



The Distanced Church

Reflections on Doing Church Online

Heidi A Campbell, Editor

The Distanced Church: Reflections on Doing Church Online

Edited by Heidi A Campbell

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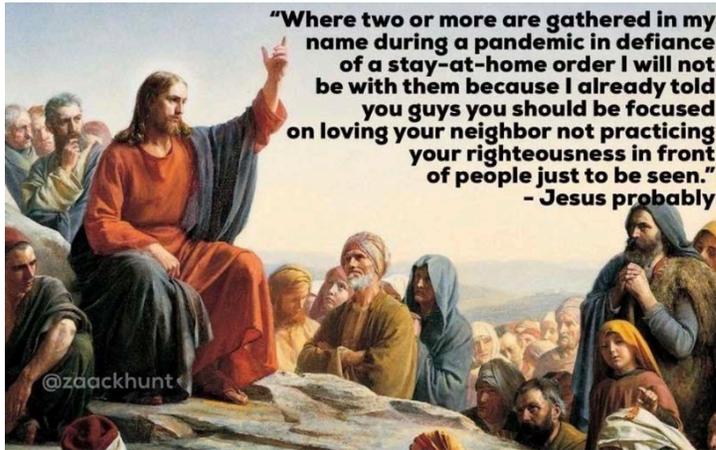
Heidi A Campbell

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Reassessing Embodiment and Its Role in Developing Digital Literacies for Ministry

Stacy Williams-Duncan and Kyle Matthew Oliver

Author of a research-based framework of digital literacies for ministry reexamine the framework's structure in light of observations and firsthand leadership experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, arguing that the literacy "presenting authentically and pastorally online" is not the outcome of mastering the other literacies but the motivation to develop them.

The Digital Literacies for Ministry Project

Five years before the novel coronavirus pandemic forced churches to take their worship and many other ministries online, we were applying for the first round of funding for a substantial research project about digital religious engagement and leadership. By 2015, we, and our colleague Lisa Kimball at Virginia Theological Seminary had already been involved in numerous teaching and consulting initiatives aimed at helping faith leaders respond creatively to the sociocultural changes occurring under the impact of new media (Kimball & Oliver, 2013; Fentress-Williams & Williams-Duncan, 2015; Oliver, 2019; Oliver & Kimball, 2019a; Oliver & Kimball, 2019b).

During 2015-16, we interviewed 36 leaders in 13 ministry training organizations and the following summer convened a participatory symposium to refine and extend our preliminary analysis. Our primary research objective was to identify the

digital media ministry skills most important for ministers and ministry students. The result was a framework of seven digital literacies for ministry (DLMs, see Table 1) and offered, to our knowledge, the first empirically-derived ministry competencies emerging from American theological education (Oliver, Kimball, Williams-Duncan, & Blanchard, 2016; Oliver & Williams-Duncan, 2019; Oliver, Williams-Duncan, & Kimball, forthcoming).

Since we identified each literacy via a grounded theory analysis of semi-structured interviews, there was no *a priori* way to order them, much less capture their interrelationships. In our forthcoming foundations paper about this study (Oliver, Williams-Duncan, & Kimball, forthcoming), we grouped them into the four categories also listed in Table 1.

Table 1
Digital Literacies for Ministry Framework

Name of literacy (abbreviations boldface)	Definition
Communal Literacies	
Navigating hybrid & digital cultures	the ability to move with confidence through relevant spaces and communities online
Convening hybrid & digital community	the ability to bring together groups online and help them flourish as communities
Dispositional Literacies	
<i>Cultivating a spiritually wise digital habitus</i> (centering)	the ability to apply the insights of spiritual traditions to the daily practice of digitally mediated social participation

Maintaining a posture of experimentation
(experimenting) an orientation for exploring new tools, trying out strategies, tolerating and learning from apparent failures, and innovating in a fast-changing landscape

Constructive Literacies

Creating & curating faith-based media artifacts the ability to find or make and then share appropriate resources to teach faith and prompt reflection

Connecting media theory to theological reflection
(reflecting) the ability to reflect on new media theory and practice from a theological perspective and on religious belief and practice from a media studies perspective

Embodied Literacy

Presenting authentically & pastorally online the ability to explore, claim, and “inhabit” appropriate traits of religious leadership

Digital Literacies Ministries Amid Pandemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic, our observations as researchers and experiences as congregational leaders have strengthened our confidence in the value of the DLMs. Many religious leaders and the people they serve are progressing rapidly through the development of several of these literacies in the face of tremendous need for connection and continuity.

