

"Deepening and Growing Faith in Disciples in an Information, Communication and Technology Age"

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Faith formation can utilise powerful web-based and digital technologies and resources to blend face to face, interactive faith formation with virtual faith formation, providing 24/7/365 faith formation for all ages, generations, anytime, anywhere.¹

Synopsis:

Helping/supporting/facilitating people to deepen their faith through the digital environment is possible where formation of disciples is part of the intention of learning. Theology, spirituality and biblical studies, are no longer 'strange bed-fellows' with Information, Communication and Technology, but fellow pilgrims on the journey of learning/life.

The paper will discuss the significance of particular Information, Communication and Technology (ICT) platforms for faith development in lay adults and lay leaders in the Uniting Church.

Introduction:

In terms of the invention of the printing press and radio and television since then, the church can be both at the forefront, or reluctant, as an uptaker of the benefits of new technology. The reasons for a reluctant uptake are many and vary for each context: suspicion, cost, access, competence/confidence, audience potential, institutional potential, technophobic/Luddite responses, biblical (?) and theological.

Over time, these reasons can be addressed but the one reason that has some persistence is that face to face interaction is the preferred and, in some views, the only way in which faith conversations, growth in faith and, faith transmission can occur. We, as with others²,

¹ John Roberto, *Faith Formation 2020*, Naugatuck: LifelongFaith Associates, 2010, 127.

² For articles that dispute the view that faith formation can occur only in face to face educational settings see: Andrew T. Babyak, "A Teaching Strategy for a Christian Virtual Environment", *Journal of Research on Christian Education*, 24:1 (2015): 63-77, DOI:10.1080/10656219.2015.1008080.

contend that faith formation, intentionally undertaken, can occur in a digital environment with the intentional use of ICTs.

In working alongside colleagues in schools, universities, dioceses, and seminary, I have encountered mixed views about Christian adult education and online learning. These sometimes reflect a lack of understanding or practical experience or questions rooted in genuine caution, suspicion, fear, or doubt. None should be dismissed or taken lightly. Communicating faith through online learning must present the opportunities as well as the challenges, and the allure of new learning technologies should not cloud our critical faculties. For some, like myself, engaged in online teaching and learning, there is an excitement and vision for the online educational mission of the contemporary church, especially in the adult community and lifelong learning sectors. When new online technologies are employed with sound educational pedagogy and Gospel values in the wisdom of the Spirit, then they can indeed be good news for Christian education in today's world.³

The current experience and potential for digital technologies to change the way humans interact through accessing and sharing information is being documented in other studies. What it means to be human in terms of neuroscience, the new communities of interest, and navigating the ethical and moral morass of a digital civilisation that is everywhere connected, all of the time, hovers cloudlike about this paper in the internet space.

Matt Guevara writes,

Research makes clear that the generation of children in our ministries today is vastly different than any other group of children the Church has sought to teach. They engage and edit media, experiment with culture, and experience community in new ways. They are fluent in the language of technology. They collaborate, teach, connect, and relate using a network of individualized digital tools. They prefer a unique learning experience with parallel processing, multitasking, feedback, and relevance. They navigate the digital world deftly and quickly. They blur the lines between the physical and virtual. They are open to the truth of God's Word.⁴

Dawn Della Bella, "Faith Formation in an Information Age", *Momentum*, Sep/Oct 45, 3 (2014): ProQuest, 61-62.

For an early, Catholic response see, Mark A Maddix, "Generating and Facilitating Effective Online Learning through Discussion", *Christian Education Journal*, Fall 9, 2 (2012): Proquest, 372-385.

An Australian perspective can be found in Diane Hockridge, "What's the Problem? Spiritual Formation in Distance and Online Theological Education", *Journal of Christian Education*, Vol. 54, No. 1, May (2011): 25-38.

³ John Sullivan, *Communicating Faith*, Washington, DC, USA: Catholic University of America Press, 2010, 343.

⁴ Matt Guevara quoted in John Roberto, "[Teaching and Learning in the iGeneration](#)", *Lifelong Faith*, Fall 45, (2010), accessed November 5, 2015.

It is not just children in church life who demonstrate these learning preferences. The same can be said of many youth, young adults, middle aged and seniors in our church communities who have engaged with and embraced ICTs in some form⁵.

*Contemporary culture is experienced-based, participative, interactive, image-driven, and connected or relationship centred. People of all ages, but especially the younger generations, bring these perspectives and expectations to their involvement and learning in Church.*⁶

In this paper, we will describe the journey, so far, as two lay educationists have dreamed and set about establishing a digital learning environment that not only seeks to address equity of access and provision⁷, but to support the growth in faith of those who, for whatever reason, do not access the face to face offerings available. That journey is only a little advanced and the purpose of this paper is to tell our story and to hear responses that will step it further down the pathway.

