

The aim of this final section is to review key literature on the topic. In reviewing the most recent literature on theological training in an online context, four general categories emerge, each of which will be addressed in this section of the review Those categories are (1) technology, (2) pedagogy, (3) community, and (4) formation.

Technology, the medium of online theological ministry training. Although technology in relation to online learning in general has already been discussed, there was sufficient enough literature on the topic of technology and theological education to warrant a review. In an article that summarizes interviews with 45 institutions of theological education, Steve Delamarter first discusses theological educators' concerns about technology. Examples of concerns are the cost of the technology, the time needed to learn technology, a lack of desire to learn a new way of doing things, and whether there is even a market for distance education.[58] Delamarter followed this article with another that discusses the path ahead when it comes to technology and theological education. Much of what he discusses has been observed in the years since the article was published. His admonishment for everyone to embrace technology as something here to stay is especially important.[59] Yet another article by Delamarter explores the obstacles to good strategic planning when it comes to theological education and technology.[60] An additional helpful article, in which Delamarter is one of six contributors, gives insight into the firsthand experiences of some faculty members.[61] Lastly, Mary Hess argues that technology is an aid for theological educators. A few

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[58]Ibid., 131-35.

[59]Steve Delamarter, "Theological Educators, Technology and the Path Ahead," *Teaching Theology & Religion* 8, no. 1 (2005): 51-55.

[60]Steve Delamarter, "Strategic Planning to Enhance Teaching and Learning with Technology," *Teaching Theology & Religion* 9, no. 1 (2006): 9-23.

[61]Steve Delamarter et al., "Technology, Pedagogy, and Transformation in Theological Education: Five Case Studies," *Teaching Theology & Religion* 10, no. 2 (2007).

examples are that it provides a richer learning environment, provides greater opportunity for collaboration, gives teachers access to information about what knowledge students possess when they enter coursework, provides access to learning materials, and overcomes geographical constraints.[62] Theological education and technology have its detractors; however, in this regard theology is not really much different from other academic disciplines. Technology has its advantages and disadvantages, but with regard to an online learning environment, it is indispensable.

Pedagogy, instruction in the online theological ministry training. Another primary topic that emerges within the scope of theological education in an online learning context is pedagogy. Delamarter lays out several pedagogical and educational concerns for theological education and technology. Some examples are rampant cheating, loss of spontaneity, course material being impossible or impractical to teach at a distance, and the loss of the library experience. [63] Richard Ascough argues for an essential order in that it is not either sound pedagogical principles or learning that makes use of technology, but rather that the sound pedagogical principles must be the driving force behind the use of technology.[64] Mary Hess argues for the use of technology with regard to both the pedagogical and theological concerns that is committed "to remember those who have come before us, and honor what they have learned." [65] In a more recent article on the subject, Matthew Ogilvie makes the case that the technology is eliminating old distinctions such as "non face-to-face" versus "face-to-face." Technology is helping

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[62]Mary Hess, "What Difference Does It Make? Digital Technology in the Theological Classroom," *Teaching Theology and Religion* 5, no. 1 (2002): 30-38, 30.

[63]Delamarter, "Theological Educators and Their Concerns," 135-37.

[64]Richard S. Ascough, "Designing for Online Distance Education: Putting Pedagogy Before Technology," *Teaching Theology & Religion* 5, no. 1 (2002): 17-29.

[65]Mary E. Hess, "Pedagogy and Theology in Cyberspace: 'All That We Can't Leave Behind," *Teaching Theology & Religion* 5, no. 1 (2002): 30-38.

breach the distance. However, he also argues that online education will not ultimately become like residential education. It will become its own unique kind of pedagogy.[66] Most notably, Ogilvie addresses the distance "problem" with online learning when he asks,

> Wherein lies the "distance" in distance education? Is the "distance" between the student and the institution, or between the student and the community one serves or will serve? Such a question challenges our traditional educational paradigms. It would seem that onsite education creates distance between a student and his or her community, and that the opposite may also apply.[67]

Lastly, an article found in virtually every bibliography on the subject of online theological education is that of John Gresham on the topic of the divine pedagogy. In this article, Gresham discusses four aspects of the divine pedagogy that can reasonably be seen in an online learning context: (1) incarnational aspects of divine pedagogy are not limited to physical presence, (2) ecclesial or communitarian aspects of divine pedagogy can be achieved in rich discussion groups, (3) active participation aspects of divine pedagogy can be actively promoted in an online context, and (4) symbolic aspects of divine pedagogy can be utilized in the media-rich environment of online learning. [68] Online education certainly raises legitimate pedagogical concerns, but the research seems to indicate either that there are solutions to these problems or that they are not problems unique to online learning.

Community, the context of online theological ministry training. A third category is related somewhat to pedagogy in that it deals with the community aspect of theological education. If pedagogy is focused on the approach to education from the

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[66]Matthew Ogilvie, "Teaching Theology Online," *Australian EJournal of Theology* no. 13 (January 1, 2009): 27, accessed January 15, 2013, http://researchonline.nd.edu.au/theo_article/66.

[67]Ibid.

[68]John Gresham, "The Divine Pedagogy as a Model for Online Education," *Teaching Theology & Religion* 9, no. 1 (2006): 27-28.

professor, then community can be seen as the context in which the learning takes place. The question is whether or not real community can be achieved in an online learning environment. When it comes to defining the concept of the online theological community, Palka's research is very useful.[69] Mary Hess argues against the "disembodiedness" accusations of online learning by articulating that online learning calls for a whole new kind of learning. She exceptionally points out that physical presence in a building does not in and of itself create community.[70] Thomas Esselman argues that online learning can foster a "wisdom community" in that online teaching can "nurture the transformation of mind and heart expected of those preparing for church ministry."[71] A research article discovered that residential programs feel a stronger sense of community in the area of the social dimensions. However, in areas of shared values and things of that nature, no significant difference was discovered.[72] Finally, Lowe discusses the dilemma that distance learning faces if indeed physical presence results in a higher quality of learning.[73] Lowe astutely observes that the critical ingredient of community is not necessarily physical presence but the "ongoing exchange between students and students, students and faculty, as well as students and course materials."[74] In other words, if these ingredients are present in online education, then community

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[69]John Palka, "Defining a Theological Education Community," *International Review of Research in Open & Distance Learning* 5, no. 3 (December 2004): 1-6.

[70]Mary Hess, "Attending to Embodiedness in Online, Theologically Focused Learning," accessed September 18, 2013, http://www.academia.edu/666289/Attending_to_embodiedness_in_online_theologically_focused_learning.

[71]Thomas Esselman, "The Pedagogy of the Online Wisdom Community: Forming Church Ministers in a Digital Age," *Teaching Theology & Religion* 7, no. 3 (2004): 169.

[72]Alfred P. Rovai, Jason D. Baker, and William F. Cox, "How Christianly Is Christian Distance Higher Education?" *Christian Higher Education* 7, no. 1 (2008): 1-22.

[73]Stephen Lowe, "Building Community and Facilitating Formation in Seminary Distance Education," *Christian Perspectives in Education* 4, no. 1 (December 28, 2010): 1.

[74]Ibid., 28.

exists. On the contrary, despite physical presence, if these ingredients do not exist in a residential environment, then it could be argued that community does not exist. There are advantages to physical presence but it appears to be a fallacy to argue that presence automatically results in community or that the lack of presences automatically negates community. If nothing else, it seems to be a relatively simple task to disprove the null hypothesis that some writers try to prove by saying that community cannot exist in online learning.

Spiritual formation, the goal for the learner in online theological ministry training. The fourth category that emerges in a review of theological education in an online context is that of spiritual formation. If technology is the medium, and community is the context for learning, and pedagogy focuses on the teaching (from teacher to student), then spiritual formation is the result of what a student receives in the learning process, or, as Forrest and Lamport described it, "How professors might spiritually influence their students."[75]

Both the issues of community and spiritual formation seem to be at the core of the debate on the legitimacy of theological training in an online context. In 2002, Susan Graham made the case for spiritual formation in an online format. Her study created a virtual community within an introductory biblical studies course as a means of discovering whether or not spiritual formation within an online context was feasible.[76] Roger White also wrote about the issue related to faith development in an online community.[77] He argued that "spiritual formation can be nurtured in distance education

[75]Benjamin K. Forrest and Mark A. Lamport, "Modeling Spiritual Formation from a Distance: Paul's Formation Transactions with the Roman Christians," *Christian Education Journal* 10, no. 1 (2013): 111.

[76]Susan Lochrie Graham, "Theological Education on the Web: A Case Study in Formation for Ministry," *Teaching Theology & Religion* 5, no. 4 (2002): 227-35.

[77]Roger White, "Promoting Spiritual Formation in Distance Education," *Christian Education*

through the creative ways in which faculty and students interact."[78] Some of the recommendations along this line are to "feature spiritual formation as a course goal . . . model a redeemed personality . . . encourage interaction . . . [and] promote a safe and nurturing community."[79] Stephen and Mary Lowe argue for the possibility of spiritual formation in distance education by way of Bronfenbrenner's Ecology of Human Development Theory. The argument is that an

> ecosystems model views spiritual formation as an ecological phenomenon whether the ecosystem exists in physical, spiritual, or cyberspace environments, thereby offering evidence for the possibility of student spiritual formation in Christian distance education settings regardless of physical proximity. [80]

Lowe and Lowe discuss the disagreement as to both the wisdom and feasibility of offering theological distance education.[81] Lowe and Lowe also address the problem with ATS' definition of spiritual formation (in that there really is no absolute definition given the great variety in its member base) and that their requirement is intentionality, which is a standard that distance education, can certainly meet.[82] Using the ecosystem as a model, the body of Christ can be viewed ecologically: there is a real living interconnectedness of all believers within the body of Christ.[83] Lowe and Lowe then argue that reciprocal relationships where behaviors and attitudes influence one another do not necessitate physical proximity.[84] There is a sense in which an ecological view of spiritual formation

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Journal 3, no. 2 (Fall 2006): 303-15.

[78]Ibid., 303.

[79]Ibid., 314.

[80]Stephen Lowe and Mary Lowe, "Spiritual Formation in Theological Distance Education an Ecosystems Model as a Paradigm," *Christian Education Journal* 7, no. 1 (2010): 85.

[81]Ibid.

[82]Ibid., 85-87.

[83]Ibid., 88-89.

[84]Ibid., 95.

requires the educator to consider all contexts in which this growth takes place, including distance education. Along the line of a how-to, Mark Maddix and James Estep developed a theoretical matrix for online spiritual formation as well as a survey of the existing models.[85] Marilyn Naidoo, recognizing the concerns about the capacity of theological distance education to develop students spiritually, constructed a conceptual map of the challenges for theological online education.[86] Finally, and most recently, Ben Forrest and Mark Lamport proposed that Paul's letter to the Romans was indeed a process of spiritually formative education from a distance. The authors argue that Paul's relationship with the readers, not based on a face-to-face learning experience, can be compared to modern relationships between faculty and students in an online learning environment. [87]

In addition to spiritual community, the topic of spiritual formation in online theological training is well researched and consistently discussed and debated. However, though much has been written on the topic, there does not appear to be research that establishes consensus among the experts on what the best practices should be.

Definitions

The following section provides an overview of various and important terms that are key to understanding the research. In addition to key terms, explanations of various organizations, or titles are also be given.

Association of Theological Schools. The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) exists "to promote the improvement and enhancement of theological schools to the

[85]Mark A. Maddix and James R. Estep, "Spiritual Formation in Online Higher Education Communities: Nurturing Spirituality in Christian Higher Education Online Degree Programs," *Christian Education Journal* 7, no. 2 (Fall 2010): 423-34.

[86]Marilyn Naidoo, "Ministerial Formation of Theological Students through Distance Education," *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 68, no. 2 (2012): 1-8.

[87]Forrest and Lamport, "Modeling Spiritual Formation," 110-24.

benefit of communities of faith and the broader public."[88] ATS is made up of more than 270 graduate schools or seminaries from the United States and Canada. ATS provides programs, services, and research while the Commission on Accrediting approves degree programs.[89]

Community. Stephen Lowe addresses the feasibility of building community in an online setting (without physical presence).[90] Indeed this has been the subject of many such articles. Lowe identifies a definition of the term *community* that can suit online learning very well. Robert Banks, in his work on early house churches defined community as "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."[91]

Distance education. There are various classifications within the realm of non-traditional education. In short, not all non-traditional education is the same. When this research refers to the term *distance education*, the operative definition is "a formal educational process in which the majority of the instruction (interaction between students and instructors and among students) in a course occurs when students and instructors are not in the same place."[92] This should be seen as a broad category within which one can understand online education.

Education. The general term *education*, for the purposes of this research, is

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[88]The Association of Theological Schools, "About ATS."

[89]Ibid.

[90]Lowe, "Building Community and Facilitating Formation."

[91]Robert J. Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in Their Cultural Setting*, rev. ed (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 19.

[92]Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, "Guidelines for Addressing Distance and Correspondence Education," accessed August 1, 2014, http://www.sacscoc.org/pdf/081705/Guidelines%20for%20Addressing%20Distance%20and%20Correspondence%20Education.pdf .

defined as "the intentional process of facilitating preferred learning. As such, education is a systematic approach to intentional learning that combines the activity of educating students, the process or students becoming educated, and the educational result of this approach**."**[93]

Master of Divinity. Defining *Master of Divinity* is best accomplished by citing the purpose for the degree according to ATS: "The purpose of the Master of Divinity degree is to prepare persons for ordained ministry and for general pastoral and religious leadership responsibilities in congregations and other settings."[94] Additionally, when this research mentions *theological ministry training*, this description is fitting.

Online education. If *distance education* can be defined in a broad sense as education in which instructors and students are separated for the majority of the course, then *online education*, for the purpose of this research is viewed more narrowly as education in which instructors and students are separated for the entirety of the course.

Spiritual Formation. For the purposes of this research, *spiritual formation* is defined as

> the process of coming to grips with our finite humanness and developing an understanding that our sufficiency lies in the person of Christ. This definition represents the 'transformed mind' that Paul describes in Romans 12. The result of this type of transformation is an understanding that our position and sufficiency are wholly and completely dependent upon Christ and what he has completed for us in his death and resurrection.[95]

Conclusion

What is the status of the research on best practices for online theological ministry training? In order to answer this question, two major categories were explored:

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[93]James R. Estep, Michael Anthony, and Greg Allison, *A Theology for Christian Education* (Nashville: B & H, 2008), 16.

[94]The Association of Theological Schools: The Commission on Accrediting, "Educational and Degree Program Standards," accessed September 25, 2013, http://www.ats.edu/uploads/accrediting/documents/educational-and-degree-program-standards.pdf.

[95]Forrest and Lamport, "Modeling Spiritual Formation," 111.

best practices for online learning and theological ministry training. Within the category of best practices for online learning, the demographics of online learning clearly demonstrate that the student of online learning averages 34 years of age, well beyond that of the typical college student. For this reason, the topic of adult learning theory becomes relevant to the research in that best practices of online learning incorporate key aspects of andragogy. Additionally, the best practices of online learning are built upon the best practices of education in general with additional categories that, in addition to adult learning theory, are specifically related to elements of online learning such as instructional design, technological support, and quality of instruction in an online setting. What seemed evident from the literature, although things are ever changing, is that the best practices of online learning have been explored and established.

The second major category of this literature review was theological ministry training. Within this category the established mission of theological seminary training of Master of Divinity programs were explored. This was accomplished by looking at the aims of the Association of Theological Schools and two of its major seminaries. With an understanding of the best practices of online training, as well as the general aims of theological ministry training, specific articles were reviewed that addressed topics related to theological ministry training in an online learning context. Within the category of theological ministry training in an online learning context, four general topics emerged: the technology associated with theological ministry training online (the medium), pedagogical concerns for theological ministry training online (teaching from professor to student), community within online ministry training (the educational context), and spiritual formation within online theological ministry training (the product of a spiritually growing student).

Best practices for online learning that incorporates adult learning theory are well-established. The aims of theological ministry training also appear to be well-established. Relevant topics relating to theological ministry training such as technology,

pedagogy, community, and formation are also gaining ground. However, there did not appear to be research that establishes consensus among the experts on what the best practices are for ministry preparation in online theological education. Building on firmly established practices for online education and theological ministry training, research needed to be conducted where a panel of experts was consulted on the establishment of best practices for how theological ministry training is accomplished in a fully online learning context.[96]

[96]Some may inquire as to why the research was aimed at fully online degree programs as opposed to partially online programs or hybrid models. There are two explanations. First, if the research demonstrated that the best practices could be established for fully online programs, then it stands to reason that it would apply as easily to partially online programs. However, the opposite could not be said. Second, the question of fully online Master of Divinity degrees without at least some residential courses is precisely what is not permitted by The Association of Theological Schools without a special exception.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this thesis was to discover the best practices for ministry preparation in online theological education. Since no such research existed on the subject, these best practices needed to be discovered. In order to articulate these best practices, a panel of experts qualified to speak on the subject of ministry preparation in online theological education was assembled in order to determine if there was consensus among them on what these best practices ought to be.

Chapter 1 of this thesis reviewed the research problem in that, although there is a wealth of literature related to online learning, there is no single work of research that establishes consensus among experts as to what online theological ministry preparation should look like. When taking into account three important unique characteristics of online theological ministry training—the technological nature of online learning, the challenges related to theological training in an online environment, and implications that extend from the typical age of online learners—there was a warrant for research on best-practices. As stated at the end of chapter 1, "These best practices were aimed at addressing the challenges associated with fulfilling the learning outcomes of ministry training degree programs in a fully online mode of delivery."

Chapter 2 of this thesis reviewed the literature of two primary categories: online learning and theological education. When reviewing the literature for online learning, it became clear, given the average age of the online learner, that how adults learn should be relevant to any discussion of best-practices for online learning. Additionally, literature of online learning tends to build upon the existing literature for best practices in education

by speaking to that which is unique, namely instructional design of online courses and the quality of instruction in online courses. Lastly, literature related to policies and procedures of accrediting agencies helps researchers understand the importance of guarding the integrity of academic programs in an online learning environment. When reviewing the literature for theological ministry training, the established mission of ATS-accredited Master of Divinity programs was identified as a starting point for online ministry training programs. In addition to program goals, other literature on the topic of theological training in an online learning environment tends to fall into one of four categories: technology (the medium), pedagogy (the teaching), community (the context), and spiritual formation (the product). Research was needed that builds on established practices of both online and theological education by establishing consensus among the experts on best practices for online theological ministry training.

The following chapter aims to describe the research methodology that this thesis employed in order to gather input from these experts, analyze the data, and discover whether or not there is consensus among the experts on the best practices for ministry preparation in online theological education. The chapter is organized around the following categories: design overview, population, sample, delimitations, limitations of generalization, instrumentation, and procedures.

Design Overview

This thesis was a mixed-methods study that was an exploratory sequential design. Creswell and Plano define mixed-methods studies as those where the researcher

- collects and analyzes persuasively and rigorously both qualitative and quantitative data (based on the research questions);
- mixes (or integrates or links) the two forms of data concurrently by combining them (or merging them), sequentially by having one build on the other, or embedding one within the other;
- gives priority to one or to both forms of data (in terms of what the research emphasizes);
- uses these procedures in a single study or in multiple phases of a program of study;
- frames the procedures within philosophical worldviews and theoretical lenses; and

- combines the procedures into specific research designs that direct the plan for conducting the study.[1]

In the case of this mixed-methods study, an exploratory sequential design was followed which means that the qualitative data collection and analysis moved to the quantitative data collection and analysis followed by interpretation.[2]

Overview of the Delphi Method

In order to discover the potential consensus among the experts as it relates to best practices for ministry preparation in online theological education, a Delphi Method was utilized. Sometimes referred to as the Delphi technique, the Delphi Method

> is an iterative process used to collect and distill the judgments of experts using a series of questionnaires interspersed with feedback. The questionnaires are designed to focus on problems, opportunities, solutions, or forecasts. Each subsequent questionnaire is developed based on the results of the previous questionnaire. The process stops when the research question is answered: for example, when consensus is reached, theoretical saturation is achieved, or when sufficient information has been exchanged.[3]

Dalkey and Helmer, the researchers known to have conducted the first ever Delphi study, explain the goal of the method as to "obtain the most reliable consensus of opinion of a group of experts."[4] Rowe and Wright describe four key features that are necessary in order to define the procedure as "Delphi":

1. Anonymity of Delphi participants: allows the participants to freely express their opinions without undue social pressures to conform from others in the group. Decisions are evaluated on their merit, rather than who has proposed the idea.
2. Iteration: allows the participants to refine their views in light of the progress of the group's work from round to round.
3. Controlled feedback: informs the participants of the other participant's perspectives, and provides the opportunity for Delphi participants to clarify or

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[1]John W. Creswell, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*, 2nd ed. (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2011), 279, Kindle.