For example, entire congregations are collaboratively learning to *convene hybrid and digital communities*, socializing with each other in Zoom etiquette and developing or updating online communication covenants and comment-moderation policies. We, and many of the experts we interviewed, have been

pressed into emergency service *creating and curating faith-based digital artifacts* by offering impromptu training and crowdsourcing resource collections.

Our understanding of digital literacy follows prominent scholars' view that these competencies are more about social practice than technical instrumentalism (e.g., Street, 1995; Gee, 2000; Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton, & Robison, 2009). Indeed, our groupings of the literacies in Table 1 underscore their alignment with more traditional understandings of ministry formation. Our hope is that this peculiar moment will help all church leaders better understand this connection. While we never wished to see these devastating circumstances unfold, we are finding they have moved digital ministry conversations usually relegated to elective courses, specialist conferences, and the job descriptions of young associate pastors onto the agendas of bishops, seniors pastors, and even the secular media.

In Figure 1, Episcopal priest Ian Lasch articulates an urgent need to develop new skills — in this case, the literacies we call *creating and curating faith-based media artifacts and maintaining a posture of experimentation*. He articulates emerging priorities in a way that resonated with us as theological educators — not because every religious leader should be an expert video editor, but because digital literacies for ministry are always about being present with our people in the midst of ever-changing ministry circumstances.



Figure 1: A priest reports on his pandemic-inspired professional development. Screenshot shared with permission of author.

Embodiment as Source, Not Result

We originally described the literacy *presenting authentically and pastorally online* as an embodied literacy that emerged from the skillful integration of the others. As we imagined this relationship, a ministry leader becomes more competent in embodying their leadership role online as they learn to bring their flock together, try new things with them, collect new resources for faithful adaptation, etc. In this way of thinking, it is tempting to view the other literacies as prerequisites.

The responses we've observed during the pandemic have caused us to rethink this aspect of our framing. Amid physical distancing, people who previously would not have even been open to digital ministry have gone online to pragmatically and faithfully meet the spiritual needs of their communities. We have been inspired by those who were honest about their digital skills, willing to experiment and risk "failing" publicly, all while using tools they may not have encountered before.

We realized the leaders that most impressed us demonstrated a high degree of authenticity — to their own values and skills, and to the equipment and other resources available in their community. As Kyle often says in training contexts, they trusted they already had everything they needed to be digital ministers (Oliver, 2016). Instead of understanding embodiment as an *outcome* of the other literacies, the crisis has caused us to view **presenting authentically and pastorally online** as the *motivation* for developing the other literacies.

When there was no other way to be present to their congregations, these leaders entered a strange land and discovered they could still sing the Lord’s song (Psalm 137). We believe those who have learned to flourish in digital exile will find their ministries enriched when they return to Jerusalem and continue to practice their new competencies.

Digital Literacies Ministries After COVID-19

This crisis has reenergized our commitment to DLM research, confirming for us the relevance of several future areas of work we discerned in a January 2020 strategy session:

- Especially now that many senior pastors have had direct personal experiences of digital ministry, how can we more deeply explore the implications of DLM for religious leadership in a time of accelerating change?
- How can DLM’s rich emphasis on spiritually wise habits and critical reflection guide leaders to balance both engagement and critique when considering the moral, spiritual, and communal challenges posed by our digital world?

Jen

Kim

As ministers and researchers, we hope to look back at the COVID-19 pandemic and see a moment that both expanded and *deepened* the digital ministry conversation.

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