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

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Even before the unprecedented events following the Covid-19 pandemic, the digital revolution had already caused paradigmatic shifts in higher education. Although digital technology has been part of higher education since the nineties, its prevalence has expanded to institutions that previously did not offer online programs. Christian educational institutions greatly value transformative learning that produces spiritual formation. The current educational shifts toward online learning have proven challenging to many Christian institutions and educators. Although research has shown that online learning can produce spiritual transformation, various Christian institutions remain uncertain that such an outcome is achievable. The Old and New Testaments provided several models of effective distance learning communities. History has recorded how Christian communities often were in the vanguard of innovation with technological tools for spreading the Gospel. This qualitative research aimed at exploring the integration of spiritual formation through distance learning at Christian colleges, seminaries, and universities. The research results will help educators develop models for integrating spiritual formation through online courses and virtual learning communities.

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

The Integration of Spiritual Formation Through Distance Education for Christian Higher Education Students

Since the early days of distance education, Christian educational institutions have raised questions about the online learning environment's ability to facilitate or produce spiritual formation and transformative learning (Lang et al., 2019; Lowe & Lowe, 2018; Maddix & Estep, 2010; Mokhtarian, 2020; Nichols, 2016; Roberts 2019). This phenomenological study analyzes the integration of Christian spiritual formation among higher education students in Christian institutions. The digital revolution (Lowe & Lowe, 2018) has resulted in a paradigm shift in higher education (Harasim, 2002). Although the current "new normal" of a post-Covid-19 pandemic requires rapid adjustment, Christian universities have neither embraced its urgency nor come to the

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point of embracing the need and necessity of this new phenomenon. Maddix and Estep (2010) framed Christian universities and accreditation boards' need to validate online education under the question, "Is Christian nurture and spiritual formation possible in an online course or program" (p. 424)?

In 2017, the Pew Research Center offered a positive report that nearly three times as many students became more religious during college than those who conveyed the opposite (Gecewicz & Smith, 2017). Palka (2004) highlighted that in the early 2000s, many theological educators were unconvinced that online theological education was as efficient as face-to-face learning. Several assumptions fueled the arguments against online learning and its ability to form a sense of community. A dominant assumption was the idea that "a community must be spatially situated and defined in fixed physical terms (e.g., by village or neighborhood, or campus boundaries)" (Palka, 2004, p. 1).

Research Concern

Lowe and Lowe (2018) highlighted that various Christian education and spiritual growth experiences now occur in digital environments supported by innovative technologies and communication devices. However, some institutions struggle to replicate the community-learning environment found in face-to-face modalities. Students' interconnectivity in higher education through various learning communities is vital to the college experience. Since the early days of distance education, community formation has posed a significant concern to Christian educators and administrators (Roberts, 2019). Palloff and Pratt (2007) suggested that instructors are the crucial initiators of an effective virtual learning environment.

The Barna Research Group reported that over half (59%) of traditional college-aged students leave the Christian faith during college (Kinnaman & Hawkins, 2016). The challenge for some institutions is more significant than technology versus theology. Christian institutions' core curriculum and overall purpose lead to assumptions about integrating spiritual formation—studying subjects with theological content does not automatically produce spiritual growth. It is imperative to understand how the idea of a community identifies itself in this computer-mediated setting (Rummel & Spada, 2005). Duplicating the sense of community in online settings is a continuous challenge but not altogether impossible (Sadera et al., 2009). Although technology has positively impacted many higher education areas, literature is meager on how it has affected spiritual formation integration.

Current trends indicate impending disaster for institutions that choose not to offer online courses. Therefore, the implications are that the future of higher education depends on the adaptation of online learning despite other causative influences. Research has shown how online learning significantly impacts the lives of higher education students (Campbell & Garner, 2016; Challies, 2011; Lowe & Lowe, 2018; Maddix et al., 2014). Researchers have concluded that non-traditional students prefer online learning formats in their academic pursuits over traditional face-to-face delivery methods (Overholt, 2016). Some scholars have suggested that online programs have erased almost all geographic barriers to accessing educational programs (Allen & Seaman, 2004). The shift in higher education's student body requires educators to

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understand the non-traditional students' needs and acknowledge how life experiences impact learners (Overholt, 2016). Higher education's success depends on instructors' willingness to employ transformative learning theories in class preparation (Mezirow, 1991).