[2]Ibid., 933.

[3]Gregory J. Skulmoski, Francis T. Hartman, and Jennifer Krahn, "The Delphi Method for Graduate Research," *Journal of Information Technology Education* 6 (January 2007): 2.

[4]Norman Dalkey and Olaf Helmer, "An Experimental Application of the Delphi Method to the Use of Experts," *Management Science* 9, no. 3 (1963): 458.

change their views.
4. Statistical aggregation of group response: allows for a quantitative analysis and interpretation of data.[5]

The use of the Delphi method for this research was appropriate when considering the following possibilities for which the Delphi technique was designed:

1. To determine or develop a range of possible program alternatives;
2. To explore or expose underlying assumptions or information leading to different judgments;
3. To seek out information which may generate a consensus on the part of the respondent group;
4. To correlate informed judgments on a topic spanning a wide range of disciplines, and;
5. To educate the respondent group as to the diverse and interrelated aspects of the topic.[6]

The process of the Delphi method itself is flexible and, as a result, there is some variation when it comes to several factors. For example, the number of rounds in the study as well as the number of participants can vary.[7] The number of rounds and the number of participants were determined primarily on the aim of the research and the kind of group being utilized. For example, the number of rounds (iterations) was highly influenced by "the degree of consensus sought by the investigators."[8] When it came to how many participants were used in the study, a major factor that influenced the decision was whether the participants were heterogeneous or homogeneous. Skulmoski, Hartman, and Krahn wrote that "where the group is homogeneous, a smaller sample of between ten to fifteen people may yield sufficient results."[9]

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[5]Gene Rowe and George Wright, "The Delphi Technique as a Forecasting Tool: Issues and Analysis," *International Journal of Forecasting* 15, no. 4 (1999): 354.

[6]André L. Delbecq, *Group Techniques for Program Planning: A Guide to Nominal Group and Delphi Processes*, Management Applications Series (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1975), 11.

[7]Skulmoski, Hartman, and Krahn, "The Delphi Method for Graduate Research," 6.

[8]Chia-Chien Hsu and Brian A. Sandford, "The Delphi Technique: Making Sense Of Consensus," *Practical Assessment, Research & Evaluation* 12, no. 10 (2007): 3.

[9]Skulmoski, Hartman, and Krahn, "The Delphi Method for Graduate Research," 10.

Delphi Method Description for this Research

In the case of this research, a three-round Delphi study was performed with 17 participants. An initial list of open-ended questions was developed based on the four learning outcomes for the Master of Divinity program for ATS.[10] Participants were asked to respond to each of the questions as well as invited to offer input in other relevant areas they felt might be missing from the list of questions. The questions were narrow enough to give participants some direction while remaining broad enough so as not to script their responses. Prior to administering this first round, the questions were pilot-tested with five individuals. The purpose of the pilot test was to discover unclear questions and other similar problems before the study went live. Once the answers were received, each respondent received the responses of the entire group. Though the study remained anonymous, individuals were able to see their answers in light of the rest of the group and had an opportunity to revise, add to, or subtract from their answers. This opportunity for reassessment and revision is characteristic of the Delphi technique.[11] Lastly, participants were invited to submit any of their own published articles that they felt answered any of the questions asked.

Once the revised answers and articles were received, responses were analyzed for themes and coded based on their content. Responses were grouped according to the program learning outcome from which the question was generated. This allowed for major constructs to be established for which future surveys were developed. The analysis of the round 1 information discovered emergent themes that served as a basis for a round 2 survey that was administered to this same group of participants. This survey was quantitative in that it contained a four-option Likert-type scale for its answers. Results

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[10]The Association of Theological Schools: The Commission on Accrediting, "General Institutional Standards," accessed September 3, 2013, http://www.ats.edu/accrediting/standards-and-notations.

[11]Hsu and Sandford, "The Delphi Technique," 2.

were collected and analyzed statistically. Statistical measures of standard deviation and mean were used. Round 2 served as the first attempt to measure consensus among the group.[12] Once the survey responses were collected and the survey closed, each of the respondents once again were able to see their answers as compared to the rest of the group and given an opportunity for revision. When consensus was achieved for a particular question, respondents who fell outside of consensus were asked either to provide justification for remaining outside of consensus or to consider joining the consensus. Questions for which the answers achieved consensus served as the basis for the third-round survey. Questions for which the answers do not achieve consensus in the response of the participants are also discussed in the findings.

After the round 2 survey was collected and analyzed. A second survey, using the questions for which consensus was achieved, was administered using a dichotomous scale for its answers. This survey sought consensus a final time regarding the best practices for ministry preparation in online theological education. Once again, results of the survey were sent to the participants for comparison and possible revision. Results were collected and analyzed statistically and findings are discussed in chapter 4. Overall, this research design followed a standard three-round Delphi study.[13]

Population

Because the research question of this thesis sought to discover consensus among experts with regard to best practices for ministry preparation in online theological education, the population was all faculty and/or administrators in the area of online

[12]Definitions of what constitutes consensus are discussed later in this chapter.

[13]James Neill, "Delphi Study: Research by Iterative, Consultative Inquiry," accessed December 10, 2013, http://www.wilderdom.com/delphi.html; Kenneth W. Brooks, "Delphi Technique: Expanding Applications," *North Central Association Quarterly* 53, no. 3 (January 1979); Skulmoski, Hartman, and Krahn, "The Delphi Method"; Harold A. Linstone and Murray Turoff, eds., *The Delphi Method: Techniques and Applications* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1975); Rowe and Wright, "The Delphi Technique as a Forecasting Tool"; Ravonne A. Green,"The Delphi Technique in Educational Research," *SAGE Open* 4, no. 2 (2014); and Hsu and Sandford, "The Delphi Technique."

ministry preparation degrees at seminaries or graduate schools. Since the research specifically sought to establish best-practices with regard to ministry training in online seminary or graduate programs, only faculty and administrators from institutions that fit those criteria were considered as part of the population. This Delphi study utilized a homogeneous group of participants further emphasizing the specific nature of this population.

Sample

As previously discussed, the number of participants in a Delphi study can vary greatly. Since the sample of the population used to participate in this study was a homogeneous group, 10 to 15 participants were sufficient.[14] Since input from experts was sought, a nonprobability purposive sampling of faculty and administrators from institutions that offer online ministry preparation oriented degrees from seminaries or graduate schools was utilized.[15] The goal was to find 15 participants that met the above criteria and were willing to participate in this Delphi study. Seventeen of the 22 participants who initially agreed to participate, completed the study.

Delimitations

Several intentional delimitations impacted the design of this research. The two primary areas of intentional delimitation were the participants in the study and the nature of the topic itself. First, given the purpose of the research to discover the best practices for ministry training in online theological schools, the selection of the population and the subsequent sample were intentionally limited. Only seminary or graduate school faculty or administrators were selected. The research was specifically aimed at ministry preparation at the graduate-level and so the opinions of undergraduate faculty or

[14]Skulmoski, Hartman, and Krahn, "The Delphi Method," 10.

[15]Ibid., 4.

administrators, though valuable, were not sought. Also, it did not serve the purpose of the research to consider the input of graduate faculty or administrators that did not oversee ministry degree programs. In the spirit of utilizing a homogenous group for the Delphi study, a narrow audience of experts needed to be consulted.[16] For that reason, this group of seminary or graduate faculty and administrators that were involved in teaching in or overseeing online ministry preparation degree programs can be described as "like faith."[17] Since theological positions can have major pedagogical implications, a group of experts whose religious beliefs are too varied could not be considered a homogenous group for the Delphi study. Additionally, only faculty or administrators of online programs were selected. The Delphi method stipulates that participants be considered experts. Therefore, only faculty or administrators with experience in online degree programs were considered for selection. In summary, since this research was specifically aimed at discovering consensus among the experts on best practices for ministry preparation in online theological institutions, the population of experts being consulted in this research needed to be limited to seminary or graduate faculty of like faith that have experience teaching in or overseeing online ministry degree programs.

Secondly, the aim was to discover best practices for online ministry training. Therefore, only best practices for ministry training oriented degree programs (i.e. the Master of Divinity) were discussed.[18] Much has been written on best practices for education and even more specifically, online education. This research was not aimed at

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[16]Ibid., 10.

[17]A brief survey was given to participants to measure their willingness to affirm the characteristics of Evangelical Christianity.

[18]The M.Div. was chosen in this study since other, shorter graduate degrees are already approved to be fully online by ATS, and because, as a review of the website for ATS reveals, 233 of their 270 member schools have approved M.Div. programs making the M.Div. its most popular graduate degree. As such, the M.Div. is considered a standard and typical ministry training graduate degree. The Association of Theological Schools, "Approved Degrees," accessed December 10, 2013, http://www.ats.edu/member-schools/approved-degrees

exploring those practices except where it overlapped with the categories of online ministry training. Both the population of experts and the nature of the topic of the research was limited to the scope of the research question. Only experts that qualified were consulted, and only topics relevant to ministry training in an online theological degree program were included.

Research Assumptions

1. The four existing ATS M.Div. learning outcomes are sufficient and valid.
2. The participants for this Delphi study are able to answer credibly the questions associated with this research.

Limitations of Generalization

Given the intentional delimitations of this research, there are four primary areas to which the results of the research may not generalize. The first and perhaps most obvious area is the mode of learning. This research was aimed at discovering best practices for online ministry preparation degrees. Therefore, the results do not necessarily generalize to other modes of learning. Examples of other modes are: conventional "bricks and mortar" classes or programs, hybrid programs that mix the online and conventional classroom, or any other kind of distance program such as correspondence coursework. These other kinds of programs incorporate various pedagogical approaches to which fully online degree programs may not apply. This research was designed around only fully online ministry preparation degree programs and the results do not generalize to other modes of learning or delivery.

Secondly, given that this research was aimed at ministry programs at the seminary or graduate-level, results of this research may not necessarily generalize to undergraduate courses or programs. Too many variables exist between undergraduate and the graduate-level to assume that this research can automatically generalize to undergraduate programs. The results may provide some useful considerations to review, but cannot necessarily be generally applied to anything but seminary or graduate-level

courses or programs.

Third, the research was aimed at discovering best practices for ministry preparation degree programs such as the Master of Divinity. Therefore, the results of this research cannot necessarily be generalized to other seminary or graduate degree programs. Program learning outcomes vary among the degrees for which they are designed. So, it stands to reason that the results of this research cannot be generally applied to a seminary or graduate degree with program learning outcomes that fall outside of ministry preparation. The obvious examples, of course, would be areas such as mathematics or medicine. But less obvious examples would be categories of seminary or graduate programs that are somehow mostly biblical or philosophical in nature but are not explicitly designed with the outcome of ministry preparation in mind.

Lastly, given the intentional delimitation surrounding a homogenous group of seminary or graduate school faculty and administrators of "like faith," the results of this research cannot be generalized to programs that do not fall into this "like faith" category of Evangelical Christianity.

Instrumentation

The instrument utilized in this research was a three-round Delphi method. Round 1 of the study was aimed at collecting responses using open-ended questions. These responses formed the basis for a Likert-type survey in round 2. The results of round 2 served as the basis for a dichotomous-scale survey in round 3. Michael Conti used this approach for a mixed-methods best practices study.[19] Nvivo software was used to analyze the round 1 responses. Using NVIVO, all round 1 responses were imported. Additionally, articles submitted by respondents were imported. An index was created for

[19]Michael J. Conti, "The Online Teaching Skills and Best Practices of Virtual Classroom Teachers: A Mixed Method Delphi Study" (Ed.D. diss., University of Phoenix, 2012), accessed December, 10, 2013, http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.liberty.edu:2048/docview/1266447119/abstract?accountid=12085.

each question used in round 1. The indexes for each question were then combined into a node that represented the M.Div. learning outcome from which the question was derived (therefore, there were four major nodes). This organized all feedback into each of the four M.Div. learning outcomes in which they belonged. Using content analysis, themes were identified and described. Similar themes were combined. Approximately 8 to 12 thematic statements were constructed for each major node from the themes discovered in the round 1 analysis. These statements were used to construct the round 2 Likert-type survey. Qualtrics survey software was used to administer and collect the responses for rounds 2 and 3.

The first round of this study was a document questionnaire that was emailed to the participants. Seven questions were developed using the four program learning outcomes for the Master of Divinity at ATS. For the most part, each question began with, "How specifically can an online program develop. . . ." In addition to a list of seven questions, there was a final question that gave the participants an opportunity to offer any insights that they felt were not covered by the already provided questions.

Before this open-ended round 1 questionnaire was administered, it was pilot-tested with five qualified experts. The purpose of the pilot-test was to gather feedback on the questions. The goal was to ensure that the questions were understandable and that any obvious errors were corrected prior to distributing the questionnaire to the actual Delphi panel.

Once the pilot-test was complete and revisions to the questions were complete, the questionnaire was distributed to the participants. Participants responded to the questionnaire by giving their expert opinion on each and every question provided. Additionally, each participant was permitted to offer any insights for which the existing questions did not provide an opportunity to discuss. Lastly, participants were able to review and revise their responses in light of the responses from the other anonymous participants. Participants were also permitted to submit their own published articles that

they felt spoke to a specific question. Finally, responses from the experts were analyzed for themes or "coded." The goal was to discover themes from which a Likert-type survey would be developed. Nvivo is a software tool that allows the researcher to "collect, organize, and analyze content from interviews, focus groups, surveys, and . . . social media data, YouTube videos and web pages."[20] Responses were grouped according to the four learning outcomes from which the questions were generated providing an objective and consistent set of major constructs or categories that would be used throughout the rest of the study.

Using Qualtrics as a survey tool, a survey was developed for round 2 based on the discovered themes in round 1. The goal of round 2 was to discover where consensus exists by giving the participants an opportunity to rate the themes that emerged in round 1 using a Likert-type survey that ranked responses on a four-point scale of importance. Paul Green used a Likert-type survey determining that consensus would be 70 percent rating three or higher on a four-point scale.[21] For round 2, that same percentage was utilized for this study. Prior to the administration of this round 2 survey, the survey was pilot-tested and Cronbach Alpha was used to measure the reliability, or the "internal consistency or average correlation of items in a survey instrument."[22] Some questions in the survey were dropped due to their negative impact on the reliability or "Alpha" rating. In another case, subscales were combined because of the positive effect on the reliability rating. After the completion of the round 2 survey, participants were able to review their responses in light of the rest of the group and were given an opportunity to revise their responses. In the case where a survey item received consensus, participants that were

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[20]QSR International, "NVivo 10 Research Software for Analysis and Insight," accessed December 18, 2013, http://www.qsrinternational.com/products_nvivo.aspx .

[21]Paul Green, "The Content of a College-Level Outdoor Leadership Course," March 1982, accessed December 18, 2013, http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED276546.

[22]J. Reynaldo A. Santos, "Cronbach's Alpha: A Tool for Assessing the Reliability of Scales," *Tools of the Trade* 37, no. 2 (1999), accessed August 6, 2014, http://www.joe.org/joe/1999april/tt3.php.

outside of consensus were asked to especially review their response and either justify remaining outside of consensus or join the consensus. This was deemed important in order to understand why an expert chose to remain outside of consensus.

For round 3, the same survey was given a second time except only questions that met the criteria for consensus were utilized. Additionally, results from round 2 were analyzed for reliability resulting in the removal of some questions that hurt the reliability rating of the survey. For round 3, a simple dichotomous scale was used where respondents chose "agree" or "disagree." Consensus in round 3 required 70 percent (as with round 2) except it was 70 percent of respondents choosing "agree." The aim of the round 3 survey was to reiterate the consensus discovered in round 2 as well as provide another opportunity for review, revision, and clarification. Items that did not meet consensus would also be removed. Both rounds 2 and 3 were analyzed statistically to discover consensus among the experts.

Procedures

Procedures for this Delphi study followed what Skulmoski, Hartman, and Krahn describe as "The Classical Delphi" where anonymity of the experts was preserved, an iterative process was used, controlled feedback was gathered, and statistical aggregation of responses was gathered.[23] An excellent example of the process followed here can be found in Michael Conti's Best Practices research.[24] In order to conduct the research in a methodical and appropriate manner, the following procedures were followed:

3. Experts were recruited to participate in the study. The purpose and the procedures of the study were discussed either by phone or email with each potential participant. Each participant understood both the voluntary and anonymous nature of the study.

4. For each round of survey research, each participant read and acknowledged an

[23]Skulmoski, Hartman, and Krahn, "The Delphi Method," 2.

[24]Conti, "The Online Teaching Skills."

informed consent, as part of the survey, indicating that they understand the nature of the research, and their identities and responses would remain anonymous during the study. Additionally, there was a statement of faith that each participant affirmed in order to ensure that they fit the category of "like faith."

5. Once pilot-tested, a free-form questionnaire was distributed to each participant and the participants were given two weeks to respond to the questionnaire.

6. Anonymous results were collected and distributed to all panel members giving each an opportunity to revise their responses.

7. Revised responses were collected and analyzed for themes (or "coded") using Nvivo software.

8. A four-point Likert-type survey was created utilizing the themes that emerged from analyzing the round 1 responses. This survey was pilot-tested and Cronbach Alpha was used to test the reliability of the survey.

9. The round 2 survey was distributed to the panel members with another two-week timeframe for completing the survey.

10. The round 2 results were analyzed in order to discover where consensus existed among the experts. Consensus for round 2 was defined as a 70 percent ranking of three or higher on a given answer.

11. Once again, anonymous results was collected and distributed to all panel members giving each an opportunity to revise their responses. Those outside of the consensus on any given question were asked either to justify their position or consider joining the consensus. Cronbach Alpha was used to further reduce the number of statements for round 3.

12. A dichotomous agree/disagree survey was created by simply reducing the questions to only those which met the threshold of consensus from round 2.

13. The round 3 survey was distributed to the panel members with a one-week timeframe for completing the survey.

14. The round 3 results were analyzed in order to further finalize areas of consensus. Consensus for round 3 was defined as anything with a 70 percent ranking of "agree."

15. Once again, anonymous results were collected and distributed to all panel members giving each an opportunity to revise their responses. Those outside of consensus (if different from round 2) were asked either to justify their position or consider joining the consensus. Additionally, respondents who chose disagree on an item of consensus for round 3 but had chosen either 3 or 4 for round 2, were asked either to justify their position or consider joining the consensus.

16. Once all findings were analyzed, conclusions were drawn as to the answer to the research question, the contribution of the research to the literature, and recommendations for the application of the research in practice.

Conclusion

While chapter 1 of this thesis sought to identify the research problem and the resulting need for the research, and chapter 2 sought to review the existing research in order to identify the void that the research hopes to fill, chapter 3 aimed to describe the research methodology that this thesis would employ in order to gather input from the experts, analyze the data, and discover whether or not there is consensus among the experts on the best practices for ministry preparation in online theological education. The chapter discussed design overview, population, sample, delimitations, limitations of generalization, instrumentation, and procedures.

