A Comparison of Spiritual Formation Experiences between On-Campus and Distance Evangelical Theological Education Students

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Abstract

Distance education has a well-established heritage as an effective means of formal higher learning. Despite this, its role in theological education is actively resisted by many theorists. The main reason for this reluctance to endorse theological distance education is the concern that distance students do not have an adequate formation experience as they learn. Formation is a term representative of development as a Christian disciple, typically measured in terms of spiritual maturity. Very few primary investigations into theological education students’ formational experiences have been undertaken, and no comparison of on-campus and theological distance education students has been found in literature. Yet, the assumption of many writers is that theological distance education students have an impoverished formational experience.

This study seeks to address a serious gap in literature. It provides a comparison of the spiritual maturity, propensity for further spiritual growth, and an exploration of the formation experiences of on-campus and theological distance education students studying similar undergraduate degree programmes at Laidlaw College, a New Zealand provider of theological education with an evangelical emphasis. Laidlaw College provides both under-graduate and post-graduate programmes in theology; the participants of this investigation are students enrolled in the Bachelor of Ministries and Bachelor of Theology degrees, which are offered both on-campus and through distance. These degrees have been chosen as the basis for comparison because of their similarity to the U.S. Master of Divinity (MDiv) degree, which, mainly because of concerns about student formation, can only as of 2013 – and by special dispensation – be earned solely through online distance education. Much of the recent debate in literature related to distance theological education has come from authors associated with the MDiv. At Laidlaw College distance students are not required to undertake
any on-campus or face-to-face tuition and study courses based on similar prescriptions, providing a clear distinction between on-campus and distance populations.

This study applies a mixed-methods approach. From a population of 148 on-campus and distance theological education students, 77 students were successfully surveyed using Christian Spiritual Participation Profile (CSPP) instrument. Semi-structured qualitative interviews with ten each of on-campus and distance education students were also held, exploring interviewees’ formational experiences during the period of their study with an emphasis on their all-of-life and church community perspectives.

This study found no significant difference across the spiritual maturity profiles and propensity for further growth between on-campus and theological distance education students. It is also evident that those students self-selecting for theological distance study already tended to be mature believers, and studied alongside strong church involvement. The church membership and involvement of distance respondents was in marked contrast to that of on-campus students, bringing into question the nature of the community experience across both groups during their period of study. Further, evidence was found that both on-campus and distance education students experienced transformative learning, considered by some the optimal outcome of higher education. These findings reinforce the efficacy of theological distance education.
Preface

I began this study in 2008, following a few false starts with other PhD topics. My MA in Open and Distance Education through the Open University UK introduced me to the wonderful possibilities of distance education; that I studied the MA by distance (and 12 hours’ time difference) added to my appreciation of the potential of distance education. A thesis investigating some aspect of distance education was a logical next step.

I began work with Laidlaw College as an academic staff member in 2007. My role was not to lecture, but rather to set up online learning and further develop the College’s distance education activities. My research activity then turned to theological education. I admit to being somewhat surprised when I encountered in literature perspectives disparaging of distance education. Laidlaw College had long offered its Bachelor of Ministries degree by distance, and I had myself begun (and, sadly, have still not finished) the Laidlaw College Graduate Diploma in Theology by distance. The reservations about theological distance education needed some investigation.

I first became aware of the somewhat dismal appreciation of theological distance education when I travelled to the UK in 2004. Before visiting the Open University, I had the opportunity to meet with some theological distance educators in various Colleges, and to present to some of the academic staff. I recall talking afterward with one lecturer in particular, who seriously doubted that distance education was worth growing beyond its single (and seriously overworked) member of staff because students would not be able to benefit from what he, the lecturer, had to say. In the intervening years, I have found very few people who consider theological distance education a worthy contributor to discipleship.

Naturally, a deep-seated concern that distance education was not as appreciated as it ought to be served as an on-going motivation for a study of this magnitude. I have
been surprised at the state of literature in the field. The untidy definitions in literature particular irked me, because they made it difficult to discern whether or not the author was meaning distance education in the sense of no on-campus contact required; as a complement to on-campus education; or as a way of describing the use of online technologies in on-campus education. The poor use of definitions in literature, along with an inadequate use of the term community in theological education, led to the first publication resulting from this thesis (Nichols, 2011). It is only recently that the valuable contribution distance education might make to theological education is being appreciatively explored.

Completing this work has been a long journey. Since beginning this study I took time out to write a five-part series of scholarly e-primers introducing e-learning at the request of Ako Aotearoa, and began the extremely challenging position of Executive Director of Faculty at Open Polytechnic. The latter involved a shift to Wellington, New Zealand, from Auckland – and a shift away from theological distance education. Despite these changes my supervisors, Professor Kwok Wing-Lai and Drs Bill Anderson and Hugh Morrison, all of the University of Otago (Bill now retired), have provided consistent support and encouragement.

There are many people I need to thank at this time. Some have provided encouragement beyond what they may have thought. I am grateful to Dr Tim Meadowcroft of Laidlaw College, for his insistence that I take my research time seriously; Dr Martin Sutherland, also of Laidlaw College, for his advice about next career steps and for modelling the combination of academic management with scholarly pursuit; Dr Caroline Seelig of Open Polytechnic for her consistent urging that I finish; and to the University of Otago for permitting me PhD candidature at a distance. The interest shown by family and friends has also provided me with encouragement, and the discomforting thought of having to provide an explanation of
why I did not complete, should it have come to that. Above all comes the support of my wife, Charlotte. Thanks, Sweet, so very much.
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<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ATS</td>
<td>Association of Theological Schools</td>
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<tr>
<td>ABHE</td>
<td>Association for Biblical Higher Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>On-campus respondent</td>
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<tr>
<td>CEO</td>
<td>Chief Executive Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSPP</td>
<td>Christian Spiritual Participation Profile</td>
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<td>D</td>
<td>Distance respondent</td>
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<tr>
<td>DDLE</td>
<td>Directed Distance Learning Environment</td>
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<td>DE</td>
<td>Distance Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>EFTS</td>
<td>Equivalent Full-Time Students</td>
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<td>ETE</td>
<td>Ecumenical Theological Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>F2F</td>
<td>Face-to-Face</td>
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<td>FMS</td>
<td>Faith Maturity Scale</td>
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<tr>
<td>FT</td>
<td>Full-Time</td>
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<tr>
<td>FTE</td>
<td>Full-Time Equivalent</td>
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<tr>
<td>ID</td>
<td>Identification</td>
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<tr>
<td>IDLE</td>
<td>Informal Distance Learning Environment</td>
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<tr>
<td>MDiv</td>
<td>Master of Divinity</td>
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<tr>
<td>NDLE</td>
<td>Negotiated Distance Learning Environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PT</td>
<td>Part-Time</td>
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<tr>
<td>Acronym</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<tr>
<td>RSV</td>
<td>Revised Standard Version</td>
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<tr>
<td>SAI</td>
<td>Spiritual Awareness Inventory</td>
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<tr>
<td>STS</td>
<td>Spiritual Transformation Scale</td>
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<tr>
<td>SWBS</td>
<td>Spiritual Well-Being Scale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TEE</td>
<td>Theological Education by Extension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WCC</td>
<td>World Council of Churches</td>
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<td>WOCATI</td>
<td>World Conference of Associations of Theological Institutions</td>
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Chapter One

Introduction

In New Zealand, undergraduate degrees in Christian theology are available by distance education through Laidlaw College and Carey Baptist College (both evangelical in outlook), and the University of Otago. The options for theological distance education in New Zealand are indicative of a consistent demand (Ministry of Education, 2012), within the context of a more general and global shift in demand toward part-time, flexible, and online education (Walsh, 2009). In the United States, though, fully accredited distance theological education programmes are viewed with some suspicion. Even though it is clear that theological education seminaries throughout the Western world are confronted with declining enrolments and increasing expectations for more accessible, and flexible, expressions of education (Ball, 2012; Klimoski, 2005; Lindbeck, 1988; Naidoo, 2012; Palka, 2004; Shaw, 2005; Thoennes, 2008; Werner, 2009a), the efficacy of theological distance education is debated by North American scholars.

This study seeks to address a question posed toward the close of the twentieth century, a question which, just over a decade later, is returning to the fore of theological education literature: “As theological education enters the world of distance learning, very few topics generate as impassioned a response as does the question - can distance education be transformational education?” (Reissner, 1999, p. 88). Over the last decade, the need for a definitive answer to the question has become more acute. Advances in online learning are making distance education more attractive, and students are demanding more flexible study options. Implicit in the question is concern that distance education may not serve its students as well as its on-campus alternative. The success of theological distance education programmes would indicate that, in New
Zealand at least, the transformative potential for theological distance education has simply been assumed. The accreditation of such programmes by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority also demonstrates satisfaction that student outcomes are appropriate.

Reissner’s question is a pivotal one, in that it (probably unintentionally) applies the terms transformation and formation as effective synonyms. Conceptually, however, they represent very different outcomes. Formation has a meaning in theological education literature that equates to Christian spiritual growth; transformation is a term linked to the education theory of transformative learning. The subtle relationship across these terms, whose interplay can be used to describe the development of the theological education student, provides an interesting starting point for considering the efficacy of theological distance education.

In the broadest Christian sense, formation is a believer’s “continuing response to the reality of God’s grace shaping [them] into the likeness of Jesus Christ, through the work of the Holy Spirit, in the community of faith for the sake of others” (Schwanda, 2011, p. 452). As such, formation contributes to discipleship and spiritual maturity. The terms spiritual formation and formation in theological discourse are interchangeable (Lowe, 2012b; Willard, 2002). The term formation is often qualified in literature. Naidoo (2008), for example, differentiates between spiritual and human formation, the former “concerned with discernment of vocation and developmental growth in qualities necessary for effective ministry”, while the latter “concentrates on relationship with God – prayer life, personal faith and spiritual growth in general” (p. 129). Others differentiate between spiritual, ministerial and personal formation (Reissner, 1999), and academic, pastoral, spiritual, and human formation (Klimoski, 2005). Smith (2005) suggests spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral formation as interdependent categories of formation, while the Association of Theological Schools (2012b) lists personal, vocational, spiritual, and academic formation as objectives in its
accreditation documentation for the MDiv degree. These different schemas might be reconciled as follows:

- Character formation – how to be Christian.
- Vocational formation – how to serve on God’s behalf.
- Spiritual formation – how to relate to God.
- Personal formation – how to reach one’s own potential.
- Intellectual formation – how to think theologically.

For the purposes of this thesis, the term formation is considered to encompass all of the types above in that all are associated with Christian development. The term formation in this study is used in the universal, everyday sense suggested by Wilhoit (2009), in that every experience is a formative one for every individual. In the Christian faith, community centred in the church is an important element of formation (Cannell, 2006; Niebuhr, 1956; Sweeney & Fortosis, 1994). Formation, then, is generally the development of the individual through daily experience; in the Christian sense, formation is an on-going process of a believer’s development as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Transformative learning is defined as “The process of learning through critical self-reflection, which results in the reformulation of a meaning perspective to allow a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative understanding of one’s experience” (Mezirow, 1990, p. xvi). Transformative learning theory recognises that learning is more complex and enduring than is implied by the terms comprehension (knowing) and cognition (thinking). Learning is instead posited as a process of epistemic cognition, that is, “the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience as a guide to future action” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 5). Transformative learning goes beyond just knowing more or
thinking differently, because transformative learning involves new ways of understanding and acting in the world.

The theory of transformative learning contends that perspective transformation is the ultimate and valid objective for higher education:

Adult education may be understood as an organized effort to assist learners who are old enough to be held responsible for their acts to acquire or enhance their understandings, skills, and dispositions. Central to this process is helping learners to critically reflect on, appropriately validate, and effectively act on their (and others’) beliefs, interpretations, values, feelings, and ways of thinking (Mezirow, 2000, p. 26).

Reflection on and exploration of others’ views as a means of exploring one’s own thinking and beliefs is fundamental to transformative learning, and such activities are not limited to the on-campus classroom. The theory is yet to be applied to that type of distance education not requiring any on-campus attendance. Transformative learning is, at least theoretically, possible in online distance education where course materials are designed to encourage the development of new perspectives; online discussion is deliberately linked to the sharing of perspectives; and where assessments encourage reflection. While the theory has its critics (Cranton, 2006), transformative learning remains a valuable reference point for educational investigation and effective practice. In theological education, transformative learning theory has been readily applied to various studies (Ball, 2012; Fleischer, 2006; Leslie, 2004; Nichols & Dewerse, 2010; Wickett, 2005), and is identified as being particularly descriptive of effective student learning. Transformation and transformative learning are also terms linked to Christian formation and discipleship (Ball, 2012; Gorman, 2001; Hodgson, 1999; Lamoureux, 1999; McEwen, 2012). Transformative learning theory provides a lens through which the development of theological distance education students might be examined.
The term distance education is used in this study to describe a means of tuition where there is no requirement for faculty and student to meet, or for any student to meet with any other student. Distance education is assumed to include the use of online technologies (Cleveland-Innes & Garrison, 2010) however it is vital that online and distance education are not considered to mean the same thing (Guri-Rosenblit, 2005, 2009), particularly because on-campus tuition increasingly makes use of online technologies. Distance education can be based on synchronous (same-time) or asynchronous approaches (Bernard et al., 2004). The form of distance education considered for this study is best described in terms of Nipper’s (1989) third generation, in that it assumes the use of multimedia and asynchronous online interaction between students and their tutors, in addition to traditional distance study materials. The third generation is in contrast to the first generation (consisting of printed materials) and second (printed materials supplemented with multimedia) (Nipper, 1989).

The main objection to theological distance education in literature is that it is not formative; the transformative potential of theological distance education, and the link of transformative learning to formation, is not considered. Transformative learning as perspective transformation is likely a more valid objective for theological education than is formation, particularly given the academic focus of theological education. Indeed, the requirement for on-campus seminaries to provide intentional formation also has its critics (Bramer, 2007; Hill, 1998; Lindbeck, 1988; Roberts, 2004). At the time of writing, it has been well over a decade since Reissner’s question about the transformational efficacy of distance education was published. In the intervening time providers of theological degrees have embraced online education alongside on-campus tuition, but distance education remains largely side-lined. Where theological distance education is provided, it tends to lack depth and commitment (Cagney, 1997; Cannell, 1999; Delamarter, 2006; Harrison, 2004; Lumsden, Ray, Lowe, & Newsom, 1999; Patterson, 1996). An exception to this pragmatic approach to theological distance education is Laidlaw College, a private training establishment based in Auckland.
Laidlaw College, founded in 1922, was an early adopter of correspondence education (Meadowcroft & Habets, 2011). From its inception as the Bible Training Institute, the College was characterised by a biblical conservatism (Sutherland, 2001), and broad evangelical appeal (Lange, 2013; Lineham, 2011). Indeed, the Institute was established because Joseph Kemp, an early Baptist minister, was “deeply concerned at the inroads of liberal theology into the Protestant churches” in New Zealand (Breward, 2001, p.54). The Institute drew support from Baptist, Brethren, Presbyterian, and Anglican and Methodist traditions, and its inclusive evangelicalism continues to reflect a broad acceptance of faith traditions. In 2008, Laidlaw College had approximately 490 EFTS.¹ Some 90 of these were enrolled in distance studies. Distance students therefore make up about one-fifth of total College EFTS. However, the Centre for Distance Learning serves about one quarter of Laidlaw College’s student body, because a larger proportion of its EFTS base is part-time. Distance education, then, is a significant activity for Laidlaw College’s theological degree tuition.

As of 2010, the College offered four degrees: a Bachelor of Ministries, Bachelor of Theology, Bachelor of Education, and Bachelor of Counselling. The College has been offering a Bachelor of Ministries degree by distance through a dedicated and well-resourced Centre for Distance Learning since 2001, and had recently added the Bachelor of Theology to its distance options; the degrees in education and counselling degrees do not have a distance option at the time of writing. The Laidlaw College Bachelor of Ministries and Bachelor of Theology degrees share a common core of courses, and are considered equivalent theological degrees for the purposes of this study.

The form of distance education applied by Laidlaw College is asynchronous, well-resourced, facilitated by trained and experienced online tutors, and deliberate in its

¹This figure includes a small contribution from a Palmerston North centre (subsequently closed), and a Christchurch centre.
design for online discourse; students are also effectively orientated and supported in their study (Nichols, 2010b). Distance learning courses at Laidlaw College make use of the Moodle learning management system, and their application of active online discussion areas make distance education at Laidlaw College an example of the third generation of distance education (Nipper, 1989). There are no compulsory on-campus or face-to-face workshops or seminars for distance students. The application of reflection, perspective sharing, and disorienting dilemmas to the educational task, all of which are elements of transformative learning, is possible in distance education. Each of these three elements is characteristic of Laidlaw College’s approach to its distance degree programmes.

While Laidlaw College has traditionally hosted a considerable residential student body, the number of students living on campus has declined in recent years. The College has also adopted a less regimented residential experience, with cleaning and dish duties no longer required at the time of this study. On-campus community activities were largely optional as of 2010. In the timeframe for this study, a weekly chapel and optional lunchtime groups existed for those students wanting to attend. On-campus classes consist mainly of on-site lectures. The only required community activities for on-campus students consisted of small-group membership associated with a compulsory first-year course, 401.515 Spiritual Formation. This particular course is taken across one semester, and most on-campus respondents had completed this course at the time of data gathering. Distance students taking course 401.515 are not required to attend any classes or small groups, but are expected to participate in various online discussions. At Laidlaw College, on-campus and distance courses are considered academically equivalent.

In North America, by contrast, the response to Reissner’s question is under considerable debate. The Association of Theological Schools (ATS), an accreditor of theological degrees, answers Reissner’s question with a distinctive no when it comes
to accrediting its prominent Master of Divinity (MDiv) degree. The MDiv is an award very similar to the Laidlaw College Bachelor of Ministry and Bachelor of Theology degrees. While some courses in degrees accredited by the ATS can be studied by distance, it is not usually possible for the full MDiv degree to be conferred on a distance student largely because of concerns related to the sub-optimal formation of the distance student. The New Zealand Qualifications Authority, which requires academic rigour as the basis for accreditation, on the other hand, accredits Laidlaw College; NZQA does not specifically require any formational outcomes. With its dedicated Centre for Distance Learning, experience in distance education, and the similarity of the Laidlaw College degrees to the ATS MDiv, Laidlaw College is well positioned as a case study for investigating the formational outcomes of theological distance education. Are Laidlaw College distance students at a disadvantage in their formation? Alternatively, are the concerns of the ATS and many theological education writers unfounded or, at best, overstated?

When theological distance education is mentioned in literature, it tends to be quickly dismissed. In one consideration of how seminary and church might partner in theological education (Sweeney & Fortosis, 1994), the option of distance education received rather swift treatment. While the phenomenon and growth of theological distance education is often acknowledged in literature, it tends to be quickly put aside as being unaccredited and of poor quality. Serious treatment of third generation distance education in a theological context is provided in but two articles, both published in the late 1990s (Cannell, 1999; Patterson, 1996). Neither was prepared to endorse distance education as a valid alternative to the on-campus seminary. That distance students are less likely to complete their theological education programmes

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2 It was not possible at all for the MDiv to be earned solely at a distance before a review of standards completed on 1 July 2012, when more flexibility for distance provision was provided. Actual guidelines were made available in February 2013. As at December, 2013 only three institutions are accredited to offer the MDiv completely through online distance delivery (Association of Theological Schools, 2013). The ATS requirements are further described in the Literature Review.
is viewed as self-evident by some; this assumption remains even where distance courses feature online discourse between participants (Delamarter, 2006; Ryan, 2001). While a considerable literature concerning theological distance education is emerging, most attention is being given to online learning, a term that typically indicates the use of technology in addition to, rather than instead of, on-campus tuition. Extending the on-campus model online is seen by many as a preferred alternative to theological distance education, particularly because the latter might not require any face-to-face contact with a member of faculty or other enrolled students. Some form of on-campus experience is deemed a safeguard to ensure student formation takes place during study.

**Purpose of the study**

This study contributes to the literature concerning theological distance education by investigating the formation and transformative learning experiences of on-campus and distance education degree students. To this end, an instrument measuring spirituality as an indicator of Christian discipleship and interviews with on-campus and theological distance education students have been applied.

On-campus and theological distance education students from Laidlaw College’s Bachelor of Ministries and Bachelor of Theology programmes who had completed one full-time equivalent semester (four courses) of study as at the first semester of 2010 (n=148) formed the population of interest. Participants were students studying the same academic programmes, across either on-campus or distance education settings. Specifically the development of the students as Christian disciples is in view, as discipleship represents the highest form of Christian growth and life (Weber, 2008). Discipleship can be measured in terms of spiritual maturity, which, in turn, is the result of formation experiences. The comparison of spiritual maturity across on-campus and
distance students brings primary data to bear on the matter of whether concern about the formative potential for theological distance education is well founded.

Interviews with a sample of respondents (n=10 for both on-campus and distance respondents, 20 interviews) were conducted to explore the ways in which theological study had developed each student. Interviews also sought data about respondents’ life context as they studied, with an emphasis on community experience.

Specific research questions for the study are:

1. How do post first-semester theological students, studying on-campus and at a distance, compare in their spiritual maturity and disposition toward further maturity?

2. How do post first-semester students perceive the contribution of their formal study experience to their formation across the term of their studies?

The comparison of spiritual maturity and disposition toward further maturity was measured using the quantitative Christian Spiritual Participation Profile (CSPP) instrument (Thayer, 2004), which is designed for use in evangelical contexts. Five hypotheses were tested for the first research question:

1. There is no significant difference between the overall spiritual maturity of on-campus and distance education students, null hypothesis.

2. There is no significant difference between the formation trajectory profiles of on-campus and distance education students, null hypothesis.

3. Full-time students (on-campus and at a distance) have similar overall scores across the a) Fellowship, b) Service and c) Stewardship scales of the CSPP as part-time students (on-campus and at a distance), null hypothesis.

4. Students across various age groups report similar levels of spiritual maturity, null hypothesis.
5. Students report similar levels of overall spiritual maturity regardless of their length of time as a Christian (self-reported), null hypothesis.

Students’ perceptions of how formal study contributed to their formation was the subject of qualitative interviews, which explored each respondent’s formational experience with an emphasis on an all-of-life and church community perspective.

**Significance of the study**

Formation is considered a necessary element of theological education in literature; it is a specific requirement for accreditation for the MDiv degree. The belief that theological distance education cannot provide a formative experience was one of the major objections to its use in theological education in the United States (Cannell, 1999; Patterson, 1996; Rovai, Baker, & Cox Jr, 2008). Suspicion of distance-only theological education is a theme across literature, much of which comes from US scholars; only in the last few years have perspectives in literature emerged defending the potential of distance theological education (Gresham, 2006; Lowe & Lowe, 2010a; 2010b; White, 2006).

This study investigates whether distance education is perceived as being capable of providing a formative learning experience for students of theological education. A primary study into the efficacy of formation across on campus and distance education graduates is overdue. Current literature is largely characterised by posturing, speculation, and assumption related to both the validity of formation as a distinctive objective, and the actual formational experience of on-campus theological students. The position is well summarised in this quotation from theological education writers:

> Our intuitions tell us that most people would regard a solid liberal arts education taught in a predominantly traditional way, that is, with face-to-face intensive contact between faculty and students (such as occurs at small liberal
arts colleges), as preferable to and qualitatively better than any education one could get at a ‘virtual’ university or at a distance (Diekema & Caddell, 2001, pp. 173–174).

This study informs the intuitions of those involved in writing theological education literature by investigating and comparing the formation experiences of theological education students studying the same programmes on-campus, and at a distance. While various investigations in theological education literature have considered the formational experiences of on-campus students (Birkholz, 1997; Roehlkepartain & Benson, 1996; Williamson & Sandage, 2009), no study has been found that considers the formation experience of distance students, or seeks to compare formational experiences across different educational settings. Exploring the formation experiences of distance and on-campus students during their studies provides further insight into the dynamics of formation, and the role of theological education in that process.

Definition of terms

For the purposes of this study, the following definitions are applied. Note that distance education, formation, and transformative learning have been previously defined.

Church.

The Protestant church is generally understood to be “the people of God, the community and body of Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit” (Ferguson, Wright, & Packer, 2000, p. 140). This definition deliberately avoids any mention of a building or notion of any specific denomination, even though this study is concerned with theological education in the church context. The church as defined here reflects
the Nicene Creed (AD 325), which proclaims one holy catholic (universal) and apostolic church. The church has both a universal and local expression, the latter consisting of a community of Christian believers in the same geographic location, which meets on a regular (usually weekly) basis.

Discipleship.

Discipleship is the on-going development of a Christian believer into the likeness of Jesus Christ. It involves a lifelong process of Christian development and service in community (Cannell, 2006; Collinson, 2005; Llovio, 1985; Weber, 2008), and is equated with spiritual maturity.

Evangelical.

The term evangelical is an adjective used to indicate a particular set of Protestant Christian values and beliefs (Bebbington, 1993), though there is considerable variety within evangelicalism (Nettle, 2001). Some evangelical denominations, on their arrival in New Zealand, formed local identities more willing to cooperate cross-denominationally (Sutherland, 2001; Lineham, 2011); despite this, variety across evangelicalism is as evident in New Zealand as it is elsewhere in the Western world (Bebbington, 2011). British evangelicals shaped the Christian churches in both Australia and New Zealand (Breward, 2001; Lange, 2013). The development of evangelicalism in New Zealand and Australia has had more in common with the British form of evangelicalism “up until the end of the 1960s” (Lange, 2013, p.15); from that time since, New Zealand evangelicalism has effused a more conservative and fundamentalist flavour more akin to American evangelicalism (Ward, 2011).
Evangelicalism is a broad and adaptive framework of Christian faith that transcends denominationalism, defined as “a broad stream of belief and practice within Christianity” (Lange, 2013, p.7), and “a mindset rather than a closed system” (ibid., p.12). An evangelical Christian believes that the defining elements of the Christian faith include conversion (the necessity of conversion for salvation before God), activity (expressing the Christian message through service), the Bible (devotion to the Bible as inspired of God), and the atoning work of Jesus on the cross. These four elements of evangelicalism are summarised as conversionism, activism, biblicism and crucicentrism (Bebbington, 1993). God as creator, existing as Trinity; the second advent of Jesus Christ; and the final resurrection and judgement of all of humanity are further specific characteristics of evangelical belief (Ferguson et al., 2000). The term evangelical is frequently used in literature to contrast with confessional forms of Christianity.

Formal, non-formal, and informal education.

Estep, Anthony, and Ellison (2008) distinguish between formal, non-formal, and socialisation as three complementary formats of theological education. All three forms of education “can contribute to the spiritual growth of the individual when they are intentionally used to guide and direct someone toward Christ” (Estep et al., 2008, p. 18). As contributors to Christian development, the three forms might also be characterised as developing faith as perspective (formal), faith as informed (nonformal), and faith as life (informal). Formal education is defined by Black as focusing on “acquiring skills, knowledge, attitudes, and values growing out of planned, intentional learning experiences” (Anthony, Benson, Eldridge, & Gorman, 2001, p. 298). Formal education is institutionalised, structured, and evaluated in terms
of learning objectives (Estep et al., 2008). By contrast, Estep et al. suggest, non-formal education is not curriculum-based or qualification driven; it might consist of ad-hoc training or seminar events, with an emphasis on a small set of skills or limited content. Informal education is that experienced in the school of life.

Theologia.

Theologia is a term introduced by Farley (1983), who writes that “theology in its original and most authentic sense referred to a sapiential and personal knowledge” (p. xi), later described by him as a “sapiential habitus” (p. 42; see also Kelsey, 1992). The term sapiential refers to wisdom, particularly the wisdom of God as revealed in the Bible. A habitus is a way of life, based on a series of habits. The term sapiential habitus therefore refers to the development of a wise way of life, informed by biblical truths and the relation of those truths to everyday life. Farley applies the term theologia in contrast to the contemporary term theology; his point is that the term theology is now used to describe an academic pursuit, rather than an everyday seeking for wisdom as a way of life. The concept of theologia makes an important contribution to how the objectives for theological education ought to be understood, and the pursuit of theologia is considered foundational to a legitimate and formational theological education experience (Cannell, 2006; Kelsey, 1992).

Theological education.

Broadly speaking, theological education is education concerned with the knowledge and purposes of God, for the whole people of God (Noelliste, 2000). For the purposes of this study, theological education is understood to be the formal education element
of Christian education that is concerned with Christian discipleship and the expression of Christian love (Estep et al., 2008). This study investigates theological education in the context of a specific theological education provider with an evangelical identity.
Chapter Two

Review of Literature

Introduction

Until recently theological education literature has, for the main, assumed on-campus provision in some form. The potential for online technologies, and changing demand for theological education, are bringing forms of provision different from the classroom-based seminary to the fore. Concern about the formational aspects of theological education makes some form of face-to-face tuition a necessary component of even emerging forms of provision. Theological distance education, then, is specifically dismissed in much literature, primarily for concern about whether distance education can facilitate a formation experience for students.

There is a distinctive lack of studies measuring formation in theological education. No peer-reviewed studies were discovered in this survey of literature that evidence the formation experiences of theological distance education students (based on the search terms “formation AND theological education AND distance education” across ERIC, EBSCOhost, ProQuest Central, and Academic OneFile databases). Broadening the literature search to “formation AND theological education” revealed a plethora of scholarly work, though few primary studies. Despite the lack of primary studies, perspectives on the importance and dynamics of formation in theological education abound (Cannell, 1999; Halvorsen, Mahfood, & Beckmann, 2009; Naidoo, 2012; Patterson, 1996). The few studies exploring the formation of theological education students are limited to the experiences of on-campus students, either in limited settings or else focussing on the formational opportunities made available to students.
(Birkholz, 1997; Naidoo, 2011; Rovai, Baker, & Cox Jr, 2008; Williamson & Sandage, 2009). This gap in literature makes an investigation into the formation experiences of distance students both timely and important. Accentuating the importance of the investigation are changes in demand for theological education toward flexible and part-time study options, which threaten the viability of on-campus provision.

This literature review draws on peer-reviewed articles and published books on the general themes of theological education, distance education, Christian spiritual formation, and transformative learning. It begins with an exploration of theological education’s purpose, with an emphasis on its plurality and its contribution to discipleship. Debate as to whether theological education providers should purposefully involve themselves in the formation of students is also considered.

Theological education is undergoing significant change, in that its traditional residential student base is declining. The second part of this review considers how seminaries are responding to shifts in demand. The nature of student preference is such that the traditional full-time residential model that has served as the norm for much seminary education is under threat. Seminaries are exploring new ways of making theological education suitable to changing student preferences, yet distance education is deliberately excluded in favour of education models that maintain some form of on-campus experience.

