

The Challenges of Distance Theological Education¹

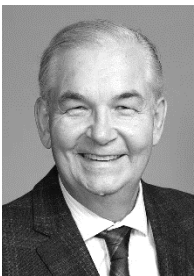
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Abstract

Distance models of theological education are here to stay. As a result of the pandemic, many seminaries, institutions and faculty members that approached it with derision, or at least a high degree of skepticism, were forced to experiment with distance models, making the best of it with the technology at hand. This has meant that more and more theological educators have had experience with distance learning and bring to the debate new experiences and insights regarding its pros and cons. While distance learning is here to stay, it is no universal remedy for the ministerial training needs of the church. However, those interested in moving to distance learning models must do so with a clear picture of both the significant challenges and the opportunities.

I. Introduction

Distance theological education² at times and among certain groups has been promoted as a panacea for solving the changing ministry needs of the church in today's world. However, my forty-year history of working with and studying a variety of models that have evolved through the years, even going back to early experiments and movements that emerged in Central America in the 1960s, has made it abundantly clear that distance learning models pose significant challenges as well. While there are compelling examples of how distance learning has benefited the church and her mission, one should not make the mistake of oversimplifying the barriers or difficulties



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that distance learning presents if one endeavors to pursue it in a responsible and legitimate manner.

When considering the title of this paper, “The Challenges of Distance Theological Education,” we might consider at least two perspectives. From one angle, we can look at the *complexities and difficulties* that non-traditional programs of theological education face. For example, one can critique distance programs in terms of how well they are administered, how well they prepare participants for ministry, how credible they are in the eyes of stakeholders, how efficient and useful they are in meeting the needs of the church, how they provide for theological formation, and what difficulties participants face along the way. These are important questions, and I will address some of them here.

Alternatively, one can see this title in a slightly different light: “The Challenges of Distance Theological Education” can be seen in terms of the question, In what ways do the non-residential, non-traditional models challenge the assumptions, values, pedagogic methodologies and results of the traditional, residential seminary model of ministerial formation? That is to say, What, if anything, do the non-residential programs of theological education have to teach those of us involved in more traditional, residential institutions? I think we must look at this theme from both perspectives, for while I will readily admit that there are problems, questions, and issues to be addressed in the non-traditional training programs I have seen and experienced,³ I am also convinced that the proponents of these alternative programs⁴ have raised some important considerations that anyone interested in well-rounded, functional ministerial formation must take seriously. This is especially true when considering the missional context in which the church lives.

II. Debate Concerning Purpose and Goals of Theological Education

Since the early 1980s, there has been a great deal of debate, especially among mainline Protestants in the United States, over the nature, purpose, and goals of theological education. This discussion was launched in large part by the 1983 publication of Edward Farley's work, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education*.⁵ Farley pointed to the fact that the older conception of theology as *habitus* had been lost somewhat. He claimed that there was a lack of coherence in theological education due to the fragmentation of curriculum into the various disciplines and sub-disciplines, each often pursuing its specialty independently from the others. He claimed that theological education has evolved, especially since the time of the implementation of Schleiermacher's ideas at the University of Berlin, so that today, at least among mainline Protestants in the United States, there is little that holds it together:

The divinity approach is largely replaced with a plurality of “theological sciences” requiring specialist teachers. The shift was not from piety to learning. A learned ministry was never seriously questioned in many of the church traditions. The shift was from one meaning of learning to another, from study which deepens heartfelt

knowledge of divine things to scholarly knowledge of relatively discrete theological sciences.⁶

The impact of these developments on the ministry, according to Farley, was that “the direction is . . . from office to profession.”⁷ For confessional Lutheran theological educators with a high view of the office of the public ministry, such a move is a concern.

Daniel Aleshire, the longtime executive director of the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada, brings the ongoing reflection about the direction of theological education in light of the church’s current needs to the present day in his extended essay published under the title, *Beyond Profession: The Next Future of Theological Education*.⁸ He documents the evolution among many seminaries in the United States to what has become a self-understanding of their mission as that of providing specialized, academic training coupled with a view of the goal being “profession,” akin to law schools and medical schools. He asserts that toward the end of the twentieth century the need for attention to *spiritual* concerns on the part of some of the institutions was called into question. He argues, “The introduction of curricular attention to personal and spiritual formation was contested because it was not considered the proper work of graduate schools or because the schools did not have the educational practices that this addition would require.”⁹

