Teaching theology online in class
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This book explores the teaching of theology using technology. This is often assumed to mean moving the whole process online. However, web-supported and technology-enhanced learning can be effective in class as well as online. We now teach theology in a technology-saturated world. Technology allows the blending of online and face to face processes in what is sometimes identified as blended learning. Yet learning is always a blend of processes, proclivities, perspectives and personalities.

The questions addressed in this paper are: How might we learn to teach more effectively in the classroom based on our experience of technology, particularly online, often asynchronous, methods? And, How does a theological framework help us to shape our understanding and apply our experience?

Stepping out online: The strange world of home
Travel has peculiar consequences. The experience of the return from the “far country”, Karl Barth’s term for repentance, alluding to the “Prodigal Son” of Luke 15, is ours each time we come home. This book has taken us on many trips to new lands. Many of us will return home, as it were, to our classrooms asking “so what?” Missions have taught us how to adapt our approach to new cultures, and the returning missionary may have fresh eyes to see the old anew. What might we learn from the online teaching mission for our own classroom-based mission?

Using the frame of trinitarian community, acknowledging the ever-presence of the Spirit, and recognising historical approaches to ecclesial change inspired by mission and missiology, this paper considers how online processes and insights might inform classroom-based practices.

I suggest that thinking about the triune community and using some simple processes from ecclesiology may help us. The God who declared that it is not good for a person to be alone also assured those who came to know him in his Son Jesus that he would not leave them alone. Those of us who have pondered our successes (and failures) in teaching are often drawn back to the changes that have occurred in classes, in students and in us through the encounter of God, of each other, and of truth in our learning together. Communities change us.

Facebook and the Twitterverse were once strange countries. We needed passports and language lessons to enter. They are now the place of primary citizenship for many. For many younger humans, the Internet is the matrix of reality, and the three dimensional world of objects is its sluggish mimic. Connections are made and unmade in cyberspace, and sometimes the connection spills over into hard space. This observation was made well in the context of both religious community and theological education a decade ago.1

Stepping back home
In recent years there has been an upsurge in research in education by educators whose academic discipline is not education. It is not a new phenomenon. It is one with historical significance.

A major Twentieth Century contributor to professional education was Donald Schön.2 His work remains in print and continues to be influential. Schön’s influence is widespread. From his dissertation on theories of inquiry, his educational travels took him to leadership in the area of urban studies and in architecture education. He encouraged his fellow educators beyond a focus on educating for technical competence to paying attention to the “artistry” of their disciplines. How was it that one might not simply apply what one knows of the practice of one’s discipline, but how might one apply the deepest realities of one’s profession? Schön’s influence in organisation learning is attributed to his encouragement to educators and leaders to nurture the investment of learning from life experiences into their professional practice. This has led to appreciation of learning systems, supra-individual learning, and reflective practice. His journey has informed our journey.

Much advance in professional education comes from similar individuals – those whose starting point is not education as a theory, but rather who reflect on education as a practice. For many of us in the theological education this is our story.

That education was not a recognised university discipline until the early Twentieth Century did not mean that it did not exist, of course. Rather it was an art engaged by many people from many disciplines. Pilgrims and

1 See Mary Hess, Engaging Technology in Theological Education: All That We Can’t Leave Behind, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), and Heidi Campbell, Exploring Religious Community Online: We Are One in the Network, (New York: P. Lang, 2005).
vagabonds, we have learned from the strange land of learning, and have returned to our own educational practice wiser, though sometimes more confused and surprised by what we used to consider normal.

The recent growth in recognition of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL) is in some ways a return to this dynamic. It has been driven by a number of factors, including a growth in teaching recognition in higher education, funding for SOTL-inspired research, and the ability to count research output in the study of teaching one’s discipline, rather than just in the discipline itself, towards various performance targets (which was previously not possible).

This growth is reflected in theological education, with two historical journals (Theological Education (ATS), since 1964 and British Journal of Theological Education, since 1987) now joined by more recent offerings (such as the Teaching Theology and Religion of the Wabash Center, since 1998, and the Journal of Adult Theological Education of the British and Irish Association for Practical Theology, since 2004). These sit alongside a remarkable and growing repository of online resources in the education. This has yet to be repeated online in theological education.