The third part of this review addresses the debate surrounding formation in theological education, and the specific objections in literature raised about distance theological education. The concern about formation through theological distance education is largely centred on the belief that distance students experience a deficit of community, calling into question the embodied nature of distance study. A further concern is that distance education is solely concerned with cognitive development.

In the final sections of this review, attention turns to the theory of transformative learning and previous studies concerned with the formation of theological education
students. An outline of the significance for and location of the current study to the debate on distance theological education completes this literature review.

**Theological Education**

This section considers what constitutes theological education, and explores several themes related to the term to set a context for this study. The term theological education in this study represents formal education in subjects related to Christianity, in a higher education setting. The many forms of theological education offered across the Christian spectrum reflect subtle differences in the theology of each education provider, rather than any fundamental disagreement as to the overall goals of theological education. The theological component of theological education includes Biblical subjects relating to exegesis and languages, as well as ecclesiastical studies and pure theological subjects included in systematic works (Estep et al., 2008). So, the term theological in theological education should be understood in the sense of theological studies (Erickson, 1998), rather than as a distinct subject in itself. The level or outcomes of education for the purposes of this literature review relate to the equivalent to levels four and above of the National Qualifications Framework in New Zealand (that is, post-secondary), though for the primary investigation component of this study emphasis is on levels five through seven.

**Theological education as a sub-set of Christian education.**

Differentiating between Christian education and theological education involves moving from general to more specific forms of learning in the Christian context. Christian education has been described as simply “a process of transmitting the
Christian faith” (Llovio, 1985, p. 15). Christian education is an expression of theological conviction, based on a biblical understanding of reality (Benne, 2001; Estep et al., 2008; Howard, 1999), integrated with general education theory (Knight, 2006). The function and dynamics of Christian education also intersect with the social sciences (Estep et al., 2008; Howard, 1999; Knight, 2006). Estep et al. (2008) propose three sets of objectives for Christian education, which give direction to its activity:

1. Christians must approach all of life with a Christian worldview (student as learner, teacher as knowledgeable instructor).

2. Christians must develop piety and character consistent with their faith (student as disciple, teacher as pastoral mentor).

3. Christians must serve as the church (student as apprentice, teacher as trainer-coach).

Ultimately, Christian education applies the medium of information to Christian formation (Pazmiño, 2010; Steibel, 2010).

The formation facilitated by Christian education takes place in the context of discipleship and the church. Indeed, Estep et al. (2008) describe the transformation of the believer as constituting “the heart of discipleship” (p. 22). Central to the Christian faith is the imperative of making disciples (Matthew 28:18-20), an imperative that encapsulates Christian mission, lifelong development, and the everyday expression of faith in the believer. The relationship between Christian education and church is fundamental to the work of many Christian education theorists (Richards, 1980, and Westerhoff III, 1978, both cited in Llovio, 1985; see also Niebuhr, 1956; Wilhoit, 2008). The church as a community of Christian disciples both facilitates and benefits from the

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Matthew 28:18–20 (RSV): 

18 And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,

20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.”
growth and development of each member, as its members mature in their discipleship. The link is made clear by Llovio (1985):

The church... is defined as a community sharing the divine life whose goal is to be perfect in the likeness of that divine life [of Christ]. Christian education is the transmission and nurture of the body’s life to that same goal of Christlikeness (p. 15).

Hill (1998) suggests that Christian maturity is measured by one’s ability to demonstrate love, that is, selfless love for oneself, for God, for one’s neighbour, and for creation (see also Brunner, 1949 and Niebuhr, 1956). Brunner (1949) links theological education to the development of personality, noting that the self-developed person empowered by God’s grace finds their true humanity in the expression of love towards others. It is the Christian’s capacity for selfless love that provides the ultimate measure of Christian depth and character. The ultimate purpose of Christian education, then, is to further the mission of the church itself through formation that constitutes discipleship in the context of the church, and the ever-developing and deepening expression of love toward God and neighbour in one’s daily life.

Christian education can be considered formal, non-formal, and informal in scope (Estep et al., 2008). For the purposes of this study, theological education is assumed to represent the formal education expression of Christian education, concerned specifically with the development of faith as perspective (Niebuhr, 1956). The overall goal of Christian education is to be formative; theological education contributes to this goal by providing a particular emphasis on the development of perspective. Formal education is “intentional instruction where students study to advance through an institutional curriculum with life applications made later” (Estep et al., 2008, p. 50). As such, theological education operates within an atmosphere of critical perspective and informed reflection, drawing on the ideas and insights of a community of scholars. The suggested taxonomy of theological education as the formal expression of Christian
education assumed in this study is not universally held. Howard (1999), for example, prefers to use theological education as the broader term, placing Christian education and formal theological education as extremes across a theological education spectrum. Where such work is cited later in this review, the conceptual framework of Estep, Anthony, & Allison (2008) of theological education as formal Christian education is applied.

It is important that formal theological education is not seen as a higher stage of Christian education, but rather as “a more intensive level of education that exists on a continuum of Christian education” (Howard, 1999, p. 18). In other words, theological education is not an exclusive or compulsory activity for Christian discipleship (Kelsey, 1992; Werner, 2009a). It is, perhaps, best understood in Kelsey’s (1992) terms: theological education is not necessary for the being (esse) of the church, but is useful for the well-being (bene esse) of the church. Theological education as the formal expression of Christian education is, optimally, strongly linked to the church (Estep et al., 2008; Howard, 1999; Kelsey, 1992; Niebuhr, 1956). Despite this, residential, seminary-based theological education takes place in a setting removed from the church. Consequently, the seminary community the theological education student is a part of while they study is considered an important element of theological education, even if the student should remain in attendance at a church. The relationship of theological education to the church is an important consideration for this study, primarily because distance students tend to have their church, rather than the on-campus seminary, as their primary community as they study.
The church or *ekklesia*\(^4\) is concerned with community and gathering. Because of the church’s relational and grounded reality, Coe (2000) can confidently state that the “church, not the university, is the place for... intentional training-in-righteousness” (p. 101). Even where on-campus seminaries take great pains to maximise student formation opportunities, it is acknowledged that the church has a critical part to play in forming the student (Tenelshof, 2000). Collinson (2005) makes a concise case for the church as the indispensable Christian community for spiritual growth in describing the church as “a worshipping, serving..., living and growing community” (p. 245), characterised by a membership that varies across age, ethnicity, and socio-economic status.

Theologically, it is clear that a sense of harmony and partnership between the seminary and the church is an essential element of theological education. However the accountability of the theological school to the church can be lost in educational pursuit (Sweeney & Fortosis, 1994), as the requirements of academia and accreditation can be at odds with issues that are of importance to the church. That this service and partnership does not always occur may explain why theological education scholarship makes a marginal influence on the church, as noticed by Werner (2009a). It has been pointed out by Werner that believers in the church (removed from formal theological education) tend to be more in tune with popular religious publications (which tend not to demonstrate trained theological insight; see also Lamport & Yoder, 2006), than scholarly ones. While theologically speaking theological education should serve and collaborate with the church, this is not always the case.

Absorbing a theological education institution within the church does not seem a viable means of improving the partnership across the two. It has been pointed out that

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\(^4\)The term *ekklesia* (New Testament Greek: ἐκκλησία) is the New Testament Greek term translated church. The term literally means assembly, gathering, community or congregation (Arndt, Danker, & Bauer, 2000).
church-based theological education programmes tend to be unaccredited and are confined to only large churches (Sweeney & Fortosis, 1994), which are not representative of the multiple small congregations that tend to constitute the church as a whole. While the church has its own educational mission, by nature informal and non-formal rather than formal (Estep et al., 2008), the nature of church-based education varies considerably across denominational lines and is often diffuse. Those traditions with a well-established sense of formal education have tended to assign the responsibility to specialists (Larsson, 2010). Neither does somehow making the seminary similar to a church seem practical, as the nature of the community experienced would be quite different (as described later in this review). Field education consisting of placements or practicums that require theological students to serve in a church context is also fraught, because the temporal nature of the placement makes authentic learning as part of the host community difficult (Harrison, 2004).5 Students studying away from their home church context also tend to find the experience alienating. Overend (2007) adds that theological education can in fact compromise its contribution to the church because of education’s emphasis on individual development and competition. This individualism can disrupt the student’s community association with the church.

The role of theological education in the development of the church is widely held to be that of critic and servant. Dietterich (2005) writes, “Theological educators need to ‘listen to congregations’ without losing their critical or transformative edge” (p. 95). Werner (2009a) adds that theological education and the church must be in partnership, but that theological education ought to maintain “some critical distance and a certain degree of autonomy from the daily pressures of church work and/or from the direct governing processes and vested interests of church institutions” (p. 25). This

5Indeed, Niebuhr (1956) suggests that fieldwork, the traditional name for ministry placements, should be called Church work with an emphasis on being a minister now rather than being prepared for a future ministry.
relationship could be described as one of theological education being the servant critic of the church in that theological education positions itself to be directly involved in the church’s mission and objectives, while also seeking to critique and improve the church’s orientation and activity (Theme Six: Edinburgh 2010, Theological education and formation, 2010).

Kelsey (1992) uses the term ‘Christian thing’ as shorthand for the subject matter of theological education, in recognition of Christianity’s diverse expressions across various faith communities. What constitutes effective theological education, and even to some extent effective formation in Kelsey’s view, is nuanced through the lens of various faith traditions that, in turn, inform church practice. Expressions of Christianity provide diverse traditions of worship through which believers might relate to God, none of which is universally representative of Christianity yet all of which are recognisably Christian. If the theological college and the church are to act in partnership, it seems that the nature of the partnership would involve theological education acting to constructively critique and explore the church from within, making theological education grounded, authentic and connected to the concerns of Christian communities (Cannell, 2006; Smith, 2005). In making the church the focus of and context for its academic inquiry, it is suggested, theological education becomes positioned to bring a self-critical context for formation while also exposing students to the rich diversity of expressions of Christian worship and community (Kelsey, 1992).

Because of the pluralism in how church is expressed and experienced, Kelsey (1992) adds that study of congregations needs to be comparative both “in the same culture and cross-culturally (synchronously) and through history (diachronically)” (p. 150). Adopting a synchronic and diachronic approach to the study of church can develop students who are both rich within their own context of the ‘Christian thing,’ and who are exposed to the fact that their own context is but one expression of a pluralistic phenomenon. Maddix (2009) quotes Hopewell (1988, p. 5):
The local church is proposed as the object of theological education because it is the nearest at hand to the seminary and the primary community in the careers of theological students. Focusing on the congregation, however, is more than a pedagogical convenience. The local church also exhibits an unusual capacity to reflect the struggle of human society and the theological and ethical issues that emerge in this struggle (p. 222).

Mention of the ‘unusual capacity’ of the church to contextualise ‘the struggle of human society’ underscores the church’s importance to the processes of discipleship. Indeed, according to Collinson (2005), discipleship is “life-centred” (p. 249) and “closely aligned with the normal life of the community of faith” (p. 246). Collinson goes so far as to contrast discipleship and schooling as educational options for Christians, and affirms, with others (Hill, 1998; Koontz, 2007; Nicholls, 2003), that it is within the church that true discipleship occurs.

Ultimately the goal of discipleship benefits from a grounded approach to theological education, whereby the church is the context (and potentially the source) of the curriculum. Theological education properly seeks to critique the church from within it (Cannell, 2006; Kelsey, 1992; Werner, 2009a). The church and theological education ought to be firmly intertwined, the latter serving, critiquing, informing and complementing the former as critical servant. While the church does not necessarily facilitate the depth of understanding possible through theological education, theological education cannot separate itself from the church without compromising the legitimacy of its curriculum and its relevance to discipleship.

Models of theological education.

While it is defensible to consider theological education as the formal element of Christian education, which in turn is primarily concerned with discipleship, a more definite view of theological education requires an acceptance of plurality (Kelsey,
The plurality of theological education is a direct reflection of the plurality of the Christian church. Plurality of perspective and practice is also characteristic beneath the over-arching banner of evangelicalism. Recall that the evangelical church is broadly aligned in its emphasis of conversionism, activism, biblicism, and crucicentrism (Bebbington, 1993). Under a more discerning lens, the evangelical movement embraces a complex and diverse series of traditions and emphases (Anthony et al., 2001). Kelsey (1992) suggests that different faith communities provide a wonderful mosaic of tradition and practice made up of “a complex of beliefs, truth claims, practices of worship, stories, symbols, images, metaphors, moral principles, self-examination, meditation, critical reflection, and the like” (p. 109). Each of these traditions, says Kelsey, is a particular expression of Christianity that represents a valid part of what makes up the wonderfully diverse expression of God’s true community.

Subsequently, theological education providers consider and express formation, Christian growth, and even theological education in nuanced ways that make universally accepted measurement and definition difficult. While the objective of discipleship is clear, the means and expressions of discipleship and formation tend to differ – even across providers sharing a commitment to the four elements of evangelicalism. Kelsey suggests that diversity in the church is an expression of its richness, though in theological education differences seems to have more to do with fragmentation. The importance of a seminary education is taken for granted in literature; however what such an education should consist of and its immediate aims should be are frequently (and sometimes “sharply,” in the words of Finke & Dougherty, 2002, p. 105) debated. Historically, concern about such things has been described in terms of crisis (Becker, 1999; Howard, 1999). Estep et al. (2008) suggest that Christian education remains in a state of flux, stating that it “lack[s] definitive direction or substance” (p. 296).
Concern about the nature of theological education is evidenced in literature from the U.S., the U.K., the African continent (Kuligin, 2007; Naidoo, 2008), and Eastern Europe (Pilli, 2006). The central issues, according to sources cited by Howard (1999), include a lack of compelling focus, lack of direction, inappropriate competitiveness, abstract curricula, and unready graduates. To this can be added “lack of purpose, the disparateness and inadequacy of its content, disconnectedness with the community of faith, insensitive policies, ineffective teaching methods, and many others” (Noelliste, 1993, Introduction section, para. 1). Cannell (2006), a critic of the contemporary US seminary, puts it this way:

…the curriculum is specialized and fragmented, thus hindering the equipping of leaders; a coherent purpose and compelling vision for theological education are lacking; the effort historically to integrate the curriculum around theology has been lost; theology itself is undefined, fragmented, rationalized, and specialized; theory and practice are in perpetual tension; and education is not sufficiently concerned with learning (p. 19).

The fragmentation and perceived lack of purpose to theological education extends to the sort of formation with which it is concerned. Kelsey (1992) poses the issue of formational outcomes in the form of a question: “Should we think of theological schooling as ‘character formation’ or ‘spiritual formation’ or ‘personal formation’ or ‘intellectual formation;’ and if more than one of these, how are we to understand their interrelation?” (p. 26). The question is fundamental, as theological education supposedly has a natural tendency to emphasise cognitive development (Niebuhr, 1956). It is assumed that developing character requires a particular focus. This point is reinforced by others concerned that formal theological education is made easy hostage to the methods and concerns of scholarship or the functions of clergy rather than the development of character (Farley, 1983; Meadowcroft, 2007). Put another way, there are concerns that theological education might emphasise abstract academic knowledge about God (cognitive), at the expense of a relational emphasis that teaches students to know God (formational) (McKinney, 2005).
Literature suggests four models of theological education, each emphasising different outcomes. The Athens, Berlin, Jerusalem, and Geneva approaches are summarised by Edgar (2005), in response to the typologies suggested by various writers (Banks, 1999; Kelsey, 1992). Some further discussion is necessary to help with the distinguishing elements of the four.

The distinction between Athens and Berlin was the first proposed in theological education literature. Kelsey (1992) suggests that excellence in theological education either emphasises *paideia* (in his terms schooling, culturing or character formation – characterised as the Athens approach), or *Wissenschaft* (scientific research and the development of professionals – characterised as the Berlin approach). The Athens model is concerned with formation of the individual, the gaining of wisdom, and the development of character and the citizen. In the Athens model virtue and the public good are emphasised. Berlin, by way of contrast, is vocational in scope. The Berlin model is concerned with theoretical study and ministry training; the term Berlin was chosen to represent this model because the University of Berlin, founded in the year 1810, typifies it. Reason, critical inquiry, theoretical study and the formation of ministers are the focus of the Berlin model. Stortz (2011) suggests that the core differences between Athens and Berlin are their respective concerns with formation and being, and mastery and doing, respectively. Kelsey (1992) claims that the Association for Theological Schools was formed to “legitimate revisions in the Berlin model of excellence” (p. 93), by encouraging standards in what constitutes theological education.

Banks (1999), who reframes Kelsey’s Athens and Berlin approaches as classical and vocational forms of theological education respectively, suggested a third missional alternative based on “action-reflection or reflection-action” (p. 142). Banks suggests a practical approach to theological education that expresses itself through actual service, one that makes use of a critique, self-critique, inquiry, and action-reflection process
that goes well beyond considering theological knowledge as the mere transfer of academic knowledge about God. Banks’s missional model (termed the Jerusalem model by Edgar, 2005) is concerned with aligning theological education with the Christian call to mission and the making of disciples; in Banks’s view, the lessons of Berlin should be applied in Athens. Finally, in an integrative work of the three models mentioned here, Edgar (2005) proposed a fourth Geneva, or confessional, model concerned with tradition within and an orientation to a particular faith tradition. Edgar (2005) notes that the Athens, Berlin, Jerusalem and Geneva models should be applied carefully and concedes that “Many programs of theological education as they actually exist today are actually a mix of the types noted here” (p. 213). Each model reflects a particular approach to theological education that emphasises either character, scholarship, mission, or denominational tradition. While instances of theological education may not be easy to strictly diagnose, such models are useful for illustrating the various types of formation different providers might emphasise (Edgar, 2005). Any specific instance of theological education might be characterised by any one, or any combination, of these models.

An alternative to such categorisation is provided by Wood (1985), who proposes a two-part theological education model consisting of a vision of theology, and the complementary development of discernment for the application of that theology. According to Wood (1985), vision “points to a general, synoptic understanding of some range of data or field of objects… a grasp of things in their wholeness and relatedness” (p. 67); discernment is “the appreciation of differences; discrimination, rather than synthesis” (p. 68). Banks (1999), referring to Wood’s proposition, notes that “Vision and discernment have something to do with who we are as well as what we think or do” (p. 49). An intentional balance across both vision and discernment is deemed prudent; a tendency toward too much vision can be misleading in that it suggests too much harmony across theological perspective, while too much of a focus on discernment can leave the impression of too much fragmentation (Wood, 1985). The
two together serve to provide perspective and action, and a discriminating attitude toward knowledge. Cognitive development in the shape of vision and discernment necessarily shapes the individual, as it promotes the synthesis of a theoretical understanding of knowledge with its implications for practice. Wood’s concept of vision and discernment as the basis for cognitive development in theological education also has a natural fit with learning from within a church, as the vision of theology can find its discerned place within an authentic setting (Howard, 1999; Wood, 1985). It appears that theological education might properly involve the development of informed critical thinking, on the basis that cognitive development is ultimately formative for the individual in character, spirituality, person, and intellect. This broader formation is particularly amplified if the one being formed is applying a faith response to God within the process, from within the context of the church (Wood, 1985).

The concept of vision and discernment goes some way toward reconciling theological education with its true roots, which were firmly set in the foundations of the church itself. Farley (1983) suggests that contemporary debate about what constitutes theological education demonstrates a misunderstanding of what constitutes theology itself. Farley’s book Theologia: The fragmentation and unity of theological education traces the way in which the meaning of theology changed across the centuries, and outlines the significance of this history to contemporary theological education. While Farley’s work has been criticised on the grounds that theology bears more resemblance to anthropologia (Noelliste, 1993) because of its basis in primary experience,6 Farley’s book is widely recognised as a foundational contribution to theological education (Wood,

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6 It is not clear from Noelliste’s comment just what it is that anthropologia consists of; the etymology suggests a human-centred rather than God-centred approach to the subject. The critique is supplemented with the statement that Farley believes “theology is the explication of the pre-reflective dispositions of faith. It finds its starting point in the contemporary experience and devotes itself to explicating this faith experience” (Noelliste, 1993, Introduction section, para. 4). This seems a rather inadequate dismissal of such a prominent theory.
Kelsey (1992) notes that Farley’s *Theologia* “may fairly be said to have launched the conversation” (p. 105) about why a unified theory of theological education has not yet emerged, and Cannell (2006) adds that “the critiques of contemporary theological education can be seen as a series of footnotes to Farley” (p. 39).

Farley (1983) suggests that the pluralism and complexity evident in theological education are the direct result of misunderstanding the nature of theology itself. Writing about the North American seminary context (and therefore about much of Western theological education), Farley explored the foundational history of Christian theological education as an activity. Ultimately Farley (1983) proposes that theology, properly understood, constitutes “the insightfulness, the ‘knowledge’ which attends faith in its concrete existence” (p. 160). This historical form of theology, inherently practical as opposed to theoretical, Farley terms *theologia*. Until *theologia* is reclaimed, Farley (1983) believes, theology as a subject of study will lack both a central theme and personal relevance. The thesis of Farley’s work is that any improvement or reform in theological education will be merely cosmetic until *theologia* is rediscovered; indeed, the term *theologia* is applied in contrast to the theological education concerned with the professional training of clergy. *Theologia*, says Farley (1983), has always been an activity of study however its goal was life in God, rather than academic attainment and ordained ministry; he writes, “theology at one time meant a disposition and knowledge which resembled wisdom, and as such had no clerical restriction. It was simply the sapiential knowledge which attended Christian life” (p. 130).

Early theological education, claims Farley, was actually a process of enculturation whereby believers became a part of the church family, with all of its Sacraments and community. Indeed, Brunner (1949) suggests early forms of theological education consisted of two parts: “The first part, doctrinal instruction, was performed according to the didactic rules prevalent in the synagogue and existing schools. The second part
was performed, so to say, instinctively” (p. 48). Theological education in the early church was *theologia* characterised by *paideia*,\(^7\) that is, the Greek concept of education for the purpose of enculturation and the development of *areté* or virtue\(^9\) (see also Kelsey, 1992). Dedicated theological education of this nature declined in the time of the Reformation; the decline of *theologia* was further exacerbated in the post-Reformation emphasis away from sacramental training to the preaching of the Bible (Brunner, 1949). The eventual departing of *theologia* from formal theological education can be traced in part to the Catholic mandate of the Council of Trent, which required Catholic clergy to be theologically educated. Protestant seminaries followed some 250 years later. As this shift toward Bible preaching and teaching took place,

...it was almost completely forgotten that the original Christian Church was before all a living community, that the Holy Spirit worked primarily by means of communal life, and that at that time the younger generation received their Christian influence and instruction not merely through preaching and teaching but through training in Church life (Brunner, 1949, pp. 48–49).

The loss of *theologia* was gradual, yet conclusive. What began with the Reformation seems to have been completed by the time of the Age of Reason, by which time theology was becoming “emotionally inaccessible to believers and academically unacceptable to the wider academy” (Charry, 2000, pp. 82-83, cited in Cannell, 2006, pp. 91-92). As theology morphed into an academic discipline its emphasis shifted toward doctrine, to the detriment of training in church life (or life in Christian community). The loss of *theologia* was subsequently caught up in “structures, practices, and traditions”, reinforced by “[academic] disciplines, assumptions about the nature

\(^7\)Brunner (1949) further remarks that theological education “must have been very efficient in the first centuries, because otherwise the continuous growth of the Christian Church could not be understood” (p. 48).

\(^8\)Paideia (New Testament Greek: παιδεία) is “the act of providing guidance for responsible living, upbringing, training, instruction” (Arndt et al., 2000, p. 748).

\(^9\)The term *areté* (New Testament Greek ἀρετή, ‘excellence of character’) is associated with civic virtue (Arndt et al., 2000).
of knowledge, and teaching methods, along with the social structures of academia” (Cannell, 2006, p. 105). Once theology became situated in the university as an academic subject, it became necessary for it to conform to the administrative and institutional aspects of ordained ministry as an education or vocational outcome. Theology became linked to a profession, and was identified as an academic pursuit. Consequently, says Farley (1983), the sapiential knowledge once characteristic of theologia is now relegated to special formation courses or other on-campus events linked to community (see, for example, Tenelshof, 2000). Theological education in the contemporary sense is no longer concerned with the development of personal wisdom or of the heart toward God; instead, its focus is scientific inquiry and academic critique. To Wolterstorff (1996, cited in Cannell, 2006), theology lost its Christian conviction and usefulness to the church in the process of making itself suitable for the formal education curriculum.

In sum, theological education is diverse in its emphasis and expression, reflecting to some extent the diversity of the church it serves. This diversity is frequently criticised as more representing fragmentation and a lack of focus. The extent to which theological education should be concerned with formation, and what type of formation, is debated; the differences between Athens, Berlin, Jerusalem and Geneva approaches do not suggest any single solution, but are rather illustrative of theological education’s diversity. A model for theological education based on vision and discernment, combining the harmony and fragmentation of theological perspective, matches the development of knowledge and practice that might underpin theological education in partnership with the church. Vision and discernment is a model of theological education that combines cognitive understanding with Farley’s (1983) concept of theologia, a grounded, church community-based development of Christian knowledge and character. These distinctions are foundational to understanding the contribution of theological education to Christian development.
Formation and theological education.

Formation is understood in this study as a generic term describing Christian development in all forms, character, vocational, spiritual, personal, and intellectual (Klimoski, 2005; Lowe, 2012a; Naidoo, 2008, 2011; Reissner, 1999; Smith, 1988; Wilhoit, 2008; Willard, 2002). In the broadest Christian sense, formation is a believer’s “continuing response to the reality of God’s grace shaping [them] into the likeness of Jesus Christ, through the work of the Holy Spirit, in the community of faith for the sake of others” (Schwanda, 2011, p. 452). Formation is understood as a process (Vanhoozer, Bartholomew, Treier, & Wright, 2005; Wilhoit, 2008; Willard, 2002) by which “the human spirit or will is given a definite form or character” (Willard, 2002, p. 18, emphasis removed). Formation is widely held to be the means by which Christians grow in maturity (Bramer, 2007; Hall, 1988; Howard, 2008; Smith, 1994). White (2006) describes formation as “the process by which believers grow into their relationship to God in Christ” (p. 303). The evidence of formation is love (Gushee & Jackson, 1996; Niebuhr, 1956; Reisz, 2003), and the validity of formation consists of its contribution to discipleship (Hall, 1988). Dettoni (1994) suggests five passages of the New Testament that speak of formation, each of which contain one or more of the three key words formation, disciple, and maturity: Romans 12:2, Galatians 4:19, Matthew 28:19, Colossians 1:28-29, and Ephesians 4:13. Dettoni (1994) concludes that “from a biblical foundation, spiritual formation is an intentional, multifaceted process which promotes the transformation by which Christ is formed in us so that we can become His [Jesus’] continually maturing disciples” (p. 16).

Formation needs and outcomes may vary by age and life experience, as suggested by Fowler’s (1981) stages of faith development. Fowler’s Faith Development Theory is based on in-depth empirical research drawing on the work of Piaget’s and Erikson’s theories of human development (Fowler, 1981). The theory describes the journey of the
self through time, and is based on interview and observation. Some 20 years following
the original publication of his theory, Fowler (2001) is able to maintain that the stages
he identified remain “sequential, invariant, and hierarchical” (p.171). The claim is
largely, though not definitively, affirmed through three decades of studies (Parker,
2010), despite a lack of longitudinal study support, and concerns over Fowler linking
faith development to what might be considered normal cognitive and psychosocial
development (Jardine & Viljoen, 1992; Parker, 2010). Indeed, Parker (2010) writes that
“those inclined to look elsewhere for models of spiritual or religious development with
more empirical support will not find the picture any better, and often not as well
supported as Fowler’s model” (p. 246).

The stages of faith identified by Fowler (1981) progress from Stage Zero (Primal or
Undifferentiated Faith) through to an enlightened Stage Six (Universalising Faith),
with movement from one stage to the next usually linked to an individual’s natural
journey through life and its circumstances. Stages are based on the analysis of 359 in-
depth interviews, sampled from a variety of Judaeo-Christian faiths in people of all
ages in Chicago, Boston, Atlanta, and Toronto across various studies (Fowler, 1981).
The first two of Fowler’s Stages (Intuitive-Projective, and Mythic-Literal faiths) are
particularly susceptible to age. All but 3.4% of Fowler’s respondents placed within
Stage One were aged less than seven, with approximately 10% of interviewees aged
between seven and 12 either still in stage one or else transitioning to Stage Two. Stage
Two is associated with the school years, with only 16.1% of Fowler’s interviewees aged
between 13 and 20 still in Stage Two, or transitioning into Stage Three. Beyond Stage
Three, faith development depends very much on the individual’s life journey; Stage
Five (Conjunctive Faith) was only evident in some interviewees, all aged 31 or older
(Fowler, 1981).

Citing Parks (1986), Thoennes (2008) claims that young adults tend to be in a state of
dissonance and search for identity characterised by the transition between Fowler’s
Stages Three (Synthetic-Conventional Faith) and Four (Individualistic-Reflective) of faith development – a transition during which community relationships are very important. Fowler’s own data indicates that some one third of respondents aged 21 to 30 were transitioning from Stage Three to Stage Four (Fowler, 1981). For young adults, the transition from Fowler’s Stage Three to Stage Four coincides with Erikson’s stages of Identity vs. Role Confusion and Intimacy vs. Isolation (Fowler, 1993). Students between the ages of 17 and 22 are considered to be at a critical time of personal and faith development; the transition from Stage Three to Stage Four “can be a frightening and somewhat disorienting time of being apart from one’s conventional moorings” (Fowler, 1993, p. 178). Associated with the increasing average age of students seeking theological education comes a shift in their requirements for pastoral support, as more mature students are likely to be characterised by a stage four faith that is already informed by “a perspective genuinely aware of social systems and institutions” (Fowler, 1993, p. 179). While transitions across stages are certainly possible across adult life, Fowler’s theory indicates that adults aged between 17 and 24 are likely to have specific community needs as they progress from one paradigm of faith to another.

Formation consists of those life activities that contribute to discipleship, particularly those that take place within the community context of the church (Bramer, 2007; Dettoni, 1994; Roberts, 2004). Hess (2008) suggests an approach to formation as “shaping being shaped” (p. 19), whereby Christians are formed as they involve themselves fully in their contextual setting and deliberately serve those around them. Dettoni (1994) states that “the nurturing process of transformation lies at the very heart of the church’s ministry” (p. 13). Formation is also considered a work of the Holy Spirit (Vanhoozer et al., 2005), who “conforms the child of God more and more to the image of Christ” (Lightner, 1994, p. 39). Human effort and relationship, encountered through the church, provide the context or circumstances of formation. In Bramer’s (2007) thinking, worship, instruction, ministry, administration/leadership and community are the ingredients of formation, though formation is ultimately “a matter of life and
spirit” (p. 355). One of Bramer’s main concerns about formation through theological education is the individualism that education tends to gravitate toward; by contrast, many theologians understand formation to be community-based (Bramer, 2007; Dettoni, 1994; Lowe & Lowe, 2010a; Roberts, 2004). Ultimately, however, formation is the result of God’s activity in partnership with human assistance (1 Corinthians 3:6).