Hence, the title of his book, *Beyond Profession*. His concern is that theological education should be more than mere intellectual knowledge and professional training, and even more than the “joy of salvation.” He argues that it should have a holistic goal that includes knowledge, surely, but also affective and behavioral aspects that come about by the handing down of a long tradition. This will factor into the concerns often expressed over how to account for the formative dimension at a distance. Aleshire puts it this way:

The wisdom of God and the ways of God—this longing for and loving of God, this understanding that accrues from the centuries and cultures that people have longed for God—are *fashioned from intellectual, affective, and behavioral understanding*—these very different ways of comprehending, leaning into, and learning. The goal of theological education, however, is not the joy of knowing God and the things of God, satisfying as that may be, but *spiritual and moral maturity, relational integrity, knowledge of the Scripture and tradition, and the capacity to exercise religious leadership*.¹⁰

This decades-long conversation, I believe, has been helpful to traditional seminaries as it has sought to restore what we would consider to be a fundamental goal, perhaps *the* fundamental goal, of theological education: the formation of a *habitus practicus* shaped by the theology of the cross in community. It has served to help theological educators reflect upon the place of theology in its primary sense in theological education¹¹ and has caused us to consider the important question of coherence in our seminary programs.¹² Moreover, this discussion is important because

many critiques leveled against distance theological education have to do with the question of *formation* and how it should best be provided for.

III. Contextual Concerns

Many of these questions raised today in North American seminaries have been under discussion for a long time by missiologists, especially during the past one hundred years. As missionaries in the twentieth century went out from western lands to proclaim the Gospel, they were faced with the immediate problem of how to form workers to minister to the numerous new congregations. The need to prepare local pastors was obvious. It was only logical that early missionaries believed the education of local clergy could best be accomplished by establishing institutions similar to the ones they had attended. Therefore, residential seminaries were set up to duplicate, in as much as possible, the design, methodology, and curriculum of the seminaries in the United States and Europe.

The results, however, in terms of preparing effective local, autochthonous ministries, were sometimes viewed as less than satisfactory. Although the academic level of these institutions was frequently quite high, the graduating students sometimes did not satisfy the ministry needs of the church. In some cases, students became deculturated from their context of origin after four to five years of life in a residential seminary so that they were incapable (either psychologically, culturally, or socioeconomically) of returning to the context of from which they had come.¹³ Others grew intellectually, but it became apparent that some did not have a vocation for ministry and used their training to obtain positions in the secular world.¹⁴ In addition, the cost of operating the residential seminaries in areas where the church was still in its formative stages and relatively small was beyond the reach of the nascent churches. To illustrate, in 1986 Jose Fuliga, former president of the Philippine Lutheran Church, reported that the budget of the Lutheran Theological Seminary in the Philippines was about \$220,000 annually (the equivalent of \$604,000 today), yet it was graduating an average of only 1.5 students per year.¹⁵

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Moreover, many felt that some candidates for ministry were not credible in their home contexts. José Fuliga saw this happening in the Philippines, for example, when he observed that, sometimes, theological education had not prepared the men most likely to be respected in their communities for ministry. Rather, he states, “the grave men of the church” and “the natural teachers” are co-opted by “either a foreigner

or someone who has come with a foreign education.”¹⁶ These kinds of concerns gave rise to the desire for other models of theological education in mission settings, especially what today we would call distance models.

While finances played a role, it was also maintained by the proponents of alternative approaches to theological education that the non-formal, non-traditional models that are now being utilized in many parts of the world have not been merely the result of a lack of resources or the result of a desire to do theological education more quickly and cheaply. Rather, in many cases the alternatives were born of a desire to meet the needs of the church for effective ministers and to prepare apt candidates for ministry in ways more aligned with the contexts in which they will serve.

IV. The Rise of Distance Theological Education

While there are a variety of non-traditional methodologies through which theological education can be carried out, a model that has had considerable impact is theological education by extension. It was begun when the Presbyterian Church in Guatemala noted difficulties with their residential seminary similar to those mentioned above. Although most of the Presbyterian churches were located in the western highlands, the seminary was located in Guatemala City. And, while most of the members of the church were from the Mayan-Quiché people, the student body of their residential seminary was made up mainly of Spanish speaking *Ladinos*, who were little inclined and ill-prepared to go to the impoverished rural areas to live and work among the semi-literate church population.¹⁷

In 1963, the Presbyterian Church decided to bring theological education to where most of the church membership was, and the seminary was moved to the small town of San Felipe in the mountains of the department of Retalhuleu. It was also recognized that a different teaching methodology would have to be employed if the new program was going to meet the ministry needs of the church. There was a shortage of pastors, and a strategy for enrolling more students was needed. To meet this need, the seminary implemented an extension model so that students could remain in their contexts with their families and keep their occupations while still pursuing a theological education.

