LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
JOHN W. RAWLINGS SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

THE INTEGRATION OF SPIRITUAL FORMATION THROUGH DISTANCE EDUCATION FOR CHRISTIAN HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

By Derwin Earl Lewis

Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA

2020

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Abstract

Many factors contribute to the recent increase of digital education in higher learning institutions, including the expanded use of mobile devices, social media, and other online populations. CNBC reports that over two billion users ascribe to Facebook monthly (Balakrishnan, 2017). Over four hundred million Instagram users and over three hundred million active Twitter accounts are being used daily (Clement, 2019). Celebrating technology's imprint on society presents another opportunity for social sciences to applaud human achievement at the risk of discounting God's sovereignty. The digital era has created an opportunity for Christian education to expand its reachability through churches and Bible-based institutions. Covid-19 is a catalyst for congregants focusing on different forms of digital discipling methods. The pandemic has impacted all levels of academics, and Higher education is no exception. Although digital technology has been part of higher education since the nineties (Harasim, 2000), its prevalence has expanded to institutions that previously did not offer online programs. Bible-based institutions are situated to educate, equip, and evangelize believers in more significant numbers. This qualitative research aimed to explore the integration of spiritual formation through distance learning at Bible-based institutions. The phenomenological study method used data from video conferencing interviews to assess faculty and students' actual experiences from Bible-based colleges, seminaries, and universities. The research results will help educators develop models for integrating spiritual formation through online courses and virtual learning communities (Lock, 2002).

Keywords: Higher education, distance learning, learning community, spiritual formation.

Dedication

I would be remiss to entertain any thoughts of appreciation without beginning with almighty God; without Him, I am nothing. Being able to participate in this Christian leadership doctoral program has been rewarding, but not without the sacrificial efforts of those closest to me. To my beautiful wife, Susan, who has allowed me to experience Proverbs 18:22 NKJV, "He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favor from the LORD." Your inspiration, prayers, and occasional proofing were as special as you are. To my wonderful children of whom I am most proud; daughters, Kirstie, Jordan, and son Caleb. Thank you all for continually sharing your insights, which help broaden my view and challenged many of the predispositions I had about college life for today's students. To my beloved mother, Gwen Lewis. Thank you for your unconditional love and endless encouragement. I dedicate this research to you all, hoping that it honors God and inspires others to desire to know Him through a relationship with Jesus.

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Thank you to the John Rawlings School of Divinity faculty at Liberty University's Educational and Christian Leadership program. Your continuous encouragement and demand for excellence have blessed me beyond words. To my fall 2017 cohorts, thank you for enriching my learning community with your insightfulness and expanding my world with your friendship. Finally, to my dissertation supervisor, Dr. Mary Lowe, for investing energy, knowledge, and wisdom amidst personal challenges and unprecedented circumstances. Your expertise and guidance were priceless, for which I am eternally grateful.

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List of Abbreviations

Association for Biblical Higher Education (ABHE)

Association of Theological Schools (ATS)

Barna Research Group (BRG)

College of Biblical Studies (CBS)

Disciples Graduate Theological Seminary (DGTS)

Faculty Staff Questionnaire (FSQ)

Fort Bend Baptist University (FBU)

Global Media Outreach (GMO)

Integrated Post-Secondary Education Data System (IPEDS)

King James Version (KJV)

Learning Management Systems (LMS)

Midtown Theological Seminary (MTS)

National Center of Education Statistics (NCES)

New American Standard Bible (NASB)

New King James Version (NKJV)

Pew Research Center (PRC)

PLATO (Programmed Logic for Automatic Teaching Operations)

Quality of Campus Life (QCL)

Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSOCS)

Student Assessment questionnaire (SAQ)

Transnational Association of Colleges and Schools (TRACS)

Virtual Learning Community (VLC)

Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)

Union Baptist Association (UBA)

World Wide Web (WWW)

CHAPTER ONE: RESEARCH CONCERN

Introduction

This phenomenological study aims to analyze the integration of Christian spiritual formation among higher education students in Bible-based institutions. The ongoing debate regarding distance learning's impact on higher education is a foregone conclusion. The digital revolution (Lowe and Lowe, 2018) has resulted in a paradigmatic shift in higher education (Harasim, 2002). A plethora of studies validating the extrapolations of growth is primarily based on quantitative data (Allen & Seaman, 2004). Studies likewise show a trending concentration of growth among non-traditional students or adults 25 years of age and older, changing the traditional view of higher education's student body. One of the challenged areas for online students as it relates to spiritual development is mentorship. The issue of mentoring tends to fuel the debate of whether or not the virtual learning community can duplicate the nurturing associated with traditional campus life experience. The deliberations are also a part of the dialogue on the value of mentoring in Bible-based institutions. In one study, Dunlow (2014) approximates 42% of the 1,377 seminary students surveyed admitted to having a mentor while enrolled in school. Bredfeldt and Albert (2006) say, "Some of the most influential teachers are those who labor faithfully, often unacknowledged, in classrooms, Sunday schools, club ministries, and mentoring programs across the nation" (p. 19).

Crawford-Ferre (2012) views online learning as an unconventional delivery method but acknowledges the advantages for students. It allows students to maintain full-time employment while taking classes at their institution of choice in higher education. Studies continue to show a rapid increase in classroom productivity in distance education. Simultaneously, the other aspects of online learning's impact on college students are vague (Freeman, 2014). Because college life

represents an essential part of young adulthood, the research focused on the interconnectedness or lack thereof between the acquisition of information and the application toward spirituality.

Further research is explored with institutions that offer Bible-based courses due to the concentration of discipleship generally associated with the teaching strategies employed. Over the last ten years, a gap has occurred in the perception of spiritual formation and what the data reflects. Schwadel (2011) gives this observation,

> The majority of American adults (71%) identify as Christians. And among Christians, those with higher levels of education appear to be just as religious as those with less schooling, on average. In fact, highly educated Christians are *more* likely than less-educated Christians to say they are weekly churchgoers (para. 3)

A 2017 survey by the Pew Research Center (PRC) reported nearly three times as many students became more religious during college than those who conveyed the opposite (Gecewicz & Smith, 2017). One year before the previous study Barna Research Group (BRG) reported that 59% of traditional students leave the Christian faith during college years. As in most, if not all surveys, the data is subjected to interpretation. It is impossible to trace how many students continue in the Christian faith or how many return at some point in life. Spiritual formation increases the opportunity for both by setting a strong biblical foundation and realistic expectations for Christianity and holistic ministry. It is also crucial in developing Christians who will draw others when leading by precepts and examples. Religious beliefs also played a significant role in influencing individual choices regarding education, career, marriage, and family. Kinnaman (2019) noted that life's foundations are typically a result of choices made from ages 18-28 or the first decade of adulthood.

Background of the Problem

Researchers predict that the rapid growth of online learning and other web-based variations of delivery in the United States are surpassing the population of college students in general (Allen & Seaman, 2004). The forecast has caused many institutions to revamp their course curriculums to include more distance education classes. The trend has also changed instructors' expectations, in some cases, demanding additional training to converge with on-ground and online instructional delivery. Several variables led to these paradigmatic shifts in the philosophy of education and teaching methods, which the study examines.

The advancements in technology have spiritual roots, which have been overlooked by many scholars. The research discusses the lack of attention given to the role of God's sovereignty through mediums, such as online technologies. Bible colleges and seminaries utilize technology to compete with other higher education institutions in recruiting students, but also as a tool to reach young men and women for Christ. Lowe and Lowe (2018) remind readers that various Christian education and spiritual growth experiences now occur in digital environments, supported by innovative technologies and communication devices. Although, as mentioned earlier, surveys show traditional students leaving the Christian faith during the college years, this is not necessarily the norm. According to Bredfeldt and Albert (2006), many students are led to faith in Christ after being influenced by a concerned faculty member.

The power of influence via the learning communities associated with higher education is underemphasized. Students' interconnectivity in higher education through the various learning communities is a vital part of the college experience. Technology continues to enhance the capabilities of distance education through e-learning formats. However, some institutions struggle to replicate the community-learning environment found in face-to-face modalities.

According to Palloff and Pratt (2007), unlike traditional learning communities, which can be student-driven, the instructor facilitates the virtual learning environment. The role of the student in the virtual learning venue involves collaboration with fellow students and teachers. The continuous interaction required in most online courses provides multiple opportunities for establishing virtual learning communities. Lock (2002) describes community as "a process, which is fluid in nature" (p. 395) instead of an entity. The commonalities that exist within the relationships generate populations that are not limited to area and space.

Research Problem

This research emerges from comparable observations of the popular movement in which many higher learning institutions integrate online classes into their course selections. The U.S. Department of Education's Integrated Post-Secondary Education Data System (IPEDS) conveyed that 26 percent of all students enrolled in higher education took at least one online course (McPherson & Bacow, 2015). The growing interest has created a new aspect to the recruiting battles for prospective students for higher education. Distance learning's reachability has enlarged students' opportunities to attend colleges outside of their local residency (Roach & Lemasters, 2006). The "networked collaborative learning" (Harasim, 2000, p. 19) has enlightened online education for students and teachers, causing a paradigm shift in higher education.

According to Lowe and Lowe (2018), unprecedented technological changes are shifting the landscape of everything in our world, including Christian education. The writers continue to explain how many Christian educational and spiritual growth experiences now occur in digital environments. However, numbers that reflect online courses' growth tend to contrast reports for spiritual formation in Bible-based institutions. The Barna Research Group (BRC) reported that

over half (59%) of traditional college-aged students leave the Christian faith during college years. This research examines the contrast in the variables. It discusses the various methods used by Bible-based institutions to create an environment that fosters spiritual formation through online modalities.

Statement of the Problem

Maddix and Estep (2010) address the issue of intentionality regarding Christian higher education institutions providing spiritual nurturing to students through online formats. The writers suggest developing a theoretical matrix based on precedent literature on the subject and spiritual formation models. Lowe and Lowe (2018) present an ecological model for spiritual formation through digital learning communities that are biblical and practical. The challenge for some institutions is more significant than technology versus theology. The core curriculum and overall purpose of Bible-based institutions lead to assumptions about the integration of spiritual formation. In other words, studying subjects with theological content does not automatically produce spiritual growth.

The value of distance education and its impact on higher education's future is not as debated as when it first emerged during the nineties. At the time, the strengths and weaknesses of the phenomenon were argued solely on measurable outcomes. However, statistics are inadequate to explain the value of the college experience, most of which can only be known when communicated by those directly involved in the practice. One of the earlier criticisms knocks against online learning was its inability to provide the student interaction that occurred in face-to-face instructional settings. Fencl (2016) points out that students interacting with each other is vital for their social development. Different activities, such as teamwork, sportsmanship, and social responsibility, are also products of campus life experiences.

Since online education is a computer-mediated setting (Rummel & Spada, 2005), the idea of community itself must be understood in how it is best identified in this digital era. Sadera et al. (2009) say the role of community learning is modified with the community at a distance. Virtual learning communities help facilitate the various teaching methods employed by online instructors. The approach keeps students engaged in assignments through various online communication tools. Researchers reveal that many institutions are experiencing success using the different models from an academic perspective. Duplicating the sense of community in online settings is a continuous challenge but not altogether impossible. Measuring the integration of spiritual formation, either on-ground or online, is an even more significant challenge requiring intentionality by all of the participants involved. Although technology has positively impacted many higher education areas, literature is meager on how it has affected spiritual formation integration.

The study proposes a theological framework to argue against proponents that have drawn the lines between technology and theology, supposing that one has nothing to do with others (Lowe & Lowe, 2018). Matthew 24:14 and Revelation 11:3-9 are two of many passages that have implications of technology being a catalyst for the fulfillment of biblical prophecy (Palm 2019). Wisnewski (2020) postulates that the church has benefited not only from informational technology but "Engineering technology—e.g., worship facilities, electricity, Medical technology—e.g., medicine, medical equipment, Computer software—e.g., church management software, mobile giving and Transportation—e.g., cars, vans, buses" (para. 2).

The theoretical framework focuses on the teacher-learner theories and the strategies that are more conducive for e-learning modalities. The term distance learning creates an anomaly in academics because it suggests learners' actions are independent of the teacher (Moore, 2009). In

this research, distance education is the preferred term because it implies a method of teaching without the physical presence of an instructor who facilitates the class via digital delivery (Rozanski, 2018). Buraphadeja and Dawson (2008) postulate that learning in online modalities "usually takes place when interaction is fostered among learners and between learners and instructor" (para. 2). Constructivism is a learning theory that stresses the idea of the learner using previous experiences in the process of linking new information to construct knowledge. It also highlights the significance of culture and context related to learning (Kim, 2001).

Purpose Statement

This phenomenological study aims to examine the integration of spiritual formation through distance education among faculty and students at Bible-based institutions. For the purpose of this research study, the focus was limited to the integration of Christian spiritual formation with the extent to which spirituality is being practiced as a result of acquired knowledge through online learning. The study offers a theological foundation to argue for the continuity between technology and theology in support of distance learning's role in fulfilling the Great Commission (Lowe & Lowe, 2018). Face-to-face interviews with open-ended questions to faculty and students from participating institutions were analyzed to identify comparisons, contrast, and trends from the phenomenon's participants' experiences.

Research Questions

The research questions were designed to assess the integration of spiritual formation through online formats in Bible-based institutions of higher learning.

RQ1. What, if any, are the models used to provide spiritual accountability through distance learning?

RQ2. What, if any, are the methods used to measure students' ethical and moral maturity in Bible-based institutions?

RQ3. What, if any, are the fundamental changes necessary to provide an environment for spiritual maturity through online modalities?

RQ4. What, if any, are the integrative practices used to engage hybrid and online students through virtual learning environments to prepare them for holistic ministry?

Assumptions and Delimitations

Research assumptions

This qualitative methodological research study is subjected to integral feedback from the individuals who participated in the research. The researcher assumes that the interview questions generated were asked through a random questionnaire process for virtual interviews to ensure the interviewer's integrity and unbiasedness. There is an assumption that students met all the qualifications for participation, including the minimum amount of credit hours for hybrid and online courses. Additionally, the assumption is that the information from interviews was answered accurately and without coercion or external influences.

The results' conclusion assumes that the persons interviewed were honest about their official positions, Christian experience, and classifications. One expects that the various institutions' data regarding faculty teaching experiences in online modalities are accurate. Finally, the researcher believes the data from interviews were analyzed without bias or prejudices against individuals or participating institutions.

Delimitations of the research design

This study intends to explore distance learning's impact on spiritual formation in Bible-based colleges, seminaries, and universities. The particulars of the research do not apply to the general higher education population. The delimitations of the study include the following:

1. The research is delimited by higher education institutions accredited by at least one or more of the following:
    a) Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSOCS)
    b) The Association for Biblical Higher Education (ABHE),
    c) The Association of Theological Schools (ATS),
    d) Transnational Association of Colleges and Schools (TRACS).
2. The research is delimited to faculty and students of the above-mentioned accredited Bible colleges and universities that offer online courses.
3. The research is delimited by higher education institutions that offer graduate and post-postgraduate academic programs.
4. This study does not include information regarding higher education institutions' online activities that only offer professional certifications such as trade or vocational schools.

Definition of Terms

Bible College – A Christian, an evangelical higher education institution that requires a Bible/theology core component equivalent to 30 semester hours (ABHE, 2012), Christian service experiences, and ministry training (McKinney, 1997).

Christian Service Formation – Ministerial preparation to include the development of personal and public ecclesiastical capacities for pastoral leadership (Lowe & Lowe, 2010).

College student life. College life refers to students with a common purpose or shared duties at higher learning institutions. The term is also used to refer to on-campus activities, including athletics, clubs, fraternal and sorority events.

Digital revolution. The digital revolution refers to the development of technology from mechanical and analog to digital formats.

Digital technology. Digital technology describes communication through computers, cell phones, the internet, and other electronic devices. Challies (2011) gives this insight, which is pertinent to this study. He says, "God has gifted human beings with remarkable ability to dream, create, and invent technologies that serve us as we serve him, technologies that enable us to better serve him" (p. 13).

Distance education. Distance education is the method of teaching without the physical presence of an instructor. Hybrid, blended courses, and virtual learning are also included in this delivery mode (Rozanski, 2018).

Face-to-face Instruction. Face-to-face instruction refers to a teaching and learning approach in which both teacher and learner are physically present in the same location. The term also applies to the traditional method of classroom delivery.

Higher Education - Higher education is an academic institution offering post-secondary degrees, including associates, bachelors, masters, and doctorates.

Learning community. A learning community is comprised of students who share common academic goals. It is used with the term cohorts in higher education modalities.

Non-traditional student. The non-traditional student is a full-time college student who falls outside of the traditional student's typical age of 18-24 years old (Miller & Lu, 2010).

Online Community. Understanding the term online community begins with a personal view of community itself. Lowe (2007) says, "The development of an online community is dependent somewhat on how the Internet shapes and molds our definitions and uses of community" (p. 47). Also used simultaneously with a virtual community, the online community is a venue where individuals interact with each other through the internet, social media, and other digital networking (Montgomery, 2019). It is worth noting that the term is not limited to the field of education. Gamers compete with opponents through online communities.

Online course. An online course is a course where information is communicated through a technical delivery system. Eighty percent of the content is delivered in a digital or online format (Allen & Seaman, 2014).

Online learning. Online learning is an internet-based method of educational delivery through the use of technology to provide curriculum and instruction through digital systems (Sener, 2015). Lowe (2007) says the "The primary difference between online learning and distance education is that the former emphasizes the use of the Internet, whereas the latter focuses on the separation between learner and instructor" (p. 15).

Seminary. The term seminary is often used simultaneously with theological college or divinity school. It is described as an institution of secondary or post-secondary education for training students in theology. In this research, the term describes institutions that offer graduate and post-graduate degrees in related theological studies.

*Social presence. T*he degree to which a person is perceived as a 'real person' in mediated communication (Shore, 2007, p. 92).

Spiritual formation. French writers favored the term spirituality during the 17th and 18th centuries, denoting pious or devout lifestyles (Lowe, 2007). Lowe (2007) talks about how

Clemmons (2004) credits spiritual formation to the early church fathers with the introduction of systematic theology and its "formational processes through the breaking of bread, prayer, teaching, and fellowship" (p. 32). According to Clemmons (2004), the teachings were passed down through centuries and recognized as spiritual formation. Spiritual formation is the process in which a believer develops toward spiritual maturity. God does the transformation through the renewing of the Holy Spirit (Willard, 2011). The Apostle Peter talks about how God equips the believer with all a person's needs for spiritual maturity and sanctification, which is the goal of spiritual formation based on 1 Peter 1:3. It is worth noting that the focus of Spiritual formation in the study applies to both students and faculty. According to Daniels (1983), "The spiritual formation and development of seminary students begins with and is dependent upon, the spiritual formation and development of the faculty" (p. 9).

Traditional student. The traditional student is an individual who attends a post-secondary institution following graduation from high school, generally between 18-25 years old.

Virtual learning environment. A virtual learning environment (VLE) is a set of teaching and learning tools designed to enhance students' learning experience by including computers and the internet in the learning process (Rouse, 2011).

The Significance of the Study

The rapid growth of digital technology has led many researchers to conclude that institutions that choose not to offer online courses are destined for disaster. The implications are that the future of higher education is dependent on the adaptation of online learning without considering other causative influences. Campbell and Garner (2016), Challies (2011), Lowe and Lowe (2018), and others tend to lean toward the eternal significance of online learning's position of impacting the lives of higher education students through technology. Much of the growth is

due to the increased enrollment of non-traditional students. The National Center of Education Statistics (NCES, 2018) predicts that 12.3 million college and university students were under age 25, the age of the traditional college student who will enroll in courses for the 2018-2019 school year. However, 7.6 million non-traditional students, age 25 and over, will join higher learning institutions during the same period. These numbers have decreased from 8.9 million, with those 25 and over during the 2010/2011 school year (NCES, 2018). Nevertheless, overall enrollment in higher education continues to increase.

The shift in the average age of higher education's student body requires educators to understand the non-traditional student's needs. Researchers have concluded that non-traditional students prefer online learning formats in their academic pursuits over the traditional face-to-face delivery methods (Overhholt, 2016). Family life, employment, and other responsibilities impede non-traditional students from pursuing a degree in on-ground situations. The distinct needs of the non-traditional student tend to modify the traditional teacher-learner dynamics as educators try to comprehend the student's lifespan development (Overholt, 2016). Educators are wise to acknowledge how life experiences impact learners. Higher education's success depends on instructors' willingness to employ transformative learning theories in the framework for class preparations (Mezirow, 1991). For this study's purpose, the researcher surveyed the instructors' intentionality to include spiritual transformation when designing their online courses.

The research also explores the other areas of higher education beyond facilitating post-secondary degrees to students. The academic dynamics of educational institutions are the foundation for creating future leaders in society. These skill sets and levels of maturation are developed as individuals experience independence typically associated with college life. Professional mentors and a community of learners seeking the same academic and life goals are

pivotal in college students' future. This research is instrumental in revealing how online learning creates an opportunity for institutions to equip students ethically, morally, and spiritually through virtual learning communities that otherwise may not have been possible.