Dettoni (1994) notes that

Three elements mark the approach to Christian nurture and discipleship called spiritual formation: (1) it involves the whole church’s ministry; (2) knowledge is viewed as a means to Christian growth and never as an end in itself; and (3) there is a distinct accent on the work of God’s grace in the process of formation (p. 10).

Dettoni situates the contribution of theological education to formation within a framework consisting of the church (community context), theological education (pursuit of knowledge), and the work of God (divine sovereignty). This distinction brings into question the view that theological education should be responsible for all three aspects of formation rather than just one (pursuit of knowledge), or even two (community context).

Ultimately, Dettoni (1994) suggests that theological education is but one contributing element to formation. The ATS, in contrast, requires formation as a distinctive outcome of theological education as a condition for accreditation of the MDiv degree (Association of Theological Schools, 2011); this requirement is supported by various voices in the literature (Diekema & Caddell, 2001; Dietterich, 2005; Naidoo, 2011; Rovai et al., 2008; Sasse, 1998). However, the insistence that theological education providers be required to facilitate formation in addition to academic teaching has its critics (Bramer, 2007; Hill, 1998; Lindbeck, 1988; Roberts, 2004), as outlined in more detail later. Kemp (2010) comments that “It has often proved difficult for academic institutions to maintain proper emphasis on ministry training and spiritual formation while also achieving academic excellence” (p. 130), suggesting that theological
education providers struggle to balance what might be considered competing or even incompatible objectives. Bramer (2007) sees formation as the responsibility of both church and seminary however he cautions that the somewhat individualistic nature of spiritual formation makes it more suited to the context of the church.

Seminaries typically develop on-campus community events in order to provide for the formation required by accreditation. For Hill (1998), making such events compulsory in theological education undermines student choice and takes the responsibility of the theological education institution too far. Lindbeck (1988) adds that formation should be a necessary component of formal theological education only if informal means are considered to have failed (see also Gilpin, 1988).

The potential for formation to be viewed separately from the study of theology can be seen as confirmation of Farley’s (1983) notion of theologia. Indeed, it is generally acknowledged that the emphasis on formational development in theological education contexts under the guise of spirituality is a relatively recent one. Spirituality, referring “to the deepest values and meanings by which people seek to live” (Sheldrake, 2007, pp.1-2), has come to prominence as a descriptor of the Christian life since the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s (Schneiders, 2002; Sheldrake, 2007). As Reisz (2003) makes clear:

In theological contexts, the word ‘spirituality’ itself only dates from around the seventeenth century. Its widespread use in the Christian community is much more recent, in the last thirty-five years. Culturally, its prominence in secular bookstores where there are shelves labelled for ‘spirituality’ is even more recent in the last fifteen to twenty years (p. 29).

Spirituality is identified as a legitimate form of Christian formation, particularly when the term is used to mean “a pattern of Christian life” (Schneiders, 2002, p.135, emphasis removed). This definition links nicely to that of theologia as described by Farley (1983), which, as previously noted, seeks to unite theology with a wise way of living.
Significantly, a distinction between information and formation is directly challenged by many theological educators (Glennon et al., 2011; Smith, 1988; Wood, 1985); information is formational in itself, it is suggested, an assertion potentially making irrelevant any separate focus on formation. This theme will be revisited later, as this review turns toward a consideration of cognitive and affective dualism, and transformative learning. Wood (1985) comments that “theological understanding requires personal engagement” (p. 85), making theological education formational by default. Moore, in Glennon et al. (2011), points out that Courses focused on textual analysis, history, theology, and ethics are assumed to be information-based. Courses focused on religious practices, histories of a particular denomination or tradition, or internships are assumed to be formation-based. Such assumptions deny the inevitable formative influence of the former and the intellectual content and questions of the latter. I suggest that any simple bifurcation is flawed, a point that has been made by numerous feminist scholars. I would add that all courses in theological and religious studies are informative, formative, and more. I suggest that they are also reformatory and transformative. The critical question is not whether each area of study performs these roles, but how (p. 377, emphasis original).

Even where formation is considered an appropriate and additional goal for theological education in literature, it is conceded that such formation is difficult to recognise and appraise. Roberts (2004) remarks that spirituality is difficult to encourage in seminaries because it

...is one of those amorphous words that can mean anything in general and nothing in particular...spirituality can be any smorgasbord of beliefs and practices that an individual selectively chooses to tailor a subjectively meaningful practice and worldview [sic] (p. 46).

Significantly, there is no shared definition of what formation constitutes across theological seminaries, because varying faith traditions underpin each seminary (Lindbeck, 1988; Lowe, 2012a; Lowe & Lowe, 2010a, 2010b; Naidoo, 2011). Lowe and Lowe (2010b) note that many seminaries accredited by the ATS have “have very vague descriptions” (p. 86) of what they mean by the term formation. Students also seem to
misunderstand the nature and process of formation (Roberts, 2004; Smith, 1988), with Roberts (2004) remarking that “many students would like the seminary to give them a totally integrated, profoundly spiritual, un-conflicted Christian identity in a painless and entertaining three years. Life doesn’t work that way” (p. 47).

Seminaries accredited by the ATS are required to align themselves with formational expectations however it is far from clear how they should do so (Reisz, 2003). Neither is it clear how such an alignment should find its place amidst an academic curriculum. Meaningful spiritual formation activities are also frustrated by the increasing diversity in Christian maturity of theological education students (Gilpin, 1988), a diversity that is only increasing. One way theological education providers seek to facilitate spiritual formation is through a specific course (see, for example, Gushee & Jackson, 1996). Such courses have their critics, usually on the grounds of tokenism (Cannell, 2006; Farley, 1983) and the difficulty of assessment (Hill, 1998; Klimoski, 2005; Reisz, 2003; Smith, 1988). Hall (1988) emphasises the difficulties of making formation an academic pursuit:

...if we offer courses in spirituality, how can we avoid sliding from the academically acceptable into a kind of sub-stanceless meandering into that which is personally “meaningful” but intellectually indefensible? Is it appropriate to have quite different expectations of students in such offerings? Or more specifically, does a course that requires only the keeping of a spiritual diary really qualify in an academic curriculum? What does it mean to teach spirituality? Can one, for example, teach “about” meditative techniques without actually teaching (and thus practicing?) the techniques? (p. 82).

There is little evidence in literature as to how effective formation efforts in seminaries actually are; a later section in this review gives further insight into the debate. One major study called Being there: Culture and formation in two theological schools, published in 1997 (cited in Kemp, 1999), was far from representative of theological education providers and limited its investigation to the on-campus experience of students, with no regard for their off-campus context. The study is criticised for focusing on “the
cultures of schools without giving enough attention to the cultures of students” (Kemp, 1999, p. 2). Reisz (2003) has prepared a research agenda for measuring the effectiveness of formation efforts on-campus, but to date his paper has been referenced by only one study which has done broad primary investigative work.\(^\text{10}\) The single study, that of Williamson and Sandage (2009), measures improvement in on-campus student spirituality longitudinally across 119 graduate seminary students. Measures of intrinsic (internalised) and quest (exploratory) religiosity, and realistic acceptance were applied. Positive changes were found in characteristics related to questing, intrinsic religiosity, spiritual openness, and spiritual wellbeing. No changes were found in the areas of spiritual activity or realistic acceptance. Finke and Dougherty (2002) also note the lack of research into the measurement of formation within seminary contexts.

This review of literature suggests that theological education, defined as the formal expression of Christian education, has discipleship as its ultimate goal. While ideally theological education is a partnership between seminary and church, separation between the two is evident; further, theological education itself is fragmented in that it tends to demonstrate different formational emphases across different denominational lines. Ultimately, the development of vision and discernment and the realisation of theologia are unifying themes. Whether theological education should deliberately concern itself with formation, or whether theological education is in itself formative, is debated in literature. Primary studies in the area of formation through theological education are also lacking.

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\(^{10}\)Google Scholar, checked 21 December 2013. Primary work in this entire area is woefully inadequate given the plethora of posturing in literature.
The Changing Context of Theological Education

Literature is clear that traditional expressions of formation in theological education are threatened as the residential seminary model becomes increasingly unsustainable. Traditionally theological education has been the domain of the residential seminary, which is still perceived by some as the ultimate form of theological education. Jeynes and Robinson (2010), tracing the history of character education in U.S. Christian higher education, note that students are often required to study residentially for the development of morality as much as academia. Dietterich (2005) supports the traditional form of residential theological education, suggesting that “a key aspect of the seminary experience is to step out of the familiar context, to become a ‘stranger,’ to encounter and learn to appreciate different kinds of people and traditions” (p. 96). The residential experience is assumed to have a particular beneficial ethos (Diekema & Caddell, 2001; Dietterich, 2005; McCarthy, 2004; Rovai et al., 2008; Sasse, 1998), described by Dietterich (2005) as “a holistic community that includes disciplined academic study as well as a spiritually enriching and personally supportive climate” (p. 97). The residential approach to theological education best suits young people without family responsibilities, who do not have to travel far from their homes or normal church communities (Anthony et al., 2001); subsequently, residential seminaries are typically a part of a young person’s transition from stages three to four in Fowler’s stages of faith development. The full-time residential seminary is still largely considered the normative form of theological education, even though the on-campus model of theological education has its critics (Cannell, 1999, 2006; Hill, 1998; Nysse, 2005).

Increasingly, the residential seminary experience is under threat. While advances in technology are partly responsible for rethinking how theological education ought to be provided, the real imperatives for change from an educational model based on the
traditional residential seminary experience are social and demographic in nature. Rising costs, student debt, and the loss of income as a result of endowment loss form one set of challenges (Steinke, 2011). Enrolment patterns have also undergone an enormous demographic shift, from homogenous groups of residential young men to a diverse range of increasingly part-time, commuting, and older students (Ball, 2012; Killacky, 2011; Klimoski, 2005; Lindbeck, 1988; Palka, 2004; Shaw, 2005; Thoennes, 2008; Werner, 2009a). Globally theological education institutions suffer challenges of long-term viability because of the mismatch between patterns of demand, and models of supply. A relative decline in Christianity in the Global North\(^\text{11}\) is also taking its toll (Werner, 2011).

This change in enrolment patterns has brought considerable challenge to the traditional residential seminary or Bible College. Broadening entry options to seminaries in an attempt to boost student numbers has led to further diversity of the student body in educational background, biblical literacy, and Christian maturity (Lindbeck, 1988; Warford, 2005; Winkelmes, 2005). Howard (1999) notes that the make-up of theological students is changing, in that students tend to study in later stages of life, prefer to study part-time, and pursue theological training for second or third career options. Demand for theological education is increasingly made up of a student body that is non-residential, rich in life experience, and infused with a post-modern and individualistic worldview (Kiesling, 2008; Klimoski, 2005). Such students are more likely to be seeking answers, relationships, and nurture, rather than ordination; older students beyond the 18 to 25 age group are also more likely to have previously and purposefully engaged with Christian formation (Setran, Wilhoit, Ratcliff, Haase, & Rozema, 2010). Subsequently, those students now seeking theological education also have different development needs in terms of stages of faith (Fowler, 1981, 1993). In

\(^{11}\) Werner (2011) contrasts the comparatively well-resourced Global North (Europe, North America) and the Global South and East, which is where the Christian faith – and demand for theological education – are in fact growing.
U.S. seminaries part-time students are increasingly becoming the norm, even though the traditional seminary is designed around a full-time, residential experience. Seminaries frequently struggle to cater for both student communities (Shaw, 2005). In addition, part-time students are tending to view their church commitments as more meaningful than community offerings on the seminary campus. Indeed, Shaw (2005) speaks of

…the clash between students who want to do ministry in the real world and have many commitments outside the seminary, and faculty who are...overwhelmed by obligations that leave them little time for scholarly pursuits or spiritual contemplation and frustrated by the burdens of trying to teach a seemingly resistant or ungrateful student body (p. 91).

Some seminaries have been reluctant to respond to changing demand by removing their residential experience, as Hill (1998) makes clear:

I have heard some college administrators take the extreme position that ‘Students must be full-time and residential. We won’t compromise by allowing less satisfactory modes of teaching to be used.’ This might just possibly have been a justifiable stance in earlier ages, when ordination created a class apart, and the range of possible vocations for those of literary-academic talent lay mostly within clerical ranks. But it’s totally inappropriate for the modern day (p. 55).

The assumption that students’ gathering together in a seminary is more powerfully formative than is participating in authentic Christian community through a church is strongly, though often implicitly, held by defenders of the seminary experience. McCarthy (2004) writes of “a value in ‘being there’ on site with all of the values traditionally associated with residential learning” (p. 182). In response to the criticism that residential training requires students to leave their churches, Dietterich (2005) replies that “because [a certain denomination] in America expects pastors to be open to a call anywhere in the country, it might be better if potential pastors dealt with the issues of uprooting right at the beginning” (p. 97).
While Dietterich’s perspective is representative of some, it is clear that most seminaries are actively adapting to shifts in demand. Theological education providers are seeking viable ways to achieve their objectives in ways that are both accessible to and formational for their students. Klimoski (2005) remarks that residential seminaries enabled a great deal of learning through life by osmosis, but adds that

...the osmotic approach no longer holds... Structures that served the osmotic phase of seminary education need to be re-examined and changed as radically as necessary in order that students might reap the greatest possible benefit from their experience in a formative environment (p. 40).

Changes to the residential seminary in response to changing demand tend to be toward part-time and hybrid study options, both of which require some form of on-campus attendance.

**The hybrid response to the changing context of theological education.**

Perhaps inevitably, the contemporary seminary response to shifts in demand and advances in internet technologies has seen an emphasis toward online learning. The plethora of literature resulting from a series of Lilly Foundation grants to seminaries in the US in the early 2000s, which were linked to the application of technology to traditional forms of theological education, are illustrative of this emphasis (Willard, 2005b). Unfortunately distance education activities were not eligible for the grant (Delamarter, 2004), so reports tended to focus on the contribution technology might make to on-campus education. Work done just before and as a result of these grants generated much excitement about the potential for online learning (for example in Ascough, 2002; Cormode, 1999; Delamarter, 2005a, 2005b; Delamarter & D. L. Brunner, 2005; Foley, 2005; Hart, 2010; Jewell, 2005; Taylor & Stoffer, 2007; Viktora, 2005; Willard, 2005a). One limitation of the grant-funded research, though, was the assumption that the online experience would serve as an after-hours complement to
traditional on-campus, lecture-based education. In the opening chapter of a recent work entitled *Best practices of online education*, a book unique in that it is specifically written for theological educators, Heinemann and Estep (2012) make three key presuppositions about online learning (emphases original):

[Firstly], Christian education remains Christian by its theological orientation and assumptions, not by the methods of delivery… Second, it is assumed that the distance in distance education does *not* fundamentally change the *nature* of the teaching/learning process, in all of its variety, complexity, and mystery… Third it is assumed that the primary value of distance education is not as a replacement for local, face-to-face teaching and learning. Rather, it is a set of possible strategies, which can be used by an educational institution to overcome a temporary or long-term separation between the teacher and perspective students (p. 5).  

In other words, distance education that does not require any on-campus attendance is not considered a viable alternative to local, face-to-face tuition. Instead, distance education is acceptable solely as a set of educational possibilities that might complement on-campus teaching. Online learning is largely understood in theological education literature as a complement to on-campus teaching.

The new model for seminary education most prominent in contemporary theological education literature is the hybrid one (Ascough, 2002; Brunner, 2006, 2007; Delamarter & Brunner, 2005; Delamarter, 2005a; Hege, 2011; Hess, 2005a; Hook, 2005; MacLeod, 2010; McCarthy, 2004; Naidoo, 2012; Rovai et al., 2008). Hybrid learning adopts various instructional practices normally associated with third generation distance education (Nipper, 1989), as an extension to the face-to-face classroom experience. Tellingly, in an article outlining six new forms of theological education made possible by the internet, Delamarter (2005a) does not mention distance education. The closest mention

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12 As an unfortunate aside, Heinemann & Estep also cite Prensky’s distinction of digital natives and digital immigrants as a reason for online education, even though Prensky’s work has been soundly discredited. That Heinemann & Estep later mention Moore’s transactional distance theory and the theory of connectivism as two influential distance education theories further indicates a lack of familiarity with distance education literature.
of distance education among the six forms is in the videoconferencing and synchronous net meeting classroom, which seeks to replicate the on-campus classroom for distance students either at a satellite campus (videoconferencing) or at home (net meeting). Any application of asynchronous technologies such as online discussion forums is thought best as a complement face-to-face tuition. Cost and convenience are cited as the two barriers to this style of education. The classroom and lecturer as presenter are at the core of Delamarter’s (2005a) new models. In theological education literature, hybrid learning is seen as the answer to the “false dichotomy between online and face-to-face models” (Delamarter & Brunner, 2005, p. 145); what is not clear is whether online is intended as a synonym for that form of distance education characteristic of Nipper’s (1989) third generation. Even if online and distance forms of education are equated, it is clear that distance education in a form not requiring any form of on-campus attendance is discounted. It is very difficult to distinguish between distance, hybrid and online courses in theological education literature, as many authors apply these terms as synonyms or else assume that hybrid learning is an extension of distance education (Brunner, 2006; Cannell, 1999; Flattery, 2002; Groeling & Ruth, 2007; Hege, 2011; Jewell, 2005; Killacky, 2011; MacLeod, 2010; Maddix & Estep, 2010; Naidoo, 2012; Nysse, 2005; Rovai et al., 2008). Groeling & Ruth (2007), for example, differentiate between face-to-face and online education without once mentioning distance, leaving uncertainty as to whether their commentary is relevant to distance education. Nysse (2005) writes of his own online teaching at Luther Seminary, implying a distance experience but also noting that such online options are not typical of the Luther Seminary student experience. The lack of distinction in terminology greatly hinders further development in literature (Nichols, 2011).

Hybrid learning can be considered the theological education-specific term for what is otherwise termed blended learning in distance education literature, where blended learning is defined as “the thoughtful fusion of face-to-face and online learning experiences” (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008, p. 5). The terms hybrid and blended are to
be synonymous for the analysis that follows. The work of Brunner and Delamarter (Brunner, 2006; Brunner, 2007; Delamarter, 2005a; Delamarter, 2005b; Delamarter, 2005c; Delamarter, 2004; Delamarter, 2006; Delamarter, Alanis, Haitch, Hoffman, Jones, & Strawn, 2007; Delamarter & Brunner, 2005) has established hybrid as the preferred term used in theological education contexts. Rovai et al. (2008) go so far as to suggest that a hybrid approach to theological education resembles that technique of instruction “used by the Apostle Paul that included both face-to-face and correspondence components” (p. 16).

Hybrid education bridges the divide between on-campus and online education by combining the two in varying degrees. In theological education literature it is difficult to tease apart a hybrid course requiring on-campus block time, supplemented with online discussion (Delamarter, 2004) from one that makes extensive use of local tutorials, videoconferencing, and visits to a local centre by a main campus lecturer (Dukes, 1999). Adding to the complex picture is the assumption that not all courses may be suitable for distance or online delivery (Killacky, 2011). At one extreme of hybrid learning, Delamarter (2004) suggests that a distance education student with a local mentor is participating in a hybrid education experience; at the other end might be an on-campus class making use of an integrated online discussion tool (Delamarter, 2005a). Delamarter and Brunner (2005) point out how difficult terminological matters have become for accrediting bodies, specifically the ATS in the US, because the bounds of what constitutes distance education are notoriously unclear. Willard (2005a), representing the ATS, remarks on the difficulties hybrid courses present for the purposes of accreditation: “At least one problem with many hybrid courses is that they tend to depend, in their face-to-face phase, on one form or another of an intensive” (p. 163). Much less acceptable is theological distance education not requiring any form of face-to-face tuition, though there are signs this is changing (Association of Theological Schools, 2013). The ATS does not see itself as taking the lead on such matters; it tends to have a deliberate wait and see approach which reacts to trends (see Willard, 2001).
The difficulties of distinguishing between on-campus and theological distance education are significant, and result in a fragmented literature. What is clear is that hybrid is considered a valid response to making theological education more accessible; distance, as defined for the purposes of this study, is not.

While hybrid learning is portrayed in the literature by some as an inevitable future for theological education (Delamarter & Brunner, 2005), early case studies on its application mention higher workloads for faculty and students, or else minimal use of online discussion (Blier, 2008; Hege, 2011; Koontz, 2007). Cases also report success with using online discussion, highlighting the importance of intentional pedagogy or implementation when technologies are applied to education (Hege, 2011; Nysse, 2005; Snyder, 2007; Van Kleeck, 2007). One case study, that of MacLeod (2010), is very positive about the potential of hybrid learning while highlighting the administrative difficulties hybrid learning brings about in a predominantly on-campus setting. Work by Hege (2011) confirms that hybrid learning has the potential to link course concepts to the students’ own church experiences, and that the online experience can lead to a sense of online community. The case study written by Hege describes a course that is essentially a third-generation distance education course, with the addition that it requires an additional one-week intensive. Hege (2011) uses weekly blogging and encourages students to be “consistently engaged with the course material, with one another, and with me” (p. 14).

Subsequent to the recent focus on the role of technology in theological education, many authors have suggested the emergence of a new paradigm of theological education that overthrows a transmissive or informational model of education in favour of a more dialogue-based or collaborative one (Adam, 2002; Amos, 1999; Ascough, 2002; Brunner, 2007; Byer, Clark, Mahfood, & Welch, 2002; Cannell, 1999; Delamarter, 2004; Groeling & Ruth, 2007; Hammon & Hollon, 2004; Hess, 2005a; Ryan, 2001). Specific benefits of increasing reach and participation for students are also mentioned in Nysse
Most commentators suggest the new paradigm will be characterised by a hybrid or blended approach to education that combines on-campus classes with online discourse and resources. No vision for theological distance education has yet been articulated in literature.

**Alternative forms of theological education.**

Literature related to theological distance education mentions several modes of study that differ from the traditional on-campus model characteristic of seminary education, though some might be considered examples of hybrid learning. Theological Education by Extension (TEE) had its beginnings in Guatemala in the 1960s (Anthony et al., 2001). TEE was created in response to rapid church growth, and the consequent need to train pastors as they ministered. Under these conditions of growth, new church leaders did not have the time to attend a seminary. As a result, the local seminary “ran short of students” (Ward, in Anthony, Benson, Eldridge, & Gorman, 2001, p. 692) because it could only serve those in its immediate vicinity. By contrast, TEE enabled students to study in situ. In TEE, study materials are not designed to be stand-alone in that they do not replace a teacher however “they do replace most of the teacher’s lecturing function” (Harrison, 2004, p. 319). Central to TEE are three specific components: self-study materials, regular seminars, and context-based ministry and life experience. If any of these is removed, then the label TEE does not apply (Harrison, 2004; Hart, 2010). The TEE approach to ministry education proved popular and soon spread world-wide, peaking in the 1970s; it waned soon after (Anthony et al., 2001). According to Cannell (1999), TEE has been highly successful although it has attracted some criticism. Cannell also notes that course materials have been described as programmed, behaviourist and overly formal, while the actual content itself is often poorly contextualised and seminars are inconsistently facilitated. TEE has further been described as
inappropriate to local settings, particularly where accountability and mentoring were lacking (Fluegge, 2010). Despite such reservations, Werner (2009a) sees TEE as making a key contribution to theological education in the twenty-first century, particularly in countries and locations where residential seminary education is too costly to facilitate or access.

Another form of theological education, termed the InMinistry programme, is described as a distributed learning delivery system by Anderson (2007). As with TEE, the InMinistry model assumes the student is already involved in ministry and can therefore engage with their normal ministry context as they learn. The programme consists of three types of courses, listed as “intensive, distance, and contextual” (Anderson, 2007, p. 68), so represents a variety of different approaches. Block courses or on-campus intensives are integral to the approach (Reissner, 1999), and through online learning students “form a rich learning community that spreads across the United States and around the world” (Anderson, 2007, p. 67). The InMinistry programme was launched in 1995, and was an early adopter of online technologies.

Examples of theological distance education are also mentioned in literature. The Global University (previously ICI University, as mentioned in Cannell, 1999) provides online degrees that make use of a mostly first-generation (Nipper, 1989) distance education approach. The Global University is not accredited by the United States ATS; rather it is accredited by the DETC (Distance Education and Training Council). The DETC is recognised by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) in the United States. Kuligin (2007) describes how the Namibia Evangelical Theological Seminary (NETS) makes use of distance education for its undergraduate students. While a first-generation approach is used, students are required to attend the main campus at least once before their programme is considered complete, and local (face-to-face) mentors are appointed for each student. Kuligin mentions the South African Theological Seminary (SATS) as a distance-only institution with international reach.
While the SATS Web site gives evidence of a third generation approach, no peer-reviewed literature about its activities seems available. An online-only US seminary, Rockbridge Seminary (http://www.rockbridgeseminary.org/) also offers third-generation distance education. As with SATS, though, no peer-reviewed literature about Rockbridge Seminary has yet been published. Rockbridge Seminary was successful in attaining accreditation from the CHEA in 2013 (Rockbridge Seminary, n.d.).

One article discovered for this review that does claim to provide an example of online theological distance education (Maddix & Estep, 2010) includes the use of dedicated online spiritual mentors/directors, who are charged with making students more self-aware. These mentors actually meet with students “at least twice during an 8-week course for a total of at least 16 meetings during the program” (Maddix & Estep, 2010, p. 431). While not strictly speaking an example of distance education as defined in this study (and the provider institution is not accredited by either the ATS or the ABHE), the article addresses many issues associated with the concerns of this study related to formation and is frequently cited later in this review.

Finally, Kemp (2010) proposes situated learning as a means for theological education. Writing hypothetically Kemp, drawing heavily on the work of Kolb, suggests that education should recognise the importance of “real-life contexts and primary social relationships as God-given contexts for learning” (2010, p. 138). Kemp (2010) concludes as follows (emphases original):

> It is my conviction is that [sic] experiential learning turbocharges education... and situated learning turbocharges experiential learning, particularly for ministry training and theological education because of the unique overlapping of interests of educational institutions, churches, church networks, and Christian families (p. 138).

Alternatives to the seminary expression of theological education certainly exist in literature, but none of those found for this review (with the exception of Kemp’s
propose) consider it viable for students to study with no face-to-face or on-campus encounter across the entire period of study. Further, with the exception of the InMinistry programme (which includes intensive, on-campus course instruction) none of the alternatives to on-campus seminary education listed here are (or, until very recently, could be) accredited by the ATS. This is indicative of the suspicion with which non on-campus models of education – in particular, distance education – are viewed.

The potential of theological distance education.

Theological distance education is largely unappreciated in literature, despite its clear potential to improve the reach and flexibility of theological education. Distance education is mentioned in a general sense by Werner (2009b), whose report taking an international perspective on theological education includes mention of the need for “web-based courses of study, research groups working via the internet, distance degree courses at all levels using digital formats, and electronic library and other data resources” (p. 18). This call is later echoed by the Edinburgh 2010 World Missionary Conference (Theme Six: Edinburgh 2010, Theological education and formation, 2010). Werner does not elaborate on how this approach might be reconciled with the concerns (such as formation, community and poor engagement with affective learning) raised later in this literature review. Cannell (2006) critiques the on-campus seminary, and argues strongly for a church-based and community-centric approach to theological education. The subject of theological distance education is becoming an important one in an educational context that takes the full-time on-campus seminary experience as the norm, and which needs to respond to fundamental changes in student demand. It is difficult to understand how the potential for theological distance education might be overlooked.
The strong demand for part-time and flexible study is already established in literature, as is the importance of the church context for the purposes of Christian discipleship. Even young people attracted to theological education are most likely to be actively involved in a church community (Black, 2008), and so tend to be already engaged with a supportive and grounded learning context. The potential for distance education to complement the church’s activity, and provide accessible theological training, is also noted in the literature (Cannell, 2006; Theme Six: Edinburgh 2010, Theological education and formation, 2010; Werner, 2009a). It might seem that the corresponding potential for church-based distance education would be merely a matter of implementation. Despite this potential, the implementation of theological distance education has not received much appreciative attention in literature. While the efficacy of distance education in general literature suggests there should be no objection to theological distance education, serious concerns are raised by accrediting agencies in practice and in the minds of many theological educators.

The efficacy of distance education for the purposes of cognitive development is well attested across general education literature (Bernard et al., 2004; Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2010; Russell, 1999; Saba, 2000; Tucker, 2001). The meta-analysis by Bernard et al. (2004) provides a useful summary; 232 studies between 1985 and 2002 provide evidence that distance education tends to have a slight advantage over on-campus learning in the area of student achievement. The meta-analysis study also found that retention rates were, overall, better in on-campus settings. The authors caution that this overall summary of data glosses over wide variation, to the extent that “a substantial number of DE [Distance Education] applications provide better achievement results, are viewed more positively, and have higher retention rates than their classroom counterparts” (Bernard et al., 2004, p. 406). The authors further suggest that effective course design, active learning techniques (such as problem-based learning), opportunities for communication, and media supporting interactivity tend to improve student achievement, student attitude, and retention in favour of distance
education. These findings are corroborated in the study by Means et al. (2010), a meta-analysis of online education outcomes compared with face-to-face ones. A further meta-study specifically concerned with interaction treatments in distance education courses (Bernard et al., 2009) suggests that increasing the level of interaction in distance education courses, particularly student-content interaction, can further improve student achievement. The findings of Bernard et al. (2009) led to additional work outlining effective approaches to distance education to enhance student achievement (Abrami, Bernard, Bures, Borokhovski, & Tamim, 2011); the approaches suggested are consistent with the provisions of third generation distance education.

The term distance education includes a broad spectrum of practice, ranging from classic correspondence materials delivered through the post, right through to online interpersonal engagement in support of problem-based learning. Distance education can also be based on synchronous or asynchronous approaches. Comparative studies confirm that distance education can be every bit as effective as on-campus education, provided effective instructional strategies are employed.