Thus, the movement called Theological Education by Extension (TEE) was launched.¹⁸ The three founding faculty members of the new seminary in Guatemala shared their insights with other Christian missionaries and churches around the world, and the movement spread and grew tremendously. It is difficult to know the number of TEE or distance programs around the world used by virtually every denomination today, but there are hundreds if not thousands.

As mentioned above, the design of non-traditional programs has not been viewed solely in pragmatic terms. It is not mainly a matter of doing theological education more cheaply, more easily, or with less work; rather, advocates have pointed out that there were and are certain pedagogical and theological presuppositions underlying such approaches.

Pedagogically, most non-formal programs of theological education have sought to incorporate the latest insights from the field of adult education, or andragogy. One can debate the validity or appropriateness of some of these philosophies of education; however, concepts such as the “action/reflection/action” pattern, and the insights of

educators such as Paulo Freire, Robert Carkhuff, Arthur Combs, Malcolm Knowles, and Jean Piaget are often cited as vital to distance education models.¹⁹

The early models of distance education were very simple.²⁰ They usually included three dimensions: (1) Self-study materials that the student completes at home; (2) in-ministry activities that the student is expected to carry out; and (3) regular “seminars” at an “extension center” in which the students can reflect both upon what they have learned cognitively and how it applies to their ministry experience. Today, the third component, the “extension center,” has been essentially replaced with online means such as digital discussion boards, chat rooms, and/or streaming video sessions. Yet, those regular times of meeting together, even if only virtually, continue to play an important role. Proponents of non-formal theological education are convinced that the *processes* of theological education are just as important as the content and that the experiential dimension is essential.²¹ They propose that such factors have been ignored for too long in many residential seminaries. Most distance ministerial training programs emphasize the need to be intimately connected to the church so that theological *formation* can take place in a dynamic of engagement with the people of God in their regular lives.

This emphasis on the experiential has a theological rationale. Charles Wood, in his book *Vision and Discernment*, expresses the validity of how earlier theologians conceptualized theological study.²² He points to Luther, who refused to draw a dichotomy between theory and practice. Luther recognized the experiential dimension in the making of a theologian when he spoke of *tentatio* or *Anfechtung*. He said that only in *tentatio* does one really learn the meaning of Scripture: “I did not learn my divinity at once, but was constrained by my temptations to search deeper and deeper; for no man, without trials and temptations, can attain a true understanding of the Holy Scriptures.”²³ This *tentatio* is a real experience of struggle and temptation that can only take place in the arena of life and ministry. Any purely speculative or theoretical approach to theology was deficient, according to Luther. One of his most powerful sayings for the young pastor or student experiencing trial was, “*Vivendo, immo moriendo et damnando fit theologus, non intelligendo, legendo aut speculando*”²⁴: In the trials of life and ministry experience is the theologian made.²⁵

The nature and process for theological formation is important to the debate concerning residential versus distance theological education because much of the concern revolves around the issue of theological formation, how and where it happens.

V. “Challenges” to Traditional Programs

As mentioned above, distance or extension theological education has sometimes been promoted as the universal remedy for all the ills and problems associated with traditional means of providing effective and faithful ministry in the Christian Church. It is widely recognized, however, that there are problems and difficulties to be overcome in non-residential programs. It is also true that a polarization has taken place between theological educators from the residential seminaries and those who work with and advocate non-formal, alternative models. This polarization has been due, in part at least, to the harsh criticisms that the early proponents of distance or “contextual” models were leveling against the residential seminaries. Some would passionately

assert that the residential seminaries were “stifling, impeding, and thwarting” the growth of the Church. Today, however, most recognize that the non-formal options for contextual theological education should not be seen as replacements, but rather as complementary aspects to residential seminaries.

In summary, I would like to reiterate some of the advantages or positive aspects of certain non-formal or non-traditional programs. There are ways in which alternative models “challenge” our assumptions and methodologies. Some of those have become apparent in the earlier discussion of pedagogical theory, methodology, candidate selection practices, etc.

Conducted in Context

Distance theological education does not decontextualize learners the way residential programs might. Distance programs can allow participants to learn and grow without removing them, whether geographically, psychologically, or socially, so far from their contexts that they have great difficulty returning to the places where they are expected to serve. For example, the Ethnic Immigrant Institute of Theology, a distance program leading to ordination in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, makes it possible for the natural spiritual leadership of a particular ethnic and/or linguistic group to remain in their context throughout their theological educational program. Their context is *missional*. If a candidate for ministerial leadership were to be removed from the lives of their nascent flock for four years or more, it is easier for the flock to become scattered. The proponents of distance theological education would say that the goal of theological education is to form pastors and deaconesses who are prepared to minister faithfully among their own people in contexts that vary vastly from the sheltered walls of residential theological seminaries.

