**Church Ministry in the Digital Age**

12 credit hour cognate for the M.Div. and MAR Degrees

Introduction to the Cognate

Digital Ministry involves the practice of ministry in online digital environments that do not necessarily involve physical gatherings of leaders and participants. Digital ministry intentionally expands a church’s ministry beyond the physical confines of its building or campus to reach the world for Christ. Digital ministry creatively utilizes digital technology to achieve spiritual outcomes consistent with the Great Commission and the Mission of God.

Digital church ministry does not replace in-person ministry but rather expands church ministry in order to reach the 3.8 billion people that have access to the internet worldwide. Why would a follower of Christ want to delimit and restrict access to this ever-expanding population of potential followers of Christ? Digital ministry involves digital evangelism, digital discipleship, digital fellowship, and even digital worship. Lee Moore was an inmate in prison when he placed his faith in Christ and while in prison he established a connection with a Lutheran church that had an online ministry. Listen to his own description of how he joined the church in worship as they celebrated the Lord’s Supper.

“So without Communion during my months at county, I joined my Lutheran friends in Spirit. While they gathered at the table on Sunday mornings, I communed with them from a distance. I followed the liturgy from worship bulletins that my pastor had sent me. And with “wine” made from water and grape jelly, and a slice of bread from my meal tray, I joined them in sharing in the body and blood of Christ. It may seem uncouth or even foolish to join in Communion remotely, like a child having pretend tea in plastic cups, but these were vital moments of grace that preserved me in my time of desperate need.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

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Rationale for the Cognate

Heidi Campbell and Stephen Gardner (*Networked Theology*, 2016) describe the current blurring of bright lines of distinction between physical and virtual as “networked religion” or “multisite reality” where we are experiencing an expanded spatial understanding of where ministry happens. A good example of the blurring of the lines between physical and virtual was included in a recent D.Min. student’s project dissertation. The student was helping his congregation appreciate the significance of church memorials (dedicated spaces memorialzing an event or person) and linking them to the memorials found in scripture. He used the church’s Twitter feed and Facebook page to draw attention to a particular memorial each month thereby leveraging digital/virtual media to draw attention to a physical space in the church.

As church ministry becomes increasingly multisite, distributed, and diasporic we will need to prepare students to be agile and adaptive so that they can perform ministry whether situated physically or virtually. We also need to give students a biblical theology of ministry for the 21st century that does not elevate physical environments of ministry over virtual ones in an either/or dichotomy. This cognate is desiged to help students think biblically, theologically, and practically about the ancient Christian belief in our union with Christ and the communion of saints. Recognizing that in the Spirit Christians are always present and never absent.

Four Domains of Digital Ministry Practice

This conceptual framework provides a curricular road map to assist in the selection and design of digital ministry courses across the theological curriculum. Courses and learning experiences should be balanced equally among all four digital ministry domains of practice.

**Digital Theology (DT)** – What biblical and theological concepts and principles permit and encourage the development of digital ministries that do not involve physical face to face encounters?

**Digital Formation (DF)** – How do Christians grow spiritually in digital environments? What are the requisiste ingredients for spiritual formation in online contexts that are consistent with God’s design for growth in the church and kingdom?

**Digital Community (DC)** – How is digital community formed and maintained when members are disbributed geographically but present spiritually?

**Digital Strategies (DS)** – What specific ministry strategies, practices, and experiences does a digital ministry use to support the mission of God and the fulfillment of the Great Commission?

Four New Courses

1. **CLCM 510 Constructing a Theology of Networks for the Digital Age (3 hrs)**

The Digital Age has created an interconnected network of overlapping communities that is blurring the historic distinction between physical and digital. Given the evidence for the existence of these networked realities and their counterparts in the natural world, what is our theological and biblical response? This course provides students an opportunity to formulate an emerging theology of networks through which the Spirit of God works to minister to his people.

Prerequisites: RTCH 500

Measurable Learning Outcomes. Upon completion of the course, students should be able to:

1. Construct a biblical theology of ministry practice for the digital age.
2. Articulate a biblical and theological justification for doing digital ministry.
3. Critique competing models of digital ministry from a biblical-theological perspective.
4. Prepare a thoughtful and articulate written presentation of an emerging model of digital ministry for a local church in the 21st century.

