


# Is Online Theological Education Suitable for Spiritual/Ministerial Formation?: A Response from an African Perspective



Isaac Boaheng <sup>1</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> Lecturer in Theology and Christian Ethics, Christian Service University College, Kumasi-Ghana, Research Fellow, University of the Free State, South Africa.

## ABSTRACT

The advancement in information and communication technologies in the last few decades has led to various innovations in the world of education. The application of technology makes information more accessible and knowledge more widely distributed, giving rise to various opportunities for instruction and learning. One such example of technological innovations in the education sector is the emergence of online academic institutions across the globe. Rising interests in the theological and pedagogical issues associated with the use of online teaching and learning platforms for spiritual/ministerial formation have prompted this study. Using a literature-based research approach, this paper analyzes data collected from books, journal articles and dissertations to ascertain the appropriateness or otherwise of online theological education for spiritual/ministerial formation from an African Christian perspective. It also discusses some pedagogical issues in online education. The paper argues that there is nothing inherently wrong with the use of online theological education for spiritual/ministerial formation; yet, the lack of access to electricity and internet facilities in some communities and unethical practices in the virtual space are major setbacks in this mode of education. In view of this, spiritual/ministerial formation through online education is encouraged only if the student is committed to ensuring ethical practices in the online learning environment, has the appropriate logistics to access the technologically-mediated teaching and learning process, and is enrolled in an institution which has the pedagogical, scholarly, technological requirements for ensuring effective teaching and learning in a virtual space.

**Keywords:** *Africa, Online Education, Theological Education, Spiritual Formation*

Correspondence

Isaac Boaheng

Email: [revisaacboaheng@gmail.com](mailto:revisaacboaheng@gmail.com)

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## INTRODUCTION

Globally, the 18th century marked the beginning of the provision of education to students who are geographically distant from teachers. This was a form of correspondence education and distant education where students “receive lessons and exercises through the mail, or some other device, and, upon completion, return them for analysis, criticism, and grading.”<sup>1</sup> With time, radio and television broadcasts, audio and video systems, computer-mediated communication and internet-based systems also became other means of distance education in addition to the print media.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Victor C. X. Wang (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Information Communication Technologies and Adult Education Integration* (Hershey: Information Science Reference, 2011), 752.

<sup>2</sup> Kumiko Aoki, “Generation of Distance Education and Challenges of Distance Education Institutions in Japanese Higher Education,” *Distance Education* edited by Paul Birevu Muyinda (pp. 181-200) (Rijeka: InTech, 2012), 183.

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The application of technology in education makes information more accessible and knowledge more widely distributed, giving rise to various opportunities for instruction and learning. One such example of technological innovations in the education sector is the emergence of online academic institutions across the globe. Currently, there are a number of institutions that offer online theological and/or secular education in Africa. Though a highly patronized method of education, online theological education has raised some ethical, theological and pedagogical concerns. One of these concerns has to do with the effectiveness and appropriateness of online education in spiritual/ministerial formation. It is argued that the online environment cannot offer the community of learners—including a group of learners and their instructors—the required ingredients for spiritual formation. Another issue has to do with academic dishonesty as online education makes it possible for someone to hire the services of another person to write examinations and/or a dissertation/thesis for him/her. The online environment makes it difficult to detect such unethical practices which affect the quality of the learning experience. A key theological issue raised about online education is that it does not promote the communal/social dimension of humans. Students live individually in their homes and have no opportunity to form a physically-interacting community. Therefore, it is reasoned, online education undermines the social aspect of biblical anthropology. The ethical and theological concerns raised about its acceptability have made it necessary to conduct this research to ascertain the appropriateness of online theological education for spiritual/ministerial formation from an African Christian perspective. In the process, the paper also considers some pedagogical issues in online teaching and learning.

### **History of Distance and Online Education in Africa**

J. C. Taylor outlines five generations through which distance education has evolved: the first generation was the Correspondence Model based on print media; the second, the Multimedia Model which used print, audio and video technologies while the third, the Telelearning Model, employed the use of telecommunications technologies in teaching and learning.<sup>3</sup> The fourth model, the Flexible Learning Model, used the internet to deliver information online, and the fifth, Intelligent Flexible Learning Model employed interactive content in teaching and learning.<sup>4</sup> The various models underline that the education sector has (continues to) employ technology in its operations. Since technology continues to invent new applications, one expects a new model beyond the Intelligent Flexible Learning Model in the near future.

Formal education was introduced into Africa by early Christian missionaries who worked in many parts of the continent. The linguistic barrier that the missionaries faced made them realize the need to educate their audience, some of whom later became interpreters for the missionaries. The missionaries established a number of traditional face-to-face educational institutions to train people to read and write. For example, in 1823, missionaries began a school in Leicester Mountain near Freetown, Sierra Leone.<sup>5</sup> When this school failed to achieve the desired results, the missionaries opened Fourah Bay College in 1827.<sup>6</sup> In Ghana, the Wesleyan mission, in 1876, founded the Wesleyan High School now Mfantsipim School—the first Secondary School in the country. In the Gambia, a Boys' School was established in Jollot Town in 1824. Though formal education does not necessarily lead one to Christ, the Christian missionaries consciously included Christian Education in their curricula. Formal education, therefore, became an evangelistic tool. Thus, mission schools became a key place where people converted to Christianity and got equipped for evangelistic tasks.

With time, it became necessary to establish special schools for training Christian workers—missionaries, pastors, evangelists and others. Consequently, various Seminaries were established in different parts of Africa. In Ghana, for example, the Basel Mission established two seminaries, one located at Akropong, established in 1848 and the other at Osu, established in 1850. Later in 1942, the Trinity Theological Seminary (formerly Trinity College)—which now trains ministers for the Methodist Church Ghana, the Presbyterian Church of Ghana, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, the Anglican Diocese of

<sup>3</sup> J. C. Taylor, "Fifth generation distance education" (Report No. 40) *Higher Education Series* (2001), 5-6. <http://www.c3l.unioldenburg.de/cde/media/readings/taylor01.pdf> -

<sup>4</sup> Taylor, "Fifth generation distance education," 6.

<sup>5</sup> J. Kofi Agbeti, *West African Church History: Christian Missions and Church Foundations 1482-1919* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986), 26.

<sup>6</sup> Agbeti, *West African Church History*, 26.

Accra, and the African Methodist Episcopal Church—was established. The St. Paul's Divinity School (now St. Paul's University, Limuru-Kenya) was also one of such institutions established for the training of church workers. It was founded on the 28th July 1903 at Frere Town, Mombasa and later (in 1930) moved to Limuru.