Provides for the Experiential Dimension

Good distance programs rely more heavily on the dynamic of engagement in the training processes. This can have the effect of deepening the student's understanding of theological concepts as they see how they are related more directly to the needs and problems of people in real-life ministry situations.²⁶

The question of “formation” is of paramount importance in relation to the role of experience in making a theologian since how and where formation takes place is probably the most contentious point of debate between proponents of residential and distance programs. Where does the formation of a theological *habitus* take place? How is it best provided for? Proponents of non-formal programs would say that it takes place best in the context of ministry, where the students can wrestle with the tough questions and issues that one involved in ministry must confront during his or her time of study. Others would say that there are certain important formative processes that can best be carried out through the community life of a seminary, which includes plenty of time for interaction among teachers and students—most importantly, through the worship life of the seminary community, as all are brought together in God's presence to hear His Word and receive the Sacraments. This is, I believe, the crux of matter regarding the question of non-residential versus residential theological

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education. In other words, are theologians formed by and in the church or by and in the school? The answer is no doubt both. Both contexts for ministerial formation are valid and legitimate, although they are different.

Cost Effective

A pragmatic point is that distance theological education can be cost effective. Instead of one hundred students moving themselves and their families to a centralized location, for example, one teacher can connect virtually with students in various locations of life and ministry. Instead of maintaining a large, expensive-to-maintain, centralized campus, the facilities of local churches and other venues can be put to use for distance learning opportunities.

Theological Education Available to More Students

This is related to the previous point. Non-formal programs can make theological education accessible to many more students. Just as the invention of the printing press is said to have brought about a democratization of knowledge during Luther's time, and that modern digital technology brings about another revolution in terms of the dissemination of knowledge to all, some argue that distance models can bring about a democratization of theological education.²⁷ Not all distance students will go on to prepare themselves for the pastoral or diaconal ministry, but it has been seen that many who might not otherwise be able to receive advanced theological education are afforded the possibility of doing so through a variety of non-formal models.

Supports Ministerial Candidate Selection Processes

Many of the "grave men" of the church and the "natural teachers" can participate while maintaining their relationships with their communities. Learning about potential candidate's community relationships actually helps measure their attitude and aptitude for real-life ministry as part of the application and admissions screening, when oftentimes that is not fully known until after graduation and placement.

Open Ended

A non-formal program is more open ended. Participants can embark upon a study program more easily because they do not have to go through the disruption of moving themselves and their families to a centralized location. There is the personal risk and significant expense involved with uprooting oneself, and sometimes an entire family. If a student comes to the realization that pastoral ministry or diaconal ministry is not for him or her, or if the church should conclude that the candidate is not fit for ministry, it is much easier for the individual to gracefully withdraw from a distance program. It is not considered a mistake, nor does it create a stressful and possibly embarrassing situation for the student who withdraws from his or her studies if it does not involve having to return home after "failing" at the seminary.

VI. Disadvantages, Problems, and Challenges of Distance Theological Education

At the same time, several concerns and issues have been raised by those both inside and outside of the alternative models. These challenges must be carefully considered.

Lack of Credibility

In many places, the distance programs of theological education have not achieved the credibility necessary for them to be fully recognized by the participants and/or the church. One of the reasons, perhaps, is that much of the older leadership in churches has come from the residential model, and they view the new model as inferior or second-rate.²⁸ There is a common misconception that an inherent requirement for public ministry is a residential seminary degree. For many people, the unmarked meaning of the word “ordained” is “graduated from a four-year residential seminary.” However, over the course of history there have been many paths to ordained ministry, and the current model of the theological seminary is a relatively new development.

That is not to say the four-year seminary model is not a good development. I would hope that it has been a positive development, as we constantly attempt to improve how those who are called and ordained to proclaim the Gospel will be prepared for this office within increasingly complex and challenging contexts. The same goes for deaconess training and their valid and legitimate call. Ordination, especially from a Lutheran theological perspective, has never been simply a matter of graduation from a residential seminary. Yet, with all the talk about the insights of adult education theory and methodology, contextualization and the importance of the experiential dimension notwithstanding, the alternative models continue to suffer from a lack of credibility, especially if they are not accredited.

