

Spiritual Formation of Ordination Candidates and Online Learning

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Introduction

Christensen (2012) states that the education sector is about to fall off a cliff in the same way that the media market has collapsed or been transformed. The way this is occurring in the educational sector, including theology, is the advancement of online learning. Online learning is transforming the way education is conducted. The old bricks and mortar model of education is in decline and online is rapidly increasing. This paper will not deal with the virtues or otherwise of online learning but rather the impact on spiritual formation of students who are preparing to enter into the ministry. I will define this category of students as ordination candidates so as to clearly distinguish them from a general population of students attending ministry or theological training for personal enrichment.

The theological sector as with other academic institutions has seen a significant shift from campus based learning to online learning. This growth is a phenomenon that has caught many theological institutions unprepared technologically and spiritually. Harvest Bible College, Australia has seen a growth in online learning from less than 1% in 1999 to 54.3% in Semester 1 of 2013¹. In the last 12 months alone the number has increase by 16.3 %. The students are demanding more flexible ways of studying. When study options are being presented to them online learning is outstripping campus based learning two to one². It is reasonable to expect that this trend will continue and online learning will become established as the major form of training for emerging pastors. This is a significant shift from traditional training and it raises several questions about how colleges train, educate and prepare students for ordained ministry.

There is a perceived problem with the expansion of online learning in the theological community. Many have seen it as having a negative impact on the real and very important part of the hidden curriculum of Theological Institutions which is spiritual formation (Headley, 1999). There is an implied understanding that spiritual formation of ordination candidates happens when they are in a residential setting or a campus based model of training. That is when the candidate is in the same physical space as their training. In residential and campus based settings the ordination candidate spends a significant amount of time in the same physical space as their educators.

¹ This statistic is the percentage of units being undertaken in a particular mode. Many Harvest Bible College students are part-time. This needs to be taken into consideration as part time students are more likely to select the online mode rather than full time students at Harvest Bible College.

² This emerging pattern has been confirmed in the Harvest Bible College statistics for semester 2, 2013.

The shift from campus based training to online training is another step away from the traditional residential program. For most of the 20th century the Pentecostal Church has modelled key elements of training of ministers on a residential model. That residential model of training was based on Evangelical, Roman Catholic, Orthodox and other residential programs. The residential program consisted of several key factors that impacted on spiritual formation including: faculty, students and families all living together in community; a structured devotional program; a structured chapel program, supervised Church attendance; a cohort of likeminded students; and faculty who were constantly available before, during and after lectures. As Pentecostals moved into the later part of the 20th century local Church or community based Bible Colleges emerged under the mantra of keeping the potential pastors in their Churches and communities. For the first time the clients or students now had a realistic option to study locally. Many students choose the local option and the overall number of students at Bible Colleges rapidly rose in the 1980's and 1990's in Australia.

The perceived benefits of this local interaction seemed to outstrip the benefits of living in residential community. Some aspects of spiritual formation were taken over by local Church pastors and or the initiative of the individual ordination candidate. In this shift the following aspects of spiritual formation were removed from the strict supervision of a College environment; the living in close community; a structured devotional life; and high and frequent access to faculty. While many lamented this transition the economics of living away from home and the perceived benefits of residential colleges began to diminish.

Theological institutions are now on mass moving towards online learning. Some in response to the shift in the marketplace and some in response to changing student needs. Even stalwarts of campus based training have now shifted to allow parts of their programs to be competed online.³ This shift creates further losses in the traditional approach to spiritual formation. If changes are not made to the way the theological institutions address spiritual formation then Colleges are by default handing over the responsibility for spiritual formation of ordination candidates to the local Church, the candidate themselves and the providential will of God.

Spiritual Formation of Ordination Candidates

There is no doubt that spiritual formation is a critical role of ministry training colleges. "As much weight should be given to the spiritual formation of students as to their academic development" (Kleinig, 2001). This goes to the core purpose of why a ministry training colleges exists. Many international theological accreditation agencies look for this characteristic in a Bible College as part of the accreditation process⁴. If ministry training and spiritual formation are not part of the curriculum then eventually the institution will devolve into a secularised history or philosophy department.

Once the discussion on spiritual formation commences a myriad of definitions, prejudices and strongly held opinions backed by theological positions must be evaluated. Spiritual formation from a

³ Conversations with faculty from Regent Vancouver and Fuller held in the midst of the first decade of the 21 century declared that online who never be a part of their programs. In recent years both institution have made online classes available as a limited part of their programs. This is a typical reflection of the larger theological community that heavily resited online training some 10 years ago.

