

## SECTION 2

### PRACTICES

#### **Teaching Practices Online: Different—Yes; Necessary—Yes**



The use of digital technology has already changed many practices in religious communities. Prayer teams respond almost instantly to requests sent by email or text messages. Hymns are projected on walls. Church newsletters are circulated electronically. Envelopes have been replaced by online giving. Blogs invite conversation about faith and life. Google makes sermon preparation easier. There is an iPhone app to guide Roman Catholics through confession. Churches without walls, religious leaders without an office, and congregations without membership are undoubtedly future religious practices that have already arrived. There are already multi-campus networks of satellite-based congregations with technically competent staff supporting a charismatic preacher who simultaneously addresses millions of faithful followers around the globe from a location almost anywhere. If this is a preview of future religious communities, what kind of ministers will be needed and how shall they be prepared?

The utilization of technology like Blackboard or Moodle, and other web resources for online teaching, has been part of theological education for some time. These practices are a response to the “digital-natives” who are coming to study theology. Blogs, wikis, tags, texts, and tweets are the tools they use to communicate and connect and learn. Digital technology brings a rapidly evolving landscape to theological education that has been notoriously slow to change. The next gadget often makes the previous radically new technology obsolete overnight. While it is undoubtedly true this technology cannot by itself change education because people make change—it is true also that the life patterns of people preparing today to be religious leaders tomorrow have already been changed by digital technology in ways that challenge traditional patterns of ministerial formation.

In this section, we examine the use of digital technology, both in the practice of ministry and in preparation for the practices of ministry. What can the success of online learning of knowledge-based content teach us about using digital technology to teach interpersonal religious practices? Because teaching ministerial practice has depended on community building, personal vulnerability, and personal interaction, what accommodations

need to be made to make online teaching of pastoral care or other ministry practices effective? If the future of religious communities and, hence, religious leadership will be substantively shaped by digital technology and its consequences, should formation for ministry be accordingly digital? How will digital technology affect our expectations of a ministry like spiritual direction?

Elaine Ramshaw has taught pastoral care online for a long time. For that reason, we are grateful for her reflections on text-based teaching online with no “real-time” conversations and, certainly, no virtual classroom. For Ramshaw, teaching about being present without actual presence presses students to pay more attention to their own stories, listen more carefully to the stories of others, and allow themselves to be deeply affected by what they hear without worrying about making a response in ‘real-time’. Everyone, Ramshaw proposes, should have an online distance-learning experience because online students often live in very different settings, at very great distances from each other, with different regional and ethnic cultural assumptions and practices that add richly to the conversation and leading students into awareness of the cultural intricacies of care.

Teaching intercultural spiritual care online, as Carrie Doehring envisions it, is a bold interactive process including three hour-long spiritual care ‘chats’ between students based on role plays derived from fictional short stories. In contrast to traditional verbatims that have been used for decades in teaching pastoral care, these online conversations are an actual account of the meeting and available immediately for reflection. The advantage of using online transcripts of a conversation, Doehring found, is that she is able to give much more detailed feedback to the student and students are able to demonstrate how they used the feedback. The idea of using fictional short-stories for role-playing is beneficial whether or not the course is taught online. Doehring invites readers to share ideas about the use of her method for teaching intercultural spiritual care.

The third essay in this section is about both the practice of and preparation for spiritual direction. John Mabry reflects on his experience of online spiritual direction using both email and Skype, concluding that they are not the same as face-to-face companionship but still valuable. Once the work begins, he observes, the barriers to intimacy drift away. Mabry is correct to challenge the idea that technology is somehow antithetical to authentic spiritual discernment. The response to Mabry’s essay by Maria Tattu Bowen offers qualified agreement to his claims that in using technology to offer long-

distance spiritual direction, certain problems, are solved while others are created. One of the advantages of online spiritual direction Bowen reports was surprising: because she can close her eyes while listening, she finds herself hearing more nuances in the conversation.

The changes initiated by digital technology, Gordon J. Hilsman and Angelika A. Zollfrank contend, are significant enough to consider changes in the standards for supervision in the Association of Clinical Pastoral Education in order to insure the quality of supervisory programs. They present two theories of supervision in order to explore the benefits and limitations for using distance-education technologies and then raise critical questions about distance-education methods in clinical pastoral education. "Careful observation and evaluation of distance supervision experiments will be vital in charting the future of the use of electronic media for some educational functions, including the processing of theological and spiritual core values relative to pastoral care work." This essay provides criteria for evaluating the descriptions of supervision using distance-learning, as addressed in the next section of this volume.

The seeds for changes in teaching and learning preceded the digital revolution. The focus on outcomes has challenged teachers to redo syllabi and alter teaching methods and goals. Honoring human individuality in general meant a greater acknowledgment that people learn differently. Economic factors have dictated curricular redesign in order that advanced learning is accessible to, and affordable for, more individuals. Even if online education disappeared tomorrow, 'student-centered' learning is likely to remain. The social media tools have simply made it easier to help people do what they already had been determined to do.

Along the way, old questions have been sharpened by new possibilities. What maximizes learning? What kind of human interaction around a subject is necessary for learning to occur? What is the role of the charismatic teacher in learning? What is the importance of real-time for learning? What constitutes distance-learning? How much face-to-face interaction is necessary to prepare people for the 'interpersonal' dimension of digital ministry? How will evaluation be changed by less face-to-face contact? In what ways will online teaching and formation continue the focus on student-directed learning? In the next section, several possibilities for using digital technology in supervision and formation are described and reflected on in the light of these and other questions.

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