**Coming together in encounter**

Teaching online has shown, at its best, that the processes of proximity and engagement can be emulated, transferred, and in many cases improved online. It has also shown that some of the troublesome indicators of age, gender and ethnicity can be removed from the mix in fully or partially anonymous (but safe) online spaces. Early experiments in distance and online learning had an unintended benefit in improving the educational outcomes of those in the same units in class. This benefit is derived, typically, from the benefit of thinking through the educational dynamic. This learning process specialists, and learning designers, are in evidence in quality online education, and increasingly in face to face education. The embracing of the online Learning Activity Management System (LAMS) is evidence of the value of this beyond merely online learning, and the use of Learning Management Systems to support both online and face to face classes is evidence of the value of thinking through educational process.

**Melding online and face to face experience;**

The trend in education is now the embracing of the online – as space of encounter and as paradigm for reality – in all of education. Blending is now the norm, and the experience of most students is a sometimes seamless, sometimes clunky, but almost always hybrid process. The online is as close as – or closer than – the next person.

Some useful outcomes of this, as regards the building of learning community: many tertiary educators are now using online resources for students to introduce themselves to the class. This is more timely, avoids many of the pressures of competition in class, and allows students to link to blogs, LinkedIn or Facebook profiles, and to provide more information than could be shared in class – and allows for others in the class to recall who’s who – in the room or online. Even something as simple as pictures – whether a snapshot, or an image of a favoured pet – reminds those in class and those online who each person is, and allows the teacher also to guide the (inevitable) online pursuit by students of her or his own personal information.

**Pilgrims in community**

This paper is shaped by the question: “What do we as educators in theology bring to education?” Put differently we might as “What is theological about theological education?”. This was a recent lively discussion in the course development panel working up the proposal for a Graduate Certificate in Theological Education for the University of Divinity. If theology was merely the content, then we could well either develop a Graduate Certificate in Higher Education, as most universities have done, or more pragmatically, use theirs! But the reflection, held as strongly or perhaps even more strongly by those outside our institution than those within, was that there is something distinctive about theological higher education.

Many answers might be given, including the interplay of the content with the life of the learners, the call to profess, not merely to state, the tenets of theology, the implicit subject of the study as reflexively being humankind as the object of God’s attention, rather than merely an interest in God – whether as concept or being, the experience that we have of being outside the majority of Australian universities, and so on. For me, a key is the interplay between the subject matter and the lives of those who teach and learn theology. Mathematics keeps less students awake at night than does theology or philosophy, I think. We rejoice when former students succeed, whether in academia or church leadership, but I think that many of us find yet greater delight in hearing a student pray with conviction and read Scripture with insight. The interplay of the cognitive and the affective, the personal and the professional, is profound in our practice.

Theological educators typically has stopped to think about this. We are encouraged in our thinking as a community of teaching scholars when we ponder and reframe our vocation. After all, those who know God are not necessarily those who study God. It is we who struggle with God who seek insight in our own exploring. We are inspired by our colleagues, and by our students. Our own practice of faith needs us, in many cases, to draw

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together with others who like us are “burdened with the difficulty of God” (Ben Myers, blog, 2010); to continue teaching about God because it is too painful not to say something about God; to keep researching in the things of God because otherwise God seems even further away. In my own case, to keep engaged with the God of joy, who commands joy, since otherwise the world seems so joyless and sad. I might otherwise forget to rejoice. The little flame of hope sustained by the life of learning in faith might otherwise be snuffed. And to go on is more life-giving than considering the option to stop. The online world opens new ways to explore as well as to express this vocation.

This is no simple task. If it were, we would be finished by now. Rather, we are drawn into a complex and ever expanding network of knowing. Our analysis of texts and of trends is not simple. It is challenging and it is vexing. There are no neat simple solutions. If there were, we would have found them by now. Rather, we strive to engage and to understand. We struggle to make sense, and to communicate that sense as best we can apprehend it today, as we are today, and in the light of what we are becoming. Whilst we try to work to bring the best of simplicity to our teaching, we know that we are dealing with no simple matter.