The traditional face-to-face model of theological education was later supplemented by Theological Education by Extension (TEE). The TEE model of ministerial/spiritual formation provides training for people who are already serving in church leadership positions. In this model, lesson materials are prepared for students to study at home. The student studies independently and gains the facts and knowledge relating to the course. The lessons are prepared with well-defined objectives so that the student can carefully assess whether he/she has grasped the content materials or not. Having read the course materials, students then have "Seminar" meetings (held weekly, several times a month, or monthly) with course facilitators to discuss the course and to point out key practical applications of the study for everyday life and church work. The TEE model of ministerial formation also includes field/practical ministerial assignments. Since the students are normally involved in leadership positions, the knowledge gained in the lesson materials and through the face-to-face meetings can be applied almost immediately. From the description given above, TEE may be classified as a hybrid model of education, involving both distant and face-to-face aspects.

TEE may be done on denominational or ecumenical basis. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Tanzania, the Methodist Church Ghana and the Presbyterian Church of Ghana are among the denominations which organize different forms of TEE on a denominational basis. The Kgolangano Theological College by Extension in Botswana offers an ecumenical TEE. This College trains students from the Anglicans, Lutherans, Congregationalists and Methodists churches.<sup>7</sup> The ecumenical TEE College of the Republic of South Africa was established in 1976 to train ministers for the Anglican, Roman-Catholic, Congregational, Lutheran, Methodist and Presbyterian churches.<sup>8</sup> TEE institutions may also be classified into those that offer accredited programs for academic purposes and those that are only meant for equipping people for ministry without giving participants any accredited academic certificate.

John S. Pobebe has given three reasons for the emergence of TEE.<sup>9</sup> The first factor that led to the adoption of TEE mode of training ministers was the church's realization of her responsibility to equip all her members to be involved in Christian mission. The Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20 and its parallels) requires the church to equip all believers for the task of reaching every person on earth with the gospel. The church realized that the task of equipping all Christians for mission work cannot be achieved without introducing other forms of education of which TEE is one. Secondly, the number of people who wanted to pursue tertiary education normally far exceeded what the traditional face-to-face seminaries and universities could accommodate. Therefore, TEE was introduced to cater for those who could not be accommodated by the traditional face-to-face mode of education. The third factor was that education acquired a new meaning that made it relevant to include distance programs. The new understanding was that while people traditionally learnt in the classroom setting, learning actually takes place throughout a person's life whether in the classroom or outside the classroom. This understanding was facilitated by the advancement in science and technology which brought new means of communication such as radio and television. The TEE mode of ministerial training, therefore, emerged as a result of the church's desire to have more people trained for ministry, to give opportunity to all who desire to acquire tertiary education in theology (but for some reasons) cannot take part in the traditional face-to-face mode, and as a response to a new understanding of teaching and learning as a lifelong process.

After the Second World War, Adult Education programs emerged to offer education to psychologically, physically, sociologically and economically mature persons.<sup>10</sup> Soon, Adult Education became Mass Education to give people of all places, especially those in the rural communities, access to formal education.<sup>11</sup> Adult

<sup>7</sup> John S. Pobebe, "Some Thirty Years of Theological Education by Extension in Africa," *Theological Education by Extension in Africa* edited by John S. Pobebe (Accra: National Science and Technology Press, 1993), 82.

<sup>8</sup> Pobebe, "Some Thirty Years of Theological Education by Extension in Africa," 82.

<sup>9</sup> Pobebe, "Some Thirty Years of Theological Education by Extension in Africa," 80-81.

<sup>10</sup> Pobebe, "Some Thirty Years of Theological Education by Extension in Africa," 80.

<sup>11</sup> Pobebe, "Some Thirty Years of Theological Education by Extension in Africa," 80-81.

Education is the process by which mature people (alone, in groups or an institutional environment) engage in systematic and sustained self-educating learning activities in order to gain new forms of knowledge, skills, attitudes, or values.<sup>12</sup> In Ghana, for instance, the Institute of Adult Education of the University of Ghana was established (in 1948) as a Department of Extra-rural Studies and has since been involved in University-based adult education.<sup>13</sup> In this kind of learning “the tutor’s role is to facilitate learning, with particular attention to pedagogy, facilitation and administration (necessary planning and organizing).”<sup>14</sup> The idea that the task of facilitating the learning process did not necessarily require regular physical interaction emerged and developed, leading to the acceptance and development of TEE. The introduction of TEE prepared grounds for online theological education.

With various advancements in technology, theological education in a virtual space was introduced. In South Africa, the beginning of the internet-based communication dates back to the 1980s. Bishops (at that time) used the internet to exchange messages. Currently, there are a few institutions in Africa that offer theological formation and ministerial/spiritual formation through online/distance education—including, the South African Theological Seminary (SATS) and University of South Africa (UniSA), both in South Africa and Olivet Seminary, Lusaka, Zambia. These and other online institutions offer the same curriculum as institutions that operate through the traditional face-to-face mode of delivery. SATS is a world-class seminary with a strong commitment to equipping believers for the fulfilment of the Great Commission (cf. Matt. 28:19-20; Acts 1:8). Jesus Christ gave the Great Commission to the church after his resurrection. SATS’s commitment to equipping believers for the fulfilment of the Great Commission is evident in its mission statement, namely; “to provide Biblical, Christocentric distance education and training to Christians, and leaders in particular, within their local church environment, to equip them to be Holy Spirit empowered members of God’s household.”<sup>15</sup> Obviously, theological education at SATS does not require students to reside on campus; therefore, students continue to interact actively with their local churches while undertaking their education. Again, like other theological seminaries, SATS empowers people for ministry through the power of the Holy Spirit.

### **Spiritual Formation and Online Theological Education**

The concept and method of spiritual formation vary from one Christian tradition to another. However, it was the Catholics who first used the expression “spiritual formation” in reference to the training of their priests. Later, Protestants also embraced this expression as well. The author’s working definition of Christian spiritual formation is this: A life-long process of being conformed to the likeness of Jesus Christ through the power and works of the Holy Spirit, for the glory of God and for the sake of others (cf. 2 Cor. 3:17-18). Spiritual formation is rooted in the works of the Holy Spirit and must yield a spiritually formed community whose members are in the right relationship with God, self, and others.<sup>16</sup> Spiritual formation, therefore, aims at deepening one’s relationship with Christ.