The research is especially significant in sharing how technology has enhanced the opportunities to teach the truth of God's Word in Bible-based institutions of higher learning through distance learning. Over the last twenty years, many of the fastest-growing colleges and universities, which offer distance education courses in entirely online degree programs, are identified as Bible-based institutions (Lowe & Lowe, 2018). The benefit for the students enrolled in biblical institutions is an accredited education and spiritual development. Diamond and Hannum (2009) list the following advantages that led to an increase in enrollment for distance education courses

- Improved instructional quality
- Increased productivity of learning
- Greater access to learning
- Improved student attitudes toward learning and the subject matter
- Encouragement of greater student independence and self-regulation of learning
- More active involvement of students in the learning process
- Greater opportunity for students to collaborate and co-construct knowledge with others
- More immediate feedback to students, as tests and papers are graded more quickly
- Enhanced communication between faculty and students, especially part-time students
- Greater use of multimedia as opposed to exclusive reliance on text

- Developing a higher level of knowledge rather than simple acquisition of content
- A shift from instructor-centered learning to student-centered learning (p. 240)

Summary of the Design

Creswell and Creswell (2018) suggest that the qualitative research design method is a favorable approach to "understanding the meaning of individuals or groups to a social or human problem" (p. 25). Spiritual formation is a religious matter that has been impacted by the changes in the "societal hubs of learning and education" (Anderson et al., 2014, p. 2). A societal hub is a term used to describe a group or network of individuals who interact with each other. In the context of the article, social media is the primary method of socializing within these groups. The researcher used a phenomenological research method to understand perceptions and perspectives comparative to a particular situation (Leedy & Omrod, 2010). Phenomenological interviews are typically unstructured, allowing the researcher to be more of an observer rather than an interrogator. This method enabled the researcher to "arrive at the heart of the matter" (Tesch, 1994, p. 147). The open-ended questions assess the philosophical and psychological perspectives based on the participants' actual experiences regarding the phenomenon in question (Moustakas, 1995).

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The definitions, histories, and progress of online learning are vital to understanding the challenges related to spiritual formation in higher education. A study of the theological framework provides a scriptural premise for the origin of distance learning from both the Old and New Testaments. The prison and general epistles (Morris, 2012), along with John's record of Jesus correspondences to the seven churches in Asia Minor from the Island of Patmos (Revelation 2-3), are biblical examples of distance education.

After evaluating the theological foundation, a timeline of the technological advancements and their influences on distance education's evolution is explored. The invention of the internet and the World Wide Web are significant contributors to the digital age growth (Lowe & Lowe, 2018). The study views the precedent literature for contrast and comparisons by various scholars on the purpose of spiritual formation, the role of mentors, and virtual communities in integrating spiritual growth among higher education students. Freeman (2014) believes there is a passive and active component of spiritual development. The research surveys some of the factors and discusses which, if any, appear to be more prevailing for integrating spiritual growth more than others. These and other factors are some of the issues that are often overlooked when assessing or determining best practices for discipling and incorporating spiritual formation to students in on-ground or online formats.

The Theological Framework for Study

Distance education and its impact on higher learning institutions were initially met with varying responses by educators who debated its value and effectiveness. However, with the increase of online activity through the World Wide Web (WWW), internet, social media, and

other digital communications, digital learning has become, for some, synonymous with higher education. What was once seen as a supplementary choice for students is now the norm in most higher education curricula (Obrien, 2019). This research explores distance learning's theological implications and its correlation to spiritual formation in online delivery (Lowe & Lowe, 2018).

Eckel (2003) expresses his personal views of applying a biblical perspective to everyday living by resolving that everything is theological, including education. "The fear of the LORD *is* the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction" (Proverbs 1:7, NKJV), which is suggestive of theology being the foundation of education. The Bible also emphasizes the value of acquiring and applying knowledge with the belief that the desire to learn is motivated by what is in a person's heart, "The heart of the prudent acquires knowledge, and the ear of the wise seeks knowledge" (Proverbs 18:15 NKJV). This research proposes that intellectual disciplines, such as epistemological, philosophical, and theological prolegomena, which is the knowledge of divine truth (Elwell, 2009), are vital for academic success and necessitate a theological perspective for learning in general.

Many passages in the Bible directly correlate to technology's imprint on society, including Matthew 24:14, Matthew 28:18-20, and Revelation 11:3-9. These three passages are the most relatable to the current research because they address technology's present and eschatological implications. Jesus's commission to the disciples in Matthew 28:18-20 came to fruition at the church's birth in Acts 2. The dispersion of the Jews, the missionary journeys of the Apostle Paul, and others, help spread the Gospel during the infant stages of the early church. Over time, evangelistic crusades and similar efforts help reach people in other parts of the world.

The opportunity for the church to fulfill the Great Commission has been enhanced with the digital revolution. Billy Graham, Charles Finney, D. L. Moody, Billy Sunday, and George

Whitefield are names that come to mind regarding those who led evangelistic crusades during the nineteenth century. The movements were also called revivals. The Gospel was presented in different settings to large crowds, where many received salvation. According to Earls (2018), 215 million people heard Billy Graham preach the Gospel at his crusades over 66 years (1952-2018), with 2.2 million stated conversions to the Christian faith. In comparison, the Global Media Outreach (GMO) reported 12.4 million gospel presentations in March 2020 through their internet evangelism operations (Roach, 2020).

Matthew 24:14 and Revelation 11:3-9 both refer to events that will take place during the tribulation. There is an estimation of over 500 people worldwide with no physical Christian presence (Joshua Project, 2015). According to Jenkins (2004), people groups are "ethnolinguistic groups with a common self-identity that is shared by the various members" (para. 2). The statistics reflect areas, especially certain villages in India, where Christianity's rejection is too hazardous for missionaries to serve. Technology is instrumental in allowing the Gospel to be accessible even in these areas of resistance. It will also enable Matthew 24:14, "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come," come to fulfillment.

Morris (2012) used the mixed-method approach, combining qualitative and quantitative research, with the former being more evident than the latter. His research has a different focus than those offered by others on the subject, addressing online courses' spiritual impact. Rather than centering on learning outcomes, he used the Pauline and general epistles to support his position for distance education's biblical origin. The study examines his premise of how these letters were used to "provide instruction, correction, and exhortation for those to whom they were addressed" (Morris, 2012, p. 24) even in the physical absence of the writers.

The Theological View of Distance Learning

One of the more famous quotes by Steve Jobs is, “technology alone is not enough” (Dediu, 2011, p. 1). Learning that promotes change requires faith from the learner to apply the principles to everyday life. They also are equipped to think critically through the creation versus evolution issues from a theological perspective. The unprecedented technological changes are shifting the landscape of everything in our world, including Christian education (Lowe & Lowe, 2018). How will distance education help or hinder the fellowship of learning associated with biblical institutions of higher learning is a critical question for educators (Overholt, 2016). The student’s worldview changes significantly as a result of Bible-based education and associations with the Christian community.

One aspect often overlooked in interchanges concerning the advancements in technology is its impact on spiritual formation for students absent from face-to-face interactions with instructors who also serve as mentors. Bible colleges and seminaries utilize technology to compete with other higher education institutions in recruiting students, but also as a tool to reach young men and women for Christ. Many Christian education and spiritual growth experiences now occur in digital environments, supported by innovative technologies and communication devices (Lowe & Lowe, 2018). With the numbers of young adults who are leaving the Christian faith during their college years, the hope is that digital technologies will help retain this demographic and inculcate a lifelong desire to remain grounded in the faith.

The goal of higher learning is to produce educational excellence in guiding students to reach their academic goals. Educators, scholars, and the institutions themselves differ on the best method of how this task can be accomplished. The stakes are higher for Bible-based institutions because of their holistic emphasis, where morality and spiritual maturity are developed in a faith-

based setting. Some believe that online or distance education tends to complicate the task from being attained, primarily because of a lack of intentionality or processes for integrating spiritual formation. According to Lesniak (2013), "As one is formed for ministry lay or ordained—integration becomes the crucible for mixing knowledge with practice" (p. 230). Studies continue to show rapid growth in distance education, leading some to question the long-term impact distance learning has on higher education beyond technological usage (Allen & Seaman, 2006). Other scholars record small disparities between teacher-learner interactions through online courses compared to those in face-to-face settings (Sadera et al., 2009). The statement implies that one modality is neither more nor less impactful than the other. Sadera et al. (2009) argue against the idea that spiritual transformation is difficult to accomplish with distance education's mode of course delivery.

Crisp and Cruz (2008) believe that mentoring students is better facilitated with face-to-face interactions through relationships primarily established on the college campus. Schlosser and Gelso (2001) comment on how mentoring relationships are frequently developed between faculty advisors and the students assigned to them. Both speak about the role of mentoring that takes place on campus. It is also worth mentioning that these comments were made before the digital shift in higher education (Freeman, 2014). According to Allen & Seaman (2007), "nearly twenty percent of all U.S. higher education students were taking at least one online course" (p. 1). The increased use of distance learning has likewise expanded the reachability of mentors and other social interactions through digital delivery. Shore (2007) argues that even social presence, which she describes as "interactivity and interpersonal contact" (p. 92), can occur in both face-to-face or distance education courses. In other words, distance education does not limit social engagements between faculty and students but rather enhances them.

How institutions view the significance of the discipleship and or mentorship process in academics will determine how they adapt to the paradigm shift in higher education. (Harasim, 2000). Selecting the best delivery method was vital to this research. Being created in the image of God implies that humanity was designed for mutual relationships with one another. One of the assumed threats of distance education is the elimination of the learning community. However, studies show that participation among students in online learning communities equal and, in some cases, surpasses interactions in traditional settings (Sadera et al., 2009). These groups are especially critical for Bible-based colleges, which serve different purposes than other higher learning institutions. There are underlying psychological needs for emotional and physical safety resulting from the supportive relationships that come from a sense of connectedness (Resnick et al., 1997) or belongingness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). These elements are vital to student success. Shore (2007) gives this endorsement, "Experience teaching online has convinced me that text-based Web courses can, in fact, be designed and delivered in such a way as to facilitate genuine, formative social interaction among students, professors, and a curriculum" (p. 93). This assertion further supports the idea that the success of spiritual formation through online learning is dependent on the intentionality of faculty, staff, and students.

Bible-based institutions have been adversely jeered as newcomers to technology and distance education (Morris, 2012). Others suggest that Bible-based colleges, seminaries, and universities are two decades behind other academic educational institutions. Baltrip (2015) corrects this misinformation by sharing how various online learning questions surfaced in Christian theological education in the mid-2000s. Those propositions also contradict Lowe and Lowe's (2018) assessment of Christian education's role in the digital revolution. The writers cite how Christian education was the vanguard to the printing press, radio, and television. They also

comment on how entire degree programs were being offered during the 1990s in online formats in Bible-based institutions (Lowe and Lowe, 2018).

Freeman (2014) defines distance learning as the non-traditional form of education where teachers and students do not occupy the same physical space. The most significant theological implications for distance learning is the Bible itself. It has been edited by the Holy Spirit, providing information from heaven about God's ways to humanity on earth. Illustrations of distance education is observational throughout the Old and New Testaments. Morris (2012) proposes that the letters of Paul are models of distance teaching and distance learning. He also talks about their impact on spiritual formation and discipleship.

Jesus also demonstrated the use of distance learning in the book of Revelation. Chapters two and three comprised of letters to the seven churches in Asia Minor. The Apostle John was drafted to transcribe Jesus' message to the churches, he had been exiled to Patmos Island during the reign of Domitian (Walvoord, 2004). Theologians continue to debate how and when the letters arrived from Patmos to the various churches. These letters by John are examples of distance learning, as demonstrated through the Pauline epistles.

The Theological View of Education

When historians discuss the history of education, several names are cited depending on the conversation region. The most notable is Confucius, the Chinese philosopher. Confucius is often credited with the origin of formal education, partly due to being recognized as the first teacher or one professionally employed to teach others (Hirsch, 2019). Much of what is known about Confucius accrued after his death, increasing speculation about his background and upbringing. His emphasis on education was simple. One should find a good teacher, someone

older who is familiar with the ways of the past and the ancients' practices, and imitate his words and deeds (Riegel, 2013).

The writer of Ecclesiastes provides this timeless principle, "That which has been being what were, That which is done is what was done, And there is nothing new under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 1:9, NKJV). Despite humanity's diligent effort to accredit the origin of teaching to Confucius, our Creator God was the first teacher in creation. When He began to speak in Genesis 1:2, His command for creation was also instructions to creation. Jamieson et al. (1997) articulate how God's command to "let there be, is a declaration of His will being decreed, appointed and followed with the immediate result" (p. 17). With God being the first instructor of the universe, education begins from a biblical or spiritual emphasis that eventually expanded through general practices.

Old Testament

Theologians agree that the Old Testament was written primarily in the Hebrew language, where there are several words used for the term teach. Those most commonly used are *Yara, Yasar, and Zahar* (Vine, 2003). The first time the term *teach*, or its synonyms, are stated in the Bible is in Exodus 4:12, when God addresses Moses's speech impediment. God told Moses that He will teach him what to say, "Now, therefore, go, and I were with your mouth and teach you what you shall say" (Exodus 4:12 NKJV). The writer uses the word *Yara* for the word teach, which means to direct, inform, and instruct. In this same manner, God called all creation into existence, who understood His command, and His will was accomplished (Pfeiffer, 1990).

The Old Testament also provides an example of the first system of formal public educational training. Various scriptures covering the life of Samuel, Elijah, and Elisha refer to a group of men who resided in a place identified by theologians as "The school of the prophets" (1

Samuel 19:18-24, 2 Kings 2:3-15 NKJV). The disciples or pupils of the prophets were called sons, as teachers were called father, as stated in 2 Kings 2:12, 6:21" (Freeman and Chadwick, 1998, p. 256). Some believe that Samuel, who served the first two kings of Israel, Saul and David, founded the school. Scripture cites several locations where the school was held including, Bethel (1 Kings 2:3), Ramah (1 Samuel 19:19), and Jericho (2 Kings 2:5).

The school of the prophets resembled most Bible colleges and seminaries today. These institutions provided more than training on the handling of scripture and ministry services but other disciplines as well. According to Freeman et al. (1998), the sons of the prophets, as the students were often called, were not only trained for ministry services, but they also "studied law, history, poetry, and music" (p. 257). There is no information available to determine the extent of the school's existence. Two centuries separate the ministry of Samuel and the call of Amos. Amos admits that he was never trained in the school of the prophets (Amos 7:14). This passage could either suggest that the school was no longer around during his time or emphasizes his direct call from God himself. Sunukjian (2004) says, "Amos denied that his ministry was self-generated, insisting that it was solely the result of God's initiative" (p. 144).

New Testament

There are also references to learning paradigms that resemble the educational institutions of today in the New Testament. Luke records Paul's frustration when ministering in Ephesus during the infant stages of the early church. Paul left the synagogue to teach the Word in a place identified in scripture as the school of Tyrannus (Acts 19:9). Scholars differ on whether this was an actual school with students or merely a lecture hall owned by a converted Jewish doctor or Rabbi. According to Toussaint (2004), visiting teachers were allowed to use the building from eleven to four o'clock in the evening during the noon and afternoon meal-times.

Greek culture

In addition to the New Testament examples, the Greek culture during biblical times contributed to education as well. The Greeks were known for arts, music, philosophy, poetry, and observers of nature. The region's climate availed opportunities for appreciation of nature, noted by the numerous outside events, including the Olympics and Pythian Games (Anthony & Benson, 2003). It also enhanced the story of creation because of the decorative paintings and other visual images introduced to those less exposed to scenery locations. More pertinent to this study is the influence of the Greek philosophers. Aristotle, Plato, Socrates, and others were instrumental in encouraging critical thinking and the importance of educating children (Anthony & Benson, 2003). Religion is another vital contribution from Greek culture, but not necessarily Christianity. The concept of gods and their assumed power laid the foundation of Christian teaching. Scripture comments about gods and their association with unusual supernatural activity and the homage practice given to deities, especially in Paul's writings.

Pedagogy of Christ

When observing the different teaching paradigms discussed in the New Testament, the diversified teaching ministry of Jesus immediately comes to mind. From a theoretical standpoint, it is a mixture of pedagogy and andragogy. According to Cole (2019), Pedagogy "can either be teacher-centered or learner-centered with a low-tech or high-tech approach" (para. 2).

Teacher-centered learning focuses on the teacher giving lectures and sharing content through direct instruction' (para. 2). Dunn (2002) describes andragogy as student-centered, experienced-based, problem-oriented, requiring collaboration between learners and educators. He argues that it represents a self-mastery process in which learners must be highly motivated and engaged. The New Testament presents a platform for theology and education's

interrelatedness through Christ's pedagogy (Sales, 2017). The impact of Jesus' methods was applauded even by those who opposed Him. They marveled, saying, "No man ever spoke like this Man!" (John 7:46 NKJV). The most overlooked aspect of Jesus' teaching was its contemporary approach, which was often displayed using the andragogy method.

Opposed to popular belief, Jesus was not the initiator of parabolic teaching. Still, it is the style that symbolized His preferred technique. Parables proved to be an innovative and opposing approach to the traditional method used by the religious leaders consisting mostly of repetitive reading of the law without explanation. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for parable is *Masha.* Lockyer (1989) says, "In a wide range of use, this word covers several forms of picturesque and suggestive speech all those forms in which ideas are presented in the robes of imagery" (p. 10). In the New Testament, the verbal pictures in Jesus' parables portrayed universal situations that grew out of typical experiences that appealed to common sense (Jones, 1999). Parables were also used to communicate divine truths without being offensive, displaying Jesus' sociability dimensions and the use of verbalization (Sampson, 2011). Jesus regularly used non-verbal skills to defuse hostile situations with religious leaders. John records the story of the woman caught in adultery and how Jesus continued to write on the ground as her accusers waited to see how Jesus would respond to the allegations (John 8). His response or lack thereof to their demands for actions against the woman led to convictions within their hearts. Effective teaching influences the heart; unfortunately, it was only temporary for the religious leaders of Jesus' day.

Theological View of Constructivist Learning Theories

Dunlow's (2014) study on the relationship between mentoring and the spiritual formation of non-traditional seminary students focuses on the importance of mentorship in the teacher-learner paradigm, which is an essential element of this research. Quoting Pyeatt, Dunlow (2014)

says, “constructivists regard mentoring as a methodology of teaching/learning that illustrates and utilizes constructivism methods that provide feedback and guidance to the mentee” (Dunlow, 2014, p. 3). The spiritual community identifies itself with such terms as baptized believers, the body of Christ, and congregants. Students who engage in academic endeavors through biblical institutions of higher learning experience the best of both worlds. First, they experience spiritual community through a fellowship of learning that challenges their faith. They also benefit from having instructors who often serve as mentors and models of the Christian faith. Constructivism tends to be the learning theory that complements spiritual formation for teachers and students.

Constructivism

Constructivism is a widely used philosophical term that is significant to higher education. The focus of the theory is on how people learn. The premise is that the learner actively constructs their knowledge and significance based on past experiences (Fosnot, 1996). Proponents argue that learning originates from the individual who then disseminates new data by filtering information through a set of experiential systems. The student asks questions, explores objectives, and then assesses whether a change is necessary or discard information altogether. Some scholars refer to this model as constructive constructivism.

Contrary to belief, constructivism does not compel students to reinvent the wheel but encourages them to think critically about the world and how it functions. Yilmaz (2008) says constructivist learners “are generative individuals (with the capacity to pose questions, solve problems, and construct theories and knowledge) rather than empty vessels waiting to be filled” (p. 162). It provokes inquiries of issues, including creation and evolution, which is why spiritual formation must remain viable in higher education.

Knowledge is not an act of transmission from teacher to student but happens when it is constructed cognitively by the student. Hein (2019) says, “There is no knowledge independent of the meaning attributed to experience (constructed) by the learner, or community of learners” (p. 1). The Bible expounds on humankind’s inability to mentally construct a spiritual cognizance of who God is and their need for him on their own. “As it is written: There is none righteous, no, not one; There is none who understands; There is none who seeks after God” (Romans 3:10-11, NKJV). Online spiritual formation programs help students stay engaged in “traditional spiritual formation practices such as prayer, contemplation, journaling, fasting, blessed subtraction, and solitude” (Maddix & Estep, 2010, p. 431). These practices are not innate behaviors that students acquire cognitively or without spiritual guidance and nurturing.

Social constructivism

Social constructivism, also called social constructionism, is one of the sub-categories or domains (Phillips & Early, 2000) of constructivism. The contrast between constructivism and social constructivism is argued from the origin of the primary base of knowledge. Social constructivism underscores some of the epistemology tenets, which is a philosophical concentration toward knowledge and its meaning. When comparing the two learning theories, the former tends to lean toward knowledge being internal. In contrast, the latter suggests that knowledge is acquired from external influences.

The philosophy of social constructivism does not separate the student from his or her culture and environment. Sscholars believe that both the learner and society benefit from exposure to one another. The social world is developed through collaborations of what Lynch calls “the process of social negotiation and evaluation of the viability of individual understanding” (Lynch, 2016, p. 1). Knowledge is obtained by the student’s social exchanges,

which help develop a sense of balance and commonality. Although the learning process may still begin with the learner's current mindset or construct, it opens the opportunity to add to the student's initiative's present construct. Social constructivism facilitates the opportunity to make observations that lead to questions and a greater appreciation by discovering the answers. Lynch (2016) believes learning attaches as much meaning to the process of learning as it does to the acquisition of new knowledge. In other words, how the student learns is as important as what they learn.