While the outcomes of distance education can be demonstrated as comparable to on-campus education, and in some cases better, the educational processes of on-campus and distance education differ. This, it seems, is problematic for the purposes of Master of Divinity, or MDiv accreditation. The MDiv is the primary professional theological degree in the United States, accredited by the ATS; it is a broad-based degree very similar to the Laidlaw College Bachelor of Ministry (BMin) and Bachelor of Theology (BTheol) degrees. The purpose of the MDiv is to “prepare persons for ordained ministry and for general pastoral and religious leadership responsibilities in congregations and other settings” (Association of Theological Schools, 2012a, p. 39), across a broad range of theological education providers, including those in the evangelical tradition.
The ATS sets rigorous standards for accreditation across various post-baccalaureate degrees. Other programmes besides the MDiv accredited by the ATS include Master of Arts degrees with various ministry-related majors; various Masters programmes in music; Master of Theological Studies, Master of Theology and Master of Sacred Theology degrees; Doctoral programmes in Ministry, Education, Music, Theology, and other specialised options; and a generic PhD. The ATS differentiates between campus-based education, extension education, and distance education. Extension education is a mode of education which “gathers students and faculty for in-person classroom learning at locations away from the main campus of the institution” (Association of Theological Schools, 2012a, p. 30), and so has face-to-face tuition on a branch campus or alternative site as a requirement. Distance education is defined as

...a mode of education in which a course is offered without students and instructors being in the same location. Instruction may be synchronous or asynchronous and employs the use of technology. Distance education courses may consist of exclusively online or other technologically assisted instruction or a blend of intensive classroom and online instruction. In all cases, distance education courses shall ensure regular and substantive interaction of faculty with students (Association of Theological Schools, 2012a, p. 32).

The definition of distance education used by the ATS insists on regular and substantive interaction of faculty with students, probably because of the influencing factor faculty are presumed to have on formation. Distance, then, is defined in terms of geographical location and has strict conditions surrounding its implementation. The ATS’s understanding of distance education is slightly dissimilar to that of Moore and Kearsley (1996), who define distance education as

...planned learning that normally occurs in a different place from teaching and as a result requires special techniques of course design, special instructional techniques, special methods of communication by electronic and other technology, as well as special organizational and administrative arrangements (p. 2).
The significant difference across the two definitions is the insistence of the ATS that distance education be characterised by regular and substantive interaction between faculty and students.

As at early 2014, the ATS accredited some 270 graduate schools from across the US and Canada in its membership (Association of Theological Schools, n.d.). Another accrediting agency, the Association for Higher Biblical Education (ABHE) also has an evangelical statement of faith and, in 2013, accredited some 200 seminaries and Bible Colleges across the US and Canada (Association for Higher Theological Studies, n.d.). As with the ATS, accreditation through the ABHE requires the development of spiritual formation (Maddix & Estep, 2010). The ABHE recognises distance education only insofar as it involves “off campus instructional sites” (The Association for Biblical Higher Education, 2012, p. 47); the ABHE is not able to recognise correspondence education under its own scope of recognition by the US Department of Education. Seminaries seeking accreditation by the ATS are required to adhere to General Institutional Standards and Educational Degree and Program [sic] Standards. General Institutional Standards are those all accredited providers are expected to comply with, regardless of the programmes being accredited. Changes to the Standards in 2012 have moved distance education requirements away from the General Institutional Standards (the previous Standard 10) so that provision for distance education might be made in accordance with the specific characteristics of each programme. Previously, under Standard 10, the Association was adamant that “it is not possible to earn a degree in an accredited institution solely by distance education courses” (emphasis original). New requirements of the ATS, examined below, still require a deliberate focus on formation using equivalence to the residential formational experience as the standard of reference. The ATS requirements go some way toward explaining the

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consequent emphasis on hybrid learning, rather than distance education, as a means of extending the on-campus model and including technology in the educational mix.

The ATS Standards for the MDiv relevant to this study centre on the formational requirement, learning community, and location of study. Personal and spiritual formation is the focus of the ATS Standard A.2.4, which states that

The program shall provide opportunities through which the student may grow in personal faith, emotional maturity, moral integrity, and public witness. Ministerial preparation includes concern with the development of capacities—intellectual and affective, individual and corporate, ecclesial and public—that are requisite to a life of pastoral leadership (Association of Theological Schools, 2012a, p. 40).

The requirements for “intellectual and affective, individual and corporate, ecclesial and public” opportunities stated above for the purposes of formation are significant for this study, as it is precisely these requirements that cast doubt on distance delivery of the MDiv. Learning community requirements are also linked to formational requirements by the ATS, and are mentioned under Standard A.3.1.1 related to Location:

MDiv education has a complex goal: the personal, vocational, spiritual, and academic formation of the student. Because of the importance of a comprehensive community of learning, the MDiv cannot be viewed simply as an accumulation of courses or of individual independent work... An institution shall demonstrate that its students are engaged in a community of learning whereby faculty and students have significant opportunities for interaction, peer learning, development of pastoral skills, supervised experiences of ministry, and growth in personal, spiritual formation (Association of Theological Schools, 2012a, p. 41).

The concept of “a community of learning” stated above is also an important one in this study. Finally, the location of study sets specific conditions under which distance education might be acceptable, under Standard A.3.1.3:

Because MDiv education expects regular and substantive student-faculty interaction to achieve the stipulated learning outcomes, this interaction requires
that at least one year of full-time academic study or its equivalent shall be completed at the main campus of the school awarding the degree or at an extension site of the institution that has been approved for MDiv degree-granting status. An exception may be granted if a school can demonstrate how its educational design and delivery system accomplishes the learning outcomes associated with residential theological study (Association of Theological Schools, 2012a, p. 41).

It is not clear from the ATS Standards what the conditions for exemption might entail, as no “learning outcomes associated with residential theological study” are explicitly mentioned; presumably, the formational and community requirements already noted are in mind. The potential for an exemption whereby the full degree might be offered at a distance is a concession to the previous Standard A.3.2.1, which stipulated that:

In order to ensure an appropriate educational community, at least one year of full-time academic study or its equivalent shall be completed at the main campus of the school awarding the degree or at an extension site of the institution that has been approved for MDiv degree-granting status (Association of Theological Schools, 2011, p. 111).

As at 2010 over 100 institutions accredited by the ATS offered some form of distance tuition for the MDiv; in the 2012-2013 academic year, some 20,000 students, almost one-quarter of all students studying toward ATS-accredited degree programmes, completed at least one distance education course. Further, close to 40% of all ATS-accredited institutions offered at least six degree courses through distance education (Association of Theological Schools, 2013). The same source indicates that, as of August 2013, only three ATS-accredited institutions were exempted to offer the MDiv degree solely online.

The ABHE, ATS, and general seminary hesitancy to accept distance education reflects a general consensus that distance education and theological education ought not to mix, at least not exclusively. Contemporary discussion in theological education literature is largely tangential in its treatment of third generation distance education; an exception, though not one favourable to theological distance education, is Rovai,
Baker, & Cox Jr (2008). The recent attention given to hybrid and online learning, though, has brought several educational issues to the fore. There is a growing awareness of the financial and social costs to students for on-campus study, and a recognition that there are opportunities here for distance learning (Amos, 1999; Delamarter & Brunner, 2005; Delamarter, 2005a; Nysse, 2005; Reissner, 1999; Walton, 1997). While the accessibility, efficiency and flexibility benefits of distance education are acknowledged in theological education literature (White, 2006), there are many theological cautions, and much suspicion that hinders its widespread use.

Where distance learning is applied by providers accredited by the ATS, it is typically applied in ways that replicate classroom-style delivery of content. Kemp (2007) investigated the use of situated learning techniques in theological distance education materials, based on Kolb’s model of experiential learning. His evaluation of providers accredited by the ATS offering at least ten courses at a distance\textsuperscript{14} found that providers of theological distance education were making use of situated learning techniques, and were involving primary social relationships in course materials. While these results are heartening, Kemp indicated that the courses he evaluated were not making the most of the opportunities provided for situated learning. Kemp (2007) talks of being “struck from an experiential learning perspective by how many opportunities are not taken” (p. 126), and speculates that this lack of exemplary design is in part due to the desire to replicate the transfer of knowledge in on-campus education. This replication, he further suggests, is based on a suspicion of the legitimacy of distance education such that theological providers of distance courses deliberately design them to be similar to on-campus education as much as possible. A lack of experience in distance education, Kemp adds, is also likely.

\textsuperscript{14}The sample included only those providers that were evangelical and offered at least ten courses in three key areas: New Testament Survey; Leadership Development; and Introduction to Missions. Institutions whose courseware was sampled also had to have at least ten distance students in each distance course over a three-year period.
Theological distance education in US seminaries is portrayed in literature as having a history of being under-resourced and somewhat ad hoc (Amos, 1999; Cannell, 1999; Patterson, 1996). It is also criticised for having been implemented for pragmatic reasons, rather than having been adopted for proactive and visionary reasons (Cagney, 1997; Cannell, 1999; Delamarter, 2006; Harrison, 2004; Lumsden et al., 1999; Patterson, 1996). Sasse (1998) goes so far as to suggest that seminaries adopting distance education do so for utilitarian rather than theologically-driven reasons, adding that the on-campus environment is an important place for reflection, dialogue, and relationships that provide experiential knowledge in addition to more cognitive propositional knowledge. Most perspectives offered in theological education literature imply that adopting a distance education approach would be perceived as opportunistic, rather than of sound educational substance.

Theological distance education is not considered a serious alternative to on-campus teaching. In Sweeney & Fortosis (1994), correspondence education is not seriously considered as having potential to link seminary and church. Serious treatment of third generation distance education in a theological context is provided in but two articles found for this review, published in the late 1990s (Cannell, 1999; Patterson, 1996). Both are substantial in their treatment, and draw from sources familiar to students of distance education literature. A further article (Reissner, 1999) discusses distance education in the context of an overall on-campus experience; subsequently, the work does not grapple with the important themes related to exclusive distance learning, but talks instead of how distance students might be linked back to the seminary while taking distance courses. A further article dedicated to distance education (Diekema & Caddell, 2001) is a reaction against distance education, portraying it as indicative of a utilitarian, cost-cutting and commoditised approach to education that eliminates “a fundamental aspect of higher learning: the intensive mentoring and modelling that goes on at the face-to-face level between professor and student” (p. 171). This review of literature has found only one voice proposing that third generation distance
education might be the way of the future, if only objections to it would be honestly confronted and if institutions themselves would re-configure themselves (Cannell, 1999, 2006). Cannell (1999, 2006) argues that distance education might serve as a mode of theological education that is both socially- and community-driven, which then permits students to maintain their place within their own community of faith. That reasoned discourse, critical thinking, the development of higher thought and collaboration are all possible through distance education is acknowledged; the added advantages of accessibility and social inclusiveness for the student are also mentioned (Cannell, 1999, 2006).

Demand for theological education is changing. Residential seminaries are responding with more flexible on-campus options, particularly those that include some form of online learning (termed hybrid courses). Alternatives to the on-campus provision of theological education also exist, and have proven popular. Despite this, accrediting agencies of theological education programmes based in the United States require some form of on-campus provision, or its equivalent in terms of deliberate formational activity, as a condition for recognition of the degree. Theological distance education is viewed with some suspicion, and is, overall, not considered a viable alternative to on-campus tuition. In New Zealand, though, accreditation has been gained by Laidlaw College from the New Zealand Qualifications Authority to offer Bachelor of Theology and Bachelor of Ministries degrees, degrees similar to the MDiv, by distance.

**Reservations and Debate Related to Theological Distance Education**

Objections to theological distance education, to which this literature review now turns, might be separated into secondary and primary concerns. Those deemed secondary for the purposes of this review are relatively straightforward, non-theological, and are largely already addressed across distance education literature. Because of their relative
simplicity, secondary concerns are considered first below. The primary objection, which centres on formation, is more complex in that it involves debate encompassing the efficacy of on-campus formation, the nature of community and embodiment, and consideration of the relationship between cognitive and affective learning.

**Secondary concerns related to theological distance education.**

The secondary concerns about theological education at a distance in literature relate to higher drop-out rates for distance education (Patterson, 1996; Ryan, 2001), the requirements for specialised implementation and changes to institutional systems (Cannell, 1999; Delamarter, 2006), a lack of direct pastoral support (Patterson, 1996), and the prescriptive nature of learning materials (Le Cornu, 2001). It appears that some of the secondary criticisms of distance education may have more to do with poor implementation than with any fundamental flaw in distance education as an educational approach (see, for example, Lumsden, Ray, et al., 1999; Nichols, 2010b; Walton, 1997). The institutional requirements for implementing distance education, though significant and far-reaching, are not theological objections and can be managed; as previously noted, the problems of implementation seem to be that theological distance education is frequently under-resourced, ad-hoc, and pragmatic. An additional objection to theological distance education relates to the authoritarian nature of distance education materials. Prescriptive course materials, it is suggested, may discourage “formation and / or development of an independent self-identity” (Le Cornu, 2001, p. 15), particularly because distance students “often have fewer opportunities to assess the validity of the content than face-to-face students” (Naidoo, 2012, p. 5). However, such concerns are likely overstated. Sharma, Oliver, and

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15 The requirement for an institutional approach to effective distance education is emphasised particularly by Moore & Kearsley (1996).
Hannafin (2007) contend that Directed Distance Learning Environments (DDLEs) “typically emphasize the acquisition of specified knowledge with aligned assessment, and are often designed to disseminate similar (or identical) instruction across multiple sites and learners” (p. 259). This is presented in contrast with NDLEs (Negotiated Distance Learning Environments) and IDLEs (Informal Distance Learning Environments) (Hill, Domizi, Hannafin, Kim, & Kim, 2007), both of which are based on a different epistemology. Nation (1991) also suggests that the criticism regarding the authoritarianism of distance learning materials tends to overlook that on-campus teaching can be just as authoritative in nature (and that behind closed doors), whereas distance materials are often much more transparent. Nation (1991) includes samples of distance learning materials deliberately designed to model a facilitative or discursive rather than authoritative tone, and exemplifies an approach to text that is deliberative and reflective, anecdotal and conversational rather than pointedly didactic. Finally, Nation (1991) concludes with the observation that “employing a project-based form of assessment and having some teaching texts which [move] away from authoritative monologues” (p. 128) promotes independent learning among students. Distance materials will always reflect the weaknesses of a particular instructional approach; any prescription is therefore not a necessary component of distance education materials. Indeed, Le Cornu (2001) advocates the use of self-reflective questions, computer conferencing and student journaling as practical means by which students might express their own ideas and so assert more control over their own learning. Le Cornu further speculates that, if done well, such activities in distance courses may provide a formational advantage over classroom settings.
Primary concerns: The objection of formation.

The main objection to theological distance education is that it does not facilitate formation (Naidoo, 2012). This objection is usually linked to the perceived lack of students’ community experience while studying at a distance (often expressed in terms of disembodiment), and a lack of affective emphasis. Underpinning these criticisms are the assumptions that formational development is effective in on-campus settings, and that cognitive learning has minimal affective influence. This section of the review of literature focuses on the objection to theological distance education on the basis of poor formation, beginning with an overview of the objection before moving on to literature critical of the on-campus formation experience. From this vantage point, the related issues of community and affective learning are explored.

In one prominent article critical of distance theological education, Diekema and Caddell (2001) argue that distance education cannot impart the “way of life that values the habits and discipline required to cultivate the intellect”, which to them is a particular problem “when considering the unique mission of Christian education” (p. 169). At the heart of Diekema and Caddell’s (2001) concern is the lack of habitus in distance education, with habitus defined as

...a system of acquired schemes of perception, thought and action, engendered by objective conditions, but tending to persist even after an alteration of those conditions.... [It] generates regular, repeated practices that make up social life. It is action in relation to a coherent system of beliefs and values (p. 175).

The question of whether theological distance education can be formative forces an important question, one raised by Patterson (1996) in a review introducing distance education literature to theological educators. Patterson (1996) provocatively suggests:

We are pushed into a consideration of what is meant by formation – whether it does in fact occur in connection with traditional methods of theological
education, and does not exist at a distance; whether it is an authentic goal or an excuse for outmoded authoritarian needs for control (p. 62).

Earlier in this review, literature is cited indicating that formation need not be of concern for theological education, particularly in the context of Farley’s (1983) *theologia*. Despite this, accreditation through agencies such as the ATS require theological educators to provide an intentional formational experience for their students. Put simply, formation is not accepted as a natural or effective outcome of theological education at a distance, though it is taken for granted as a feature of theological tuition within any compulsory on-campus experience (Naidoo, 2012; Patterson, 1996; Rovai et al., 2008). Essentially, the argument goes, in order for formation to occur in theological education students “there must be a physical community in which students interact with other students, staff and faculty” (Naidoo, 2012, p. 4). Kuligin (2007) considers the formational experiences of on-campus students with those of distance students and articulates a deficit perspective of the distance education experience:

Mailing students and course material via distance and expecting them to get as much out of their educational experience as a residential student is nearly impossible.... As much as we tried, we could never make the distance programs identical to the residential. There are too many other factors at play when a student is residential. Distance students miss daily or weekly devotions, growth groups... special classes, seminars, workshops on-campus, student trips and outings, student meetings, participation in the student representative council and sporting activities. The residential experience has much to offer that can never be transferred to the distance students (p. 304).

Formation is not perceived as an issue for hybrid education because the hybrid experience includes an on-campus component (Anderson, 2007; Bourgond, 1999; Brunner, 2007; Delamarter et al., 2007). Neither is formation considered problematic for Theological Education by Extension (TEE), which includes meetings with a teacher or small group facilitator alongside course materials (Harrison, 2004). The substance of the issue as it applies to distance education is well described by Willard (2001) who,
while noting a trend toward distance education among theological educators, identifies that some have “a conviction that distance education cannot deliver the required formational aspects of the existing degree programs, either not so well as a residential community or not at all” (p. 113). To those Willard is describing, this conviction is an insurmountable barrier that limits the potential of distance education for the teaching of theology. This barrier is based on concern that distance education does not replicate comparative community to on-campus settings (Rovai et al., 2008), which supposedly hinders the interpersonal modelling of character (see also Naidoo, 2011). Indeed, Rovai et al. (2008) warn that in the U.S. context and perhaps more broadly, “Without [deliberate on-campus Christian] community...universities run the risk of losing their Christian purpose as they become less Christianly” (p. 19). Some form of on-campus contact, critics of theological distance education maintain, is required for formation to be considered valid. Palka (2004) summarises the issue, providing an explicit view of the assumptions surrounding formation as it is thought to occur on-campus:

Most theological educators still view DE as an inferior form of education compared with face-to-face (F2F) studies. They typically present several reasons for their slow adoption of DE, but perhaps the most common and most forcefully stated reason centers around issues of community. Theological education involves much more than the mere transfer of information, and seeks to establish a modeling/mentoring relationship that takes place within a theological community. There, theological thinking, reasoning, and lifestyle are modeled, students daily engage in “water cooler” discussion and debates, and theology involves the engagement of one’s personal being and the transfer of an entire culture and belief structure. These activities have traditionally involved close F2F contact between students and faculty, and theological educators have resisted DE because they contend that the rich traditional, environment cannot be reproduced in a distance setting (p. 1).

Palka here assumes an optimal on-campus experience, where Christian character is modelled by faculty and exposure to the on-campus culture. At the core of Palka’s critique is the concept of community, a theme this review will return to.
The literature critical of formation in on-campus theological education provides an important foil to the perspective of Palka (2004) above; there are apparently dangers in assuming too much of the on-campus formational experience. Some insist that the role of the seminary in formation should not be overstated (Cannell, 2006; Glennon et al., 2011; Hill, 1998; Naidoo, 2008). Winkelmes (2005) criticises the residential on-campus experience as poorly suited to the fragmented student body now typical in theological education. Hill (1998) adds that on-campus communities are “too often ingrown and elitist” (p. 26), and suggests that a person’s lecturer is far from an ideal choice as a spiritual director as the lecturer is in a position of authority rather than in a peer relationship with their students. Further, it is pointed out that it is unusual for faculty to be excellent teachers and researchers, as well as counsellors; this is a concern, because “all staff – for good or ill – confront their students as gospel models” (Hill, 1998, p. 54). Suggesting staff as role models of the faith has two-edges to it.

Kelsey (1992) lists the following complaints about residential seminaries:

Anyone who has lived for a time in student dormitories or apartment buildings or has eaten in their dining halls can recall endless student complaints about the theological schools’ curriculum. The complaint may be that the curriculum is too ‘academic’ and insufficiently ‘professional’; too ‘theoretical’ and insufficiently ‘practical’; or, conversely, that it is too single-mindedly focused on producing ‘professional ministers’ in a certain model and too inflexible to allow individual students to pursue their intellectual interests; and, above all, that the curriculum consists of too many small pieces of information not adequately ‘integrated’.... One will also recall frequently complaints about the lack of ‘real community’ within the theological school. Increasingly during the past two decades one could also have heard complaints...that the school is insufficiently ‘pluralistic’ (p. 23).

While many of Kelsey’s observations here relate to tensions in the nature of theological education itself, those related to community and a lack of pluralism are fundamental to the effectiveness of on-campus formation.
Ways in which on-campus institutions might meet the demands for formation are suggested in literature (Reisz, 2003; Setran et al., 2010); Naidoo (2008) provides the following:

...include courses on spirituality, instruction in personal spiritual disciplines, counselling services, community life, small-group work, psychometric and psychological testing, classroom teaching, spiritual direction, the curriculum, personal mentoring and personal development interviews, chapel and worship service, field-work exposure, in-service training and vocational development (p. 139).

Despite lists such as these, there is confusion among seminaries themselves over what constitutes effective formation activity. The role of on-campus formation and community events is also contested in literature. Ward (cited in Cannell, 2006) warns of the various difficulties of attempting to address more than the intellectual in theological education; specific concerns are that character traits and moral judgment do not form the basis of formal qualifications; objective testing cannot assess those qualities of a person that might be of more importance; and formal qualifications do not provide evidence of vital Christian interrelationships. While authors such as Reisz (2003) suggest that on-campus formational events should be compulsory for students, Hill (1998) disagrees stating that

If we impose too many rules and requirements, in our eagerness to ensure spiritual development, we’ll be trapped into thinking we can represent spirituality by a set of behavioural outcomes, and we’ll show most favour to those who are the most conformist (p. 50).

Student interaction with faculty is also difficult because many faculty tend to be overworked (Hill, 1998; Shaw, 2005), or else find it difficult enough to engage students with course materials without the added pressures of additional agendas for formation (Glennon et al., 2011). Faculty are simply too busy to commit themselves to formation beyond that in the academic sense, and are not specifically rewarded for it (Cannell, 2006; Klimoski, 2005; Setran et al., 2010). Neither, it seems, do faculty deliberately seek to engage students with creative learning activities outside of the classroom (Ball,
Houston (2008) adds that much talk about formation “seems little more than institutional propaganda...how can high student-to-faculty ratios personalize teaching as essential for ‘spiritual formation’?” (p. 89). Collinson (2005) adds that

The formality of the schooling model can mitigate against the formation of open, caring relationships and hinder the promotion of community. Development of faith through experiences requiring its exercise is largely absent and opportunities for reflection on such times are divorced from the moment of experience and action.... Discipling’s emphasis on the mission of the church is not reflected strongly in the schooling model (p. 249).

Further criticism of the on-campus formational model is expressed on the grounds that faculty are appointed for their ability to work in the abstract; the culture of the seminary is one centred on certification within an artificial community, requiring a period of re-orientation back into the real-world; and the fact that students’ relationship with the seminary itself, and access to its agents, is a contractual one (Hess, 2008). Hill (1998) adds that imposing rules and requirements onto spiritual development, as so often occurs in on-campus settings, robs formation of its authenticity. Finally, Patterson (1996) adds the factors of class size and didacticism:

...to the extent that traditional classrooms are large and impersonal, with little opportunity for dialogue, students will not have as great an opportunity for noncognitive formational learning as they might have in an intentionally interactive distance setting, which has built-in means of access to faculty and other peer learners (p. 68).

Even if formation is considered a legitimate objective for theological education, it is clear that intentional on-campus formational activity is more difficult to achieve than critics of theological distance education acknowledge.
Primary concerns: Community in theological education.

Much of the criticism of formation in theological distance education is ultimately tied to that of community (Kuligin, 2007; Le Cornu, 2001; Lowe & Lowe, 2010b; Palka, 2004; Patterson, 1996; Rovai et al., 2008). To Rovai et al. (2008), there is concern that distance education does not adequately facilitate community or fellowship despite the acknowledgement that “professional literature provides substantial evidence to support the value of distance learning as an effective alternative to face-to-face instruction” (p. 2). Thoennes (2008) cites Willimon and Naylor’s (1995, p. 145) definition of community as “a partnership of people committed to the care and maturing of each other’s mind, body, heart, and soul through participatory means” (p. 77). Community, in this sense, has a rich connection to affective outcomes and formation. In formation literature, community is the hub for concerns related to embodiment, online interaction, and the role of the church in discipleship.

It is clear that research into the role of community in theological education is underserved. There are only two primary studies in the literature that make reference to formation in theological distance education, and both are concerned with community building (Amos, 1999; Rovai et al., 2008). While in Amos’s (1999) study the activities of community building were “varied, creative, and showed insight into the difficulties of ‘building community’ and ‘developing spiritually and personally’ at a distance” (p. 13), the author was not satisfied that the formational outcomes for distance respondents were sufficient, even though no criteria for measuring formation were suggested. The study included many examples of hybrid learning. One respondent to the survey indicated that they were streaming on-campus chapels through the internet; another said that “distance education...allows students to stay in their community in which they are ministering, thus providing the needed support as well as immediate application of their learning” (Amos, 1999, p. 133). Other respondents
talked of on-campus intensives, with several mentioning the use of email and online discussion groups. In the study of Rovai et al (2008), on-campus and online students in a Christian and state university were surveyed on how they perceived their experiences of community and learning. An instrument termed the Classroom and School Community Inventory (CSCI) was used in the study, which would seem to bias results toward peer community rather than ecclesiastic community. Indeed, students did report a higher sense of community in the on-campus setting. Rovai et al (2008) suggest four ways in which the loss of community through distance education might be handled:

1. Accepting it – considering the loss of community as a necessary compromise to make education more accessible.

2. Enhancing institutional engagement – providing additional resources and opportunities to distance students, perhaps through streaming sessions and some face-to-face activities.

3. Blending the online learning experience – blending on-campus or face-to-face sessions with the online.

4. Extending the school community – looking for “ways of enriching the distance learners’ existing community connections”, which has “the potential of putting the university in a position to positively affect the students’ larger culture, which is not inconsistent with a Christian philosophy of education” (p. 17).

Surprisingly, Rovai et al. did not consider the church as a conduit for community or formation. Rather, as seems common in theological education literature, community and formation are considered from the perspective of the theological school. On-campus education is held as the biblical model for education; Rovai et al. (2008), for example, cite Caddell and Diekema (2002, p. 25) as stating that “Paul’s extensive
travels would not have been necessary had his physical presence not been preferable to correspondence” (p. 4). Rovai et al. (2008) conclude that

…the unique challenge for the Christian administrator or professor is to extend educational opportunities without compromising the affective and spiritual growth and development of students.... To borrow a Jesuit concept, true Christian education involves *cura personalis* (care for the whole person) and this should occur even for distance learners (p. 4).

Implicit in Rovai et al.’s conclusion is the assumption that *cura personalis* is characteristic of the on-campus experience, earlier critiqued. The concern related to affective learning is considered later in this review; for now, the discernable themes of embodiment and online community are addressed.

The issue of embodiment in theological distance education is raised as a concern by several authors (Basney, 1999; Diekema & Caddell, 2001; Kelsey, 2002; Naidoo, 2012; Sasse, 1998). Essentially the objection is that, because students do not meet with their educators or one another, distance students’ learning experiences are disembodied through lack of community. The criticism is based firstly on the association of the revelation of God through the incarnation of Christ. Central here is the theme of the incarnation proving the ideal of physical presence. Diekema and Caddell (2001) go so far as to say “is not the incarnation of Jesus Christ ultimately God’s rejection of distance learning? If relationship was an unnecessary component, would Christ’s physical manifestation have been necessary?” (p. 182). Physical presence, it is claimed,

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16 Ironically, had Paul been able to visit all destinations he needed to when he wanted to we would lack half of the New Testament writings today. As Paul’s writings demonstrate, where he could not be physically present his written word carried his authority and projected his teachings. Paul has not visited churches for almost two millennia however his writings continue to influence and form Christian believers.

17 The incarnation is neatly defined by Erickson (2001) as “A reference to the doctrine that the Second Person of the Trinity [Christ], without giving up his deity, became a human being” (p. 98).

18 That their own experience of and participation in this incarnation is, necessarily, at a temporal and spacial distance seems not to have occurred to them.
encourages the relationality required to access others’ perspectives in order that we can overcome our own subjectivity (Hall & Thoennes, 2006). Sasse’s (1998) position is typical of the critics of theological distance education:

The model [used for theological education] should be embodied, fully human education, where there is personal contact between teacher and student. Distance learning is solitary learning...the reality is that teachers and students who are in the same place can eat together, walk together, and talk together. This is the ideal context for truly human education, and it should be our model (para. 45).

The objection to theological distance education on grounds of embodiment is challenged on theological grounds by several authors (Gresham, 2006; Hess, 2005a; Kemp, 2010; Lowe & Lowe, 2010a, 2010b). Gresham (2006) suggests that criticism of distance education based on embodiment actually reflects a misunderstanding of the incarnation, proposing that “virtual instruction can be incarnational if it points students toward response to the gospel in their daily lives and if the instructor communicates his or her own lived participation in the truth” (p. 27). Incarnational pedagogy, says Gresham, can be expressed in terms of participation and life experience rather than physical presence. Gresham further suggests that a distinction can be made between belonging to a worshipping Christian community and an educational community, citing the Pontifical Council for Social Communications’ (2002) recognition that the internet can be used to complement incarnational realities, particularly for the purposes of education. Whether on-campus seminaries are themselves incarnational, on the grounds that the on-campus experience tends to remove students from everyday lived world experiences (Gresham, 2006; Shaw, 2005), raises an interesting counter-perspective.

Recent literature describes the mechanism by which theological distance students, studying in the context of their own church communities, do experience embodiment (Kemp, 2010; Lowe & Lowe, 2010a, 2010b). Lowe and Lowe introduced the concept of
*allēlon,* a term used about 100 times in the New Testament, into the debate. *Allēlon* describes the reciprocity of activity among Christians which, when exercised, results in formation. Lowe and Lowe (2010a) claim that *allēlon* is the expression of Christian fellowship that involves a

...reciprocal exchange of behaviors, attitudes, and actions that we influence one another toward Christian development.... These reciprocal relationships stimulate our growth in faith and that growth can only happen as we relate to one another as members of the ecosystem of the body of Christ (pp. 291-292).