⁴ APTA and ATA are two examples in the Asia Pacific region.

Roman Catholic perspective is a more contemplative model than what Pentecostals experience (O'Malley, 1992). The Evangelical model is strongly based on the Word. That is diligent study of the word of God is the primary cause that forms people spiritually (Cheesman, 2012). Although many Pentecostals see themselves as primarily a word based community the reality is that Pentecostals are better defined as an experiential community. In many ways there is a vast difference between Roman Catholics and Pentecostals. Pentecostals and Roman Catholics are both deeply experiential communities. It would appear that the major difference between the Roman Catholic experience and the Pentecostal experience is volume. That being said the Pentecostal community has drawn valuable aspects of spiritual formation from all dimensions of the Christian Church.

Spiritual formation of itself is not a universal term but rather one that is variously defined by authors. Gerald G. May (1992) writes, "Spiritual formation is a rather general term referring to all attempts, means, instructions, and disciplines intended towards deepening of faith and furtherance of spiritual growth. It includes educational endeavors as well as the more intimate and in-depth process of spiritual direction." Spiritual formation may be thought of as the shaping of the inner life, the spirit, or the spiritual side of the human being (Willard, 2006). This shaping is performed by the Holy Spirit and other spiritual agencies involved in the kingdom of God, especially the Word of God (Willard, 2006). The role of the engaged Christian leader should likewise not be underestimated in the process. Spiritual formation is a limitless variety of engagements and interactions that cause a person to be transformed into the image of Christ (McNeal, 2009, p. 73).

The literature on spiritual formation covers a wide range of activities that are seen to have a positive impact on spiritual formation. They include contemplative practices; corporate or group experiences; and one to one experiences. The following are comprehensive but not exhaustive lists of practices from the above groupings. Well recognised contemplative practices include: prayer; scripture reading; journaling; fasting; meditation; devotional reading (not scripture); silence and solitude; and simplicity. Well recognised corporate or group experiences practices include: theological training; Bible studies, spiritual retreats, conferences; corporate worship; volunteer service; and submission. Well recognised one to one experiences include: guidance; work and play; life tribulations and trials; and confession. Many of these activities have significant overlap between the categories and in no way is this list meant to be an exhaustive of all possibilities. They are to guide the discussion. For the purpose of this paper and to facilitate discussion this paper will separate the activities listed above into the three categories of contemplative activities, corporate activities, and one to one interactions.

Contemplative activities are those that are conducted most often privately and in an individualised manner. Living a contemplative life is not cocooning or cloistering oneself away from all contact with the real world. It is not sitting under a tree with palms open to the heavens (Meadows, 2011). It is taking time to separate oneself from the day to day environment to focus exclusively on God. This can be in the midst of a crowd or in the solitude of a desert. The potential problem with contemplation is that it is an experience that isolates the person from the community they are endeavouring to serve (Merton, 2003). This practice in short duration and limited frequency is beneficial. Cocooning is only an issue if a person dedicates their life to one of contemplation. It is at this point that contemplation turns into cocooning and separation from the community to be served.

Corporate activities are those where Christians come together into community and conduct religious activities together at a designated time and space. This is a substantial part of what most people experience as part of their local Church or Bible College environment. It is the place where the sacraments are taken together, corporate prayer is offered, songs or worship are given and the word of God is preached. It is also the place of coming together in fellowship and study of the word of God. The Bible College setting formalises the educational endeavour into a structured and systematic approach. Many of the same corporate worship experiences inside a College are reflective of what occurs in a local Church or conference.

One to one interactions are those that happen in a private setting that normally comprises of a private conversation between two persons (maybe more) leading to the intentional development of one of the persons. This can manifest itself in a structured or casual environment. Coaching and mentoring are relatively recent developments in the Church. It has taken a casual conversation to a structured environment. The confessional of the Roman Catholic Church is a likewise structured environment. Whether the one to one engagement is formalised or casual it must be intentionally designed to bring about spiritual formation otherwise it is just a conversation. It is in these one to one experiences that challenging issues can be reflected on with the assistance of another. Luther proposed an evangelical pattern of spirituality which as well as prayer and meditation included temptation (Kleinig, 2001). It is interesting to note Luther's idea of temptation. Temptation cannot be activated by the ordination candidate at will however the candidate is likely to experience temptation during their college experience. Temptation or life's problems and challenges reveal what is otherwise unknown by the candidate and a mentor (Cunningham, 1998).