The importance of spiritual formation in theological education is evident in the accreditation requirements of most accrediting agencies around the world. Accrediting agencies require theological education to yield personal, spiritual, and ministerial formation. In this light, a theological institution is defined as “a community of faith and learning that cultivates habits of theological reflection, nurtures wise and skilled ministerial practice, and contributes to the formation of spiritual awareness and moral sensitivity.”<sup>17</sup> This means that no legitimate theological education can take place without resulting in spiritual formation and no authentic spiritual formation can take place without proper and suitable theological education. Theological institutions are therefore expected to make spiritual development and experiences an integral part of the total development of students. Spiritual formation must be intentional—not accidental—and a lifelong process,

<sup>12</sup> Pobe, “Some Thirty Years of Theological Education by Extension in Africa,” 81.

<sup>13</sup> Pobe, “Some Thirty Years of Theological Education by Extension in Africa,” 81.

<sup>14</sup> Pobe, “Some Thirty Years of Theological Education by Extension in Africa,” 81.

<sup>15</sup> South African Theological Seminary, “Theology as Mission” <https://sats.ac.za/about/our-mission/> [Accessed: 24th October, 2021].

<sup>16</sup> Tang, *Till we are fully formed*, 104–108.

<sup>17</sup> Glenn Thomas Miller, *Piety and Plurality: Theological Education since 1960* (Eugene, OR: Wipf&Stock, 2014), 319.

not an event. The lifelong nature of spiritual formation is found in almost all Christian traditions. In the broad sense, spiritual formation includes personal formation (comprising intellectual engagement, reflection, and application to personal life, character, or perspectives) and ministerial formation (comprising intellectual engagement, reflection, and application to ministry calling, issues, or practices) of a believer.

Spiritual formation is enhanced by spiritual disciplines. Different scholars have categorized spiritual disciplines differently. Richard J. Foster suggests a threefold typology of spiritual disciplines comprising inward spiritual disciplines (including fasting, meditation, study, and prayer), outward disciplines (like solitude, submission, modesty, humility, and service) and corporate disciplines (such as confession of faith, worship, and mentoring).<sup>18</sup> Another way of categorizing spiritual disciplines is Willard's two classes of disciplines of abstinence (solitude, silence, fasting, frugality, chastity, secrecy, and sacrifice) and disciplines of engagement (study, worship, celebration, service, prayer, fellowship, confession, and submission).<sup>19</sup> Ripley *et al.* list the Scripture, spiritual disciplines, the Holy Spirit, biblical scholarship, faith integration, and the role of faculty and mentors as key factors that affect spiritual formation offered by (both traditional face-to-face and online) educational institutions.<sup>20</sup> In evaluating the effectiveness of online theological education for spiritual formation, the author seeks to find out whether or not online theological education can provide the listed "ingredients" for spiritual formation.

Spiritual formation for ministerial purposes usually requires the student's active participation in ministry (referred to as *practicum*). *Practicum* together with academic activities and others, not only facilitates the student's spiritual growth but also prepares him/her for ministry. The practical aspect of ministry is very important in spiritual/theological formation; therefore, any acceptable and appropriate spiritual formation must have an adequate practical component. One of the strengths of online theological education is its adequate provision for *practicum*. In the online mode of theological education, students remain in their ministry contexts while pursuing their studies. Since students continue to live in their home region while pursuing their course, and because they work at their own pace, they have adequate time and opportunity to practice what they study. Training people for ministry within ministry, as is the case in online theological education, is key for students' practicalization of theological concepts which may remain abstract to them without adequate practical application. Practical work is not absent in the traditional face-to-face mode of theological education; however, the traditional system gives less attention to and less opportunity for practical work as compared to online theological education. The adequate provision for *practicum* is very important because Christian ministry is a practical vocation that required more practical activities than theoretical ones. In short, the online mode of education allows students to acquire more practical experience while still studying than the traditional face-to-face mode of education.

The Holy Spirit plays a crucial role in Christian spiritual formation. Gordon R. Fee maintains that spiritual formation is not possible without the work of the Holy Spirit; he states, "Spirituality without the Holy Spirit becomes a feeble human project."<sup>21</sup> Such an exercise is based only on human intellect and reason, and does not yield any acceptable spiritual results. Indeed, the role of the Holy Spirit—in indwelling, empowering, teaching, interceding for, sanctifying, and bestowing gifts to the believers—cannot be replaced by any human activity. Spiritual formation consists of the Spirit's moral and spiritual transformative work in the believer toward Christlikeness and maturity in Christ (Rom. 8:29).

Theological education (whether online or traditional face-to-face approach) without the work of the Holy Spirit is just a dry intellectual exercise with no spiritual value. Being God and having the attributes of omnipresence, omnipotence, and omniscience, the Holy Spirit transcends over space. The transcendent power of the Holy Spirit makes it possible for him to form students, whether in physical communities or

<sup>18</sup> Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of discipline: The path to spiritual growth* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978).

<sup>19</sup> Willard cited in Kenneth D. Boa, *Conformed to His Image: Biblical and Practical Approaches to Spiritual Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 82.

<sup>20</sup> J. S. Ripley *et al.*, "Spiritual formation training at Regent University's psychology doctoral program," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, 32(4): 2013.

<sup>21</sup> Gordon. D. Fee, "On getting the Spirit back into spirituality," In J. P. Greenman and G. Kalantzis (Eds.), *Life in the Spirit: Spiritual formation in theological perspective* (36–44)(Westmont, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 42.

virtual environments.<sup>22</sup> Through technology, one can overcome the barriers of the physical divide—through interactive unconstrained communication with others in the community of learners—and then have a real encounter with others in the virtual community, “whether visual or embodied,” resulting in a “fuller and richer understanding of the transcendent Other.”<sup>23</sup> Since the Holy Spirit is not geographically bound—but is everywhere and in every believer—his works in one’s spiritual formation cannot be determined by the nature of one’s theological education (online or traditional face-to-face). In fact, students in the online environment have the right and enabling ministerial environment to enhance the power of the Holy Spirit in their formation just as those in the face-to-face environment have. In addition, studying online does not deprive one of spiritual disciplines such as solitude, silence, fasting, frugality, chastity, secrecy, and sacrifice, study, worship, celebration, service, prayer, fellowship, confession, and submission, all of which contribute to spiritual formation. Rather, online theological education gives the student the right context to undertake such disciplines to enhance their spiritual growth and maturity.