Purpose Statement

This phenomenological study examines the integration of spiritual formation through distance education among faculty and students at Christian institutions. The focus was limited to integrating Christian spiritual formation with the extent to which spirituality is 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).

Research Questions

The research questions were designed to assess the integration of spiritual formation through online formats in Christian 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 Christian 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?

Literature Review

Theological Framework

Literature supports that spiritual formation is often subjective. Freeman (2014) defended the existence of a passive and active component of spiritual development. Although Christian higher education institutes and accrediting associations expect spiritual formation as a learning outcome, determining a universal meaning for spiritual formation is problematic (Maddix & Estep, 2010). Howard (2018) proposed that "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). Christian formation can represent the stages of faith as a model for integrating toward spiritual maturity and Christ-likeness (Estep & Kim, 2001; Fortosis, 1992; Francis, 2019).

Theologians have viewed the term "teach" in Exodus 4:12 (when God addresses Moses' speech impediment) as synonymous with spiritual formation deriving from God's directing, informing, and instructing (Pfeiffer, 1990; Vine, 2003). Jesus' parabolic teaching style in the New Testament is likened to the modern adult learning principles (see Knowles et al., 2020, for more detail). Scholars agree the Bible's validation of

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distance learning is theologically and philosophically indisputable (Eckel, 2003; Lowe & Lowe, 2018; Morris, 2012; Overholt, 2016; Walvoord, 2004). Sadera et al. (2009) argued against the idea that spiritual transformation is difficult to accomplish with distance education's mode of course delivery.

Before the higher education digital shift took place in the early 2000s, various researchers highlighted the need for social presence and mentoring relationships between faculty and students (Crisp & Cruz, 2008; Dunlow, 2014; Etzel et al., 2017; Freeman, 2014; Maddix & Estep, 2010; Shore, 2007). Also, various studies have been conducted throughout the years evaluating the various teacher-learner dynamics (Anton, 1999; Bretz, 2001; Chang & Davis, 2009; Panichi, 2018; Robertson, 1996; Schumacher et al., 2013; Somers, 1971). 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" (*New King James Version,* Romans 3:10-11, 1982). 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 presence, which Shore (2007) described as "interactivity and interpersonal contact" (p. 92), can occur in both face-to-face and distance education courses. Studies show that participation among students in online learning communities is equal and, in some cases, surpasses interactions in traditional settings (Sadera et al., 2009). There are underlying psychological needs for emotional and physical safety resulting from the supportive relationships that come from a sense of connectedness or belongingness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Resnick et al., 1997). The success of spiritual formation through online learning depends on the intentionality of faculty, staff, and students (Shore, 2007).

Some scholars argue that spiritual formation in 2 Corinthians 3:18, 4:16, and Colossians 3:10 refers to the process of attaining a deeper connection with God (Christensen & Laird, 2010). Boa (2001) viewed it as a journey where twelve facets of spirituality are practiced, leading one to conform to Christ's image. Banks and Stevens (2011) proposed that 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 their lives. 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) concluded that "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"… without the truth, no spiritual transformation is possible" (p. 48).

Christian institutions have been adversely jeered as newcomers to technology and distance education (Morris, 2012), with some suggesting that Christian academic educational institutions are two decades behind their counterparts. Baltrip (2015) corrects this misinformation by explaining how various online learning questions surfaced in Christian theological education in the mid-2000s. Lowe and Lowe (2018) recalled how Christian education was on the vanguard of the printing press, radio, and

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television. Christian academic educational institutions offered entire degree programs during the 1990s in online formats (Lowe & Lowe, 2018).

Theoretical Framework

Scholars have typically used two theoretical frameworks in their studies on distance spiritual formation (Etzel et al., 2017; Fifolt & Breaux, 2018; Maddix et al., 2014; Roberts, 2019): adult learning theory (Knowles et al., 2020) and transformational learning theory (Mezirow, 1991). Formation and transformation are from the same Greek word, *morphe* (Strong, 2007), from which metamorphosis derives. The Apostle Paul spoke about the renewing of the mind in Romans 12:2. Such transformation derives from God's Word and Spirit, a process of spiritual formation for the believers' nurturing, reshaping, molding, and changing until they mirror Christ's image (Banks & Stevens, 2011; Graves, 2018).