As our subject matter is challenging and requires skill and discernment, so does the teaching of it. There is no simple method. Our quest to improve our teaching practice will continue. There may be, as TS Eliot had it, an ongoing journey:

> And the end of all our exploring
> Will be to arrive where we started
> And know the place for the first time. (Little Gidding, V, from Four Quartets)

Theological education is complex and involved, it takes hard work, and it is rewarding, just as its subject matter is complex, involved, hard work and rewarding. Karl Barth rebuffed those who wanted theology to be spoken of in simple and intelligible terms on the basis that theology was demanding and required deep understanding. However, his delight was that his theology might stray into the hands of non-theologians who might understand it better than did the theologians. We should not make the subject matter easier than the subject matter allows.5

The changing world, and the parallel world of cyberspace, mean that our task is an ongoing one. Discovery of the world and of ourselves go hand in hand.

Inviting worlds to come together

Two key articles in Theological Education counterpoint the issues for us:

Richard Mouw6 says that he is often asked, “How in the world did you manage to lead such a diverse school as Fuller?” As part of his reflection on this he says “finding value in that diversity while also constantly exploring the underlying commonalities” was part of his approach. This led him to “admire——even love——diversity”. This reflection on the diversity of churches and believers led him to appreciate the “considerable diversity in…understanding of the scope and character of theology”…and helped him to also appreciate “the [relationship] between theology and religious studies”. Implicitly, theology, and thus theological education, is paying attention to all of life.

Mary Hess asks “what is educational about theological education? She quotes Mary Boys:

> Religious education is the making accessible of the traditions of the religious community and the making manifest of the intrinsic connection between tradition and transformation.7

Participation in and exposition of the various theological traditions is part of the role of the theological educators. Yet our educational tradition is, at least until recently for most of us who teach today, the classroom. For our students, social and educational tradition is, increasingly, the online world. Our entry into their world (and increasingly our ranks as teachers filled with those from their world) makes for a sometimes uncomfortable cross-cultural exchange. This is, of course, as it has ever been for students! The transformation of our teaching has taken many of us to what was, initially, the strange land of the online world. Yet many have found that we can be at home there, function effectively, engage transformatively, and live and teach well.

The changing role of the teacher;

To embrace the changing world around us, and to teach effectively in a world shaped by online dynamics, requires us, as educators, to move beyond an industrial era model of “schooling”8. It pulls us off the production line and into community.

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Kegan and Lahey\(^9\) report that “a series of shifts happen in the midst of adult learning” moving us from “complaint to commitment”, from “blame to personal responsibility”. The egalitarianism of the Internet is a contributor to this. It is part of the resonance of “the symbolic language of various religious traditions.”\(^10\) Knowing learners, engaging with them in their contradictions, working with them in the disruption that comes to their frames of meaning (and sharing their pain) and helping with the reframing in more durable tested containers\(^11\) is part of what is educational about theological education.

Parker Palmer\(^12\) notes the already – not yet tension in theological education as reflecting the already – not yet tension in theology, and in life.\(^13\) It is exemplified in the online-face to face dialogue.

Palmer identifies five practices to help educators embrace this as a healthy and generative tension:

1. An understanding that we are all in this together
2. An appreciation of the value of otherness
3. An ability to hold tension in life giving ways
4. A sense of personal voice and agency
5. A capacity to create community.\(^14\)

It is interesting to pass current practices in online and face to face education through this lens. The experience of engaging the online education process in theological education has affirmed the value of community and agency.

**Testing against our own craft**

The two questions “What’s *theological* about theological education” and “What’s *educational* about theological education” confront us continually – we are not merely theologians, and we are not merely educators. We are members of communities of faith who are engaged in the communal exploration of the faith and traditions of the community. What does it mean to teach theologically, and what does it mean to learn theologically? It is more than content. But how much more, and in what ways?

A major contributor to this conversation was Ed Farley, who died on 27 Dec 2014. Farley argued that the academy should engage the large questions of life and faith, the hermeneutics of life and texts, with the seminary attending to the “hermeneutics of vocation”.\(^15\) However, as one of his early reviewers noted, this big picture work is an unlikely outcome given that the problem of “the crushing weight of unintegrated specialism in the university’s self-understanding…and the dominance of academic subspecialization with which seminars now find themselves extensively infected.”\(^16\) Farley defined theology as “the reflective wisdom of the believer,”\(^17\) and the refined reflective skills of its teachers are shaped if not mediated by the discipline/s that the teacher brings to their reflection. This reflective wisdom surely should not be sundered between academic theology and the practice of faith.