The Approach:

The courses offered by the Adult Faith Education facilitators within Trinity College Queensland, a Uniting Church Synod of Queensland activity, are focused on adults interested in learning more about their faith including those who are current or developing lay leaders. The audience includes those interested in learning more about biblical and theological topics, those studying towards accreditation as a Lay Preacher, and those in Ministry of Pastor positions such as lay Chaplains and Pastors in congregations.

Over the period 2013 to the present the Adult Faith Educators (AFE) planned and implemented a philosophical approach to offering online faith education – pedagogical, communication, pastoral , and faith formation.

The **pedagogical** focus draws from the principles of Adult Education⁸ as well as digital pedagogy⁹ for the online courses.

⁵ Bella, 61.

⁶ John Roberto, *Becoming a Church of Lifelong Learners*, New London: Twenty-Third Publications, 2006, 7.

⁷ This includes the teaching of ICT skills as part of Course offerings and support to participants.

⁸ A typical listing of [Adult Education Principles](#) can be found at Adult Learning Australia. Adult Learning Australia, accessed 5 November, 2015.

For an example of the application of social constructivist theory to andragogy in a digital learning environment that caters to faith formation elements see, Angela A. Deulen, "Social Constructivism and Online Learning Environments: Towards a Theological Model for Christian Educators", *Christian Education Journal*, Spring 10, 1 (2013): ProQuest, 90.

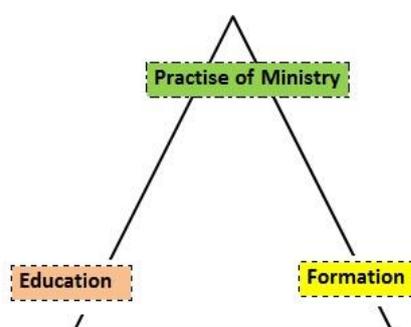
⁹ Education Queensland provides guidance for digital pedagogy in these [indicators](#). Education Queensland, accessed 5 November 2015.

The **communication** focus aims to engage course participants in regular contact with the AFE. Its purpose is to encourage and support learners as well as provide a personalised experience.

The **pastoral** focus has emerged strongly from practice. The initial understanding was educational focused care. In practice, the AFEs provide significant pastoral support for particular course participants (e.g. situations such as grief, medical outcomes, doubt, support for ministry and key life decisions).

The **faith formation** focus, whilst it draws from all three of the above, has become an intentional focus for course provision. This is expressed as one of the three components that shape course structure in Figure 1 below:-

Figure 1 Course Structure



Rationale for offering:

Whilst the overall rationale for online offering relates primarily to equity of provision and access, the particular rationale for a focus on faith formation arose for other reasons.

During 2013, the AFEs came to the view that the current course offerings were too strongly concentrated on an academic approach. Faith conversations were arising as an adjunct to the teaching component but were not in the foreground of teaching and learning. The development of online learning came at the same time as conversations were taking place concerning the development of a stronger faith formation approach. The initial conception was strongly intuitive to begin with – that Christian education must contain a faith formation component.

The key question was, ***“How can we incorporate a faith formation approach in an online learning environment where there are potentially limited face to face learning opportunities?”***

Faith Formation in an ICT learning environment:

How might Adult Learners in a digital learning environment become Adult Faith Learners?

We have not offered definitions of "Adult Faith Education"¹⁰ preferring an open interpretation of this concept. The course facilitators have adopted the use of this description with participants of '*partnering with you on your faith learning journey*'¹¹. How and why faith is deepened is an individual experience, and this approach is qualitatively reported in this paper.

What follows is a brief outline of the digitally shaped processes used to support faith formation in an ICT environment:

1) Digital:

Aside from the use of computers or devices to access the learning materials, staff make use of telephone contact, regular email contact in some courses, and text messaging.

The online learning management system, Trinity OLÉ (Online Learning Environment) based on Moodle software, provides opportunities for staff and participants to interact through its own in-house resources.

The GoToMeeting webinar materials are used for 'live' delivery of course information with groups of participants. This affords faith sharing and faith deepening opportunities. The webinar format has also been effectively used for one on one learning support for course participants.

2) Digital Pedagogy

Course content makes provision for questions and interactions around faith formation. The online curriculum has "Learning Activities", "Reflection" and devotional activities (often the focus of the introduction to the course Unit) that specifically engage and call for a faith response.