Research findings have emphasized that the Christian community benefits significantly from online communities (Lowe & Lowe, 2018; Maddix et al., 2014; Roberts, 2019). One of the subsets from online communities comprises cohorts in Christian institutions. A learning cohort is a group of learners working as a single unit in a course (Blankenship & Gibson, 2016; Fifolt & Breaux, 2018; Garst et al., 2019; Imel, 2002; Maher, 2005; Reynolds & Hebert, 1998). Imel (2002) verified that transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991), one of the hallmarks of adult learning (Knowles et al., 2020), frequently occurs in cohort-based learning. Interaction, interconnectedness, collaboration, mentoring, spiritual nurturing, and accountability are verified effective learning elements necessary for spiritual formation in distance learning (Dilling et al., 2020; Lock, 2002; Lowe & Lowe, 2010; Pinzer, 2017). The learning community is vital to the success of spiritual formation in higher education because of the societal hubs for students, which can be instrumental in spiritual growth processes (Anderson et al., 2014). Parker et al. (2014) also concluded that students' online communications are crucial to influencing successful distance education outcomes. Lyke and Frank (2006) proposed 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?" (Lyke & Frank, 2006, p. 18).

Instructors' influence, mentorship, leadership, and intentional participation in the students' spiritual formation are vital factors in successful Christian distance learning (Asselin, 2014; Berry, 2017; Bowers & Kumar, 2015; Bredfeldt & Albert, 2006; Burns & Bass, 1978, 1994; Crosta et al., 2016; Dilling et al., 2020; Garrison et al., 2000; Greenleaf, 2002; Kouzes & Posner, 2017; Plante & Asselin, 2014). Bredfeldt and Albert (2006) contended that "God's most common means of leading His people is through those who teach His people" (p. 8). Instructors are essential in facilitating spiritual formation because they are often the first line of contact with students and the institution's visible representation. They also occupy a strategic leadership position because they influence students' academic and spiritual development. The faculty's social presence is one of the essential contributors to the student's online learning experience. According to Dilling et al. (2020), students who feel a sense of belonging, support, and accessibility to their instructors are more likely to succeed in the learning experience.

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Freeman (2014) proposed that the nature of how courses are developed impacts spiritual formation's inclusion in the course. He discussed how some instructors automatically include some form of spiritual formation in their class discussions or assignments. However, spiritual formation is more likely to happen when it is "purposefully included in the master course design" (Freeman, 2014, p. 102). Technology is not anti-religious but a way in which humankind can use what God has provided through intellect and will. Mason (2017) highlighted a 2012 report when the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that more than half of the current jobs required technological skills, which is projected to increase to 77% by 2020. 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 (Maddix & Estep, 2012).

Research Methodology

This phenomenological study aimed to explore online spiritual formation perceptions in Christian institutions from individuals directly involved with the phenomena. The participants are faculty and students from Christian 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 learning. Ethical protocols were defined and followed to ensure the confidentiality of all participants and institutions in the study. The research aimed to assess the social and spiritual philosophies of spiritual formation in higher education through interactions and observations made during virtual interviews with participants.

The qualitative methodology is connected historically to anthropology, sociology, the humanities, medicine, and education (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010), which was the focus of this study. Phenomenological research was used to understand perceptions and perspectives of a particular situation (Leedy & Omrod, 2010). Phenomenological interviews are typically unstructured, resulting in the researcher being more of an observer than an interrogator (Moustakas, 1994). Since spiritual formation is often assumed in Christian colleges, this approach helped the researcher "arrive at the heart of the matter" (Tesch, 1994, p. 147). Open-ended questions allow 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). Anonymity and confidentiality were secured by utilizing coding schemes that would not identify personal information about the participants or the institutions contributing to the research (Leedy & Omrod, 2010). An analysis was conducted to identify comparisons, contrast, and trends from the phenomenon's participants' experiences. A triangulation strategy was used to determine consistencies, gaps, or trends in the data along with Creswell and Creswell's (2018) "winnowing the data" strategy for a thematic analysis for examining data (p. 192).