In summary, this was a mixed-methods research study that is an exploratory-sequential design in which the instrument was a three-round Delphi technique with a homogenous group of 17 experts where consensus on the best practices for ministry preparation in online theological education was discovered. Chapter 4 analyzes and summarizes the findings of this research that are relevant to the research question.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

This research explored the best practices for ministry preparation in online theological education. Using a mixed-methods approach that was an exploratory sequential design, the Delphi method was utilized. This chapter describes how the data related to the research question were compiled, analyzed, and summarized. Lastly, the methodology itself is evaluated as to its strengths and weaknesses.

Compilation Protocols

Qualified Participants

This research was conducted in multiples steps. The first step involved recruiting qualified experts to participate in the Delphi study. Of those who were initially invited to participate, either in-person or by email, 22 consented to be a part of the study.[1] These 22 participants attested to qualifying for the study by affirming their experience as either professors or administrators for either seminary or graduate level online theological ministry degree programs. Additionally, in order to ensure that the participants were of like faith, each recruit affirmed the following widely accepted characteristics of evangelical Christianity: the Bible is central and authoritative for Christian faith and life, the death of Jesus on the cross provided atonement for sin, human beings need to repent and trust in Jesus, this conversion changes the way that individuals relate to other people and to the world.[2]

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[1]An example of the initial email may be found in appendix 1.

[2]D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Routledge, 1993), 2-17. These four characteristics of Evangelical Christianity were adapted from Bebbington's Quadrilateral. The survey may be found in appendix 2

Round 1

The second step in the research was to conduct the first round of the Delphi study. The first round served as the qualitative portion of this mixed methods study. As an exploratory sequential design, the round 1 qualitative data served as the basis for the quantitative data in rounds 2 and 3. A free-form survey was created for round 1 (see appendix 3). The questions for this survey were developed from the four program learning outcomes for the M.Div. under the Association of Theological Schools.[3] Using M.Div. program learning outcomes seemed appropriate since the research sought best practices for ministry preparation in online theological education. Before the survey launched, a pilot study was conducted with five experts. The aim for the pilot study was to address any problems and improve survey comprehension.[4] After the pilot study, the round 1 free-form survey was finalized.

The round 1 free-form survey was distributed as an electronic document attachment via email. Anonymity was carefully maintained throughout the study. Respondents were given two weeks to complete the survey and send the document back via email. Of the 22 participants who had completed the initial qualifications survey, 18 completed the round 1 free-form survey. Of those who did not complete this survey, all but 1 replied to the request declining to continue due to the time commitment. One did not respond at all and was not contacted further. After the initial responses were collected, each participant was asked to review their own responses as well as the responses of the other participants. Each document was carefully edited to remove identifying information so that the study would remain anonymous. After the deadline passed and no edits were requested by participants, a final request was made for

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[3]The Association of Theological Schools: The Commission on Accrediting, "General Institutional Standards," in *Handbook of Accreditation* (Pittsburgh: Association of Theological Schools, 2012), G40-G42.

[4]Gregory J. Skulmoski, Francis T. Hartman, and Jennifer Krahn, "The Delphi Method for Graduate Research," *Journal of Information Technology Education* 6 (January 2007): 4.

participants to submit any published articles which they had authored that they felt might answer any of the eight survey questions.

Once the round 1 survey answers and articles were received and opportunity for revision was given, responses were analyzed for themes and coded based on their content using NVIVO software.[5] Responses, as well as any articles that were given as a response, were downloaded to the program. Since the initial survey was created using the four program learning outcomes for the M.Div. for ATS, responses were grouped according to the program learning outcome from which the question was generated by what NVIVO refers to as "nodes." For example, since the first question was developed out of the first program learning outcome, all 18 answers to question 1 were grouped together in a single "node" and analyzed. These "nodes" served as the major constructs for the surveys in future rounds. Each "node" was analyzed for themes based on the content as well as the frequency with which those themes appeared. The analysis of the round 1 information discovered themes from which statements would be developed for a round 2 survey that was administered to this same group of participants. The result of the round 1 for this Delphi study was the generation of 44 statements that served as the basis for the second round of this study. The second and third rounds of the study served as the quantitative elements of the research.

Round 2

Once participant qualifications were established, and round 1 responses were collected and analyzed, the third step of the research was to develop a round 2 Likert-type survey. Each respondent consented to take the survey and anonymity was maintained throughout round 2. The survey was built using the four M.Div. learning outcomes as the

[5]QSR International, "NVivo 10 Research Software for Analysis and Insight," accessed December 18, 2013, http://www.qsrinternational.com/products_nvivo.aspx.

main constructs. Qualtrics software was used to create and distribute the survey.[6] Each construct initially contained two subscales of questions; one set of questions dealt with the learning institution and the other dealt with the degree program. Each construct contained anywhere from 10 to12 questions. As with the round 1 survey, a pilot study was conducted for this round 2 survey. The primary purpose for the pilot study was to test for reliability. Reliability was measured using Cronbach Alpha, which measures "how closely related a set of items are as a group."[7] Since constructed scales within a survey should be related, it was important to discover "whether the same set of items would elicit the same responses if the same questions are recast and re-administered to the same respondents."[8] Generally speaking, the higher the Alpha rating, the more reliable and stable the scale is considered. The value range for Alpha is 0-1 and, as a general rule, a rating of .7 is usually acceptable.[9] The results of the pilot study were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Cronbach Alpha is one of several possible approaches in SPSS. Additionally, SPSS identifies what the Alpha rating will become if a particular item is deleted. This is helpful if a scale in the survey falls below the desired .7 Alpha rating. Due to the Alpha ratings on the pilot-test of the round 2 survey, two questions were dropped from the survey. Additionally, in the fourth section of the survey, the two subscales of the fourth section of the survey were consolidated. When combined, the Alpha rating improved to .709 whereas separately scale 7 was .296 and scale 8 was .694. Not all subscales reached .7; however, it was

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[6]Qualtrics, "Online Survey Software & Insight Platform," accessed August 5, 2014, http://www.qualtrics.com/.

[7]Institute for Digital Research and Education, "SPSS FAQ: What Does Cronbach's Alpha Mean?" accessed August 6, 2014, http://www.ats.ucla.edu/stat/spss/faq/alpha.html.

[8]J. Reynaldo A. Santos. "Cronbach's Alpha: A Tool for Assessing the Reliability of Scales," *Tools of the Trade* 37, no. 2 (1999), accessed August 6, 2014, http://www.joe.org/joe/1999april/tt3.php.

[9]Ibid.

decided to leave the rest of the subscales intact for the actual round 2 survey administration since questions could be removed after the fact.[10]

Once both the pilot study and reliability analysis were conducted, the resultant 43 statement survey was distributed via email (see appendix 5). The survey called for participants to rate each statement on its level importance as it related to successfully meeting the learning outcome with which it is associated. The Likert-items were 1—not at all important, 2—somewhat important, 3—very important, and 4—extremely important. The purpose of the survey was to measure where consensus on best practices for online theological ministry training existed among these experts. Consensus was defined as 70 percent of respondents selecting "3" (very important) or higher. As with round 1 of this research, all participants were presented with the opportunity to review and revise their own responses in light of the rest of the responses. Additionally, respondents that fell outside of consensus on items that achieved consensus were asked to either justify remaining outside of consensus or choose to join the consensus. One respondent did not complete the survey (or reply to emails) despite several reminders. After all applicable changes were made, the results of the survey were also analyzed using Cronbach Alpha. The statistical analysis of this round is presented later in this chapter using tables. This analysis includes statements made by participants as to their justification for remaining outside of consensus. After removing all items that failed to meet consensus, as well as items that decreased the reliability of the survey (using Cronbach Alpha), 30 statements remained.

Round 3

After the completion and analysis of round 2, which included both an opportunity for participants to review and revise their responses and a reliability analysis using Cronbach Alpha, 30 statements remained that could be described as having met the

[10]See appendix 4 for a summary of the pilot study reliability analysis.

definition of consensus (70 percent of participants at "very important" or higher). The third and final round of this research was a second iteration of the round 2 survey. The 30 statements for which consensus was achieved were included in this survey; however, unlike round 2, instead of using a Likert-item scale, a simple disagree/agree dichotomous scale was used. Additionally, following the indicators of the reliability analysis of round 2, the subscales of the first three sections of the survey were consolidated so that the survey contained four major sections with no subscales (see appendix 6).

As with round 2, the survey was distributed via email. Each respondent consented to take the survey and anonymity was maintained throughout round 3. Unlike round 2, which called for participants to rate each statement on its level importance as it related to successfully meeting the learning outcome with which it was associated, round 3 called for participants to choose "agree" or "disagree." For example, a question such as "What are ways that the above Religious Heritage—history and faith tradition and denominational expression—learning outcome be met for an online Master of Divinity degree program?" was asked, followed by a number of statements. Participants were to rate each statement with "agree" or "disagree." Consensus was defined as 70 percent of respondents choosing "agree." As with round 2 of this research, all participants were presented with the opportunity to review and revise their own responses in light of the rest of the responses. If a respondent was outside of consensus in a manner consistent with their round 2 response, the round 2 narrative that justified remaining outside of consensus was considered sufficient.[11] However, respondents that were outside of consensus on statements in round 3, but were part of consensus on those same statements in round 2, were asked to either justify remaining outside of consensus or choose to join the consensus. This was especially important considering that their response could represent a change of mind from round 2. After all applicable changes were made, the

[11]Unless a respondent chose to add more explanation to his or her position.

results of the survey were analyzed statistically. The statistical analysis of this round is presented later in this chapter using tables. This analysis includes statements made by participants as to their justification for remaining outside of consensus in cases when they had been part of the consensus in round 2. All 17 participants completed the survey, and as expected, all 30 statements of the round 3 survey achieved consensus as defined by at least 70 percent of respondents choosing "agree."

Summary of Findings

The following section is a detailed display of the findings as it relates to each round of the research. Round 1 findings are a display of thematic statements gleaned from the free-form eight-question survey completed by the 18 participants. Round 2 findings demonstrate results and statistical analyses of the Likert-item survey. Items that failed to meet consensus are also identified. Additionally, narrative explanations by participants who remained outside of consensus are given. Lastly, a reliability analysis of the round 2 survey that led to a further reduction of the list of practices are explained. Round 3 findings demonstrate results and statistical analyses of the dichotomous scale survey. Additionally, narrative explanations by participants as to their justification for remaining outside of consensus in cases when they had been part of the consensus in round 2 are given.

Round 1

In order to discover the thematic statements that would be used to build the round 2 survey, a free-form survey was created for round 1 (see appendix 3). The questions for this survey were developed from the four program learning outcomes for the M.Div. under the Association of Theological Schools.[12] The compilation protocols discussed the pilot study used to build the eight-question survey. After the pilot study

[12]Association of Theological Schools, "General Institutional Standards," G40-G42.

was complete, the surveys were emailed as document attachments.

Once the round 1 surveys were received, responses and article submissions were downloaded and analyzed for themes and coded based on their content using NVIVO software.[13] Since the initial survey was created using the four program learning outcomes for the M.Div. for ATS, responses were grouped into nodes according to the program learning outcome from which the question was developed. Each "node" was analyzed for themes based on the content as well as the frequency with which those themes appeared. The analysis of the round 1 information discovered themes that were developed into 44 statements that served as the basis for the second round of this study. Although frequencies were not ignored, they were not the sole factor in the decision of whether or not to include a statement in the round 2 survey. Statements were also included based on content. In other words, items with a low frequency were permitted to be a part of the round 2 survey given that the statements were expressions from the participants and that the processes of rounds 2 and 3 allowed for the participants to eliminate statements by virtue of their decisions with regard to ratings of importance. The following tables give an overview of the thematic statements discovered in the round 1 analysis.

[13]QSR International, "NVivo 10 Research Software."

Table 1. Round 1 thematic statements for program learning outcome 1

PLO 1	Religious Heritage: The program shall provide structured opportunities to develop a comprehensive and discriminating understanding of the religious heritage.	N	Percentage of Respondents citing this concept
1	Integrate content across a variety of courses within the degree program related to a comprehensive understanding of history, faith tradition, and denominational expression	10	55.5
2	Require a course, or multiple courses, in which the aim is a comprehensive understanding of history, faith tradition, and denominational expression	8	44.4
3	Utilize the student's church community context as a means of teaching the Institution's mission, history, faith tradition, and denominational expression	4	22.2
4	Align the program with the learning institution's mission, history, faith tradition, and denominational expression	4	22.2
5	Utilize virtual environments, such as wikis or blogs, to emphasize or reinforce an Institution's mission, history, faith tradition, and denominational expression	3	16.6
6	Offer publicly available resources with regard to the learning Institution's mission, history, faith tradition, and denominational expression	3	16.6
7	Allow students to choose from a list of courses in which the aim is a comprehensive understanding of history, faith tradition, and denominational expression	2	11.1
8	Hire faculty that are in alignment with the learning Institution's mission, history, faith tradition, and denominational expression	1	5.5
9	Provide a means for ongoing faculty training on the learning Institution's mission, history, faith tradition, and denominational expression	1	5.5
10	Orient students, as part of the admissions process, with regard to the learning Institution's mission, history, faith tradition, and denominational expression	1	5.5

Table 2. Round 1 thematic statements for program learning outcome 2

PLO2	Cultural context: The program shall provide opportunities to develop a critical understanding of and creative engagement with the cultural realities and structures within which the church lives and carries out its mission.	N	Percentage
1	Offer a course on cultural exegesis that is historical and analytical in nature	11	61.1
2	Integrate a ministry residency experience such as an internship in order to contextualize and apply learning within culture	11	61.1
3	Include projects that students execute in their own ministry culture as an application and reinforcement of learning	8	44.4
4	Integrate critical thinking assignments across the curriculum that are designed to interact with culture	7	38.8
5	Utilize various technologies such as social media as a legitimate means for understanding and engaging culture	6	33.3
6	Incorporating ongoing training for faculty on relevant cultural issues	5	27.7
7	Hire faculty that have the ability to lead and teach students with regard to culture	4	22.2
8	Incorporate current research material such as books, blogs, videos, wikis, and podcasts as sources of information for understanding culture	3	16.6
9	Employ student-to-student interaction, such as discussion boards, wikis, and blogs, where skills can be developed for understanding and engaging culture	3	16.6
10	Assign students a mentor in order to contextualize learning in their own culture	3	16.6
11	Solicit input on pertinent issues from outside organizations such as churches or advisory boards in an effort to keep informed of changes in the culture	1	5.5
12	Solicit student input in an effort to keep informed of changes in the culture	1	5.5
13	Solicit student feedback with regard to ministry strategies that are successful or unsuccessful in an effort to keep informed of changes in the culture	1	5.5

Table 3. Round 1 thematic statements for program learning outcome 3

PLO3	Personal and spiritual formation: The program shall provide opportunities through which the student may grow in personal faith, emotional maturity, moral integrity, and public witness. Ministerial preparation includes concern with the development of capacities—intellectual and affective, individual and corporate, ecclesial and public—that are requisite to a life of pastoral leadership.	N	Percentage
1	Incorporate in-context field experiences or internships where students can practice ministerial leadership under the supervision of a mentor who will provide spiritual direction	13	72.2
2	Utilize in-context experiences for the practice of and reflection on ministerial service such as mercy ministry, personal evangelism, or preaching	12	66.6
3	Offer courses that cover various related topics such as spiritual formation, calling, pastoral theology, or leadership	9	50
4	Encourage and expect areas of relational community and reciprocal learning in online courses such as care, connection, communication, and shared faith	8	44.4
5	Include reflective assignments on personal and ministry life such as work, family, study, worship and rest	5	27.7
6	Emphasize faculty as spiritual models when facilitating and leading discussions, wikis, or video chat	4	22.2
7	Require students to complete a ministry portfolio where various assessments are conducted such as a personality profile	3	16.6
8	Utilize a cohort format where students remain together in their program so that community is promoted and students are more willing to be open about their spiritual journey	3	16.6
9	Teach and practice guidelines for in-course discussion such as truthfulness, respect, integrity, and maturity	3	16.6
10	Incorporate assignments that utilize case-studies or problem-based learning	2	11.1

Table 4. Round 1 thematic statements for program learning outcome 4

PLO4	Capacity for ministerial and public leadership: The program shall provide theological reflection on and education for the practice of ministry. These activities should cultivate the capacity for leadership in both ecclesial and public contexts.	N	Percentage
1	Incorporate in-context ministry practice as a demonstration of ministerial and leadership capacity	13	72.2
2	Incorporate in-context ministry practice as an extension of theological reflection	11	61.1
3	Offer biblical theology and exegesis courses as part of the curriculum	6	33.3
4	Enhance ministry courses on the practice of ministry with current materials from pastoral leaders such as textbooks, blogs, or podcasts	5	27.7
5	Offer a core of courses on various critical theological topics	4	22.2
6	Include curriculum that addresses theoretical concepts related to ministry practice	4	22.2
7	Utilize discussion forums, collaborative blogs, video chat, or other student-to-student and teacher-to-student interaction as a vehicle for theological discussion and reflection	4	22.2
8	Train students in auxiliary areas such as professional skills, sacred use of technology, and legal issues in the ministry	3	16.6
9	Incorporate assignments on ministry practice such as case studies	5	27.7
10	Integrate student journal entries of ministry experiences that are discussed in an online environment	2	11.1
11	Evaluate in-context student teaching or preaching using technology such as uploaded video recordings	1	5.5

Round 2

Once round 1 responses were collected and analyzed, a Likert-type survey was developed, pilot-tested, analyzed, and edited. The compilation protocols discussed the process by which the pilot study was analyzed for reliability using Cronbach Alpha and subsequently edited. After the survey was pilot-tested, analyzed, and edited, the resultant forty-three-statement survey was sent to the 18 remaining participants. The survey was built using the round 1 learning outcomes as the four main constructs (see appendix 5). The survey called for participants to rate each statement on its level of importance as it related to successfully meeting the learning outcome with which it was associated. The

Likert-items were 1—not at all important, 2—somewhat important, 3—very important, and 4—extremely important. The tables contain the raw percentage data from this survey. The N for the entirety of the surveys was 17.

