

TEACHING AND LEARNING THEOLOGY IN THE ONLINE ENVIRONMENT.
By Matthew C. Ogilvie. Perth, Australia: Novum Organum Publications, 2015.
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Currently, many books have been written about distance education. The emphasis varies from book to book, but all deal with the same educational possibility. The advent of the internet, however, has opened educational possibilities that have not existed previously.

Dr. Matthew C. Ogilvie is an Australian Roman Catholic who has served as Professor of Theology at the University of Notre Dame, Australia, and for five years (2009–2014) served in the US as Dean of Philosophy and Theology at the University of Dallas, a Roman Catholic school. In addition to his continuing institutional involvement, he has been actively involved in efforts to teach and learn theology in an online environment.

Ogilvie is fair in his presentation of the advantages and disadvantages of both residential and distance education. His central concern is the difference between the transfer of what he calls “theological information” and the process that he calls “theological formation.” Theological information is the information that can be obtained from books, lectures, and other sources. This kind of information is important and a necessary part of theological education, but preparation for ministry involves much more than knowledge of a certain number of facts.

The truly important part of preparation for ministry involves theological formation. For Ogilvie, the goal is to “(i) engage students in the active pursuit of understanding and (ii) facilitate an active mediation between faith and culture/s” (Kindle Location 405). In other words, theological formation involves keeping students actively involved in word and deed by discovering and using the information they have mastered to build the necessary bridges between theological truth and the daily lives of believers.

An important question for the discussion then becomes, Is it better for theological formation to take place within a residential community of scholars and their students alone, or is it better if students are formed in the midst of the contexts that will actually be part of their continuing ministry? Information can be transferred anywhere, but where are the conversations best held where theological formation will take place? In Ogilvie’s view, valid theological formation cannot be assumed on a residential campus any more than its absence can be assumed in a distance course.

Ogilvie is at pains to show that his ideas about distance education are not simply his own opinions but are ideas derived from and supported by rigorous, published

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research. The book is not an easy read in the sense that the reader is continually referred to specific books and research papers (and since the book is presented in an electronic form, the links will frequently take the reader to the original article if desired), but since he is proposing an innovation, he recognizes the importance of demonstrating that his proposal stands within a recognized academic tradition.

Of course, this book is nearly ten years old now, and the blizzard of studies about the use of distance education in theological formation continues. The results generally are not different, but the research is repeated and refined. To put it in general terms, students in distance courses generally are satisfied with their instruction, feel that they learned as much away from campus as they learned on campus, received value for money on their investment, generally feel connected to their teachers and classmates, and most importantly, are willing to continue in their programs until they reach their goals.

Of particular interest in our present Lutheran situation is that distance education programs make preparation for ministry possible for students who otherwise would have no opportunity. Ogilvie is well aware that a host of problems including financial, cultural, racial, work, family, etc. prevent men who want to serve as pastors from pulling up stakes to move to a residential institution. The question is, Can the church find a way to use its available resources? For the most part, people who have chosen to be involved in distance education programs have their own valid reasons for not choosing to be a part of residential education.

Following other researchers, Ogilvie characterizes an online learner as a person who (1) has an independent self-concept and who can direct his or her own learning, (2) has accumulated a reservoir of life experiences that is a rich resource for learning, (3) has learning needs closely related to changing social roles, (4) is problem-centered and interested in immediate application of knowledge, and (5) is motivated to learn by internal rather than external factors (Location 702). Fortunately, God has blessed Lutheran congregations with no lack of such people.

This is an interesting read to prepare for changes that are inevitably coming. The Association of Theological Schools (the accrediting agency for seminaries in the US and Canada) has given approval for more than 200 seminaries to make use of varying levels of distance education techniques in their programs. (This includes the two Missouri Synod seminaries and virtually all other Lutheran seminaries in the US.) Almost all-American seminaries are looking at various ways to incorporate at least some aspect of distance education to improve and expand their programs.

The need for ministry is not negotiable. Ministry is a gift of the Lord to His people, and the methods of preparation for that task must be carefully considered. However, the means of preparing ministers for the task of ministry *is* negotiable. The Lord of the Church did not mandate either the course of instruction or the institutions needed to prepare for ministry. Seminaries were not created as an answer to the Church's need

for ministerial formation until the Early Modern period, and Luther himself taught in the hurly-burly of a newly created university, not a seminary. Now the Church needs to search out answers to fulfill its need for ministry in a very different Post-Modern world. It has fantastic resources in its seminaries, who are already involved in the search for a more excellent ministry, and as Ogilvie makes clear, it is surrounded by a host of new opportunities.

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