The research contends that social constructivism is the best approach for integrating spiritual formation through distance education in Bible-based institutions. Its philosophy conveys that knowledge and disciplines are human constructs formed by "politics, ideologies, values, the exertion of power and preservation of status, religious beliefs, and economic self-interest" (Phillips, 2000, p. 6). How these bodies of knowledge are constructed regulates a person's theoretical worldview. How they are reconstructed through acquired knowledge and spiritual formation helps form a biblical worldview. According to Yilma (2000), "social constructivism is an adaptive activity requiring the erecting of conceptual structures and self-regulation through reflection and abstraction" (p. 165). The constructs are necessary tools for spiritual formation in building bridges between the head's knowledge and motivations of the heart (Freeman, 2014).

The desired goal of education is to develop people to reach their full potential, including leading others. Sampson (2011) deliberates on an influential leader's six attributes, including the "sociability dimension." He describes sociability as a person's "fittedness to function in society with others" (p. 188). Of the ten principles associated with sociability, two are pertinent to this study: verbal and nonverbal actions when relating to others. When God completed His work of creation, He concluded that "it is not good for man to be alone" (Genesis 2:18 KJV). The need

for social engagement with humans can be viewed from the Genesis texts in the creation of the first man and woman. From this divine assessment, God gave Adam a helper who was suitable for him. Many view this passage as a way of understanding that God, the perfect matchmaker, gave Adam a counterpart with whom he could commune and cohabitate (Strassner, 2009). Creating Eve enabled Adam to fulfill his potential by expressing his likeness of God.

Being in God's image had nothing to do with the physical likeness but having godly attributes. Adam reflected God's image through dominion, to "rule over" the other created beings and subdue the earth (Genesis 1:26-28). Adam and Eve represent distinction in that they are both human but have different roles and functions in creation. God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all God and equal in divinity but have diverse functions. "Man and woman were created equal, in the image of God, but their roles are distinct" (Strassner, 2009, p. 25) as it relates to the issue under discussion.

Another distinctive attribute of being created in the image of God is relational proficiencies. It would have been impractical for God to give Adam someone to cohabitate with absent from the capabilities to relate with them. The relationship that exists between the Creator and His creation is what separates God from other deities. The relationship approach is viewed as the more common way to categorize being created in God's image from a modern perspective (Kilner, 2015).

Scholars differ on how the relationship corresponds to the image of God. Kilner (2015) says, "Relationship is a complex term since it can involve different sorts of associations between different sorts of entities" (p. 211). Others argue that man's relationship with God results from being in His image, which allows humankind to have relationships with one another, using the Trinity's relativeness as an example (Strassner, 2009). In the creation language, we see that God

uses plural pronouns such as “us” and “our” to suggest that humans reflect Godhead’s collaborative and relational nature.

Erickson (1998) affirms his position from what he calls the relational view of God’s image. He says, “Humans can be said to be in the image or to display the image when standing in a particular relationship, which indeed *is* the image” (p. 524). Not only are relationships among humans equivalent to relationships among God’s person, but “humanity’s relationship with God is also parallel to the relationship within the being of God” (Kilner, 2015, p. 212). Social constructivism supports the learner’s natural and spiritual design for relationships, enabling them to learn by association and other people.

Theoretical Framework for the Study

Overview

Online learning’s impact on higher education expands beyond the point of delivering academic information through digital formats allowing students to achieve college-level degrees. Studies reveal a dramatic increase in all related aspects of online education, including the enrollment of non-traditional students, adults 25 years and older. The reports affirm Carlson’s (2005) declaration that “a new generation of college students have arrived” (p. 34). At times the new student is a technological version of the same student. Allen and Seaman (2004) postulate that the Master’s degree is second only to the Associate’s degree in programs offered in online formats.

Much attention has been given to the convergence of technological, instructional, and pedagogical developments in online learning, with little regard to God’s sovereignty in the new shift for online learning (Harasim, 2000). This research explores related studies on online learning and the assumptions and threats to spiritual formation for students in Bible-based

institutions of higher education. Special attention is given to the history of online learning and the paradigmatic changes in education due to this phenomenon.

History of distance education

This study was initiated by an examination of the complexity of the historical background of distance education. One of the earliest and most significant contributions to adult education in America was the Chautauqua movement. Businessman Lewis Miller partnered with John Vincent, a Methodist minister, to organize this event, which originated as a summer camp for Sunday school teachers in 1874. Vincent and Lathbury (2010) say, "Chautauqua's mission is to develop and make more practical the teaching of the Book as condensed in the great second commandment, "Love thy neighbor as thyself" (p. 7).) Sunday schools were key educational centers before being required in America (Scott, 1999). Miller and Vincent utilized their organizational skills, speaking abilities, and academic expertise to teach Christian education through unconventional methods. The religious emphasis gave way to other educational focuses.

Consequently, the Chautauqua institute was formed and would offer intensive summer courses for religious teachers to parallel the contemporary or standard courses for public school teachers. The curriculum was extended to comprise general education as well. Each summer, the program would introduce various delivery modes for religious and secular adult education (Schurr, 1992). Chautauqua's contribution to higher education includes "pioneered extension and correspondence courses, summer sessions, and the university press in the United States" (Scott, 1999, para. 3). Vincent's Chautauqua Movement (1886) may well represent "the first modern theory of adult education in the United States" (Stubblefield, 1981, p. 199). Riley et al. (2006) say, "From the Chautauqua literary and scientific circles (CLSC) to national correspondence courses, adults from all walks of life participated in rich educational experiences such as debates,

lectures, and travelogues" (para. 5). These developments contribute to the processes used today in higher education.

Diligent research has determined that it is far less complicated to describe distance education than to identify a universal definition or agreement on its origin date. Allen and Seaman (2014) summarize online learning as a revolutionary solution to equality's diverse educational problems. The writers also define an online course as "one with 80% of the content is delivered online" (p. 6). Although the World Wide Web invention in 1992 (Harasim, 2000) increased internet activity globally, distance learning's technical aspect can be traced back to the 1960s. The staff from the University of Illinois introduced PLATO (Programmed Logic for Automatic Teaching Operations) as the first known computerized teaching system (Timmins, 2017). It allowed educational information to be transmitted from a mainframe computer in Champaign, Illinois, to other interconnected devices.

The PLATO system was classified as an intranet model because it operated as an internal digital communication system. By the end of the decade, Leonard Kleinrock would lay the groundwork for a new technological system known as the internet (Leiner, Cerf, Clark, et al., 1997). Twenty years later, in 1992, the World Wide Web invention made online education increasingly accessible and allowed new pedagogical models to emerge (Lee, 2017). The 1980s and 90s' saw a combination of increased use of telecommunication devices, social media activity, and improved technology had enhanced digital delivery methods in higher education (Harasim, 2000). The change would impact all higher education areas, including enrollment, marketing, mentoring, recruiting, teacher-learner dynamics, and spiritual development. The immediate impact of technological advances is in the area of admissions. Overholt (2016) states that "Online programming has expanded and opened educational opportunities to a wider student

demographic, which has allowed for new opportunities for non-traditional students" (p. 1). The unique needs of the non-traditional student, which are predicted to outnumber the traditional students, forces instructors to modify their teaching methods to achieve the desired result (Chen et al., 2010). Furthermore, colleges and seminaries have to alter their marketing and recruitment strategies because of global assess to higher education campuses through distance learning.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Distance Learning

Strengths

Studies have shown that the most significant Christian distance learning asset is its reachability, encompassing academic and spiritual connotations. Thirty-eight percent of the 3,068 degree-granting higher education institutions responded to the Bastrop group 2004 survey, indicating that over 1.9 million students took online courses in the previous year (Allen & Seaman, 2004). Research also reveals an increase in overall enrollment in higher education courses due to online learning's flexibility (Roach & Lemasters, 2006). The flexibility of taking college-level classes without having to compromise employment or other life responsibilities is an option that was not available to students before distance education.

Distance learning also allows both traditional and non-traditional students to pursue higher education degrees from institutions regardless of the student's residence or location. Some scholars suggest that online programs have erased almost all geographic barriers to assessing the educational leadership program, increasing attention toward student satisfaction (Allen & Seaman, 2004). Diamond and Hannum (2009) says, "In recent years we have seen a dramatic rise in distance learning courses, especially courses taught online. The vast majority of colleges and universities now offer both courses and complete degree programs through distance learning" (p. 238).

The advantages presented by the digital revolution are not all relegated to facts and figures. Since the study's focus is integrating spiritual formation for students through the online learning modality, it explores how the increase in enrollment should be comparative to increased opportunities for discipleship, especially for Bible-based institutions. Although registration for private and smaller faith-based colleges and universities has declined over the last six years, the number has grown over the same time for larger Bible-based institutions (Clarke, 2018). The U.S. News reported that enrollment for Liberty University had quadrupled its freshman enrollment over the last 15 years (Powell and Boyington, 2017).

Pew Research Center (PRC) reported that only four out of ten (41%) Millennials rate religion as a priority in life (PRC, 2015). This, coupled with 27% considering themselves atheist, suggests a lack of discipleship and spiritual formation taking place among college-aged young adults in society. According to the Barna group (2018), Gen Z is primarily teens who identify as such and is twice that of the general population (13% vs. 6%) of all adults). According to Morrow (2018), the group's worldview is based on having a nonjudgmental position with morality and religious issues due to their misinterpretation of Matthew 7:1-6. The research group also noted that the proportion that identifies as Christian likewise drops from generation to generation. With at least a minimum amount of Bible courses required for degrees from a Bible college or university, online education presents an opportunity to minister to a more significant percentage of prospective Christians.

Samra (2008) proposes that spiritual growth is fostered through the Christian community, which is already established at Christian-based institutions through its various learning communities. Community means like-mindedness, shared interest, and other associations. When spirituality is added to those commonalities, the bond is stronger because of its eternal

repercussions. The community of faith plays a vital role in the progression of spiritual maturity. Samra (2008) says, “Imitating Godly examples” (p. 124) are marks of spiritual maturity. Allowing students to see the life of Christ being lived out through Christian educators helps formulate spiritual growth. Learning communities built on mentors serve as perfect models for students, which the study explores further.

Campbell and Garner (2016) postulate that technology cannot be removed from human existence. Observing how technology has enhanced education, especially in religious studies, reassures the notion that the Christian community benefits significantly from online communities. One of the subsets from online communities is those comprised of cohorts in Bible-based institutions. Relationships founded through the continued interactions with cohorts are the essence of the online spiritual community. According to Pinzer (2017), “Historically, cohorts of students in higher education have been an effective option for learning collaboration” (p. 3). The engagement among students in these virtual learning communities (Lock, 2002) provide opportunities to foster spiritual nurturing and accountability with possible lifetime friends. Lowe and Lowe (2010) use insights from Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) discussion on human development to build an argument for the value of “interactions and interconnectedness” (p. 93). The writers expound on the importance of social interconnections and how it affects a person’s growth rate and development.

Weakness

The opportunity to participate in the traditional college experience is voided by those who choose to obtain a higher education degree exclusively through distance education. Campus life creates a plethora of growth opportunities for students, including applying faith lessons to life choices. Learning to adapt to living independently from a parent’s watchful eye is a

fundamental part of matriculating from teens to young adulthood. Campus life can be a non-military boot camp experience because students have to manage self-discipline to achieve their desired academic goals. Most college students view the communal aspect as one of the benefits of campus life. The commonality among students in the same area of study, clubs, hobbies, or interests naturally creates a learning community. The ecological connections and interactions (Lowe & Lowe, 2018) with other students with the same goals help them to grow, develop, and mature individuals through this stage of life. Lifelong friendships are also formed through on-campus interactions that tend to outlast those made in high schools. A socio-psychologic dynamic exists among some students that being on a college campus allows them to escape. The Sirgy (2006) Quality of Campus Life (QCL) measures the positive and negative effects of college students' academic and social aspects. The report determined that students who are optimistic about college life's social elements are also positive about other areas, including academic campus administration, faculty, facilities, and services.

The mentor-mentee relationships built from a random conversation with an instructor or executive staff member walking through a parking lot or campus café cannot be duplicated through distance education. Perhaps Lee (2017) had this in mind when sharing that one of the disadvantages of distance education is that it gives the students only limited access to the institution. However, studies show that the by-product, spiritual community, from these chance encounters, happens more often through online exchanges than face-to-face meetings. Larsen (2001) reported that **“**28 million Americans have used the Internet to get religious and spiritual information and connect with others on their faith journeys” (p. 1). The continuous correspondences that occur through digital learning systems create the potential for students to find virtual learning communities (VCL), some of which are spiritual. Theodore Roosevelt (date

unknown) is one of many who have been attributed to coining the phrase, “People do not care how much you know until they know how much you care.” The quote is particularly relevant to the college and seminary students, particularly those who struggle with a sense of belonging or worth. Mentors often serve as bridges between the unbeliever and the journey of faith in Bible-based institutions. Mentoring has been recognized in many fields and industries and “cuts across all academic disciplines, professions, and contexts” (Dunlow, 2014, p. 2). This study reveals how mentoring contributes to the success of spiritual formation for online students.

Concepts of Spiritual Formation

Definition

Spiritual formation has been considered one of the expected outcomes of Christian higher education for many years (Maddix & Estep, 2010). The accrediting criteria also emphasize its importance for the Association of Biblical Higher Education (ABHE) and the Association of Theological Schools (ATS). A working definition of spiritual formation from a biblical perspective that applies to both face-to-face and distance education is produced from this study. Determining a universal meaning for spiritual formation was problematic due to its ambiguous usage. Howard (2018) says, “Each of these words—spiritual and formation—has been used in different ways at different times; as a result, the phrase spiritual formation means slightly different things to different people” (p. 6). Spiritual and formation are terms that are used directly and indirectly in scripture. The idea of the development process being used through spiritual formation is captured biblically by the Apostle Paul’s imagery of a child's embryonic stages in the mother’s womb. He writes, “My little children, for whom I labor in birth again until Christ is formed in you” (Galatians 4:19, NKJV). The Apostle Paul expresses his desire for the church in Galatia to grow spiritually, which only happens with external assistance.

There are also cultural and denominational differences that obscure efforts of determining a universal definition of spiritual formation. The term itself is typically used more in mainstream denominational churches, especially those with primarily white congregations. Many African American churches prefer discipleship as the term to express the process of spiritual growth. As it relates to spiritual formation, cultural diversity is not limited to race or skin color alone. The cultural differences exist within each race as well (Livermore, 2015). A suburban church with an African American congregation employs different ministry methods than one in an urban community. The church's heritage, biblical knowledge, and the community's needs are all factors in how spiritual maturity is communicated and applied in a believer's life. It is similar to the essence of Graves' (2018) "Habits of theological reason in spiritual formation" (p. 35). He believes that knowing what drives a person's cognitive faculties in processing information is key to spiritual formation. Differences in how theological concepts are processed among diverse groups do not mean that one is inferior nor superior to the others, just different. Francis (2019) favors "Christian formation" (para. 2) that represents the stages of faith as a model for integrating toward spiritual maturity. He also explains that faith development's ultimate goal is spiritual maturity (Fortosis 1992) and Christ-likeness (Estep and Kim, 2001), which describes what spiritual formation produces when achieved.

Observations of precedent literature further support spiritual formation's subjective definitions that align with perceived purposes on the topic. Some scholars refer to it as a process of attaining a deeper connection with God (Christensen, 2010) using 2 Corinthians 3:18, 4:16, Colossians 3:10, and others supporting their argument. Boa (2001) sees it as a journey where twelve facets of spirituality are practiced, leading one to become conformed to Christ's image. Banks and Stephens (2011) proposes spiritual formation is a monastic practice where a spiritual

director guides men and women through a process whereby they can discern God's will for a person's life. Opponents of the term "spiritual formation" view it as an unbiblical postmodern movement that has become popular over the last decade, preferring "spiritual transformation" instead. MacArthur (2007) says, "The goal of human philosophy used to be truth without God. Today's philosophies are open to the notion of God without truth or, to be more accurate personal "spirituality." He continues that "Without the truth, no spiritual transformation is possible" (p. 48).

In 2 Timothy 3, The Apostle Paul warns the believers about the worthlessness of quarreling about words, "Remind *them* of these things, charging *them* before the Lord not to strive about words to no profit, to the ruin of the hearers (2 Timothy 3:14). Both formation and transformation are from the same Greek word *morphe* (Strong, 2007), from which metamorphosis derives. Morphe is the same word used to describe Jesus during his transfiguration (Mark 9:2), representing a change of character and conduct (Banks et al., 2011). The Apostle Paul used morphe in Romans 12:2, signifying the need for a renewed mind or striving to have Christ's mindset. Banks et al. (2011) says, "Here then are the stages of Christian moral transformation: first our mind is renewed by the Word and Spirit of God; then we can discern and desire the will of God, and then we are increasingly transformed by it" (p. 324). says, "Despite significant and often heated debates concerning differing Christian views on justification, sanctification, deification (*theosis*), humanity's natural moral state, and the role of grace in salvation, spiritual formation across major Christian traditions likely share a core set of developmental processes" (Graves, 2018, p. 36). Spiritual formation is a process by which the believer is nurtured, reshaped, molded, changed until he or she mirrors Christ's image through word and deed.

Assumptions

The study investigated some of the assumptions regarding spiritual formation in Bible-based institutions. One of the challenges of determining the effectiveness of spiritual formation for Bible-based higher learning institutions is the assumption that Bible courses automatically produce spiritual growth. This premise may be true in most cases but not all-inclusive. Haverluck (2017) says, 70% of Christian college students leave the faith after attending Bible colleges after one year. Spiritual growth cannot be approached passively in Bible-based institutions. Intentional strategies related to spiritual development must be employed. Another contributing factor may be due to the dichotomization that we see between cognitive and spiritual maturation. Lowe (2007) contends that the problem may be in part to a historic event in world history as a reason for the "gap in theological education and spiritual formation" (p. 11). The writer alludes to Linbeck's (1998) claim of the Enlightenment period's influence, which emphasized intellect and human reason, over spiritual enrichment, as the leading cause of the disparity. Economics also adds to the gap between knowledge and application. Duncan's (2018) address of the current seminary state contends that the cost of seminary education has led some institutions to require fewer credits for a seminary degree. Unfortunately, in courses where spiritual formation is the primary area of concentration, it is often mitigated through curriculum design attrition. It tends to lead to students having immense knowledge of the Bible but are ill-equipped to understand how to live out its truths.

Teacher-learner Theories

The success of spiritual formation at any institution of higher learning is dependent on the level of commitment from all the participants, especially the teacher-leader. The study analyzes the various educational theories and the models that best complement spiritual formation.

Instructional methods tend to categorize students and teachers. In contrast, theology values the person by viewing humanity through the eyes of God. It sees the reflection of God's image in who the student is, as they interact, reason, and relate to others while learning from them. Academic progression can lead to spiritual growth as the Holy Spirit facilitates the desire to find answers.

When an educator seeks to determine which theory of education is the best one to model, it is wise to be mindful that no one size fits all. Academic progression can lead to spiritual growth since the Holy Spirit facilitates the desire to find answers, beginning with who they are and how they got here. Unfortunately, many of the solutions are fashioned through scholarship rather than theology rather than a healthy integration of both.

Spirituality is a game-changer. Educators who understand the biblical implications of being "made in the image of God" (Genesis 1:27, KJV) generally reflect this in how they treat each other. Kilner (2015) says, "Ethical behavior, which is not merely the product of externally imposed mandates; it flows from virtues that glorify God because they are like God's own" (p. 293). Glorifying God lifts the standards above moral laws to the higher standards of spiritual righteousness.

The Role of the Learning Community in Spiritual Formation

The word community is a late Middle English word, meaning gemeanscipe derives from an Old French word*, "comunete."* It also correlates with the Latin term, "*communitas,"* which is defined as public spirit (Skeat, 2005). Wellman (2014) gives this insight into how the word is seen from a biblical viewpoint,

The short answer is that the term "community" is a compound word; "com" means with

> and "unity" means what the word says…unity or being unified or having a common union. In short, God wants believers to dwell in union and in community having the same mind that is in Jesus Christ (Phil 2:1-11) (para. 2).

Citizenry, civilization, commonwealth, municipality, and society are synonyms that stem from the term community. Body, brethren, church, congregation, fellowship, and members are biblical terms used for community (Pettit, 2008).

Pettit (2008) argues that "The concept of community (aka Gemienschaft) permeates the social dimensions of Scripture" (p. 74). He also discusses the universal need for community, referring to Genesis 1. Two early accounts in the Bible show the threat to community and its consequences. First, the fall in the garden (Genesis 3) and Cain's killing of Abel (Genesis 4), causing him to be excommunicated from the community for the remainder of his life (Pettit, 2008). Lowe and Lowe. (2018) deliberate on the disruption caused by human sin upon the spiritual fellowship enjoyed in the perfect ecology in the Garden of Eden, necessitating the need for Christ to restore man in communal fellowship with God.

The learning community is vital to the success of spiritual formation in higher education because of the societal hubs (Anderson et al., 2014) for students, which can be instrumental in spiritual growth processes. At one time, the belief was on-campus modalities appear to be best suited for spiritual formation. However, studies show that student-student interactions happen more frequently in online courses. Parker et al. (2014) also say that students' online communications are crucial to influencing successful distance education outcomes. Lyke & Frank (2006) proposes that Christian ministry has always been mediated through technology in one sense or another. The enduring query accompanying its purpose is, "Which technology best serves the objective of improving one's spiritual well-being" (p. 18)? The study seeks to discover

spiritual formation models that are successfully active through distance education programs at Bible colleges that can be replicated.