Table 5. Round 2 survey with percentages, STD, and mean: Religious Heritage—with regard to online Master of Divinity degree programs

#	Question	Level of Importance				MEAN	STD
		4	3	2	1		
1	Requiring a course, or multiple courses, in which the aim is a comprehensive understanding of history, faith tradition, and denominational expression	52.9	29.4	17.6	0	3.35	0.786
2	Allowing students to choose from a list of courses in which the aim is a comprehensive understanding of history, faith tradition, and denominational expression	11.8	35.3	41.2	11.8	2.47	0.874
3	Integrating content across a variety of courses within the degree program related to a comprehensive understanding of history, faith tradition, and denominational expression	41.2	41.2	17.6	0	3.24	0.752
4	Aligning the program with the learning institution's mission, history, faith tradition, and denominational expression	64.7	35.3	0	0	3.65	0.493
5	Utilizing virtual environments, such as wikis or blogs, to emphasize or reinforce an Institution's mission, history, faith tradition, and denominational expression	23.5	29.4	41.2	5.9	2.71	0.92

Table 6. Round 2 survey with percentages, STD, and mean: Religious Heritage—with regard to learning Institutions that offer online Master of Divinity degree programs

#	Question	Level of Importance				MEAN	STD
		4	3	2	1		
1	Hiring faculty that are in alignment with the learning Institution's mission, history, faith tradition, and denominational expression	58.8	29.4	11.8	0	3.47	0.717
2	Providing a means for ongoing faculty training on the learning Institution's mission, history, faith tradition, and denominational expression	17.6	41.2	29.4	11.8	2.65	0.931
3	Utilizing the student's church community context as a means of teaching the Institution's mission, history, faith tradition, and denominational expression	35.3	41.2	23.5	0	3.12	0.781
4	Orienting students, as part of the admissions process, with regard to the learning Institution's mission, history, faith tradition, and denominational expression	17.6	47.1	35.3	0	2.82	0.728
5	Offering publicly available resources with regard to the learning Institution's mission, history, faith tradition, and denominational expression	11.8	70.6	5.9	11.8	2.82	0.809

Table 7. Round 2 survey with percentages, STD, and mean: Cultural Context—with regard to online Master of Divinity degree programs

#	Question	Level of Importance				MEAN	STD
		4	3	2	1		
1	Offering a course on cultural exegesis that is historical and analytical in nature	29.4	47.1	23.5	0	3.06	0.748
2	Integrating critical thinking assignments across the curriculum that are designed to interact with culture	76.5	23.5	0	0	3.76	0.437
3	Employing student-to-student interaction, such as discussion boards, wikis, and blogs, where skills can be developed for understanding and engaging culture	64.7	23.5	11.8	0	3.53	0.717
4	Utilizing various technologies such as social media as a legitimate means for understanding and engaging culture	29.4	41.2	29.4	0	3	0.791
5	Including projects that students execute in their own ministry culture as an application and reinforcement of learning	64.7	29.4	5.9	0	3.59	0.618
6	Assigning students a mentor in order to contextualize learning in their own culture	29.4	35.3	35.3	0	2.94	0.827
7	Integrating a ministry residency experience such as an internship in order to contextualize and apply learning within culture	52.9	35.3	5.9	5.9	3.35	0.862

Table 8. Round 2 survey with percentages, STD, and mean: Cultural Context—with regard to learning institutions that offer online Master of Divinity degree programs

#	Question	Level of Importance				MEAN	STD
		4	3	2	1		
1	Soliciting input on pertinent issues from outside organizations such as churches or advisory boards in an effort to keep informed of changes in the culture	35.3	35.3	29.4	0	3.06	0.827
2	Soliciting student input in an effort to keep informed of changes in the culture	29.4	35.3	35.3	0	2.94	0.827
3	Soliciting student feedback with regard to ministry strategies that are successful or unsuccessful in an effort to keep informed of changes in the culture	23.5	64.7	11.8	0	3.12	0.6
4	Hiring faculty that have the ability to lead and teach students with regard to culture	58.8	41.2	0	0	3.59	0.507
5	Incorporating ongoing training for faculty on relevant cultural issues	23.5	52.9	17.6	5.9	2.94	0.827

Table 9. Round 2 survey with percentages, STD, and mean: Personal and Spiritual Formation—with regard to online Master of Divinity degree programs

#	Question	Level of Importance				MEAN	STD
		4	3	2	1		
1	Utilizing in-context experiences for the practice of and reflection on ministerial service such as mercy ministry, personal evangelism, or preaching	64.7	29.4	5.9	0	3.59	0.618
2	Including reflective assignments on personal and ministry life such as work, family, study, worship and rest	58.8	41.2	0	0	3.59	0.507
3	Incorporating assignments that utilize case-studies or problem-based learning	47.1	41.2	11.8	0	3.35	0.702
4	Offering courses that cover various related topics such as spiritual formation, calling, pastoral theology, or leadership	52.9	29.4	17.6	0	3.35	0.786

Table 10. Round 2 survey with percentages, STD, and mean: Personal and Spiritual Formation—with regard to learning institutions that offer Master of Divinity online degree

#	Question	Level of Importance				MEAN	STD
		4	3	2	1		
1	Requiring students to complete a ministry portfolio where various assessments are conducted such as a personality profile	29.4	23.5	47.1	0	2.82	0.883
2	Utilizing a cohort format where students remain together in their program so that community is promoted and students are more willing to be open about their spiritual journey	35.3	23.5	35.3	5.9	2.88	0.993
3	Emphasizing faculty as spiritual models when facilitating and leading discussions, wikis, or video chat	35.3	58.8	5.9	0	3.29	0.588
4	Encouraging and expecting areas of relational community and reciprocal learning in online courses such as care, connection, communication, and shared faith	47.1	41.2	11.8	0	3.35	0.702
5	Teaching and practicing guidelines for in-course discussion such as truthfulness, respect, integrity, and maturity	41.2	41.2	17.6	0	3.24	0.752
6	Incorporating in-context field experiences or internships where students can practice ministerial leadership under the supervision of a mentor who will provide spiritual direction	58.8	35.3	5.9	0	3.53	0.624

Table 11. Round 2 survey with percentages, STD, and mean: Capacity for ministerial and public leadership—with regard to Institutions that offer online Master of Divinity degree programs

#	Question	Level of Importance				MEAN	STD
		4	3	2	1		
1	Enhancing of courses on the practice of ministry with current materials from pastoral leaders such as textbooks, blogs, or podcasts	35.3	64.7	0	0	3.35	0.493
2	Utilizing discussion forums, collaborative blogs, video chat, or other student-to-student and teacher-to-student interaction as a vehicle for theological discussion and reflection	52.9	41.2	5.9	0	3.47	0.624
3	Incorporating assignments on ministry practice such as case studies	17.6	70.6	11.8	0	3.06	0.556
4	Evaluating in-context student teaching or preaching using technology such as uploaded video recordings	41.2	41.2	11.8	5.9	3.18	0.883
5	Integrating student journal entries of ministry experiences that are discussed in an online environment	23.5	41.2	29.4	5.9	2.82	0.883
6	Offering biblical theology and exegesis courses as part of the curriculum	70.6	17.6	11.8	0	3.59	0.712
7	Training students in auxiliary areas such as professional skills, sacred use of technology, and legal issues in the ministry	41.2	47.1	5.9	5.9	3.24	0.831
8	Offering a core of courses on various critical theological topics	35.3	41.2	17.6	5.9	3.06	0.899
9	Including curriculum that addresses theoretical concepts related to ministry practice	35.3	58.8	5.9	0	3.29	0.588
10	Incorporating in-context ministry practice as a demonstration of ministerial and leadership capacity	70.6	29.4	0	0	3.71	0.47
11	Incorporating in-context ministry practice as an extension of theological reflection	52.9	47.1	0	0	3.53	0.514

The purpose of the survey was to measure where consensus on best practices for online theological ministry training existed among the experts. Consensus was defined as 70 percent of respondents selecting "3" (very important) or higher. As with round 1 of this research, all participants were presented with the opportunity to review and revise their own responses in light of the rest of the responses. The following tables represent statements that met consensus after the review/revision phase. Numbers indicate percentage followed by an indicator of "yes" or "no" as to its status with

relationship to meeting consensus. Since changes in the revision phase were so few, identification of those changes are reported in a separate table. The N for the entirety of the tables is 17. The responses in the following tables are percentages.

Table 12. Round 2 summary of consensus and non-consensus: Religious Heritage—with regard to online Master of Divinity degree programs

#	Question	Extremely Important or Very Important	Somewhat Important or Not At All Important	Consensus
1	Requiring a course, or multiple courses, in which the aim is a comprehensive understanding of history, faith tradition, and denominational expression	82.3	17.6	Yes
2	Allowing students to choose from a list of courses in which the aim is a comprehensive understanding of history, faith tradition, and denominational expression	47.1	52.9	No
3	Integrating content across a variety of courses within the degree program related to a comprehensive understanding of history, faith tradition, and denominational expression	82.3	17.6	Yes
4	Aligning the program with the learning institution's mission, history, faith tradition, and denominational expression	100	0	Yes
5	Utilizing virtual environments, such as wikis or blogs, to emphasize or reinforce an Institution's mission, history, faith tradition, and denominational expression	52.9	47.1	No

Table 13. Round 2 summary of consensus and non-consensus: Religious Heritage—with regard to learning Institutions that offer online Master of Divinity degree programs

#	Question	Extremely Important or Very Important	Somewhat Important or Not At All Important	Consensus
1	Hiring faculty that are in alignment with the learning Institution's mission, history, faith tradition, and denominational expression	88.2	11.8	Yes
2	Providing a means for ongoing faculty training on the learning Institution's mission, history, faith tradition, and denominational expression	58.8	41.2	No
3	Utilizing the student's church community context as a means of teaching the Institution's mission, history, faith tradition, and denominational expression	76.5	23.5	Yes
4	Orienting students, as part of the admissions process, with regard to the learning Institution's mission, history, faith tradition, and denominational expression	64.7	35.3	No
5	Offering publicly available resources with regard to the learning Institution's mission, history, faith tradition, and denominational expression	82.4	17.6	Yes

Table 14. Round 2 summary of consensus and non-consensus: Cultural Context—with regard to online Master of Divinity degree programs

#	Question	Extremely Important or Very Important	Somewhat Important or Not At All Important	Consensus
1	Offering a course on cultural exegesis that is historical and analytical in nature	76.5	23.5	Yes
2	Integrating critical thinking assignments across the curriculum that are designed to interact with culture	100	0	Yes
3	Employing student-to-student interaction, such as discussion boards, wikis, and blogs, where skills can be developed for understanding and engaging culture	88.2	11.8	Yes
4	Utilizing various technologies such as social media as a legitimate means for understanding and engaging culture	70.6	29.4	Yes
5	Including projects that students execute in their own ministry culture as an application and reinforcement of learning	94.1	5.9	Yes
6	Assigning students a mentor in order to contextualize learning in their own culture	64.7	35.3	No
7	Integrating a ministry residency experience such as an internship in order to contextualize and apply learning within culture	88.2	11.8	Yes

Table 15. Round 2 summary of consensus and non-consensus: Cultural Context—with regard to learning institutions that offer online Master of Divinity degree programs

#	Question	Extremely Important or Very Important	Somewhat Important or Not At All Important	Consensus
1	Soliciting input on pertinent issues from outside organizations such as churches or advisory boards in an effort to keep informed of changes in the culture	70.6	29.4	Yes
2	Soliciting student input in an effort to keep informed of changes in the culture	64.7	35.3	No
3	Soliciting student feedback with regard to ministry strategies that are successful or unsuccessful in an effort to keep informed of changes in the culture	88.2	11.8	Yes
4	Hiring faculty that have the ability to lead and teach students with regard to culture	100	0	Yes
5	Incorporating ongoing training for faculty on relevant cultural issues	76.5	23.5	Yes

Table 16. Round 2 summary of consensus and non-consensus: Personal and Spiritual Formation—with regard to online Master of Divinity degree programs

#	Question	Extremely Important or Very Important	Somewhat Important or Not At All Important	Consensus
1	Utilizing in-context experiences for the practice of and reflection on ministerial service such as mercy ministry, personal evangelism, or preaching	94.1	5.9	Yes
2	Including reflective assignments on personal and ministry life such as work, family, study, worship and rest	100	0	Yes
3	Incorporating assignments that utilize case-studies or problem-based learning	88.2	11.8	Yes
4	Offering courses that cover various related topics such as spiritual formation, calling, pastoral theology, or leadership	82.3	17.6	Yes

Table 17. Round 2 summary of consensus and non-consensus: Personal and Spiritual Formation—with regard to learning institutions that offer Master of Divinity online degree

#	Question	Extremely Important or Very Important	Somewhat Important or Not At All Important	Consensus
1	Requiring students to complete a ministry portfolio where various assessments are conducted such as a personality profile	52.9	47.1	No
2	Utilizing a cohort format where students remain together in their program so that community is promoted and students are more willing to be open about their spiritual journey	58.8	41.2	No
3	Emphasizing faculty as spiritual models when facilitating and leading discussions, wikis, or video chat	94.1	5.9	Yes
4	Encouraging and expecting areas of relational community and reciprocal learning in online courses such as care, connection, communication, and shared faith	88.2	11.8	Yes
5	Teaching and practicing guidelines for in-course discussion such as truthfulness, respect, integrity, and maturity	82.4	17.6	Yes
6	Incorporating in-context field experiences or internships where students can practice ministerial leadership under the supervision of a mentor who will provide spiritual direction	94.1	5.9	Yes

Table 18. Round 2 summary of consensus and non-consensus: Capacity for ministerial and public leadership—with regard to online Master of Divinity degree programs

#	Question	Extremely Important	Very Important	Consensus
1	Enhancing of courses on the practice of ministry with current materials from pastoral leaders such as textbooks, blogs, or podcasts	100	0	Yes
2	Utilizing discussion forums, collaborative blogs, video chat, or other student-to-student and teacher-to-student interaction as a vehicle for theological discussion and reflection	94.1	5.9	Yes
3	Incorporating assignments on ministry practice such as case studies	88.2	11.8	Yes
4	Evaluating in-context student teaching or preaching using technology such as uploaded video recordings	82.4	17.6	Yes
5	Integrating student journal entries of ministry experiences that are discussed in an online environment	64.7	35.3	No
6	Offering biblical theology and exegesis courses as part of the curriculum	88.2	11.8	Yes
7	Training students in auxiliary areas such as professional skills, sacred use of technology, and legal issues in the ministry	88.2	11.8	Yes
8	Offering a core of courses on various critical theological topics	76.5	23.5	Yes
9	Including curriculum that addresses theoretical concepts related to ministry practice	94.1	5.9	Yes
10	Incorporating in-context ministry practice as a demonstration of ministerial and leadership capacity	100	0	Yes
11	Incorporating in-context ministry practice as an extension of theological reflection	100	0	Yes

Respondents who were outside of consensus on items that achieved consensus were asked to either justify remaining outside of consensus or choose to join the consensus. The following table identifies questions in which answers were changed by participants when given the opportunity to either justify remaining outside of consensus or choose to join the consensus. In other words, in each of these questions, one participant chose to join the consensus. However, in one case (section 3, question 4), the item was changed to become an item of consensus when before it was not. Responses reported in the following tables are percentages. N is 17 for entirety of the table

Table 19. Items changed in the round 2 revision

PLO Statement	#	Question	Extremely Important or Very Important	Somewhat Important or Not At All Important	Extremely Important or Very Important	Somewhat Important or Not At All Important
			Before Revisions	Before Revisions	After Revisions	After Revisions
2. Religious Heritage - history and faith tradition and denominational expression - with regard to learning Institutions that offer online Master of Divinity degree programs.	5	Offering publicly available resources with regard to the learning Institution's mission, history, faith tradition, and denominational expression	76.5	23.5	82.4	17.7
3. Cultural Context learning outcome with regard to online Master of Divinity degree programs.	3	Employing student-to-student interaction, such as discussion boards, wikis, and blogs, where skills can be developed for understanding and engaging culture	82.3	17.6	88.2	11.8
	4	Utilizing various technologies such as social media as a legitimate means for understanding and engaging culture	64.7	35.3	70.6	29.4
	7	Integrating a ministry residency experience such as an internship in order to contextualize and apply learning within culture	94.1	5.9	88.2	11.8
4. Cultural Context learning outcome with regard to learning institutions that offer online Master of Divinity degree programs.	3	Soliciting student feedback with regard to ministry strategies that are successful or unsuccessful in an effort to keep informed of changes in the culture	82.3	17.6	88.2	11.8
5. Personal and Spiritual Formation learning outcome with regard to online Master of Divinity degree programs.	1	Utilizing in-context experiences for the practice of and reflection on ministerial service such as mercy ministry, personal evangelism, or preaching	88.2	11.8	94.1	5.9

Table 19 continued

6. Using the given options, please rate each statement on its level of importance as it relates to successfully meeting the above Personal and Spiritual Formation learning outcome with regard to learning institutions that offer Master of Divinity online degree	4	Encouraging and expecting areas of relational community and reciprocal learning in online courses such as care, connection, communication, and shared faith	82.3	17.6	88.3	11.8
	5	Teaching and practicing guidelines for in-course discussion such as truthfulness, respect, integrity, and maturity	76.5	23.5	82.4	17.6
7. Using the given options, please rate each statement on its level of importance as it relates to successfully meeting the above Capacity for ministerial and public leadership learning outcome with regard to online Master of Divinity degree programs.	4	Evaluating in-context student teaching or preaching using technology such as uploaded video recordings	76.5	23.5	82.4	17.7

As seen above, in some cases, participants chose to join consensus. However, in other cases, the participants chose to justify remaining outside of consensus. The responses from participants can be found in appendix 7.

As with the pilot-study for round 2, the results of this survey were also analyzed using Cronbach Alpha. In addition to removing all items that failed to meet consensus (1.2, 1.5, 2.2, 2.4, 3.6, 4.2, 6.1, 6.2, and 7.5), items that that decreased the reliability of the survey were also removed (3.1, 3.5, 3.6, 4.4, 4.5, and 6.2). 30 statements remained in total (see appendix 6). These 30 statements served as those that would be used in the Round 3 survey.

Round 3

After the completion and analysis of round 2, 30 statements remained that could be described as practices for which there was consensus among the 17 remaining

participants. The final round of this research was a second iteration of the round 2 survey. However, unlike round 2, instead of using a Likert-item scale, a simple disagree/agree dichotomous scale was used. Additionally, following the indicators of the reliability analysis of round 2, the subscales of the first three sections of the survey were consolidated so that the survey contained four major sections with no subscales (see appendix 6). Consensus for the Round 3 survey was defined as 70 percent of respondents choosing "agree." As with round 2 of this research, all participants were presented with the opportunity to review and revise their own responses in light of the rest of the responses. As expected, all 30 statements met the standard of consensus. Responses in the following tables are reported in percentages. N is 17 for entirety of the table.