Various authors suggest that study in a church context can actually provide a more authentic embodiment for theological students than that possible in on-campus settings (Gresham, 2006; Hall & Thoennes, 2006; Hess, 2005a; Kemp, 2010; Lowe & Lowe, 2010a, 2010b). Indeed, it has been pointed out that having students withdraw from authentic church contexts for the purposes of study can lead to students developing an unhealthy idealistic and docetic view of the church (Thomson, 2003). One prominent study of community in on-campus theological education (Thoennes, 2008) found that vulnerability and authenticity were not necessarily components of the on-campus seminary experience. Respondents in Thoennes’s (2008) study also commented that

...college life is not real life, and that fact necessarily contributed to a negative community experience. In their thinking, anything contrived or institutionalized is less than real. Unless intimacy occurs naturally and unprovoked, it is not genuine...and true community is not possible. Institutional prodding only aggravates the situation and encourages facades (pp. 81-82).

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19 In the New Testament, the term *allēlon* (New Testament Greek: ἀλλήλων) is defined as “each other, one another, mutuality” (Arndt et al., 2000, p. 46). It is the key term in such passages as Romans 12:5 (RSV): “…we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another”; Galatians 6:2 (RSV): “Bear one another’s burdens…”; Ephesians 4:25 (RSV): “…we are members one of another”; and James 5:9 (RSV): “Do not grumble, brethren, against one another…”.

20 That is, reflecting the belief of Docetism, “the doctrine that Christ’s body was not human (being either a phantasm or of real but celestial substance) and that therefore his sufferings were only apparent” (Soanes & Stevenson, 2004, n.p.).
The criticism of theological distance education on grounds of embodiment, then, may be interpreted as somewhat ironic – particularly when on-campus education can have the effect of removing the student from their normal, authentic church community (Dietterich, 2005; Hess, 2008). The term embodiment in the Christian sense is understood theologically to refer to participation in the body of Christ, that is, specifically, the church (Kent, 2010; McFadyen, 2010). Theological distance education which enables students to study without leaving their church community might be even more embodied than its on-campus counterpart; this would particularly be the case should residential students re-locate away from their normal church community for the purposes of study.

The objection to theological distance education based on disembodiment is challengeable because students’ lived world and church context constitute an embodied reality. The significance of embodiment is typically thought to require the physical presence of teacher and learner, though this criticism tends to underestimate the role of the church community in formation. Critics also ignore the potential for online discourse as a means of sharing perspective.

The efficacy of online interaction is becoming a prominent theme in theological education literature (Hege, 2011; Heinemann & Estep, 2012; Hess, 2005a; Maddix & Estep, 2010; Mount, 2008; Shore, 2007), particularly in its potential for hybrid delivery. Despite increased interest in online theological education, formational outcomes are assumed to be either impossible or extremely difficult for distance education because of the perceived shortcomings of intermediating technology (Adam, 2002; Blevins, 2008; Blier, 2008). In an early critique, Basney (1999) writes that “the computer poses senses both of text and of community very differently from the traditional Christian understanding of them” (p. 429), adding that “the loose voluntary contacts of the net will generate free associations based on free preference. The question here is, is this what a community is?” (p. 430). More recent theological work, though, approaches
online communications from an appreciative perspective. Baab (2011), for example, writes that online engagement can be affective because it provides additional means for people to express interpersonal love; further studies into the dynamics of online religious community also suggest the efficacy of online interpersonal relationships (Campbell, 2005, 2010; Mount, 2008; Mullins, 2011). Online technologies are also applied widely by religious bodies for the sharing of ideas and resources (Frye, 2012).

The assumption made by critics of online community is that online interaction seeks to substitute for all forms of community a student will experience during their term of study. Instead intermediating technology provides human connection, and can be used to link individually-lived world contexts across distance (Baab, 2011; Blevins, 2008; Mount, 2008). As such, technology need not be considered an alternative to embodiment or a comprehensive solution to community. Instead, technology can be applied to provide connection across students, each situated within their embodied life-contexts, for the purposes of education.

The transactional distance (as defined by Moore, 2007) of on-campus theological education is being questioned by those suggesting the development of online communities (Lowe & Lowe, 2010b; Nysse, 2005; White, 2006). Nysse (2005) writes that “more ‘distance’ is involved in classroom education than is generally acknowledged, making the ‘distance learning’ in online education much less novel than it seems at first glance” (p. 200). White (2006) contends that formation is actually a factor of the dynamics that characterise the learning environment. Such things as vulnerability, authenticity, care, trust, integrity, and the community values of safety, transparency, boundaries and intimacy are cited not only as the ingredients for effective teaching, but also as foundational elements of formation through distance education. White (2006) adds that “spiritual formation can be nurtured in distance education through the creative ways in which faculty and students interact” (p. 303; see also Baab, 2011), specifically through online forums.
Two primary research studies investigate the dynamics of online theological education, both limited by small samples. Saines’s (2009) study was based on a series of qualitative interviews with six final year students, being the population of a class of Anglican ordination candidates. Saines (2009) challenges the use of technology and online learning techniques from the findings of his primary research study, which “offers support to the view that the tradition of the learning community – or a constructive relational teaching environment – remains important for the deployment of deep approaches to learning theology” (pp. 344-345). Unfortunately, Saines’s findings do not compare students’ experiences across different course designs; further, while Saines admits that deep learning is dependent on reflection, he does not consider whether online or distance learning might be configured such that they encourage reflection and therefore deep approaches. The other study, that of Mount (2008), considers the nature of online community in theological education among adults studying Catholic theology online. Ten students were involved, and there was no face-to-face interaction across the eight-week course. The course was on the subject of emergent themes of technology, with text and online community as the primary focus. Mount (2008) talks of “presence in distance” (p. 277) as the result of asynchronous online discourse, and claims that strong “communal bonds” (p. 278) were formed between class members through the online interaction that took place. The contrasting findings of these studies, and their limited samples, indicate further work is required.

While the evidence of Mount (2008) supports the theory of social presence (Garrison & Anderson, 2003; Nichols, 2010a) in online theological education, the significance of social presence’s contribution to formation cannot be demonstrated. Further research into the role of online social presence in student formation is needed. For now, the question of whether online community encourages formation gives way to a broader consideration of the online student’s community context, and the nature of that community.
It has been suggested that “[t]he term community is one of the most elusive and vague in sociology and is by now largely without specific meaning” (Abercrombie, Hill, & Turner, 2006, p. 71). Specific attention on what constitutes community, and the forms it might take, contributes to a deeper understanding of the role of community in formation. Here, two explorations of community are considered; the ecology model proposed by Lowe and Lowe (2010b), and the distinction between gesellschaft and gemeinschaft observed by Tönnies (2002).

Lowe and Lowe (2010b) explain their endorsement of formation through theological distance education in terms of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecology of Human Development theory, which considers the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem which makes up each individual’s context. The microsystem is the system “in which the person actively participates, such as the family, school, church, and community organizations”; the mesosystem is “a series of interconnected microsystems that involve the developing person as an active participant”; the exosystem is external to the individual person “but can have positive or negative influences”; the macrosystem is “[t]he sub-cultural or cultural context in which all of these other settings are situated” (Lowe & Lowe 2010b, p. 92, citing Bronfenbrenner 2005, p. 47). With reference to these elements of student context, Lowe and Lowe (2010b) suggest that spiritual formation through theological education should be considered in a way that “recognizes the powerful interconnections that individual elements have to the larger whole (holism)” (p. 88). Such comments are reminiscent of the work of distance education theorist Ormond Simpson, which established that the support of family and friends is central to the success of distance education students (Simpson, 2002, 2003). Lowe and Lowe (2010b) further note that the church as the Body of Christ is in itself an ecosystem or ecology characterised by interrelationships and interdependence. They conclude that:

By assuming the validity of previous arguments against the efficacy of theological distance education on student spiritual formation because it lacked a personal face-to-face community component, we may have mistakenly
jettisoned an equally valid part of the student’s ecology... What should alert us as theological educators is the profound influence of external contexts and settings while students are in our educational communities. We often wrongly assume that the greatest impact on a student’s faith formation while in seminary is from the seminary experience... Rather than adopting a myopic view of student spiritual formation that only considers what a given Christian institution may be doing to facilitate whole person transformation or focuses primarily on the exclusively spiritual aspect of Christian development, we serve our students best with a broad purview to account for the realities of student existence rather than an idealized notion that is a carryover from a bygone era (Lowe & Lowe, 2010b, pp. 99–100).

The perspective of anthropological ecology, particularly in the context of the Christian church to which each theological student is a part, greatly legitimises third generation theological distance education and its contribution to formation. Indeed, Lowe (2012a) writes that:

What human ecology theories tell us is that whole person development (intellectual, social, moral, emotional, psychological, and spiritual) is instigated through social interactions of limitless varieties that take place across the continuum of our ecosystems (p. 58).

The ecosystem of the online theological education student includes their church community as well as their online peer group; Lowe and Lowe (2010b) recognise the contribution both make to formation.

Another framework for contrasting and comparing forms of community comes from the work of Ferdinand Tönnies, who distinguished between two forms of sociological system. Gemeinschaft and gesselschaft are primarily distinguished as being based on (or bound together by) the natural will and rational will, respectively (Tönnies, 2002). While both have expressions of membership and authority, gemeinschaft communities are described in terms of fellowship, equality, and father-type authority. Gemeinschaft communities are “real and organic” (Tönnies, 2002, p. 33). In its New Testament ideal, the church is a gemeinschaft-type community (Tönnies mentions presbyters, that is, church leaders, as examples of authoritative figures in gemeinschaft). Gesselschaft
society, on the other hand, is based on self-interest and formal agreements based on “the difference in power of two parties, as in the labour contract” (Tönnies, 2002, p. 254). A gesselschaft society is “imaginary and mechanical” (Tönnies, 2002, p. 33). The formal relationship present in the seminary or formal theological education institution is suggestive of a gesselschaft society where belonging to the group is transactional, and individual self-interest and the attainment of a qualification take precedence. Online community in the educational sense might also be characterised as an example of gesselschaft, because the payment of fees and the commitment to study are required for membership to the community. The motive beneath the community or society characterises it as either gemeinschaft or gesselschaft. The church as “the spiritual family of God” (Elwell, 2001, p. 246), which Christians ontologically constitute, is clearly a gemeinschaft community; the seminary, based on a transaction of fees for tuition and assignment success for qualification is fundamentally a gesselschaft society. By its very nature, in Tönnies’s framework, the seminary could never constitute an equivalent community to the church, and could therefore never emulate the formational experiences possible in the church as a gemeinschaft community.

Ultimately, the church is viewed as the best setting for formation because church fellowship generates Christian character. Dykstra (1997, p. 106, cited in Estep et al., 2008) states that “People are formed in faith as Christian in Christian community, and our word for that is church” (p. 256). Bringing together the formational elements of church fellowship with those of theological education holds considerable promise. Overend (2007) proposes a bringing together of practical (‘emic’, church-based) and theoretical (‘etic’, academically-based) approaches to theological education. In doing so, education and formation are combined into a model based on habitus or way of life (Kelsey, 1992), which recognises, in the words of Ballard and Pritchard (1996, p. 69), “the Church as a distinctive and historical community foster[ing] values through corporate worship and shared discipleship, forming a ‘disposition of the heart’ of
Christians” (cited in Overend 2007, p. 135). The church *gemeinschaft* is uniquely placed to facilitate the development of habitus.

The potential for theological education to see the realities of the church and lived world as opportunities for formation is recognised by many (Cannell, 2006; Estep et al., 2008; Hall, 1988; Hill, 1998; Kelsey, 1992; Kemp, 2010; Maddix, 2009; Shaw, 2005). For example, Shaw (2005) suggests that life’s everyday context should be a pillar of theological education in general, adding that “Life experiences provide us with the questions we need to put to the text” (p. 99). Cannell (2006) adds that

...the seminary has not presented itself as an effective community of scholars who with humility assist congregations to understand their identity and purpose as the people of God, who participate in a shared journey toward spiritual growth and understanding, and who are learning how to engage contemporary issues with members of congregations and society (p. 40).

Returning to Thoennes’s (2008) study of Christian college students, respondents identified various main themes associated with their experience of community. Thoennes found that authenticity, consisting of being known (through the ability to be vulnerable with others based on trust), and not being judged by others were important factors for students’ next stage of formation in terms of faith development (Fowler, 1981, 1993, 2001). The students in Theonnes’s (2008) sample noted that vulnerability and authenticity were not necessarily components of the groups they were assigned to for the purposes of fellowship during their on-campus programmes. These findings indicate important potential for the church *gemeinschaft* in formation, alongside theological education.

A more in-depth study, already mentioned, was conducted by Palka (2004). Palka surveyed on-campus MDiv students at Concordia Seminary (United States) about their sources of community and spiritual development (formation). Some 457 responses from a population of 538 were received; of importance to this study is the finding that 72.3% of respondents reported that their primary support community was
external to the seminary, and 56.2% indicated the same for their spiritual development. Contrary to the oft-claimed idea that professors and the classroom are essential elements of students’ community, Palka (2004) found that

...seminarians identified the classroom context as only the third major community setting in which their spiritual formation takes place; and a striking finding is the prominent role of external church congregations in the students' community life. Students perceive congregations (including home and fieldwork communities associated with the MDiv program) as the primary community provider of material and non-material support, and of opportunities for spiritual development. Congregations are perceived as comparable with formal classroom tuition in relation to knowledge construction, and are identified as the second largest community provider in the transfer of information (p. 5).

While caution must be taken in generalising from a single study, it seems likely that the value of the on-campus community must be considered in the context of the value students place on their own ecclesiastical association. To the extent that formation relies on interpersonal authenticity, a student’s long-term church *gemeinschaft* community (and their normal social ecosystem) would seem the best setting.

That distance students are still in their authentic and embodied church communities, and have access to others’ perspectives through third generation distance education, goes some way to exposing the weaknesses of the embodiment objection. While it may be possible to concede that the experience of studying at a distance might be described as disembodied, at no stage does any participant cease to be an embodied person or being part of an embodied daily context. For those distance students in church membership, such embodiment has the added benefit of being in the form of *gemeinschaft* Christian community.

Diekema and Caddell (2001), already cited as scathing of the potential for distance learning in theological education, close with the statement that “It is in the church, the community of believers, that we come to acquire a distinctive identity as a Christian in the full sense of that term. This should be the model for education” (p. 184). Maddix
and Estep (2010) also highlight the potential for the church as context for spiritual formation practices for distance students. In their description of theological education at a distance (requiring compulsory meetings with a dedicated spiritual mentor, with students involved with church ministry), the point is made that “this approach is more transformative than in a traditional classroom context” (Maddix & Estep, 2010, p. 431). Indeed, McEwen (2012), writing with reference to transformative learning theory, notes that “the church as community is the primary social structure through which the gospel works to bring transformation” (p. 352). The specific contribution of transformative learning theory to this study will be explored later in this review.

Concern about the formational outcomes of theological distance education are mainly centred on the belief that distance students will not experience the same community as their on-campus counterparts. Critics of theological distance education express this concern in terms of embodiment, and in comparison with an optimal sense of the on-campus formation experience. Counter-perspectives to these concerns, pointing out that distance education students participate in embodied ecologies, and experience formation as members of *gemeinschaft* communities (particularly the church), also appear in literature. Attention now turns to the perceived lack of affective outcomes, which is a further criticism related to the formational potential of theological distance education.

**Primary concerns: Cognitive and affective dualism.**

Theological distance education is held by its critics to focus on cognitive development, and is consequently considered insufficient as a means for the affective development required for the purposes of formation (Bramer, 2007; Killacky, 2011; Patterson, 1996; Rovai et al., 2008). The perspective of these authors is as follows: spiritual formation takes place through the affective domain, and the affective domain is not adequately
addressed through distance education. As theological education is rightly concerned with the formation of its students, the argument continues, distance education should be rejected as a sole means of instruction. While the equivalence of cognitive outcomes for distance education is acknowledged by Patterson (1996), distance education is rejected on the grounds that it is not concerned with “the elusive realm of noncognitive development” (p. 66). Of primary concern is the relative lack of interaction with faculty (Cannell, 1999; Patterson, 1996), though a dualism of cognitive and affective learning is also evident.

Dualism between cognitive and affective outcomes is often suggested in theological education literature (Habermas & Issler, 1992). Intellectual and formational outcomes are typically equated with cognitive and affective outcomes respectively (Bramer, 2007; Flattery, 2002; Patterson, 1996). An alternative view can also be discerned in literature. Reflection is considered a means of engaging affective learning (Setran et al., 2010), as is the use of thought-provoking questions that encourage authentic dialogue across a supportive learning community (McEwen, 2012). Criticism in theological education is also aimed at distinctions across theory and practice (Wood, 1985), which tend to polarise theological subjects unnecessarily. Divides between the cognitive and affective may be somewhat artificial.

Patterson (1996) makes a connection of the affective with deep learning, in stating that “most educators agree that ‘deep learning’ involving values, attitudes and beliefs does not occur unless the affective domain is also involved” (p. 66). Contrary to this conclusion is literature indicating that students’ adoption of a deep approach to learning is actually related to course design and the actual subject being studied (Dillon & Greene, 2003; Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005), rather than any implicit features of teaching modality.

The potential for online community for addressing affective outcomes is mentioned by several theological education writers (Baab, 2011; Hege, 2011; Heinemann, 2007; Hess,
2005b; Maddix & Estep, 2010; Mount, 2008; Shore, 2007; White, 2006), many of whom comment that engagement of the affective domain is actually dependent on the educational or pedagogical approach adopted. For example, Maddix and Estep (2010) go so far as to assert that “it is not a matter of whether the Internet [sic] has the potential as a means of engaging spiritual formation, but to what degree that potential can be realized” (p. 430); Hess (2005b) suggests that affective and psychomotor outcomes can be engaged even in online environments, provided they are approached creatively. Friendship can also be facilitated through online means, provided communicants are intentional in their attempts to demonstrate love (Baab, 2011). White (2006) recommends that online distance educators deliberately apply instructional strategies that focus specifically on the affective domain. These include making spiritual formation an explicit course goal, having instructors model a redeemed personality in the online space, personalising the engagement experience for students, encouraging interaction, and promoting a safe and nurturing community. White maintains that deep online engagement with students, reaching across geographic distance, in some ways models the way in which God draws near to us. The Apostle Paul, White suggests, exemplified this in his own relationships with distant congregations; it is further pointed out that Paul made use of multiple personalising strategies in his New Testament letters in order to connect with his readers. These strategies included greeting people by name, expressing concern, praying on their behalf, using questions to encourage personal reflection, and expressing his own personal struggles (White, 2006).
2006). Each of these, White suggests, can be used to engage the affective domain in online theological education settings.

White’s suggestions are similar to those of Shore (2007), and Blevins (2008). Blevins, who writes on the relationship between technology, Christian education and formation, helpfully distinguishes between the participating and the practising self; it is the latter that uses technology, as an intermediary for participation. Further insight is provided by Helland (cited in Maddix & Estep, 2010), who differentiates between religion on-line, and on-line religion. These two terms contrast information about religion and participation in religion through online mediation. In other words, online interaction can be applied in different ways, including “contributing personal beliefs and receiving personal feedback” (Helland, 2000, p.214). As such, online interaction serves as a means of genuinely connecting individuals. To Blevins (2008), the key to understanding technology’s role in formation is not a matter of ontology (what it is), but rather one of praxis (what it enables, how it is used). As such, technologies can be characterised as “extensions of human action or activity...often accentuating, reframing, or impeding action, but human action nevertheless” (Blevins, 2008, p. 148). Technology, Blevins argues, may be an intermediary to communication that comes between human communicants, but it is nevertheless an enabler of human communication. Blevins (2008) concludes with the statement that “Technology may be...formative as it supports the ongoing [sic] life and practice of the person, woven into their very beings as extensions of their personal relatedness, of their contextuality within this world, and of their ongoing complexity” (p. 152). Clearly the students’ own life context is directly relevant to their formational and embodied experience for the duration of their theological study, and technology can be applied to education in ways that encourage students to relate what they are learning to their daily lives (Blevins, 2008; Maddix & Estep, 2010).
The separation of cognitive and affective domains is challenged in two ways across theological education literature. Firstly, ways are sought to influence affective outcomes through particular approaches to learning; those of White (2006) have already been mentioned. Setran et al. (2010) add the suggestion of using soul projects in theological education, that is, activities focussing on the likes of journaling and identity formation that deliberately seek to bring together cognitive learning objectives and affective development. Situated learning is also a promising instructional approach for theological distance education that is yet to be widely implemented (Kemp, 2007). Further work in the area of instructional design for theological education also suggests ways of emphasising affective learning (Graham, 2002, 2003).

The second challenge to cognitive and affective dualism is the recognition that the two cannot be neatly separated. Kelsey (1992) phrases this well:

Is it adequate to pose the central diagnostic question in relation to these matters as a question whether [a particular] school in its full social reality tends more to form persons’ ‘heads’ or their ‘hearts’, as though if it were a matter of heart it would then necessarily be less a matter of head, or the reverse?...Do the contrast terms conventionally used in discussions of theological schooling, such as ‘head/heart’, really serve to illuminate the relation between this school and these persons, or do they not rather tend to obscure it by abstracting it from its social, cultural, and very physical dimensions?...‘Conceptual capacities’ are as necessary for emotional life (heart) as they are for critical reflection (head); bodily ‘action’ is as integral to reflection (head) as is experience (heart), even ‘religious experience’ (p. 262).

Kelsey’s insight here brings together the themes of embodiment, community and affective outcomes. Hall and Thoennes (2006) point out that the Christian understanding of embodiment recognises that we cannot separate body from mind, and that healthy embodiment is actually relational in character. They also (citing Schulkin, 2000, p. 4), mention findings in brain imaging which “suggests that even cognition, ‘thinking’, is connected to the visceral/autonomic systems such that ‘all emotions are cognitive’” (Hall & Thoennes, 2006, p. 37). Further, they suggest that the
incarnation has several lessons for Christian educators. Firstly, we should be aware “that we are teaching embodied creatures” (Hall & Thoennes, 2006, p. 43), so that we aim to engage the mental and emotional faculties of students. Secondly, we can acknowledge the subjective nature of our own embodiedness and our subsequent “need for others to help us arrive at the truth” (Hall & Thoennes, 2006, p. 44). Hall and Thoennes assume an on-campus connection with students, though they do make the point that the meeting of minds in education cannot be separated from the deepening of hearts; thinking is in itself an act of personhood. An embodied education, then, connects the cognitive and affective because it recognises the participation of a person.

The unification of cognitive and affective learning has implications for understanding the formation of students in theological distance education. Smith (1988) believes that it is not the place of theological education to teach formation; rather, she suggests that the sorts of courses offered at seminaries promote an indirect formation insofar as theological education “in its broadest parameters can be engaging and enriching” (p. 93). In response to the question of whether theological schools should be concerned with formation, Smith (1988) answers

I believe, it cannot do other. It is, in fact, inherent in the very nature of what we do...I would argue that to study theology in the context of the history of human religiousness is automatically to study, to learn about, and thus in some sense to appropriate... (p. 94).

If Smith is correct, so-called cognitive learning in itself influences formation. This conclusion is shared by Glennon et al. (2011), who go so far as to claim that “formation is always taking place in even the most information-centered courses and classroom settings” (p. 362). Jacobsen and Jacobsen (in Glennon et al., 2011) agree, adding that formation is continually taking place across all subject areas. Grasping more about a theological concept also expands the learner’s ability to respond to it. As the head is enlightened the heart responds, and it is possible to make use of a cognitive emphasis to extend thinking in ways that enhance the formational experience (Kelsey, 1992). The
unity of cognitive and affective learning, and the subsequent link to formation, is also reminiscent of Farley’s *theologia*. The development of sapiential wisdom, informed by biblical truths and the relation of those truths to everyday life, is central to *theologia*. The recognition of harmony across cognitive and affective outcomes is also implicit in the theory of transformative learning.

The primary objection to theological distance education in literature relates to its ability to facilitate formation. While the pursuit of formation as a distinctive activity is difficult even in on-campus settings, the potential for distance education to be formative is criticised on the grounds of distance students’ experience of community. Distance study is portrayed as disembodied, individualistic, and insufficiently affective. Contrary perspectives suggest that community should be understood in terms of a student’s overall ecology, including the church. Distinguishing between *gemeinschaft* and *gesselschaft* communities adds further nuance to the debate. Finally, challenging cognitive and affective dualism suggests a different means of considering the role of theological education to formation.

The theory of transformative learning also makes a useful contribution to the debate concerning cognitive and affective dualism, as the theory looks to perspective transformation as an overall outcome of education. Perspective transformation transcends cognitive development, in that a change in perspective effectively influences an individual’s entire personal outlook and subsequent behaviour.

**Transformative learning and formation**

Mezirow’s theory of transformational learning (1990, 1991, 2000) is defined by English (2005) as “a process by which previously uncritically assimilated assumptions, beliefs, values, and perspectives are questioned and therefore become more open, permeable, and better validated” (p. 630). Transformative learning is a well-established education
theory with a substantial literature (Fleischer, 2006; Malinen, 2000; Mezirow & Taylor, 2009; Mezirow, 1990, 2000). The theory was based on a study of women returning to community college and their development of perspective; its genesis lies in work performed by Jack Mezirow in 1978 (Mezirow, 2000). The theory recognises that learning is more epistemic than cognitive, in that the learner does not merely know more, but becomes a different person. To Mezirow (1990), transformative learning is evidenced through changed decision-making and acting on new insights.

Transformative learning theory has been directly linked to the process of Christian discipleship and formation in literature (Ball, 2012), as an expression of theological education students integrating “learning and life” (p. 146). Transformative learning is aligned with the epistemology and formation of theological education as explained by Gorman (2001):

To commit to transformational learning is to commit oneself to examining assumptions and paradigms that will challenge our comfort, our control, and our concepts.... As believers, all our knowing must be shaped by our relationship to the Logos (the Word) - and results in our more fully knowing (not just rationally) God. To know is to experience God. Since God is truth the experiencing of truth (all truth) should lead us to God and knowing God. Truth, therefore, is to be transformational (p. 26).

Theological education can be transformative insofar as it intentionally encourages reflection and the reconsideration of one’s own perspectives in the context of theological themes.

Wood’s (1985) notion of theological education as vision and discernment brings together the themes of formation and transformation in the years before Mezirow’s theory was more broadly articulated. To Wood (1985), theological education should result in an individual developing the capacity for reflection; he writes “learning to be critical involves a kind of self-formation or self-transformation” (p.88); Wood here links the development of Christian character with the ability to be critical and reflective. It is in this sense, says Wood (1985), that “theological education can be
properly regarded as ‘formation’,” particularly if formation is considered to consist of
the development of “theological judgement” (p. 89).

Transformative learning can take place through experiences that are anomalous to
previous experience, otherwise known as a “disorienting dilemma” (Mezirow, 1990,
p. 13). While such dilemmas are frequently encountered as major events in normal life,
they might also be provided through a formal education situation. Such dilemmas
“can serve as ‘trigger events’ that precipitate critical reflection and transformation”
(Mezirow, 1990, p. 14), specifically when coupled with reflective prompts, and critical
and authentic dialogue with others. Once critical reflection, which “involves a critique
of the presuppositions on which our beliefs have been built” (Mezirow, 1990, p. 1) is
applied to the disorienting dilemma, transformation can result. Mezirow’s (1990)
fundamental assertion is that “reflection on one’s own premises can lead to transformative
learning” (p. 18, emphasis original). Providing opportunities for self-reflection on one’s
own premises and preconceptions is an effective pedagogy that can lead to perspective
transformation. Such transformation might be “epochal, a sudden, dramatic,
reorienting insight, or incremental, involving a progressive series of transformations in
related points of view that culminate in a transformation of habit or mind” (Mezirow,
2000, p. 21). Studies confirm that such transformation can be measured across single
courses (Boyer, Maher, & Kirkman, 2006; King, 2009). Mezirow’s theory also suggests
that transformation is holistic, in that transformation represents change that is all at
once cognitive, affective, and conative.

The relationship between formation and transformative learning is described by Ball
(2012), who suggests the former is associated with “the growth of Christian character”
(pp. 122-123), the shape of which is generally known. Alternatively transformative
learning, Ball (2012) asserts, “carries the connotation of not just being ‘formed into X,’
but rather of being ‘changed from A to B’” (p. 123). Ball introduces the term integrative
learning as the means by which theological educators might pursue both; thus, transformative learning is intertwined with the concept of formation.

Transformative approaches to learning are critical for theological education (Ball, 2012). The major premise of the theory indicates that the potential for transformation comes from having students reflect and engage in dialogue, rather than anything necessarily inherent in the modality in which a course of study is experienced. Leslie (2004) notes that transformative approaches have the potential to help learners transcend their “distinctive ideological immersion” (p. 177) made up of political, social, socio-economic and cultural contexts; address the cognitive, affective and behavioural elements of learning; and add a prophetic edge to ministerial training. He adds “packages of discrete information do not provide the necessary skills for critical thinking” (Leslie, 2004, p. 171) needed by church leadership in a post-modern context.

The purpose of perspective transformation is to free students to understand knowledge as enabling them to see the world differently. As Fleischer (2006), writing from a theological education perspective, explains:

Mezirow theorizes that attitudes and beliefs formed early in life become the bases for action and integration of learning but later often constrain adult conceptualizations, integration of new information, and action without the transformation of these meaning perspectives into more complex and discriminating schemata (p. 148).

Fleischer suggests the key difference between integration of information and transformation of thinking is akin to thinking about a problem (instrumental), and thinking about why the problem is significant in the first place and considering our approach to the question (communicative). The issue is therefore between being able to think within problems, and being able to think transcendentally about them. Trelstad (2008) warns theological educators that transformative education can be threatening to students and suggests an ethical approach built on mutual trust, writing that “One does not seek to perform transformation of students; rather, learning is something that
occurs in a trust-based exchange of critical inquiry between the student and the professor, or the student and a discipline” (p. 200). Many theological educators do explicitly seek to transform their students, seeing transformation as the legitimate result of an intentionally liberal education (Ball, 2012; Foster, 2007), and a valid link to Christian discipleship and formation (Ball, 2012; McEwen, 2012; Sorensen, 2007). Transformation is inherently personal, influenced by each student’s formational background, learning context and their overall approach to the learning task (Johnson-Miller, 2005a, 2005b; Lamoureux, 1999; McEwen, 2012; Nichols & Dewerse, 2010; Trelstad, 2008).

Transformative learning theory, which suggests how higher education might transform an individual based on perspective transformation, is recognised as aligned with the epistemological and formational aspects of theological education. While the work of Ball (2012) contributes to the epistemological contribution of transformative learning theory to theological education, studies in the area of formation as it relates to theological distance education are lacking.