Leadership Styles for Spiritual Formation

The instructor is the key to facilitating spiritual formation because he or she is often the first line of contact with students and the institution's visible representation. It is also a strategic leadership position because of the influence on the student's academic and spiritual development. Bredfeldt and Albert (2006) contend that "God's most common means of leading His people is through those who teach His people" (p. 8). The areas of responsibility for instructors have increased with the expansion of online delivery. Communication of content is the essence of what educators do. Students must assess knowledge taught; teachers are responsible for making knowledge accessible (Eckel, 2003). How information is communicated from instructors often determines how the student receives it.

Nkadi (2013) believes ethical leadership plays a significant role in school administration. Still, transformational leadership styles have been useful in organizational settings. Exemplary (Kouses & Posner, 2017), Transformational (Burns & Bass, 1978, 1994), and Servant leadership (Greenleaf, 2002) offer unique perspectives for the teacher-learner dynamics. Their contributions to spiritual formation in on-ground and online modalities are assessed in this study.

According to Ackerman and Parker (2011), many students are familiar with online education. Still, few attach the idea of spiritual maturation with academic achievement. As the shift in higher education has changed toward more courses being offered through distance education, college education has become more accessible. It also allows Bible-based institutions with more opportunities to share the Christian faith. This study contends that for these institutions to remain relevant, the regulatory approach to spiritual formation among students has

to be more purposeful. The qualitative phenomenological approach used information from interviews and compared it with studies from precedent literature on the subject to analyze models and trends for integrating spiritual formation.

Related Literature

E-learning, distance education, hybrid courses, online learning, and virtual classrooms are all synonyms for non-traditional classes requiring technology as the process of deliverance. The popularity of digital technology usage has impacted every area of life, including education. Online courses are no longer an alternative choice, but in some cases, a matter of survival for higher education intuitions. The study explored its impact on spiritual formation in Bible-based institutions. This research investigated related studies that revealed data or qualified information addressing the topic.

The core of the study is the integration of spiritual formation through distance learning at Bible-based institutions. Harasim's (2000) work is one of the foundational sources for this research. Although written at the turn of the century, it was the cusp of distance education's popularity. The material is pertinent to higher education processes today. Harasim mentions some of the features that have improved throughout online education's history and enhanced learning outcomes in higher education. The article discusses:

- New modes of educational delivery,
- New learning domains,
- New principles of learning,
- New learning processes and outcomes,
- New educational roles and entities.

The three delivery modes are *adjunct, mixed, and total* online methods (Harasim, 2000). The adjunct mode is the earliest example of digital education. It can be traced back to the introduction of e-mail and other digital communications between instructor and student, expanding class discussions' ability. The name typifies the role of an adjunct professor. The adjunct mode was initially for network enhancement purposes and not for full access to course activity or assignments. Since the research time, the exponential growth and use of technology by colleges for e-newsletters and other campus communications have expanded the adjunct mode's use.

The mixed-mode increases the online activity to include the intergradation of the course curriculum. Harasim (2000) says, “Mixed mode delivery has many variations. It may be used for one or more major activities in a traditional face-to-face or distance mode course, such as small group discussions, seminars, and group projects” (p. 47). The mixed-mode is likely the one used for hybrid or blended courses, which are combinations of face-to-face and online learning for the same class. This discussion is pertinent to this research because of the teacher-learner dynamics.

The volume of student participation is quite distinct from traditional classroom courses, where the instructor dominates most of the time. The reverse is true when the activity is online. The overall volume of student messaging is very high, but it is also relatively evenly distributed. Most students participate most of the time, each sending several messages each week. A few students are less regular contributors, sending few or no messages for some weeks. However, rarely does a student not participate at all during an online course.

The interactions between teacher to student and student to student in hybrid or blended courses foster an atmosphere for spiritual formation. When the instructor does not initiate all of the dialogue, it allows other gifts in the body of Christ to become known. Studies reveal that

most of the conversations regarding spiritual formation in higher education are predicated on the faculty and staff's commitment, with little to no expectations from students. This issue is one of the identifiable gaps in the research, was also discussed. The key to developing a culture for spiritual formation requires buy-in and ownership from everyone on campus. Total online is the mode most are familiar with and is accessed through learning systems such as blackboard for the overall digital class experience.

Mentoring and discipling

The critical role of mentoring for students is an area of interest addressed in this research. Dunlow's (2014) study provides insights into the biblical history of mentoring and the practicality of its processes through distance education. Mentoring is not isolated to academics but used in other professional fields and industries and produces measurable outcomes on individual performances (Dunlow, 2014). However, its role is crucial for seminary students' spiritual formation because of the institution's general purpose. According to Calain (2002), the purpose of seminary is to prepare individuals to serve in ministry-related occupations. Peluso-Verdend (2011) takes a different approach believing that "The purpose of a Christian graduate seminary is *not* to create a class of educated clergy but educate future clergy leaders assuming they will then educate the laity" (p. 3). He continues to write that "Educating clergy has been the method, not the purpose" (p. 3). Graham's (2002) description of what he believes is the purpose of seminary institutions supports the study's aim. He says, "The overall aim of theological education should be to develop theological learning; practical preparation for ministry; spiritual and ministerial formation; and growth in personal maturity" (Graham, 2002, p. 227).

The Akin model introduced by the Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary (SBTS) validates Dunlow's belief that "The theological seminary is uniquely concerned about the

spiritual formation of its students in ways that a secular university is not" (Dunlow, 2014, p. 5). The Akin model is a mentoring method where students are encouraged to serve in local churches allowing them to apply what they learn. Dunlow's (2014) study is also valuable in understanding how the relationships between mentors and mentees are developed over time. Using Kram's (1983) charts, Dunlow shows that mentoring relationships' progression begins at the initiation phase, lasting 6 to 12 months. The heart of the process is the *cultivation phase* lasting anywhere from 2-5 years. The *separation* and *redefinition phases* are growth indicators for the mentor and mentee. Kram's (1983) mentoring chart's stages follow a comparable progression of discipleship or spiritual formation. At some point, the mentee reaches a point of maturity. The relationship then changes as they begin living out what has been imparted in them.

Morris (2012) observes the theological implications of mentoring, connecting it to making disciples' ancient practice. He continues to discuss how the method is related to "a very natural way of learning in which men and women have traditionally mentored young men and women for service in the adult world" (p. 28). The concepts of mentoring are compatible with the typical characteristics of disciple-making but have different purposes. According to Morris (2012), "From the Christian's perspective, making disciples is to teach someone to be like Christ as described in Matthew 28:19-20. Mentoring in the business community relates to helping mentees develop specific skills for use in the business world" (p. 29). Campbell and Garner (2016) emphasize the importance of the role of mentors in online learning processes. The writers say, "Removing established entry barriers, such as formalized mentoring or training requirements, may enable people online to bypass lengthy initiation processes" (p. 72). These processes can be determinants for students' choice in participating in mentoring programs.

Mentors serve as excellent accountability facilitators through online formats, preparing them to be ambassadors for Christ beyond college life.

The significance of community is underestimated primarily because of how it is misrepresented and used in negative connotations. The term is often used simultaneously or with references to the neighborhood. Since neighborhood and community are seldom distinguished in conversations, people are commonly esteemed or devalued, depending on where they reside. The community's impact on a person's life is beyond the demographical or socio-economical makeup, but the group's shared goals and relational values. The Bible gives clear implications of God's divine communal purpose for humanity, desiring that "man should not be alone" (Genesis 2:18). The ancient saying, "It takes a village to raise a child" (African proverb), supports the necessity of communal efforts and others' dependence to make one complete. This research identifies the reality that online communities in Bible-based higher education institutions can co-exist alongside other community forms.

Meaning of community

Depending on the context, community is assumed to be an irreligious concern. Pettit (2008) points out how the term community is not universal and could be used objectively or subjectively, depending on the user's cultural mindset. He begins by addressing the various meanings of the term, expanding it from "being the destination of society as a whole to a group of people from a particular segment of society to social bonding or sharing" (p. 72). The biblical idea of fellowship is also derived from this thought. Like technological advances, industrial growth and population increase are deemed promoters in the decline of community. The view is that the larger the populace, the more difficult it is to find common ground and like-mindedness. Pettit (2008) supports his position with the aid of various scholars and theologians. He also uses

Tonnies' (2001) classifications of the groups, “Gemeinschaft,” meaning community, and “Gesellschaft,” meaning society (p. 73). The German socialist implies that each group is classified according to motives, whether it be self-interest or self-sacrifice, for others' good.

As unrelated to the former as the church would rather be, unfortunately, both groups exist in liturgical circles. A point made all too clear by Smith (2009), who metaphorically describes the worshipper as a weekend shopper, going from store to store, looking for significance through tangible items. However, the consumer does not know what they are looking for, nor where to find it. Smith (2009) says, “Seeing the mall as a liturgical and pedagogical institution helps us to see what’s at stake” (p. 13). As Elijah tells Israelites, “How long halt ye between two opinions?” (1 Kings 18:21 KJV) The Christian educator's challenge is determining balance, as he or she develops a model for spiritual formation through community without compromising biblical standards for relevancy.

The Biblical view of community

The first note of divine uneasiness recorded in scripture came from God expressing worry regarding the crown of His creation, Adam. He said, “*It is* not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a help meet for him” (Genesis 2:18, NKJV). Adam is both the proper name of the first human and a designation for humankind. Bott (2016) says, “Adam is used both as a name and a title in Scripture, referring to his identity as the first human and his status as the representative of humanity before God” (para. 3). When God speaks of man, He does not refer to the male species in particular, but humankind as a whole. God set forth the divine premise and established man’s maturation process. Regardless if it is physical, spiritual, or otherwise, to happen communally. Pettit (2008) reiterates this thought expressing how “God created humans

as community and for community" (p. 75). He also mentions how it accentuates the need for connectedness and is hardwired in man's genetic makeup.

The connection between the community and spiritual formation is not as apparent as other concepts. Community and neighborhood are often used interchangeably. Although they are closely related, the two are distinguishably different. Neighborhood denotes location, whereas the community refers to the people in the neighborhood and the commonalities in which they tend to agree. Similarly, like *Trinity*, the term community does not appear in the Bible, except in the NIV transliteration of the word congregation (Exodus 12:3, Leviticus 4:13) and multitude (Acts 25:24). However, there are multiple inferences of its usage, with the word congregation being referenced the most. It is also used to refer to members of the New Testament church.

Online community

The diversity and prevalence of mobile devices in our society tend to threaten people's idea of communing with one another. There is more interaction among people via Facebook and other online communications than there are face-to-face conversations. CNBC reports that over two billion subscribe to Facebook, 400 million Instagram users, and 300 million habitual Twitter users (Balakrishnan, 2017). Teenagers and young adults, ages 18-25, prefer Facetime and Snapchat over texting because of the visual effects. The *King James Version* (KJV) of the Bible speaks of the "wiles of the devil" (Ephesians 6:11 KJV). It uses the Greek word, *methodeia* Strongs (2007), which is the origin of the English word method in English, meaning crafty or deceit. These different avenues of communication may have good intentions but could be used as instruments of Satan. As in anything, Christians have to be watchful of Satan's schemes even when it comes to technology. Proponents of digital technology use in communication and other

applications argue that negative intentions can color any encounter in light of the fact that we inhabit a fallen and broken world. Challies (2011) says,

> Just as God powerfully used the medium of the written word, the medium of the printing press, and the medium of the radio, He will use these new electronic media. And so, too, will Satan, who will seek to use them to corrupt and destroy. The challenge for the Christian is to learn to use these media with all the opportunities they bring to speak and to tell of this God who speaks through us. We need to use our words to speak his words (p. 81).

The proper approach to the digital-age revolution is the belief in the sovereignty of God's challenge for the Christian community and determining His purpose. Joseph tells his brothers, "what you meant for evil; God meant it for good" (Genesis 50:20). Evil can be found and influenced in any realm of life. The spiritual community is responsible for making the power of God known to the world, even in a digital age (Ephesians 3:10). Lowe and Lowe (2018) address the spiritual purpose and probability of frequent communication happens in the absence of physicality. The writers also speak of how Paul contributed to the recipients' spirituality through his letters as evidence of community not being limited by distance (Lowe & Lowe, 2018).

The Bible articulates an intuitive comment about discerning change about the Sons of Issachar, "They understood the times" (1Chronicles 12:32, NKJV). "We need a fresh infusion of biblical insight, like the insight the Tribe of Issachar provided Israel during a time of political innovation and upheaval" (Lowe & Lowe, 2018, p. 35). These men discerned the climate of their culture and advised the people accordingly. Their ecological connectivity with each other (1Chronicles 12:38) helped them to conclude that David would be the best choice for leading

Israel. Time would prove that David's choice was a spiritual affirmation from God, evidenced by Him removing His Spirit from Saul (1 Samuel 16:14). Utech (2017) says,

> With the growing diversity and interdependence of cultures that increasingly mark contemporary American society, the church in the 21st century must be sensitive and knowledgeable about those cultures and able to adapt its mission and ministry to a variety of different contexts (p. 3).

The men and women who have come to the faith through digital communications validate the digital era's spiritual interconnectedness. It also denotes that technological methods are successfully used to teach God's word without compromising biblical truth. This research argues that understanding the times is key to spiritual formation in distance education. Campbell and Garner (2016) postulate that "Technology and media might be used as an avenue for expressing an individual or community's relationship with God" (p. 143). The capability of online learning communities from Bible-based institutions can expand their outreach further than past generations. In previous years these institutions were primarily sought after by students who sense a calling for ministry-related careers. Utech (2017) declares that the 21st-century church seeks leaders with a high level of competence who can also integrate practice with spiritual depth. In other words, Bible knowledge is not enough. One of the most vital aspects of the spiritual community is the relationships established through groups of people. Lock (2002) borrows Cothrel and Williams' (1999) definition of community as a group of people who are willing and able to help each other. It describes the functions of most cohorts in higher education, especially in graduate and doctorate level programs. Many students in online and on-ground modalities benefit from academic and spiritual relationships provided through their cohort groups because of the commonalities and desire to achieve the same goals.

Rationale for Study and Gap in Literature

Rationale

This research's motivations were driven by subjective experiences and external observations of spiritual formation processes in a Bible-based institution. The idea of going back to the basics presents itself when reflecting on the opportunities that have been introduced through distance education. The paradigmatic shift in education due to the increased use of technology has resulted in higher enrollment, especially in online courses (Allen & Seaman, 2004). However, "how to teach spiritual formation within these courses is minimal" (Freeman, 2014, p. 2). The research does not intend to argue for or against the value of distance learning in higher education, but to assess whether or not facilitating the phenomenal growth has hindered the spiritual focus for Bible-based institutions. In other words, has expediency become more important than teaching students how to apply Biblical truth and knowledge? Further, suppose discipleship is not included in theological training, no matter the venue. In that case, students will not be successful in exemplifying or motivating others toward spiritual formation in their ministry.

The study likewise seeks to provide information about models for integrating spiritual formation through distance education used in Bible-based institutions to determine if customization can appropriate the school's size. There are many biblical principles that will help educators design curriculum to engage students in spiritual development, evangelism, and outreach through digital delivery methods. A cognitive understanding and biblical view of technology and theology are fundamental for the study. Freeman (2014) mentions that the nature of how courses are developed impacts spiritual formation's inclusion in the course. He also discusses how some instructors automatically include some form of spiritual formation in their

class discussions or assignments, but having it "purposefully included in the master course design" (p. 102) increases its probability.

Theology versus technology

The initial concern is how the lines are drawn between proponents and those who oppose the digital revolution in terms of acknowledging God's sovereignty. Change tends to reveal the heart. Academicians and religious leaders feel it is their call to duty to protect the traditions of old. The process of change begins with dealing with the sacred cows of each discipline. "We must begin the process of unlearning what we have traditionally held sacred to the art of teaching and learning and accommodate newer ways of educational crowdsourcing to accomplish what we say we want" (Lowe & Lowe, 2018, p. 97). The purpose of this research is to present a theological foundation to express that support of technological advances is not indicative of a lack of faith or necessarily a vote against God and his sovereignty.

Cyber Gnosticism and techno paganism (Maddix & Estep, 2010) are philosophies that suggest that technology is a preferred religion. Technology is not anti-God. Knowledge of God's sovereignty should encourage Bible-based institutions, who teach His truth while fulfilling the school's purpose while integrating technology and theology. The Bible explicitly claims, "There is no new thing under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 1:9, NKJV). To assume technology happens outside of God's will is to dismiss His sovereignty. Campbell and Garner (2016) view technology as "first and foremost, a human activity that is carried out within the context provided by God for human beings to exercise their creativity and agency" (p. 23). Technology is not anti-religious, but a way in which humankind can use what God has provided through intellect and will.

Assumptions and intentionality

There are assumptions associated with Bible-based institutions that are foreign to other institutions. Students who enroll in law or medical school do so with the intent of becoming an

attorney or physician. Those who attend Bible colleges and seminary, in particular, desire to fulfill ministry-related callings or personal growth in the knowledge of God and His Word. Others who choose Bible-based colleges are driven by a desire to become skilled and credentialed for professional careers from institutions that support their spiritual and faith-based goals (Maddix & Estep, 2010). Studies indicate that the former tends to be more of a motivating factor than the latter. With Bible-based colleges, seminaries, and universities increasing their viability by acquiring regional and national accreditations, they are no longer sought out only for ministry-related vocations. Kingkade (2015) revealed that 17.4% of students in religious colleges checked none regarding having any religious affiliation in a 2014 survey, which is more than double from a 2005 study. The numbers could vary one way or another, depending on the various schools' admissions processes. The results can also indicate the assumption by administrators of Bible-based institutions that the material itself produces spiritual growth. The passive approach toward this dilemma reduces the intentionality of employing programs to monitor spiritual growth. Stating the school's spiritual expectations in the motto and mission statements without instituting a plan to assess and apply spiritual formation is insufficient.

The growth of digital technology and online students' enrollment has increased Christian institutions' opportunity to reach those deemed as unreachable. Digital education has created an occasion for institutions to equip students for life and eternity. According to Mason (2017), in a 2012 report, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that technological skills are required for more than half of the current jobs. The figure was projected to increase to 77 % by the year 2020. Completing online courses allowed students to develop the necessary computer skills required for most jobs and equip them for ministry work in the local church, where technological knowledge is also needed. Maddix and Estep (2012) say, "Online courses in Christian higher

education provide Christian institutions an opportunity to create a networked learning community of adults that recognizes students as situated in specific familial and church contexts that instructors need to integrate into online learning experiences" (p. 27). In other words, online instructors are a vital part of the learning community, whose goal is to integrate knowledge and spirituality according to the student's current context.

Gap

According to Delucchi (1997), Faith-based colleges and universities are guided by missions that are informed and motivated by their faith convictions. These principles are emphasized to students through a regimen of theologically based courses. The biblical focus in most classes leads to an assumption that spiritual formation works concurrently with Bible knowledge acquisition. Therefore, spiritual formation becomes a by-product of the curriculum design's purposes rather than an intentional objective. A survey by Freeman (2014) articulates that 90% of the faculty and staff from a particular Bible college "saw Biblical worldview as a cognitive domain, while they believed that spiritual formation was a heart and hands issue" (p. 135). The absence of a standard institutional definition of Biblical worldview and spiritual formation among faculty and staff is indicative of the assumption regarding spiritual development for students in Bible-based institutions of higher learning. There is also little to no information regarding the expectation of student to student involvement in spiritual formation. When the campus culture reflects spiritual formation's seriousness, students will naturally participate when seeing other students involved.

This research also examines the gap between the acquisition of Bible knowledge and applying holistic Christian living. Maddix and Estep (2010) view spiritual formation as the benchmark for Christian education and regard it as a "Christian higher education community's

DNA" (p. 423). Their journal focuses on the intentionality and validity of online programs for spiritual formation. Lock (2002) builds an argument for virtual learning communities' necessity as facilitators for spiritual formation in higher education. Roels (2004) adds another dimension by addressing global discipleship through online education and the use of blackboard as a viable tool for worldwide Christian partnership. However, there is limited information on how to measure the process or application of these models.

Profile of the Current Study

The research assesses the integration of Christian spiritual formation through online courses in Bible-based institutions of higher learning. According to Throop (2011), "To be formed, spiritually means to engage in specific practices and disciplines with one clear goal: to draw nearer to God in Christ and so focus less and less on self" (para. 2). The disciplines and practices that foster Christian spiritual formation among students are the main goals of faith-based higher learning institutions. Although these institutions offer degrees in various fields of study, preparing the Christian ministry student is the primary focus. This phenomenological study explores how curriculum design, mentoring, technological advancements, and virtual learning communities have enhanced distance learning's ability to educate and disciple students.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Introduction

One of the intended outcomes of Bible-based colleges and seminaries is to provide spiritual development in an academic setting. The increased use of digital course delivery has created an opportunity to expand spiritual formation outside the college campus's grounds. This qualitative research used a phenomenological study to explore distance education's impact on spiritual formation at Bible-based colleges and seminaries. The researcher conducted video conferencing interviews with faculty and students to assess the institution's process of facilitating spiritual formation in online formats.