Table 20. Round 3 survey with percentages, STD, and mean:
Religious Heritage program learning outcome

1. What are ways that the above Religious Heritage - history and faith tradition and denominational expression - learning outcome can be met for an online Master of Divinity degree program?					
#	Statement	Agree	Disagree	MEAN	STD
1	Require a course, or multiple courses, in which the aim is a comprehensive understanding of history, faith tradition, and denominational expression	76.5	23.5	1.76	0.44
2	Integrate content across a variety of courses within the degree program related to a comprehensive understanding of history, faith tradition, and denominational expression	100	0	2	0
3	Align the program with the learning institution's mission, history, faith tradition, and denominational expression	100	0	2	0
4	Hire faculty that are in alignment with the learning Institution's mission, history, faith tradition, and denominational expression	100	0	2	0
5	Utilize the student's church community context as a means of teaching the Institution's mission, history, faith tradition, and denominational expression	88.2	11.8	1.88	0.33
6	Offer publicly available resources with regard to the learning Institution's mission, history, faith tradition, and denominational expression	94.1	5.9	1.94	0.24

Table 21. Round 3 survey with percentages, STD, and mean:
Cultural Context program learning outcome

2. What are ways that the above Cultural Context learning outcome can be met for an online Master of Divinity degree program?					
#	Statement	Agree	Disagree	MEAN	STD
1	Solicit student feedback with regard to ministry strategies that are successful or unsuccessful in an effort to keep informed of changes in the culture	94.1	5.9	1.94	0.24
2	Integrate critical thinking assignments across the curriculum that are designed to interact with culture	100	0	2	0
3	Employ student-to-student interaction, such as discussion boards, wikis, and blogs, where skills can be developed for understanding and engaging culture	100	0	2	0
4	Utilize various technologies such as social media as a legitimate means for understanding and engaging culture	88.2	11.8	1.88	0.33
5	Solicit input on pertinent issues from outside organizations such as churches or advisory boards in an effort to keep informed of changes in the culture	82.4	17.6	1.82	0.39
6	Integrate a ministry residency experience such as an internship in order to contextualize and apply learning within culture	94.1	5.9	1.94	0.24

Table 22. Round 3 survey with percentages, STD, and mean:
Personal and Spiritual Formation program learning outcome

3. What are ways that the above Personal and Spiritual Formation outcome can be met for an online Master of Divinity degree program?					
#	Statement	Agree	Disagree	MEAN	STD
1	Utilize in-context experiences for the practice of and reflection on ministerial service such as mercy ministry, personal evangelism, or preaching	100	0	2	0
2	Include reflective assignments on personal and ministry life such as work, family, study, worship and rest	100	0	2	0
3	Incorporate assignments that utilize case-studies or problem-based learning	94.1	5.9	1.94	0.24
4	Offer courses that cover various related topics such as spiritual formation, calling, pastoral theology, or leadership	94.1	5.9	1.94	0.24
5	Emphasize faculty as spiritual models when facilitating and leading discussions, wikis, or video chat	94.1	5.9	1.94	0.24
6	Teach and practice guidelines for in-course discussion such as truthfulness, respect, integrity, and maturity	88.2	11.8	1.88	0.33
7	Incorporate in-context field experiences or internships where students can practice ministerial leadership under the supervision of a mentor who will provide spiritual direction	100	0	2	0
8	Encourage and expect areas of relational community and reciprocal learning in online courses such as care, connection, communication, and shared faith	100	0	2	0

Table 23. Round 3 survey with percentages, STD, and mean: Capacity for Ministerial and Public Leadership program learning outcome

4. What are ways that the above Capacity for Ministerial and Public Leadership outcome can be met for an online Master of Divinity degree program?					
#	Statement	Agree	Disagree	MEAN	STD
1	Enhance courses on the practice of ministry with current materials from pastoral leaders such as textbooks, blogs, or podcasts	94.1	5.9	1.94	0.24
2	Utilize discussion forums, collaborative blogs, video chat, or other student-to-student and teacher-to-student interaction as a vehicle for theological discussion and reflection	100	0	2	0
3	Incorporating assignments on ministry practice such as case studies	100	0	2	0
4	Evaluate in-context student teaching or preaching using technology such as uploaded video recordings	94.1	5.9	1.94	0.24
5	Offer biblical theology and exegesis courses as part of the curriculum	88.2	11.8	1.88	0.33
6	Train students in auxiliary areas such as professional skills, sacred use of technology, and legal issues in the ministry	88.2	11.8	1.88	0.33
7	Offer a core of courses on various critical theological topics	76.5	23.5	1.76	0.44
8	Include curriculum that addresses theoretical concepts related to ministry practice	100	0	2	0
9	Incorporate in-context ministry practice as a demonstration of ministerial and leadership capacity	100	0	2	0
10	Incorporate in-context ministry practice as an extension of theological reflection	100	0	2	0

Respondents that were outside of consensus on statements in round 3 but were part of consensus on those same statements in round 2 were asked to either justify remaining outside of consensus or choose to join the consensus. This was especially important considering that their response could represent a change of mind from round 2. In two instances, respondents decided to rejoin consensus as displayed in the following table. Responses reported are percentages. N is 17 for entirety of the tables.

Table 24. Items changed in the round 3 revision

PLO Question	#	Question	Agree		Disagree	
			Before Revision	After Revision	Before Revision	After Revision
1. What are ways that the above Religious Heritage - history and faith tradition and denominational expression - learning outcome can be met for an online Master of Divinity degree program?	6	Offer publicly available resources with regard to the learning Institution's mission, history, faith tradition, and denominational expression	88.2	94.1	11.8	5.9
2. What are ways that the above Cultural Context learning outcome can be met for an online Master of Divinity degree program?	2	Integrate critical thinking assignments across the curriculum that are designed to interact with culture	94.1	100	5.9	0

As seen above, in some cases, participants chose to join consensus. However, in other cases, the participants chose to justify remaining outside of consensus. The responses from participants can be found in appendix 8. Narrative responses for round 2 (see appendix 7) was considered relevant and sufficient for items in round 3 where the same respondents remained outside of consensus again. A third area of possible change from round 2 to 3 was when participants were either in the "somewhat important" or "not at all important" category for round 2, (thus outside of the consensus), but selected "agree" for round 3 (thus joining consensus). The following table compares the two rounds using the 30 statements for which consensus was achieved. 19 of the 30 statements showed an increase of positive response from round 2 to round 3. The average increase per statement was 5.8 percent (which represents 1 participant). Responses reported are percentages. N is 17 for entirety of the table.

Table 25. Statements of consensus round 2 and 3 comparison:
Religious Heritage program learning outcome

Religious Heritage: The program shall provide structured opportunities to develop a comprehensive and discriminating understanding of the religious heritage.						
#	Statement	Round 2		Round 3		Consensus Difference
		Extremely Important or Very Important	Somewhat Important or Not At All Important	Agree	Disagree	
1	Require a course, or multiple courses, in which the aim is a comprehensive understanding of history, faith tradition, and denominational expression	82.3	17.6	76.5	23.5	-5.8
2	Integrate content across a variety of courses within the degree program related to a comprehensive understanding of history, faith tradition, and denominational expression	82.3	17.6	100	0	17.7
3	Align the program with the learning institution's mission, history, faith tradition, and denominational expression	100	0	100	0	0
4	Hire faculty that are in alignment with the learning Institution's mission, history, faith tradition, and denominational expression	88.2	11.8	100	0	11.8
5	Utilize the student's church community context as a means of teaching the Institution's mission, history, faith tradition, and denominational expression	76.5	23.5	88.2	11.8	11.7
6	Offer publicly available resources with regard to the learning Institution's mission, history, faith tradition, and denominational expression	82.4	17.6	94.1	5.9	11.7

Table 26. Statements of consensus round 2 and 3 comparison:
Cultural Context program learning outcome

Cultural context: The program shall provide opportunities to develop a critical understanding of and creative engagement with the cultural realities and structures within which the church lives and carries out its mission.						
#	Statement	Round 2		Round 3		Consensus Difference
		Extremely Important or Very Important	Somewhat Important or Not At All Important	Agree	Disagree	
1	Solicit student feedback with regard to ministry strategies that are successful or unsuccessful in an effort to keep informed of changes in the culture	88.2	11.8	94.1	5.9	5.9
2	Integrate critical thinking assignments across the curriculum that are designed to interact with culture	100	0	100	0	0
3	Employ student-to-student interaction, such as discussion boards, wikis, and blogs, where skills can be developed for understanding and engaging culture	88.2	11.8	100	0	11.8
4	Utilize various technologies such as social media as a legitimate means for understanding and engaging culture	70.6	29.4	88.2	11.8	17.6
5	Solicit input on pertinent issues from outside organizations such as churches or advisory boards in an effort to keep informed of changes in the culture	70.6	29.4	82.4	17.6	11.8
6	Integrate a ministry residency experience such as an internship in order to contextualize and apply learning within culture	88.2	11.8	94.1	5.9	5.9

Table 27. Statements of consensus round 2 and 3 comparison: Personal and Spiritual Formation program learning outcome

Personal and Spiritual Formation: The program shall provide opportunities through which the student may grow in personal faith, emotional maturity, moral integrity, and public witness. Ministerial preparation includes concern with the development of capacities—intellectual and affective, individual and corporate, ecclesial and public—that are requisite to a life of pastoral leadership.						
#	Statement	Round 2		Round 3		Consensus Difference
		Extremely Important or Very Important	Somewhat Important or Not At All Important	Agree	Disagree	
1	Utilize in-context experiences for the practice of and reflection on ministerial service such as mercy ministry, personal evangelism, or preaching	94.1	5.9	100	0	5.9
2	Include reflective assignments on personal and ministry life such as work, family, study, worship and rest	100	0	100	0	0
3	Incorporate assignments that utilize case-studies or problem-based learning	88.2	11.8	94.1	5.9	5.9
4	Offer courses that cover various related topics such as spiritual formation, calling, pastoral theology, or leadership	82.3	17.6	94.1	5.9	11.8
5	Emphasize faculty as spiritual models when facilitating and leading discussions, wikis, or video chat	94.1	5.9	94.1	5.9	0
6	Teach and practice guidelines for in-course discussion such as truthfulness, respect, integrity, and maturity	82.4	17.6	88.2	11.8	5.8
7	Incorporate in-context field experiences or internships where students can practice ministerial leadership under the supervision of a mentor who will provide spiritual direction	94.1	5.9	100	0	5.9
8	Encourage and expect areas of relational community and reciprocal learning in online courses such as care, connection, communication, and shared faith	88.2	11.8	100	0	11.8

Table 28. Statements of consensus round 2 and 3 comparison: Capacity for Ministerial and Public Leadership program learning outcome

Capacity for Ministerial and Public Leadership: The program shall provide theological reflection on and education for the practice of ministry. These activities should cultivate the capacity for leadership in both ecclesial and public contexts.						
#	Statement	Round 2		Round 3		Consensus Difference
		Extremely Important or Very Important	Somewhat Important or Not At All Important	Agree	Disagree	
1	Enhance courses on the practice of ministry with current materials from pastoral leaders such as textbooks, blogs, or podcasts	100	0	94.1	5.9	-5.9
2	Utilize discussion forums, collaborative blogs, video chat, or other student-to-student and teacher-to-student interaction as a vehicle for theological discussion and reflection	94.1	5.9	100	0	5.9
3	Incorporating assignments on ministry practice such as case studies	88.2	11.8	100	0	11.8
4	Evaluate in-context student teaching or preaching using technology such as uploaded video recordings	82.4	17.6	94.1	5.9	11.7
5	Offer biblical theology and exegesis courses as part of the curriculum	88.2	11.8	88.2	11.8	0
6	Train students in auxiliary areas such as professional skills, sacred use of technology, and legal issues in the ministry	88.2	11.8	88.2	11.8	0
7	Offer a core of courses on various critical theological topics	76.5	23.5	76.5	23.5	0
8	Include curriculum that addresses theoretical concepts related to ministry practice	94.1	5.9	100	0	5.9
9	Incorporate in-context ministry practice as a demonstration of ministerial and leadership capacity	100	0	100	0	0
10	Incorporate in-context ministry practice as an extension of theological reflection	100	0	100	0	0

The research question for this thesis was "What are the best practices for ministry preparation in online theological education?" By consulting experts in the field, this thesis aimed to discover the consensus regarding the best way forward in the field of

online theological ministry training. By utilizing a mixed-methods exploratory-sequential design where a Delphi study was conducted, the following table is a list of 30 statements on which, according to the definition of consensus in this study, 17 qualified experts in the field of online theological ministry training were in agreement.

Table 29. Statements of consensus: Religious Heritage learning outcome

Religious Heritage: The program shall provide structured opportunities to develop a comprehensive and discriminating understanding of the religious heritage.	
1	Require a course, or multiple courses, in which the aim is a comprehensive understanding of history, faith tradition, and denominational expression
2	Integrate content across a variety of courses within the degree program related to a comprehensive understanding of history, faith tradition, and denominational expression
3	Align the program with the learning institution's mission, history, faith tradition, and denominational expression
4	Hire faculty that are in alignment with the learning Institution's mission, history, faith tradition, and denominational expression
5	Utilize the student's church community context as a means of teaching the Institution's mission, history, faith tradition, and denominational expression
6	Offer publicly available resources with regard to the learning Institution's mission, history, faith tradition, and denominational expression

Table 30. Statements of consensus by: Cultural Context learning outcome

Cultural Context: The program shall provide opportunities to develop a critical understanding of and creative engagement with the cultural realities and structures within which the church lives and carries out its mission.	
1	Solicit student feedback with regard to ministry strategies that are successful or unsuccessful in an effort to keep informed of changes in the culture
2	Integrate critical thinking assignments across the curriculum that are designed to interact with culture
3	Employ student-to-student interaction, such as discussion boards, wikis, and blogs, where skills can be developed for understanding and engaging culture
4	Utilize various technologies such as social media as a legitimate means for understanding and engaging culture
5	Solicit input on pertinent issues from outside organizations such as churches or advisory boards in an effort to keep informed of changes in the culture
6	Integrate a ministry residency experience such as an internship in order to contextualize and apply learning within culture

Table 31. Statements of consensus by: Personal and Spiritual Formation learning outcome

Personal and Spiritual Formation: The program shall provide opportunities through which the student may grow in personal faith, emotional maturity, moral integrity, and public witness. Ministerial preparation includes concern with the development of capacities—intellectual and affective, individual and corporate, ecclesial and public—that are requisite to a life of pastoral leadership.	
1	Utilize in-context experiences for the practice of and reflection on ministerial service such as mercy ministry, personal evangelism, or preaching
2	Include reflective assignments on personal and ministry life such as work, family, study, worship and rest
3	Incorporate assignments that utilize case-studies or problem-based learning
4	Offer courses that cover various related topics such as spiritual formation, calling, pastoral theology, or leadership
5	Emphasize faculty as spiritual models when facilitating and leading discussions, wikis, or video chat
6	Teach and practice guidelines for in-course discussion such as truthfulness, respect, integrity, and maturity
7	Incorporate in-context field experiences or internships where students can practice ministerial leadership under the supervision of a mentor who will provide spiritual direction
8	Encourage and expect areas of relational community and reciprocal learning in online courses such as care, connection, communication, and shared faith

Table 32. Statements of consensus by: Capacity for Ministerial and Public Leadership learning outcome

Capacity for Ministerial and Public Leadership: The program shall provide theological reflection on and education for the practice of ministry. These activities should cultivate the capacity for leadership in both ecclesial and public contexts.	
1	Enhance courses on the practice of ministry with current materials from pastoral leaders such as textbooks, blogs, or podcasts
2	Utilize discussion forums, collaborative blogs, video chat, or other student-to-student and teacher-to-student interaction as a vehicle for theological discussion and reflection
3	Incorporating assignments on ministry practice such as case studies
4	Evaluate in-context student teaching or preaching using technology such as uploaded video recordings
5	Offer biblical theology and exegesis courses as part of the curriculum
6	Train students in auxiliary areas such as professional skills, sacred use of technology, and legal issues in the ministry
7	Offer a core of courses on various critical theological topics
8	Include curriculum that addresses theoretical concepts related to ministry practice
9	Incorporate in-context ministry practice as a demonstration of ministerial and leadership capacity
10	Incorporate in-context ministry practice as an extension of theological reflection

Evaluation of Research Design

Weaknesses

The first weakness of this research design was that a nonprobability purposive sampling was used. Random sampling is more desirable in that when all individuals within a population have an equal probability of being chosen, results of the research can be generalized in a more comprehensive way.[14]

Another area in which this study could have improved was clarity of question wording. Since the research, as in the case of most Delphi studies, began with a questionnaire, ambiguous terms or concepts could have allowed for a variety of interpretations among the participants.[15] The first round questionnaire was pilot tested for clarity; however, with a larger participant group the issue of various perceptions for how a word could be defined became apparent. This seemed to be the case when reading through several of the narrative responses from the participants in round 2. Fortunately, participants were able to provide feedback throughout the process, which is precisely how a Delphi study is designed to function.

Additionally, the instructions for the first round questionnaire could have been clearer. If this study were to be conducted again, more detailed instructions would be provided. For example, although participants were permitted to submit journal articles as part of their answer, stating that up front rather than after the initial data collection would have been more orderly. Additionally, although there is a danger in leading participants toward a biased response, more examples could have been given with certain questions to aid in clarity. Some participants were simply overwhelmed by the task of the first round questionnaire and dropped out due to time constraints. Greater clarity on what was being

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[14]John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2014), 3342, Kindle.

[15]Kim Quaile Hill and Jib Fowles, "The Methodological Worth of the Delphi Forecasting Technique," *Technological Forecasting and Social Change* 7, no. 2 (1975): 179-92.

sought might have helped them see the task as more manageable.

Another issue that could be raised as a potential weakness is that of reliability. While this thesis followed standard research procedures for a Delphi study, the question of reliability using Cronbach Alpha persisted as not all of the four main sections of the survey reached .700. This was perplexing as the Alpha rating of .700 had been reached in the pilot-study. In the end, all possible items were deleted, as recommended by SPSS. Additionally, combining the 8 original subscales into the 4 represented in round 3 greatly improved the Alpha rating. However, it would certainly have been more desirable to have met the Alpha rating of .700 for both the pilot study and round 2. Another round of edits during the pilot test phase before the round 2 survey was launched might have improved the reliability ratings. Additionally, some statements may have been too generic which could account for some of the change.

One challenge that exists for all Delphi studies is that of the anonymity of the respondents. Given that anonymity must be maintained in a Delphi study, some may find that this "characteristic can detract from the credibility of the study and can make the experts inaccessible to future researchers and practitioners."[16] There can be differences on what is preferred between what was said and who said it. In other words, the reputation of the participant can lend credibility to what is said. On the other hand, the value gained with anonymity is the avoidance of peer pressure on one participant to change their response due to the reputation of another participant in the group. Appendices 7 and 8 assist to substantiate the credibility of respondents. Additionally, it should be noted that anonymity is a non-negotiable characteristic of a Delphi study.

Lastly, given that the round one questionnaire was limited to text in an electronic document, responses in the qualitative phase might have been unnecessarily limited. A phone interview might have given respondents opportunities to ask questions,

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[16]Ravonne A. Green, "The Delphi Technique in Educational Research," *SAGE Open* 4, no. 2 (April 1, 2014): 6.

or receive clarifications that contributed to greater consistency in understanding of key terms. One strength of the electronic document, however, was that participants could take their time and give well-thought responses as well as complete them in timeframe convenient for them. Perhaps what would have been best is a combination of the two methods described above.

Strengths

One typical problem for Delphi studies is a high rate of attrition.[17] In this kind of Delphi study where a homogenous group of participants was used, 10-15 experts would have been sufficient. The study began with 21 participants and finished with 17 (r 81 percent). Additionally, 4 out of the 5 participants that dropped out did so before any results from round 1 were collected. Therefore, despite the loss of some participants, the number of experts that completed the study was more than sufficient.

A Delphi study has been described as a "flexible research technique well suited when there is incomplete knowledge about phenomena."[18] As demonstrated in the literature review, while the concepts related to online theological learning have been discussed, the idea of best practices for online ministry training degree programs have not been scientifically researched. Since this is an area of incomplete knowledge, the Delphi study was a very appropriate method.

A panel of experts is required for any Delphi study. In this particular case, qualified participants were defined as professors, and/or administrators directly involved in online theological ministry training degree programs at either seminaries or graduate schools. These participants, of like faith, averaged over 10 years of experience in the field of online theological ministry training. So, given that sampling was discussed as a weakness of the design, a particular group of people was sought making a more

[17]Hill and Fowles, "The Methodological Worth."

[18]Skulmoski, Hartman, and Krahn, "The Delphi Method for Graduate Research," 12.

purposive approach desirable. The sampling was not based on convenience and although the results cannot be as generalized as it would be with a random sampling, the results can apply to seminaries that match the qualifications of the research participants. Since this is indeed the nature of the research question, this is a favorable.

Conclusion

Whereas, chapter 3 aimed to describe the research methodology that this thesis would employ, chapter 4 described how the data related to the research question were compiled, analyzed, and summarized. Additionally, the methodology itself was evaluated as to its strengths and weaknesses. Whereas chapter 4 reported the findings of the research, chapter 5 offers an interpretation of those findings by analyzing the results of the research, its contribution to the precedent literature, and recommendations for how this research can be used in practice.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

This research explored the best practices for ministry preparation in online theological education. Using a mixed-methods approach that was an exploratory sequential design, the Delphi method was utilized. This chapter seeks to answer the research question posed by the thesis, provide an assessment of the contribution of the research to the precedent literature, and offer recommendations for practice related to the research.

Analysis of Results

Research Question and Methodology

The purpose of this mixed-methods exploratory sequential design was to answer the question "What are the best practices for ministry preparation in online theological education?" In order to answer this question, a Delphi study was conducted with a homogenous group of 17 experts that sought to discover statements of consensus on best practices for ministry preparation in online theological education.

Round 1 of the research involved a free-form eight-question survey based on the four program learning outcomes for ATS M.Div. programs (see appendix 3). This survey sought to discover, from the perspective of the respondents, how these learning outcomes might be accomplished in an online M.Div. program. These responses were analyzed for themes. The round 1 analysis yielded 44 statements that served as the basis for round 2 of this study (see tables 1-4).