The course assessment incorporates a standard Task A, known as a "Spiritual Reflection", across all courses which is specifically designed to elicit a faith response. This assessment device and its outcomes will be addressed later in the paper.

Webinars also address faith sharing/faith deepening through various 'live' activities.

¹⁰ The Catholic Archdiocese of Brisbane offers a definition on its [Adult Faith Education](#) webpage.

¹¹ Language regularly used in communications with course participants.

Links from within the Units to other websites, including YouTube, are intentionally used to expose participants to quality presenters, songs, images and other materials that promote faith learning.

3) Pastoral and other Communication forms

AFE staff are intentionally focused on pastoral as well as learning support. Faith conversations are integral to this approach. These conversations range well beyond course content. An example is that, in 2015, five of the online New Testament participants experienced the death of close family members within the first six weeks of the course. In other instances, staff are supporting course participants who are encountering difficulties in discerning God's call, or participants who are struggling with personal faith questions and health issues.

Other pastoral conversations are more positive with support given to those proceeding in their Period of Discernment process, those completing requirements for work in the church in ministry of Pastor or as Chaplain.

The focus on faith sharing is a constant in staff communication with course participants, encouraging them to talk about their faith and experience of God.

Indicators: So how has this approach gone?

A total of 60 comments received.

Comments summarised into the following categories. Note some comments contained information that is summarised in one or more categories below (see Table 1). See Appendix 1 for a selection of participant comments.

Table 1: Anecdotal comments summarised from course participant emails in the period August 2014 to October 2015

Quality of Learning	Teacher Quality and Support	Learning Support	Pastoral Support	Personal Benefit
29	31	20	15	31

Intentionally focusing in on faith formation:

A key perspective underlying all Courses is a strong and intentional focus on faith formation. This permeates all that we do – be it telephone calls, emails, assessment items, course outlines, etc, writing course material, learning activities. We can't stress enough

that is something that characterises what we do – intentionality. We are conscious that there *is* a difference between face-to-face learning and digital learning, particularly where faith formation is the focus. But with an intentional approach, some of the hurdles can be overcome and can be in fact used to advantage. Being intentional forces us to adapt how we deliver our learning material and how we communicate with participants. This adaptation is necessary for faith formation in an online environment and is identified by other Christian online educators¹².

Course Completion Task A – Spiritual Reflection:

When people know we have faith components as part of our assessment, one of the questions we often get asked as Course Facilitators is “How do assess faith or faith formation?” Be assured we aren’t seeking to ‘play God’ in deciding whether people are growing in faith or ‘passing’ a faith test. We’ll explain a bit more later about the criteria we use to assess this particular piece of assessment. To understand this first we want to unpack the rationale behind this Task and why we included it in the first place.

Rationale behind this assessment:

I think for both of us there was something of an intuitive sense that we needed to give more attention to the faith component in adult faith learning. We both had a sense we wanted to encourage participants to deepen their faith/spiritual development in other ways. At the time we were Pilgrim Learning Community (before amalgamating with TCQ), and Neil and I, along with our Administrator, Annette Dale, spent a number of hours bouncing around ideas and possibilities. Along with integrating questions around faith into Learning Activities scattered throughout our developing online Courses, we decided to develop an assessment piece that would be intentionally faith-focused.

Hence we developed what came to be known as “Task A”. See Appendix 2 for two variations of Task A in two Course Outlines.

- In our Biblical Courses, the stimuli for Task A are Scriptural passages, and the participants are encouraged to approach the passages from a modified Lectio divina approach (reading the passage through a number of times, etc). Participants are often given a number of passages to choose from.

- In our theological Courses (Theology and Christology), the stimuli for Task A are poems, images, songs, prayers, writings from across church history and all Christian spirituality, not just Protestant; that relate to the particular Unit – participants are given a number to

¹² As Gresham notes, “Just as the divine adaptation involved accommodation on God’s part, requiring the translation of transcendent divine truths into the humble language of the human audience, so online adaptation calls upon theological educators to accommodate traditional practices to a new virtual environment” (p. 25). Gresham (2006) quoted in Babyak, 64.

choose from – can engage with all or one. We also offer some spirituality practices for students to engage with as an alternative – eg. Dadirri, Examen Exercise – for some these are introductions to faith practices/traditions of the wider church, for some it is a re-acquaintance.

Once the participant has identified the stimulus/stimuli they wish to engage with, they then need to choose what form in which they will respond. Across a Course, we ask that they engage with at least 3 or 4 different forms – we force the genres to challenge expression through multiple intelligence responses (poetry, song, church newsletter item, prayer, banner, photo/image, artwork in clay or paint, PowerPoint presentation, or can negotiate). Apart from the PowerPoint presentation (which can contain others' images) the material must be their original work, not something they have obtained from elsewhere.