**Measuring formation in theological education**

Measuring formation is a complex exercise, primarily because a definition of formation, and what is considered evidence of it, must first be determined. The variable nature of what constitutes formation across various denominations has already been commented on. It is clear that formation contributes to discipleship; in literature, discipleship is assessed in terms of spirituality.

Measuring spirituality has a rich literature, in which the terms spiritual formation and spiritual growth are frequently used as synonyms for formation. Spirituality, then, becomes the characteristic to be measured. Defining spirituality in a way sympathetic
to respondents is a vital element of effective measurement (Bassett, DiPaola, Ewer, Longo, & Coleman, 2001; Hancock, Bufford, Lau, & Ninteman, 2005; Kapuscinski & Masters, 2010; Moberg, 2002; Slater, Hall, & Edwards, 2002). Moberg’s (2002) concerns about measuring spirituality relate to the limitations of transferability of studies, based on their underlying assumptions of spirituality (universal studies are therefore flawed); studies can only measure indicators of spirituality, and not the phenomenon itself; and, only those elements that can be measured are able to be validly discussed.

The issues of definition and assumptions of spirituality are such that the same instrument used across different denominational groups might bias the reported spiritual maturity of one denomination over another (Slater et al., 2002). Slater et al. (2002) add that it is possible in many quantitative instruments for respondents to be able to hide spiritual distress, and suggest that researchers attempt to measure “automatic (unconsciously processed) beliefs”, rather than “conscious ‘reasoned action’ processes” (p. 238). The authors also suggest that some respondents might exaggerate their answers in a form of impression management.

Another distinction in literature is between the measurement of cognitive and affective spirituality, and spirituality as expressed through behaviour (Kapuscinski & Masters, 2010). Measuring behaviour, according to Kapuscinski and Masters (2010), provides “a more balanced scientific knowledge base” (p. 195). Hall and McMinn (2002) contend that measuring spirituality is complicated by the necessity for clarity as to what is being measured, the potential error introduced by respondents’ self-reporting, ceiling effects, and defensiveness from respondents. A ceiling effect is the term used to describe a “considerable negative skew and/or the majority of individuals score within one or two standard deviations of the maximum score” (Slater et al., 2002, p. 239). Kapuscinski and Masters (2010) add the difficulties associated with no agreed means of scale development, and the plethora of instrument choice. Despite these complications, Ma (1999) remarks that
...limitations of scientific and empirical research does not mean that such studies are erroneous and have no worth, nor does it imply that spirituality can be reduced to mere concrete and rational entities and lose its mystical or spiritual dimensions” (p. 83).

Despite these reassurances, the concerns raised in literature do underscore the importance of a transparent, deliberate and cautious methodology for studies in the area of spirituality.

Kapuscinski and Masters (2010) state that “when choosing a measure for use in a research study, investigators should carefully scrutinize what conceptualization of spirituality is guiding their own thinking and research objectives” (p. 201). The difficulties of defining formation are such that the ATS, the major US accrediting body for theological seminaries across various traditions, insists that its members facilitate formation even though it does not venture to provide a definition (Lowe & Lowe, 2010b). Because formation for the purposes of this study is understood in its everyday and lifelong sense, it is important that spirituality be measured in a way sympathetic to the everyday context. Because formation is not static, and because distance students tend to be part-time and therefore study over an extended period, it is useful if a measure of spirituality is also able to provide insight into the respondent’s spiritual formation trajectory. An alternative to an instrument demonstrating trajectory would involve applying an instrument to the same population at two periods. That distance students tend to study less courses than on-campus students would make a time-based comparison difficult, because of the different experiences on-campus and distance students would be exposed to. An instrument showing trajectory provides a point of comparison as at a particular time, independent of life circumstances that may later alter respondent spirituality for reasons other than academic study. In other words, a single point of measurement controls for non-study related circumstances that may go on to influence spirituality. An instrument able to provide not just a measure of maturity but also an indication of the likelihood of further spiritual development is
preferred; measuring the actual difference of spiritual development across on-campus and distance students over time would be an interesting extension of this work.

While instruments used to measure formation and spirituality have not yet been as rigorously tested for reliability and validity as have major psychology instruments (Hill & Hood, 1999; Ma, 1999), many authors contend that spirituality can be measured, at least from indicators that are observable and measurable (Birkholz, 1997; Fee & Ingram, 2004). However it is also pointed out that spirituality cannot be measured objectively (Moberg, 2002). Indeed, Moberg (2002) cautions that “No research tool is perfect” (p. 54), as all instruments designed to measure elements of spirituality are based on particular assumptions that might be unique to the designer’s population of interest. The imperfection of instruments may explain why there were some 34 instruments developed between 1982 and 2008 (Kapuscinski & Masters, 2010). One prominent collection assembles 125 measures, arranged in 17 categories (Hill & Hood, 1999).

The lack of research into the formation experiences of theological education students has already been pointed out. Few studies related to the influence of theological education on student formation were found for this review; those that were located are concerned with a very specific context. All use different instruments and methods, and none is concerned with the formation experience of theological distance education students. More detailed coverage of primary studies is offered at this stage of the literature review as a bridge into the contribution made by this study.

The primary study most related to formation through distance education, that of Amos (1999) investigated educational technology and distance education across schools accredited by the ATS; while the survey did address formation in distance education

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22 The CSPP instrument applied in this study was not one of the instruments considered in Kapuscinski & Masters’s paper.
it did so from the perspective of the seminary, and emphasised the efforts seminaries made to build community at a distance.

Two studies measure the influence of the seminary on student formation. One (Rovai et al., 2008), already cited, considers community from the perspective of the seminary; the Classroom and School Community Inventory (CSCI) instrument was used in their study. The findings suggest the importance of on-campus community to formation, which, in Rovai et al.’s view, calls into question the efficacy of online and theological distance education. The study by Birkholz (1997) consisted of in-depth qualitative interviews with seminary students (54 longitudinal interviews, over a three-year period), exploring their understanding of spirituality and spiritual development. Birkholz found that most respondents felt they had grown spiritually while attending seminary, and faculty and staff were identified as the primary influences. Respondents did note that the modelling of staff was a mixed experience, and the knowledge gained through seminary study was included under the general heading of faculty and staff. This conflation of categories makes it difficult to extract the influence of new knowledge from the professors who facilitated it. A third study, that of Naidoo (2011), focuses on student perceptions of formational opportunities provided by their on-campus seminary. These studies provide useful insight into the formational experiences of on-campus students, but leave the influence of external factors (such as church) out of their analysis and do not provide a useful basis for comparison across different models of education.

Two further studies demonstrate the formational contribution made by Christian education generally (that is, not theological education specifically as the formal expression of Christian education). One major study (Roehlkepartain & Benson, 1996) found that lifetime church involvement and lifetime Christian education involvement had the highest relationship to mature faith among adults. The Roehlkepartain and Benson study measured formation expressed in terms of faith development toward
maturity. In their study, it was acknowledged that faith in itself cannot be measured; attention was given to those “visible signs or indicators in people's lives” (Roehlkepartain & Benson, 1996, p. 24) that would indicate a mature faith. The study was church-based \((n = 561\) congregations, 11,122 participants) and included adolescents from grades seven through 12. Finally, Williamson and Sandage (2009) performed a longitudinal study of evangelical seminary students \((n = 119)\), exploring formation in terms of religious and spiritual development across a two-year period. This study, which made use of multiple measures exploring complementary elements of formation, found general improvements in “demonstrated growth in intrinsic religiosity, spiritual well-being, spiritual openness, and questing” (Williamson & Sandage, 2009, p. 796), questing defined in terms of willingness to explore new forms of spirituality. The study also found that “those who became more intrinsically religious tended to become more active in the church, higher in spiritual well-being, and developed a realistic acceptance of some of the turbulence associated with a relationship to the divine” (p. 796). The studies of Roehlkepartain and Benson, and Williamson and Sandage, provide evidence that Christian education benefits student formation, but do not provide insight into its mechanisms nor provide clues as to whether theological distance education might be formative.

One major study reviewing the role of transformative learning in theological education across Australia, already cited, is of direct interest to this study (Ball, 2012). Ball's project seeking evidence for transformative learning in theological education drew from four 20-student focus groups, a survey instrument completed by 565 seminary students (237 first-year, 141 final-year and 187 as longitudinal cohort), and a national survey to church leaders (2,235 respondents) seeking retrospective perspectives on ministry training. Interviews with academic faculty, academic managers, church leaders and previous graduates from theological education were also held, and a national workshop involving some 73 delegates, “mainly senior teaching personnel, representing forty institutions associated with fifteen denominational traditions” (Ball,
Ball (2012) concluded that the transformative element of theological education in Australia typically relied on the “relatively unstructured extra-curricular life” (p. 2) of the campus; the study also found that, even though transformative learning was a popular aspirational goal, it was variably pursued. The focus of Ball’s study was the extent to which seminary education is and might become more transformative; distance education was excluded from his analysis.

**Is theological distance education formative?**

This literature review concludes that discipleship is the ultimate objective of Christian education, and all formation is valid only insofar as it contributes to discipleship. Theological education, as the formal element of Christian education, should be seen to further students as disciples by means of formal tuition. Theological education might have various emphases, though it is broadly accepted that the development of vision and discernment and the development of a wise way of life (as in theologia) are central. The role of and requirement for formation in theological education is disputed, even though it is a required element for accreditation by the ATS.

The demand for theological education is changing, with an older student base seeking flexible access to study opportunities. While theological educators are eagerly exploring online forms of education, distance education is excluded because of concerns surrounding student formation. Distance education has a proven ability in terms of cognitive development when particular educational strategies are adopted, but there is a dearth of primary studies considering the formation experience of theological education students.

Formation is considered by many to be a *sine qua non* of theological education, even though its implementation within the seminary is debated. Formation in theological
distance education is disputed because learning is separated from the on-campus community, and the belief that distance learning is best suited to cognitive, rather than affective, learning. Conversely, elements of literature also suggest that on-campus formation should not be taken for granted; distance students have a rich learning ecology in their daily relationships; formation requires participation in a genuine community, particularly the church; and the separation of cognitive from affective learning is artificial.

Transformative learning theory is also emerging as a theory of interest to theological education. Transformative learning theory proposes that the objective of higher education is perspective transformation, that is, the ability of the student to attain a more discerning, self-reflective and informed view of the world and their actions within the world. As with formation, no specific study into the transformative nature of theological distance education has yet been performed, but preliminary studies suggest transformative learning as a theory with rich potential for theological education (Ball, 2012; Nichols & Dewerse, 2010).

This literature review gives rise to an important question: Is theological distance education formative in itself because of each student’s ecological (ecclesiologial) context, and the transformative nature of higher education? If the answer to this question is affirmative, there can be no valid objection to its confident adoption as a means of meeting the changing demand for theological education. While the measurement of formation as spirituality must be carefully considered, literature indicates that such measurement is possible. A comparison of the spiritual maturity of on-campus and theological distance education students studying the same programme, with an indication of how maturity will continue to develop, would be a timely contribution to literature. Further insight into the respective formational experiences of on-campus and theological distance education students would add to
understanding of how theological education, irrespective of delivery type, contributes to Christian development and, potentially, transformative learning.
Chapter Three

Methodology

This study considers the spirituality and disposition toward further spiritual development of theological education students in both on-campus and distance education settings, as a means of comparing the formation experience of both groups. The study investigated students’ own perception of their formational experiences since they began formal theological study, and explored evidence for transformative learning experiences. A particular emphasis of this study was comparison between the spirituality characteristics of on-campus and distance study respondents, in order to gain insight into their formation. Differences between part- and full-time students were also considered. Because most distance students tend to be part-time, the analysis of part-time and full-time students predominantly evaluated the differences across on-campus respondents.23

As has been noted in the literature review, it is vital that the study be conducted with a representative understanding of spirituality in mind. For this study, an evangelical and broad definition of spirituality was used. Further, any measure applied to the question of spiritual formation in students must be congruent with a holistic view of spirituality. This study deliberately considered formation in its broadest sense. Many previous studies have measured spirituality or community only insofar as it occurs within the seminary environment, or without a consideration of how a student’s local church context contributes to spirituality (Birkholz, 1997; Ma, 1999, 2003; Rovai et al., 2008; Tenelshof & Furrow, 2000; Williamson & Sandage, 2009). Such studies are useful

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23 A very small number of Laidlaw College distance education students, less than five at any time, are full-time.
for determining those aspects of formal education that are perceived most beneficial for formation, but they overlook many factors that contribute toward formation in its overall sense.

Methodological Overview

The study used a mixed-methods design, appropriate when “the researcher seeks to elaborate on or expand on the findings of one method with another method” (Creswell, 2009, p. 14). The value of the mixed methods approach to this study is twofold. Firstly, in the area of primary research relating to spirituality, so-called pencil and paper quantitative surveys for spirituality are “susceptible to superficiality” (Sappington & Wilson, 1992, p. 63), so quantitative investigation is considered an incomplete method in isolation. A mixed-methods approach has significant precedent in studies measuring spirituality, as qualitative factors might help to further explain the findings of quantitative surveys (Hill, Sarazin, Atkinson, Cousineau, & Hsu, 2002; Moberg, 2002). Subsequently, the initial quantitative investigation into student spirituality and disposition to further formation was supplemented by qualitative interviews with self-nominating representatives. The design described here is characteristic of a sequential explanatory design as the qualitative study, in part, builds upon the quantitative results (Creswell, 2009).

Secondly, the results of the quantitative survey provided the means for selecting a purposeful sample from both on-campus and distance respondents, according to their spirituality profiles. A variation sampling approach, which involves purposefully selecting a range of cases so as to broadly explore an issue (Patton, 2001), was used. Qualitative interviews, conducted by telephone, explored the quantitative differences in spiritual maturity and disposition measured across the respondent groups (on-campus, and distance) in the initial survey. Interviews also specifically explored the perceived influence of study mode on the determinants of formation, including aspects of community and the transformative influence
of study. While the sequential explanatory approach is straightforward, the sequence does mean data collection took place over a longer timeframe than would a concurrent mixed-method or single-method design (Creswell, 2009).

**Researcher’s statement**

The motivation for this study was, in part, the observation that distance students studying toward a theological qualification seemed to be mature well-grounded Christians. Indeed, having met both on-campus and distance students, and having experienced part-time theological distance education myself, it seemed that distance students might even have an advantage over their on-campus peers when spirituality is measured in such a way that the student’s broader social ecology is considered. My previous work in distance education as a student and as an educator, later in theological distance education, have alerted me toward the advantages offered through distance study. Further, I subscribe to the holistic nature of transformation through academic study and reflection (Ball, 2012; Cranton, 2006; Fleischer, 2006; King, 2009; McEwen, 2012; Mezirow & Taylor, 2009; Mezirow, 1990, 1991, 2000). My assumption is that academic theological education, done well, enhances student formation in ways complementary to authentic Christian community (that is, the church). I also believe that the church community is the only authentic expression of the Body of Christ, and that it encourages a belonging and involvement more genuine than what might be possible in an on-campus or online community (Tönnies, 2002).

Further, at the time this study was started I was an employee of Laidlaw College, responsible for the development of online learning (including the training of distance education tutors). With these admissions, particular care has been taken to avoid bias in analysis, particularly in the disclosure of statements offered in qualitative
Every effort has been made to ensure that data collection and reporting has taken place with the utmost integrity.

## Participants

The primary group of interest for this study was all students enrolled in level five to level seven courses\(^\text{24}\) with at least 60 credits (the equivalent of one full-time semester of study) toward a Bachelor of Ministries or Bachelor of Theology degree with Laidlaw College. Graduates of the programme were not of interest for the following reasons. Firstly, distance students can take considerable time to complete their studies. Including graduates would include distance respondents who had been studying for up to ten years, compared with on-campus graduates who tend to study for three years. Second, the distance programme at Laidlaw College had only recently (as of 2003) adopted a consistent, third generation approach to distance education. Finally, the population of graduating degree students at the time of this study was very low whereas the number of distance students was comparatively substantial. In 2011, there were only 14 distance graduates from the Bachelor of Ministries and Bachelor of Theology degrees, combined.

Members of the population of interest were those enrolled either with the Henderson campus of Laidlaw College\(^\text{25}\) or with the College’s Centre for Distance Learning as at the first semester of 2010. Because of the common core of both degrees, most participants were likely to have completed the same courses. These courses were likely to have included course 401.515 Spiritual Formation. Students with at least 60 credits

\(^{24}\) Levels five to seven of the New Zealand National Qualifications Framework (NQF) are the three years of an undergraduate degree, and equivalent; see New Zealand Qualifications Authority (n.d.).

\(^{25}\) A further, smaller, campus is based in Christchurch.
toward their undergraduate degree as of the first semester of 2010 formed the population \((n=148)\). Students who have completed their first-semester equivalent of study were selected because of their exposure to the requirements of study, and (particularly in the case of distance students) they tend to be those students committed to completing their entire qualification. The population of interest studying on-campus in Auckland \((n=102)\) and distance \((n=46)\) was invited to complete an online version of the CSPP (the quantitative survey). A total of 77 responses were received (an overall response rate of 52%), 46 from the on-campus population (45.1%), and 31 from the distance population (67.4%).

In the online survey, respondents were asked if they would like to be considered for a follow-up interview. The online survey yielded 35 respondents who were willing to be contacted for interview; 20 interviews were initially considered, ten each from the on-campus and distance groups. Ten of those willing to be interviewed were distance respondents, and all were interviewed. Of the remaining 25, five each from on-campus full-time and on-campus part-time groups were purposively selected to provide diversity, based on analysis of the quantitative survey. For qualitative research it is not necessary to sample exhaustively, because the purpose of qualitative study is not to extrapolate to a population but rather to provide analytic and theoretical insight (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In the case of this study, the qualitative sample was selected in order to provide further insight into the quantitative survey, and to learn more about the community and transformative learning experiences of each respondent. Multiple respondents add to the validity and stability of findings (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Since data saturation was reached from the initial pool of 20 interviewees, further interviews were not considered necessary.
Instruments and procedures

Difficulties of measuring spirituality were discussed in the literature review. Moberg (2002), who provides an overview of methodology for those seeking to investigate spirituality, offers the following guidelines:

1. Appreciate the limited universal transferability of specific studies.
2. Use an instrument appropriate for the group being investigated.
3. Use an emic (from the perspective of the respondent) rather than etic (from the perspective of the researcher) understanding of spiritual wellness.
4. Acknowledge differences in spiritual perspective when performing comparative and cross-disciplinary studies.
5. Acknowledge “typologies of spirituality and its components” (p. 57).
6. Be precise with definitions.
7. Examine the influences of different definitions on study results.
8. Use a mixed-methods approach.

Moberg’s guidelines served as the basis for a search for an appropriate instrument. Because of the nature of this study, items three and seven are only indirectly relevant. Spiritual wellness, the concern of item three, is not a focus of this study; that said an emic approach (from the perspective of the respondent) has been applied in this study’s exploration of formation. For item seven, a single definition of spiritual formation has been adopted; the purpose of the study is not to compare across definitions of spirituality, but rather to compare two sub-groups based on the same definition.

The plethora of potential instruments for measuring spirituality (Hill & Hood, 1999; Kapuscinski & Masters, 2010) necessitates further criteria for selection beyond those suggested by Moberg (2002). The experiences of other researchers (Hall & McMinn,
2002; Slater et al., 2002) indicate that the research instrument selected for this study needed to meet four criteria. Firstly, it had to be based on a definition of spirituality congruent with evangelical Christianity to reflect Laidlaw College’s own heritage. Second, it needed to consider formation as a holistic activity, to be congruent with the broad definition of formation assumed for this study. Third, it ideally needed to consider spirituality as an on-going concern, such that the instrument could provide a trajectory indicating the rate of further formation. Finally, the instrument needed to have verified validity and reliability, and not be susceptible to ceiling effects.

The Christian Spiritual Participation Profile (CSPP) instrument was used for the quantitative survey (Thayer, 2004). It meets the four criteria as follows:

1. The CSPP is based on a theoretical approach to spiritual formation consistent with evangelical Christianity (Hancock et al., 2005; Kapuscinski & Masters, 2010; Ma, 1999; Moberg, 2002; Thayer, 2004). The CSPP affirms the contributions made by spiritual disciplines and Christian community to formation (Averbeck, 2008; Howard, 2008; Mulholland, 1993), and has been tested across evangelical denominations (Thayer, 2004). An instrument measuring spirituality must have a sound theoretical foundation (Hill et al., 2002; Sappington & Wilson, 1992). The CSPP considers in its analysis each respondent’s further spiritual development through concrete experience, abstract conceptualisation, reflective observation, and active experimentation based on Kolb’s experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984). Further, the instrument has been reviewed by six experts in evangelical formation (Thayer, 2004).

2. The CSPP endorses the holistic and on-going nature of formation. The use of measures that consider formation only in the context of respondents’ theological educational experience is inappropriate for this study. Measures that only consider a snapshot or measure of spirituality at a particular time are also less useful, because while they provide some indication of current spiritual
maturity they do not provide any sense of the trajectory the subject is on for further development. The CSPP measures “the intensity of a person’s involvement in a process that leads to desirable change” (Thayer, 2004, p. 196), providing a reliable indication of the respondent’s disposition to further spiritual growth, in this case based on Kolb’s experiential learning theory. The CSPP, then, recognises formation as a lifelong process influenced by experience, and the subject’s tendency to process their experiences into personal development and participate in learning as a lifelong process. Of various alternatives scales the SWBS (Spiritual Well-Being Scale) focuses on affective impressions rather than indicators of behaviour, and emphasises overall health rather than spiritual maturity (Sappington & Wilson, 1992); the FMS (Faith Maturity Scale) has difficulties relating to its definition of spirituality, which is at odds with evangelical Christianity (Thayer, 1993 in Thayer, 2004; see also Slater et al., 2002), and also measures an instance of maturity rather than a trend (Lowe, 2007; Slater et al., 2002); the SAI (Spiritual Awareness Inventory) is a measure of spiritual maturity developed for clinical use rather than trajectory for growth, and its emphasis is on one’s relationship with and awareness of God rather than formation (Slater et al., 2002); and the Spiritual Transformation Scale (STS) instrument indicates only whether spiritual growth is occurring, with no corresponding indication of maturity (Cole, Hopkins, Tisak, Steel, & Carr, 2008). Further, the STS instrument relies on a before and after comparison that is difficult given the part-time nature of distance study, as distance students study over a longer period of time. Differences across the populations of interest in this study make a time-bound comparison difficult, as some respondents will have benefitted more from their theological education experience than others.

3. *The CSPP provides insight into respondents’ formation trajectory.* Because part-time distance students tend to study across a longer period, establishing a spirituality trajectory is a more reliable basis for comparison than is attempting
to measure a perceived change in spirituality since initial enrolment.\textsuperscript{26} Part-time distance students will have experienced much more since beginning their studies compared to full-time on-campus students, because their exposure to life’s events is across a longer timeframe. The personal spirituality report generated by the CSPP includes a breakdown of the ten scales of the instrument and a profile based on the four modes of learning related to spiritual growth (equated to those of Kolb). Thayer (2004) states that “It is believed that the greater the extent of participation and the more balanced the participation in the modes, the more open the person is to transformation by the Holy Spirit” (p. 196).

4. The CSPP instrument has demonstrated validity and reliability, and no ceiling effect.\textsuperscript{27} Validity and reliability were confirmed in a pilot study; the pilot confirmed that the questions were correctly understood, and that the scales measure what they set out to measure (Thayer, 2004). The ceiling effect is a phenomena where respondents are likely to rate themselves closely to the maximum score possible, leading to a cluster of high results. The lack of a ceiling effect for the CSPP is in particular contrast to the SWBS (Spiritual Well-Being Scale), which is susceptible to ceiling effects particularly when used in evangelical samples (Cole et al., 2008; Fee & Ingram, 2004; Simpson, Newman, & Fuqua, 2008; Slater et al., 2002). The CSPP instrument measures behaviours rather than intention or dogma, making it less likely that a respondent will give the expected answer (Bassett et al., 2001), and reducing the potential for error based on subjective

\textsuperscript{26} That said, the CSPP can be used as the basis for a pre- and post-test study (Breon, 2008).

\textsuperscript{27} Thayer, in a personal email dated 26 January 2010, commented that the CSPP does have potential for a ceiling effect “if the students include in their answers--their thinking--all the school work and practices [sic] that they do for their degrees. They should answer the questions in terms of their own personal (voluntary) participation.”
recall (Edwards & Hall, 2002). In particular the criterion-related validity of the CSPP demonstrates its clear use of terms, addressing criticism related to the efficacy of quantitative measures of spirituality (Birkholz, 1997). The validity and reliability tests disclosed in Thayer (2004) involved a study that included church members and Christian college students from various Protestant denominations (n=899). The scale of the pilot contrasts to many other instruments, such as the spiritual growth instrument developed by Hancock et al. (2005).

The CSPP consists of 50 questions contributing to ten scales: Prayer (six questions); Repentance (four questions); Worship (four questions); Meditation (four questions); Examen of Conscience (eight questions); Bible Reading & Study (seven questions); Evangelism (four questions); Fellowship (five questions); Service (four questions); and Stewardship (four questions). The ten scales contribute to a ‘Four-sided figure’ profile that illustrates the respondent’s activity in the four modes of learning that contribute to further spiritual growth. The modes of learning referred to by Thayer are those of Kolb (1984). The Growing through My Relationship with God mode (reflective of Kolb’s concrete experience) consists of the worship, prayer, and repentance scales; the Growing through the Word mode (Kolb’s abstract conceptualisation) consists of the Bible reading & study, and meditation scales; the Growing through My Relationship with Others mode (Kolb’s active experimentation) consists of the evangelism, fellowship, service, and stewardship scales; and the Growing through Critical

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28 The CSPP has been criticised in that it is a self-reporting survey (Luman, 2005) however this is the case for all quantitative surveys relating to spiritual formation unless peer evaluation is used. A peer-evaluation methodology raises its own problems.

29 Hancock et al. (2005) did not consider the CSPP before developing their own instrument. Also discounting the spiritual growth survey for the purposes of this study are its doctrinal items (susceptible to attracting the ‘expected answer’); no subscales have yet emerged from the instrument; and the instrument items are not as specific to aspects of spiritual formation as is the CSPP. The spiritual growth survey has also been developed to help inform on-campus formation activities, rather than as a comprehensive measure of spiritual maturity and indication of further growth.
Reflection mode (Kolb’s reflective observation) consists of the examen of conscience scale. The Christian Spiritual Participation Profile instrument is included as Appendix A.\textsuperscript{30}

For the purposes of this study, the Denominational Code (demographic data) question was removed from the instrument, as it was considered irrelevant to the research questions (all participants were evangelical Christians) and would not yield sufficient data for the purposes of statistically significant comparison based on the size of population. Two additional demographic questions were added; one was a series of categories relating to the number of years the respondent has considered themselves a Christian, the other determining whether the respondent was studying on-campus or at a distance, and whether they were residential (living on campus). The demographic relating to age remains important, as several studies have found evidence that spiritual development is influenced by life stage in terms of Fowler’s stages (Fee & Ingram, 2004; Fowler, 1981, 1993; Lowe, 2007; Luman, 2005; Wink & Dillon, 2002). A further demographic question related to ethnicity was included as a requirement for ethics approval, though no analyses used responses to this demographic as the basis of comparison. As with the Denominational Code, it was unlikely that the data yielded would be of statistical significance in analysis.

\textbf{Implementation of survey.}

The CSPP is a pencil and paper survey. For this study, an online version of the CSPP was prepared using the online Survey Monkey research tool.\textsuperscript{31} Benefits of an online

\textsuperscript{30}Permission to include this copyrighted material was provided by the copyright holder and author, Associate Professor Jane Thayer, by email on 30 January 2013.

\textsuperscript{31}A personal email from Thayer, dated 29 January 2010, stated that the generation of an online version of the CSPP “sounds appealing.”
approach are a reduction in cost and the speed of data collection (Czaja & Blair, 2005) with the associated advantages of the respondent providing data entry services, meaning responses are ready for analysis once the online survey has been completed.

All Laidlaw College students are required to make use of a Laidlaw College email address. All online assignment submission and course information makes use of this email address. Permission was granted by Laidlaw College to use these email addresses to invite post 60-credit (one full-time semester equivalent) students to participate in an online survey relating to spirituality. Promotion of the survey also took place across Laidlaw College newsletters. The email sent to invite participation included a link to the online version of the CSPP instrument, and had the project Information Sheet in Appendix B attached. Students self-selected for the survey. Two reminder emails for the survey were sent. Toward the end of the survey instrument, respondents were asked to self-select for a follow-up interview; students were also asked if they would like the results of their CSPP emailed to them once the survey closed. In both cases, students were asked to provide their ID numbers so that they could be contacted for interview and/or have their results emailed to them. No effort was made to identify individual students based on their ID numbers unless the respondent was selected for interview.

The disadvantages of online surveys, namely uneven levels of internet access across respondents, comparatively lower response rates, potential for response bias, and the necessity for online instruments to be short (Czaja & Blair, 2005), were not considered to outweigh the advantages for this study for the following reasons:

1. All participants had internet access. Internet access is a requirement for all Laidlaw College degree students, and by the time students have completed their first-year equivalent they are in the habit of using their Laidlaw College email address, entering data, and submitting assignments online.
2. The use of electronic contact permitted more reminder messages to be sent, providing potential respondents with greater exposure to the survey link. This, combined with the incentive of a personal CSPP report and the familiarity of Laidlaw College students with online systems, had the potential to improve response rates over a mail-out survey.

3. The nature of the survey instrument was such that response bias through social desirability would be an issue regardless of whether respondents complete the survey on paper or online (Slater et al., 2002). The offer of one's own personal CSPP report acted as an incentive for online participants to respond honestly; those who did not request their CSPP had the option of complete anonymity,\(^{32}\) which improves the likelihood of honest response.

4. The CSPP is a brief instrument, consisting of 50 Likert-scale questions. No skips are necessary, making the instrument a simple one for the purposes of full disclosure on a single Web page.

The online survey was made available to the survey population on 5 April 2010; two reminders were sent on the 12\(^{th}\) and 19\(^{th}\) April. The survey closed on Wednesday 21\(^{st}\) April, after which all results were downloaded. Personal CSPP reports were issued on Friday 23\(^{rd}\) April 2010.

**Interview procedures.**

The purpose of the interviews was to investigate further the formation outcomes from the CSPP, and to explore the formational, community, and transformational experiences of respondents. Selected interviewees were asked by email if they were

\(^{32}\) This is not the case for those who did not want their CSPP report, but who did want to nominate for an interview.
still prepared to be interviewed, and whether they might provide a postal address so that the consent form could be sent to them. On positive response, they were sent a copy of the Interview Consent Form (see Appendix C) with a stamped, self-addressed envelope included. Once the signed Interview Consent Form was received, a time was made for a telephone interview. Once telephone contact was made and before the interview commenced, interviewees were invited to discuss the study and their role in it with the interviewer. Respondents were also reminded of their rights as participants, and were specifically asked if they were prepared to proceed with the interview. All interviewees agreed to continue. Interviews, conducted by telephone, lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. All participants gave their permission for interviews to be recorded.

