THE CHURCH ISN'T EMPTY,
THE CHURCH HAS BEEN DEPLOYED!

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
Editorial Assistance by Sophia Osteen
All essays remain the property and under the copyright of their respective authors.

Digital Religion Publications
An Imprint of the
Network for New Media, Religion & Digital Culture Studies
Visit our website at www.digitalreligion.tamu.edu

Table of Contents

numerous clergy I've heard expressing their surprise at increased viewership. Making the service available on members' timeframes means more of them can "show up" virtually, and it can be captioned for the hearing-impaired. Finally, for a similar reason, virtual-meeting software for committees and gatherings will survive because it allows greater involvement by busy members; easier participation equals increased commitment.

In addition to these three, I truly hope that the virtual religious response to the virus will have a generalized, long-lasting effect on congregations, a mindset change – a greater openness to technological use by Luddites and older members of religious communities. Perhaps this virtual baptism by fire will free them to try out screens in the sanctuary, image magnification of the preacher, digital daily devotionals, e-news announcements, and social media photo sharing. Maybe the epidemic will have a silver lining of bringing religious communities into the 21ˢᵗ Century technologically.

Scott L. Thumma is Professor of Sociology of Religion at Hartford Seminary. He directs the Hartford Institute for Religion Research and the Faith Communities Today project. Scott is a leading expert on megachurches and has written on nondenominational churches and the impact of the internet and social media on church dynamics.

"Where two or more are gathered in my name during a pandemic in defiance of a stay-at-home order I will not be with them because I already told you guys you should be focused on loving your neighbor not practicing your righteousness in front of people just to be seen."
- Jesus probably
@zaackhunt
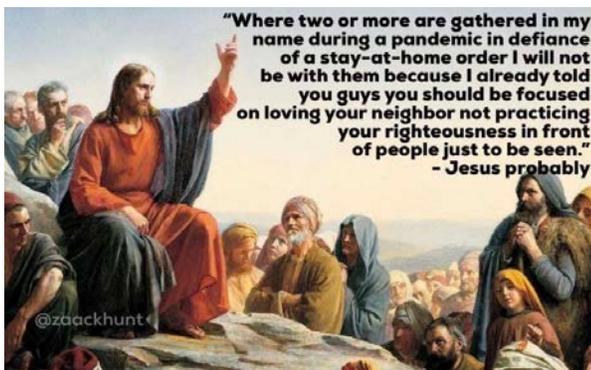
-29-
Reassessing Embodiment and Its Role in Developing Digital Literacies for Ministry
Stacy Williams-Duncan and Kyle Matthew Oliver

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	
*Cultivating a spiritually wise digital habitus (**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 artifact*s 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?

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.

Stacy Williams-Duncan is Rector of Little Fork Episcopal Church and founder of Learning ForTE consulting, which specializes in digital learning, program design, and facilitating change.

Kyle Oliver is a media educator specializing in creative meaning making. He manages communications and teaches Christian education at Church Divinity School of the Pacific.

Sources

Fentress-Williams, J. & Williams-Duncan, S. (2015, June). *Everything is a remix: Using digital storytelling to re-engage oral texts*. Paper presented at the Pedagogical Possibilities: New Paradigms in Teaching for Ministry, Nashville, TN. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=efuhB0a8348.

Gee, J. P. (2000). The New Literacy Studies: From "socially situated"' to the work of the social. In R. Ivanič & D. Barton (Eds*.), Situated literacies: Reading and writing in context* (pp. 180–196). New York, NY: Routledge.

Jenkins, H., Purushotma, R., Weigel, M., Clinton, K., & Robison, A. J. (2009). *Confronting the challenges of participatory culture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Kimball, E. M. & Oliver, K. M. (2013, November). *Communities of (digital) practice: Preparing religious leaders for lively online engagement*. Paper presented at the Religious Education Association Annual Meeting, Boston, MA.