Farley brought skills as philosophical theologian, and perhaps also from his life as a jazz musician. What do we bring to our work, and how does it shape our teaching? Our own biography affects our work. We examine this when we reflect, as Schön would encourage us, as reflective practitioners. If we fail to do this, we are likely to miss some important insights. Our move to the “far country” and our return have heightened our awareness of the online and the hard world. As theological educators we have many resources at our fingertips. I wish to identify two: history, and ecclesiology.

**Particular paradigms and theological education**

For insights as to the value of a historical matrix, I am indebted to Denis Kirkaldy\(^18\). Kirkaldy argues that we know and integrate learning when we have a clear framework into which we can integrate understanding. History forces us to confront issues of power, culture and texts. Asking the history question pushes us to engage our own context in the light of insights from the past, and to engage insights from the past with our own context.

\(^12\) Parker Palmer is a Quaker educator, known for his seminal work *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997).
\(^14\) Summarised by Hess, “Learning”.
\(^15\) Edward Farley, *Fragility of Knowledge: Theological Education in the Church and the University*, (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1988).
For insights in the second matrix, ecclesiology. I am indebted to Neil Ormerod. It is a rare week when I am not in a college and engage in or overhear a conversation about community, connectedness, or engagement. Ormerod notes that there seem to be two approaches that pertain in the study of ecclesiology: an idealist (Platonic, supra-historical) and a realist (Aristotelian, structured, historical, real world) approach. This divide also seemed to pertain to studies in education. In ecclesiology the balance seems to be more to the idealist, and in education more to the realist approach.

Ormerod notes that unlike other theological topics, ecclesiology seeks not only to describe a reality, but to change it, both in structure and modes of operation. The ideal may be set in the purposes of God, but there is much that can be changed and adapted in the day to day life of the church. Thus, ecclesiology is a norming (for Ormerod, normative) discipline. I prefer “norming” to “normative” as it clarifies that what is intended is a prescriptive norm, rather than a merely descriptive norm. Empirical research in ecclesiology tends to identify descriptive norms (the church is like this or that) but the output of most thinkers in ecclesiology is with a view to shaping a reality in line with the norm – thus “norming” the church. It seeks to produce norms, shaping how the church should be and should behave.

As an example of idealist ecclesiology, Ormerod notes the work of Miroslav Volf. He notes, however, that the three disparate ecclesiologies (those of Zizioulas as representative of Orthodoxy; Ratzinger as representative of Catholicism; and Moltmann as exemplary of the free-church tradition) are based on the idealist norm of the Trinity. He notes how hard it is to imagine a normative approach to ecclesiology emerging from such a methodology. He engages the alternative contemporary construct of communion similarly, and with parallel results. The symbolic and mystical, it seems, are not a great asset in management! Are they in education?

In examining realist-historical approaches, Ormerod notes that we need to differentiate our approach from Church History. Methodologically, he notes Hans Küng’s which draws implications for the (then) contemporary church from the life of the early church; and David Bosch which draws implications from the missional life of the early church for the paradigms which he describes that shape the mission of the church of today, as examples of this realist approach. What then, we may ask, is the normative (norming) value of these approaches, since “the problem of normativity is not unique to ecclesiology and in fact is a common problem within the human sciences”?

Applying insights

Empirical research can indeed show us what is observed, but struggles to describe why. Put differently, the matters that can be measured are not always (perhaps not often) the important ones. For instance, that people do a certain thing can be observed, but the underlying questions of value, meaning and destiny cannot be directly observed. Whilst these can be dismissed as non-empirical, there is still an influence from them, so they cannot be ignored. The question then becomes whether and then how the social sciences are appropriated in ecclesiological studies. And in parallel, how they are appropriated in educational studies.

In education, as in any human science, it is easy to measure some less important factors. It is the most important ones are often elusive. The norming nature of our investigations in to our teaching carry this risk. An awareness of how the disciplines of our own academic expertise can helps us engage may help us to avoid confusing the ideal and the real.

Just as problems in the study of ecclesiology seem to me to arise when the ecclesiologist is unaware of the methodological limitations of their approach, or when idealist and realist approaches are mixed inappropriately, so can be the case in education.

