



*Ecologies of Faith in a Digital Age: Spiritual Growth Through Online Education*

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*"Mary Lowe and Stephen Lowe have long been trailblazers in the work of online theological education. In this volume they bring together their passion for spiritual formation, faithful pedagogy, and online learning. Those who doubt if these things can be brought together will find a well-informed, illuminating, and creative apologetic for faith formation in a digital age."*

—David S. Dockery, president  
of Trinity Evangelical Divinity  
School

## Spiritual Formation Through Online Education?

The experience of teaching online courses and guiding doctoral research online evolved over the years for us. We did not set out to teach online courses or write about issues related to online Christian education. Expectations for our professional academic careers involved a beautiful campus with ivy-covered walls and a close-knit academic community of colleagues and students. While we certainly have had that, we have also had an unexpected blessing given to us through our participation in online Christian education. We believed, maybe like you, that online learning was inferior to traditional education on a physical campus and in a typical classroom setting. This was especially true in our early days of distance education using VHS video tapes, audio cassettes, postal delivery of course materials, and mediated communication through keyboarding in real time. We can still remember our first ventures in synchronous live "webinars" with students from all across the United States who met in real time for about an hour of discussion and interaction. The poor students who could not type fast had a hard time keeping up with the pace of the discussion and exchange of messages through CompuServe.

With the advances in learning technologies, many of the old distance barriers and the clunky means of communication have vanished. Just recently, Steve conducted a research methods class for doctoral students in South Korea while seated in a video classroom in Virginia. The quality of the images and the ease of communication between professor and students in real time was startling. Students could see his PowerPoint slides as if they were in the room with him, and he could see the expressions on their faces and what they were eating for snacks during the breaks. A host of other technological innovations that many who teach online employ on a regular basis makes using such technology seamless and unobtrusive.

Two of the major stumbling blocks for many who resisted teaching online were community formation and spiritual growth. We understood the concerns because we had to face these issues ourselves as we migrated over the years to online teaching. While each of us had our educational, sociological, and theological reasons why both are problematic or potentially possible in online settings, the feedback and unsolicited comments from our students have sealed our conclusions about both community formation and spiritual growth in online courses and degree programs.

One student, who was taking an online course for the very first time, wrote in his online journal, "[As a result of taking this online class,] I can report that I have grown not only academically but in every area of my life. That is to say, I have grown holistically as a person and as a child of God. My personal goals have changed and evolved throughout the journey of my studies." A doctoral student in an online degree program wrote, "Not only am I

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allowed to pursue my chosen degree, I am also able to connect to a network of people whom I would have never met, much less interacted with and formed a community.” Another online student provided this unsolicited comment, “I have experienced the most accelerated spiritual growth while completing my master of divinity online and it was because of the collaborative learning process and sense of community. I was able to learn deep, theological truths and how they apply to my life through interacting with classmates, professors, and the course material. In turn, my social network (friends, family, church, neighbors, etc.) benefited, as I would share what I was learning with them through discussions, Sunday School, and Facebook.” Space does not permit including other written feedback we have received over the years from both students and faculty. Those who have made the decision to participate in online Christian education have discovered that many of the prospective drawbacks and concerns vanished as a result of their experience, and they became enthusiastic supporters of this form of educational delivery. These experiences in online Christian education happened because we have entered a new era of unprecedented technological innovation that makes possible the creation of spiritual connections between believers—connections that have never existed before in human history

Since we live in a highly interconnected world where first-year students know about their roommates before they ever arrive on campus and where we may interact with people overseas as much as we do our neighbors next door, we propose a model of spiritual formation that recognizes and utilizes these interconnective and interactive realities. In the natural world nothing grows alone, isolated and disconnected from its ecological habitat. Instead, everything grows ecologically through connections to and interactions with other living and nonliving things producing mutual growth and fecundity. We will argue that there is an ecological motif running through the Bible that uses the ecological growth observed in nature to illustrate spiritual growth. Jesus taught his parables upon the assumption that what is valid in one sphere (the natural) is valid also in the other (the spiritual).

An ecological perspective on how we grow as Christians enlarges our orientation to spiritual formation and engenders relationships and connections beyond our traditional privatized perceptions of how Christians grow. An ecosystem perspective reminds us, indeed requires us, to think of growth both individually and corporately. Defined natural ecologies like forests, gardens, vineyards, and fields, as well as defined social ecologies like families, workplace, and educational institutions, inform us about how spiritual ecologies like the church, Christian homes, Christian organizations, and other faith communities function to promote spiritual growth. In God’s ecology, individual things and people do not grow alone. They grow when they connect to and interact with the ultimate Source of life and other growing people.

—Adapted from the introduction