Online learning brings to the forefront the question of how spiritual formation occurs. As noted above in this paper spiritual formation occurs in a variety of ways for a variety of people. There is one universal truth and that is that spiritual formation occurs differently for each person. Spiritual formation occurs all the way along a believer's journey from salvation to death. Spiritual formation occurs through engagement with the Church, other believers and the College. There is an expectation that a certain level of spiritual formation should occur prior to ordination taking place (Banks, 1999).

The spiritual formation of ordination candidate is of critical importance. Ordained pastors are held to a high standard and it is important that novices who are spiritually immature are not ordained. Ordination candidates will quickly find themselves in a position where they must be spiritually self aware and self sustaining. They will be responsible for leading others on the spiritual formation journey. If they are a spiritual novice then they are unable to take others on the journey.

The world of a ministry training college is a unique culture and environment. It is different to the local Church and it is different to a broad based university education. There is a focus and there is intent to develop ascension gift ministries. Bible Colleges must engage ordination candidates in spiritual formation.

The Myths of Spiritual Formation.

The discussion about spiritual formation and online learning in a ministry training college setting very quickly moves to several reasons why this is inappropriate, inferior or not possible. Whilst this paper is not suggesting that spiritual formation can be shifted entirely online the myths as to why

spiritual formation cannot occur online must be explored. Some may find the use of the term myths offensive. It accurately describes the fervent passion combined with a lack of logic applied to these arguments. Whilst many of these are genuinely held beliefs this paper will call these positions myths and explore the logic behind them. This will then provide a platform for taking the discussion further⁵.

It seems that it is the unique environment of a College campus that produces some interesting myths about spiritual formation. The first myth is that teaching faculty, in particular, believe that a student and an instructor must (emphasis on must) be in the same physical space and time for spiritual formation to occur. This is universal myth but is much stronger amongst Pentecostals. It can be traced back to the particular Pentecostal emphasises of the laying on of hands, anointing with oil and prophecy. These activities, traditionally, demand physical contact and physical presence. The very nature of the altar call demands a physical presence. The day of Pentecost itself starts with, "they were all gather together in one place." The myth asserts that for transforming power to arrive there must be a physical presence. Pentecostals emphasise these expressions of spirituality more than other sections of the Church. As a consequence struggle with spiritual formation online. The Bible gives several clear examples of the exercising of the above mentioned gifts when persons are not in the same physical space. Healing occurring over a distance, prophetic words being communicated to a person not present, anointing clothes being carried to remote location are just a few biblical examples. If there is no absolute requirement to be in the same place at the same time it allows other methods to be utilized. Colleges need to address the reality of the situation. Spiritual formation does not occur just because the students sit in a lecture room with a lecturer.

The second myth of the residential/campus based model is that the faculty spend time with the students. There are some clear differences here between residential and non residential models and the amount of time they spent with students. It is clear that faculty do not spend time a significant amount of time with the students, in fact most faculty spend very little time with students. The typical faculty member will spend time with the students while lecturing, being in chapel or maybe in a communal dinning situation. When I have questioned faculty about their involvement with students they normally default to myth one i.e. I spend time with all my students. Once we get beyond the idea that being in a lecture room with students does not mean any meaningful spiritual formation has occurred. The discussion can move to the question of intimacy of relationship. In other words how much quality time does a lecturer spend with the students and how many students are engaged. Most faculty report that it is limited to a few students who engage with the lecturer on a personal or function level i.e. I need help with my assignments. I often ask the question of faculty do you speak with all of your students. The initial response is yes. Then when questioned further to discover that generally there is high interaction with a small percentage of students and some interaction with some students and significant minority of student who have no interaction with the lecturer. If one to one contact with faculty is an important element of spiritual formation then all students on an ordination pathway should be actively engaged. As powerful a tool this is for the blessed few it needs to be expanded to as many as possible.

⁵ Harvest Bible College has been on a 14 year journey with online learning. Over the time I have had many discussions with faculty, staff, advisory boards, and accreditation panels about this topic. My assertions listed are based on those discussions with people who have had genuine concern about spiritual formation in an online learning environment.