Research Design Synopsis

Research problem

This research examined the conventional thoughts regarding the integration of spiritual formation in Bible-based institutions. The paradigmatic shift in education (Harasim, 2000) has changed the landscape for higher learning inside and outside the classroom. There is a challenge for some institutions to remain relevant in theological education yet faithful in training men and women for ministry vocation. Spiritual formation is vital for success in accomplishing both academic and spiritual goals. Statistics are inadequate to explain the significance of the college experience, which many students attain through participation in a learning community.

Research purpose

This phenomenological study aims to examine the integration of spiritual formation through distance education among faculty and students at Bible-based institutions. At this stage of the research, distance learning is generally defined as a teaching method without an instructor's physical presence. Hybrid, blended courses, and virtual learning are also included in

this mode of delivery (Rozanski, 2018). The theological view of distance learning and its divine purpose in fulfilling the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20) through distance education is a critical component of the research.

Research questions

The research questions are designed to assess the integration of spiritual formation through online formats in Bible-based institutions of higher learning.

RQ1. What, if any, are the models used to provide spiritual accountability through distance learning?

RQ2. What, if any, are the methods used to measure students' ethical and moral maturity in Bible-based institutions?

RQ3. What, if any, are the fundamental changes necessary to provide an environment for spiritual maturity through online modalities?

RQ4. What, if any, are the integrative practices used to engage hybrid and online students through virtual learning environments to prepare them for holistic ministry?

Research Design and Methodology

Creswell and Creswell (2018) suggest that the qualitative research design method is an excellent approach to "understanding the meaning of individuals or groups to a social or human problem" (p. 25). Spiritual formation in bible-based institutions is viewed as a social movement for students because of its association with spiritual community activities. The open ended-questions generally associated with the qualitative methods were beneficial in assessing information from individuals directly involved in the phenomena. The research questions were formulated to address distance education issues and possible gaps between assumed and actual spiritual formation in Bible-based colleges, on-ground or online. Some quantitative data was

used in this qualitative research. The qualitative methodology is connected historically to anthropology, sociology, the humanities, medicine, and education (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010), which was the focus of this study. Scholars generally view qualitative research as that which addresses the social issues and their impact on the human community at large from information collected directly from the individual in the field (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The phenomenological research was used to understand perceptions and perspectives comparative to a particular situation (Leedy & Omrod, 2010). Phenomenological interviews are typically unstructured, resulting in the researcher to be more observer rather than an interrogator. Since spiritual formation is often assumed in Bible-based colleges, this approach helped the researcher “arrive at the heart of the matter” (Tesch, 1994, p. 147). Moustakas (1995) concurs with other scholars and adds that phenomenological research makes inquiries from philosophical and psychological perspectives based on the participants' actual experiences regarding the phenomenon in question. This research intends to personally interact and interview participants from a particular Bible-based college and seminary to assess any themes and patterns in their prospective spiritual formation processes. Roberts (2010) says attaining feedback from several individuals with similar experiences result in a better understanding of the essence of the phenomenon studied.

The researcher created a customized online survey, which was distributed in two variations to determine eligibility for the study. The questions in the survey were generated according to the role of the participant. Although similar questions were asked of each group, some were role-specific to the participant's current position, faculty, or a student, at the school. The following questionnaires were used.

- Faculty Staff Questionnaire (FSQ) – Full-time and adjunct online instructors who have facilitated at least 12 credit hours of online courses at Bible-based colleges and seminaries.
- Student Assessment questionnaire (SAQ) – Online full and part-time students who have completed at least 12 credit hours of online courses at Bible-based colleges and seminaries.

The second phase of questions was sent to those who met the conditions to participate in the research. The opened-ended questions were asked to assess the experience and perceptions of spiritual formation through online education courses.

Setting

The researcher conducted a qualitative study of faculty and students from the following institutions. Fort Bend Baptist University (FBU), Disciples Graduate Theological Seminary (DGTS), and Midtown Theological Seminary (MTS). Each institution is located in the Houston, TX area and has been in existence for over thirty years. Only one, FBU, is affiliated with a nationally known denomination. The institutions are fully accredited with the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on College (SACSCOC), the Association of Theological Schools (ATS), or both. All of the Bible-based institutions chosen have physical campuses within greater Houston and different states and national regions. The institutions were selected for this qualitative study because of their geographical location within the local area and their digital learning course offerings.

Houston, Texas, is the 4th largest city in the United States with an estimated population of 2.3 million, according to the US Census Bureau (2018). The institutions were also selected because of the various communities they represent. DGTS is near the downtown area and

business districts of the city. At the same time, FBU is in the Southwestern and more suburban areas of the city. SBC campus approximates the inner-city or urban neighborhoods. The different locations of the various institutions characterize the diversified cultures and socio-economic backgrounds of the student body. It also indicated the local churches represented. Houston is ranked as the 12th worst city to commute in the US, where 90.3% of the residents drive personal cars (Martucci, 2019). Scholars have determined that less travel is one of the many conveniences of taking online courses (Maddix & Estep, 2010). However, since the study's focus is distance learning, the location was used only for demographic purposes. The research assessed or compared the level of involvement in school-related activities, including spiritual formation among online students.

Participants

The study population consisted of full-time and adjunct faculty members and seminary or graduate students of contributing institutions. Faculty members comprised those who have facilitated at least 12 credit hours of distance education courses at a Bible-based college or seminary. Department heads and individuals who are directly involved in designing online courses and those who facilitate spiritual formation processes were also be included in the study for observation reasons (Maxwell, 2013). Only students who have completed 12 credit hours in hybrid or online courses were allowed to participate in the study. The research population was delimited to students from Bible-based colleges and seminary students of the participating institutions for the research.

Role of the Researcher

Creswell and Creswell (2018) talk about “reflexivity” (p. 183) as an essential aspect of the researcher’s role in qualitative research. Examining past experiences helps the inquirer to

identify the biases or values that may affect how information is disseminated in the study. The researcher's previous experience as an administrator, online instructor, and distance education learner provides a 360° view of the phenomenon. Observations of spiritual formation in higher education from both sides of the proverbial coin bring assurances and promote concerns. Many Bible-based institutions are impacting lives through spiritual formation initiatives, including discipleship and mentoring in face-to-face and online learning communities. White (2006) suggests "that spiritual formation can be facilitated through distance education learning opportunities by giving greater attention to the effective and relational components of instruction in the online learning environment" (p. 5). Intentionality is crucial for the success of spiritual formation through distance learning.

Leedy and Omrod (2010) suggest that "looking at multiple perspectives on the same situation" (p. 254) in phenomenological study broadens the view of the researcher, especially if he or she is familiar with the phenomena. The researcher then becomes an objective observer of what and how a person responds. The goal is not to approach the research as a subject matter expert with a predetermined idea of the results. Leedy and Omrod (2010) refer to this as bracketing, which is "suspending preconceived notions from past experiences" (p. 255). Avoiding questions similar to the researcher's experience increased the opportunities for new-found knowledge of the phenomena.

Ethical Considerations

Anticipating ethical issues that tend to arise during the study is part of the writing process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Patton (2002) suggests that qualitative "analysts have an obligation to monitor and report their own analytical procedures and processes as fully and truthfully as possible" (p. 434). Before the study, the researcher identified the gatekeepers and other

authorized personnel to obtain permission to interview participants for this phenomenological study. A contractual agreement was drawn up, listing the researcher and institution's detailed agreement regarding the study's goals, processes, and length. The contract included details of the procedures if any of the information obtained is published. Also, a consent form was required from all participants that contain information acknowledging the protection of human rights. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), the form included:

- Identification of the researcher
- Identification of the sponsoring institution
- Identification of the purpose of the study
- Identification of the benefits for participants
- Identification of the level and type of participant involvement
- Notation of risks to the participant
- Guarantee of confidentiality to the participant
- Assurance that the participant can withdraw at any time
- Provision of names of persons to contact if questions arise (p. 163)

There are no vested relationships between the chosen institutions or participants in the research that will benefit the researcher or the study outcome. The researcher used a systematic sample of randomly selecting individuals for interviewing to give all qualified participants an equal opportunity for selection. Creswell and Creswell (2018) say:

> In this approach, you choose a random start on a list and select every X numbered person on the list. The X number is based on a fraction determined by the number of people on the list and the number that are to be selected on the list (e.g., 1 out of every 80th person). (p. 257).

Names of faculty, staff, or students were not identified by the research to ensure that no information was detrimental to the institutions' reputation. All schools were recognized in pseudonyms, which met IRB approval. The study results were provided to all gatekeepers, participants, stakeholders (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), and Liberty University's IRB committee. According to APA standards, all study analyses will be stored for five years (APA, 2010). Recognition was credited to the researcher, participants, and advisors to the project.

Data Collection Methods and Instruments

In this qualitative research, a phenomenological study was used to assess the differences in how faculty and students view their experiences regarding spiritual formation in Bible-based higher learning institutions. Creswell and Creswell (2018) suggest that the qualitative research design method is a favorable approach to "understanding the meaning of individuals or groups to a social or human problem" (p. 25). Attaining perceptions from individuals within their current experiences with a particular phenomenon is profitable for present and future enhancements. Because spiritual formation is a religious matter that impacts the societal hubs (Anderson et al., 2014) in higher education, the interviewer utilized open-ended questions in all virtual interviews.

Maxwell (2013) expresses that an inductive, open-ended interview strategy in qualitative research generates understandable and trustworthy results for the participants and future study of the phenomenon. The perspective of spiritual formation is subjective to the individual's experience. Open-ended questions provide opportunities for participants to communicate their experiences without feeling influenced in a particular direction because the interview is often viewed as a general conversation (Saura & Balsas, 2013). The approach allowed the researcher to observe the phenomena holistically from those personally involved (Roberts, 2010).

Collection methods

According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), the purpose of data collection in a qualitative study is to select sites that are purposeful for understanding the problem and questions posed by the research. The process was intentional and began by getting permission for the study, identifying participants, conducting virtual interviews, acquired information, and analyzed the results. The initial results were used "to plan (or build on to) the second, qualitative phase" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 278) or follow-up dialogues that were needed with individual participants.

Permission

The researcher emailed letters to the Academic Dean, Dean of Students, and other "gatekeepers" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 164) of the anticipated Bible colleges, seminaries, and universities, that were approved by Liberty University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB's purpose is to protect participants in the research study regarding ethical and confidentially issues (Roberts, 2010). The letter requested permission information for administrators, faculty, and students to participate in the research and their contact information. When and if approved, emails were sent to faculty and students, inviting them to participate in the study. The correspondence also included IRB approval letters from both the participants and the researcher's respective institutions. It also comprised the study's proposed length, purpose, and the benefit to the participating institution (Leedy & Omrod, 2010). The Academic Dean, Dean of Students, and the institutions' gatekeepers were asked to acknowledge receipt of all approval correspondences before the research was conducted.

Sampling

All participants were chosen from Bible-based institutions of higher learning that are

accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on College (SACSCOC), the Association of Theological Schools (ATS), or both. This qualitative study aimed to assess how spiritual formation is integrated into the institution's life and gauge the spiritual culture, if possible, by interviewing individuals directly involved.

A different set of criteria was utilized for each level of the individual's relativeness to the institution. The sampling comprised of the following;

- Students who have completed at least 12 hours of online courses.
- Full-time and adjunct faculty members who have facilitated at least nine credit hours of online courses within the last ten years at a Bible-based institution of higher learning.

Each school's administration/registration department was asked to identify participants who met the criterion and provide preferred communication information. Once identified, qualified participants were emailed a description of the research, IRB acknowledgments, confidentiality agreement, and consent forms. The average range for participants in a phenomenological study is three to ten (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Because the research involves different roles by the participants, the intent was to recruit ten faculty and twenty students, presenting balance and consistency in the study findings. After the systematic random selection of individuals for interviewing, the researcher condensed the list to 10, anticipating possible withdrawals from the study, which is the participant's right (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Leedy & Omrod, 2010).

Instruments and protocols

Researcher. In a qualitative study, the researcher is the primary instrument. He or she is responsible for making the decisions that inform the study (Leedy & Omrod, 2010). Once a

sampling for research has been approved and identified, the researcher will determine the most qualified individuals for accomplishing the research purpose. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), three to ten are the allowable number of phenomenological research participants. This researcher's goal was to utilize data from 10-20 participants, if possible, a representative sampling from each site for contingency purposes and avoid biases. A twenty-five dollar gift card was given to those who committed to and completed the study, regardless of whether their information was used in the final report (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researcher facilitated all interviews, collected and transcribed data from participants, and preliminary observations of the setting. Anonymity and confidentiality were secured by utilizing coding schemes (Leedy & Omrod, 2010) that will not identify personal information about the participants or the institutions contributing to the research.

Interviews. The researcher employed the triangulation strategy (Leedy & Omrod, 2010), using several forms of the same question during interviews to determine consistencies, gaps, or trends in the data. The goal was to provide inquiries based on the individual's familiarity and experience with the phenomenon. The different roles of the participants was also a factor in the dissemination or how questions were postured. The inquiries for students were different from those directed to faculty. All questionnaires were provided to gatekeepers and IRB committees during the IRB approval process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The interviews were open-ended with structured and follow-up questions for clarity and details. Leedy and Omrod (2010) recommend that interview questions be limited to five to seven questions. All interviews were done through video-conferencing lasting about 45-60 minutes each. The interviews included a one to two-minute demographic survey. Supplemental interactions were done via email, phone, skype, or other digital delivery as needed.

Maxwell (2013) says, “data in a qualitative study can include virtually anything that you see, hear, or that is otherwise communicated to you while conducting the study” (p. 87). At the conclusion of all initial interviews, a survey was sent via email to each participant to rate their experience from the consultation. The evaluation enabled the researcher to observe any themes and patterns (Roberts, 2010) from the spiritual formation processes' answers. The researcher intended to visit the campus before interviews to interpret information as an insider and observer. The goal was to “gain insights about the group and its behaviors that could not be obtained in any other way” (Leedy & Omrod, 2010, p. 255).

Procedures. The researcher used two different sets of interview questions based on the category of the participants. The Faculty Staff Questions (FSQ) was given to the full-time and adjunct faculty members. The inquiries for students were used from the Student Assessment Questions (SAQ). One week before scheduled meetings, the participants were sent notification reminders of digital interviews' time and date. Follow-up reminders were sent 24 hours before the interviews. The notice included the researcher’s proposed itinerary for rescheduling purposes if needed. No interviews or meetings were scheduled during the first two or last week of the school semester.

Data Analysis

Analysis methods

The researcher took notes from all interviews and other visible observations, labeled material for easy visibility before filing them in the appropriate categories (Maxwell, 2013). The data were examined with notes highlighting the contrast, comparisons, developments, and trends commonly shared by interviewees. Creswell and Creswell (2018) recommend scrutinizing material to determine trends and patterns from interviewees. Differences and similarities were

identified to provide the researcher with a more in-depth look at the information provided. The researcher then analyzed material to assess spiritual formation's overall perception of all participants and online learning communities' impact.

"Bracketing chunks" is a term used by Creswell and Creswell (2018, p. 193), which was coined by Rossan and Rallis (2012) as a way to describe categorizing information in margins. After analyzing data from interviews, findings were classified in bracketing chunks according to the following themes:

- **Campus memberships (clubs, student council, volunteer).** Campus involvement is a vital part of academic matriculation for college students. Scholars propose that when students' perception of college or campus activities is positive, it is reflective in their academic pursuits (Sirgy et al. 2006).
- **Christian experience.** There is a common assumption that most students in Bible-based colleges have Christian backgrounds and desire to pursue a ministry-related vocation or personal training.
- **Class modality (hybrid, on-ground, online)** Students may view the institution's spiritual formation programs differently depending on the primary modality of the courses they take.
- **Demographical makeup**. The background of the student may influence their view about education, learning, and religion.
- **Learning community involvement.** Students' participation or involvement in learning communities impacts their overall view of the institution, which may influence their answers.
- **Ministry involvement or role (**Chaplain, minister, church leader, Sunday school teacher, youth ministry)
- **Participation in institutions spiritual formation programs (**None, some, very**)**

- **Engagement in learning communities (**None, some, very**)**
- **Role of the participant (**Faculty, student**)**

Because the researcher's role in a qualitative method is data collection, the study utilized a “winnowing the data” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 192) strategy. It employed thematic analysis for examining data. Interviews required patience in receiving information and discernment to filter out unnecessary data, which is the winnowing data strategy's purpose.

Data analysis processes typically required in using the method

Step 1

Analyzing qualitative research data begins with transcribing notes from interviews and other observations from the field: organizing and labeling material for easy visibility.

Step 2

The next step requires examining the information making notations where needed, and categorizing findings. Creswell and Creswell (2018) recommend scrutinizing material to determine trends and patterns from interviewees. Contrasts and comparisons are identified to provide the researcher with a more in-depth look at the information provided. This researcher will assess information at this phase of the process and examine the participants' overall spiritual formation perception.

Step 3

The next step in the process is coding information in bracket chunks and assign them to specific categories or themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Step 4

The bracket chunks were separated and categorized by themes. The following categories were used in the research on spiritual formation in distance education:

- Christian experience
- Demographics
- Involvement in virtual learning communities
- Participation in institutions spiritual formation programs (None, some, very)
- Role of the participant (Faculty, student)

Step 5

A detailed discussion of the various themes was summarized. Qualitative tables and graphs can be used depending on the design.

Step 6

Codes and themes are assigned to three distinct groups: “expected codes/ themes, surprising codes/ themes, and unusual codes/ themes” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 197).

Step 7

A flow chart or map of codes and themes is created to identify findings. Creswell et al. suggest presenting information from general to specific.

Step 8

The researcher utilized “winnowing the data” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p.192) strategy and content analysis to evaluate data. The researcher used the thematic analysis method to analyze, code, and record data for this research. Thematic analysis is considered one of the most common methods for analyzing qualitative data, primarily when the findings are based on interviewees' responses (White & Marsh, 2006). Once coding was completed, all information was reviewed for duplicity (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). A summary of the data analysis was recorded and filed on the researcher's personal computer.

Trustworthiness

Ary & Razavieh (2006) offer these insights on qualitative research in the field of education regarding trustworthiness. The researcher should "demonstrate that the methods used are reproducible and consistent, that the approach and procedures used were appropriate for the context and can be documented, and that external evidence can be used to test conclusions" (p. 509). The researcher utilized the triangulation method for inquiries, member checks, and interrater reliability. The purpose of "Interrater reliability" is to "check on the consistency between raters or between a rater and an expert" (Roberts, 2010, p. 170). This step was pertinent to the phenomenological study because the researcher used open-ended questions during the interviews. The researcher asked experts in distance education and spiritual formation in higher education to analyze information from the interviewer's findings to minimize bias interpretation of the data. All observers used the same conceptual framework in analyzing data (Roberts, 2010)

Credibility. The researcher applied measures to protect the confidentiality of the individuals and institutions used in the research. All correspondence to faculty and students was submitted for approval before recruiting letters and interview questions.

Dependability and confirmability. The interview questions were developed by the researcher with the intent to advance the study based on the framework and purpose of the research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Questions were reviewed by the researcher's dissertation supervisor, IRB committee, and other online instructors.

Transferability. The results of this research will enable Bible-based institutions to strategize on how to implement biblically based models of spiritual formation through distance education from both the student and teacher perspective.

Chapter Summary

This phenomenological study aimed to explore online spiritual formation perceptions in Bible-based institutions from individuals directly involved with the phenomena. Higher education institutions have been successful at bridging technology and the college experience for students in online formats. Jones (2005) addresses the multiple aspects of spirituality and the apprehension surrounding how the topic is discussed among educators in Bible-based institutions. This qualitative research used a phenomenological study method to examine the integration of Christian spiritual formation in higher education. The participants are faculty and students from Bible-based institutions that offer online graduate-level courses. Virtual interviews and web conferences were conducted to evaluate the overall spiritual awareness and identify strategic spiritual formation approaches in online formats. Ethical protocols were defined and followed to ensure the confidentiality of all participants and institutions in the study. This phenomenological method was used to assess the social and spiritual philosophies of spiritual formation in higher education through interactions and observation made during virtual interviews with participants.

CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

Overview

This phenomenological study aimed to examine the integration of spiritual formation among faculty and students in distance education programs at Bible-based institutions. For the purpose of this research study, the focus was limited to the integration of Christian spiritual formation with the extent to which spirituality was practiced as a result of acquired knowledge through online learning. The following four research questions guided the study:

RQ1. What, if any, are the models used to provide spiritual accountability through distance learning?

RQ2. What, if any, are the methods used to measure students' ethical and moral maturity in Bible-based institutions?

RQ3. What, if any, are the fundamental changes necessary to provide an environment for spiritual maturity through online modalities?

RQ4. What, if any, are the integrative practices used to engage hybrid and online students through virtual learning environments to prepare them for holistic ministry?

The results of the thematic analysis are presented in this chapter. First, the interview protocol is discussed, followed by a review of data collection procedures. Demographic information is provided in the form of a brief description of each participant. Data analysis procedures are discussed, and findings are thematically presented in accordance with each research question. The section closes with an evaluation of the research design.

Compilation Protocol and Measures

The instruments used in this study were interview protocols. The protocols used for students and faculty were slightly different, so two separate protocols were created. Each

interview protocol consisted of eight questions and four follow-up questions. The questions were designed to gather data on different strategies employed to foster accountability, ethical and moral maturity, spiritual maturity, and engagement in online Bible-based courses.

