Distance-learning in the formation of religious leaders looms large on a horizon of misunderstanding, even misjudgment, by under-informed ecclesial and educational bodies. 'Distance-learning' (DL) refers to the teaching/learning practices made possible by a wide variety of internet technologies. Many institutions of higher education now use them amidst new challenges and increasing demand. Some DL even offers access to graduate work with minimized residential requirements for on-campus living with 'brick-and-mortar' classroom instruction.

Complex, even polemical, battles rage on in higher education about the virtues and vices of DL, its potential and our impotence against it. I say complex because very few in positions of religious leadership today learned their profession with these teaching/learning tools. Most of the senior voices in biblical-theological-historical fields had little use of computers, let alone Blackboard or Moodle or hot-button phenomena like Facebook and Twitter. Seminary/rabbinic educators know only marginally more about it, as few have access to highly qualified educators in online-learning theory and practice. It has no obvious place in the theological curriculum and most theological educators naturally resist the move of DL students out of residential education. Those who have the privilege of avoiding DL technologies within today's educational ecology most likely will continue to do so. Those who, for whatever reason, find their work/calling within DL practices will be the ones who must educate the church and others about the possibilities, advantages, and disadvantages in DL for fidelity to educational and ecclesial mission(s). As it stands today, ecclesial and educational bodies are ripe for misunderstanding and misjudgment of DL teaching/learning in religious leadership formation today.

A rather privileged academic and contemplative luddite myself, I should know. I have resisted the use of DL technologies with elegant, theologically-convincing arguments rooted in such sacred domains as incarnation, relationality, and the intimacy of God made known only in the flesh. My contributions and concerns in practical theology, pastoral formation, and a rigorously disciplined Christian spirituality have

provided steady fodder against the Internet barbarians at the gate. I even gave up my Blackberry last year in order to return to the habits of mind more suited to the contemplative life I strive to live, least-disrupted now by what I call my 'dumb' phone. I do not like distance-learning, nor can I imagine ever finding a comfortable competence within the virtual worlds it propagates. 'Digital immigrant' would be my category, so the literature says.

With a little fear and trembling, ultimately with an invitation into curious and communal discernment, I offer the following reflections as a begrudging, recalcitrant theological academic. My sacred vow compels the education of ecclesial and educational bodies yet my unspoken desire is to be argued out of what I now know about DL. 'Best-practices' distance-learning offers startling redress of pressing issues in our academic and faith communities today: fear-ridden inabilities to discern fidelity with curiosity in relationship, the never-ending problems of contextual learning and 'seminary-to-congregation' transition, healthy sustenance of missional leadership in increasingly small congregations, and most surprisingly, an imperative for nonviolent communication in face of overwhelming violence and disconnection in our world. First, a glimpse of context for sake of location and perspective.

My foray into DL strategies within higher theological education began when my institution requested me to develop a hybrid curriculum of what we call formation and integration. In my setting, this refers to a peer-group learning curriculum over a period of at least two years in which students shape and are shaped by a clinical pastoral method in facilitated, face-to-face (F2F) peer-groups alongside classical theological disciplines and field work. For institutions of higher theological education, this portion of the curriculum is usually the last vanguard of insistence *against* technological innovation, *for* solely face-to-face, interpersonal skill development in theologically sound religious leaders. Was I unfaithful in my agreement to attempt such a thing? Perhaps. Or, perhaps there's some truth in the cliché about necessity, motherhood, and invention. Regardless, to use another, the horse had already left the barn by the time I got to the door.

As I fumbled around with technologies I'd never heard of, becoming acutely aware of how isolated theological-techies are within most theological faculty, an unbidden theological question emerged for me: "Have humans finally created a space where the Triune God's redemptive and sanctifying work cannot be witnessed, offered, and received?" Even if we smilingly grant that Al Gore did *not* create this space, that collectively the human species is creating this space amidst individuals and corporations, is it possible that there is absolutely and definitively *no* divine purpose or action within it? I'm a Calvinist by heritage, so I honestly don't think we're that creative. Living amongst the Methodists, "prevenient grace" has sneaked into my vocabulary, though other traditions have similarly catchy phrases for this phenomenon. As a theologically-trained, tenured faculty person, I could no longer disregard that a wiser course of action in face of this unknown might be curious investigation and communal discernment of how the Spirit of God is already working within the world(s) we inhabit, regardless of previous assumptions. I began to look for Christ's face in the most unexpected of places—the persons behind the blogs, community-boards, Moodle shells and more. I saw him. And true to who he is, I learned things I did not want to see.