The third myth of spiritual formation is a gospel centric view of spiritual formation (Demaray & Johnson, 2007). That is that Jesus did all of his spiritual formation with the Apostles face to face. Jesus lived, travelled and ministered with the Apostles over a period of years. This is certainly true that Jesus did impart significantly into the lives of the Apostles but it is not an exclusive or even recommended form of spiritual formation. Jesus made it clear that there was the Holy Spirit coming once he left and it would be the Holy Spirit who would be the major element of spiritual formation. This myth ignores the spiritual formation methods of Paul.

Paul as he travels and preaches the gospel gives us another model of spiritual formation. Paul did engage in face to face spiritual formation. However when Paul was faced by the reality of not being able to be in several cities at the same time he came up with other methods to keep the new Church growing into spiritual maturity. Paul came, visited, conducted ministry only to eventually leave and travel to another city. Paul used what many in the Evangelical world would suggest is the only valid form under which spiritual formation can occur and that is the word of God. Paul wrote letters to encourage, correct and reprove. He wrote letters which have become the backbone of spiritual formation for two millennia. This of itself demonstrates a clear capacity to engage ordination candidates in spiritual formation via a distance mode of education.

The fourth myth of spiritual formation is that people must (emphasis on must) live in community for genuine spiritual formation to occur. This view is a legacy of the residential college where all aspect of life are done together as a community, including meals, training, lectures, worship, devotions, and Sunday services. In many aspects this mindset has transferred across and can now be found in the mind of the local Church pastor. It is not that people functionally live together but rather relationally are in community together. This is evidenced by such phrases as, “we do life together” or “we are all part of the same family.” There has been a fundamental shift in the local Church of Australia that values engagement with the community rather than isolation from the community. It is unlikely that a residential or campus model of ministry development that reflects an isolationist attitude will be embraced by the local church.

Once these four myths are dealt with in the minds and hearts of those who are responsible for spiritual formation of ordination candidates we can move onto the question of how a Bible College of today should engage in spiritual formation.

The Implementation of Various Spiritual Disciplines into Online Learning in a Bible College Setting

So far this paper has broadly defined spiritual formation, categorised spiritual formation and dealt with some of the myths. This paper will now address which spiritual formation disciplines are suited to the College environment and of those which are possible or best to be engaged online.

The first thing that must be acknowledged is that all spiritual disciplines cannot be fully implemented online. For example corporate worship is difficult to do online. This paper is not proposing that spiritual formation could be done entirely online as that goes against the principle of gathering together in one place to worship God. However, there are several aspects of spiritual formation that can be engaged within an online learning environment.

The day has arrived were a person could study an entire course online, graduate⁶ and apply for a credential based on the course of study. Rightly or wrongly a Bible College qualification carries an implied stamp of approval which at least in part validates a person's capacity to serve as a minister. This is not only an academic reference but a personal and spiritual one as well.

Contemplative Practices in Bible College Environment

Well recognised contemplative practices include: prayer; scripture reading; journaling; fasting; meditation; devotional reading (not scripture); silence and solitude; and simplicity. Although these are contemplative and by nature private it is possible to incorporate these practices into an online learning environment. It is also possible to address these practices in the one to one practices described below.

Reflective thinking or contemplative thinking is a crucial part of the development of a minister. The ordination candidate should experience reflective thinking in the College environment. It brings them to a place where they engage with God, to hear his voice and learn to trust his voice. In a busy, cocooned and the somewhat detached lifestyle of ministry it is important that the ordination candidate learns how to hear the voice of God and respond rather than hear the voice of the popular media and mimic. Jesus modelled this type of spiritual discipline several times. It is normally evidenced by the simple words he went aside to pray or he went to the mountain to pray. Jesus did this many times by himself but several times he engaged his disciples. The gospels indicate that this happened many times before significant events, miracles or trails or at the end of a long day of ministry events. This is not to say that this type of devotion is limited to significant events or a trying day but rather the development of this skill is essential before, during or after the events of the day.

Contemplative practices are relatively easy to conduct in an online learning environment as instruction can be given online and assessments can be submitted online. Webcasts, blogs, e-mails and phone calls are all ways to provide extra support as needed throughout the process.

In the online environment colleges can encourage private contemplative practices. If colleges move these contemplative practices into the assessment of the unit they can become measureable and developmental. The normal behaviour of a student in an academic course is to extract the information required to complete assessment tasks as quickly and effectively as possible. Placing contemplative practices into this mindset is a challenge. The student sees an assessment task to be completed rather than a process of spiritual development. The assessment task also risks creating the mindset that the spirituality of an individual is a short measurable journey. This is in conflict with the reality that true spiritual formation occurs over a long period of sustained relationship with God.