Analysis of Findings

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The sample consisted of eleven participants—seven students and four professors. All participants either taught or studied at one of three southwest Christian institutions that offered online education. The institutions are fully accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on College (SACSCOC), the Association of Theological Schools (ATS), or both. The sample consisted of five females and six males. Seven participants were between 30 and 49 years of age, and four were between 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. To be considered for the study, professors had to have facilitated nine or more credit hours of online courses, and the students had to have completed twelve or more credit hours in online courses.

After data saturation was met, a codification of the answers organized the data collected from interviews with seven students and four professors, and then the data was placed into themes. Ten themes emerged from the research: connection creates accountability; teachers follow up with students; provide students with opportunities for autonomy; challenge students to apply knowledge; embrace technology; endeavor to overcome the challenges of online learning; online tools and assignments; collaboration and interaction among students and teachers; and traditional strategies. One final theme was not paired with any research questions—the benefits of online learning.

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 additional probing questions were asked based on the participants' answers. The questions were designed to gather data on strategies employed to foster accountability, ethical, moral, and spiritual maturity, and engagement in online Christian courses. The transcript was coded to identify similar and repetitive ideas. 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.

After coding was completed, the final list of codes was reviewed for similarities and alignment with the research questions. Three codes (secular, missional, and the church's role) did not align well with any research questions and were discarded. Finally, a thematic map was created to visually depict the relationships between the themes and research questions (Figure 1). Each theme is discussed as follows, organized by the research question.

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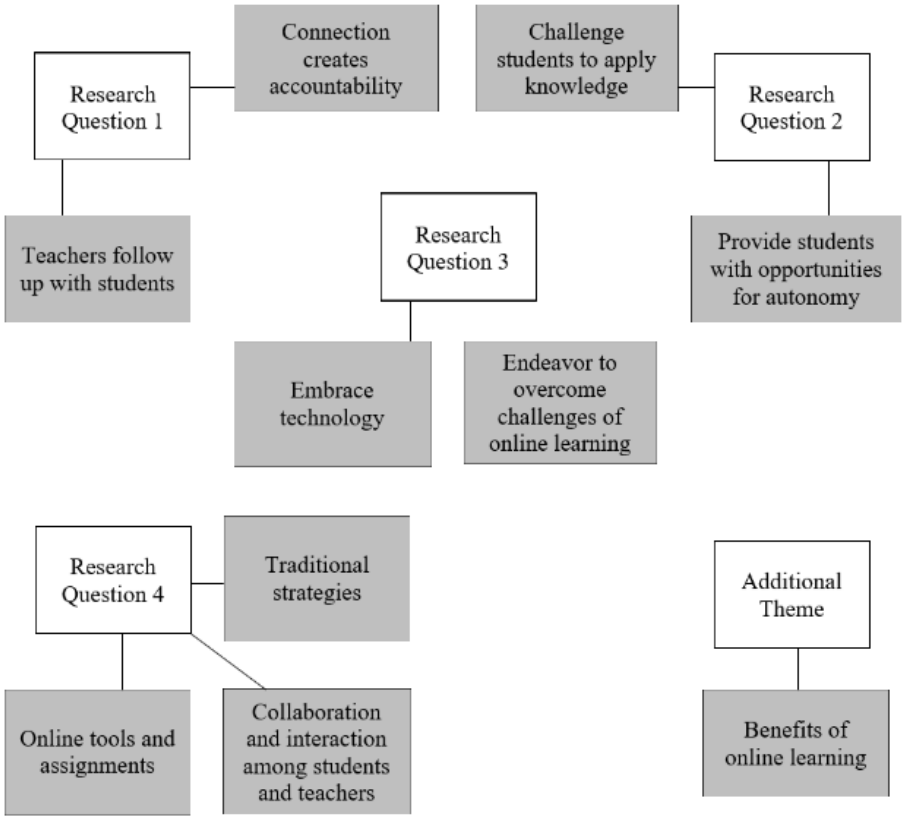
Figure 1.

Thematic Map



Note. Relationships between the themes and research questions.

Research Question 1

"What, if any, are the models used to provide spiritual accountability through distance learning?" Two themes aligned with research question one: (1) connection creates accountability, and (2) teachers follow up with students. See Table 1 for a connection between the research question, theme, and codes.

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Table 1

Research Question 1

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

Connection Creates Accountability

This theme described spiritual accountability, in the distance learning context, as something that required connection and interaction with others. Distance learning is unique from traditional settings because it requires students to take much more responsibility for their 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 the Scriptures, 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."