So many conversations today about DL have nothing to do with a holy curiosity and communal discernment within faithful relationship. A common frame in discourse today is, inevitably, comparisons with current educational practices. One always moves into new things by trying to fit them into what we already know, which seems good practice. In this case, however, such comparisons are only minimally helpful. One, these arguments can be made by educational experts of days gone by who have little to no experience or training in best-practices distance-learning. For example, one well-credentialed fellow in my community brought a sociological study to the conversation with apparent purpose to discredit any engagement in DL. When I asked whether those who had engaged the study had ever been trained by those who learn in a DL way, he had not even considered that question significant for our conversation. He did not know. Given the age and standing of the authors, the results in my view were questionable. Research

and argument by those who have never been trained in best-practices make only moot points, in my view, with hopes of rhetorical persuasion from presumed expertise. We should be paying much more attention to those 'outside' our community (whatever that comes to mean), such as Jaron Lanier with his article, "The Virtual Curmudgeon." He at least educates us about difficulties from years invested in technological innovation.

Another reason the comparison conversation is only minimally useful is that it often comes with a predisposed rigidity, not curious or connective discernment. Such comparisons fund disconnective chatter in which the end is already known and the unrecognized violence is to get others to be where you are too. On the rare occasion when comparison with face-to-face learning is framed as a preliminary educational springboard—such that a more informed, educated discourse may aid in ecclesial and educational discernment—then it can be quite informative. I usually illustrate all these observations with a little reverse psychology. By showing the shortcomings of F2F learning, I can make an argument for why F2F learning ought not to be explored for its benefits in religious leadership formation.

First of all, in F2F settings, students can easily hide their lack of participation and comprehension within interpersonal charm and ageless methods of relational evasion. This is impossible in distance-learning, in which all may assess level of investment and comprehension of materials within chat-discussions and written contributions to communal learning. Areas of misunderstanding become immediately observable, as does lack of any participation at all. Second, extroverted students dominate F2F settings while introverted students may appear nonresponsive or non-participatory. In the DL environments, the learning styles of introverted students are given room to contribute as strengths. They have time to formulate responses to course material and tend to drive the discussion to a much deeper level, more quickly. Third, F2F settings prefigure student/teacher interactions based in the overtly perceived gender, race, ethnic, and orientation assessments by all in the class. White males dominate. Cultural norms of others figure into the

expected socialization norms of higher-education classrooms. DL does not hide these important differences, but it does lessen their initial importance. Discussions often begin without knowing another's gender, race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. Different doorways open for cross-categorical and less-politicized learning community. These social realities are unavoidable in virtual environments, as are inequities in power-relations, but DL's distinctiveness may contribute to different learning in potentially healthy ways. Lastly, F2F settings in higher theological education today are presumed to be primarily relational when in actuality, pedagogies often center around the lectern or the disciplinary expert, insuring that F2F instruction is largely "information transmission." DL, on the other hand, places all participants around the disciplinary subject with active-participation and learner-centered pedagogies. In this sense, DL is more 'primarily relational' and allows greater modeling of disciplinary expertise of the faculty-person, if s/he is trained to do so.

Given these four shortcomings, do we therefore argue that F2F learning should not be a part of religious leadership formation? Of course not. F2F and DL are more like pomegranates and tomatoes than easily comparable learning-strategies whose shortcomings make one or the other de-legitimate for innovation and incorporation. As we move forward, I urge us to listen for when comparisons serve to educate and disregard those comparisons used to shut down the conversation.

Within my disciplinary training, contextual issues in the interpretation and practice of ministry figure high in expertise and contribution. DL here offers new questions and startling potential for the never-ending problems of 'seminary-to-congregation' transition and the sustenance of leadership. Students who elect to take a portion of their degree in distance-learning offerings wind up being theologically resourced while remaining deeply steeped in their local congregational contexts. The phrase 'distance-learning' conjures up immediate misunderstanding for so many of us who are unacquainted with online learning. Distance-learning means local-congregational-learning over years of access to a critical learning community. Instead of being ripped out of residential communities of faith practice to attend differently residential

seminary communities of practice, DL students remain in the local congregation and learn to integrate their learnings every step of the way. Not at the conclusion of degree studies in settings markedly unlike the congregational contexts they will serve in the years to come. Not after three years of being socialized into an artificially residential community with vastly different values and habits of prayer and worship from the highly mobile, disestablished, local congregations they yearn to serve today. They will have never left the primacy of the church in the first place.

The concerns about removal from residence and distance from professional instruction still require serious attention. Congregations today are already too removed from 'critical learning' or 'rigorous' professional instruction. I have even begun to wonder whether God continues to work in, or has perhaps abandoned, some local congregations, whom I have experienced as more interested in tribalistic survival than the radical claims of the gospel. That said, sustaining pastoral excellence within local congregational life today requires new empowerment of lay leaders and more accessible critical theological resourcing for any and all who thirst for it. So many thirst for it, but only those who sense a call and are willing to risk unsustainable debt pursue it, often winding up in a professional role of institutional maintenance. In this sense, theological education *sans* distance-learning has become a bottle-neck endeavor of educational privilege and risky debt. Might DL level the playing field a little, offering refreshing redress of clericalism, elitist privilege, unsustainable debt? Were seminaries and ecclesial bodies trained in best-practices DL, might the critical theological learning be made accessible, broadened, deepened, even beyond church or synagogue walls into an expansive public? Might those in more rural settings begin to have access to something historically, theologically rooted within the breadth and depth of Christian heritage, other than current offerings of rural fear-mongering or liberally-progressive anger or ideologically-driven media-religion?