A semi-structured approach was used to encourage the facilitation of dialogue and response (Carspecken, 1996; Seidman, 1998), rather than seeking answers to specific questions. The goal was for each interview to resemble a “prolonged and intimate conversation” (Punch, 2006, p. 172). Carspecken (1996) suggests using a set of lead-in questions to open specific domains of dialogue, and supplementing these with probing questions based on other listed items of interest in each domain. The discussion guide for the qualitative interviews (see Appendix D) was finalised following analysis of the quantitative data, so that the interviews could be informed by initial results. The objective of the guide was to ensure that each interview followed the same basic line of inquiry (Patton, 2001). Each question and probe in the semi-structured interview guide was evaluated following each interview to ensure that the question was adequately understood and responded to. Following the first few interviews, the probe related to cognitive and formation was made more explicit. Otherwise, the interview guide proved robust.

Following an initial introduction and confirmation of willingness to participate, interviewees were specifically informed that their Laidlaw College experience should not necessarily serve as the basis for their responses. The interview was concerned
with respondents’ all of life formation experiences, and not just those specific to their involvement with formal study. Initially, participants were asked to describe any encounter or behaviour they had been involved with for the duration of their study that was an episode of spiritual growth for them. Participants were then asked for a second example, one that either included or excluded their direct Laidlaw College experience as a foil to their first response. The purpose of requesting two examples, one related and one not related to Laidlaw College study, was to explore the relationship between the student’s study mode (distance/on-campus, full-time/part-time) and their immediate association with specific events for spiritual growth.

Once significant spiritual growth encounters had been described, the interview probed the participant’s experience of Christian community for the duration of study up to the time of the interview. Church involvement, service and the ability of the student to discuss their studies with others in Christian relationship were of particular interest. Next, students were prompted to describe a typical study time and to indicate whether their study experience contributed to spiritual growth. Typically, the student response led to a probing question relating to how they understood the relationship between cognitive and spiritual development. A subsequent avenue of inquiry related to participants’ perception of how study with Laidlaw College is formational.

Toward the end of the interview, students were asked to imagine they had to study in an alternative mode. On-campus respondents were asked what their response would be to having to study part-time at a distance; distance students were asked about having to study full-time on-campus. This question led to comments related to comparing on-campus with distance study for the purposes of formation. Finally, respondents were asked to share anything further they thought might be relevant to their formation since beginning formal theological study.
After each interview a contact summary sheet was prepared so that impressions of immediate note were captured to enhance reflection (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2001). Contact summaries were prepared in the following format:

1. Respondent and date/time of the interview.
2. Key issues or themes that arose.
3. One-sentence descriptions of responses to each question (also noting whether the question was effective).
4. Salient, interesting or illuminating points from the interview.
5. Any items for follow-up with this or other respondents.

Once all interviews were complete, a transcription service was used. All transcripts were checked against the original recording to confirm accuracy and provide a means of reflection.

**Data analysis.**

The raw data from the CSPP survey was downloaded from the Survey Monkey Web site once the survey closed. The ten scales of the survey were automatically calculated for each respondent, based on a series of spreadsheet calculations configured according to the scoring sheet. Those respondents requesting a personal report had their results emailed to them using an email merge to their Laidlaw College email address.

Five hypotheses were tested, each related to the first research question:

1. There is no significant difference between the overall spiritual maturity of on-campus and distance education students, null hypothesis.
2. There is no significant difference between the formation trajectory profiles of on-campus and distance education students, null hypothesis.
3. Full-time students (on-campus and at a distance) have similar overall scores across the a) Fellowship, b) Service and c) Stewardship scales of the CSPP as part-time students (on-campus and at a distance), null hypothesis.

4. Students across various age groups report similar levels of spiritual maturity, null hypothesis.

5. Students report similar levels of overall spiritual maturity regardless of their length of time as a Christian (self-reported), null hypothesis.

Analysis for hypotheses three through five was at the five per cent level of significance. Fellowship, service, and stewardship were the scales selected for testing in hypothesis three because it seemed likely that these would be the scales most likely to be different across the on-campus and distance samples. They are also the only three scales dependent on Christian community. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) and t-tests were applied to the data, to measure statistical relationships and compare across groups. For hypotheses one and two, an average of factors was taken as the overall measure for spiritual maturity and spiritual formation trajectory, respectively. The use of an averaging of factors to provide an overall indication of spirituality is an assumption based on the make-up of the CSPP instrument itself. The CSPP instrument implies that all disciplines considered for hypothesis one are equally important, stating that those areas less strong in a particular individual’s case are those that need to be emphasised for further spiritual growth to occur (Thayer, n.d.). To assess hypothesis two, the trajectory factors are also averaged to provide an overall measure. This average is consistent with the assumptions underlying the CSPP instrument, as “The theory on which the CSPP is based states that spiritual growth can be enhanced by a balanced, in-depth use of all the modes because these learning modes provide different ‘learning opportunities’ that God uses to transform us” (Thayer, n.d., p. 3).
The credibility of qualitative research is, to a major extent, reliant on rigorous method (Creswell, 2009; Patton, 2001; Punch, 2006). Some comments on data analysis are therefore necessary to provide assurance that the qualitative data was gathered and treated appropriately. Miles and Huberman (1994) note that “human judgments are consistently less accurate than statistical/actuarial ones” (p. 262). This, coupled with the fact that many qualitative researchers work in isolation, makes rigorous methodology vital. It is acknowledged that the transfer of data from notes into categories is a fallible process (Patton, 2001). While qualitative findings and analysis cannot be guaranteed accurate, steps can be taken to ensure confidence. It is vital that methods of analysis are carefully constructed, as it is from analysis that inferences are made and conclusions drawn (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Miles and Huberman (1994) define analysis “as consisting of three concurrent flows of activity: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification” (p. 10). Their use of the term concurrent flow emphasises that the activities interact.

Data reduction: Coding is the first formal step in analysing qualitative data (Patton, 2001). So that the immediate impressions from contact summary sheets did not lead to premature conclusions, contact summary sheets were all put aside once all interviews had been completed (Patton, 2001). During the transcription checking activity an initial set of coding categories was drafted using ATLAS.ti software (www.atlasti.com/). Initial coding categories were community, internal formation, external formation, cognitive development, and faith development. An inductive approach was used that enabled the data to speak for itself as the basis for data reduction (Seidman, 1998). Coding was not subject to triangulation because of time and cost constraints. After an initial coding round, the themes in the contact summary sheets were revisited so that the summary sheets might enrich the initial choice of codes. ATLAS.ti was used to help

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33 Patton adds the credibility of the researcher and a philosophical belief in the value of qualitative inquiry as two further criteria.
establish relationships across the data. A further pass through the transcripts resulted in a new coding regime, which was applied to the data. Following further consideration of the coding scheme’s appropriateness, a further coding regime was applied. The coding categories of formation experiences (with sub-categories of ‘extra-College’, College formation, cognitive as spiritual, indicators of [trans]formation, and formation as process), community (sub-categories of church, and College), and perceptions of distance education (sub-categories of accessibility and flexibility and cannot attend on-campus, limited on-campus growth, isolation, interpersonal deficit, disempowerment, cognitive benefit, and power of forums) eventually emerged (see Appendix E). Memoing took place throughout the process (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Punch, 2006).

Data display: Displaying data in the summary form of typologies and matrices helps to identify links across the data (Patton, 2001). However, these only provide descriptive representations. A chain of evidence approach was adopted, by which apparent relationships are illustrated. The chain of evidence approach requires a gradual treatment of the data that reinforces “the classic procedure of analytic induction” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 261), through reinforcing cycles of enumerative (reinforcing) and eliminative (bounding) analysis. These cycles are similar to the dance between inductive then deductive analysis described by Punch (2006), “whereby data-driven inductive hypothesis generation is followed by deductive hypothesis examination for the purpose of verification” (p. 196). Constructing a chain of evidence establishes the major causative relationships within the data, bounded by statements that indicate limitations to causation. Establishing such a chain of evidence requires care to avoid the appearance of strictly linear representations which serve to oversimplify relationships (Patton, 2001). Once chains of evidence were drafted, the original transcripts were revisited with a specific search for negative cases. If substantial revision of the chains of evidence was necessary, further sweeps of the transcripts took place until the chains of evidence became firm reflections of the
transcribed data. Following this analysis, tree diagrams (Dey, 1993) were prepared to trace relationships and form categories; this enabled various themes to be identified. So-called discrepant findings (Creswell, 2009) are highlighted in the discussion of qualitative findings.

**Conclusion drawing/verification:** Clustering, counting, factoring and testing for relationships between variables are all techniques for generating meaning that were particularly applied, to ensure that interview data were effectively analysed. Various passes over the data assisted to establish the credibility of conclusions. The subjectivity of the researcher has been acknowledged, and multiple participants were interviewed to provide a basis for triangulation. Conclusions are provided with the goal of presenting an understanding of the data rather than a description; the emphasis of the analysis is on providing perspective rather than “singular truth and linear prediction” (Patton, 2001, p. 546).

Dey (1993) suggests producing an account in the form of a story as an optimal means of presenting qualitative data. In this study, the approach taken was to provide the narratives of distance and on-campus students separately, before highlighting areas of similarity and contrast. Once themes were identified, draft summaries for each theme of the data were prepared. It became clear that most relationships across the data were best clarified once distance and on-campus students were separated by their mode of delivery, though this was not always the case. Some themes, such as ‘perceptions of cognitive growth and spiritual formation’, were common across both distance and on-campus respondents. However most of the data, relating to themes of ‘community and learning context’, ‘formational experiences’, ‘formational dynamics of study’ and ‘perceptions of distance education’, was found to be best represented by considering the distance, then on-campus narratives individually. Such analysis enabled the clearest contrast across themes. This contrast also adds to the objectivity of the analysis, as across these latter four themes there was either commonality or fragmentation
within the distance and on-campus groups. For example, it was clear that the theme of ‘community and learning context’ would be best described once the similarities across the distance respondents could be summarised and contrasted with the more fragmented picture provided by on-campus respondents.

**Ethical considerations.**

The research plan for this study was approved by the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee (approval 10/014), and a formal letter of approval was received from Laidlaw College before respondents were approached. An information sheet (Appendix B) accompanied the invitation for response. A compulsory acknowledgement in the online survey read, “I have read through the Information Sheet and consent to my responses being used as described.” Consultation with Ngai Tahu through the University of Otago was also sought and approved, subject to the inclusion of a question requesting the ethnicity of participants. Ethnic data, while captured from respondents, was not used for the purposes of analysis as such analysis was beyond the scope of the study.

Respondents who chose to participate in the quantitative survey were not required to identify themselves, and no payment or reward was offered. However, the CSPP instrument is designed so that each completed survey can be used as the basis for a personalised spirituality report. Participants were given the option to receive a personalised report based on their response to the CSPP. Those students requesting their CSPP report were required to provide their student ID number so that the results could be emailed to them. The Laidlaw College email system is based on student ID numbers, so returning CSPP reports did not require any respondent to provide their name. Respondents to the quantitative survey who self-nominated for qualitative interview also needed to disclose their ID numbers so that they could be contacted for interview. The survey results for those students self-nominating were analysed to assist in the decision of whom to interview, and to inform the interview itself.
Data from both the quantitative and qualitative studies were stored electronically, on a password-protected computer. Quantitative results were gathered and initially stored on a password-protected server, using the online SurveyMonkey (www.surveymonkey.com) service. Quantitative results were permanently deleted from the SurveyMonkey server once raw results had been downloaded to the password-protected computer. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed electronically, again on a password-protected computer. A confidential transcription service was used. Printed transcripts were destroyed on submission of this thesis. Automatic digital backups during the data gathering and analysis processes were made using a secure online service (www.getdropbox.com). Raw survey results and interview recordings and transcripts will be kept in digital form for five years, after which they will be permanently deleted.
Chapter Four

Findings

This chapter presents first the qualitative, then quantitative findings of this study. Findings are here presented in reverse order of data gathering, as the interviews provide a rich and useful context for the quantitative data. Interviews revealed spiritual growth as occurring across both on-campus and distance respondents; in turn, the quantitative findings provide a measure of the spiritual growth and provide insight into its further likely trajectory.

Analysis is confined to the hypotheses stated in Chapter Three and the data gathered during follow-up interviews with 20 respondents.

Specific research questions for the study are repeated as:

1. How do post first-semester theological students, studying on-campus and at a distance, compare in their spiritual maturity and disposition toward further maturity?

2. How do post first-semester students perceive the contribution of their formal study experience to their formation across the term of their studies?

The comparison of spiritual maturity and disposition toward further maturity was measured using the quantitative CSPP (Christian Spiritual Participation Profile) instrument (Thayer, 2004), which is designed for use in evangelical contexts. Students’ perceptions of how formal study contributed to their formation was the subject of qualitative interviews, which also explored each respondent’s community context and impressions of how their studies had transformed them.
Qualitative Analysis

From analysis of the interview transcripts, six main themes were discerned: church community and learning context; formational experiences; formational dynamics; perceptions of distance education; perceptions of cognitive growth and formation; and observations about part-time study. For the first four themes, the responses of distance and on-campus students differed greatly, so each group is reported on separately. For the latter two themes, responses were similar, so both distance and on-campus responses are combined.

Ten each of distance and on-campus students were interviewed by telephone, to complement the CSPP survey. An interview guide was used to ensure consistency of questioning (the interview guide is included Appendix D). The interview explored the respondents’ formational experiences during study, with a particular emphasis on major spiritual encounters, community and relationships, and the perceived benefits of theological study. Respondents were also asked to discuss their perceptions of theological study on campus and at a distance.

The participants.

Of the 35 respondents to the quantitative survey who expressed willingness for interview, 20 were selected. Ten interviewees were distance students (one full-time), and five each were selected from the part-time and full-time on-campus respondents. Initially a purposive sample of on-campus respondents was selected based on demographic and quantitative survey outliers. A purposive sample is frequently employed in qualitative research because selecting a few participants at random can result in a biased view (Miles & Huberman, 1994). An emphasis on outliers can also
provide insight into diversity, resulting in a richer picture because of the “de-centering” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 34) of the sample. The purpose of the interviews was to explore the potential variety of responses, rather than serve as the basis for extrapolation. However, as findings indicate, there was a great deal of consistency across interviewees in multiple areas.

The distance sample of ten respondents was selected from 18 willing to be interviewed. To provide diversity, selection was based on the following:

- Student one had been a Christian for the lowest length of time (between six and ten years), and had a high overall disciplines score.
- Student two received the lowest score for stewardship.
- Student three was in the lowest age group for distance students (25 to 29) and had been a Christian for the lowest length of time (between six and ten years).
- Student four had high overall scores for the disciplines and learning characteristics.
- Student five was in the lowest age group and had been a Christian for the lowest length of time (between six and ten years).
- Student six had high overall scores for the disciplines and learning characteristics.
- Student seven represented the average in areas of age (40 to 65), length of time as a Christian (more than 20 years), and discipline and learning scores.
- Student eight was the sole full-time distance student self-nominating for interview.

Two additional students who were initially selected for interview, one with the lowest overall scores for the disciplines and learning characteristics, and the other who had
been a Christian for the shortest length of time, both declined to participate following initial contact. Two alternative distance students (nine and ten for the purposes of analysis here) were chosen at random from the remaining pool of potential respondents, and were interviewed to maintain the distance sample size of ten. Table 4.1 summarises the demographic characteristics for each interviewee; interviewees are themselves identified in this analysis by a number and a code indicating their distance (D) status. The disciplines and learning scores are carried across from each respondent’s CSPP results. The Disciplines score is the total score from the CSPP instrument across the worship, prayer, repentance, meditation, examen of conscience, Bible study/reading, fellowship, service, evangelism, and stewardship scales. The Learning score is made up of the various scales associated with the Disciplines score, based on the average of those Disciplines scores for each of the four learning capabilities suggested by Kolb (1984): concrete experience, abstract conceptualisation, reflective observation, and active experimentation. The scales that contribute to each of these learning capabilities are as follows: disciplines of worship, prayer, and repentance contribute to concrete experience; Bible study/reading and meditation contribute to abstract conceptualisation; examen of conscience contribute to reflective observation; and evangelism, fellowship, service, and stewardship contribute to active experimentation.
Table 4.1

Demographic characteristics of distance student interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>PT/FT</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Christian (years)</th>
<th>Years of Laidlaw study</th>
<th>Disciplines score</th>
<th>Learning score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1D</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>40-65</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>52.7</td>
<td>21.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2D</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>40-65</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>21+</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>47.2</td>
<td>19.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3D</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>25-39</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>48.5</td>
<td>19.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4D</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>40-65</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>21+</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>51.6</td>
<td>20.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5D</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>25-39</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>44.6</td>
<td>18.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6D</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>40-65</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>21+</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>55.3</td>
<td>22.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7D</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>40-65</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>21+</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>47.6</td>
<td>19.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8D</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>40-65</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>21+</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>42.4</td>
<td>17.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9D</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>40-65</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>21+</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>49.7</td>
<td>19.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10D</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>40-65</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>21+</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>44.9</td>
<td>18.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The interviewed sample of distance students was over-represented by students who were aged between 40 and 65, by those who had been Christian between six and ten years, and by those who had been Christian for more than 21 years. Neither of the two distance students aged between 17 and 24 expressed an interest in interview, nor did the single distance participant in the CSPP survey who had been a Christian between three and five years. Otherwise, distance student interviewees were broadly representative of the quantitative sample.

Of the 14 on-campus students who expressed willingness for interview, five were part-time and all were selected. Two declined interview, so additional full-time participants were selected at random. Of the nine full-time on-campus students, five participants were purposefully selected based on the following:
- Student seven had the highest overall scores for the disciplines and learning characteristics based on CSPP results.

- Student eight was in the oldest age group (40 to 65), had been a Christian for over 20 years and was an on-campus resident.

- Student nine was as student eight above, but non-residential.

- Student ten had the lowest overall score for disciplines and learning characteristics.

One additional full-time student was also purposefully selected based on being in the youngest age group (17 to 24) and having the shortest length of time as a Christian (between three and five years). As this student declined interview, another full-time on-campus respondent was selected at random. In all, seven full-time on-campus respondents were interviewed from the available self-nominating pool of nine.

Table 4.2 summarises the demographic characteristics of each interviewee representing on-campus students, and Table 4.3 indicates whether each respondent was, at time of interview, an on-campus resident, and whether they had relocated to Auckland for the purposes of studying on-campus. Interviewees are identified in analysis with a number and code, the C indicating the respondents’ on-campus association. Students 4C and 5C were interviewed in lieu of the part-time on-campus students who declined the invitation; students 1C through 3C were part-time students. The age spread of respondents across the on-campus and distance groups indicate the potential for different formational stages and needs arising across the interviewees (Fowler, 1981).
Table 4.2

Demographic characteristics of on-campus student interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>PT/FT</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Christian (years)</th>
<th>Years of Laidlaw study</th>
<th>Disciplines score</th>
<th>Learning score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1C</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>40-65</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>10-20</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>42.5</td>
<td>17.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2C</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>40-65</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>10-20</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>48.0</td>
<td>19.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3C</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>17-24</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>10-20</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>37.7</td>
<td>15.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4C</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>25-39</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>10-20</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>49.8</td>
<td>19.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5C</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>25-39</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>3-5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>40.1</td>
<td>16.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6C</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>40-65</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>20+</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>53.2</td>
<td>21.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7C</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>25-39</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>46.0</td>
<td>18.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8C</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>40-65</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>20+</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>46.1</td>
<td>18.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9C</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>40-65</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>20+</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>47.4</td>
<td>19.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10C</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>17-24</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>3-5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>38.7</td>
<td>15.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On-campus interviewees were over-represented by those who had been Christian between ten and 20 years (40%) when compared to CSPP respondents (30.4%), otherwise length of time as a Christian was broadly equivalent between the two samples. As with the distance student sample, students aged 40 to 65 were over-represented; again, this is the result of younger students declining the invitation for interview.
Table 4.3

On-campus interviewees and residential characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>Part-Time/Full Time</th>
<th>On-campus resident</th>
<th>Shifted to Auckland</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1C</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2C</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3C</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>Former</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4C</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5C</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6C</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7C</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>Former</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8C</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9C</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10C</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>Former</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Three on-campus respondents were residential, that is, they lived on the Laidlaw College campus at time of interview. Three former on-campus residents were also interviewed (two were resident the year before their interview). A higher proportion of full-time on-campus students were interviewed (70%) than participated in the CSPP survey (19.6%) for the sole reason that most on-campus part-time students were reluctant to be interviewed.

Church community and learning context.

Interviewees’ experience of church community during their study were of particular interest for this study because of the importance of community and church adherence for formation (Cannell, 2006; Estep et al., 2008; Hall, 1988; Hill, 1998; Kelsey, 1992;
Kemp, 2010; Maddix, 2009; Shaw, 2005; Thoennes, 2008). Interviewees were asked about their involvement in community and their relationships with others, specifically as these related to church involvement and significant fellowship relationships.

Of the ten distance interviewees, all were associated with a church community. All but one was also involved in a definite area of Christian service. The respondent who did not indicate any Christian service had recently changed church (he had been involved in his previous church’s music ministry). The only ordained person was a youth pastor, and only one other respondent was actually employed by her church (as a full-time administrator). The active service of the other seven distance respondents ranged from Alpha ministry34 coordination (two respondents) through to small group leadership. Two of the nine respondents involved with service did not have formal roles within their church, though one of these two was being supported and mentored in her study by her vicar, and was being encouraged toward ordination. The other was involved in Christian evangelism through an organisation external to her local church, though her church supported her work and she maintained a general contribution of service to her church. Respondents indicated that their studies had coincided with increasing involvement and responsibility in their church, which complemented their decision to study and enhanced its benefit. For example, Respondent 3D remarked that

...suddenly you’re called on to take funerals, or just be kind of like the minister guy. You’re there for ministry. Even recently it’s dealing with church discipline issues, taking the lead in that... I think the fact that I’ve nearly finished this degree and the process [of doing it] has involved greater, greater responsibilities [in my church].

Respondent 3D further described how he had been provided with more church leadership responsibilities across his denomination since beginning study. His

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34 Alpha is a cross-denominational evangelism programme run by many New Zealand churches. The Alpha programme started at Holy Trinity Brompton (Anglican), London in the 1990s. It is a popular church programme applied in evangelical churches throughout the Western world.
increased leadership responsibilities appeared to mirror the progress he made in his studies.

Most distance respondents remarked that their church congregation was extremely supportive of their study. Comments of receiving encouragement and affirmation from other congregation members were common, and three distance respondents explicitly mentioned direct support from their church. A further three stated that they were able to talk with others in their church specifically about their studies in a meaningful and helpful way. Another respondent talked about her ability to draw on a wider network of people involved in theological education for support. Overall, three respondents shared that their church leader encouraged them to enrol with Laidlaw College, and in all three cases the church leader was providing on-going encouragement.35

While church involvement was ubiquitous and positive among distance respondents, it was not always possible for respondents to converse with others in their congregations about what they were studying. One respondent, 2D, talked about the difficulty he had in sharing what he was learning through his College experience:

> It isn’t easy [talking to others about my studies] when, to actually have some of the conversations you really wanna have, someone has to do some hard yards in reading first. You’re not gonna have a conversation about Kierkegaard with too many people [laugh]... you’ve gotta continually translate, which is a good thing I guess, but people just really haven’t studied the Bible in the way that you have so it’s very hard to translate it.

A few respondents mentioned the need to translate what they were learning for the benefit of others. This difficulty was offset for one respondent by the ability to relate

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35 In two cases (unrelated) the church leader encouraging the students was ordained in a denomination requiring academic qualifications for ordination; in the third instance, the church leader was studying for a Master’s degree with Laidlaw-Carey, the postgraduate study centre for Laidlaw College in partnership with Carey Baptist College.
his studies directly into challenging real-life contexts, as respondent 2D went on to describe:

... actually the first half of my studies were in the context of... disaffected churchgoers who were still exploring faith in a setting of a home group situation. They really did throw everything at me that they possibly could... [so, for] the first two to three years of my papers, each paper was a challenge that wasn’t just lived out in me... it was actually lived out in the life of this group... it took those discussions out of the world of [the] academic and into somebody’s living room [laugh].

Distance students frequently had opportunity to discuss their studies with others from their church in small group contexts. Comments were often made by respondents about how the perspective provided by theological study enriched conversations in small groups. In all, six distance respondents made explicit mention of how their theological studies were directly enhancing their Christian service within their church. Distance students were earning reputations in their congregations as being the people to ask questions of related to the Bible, and of relating the Bible to life. One distance respondent mentioned how his studies were useful as material for sermons (“most of the time when I do a sermon it’s based on what I’ve actually studied”); another talked about how what he had just studied tended to provide useful perspectives for what his church happened to be facing from time to time. These benefits were common to those in formal ministries and those in lay service.

Commitment to the church context was very high among distance respondents, with frequent accounts of long-term belonging to a specific congregation. Two respondents indicated that they were going through a difficult time in their ministry, but their church connection remained strong. In both cases, there was optimism about the outcome of the situation they were facing, and a commitment to remain with the congregation. Respondent 9D talked about her own commitment in these terms:

I’ve been in the same church [over the last six years]. Over that time the church has grown... We’ve split to two services just recently. We’ve gone through I
don’t know how many ministers, through natural causes, not through church splits... [We’re] strong on community. I have been really challenged lately, because of this huge growth that has happened in our church... The whole culture, the whole nature of our church has changed. And so for me community at the moment is actually a very interesting question. My community has changed, and yet I go to the same church... yet, my ties to the community are strong.

Distance respondents also mentioned their involvement with online forums, used in Laidlaw College’s distance courses to stimulate the sharing of perspectives. Mention of forums was unprompted in each case. Online forums gave students the opportunity to share ideas with one another in a form of online community. Three respondents made affirming references to the online forums; the comment by respondent 1D is representative of how the online forums encouraged the sharing of perspectives:

…the Laidlaw experience [has] opened my eyes to the way so many different people think. I mean, for me, one of the things I really got out of studying through distance education is being part of an online forum and seeing how up to 30 people respond to a similar question. That’s been really revealing and probably helped me break through some of the prejudices I probably had. There’s been some really deep and meaningful discussions going on online for me, which has really helped me in a lot of ways.

One respondent, 5D, also mentioned that the familiarity built up from online discussion eventually means that students could converse online “as if you have known them [other students] for years, when you’ve actually never met them.” However, not all distance respondents agreed with respondent 5D. For example, respondent 2D suggested that the online forum constituted an “intellectual community,” rather than a truly interpersonal one though he also talked of “empathy” developed online with others.36 Respondent 6D stated that he found it “really hard”

36 Respondent 2D did intentionally meet one of the other students in his distance class during a visit to another city.
to “make connections with other Laidlaw students” despite the benefits of the online forums.

Distance students valued the online sharing of perspectives, though it was clear that the comments made about the online forums indicated that respondents did not associate the sharing of perspectives online with *gemeinschaft* community (Tönnies, 2002). Respondents did not expect the online community to provide anything more than an opportunity for the exchange of ideas. The value of the online forums was in the opportunity they provided for students already in distinctive *gemeinschaft* communities to learn from one another.

Overall, distance students were actively involved in and committed to their church contexts. Respondents were also able to draw considerable support from their churches. Theological study tended to make respondents more valued members of their congregations, and most had clear opportunities to apply and relate their studies in a ministry situation. Online forums were appreciated as environments for the sharing of ideas, with no expectation that they become places where interpersonal relationships might be formed or where fluid, interpersonal discussion might take place. Distance respondents tended to already have relationships and interpersonal contexts where they could share and apply what they were studying.

In contrast, the on-campus students interviewed in this study were more varied in terms of their church involvement. Only half of the on-campus respondents belonged to a congregation. The difference between attendance and non-attendance was not reflective of part-time or full-time study status across the sample. Two of the three part-time on-campus interviewees did not belong to any church community and the third, though a church attendee, was not involved in any sort of service within the church. Of the seven full-time respondents three did not belong to a church, and of the remaining four two were involved in service within their churches (one heavily).
For the five respondents who were church attendees, adherence to the church community was seldom well established. One of the full-time student respondents started attending a church since moving off-site (he was previously an on-campus resident). While on-site, this respondent had not been attending a church at all. Not one of the on-campus respondents attending a church indicated that their current church involvement pre-dated their on-campus study, and none stated that their involvement with the congregation they had joined would continue once their studies were completed. This was a very different dynamic to that reported by distance respondents, probably attributed to the fact that many on-campus students had shifted to West Auckland in order to attend their classes. Only one respondent had remained a member of the church she attended before commencing study, though she had left it by the time of interview and was no longer attending any church.

Those on-campus respondents who did identify with a church community reported that settling in to their new congregations had proven difficult. Of the two on-campus students who were serving in a church only one, respondent 6C, seemed truly settled:

... the [church] community now know who I am and where I stand... we had a guest speaker, a pastor who didn't show up for the service. And they asked me to speak that very morning. So I think they're beginning to trust me, and I'm beginning also to build relationship with them... it enriches me... whatever I gather from Laidlaw [studies], I'm presenting that, or I'm using that at church and I've realised that I'm growing because I'm actually putting it into use.

Respondent 6C had purposefully busied himself in the church. He was also involved with a radio programme, youth events, preaching and leading a prayer group on top of full-time Laidlaw College study. Respondent 6C was finding all of this activity beneficial to his formation (“I’m growing because I’m actually putting it into use”). However, this combination of belonging and serving proved a unique one for on-campus respondents. Respondent 6C was a clear outlier. The other on-campus respondent serving with her church, respondent 8C, found it was not all it might have been:
I’ve found that I’ve developed a new family, at church… you make new friends, but they’re surface friends, there’s not a lot of depth. I find that I don’t have a lot in common with a lot of the people there… I spend time with them, like on Sunday or in the week when I do pastoral care. But there’s no deep friendships there, no.

Five respondents indicated that they had left prior churches in order to relocate to Auckland for on-campus study. Only one, 6C quoted above, found relocation a positive experience, despite reporting a lack of deep interpersonal relationship within the congregation he attends. Of the other four respondents who had left their previous church, two were on the verge of leaving their previous church before their decision to move to West Auckland for study.