Data was collected via semi-structured interviews with seven students and four professors. Following transcription, thematic analysis began. Data were examined by highlighting similar ideas, phrases, and sentiments in the transcripts. Each transcript was read several times to gain familiarity before the coding process. Transcripts were then coded. This coding process involved moving through each transcript, slowly and intentionally, to identify similar and repetitive ideas in the transcripts. Codes were named and assigned as identified throughout each transcript. Three observations were made through each transcript to ensure all defined codes were appropriately allocated.

As illustrated in Table 1, a total of 45 initial codes were identified. After coding was complete, the final list of codes was reviewed for similarities and alignment with the research questions. Three codes (secular, missional, and role of the church) did not align well with any of the research questions and were discarded.

Table 1

Initial Codes

communication barriers	discussion board
technical challenges	writing assignments
embrace technology/online delivery	applying knowledge to develop spiritually
staying abreast of new technology	applying knowledge to real-world situations
learn new technology	connecting students with each other
leadership	connecting teachers with students
accountability	tools for online collaboration
community	reflection
face-to-face	intention
group projects	lack of interaction online
secular	creative
provide detailed instructions	role of the church
employing strategies from thought leaders	professors reach out to students
discussion between students	autonomy
online creates disconnectedness	discipline
communicative technologies	plagiarism/cheating
spiritual formation requires interaction	missional
virtual meetings/discussions	online communication is more open
student-teacher relationship	chapel
school-based activities	benefits of technology
devotions	online classes are flexible
in-person interaction	lack of engagement
	distractions

Next, the researcher examined for similarities between codes. Guided by the research questions, the codes were organized into ten themes. Nine of the themes aligned directly with the four research questions. Though not directly aligned, the tenth theme highlighted the benefits of online learning and was relevant to the study. The two themes aligned with research question 1 were *connection creates accountability* and *teachers follow up with students.* Two themes aligned with the second research question, including *provide students with opportunities for autonomy* and *challenge students to apply knowledge.* The two themes aligned with research question 3 were *embrace technology* and *endeavor to overcome online learning challenges.* Three themes aligned with the fourth research question, including *online tools and assignments,*

collaboration and interaction among students and teachers, and *traditional strategies.* The final theme, which was not paired with any of the research questions, was the *benefits of online learning.* Table 2 illustrates the alignment between the themes and research questions, as well as the codes that supported each item.

Table 2

Research Questions, Themes, and Codes

Research Question	Theme	Codes
RQ1. What, if any, are the models used to provide spiritual accountability through distance learning?	Connection creates accountability	*Connecting students with each other *Accountability *Spiritual formation requires interaction *community
	Teachers follow up with students	*Professors reach out to students *Connecting teachers with students
RQ2. What, if any, are the methods used to measure students' ethical and moral maturity in Bible-based institutions?	Provide students with opportunities for autonomy	*Autonomy *Discipline *Plagiarism/cheating
	Challenge students to apply knowledge	*Devotions *Applying knowledge to develop spiritually *Applying knowledge to real-world situations *Reflection
RQ3. What, if any, are the fundamental changes necessary to provide an environment for spiritual maturity through online modalities?	Embrace technology	*Embrace technology/online delivery *Staying abreast of new technology *Learn new technology
	Endeavor to overcome the challenges of online learning	*Communication barriers *Technical challenges *Distractions *Lack of engagement *Lack of interaction online *Online creates disconnectedness *In-person interaction *Face to face

RQ4. What, if any, are the integrative practices used to engage hybrid and online students through virtual learning environments to prepare them for holistic ministry?	Online tools and assignments	*Tools for online collaboration *Discussion board *Communicative technologies *Virtual meetings/discussions
	Collaboration and interaction among students and teachers	*Discussion between students *Group projects *Student-teacher relationship
	Traditional strategies	*Provide detailed instructions *Employing strategies from thought leaders *Writing assignments *Chapel *School-based activities
Additional theme	Benefits of online learning	*Benefits of technology *Online classes are flexible *Online communication is more open

Finally, a thematic map was created to visually depict the relationships between the themes and research questions (see Figure 1). Each of the themes is discussed as follows, organized by the research question. Examples and quotes from the participant interviews are used to illustrate each of the themes.

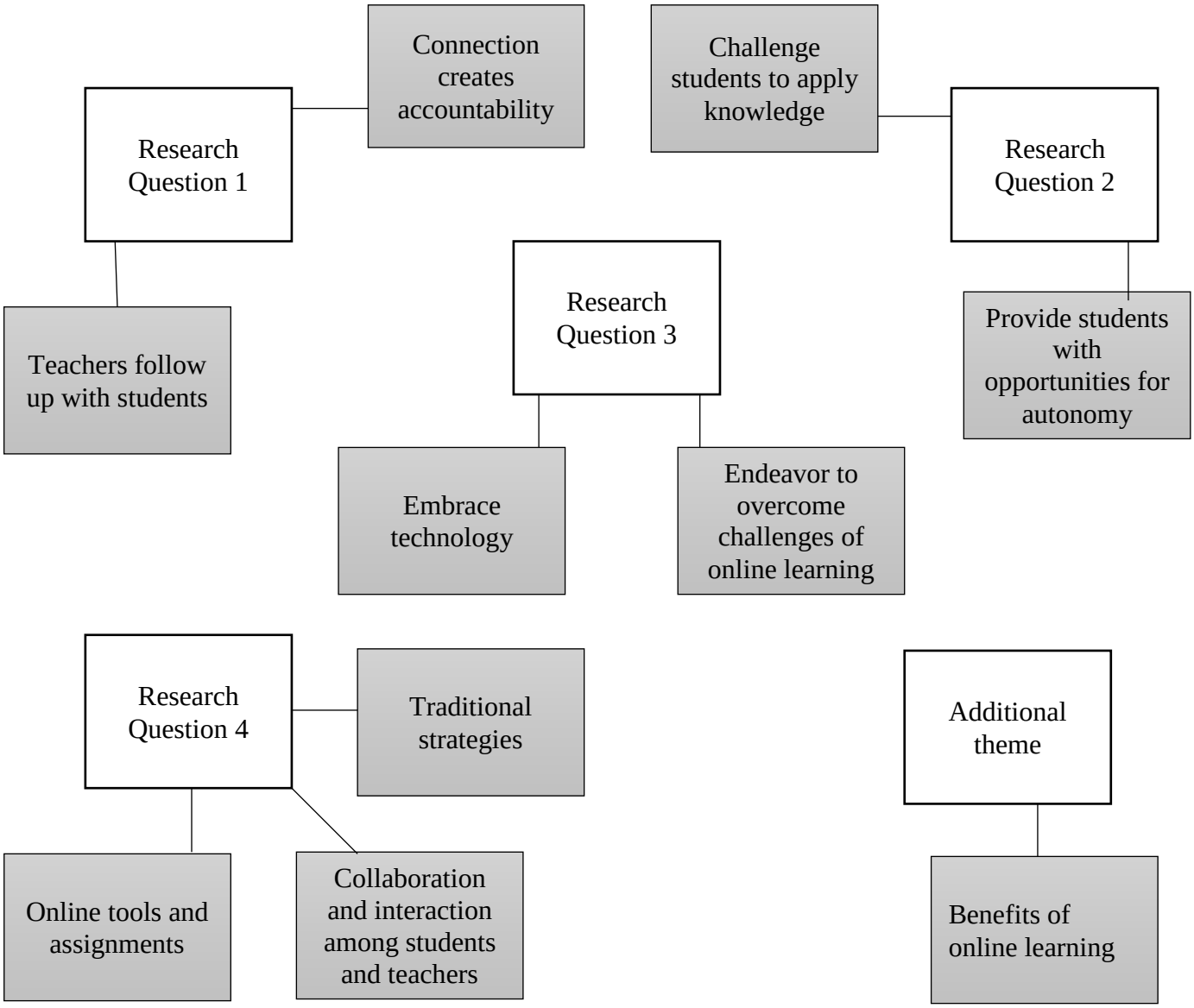

Figure 1. Thematic Map

Demographic and Sample Data

The sample consisted of 11 participants; seven were students, and four were professors. All participants either taught or studied at a Bible-based institution that offered online education. In terms of gender, the sample consisted of five females and six males. Seven participants were between the ages of 30 and 49, and four participants were between the ages of 50 and 64. All faculty participants had at least ten years of teaching experience. The participants' racial breakdown was as follows: six African Americans, four Caucasians, and one Latin American.

Data Analysis and Findings

Research Question 1

The first research question asked: "What, if any, are the models used to provide spiritual accountability through distance learning?" The two themes aligned with research question 1 were *connection creates accountability* and *teachers follow up with students.* Each of these themes was discussed as follows.

Connection creates accountability. The first theme to emerge for research question 1 was *connection creates accountability*. This theme described spiritual accountability, in the context of distance learning, as something that required connection and interaction with others. Distance learning is unique from traditional settings in that it requires students to take much more responsibility for their own learning and development. The theme of accountability was prevalent throughout the interviews, expressed by both students and faculty. For example, when asked about courses that fostered spiritual formation, Student 4 explained that understanding scripture, connecting with others, and being accountable all went hand-in-hand. Professor 2 described the importance of connection and relationships for fostering accountability and spiritual growth in online settings: "You seeing students asking questions, challenging, pushing

back, raising alternatives, because all of that can also be very good ways in which brothers or sisters can hold each other to account."

Without the constant oversight of professors, students need other ways to exercise accountability for their spiritual development. Connection, despite the distance involved with online learning, was a strategy to foster accountability among participants in this study. Accordingly, professors emphasized the importance of connectivity and the strategies they used to bring students together. For example, Professor 1 said they were always seeking new ways to connect students: "I'm always looking for whatever you want to call it, the latest and greatest way that not only I can connect with students spiritually online, but also how students can connect with one another in various ways." Professor 3 described the importance of accountability for "some of the more traditional disciplines of prayer and fasting and scripture memory," adding, "Without that intensity, sense of accountability, those things don't go on." Student 4 also alluded to the importance of interaction and connection for creating spiritual growth, explaining: "I think that spiritual formation is done in community." Later, Student 4 added, "I don't think that spiritual formation happens without the other." This sentiment was echoed by Professor 1, who explained that the "developing community" was akin to spiritual formation.

Professor 2 described creating groups to help students connect with one another on more personal levels, which could help them build relationships and foster accountability among one another. Professor 2 had students pair up with "accountability partners" to foster spiritual development, explaining, "It's always good to have a good partner to be able to touch base with and say, 'Here are certain things that I see.' Someone that you can go to when you're struggling spiritually. If you're struggling academically." Professor 1 also created small groups within

online courses to foster spiritual accountability. They gave an example of partnering up and allowing others to check one's web browser history to hold one another accountable for the sites they visited:

> You're going to give someone permission to do this. And so, you would give them permission to be able to look at all the websites that you visited, whatever, for the last week or the last month. And that's another way of doing it online. Of holding someone accountable and developing more of a spiritual formation between people.

Professor 3 also emphasized the importance of connecting students in more intimate ways to help them develop friendships, which could ultimately lead to fellowship and accountability. Professor 3 acknowledged that students were often busy and placed relationship-building on the back-burner. In response, Professor 3 assigned students to small groups, giving them opportunities to engage and make friends:

> No matter how important they think spiritual formation is, the spiritual life is, and even just more basic friendships are, they won't make time for it unless you assign it and require it. And yet, when you do assign it and require it, they think it's the best thing that's come down the line.

Student 1 echoed this idea, explaining that students looked forward to opportunities to come together and connect with one another.

Teachers follow up with students. The second theme to emerge for research question 1 was *teachers follow up with students.* This theme emphasized teachers' roles in holding students accountable for their learning and spiritual development. Without regular, in-person contact, professors had to be intentional about reaching out to students, checking in on them, and fostering accountability for student success. Not only did this follow-up foster accountability

and connectedness, but it was also an essential component of discipleship; as Professor 2 explained:

> That's a form of discipleship right there. Whether it's emailing the students, posting an announcement saying, 'I'm thinking of you, praying for you.' Whether it's picking up the phone and calling, there are those things that just help foster a sense of greater connectedness.

Professor 4 also described the importance of connecting students, not only with each other but with professors:

> And then I think that the contact, just outside of the scheduled group sessions, through email and text and just everything, is vital between instructor and students…they really seem to need to know that I'm there with them and that I am interested in what they're going through. So that has become just vitally important. I work pretty hard at keeping those connections. If someone is behind, or I don't see their post, something's happening, and I won't wait. I'll just say, "What's going on? Is there something that I need to know about?" And hopefully trying to share my care, that I want them to be successful, and I care that they're missing.

In addition to connecting with students individually, professors endeavored to connect strongly with students in the online class settings. For example, Professor 2 used discussion forums as opportunities to engage with students individually and as a class, asking them questions and challenging them in ways to foster their spiritual growth. Professor 4 believed that online settings were advantageous over traditional settings, as they allowed professors more opportunities to connect with students in various ways:

> When it's in the classroom, I might answer some questions by email, but we'll see each other every week or whatever that is. But with online, I am there. I am writing, and we call, and we text, and we're just, it's an amazing sense of community that we have.

Research Question 2

The second research question asked: "What, if any, are the methods used to measure the ethical and moral maturity of students in Bible-based institutions?" Two themes aligned with the second research question, including *provide students with opportunities for autonomy* and *challenge students to apply knowledge.* Each of these themes was discussed as follows.

Provide students with opportunities for autonomy. The first theme to emerge for research question 2 was *provide students with opportunities for autonomy.* This theme described the independence of online learning environments, the self-discipline required, and the ways students had to make ethical decisions to avoid temptations to plagiarize or cheat. An essential aspect of developing spiritual and moral maturity is providing students with opportunities to exercise the ethical or moral principles they have learned. Students described the autonomy inherent in online education. As Student 1 explained of online learning, "A lot of it is self-guided and self-motivated." Professor 2 shared that students had to "set up their own Skype calls, FaceTime calls, phone calls, to work together in an online environment." Professor 3 described the importance of students "taking ownership" for their own spiritual formation. An autonomous environment also allowed professors the opportunity to observe when students demonstrated excellence, striving to learn more than what was required by a class. Student 2 described feeling empowered to seek out additional information when struck with curiosity about something learned in class:

> I've read a book before the professor even assigned it, so I was ahead of the ball game because I'm already reading other things. That's what distance learning, I think, really enhanced with me was, not just doing the syllabus, but doing more than.

Later, Student 2 added, "You don't always have access to a professor to guide you, but you do have the self-discipline to go and research." Seven times during their interview, Student 2 described the importance of being self-disciplined to excel in online education. Student 6 described a significant difference between online and traditional settings, explaining that they had to wrestle with concepts in an online class without professors' constant guidance.

One student and one professor specifically mentioned resisting the temptation to plagiarize or cheat in online settings. Without strong oversight, it is often easy for online students to cut corners or cheat. It is up to their own developed ethical and moral maturity to resist such urges. Student 4 described the importance of maintaining personal integrity when her professor was not "at home sitting with me when I did my final." Student 4 admitted that "if somebody wanted to cheat, they could have opened up other windows." Professor 2 described a time when they caught a student plagiarizing:

> I remember with one student, one of the assignments that we had working just as internalist to give your own personal reflections. And then I opened up that student's journal. And as a prof, you can tell what a student has submitted to you before versus something that reads all together differently for this particular journal. And then I was just able, and it didn't even take me long to go through and find the place where this student had basically lifted the material word for word. So I had to get on that student, not just in terms of the grade, but also in terms of the ethics of what she's doing.

Professor 2 used this opportunity as a teachable moment to help the student "own it, confess it, repent of it," so she could move forward with the course.

Challenge students to apply knowledge. The second theme to emerge for research question 2 was to *challenge students to apply knowledge.* This theme described the ways teachers examined students' ethical and moral maturity by challenging them to apply the things they learned to real-world situations or to enhance their own spiritual growth. Professors and students both described the use of devotionals as ways to help students reflect on what they had learned and apply that knowledge to their own spiritual development. Professor 1 detailed the way they integrated devotionals as tools to help students apply knowledge through journaling: "And so in that journal, one of the questions that I'll ask is, what did you learn from the devotional that ties into this particular topic this week?"

Similarly, Professor 2 used devotionals to help students "understand and digest the content of the information that we're giving, and that you're able to replicate it, that you're able to absorb the nutrients and give it back out." Interestingly, only one of the students mentioned devotionals, and it was in the context of lack. Student 5 described devotionals as an area for improvement, explaining that the integration of devotionals could help students develop and grow spiritually throughout their education.

Participants described other ways students were challenged to apply the moral and ethical principles they learned in practice. For example, Student 3 told how participating in a class that improved her spiritual life by helping her reflect on her actions as a counselor: "The class caused my mind to look back at my own life and what I been through and how I reacted to different situations. Did I act like a Christian then, and how would I act now?" Student 4 described debating the topic of euthanasia and examining controversial issues through a Christian lens.

Professor 3 detailed school-wide case studies of different problems students across the institution would discuss from a Christian perspective. Professor 4 described an exercise in which they had students write definitions for things like spiritual disciplines, Godly virtues, or devotional thoughts, and then explain how they envisioned those things being lived out in their lives.

Student 1 described a class in which students learned "about the different spiritual disciplines, what they are, practicing them, learning about lesser-known spiritual disciplines and incorporating, practicing into your life, into your spiritual formation." In this class, Student 1 explained that students were challenged to better understand the Bible and apply its principles to their lives. Student 4 described a course in which the professor challenged them to unravel scripture and apply a Christian perspective to real-world scenarios. Student 4 emphasized the importance of being able to apply spiritual principles to their lives, sharing that it would be "one of the saddest things…to come through this experience and be just as secular and carnal." Professor 2 echoed this sentiment:

> I tell my students if you can recite the scripture beautifully, and if your mind is as sharp as a razor, but if you leave my class or if you walk out of this institution with little to no affection for the Lord, and if you leave and you're not worshiping, so much of this has been for naught.

All four professors described ways they challenged students to apply learned principles to their lives. Professor 2 believed it was important for students to understand that their education was just not about knowledge and cognition but also about applying that knowledge to become more spiritual and effective in their ministries. Professor 3 went into great detail about the importance of connecting the head with the heart, taking learned (head) principles and demonstrating those principles in their lives and hearts. One strategy that Professor 3 used to

foster this connection was assigning activities that required reflection. For example, after writing exercises, Professor 3 would have students conclude their essays with their thoughts on applying principles to their lives and worship. Similarly, in writing assignments, Professor 4 would have students reflect on how they would "live out" spiritual principles they learned.

Research Question 3

The third research question asked: "What, if any, are the fundamental changes necessary to provide an environment for spiritual maturity through online modalities?" The two themes in alignment with research question 3 were *embrace technology* and *endeavor to overcome the challenges of online learning.*

Embrace technology. The first theme to emerge for the third research question was to *embrace technology*. This theme highlighted the importance of learning and embracing new technology in online learning settings and viewed the failure to do so as an impediment to fostering students' spiritual maturity in online environments. Student 2 and Student 4 emphasized the importance of embracing technology and advancements for students as well as instructors. When asked about areas for improvement in online modalities, Student 2 felt that traditionalists sometimes shunned the changes ushered in by technology:

> You see that traditional line of the older people, "Oh, we don't want that." The new people, "Yeah, we do." I think the message I would say is for the church as a whole is, embrace. We're Holy in that we're set apart, but we're not set away from. We're called to embrace the technology and the society that it comes from, rather than trying to shun it.

Later, Student 2 added, "I hope that when I'm 60 some odd years old, somebody says, 'Well, here's a new technology.' I go, 'Great. Let's see what it does.' Rather than, 'Well, that's not the way we did it 20 years ago.'"

Student 4 gave an example that emphasized the differences in effectiveness between online professors who embraced technology and those who resisted it. They described a professor who was really familiar with the online platform as "comfortable with the technology. He was able to come on and really facilitate. I feel like a robust discussion because he understood how to use it." In contrast, Student 4 described another professor who was not as technologically savvy. Student 4 explained, "The professor is not as comfortable with the technology. While the questions are good, he doesn't come onto the screen even. It doesn't feel like community at all." In other words, Student 4's savvy professor was able to use technology in a way that fostered a sense of community and meaningful discussion. Compared with this savvy professor, Student 4's other instructor was less effective.

> Professor 1 acknowledged the communication barriers inherent to online learning, explaining that some of those barriers could be overcome by embracing new technologies: There are so many different ways of overcoming communication barriers. The key is, like I said, you got to understand how to do it, and you have to embrace it. You have to be willing to embrace it, to learn a new way of teaching in order to promote spiritual formation.

Student 4 emphasized the importance of students staying abreast of new technology: "So making sure that we stay up to date on the things that are available to us, the interviews such as this, the online class format, the being able to look at different webinars, seminars, and different things." Student 4 later mentioned the "technology divide," explaining, "It's one thing to be able to use your email or send a text. It's another thing to be able to get onto Zoom or get onto the WebEx piece."

Endeavor to overcome the challenges of online learning. The second theme to emerge for research question 3 was an *endeavor to overcome the challenges of online learning.* This theme highlighted the challenges of online learning and viewed them as impediments to learning and spiritual maturity in online, Bible-based schools. The typical difficulties discussed included communication barriers, distractions, lack of interaction and engagement, and disconnectedness. The inability to read facial expressions and body language when using some online tools, such as discussion forums and chats, has the potential to create communication barriers in online classrooms. As Student 3 shared, "In the classroom, you can read somebody's body language, you can look into their eyes, you can, you know, you can reach out and touch that person, but you can't really do that online." Professor 1 also mentioned the inability to read body language in online classes: "You miss a lot of body language." Five participants noted the lack of face-to-face interaction in online courses. Professor 2 described challenges with online learning associated with not having "the luxury of being able to touch the person." Student 2 said, "Physical touch is incredibly important," and Student 5 mentioned that online settings lack "the physical presence of others." Professor 4 described the challenge of online learning as the lack of in-person interaction, sharing, "It would be good to be physically present together."