Other key “ingredients” for spiritual formation include biblical scholarship, faculty and mentors. Biblical scholarship enhances spiritual formation because it is through the study of the Bible that one gets to know God better and to prepare for an encounter with the Holy Spirit.<sup>24</sup> Biblical scholarship does not require face-to-face interaction to be effective. As a matter of fact, many researchers have proved that “the cognitive effects of e-learning equal or surpass those of traditional classroom teaching.”<sup>25</sup> Online learning requires students to be active and attentive which, in effect, “greatly enhances speed and retention.”<sup>26</sup> Again, online learning compels every student to engage with all the study content and to participate in every activity. The student has to make his/her personal efforts in contacting the instructor or other students for clarification. “Nobody can hide in the crowd and conceal their lack of diligence” as one may do in a traditional face-to-face setting.<sup>27</sup> This helps in intellectual development which eventually enhances spiritual growth. Online instructors are not less competent than those working in a traditional face-to-face setting. Whether online or not, every serious theological institution employs the services of the best scholars in order to deliver the best to its students. Most online theological institutions employ the best scholars in the world, who are not only scholars but active and committed Christians who pursue the edification and spiritual growth of other believers. Online instructors not only teach their students; they mentor them as well.

Spiritual formation through online theological education has a four-fold dimension.<sup>28</sup> The first dimension is a personal-spiritual formation which includes moral character, spiritual disciplines, and maturing in one’s identity. As noted earlier, online theological institutions make it a priority to develop the morality of their students to equip them to nurture other believers. The second aspect of the formation is ministry—pastoral formation comprising one’s growth in faith, skill, knowledge and character in preparation for ministry. Also, online theological education leads to academic/intellectual formation that requires one’s “intellectual engagement with content, particularly the Scriptures.”<sup>29</sup> The last aspect is enculturation which “involves the taking on of an ethos, or a way of thinking, acting and behaving.”<sup>30</sup> These four dimensions involve introspective assessment of one’s relationship with him/herself, vertical integration (concerning human-divine relationship) which leads to increasing godliness, horizontal integration involving human-human and human-environment relationships and the desire to participate in the Great Commission because

<sup>22</sup> M. E. Lowe, “Spiritual formation as whole-person development in online education,” In M. A. Maddix, J. R. Estep and M. E. Lowe (Eds.), *Best practices of online education: A guide for Christian higher education* (pp. 55–63) (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2012), 60-61.

<sup>23</sup> Steve Delamarter *et al.*, “Technology, pedagogy, and transformation in theological education: Five case studies,” *Teaching Theology & Religion*, 10(2), (2007): 64–79, 71. [Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9647.2007.00319.x>]

<sup>24</sup> Ripley, *et al.* “Spiritual formation training at Regent University’s psychology doctoral program,”

<sup>25</sup> Kevin G. Smith, “E-Learning for Africa: the relevance of ODEL methods for Theological education in Africa” (Unpublished Article, 2020).

<sup>26</sup> Smith, “E-Learning for Africa: the relevance of ODEL methods for Theological education in Africa,” 4.

<sup>27</sup> Smith, “E-Learning for Africa: the relevance of ODEL methods for Theological education in Africa,” 4.

<sup>28</sup> Diane Hockridge, “Challenges for educators using distance and online education to prepare students for relational professions,” *Distance Education*, 34(2), (2013): 142–160, 144, 149.

<sup>29</sup> Hockridge, “Challenges for educators using distance and online education to prepare students for relational professions,” 149.

<sup>30</sup> Hockridge, “Challenges for educators using distance and online education to prepare students for relational professions,” 149.

of one's love for God and humanity.<sup>31</sup> The obvious conclusion from the foregoing discourse is that online theological education can provide the needed "ingredients" for spiritual formation.

### **Physical Presence, Community and Spiritual Formation in an Online Setting**

The question of whether an online learning environment can provide physical presence and community for effective spiritual formation is very significant in discussing online theological education. Objecting to the validity of online spiritual formation, D. H. Kelsey asserts that proper and theologically-sound spiritual formation must be rooted in theologically-sound anthropology.<sup>32</sup> It is argued that theological anthropology requires humans to interact physically, not virtually, to have proper fellowship which eventually leads to the building of the faith community. Kelsey's position highlights the significance of the physical presence (that is, the presence of organic bodies) of both the instructor and student in the theological discourse. He contends further that Jesus's bodily incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection underscore the value God places on "organic matter."<sup>33</sup> Therefore, the incarnation supports a face-to-face learning environment and does not in any way endorse a virtual learning model for spiritual formation. For Kelsey, educational pedagogy must be informed by Christian anthropology, and since Christian anthropology emphasizes physical interaction (which the seeming disembodied nature of online distance education cannot offer), online learning cannot offer any meaningful spiritual formation.

It is further argued that the online learning environment lacks the sense of community that effective education requires. According to Alex Tang "Christian spiritual formation is the intentional and ongoing process of inner transformation to become like Jesus Christ himself, to become with others a communal people of God, and to become an agent for God's redemptive purposes."<sup>34</sup> Tang identifies three major dimensions of spiritual formation, namely; the restorative, communal and missional dimensions. The communal and relational dimension of Tang's view on spiritual formation relates closely with the *imago Dei* which informs the social aspect of human life. Because humans are inherently social in nature, it is argued that spiritual formation requires a physical spiritual community and personal interactions between the student and the instructor, something online distance education cannot provide.

Admittedly, the embodiment of the divine through the mediated bodily incarnation of Christ is central in the divine pedagogy (God's means of teaching humanity). However, this "pedagogy of incarnation" refers not to physical bodily presence but to "incarnation of divine truth in the life of the instructor and the instructor's ability to assist students in discovering and incarnating that truth in their own lives."<sup>35</sup> In the contact model, instructors make a lifelong impact on students through their physical interactions with them. Instructors in online distance education can fulfil the incarnational pedagogical demand by incarnating and demonstrating the Christian faith in their everyday lives and doing everything possible to ensure that their students also demonstrate this faith in their lives. In other words, the incarnational demand is fulfilled in the life of instructors such that the student and the community in which the instructor lives sees Christ in them. Again, the incarnation pedagogy is demonstrated in the instructor's willingness to go to the student in the online classroom. Here, the key aspect of incarnational pedagogy is the instructor's communication and not the educational mode. Moreover, online instructors and students may also have lifelong interactions. As a matter of fact, online students and their instructors are not to be viewed as bodiless spiritual beings but as real humans who influence one another. Participants in an online learning setting are equally bodily beings involved in some kind of ministry wherever they are.

The argument that an online learning environment cannot provide a legitimate community assumes

<sup>31</sup> M. J. Freeman, *Digital discipling: Assessing the strategies of spiritual formation in online course design for Bible colleges* (Doctoral dissertation: Indiana University of Pennsylvania, 2014), 11-12.

<sup>32</sup> D. H. Kelsey, "Spiritual machines, personal bodies, and God: Theological education and theological anthropology," *Teaching Theology & Religion*, 5(1), (2002): 2-9, 6.

<sup>33</sup> Kelsey, "Spiritual machines, personal bodies, and God," 6-7.