Round 2 of the research was a Likert-type survey in which participants were asked to rate each of the statements from round 1 on its level of importance as it relates to successfully meeting the learning outcome with which it was associated. After the survey

was conducted, opportunity for revision given, and reliability analysis was completed, 30 statements remained that met the definition of consensus given in this thesis.

Round 3 of this research was a second iteration of the round 2 survey. However, only statements that met consensus were included. Additionally, instead of using a Likert-type survey, a simple disagree/agree dichotomous scale was used. All 30 statements that met the definition of consensus for round 2 in this thesis also met the definition of consensus for round 3. In summary, after this three-round Delphi study, 30 statements met the definition of consensus on best practices for ministry preparation in online theological education.

Analysis of Results

The singular question this thesis sought to answer was "What are the best practices for ministry preparation in online theological education?" In order to answer this question, experts in the field of online theological ministry training degree programs were consulted. It was determined for purposes of this thesis, that the research question would be answered by discovering where consensus existed among the experts in the field of online theological ministry training. A group of professional practitioners in the field were able to view the issues at hand from a vantage point of knowledge and experience.

Additionally, the questions in all three rounds of the Delphi study were built around an existing set of program learning outcomes determined by ATS to be the standards of success for any school desiring to offer a Master of Divinity. Rather than invent a set of criteria, it seemed best to employ an already-existing objective set of outcomes. If the experts felt as if there were ways to successfully meet these outcomes in online programs, then it would stand to reason that fully online M.Div. programs ought to be considered as normal practice, rather than as an exception to the rule. Ultimately, using consensus, the aim was to establish a set of best practices for each of the four program learning outcomes associated with the ATS M.Div. program. The hope was that

a set of best practices could be established whereby each of these learning outcomes could be accomplished in a fully online M.Div. program.

The first of the four program learning outcomes involved religious heritage in which a comprehensive and discriminating understanding must be developed. In this area, six practices were discovered that met the definition of consensus (see table 8):

1. Require a course, or multiple courses, in which the aim is a comprehensive understanding of history, faith tradition, and denominational expression.
2. Integrate content across a variety of courses within the degree program related to a comprehensive understanding of history, faith tradition, and denominational expression.
3. Align the program with the learning institution's mission, history, faith tradition, and denominational expression.
4. Hire faculty that are in alignment with the learning institution's mission, history, faith tradition, and denominational expression.
5. Utilize the student's church community context as a means of teaching the Institution's mission, history, faith tradition, and denominational expression.
6. Offer publicly available resources with regard to the learning institution's mission, history, faith tradition, and denominational expression.

Not surprisingly, given that this learning outcome revolved around understanding, many of these statements involved the cognitive domain (require a course, integrate information, publish information, etc.). Two of the statements that stand out as less expected were 4 and 5. Although it seemed normal and rational to hire faculty that align with, or at least supportive of, the learning institution's religious heritage, do schools intentionally view this as an integral part of meeting this particular program learning outcome? It seems that, if statements 1 and 2 are going to be accomplished, schools that offer online M.Div. programs ought to be especially aware of the importance of faculty in terms of their alignment with the institution.

A theme that ran throughout the statements discovered in this research is the importance of the student's church community as an integral part of meeting the learning outcomes. In this particular instance, the consensus was that one way to meet the religious heritage learning outcome was to utilize the student's church community. The

strength of this, of course, was that an institution has an opportunity to teach about its own religious heritage while allowing this understanding to be emphasized and reinforced in the student's church. The challenge, naturally, is that religious heritage will vary within the typical student body. Nevertheless, it seemed that the experts consider the student's church community context vital to the understanding of religious heritage. Why unnecessarily isolate a student from their church community while they are studying in an M.Div. program?

The second learning outcome for ATS M.DIV. programs dealt with cultural context where opportunities to develop critical understanding of and creative engagement with the cultural realities of the church's mission were to be provided. In this area six practices were discovered that met the definition of consensus (see table 8).

1. Solicit student feedback with regard to ministry strategies that are successful or unsuccessful in an effort to keep informed of changes in the culture.
2. Integrate critical thinking assignments across the curriculum that are designed to interact with culture.
3. Employ student-to-student interaction, such as discussion boards, wikis, and blogs, where skills can be developed for understanding and engaging culture.
4. Utilize various technologies, such as social media, as a legitimate means for understanding and engaging culture.
5. Solicit input on pertinent issues from outside organizations, such as churches or advisory boards, in an effort to keep informed of changes in the culture.
6. Integrate a ministry residency experience such as an internship in order to contextualize and apply learning within culture.

One significant observation regarding the list was that only 2 of the 6 (4 and 5) do not expect, either implicitly or explicitly, some form of engagement by the students with their culture. In statement 1, students functioned as a sounding board regarding the effectiveness of ministry strategies learned in a course or program. Statement 2 seemed to require some level of cultural engagement in that the assignments are designed to integrate critical thinking as a result of interacting with culture. Statement 3 may not involve students in their own culture, but in as much as online courses are likely to be

comprised of students from a variety of cultures, any student-to-student interaction is a form of cultural engagement. Finally, statement 6 appeared to be the most explicit statement with regard to the understanding of and engagement with culture. Whether it was in the form of an internship of some kind, or the utilization of an existing ministry role for a student, the experts in this study seemed to indicate strong interest in the utilization of the students' existing cultural context for this particular learning outcome. The narrative responses in round 1 repeatedly drew attention to the value of the student pursuing ministry training without having to move away from their community. This sentiment presented itself repeatedly in the research findings.

The third learning outcome for ATS M.DIV. programs dealt with personal and spiritual formation where students are provided the opportunity to grow in personal faith, emotional maturity, moral integrity, and public witness. In this area, eight practices were discovered that met the definition of consensus (see table 8).

1. Utilize in-context experiences for the practice of and reflection on ministerial service such as mercy ministry, personal evangelism, or preaching.
2. Include reflective assignments on personal and ministry life such as work, family, study, worship, and rest.
3. Incorporate assignments that utilize case studies or problem-based learning.
4. Offer courses that cover various related topics such as spiritual formation, calling, pastoral theology, or leadership.
5. Emphasize faculty as spiritual models when facilitating and leading discussions, wikis, or video chat.
6. Teach and practice guidelines for in-course discussion such as truthfulness, respect, integrity, and maturity.
7. Incorporate in-context field experiences or internships where students can practice ministerial leadership under the supervision of a mentor who will provide spiritual direction.
8. Encourage and expect areas of relational community and reciprocal learning in online courses such as care, connection, communication, and shared faith.

As in the previous two learning outcomes, the idea of utilizing the students' existing context emerged once again in connection with personal and spiritual formation.

Statements 1 and 7 directly indicated the use of in-context experiences. As in a residential mode of learning, statements 2 and 3 demonstrated the need for assignments that could be reflective in nature as a way of partially meeting the personal and spiritual formation outcome. However, two ideas seemed to emerge from this particular set of statements on the personal and spiritual formation outcome. The first was the possibility for faculty as spiritual models, even in an online program. Second as the idea of students learning from one another in the relational community that is the online course or program. With the eight statements for personal and spiritual formation in view, one can see the possibility of this formation from the view of students with the material itself, students within their own context, students with other students, and students with their faculty. In this regard, what appeared to separate the online environment from the residential environment (once again), is the additional opportunity availed to the online students as it relates to remaining in their community contexts.

The fourth and final learning outcome for ATS M.Div. programs dealt with the capacity for ministerial and public leadership where theological reflection on and education for the practice of ministry are provided. In this area, ten practices were discovered that met the definition of consensus (see table 8).

1. Enhance courses on the practice of ministry with current materials from pastoral leaders such as textbooks, blogs, or podcasts.
2. Utilize discussion forums, collaborative blogs, video chat, or other student-to-student and teacher-to-student interaction as a vehicle for theological discussion and reflection.
3. Incorporating assignments on ministry practice such as case studies.
4. Evaluate in-context student teaching or preaching using technology such as uploaded video recordings.
5. Offer biblical theology and exegesis courses as part of the curriculum.
6. Train students in auxiliary areas such as professional skills, sacred use of technology, and legal issues in the ministry.
7. Offer a core of courses on various critical theological topics.
8. Include curriculum that addresses theoretical concepts related to ministry practice.

9. Incorporate in-context ministry practice as a demonstration of ministerial and leadership capacity.
10. Incorporate in-context ministry practice as an extension of theological reflection.

The statements for this learning outcome seemed to be particularly heavy in the area of course content. Statements 3, 3, 5, 6, 7, and 8 all fell along the lines of material that can be taught in an online course similarly to how it might be approached in a residential mode of learning. Statement 2 articulated a means by which students can interact with one another on the material they are learning in a particular course. Finally, as mentioned in each of the other three learning outcomes, the idea of in-context practice emerged (see statements 4, 9, and 10). In this particular learning outcome, it might be argued that the in-context practice of ministry is critical to the accomplishment of this learning outcome.

Contribution of Research to the Precedent Literature

The literature review of this thesis explored two primary categories related to the research question "What are the best practices for ministry preparation in online theological education?" The first was the general category of best practices for online learning. The second category was that of theological ministry training.

What seemed evident from the literature, although things are ever changing, is that the best practices of online learning have been explored and are established. The second major category of the literature review was theological ministry training. Within this category, the established mission of M.Div. programs was explored. This was accomplished by looking at the aims of the Association of Theological Schools and two of its major seminaries. With an understanding of the best practices of online training, as well as the general aims of theological ministry training, specific articles were reviewed that addressed topics related to theological ministry training in an online learning context. Within the category of theological ministry training in an online learning context, four general topics emerged: (1) the technology associated with theological ministry training online (the medium), (2) pedagogical concerns for theological ministry training online

(teaching from professor to student), (3) community within online ministry training (the educational context), and (4) spiritual formation within online theological ministry training (the product of a spiritually growing student).

Best practices for online learning that incorporate adult learning theory appear to be well-established, as do the aims of theological ministry training. Relevant topics relating to theological ministry training, such as technology, pedagogy, community, and formation are also gaining ground. However, at the time of this research, there did not appear to be research that establishes consensus among the experts on what the best practices are for ministry preparation in online theological education. Research needed to be conducted where a panel of experts was consulted on the establishment of best practices for how theological ministry training is accomplished in a fully online learning context.

This thesis conducted research that established consensus on best practices for online theological ministry training. Utilizing the Delphi method, a panel of 17 qualified experts was consulted on the best ways to accomplish the four ATS M.Div. program learning outcomes in an online degree program. These responses were analyzed for themes and developed into a Likert-type survey. The panel rated each statement on its level of importance with regard to accomplishing the learning outcome with which the statement was associated. Consensus was defined as 70 percent of the participants choosing 3 (out of 4) or higher. After the survey was conducted, opportunity for revision given, and reliability analysis was completed, 30 statements remained that met the definition of consensus given in this thesis. A second iteration of this survey was then given to the same participants. However, only statements that met consensus were included and a simple disagree/agree dichotomous scale was used. All 30 statements that met the definition of consensus for round 2 in this thesis also met the definition of consensus for round 3.

In summary, there was a need for research to be conducted where experts were

consulted on the best practices for theological ministry training in a fully online learning context. This thesis offers an answer to the research question, "What are the best practices for ministry preparation in online theological education?" by providing 30 statements of best practices for ministry preparation on which the experts agree (see tables 29 to 32).

Recommendations for Practice

As a result of this research, recommendations for practice can be made with regard to at least two major categories. The first category addresses recommendations of a practical nature while the second category addresses recommendations of a philosophical nature.

Considerations of Praxis

The practical value of the research should be understood in light of three realities: popularity, opportunity, and methodology. The first reality is the overall popularity of online education. Online learning is flourishing. The second reality, flowing out of the flourishing nature of online education, is opportunity. Given that there is great interest on the part of students to receive training via an online model, seminaries have an opportunity to provide this highly desired commodity. As described already, ATS indeed demonstrates a willingness to allow its seminaries to offer fully online M.Div. programs in that it is waiving its residence requirements by way of providing exceptions to qualifying schools. The great level of interest in online education leads to a great potential opportunity. However, there is a third reality, methodology. At the time of this thesis, no research existed that established best practices for online theological ministry training. The establishment of best practices for each of the four ATS M.Div. program learning outcomes fills a previously unmet need. It is hoped that the establishment of these best practices adds methodological framework to the already existing realities of popularity and opportunity. When online programs are popular,

resulting in a great opportunity for seminaries to offer these online programs, a methodological guide driven by established learning outcomes should help in the prevention of a purely pragmatic approach.

There are at least two specific practical uses for these established best practices. The first suggestion for practice with regard to these best practices is as a helpful guide for seminaries or graduate schools who are considering offering online theological ministry training. The prospects of offering a fully online theological ministry degree program might seem like a daunting task, especially for those who lack experience or training in the area of online education. Administrators who consider this move may have a connection or two to schools who have already made this transition and are likely to leverage those relationships as a way of seeking counsel on establishing an online program. This research collected the insights of 17 experts who average over ten years of experience as either professors, administrators, or both, in online ministry training degree programs for either seminaries or graduate schools. These experts did not give random input on the idea of online theological ministry training, but answered questions on how to successfully meet specific and established learning outcomes for the ATS M.Div. program via online learning. Therefore, an administrator who seeks to develop an online M.Div. should benefit greatly by considering what the experts have to say about successfully meeting each of the four learning outcomes in an online degree program.

A second suggestion for practice is for those schools who already offer online theological ministry degree programs. Schools that already offer online theological ministry degree programs are likely to benefit from this research by using the 30 statements as a means of self-evaluation. It is very possible that ideas may be discovered in this research that lead to more innovative, creative, and effective ways to enhance an already-existing online ministry degree program. One suggestion for further research is the development of an instrument of self-assessment using the 30 statements discovered

in this research. This assessment could be implemented at the faculty or student level.

Considerations of Philosophy

In addition to suggestions of a practical nature, a philosophical consideration seems to be raised by this research. The primary philosophical consideration that surfaced regularly in this research was that of the distance involved in online education. As referenced in the literature review, much has been written on the issues of spiritual formation and community when comparing the advantages and disadvantages of residential and online models of learning. On the one hand, this research demonstrates the feasibility of meeting the learning outcomes related to these topics (personal and spiritual formation and capacity for ministerial leadership). In addition to this, however, it is interesting to note that among each collection of statements of best practice for the four ATS M.Div. learning outcomes, there appeared references to the in-context community of the online student. Evidently, rather than see the distance of online students to their residential campuses as problematic, the participants in this research acknowledged the distance as a benefit (or at the very least non-problematic), when considering that online ministry training can be interweaved with immediate in-context ministry experiences.

The idea of utilizing the in-context community of students as a part of the M.Div. program raises a question of strategy. Should seminaries expend energy in an attempt to make online courses as much like their residential counterparts as possible, or should they look to accomplish the same objectives while utilizing the student's in-context community? It is worth repeating from the literature review, a statement to this very point by Matthew Ogilvie:

> Wherein lies the "distance" in distance education? Is the "distance" between the student and the institution, or between the student and the community one serves or will serve? Such a question challenges our traditional educational paradigms. It

> would seem that onsite education creates distance between a student and his or her community, and that the opposite may also apply.[1]

In other words, as illustrated in figure 1, distance is inevitable in seminary education. It is a matter of choosing which distance is preferable, distance from faculty (online education) or distance from one's in-context community (residential education). The online student has the disadvantage of distance with a faculty member, while having a tremendous advantage of proximity to his or her community.

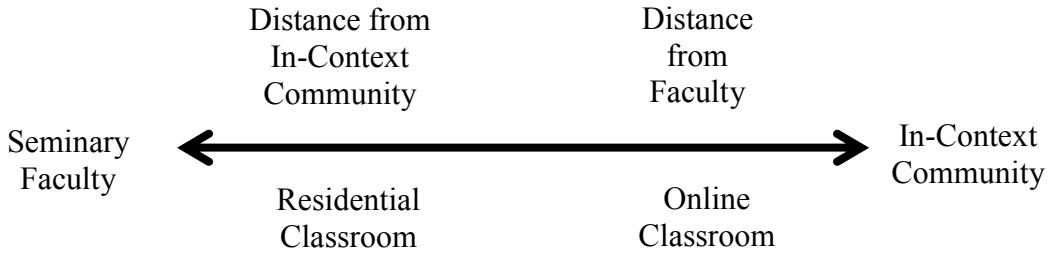

Figure 1: The inevitable distance in all education

In addition to the obvious advantages of convenience, such as not having to move or quit their jobs, online students have the opportunity to immediately practice what is being learned in their in-context community. The reasons then move beyond pure pragmatism when this practice is intentional and not just coincidental. The practitioners involved in this research recommend an intentional inclusion of the student's in-context community as a means of emphasis and reinforcement of learning by way of practice.

Bold as this may sound, online ministry training degree programs have the potential to be an equally effective option for students. Given the scenario where best practices for online ministry degree programs are fully implemented according to the recommendations by experts in the field, and full advantage is taken of a student's in-context community, it could be argued that online theological ministry training combines the best of both theory and practice. At the very least, it should be acknowledged that the

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[1]Matthew Ogilvie, "Teaching Theology Online," *Australian EJournal of Theology*, no. 13 (January 1, 2009), accessed September 18, 2013, http://researchonline.nd.edu.au/theo_article/66.

physical distance between a student and his or her professor can be overcome, especially when done in favor over the physical distance between a student and his or her in-context community.

APPENDIX 1

INITIAL CONTACT EMAIL

Greetings Dr. (name removed for anonymity),

My name is John Cartwright and, in addition to my role at Liberty University as a Department Chair overseeing online programs in the School of Religion, I am also a doctoral student at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Over the next several months, I hope to be conducting research that seeks to establish consensus on the best practices for online theological ministry training. The nature of my research involves recruiting professors who have experience teaching online courses or administrating online programs at the graduate level.

During my research I noted that, due to your role at (school name removed for anonymity), you are likely to have an interest in distance theological education.
My initial question for you is whether or not you might be interested in participating in my research. I am more than happy to provide much greater detail about the nature of the study and the commitment required for the study if you are indeed interested.
Thank you so much for your consideration.

Sincerely,

John Cartwright

APPENDIX 2

PARTICIPANT QUALIFICATIONS SURVEY

1. The following survey is for the purpose of determining if those who have agreed to participate in the research for John Cartwright's doctoral thesis fit the qualifications defined in his thesis for the Delphi group. The survey should take no more than 5 minutes. Your identity will remain anonymous throughout this research.

   Do you consent to take the survey?
   - o Yes
   - o No

2. Do you have experience as either a professor or administrator for online seminary/graduate level ministry training degree programs?

   Note: Only participants with experience as either professors or administrators for either seminary or graduate level online theological ministry degree programs and/or courses are being sought for this research.
   - o Yes
   - o No

3. Which of the following could be used to describe you? (check one or both)
   - o Professor
   - o Administrator (Dean, Associate Dean, Chair, Director, etc)

4. How many years of experience do you have as either a professor or administrator (or both) for online ministry training degree programs?

5. Although not intended to serve as a comprehensive faith statement, are you able to at least affirm the following widely accepted characteristics of Evangelical Christianity?
   1) The Bible is central and authoritative for Christian faith and life.
   2) The death of Jesus on the cross provided atonement for sin.
   3) Human beings need to repent and trust in Jesus.
   4) This conversion changes the way that individuals relate to other people and to the world.
      - o Yes
      - o No

APPENDIX 3

ROUND 1 SURVEY

The following eight questions have been developed using the Association of Theological Schools' four primary learning outcomes for Master of Divinity programs as a starting point. The four areas are: 1. Religious Heritage, 2. Cultural Context, 3. Personal and Spiritual Formation, and 4. Capacity for Ministerial and Public Leadership. Due to converting these outcomes into specific questions each of which need answers and examples, it seemed necessary to divide some of these learning outcomes into multiple questions. If respondents feel the need for more information or a specific explanation for each of these, they are encouraged to read pp G39-G41 in the Educational and Degree Program Standards for ATS.