At this stage, out of 12 Units in a Course, most of our Courses would have at least 10 Task A assessment pieces. We have debated a number of times amongst ourselves about cutting this down, and will do so from next year. We have 'given in' due to the need to reduce the number of hours participants are engaging in the Courses. However, we have resisted until now because of the overwhelming benefit participants have received from engaging in this Task – more than we hoped or expected when we set it up. See Appendix 3 and 4 for a selection of participant comments.

Overall, participants have embraced this Task with overwhelming enthusiasm. One of our early online participants (who has now undertaken a number of our Courses) told us that they loved this Task so much, that while they wanted to do it first up in each Unit, they made themselves leave it to last! And in fact, this particular participant has grown so much in their studies – and we have particularly seen it in their Task A responses, which have developed with such maturity and depth! We have been blessed by reading their responses! And generally this is true – while there have been some participants who have struggled with this particular assessment piece, many have used it as a means to grapple with their faith and the material before them. For those who have been used to theological and biblical study being more of an academic or 'head' pursuit, this assessment piece, has provided the means for participants to be more creative, and more integrative in their response (heart, head, and soul). See Appendix 4 for a selection of participant comments.

For those who prefer a more rational-based approach, this is a challenging Task. And we are aware of their particular concerns, frustrations and challenges. As time has gone on though, we have become more aware how this particular Task prepares participants for leadership in the church in many ways – Worship (eg. writing prayers); sharing news with their faith community (newsletter items); leading small groups (eg. writing prayers,

poems, sharing faith). A number of our participants have used their assignments in these ways in their faith communities. And so, in a way, the Task itself is evolving, as we become more aware of a deeper purpose for it – helping to train leaders – which will change the way we write the Task for future participants.

How do we assess this Task?

We use criteria based assessment (see Table 2) – students are aware before they undertake the assessment how they will be assessed. Firstly, they have to have engaged with one of the given stimuli for that particular Unit – they can't pick their own stimuli. Each stimuli is carefully chosen to fit with the theme of the Unit and to encourage engagement with the wider church community (eg. spiritual practices; community of faith – eg. Thomas Merton, Theresa of Avila, John Wesley; particular Biblical passages). Secondly, their response must address the central theme or message of the stimulus or stimuli chosen – they need to keep on topic! Thirdly, their response must show evidence of thoughtful and prayerful reflection on the task, matching the mood/tone of the stimulus or stimuli chosen – again, it needs to be on topic, and we want evidence they have thought about their answer.

Table 2: Criteria to Assess Course Completion Task A

Criteria for Task A – Spiritual Reflection
<i>Assignment Criteria</i>
Shows evidence of thoughtful and prayerful reflection on the task, matching the mood/tone of the reading/s
The response addresses the central theme or message of the stimulus chosen.
At least 4 of the forms below are used: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • prayer • poetry • a banner (with a SHORT explanation) • a photo or image (with a SHORT explanation) • lyrics for a song (can be provided with audio) • an item in a church newsletter • photos of a piece of your own artwork in clay or paint, etc (with a SHORT explanation) • a PPT slide/s – consider copyright issues for any images used • OR another form as negotiated with the Course Co-ordinators
References: Evidence of engagement with the stimuli Use of other readings/books

So what kind of growth/engagement have we seen? We thought we would take you through a few examples to look at the movement that has occurred for the individual as a result of engagement with these Task As – remembering that in amongst these, there have been phone calls, emails, other Tasks, and other feedback.

Case Studies (material will be distributed during the presentation, and the following are notes that provide commentary for the material):

Student 1: has allowed him to explore his ethnicity, and a friend's dying, as well as a number of other issues of faith; a number of his prayers would be suitable for use in Worship

Student 2: has allowed her the space to explore her grief following the death of her father, and her struggles as she cares for her dying mother. My training (current) as a spiritual director allows me to pick up on cues that helps me tap in to extra points that might help her through a bit more, things I (Mel) pick up in her submissions – I (Mel) mark her assessment, and then might send her an email with some info or a further comment. For this participant, this is clearly more than a piece of assessment. There have been other stimuli that have touched other places for her too. Her work is raw and honest and real and very personal.

Student 3: movement from more external to the internal, became a personal soul journey rather than a head journey, tackled some very personal issues

Student 4: grown in depth, explored and 'played' in this space, delighted as she has grappled and wrestled

Student 5: movement from generalised faith to something that is more owned, deeper, integrated

Student 6: while still operating more in his head, there is more personal integration than before

Student 7: movement to a more personal faith, a deeper longing

Student 8: movement from more of a head space to a more figurative/ space

Student 9: continual deepening movement; encouraged her to move into different form of poetry and within the lessening of words, a further deepening has occurred

Assessment morphing into a faith formation opportunity?