Oliver, K. M. (2016). You already have everything you need to be a digital media minister. *Faith & Leadership*. Retrieved from https://faithandleadership.com/kyle-matthew-oliver-you-already-have-everything-you-need-be-digital-media-minister.

Oliver, K. M. (2019). Networked religion meets digital geographies: Pedagogical principles for exploring new spaces and roles in the seminary classroom. *Teaching Theology & Religion*, *22*(1), 4–16.

Oliver, K. & Kimball, L. (2019). Digital media for ministry: Key concepts and core convictions. In M. Percy, I. Markham, E. Percy, & F. Po (Eds.), *The Study of Ministry: A comprehensive survey of theory and best practice* (pp. 217–232). London, UK: SPCK.

Oliver, K., & Kimball, L. (2019). Digital media for ministry: Portraits, practices and potential. In M. Percy, I. Markham, E. Percy, & F. Po (Eds.), *The study of ministry: A comprehensive survey*

of theory and best practice (pp. 233–249). London, UK: SPCK.

Oliver, K. M., Kimball, E. M., Williams-Duncan, S., & Blanchard, I. (2016, November). *Digital media for ministry asset mapping: An exploratory study in theological education*. Poster presented at the Religious Education Association Annual Meeting, Pittsburgh, PA. Retrieved from https://religiouseducation.net/papers/rea2016-oliver1.pdf.

Oliver, K. M. & Williams-Duncan, S. (2019). Faith leaders developing digital literacies: Demands and resources across career stages according to theological educators. *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, *11*(2), 122–145.

Oliver, K. M., Williams-Duncan, S., & Kimball, E. M. (forthcoming). Digital literacies for ministry: A qualitative study of theological educators preparing students for new media engagement. *Ecclesial Practices*.

Street, B. V. (1995). *Social literacies: Critical approaches to literacy in development, ethnography and education*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Darn it Jim I'm a Pastor not a videoographer!
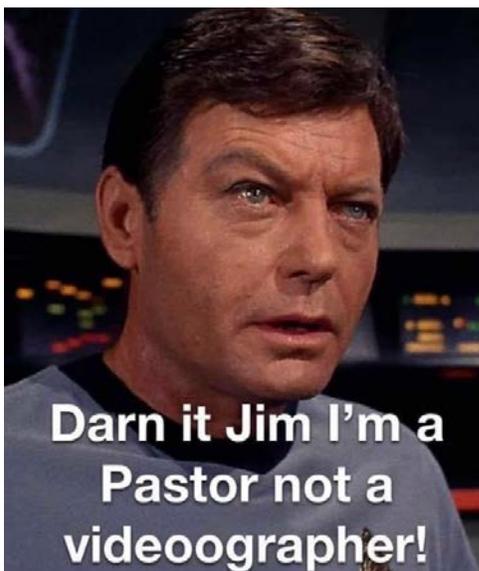
-30-

Is It Real? Mystagogizing the Livestreamed Service

Daniella Zsupan-Jerom

This essay ponders the reality of worship as a digitally mediated experience and proposes that communities reflect on this intentionally as part of the life of the

In response to the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic, all public gatherings including assemblies of religious practice and worship have ceased, either by order of the government or by the prudent decision of the religious leader. Multitudes of Christian churches, and many more individual persons of faith, have turned anew to social communication in order to broadcast services, devotional practices, prayerful reflections, and encouragement. One significant challenging question arising during this time of transition is to what extent such mediated worship is "real" for those who experience it via broadcast or livestream, especially Eucharistic and sacramental celebrations.

To a certain extent, the answer to this question is defined denominationally, according to the normative sacramental theology of a particular church. Roman Catholics, Orthodox, and some Protestant Christians have a hard line when it comes to broadcasting sacramental events: Participation in the sacraments needs to take place in person, and thus mediating them through broadcast or livestream, while beneficial, does not replace the actual face-to-face event. Other Christian denominations have thought about presence, participation, and online worship in more fluid terms. While these approaches generally pre-exist the current COVID-19 health crisis, the pandemic has brought the question to the table anew. In a