Lack of Accreditation

Related to the lack of credibility is the practical concern for accreditation. Our distance students, especially those who come from underrepresented ethnic or linguistic groups, desire to achieve an accredited academic degree of some kind. The fact that some distance theological education programs are not accredited has undermined their credibility, and students sometimes feel limited in their potential for leadership in the church, even if duly ordained or installed, because they do not have an accredited theological degree.

Lack of Administrative Support

There are many difficulties inherent in the administration of such a program. Some of this is because students are separated from one another and from the headquarters of the program, sometimes by great distances. Students often participate irregularly. Probably most distance theological education programs suffer from

understaffing. Non-formal programs of theological education require a great deal of administrative support in areas such as the collection of fees, management of budget, student records, scheduling of classes, production of materials, preparation of faculty for online teaching, course development, etc. Often these are not adequately provided for, and the programs suffer from a lack of credibility as a result.

Overuse of Adjunct Faculty

It has been the experience of many distance programs that a greater proportion of the teaching faculty is made up of adjunct instructors, who are not fully connected to the institution providing the courses. The use of adjunct faculty can surely be a great blessing, yet students in distance programs would benefit from greater exposure to the regular faculty of an institution.

Course Development

Often, a regular faculty member simply does not have the time to fully develop an online course. It requires a different approach to teaching/learning, and a great deal of preparation up front. In the Auburn study (*Not Being There*), researchers found that two of the greatest challenges for schools in carrying out distance theological education, were, first, the demands it puts on a faculty member in terms of *time*, and, second, the training that is necessary to properly develop and teach a course. Seventy-five percent of those surveyed said that the “amount of time to teach and assess online students was more or far more than the time it took to teach and assess students in a traditional classroom.”²⁹ This is a factor that administrators often overlook or fail to account for when making teaching assignments. Any faculty member who has taught extensively in a face-to-face classroom will report that it is much less work than developing and teaching a course online.

Time Management

We have also found that time management, both on the part of the students and the instructor, can be a major challenge. Life can easily get in the way for both, and soon a week or two can have passed without students and/or faculty members checking into the LMS to respond to posts and questions or to review assignments. This is a serious issue, and it is important for an institution to enforce a certain discipline for the sake of the students and the legitimacy of the program. It is only to be expected that participation in a non-formal, distance theological education program often presents a great challenge for students. They must somehow balance family life, occupation, and ministry responsibilities with a program of studies. Sometimes family responsibilities and work duties make it difficult for students to find time for their studies, and they simply cannot do it, or they do not have the time to do the work well.

Distance Learning is Not for Everyone

Distance and non-formal education is not for those who do not possess the self-discipline, study habits, or internal self-motivation to complete their assignments and projects in a timely manner. A student who does not respond to emails, text messages, or phone calls will have difficulty in the more flexible and somewhat less-structured environment. Cultural differences can play into this as well. Someone from a more communal culture will benefit a great deal from opportunities for “personal” interactions, such as video conferencing with the entire cohort. Some of the distance programs I have been involved with are almost exclusively text based, with the major mode of interaction being extensive readings and writing. That mode of communication and engagement is not adequate for everyone, and some cannot thrive in such an impersonal environment.

Lack of “Social Presence”

The fact that the student is doing a great part of his or her learning at a distance from the professor means that ongoing opportunities for dialogue, evaluation, and mentoring can be more difficult to maintain. This can make it difficult for the teacher to accurately assess the progress of the student in a holistic way. It is important for those contemplating the implementation of a distance learning program to account for this factor and build in ways to provide for it. All too often, however, it is not adequately addressed, and the course of study becomes little more than a “correspondence course.” Some form of social presence must be intentionally built into distance programs to provide for a more holistic preparation. John Cartwright, Gabriel Etzel, Christopher Jackson, and Timothy Paul Jones in their book, *Teaching the World: Foundations for Online Theological Education*, readily admit the loss of social presence in online learning. Responding to certain scholars who have critiqued the validity of online learning, they state. “[T]hey are correct in their concern that certain opportunities for formation are lost in online formats—opportunities like shared meals, prayers, and worship.” Thus, they assert, “Theological institutions, accrediting agencies, and potential students should attend to this application when making decisions about the place of online formats in theological education.”³⁰ In spite of these observations, the authors propose ways to address the need for social presence in a constructive way.