We are prepared to walk beside participants as part of our intentional focus on their faith development, despite the distance/online barrier – according to how much participants are prepared to ‘let us in’ – some do this more than others.

Pastoral care takes on a spiritual dimension through the online environment sometimes through the assessment. Task A gives us a window sometimes into what is going on for some of our participants. This allows us to engage from our faith perspective as individuals to encourage our participants and ourselves in both of our faith journeys – this brings a sense of communion. Both of us come with particular gifts and abilities – teacher trained, work in the church, interest in spirituality – combined with intentionality – as we mark Task A assessment pieces (besides the email and phone calls we receive from participants), we are also looking for cues and hints that tell us that there is something else we might need to follow up on pastorally and spiritually with someone. So, once we mark their assessment, for some participants, we do follow-up via phone call or email, with a thought, encouragement, question, suggestion for extra reading or just checking-in with them. As I have said before, this is about the intentionality, in this case, combined with the skills and gifts each of us bring to this role.

Not all students choose to really engage with this Task. Some seem to hold something of themselves back somehow. But with others, it is really different. It is as though it **is** more than a piece of assessment for them. This can be a gradual process or can happen right from the beginning. But as a Course Facilitator you can see the difference – the engagement is more honest, raw, and real. The participant lays themselves bare – open to the stimulus and what God might have to say to them in that space. And the result is very moving – as assessors we often find ourselves amazed and awestruck by what comes back to us in this Task, when people really engage with it. When they allow themselves to be transformed by the Spirit moving through it.

Alignment to current thinking:

Christian professors can create a Christian virtual environment that encourages spiritual development and intellectual growth. Professors need to remember that, “instructional technology can never replace the critical presence of faculty members as mentors and guides in the lives of their students” (Esselman, 2004, p. 162). Ultimately, professors can create meaningful relationships with students online and that should

*continue to be the focus of Christian professors. It is important that Christian professors become accomplished teachers in the online environment.*¹³

The intentionality in our approach to our online Courses is something we have been working on over a couple of years now, and we have recently found that our thinking also aligns with current thought in this area.

Firstly, while we know we cannot move away from the fact that we *are* assessing our participants work, we intentionally approach our interactions with participants from the point of being companions on a journey¹⁴. This allows for a more relational approach to formation and development, and permits a flow of learning that is two-way, where both participant and facilitator can be vulnerable and authentic in their faith journey¹⁵. We are often enriched by our participants and what they contribute to our Courses through their assessment (and comments on improvements to the Courses).

Secondly, we regularly intentionally pray for our participants¹⁶ (daily), and have been able to pray with our participants via webinar – once in a short worship service, with people participating at various points.

Thirdly, besides correcting our participants' assessments, we offer encouragement where we can¹⁷, both through assessment feedback and through general or individual emails or phone calls. Some of our participants are open in being vulnerable with us about what is going on in their lives and we respect the trust they place in us with this information. Giving participants honest feedback about their abilities and pointing to where God is at work in their lives, is an opportunity to provide hope and reassurance. This is particularly important for those who are going through difficult times, and general encouragement for others. We know that participants appreciate our encouraging them from their feedback to us about this.

Fourthly, our goal in education is that our participants seek to integrate their learning in ways that move them towards spiritual transformation. Their learning should hopefully change their heart, mind, body and soul and re-orient them towards God and God's purposes for themselves and the world¹⁸.

¹³ Babyak, 67.

¹⁴ See also Babyak, 65. Quoted in Babyak, 65: "The first recommendation is that professors adapt a biblically based, relational pedagogy: "Pedagogy in theology requires a kind of accompaniment or willingness to walk with students; it presupposes embodied presence, a companionship in real time" (Esselman, 2004, p. 162)."

¹⁵ See also Babyak, 64-65. "Despite those fears and doubts, distance education has been proven to provide learning opportunities can capitalize on relational values as professors are vulnerable, authentic, display integrity, and create community online by making sure that the online community is safe, transparent, intimate, and has clear boundaries (White, 2006), which can actually help students grow spiritually."

¹⁶ See also Babyak, 66.

¹⁷ See also Babyak, 66.

¹⁸ See also Babyak, 66.