The lack of in-person contact can contribute to less interaction in online classrooms. Student 3 referred to the lack of intimacy and fellowship with other believers, which they felt was inherent to online learning. Student 6 felt that students could not dive as deeply into content in online classes as in traditional courses. Student 6 felt obliged to keep questions brief because there were so many students in classes, which prohibited a richer learning experience. For Student 6, a drawback to online education was the lack of interaction:

> One thing that I do miss being online is the interaction, talking to my classmates, going through homework face-to-face, due to the fact that we have to do it online. So, for me, that's the biggest drawback because I'm a people person.

This concept was also shared by Student 3, who said online learning made them "miss that human condition." Student 2 said that virtual learning was "not the same as being in person." A challenge with online learning mentioned by Student 4 was "recreating that classroom, face-to-face feel." The idea of technology creating a disconnect between people was also mentioned. Professor 1 shared that people often "Feel disconnected online," and Professor 3 described today's "disconnected world."

Lack of interaction from little in-person contact can ultimately lead to a lack of engagement, which may also be caused by distractions. When describing online church services, Professor 3 admitted:

> Our church has been meeting online, that I'm just not as engaged in the service when I'm watching it on TV as when I am there in person. All of these other distractions. And I think it's the same distractions that are evident in an online spiritual formation aspect.

Student 3 also discussed the challenge of distractions, especially for younger generations. Student 3 felt that Millennials and members of younger generations lacked the attention span to sit and study for long periods of time and were more easily distracted. In order to keep these individuals engaged, multimedia strategies were necessary, such as "bright colors and videos and stuff like that."

Research Question 4

The fourth research question asked: "What, if any, are the integrative practices used to engage hybrid and online students through virtual learning environments to prepare them for

holistic ministry?" Three themes aligned with the fourth research question, including *online tools and assignments, collaboration and interaction among students and teachers,* and *traditional strategies.*

Online tools and assignments. The first theme to emerge for research question 4 was *online tools and assignments.* This theme described the online assignments, programs, and tools that professors employed to foster engagement in online learning settings. Specific tools for online collaboration were mentioned by two of the participating professors. Professor 1 described Google Docs, while Professor 2 referred to using Skype calls and FaceTime calls. Student 4 mentioned WebEx and Zoom. Three professors and one student described participating in virtual meetings and discussions. Professor 1 used virtual meetings with groups of students to ask questions and challenge them in online settings. Professor 2 described using virtual meetings to "strategically foster dialogue just like you would in a classroom." Professor 4 described virtual meetings' effectiveness, feeling that online interactions and dialogue were even more substantial than traditional classrooms. Professor 1, Professor 2, and Professor 4 all referred to the use of online discussion forums.

Collaboration and interaction among students and teachers. The second theme to emerge for research question 4 was *collaboration and interaction among students and teachers.* This theme viewed connection and collaboration as essential to online learning and engagement. Student 4 mentioned the importance of having a strong online facilitator to foster effective interaction between students and teachers. Professor 2 referred to expecting "substantive interaction on the discussions" and would ask probing questions to foster meaningful dialogue among students. Professor 2 believed that even in an online setting, it was possible to encourage students to push "each other, maybe to think differently or behave differently again, based upon

scripture." Three professors described using group projects to promote interaction among students. Professor 2 felt group projects were effective in large classes and explained they would "assign the students to the groups that I think maybe best so that different students can interact with each other differently."

Two professors intentionally nurtured relationships with their students because they believed those relationships fostered meaningful interaction and collaboration. For example, Professor 1 said, "I try from the very start. I really want them to feel transparent. I want them to be able to not only trust me." Professor 2 also described the importance of transparency and

> …being open and willing to where appropriate, to share certain things, even that you as a professor may have experienced again, not just in order to make yourself seem more real to the students but also to model before the students.

Traditional strategies. The third theme to emerge for research question 4 was *traditional strategies.* This theme referred to the ways professors incorporated traditional strategies, typically used in brick-and-mortar schools, in online settings. Standard traditional methods mentioned by participants included writing assignments, providing detailed instructions, employing strategies from other thought leaders, and engaging in school-based activities. Professor 1, Professor 2, and Professor 3 described giving writing assignments, such as essays and research papers. Because of the potential for communication barriers, Professor 1 emphasized the importance of providing detailed instructions: "You got to give them step-by-step instructions" and "parameters." Similarly, Student 4 mentioned the importance of providing clear expectations of assignments and requirements for courses.

Professor 1, Professor 2, and Professor 3 all named leaders they followed or borrowed ideas. Professor 2 referred to Habermas and William Lane Craig, and Professor 3 mentioned

Henri Nouwen. Students also made references to leaders who stood out in their minds as well. For example, Student 4 referred to Howard Thurman as "a great mystic" who "really prayed and was very contemplative." However, Student 6 shared, "I look at people like Joel Osteen and Benny Hinn, and it makes me more conscious about what I am saying to others."

Participation in school-based activities was also mentioned as a traditional strategy that could foster engagement and learning needed to prepare students for the ministry. Six student participants mentioned the availability of chapel but did not describe much engagement with it. In other words, chapel was available, but few took advantage of it. Student 2 mentioned silent retreats, and Student 6 referred to "different social events for students." Professor 1 referred to the school's recently hired chaplain. Professor 3 mentioned seminary sponsored groups and activities but admitted the school had been inconsistent in offering such activities. Finally, Professor 4 described partnering with outside organizations to provide students with opportunities to minister.

Unaffiliated Theme

A final theme to emerge, which was not directly aligned with any of the research questions, were the *benefits of online learning*. This theme encompassed the benefits of online learning environments, described by students and professors. Participants described the benefits of technology, online classes' flexibility, and open communication facilitated by online settings. Student 1 and Student 5 both appreciated online learning's flexibility, making it easier for them to pursue their educational goals. Student 1 described how online classes helped her participate in school despite a chronic illness: "Oftentimes I couldn't make it to campus because of, because of a chronic illness that I have. So, I would miss classes. So now there isn't much of an excuse for missing class." Student 5, also referred to the benefits of flexible education:

> Personally, I prefer the online process because the brick and mortar limits your ability to be able to go to class. So, you know, I don't think it limits me. It doesn't stymie me. It actually frees me to be able to do all the things that I do.

Two participants believed another benefit of online education was that it liberated people to be more open and honest in their interactions within the class. For example, Professor 4 shared, "What I discovered was, in the online part, when we have discussion boards, people that didn't speak up as often, had an equal voice." Student 4 echoed this sentiment, sharing:

> For some reason, with both of my classes, the history class, and the ethics class, it's like people felt freer to talk more. I guess it's kind of the courage that we get when we're behind emails and we say whatever we want to say.

Evaluation of the Research Design

This qualitative study employed a phenomenological design. According to Leedy and Omrod (2010), phenomenological researchers attempt to understand individuals' perceptions and experiences of the phenomenon studied. Phenomenological interviews are typically unstructured, causing the researcher to be more observant than interrogative. Phenomenology allows researchers to examine the essence of lived experiences, using open-ended questions to explore the phenomenon in question (Moustakas, 1995).

The phenomenon under investigation in this study was the strategies employed to foster accountability, ethical and moral maturity, spiritual maturity, and engagement in online, Bible-based courses. A phenomenological design ended up being very appropriate and helpful for examining this issue. It allowed the researcher to ask questions in an individual setting while endeavoring to understand the study topic through information provided by those who had direct experience with online, Bible-based courses. Findings from this study shed light on some of the

effective strategies used by professors, students' perceptions of those strategies, and areas where both students and professors believed room for improvement exists. Rich, detailed findings emerged from this study, which is likely the result of the researcher's choice of this phenomenological study.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to examine the integration of spiritual formation among students enrolled in Bible-based institutions of higher learning, who were taking courses through distance education. A phenomenological design was selected to explore the strategies employed to foster accountability, ethical and moral maturity, spiritual maturity, and engagement in online, Bible-based courses. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews with seven students and four professors who taught or attended online, Bible-based courses. The results of the thematic analysis revealed ten themes. Two themes aligned with research question 1, including *connection creates accountability,* and *teachers follow up with students.* Two themes aligned with the second research question, including *provide students with opportunities for autonomy* and *challenge students to apply knowledge.* The two themes in alignment with research question 3 were *embrace technology* and *endeavor to overcome the challenges of online learning.* Three themes aligned with the fourth research question, including *online tools and assignments, collaboration and interaction among students and teachers,* and *traditional strategies.* The final theme, which was not paired with any of the research questions, was the *benefits of online learning.*

This chapter included a presentation of study results, organized by the research question. In the following chapter, a discussion of these findings is provided. Chapter 5 has practical and

theoretical implications, a review of results in light of previous research, and suggestions for future investigations.

Appendix A: Code Frequency Table

	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	P1	P2	P3	P4	total
*communication barriers	x	x	1	x	x	x	x	4	x	x	x	5
*technical challenges	1	x	x	3	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	4
*embrace technology/online delivery	x	8	x	1	x	x	x	5	x	x	x	14
*staying abreast of new technology	2	x	x	x	x	x	x	1	x	x	x	3
*learn new technology	2	x	x	x	x	x	x	1	x	x	x	3
*leadership	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	4	x	2	1	7
*accountability	x	x	x	2	x	x	x	10	5	1	x	18
*community	x	x	x	6	x	x	x	1	x	x	4	11
*face-to-face	1	x	x	1	x	1	x	3	2	x	x	8
*group projects	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	4	3	1	x	8
*secular	x	x	1	1	x	x	x	1	x	x	x	3
*provide detailed instructions	x	x	x	3	x	x	x	2	x	x	x	5
*employing strategies from thought leaders	x	x	x	1	x	1	x	1	2	4	x	9
*discussion between students	x	x	x	3	x	x	x	1	4	x	x	8
*online creates disconnectedness	x	x	2	1	x	x	x	1	1	1	x	6
*communicative technologies	x	1	x	1	x	x	x	1	5	x	x	8
*spiritual formation requires interaction	x	x	x	2	x	x	x	1	x	x	x	3
*virtual meetings/discussions	x	1	x	x	x	x	x	6	1	x	2	10
*student-teacher relationship	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	1	1	x	x	2
*school-based activities	x	2	2	x	1	1	x	1	x	4	2	13
*devotions	x	x	x	x	2	x	x	8	2	x	x	12
*discussion board	x	x	x	2	x	x	x	1	6	x	2	11
*writing assignments	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	1	3	1	x	5
*applying knowledge to develop spiritually	3	x	x	4	3	1	x	1	4	10	1	27

*applying knowledge to real-world situations	x	x	2	3	x	x	x	x	x	3	3	11
*connecting students with each other	1	x	x	x	x	x	x	2	2	5	x	10
*connecting teachers with students	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	1	x	2	3
*tools for online collaboration	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	3	1	x	x	4
*reflection	1	2	x	x	x	x	x	x	2	1	1	7
*intention	1	4	x	1	x	x	x	x	8	1	x	14
*lack of interaction online	x	x	3	x	x	4	x	x	1	x	1	9
*creative	x	x	4	x	x	x	x	x	1	x	x	5
*role of the church	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	5	1	x	6
*professors reach out to students	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	1	x	3	4
*autonomy	2	4	x	x	x	1	x	x	1	1	x	9
*discipline	x	7	x	5	x	1	x	x	x	x	x	13
*plagiarism/cheating	x	x	x	2	x	x	x	x	4	x	x	6
*missional	1	3	x	x	x	1	x	x	x	x	3	8
*online communication is more open	3	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	2	5
*chapel	5	1	2	2	1	1	x	x	x	3	x	15
*online classes are flexible	3	x	x	x	2	x	x	x	x	x	x	5
*lack of engagement	x	1	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	1	x	2
*distractions	x	x	6	x	x	x	x	x	x	2	x	8
*in-person interaction	x	2	3	x	1	x	x	x	x	x	1	7

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

Overview

This study explored the integration of Christian spiritual formation for students enrolled in Bible-based higher learning institutions and what, if any, are the digital discipleship (Freeman, 2014) methods employed in various institutions. Integrating spiritual formation through distance learning involves spiritual maturity progression due to acquired knowledge through online courses. This chapter will present the research purpose and the inquiries used to explore the writer's intent. The next section will address the conclusions, implications, and suggested applications from the study's findings. It will also examine the contrasts and comparisons of related empirical studies and the theoretical literature on the subject. The concluding chapters discuss the limitations of the research and possible weaknesses due to the phenomenon's concentrated area and specifics in the samplings. The exploratory findings from this study prompted further discussions that are not included in this body of research.

Purpose Statement

This phenomenological study aims to examine the integration of spiritual formation through distance education among faculty and students at Bible-based institutions. For the purpose of this research study, the focus is limited to the integration of Christian spiritual formation with the extent to which spirituality is being practiced as a result of acquired knowledge through online learning. The study proposed a theological foundation to argue for the continuity between technology and theology in support of distance learning's role in fulfilling the Great Commission (Lowe & Lowe, 2018). Face-to-face interviews with open-ended questions to faculty and students from participating institutions were analyzed to identify comparisons, contrast, and trends from the phenomenon's participants' experiences.

Research Questions

The research questions were designed to assess the integration of spiritual formation through online formats in Bible-based institutions of higher learning.

RQ1. What, if any, are the models used to provide spiritual accountability through distance learning?

RQ2. What, if any, are the methods used to measure students' ethical and moral maturity in Bible-based institutions?

RQ3. What, if any, are the fundamental changes necessary to provide an environment for spiritual maturity through online modalities?

RQ4. What, if any, are the integrative practices used to engage hybrid and online students through virtual learning environments to prepare them for holistic ministry?

Research Conclusions, Implications, and Applications

A qualitative phenomenological study was used with open-ended questions that allowed participants to share their online experiences with spiritual formation without the interviewee's coercion. The virtual interviews revealed varying insights from instructors and students about the phenomenon in their own words. Their responses to the semi-structured questions were analyzed and categorized by themes. The recruiting was facilitated by administrators from each institution, comprised of an Academic Dean and two Department heads. Invitations were sent through email correspondences. Eighteen prospective participants from three Bible-based institutions of higher learning expressed an interest in participating in the study. Participants were screened for eligibility, requiring a minimum of 12 hours of online course completion by the student. Eleven individuals, four instructors, and seven students met admissibility requirements. They participated in a one-on-one video conference, which included a demographic survey and eight

interview questions. Contributors candidly shared perceptions of the integration of spiritual formation through distance education from their personal and observational perspectives. The data from interviews were collected, analyzed, categorized, and coded to identify trends from findings. The findings were compared and contrasted repeatedly, resulting in data being condensed into thematic units. Actual quotes from the various participants were used to support the influences that led to particular themes.

The 11 virtual interviews were initially planned to last 45 to 60 minutes; the average interview was about 34 minutes. There was a healthy demographical balance represented by the samplings for the study. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the sampling was diverse in age, gender, and race. The targeted institutions for the research are located in the Southwest region of the United States. Still, participants reside in all areas of the country. The wide range of student's residences is indicative of the far-reaching ability of distance education. The test group also characterized distance learning's diverse student body by the different routes taken in their academic pursuits. It was comprised of graduates from community colleges, vocational schools, and Ivy League universities.

Conclusions

The results from the virtual interviews differed from student to student and school to school. Overall, answers from open-ended questions were consistent among faculty and students regarding most issues. However, there were some misalignments in how each group viewed certain aspects of the online learning experience. For instance, some professors believe students feel more connected to instructors through online courses as opposed to face to face settings. The frequent communication that takes place through the various learning management systems (LMS), such as blackboard, contributes to this belief. Yet, some students expressed how they still

feel somewhat disconnected from faculty and students in online settings. One student communicated, as an example, how they were reluctant to share personal experiences in discussions because of feelings of disengagement. The student also mentioned how the plethora of information shared by others led to their hesitancy.

The online experience is comparative to all other academic activities requiring personal investments from the student to receive its full benefits. Students tend to favor the advantages of distance education and reluctant to acknowledge the necessary changes needed to succeed as a student. Others delight in the conveniences provided via online courses but need the personal nurturing associated with face-to-face classroom settings. Shore (2007) discussed the possibility of inner connectivity being plausible through digital delivery systems, enhancing the opportunity for social engagements. The findings from this research agree with Lock (2002) concerning the value of the learning communities' role in complementing the paradigmatic shift in higher education (Harasim, 2002). These virtual learning communities in Bible-based institutions provide peer interactions, social networking, and mentoring, typically associated with traditional settings. The research also contended that the pessimistic view some still have regarding the digital revolution (Lowe & Lowe, 2018) is mostly due to ignorance or a simple matter of resistance to change.

Comparable to the church community, Bible-based institutions agonize with some faculty and students' proverbial sacred cow mentality, and online learning is no exception. A sacred cow is an expression that originates from the Hindu custom that cows are sacred. The phrase is related to traditional beliefs about something deemed untouchable and above criticism. Even with the advancements in technology, increased internet usage, and recognized improvements in online course delivery, some still do not believe online communities can duplicate face-to-face

interactions. The misconception in this thinking is the notion that online and residential delivery systems are inherently equal. This writer would argue that they should be viewed as comparable or equivalent learning experiences.

Lock (2002) postulated that community is "a process, which is fluid in nature" (p. 395) and not limited to physical proximity. This research concluded that students in the 50 to 64 age group are those who related physical interactions as the sacred cow of community. It also supports Lock's (2002) position that virtual learning communities (VLC) are an essential component for distance education's success (Sirgy et al., 2006). The findings from the current research further revealed that spiritual formation's groundwork happens more often than not through VLC's in Bible-based institutions of higher education. The study did not intend to debate the inferiority or superiority or of one modality over the other. The goal was to understand the role of online education in students' spiritual development. The virtual learning environment is not intended to replace traditional educational experiences but enhance them through technological learning tools (Rouse, 2011).

Implications

The framework for this study was both theological and theoretical. The spiritual ramifications of the research required a theological view of education and distance learning as its foundation. Scriptural support for formal education and the integration of spiritual formation is provided in the Bible with the school of the prophets (1 Samuel 19:18-24; 2 Kings 2:5, 12, 3-15, 6:21). Knowledge of God's sovereignty is the best approach to understanding and applying the digital-age to Christian education. Technology versus theology was once a hotly debated topic in the early stages of the digital revolution. Maddix and Estep (2010) say some philosophers even regarded technology as a proffered religion. The notion is contradictory to historical data that

shows Christian education as one of the precursors of the printing press, television, and radio (Lowe & Lowe, 2018).

Social constructivism was the theoretical framework used in this research. According to Fosnot (2004), this learning theory's principles are based on how the learner keenly constructs their knowledge and significance established by past experiences. A social constructivism approach complemented the phenomenological research method used in this study. As the participants talked about their experiences with online education, it became evident that the various experiential systems were factors in how they viewed the integration of spiritual formation in their context. Online learning pushes the student to think or cognitively construct how information is received and disseminated (Hein, 1991).

Social constructivism applied to students, while the theory of transformational leadership (Bass, 1994) closely applied more to professors in the study. All four faculty members used attributes identified with this leadership style and the desire to facilitate change in both the individual and their organization. The personable model involved being innovative thinkers (Northouse, 2016). The intrapersonal aspect is observed as the leader is being transformed by developing others. A transformational instructor generates significant shifts in their students' thinking, leading to substantial changes in their behavior (Vernon, 2015). Spiritual formation is a dynamic process where the believer is continuously growing toward spiritual maturity (Willard, 2011). The Bible says God equips the discipler and the one being discipled toward sanctification, which is an ongoing process.

> Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you complete in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well-pleasing in His sight,

> through Jesus Christ, to whom *be* glory forever and ever. Amen (Hebrews 13:20-21, NKJV)

The probability of spiritual formation is higher when instructors see themselves as transformational leaders. The essence of Bible-based colleges, seminaries, and universities is to prepare individuals to be virtuous and vocational.

Applications

Research question 1. Many phrases and terms were shared among students and faculty during virtual interviews, and none stood out more than intentionality. Both faculty and students agreed that spiritual formation did not occur accidentally. Findings for the research questions produced several themes necessary for integrating spiritual formation through distance education. Research question one asked, *What, if any, are the models used to provide spiritual accountability through distance learning?* A consensus from the responses suggested that constant interaction among faculty and student, and student to student, created a sense of accountability in online modalities. Several instructors mentioned how observations from discussion boards, journals, and prayer request forums revealed more than the student's academic progression. Virtual learning communities (Lock, 2002) serve twofold purposes in distance education programs. First, students become acquainted with one another quickly and in a shorter period than in traditional settings. Second, students have greater access to instructors through email and assignments because of the interaction required in online courses. The study concluded in agreement with Lock (2002) on VLC's importance that constant contact allows for academic and personal accountability, which is vital to integrating spiritual formation in Bible-based institutions.