1. How, specifically, can an online program develop a comprehensive and distinctive understanding of the history and beliefs of its specific faith tradition and denominational expression (if applicable)? Please give detailed examples when possible.

2. How, specifically, can an online program develop a critical understanding of the cultural realities and structures within which the church lives and carries out its mission? Please give detailed examples when possible.

3. How, specifically, can an online program develop creative engagement with the cultural realities and structures within which the church lives and carries out its mission? Please give detailed examples when possible.

4. How, specifically, can an online program provide learning experiences through which the student may grow in personal faith, emotional maturity, moral integrity, and public witness? Please give detailed examples for each when possible.

5. How, specifically, can an online program cultivate the capacity for a life of pastoral leadership (such as intellectual and emotional, individual and corporate, congregational and public)? Please give detailed examples for each if possible.

6. How, specifically, can an online program provide theological reflection on the practice of ministry? Please give detailed examples when possible.

7. How, specifically can an online program provide education for the practice of ministry? Please give detailed examples when possible.

8. What are other specific areas that do not fit any of the general categories already listed above that you deem necessary for online ministry training degree programs? Please give detailed examples and explain why you feel they need to be included.

APPENDIX 4

ROUND 2 PILOT STUDY RELIABILITY ANALYSIS SUMMARY

Table A1. Round 2 pilot study reliability analysis summary

Scale 1 : Religious Heritage Degree Programs	
Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
0.746	5
Scale 2: Religious Heritage Institution	
Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.829	4
Scale 3: Cultural Context Degree Programs	
Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
0.438	8
Scale 4: Cultural Context Institution	
Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
0.642	5
Scale 5: Personal and Spiritual Degree Programs	
Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
0.766	4
Scale 6: Personal and Spiritual Institutions	
Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
0.729	6

Table A1 continued

Scale 7: Capacity Spiritual Degree Programs	
Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
0.296	4
Scale 8: Capacity Spiritual Institution	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
0.694	6
Scales 7 and 8: Capacity Spiritual	
Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.709	10

APPENDIX 5

ROUND 2 SURVEY

The following survey is intended to serve as the 2nd round of research for John Cartwright's doctoral thesis. The 8 questions for the round 1 survey were established based on the 4 learning outcomes for the Master of Divinity program for the Association of Theological Schools. The answers to these 8 questions from this round 1 survey were compiled under the 4 original learning outcomes from which they were developed. These answers were analyzed for emerging themes which were developed into the questions that comprise this round 2 survey. The 4 learning outcomes serve as the 4 main constructs for the round 2 survey. This round 2 survey will ask respondents to rate each item on its level importance as it relates to successfully meeting the learning outcome with which it is associated. The survey should take no more than 20 minutes. Your identity will remain anonymous throughout this research. Do you consent to take the survey?

The survey questions are organized according to the following four ATS learning outcomes for Master of Divinity programs:

1. **Religious Heritage:** The program shall provide structured opportunities to develop a comprehensive and discriminating understanding of the religious heritage.

2. **Cultural context:** The program shall provide opportunities to develop a critical understanding of and creative engagement with the cultural realities and structures within which the church lives and carries out its mission.

3. **Personal and spiritual formation:** The program shall provide opportunities through which the student may grow in personal faith, emotional maturity, moral integrity, and public witness. Ministerial preparation includes concern with the development of capacities—intellectual and affective, individual and corporate, ecclesial and public—that are requisite to a life of pastoral leadership.

4. **Capacity for ministerial and public leadership:** The program shall provide theological reflection on and education for the practice of ministry. These activities should cultivate the capacity for leadership in both ecclesial and public contexts.

Using the given options, please rate each statement on its level of importance as it relates to successfully meeting the above Religious Heritage - history and faith tradition and denominational expression - learning outcome with regard to online Master of Divinity degree programs.

#	Question	Not at all Important	Somewhat Important	Very Important	Extremely Important
1	Requiring a course, or multiple courses, in which the aim is a comprehensive understanding of history, faith tradition, and denominational expression				
2	Allowing students to choose from a list of courses in which the aim is a comprehensive understanding of history, faith tradition, and denominational expression				
3	Integrating content across a variety of courses within the degree program related to a comprehensive understanding of history, faith tradition, and denominational expression				
4	Aligning the program with the learning institution's mission, history, faith tradition, and denominational expression				
5	Utilizing virtual environments, such as wikis or blogs, to emphasize or reinforce an Institution's mission, history, faith tradition, and denominational expression				

Using the given options, please rate each statement on its level of importance as it relates to successfully meeting the above Religious Heritage - history and faith tradition and denominational expression - learning outcome with regard to learning Institutions that offer online Master of Divinity degree programs.

#	Question	Not at all Important	Somewhat Important	Very Important	Extremely Important
1	Hiring faculty that are in alignment with the learning Institution's mission, history, faith tradition, and denominational expression				
2	Providing a means for ongoing faculty training on the learning Institution's mission, history, faith tradition, and denominational expression				
3	Utilizing the student's church community context as a means of teaching the Institution's mission, history, faith tradition, and denominational expression				
4	Orienting students, as part of the admissions process, with regard to the learning Institution's mission, history, faith tradition, and denominational expression				
5	Offering publicly available resources with regard to the learning Institution's mission, history, faith tradition, and denominational expression				

Using the given options, please rate each statement on its level of importance as it relates to successfully meeting the above Cultural Context learning outcome with regard to online Master of Divinity degree programs.

#	Question	Not at all Important	Somewhat Important	Very Important	Extremely Important
1	Offering a course on cultural exegesis that is historical and analytical in nature				
2	Integrating critical thinking assignments across the curriculum that are designed to interact with culture				
3	Employing student-to-student interaction, such as discussion boards, wikis, and blogs, where skills can be developed for understanding and engaging culture				
4	Utilizing various technologies such as social media as a legitimate means for understanding and engaging culture				
5	Including projects that students execute in their own ministry culture as an application and reinforcement of learning				
6	Assigning students a mentor in order to contextualize learning in their own culture				
7	Integrating a ministry residency experience such as an internship in order to contextualize and apply learning within culture				

Using the given options, please rate each statement on its level of importance as it relates to successfully meeting the above Cultural Context learning outcome with regard to learning institutions that offer online Master of Divinity degree programs.

#	Question	Not at all Important	Somewhat Important	Very Important	Extremely Important
1	Soliciting input on pertinent issues from outside organizations such as churches or advisory boards in an effort to keep informed of changes in the culture				
2	Soliciting student input in an effort to keep informed of changes in the culture				
3	Soliciting student feedback with regard to ministry strategies that are successful or unsuccessful in an effort to keep informed of changes in the culture				
4	Hiring faculty that have the ability to lead and teach students with regard to culture				
5	Incorporating ongoing training for faculty on relevant cultural issues				

Using the given options, please rate each statement on its level of importance as it relates to successfully meeting the above Personal & Spiritual Formation learning outcome with regard to online Master of Divinity degree programs.

#	Question	Not at all Important	Somewhat Important	Very Important	Extremely Important
1	Utilizing in-context experiences for the practice of and reflection on ministerial service such as mercy ministry, personal evangelism, or preaching				
2	Including reflective assignments on personal and ministry life such as work, family, study, worship and rest				
3	Incorporating assignments that utilize case-studies or problem-based learning				
4	Offering courses that cover various related topics such as spiritual formation, calling, pastoral theology, or leadership				

Using the given options, please rate each statement on its level of importance as it relates to successfully meeting the above Personal & Spiritual Formation learning outcome with regard to learning institutions that offer Master of Divinity online degree programs.

#	Question	Not at all Important	Somewhat Important	Very Important	Extremely Important
1	Requiring students to complete a ministry portfolio where various assessments are conducted such as a personality profile				
2	Utilizing a cohort format where students remain together in their program so that community is promoted and students are more willing to be open about their spiritual journey				
3	Emphasizing faculty as spiritual models when facilitating and leading discussions, wikis, or video chat				
4	Encouraging and expecting areas of relational community and reciprocal learning in online courses such as care, connection, communication, and shared faith				
5	Teaching and practicing guidelines for in-course discussion such as truthfulness, respect, integrity, and maturity				
6	Incorporating in-context field experiences or internships where students can practice ministerial leadership under the supervision of a mentor who will provide spiritual direction				

Using the given options, please rate each statement on its level of importance as it relates to successfully meeting the above Capacity for ministerial and public leadership learning outcome with regard to online Master of Divinity degree programs.

#	Question	Not at all Important	Somewhat Important	Very Important	Extremely Important
1	Enhancing of courses on the practice of ministry with current materials from pastoral leaders such as textbooks, blogs, or podcasts				
2	Utilizing discussion forums, collaborative blogs, video chat, or other student-to-student and teacher-to-student interaction as a vehicle for theological discussion and reflection				
3	Incorporating assignments on ministry practice such as case studies				
4	Evaluating in-context student teaching or preaching using technology such as uploaded video recordings				
5	Integrating student journal entries of ministry experiences that are discussed in an online environment				
6	Offering biblical theology and exegesis courses as part of the curriculum				
7	Training students in auxiliary areas such as professional skills, sacred use of technology, and legal issues in the ministry				
8	Offering a core of courses on various critical theological topics				
9	Including curriculum that addresses theoretical concepts related to ministry practice				
10	Incorporating in-context ministry practice as a demonstration of ministerial and leadership capacity				
11	Incorporating in-context ministry practice as an extension of theological reflection				

APPENDIX 6

ROUND 3 SURVEY

The following survey is intended to serve as the 3rd and final round of research for John Cartwright's doctoral thesis. The round 2 survey listed 43 statements divided among the four learning outcomes for the Master of Divinity program for the Association of Theological Schools. Respondents rated each statement on its level of importance as it relates to successfully meeting the learning outcome with which it is associated. After the responses were analyzed and an opportunity was given for review and revision of original answers, a list of statements remained that met the definition of consensus for this research study. This survey includes only those statements that met the definition of consensus. Additionally, some other statements were dropped due to their negative impact on the reliability ratings when analyzed. In this survey you will be asked to choose between agree or disagree with regard to the statements in the survey. The survey should take no more than 10 minutes. Your identity will remain anonymous throughout this research. Do you consent to take the survey?

The survey questions are organized according to the following four ATS learning outcomes for Master of Divinity programs:

1. **Religious Heritage:** The program shall provide structured opportunities to develop a comprehensive and discriminating understanding of the religious heritage.

2. **Cultural context:** The program shall provide opportunities to develop a critical understanding of and creative engagement with the cultural realities and structures within which the church lives and carries out its mission.

3. **Personal and spiritual formation:** The program shall provide opportunities through which the student may grow in personal faith, emotional maturity, moral integrity, and public witness. Ministerial preparation includes concern with the development of capacities—intellectual and affective, individual and corporate, ecclesial and public—that are requisite to a life of pastoral leadership.

4. **Capacity for ministerial and public leadership:** The program shall provide theological reflection on and education for the practice of ministry. These activities should cultivate the capacity for leadership in both ecclesial and public contexts.

What are ways that the above Religious Heritage - history and faith tradition and denominational expression - learning outcome can be met for an online Master of Divinity degree program?

#	Question	Disagree	Agree
1	Require a course, or multiple courses, in which the aim is a comprehensive understanding of history, faith tradition, and denominational expression		
2	Integrate content across a variety of courses within the degree program related to a comprehensive understanding of history, faith tradition, and denominational expression		
3	Align the program with the learning institution's mission, history, faith tradition, and denominational expression		
4	Hire faculty that are in alignment with the learning Institution's mission, history, faith tradition, and denominational expression		
5	Utilize the student's church community context as a means of teaching the Institution's mission, history, faith tradition, and denominational expression		
6	Offer publicly available resources with regard to the learning Institution's mission, history, faith tradition, and denominational expression		

What are ways that the above Cultural Context learning outcome can be met for an online Master of Divinity degree program?

#	Question	Disagree	Agree
1	Solicit student feedback with regard to ministry strategies that are successful or unsuccessful in an effort to keep informed of changes in the culture		
2	Integrate critical thinking assignments across the curriculum that are designed to interact with culture		
3	Employ student-to-student interaction, such as discussion boards, wikis, and blogs, where skills can be developed for understanding and engaging culture		
4	Utilize various technologies such as social media as a legitimate means for understanding and engaging culture		
5	Solicit input on pertinent issues from outside organizations such as churches or advisory boards in an effort to keep informed of changes in the culture		
6	Integrate a ministry residency experience such as an internship in order to contextualize and apply learning within culture		

What are ways that the above Personal & Spiritual Formation outcome can be met for an online Master of Divinity degree program?

#	Question	Disagree	Agree
1	Utilize in-context experiences for the practice of and reflection on ministerial service such as mercy ministry, personal evangelism, or preaching		
2	Include reflective assignments on personal and ministry life such as work, family, study, worship and rest		
3	Incorporate assignments that utilize case-studies or problem-based learning		
4	Offer courses that cover various related topics such as spiritual formation, calling, pastoral theology, or leadership		
5	Emphasize faculty as spiritual models when facilitating and leading discussions, wikis, or video chat		
6	Teach and practice guidelines for in-course discussion such as truthfulness, respect, integrity, and maturity		
7	Incorporate in-context field experiences or internships where students can practice ministerial leadership under the supervision of a mentor who will provide spiritual direction		

What are ways that the above Capacity for ministerial & public leadership outcome can be met for an online Master of Divinity degree program?

#	Question	Disagree	Agree
1	Enhance courses on the practice of ministry with current materials from pastoral leaders such as textbooks, blogs, or podcasts		
2	Utilize discussion forums, collaborative blogs, video chat, or other student-to-student and teacher-to-student interaction as a vehicle for theological discussion and reflection		
3	Incorporating assignments on ministry practice such as case studies		
4	Evaluate in-context student teaching or preaching using technology such as uploaded video recordings		
5	Offer biblical theology and exegesis courses as part of the curriculum		
6	Train students in auxiliary areas such as professional skills, sacred use of technology, and legal issues in the ministry		
7	Offer a core of courses on various critical theological topics		
8	Include curriculum that addresses theoretical concepts related to ministry practice		
9	Incorporate in-context ministry practice as a demonstration of ministerial and leadership capacity		
10	Incorporate in-context ministry practice as an extension of theological reflection		

APPENDIX 7

ROUND 2 PARTICIPANT RESPONSES

Responses are broken down by program learning outcome and statement.

1. Religious Heritage - history and faith tradition and denominational expression - learning outcome with regard to online Master of Divinity degree programs.
   1.1 Participant Responses
      1.1.1 "I work in a multi-denominational seminary context. It is simply not feasible to require courses that aim for a comprehensive understanding of history, faith tradition, and denominational expression in a context that represents a variety of denominations and Christian traditions, yet owes allegiance to none. In my opinion, this standard from the ATS represents a legacy conception of seminaries as the educational arms of specific denominations. That is no longer always the case."
      1.1.2 "This question reflects what I believe is systematically wrong with theological education today. The solution to many matters in theological education to date has been to "create a course" for any need that arises. This is because of the reductionist mentality that has crept into theological education as a result of an inordinate emphasis on academics over formation. Because of an over-emphasis on reason, the solution has been to reduce subject matter to finer and finer foci and create a course for the specific focus. This is led to a proliferation of classes for which there is no end. It also requires theological education tire specialist to fill the need for those classes that are created, creating an unsustainable model for

theological education that is too expensive for most people to access, and even if they can access it, it creates inordinate amounts of debt. This question is a primary example of what is wrong. You could create a class on the history of a denomination, another class on faith tradition of a denomination, and then another class on specifics of denominational polity and tradition. Just because you do that, doesn't mean that the students are going to learn the most effective way, but it does mean that you're going to have lots of classes they have to take, hire lots of experts to teach those classes, and drive the cost of theological education to the point where it can be hardly afforded by the students. If afforded they're going to come away with a lot of debt because of that. I believe a more effective answer would be to integrate each of these important elements – history, faith tradition, and denominational expression into EVERY core class that you teach, rather than proliferating classes. If something is really core to your existence, it should exist is a thread throughout multiple classes rather than creating more expensive classes that students have to take on a particular subject. That way, as a thread, it is emphasized over and over again in multiple classes, and you don't have to hire a lot of expensive professors to teach a specific class on the matter, or require students to take a lot of expensive classes on the subject. There is literally no end to the number of classes you could proliferate, as is evidenced by many curricula today, and then 90 credit hour M.Div., which is 2 1/2 times the size of almost any Masters degree."

1.1.3 "I prefer allowing the students to choose from a list of courses or better, the integration of history/faith tradition and denominational expression longitudinally throughout the curriculum. First, having a required course focusing on this would seem to isolate it from the rest of the curriculum.

Having a requirement puts students from other denominational ties into a course that my not benefit them. In this case, the education should serve the student and their constituencies' needs, rather than the institution. in my opinion."

1.3 Participant Responses

1.3.1 "I leave this as "somewhat important," because in my judgment that's all it is -- somewhat important. Some of the content will integrate across the entire curriculum, but not all of it."

1.3.2 "In my opinion, integrating content across the curriculum isn't as successful as focused courses. Faculty have a tendency to assume one of two things: (1) that someone else's class covers the integration material and thus it gets completely ignored, or (2) that no one is covering the material and so it gets re-introduced in every class, leading students to think they're taking the same class over and over again. Integration sounds like a good idea, but unless faculty are very careful to plan courses in committee and not change them over time - two things seminary faculty are not very good at - it usually doesn't work."

1.3.3 "While denominational expression is important, it is also important to expose students to a variety of perspectives on issues where Christians within the bounds of orthodoxy disagree (e.g., eschatology, church government, etc.). This is the rationale to why I chose "somewhat agree" on this question."

2 Religious Heritage - history and faith tradition and denominational expression - learning outcome with regard to learning Institutions that offer online Master of Divinity degree programs.

2.1 Participant Responses

2.1.1 "My rationale for that answer is that given my own experience of working at

a seminary in which the faith tradition and denominational expression is different from my own, leads to what I believe is a richer experience for our students. I don't think that an institution needs to hire faculty that strictly align with the host institution's denominational affiliation but should certainly be sensitive to and aware of the expectations and respectful of their views. If the question had been 2-part: mission/history and faith tradition/denominational expression, I might have answered differently. I do think faculty need to be aligned with the host institution's mission but not the other factors. Further, the more we learn and study spiritual formation from the perspective of diverse ecosystems, my views on denominational differences are supported by the realities of the strength in diversity. I do believe faculty should be aligned on matters of faith – if the institution is Christian, faculty should certainly adhere to the tenets of that faith but not necessarily the particular tradition or denomination of that institution."

2.1.2 "While faculty should understand and be willing to support (= not oppose) the school's tradition, I believe it is more helpful to hire a diverse faculty, especially if the school's student body comes from diverse denominational backgrounds."

2.3 Participant Responses

2.3.1 "I leave this as "somewhat important," because the ministry context is not the best place to teach the institution's mission, history, etc. The student has more important things to learn in ministry context."

2.3.2 "In a seminary context that is multi-denominational, it is difficult to utilize a student's church context to teach the institution's mission, history, faith tradition, and denomination expression, since the institution doesn't hold allegiance to the student's denominational context."

2.3.3 “This presupposes the institution and the church are denominationally connected. Using the local church implies the church and the institution compare in all points. That is not the case with our institution. Yes, in some instances the theology of both are alike but not in all since this institution is a "non-denominational" institution that ministers and serves many denominations, ranging from Episcopal, United Methodist, Anglican, to Presbyterian, Southern Baptist, and conservative holiness groups. We teach the history of Methodism, theology from a Wesleyan perspective, but not focusing solely on denominational contexts.”