Lack of Formation in Community

Related to this is the question of formation discussed above. How is the kind of formation described by Martin Luther to be provided for when the students are not afforded opportunities for ongoing contact with their professors and fellow students, and are not brought together regularly, daily, in Word and prayer? This lack of community is lamented by one professor from Iliff School of Theology:

Once we began teaching online, we had less control of the formative environment of our students. They are in their own

community and not as immersed in our community and culture as a school. We've had to wrestle with this more; they aren't getting the Iliff culture through the informal and implicit curriculum in the same way they used to.³¹

Another states,

Personal relationships are more difficult. . . . It doesn't lend itself to people coming by your office, or to following you down the hall. There's a good part of seminary education that happens in private, face-to-face [interactions]. Our students feel free when they see you in person. You're their professor and they want to talk with you and pray with you. The more intimate education moment that takes place in a residential student, that's missing.³²

Without a doubt, the sentiments of the above professors are valid and important. Indeed, the Association of Theological Schools seeks to measure and assess what it calls "co-curricular activities" that are a part of the seminary experience, like chapel, but also sports, informal gatherings, clubs, debates, talent shows, etc., all of which contribute in some way to building a sense of community and formation.

Feeling a Loss of Control

Related to the above is the concern often voiced by teachers that they do not have adequate control over the learning experience. The students are more on their own to carry out their studies and sometimes need additional help that is not readily available. The use of local pastors as facilitators helps greatly to reduce this tension, but experience in using local pastors as mentors has been uneven: sometimes very effective and sometimes not so much.

Relationship to the Church as a Whole

Some fear that those who participate exclusively in distance programs of theological education will not grow the kind of bonds and relationships with their fellow students that the residential students have the opportunity to experience. This could result in less of a commitment to the church body as a whole. The student may not experience the same connection with the wider church if his or her formation takes place almost exclusively in a local ministry.

VII. Conclusion

As can be seen, there are challenges and difficulties to be faced. The non-formal, non-traditional programs that have been implemented around the world are not the universal remedy that some proponents claim they might be. A good distance theological education program requires a commitment to invest time and money to carry it out in a responsible way. It is not an "easy out," either for students or for the

institutions. Understanding the limitations of distance education is essential, just as it is essential to understand the limitations of residential theological formation.

However, the proliferation of extension and distance models demonstrates that the church and her institutions see value in them for meeting the challenges of providing ministerial formation for the wide variety of contexts in which Christian ministry takes place. The pandemic has only accelerated the use of distance models and has forced institutions, faculty, and staff members who may have been dragging their feet to find ways to carry out their mission in a new way. Distance theological education is not going away. The challenges that have been discussed here can, in fact, be met in order to responsibly and effectively offer distance education.

There are caveats and issues, though, that need to be explored further and addressed. More study is needed, especially regarding the impact of the pandemic on distance theological education, as well as honest assessments of strengths and weaknesses. As Richard Ascough remarks, “Good pedagogy requires an awareness of the opportunities and limitations of the mode of education.”³³ This goes for any mode of education. My hope is that we can evaluate and appreciate the strengths and weaknesses of all models and continue the process of improving theological education, whether it be the residential seminary, a distance model, a combination, or some other way that we have forgotten (or have yet to discover) for the preparation of men and women to serve faithfully in the mission and ministry of the church.

ENDNOTES

¹ This is a significantly revised and updated version of a paper delivered at the World Seminaries Conference of the International Lutheran Council in Canoas, Brazil. Douglas L. Rutt, “The Challenges of ‘Non-Seminary’ Training” in *Preparing Lutheran Pastors for Today: ILC - Theological Seminaries World Conference* (Canoas, Brazil: Editoria da ULBRA, 2006), 293–316.

² When one thinks of distance learning today, it is usually assumed that we are talking about *online* distance learning. Obviously, digital educational technology has advanced amazingly during that past twenty years, and online platforms such as the various learning management systems (LMS), video conferencing (e.g., Zoom), and digitalized library resources have become pretty much ubiquitous in distance programs. The discourse today usually revolves around *online* distance education, represented by the acronym ODE. For this paper, I mostly use the more generic term, *distance learning*. Moreover, I prefer *learning over education* because of my own commitments to seeing education as a process and as learner *focused*.

³ My personal experience includes involvement in distance theological education programs in Latin America, membership in the LCMS’s original DELTO (Distance Education Leading to Ordination) steering committee, the SMP (Specific Ministry Pastor) steering committee at its inception, and several years as dean for distance learning at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana. I have also taught online courses for Grand Canyon University.