Prayer, fasting, meditation, silence and solitude are by their very nature undertaken in private. It is impossible to prove that a person has fasted for example. So rather than coming up with systems that reward, encourage or facilitate people being deceptive about such practices they must be left open to the bigger picture of spiritual formation with integrity. It may for example be appropriate for a person to state that they have not prayed every day as required in the assessment task and that they missed three days out of ten and reflect on why and how that impacted on them. If our goal is spiritual formation rather than slavish adherence to a spiritual discipline then reflection documenting genuine situations rather than aspirational goals will be effective.

⁶ Harvest Bible College graduated its first fully online student in 2010.

The way colleges set reading tasks also impacts on contemplative practices such as scripture reading and independent study. Most reading assignments are done to extract information quickly and may or may not require the taking of notes. It is difficult for the normal student to shift mindset from a reading assignment of a required text to the contemplative practice of reading the Bible. Students spend a significant amount of time reading and studying scripture in the normal course of their studies but how much time is spent reflecting on the content of scripture. A potential way to have a student reflect on scripture is to include it as part of an assessment task. At Harvest Bible College it is common to have students reflect on how what they have studied can be applied to everyday life or a ministry setting. Converting this assessment to online is a relatively simple and painless process.

Faculty must engage with the reflective components of the assessment and assign significant weight to the spiritual reflection component. If a student is able to get a high grade and not reflect then this is what will happen. Weightings drive student effort and performance. Marking grids and guidelines should be adjusted to ensure that a top grade cannot be achieved without the spiritual formation component being addressed. It is not just what colleges state but it is about how colleges marked the assessed units that give a true indication of what is valued. Students understand very quickly that if they can achieve a High Distinction without spiritual reflection then it is superfluous to the academic endeavour. If this policy strictly applied then the message about its importance becomes loud and clear.

Online learning management systems makes these activities simpler and more effective than ever before. For example, a daily pray log or journal that remains private but is completed and submitted online as evidence of activity. Accountability groups between students who engage with issues on a personal or confidential manner. Rather than being limited to one form of communication, that being face to face in the classroom, the students can engage through face to face, social media, electronic communication tools, phone calls or face to face. In fact online learning opens up a whole new dimension of contemplative practices to be done more effectively and efficiently.

A way to create an environment online is to use the contemplative practices to create time, space and awareness of God. A time of prayer, fasting, scripture reading, silence or meditation in a quiet uninterrupted environment can create space for deep encounters to occur (Miller, 2007). These deep encounters can be reported back through journaling or other assessment tools feedback. The emphasis in assessment must be genuine deep reflection and not word limits or other time driven elements (Jones & Jennings, 2000). Some may struggle with the notion of assessing spiritual formation. One option is to have them as hurdle tasks. That being the task is not assessed in a formal manner but must be completed in order to get credit for the unit of study.

Many if not all contemplative practices can create the environment for the ordination candidate to have a deep encounter with God. Deep personal encounters with God come in a variety of forms. They can be individual or they can be group or community oriented. The common denominator of these experiences is that they bring about a deep personal and or spiritual change in a person's life. These are encounters that people will reflect on or draw on for years to come. The measure of deep encounters is not their dramatic nature but rather whether the encounter has a deep lasting and or spiritual impact on the person.

Deep encounters with God are a critical connection point in the spiritual formation of ordination candidates. Deep personal encounters with God cannot be manufactured, created or forced but the

College can provide an environment for those encounters to occur. They tend to happen in an environment where there is an intention to provide a place where people remove themselves from the day to day and encounter God. This does not normally happen in a classroom, physical or virtual, it does not normally happen in a regular chapel service and it does not normally happen in regular local Church service. These encounters happen when the College creates an intentional atmosphere for this happen when people have a longer period of time to engage. In the College environment this has been traditionally done through a spiritual emphasis event. This can present itself in many different formats including but not limited to extended chapels, whole of community events, and spiritual emphasis events. Finding an assessable way to link this with the curriculum is key.

Corporate or Group Practices in Bible College Environment

Well recognised corporate or group experiences practices include: theological training; Bible studies, spiritual retreats, conferences; corporate worship; volunteer service; and submission. Theological training, chapel services, volunteer service and spiritual retreats are all the strong points of spiritual formation for residential and campus based Colleges. Spiritual formation through college based corporate experiences is a more challenging area for the online ordination candidate to engage.