How then do we apply what we learn in our adventure into the online domain when it comes to applying our insights into our classroom domain? At the least we note the different contexts. Further, we note that the particular learning in one domain may or may not apply to the other – or to the blend. That is, if the realist or particular insight is context dependent, it is unlikely that the insight will transfer. This has been well documented in the transition from engaging lecturer in the classroom whose recorded lectures fall flat when provided to the online cohort. It is probably also seen when forums, used well in an online cohort, replace a more valued process, such as open discussion in the classroom. In some processes, context shapes the possibility. What, we might ask, does this particular task or dynamic mean if translated to the idealist? Or better, what is the principle at play, and how does it transfer?

One idealist commonality shared by both ecclesiology and education is the value that each places on community – the community of worshippers and the community of learners, led, perhaps, by the community of

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2 Ormerod, “Recent Ecclesiology”, 58.
6 Ormerod, “Recent Ecclesiology”, 61.
7 Ormerod, “Recent Ecclesiology”. 62f describes some instances.
priests or “pastors and teachers” (Eph 4:11) and the community of scholars, or the “academic community” respectively.

Ecclesiologists – from structuralist to constructionist to relationalist – know that it is not the content, but the approach that makes a difference to perception and understanding. How would each of these view the task of teaching? Likely, the content as well as the context will shape the process. The structuralist may well focus on the formwork that allows her own insights to be communicated, whereas the relationalist may prefer to look towards the human interrelations as the matrix in which understanding is forged.

It is a fruitful exercise to apply Ormerod’s idealist/realist frame to the theological curriculum, and to the content and learning outcomes of various units. It helped to sharpen our institutional insights as to how we are, implicitly and explicitly, attending to our task as theological educators. Attending to this may also help our work in the scholarship of teaching and learning. How do we link our idealist notions into our practice? How are our graduate attributes linked into the practice of teaching?

Each of us, from our own specialisations, will bring insights to this. Our community, as scholars, and as labourers together in theological education, will add insight and opportunity. It will mediate the insights that we draw from the online world back into our classroom, just as it shaped the transition from the classroom to online. It is the place where missiology meets ecclesiology.

Questions we might ask ourselves include: Around what, in this unit, will I seek to build community? Will it be the assessment task/s, a particular learning activity (debate, seminar, presentation), or interaction around a text or an issue? Will it be online or offline, together or apart? And through all of this we ask: How, as a community, will we build trust, nurture exploration, and encourage integration?

These are challenges to us as practitioners in the gathered face to face classroom. They take on new dimensions when we move into cyberspace. In this context we risk retreat into very private worlds, and the smudging the public/private distinction which seems to be the result of learning when community is absent, and learning becomes a retreat from the public world to the private. The real world of learning experience becomes a small world. The return from the far country of online to the classroom raises its own set of challenges.

**Identifying the needs and limits of student cohorts.**

In the theological classroom we are involved in a new “community of truth”\(^ {26}\). The online makes the remote present and the strange proximate. Heidi Campbell identifies five key traits in online communities of faith: networked communities, storied identities, shifting authority, convergent practice, and a multisite reality.\(^ {27}\) These traits are also part of online life more broadly, and pertain to online education. These traits are distinguished by rhythms moving between the personal and the collective than they are by the public and private.\(^ {28}\)

Both Heidi Campbell and Mary Hess\(^ {29}\) have shown that online community can be as engaged and transformative as can face to face community. This has been borne out in a number of studies in theological education as well.\(^ {30}\) In the online world, as well as in the face to face world, we have moved from a “banking [of knowledge] and schooling” to a relational view of adult learning which “inhabits the questions”.\(^ {31}\)

**Engaging emerging possibilities**

What do our theological disciplines bring into this educational world? Translation, context, text focus, a desire for community, and an understanding that the whole is bigger than the parts. The already — not yet tension is a reality. We are ever on the edge of a new world. As Justo González noted, in reflecting on 50 years of the ATS and thus the journal *Theological Education* “The worst problem that a (theological) school may have at a time such as ours is to have no problem and therefore not to feel the urgent need for change.”\(^ {32}\)

An alternative serious issue is the rigidity which does not permit change. History tells us that it is a problem normally overcome. The translation to a new world is an important stress test for ideas and processes. Their translation back adds further insights. How have we built community online, knowing that community – a sense of belonging and of shared practice – is good for learning? And how, having built community online (through forums, shared activities) have we discovered dimensions that when translated back to the classroom build stronger communities of learning?