Consideration of educational innovation in religious leadership formation next begs the question of congregational comprehension and eventual reception of leaders, so trained. If graduates have been shaped

using tools and materials unfamiliar to a specific congregation's life, then how will the bridge be built between DL grads and local congregations? For some, they won't have left for very long, requiring no 'bridge.' For others, the bridge will be built like it's always been built: mutual learning, leadings of the Spirit, and communal discernment amidst old faithful and newly risked ventures. At a recent presbytery meeting, I saw one of the strongest candidates for ministry I've seen in years questioned with rather gruff suspicion about the DL components in his theological training. The candidate fulfilled his calling right there, beginning to teach the presbytery eloquently, modeling his call before our eyes. He showed me my responsibility to write, as these things ought not to be taught solely by candidates on the altar of ecclesial discernment.

In terms of hard-numbers and pedagogical studies, we simply have not been doing this long enough to know how good we can be at it yet. I can say that the DL students I have met are some of the most humble, missionally-oriented, least elitist and entitled students with whom I have ever studied. They refuse to leave their settings of practice and service in which their callings first arose, settings which need to be honored even as they desperately need transformation too. These students want to participate in the transformation of their world(s). They have regularly expressed much more fully a sense of gratitude and blessing for receiving theological nourishment they would not have had access to otherwise. They have little voice in ecclesial bodies. They are willing to try new things to be faithful in their zeal and callings, even as many of them do not find DL familiar or easy to negotiate either. Does the church really want to discourage humble, missionally-oriented, less entitled, less-privileged students with clear zeal and tenacious commitment to theological resourcing across new and sometimes unpalatable means? We are already invested in unsustainable debt for old models of residential education increasingly questionable in the nurture of leaders for smaller and smaller, disestablished and highly-mobile congregations. Why not at least be curious about something with unexpected and untapped potential?

Finally, there is the moral imperative within DL I cannot seem to escape. As I began to develop the hybrid-delivery formation/integration curriculum, I sought a means of interaction or communication that could be rigorously engaged in textually-driven, content fashion as well as in F2F, peer-group settings. Marshall Rosenberg's nonviolent communication (NVC) appeared on the providential horizon. The specific work of development began. In the assignment for students to find examples of NVC in the blogosphere and media-Internet traffic, the violence apparent in image, language and thought overwhelmed me, then us all. Without a doubt, the Internet makes apparent how violent our world is. Worse yet, the Internet itself is one of the most violent 'places' in global human interaction today. It is shaping our habits of mind, practices of communication, and worldviews about the goodness (or not) of our created (dis)order. Deeply rooted, religious-wisdom practitioners are those within the human community who have sacred callings to transform such violence into plowshares of peace, to participate in the transformation of such woundedness into a holy strength and compassion. Any deeply-rooted religious practitioner, in other words, has a moral obligation to 'be there,' to 'live peace in human words and actions,' to humanize what has become dehumanizing, whether we like it or not. Of course, 'other religious people' are some of the most quarrelsome creatures on the planet. But the undeniable wisdom of our traditions, the invitation to a deeper yearning of interconnection and compassion, requires active learning within virtual-world technologies. This is one good that wisdom practitioners can and I say must offer Internet discourse. If not us, then who? DL may be one avenue of such spiritual practice innovation for those of us who are willing to stretch into discomfort for the sake of truths professed and shared.

At the conclusion of all these musings, and surely the 'more' that will come, I still do not enjoy distance-learning education. I am not as competent at DL as I would like to be in what I do. Most faculty colleagues I know are just as befuddled about how to be faithful to the new things of Spirit amidst the life of our Christian tradition and the unending barrage of technological advance. Yet in all I have had to read, and

in all the discussions in which I've been privileged to participate, I see no faithful release from the learnings we may still *not* want to receive. Many of our best conversations about DL are not conversations of discernment or exploration at all, but hard-line, grieving resistance against things most of us have never tried or experienced for ourselves in ecclesial and theological education. DL has unexplored, highly plausible potential for resolving issues of 'seminary-to-congregation' transition, let alone the implicit issues of privilege, elitism and entitlement that accompany graduates (such as myself) from many higher education institutions with a more 'establishment' bent. I would most appreciate it, however, if someone could convince me that deeply rooted religious-wisdom practitioners do not have a moral imperative to bring nonviolent, compassionate, and covenantal grace to rehumanize life and love in one of the most violent, if virtual, 'places' shaping human habits of mind and conceivable action today. Best practices of DL not only have the potential to show us how inhuman we have become with one another. When so convicted in that sin, open to living in Spirit's holy curiosity and compassionate wisdom, we may just see new doors open wide to previously inconceivable but enduring, recognizable wisdom.