<sup>34</sup> Alex Tang, *Till we are fully formed: Christian spiritual formation paradigms in the English-speaking Presbyterian churches in Malaysia* (Bukit Merah: Armour Publishing, 2014), 6.

<sup>35</sup> John Gresham, "The divine pedagogy as a model for online education," *Teaching Theology & Religion*, 9(1), (2006): 24-28, 26.

that because the online students have no physical interaction with their mates and lecturers, there is no way one can be said to belong to a community. But Palka argues that “Personal communities have expanded beyond spatial boundaries and include people who live far apart.”<sup>36</sup> In other words, the believer’s spiritual community goes beyond those he/she has physical contact with to include people of all places with whom he/she can interact in one way or the other. This view agrees well with Paul’s teaching about the universal Christian community (cf. 1 Cor. 12:12-30; Heb. 12:1). The universal Christian community includes believers of all times at all places. It includes believers who have died (church triumphant), those who are living (church militant) and those yet to accept the Christian faith (church expectant).

In Africa, where community is a priority, the question of whether the online “community” is a legitimate “community” is of great significance. Africans do not live in isolation; they are highly social and enjoy relationships, interconnectedness and interdependence as expressed in the Ubuntu philosophy of “I am because you are, you are because I am” which explains the African communal sense of life. In Africa “the value of humanity is, intrinsically, linked with that of the unity of all people, whether biologically related or not.”<sup>37</sup> In other words, “Africans tend to find their identity and meaning in life through being part of their extended family, clan and tribe. There is a strong feeling of common participation in life, a common history, and a common destiny.”<sup>38</sup> The African communal sense of life is evident in the extended family system which goes beyond parents and their children to include, nephews, cousins, grandparents, in-laws and others. The traditional African family system also goes beyond the living; it comprises the spirit of the dead (referred to as living dead), the living and the unborn. The African communal sense, therefore, transcends the physical community to include the unseen community. Therefore, from both African and biblical perspectives, a student’s spiritual community is not limited to those around him on a school campus.

In the past, the seminary community was defined in terms of physical proximity and relational closeness; however, this definition does not work for seminarians who live and work far from the main campus. In many seminaries, because students and lecturers live far apart and far from the campus, and seminarians hardly maintain physical relationships with others outside the lecture room and beyond the walls of the campus. As Mark A. Maddix has noted, “Many students drive to campus to take classes, sit in the back row, and do not engage their colleagues or professor in the learning process. In online learning communities, each student is active in online interaction and dialogue. In essence, everyone is in the front row.”<sup>39</sup> In online schools, there are faculty spiritual mentors, online field education directors, and online institution chapel services to facilitate spiritual formation. At SATS, for instance, the staff meet regularly to exhort themselves, and pray for the institution and for the world.

Thus, in an online environment, the interaction between persons with common interests and values leads to the formation of a community. M. H. Heinemann and J. R. Estep Jr. outline a seven-fold dimension of interaction in the context of theological education; namely, God–Instructor, God–Student, God–Content, Instructor–student, Student–Student, Student–Content, and Student–Self.<sup>40</sup> God is actively present in the virtual environment, not only inspiring the student and the instructor but also making subject content come alive to them. Just as God condescended and adapted himself to human pedagogy to teach humans in the language they could understand, so will he adapt modern technology to meet the needs of students in the virtual environment. One does not have to be physically present with others to be in communion with them. Thus, as Cannell stated, “The fact of a classroom does not guarantee community any more than a distance learning chat room will.”<sup>41</sup> This however means that “In distance education, attention needs to be paid

<sup>36</sup> John Palka, “Defining a theological education community,” *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 5(3), (2004), 1. Retrieved from <http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/197/279>

<sup>37</sup> Emmanuel Asante, *Unity in Difference* (Belarus: Printcorp, 2010), 5-6.

<sup>38</sup> Wilbur O’Donovan, *Biblical Christianity in African Perspective*. 2d ed. (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1996), 4.

<sup>39</sup> Mark A. Maddix, “Developing Online Learning Community,” In M. A. Maddix, J. R. Estep, & M. E. Lowe (Eds.), *Best practices of online education: A guide for Christian higher education* (pp. 31–40) (Information Age Publishing, 2012), 32.

<sup>40</sup> M. H. Heinemann and J. R. Estep Jr., “Educational theory and online education,” In M. A. Maddix, J. R. Estep, & M. E. Lowe (Eds.), *Best practices of online education: A guide for Christian higher education* (pp. 3–16) (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2012).

<sup>41</sup> Linda Cannell, “A review of literature on distance education,” *Theological Education*, 36(1), (1999): 1–72, 21.



to the development of the sense of community within the group of participants in order for the learning process to be successful.”<sup>42</sup> In the broad sense, the concept of community includes both one’s immediate physical community (including family, church, and civic organizations) and those found online (faculty, and fellow learners). In this respect, online education seems to offer a better opportunity to students. Whereas online education allows for one’s participation in both the immediate and learning communities, face-to-face learning environment focuses more on the learning community of peer learners and the faculty which sometimes is not even be realized. In the face-to-face approach, the immediate family and people in one’s home environment are only involved in the formation process during vacations. This is not the case in online theological education. In the online setting, community connections are enhanced by providing mentoring relationships, experiential learning activities, and professional networking, among others. Through such connections, the community of online students transcends the learning community to include a broader network that can contribute to their growth and development.

The faculty is also important in the formation process. Through interactions with students, faculty members mentor and facilitate the formation of their students. In the process, the issue of whether faculty members share the same geography as students is not as important as whether they intentionally encourage spiritual development through course development and delivery, the quality of faculty-student interactions, and faculty’s own alignment with faith and learning. Geographical location should therefore not be considered as a primary factor in spiritual formation. Palka, in a study about Concordia Seminary, concluded that the primary impetus for spiritual formation in a face-to-face seminary setting may not necessarily be the seminary environment but rather the community in which the student lives and works.<sup>43</sup> Palka noted, “Spiritual development activities are also seen by students as taking place predominantly outside the seminary community” while activities that bring intellectual development predominantly take place inside the seminary.<sup>44</sup> According to Palka “...seminarians identified the classroom context as only the third major community setting in which their spiritual formation takes place.”<sup>45</sup> The local congregation of which the student is a part has the strongest influence on their spiritual formation. The community of believers that the online seminarian has access to constitutes a very important resource for ministerial/spiritual formation. This community helps in shaping the would-be leaders. By allowing students to continue ministry in their congregations and to remain engaged in serving their communities while undertaking theological education, online theological education helps students to reflect, apply and develop their faith and skill in their existing contexts. Such a method of formation is potentially more dynamic, real, and transformative compared to the static classroom environment.