\(^{26}\) Parker Palmer, (in Hess, *Learning*, 15)


\(^{28}\) Campbell, “Understanding the Relationship”, 83.

\(^{29}\) Mary Hess, *Engaging Technology* and Campbell, *Exploring Religious Community*.


\(^{31}\) Hess, *Learning*, 16.

One such dynamic emerged from online anonymous asynchronous role play. Students in that context had not been prejudiced by their learning together through issues of age, gender and ethnicity. In another class which had more than a dozen faith traditions in it, I ensured that even face to face we would begin work together and deal with issues that did not require immediate disclosure of our own faith traditions. This built community based on shared concerns drawn for the unit content, and soon students discovered that their learning partners were from traditions different to theirs, and in some cases which theirs considered poorly, but they were unable to exercise prejudice since they had build understanding and appreciation of each other as people.

Building students into working groups for later presentation in class builds resilience. Less students withdraw early for small reasons, since they have a task, a commitment, and a loyalty group. Learning together in class has led to some useful experiments online. How might we bring the online learning back to the classroom? How might we build unprejudiced learning community by affirming some anonymity?

Peer marking and self assessment methods

With communities of trust and awareness, two areas emerge: peer processes, including marking, and self-assessment. With trust built in a classroom, some peer work can be undertaken – and with small tasks good feedback can be provided, and higher level critique engaged, through peer marking. The online context also permits students who are preparing short pieces of work to develop higher level appreciation of skills and processes by engaging on some guided peer marking. This can allow interaction between the student and teacher through discussion of the mark awarded to the student themselves and the mark that the teacher would have given (and why). This is a process that is possible in class, but is much better achieved online – both through the benefits of privacy from other students and the faster possibilities for feedback and interaction between student and teacher online compared with face to face.

Conclusion

Two parameters have emerged in our exploration: the building of learning community, and careful attention to learning design. These are important in both online and classroom contexts. Our experiences of rethinking the community and the educational process online allows a return “home” the classroom with new insights and heightened skills. It brings also the realisation that there is not one solution that meets all needs. When asked “what do we need to do to teach well online” we cannot point to a single solution. It is not the techniques, but the particular context and opportunity that point to possible solutions. No one discipline will give us this answer, for education, like ecclesiology, is eclectic.

After a substantial analysis, Ormerod concludes “that any attempted method of correlat[ing] the results of the social sciences with the theological tradition, will inevitably break down.”. He identifies four problems, namely: (1) that the social sciences do not provide one unified system of knowledge in their area; (2) the social sciences and the social situation are suffused with the realities of sin and grace; (3) the social sciences are not a self-enclosed body of knowledge, and in fact they need theology to appreciate this; and (4) theology cannot simply adopt the results of the discipline(s) of the social sciences but must reflect on the problem of evil and the solution of grace.

Similarly, in our educational endeavours, there is no one model or one technique. The historian and the biblical scholar both treat historical texts, but each has different methods and different paradigms in play. Each will draw differently from their methodological repertoire, and each will construct different solutions. However, we can learn from each other. How might we mediate the solutions of our discipline within the processes of evil and grace? How has anonymity made grace more accessible in some contexts, rather than allowing more evil in others? How has working together built trust, and how do we reduce the risks of misdoing? How might we learn from netiquette the lessons that allow us to work with courtesy in the classroom? How might the asynchronicity of the forum, which allows us to formulate our answers carefully (checking, perhaps, grammar and spelling), allow us to find ways of clear communication in class? Are some processes better moved online, even if they can be done in class? How might the most effective blend of processes by constructed?

As the church risks annihilation – standing, as it has been noted, just one generation from extinction – and yet has proved resilient and adaptive, so is theological education. We learn from ecclesiology, and from all of our disciplines, that we have much to offer and much to learn. We learn from history that adaption is a key to endurance. We offer to our students, our churches, the academy if it will listen, and to ourselves, lessons based on experience and reflection. And we learn from all of these as well. Theological education is an art and a science, well conducted in community, best conducted in harmony with the divine community.