Corporate activities by their very nature bring people together in the one place at the one time. The major challenge of online spiritual formation is to incorporate group activities such as retreats, conferences, corporate worship or any activity where people come together in traditional Christian community. It is at this point that the College community should see itself as a complementary and integrated part of Church life. The role of the Bible College is not to provide a substitute for local Church attendance. Rather the College should seek to supplement and enhance the Sunday experience and make it a part of the spiritual formation experience.

As the evangelic community would argue study of the word of God is a key element of spiritual formation (Cheesman, 2012). Our argument then shifts to if the delivery of theological training online is as high a quality as onsite delivery. Studies have shown that online study is not inferior to on campus study (Johnson,2000). The quality of lectures, tutorials, resources, assessments and engagement do not have to decline if the unit is delivered online. Quality of delivery is not measurable by mode but rather student and faculty engagement. Therefore spiritual formation should not be affected by mode of delivery.

Chapels and spiritual emphasis events are the staples for a College in the spiritual formation process. How a chapel or a spiritual emphasis event could be done online and have the same impact as a group of people meeting together is difficult to imagine. Events can certainly be placed online and people can engage from a distance just as they would with any other form of online media. This could be trailed to see if the event was successful. Many churches are now streaming preachers from a central venue to a remote campus. An alternative way is to create a mixed mode of online and face to face events or connection points where some participants are in a designated venue and some are engaging in an online environment.

A critical intersection between on campus and online training is connection points. Connection points are where human interactions either face to face or online are conducted. Connection points make a person feel that they are in a genuine relationship with another person or God. It removes a sense of disconnectedness and replaces it with a sense of community. Connection points are

interactions were online and campus based students have the opportunity to come together as a community and connect with each other and God. At Harvest Bible College it is done in three simple ways, chapel services, anointing nights and units of study being done in a camp or study tour mode. Students who want to and or need to connect personally or spiritually take great advantage of these events. They are used sparingly and aim for high impact. Students come expectantly to encounter God and be encouraged.

One to One Practices in Bible College Environment

Well recognised one to one experiences include: guidance; work and play; life tribulations and trials; and confession. One to one practices are what many faculty have been informally involved in when we examine the residential and campus based models. When faculty express concern about online learning they are lamenting the precious time they have spent with students having conversations about life, God and ministry. The reality is that with the demise of the residential college these interactions have become fewer and further between. The current ordination candidate has less time and opportunities to interaction with faculty. Time poor faculty now go back to their offices to do administrative work, prepare lectures, mark assessments and conduct research because these are the things by which they and their institutions are measured. International university rankings are based on research publications not on how many life changing interactions a faculty member has with an ordination candidate.

The faculty lament of the loss of engagement with students appears to be exacerbated by online learning. This is further exacerbated if the online learning environment is nothing more than a repository for lectures, handouts, marked assessments and grades. Whilst this is convenient for students and faculty the loss in interpersonal relationship is staggering. On the other hand if the online learning environment is fully exploited then it becomes a highly interactive and interpersonal experience. Whilst the lecture room appears to be a highly interactive environment it is often the opposite. Many students sit passively in a lecture and disengage. It is impossible to know if they are engaged in the learning process or not. At the same time a few students are highly engaged and maybe even be dominating the environment. A high quality learning management system will allow the astute lecturer to know if a student is engaged or disengaged in the learning process. The inbuilt tracking mechanisms and the one to one personal communication devices lift the level of interaction to a level not possible in a lecture room setting. Engagement with faculty is not driven by the mode of study but rather by the quality of engagement the lecturer with the student either online or onsite.

One of the forms of spiritual development is how an individual handles difficult personal circumstances and challenging life issues. This is a very much under rated form of spiritual formation. Ordination candidates need to learn how to navigate life's challenges and grow spiritually through the experiences. An ordination candidate who studies with a College over a three or four year period is very likely going to come a point where some sort of circumstance is going to impact on them personally. It could be a personal, financial, health, family or any other issue that places pressure on the student's college, church or family commitments. These are a significant opportunities to engage with the student in their spiritual formation process. A candidate's reaction under pressure speaks to their spiritual development. It is not suggested that ordination candidates be artificially placed under undue pressure to see how they respond. However, ordination candidates do come under pressure as a normal part of life and study whilst preparing for ministry.