Fifthly, we have spent much time in learning about the environment in which we teach and how to utilise it more fully for effective, creative and transformative online education¹⁹. Both of us were employed with the understanding that we would teach in both the face-to-face and online areas. With backgrounds in teaching, we understand the need to fully appreciate the environment in which we teach and to utilise its potential. This continues to be a work in progress and a continuing learning for each of us, and an area we continue to grow within.

Finally, as mentioned previously, intentional adaptation²⁰ is the key to our approach. Our goal is to provide accessible education that serves students who cannot access a face-to-face environment for whatever reason. And so, we seek to adapt our learning activities and course materials in ways that provide a stimulating, engaging and enticing environment for our participants that leads to spiritual transformation.

Next steps:

Online learning communities that foster faith formation

Whilst faith formation has been occurring effectively in one with one contexts (i.e. course facilitator with course participant), for various reasons²¹, there are limited opportunities to create faith formation experiences with cohorts of learners (such as webinars). The benefits of regular and closer interaction between course participants and the value of both learning and growing in faith with each other are evident²².

The quest for authentic faith learning communities is a 'next step' in the development of these online courses. Aside from ensuring the online space is a safe space for participants and setting the parameters of its use, there are questions relating to the structure of the course offerings that need to be addressed.

First amongst these is the creation of learning cohorts of course participants who will travel together on the learning journey from its beginning to its end. Second, is encouraging them to commit to participating in the online space provided (e.g. Forum, Blog, Wiki) regularly and responsively that contributes to the mutual learning and faith development of the cohort.

¹⁹ See also Babyak, 67ff.

²⁰ See also Babyak, 64.

²¹ There has been a focus on self-paced learning so far. There have been attempts to create cohorts and pastoral issues for participants have resulted in these cohorts becoming unviable in terms of numbers.

²² For instance see Mark Maddix's discussion on online learning communities and faith formation in Mark A Maddix, "Developing Online Learning Communities", *Christian Education Journal*, Spring 10, 1 (2013): Proquest, 140, and 143-146.

Utilising "Presence"

Key to the use of ICTs to support faith formation is the ongoing identification and subsequent adaptation of devices and software to accommodate faith formation activities. This is an ongoing matter with course facilitators continuing to test and use software (e.g. Citrix's GoTo... webinar software, Facebook, Twitter etc) and explore how they might be used effectively and safely in the courses.

These ICT "tools" serve to promote and increase 'presence' in the course. Importantly, this is the course facilitators' presence to the participant as teacher, guide, carer, and companion in the faith journey. For this to be effective, facilitators need to increase communication, reduce the sense of isolation experienced by some participants, and model faith in an online environment.

Our experience is that the initiative in developing and deepening faith conversations needs to be an intentional focus adopted by the course facilitators. This focus may begin by being implicit in all interactions with participants. It should become increasingly more explicit with each one as the learning relationship develops.

Broadening the offerings

Following a review in 2015, the facilitators have been working on offering the courses in a range of ways. Ten Unit courses will be offered in a "Lite" format of say, 4 to 5 Units, for those who find the current courses either too long or too demanding in time and content.

Courses, particularly the new Worship and Preaching Units, will also be offered in discrete units enabling individuals and faith groups to study. For example, a group or individual may study one Unit of Preparing Worship.

Plans are envisioned for a range of congregational and individual focused resources to expand into areas of faith development, spirituality and prayer, and resources for leadership.

The above developments will find their place within a range of lay education offerings and courses.

In and through these developments, we will continue to look for opportunities for faith formation to occur.

Conclusion:

Web-based technologies and digital media provide the means to connect with spiritually hungry people and provide online tools and resources for them to explore faith and spirituality, engage in spiritual conversations with others, and invite them to a faith community.

The new digital tools can empower people to connect with each other online, share their stories and faith experiences, give witness to the ways they are living their faith (practices), create faith formation content (print, audio, video) to share with others, and so many other user-generated activities²³.

This paper traces the development of a faith formation approach that has arisen from review and reflection on the purpose of adult faith education. The subsequent availability of digital learning provided the challenge to translate these ideas into the ICT environment. Our experience is that the key to success in combining faith formation with digital delivery is an intentional approach aligned with adaptation. Initial feedback and outcomes from course participants indicates early success in the implementation of this approach. These results are promising and certainly support current literature in the area of faith formation in the digital educational arena.

While there is more work to be done around the setting up of online learning communities, we want to acknowledge that this is very much a work in progress.

In a 21st C faith environment, as in all times, Christians require access to faith learning and faith deepening experiences that will resource their participation in God's mission. Where diminished resources or access to resources occur in the face-to-face environment, people may access quality online resources that can support community, mission and faith development in local and wider settings.

²³ John Roberto, *Faith Formation 2020*, Naugatuck: LifelongFaith Associates, 2010, 127.