### **Pauline Epistolary Practice and Online Theological Education**

Paul’s ministry supports the legitimacy and effectiveness of the use of distance education in spiritual formation. Throughout his ministry, Paul used the media technology of his time (that is, letters) to educate churches from a distance.<sup>46</sup> In his teaching ministry, Paul overcame the geographical gap through his letters to various churches. His letters were designed for congregations just as online teaching materials are designed for groups of people.<sup>47</sup> His letters were interactive—designed to facilitate communication between the writer and the reader—and this made them enjoyable to his readers. Some of Paul’s letters were read to the local church. The oral reading of these letters in the liturgical gatherings mediated Paul’s personal presence to the congregation and contributed to their spiritual formation. According to John Paul Heil, Paul’s letters made “him present to his various audiences in and through his words of worship considered as ritual ‘speech acts’, that is, words that actually do what they say, words that communicate by not only informing but

<sup>42</sup> R. M. Palloff and Keith Pratt, *Building learning communities in cyberspace* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999), 29.

<sup>43</sup> Palka, “Defining a theological education community,” 2.

<sup>44</sup> Palka, “Defining a theological education community,” 2.

<sup>45</sup> Palka, “Defining a theological education community,” 2.

<sup>46</sup> Gabriel Etzel, “How Strong Theological Foundations Can Improve Online Faculty,” Gabriel Etzel, Timothy Paul Jones, Chris Jackson, and John Cartwright, *Teaching the World: Foundations for Online Theological Education* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2017), 26.

<sup>47</sup> Etzel, “How Strong Theological Foundations Can Improve Online Faculty,” 28.

performing.”<sup>48</sup> For instance, when the congregation hears Paul’s greetings through the reader, they experience a renewal of their fellowship with him; when they hear Paul praying for them, they feel Paul as part of their communal worship and so on.<sup>49</sup> Paul highlights his spiritual presence with his audience and the effectiveness of his letters in enhancing the spiritual growth of his audience when he says that he is with his audience in spirit though he is absent physically (Col. 2:5). Thus, despite Paul’s physical absence, his letter made it possible for him to lead the believers, “gathered as a liturgical assembly, in an act of worship that celebrates the significance of what God has done in raising Jesus from the dead.”<sup>50</sup> Paul’s use of correspondence (or distance education) in no way made his message less imparting.

Paul’s methodology of facilitating spiritual formation from a distance includes contextualization of the gospel for his audience, staying true to the content and authority of the Bible, being transparent and vulnerable in personalizing truth, anticipating questions and providing answers, motivating the audience to strive toward maturity, praying for the addressees, and providing guidelines for self-assessment of spiritual growth and maturity.<sup>51</sup> All these can be achieved through online correspondence without much difficulty. Modern technology (which most online theological institutions use) offers a more effective means of reaching people than Paul’s letter. Today, one can use recorded videos, live videos, interactive text and other means to interact with his/her students in an online setting. The combination of their virtual interaction with their participation in ministry in a community setting is part of the legitimate and essential “ingredients” for spiritual formation.

### Some Pedagogical Considerations

Robert M. Bernard *et. al.* argue that “effective DE [Distance Education] depends on the provision of pedagogical excellence.”<sup>52</sup> Annang Asumang identified four practices that maximize the effectiveness of online theological education for ministerial formation; namely, institutional intentionality, interactivity, internet and all the possibilities it offers, and instructor.<sup>53</sup> Pedagogical issues in online education boil to the idea of presence. Three dimensions of presence are identified, namely; cognitive presence, teaching presence and social presence. Cognitive presence refers to the “extent to which the professor and the students are able to construct and confirm meaning through sustained discourse (discussion) in a community of inquiry.”<sup>54</sup> “Cognitive presence is cultivated by students’ expressing a desire to understand ideas more deeply and by dialogue that discerns patterns, connects ideas, and identifies relationships.”<sup>55</sup> Teaching presence is the actual teaching done before and during the course, including all the course materials like the syllabus, concept introductions, course reading materials and discussions, assignments, rubrics, and bibliography of required readings as well as all the monitoring, mentoring, questioning and shaping of the students’ knowledge. Social presence facilitates the process of building trust between the facilitator and the student at the social level. Maintaining social presence requires projecting one’s personal characteristics into the discussion so that he/she becomes a “real person.” The present section focuses on the instructor’s role in promoting and maintaining presence and hence making online teaching and learning as effective as it can be.

### Effective Mediation of Learning Materials to Students

Effective teaching and learning cannot take place without the supply of appropriate and adequate up-to-

<sup>48</sup> John Paul Heil, *The Letters of Paul as Rituals of Worship* (Eugene, OR: Wipf&Stock, 2011), 3.

<sup>49</sup> Heil, *The Letters of Paul as Rituals of Worship*, 3

<sup>50</sup> Heil, *The Letters of Paul as Rituals of Worship*, 41.

<sup>51</sup> Ee Lin Lam, *Spiritual Formation in the Online Learning Community of a Bible College* (PhD Dissertation: Regent University, 2020), 28-29.

<sup>52</sup> Robert M. Bernard *et. al.*, “How Does Distance Education Compare With Classroom Instruction?: A Meta-Analysis of the Empirical Literature,” *Review of Educational Research* 74(3), (2004): 379–439, 413.

<sup>53</sup> Annang Asumang, “Fostering Spiritual Formation at a Distance: Review of the Current Debates, and a Biblically Grounded Proposal for Maximizing its Effectiveness as Part of Ministerial Formation,” *Conspectus* 22 (2016): 1-38, 13.

<sup>54</sup> Garrison, Anderson and Archer as cited in Judith V. Boettcher and Rita-Marie Conrad, *The Online Teaching Survival Guide: Simple and Practical Pedagogical Tips* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 54.

<sup>55</sup> Boettcher and Conrad, *The Online Teaching Survival Guide*, 54.

date course materials to students.<sup>56</sup> To make teaching and learning effective, the instructor must go beyond preparing course content and outlines with a list of reference materials to supplying students with the basic materials needed for the course. Supplying students with resource materials (or mediating learning materials for students) enables them to study on their own ahead of time so that they may seek clarification when need be. The online instructor has the opportunity to expand and/or improve the traditional instructor-created resources—like lectures, handouts, and supplementary readings—to include other resources such as audio, audio-visual, and interactive texts, among others.<sup>57</sup> In the case of audio or audiovisuals, the instructor must prepare well and give an excellent delivery so that students will enjoy the lessons. More so, to ensure effective delivery, online instructors must prepare their resource materials ahead of time and relate the content to the contemporary context. These resources must be made available on the learning platform before the course begins. Thus, an effective online education requires the effective delivery of lectures and the supply of course materials.