⁴ Educators like to speak of three categories when describing educational programs: *formal*, *informal*, and *non-formal*. *Formal* education refers to organized institutional education recognized by the society in which it exists. It is preparation that takes place in institutions set up to offer programmatic instruction leading to degrees or other recognized closure incentives. *Informal* refers to training that takes place in the context of normal life activities. It does not necessarily mean “unintentional,” but rather that the training revolves around normal situations that arise in life. *Non-formal* education refers to semi-organized preparation that

usually takes place outside the jurisdiction of formal training. It refers to organized, non-programmatic, functional training that focuses on skills and knowledge that can be immediately applied to practical ministry, much like an apprenticeship. See Robert Clinton, *Leadership Training Models* (Altadena, California: Barnabas Resources, 1986), 131–150. While distance theological education programs can be quite formal in their approach, generally they would be classified as non-formal, in that, usually, they intentionally incorporate intensive ministry experiences into the learning processes, although this may be changing.

⁵ Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983). The discussion on the purpose and aim of theological education in America goes back to Kelly's study of theological education in 1924 and Richard Niebuhr's classic study of 1956. See Robert L. Kelly, *Theological Education in America: A Study of One Hundred Sixty-one Theological Schools in the United States and Canada* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1924); Richard H. Niebuhr, *The Purpose of the Church and its Ministry: Reflections on the Aims of Theological Education* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956).

Moreover, Farley's work sparked a profusion of literature on the topic of the formative side of theological understanding and education over the next couple of decades. For representative examples, see Paul Merritt Bassett, ed., *The Aims and Purposes of Evangelical Theological Education*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000); Don. S. Browning, David Polk, and Ian S. Evison, eds., *The Education of the Practical Theologian: Responses to Joseph Hough and John Cobb's "Christian Identity and Theological Education,"* in *Scholars Press Studies in Theological Education* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989); Clark W. Gilpin, "Theological Education as the Formation of Character," *Theological Education*, Supplement 1, 24 (July 1988): 5–10; Joseph C. Hough, "The Education of Practical Theologians," *Theological Education* 20, no.2 (Spring 1984): 55–84; Joseph C. Hough and John B. Cobb, *Christian Identity and Theological Education*, *Studies in Religious and Theological Scholarship* (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1985); David H. Kelsey and Barbara G. Wheeler, "The ATS Basic Issues Research Project: Thinking about Theological Education," *Theological Education* 30 no. 2 (Spring 1994); Alan E. Lewis, "The Makings of a Theologian," *Insights* 109 (Spring 1994): 29–38; Charles M. Wood, *Vision and Discernment: An Orientation in Theological Study*, *Studies in Religious and Theological Scholarship*, (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989) and *An Invitation to Theological Study* (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1994); John Haddon Leith, *Crisis in the Church: The Plight of Theological Education* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997).

In addition, David H. Kelsey published two works that were exceedingly influential in the debate revolving around the nature of theology and its relationship with theological education in general: *To Understand God Truly: What's Theological about a Theological School*, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992) and *Between Athens and Berlin: The Theological Education Debate*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing: 1993).

⁶ Farley, 10.

⁷ Farley, 11.

⁸ Daniel O. Aleshire, *Beyond Profession: The Next Future of Theological Education* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021).

⁹ Aleshire, 30.

¹⁰ Aleshire, 86, italics in original.

¹¹ Robert Ferris, "The Role of Theology in Theological Education," in *With an Eye on the Future: Development and Mission in the 21st Century*, ed. Duane Elmer and Louis McKinney (Monrovia, California: MARC, 1996) and "The Future of Theological Education," in *Cyprus: TEE Come of Age*, ed. Robert Youngblood (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1984), 101–111.

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¹² Samuel F. Rowen, “Missiology and the Coherence of Theological Education, in *With an Eye on the Future: Development and Mission in the 21st Century*, ed. Duane Elmer and Louis McKinney (Monrovia, California: MARC, 1996).

¹³ Years ago, I heard this complaint from the laymen of the Lutheran congregations in the north of Brazil. The north of Brazil is quite different socially, economically, and culturally than the south of Brazil. Northern Brazil evidences much more African and Native American influence, while the south of Brazil is much more heavily influenced by European culture. At a regional conference I attended in the late 1990s, the lay-leadership of the northern regions verbalized that they had sent several of their sons south for seminary training, but by the time they completed their program of study, they had little inclination to return to the northern regions, preferring calls to the well-established congregations in the south where what they learned in the seminary would have more direct application than to the largely missional contexts of the north.

¹⁴ The classic texts describing these issues as they immersed are Herbert Zorn's *Viability in Context: A Study of the Financial Viability of Theological Education in the Third World—Seedbed or Sheltered Garden?* (Kent, England: The Theological Education Fund, 1975), and James Bergquist and P. Kamar Manickam's *The Crisis of Dependency in Third World Ministries: A Critique of Inherited Missionary Forms in India* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1974).