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Appendix 1 – general comments from participants about the online courses

Wow guys.....you have no idea how much this email has meant to me! I feel frustrated at times at not getting into it more - but appreciate your support and encouragement.

Our studies in Theology have been enriching, challenging and at the same time comforting. To start to read the Bible – not just to 'believe the Bible' but to actually live the 'by' the Bible – requires us to start to build on our own understanding of the process this journey we call Christianity really means.

Thank you for all your support of my efforts this year. I would not have had the strength to continue at times if not for your love and uplifting in the background. It meant a lot - and has allowed me to set the goal for next year as achievable.

Thank-you for your comments and phone calls and also for your support

WOW!!!! Thank-you. Thank-you both so much for your support throughout this course. I have learnt so much from you both and I have learnt a lot every time I had to do any task again - it meant I had to do more study and research.

I am thoroughly enjoying the study – especially digging deep into the death of Christ. Amazing how many times one has read the Easter story and then – so much revealed by module 2 unit 1.

A quick thank you again for your support and constructive guidance in this Unit. As mentioned previously, the layout, content and resources, workload, and your leadership, is comparable with, and surpasses in some instances, that offered by mainstream correspondence tertiary providers in my experience.

Thank you for all your help, encouragement and support, I have found the course worthwhile and will encourage others to do it.

Appendix 2: Course Completion Task A

From "Exploring Theology":

Task A requires a different kind of response to the other Tasks

- more of a faith or spiritual response, than an academic one - involving **heart, mind and soul**.

This Task also has its **own set** of stimuli provided in each online Unit in the folder "Course Completion Task A – [Unit Name]" (these stimuli could be a reading, a poem, a song or link to a YouTube clip).

Choose **one** of the stimuli and sit with it. Pray about it and allow it to have a conversation with your life. Your response may draw from your opinions and beliefs, your thoughts and feelings about the stimulus, your own life and experiences (similarities and contrasts), and how you believe the Spirit is speaking into your life at that time.

Some Units will have a stimulus that is a bit different – one of the options will be to learn/revisit an ancient prayer practice. It will have its own information provided.

Only **one** response is required for each course Unit (not a response for each stimulus within the Unit.) Your response for each Unit should be **no longer than 150-200 words**.

Across the entire Course, you are encouraged to vary your forms of responses. You are asked to use at least **four (4)** of the forms below:

- prayer – written by you
- poetry – written by you
- a banner that you have created yourself (with a SHORT explanation)
- a photo or image that you have created yourself (with a SHORT explanation)
- lyrics for a song that you have written yourself (can be provided with audio)
- an item in a church newsletter (eg. a reflective paragraph or a poem written by you)
- photos of a piece of your own artwork in clay or paint, etc (with a SHORT explanation)
- a PowerPoint slide/s – consider copyright issues for any images used (with a SHORT explanation)
- **OR** another form as negotiated with the course facilitators

Your response needs to clearly show that you have interacted with the stimulus, and have **addressed the stimulus' meaning and impact upon you**.

You will find an example stimulus and response in the first Unit of the first Module.

Your Spiritual Reflection will be uploaded as you complete each Unit.

Grading is based on reaching Competency (C) or competency not yet achieved (NC). You may resubmit assessments until the end of the course.

From “Exploring the Old Testament”:

Task A requires a different kind of response to the other Tasks

*- more of a faith or spiritual response, than an academic one - involving **heart, mind and soul.***

Selected Readings for Personal Reflection:

Psalm 139 or Psalm 23

Genesis 1 to 2:3 or Psalm 104

Exodus – 3:13-15

Deut 6:4-9 or Ruth 1:11-22 or Joshua 24: 14-18

1 Samuel 2:1-10 or 2 Samuel 11:27 - 12:1-14

Micah 6:6-8 or Hosea 2: 14-23 or Ezekiel 2

Jeremiah 31:31-34 or Isaiah 52:13 -53:12 or Lamentations 3: 1-33

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 or Proverbs 1:20-2:15 or Song of Solomon 4 or Psalm 88

Daniel 3:1-16

Over the duration of the course, read each of the above texts. To help you, they are identified in each Module that you study. Prayerfully read, and re-read each of these passages **identifying their meaning and what is significant for you**. Meditate on the part you have selected asking God to illuminate your “heart, mind soul and strength”.

Place yourself within the passage as a participant or observer. Imagine what it would be like. Allow the passage to have a conversation with your own life. Be conscious of your thoughts and feelings about the passage. Your personal reflection will come from all this - the Scriptural passages, your life and experiences (similarities and contrasts to the Scripture). How do you believe the Spirit is speaking into your life at this time?