### **Serving as a Modeler of Christ**

As noted earlier, proper theological education (whether online or not) must be inseparable from spiritual formation. Thus, theological education involves a discipleship process that makes students conform to Christ. In this process of discipleship, the instructor exerts enormous influence on the student because of the frequent interactions between them. For this reason, the instructor's commitment to Christ is very important. The instructor must not only profess to be a Christian but must also demonstrate the Christian faith in his/her daily life. This (as noted earlier) is the fulfilment of the incarnational pedagogical demand. An ungodly attitude of an instructor will negatively affect the spiritual life of his/her student and eventually have a negative impact on others.

For this reason, educational institutions must be intentional about the hiring, training, development of faculty members. As a modeler of Christ, the instructor must have an ongoing spiritual relationship with Christ. The instructor must demonstrate his/her own formation onto the image of Christ and then facilitate the spiritual formation of his/her students. Thus, the role of the instructor goes beyond just guiding students throughout the program to modelling spiritual formation for the students. The instructor needs to demonstrate Christian love, commitment, dedication, care and integrity throughout his/her interactions with the student. The instructor's mentoring role must show clearly that his/her teaching career is service to God rather than a business transaction. The instructor, in addition to modelling Christ, must prepare his/her students for the future.

### **Effective Use of Technology**

Online learning depends largely on a wide range of technology-based learning platforms (such as Canvas, blackboard, IntraLearn, WebCT, and others), and digital learning tools like webcams, e-books, and audio devices for recording lectures, and methods of delivery of study materials.<sup>58</sup> Therefore, both students and instructors must have adequate knowledge in Information and Communication Technology (ICT). Apart from using technology for his/her own teaching needs, the instructor is required to help students when they face challenges in the course of their study. Students would normally approach their instructors with issues; it helps if the instructor can help them. To be equipped for such services, the instructor must be conversant with the various technological platforms used in a particular institution. The instructor's effective use of technology in online studies contributes immensely to the effectiveness of online course delivery and learning.

### **Interactive Teaching and Learning Platform**

Another way the instructor can make online teaching effective is to be present on the learning platform and to make the learning process interactive. It is a generally known fact that online education allows students to

<sup>56</sup> M. K. Islam and Colleen Vale, "The Teacher's Role in Promoting Online Peer Group Learning," *International journal of information and communication technology research*, 2(1), (2012): 87-96, 87.

<sup>57</sup> Younhee Kim, "Online Education Tools," *Public Performance & Management Review* 28(2) (2004): 275-280.

<sup>58</sup> Kim, "Online Education Tools," 275-280.

work at their own pace and at their convenient time. This advantage of online learning may lead to a situation where students overuse their freedom, relax and become dormant on their learning platforms. Students' activeness on a learning platform depends on the activeness of the instructor. The more the instructor engages them the more active they become. For this reason, constant prompts must come from the instructor to make students active throughout the course.

Interactions may be learner-content, learner-instructor or learner-learner interactions.<sup>59</sup> The first one is the most fundamental form of interaction; it takes place between the learner and subject content which may be a paper-based text, audio, audio-visual, CD or Web-based. The second form of interaction takes place between the learner and the instructor. As noted earlier, the instructor facilitates this interaction by developing "instruction to stimulate student's interests and to motivate their participation in the learning process."<sup>60</sup> The third form of interaction takes place between two or more learners without the presence of the instructor (see more on this below). Students' interaction among themselves increases motivation, student satisfaction, and encourages students to learn through collaboration and sharing of information.<sup>61</sup> Students acquire new knowledge, skills, and abilities through interactions with the content.<sup>62</sup> The instructor must provide and promote avenues for all these kinds of interactions. In all these, the instructor aims at making himself/herself socially present in the teaching and learning experience. One way to do this is to make weekly announcements or give response to students' queries through video recordings rather than using texts (alone).

### Peer Learning

Humans are social beings who desire to interact with others. The social aspect of human life must inform pedagogical practices in any educational institution. Effective online learning requires the instructor to satisfy students' desire for interaction with others (by instituting and promoting peer learning, as noted earlier). Students sometimes learn better when learning with their colleagues than when taught by their instructors. The instructor may put the students into groups and give them assignments for discussions. Such activities help online students strengthen the online learning community. It is the instructor's responsibility to "support and stimulate students' activities that engage them in thinking, understanding the instructions and presenting ideas intellectually about the topic or the task."<sup>63</sup> Student-to-student interactions are key elements in an online learning platform because they make students experience a sense of community, sharing of resources and knowledge, interdependence, solidarity, and a sense of trust. Through effective interactions, students can have in-depth and reasoned discussions that will enhance their learning process. In her study on the relevance of interaction in an online learning environment, Karen Ouzts concluded that "student satisfaction with online learning classes tends to be low when instructors simply post lecture notes, make individual assignments, and ask students to work in isolation without any interaction with other students or with the instructor."<sup>64</sup> Since learning is a social process, online instructors must design their courses to promote interaction and active learning.

The instructor needs to observe student-student interaction and the progress of individual students, and based on his observation offer guidance, encouragement and feedback (where necessary). This requires the ability to prompt responses from all students in the class, act as a catalyst for discussions, summarize students' points and challenge them to improve their work and provide feedback. The instructor must also give prompt responses to students' queries and assess their work and give feedback on time. To ensure that students submit their work on time for assessment, the instructor needs to give constant reminders about

<sup>59</sup> Moore cited in R. Sweat-Guy, "The Role of Interaction in e-Learning," Nicole A. Buzzetto-More (Ed.). *Principles of Effective Online Teaching*. pp. 85-105 (Santa Rosa, California: Informing Science Press, 2006), 6.

<sup>60</sup> Sweat-Guy, "The Role of Interaction in e-Learning," 87.

<sup>61</sup> Chientzu Candace Chou, Model of Learner-Centered Computer-Mediated Interaction for Collaborative Distance Learning. Annual Proceedings of Selected Research and Development [and] Practice Papers Presented at the National Convention of the Association for Educational Communications and Technology, Atlanta, Georgia (2001).

<sup>62</sup> Pamela T. Northrup, "Online Learners' Preferences for Interaction," *Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, 3(2), (2002): 219-226.

<sup>63</sup> Islam and Vale, "The Teacher's Role in Promoting Online Peer Group Learning," 87.

<sup>64</sup> Karen Ouzts, "Sense of Community in Online Courses," *Quarterly Review of Distance Education* 7(3),(2006): 285-296, 293.

submission deadlines. Every student must be engaged; the instructor must track his/her engagement with every student. The instructor may schedule one-on-one engagement with the members of the class.