¹⁵ Jose B. Fuliga, “The Past, Present, and Evolving Theological Education in the Lutheran Church in the Philippines,” *Evangelium* (1987), 102–113. The Seminario Augsburguro of Mexico City, operated jointly by the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod and the American Lutheran Church from 1964 to 1981, is another instance of the challenges that were observed with this type of residential seminary in certain contexts, at least as it was being operated at the time. During its seventeen-year history, it graduated twenty students from Central America. Of those twenty, only two were serving in Latin America by the year 2000; today, only one. Several immigrated to the United States to minister here, others went on to work in secular occupations.

¹⁶ Fuliga, 105.

¹⁷ This experiment of the Presbyterian Church of Guatemala became known as “theological education by extension” (TEE). It was developed in Guatemala through the work of people like James Emory, Ross Kinsler, and Ralph Winter, who were instrumental in the creation of the extension seminary for the Presbyterian church and mission. Around the same time, Lutheran missionaries in Guatemala were developing their own extension program for the training of catechists. See Rudy Blank, “Theological Education by Extension,” *Lutheran Mission Matters* 28, no. 2 (November 2020): 286.

¹⁸ See Marcos Kempff, “A Journey from Antigua Guatemala to St. Louis, Missouri: How Theological Education by Extension (TEE) Became a Reality for US Hispanic/Latina Lutheran Leadership Formation,” *Lutheran Mission Matters* 28, no. 2 (November 2020): 291–307.

¹⁹ Ferris, “The Future of Theological Education,” 46–52.

²⁰ The principal accreditation agency for theological education in the US and Canada, the Association of Theological Schools, has recognized and set standards for extension and distance education, although the recognition did not come easily (see Elizabeth Patterson, “The Questions of Distance Education,” *Theological Education* 33, no. 1, (1996): 59–74.) In the ten years between 2006 and 2016, ATS online enrollment spiked by 195%, while overall enrollment declined by 11%. See Sharon Miller and Christian Scharen, (*Not*) *Being There: Online Distance Theological Education* (New York: Auburn Seminary, 2017), 9, <https://auburnseminary.org/report/not-being-there>. This report is highly recommended for anyone interested in understanding the development and challenges of online distance learning

in recent years. The title of the report reflects a response to an influential study produced in 1997, which evaluated the impact of a school's culture on theological formation. Both *Being There* and *(Not) Being There* is a good starting point for further reflection on the advantages and disadvantages of residential and distance theological education programs. See Jackson W. Carroll, Barbara G. Wheeler, Daniel O. Aleshire, and Penny Long Marler, *Being There: Culture and Formation in Two Theological Schools* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

²¹ Ferris, "The Future of Theological Education," 45.

²² Charles M. Wood, *Vision and Discernment: An Orientation in Theological Study*, Studies in Religious and Theological Scholarship (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989).

²³ Martin Luther, "Of God's Word," in *The Table-Talk of Martin Luther*, trans. William Hazlitt (Philadelphia: The Lutheran Publication Society, n.d., ca. 1850), 39–40. "Trials and tribulations" is a translation of the Latin *tentationis*.

²⁴ Martin Luther, Second Lecture on Psalms 15–19, *WA* 5.162.28. "Living—no, much more still by dying and being damned—makes a theologian, not by knowing, reading or speculation."

²⁵ An interesting study would be how Luther's ideas on theological formation made their way into the theological education program of Wittenberg University.

²⁶ In the distance programs operated by Concordia Seminary, for instance, the students are from the beginning classified as "vicars" or "interns" and deeply involved in the ministry of their local setting. This is not the case of some distance programs, where the in-ministry component is not as rigorously required.

²⁷ Miller and Scharen, *(Not) Being There*, 23.

²⁸ Even in a Missouri Synod mission publication, my work in Guatemala was once described as that of preparing "lay-pastors" for the church, when I never would have used that terminology. In fact, the goal was to train fully authenticated and duly called ordained pastors. Since the training was provided via a variety of non-formal models, it was assumed to be for "lay-pastors" rather than regular, ordained pastors.

²⁹ Miller and Scharen, *(Not) Being There*, 28.

³⁰ John Cartwright, Gabriel Etzel, Christopher Jackson, and Timothy Paul Jones, *Teaching the World: Foundations for Online Theological Education* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2017), 45–46. This book represents a helpful collaboration of four authors who recognize in a balanced way the challenges of online theological education and seek to provide thoughtful foundations and ideas for how they can be addressed.

³¹ Miller and Scharen, *(Not) Being There*, 30.

³² Miller and Scharen, *(Not) Being There*, 30.

³³ Miller and Scharen, *(Not) Being There*, 13.