Harvest Bible College withdrawal statistics indicate that 12-20% of students withdrawing from units cite personal issues as the reason for withdrawing.⁷ Day to day life throws up more than enough opportunities to reflect on life's challenges. There is no need to create additional pressures.

Many of these issues may be hidden unless the student actively discloses them to the College. The ordination candidate may seek support from their local Church, family or friends before presenting to the College. If a student does not have this support network in place or the circumstances are directly impacting on the candidates study then the College normally becomes aware. It is at this point that the College can use intervention strategies. Intervention strategies applied will depend on the nature of the events. While the intervention strategy is being applied the ordination candidate needs to be made aware that their journey through this difficult time is an important part of their spiritual formation.

The astute lecturer can perceive that something is not quite right in a student's life. It can be indicated by a change in personality; assessment tasks not being committed on time or to a lower than usual; and a lack of attendance in class or chapels. In many circumstance the warning signs are not as obvious when a student is attending classes and the majority of the assessment tasks are to be completed at the end of the unit. Online learning management systems tracking's features makes early intervention possible and practical in these circumstances. "At risk"⁸ candidates disengage from the learning process, stop logging on well before assessment tasks are due. Most E-Learning Platforms allow for tracking of all activities that the student does in the online space. So instead of just monitoring attendance and waiting till the end of the unit for assessment tasks to be submitted, the faculty person can track patterns and behaviours to seek out a diminishing engagement by the candidate. Harvest Bible College uses these features to track students who are at risk. The majority of at risk students have a personal, financial or academic reason for becoming at risk. Faculty and staff are used to engage these students as part of their spiritual formation journey⁹.

Conclusion

The spiritual formation of ordination candidates has always had a component of distance education involved. As the gospel spread it was no longer possible for the Apostles to remain in Jerusalem and service the rapidly growing Church. Paul used all the tools at his disposal to develop his ordination candidates. Not only did he spend a substantial amount of time discipling candidates one to one and taking them on ministry journeys, he also used trusted persons to carry his messages, to carry the anointing, and to carry his letters. All of these by distance, all of these dealing with critical spiritual formation issues. Paul's letters and the gospel accounts continue to be the backbone of the spiritual formation journey of ordination candidates today.

⁷ Semester 1, 2012 12% of withdrawn units were for personal, lifestyle or health reasons. In Semester 1 2013 20% of withdrawn units were for personal, lifestyle or health reasons. This number fluctuates semester by semester and we are not suggesting an upward trend in the presentation of these statistics.

⁸ An at risk student is a student who has failed 50% or more of their units from a previous semester.

⁹ At risk students are often advised to cut back on their College load or to defer for a semester to work on personal issues. The goal is not to keep them as full time students but rather have them successfully complete the course and learn how to manage the ups and downs of life and ministry.

The spiritual formation of ordination candidates has not been lost but it has shifted to a different learning environment. There are many of ordination candidates who are preparing for ministry who will choose to do all or part of their Bible College online. As such it is no longer a question of how appropriate or inappropriate this activity is for the ordination candidate. Rather the question is how do ministry training colleges engage these persons in a process of spiritual formation that is no longer based on the traditional residential and campus based models.

The shift from residential to non residential to online learning has directly impacted on the ability of ministry training colleges to engage in an ordination candidate's spiritual formation. Colleges must avoid passive resistance and actively seek to engage ordination candidate's spiritual formation no matter what mode of study the candidate chooses. Avoidance will lead to Colleges abdicating their responsibility for spiritual formation to the local Church.

Whilst the local Church is an important part on the spiritual formation of a ministry ordination candidate it cannot and should replace the role of the Bible College. The local Church has a holistic approach to spiritual formation from salvation through to pastoral formation. The Bible College has a dedicated focus on preparing ordination candidates for ministry.

Ministry training colleges must embrace this responsibility and reshape its hidden curriculum of spiritual formation into the new paradigm of online learning. The learning management systems are becoming more sophisticated, interactive, and socially engaging all the time. It is up to the Colleges to embrace this new world and embrace the spiritual formation of ministers online.

Spiritual formation is not and has never been limited to all persons being in the same place at the same time. Let's not fall into the trap of resisting learning management systems but rather embrace them as neutral tools. Tools that can be used for spiritual formation. Tools that can be used for ministry development. The question is not should we? but the question is how do we? Unless ministry training colleges actively engage spiritual formation through online learning they will give up their right, role and responsibility for spiritual formation amongst the future leaders of the Church.

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