Research question 2. Research question two dealt with the methodologies needed for gauging moral and spiritual maturity, asking *What, if any, are the methods used to measure students' ethical and moral maturity in Bible-based institutions?* The educational experience requires a certain level of self-discipline. Autonomy is of greater importance in distance education. The challenge for instructors and online course designers is to facilitate the students learning without enabling mediocre performance. One of the professors expressed their belief that the absence of face-to-face interactions with an instructor appears to increase the propensity for plagiarism. However, precedent literature suggests plagiarism is equally evident in online and face-to-face modalities (Aladia & Gordon, 2019). The number of plagiarism cases appears to increase in online modalities because of more required written assignments per course. Ethical and moral maturity should accommodate learning the course material. One professor discussed using forums that required students to state how they applied what they've learned throughout the course. Intentional efforts in bridging the gap between head knowledge and heart motivation are necessary for integrating spiritual formation in online classes.

Research question 3. Research question three raised the issue of changes needed to foster an awareness of spiritual maturity in distance education. The question asked, *What, if any, are the fundamental changes necessary to provide an environment for spiritual maturity through online modalities?* The overall takeaways from this question were embracing the paradigm shift in higher education through what Harasim (2000) called "networked collaborative learning" (p. 19). Lowe and Lowe (2018) said the use of technology is ever-changing in all aspects of how the world operates, including Christian education. Since most Christian educational and spiritual growth experiences now occur in digital environments (Lowe & Lowe, 2018), Bible-based institutions must prepare students for a successful learning experience. Embracing the change

requires eliminating the assumption that academic classifications are indicative of a student's technological competency for online courses. In other words, students on the graduate level academically may not have the specialized skills to meet the demands required in fully online programs. Spiritual formation is not necessarily less important but is secondary to obtaining the skills needed to succeed in class. Therefore, as revealed in the study, students who struggle with embracing technology will be less likely or not as eager to participate in non-assignment related activities.

Research question 4. Question four involved preparing the student for their vocational ministry, which is the primary purpose of obtaining an education at a Bible-based institution. The question asked, *What, if any, are the integrative practices used to engage hybrid and online students through virtual learning environments to prepare them for holistic ministry?* Maddix and Estep (2010) discussed the need to provide spiritual nurturing to students through a matrix of spiritual formation models. There is no one size fit all when it comes to preparing students for ministry through online education. The recommended model should include some form of mentoring. Dunlow (2014) expressed how graduate students in Bible-based colleges and seminaries equate their academic success to the contribution of those who mentored them at some point during their matriculation. This study also revealed how most of the students who have been mentored often become mentors to others. It is worth noting that mentors are not limited to instructors, but also others who impact individuals' lives.

Having students complete writing assignments relating to their chosen field of ministry helps prepare them for holistic ministry. Students should also be encouraged to participate in a chapel or other spiritual development or growth activities. The issue of intentionality is needed from students and their respective schools. Bible-based institutions should make chapel services

and other discipleship activities available to faculty and students participating in online programs. It will assure all an opportunity for spiritual growth. Students will benefit significantly by extending their involvement beyond virtual attendance but applying the principles learned in these settings.

Research Limitations

The current study's focus was limited to faculty and students engaged in online learning from Bible-based institutions of higher education. The researcher assumed the level of spiritual maturity would be better assessed by students at the graduate level. Therefore, the study was limited primarily to the experiences of non-traditional students. Maxwell (2013) said, “data in a qualitative study can include virtually anything that you see, hear, or that is otherwise communicated to you while conducting the study” (p. 87). The Covid-19 global pandemic prevented the researcher from making any on-campus visits. Consequently, the study does not include any observations from the participating institutions of how spiritual formation is marketed on campus.

The sampling did not include Executive staff, Department heads, curriculum designers, or instructional coordinators for online courses. Input from this group is critical in assessing the level of involvement from all areas of the various schools concerning spiritual formation. Intentionality was a term repeated often by interviewees in research. The success of spiritual formation for Bible-based institutions of higher learning is dependent on the commitment of all of the stakeholders.

Further Research

The popularity of distance education and increased use of digital devices leads to assumptions, especially on the graduate level, that students are technically competent for online

courses. The first recommendation is to study the prerequisites further or prescreening prospective students, especially those enrolled in fully online programs. The increasing number of non-traditional students enrolled in higher education presents a gap in the generation of learners. The diversity of participants in this study revealed that some are more technically savvy than others, even within the same age group. A qualitative case study would be the best method for observing this phenomenon. The sampling group comprises non-traditional online students with at least five to ten-year gaps in their academic matriculation. Bible-based higher learning institutions could profit from observing what models comparable schools are using to prepare the e-learner for academic success.

Many studies have been conducted throughout the years evaluating the various teacher-learner dynamics (Somers, 1971), (Robertson, 1996), (Anton, 1999), (Bretz, 2001), (Chang, & Davis, 2009), (Schumacher, Englander, & Carraccio, 2013), and (Panichi, 2018). The second recommendation is to research what teaching and learning methods are most effective in online modalities. Technology is only one aspect of the gap in effectiveness for online students. Online educators should determine how a student learns, processes information, and applies the knowledge to everyday life. The same pattern can be used in integrating spiritual formation as well. The Bible provides a foundational model for spiritual formation through the words of the Apostle Paul. He says,

> For though I am free from all *men,* I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more; and to the Jews, I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those *who are* under the law, as under the law, that I might win those *who are* under the law; to those *who are* without law, as without law (not being without law toward God but under law toward Christ), that I might win those *who are* without law; to the weak, I became as

> weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all *men*, that I might, by all means, save some. (1 Corinthians 9:19-22, NKJV)

Bible-based institutions of higher learning attract students from various backgrounds and educational disciplines. Individuals who are recent converts to Christianity or new to theological studies assume the courses are less rigorous than other subjects because of their intellectual nature. Therefore, they do not make adjustments in their learning practices. Studying in an online modality can complicate the matter even further. Instructors must design courses to identify the learner style that works naturally for the student early on in the class. Some students will have to make adjustments to the learning styles they are accustomed to if needed, even if it resulted in past success in traditional or face to face courses.

Murtagh (2007) described the quasi-ethnographic approach as a mini version of the ethnographic method, usually requiring at least 12 months of observation with a particular group The quasi-ethnographic design should be used for this research. It would allow researchers to observe different groups involved in the phenomena in less time. The results are reliable because the data is produced by first-hand knowledge from participants.

The final recommendation for future research is an assessment of spiritual formation for faculty and staff in Bible-based institutions of higher learning. This research concludes that assumptions can hinder any institution's desire to create a culture of expectation for spiritual formation. Lowe and Lowe (2018) emphasizes how online learning has expanded opportunities for Bible-based colleges and seminaries to carry out the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20). Success for this requires a commitment from all persons involved directly or indirectly with distance education throughout the campus. Pettit (2008) postulated that leadership and spiritual

formation have a symbiotic relationship that requires the production and experience of continuous change.

According to Cochran (2015), “Transforming was the conceptual theme for how higher education faculty members transition from a face-to-face (i.e., on-ground) teaching format to an online teaching format” (p. 4). The 2015 study focused primarily on the technical tools necessary for instructors to make the transition from face-to-face to online delivery, which is an issue of competency. Future researchers could identify the matters of the heart as it relates to school administrators, faculty, and staff. The spiritual growth and well-being of all staff members are vital components of how students perceive spiritual formation at Bible-based colleges and seminaries. Online educators who are not committed to personal spiritual formation will not present or impose it on their students.

The qualitative phenomenological research design would be an excellent approach for this study. This method will enable the researcher to formulate questions to assess spiritual formation from actual participants. The information can be used to create a dialogue among other Bible-based institutions of higher learning to discuss models and strategies that focus on spiritual nurturing for faculty and staff. It can also help identify factors that cause a disconnection between what the school represents and what is believed.

Summary

The study's impetus was the observational disconnect between the acquisition of biblical knowledge and its application by students trained for a ministry vocation in Bible-based institutions. The primary aim was to determine if and how spiritual formation is being integrated through distance learning for students in Bible-based colleges and seminaries. The increased usage of internet activity and online courses in higher education presents challenges and

opportunities for Bible-based institutions. Bible-based higher education institutions frequently have missions that are interrelated with service and community engagement. Faith-based institutions' missions are unique in harnessing a combination of the hope characteristic in education and the gravitas of eternity. The collaboration of which is much more useful than either aspect individually (Daniels, 2016).

The research identified several commonalities regarding the perception of spiritual formation among faculty and students from participating institutions. One of the deciding factors for seeking educational opportunities at Bible-based higher learning institutions is less rigorous course requirements. Others see it as an opportunity to increase biblical knowledge, grow in that knowledge, and gain insights into utilizing their spiritual gifts. Distance education allows the student to transition from the former's mindset through courses intentionally designed to connect the head with the heart. The research revealed online strategies employed by professors to help students apply biblical knowledge into spiritual development. Chapel services, virtual learning communities, and relationships built through constant digital interactions with instructors and classmates provide spiritual nurturing and accountability. Spiritual formation is also evidenced by students' quality of work, which includes a decline in evidence of cheating or plagiarism.

One of the most disturbing discoveries in the research was students' concern regarding faculty members' spiritual commitment. Several students candidly discussed how they found it unsettling that some faculty members do not believe in the church's institution. One student conversed about asking a particular faculty member about a bible teaching church for their family to visit. The professor responded, “I’m not the right person to ask about local churches because I don’t feel it is required for a relationship with Christ.” Another student discussed a similar encounter with an instructor from their school. The professor, a former pastor, then

articulated, “They have not been affiliated with a church in over ten years.” He also claimed that he “disciples more people in the course of a semester than the average pastor does in a year.” The sentiments were conveyed by students from different schools, eliminating the possibility that the references were for the same individual. One student expressed their disbelief that one could expound with such immense knowledge of the scriptures but has no desire to use their gift in the local church. The issue was not addressed explicitly in this study. However, mentoring students through and modeling spiritual formation is vital to the Bible-based institution's success.

God’s sovereignty is apparent by the technological advances that have enabled distance education to be a standard method of instructional delivery in higher education. The increased use of digital devices, internet usage, and social media has created a familiarity with the essential functions of technology needed for distance learning. The digital age complements the universal goal of the church to reach men and women for Christ. The integration of spiritual formation through distance education in Bible-based higher learning institutions merges technology and theology to equip students for holistic ministry.

The writings of the Apostle Paul provide a biblical foundation for distance learning. He wrote letters from one location for an intended audience elsewhere. His message to various churches was inclusive. Regardless of the physical distance between him and them, the passion in his letters expressed his genuine concern and communal feelings about their situation. Integrating spiritual formation through distance education requires a teaching approach as unconventional as the digital delivery method itself. Instructors have to make a purposeful effort to expand the classroom beyond the curriculum seen on the student’s computer monitor. Students must visualize the online instructor as a person with genuine concerns for them as a person,

rather than just a virtual facilitator, grader, and tester. When personal connections take place between instructor and student, the likelihood of spiritual formation increases significantly.

The current study's findings also observed the significance of integrating spiritual formation through distance education for the disabled learning community. The levels of difficulty vary from person to person. According to Barden (2017), disabled students are classified according to their disabilities, “medical impairment, mental illness, mobility impairment, hearing impairment, learning disability, vision impairment, acquired brain impairment, and intellectual disability” (para. 4). The expanded reach in this digital era provides opportunities for those who were otherwise deemed unreachable a chance to obtain a degree in higher education.

Even with the Americans with Disabilities Act and other accommodations practiced on most higher education campuses, disabled students still struggle maneuvering from class to class. The challenge is cumbersome for some and discourages others from resolving not to pursue higher education degrees. With the increase of virtual campuses and other e-learning opportunities, disabled students view online education as rewarding and a way to remain relevant in society. Online education has increased the probability of college admissions for disabled students (Barden, 2017). For most students, distance education is a matter of choice or convenience. One participant called it a “spiritual lifeline” for him and other disabled men and women.

Finally, the desire to achieve academic and other life successes while living out God's word is probable for students enrolled in Bible-based institutions. Most faith-based higher education institutions' overall mission is to prepare individuals to impact the community for Christ holistically. With these missions, “faith-based colleges and universities are distinctively

positioned to address social issues, engage in service to the local and global community, and to involve students, faculty, and administrators in this shared purpose" (Daniels & Gustasfson, 2016, para. 3). The study's findings conclude that the success of spiritual formation at Bible-based institutions requires full participation from all areas of the school. It also included those responsible for building courses for distance education. Integrating spiritual formation through distance education requires a teaching approach as unconventional as the digital delivery method itself. Online courses that are structured to encourage spiritual formation and discipleship with intentionality will produce the desired results. Making an effort to expand the online classroom beyond the student's computer monitor allows the student to visualize the online instructor as a person with genuine concerns for them, rather than a virtual facilitator, grader, and tester.

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APPENDIX or APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

CONSENT FORM

CONSENT FORM

The Integration of Spiritual Formation through Distance Learning for Christian Higher Education Students

Derwin E. Lewis
Liberty School of Divinity

You are invited to be in a research study on the integration of Spiritual formation through distance learning. You were selected as a possible participant because you are:

- A student of one of the participating institutions who have completed at least 12 hours of online courses.
- Full or adjunct faculty members who have facilitated at least 12 credit hours of distance learning (online) courses within the last ten years at a Bible-based institution of higher learning.

Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Derwin E, Lewis, a doctoral candidate in the Liberty School of Divinity at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Background Information: The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore how spiritual formation is being integrated into the life of students enrolled in Bible-based colleges and seminaries through distance learning. The study will propose a theological foundation to support the biblical emphasis of distance learning's role in fulfilling the Great Commission. The research questions for this qualitative study are designed to assess information from those experiencing the phenomenon. The primary question is what integrative practices are being used through virtual learning environments that help encourage spiritual formation among college and seminary students?

Procedures: If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following:

1. Participate in a 45-60 minute video-conference interview at a time that is convenient for you.
2. Complete a one to two-minute demographic survey.

Risks: The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

Benefits: Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study. Christian institutions of higher education may benefit by gaining a greater awareness of the virtual learning community's role in integrating spiritual formation.

Compensation: In appreciation for your valued time, a $25 gift card will be given to all individuals who complete the interview process.

Confidentiality: The records of this study were kept private, including the name of individual participants and participating institutions. Research records were stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. I may share the data I collect from you for use in future research studies or with other researchers; if I share the data that I collect about you, I will remove any information that could identify you, if applicable, before I share the data.

- Participants were assigned a pseudonym. I will conduct the video conference interview in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data were stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Data will be retained for three years upon completion of the study. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Recordings were stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.

Voluntary Nature of the Study: Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or participating institutions. If you decide to participate, you are free not to answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

How to Withdraw from the Study: If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Contacts and Questions: The researcher conducting this study is Derwin E. Lewis. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at Dlewis66@liberty.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.

Statement of Consent: I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____

Signature of Participant Date

_____

Signature of Investigator Date

APPENDIX B

Date

Recipient
Title / Classification

Dear _____:

As a doctoral candidate in the Christian Leadership program in the School of Divinity at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctorate in education. The title of my research project is *The Integration of Spiritual Formation through Distance Learning for Christian Higher Education Students*. The purpose of my research is to examine how distance learning is being integrated into the spiritual development of students enrolled in Bible-based colleges, seminaries, and universities.

I am writing to request your permission to contact members of your faculty and students to invite them to participate in my research study.

Participants were asked to participate in a 45-60 video conferencing interview with the researcher to assess how spiritual formation is being measured and encouraged through distance education. They will also complete a one to two-minute demographic survey. Participants were presented with informed consent information before participating. Taking part in this study is entirely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, please respond by email to Dlewis66@liberty.edu. A permission letter document is attached for your convenience.

Sincerely,

Derwin E Lewis
Doctoral candidate

APPENDIX C

RECRUITMENT LETTER

Date

Recipient
Title / Classification

Dear _____:

As a doctoral candidate in the Christian Leadership program in the School of Divinity at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctorate in education. The title of my research project is *The Integration of Spiritual Formation through Distance Learning for Christian Higher Education Students*. The purpose of my research is to examine how distance learning is being integrated into the spiritual development of students enrolled in biblically-based colleges. I am writing to invite you to participate in my study.

I am seeking students who have completed a minimum of 12 credit hours of distance education courses at a biblically-based institution of higher learning. I am also asking for participation from full-time or adjunct faculty members who have facilitated at least 12 credit hours of distance learning courses at a biblically-based institution of higher learning. If you are willing to participate, you will take part in a video conferencing interview that should take approximately 45-60 minutes to complete and complete a one to two-minute demographic survey. Your name was requested as part of your participation, but your identity will be kept confidential.

To participate, please contact me at Dlewis66@liberty.edu to confirm your eligibility and schedule an interview.

A consent document is attached to this letter. The consent document contains additional information about my research. Once an interview is scheduled, please sign the consent document and email it back to me. You are welcome to type your name and date on the form instead of printing and physically signing it.

In appreciation for your valued time, a $25 gift card will be given to all individuals who complete the interview process.

Sincerely,

Derwin E. Lewis
Doctoral candidate

APPENDIX D

EMAIL RESPONSE TO INTERESTED PARTICIPANTS TO EXPLAIN THE NATURE OF THE STUDY

Thank you for your interest in this study on the integration of spiritual formation among higher education students. I want to set up a 5-7 minute phone conference with you, if possible, to explain the nature of the study. Please email me a preferred phone number, day of the week, and time to call you. If you remain interested after we communicate, I would like to schedule a 45-60 minute video-conference interview at your convenience. You would be free to withdraw from the study at any time.

Sincerely,
Derwin Lewis
Doctoral Candidate
Liberty University

APPENDIX E

PERMISSION ACCEPTANCE LETTER

Date

Derwin Lewis
Doctoral Candidate
Liberty University
dlewis66@liberty.edu

Dear Derwin Lewis

After careful review of your research proposal entitled The Integration of Spiritual Formation Thorough Distance Learning for Christian Higher Education Students, I have decided to grant you permission to access our faculty/staff and invite them to participate in your research study.

Check the following boxes, as applicable:

☐ I/We are requesting a copy of the results upon study completion and/or publication.

Sincerely,

Your Name
Your Title
Your Company/Organization

Appendix F

FACULTY STAFF QUESTIONNAIRE (FSQ) INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research. I'd like to begin by learning a bit about you and your professional and spiritual background. Please tell me a bit about your current position and teaching paradigm.
    a. What courses have you taught in the past?
    b. What courses do you currently teach?

2. Of the courses you have taught, do you feel any of them emphasize spiritual formation more than others? If so, please explain.

3. What are some of the challenges that exist in fostering spiritual formation in an online/distance learning environment?
    a. Do these challenges differ from those in traditional brick-and-mortar institutions?

4. As an instructor in a Bible-based online institution, what strategies do you employ to foster students' spiritual development and accountability?
    a. Do these strategies differ from the ones you'd employ in a brick-and-mortar institution?

5. As an instructor in a Bible-based online institution, what strategies do you employ to foster students' ethical and moral maturity?
    a. Do these strategies differ from the ones you'd employ in a brick-and-mortar institution?

6. Beyond your classroom, what school-based activities are initiated to foster students' spiritual formation at your institution?

7. Holistic ministry means ministering in accordance with God's design. He made people with a body, mind, soul, and heart. What virtual teaching practices do you employ to prepare students for holistic ministry?

8. Is there anything else you'd like to add about practices for fostering the spiritual formation and maturity of online students in Bible-based institutions, such as challenges or suggestions for improvement?

Appendix G

STUDENT ASSESSMENT QUESTIONNAIRE (SAQ) INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research. I'd like to begin by learning a bit about you and your academic and spiritual background. Please tell me a bit about your educational and ministry paradigm.
    a. What courses have you taken that you feel has enhanced your spirituality most?

2. Please share your understanding of the phrase spiritual formation.
    a. What term most identifies your explanation of spiritual formation in your ministry context?

3. Of the courses you have taken, do you feel any of them emphasize spiritual formation more than others? If so, please explain.

4. What are some of the challenges that exist in fostering spiritual formation in an online/distance learning environment?
    a. Do these challenges differ from those in traditional brick-and-mortar institutions?

5. As a Bible-based, online institution student, what strategies have helped foster your ethical and moral maturity?
    a. Do these strategies differ from the ones you'd employ in a brick-and-mortar institution?

6. Beyond your classroom, what school-based activities are initiated to foster students' spiritual formation at your institution?

7. Holistic ministry means ministering in accordance with God's design. He made people with a body, mind, soul, and heart. What virtual learning practices have prepared you as a student for holistic ministry?

8. Is there anything else you'd like to add about practices for fostering the spiritual formation and maturity of online students in Bible-based institutions, such as challenges or suggestions for improvement?

APPENDIX H

DEMOGRAPHICS SURVEY

□ Faculty

□ Student

AGE

□ 18 - 29

□ 30 - 49

□ 50 – 64

□ 65 years and over

Ethnicity:

□ Asian or Pacific Islander

□ Black/African American (non-Hispanic)

□ Caucasian/White

□ Native American, tribe/people_____

□ Latino/Hispanic

□ More than one race (specify):_____

Sex (biological):

□ Male

□ Female

Religion Affiliation

□ An Orthodox church such as the Greek or Russian Orthodox church

□ Christian Scientist

□ Jewish

□ Mormon

□ Muslim

□ Protestant

□ Roman Catholic

□ Seven day Adventist

□ Something else (please specify) _____

Educational Background

□ High School Diploma

□ GED

Year Graduated _____

Higher Education Background

Classification

Major/Minor degrees:

City, State:

Year Graduated: