

Fostering Spiritual Formation at a Distance: Review of the Current Debates, and a Biblically Grounded Proposal for Maximizing its Effectiveness as Part of Ministerial Formation

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Abstract

Due to its enormous advantages, especially within the current context of massive technological advances, distance education has globally become a major component of tertiary higher education. Despite this being eminently true of the theological disciplines, controversies rage as to its efficacy for nurturing spiritual and ministerial formation. Doubters view the enterprise in pernicious terms; their main objection being that bodily absence undermines efficacy of formation at a distance, which in itself also lacks sound biblical and theological foundation. Enthusiasts on the other hand, rebuff these criticisms and question whether it is currently viable to foster the formation of theologically effective ministers without adopting the insights, methods, and tools of distance education. This article summarises the contours of these debates, and critically evaluates some of the proposals that have been

¹ The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

propounded for its theological underpinnings. It concludes by proposing that the Pastoral Epistles provide the biblical mandate, appropriate models, and pastoral principles for maximising the efficacy and effectiveness of ministerial formation through distance education.

1. Introduction

Distance education, defined by Simonson, Smaldino, and Zvacek (2015: 32) as ‘institution-based formal education where the learning group is separated, and where interactive communication systems are used to connect learners, resources and instructors’, has for several decades now had a progressively prominent role in adult higher education. Its enormous advantages are apparent to most dispassionate observers.² It offers opportunities for cost-effective, flexible, and student-centred instruction tailored to meet their unique educational needs. It enables broadening of access to the best of education regardless of the student’s age, socio-cultural background, and distance from the faculty. It enriches pragmatic integration of theoretical learning with the student’s real-life experiences, ensuring a well-balanced graduate at the end of the formal educational process. And it provides the foundations and skills for independent continued life-long learning that is required for fruitful participation in today’s complex world. Its main disadvantage³ is the

² I am self-aware of my personal biases in this review, having obtained my theological training through distance education, and now serving as a senior member of faculty of a distance education institution. These biases notwithstanding, and given my prior experiences of full residential, and now also as a professionally trained educationist and a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy in the UK, I have endeavoured to be as even-handed as possible in evaluating the evidence.

³ The issue of accessibility of learning resources such as libraries and laboratories may rarely also pose as a disadvantage to distance education, but this depends on the degree of remoteness of the student from these facilities.

potential for reduced opportunities for immediate student-with-student and student-with-faculty interactions, feedback and orientation in the learning community (Brown 2012:9–49; Lei and Gupta 2010:616–631; Moore and Kearsley 2011; Rao and Krishnan 2014; Veletsianos 2010).

Evidently, judging the overall efficacy and efficiency of distance education depends on the weight given to the potential impact of the reduced interactions on achieving the learning outcomes. This impact is definitely offset or at least blunted by the benefits of modern communication technology in aiding these interactions. Even so, in the case of tertiary theological education, the fundamental question is whether the pivotal learning objective of fostering the spiritual formation⁴ of students preparing for Christian leadership and general ministry could be wholly achieved through distance education.

Inevitably, different organisations and theological educators make different judgements in answering this question. So, for example, in its most recent publication of standards for regulating the accreditation of registered theological training institutions in the USA and Canada, the Association of Theological Schools (ATS)⁵ stipulates the following core standard for accrediting an MDiv programme for ministerial formation:

⁴ For the purpose of this article, I adopt the following definition of ‘Spiritual Formation’ advocated by the Dallas Theological Seminary: It is ‘the process by which God forms Christ’s character in believers by the ministry of the Spirit, in the context of community, and in accordance with biblical standards. This process involves the transformation of the whole person in desires, thoughts, behaviours, and styles of relating with God and others. Such life change is manifest in a growing love for God and others—a dying to self and living for Christ’ (DTS 2016; cf., Greenman and Kalantzis 2015).

⁵ ‘The Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada (ATS) is a membership organisation of more than 270 graduate schools that conduct post-baccalaureate professional and academic degree programs to educate persons for the practice of ministry and for teaching and research in the theological disciplines. The Commission on Accrediting of ATS accredits the schools and approves the degree programs they offer’ (ATS 2015).

Because MDiv education expects regular and substantive student-faculty interaction to achieve the stipulated learning outcomes, this interaction requires that at least one year of full-time academic study or its equivalent shall be completed at the main campus of the school awarding the degree or at an extension site of the institution that has been approved for MDiv degree-granting status. An exception may be granted if a school can demonstrate how its educational design and delivery system accomplishes the learning outcomes associated with residential theological study [A.3.1.3].

It is evident from this stipulation that the ATS believes that the gold standard for effective ministerial formation is through the full residential mode, for, in its view, residential education provides the ideal and ‘substantive student-faculty interaction’. So the ATS offers a concession to distance education, but only on the terms and criteria set by residential education. Accredited institutions will only be approved to offer full distance education for their MDiv programme provided they can demonstrate their ability to meet the presumably higher standards of residential institutions.

The ATS is not alone in taking this tepid stance towards formation at a distance. Its latest decision follows several years of debate within the organisation and in the theological academy in general regarding the efficacy, viability, efficiency and indeed, the place, if any, of distance education in tertiary level ministerial formation. Some objectors were more strident. Kelsey (2002:2–9) for example argued that the lack of bodily presence in formation at a distance undermines its theo-anthropological foundations. Dietterich (2005:96) similarly insisted: ‘a key aspect of the seminary experience is to step out of the familiar context, to become a “stranger”, to encounter and learn to appreciate different kinds of people and traditions’. Kumalo and Richardson (2010:268) also argue that ‘ministers with integrated intelligence and

imagination can be formed only through intensive residential, full-time seminary experience'. And Diekema and Caddell (2001:182) quip: 'is not the incarnation of Jesus Christ ultimately God's rejection of distance learning? If relationship was an unnecessary component, would Christ's physical manifestation have been necessary?'

On the other side of the divide are theological educators who rebuff these reservations and rather regard spiritual formation at a distance as revolutionising theological education by liberating it from the severe strictures inherent in current residential modes of education. Gresham (2006:24–28) has, for example, demonstrated that the argument insisting on the necessity for bodily presence for spiritual formation to be efficacious derives from a faulty dualistic conceptualisation of the human agent and not from an assessment of the content or effectiveness of distance programmes themselves. Hess (2005:33) has similarly argued that distance education has a better chance of ensuring the moral and spiritual development of the student, since the education is personalised and the students remain situated in their context, and thus are formed through addressing the regular daily challenges of contextualisation of theological knowledge within their communities. Others have pointed to the fact that the immense flexibility unleashed by distance education results in the formation of ministers from different professional and social backgrounds, thus enriching the cohort of church leaders (Chong 2010; Forrest 2012; Wiseman 2015). All in all, an impasse of sorts appears to have marked this debate in some circles, until recently.

What has occurred 'recently' with this impasse is a perfect storm combination of socio-cultural transformations such as the rapidity of technological advances in communication, the dramatic changes in the demography of ministerial and leadership candidature of churches, and the changing attitudes of the churches themselves and also academic faculty with regard to the competing priorities of the curriculum. As a

result, the nature of these debates has significantly altered. Given this context, it is worth critically evaluating the contours of the debates surrounding the efficacy and efficiency of nurturing ministerial formation through distance education, and determining whether the ATS and other organisations with similar views are at all correct in their negative stances towards the enterprise.

This article accordingly has a threefold objective. Firstly, it summarises some of the key issues involved in the debates, and reviews the results of some recent empirical studies comparing the two modes of theological education. Secondly, it critically appraises the biblical and theological arguments which have been mounted in objecting to formation at a distance. Finding that the published literature is still insufficient in its robustness, the article finishes by proposing that the special genre of the Pastoral Epistles provides the biblical mandate, appropriate models, and pastoral principles for maximising the efficacy and effectiveness of ministerial formation through distance education.

Paul's intentional adaptation of the letter-writing technology as a major pastoral tool to circumvent the problems caused by his physical separation from his churches was in keeping with his time. Even so, his further strategic construction of a special genre for the Pastoral Epistles for the purpose of the formation of leaders of some of these churches at a distance should be regarded as the biblical template, model, and mandate for efficacious and effective ministerial formation through distance education.

2. Review of the Current Debates on Formation at a Distance

As preamble to the review of the literature, it is worth noting that the current debates were paradoxically preceded by a period of academic wrangling in the 1980s as to whether spiritual formation should in the first place be a preoccupation of tertiary level theological education. The perception by some at the time, especially those teaching in the University settings, was that the task of spiritual formation of students should be left to the churches, while educational institutions focused on ‘hard’ outcomes. So for instance, Hall (1988:82; cf., Glanzer and Ream 2009; Kemp 2010:130; Lindbeck 1988) argued that focusing on spiritual formation could well dilute academic rigour:

[If] we offer courses in spirituality, how can we avoid sliding from the academically acceptable into a kind of substanceless meandering into that which is personally ‘meaningful’ but intellectually indefensible? Is it appropriate to have quite different expectations of students in such offerings? Or more specifically, does a course that requires only the keeping of a spiritual diary really qualify in an academic curriculum? What does it mean to teach spirituality? Can one, for example, teach ‘about’ meditative techniques without actually teaching (and thus practising?) the techniques?

On the other hand, others at the time, such as Edgar, in his seminal paper contributing to the 1983 *Manifesto on the Renewal of Evangelical Theological Education* (2005:208–217), and later, Stuebing (1999:47–70), Steibel (2010:340–355), Cheesman (2012) and Graham (2015:58–77) insisted that the task of theological education of ministerial students must prioritise intentional strategies focused on their spiritual formation. It is fair to say that the current consensus in the theological academy, certainly in the conservative tradition, is tilted in favour of this latter view. To cite Naidoo (2010:352; cf., 2013:1):

Essentially theological institutions and seminaries are responsible for preparing wise, compassionate theologically astute and pastorally proficient servants who can lead the church and society. Learning to be a minister encompasses the holistic development of individuals rather than being limited to either the acquisition of knowledge about the faith or even knowing how to behave as a minister. The acquisition of knowledge is essential in ministerial formation but the scope of education must go beyond a restrictive cognitive qualification to more integrated human development. This is one of the main reasons why pedagogies of formation need to play a significant role in theological education.

Though this argument is now largely settled in the academy, it is worth rehearsing this fact that there was a time when some theological educators felt that they were not the only ones responsible for nurturing the spiritual formation of their students. Theirs, they argued, was to provide the theoretical training and the wider church was to focus on ‘spiritual formation’. While such a sharp division of responsibilities is patently artificial and ultimately wrong-headed, current enthusiasts of formation at a distance nevertheless make a valid point in insisting that, unlike the residential mode, their model of education best enables the academy and church to actively and continuously collaborate in fostering the growth and maturation of the future leaders and ministers of the church.

Be that as it may, for many theological institutions, the question now has moved from arguing over whether ‘pedagogies of formation’ ought to feature in their curriculum at all, to the issue of determining the most effective educational settings for implementing them. This discussion is in three strands, namely, (a) whether the empirical research evidence supports the efficacy and effectiveness of formation at distance, (b) if it is effective, what are the best practices for maximising formation at a

distance, and (c) what biblical and theological warrants and models undergird ministerial formation at distance. I briefly summarise the literature in these strands.

2.1. Is ministerial formation at a distance efficacious?

The question of efficacy may be sharply put in the words of Maddix and Estep (2010:424) *inter alia*: ‘Is Christian nurture and spiritual formation possible in an online course or program?’ Even though it did not focus on the specific issue of formation at a distance, nonetheless the best place to begin in seeking concrete evidential answer to this question is the meta-analysis of the ‘comparative distance education literature’ by Bernard and his colleagues in 2004. This is because this study assembled, aggregated the findings and meta-analysed the results of 232 published studies from 1985 to 2002 (2004:379–439), thus providing an excellent overview of baseline findings on outcomes comparisons between distance and non-distance education. Moreover, by employing sophisticated statistical formulae to sift out the many confounding variables in the publications to answer the key questions about parameters determining efficacy and effectiveness, this study furnishes questions upon which future more focused studies could be based.

In a nutshell, Bernard and colleagues found that distance education had only a slight advantage over on-campus education with respect to student achievement, even though there was wide variability in the individual outcomes that were analysed. When they split the outcomes between synchronous and asynchronous distance education, there was a small negative effect for synchronous distance education,⁶ but the wide

⁶ Rapid technological advances in communication have introduced significant complexities in the levels of synchronicity in distance education that would most likely jettison the current validity of this conclusion (Fleck 2012:398–411; North-Samardzic, et al. 2014:328–346).

variability suggests that it is a mistake to pit classroom instruction against distance education. They found that the quality of course design is the more important factor rather than the media for its delivery.

For distance education in particular, their findings indicate that learning activities which foster student collaboration such as interactivity and problem-solving discussions in asynchronous distance education improve outcomes. In particular, they stress that ‘effective DE [Distance Education] depends on the provision of pedagogical excellence’ (2004:413). Though they did not focus on the isolated question of ministerial formation, their insights indicate that distance education has immense strengths capable of application in spiritual and moral formation.

This has been specifically confirmed by Nichols (2014) who compared the formational experiences and the propensity for spiritual growth and maturity between two cohorts of undergraduate students (one on-campus and the other through distance learning) studying the same BTh and BMin courses in an evangelical theological seminary (Laidlaw College). A total of 77 students (of the 148 in the programme) were surveyed using the Christian Spiritual Participation Profile (Thayer 2004:195–207) as the key measuring instrument, augmented with semi-structured interviews. Nichols found that overall there was no significant difference in the formational experiences between the two arms of the study, even though students in the distance education arm tended to be more mature believers at the time of entry. Of significant interest was the fact that the distance students had a far more significant participation and enrichment through their own churches than the on-campus group. This particular finding is also mirrored in Palka’s prior study in the USA (2004:1–6).

Several other studies have confirmed this trend towards equality in formational achievement between distance and residential modes,

especially when the fifth generation of distance education, that is, those employing the Internet and latest interactive communication media, are taken into consideration (Taylor 2001:1–14; Wiseman 2015). Rovai and colleagues (2008) compared the sense of community and perceived learning between campus and online courses at a Christian university using a state university as control. They found that ‘the Christian ethos, with its influence on all facets of university life, manifests itself in stronger online as well as on-campus sense of community among students at the Christian university’. No significant differences were found in the perceived formation between the two arms of the student groups. In other words, it is the institution’s Christian ethos which invariably drives its educational programmes that reflects itself in the formation of the students, and not necessarily the mode of fostering.

Overall then, the published research indicates that the issue of efficacy and effectiveness of ‘pedagogies of formation’ depends not so much on whether it is delivered via distance or residential modes. The issue lies with maximising the exact features of the medium which may then make formation more effective. Indeed, many tertiary residential degree courses are reaping the immense advantages from distance educational methods and designs by incorporating their insights into their educational design in the so-called hybrid or blended courses (cf. Fleck 2012). As Delamarter (2004:135) puts it, the issue with education in general has progressed from locating *where* we build the new campus to determining ‘what part of which course, that is, what learning objectives for the programme need to be handled face to face and which can be done online’ (cf., Delamarter and Brunner 2005:145–164; Rovai, Baker and Cox Jr 2008:1–22; Twigg 2001). It is to the question of the practices which maximise the advantages of distance education in ministerial formation that I now turn.

2.2. What practices maximize effectiveness of formation at a distance?

If spiritual formation can as effectively be fostered at a distance as in residential institutions, what evidence exists regarding the best practices which maximise this effectiveness? In a summary, four practices that influence effectiveness of formation at distance dominate the literature. These are presented in an alliterative fashion, namely, (a) institutional intentionality, (b) interactivity, (c) Internet and all the possibilities it offers, and (d) instructor.

2.2.1. Institutional intentionality and effectiveness of formation at a distance

The contribution of Maddix and Estep (2010:423–434) is quite important in highlighting the role of institutional intentionality in maximising effectiveness of formation at a distance. They have after all accumulated significant experience in delivering full programs that focus solely on formation at distance. Affirming the viability of formation at a distance, they categorised the likely practices that will foster formation via distance education into four, namely, (a) individual course induced practices, (b) one-on-one teacher-student practices including mentorship, (c) small to medium sized group practices, and (d) church worship. They then describe an MA program in Spiritual Formation which is fully online, utilising web-based media such as blogs, journaling, chapel podcasts, mentoring and spiritual direction to foster formation in three domains, the inner, outward and corporate domains.

Similarly dismissing the academic discourse which compares distance with classroom based education as now *passé*, Abrami and colleagues (2011:82–103) have proposed that the more profitable area of research should be identifying the features of distance education that work best,

and how to improve them. Specifically, they identified instructional designs, enhanced student self-regulation, particular aspects of interactions and most importantly, institutional intentionality as some of the key areas that need further research and improvement to maximise the potential of distance education to foster moral and spiritual formation.

Although conducted on residential institutions, Naidoo's (2011:118–146) study examining the key dynamics of institutional intentionality is nevertheless worth applying to formation at a distance. She first designed and validated an index for measuring the perception of level and effectiveness of spiritual formation, the Spiritual Formation Index (SFI), in seven Protestant theological institutions in South Africa. The SFI is a perception test, which attempts to capture the students' perception of emphases placed on their spiritual formation. It is calculated from a composite of six process and integration concepts, namely, '(1) institutional commitment towards spiritual formation, (2) specialised services offered by the institution, (3) formal/informal learning of spirituality, (4) community life, (5) staff/faculty involvement in spiritual formation, and (6) spiritual activities on campus' (p. 129). The SFI was then employed to measure the students' perception of their formational experiences and the factors at play in determining its effectiveness.

The results are interesting in that the students on the whole scored their institutions at relatively positive levels. Within a Likert scale, the total average score was 2.16, with three-quarters of the student sample of 269 scoring their institutions less than 2.49. In other words, the majority of the students agreed that their institutions had a more positive approach to spiritual formation than did not. Of particular interest is that students of Pentecostal and Charismatic institutions scored their organisations far more positively for one of the six factors: 'Institutional commitment towards spiritual formation', a figure which capture students' perception of their institution's formational intentionality. In other words, within

these traditions, there was a high perception among their students that spiritual formation is taken seriously. The figures were less positive for the traditional denominations which also tended to be university-based institutions.

The literature thus indicates that institutional intentionality plays a fundamental role in ensuring that spiritual formation is nurtured among their ministerial students. This is not surprising, as the more intentional institutions are, the more likely that that intentionality will reflect in the design of courses, formational activities and their assessment, and the students' level of enthusiasm and engagement necessary to drive their own formation. Students tend to care more about their spiritual growth if their institutions and instructors demonstrate that they are interested in their growth.

2.2.2. Interactivity and effectiveness of formation at a distance

Bernard and colleagues (2009:1243–1289) conducted another meta-analysis with the aim of comparing the relative effectiveness of different interventions within distance education. They were, in particular, interested in the factors at play in three different types of interactions within the distance education context, namely, student-to-student, student-to-teacher and student-to-content interactions. Overall, all three types of interactions demonstrate highly positive effects on outcomes in terms of student achievements. However, the student-to-content interactions were slightly the most significant of the three. This would seem to imply that learning materials and activities in distance education which involve interactions between the student and the content of the programme yield better results. This obviously has immense implications with how learning outcomes of course are mapped, the courses themselves blue-printed, matrixed, and designed, and the students are assessed.

With regard to the specific issue of interactions, Outz's (2006:292; cf., Swan 2004) conclusion is perhaps most representative of the current evidence: 'The three aspects of distance courses important to student learning are: a teacher who is present and interacting with students, students who interact with each other, and students interacting with the content'. Outz's contribution is based on a study in which, using the Classroom Community Scale tool validated by direct student interviews, she measured the sense of community of a group of online course students. She identified that students' perceptions of the sense of community in a course is a key contributor to increased satisfaction and the need for online course designs to integrate 'activities that promote interaction, negotiation, and debate'. She concludes (2006:293):

Results indicate that student satisfaction with online learning classes tends to be low when instructors simply post lecture notes, make individual assignments, and ask students to work in isolation without any interaction with other students or with the instructor. If learning is a social process and faculties are concerned about the lack of socialization, courses need to be designed to promote interaction and active learning.

Lowe and Lowe (2010:85–102), have also proposed 'an ecosystems model' for ensuring maximal interactivity in the particular instance of formation at a distance. Employing Bronfenbrenner's Ecology of Human Development (EHD) theory as a heuristic device, they conceptualised the various interactional spaces of individual agents into varying sets of 'ecosystems', namely, microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. The microsystem refers to the closest context of interactive relationships involving family, school, and church, whereas the mesosystem refers to the interconnections between the microsystems with the student at their centre. The exosystem relates to the external but local factors which may have positive and negative impact on the formation of the individual, and the macrosystem refers to the overall

culture in which they exist. They argue that no formational activity, whether campus-based or distance, will be effective without attempting to foster student growth in all these ecosystems.

Though apparently complex, their analysis indicates how serious attention to the student's situatedness will be fruitful for maximising effectiveness of their ministerial formation at a distance. As echoed by Naidoo (2012:5), 'There are at least as many external variables that influence the development of students as there are campus ones, and these variables need to be acknowledged and education should be designed in a way that utilises rather than ignores them'. Lowe and Lowe conclude:

Rather than adopting a myopic view of student spiritual formation that only considers what a given Christian institution may be doing to facilitate whole person transformation or focuses primarily on the exclusively spiritual aspect of Christian development, we serve our students best with a broad purview to account for the realities of student existence rather than an idealized notion that is a carryover from a bygone era.

2.2.3. Internet and the effectiveness of formation at a distance

There is no doubt that the Internet has completely revolutionised human interaction, turning the world into a global village. This has immense implications for formation at a distance, and several studies have explored the ways and means of maximising its effectiveness through employing the numerous possibilities the Internet offers. So for example, with regard to the best communication media and the design of materials employed in the delivery of instructional courses, Mayer (2009) has perhaps far more than most pinned down some of the best features of

effective multi-media presentations in online courses which generate transformation in the learners.

Also, after identifying the sometimes authoritarian and prescriptive design of some distance learning programmes which undermine or impede intention to generate formation in the students, Le Cornu (2001: 9–21) suggests that programmes which emphasise self-reflection, personal journaling and interactive conferencing enhance the ability of distance education to deliver formation far better than the classroom option. The perceived deficit of community experience as part of formation at a distance has also been addressed by a number of researchers (Hege 2011:13–20; Maddix and Estep 2010:423–434). Others such as Baab (2011) have put forward very good practical ideas on how interactions through social media may enhance the delivery of formation at a distance.

White (2006) has highlighted specific ways in which online instructions may intentionally foster greater affective and relational values among and with the students. In particular, teachers who wish to foster formation at a distance should design their Internet presence that seeks to (a) feature spiritual formation as a course goal, (b) model a redeemed personality as much as is practicable in that space, (c) personalise their experiences for students to share in, (d) encourage interaction via the media, and (e) promote a safe and nurturing community through their interactions on the net (2006:312–315). Several seminaries are also employing social networking, streaming of online chapel services, prayer rooms, faculty Webinars, forums and general synchronous and asynchronous discussions as part of formational activities which at the same time also build learning communities of reflective practice (Gould 2015; Killacky 2015:166–185).

2.2.4. Instructors and maximizing effectiveness of formation at a distance

It should be a matter of no surprise that the exemplary conduct and intentional mentorship by teachers of distance education should play a significant role in the formation of their students. Teacher characteristics which are more conducive to formation of students, such as ‘vulnerability, authenticity, care, trust, integrity, and the community values of safety, transparency, boundaries and intimacy’ (Nichols 2014:78; cf., Maddix and Estep 2010:423–434; Palmer 1983) are as important for formation at a distance just as much as in the residential format.

In the case of distance education, more intentionality is required to make this personal role of the instructor pastorally effective in fostering the formation of the students. Indeed, the more the distance between the instructor and student, the more likelihood that the minor misconduct of the teacher becomes more influential in the student’s formation. A poorly-worded email, an apparently brash comment on a marked assessment, poor body language during a video-conference or even mere silence or delays in responding to questions or queries from students may have effects far in excess of their intention. Conversely, apparently minor teacher activities such as prayerful interest shown in the student’s personal development, brief encouragement expressed in the assessments and mere intentional and personalised attentiveness to students may have positive benefits far in excess of what sometimes may result from the same actions in residential settings. Overall, the teacher’s exemplary conduct is thus very crucial in formation at a distance. I am here in full agreement with Hall (1988:72):

One thing seems to me certain: unless the teachers of the theological disciplines manifest this kind of apostolic responsibility, and manifest it not only in their lives but (more importantly!) in the

conduct of their disciplines, it is futile to imagine that their students will do so. If part of the ‘character’ that educators desire to ‘form’ through the educational process is a spirituality that is orientated towards the service of God's people in the world, then the presentation of the professional theological disciplines as though they had nothing to do with the church's worldly confession can only be regarded as detrimental to the formation of such a character.

2.3. Biblical theological foundations of formation at a distance

The third strand of debate in relation to spiritual formation at a distance considers whether there are sufficient biblical and theological warrants that undergird it. As stated earlier, objectors argued against the enterprise on such grounds, some such as Diekema and Caddell (2001:169–184) going as far as invoking the incarnation to reject the possibilities of forming students at distance. A less dramatic but nevertheless important objection by Kelsey (K2002) on theo-anthropological grounds has also been highlighted. Others (e.g., Hall and Thoennes 2006:29–45; Sasse 1998:32–38) have made similar theological objections. Thus a challenge is posed to enthusiasts to offer sound biblical basis for the enterprise.

The responses to this challenge may be categorized into two main lines of argument, namely, (a) those which point to incarnational theology as mandating formation at a distance rather than undermining it, and (b) those who have pointed to Paul's pastoral practices as modelling formation at a distance. I now critically appraise these two lines of argument.

2.3.1. Incarnational pedagogy and formation at a distance

With regard to the former, and in response to Diekema and Caddell's charge that as compared to on-campus education, distance education lacks incarnational presence for its theology of formation, Gresham

(2006:27) has countered that ‘Virtual instruction can be incarnational if it points students toward response to the gospel in their daily lives, and if the instructor communicates his or her own lived participation in the truth’. He further (2006:25) proposes what he calls a theological model of divine pedagogy: ‘Just as the divine adaptation involved accommodation on God’s part, requiring the translation of the transcendent divine truths into the humble language of the human audience, so online adaptation calls upon theological educators to accommodate traditional practices to a new virtual environment’. In other words, incarnational theology demands that theological educators adapt to the changing realisms of distance education, an argument which seems to me to be as weak as the original charge itself.

A firmer incarnational approach was put forward by White (2006), who underscores Paul’s frequent references to being physically absent from, and yet, at the same time, spiritually present with the recipients of his letters (e.g. Col 3:5; 1 Cor 5:3-4; 1 Thess 2:17) as pivotal. Paul’s letters, he argues, show evidence that he frequently employed ‘personalising strategies’ to enable him to connect both emotionally and relationally with his churches. He cites several practical examples of Paul’s incarnational approach to formation as model of the kind of formational disposition that distance educators ought to take in order to foster transformation. He points out (2006:304, 306):

Christian theology, particularly with respect to God’s relationship with humankind, speaks profoundly of how the painful distance between God and humanity was healed and bridged through the incarnation and atoning work of Christ. From a creaturely perspective, this distance (sometimes experienced even in a spatial sense) is bridged and humanity has access to understanding and experiencing God through the person of Christ (the incarnation) and through the indwelling Holy Spirit ... By connecting at a level deeper

than merely getting acquainted, the teacher conveys experientially Christ's incarnation by displaying the spiritual riches of connection with God, self, and others, and manifesting the presence of divine life and power, crucial re-sources used by God for advancing spiritual formation.

Overall, while the incarnational line of argument has its advocates, I find its specifics not as compelling and certainly not set on firm enough grounds to serve as foundation for the enterprise of formation at a distance. In particular, by directly seeking to rebut the erroneous claim that the incarnation justifies a residential rather than distance mode of theological education, that line of discourse seems to have entrapped itself.

2.3.2. Paul's letter-writing ministry and formation at a distance

Paul's letter-writing ministry has sometimes been mooted as the biblical evidence and model of the efficacy and efficiency of spiritual formation at distance. To cite Lowe and Lowe (2010a:96), 'If [the Apostle] Paul could facilitate spiritual transformation in his readers through the socially constructed mechanism of written letters, should we not expect similar results when using the socially constructed mechanism of electronically mediated communication?' In another publication, Lowe and Lowe (2010b:281–298) combined the educational theory of developmental interactionism with the pervasive Pauline notion of ἀλλήλων (one another) in his letters to argue that mutual reciprocity should be reflected in the quality of interactions in distance education. While these reflections move forwards the discussion as to the biblical theological basis of formation at a distance, they nevertheless lack sufficient robustness to undergird the enterprise as biblically mandated.

In this respect, the proposal by Forrest and Lamport (2013:110–124) pointing to parallels between how Paul related to the believers of Rome

through his letter to them, and how a professor may foster spiritual formation of their students at a distance, could be judged to be a worthwhile attempt to firmly ground formation at a distance on biblical grounds. Based on how Paul expresses his relationship with the Romans, Forrest and Lamport suggest eight implications for contemporary practice of formation at a distance. These are (a) the Gospel should remain the ground for formational action (b) scripture's authority is fundamental, (c) transparency through personalising the message, (d) dialogue as important component of formation, (e) community as locus of formation, (f) offering of encouragement to motivate the readers, (g) prayer is important, and (h) accountability is crucial.

Though the general principle that Paul would have understood himself as fostering formation of the Romans is correct, some of the correspondences that Forrest and Lamport propose between Paul's methods and the contemporary professor's methods of formation at a distance appear strained. In particular, the letter to the Romans served wider purposes beyond seeking to foster the formation of its readers in the bodily absence of the Apostle. This undermines the attempt at reading Romans as providing the sound mandate for formation at a distance. In the next and final section of this article, I propose that by contrast, the special genre of the Pastoral Epistles provides the firm mandate, model, and principles for biblically grounded ministerial formation at a distance.

3. The Pastoral Epistles as Biblical Mandate for Ministerial Formation at a Distance

By genre, the Pastoral Epistles were letters of mandate, that is, they mandated the named recipients who acted as leaders to fulfil the special tasks which Paul details in the letter. Yet, they were to be simultaneously read by two categories of audiences, namely, the named recipients (1 Tim

1:2; 2 Tim 1:2; Tit 1:4), and the congregations and their leaders (1 Tim 6:21; 2 Tim 4:22; Tit 3:15). This bi-optic genre of these letters contributes to their distinctive vocabularies, literary stylistics and theological proclivities that set them apart from the Apostle's other letters.

Also important was the specific socio-historical contexts in which the recipient leaders ministered. It is evident that both in Ephesus and Crete, there was a chaotic milieu of heterodox teachings with their concomitant heteropraxy that Paul envisaged to be of immense danger to the churches (1 Tim 1:3–11; 4:1–7; 6:3–5, 20–21; 2 Tim 2:14–26; 3:1–9,13; 4:1–5; Tit 1:10–16; 3:8–11). The result of these was social disorder, doctrinal deviations, and moral misconduct of adherents. It is this situation which accounts for the peculiar theological concerns of these letters (Knight III 1992:12; Köstenberger and Wilder 2010; Madsen 2010:219–240; Towner 1989:21–46).

Even though these literary-theological properties are considered by some scholars as placing the authenticity of these letters in question, there are better explanations for them. One such explanation is their unique design to foster the ministerial formation of the recipients in the apostle's physical absence. The triple concerns of these letters certainly suggest a concerted effort by Paul to provide the necessary theological resources in order to empower the ministers to address the contextual challenges they faced. Though Paul's needs also feature in the Pastoral Epistles, the contextual needs of its recipients govern the nature of the discourse so as to achieve the maximal formational impact. In other words, the Pastoral Epistles primarily played the function of ministerial formation at a distance taking due cognisance of the recipients' peculiar ministerial contexts.

It was the apostle's typical style to be personally immanent in all his letters. He saw his absence as a problem, and so constructed his letters in

a manner that would substitute for and project his presence among the recipients. To put it another way, Paul's letters mediated his presence in the community of believers. As he told the recalcitrant Corinthians, 'though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present I have already pronounced judgement' (1 Cor 5:3; cf. 2 Cor 10:11; Gal 1:19–20)⁷. His letters thus circumvented the challenges to his formative ministry posed by his absence.

Nowhere is this circumvention as intense as in the Pastoral Epistles. This intensification is achieved through three literary devices, namely, (a) Paul's literary actualisation of his relationship with the recipients, (b) Paul's personal appeals to himself as example for the readers to emulate, and (c) Paul's direct and forceful formational praxis. Together, these devices result in the Pastoral Epistles acquiring a unique genre of their own among the New Testament letters. I propose that these literary-theological devices and the resulting genre underline the Pastoral Epistles as the mandate and model of ministerial formation at a distance. And in this regard, 2 Tim 2:2—'and what you have heard from me through many witnesses entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others as well' embodies this theme. I now briefly summarise these devices.

3.1. Paul's literary actualization of his pastoral relationship in the Pastoral Epistles

One means by which Paul fosters his formation of these ministers at a distance is by means of literary devices which make him immanent in the letters and proceed to actualise his pastoral relationship with the recipient leaders. This also forms the basis of his formational praxes while absent. The first of these devices is his self-introductions. Thus all three letters begin with Paul's trademark introduction in his letters as apostle (1 Tim

⁷ All citations from the Bible are from the NRSV.

1:1; 2 Tim 1:1; Tit 1:1), and further as a slave of God (Tit 1:1). It is also his habit to make some modifications to his self-introductions and his descriptions of the recipients so as to establish the nature of the relationships and the concerns of the letter (Knight III 1992, 57). This again occurs in the Pastoral Epistles (Tit 1:1). As one would expect of a letter of mandate, Paul describes himself not just as apostle, but one appointed by God's will, thus underlying his authority serving under God (cf. Col 1:9–10).

The overall picture of Paul in the self-introductions of the Pastoral Epistles is as one who was keenly self-aware of his calling and responsibilities, as well as his authority to foster the transformation which the Gospel brings. It is in this light that Paul describes Timothy as 'my loyal child' (1 Tim 1:2) and 'my beloved child' (2 Tim 1:2), and Titus as 'my loyal child in the faith we share'. For Paul, the authority of apostleship was functional: it was authority to nurture and foster formation in believers under his care. Inherent in this relationship is mentorship, but there is more to it than that. It was a spiritual bond of accountability and mutual blessings of spiritual father and spiritual son.

This picture is replicated throughout the rest of the Pastoral Epistles. But it is more heightened in 2 Timothy in which Paul evidently foresees an imminent end to his ministry, and betrays his anxiety over the future spiritual health of the believers. So he speaks, for example, of his appointment as herald, and teacher not ashamed to continue that service and willing to suffer for it (2 Tim 1:11–12). He brings very fond memories to mind, mentioning Timothy's mother and grandmother by name (1:5), reminding the younger believer of the shared memories they had in Lystra, Iconium and Antioch (3:11), and Timothy's own ordination (1:6). He also relates his disappointment with the faithlessness of some (4:10.16), apprehension of antagonism of others (4:14–15), appreciation with gratitude of yet others (4:11; cf. 1 Tim 1:16–18), and

all within the context of his general sense of loneliness (4:16). This is Paul at his most vulnerable.

Such expressions of vulnerabilities and personalised attentiveness to his recipients undercut the argument of those scholars who see the Paul of the Pastorals in overly authoritative tones (e.g. Zamfir 2009:3–14). Rather, these are shared not just as a way of obtaining the sympathy and perhaps urgent arrival of Timothy back to him, but also as part of an intentional actualisation of his relationship with the recipients. As a spiritual father, Paul did not refrain from baring his soul to these leaders at a distance if through it he might foster their growth in Christ. To put it another way, these devices enable Paul to continue his formative pastoral relationship with the recipients in his absence. They form the basis for furthering the formative process, maintaining the strong formative bond and enabling Paul's impartation of himself to the 'spiritual son'. That is how to foster ministerial formation at a distance.

3.2. Paul's Personal appeals of himself as example in the Pastoral Epistles

Paul's personal references to his own experiences, thoughts, attitudes, and habits in all his letters are also well-known. They personalise his letters, symbolise his presence and strengthen his relationships. They also serve as formative model for his readers. That the Pastoral Epistles contain a significant number of these references therefore testifies to their nature as distinctively designed to form the recipients. So for example, after charging Timothy to stop the false teachers in Ephesus, Paul narrates how he himself had excommunicated other false teachers (1:20). After denouncing the false teachers that Timothy is to silence in Ephesus (1 Tim 1:8–11), Paul shares a testimony of his experience of the Gospel as a counterpoint, and exemplar of what 'sound teaching' achieves. 'I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I

received mercy' (1 Tim 1:13). Paul thus depicts himself as model of true conversion which legitimises his teachings over and against those of his opponents.

The exemplar theme is heightened in 2 Timothy. Timothy is exhorted to follow Paul's example and not be ashamed of suffering for the Gospel (1:8). Just as Paul has been entrusted with the Gospel (1:12), so also is Timothy urged to guard that 'good deposit entrusted' to him (1:14), and he to entrust it to other faithful believers (2:2), and so the chain continues. Timothy was to share in the suffering of Christ with Paul as joint-soldier (1:8; 2:3) and continue in what he had learnt as he received those from Paul (3:14). It is clear that as a lead worker, Paul intentionally regarded himself as exemplar so as to maximise his formative impact.

Where such appeals for emulation are not explicit in the letters, it is still no doubt the apostle's formational intention. So, for example, when he reminds Timothy that 'you have observed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness' (2 Tim 3:10), Paul was urging his partner to emulate his example. Similarly, when he declares that 'I have fought the good fight' (2 Tim 4:7), Paul was encouraging Timothy to take his cue from his perseverance. Paul intentionally shared his life's joys and pains, successes and failures, anxieties and aspirations, all as means of nurturing the formation of his readers.

3.3. Paul's formational praxes in the Pastoral Epistles

In addition to the literary devices he employs in order to foster ministerial formation at a distance, Paul also explicates some of his formational principles and practices. One key practice was his principle of leadership replication. In a recent assessment of the theology of the Pastoral Epistles, Köstenberger and Wilder (2010) propose that Paul's response to the false teachings was to emphasise the responsibility of the

ministerial recipients to act as stewards of the entrusted Gospel, interpret it correctly and live by it. They argue that the controlling metaphor of the pastorals was one of ‘estate stewardship’, with 2 Timothy 2:2 epitomising this concept.

The main weakness of this otherwise attractive proposal lies in the lack of explicit account in the Pastoral Epistles of the details of the Gospel that were to be entrusted to the stewards. The stewardship theme is no doubt consistently present, but it is not pervasive, and knowledge of the exact details of that which they were to steward is assumed and not elaborated. By contrast, Paul expresses concern that this entrusted Gospel that they were to steward be guarded through the replication of faithfully formed ministers. In other words, Paul’s primary concern in the Pastoral Epistles was the formative replication of faithful ministers who would thus ensure the perpetuity of the Gospel. Formation of the leaders into faithful stewards was more fundamental than restating the foundations of the Gospel they shared.

A second formational practice in the Pastoral Epistles is the apostle’s frequent exhortations, prayers, and benedictions. This practice is not unique to the Pastoral Epistles among his letters. However, they are modified and repeated in the Pastorals in such a manner as to exemplify ministerial formational practice at distance. Paul sometimes uses directive exhortations on how they should go about performing the duties they have been assigned. In passages such as 1 Timothy 1:3–11, 18–20; 2:1–15; 3:1–13; 4:1–5; 5:1–20; 6:1–10, 17–21; 2 Timothy 2:14–19; 3:1–9; Titus 1:5–16; 2:1–10; 3:1–3; 9–11, Paul shows his attention to detail in providing directives, guidance, and instructions for fulfilling their duties, while at the same time leaving room for their discretion and self-determination.

The apostle's exhortational focus was not just on their pastoral duties, but much more on their personal spiritual growth (1 Tim 3:14–15; 4:6–16; 5:21–25; 6:11–16; 2 Tim 1:3–18; 2:20–26; 3:10–17; 4:1–8; Tit 2:7–8; 2:11–15; 3:9). For example, he challenges Timothy to watch his conduct, to pay attention to his own spiritual growth, to develop the correct attitude to the opposite sex, and to money and generally, to make progress in his personal walk with the Lord; 'for in doing this you will save both yourself and your hearers' (1 Tim 4:16).

Paul charges Timothy to pursue a life of godliness with vigour, and to fight the good fight. He describes formation with the athletic metaphor of disciplinary training in godliness. He prays for Timothy 'night and day', while he remembers his young zeal with fondness, and so exhorts him to fan them into flames (2 Tim 1:3–7). He shows a keen interest in Timothy's personal affairs, to the extent that he conveys practical medical advice to his *protégé*. He urges, exhorts, charges and encourages Timothy, using short pithy phrases with forceful second person singular imperatives. All these indicate Paul's intentionality in seeking to foster the spiritual formation of Timothy at distance.

Other passages cite theological maxims or faithful sayings which summarise the faith Paul shared in common with those he sought to nurture (1 Tim 1:15; 3:16; 4:9; 2 Tim 1:9–10; 2:8–13; Tit 2:11–14; 3:4–8). These appear to serve as pithy summaries of knowledge that they shared that bonded him to his students (Campbell 1994:73–86). Paul's interest in the regulatory discipline in the churches in the Pastoral Epistles (Marshall and Towner 2004:52)⁸, though not his primary concern,

⁸ The title 'Pastoral Epistles' was first attached to these letters as recently as the 18th century. Before then, the Muratorian canon labelled the letters as useful for the 'regulation of ecclesiastical discipline' and several second-century Church Fathers repeat this description (Knight III 1992:3, 13).

nevertheless also contributes to providing social structure for effective ministerial formation.

It is fair to conclude that the Pastoral Epistles serve as suitable model for mandating, undergirding, and appraising ministerial formation by distance. Their unique genre indeed lends them to be regarded as an ancient handbook for that purpose. It certainly exudes the intentionality which is a prerequisite of any effective formational programme. It contains the literary properties that enable it to maximise the interactions and relational bonds necessary for that enterprise. It places the contextual needs of the recipients as prime in shaping this formational discourse. And it underlines the formational replication of leaders as its key concern. These and other features of the Pastoral Epistles support the thesis that they provide the biblical mandate, appropriate models and pastoral principles for maximising the efficacy and effectiveness of ministerial formation through distance education.

4. Conclusion

This article has sought to achieve three objectives. Firstly, it has reviewed the contours of the current debates regarding the efficacy and efficiency of fostering spiritual and ministerial formation through distance education. It found that the current research evidence indicates that there is little difference in outcomes when comparing distance with residential modes of formation, provided institutional intentionality is the same. Secondly, it critically appraised some of the research findings on measures which enhance formation at a distance. It found that institutions should focus on maximising intentionality in their formational praxes, interactions at all levels; judicious use of all the opportunities offered by current communication media, and underscores the primary role of instructors to model Christ-likeness. The article finally reviewed a

number of proposals put forward to support the biblical and theological underpinnings of formation at a distance. Some of these proposals have a number of weaknesses, which have been enumerated. On the other hand, the article has closely argued that the Pastoral Epistles do provide the biblical mandate, appropriate models, and pastoral principles for maximising the efficacy and effectiveness of ministerial formation through distance education.

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