### **Effective Communication**

In traditional face-to-face classroom environments where instructors can see how students are doing daily, interacting one-on-one with students to find out what challenges they have, and how an instructor may help is a common practice. Online teaching should not in any way be a hindrance to such interaction and communication. The online classroom setting can still allow for those same opportunities for students. For example, the instructor can arrange for students to log in and chat with him/her privately or make video calls every week to address students' educational, spiritual, social and mental needs. Again, online education requires live lectures where students interact with the instructor and other students.

The instructor's real presence is very important. As noted earlier, online education should not be a disembodied experience; rather it must be embodied learning that involves the contextualization of learning in a student's home environment. One way to do this is to present him/herself as a real, interested, and welcoming person through effective communication. In a way, to be an online instructor is more demanding than being an instructor for the traditional face-to-face environment. In the latter, the instructor presents him/herself within a particular time in the classroom and goes back to the office or leaves the campus afterward. In the case of the former, the instructor is expected to be available all the time to answer students' questions, clarify their thoughts and contribute to their discussions. Due to differences in time zones, a student may even ask a question when the instructor is asleep. When he/she wakes up, he/she is supposed to respond to the question promptly.

Creativity and innovation in communication in online teaching are required to make the teaching and learning process effective. The instructor can creatively bring ideas that can push online students further in their course. Such innovations will make students feel like being in a face-to-face classroom. Again, all forms of communication must be clear and carried out in a language that is accessible to both the instructor and the student.

Effective communication for effective online education requires the instructor to make known to the students what his/her expectations are in a particular course; this must be done at the beginning of the course. The intended course outcomes, the nature of the assignment, how students should present their work, and the grading system must all be made clear at the beginning of the course. It is also crucial that the instructor defines and communicates to the students what is expected in the online classroom.

### **Motivation**

Online studies may be difficult for those who cannot study independently. A lot of people become frustrated and give up in many education institutions (whether online or not). Therefore, online students need to be motivated and encouraged throughout their courses. An effective online instructor is therefore expected to make good efforts to send carefully drafted messages of motivation to the students in general and if need be, to individual learners. Feedback to students must have some words of motivation no matter their performance. This does not mean glossing over their shortcomings. Instead, the instructor must point out students' weaknesses, suggest ways of improving their work and encourage them to do better next time. Through motivation, the instructor can help students to develop high levels of confidence. In the process, the instructor should help students to overcome fear and negative feelings. This requires patience and dedication, and the attitude of carrying out responsibility as service to Christ (Col. 3:23-24). The instructor may also coach the students on time management and other relevant topics that will enhance their studies.

### **Is Online Theological Education Appropriate for Africa?**

To answer this question there is a need to recall some of the points made so far in this paper. The discussions have shown that online theological education can even be more effective in the ministerial/spiritual formation of students than the traditional face-to-face mode. Apart from the absence of face-to-face interactions between students and instructors and/or among students, the online classroom seems more effective in

offering the other “ingredients” for spiritual formation (namely, Scripture, spiritual disciplines, biblical scholarship, faith integration, and so on). Spiritual formation occurs in online theological education through increased knowledge, community development, and personal growth; it also occurs through peer and faculty relationships that lead to positively impacted spiritual development and through the assimilation of social and spiritual dimensions attained from the course content and practical application. Also, the instructor’s effectiveness in mediating the learning materials for students, ability to serve as a representative of Christ, effective use of technology, encouragement and motivation, facilitation of peer/group studies, effective communication skills, prompt feedback and others, are key requirements for making online education effective. Therefore, the administrators for institutions which offer online learning platforms must create the right environment for both instructors and students to enhance effectiveness, efficiency and spiritual formation. The obvious conclusion is that there is nothing wrong with theological education mediated through the use of modern technology.

Nonetheless, it is important to admit that in Africa’s present situation of power failure, poverty, and lack of internet facilities, online education may not be suitable for every individual African. This does not mean online education cannot serve Africans; rather it means not every African has the logistics for studying online. Since the future of education delivery leans toward the online mode, African countries should make serious attempts to deal with the factors that make online education unsuitable for the majority of the people. Two key steps are, ensuring an uninterrupted supply of electricity and making internet facilities both accessible and affordable. While online education may not be suitable for every African, there are many Africans who have all the necessary logistics for learning in an online environment. Such people are encouraged to take advantage of the opportunity that technology offers them to study and be transformed spiritually in an online setting.

Regarding how online studies may fulfil the concept of community, it has been noted earlier that the believer’s community goes beyond people in his/her immediate physical environment to include people he/she may or may never come into physical contact with. The African view on the human community does not contradict the idea of a virtual community. It has also been noted that the concept of community even in an on-campus learning environment may sometimes not be anything more than the community of people gathered in a classroom or in the chapel. Online theological education better prepares students for ministry than the traditional face-to-face mode of teaching and learning. The reason is that online theological education allows students to study in a church context where they interact with their congregation and other believers through *practicum*.

## CONCLUSION

Is ministerial/spiritual formation possible in online theological education? Online theological education is suitable for the spiritual formation of any student and (African or not) provided the student has the appropriate logistics to access the technologically-mediated teaching and learning process, and is enrolled at an institution which has the pedagogical, scholarly, technological requirement for ensuring effective teaching and learning in a virtual space. In addition, the student must be committed to ensuring ethical practices in the online learning environment. The Great Commandment of love must serve as an antidote to unethical practices in an online learning setting. A person who desires spiritual/ministerial formation must be a Christian who loves God and fellow human beings. Such a person must note that degrees cannot enhance spiritual formation without a personal relationship with Christ. Therefore, it is one’s relationship with Christ that matters most, not good grades or “big” certificates. For this reason, it is important to maintain one’s integrity and pass or fail an examination genuinely than to pass at the expense of one’s integrity. With such a mindset, unethical practices in online theological education will reduce if not completely eradicated.

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## ABOUT AUTHOR

Isaac Boaheng holds a PhD in Theology from the University of the Free State, South Africa, a Master of Theology degree from the South African Theological Seminary, South Africa, a Master of Divinity degree from the Trinity Theological Seminary, Ghana and a Bachelor of Science degree in Geomatic Engineering from the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Ghana. He is a lecturer in Theology and Christian Ethics at the Christian Service University College, Ghana, and a Research Fellow at the Department of Biblical and Religion Studies, University of the Free State, South Africa. Boaheng has over fifty publications in Systematic Theology, Ethics, Biblical Studies, Translation Studies, African Christianity, Linguistics, Pentecostalism and Christian Mission, among others. He is an Ordained Minister of the Methodist Church Ghana serving the Nkwabeng circuit of the Sunyani diocese.