Teachers Follow up with Students

This theme emphasized teachers' roles in holding students accountable for their learning and spiritual development. 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. Professor 2 explained:

> "That's a form of discipleship right there. Whether it's emailing the students, or 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."

Research Question 2

"What, if any, are the methods used to measure the ethical and moral maturity of students in Christian institutions?" Two themes aligned with the second research question: (1) provide students with opportunities for autonomy, and (2) challenge

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students to apply knowledge. See Table 2 for a connection between the research question, theme, and codes.

Table 2

Research Question 2

Research Question	Theme	Codes
RQ2. What, if any, are the methods used to measure students' ethical and moral maturity in Christian 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

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. Student 1 explained that in online learning, "A lot of it is self-guided and self-motivated." Professor 2 shared that the 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" of their spiritual formation.

Challenge Students to Apply Knowledge

This theme described how teachers examined students' ethical and moral maturity by challenging them to apply what they learned to real-world situations or enhance their spiritual growth. Professors and students described devotionals as ways to help students reflect on what they had learned and apply that knowledge to their spiritual development. Professor 1 detailed how 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?"

Research Question 3

"What, if any, are the fundamental changes necessary to provide an environment for spiritual maturity through online modalities?" Two themes aligned with the third research question: (1) embrace technology, and (2) endeavor to overcome the challenges of online learning. See Table 3 for a connection between the research question, theme, and codes.

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Table 3

Research Question 3

Research Question	Theme	Codes
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

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 and 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."

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."

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 Christian 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 online tools, such as discussion forums and chats, can create communication barriers in online classrooms. Student 3 expressed, "In the classroom, you can read somebody's body language, you can look into their eyes, you

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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.

Research Question 4

"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: (1) online tools and assignments, (2) collaboration and interaction among students and teachers, and (3) traditional strategies. See Table 4 for a connection between the research question, theme, and codes.

Table 4

Research Question 4

Research Question	Theme	Codes
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	*Potential communication barriers *Detailed instructions

Online Tools and Assignments

This theme described the online assignments, programs, and tools 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, Professor 2 referred to Skype, and FaceTime calls, and Student 4 mentioned WebEx and Zoom. Three professors and one student described participating in virtual meetings and discussions.

Collaboration and Interaction Among Students and Teachers

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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.

Traditional Strategies

This theme referred to how professors incorporated traditional strategies in online settings, typically used in brick-and-mortar schools. 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.

Additional Theme

A final theme that was not directly aligned with any research questions emerged: 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."

Table 5

Additional Theme

	Theme	Codes
Additional Theme	Benefits of online learning	* Benefits of technology * Online classes are flexible * Online communication is more open

Conclusions

The study's primary aim was to determine if and how spiritual formation is integrated through distance learning for students in Christian colleges and seminaries. The data collected from open-ended questions in face-to-face interviews with seven students and four professors were analyzed to identify comparisons, contrast, and

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trends from the participants' experiences. Ten themes emerged from the research. The research highlighted that the success of spiritual formation at Christian institutions requires full participation from all areas of the school.

Virtual learning communities boast various learning and interactions platforms which demonstrate that the online medium does not lack quality (Harasim, 2002; Lock, 2002; Sirgy et al., 2006). A pessimistic view regarding the digital revolution is primarily due to ignorance or a simple matter of resistance to change (Lowe & Lowe, 2018). The misconception in this thinking is the belief that online and residential delivery systems are inherently equal. Arguably, these learning experiences should be viewed as comparable or equivalent. The study did not intend to debate the inferiority or superiority 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).

Limitations

The study was limited primarily to the experiences of non-traditional students engaged in online learning from Christian higher education institutions. The experiences and opinions of younger university students could differ from those interviewed in this study. The Covid-19 global pandemic prevented 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.

Future Research

The first recommendation is to study the prerequisites further or prescreen 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 second recommendation is to research online modalities' most effective teaching and learning methods. Technology is the 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 final recommendation for future research is an assessment of spiritual formation for faculty and staff in Christian institutions of higher learning. This research concludes that assumptions can hinder any institution's desire to create a culture of expectation for spiritual formation. Pettit (2008) postulated that leadership and spiritual formation have a symbiotic relationship that requires the production and experience of continuous change.

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