Reqired Textbooks:

Dwight Friesen, *Thy Kingdom Connected* (Baker Books, 2009). ISBN: 0801071631.

Heidi Campbell and Stephen Gardner, *Networked Theology: Negotiating Faith in a Digital Culture* (Baker Academic, 2016). ISBN: 9780801049149.

Tim Hutchings, *Creating Church Online* (New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2017). ISBN: 9780367333454.

1. **CLCM 520 Spiritual Formation in the Digital Age (3 hrs)**

Given the changing landscape of ministry that is moving from embodied to embedded, we need a biblical model of spiritual formation that encompasses all possible ministry contexts. This course presents a biblical-ecological model of spiritual formation that identifies God’s design for growth in all the spheres over which he presides as Lord.

Measurable Learning Outcomes. Upon completion of the course, students will be able to:

1. Articulate a biblical framework for the study of spiritual formation.
2. Identify the relationship between natural, social, and spiritual ecologies.
3. Formulate their own unique model of spiritual formation that embraces both physical and virtual ministry spheres.
4. Apply what they have learned about spiritual formation to ministry practice.

Required Textbooks:

Stephen D. and Mary E. Lowe, *Ecologies of Faith in a Digital Age* (IVP Academic, 2018). ISBN: 0830852050.

Schuurman, D. (2013). *Shaping a Digital World: Faith, Culture, and Computer Technology.* Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic. ISBN-13: 978-0830827138

Prerequisites: RTCH 50

1. **CLCM 530 Creating Christian Community Online (3 hrs)**

Is physical presence a requirement for authentic Christian community? This course examines the debate between those who advocate incarnated community and those who argue that Christian community is unconstrained by time and place because of the omnipresent ministry of the Holy Spirit. Attention is given to the biblical and theological concepts of the believer’s union with Christ and communion of the saints and their significance for the creation and formation of online communities of faith.

Prerequisites: RTCH 500

Measurable Learning Outcomes. Upon completion of the course, students will be able to:

1. Explain the biblical/theological concepts of the believer’s union with Christ and the communion of saints.
2. Describe how authentic Christian community can be formed in digital/online environments.
3. Identify the critical elements needed to create and sustain digital/online communities.
4. Articulate a biblical/theological model of Christian community.

Required Textbooks:

Phillip Graham Ryken, *The Communion of the Saints* (P&R Publishing, 2001). ISBN: 0875525075.

Andrew Feenberg and Darin Barney, *Community in a Digital Age: Philosophy and Practice* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2004). ISBN: 0742529592.

Joseph R. Myers, *Organic Community* (Baker Books, 2007). ISBN: 0801065984

1. **CLCM 540 Introduction to Ministry in the Digital Age (3 hrs)**

Martin Luther transformed Europe and eventually the world by taking his innovative theological beliefs and tethering them to an innovative technology; the printing press. Ministry leaders have a similar opportunity because of the technological innovations available to those who live in the Digital Age. This course provides a structured examination of the current digital landscape and a practical model for digital ministry in the 21st century.

Prerequisites: RTCH 500

Measurable Learning Outcomes. Upon completion of the course, students should be able to:

1. Identify appropriate technological innovations relevant to church ministry in the digital age.
2. Trace the history of the church’s use of technological innovation beginning in scripture and culminating in the present day.
3. Designate different avenues of digital ministry such as digital evangelism, counseling, discipleship, and worship.
4. Construct a digital ministry blueprint for a local church that will serve as a baseline of best practices and enable the student to launch a digital ministry initiative in a local church or Christian organization.

Reqired Textbooks:

David Bourgeois, *Ministry in the Digital Age* (IVP, 2013). ISBN: 0830856617.

Meredith Gould, *The Social Media Gospel: Sharing the Good News in New Ways*, 2nd ed. (Collegeville: MN, Liturgical Press, 2015). ISBN: 0814647073.

Jay Y. Kim, *Analog Church: Why We Need Real People, Places, and Things in the Digital Age* (IVP, 2020). ISBN: 9780830841585.

Deanna Thompson, *The Virtual Body of Christ* (Abingdon Press, 2016). ISBN: 978-1501815188.

1. Lee Moore, “Seeking the Body and Blood Behind Bars,” *Christianity Today*, Sept 20, 2018, p. 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)