Your response for each Task A should be ***no longer than 150-200 words***.

Across the entire Course, you are encouraged to vary your forms of responses to the text. You are asked to use at least **four (4)** of the forms below:

- prayer – written by you

- poetry – written by you
- a Psalm or Lament
- a banner that you have created yourself (with a SHORT explanation)
- a photo or image that you have created yourself (with a SHORT explanation)
- lyrics for a song that you have written yourself (can be provided with audio)
- an item in a church newsletter (eg. a reflective paragraph or a poem written by you)
- photos of a piece of your own artwork in clay or paint, etc (with a SHORT explanation)
- a PowerPoint slide/s – consider copyright issues for any images used (with a SHORT explanation)
- **OR** another form as negotiated with the course facilitators

Your response will reflect the **text's meaning and its particular relevance to you.**

All participants will complete this task as evidence of your engagement in the course and upload onto the assignment page in your online course. This should be completed and submitted at the end of each Module studied.

Your submissions also need to be either able to be opened in Microsoft Word, or in PDF format.

Grading is based on reaching Competency (C) or competency not yet achieved (NC). You may resubmit assessments until the end of the course.

Appendix 3 – responses from participants indicating faith formation through the courses

I do have fun with the Task A assignments! Thanks for including them.

Nothing has been in the same vein as what I have done before! It's very interesting to reflect on those changes and the pleasure I have in doing the creative reflections.

I want to tell you how much I am enjoying doing these online studies. It really is such a blessing, as I feel I'm learning so much, and growing in the Lord, as I apply myself to the spiritual reflections especially.

I love this course, and the way the Lord is ministering to me and feeding me.

So, I'm so blessed to be doing the OLE studies, and I'm feeling very enlarged spiritually, so I thank you and Mel very much.

This has brought tears to my eyes. Trying to find my mountain-top!!

I'd like to thank you and Neil for the way you've guided me through the course, which I've found so Spiritually enriching.

It has been quite a year and with doing the courses, I have found a deepening of my faith. I definitely pray more.

It's a great way of developing and understanding my faith. It has opened my eyes. You and Neil are amazing in the work you do. Your kindness and encouragement is a great blessing.

I have commenced Module 2. It is flowing very well and I am enjoying extending my knowledge and being creative with the Tasks.

Your comment brought a tear to my eye. It is amazing to think that something you do touches someone else. I am learning this about myself, not to doubt myself but to be empowered by the Holy Spirit especially as I embark on some new things for me within our church. I am really learning a lot!

Trinity OLÉ is a great way to learn and to deepen your faith. The content is wonderful. I am on my third subject, and have found the whole process spiritually enriching, and a wonderful opportunity to grow.

I am thoroughly enjoying the studies. It's renewed my spirit in the Living Christ and I thirst to know more.

Thanks for suggesting it. I find reading hard going, but I will persevere as I am enjoying it so much.

Thanks for your encouragements and teachings in last 2 years. I am so grateful to have both you walked along the faith journey with me :)

Appendix 4 – survey responses from participants around faith formation through courses

How has this course enabled you to deepen your faith:

- The reflection exercises have challenged me to go beyond my boundaries in how I express myself. The readings
- and text books have deepened my theology and how **I live out my faith more**
- it has **led me into new territory**
- encourage me to do more reading - bible and other sources
- The reflective assignment tasks and **a deepening knowledge of what my faith means.**
- Roots have **searched deeper for nutrition to enable strength to stand firm**
- Learning to see the Jesus of the NT authentically
- Developed a clear understanding and articulation of Christology
- More knowledge about the NT
- Sustained my enthusiasm
- **Yes very much.**
- To engage with scripture on a deeper level and in the process form **a deeper relationship with God.**

In what ways has this Course enriched your skills for ministry with others?

- It has helped me to understand the church's role and mission more which has overflowed in my roles as an elder and in the faith formation leadership group at church.
- Broadened my knowledge of the context and culture of the NT times. Shown me a variety of ways to communicate parts of the gospel message
- planning for worship; bible studies; sharing faith
- This has made me think about why I believe what I believe and to also question so other answers can be reviewed.
- The numerous prayers written has helped me to be more composed in prayer and praying with others.
- it has development some of my talents
- Greater background and understanding about God

Other faith related comments from within the survey:

- My faith has been deepened beyond what I ever dreamed it would be.
- I wanted to be challenged in my faith and to learn more which will help me in my ministry and life and this course is doing that.
- My relationship with God and knowledge of Jesus deepened.

- Not only did I learn but grew deeper in faith than I thought at commencement.