2.3.4 “The Catholic Church is over a billion strong and spans the spectrum from very loosely attached to magisterial teachings to very strongly attached to them. This span can be seen in the American church where communities fall in general on some area of that spectrum and persons within the communities may span it (for instance, Parish X may be very ‘liberal’ and Parish Y may be very ‘conservative’ in their interpretation of Church teachings, and in a liberal parish, we may find our conservatives, and in a conservative parish, we may find our liberals). What’s important for us in our college and seminary is that we faithfully adhere to the Magisterium. For that reason, it is somewhat important that a student’s church community context be used as a means of teaching the institution’s mission, history, faith tradition and Catholic expression (we Catholics don’t consider ourselves denominational - we leave that to the mainline Protestants) since the institution itself firmly adheres to Church teachings. If the parish community also firmly adheres to Church teachings, then it would be very important to use that context as a pedagogical tool since students could learn from laity who also adhere to Church teachings. If it doesn’t, and if the student has a pastor who preaches against Church

teachings (which happens in some cases where a liberal interpretation of, say, Humanae Vitae is professed as a parish norm), then the church community context will not be as helpful as, say, direct instruction by the faculty. In short, our institution adheres to one truth, and that's provided by Scripture and Tradition with the Magisterium as their interpreter. (Actually, liberal and conservative really aren't the right words to use here - closer to the mark is "parishes aligned more with the dominant culture than with the Church teachings" and "parishes aligned more with Church teachings than with the dominant culture" - but that's a longer way of explaining it."

2.5 Participant Responses

2.5.1 "I leave as "not at all important," because it's not my institution's job to use publicly available resources. The student can and should find those him-her self. It's our job to introduce the student to NEW resources."

2.5.2 ""publicly available" implies that students can access this material elsewhere. That might be a good place to start, but graduate level education should include more than items in the public domain."

3 Cultural Context learning outcome with regard to online Master of Divinity degree programs.

3.1 Participant Responses

3.1.1 "I see practical field work as much more effective at engaging cultural context than historical-analytical courses."

3.1.2 "I cannot understand why you would want to create a specific class on cultural exegesis. If it is an important element to your hermeneutic, then integrated into multiple classes, but do not create another class. Look at what can happen – I create a class on cultural exegesis. Then, someone says I should create a class on Latino liberation theology and cultural exegesis.

Then somebody says I should create a class on feminist theology and its cultural exegesis. Then somebody says I should create a class on African-American cultural exegesis. There is literally no end to the classes that can be proliferated, the expansive curriculum that they produce, the specialty professionals you have to hire to teach them (feminist, Latino, African-American cultural experts), and to the money students have to pay to support their salaries. Take a look at the curricula at many theological seminaries and what has evolved as a result of the "create a class on it" mentality. The curriculum is bulky, expensive, and will be the reason that many of the seminaries are going out of business. When people go to a seminary, they generally want to learn how to be ministers in the local church. That is not what they are finding it many seminary's – instead, they are finding a mishmash of curriculum put together in a reductionist manner that creates a series of hoops they must jump through to get a degree to access ministry and ordination. If we take a look at the Gospels and theological education as it occurred in the early church, we see a far different picture in ministerial formation."

3.1.3 "I'd go further than offering a course on cultural exegesis that's historical and analytical in nature, which is why I said this idea is only somewhat important. Our entire program should be engaged in cultural exegesis largely because the Catholic Church is a counter-cultural phenomenon in American society. So, students should receive that training in all their courses and also in special workshops."

3.1.4 "Learning cultural exegesis is important, but the course doesn't necessarily need to include an historical or analytical approach. "

3.3 Participant Responses

3.3.1 "While student-to-student interaction is essential, the methods given as

example aren't. (The downgrade in importance was more about the tools specified than the intended outcome.)"

3.4 Participant Responses

3.4.1 "I'd like to keep this at 2 because I question the value of social media as a legitimate means for learning. I think social media can be dissected to reveal things about culture, but it is not the medium of the learning itself. Again – I am influenced here. I went to a conference on Online Teaching and Learning at U of Wisconsin two years ago where there was a presentation on using Twitter for substantive learning. His thesis was that perhaps twitter could ultimately replace homework, research papers, assignments. It was more hypothetical and while he sounded very good and it was polished – I just am very skeptical about the plausibility of his thesis. So again – this may be my bias that goes beyond what you are asking here, but I want to make sure that students are learning. I think there is a movement in higher education (and education in general) to move so high up on Blooms taxonomy to critical thinking and evaluation that we forget to teach content. If we teach students to think critically about that which they know nothing – what we get is a worldview that critiques everything without a basis for the critique. This view questions without knowing why they are questioning. Social media is just that social-media. It is not diligent research nor is it knowledge. It is reflection not based on honed thought, but situational thoughts, and I don't think this is creating a positive result in the graduates of our educational system."

3.4.2 "While we believe the use of technology is proper to minister to the current culture, very little in our curriculum makes that connection. Again, we believe we should exhibit a proper use of those technologies (blogs, texting, tweeting, etc) to engage the world around us,

but we also believe such things are tools that are contemporary and will change drastically. If we teach Godly living in all we do then even our use of social media will be carefully approached, used, and produced."

3.4.3 "similar to 3.3, any tools for understanding culture are helpful. (The downgrade in importance was more about the tools specified than the intended outcome.)"

3.4.4 "Since social media mechanisms are always changing, I don't view this as vital to curriculum integration. It can be a helpful tool, but since the technology is constantly shifting, it is more important in my view to stick to the principles of engagement rather than specific mechanisms."

3.5 Participant Responses

3.5.1 "With the caveat in 2.3 above, I think it somewhat important to include projects that students execute in their own ministry culture as an application and reinforcement of learning but only in context with the role the student plays at the parish. A person who is a transitional deacon at a parish, for instance, is going to have the roles within the parish attendant on that position - he is going to teach RCIA classes, engage in baptisms, occasionally preach the homily, etc. Projects that he undertakes will be contextualized within those roles. The goal is to fulfill the requirements of the Program of Priestly Formation, so any projects a student executes to apply and reinforce learning will necessarily be part of those roles if they're to be relevant to his formation. In short, the student's performance of the role in which he finds himself governs the development and framing of any project, and if there is a conflict with a class project, the student's primary focus should be on the role he is there to serve."

3.7 Participant Responses

3.7.1 "Nearly all our online students are already involved in full-time ministry.

They have an existing context. Internships simply don't make sense for those already employed in ministry."

4 Cultural Context learning outcome with regard to learning institutions that offer online Master of Divinity degree programs.

4.1 Participant Responses

4.1.1 "This would seem to diminish the responsibility of the institution to be on the front lines of parsing such changes themselves. Students are the best source, but with a well-engaged faculty/subject matter experts in place, the institution should not need to engage consultants on this matter. In other words, if question number 4/5 are in place, number 1 diminishes. It would also be a questionable use of limited resources in practical terms."

4.1.2 "Perhaps I don't understand this question. We do not require our Students to receive input from outside organizations to keep informed of the culture, although they are required to interact in several classes with different organizations. Our faculty are "required" by virtue of their discipline to stay in the "know" about issues surrounding their areas. Still, it is not an institutional goal to connect with outside organizations to gain information of current culture. That's left up to individual's interpretations based on their discipline."

4.1.3 "Though soliciting input from other organizations is important and helpful, there are other means of staying abreast of cultural changes (particularly online media), which do not make this as essential in my view."

4.3 Participant Responses

4.3.1 "As in 4.1, though soliciting input from students can be helpful, many students come to seminary education with minimal ministry

experience and are not necessary able to evaluate ministry strategies effectively."

4.4 Participant Responses

4.4.1 "I leave as "somewhat important," because each faculty member is responsible for this. It's not the institution's job to teach faculty about culture."

4.4.2 "In my context, faculty do a good job of equipping themselves in relevant cultural issues. I've also found that it is exceedingly difficult (and not very effective) to compel faculty to attend any sort of training."

4.4.3 "If faculty aren't already following current cultural issues or seeking to understand them on their own, a forced training session won't help. "

5 Personal & Spiritual Formation learning outcome with regard to online Master of Divinity degree programs.

5.3 Participant Responses

5.3.1 "Case-studies and problem-based learning are simply no substitute for actually experiencing Spiritual Formation firsthand."

5.3.2 "Formation is essential but case study isn't the only way to do it."

5.4 Participant Responses

5.4.1 "I could live with a class on spiritual formation, pastoral theology, or leadership, but the idea of a class on calling pushes the envelope too far towards the problem I mentioned in the first two questions. If calling is something important, which I believe it is, it should be emphasized as a thread across multiple classes. I teach classes on formation, leadership, and pastoral theology, and the subject of calling is integrated across all of them, because it is essential to anyone preparing for ministry. But, if someone was to come to me tomorrow and say we are no longer going to have classes on spiritual formation, leadership, or pastoral theology, I

would be fine with that, because I could integrate elements of all of these three classes into any other class has threads. That is particularly true for the idea of formation – the idea of spiritual formation comes out of the 1960s and 70s from Catholic theology. Before that time, if you mentioned the idea of spiritual formation, people would not even know what you were talking about. Spiritual formation seems to encompass what we used to call discipleship, and to break it out from the other curriculum as a separate class seems to damage it because you disconnected from its curricular whole – it is an abiding theme in everything we do. I can live with breaking it out, but I don't believe it's a good idea overall, because I believe it could be more effectively taught as a thread integrated into other multiple classes. Likewise, I have no problem with the class on leadership, and as mentioned, I teach them, but much of what we teach in separate leadership classes could be integrated as threads across other classes without breaking out specific leadership classes and proliferating every kind class you can imagine on leadership – leadership in the church, leadership with teams, management leadership, administrative leadership - where does it end?"

5.4.2 "I was thinking these would be covered in most every course in the curriculum by means of assignments and application/reflection activities. The wording makes it sounds like these concepts would be siloed within discrete courses, which would not be my preference."

6 Personal & Spiritual Formation learning outcome with regard to learning institutions that offer Master of Divinity online degree programs.

6.3 Participant Responses

6.3.1 "This either happens naturally or not. Not sure you can "emphasize' this as a matter of course. if you hire the right faculty it is a moot point, it will

happen. Jesus is the spiritual model that should be emphasized in any case. Faculty should be evaluated on this aspect therefore I have it as "somewhat important."”

6.4 Participant Responses

6.4.1 “I am far less concerned with the relational community and reciprocal learning in online environments than I am with the relational community and reciprocal learning in real life environments. Courses tend to be artificial communities made up of students who come together only briefly and in a limited manner for the courses. Whereas family, church, and ministry communities are far more robust and ongoing. I prefer to see online environments leveraged directly to support real life environments. For instance, I care much more about students having good conversations with their spouses and other ministry leaders in their real lives than having good conversations in a discussion board with other students. Ideally, students could use the online discussion as a forum to process the conversations they are having with spouses and ministry leaders.”

6.5 Participant Responses

6.5.1 “I don’t love this question. In fact I kind of dislike it - I guess I would say that seminary students should naturally be truthful, respectful, mature, and with integrity, and while experience may show that some of these qualities are often missing, I don’t think this is the most important focus for a seminary education with respect to Spiritual Formation. I would argue that if these are missing from a seminarian’s repertoire it is a symptom of the problem. Doctors who spend time fixing symptoms but not the problem are not the doctors I want to see – I want the problem fixed. If these four traits are a problem then the student needs to be taught holiness, spiritual

submission, sanctification, discipline, obedience. If holiness is learned the student WILL BE truthful, respectful, mature, etc. Too often I think we deal with symptoms rather than problems. I want to kill the root of selfish-fleshliness rather than just trying to be "better" at being truthfulness. I want to focus on the reckoning of the death of the old man rather than how to do better at one specific fault. SO……I don't think I would change that answer… I would instead challenge professors concerned with this to focus on spiritual man/woman and the battle that is going on for the soul rather than the outward manifestations of what is "visually" representative of acceptable Christianity. There are many good Christians in the world who are embroiled in sin on the inside! It is a tragedy when we analyze the numbers of pastors leaving the ministry because of moral failure. Most of them though sure look mature and respectful, but they are dead, dying, and decaying on the inside and that is what we need to address in a spiritually formative education. We must teach them to BE the leaders God has called them to be rather than focusing on the DOing of what it looks like to be a Christian leader. This is one of my favorite diatribes and so I get on a little bit of a soapbox on this."

6.5.2 "My rationale is that while the expectation should be made clear that the learning community works best with truthfulness, respect, integrity, and maturity, it is not the role of the professor to teach those guidelines. It is expected and hoped that students entering a graduate program will demonstrate certain levels of maturity and integrity, but it shouldn't be the professor's job to teach or enforce those things. Further, the learning community will often take care of its own members in matters that concern each other. Additionally, those elements are only a few among other dimensions that are part of the outcome of personal and spiritual

formation."

6.6 Participant Responses

6.6.1 "My hesitation with requiring internships for online students already involved in a ministry context."

7 Using the given options, please rate each statement on its level of importance as it relates to successfully meeting the above Capacity for ministerial and public leadership learning outcome with regard to online Master of Divinity degree programs.

7.2 Participant Responses

7.2.1 "My assumption is that these discussions are significantly removed from the real life learning communities of students. I value them most when they are directly connected to discussion happening in a student's real life."

7.3 Participant Responses

7.3.1 "I don't think case-studies to be effective learning tools."

7.3.2 "as with 5.3 above, case study can be useful but is not the only (or even sometimes the best) approach."

7.4 Participant Responses

7.4.1 "Having had to assess video teaching and video preaching, I find it exceedingly difficult to make an accurate assessment of teaching or preaching skills based on video recordings. Live demonstrations during face-to-face time work much better."

7.4.2 "Evaluation is useful but do not specify the method."

7.6 Participant Responses

7.6.1 "It seems to be a false correlation that courses in biblical theology and exegesis will increase one's ministerial or public leadership capacity. Such course offerings may enhance their theological or exegetical capacities,

but do they relate directly to the practice of leadership? I don't think they do."

7.6.2 "I sound like a broken record here – no problem with the class on biblical theology or exegesis, but why break them out as separate classes? When I teach homiletics, exegesis is a part of their class. When I assign work in my church and leadership class, exegesis is a part of that class. When I do a class on pastoral theology, exegesis is part of that class. I offer class on exegesis, and then I need to offer a class on cultural exegesis, then I need to offer class on feminist, Latino, African-American, and who knows what other kind of class on specialty exegesis. If exegesis is important, integrated into every class. Again, I have no problem offering a class on exegesis, but that is why I think a specific class is somewhat important. I can also live for the class on biblical theology, but why not integrate that as a thread in to other classes as well?"

7.7 Participant Responses

7.7.1 "Same thing here – why proliferate another specialty class on technology – it is integrated into every class that I teach, so that when my students graduate, they know how to blog, they know how to construct a wiki, they know how to do streaming live seminars online, they are proficient in social media and its use, such as Facebook and Twitter, I have largely converted them to e-books and digital learning, they can produce E portfolios, and they are functionally literate in the technological world. They also have hands-on experience with these tools and the integration of the ministry. The other way of doing it would be to create classes like: social media and the church, blogging as homiletics, etc. The answer is not to create separate classes – the answer is to integrate important things as threads into classes rather than proliferating more expensive classes."

7.7.2 “The importance of these areas is dependent on the students and the ministry contexts. I would like to think that important auxiliary areas would be integrated into the basic training, rather than be isolated into courses apart from others.”

7.8 Participant Responses

7.8.1 “Not sure what is in view here. Every course in this context should contain this as part of the curriculum; This would be very important and if that is in view, revise my answer. Seems like a place where you would have faculty competing to teach their pet critical topic if there was a course focused on a single topic. A general core that focuses on mastery of essential theology that could be applied to a wide range of various critical topics would be my preference, rather than siloing topics and offering a course on this that or the other topic would seem to be an unwise stewardship of resources when courses can be designed to have application activities that would accomplish this more economically. Maybe I am over-thinking the question.”

7.8.2 “It seems that critical theological topics are better woven into foundational ministry training courses rather than being courses that stand too isolated on their own.”

7.9 Participant Responses

7.9.1 “This is a case of wanting a fifth option, between 2 and 3, "Important" (no adjective!). I’m ok with introducing theoretical concepts of ministry practice as long as there are practical application outcomes for those theories. But this question was limited to theoretical concepts only, which is why I ranked it 2.”

APPENDIX 8

ROUND 3 PARTICIPANT RESPONSES

Responses are broken down by program learning outcome and statement.

8 Religious Heritage: The program shall provide structured opportunities to develop a comprehensive and discriminating understanding of the religious heritage.

1.1 “The reason I say no is because as a non-denominational seminary (we have over 38 denominations/associations represented by our student body) we cannot focus on one denomination/tradition in our systematic theology or historical theology courses. We teach the main views and students have to write their own doctrinal statements/confessions that align with their views/beliefs.”

9 Cultural context: The program shall provide opportunities to develop a critical understanding of and creative engagement with the cultural realities and structures within which the church lives and carries out its mission.

2.6 “I chose "disagree" to this particular question because I think churches and advisory boards are likely among the last places I’d draw on to keep abreast of changes in culture. I can agree, in principle, to seeking outside input in order to keep informed of changes in culture, but it needs to be outside of the Christian subculture, not just from within another subsection of it. So, I’ll keep my answer as "disagree" for this one.”

2.8 “too short to be authentic rather than "just checking the box"”

3 Personal and spiritual formation: The program shall provide opportunities through which the student may grow in personal faith, emotional maturity, moral integrity, and public witness. Ministerial preparation includes concern with the development of

capacities—intellectual and affective, individual and corporate, ecclesial and public—that are requisite to a life of pastoral leadership.

No responses required for this section.

4 Capacity for ministerial and public leadership: The program shall provide theological reflection on and education for the practice of ministry. These activities should cultivate the capacity for leadership in both ecclesial and public contexts.

4.7 “noting the limitation of intellectual-only focus here”

4.9 “noting the limitation of intellectual-only focus here”

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ABSTRACT

BEST PRACTICES FOR ONLINE THEOLOGICAL MINISTRY PREPARATION: A DELPHI METHOD STUDY

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This doctoral thesis intended to provide a clear vision of best practices in the area of online theological ministry training at the graduate level by consulting experts in the field. The research question that needed to be answered was, "What are the best practices for ministry preparation in online theological education?"

Despite tremendous growth in online learning even among theological institutions, casual observations suggest that the decision to offer online programs may not always have been rooted in deep pedagogical or theological reflection. In other words, in the quest to utilize online education as a viable option for degree preparation, has serious thought been given to the uniqueness of the online learning environment and the potential impact of those differences to how ministry training is accomplished? Or has the choice been driven primarily by pragmatic considerations? A review of the literature revealed that research was needed that would establish consensus among the experts on best practices for online theological ministry training. This research would build on established practices of both online and theological education.

This thesis was a mixed-methods exploratory sequential design that utilized the Delphi method in order to establish consensus among the experts on best practices for online theological ministry training. Seventeen experts were recruited that are involved in either the administrative oversight or teaching with seminary or graduate online theological ministry training degree programs. In an anonymous study, each expert

answered eight open-ended questions about online theological ministry training. These answers were analyzed for emergent themes and served as the foundation for a Likert-type survey where forty-three statements were then analyzed as to their level of importance related to successfully meeting the four learning outcomes for the Master of Divinity for the Association of Theological Schools. These results were examined for consensus and another survey was given using only those items that achieved consensus.

The findings were evaluated from both a consensus and non-consensus perspective. Results of the mixed method Delphi study provided thirty statements of best practices for online theological ministry preparation for which there was consensus. Statements achieving consensus were obtained in all four areas of learning outcomes for the Master of Divinity for the Association of Theological Schools: Religious heritage, cultural context, personal and spiritual formation, and capacity for ministerial and public leadership. Finally, the implications of these findings were discussed along with suggestions for further research.

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