A major reason for the lack of church adherence for on-campus students related to the difficulty of settling in to a new congregation. Students are initially strangers, having to establish relationships from scratch. Six respondents talked about their inability to find a good fit with a church while they studied. The account of respondent 5C is broadly representative across these points:

I was attending a church [before College] for a couple of years and tried to get into it but it never really felt like a home church. So I think I struggled to see that as a church community. [Since starting College] I struggled to see [church] as my community. But also [because I am associated with] Laidlaw, it’s almost like they knew that people were just coming and going. So they didn’t really intentionally invest in me. So I found that quite hard… I think that really drew me to invest in my community at Laidlaw. At the church I didn’t really feel a part of [things] or couldn’t really make connections with people.

Student 5C’s investment into the Laidlaw College community because of an inability to engage with churches (or for churches to engage with them) was common across half of the on-campus respondents. On-campus study, particularly where the student relocated for the purposes of study, proved disruptive to church adherence. Besides 5C, two other respondents expressed that the demands of study limited their ability to be involved in the church. One, 7C, explained that:
I came to Laidlaw and left a church in the process, so I kinda turned up to a new place looking for a new church community. I found it quite hard to settle. I ended up settling at a church and even [there] I’ve found it a bit big … I really love being a part of smallish community based churches that are actually really engaged in what’s happening around them… I’ve recently joined a home group but often it’s very hard to go to ‘cause I’ve got Laidlaw College stuff on. This year, this semester I’ve had to pull out of it completely, ‘cause [one of the papers I am doing is on] a Tuesday night, so it’s ‘no’ to my home group.

The other respondent who withdrew from his church activity for the purposes of on-campus study was 9C, who lived close to the College and so was able to remain in his church. However, this same respondent was finding his church a less comfortable place because of his academic progress:

I think probably you share what you’re struggling with more with students because you know that if they’re not struggling with the same things, they’re struggling with other things and College is an environment where it’s safe to doubt. I think the church environment is not a safe place to doubt, because you tend to send other people into wobbly orbits … the church that I go to might be in a place of weakness on that issue.

Here it was clear that 9C was spread thinly across two communities, with only one (the College) safe for expressing doubts. Respondent 9C stated that he belonged to a fellowship that he would not describe as “an academic group”.

On-campus students tended to expect more from their on-campus community. Of the ten on-campus respondents, four (two part-time, two full-time) indicated that their primary Christian community consisted of a select group of Christian friends rather than an extended church community. Only one respondent seemed to miss having a supportive church adherence. Two other respondents had developed extremely negative views of church involvement since commencing Laidlaw College study.

Not a single on-campus respondent indicated that their church had encouraged them to study, and only one (6C, fully active in a church at the time of interview) mentioned any on-going encouragement from a church. Of the two students who mentioned a
ministry practicum37 in a church, neither found the experience easy and one subsequently left the church she was attending.

Where on-campus students lacked the support of church communities, Laidlaw College faculty and other students became important substitutes. Two on-campus respondents both reported seeking assistance from Laidlaw faculty members for personal problems, and a third added that one of his lecturers had made a tremendous personal impression through assistance that had been provided by him. For at least one respondent, 1C, the Laidlaw College community was a central one:

…every day I go to College I get involved in activities, so my College is my life. All my friends, it’s my life... I love Bible College community worship. I love it... the message is more powerful and then whenever I have a problem I just go and see my lecturer and they minister to me and I ask them a lot of thought provoking questions and they are able to satisfy my answers, [but] when if I walk up to a pastor, he just gives me a text book answer... I find that church has a lot of politics, so I’m very negative.

Respondent 4C, a full-time student and campus resident, seemed to perceive the College community in gemeinschaft terms but saw the church more as an example of gesselschaft (Tönnies, 2002). This is a reversal of how distance students perceived the College and church communities:

I’ve been involved in churches… I think [the] Laidlaw community is more like a family, where you, hang out with, I’m thinking after hours... it’s like a family and you have a whole bunch of siblings and you bicker and you fight and you get on people’s nerves and, you know, it’s like you all love each other and somehow get along at the end of the day. Whereas church is much more where I go to focus on God and on how the community relates to God... one of my frustrations is that church is so focused and College is so not. I think church should be like a family as well, nobody doing church face, nobody turning up and just going, ‘oh yeah life is fine’... instead of just once a week thing, [church should] actually be something that you’re actively involved in even without being there.

37 A practicum is a time of ministry service undertaken as part of Laidlaw College study.
Respondent 4C’s perceptions here reflect the stereotype of the on-campus residential experience projected in the literature critical of theological distance education, that is, the residential community as optimal (Diekema & Caddell, 2001; Dietterich, 2005; McCarthy, 2004; Rovai et al., 2008; Sasse, 1998). However, of the three current and three former residents who were interviewed, four were critical about the on-campus community they encountered. Two male respondents aged between 20 and 30 (3C and 7C) were particularly negative. The words of Respondent 7C are representative:

[The community at] Laidlaw College... [has] just been awfully disappointing. I guess I turned up expecting to find people who would be kind of outgoing and wanting to pray together and wanting to really wrestle with life and spirituality and God, and I didn’t find anyone like that. Often the conversations were very theoretical and academic, and not so many people were actually really wrestling with the reality of the theology in their lives.... When I first started there it was horrific, there was division and I was living in the halls of residence...people were talking about each other in horrible ways, there was gossip, slander, just really, really horrible comments being made about people’s character.... I’ve struggled to find good mates. I found it quite lonely at times, actually.

Both 3C and 7C decided to leave the on-campus community following their first year.38 Respondent 7C was at the time of interview a student leader. Several on-campus students (including those residential) mentioned an inability to make friends at the interpersonal level they felt required for genuine fellowship. While the opportunity to discuss academic matters was appreciated (the College is a “safe environment” to ask questions, according to respondent 9C), the lack of fellowship and community was acutely felt by some. That said, two respondents mentioned the importance of on-campus worship and small groups, with one (9C) stating that he had “made some good friends that way.” The on-campus environment was a mixed one in terms of providing supportive community for the purposes of formation.

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38 It does not seem that Respondents 3C and 7C knew one another.
Six on-campus respondents were, or recently had been, resident on-campus. Four talked about having made good friends. However Respondent 8C, the only on-campus respondent aged between 40 and 65, found making a friend on-campus very difficult:

I approached somebody when I first came and said would you like to be a prayer buddy, because she was new as well, and she said no…it’s a bit of a lonely place actually…. I’ve found that I don’t have a lot in common with the people there, because of my age.

Making connections and friendships on-campus seemed to be easier for younger students. This could be because of the similar stage of faith these students were experiencing (Fowler, 1981). A non-resident on-campus respondent aged between 40 and 65 also mentioned the difficulty he had making friends on campus: “it’s not quite the same as a young person, I think”. Even for those who had made friends, both residents and non-residents talked about how these friends tended to move on; 2C stated that “…a lot of the people I’ve made contact with have gone already, so it feels a little bit like I’m leaving and not many people realised.”

Overall, on-campus students had a mixed relationship with church fellowship that tended toward non-involvement. This meant that on-campus respondents were not benefitting from a formational association with the church. Part-time on-campus students were less likely to be involved in a church, and were more likely to express negativity toward attending a church. Those on-campus students who did belong to a church tended to be tentative and self-conscious adherents. This situation typically raised expectations about what on-campus community should consist of but, with some clear exceptions, the on-campus community was frequently perceived as disappointing. Younger respondents were more positive about having developed friendships while at College, while older respondents felt somewhat alienated from the on-campus community.

In summary, there are clear contrasts between the distance and on-campus respondents. Table 4.4 summarises church involvement across the two groups.
Table 4.4

Summary of Church Involvement for Distance and On-Campus Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Involved in a church</th>
<th>Active in a church</th>
<th>Sense of belonging</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Distance</td>
<td>10 (100%)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On-campus</td>
<td>5 (50%)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Distance respondents were more likely to be actively involved in long-standing and supportive *gemeinschaft* church communities, and also tended to describe their church adherence in active and appreciative tones. Even those respondents who talked of going through a difficult time in their church experience did so with a clear on-going commitment to the community. Distance respondents also saw their theological studies as a means of increased involvement in their congregation. Most were able to talk directly about their studies with others in their churches. Those distance students who mentioned online discourse did not necessarily require it to provide them with a sense of community, though they appreciated the insights and views of others that the online forums made possible. On the whole distance respondents were contented with their church communities, and studied comfortably within them.

On-campus respondents tended to be more dismissive about church adherence, with five not actively attending any identifiable church community. Only three respondents indicated regular involvement with church communities, yet even then two indicated that they felt like outsiders. The sole respondent who was able to maintain his on-going involvement with his church since starting College study, 9C, had pulled out of ministry involvement and also described the College community as one where he felt most comfortable sharing his doubts. The on-campus experience seemed to provide respondents with the excuse to not involve themselves in church communities, whether in attendance, service, or self-disclosure. Respondent 6C was a clear
exception, with his situation bearing more resemblance to the experience of distance students. Half of the on-campus respondents had left church communities in order to study on-campus, and three respondents indicated their Laidlaw College experience substituted for church community. Respondents’ experience of community on-campus tended to be age-related, with younger people more able to make friends. However while there were examples of those with on-campus friends being able to discuss deep personal issues, some younger respondents (particularly male) were disappointed with the on-campus community they encountered while in residence.

**Formational experiences.**

Respondents were asked to describe their most significant formational experience between their initial enrolment and the time of the interview. This meant that distance students, being part-time, typically drew on a longer period. The purpose of the question was to explore the influence of respondents’ study context on their spiritual formation. Respondents were specifically informed that they were not required to describe any event associated with their Laidlaw College study. The initial response was evaluated in terms of whether or not it was related to the respondent’s Laidlaw College experience; respondents were then asked to provide a further example counter to the first, that is, those who initially provided an example not related to their Laidlaw College study were then asked for an example that was related to their study experiences.

Six of the ten distance respondents identified their most significant formation experience since beginning study as having taken place outside of their Laidlaw College studies. Each of these six cited experiences related to their on-going church membership. Of these six, two cited positive experiences from ministries they were associated with; two mentioned difficulties in their church contexts which caused them
to draw closer to God (one was a youth leader, the other a church administrator); a fifth discovered a new direction to his ministry; and a sixth was unsuccessful in being selected for ordained church leadership.\textsuperscript{39} The four remaining distance respondents cited a College-related example as their most significant formation experience. Three mentioned specific courses: respondent 3D talked about his internship,\textsuperscript{40} which enabled him to take a more direct and on-going leadership role within his church; respondent 5D, who struggled to identify a single event, eventually cited a particular course-related online discussion as her most significant formational experience across three years since beginning study. Respondent 2D talked of a mentoring relationship rather than a ministry- or course-related example.

For their second example of formation experience since enrolling at Laidlaw College, three respondents, 1D, 7D, and 8D, specifically mentioned Laidlaw College courses as having been particularly influential. Getting in touch with his Anglican tradition through one of the spirituality courses was particularly valued by 7D; the course 7D referred to is an optional one in which students are encouraged to identify and participate in the practices of various spiritual traditions. Respondent 6D also mentioned how Laidlaw College courses had influenced his spirituality:

I sort of had a paradigm thing which was like God is always gonna move in power... [I learned I have] gotta be a bit more careful of how other people are thinking, ’cause they can obviously have just as strong relationship with God even though they’re not doing things the same way you are... I found that quite challenging to be able to encompass all relationships with God rather than just from my own personal experience.

In 6D’s case, the online \textit{gesselschaft} community of students had assisted him to take a more discerning and appreciative view of people’s Christian spirituality. For most

\textsuperscript{39} While any Christian is able to serve in ministry, many church denominations practice ordination as an official recognition of formal church leadership.

\textsuperscript{40} An internship is a practicum-based course offered through Laidlaw College.
distance respondents the overall process of studying through Laidlaw was of more formational significance than any specific event within their study time, which is indicative of an incremental transformation (Mezirow, 2000). This process resulted in an increasingly broad theological outlook, as Respondents 3D and 10D specifically described. The words of 10D are representative:

It’s hard actually to pick out one [significant formational event] in particular. The reason why I’m studying at Laidlaw is really to better understand my place in the world in terms of spirituality and purpose and all that kind of stuff. And every paper that I’ve studied has helped contribute to that understanding and that growth.

Other distance students mentioned the death of a relative and their role as an elder at their church (2D); being ordained for ministry (5D); the benefits of a personal devotional discipline (9D); and experiences while on internship with their local congregation (4D). In respondent 4D’s case, the degree’s internship course had her set up a divorce-care ministry in her church (gemeinschaft) community.

The majority of distance respondents tended to draw from examples external to their studies when describing their most significant formational experience since starting study. Most significant formational experiences were church-related. When asked for an example from their Laidlaw College association, most distance respondents mentioned the influence of formation-specific courses or a general broadening of perspective resulting from their studies.

In marked contrast to the responses of distance respondents, the majority of on-campus respondents cited College-related experiences as being the most formational for them across the duration of their study. Eight on-campus students, compared with four distance students, mentioned College-related instances first. Differences across part-time and full-time students were not apparent from the interview sample. Two on-campus respondents, 2C (part-time) and 4C (full-time), mentioned personal breakdowns as their most significant formational experiences since starting study.
Both sought and found restoration through their on-campus communities (lecturers were specifically mentioned in both cases; one respondent said “I’ve been very much undone at times spiritually, I have actually embarked on some sessions of spiritual direction with [lecturer]”). Both also mentioned unsupportive churches, in contrast to the support they received from Laidlaw College staff and other students. Respondent 8C mentioned how she had an encounter with God during a spiritual retreat, organised through a College contact. Respondents 1C, 5C, 6C, and 9C all mentioned Laidlaw College courses as having the most significant formational influence on them since the duration of their studies; respondent 5C actually mentioned course experiences before reflecting on the significance of her recent marriage as a formational event! A dedicated formation course, 401.515 Spiritual Formation, was mentioned specifically by respondents 1C and 9C. It is clear that on-campus theological study had become a significant formational context for most on-campus respondents.

Of the three on-campus respondents who did not mention College-related experiences one, 7C, talked about the death of his grandmother while the second, 3C, talked about working with “drug addicts and criminals and stuff like that” as part of his part-time work outside of College. As mentioned earlier, both 3C and 7C had lived on-campus for their first year and had independently decided that the residential experience was not for them. Finally, Respondent 10C reported his private prayer as being his most significant formation experience since beginning study. Full-time study gave Respondent 10C opportunity to invest more time than previously in prayer.

The supplementary example of formation offered by on-campus students related to: particular instances of service in ministry (in and external to the local church), and

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41 The 401.515 Spiritual Formation course is a course students are encouraged to complete in their first year. It is a course that deliberately aims to be interpersonal and reflective. The course has been designed to make use of the same base materials for both on-campus and distance students however the former interact through lectures and small groups whereas distance students interact using online forums. Its objective is to encourage students to broaden their perspective of Christian life.
acceptance within local church communities; personal matters (here respondent 5C talked of her recent marriage); and spiritual retreat events (two separate respondents), inspired by their Laidlaw College course experience in 401.515 Spiritual Formation. Respondent 10C mentioned a general appreciation for the theological understanding his Laidlaw studies were giving him, while respondent 3C talked about his negative experience of the on-campus community.

In summary, distance students were far more likely to cite ministry- and life-related experiences as being behind their most significant formational experience since beginning study, while on-campus students almost invariably described a Laidlaw College-related example. Despite not initially mentioning it, distance respondents reported on having been formatively shaped by their Laidlaw College study, although this tended to be appreciated as an overall process in the context of their personal ministries and church fellowship. Distance respondents also mentioned some Laidlaw College courses as significant. Formation, spirituality, and internship courses were particularly significant for distance respondents. Both distance and on-campus respondents specifically mentioned Course 401.515 Spiritual Formation as providing a significant formation experience. The Spiritual Formation course is especially designed to have students reflect on their relationship with God, and it is likely that the emphasis of this course on theological education as *theologia* (Farley, 1983) explains its influence.

The interview sample did not indicate any link between full-time status and formation experience with Laidlaw College examples, though it is clear that the experience of studying on-campus is significant for all on-campus students. On-campus respondents were more likely to evaluate significant formation experiences through the filter of their student status. This may be because on-campus students are less likely to be involved in church life, are more likely to be full-time, and are more likely to be disconnected from longer-term relationships. Both groups seemed to draw from their
immediate sense of community in their initial response, highlighting the role of community in formation (Bramer, 2007; Dettoni, 1994; Lowe & Lowe, 2010a; Roberts, 2004).

**Formational dynamics of study.**

The main focus of the interview was to explore how respondents understood the influence of their Laidlaw College studies on their formation. Respondents were asked about their study habits, and what they sensed about their formational development during their studies. Again, the differences in response from distance and on-campus students warrant separate treatment.

Distance respondents tended to integrate their studies into their everyday formational experiences. As respondent 7D stated, “I would have to say that [my formation experiences] have continued as before [I started studying], so the study hasn’t really had a significant impact on spiritual formation… it compliments it, but hasn’t really changed it.” The formational complementarity of study to everyday life was a key theme for distance respondents. The mention of “a lot more understanding” by respondent 7D elsewhere in his interview, presumably through course materials and encountering others’ ideas, was representative of the mechanism for formation in distance respondents. From the interviews, it was clear that others’ perspectives assisted in shaping the formational development of distance students. Half of the distance respondents mentioned the sharing of ideas during their studies as key to their formational growth. The design of the online forums and the tutor involvement also received specific mention; three students made unprompted mention of online discussion forums. The words of respondent 1D are repeated:

… the Laidlaw experience [has] opened my eyes to the way so many different people think. One of the things I really got out of studying through distance
education is being part of an online forum, and seeing how up to 30 people respond to a similar question. For me that’s been really revealing and probably helped me break through some of the prejudices, if that’s the correct word, that I probably had. There’s been some really deep and meaningful discussions going on online for me, which has really helped me in a lot of ways.

Openness to engage with others’ ideas and perspectives was discovered as a means of gaining deeper understanding, as respondent 1D went on to state:

I think you need to be willing to go in with a completely open mind, and be willing to listen and learn as you go. You know, don’t just shove things off because you don’t necessarily agree with it on the surface, but be willing to dig quite deep into what you’re studying and into what you, what you actually believe yourself.

Distance students tended to approach their studies devotionally, with the expectation that formational development would be the result. This devotional study, as previously noted, was typically performed in the context of Christian service through the church.

For distance students, others’ perspectives included not just those they discussed things online with but also their engagement with course materials that highlighted alternative faith traditions, an exposure important to the effectiveness of theological education (Kelsey, 1992). Course materials played a key role in challenging thinking and transforming perspectives. Respondent 6D described this well:

I learned through especially the Biblical Theology course about different approaches of Christianity, like [in] different churches, different doctrines, different theologies and [having to think about] how to make sure that you’re hearing which ones are of God. That was actually quite a struggle… [learning that] there are other ways of looking at things.

Theology courses and (especially) the 401.515 Spiritual Formation course were specifically mentioned as being formational, though it should be noted that most distance respondents were in the earlier stages of their degrees and had likely encountered only these courses at the time of interview. The statement of respondent
10D that the entire sum of papers he had done “helped to contribute to [my understanding of my place in the world] and that growth” provides a useful summary of distance students’ experience. Indeed, Respondent 5D attributed “80%” of her formational growth “over the last three years” to her Laidlaw College studies.

All distance respondents indicated that they were seeking life change because of their studies, indicating that the decision to study was in part motivated by formation. In interviews, it was clear that the actual formation study prompted was sometimes unexpected. One respondent, 1D, was particularly challenged by a specific task in the 401.515 Spiritual Formation course:

… when we were looking at who God is to us, looking at all the different names and terms for God, in the online forum somebody was talking about God being a loving Father. Now, I have a very conservative father, English, he’s one of these people that believes that children should be seen and not heard. I’ve never heard my father say that he loves me. I mean I know that he does, but when I had to suddenly confront God with this term of loving Father, I found I actually had some things in my past that I needed to go and confront. It took a little bit of time to work through that, but for me that was actually quite liberating in the long term.

Those distance students who described their study habits indicated a reflective approach that often considered individual topics across several days. In the words of respondent 5D:

I try and kind of spend some time in prayer, read the material, take notes, usually go off and have a run or go for a walk, and mull on it. I don’t write the answer to the forum weekly question until the next day usually. I try and just let it digest a bit… I would read the work, take notes, usually go away somewhere to think about it, come back. If there’s something I really am struggling with or think, ‘ooh that’s a new idea’, I go out into the garden or go and do something else while just letting it mull over.

Perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1990, 1991, 2000) was clearly evident across several distance respondents. For respondent 5D transformation was evidenced by her perception of becoming less dogmatic, more discerning, and more discriminating as a
thinker. In her words, “I struggle to see stuff the way I used to. Everything is affected by my belief now”. Two other distance students made similar statements:

I’m definitely a lot stronger now. Like my default setting to just nod and say yes and agree with people is now, ‘well, do you really mean that? Do you really think that’s the case?’ I know that they might have a few holes in there, in their own belief (3D).

[Laidlaw College study] changes the way you see the world. It makes your decisions regarding how you live more informed. It makes you a more grounded person, and that may sound strange with a cognitive based programme, but that’s what I believe. It brings you down to earth more (10D).

The words of respondent 10D here demonstrate the significance of transformative learning theory to theological education, whereby a ‘cognitive based programme’ results in perspective transformation. Respondent 2D stated “I’m not the person I was”, and 6D talked of the difficulties of “repacking [my] thought processes” and “restructuring my thinking”. These statements are further evidence of transformative learning as a result of theological study at a distance (Ball, 2012; Mezirow & Taylor, 2009; Mezirow, 1990, 1991, 2000). A deeper sense of spirituality because of study was mentioned by others (1D, 7D), as was a sense of being closer to God (4D, 8D). Respondent 8D stated:

I remember talking to a group, before I started Laidlaw, [which was] concerned that academia can take you away from God… I can [now] assure them that I’ve found exactly the opposite.

For many distance respondents deeper engagement with and increased confidence in interpreting the Bible were key indicators of formation. Respondents 6D and 4D were particularly explicit on this point, Respondent 4D stating that students studying at Laidlaw College will read the Bible “with so much more depth and understanding...[study has] expanded my mind, I read my Bible in a whole different way to what I used to.... It just makes me think in different ways”. Respondent 1D explained how a deeper knowledge of the Bible influenced his experience of God:
I think my understanding of who God really is to me has grown considerably. As I’ve learnt and my deeper understanding of Scripture has grown, the presence of God has also developed, or my understanding of the presence of God, that feeling of it has also grown.

Most distance respondents also described their formational development in terms that related to transformative learning theory and perspective development, reinforcing the strong link across formation and transformation (Ball, 2012). The challenges presented through online discussion forums and the course materials themselves contributed to the transformation, as did interaction with others in church communities. Increased confidence with the Bible and a devotional approach to theological study were also typical for distance respondents.

Formation as experienced by on-campus students was also tied to the exchange of ideas and the broadening of perspective, though the process of transformation was quite different to that described by distance respondents. Most on-campus respondents appreciated the opportunity to talk with other students about their studies, and the exposure this gave to other opinions. Respondent 2C expressed the challenges and rewards of such conversations well:

...through being in classes I was quite blown away by some opinions that people had. I was quite shocked by [some], because I assumed people thought a particular way.... There was a lot of people that had some quite unusual ideas about the Bible, or about spirituality, things like that. And I kind of had to decide, ‘what does God think about this? What do I think about this? What does the Bible say about this?’ And, the message that I ended up getting from the Bible was not so much ‘I’m right, you’re wrong’. It was more, ‘what is the central message of the Bible? Is it about love? Is it about acceptance? Or is it about being right?’ …I became more kind of understanding towards their context and why their thinking [developed] the way that they did.

Here again is evidence of transformative learning. Respondent 2C learned to take the views of other students more seriously as she advanced in her studies: “as time went on, the students’ opinions to me, I just saw them as theologians themselves. It wasn’t just a matter of listening to the lecturer”. The collection of students studying on-
campus at Laidlaw College from across the evangelical spectrum added to the mix of opinions. Respondent 4C’s words give some insight as to the dynamics:

I think the fact that there are so many people here from so many walks of life and so many different denominations and theological stand points and everything, it’s something that I have found equally as rewarding as it has been difficult. It has challenged me, as somebody who wants to go into ministry, to understand and accept that people may not think the way that I think about God, and I think that has probably been the biggest change in my spirituality. I have become far more accepting and far less dogmatic.

Respondent 9C, cited above for his view that the College community was a safer one than the church for expressing doubts, stated that the Laidlaw College community drew together those who were engaged in discovery. For respondent 9C, the College itself, because of its evangelical heritage, was a safe place to explore new theological ideas:

Laidlaw College is certainly more academic [than the church]. I’ve enjoyed being in the company of others who are also discovering and also there to discover. While I’m not bagging the church on this one, I do find it’s an entirely different environment... everybody is there to actually dig into the Scripture and find out what this is or that is, and I think as a result that diffuses the learning and growing experience... College gave me permission to explore.

The sense of being transformed within an evangelical Christian framework emerged clearly from respondent 9C’s interview. Later, 9C added that his theological study had provided “an inter-related and wholesome” sense to his faith, which provided “better tools to manage the process [of learning more] myself and make sense of what is orthodox, and what’s up for discussion and what’s not”.

Not all of the disclosed benefits from on-campus discussion were related to learning. Respondent 5C talked about on-campus relationships as not being of direct benefit to her studies, because “when I do assignments I do a lot of figuring out”. However, as a student in her mid-twenties, she added “had I not had [on-campus] relationships, I
don’t think I would have enjoyed myself”. Studying on-campus had a social element to it, one not always considered central to the education process.

On-campus respondents also mentioned courses and lecturers. The majority of on-campus respondents, eight, specifically mentioned the 401.515 Spiritual Formation course as having had a particular impact on their formational development. Two respondents independently talked of the same specific reading from this course as having been influential. The character of on-campus lecturers was mentioned by only three on-campus respondents, though for two of these the impression was somewhat mixed. Positively, Respondent 7C noted that “…in terms of my relationships with the lecturers that would be one of the defining factors [of my experience], really learning to see the lecturers as friends and fellow workers in the kingdom.”

As was the case for distance respondents, on-campus students tended to talk about their formational growth in terms of a deeper appreciation of the Bible. Respondent 4C talked more generally about how she saw formation taking place through on-campus study:

… we have really set ideas that we come in with about who God is and how we read the Bible and what our church did about it... and then we get in here and we’re just, we’re hit with, there’s this barrage of different ideas and people arguing against things which we just took for granted were gospel truth... it can get really quite scary and quite daunting to people.

Formation was “daunting” for respondent 4C because of the very nature of what was being studied and the personal investment students place in their faith (Wood, 1985). In the words of 4C:

…when students come here, this isn’t just another degree. This isn’t just going and studying medicine, or going and studying law, or going and studying anything, really, where you’re just looking at facts and picking it out. This is something that is actually about somebody who created you and somebody who made you and somebody who you relate to and, and, a book that you, you know, know is the inspired word of God and so therefore it is, it is gonna be
difficult and it is gonna shape you and it is gonna change you, but shaping and changing isn’t necessarily pain free.

Many on-campus respondents talked in terms of their formational experience being painful. Two on-campus respondents shared personal challenges of having to reconcile what seemed like the cerebral development of their studies with their formational development, with one, 2C, stating that she “kind of fell apart a bit”. Respondents 4C, 8C, and 10C, all of whom had experienced on-campus residency (10C as a former resident), went into some detail in describing the process of formational development through their on-campus study, using the terms “deconstructed” and “reconstructed” in particular. The ages of participants indicates that not all of those transitions may have been from stages three to four (Fowler, 1981, 1993). The words of respondent 4C are representative here; for respondent 4C, being deconstructed consisted of discovering how strongly she held on to ideas about her faith that she had inherited from her parents and her church:

…and to have somebody tell you that you may be wrong, or there may be other options, is hellishly scary to the point where I think you just end up kind of in this mess going, ‘what the heck, how can I believe be so wrong when it’s the God I know? And how can this person disagree so much with this person and both of them be called theologians and people of God? How does this work?’ So, as you come across these new ideas and readings and people you start, little by little I think, to realise that maybe if there are so many different options out there, maybe you don’t have the right one.

For all three of these respondents theological study opened new possibilities in terms of how the Christian faith could be understood and experienced. Overall, the process was perceived appreciatively despite its challenges. Respondent 10C explained:

[I need to] wrestle with these issues in my mind. And so I think the biggest struggle in my day would have to be thinking, even sometimes, I feel, to the point of madness, but also to a point of fulfilment and joy.

The description of transformation as deconstruction and reconstruction is indicative of an epochal transformation (Mezirow, 2000). Not all on-campus respondents
described their transformation in these terms. Respondent 5C, residential at time of interview, did not have a destructive then constructive transformation but still described the benefit of study as challenging her “previous held beliefs... I’ve always just gone with the flow... [and now I am] owning the belief for myself”. Respondent 9C put it in terms of his faith being “challenged... but not dismembered”; respondent 6C also used the term “challenged.” Other on-campus respondents were also able to articulate a measure of transformation, though some struggled to find the words:

I think that I’ve found that I really struggle with a kind of a narrow spirituality, or a black and white spirituality. I find that my way of thinking and the way I see God is quite broad and not liberal, but it’s hard to kind of put into words... because when you hear the word ‘liberal’ sometimes it means that you accept everything. [My understanding] is kind of like a fundamental belief about a lot of things, but yet an open mind as to God’s revelation of it. It’s difficult for me to kind of put into words really (2C).

This open-mindedness had its limits. Those respondents who mentioned an opening of their perspectives also talked about the need to hold fast to those beliefs that were foundational to their faith. Respondent 10C talked of the importance of maintaining “a strong base [of belief] to work from”. Respondent 4C talked in terms of people finding “their basis of faith... the bits that to them are non-negotiable... [they should] hold on to those and everything else is up for debate”, while respondent 7C talked of being “freed to deal with a breadth of Christian expression and thought, and learn to sit comfortably within that”. Respondent 9C spoke of being able to “make sense of the bigger picture”, 8C of “thinking in ways [I’ve] never thought before”. Respondents 4C, 5C, and 8C also mentioned a deeper sense of spirituality. Respondent 2C stated that “…I didn’t expect [theological study] to change me much, but it’s actually transformed me into a completely different person”.

On-campus respondents appreciated the opportunity they had to discuss matters of theology with other students, though some were quite shocked by what other students believed. Despite this, students found themselves shaped by the diversity of others’
opinions and the opportunity to share their own. Many reported a new respect and openness for conversation about theological issues without feeling the need to impose their own views. Several commented that the most useful conversations were those that took place informally on-campus, outside of the classroom. The Laidlaw College on-campus community was perceived as one where different ideas would be encountered, and most respondents reported benefitting from others’ perspectives. The positive sense of independence and openness respondents shared toward theirs’ and others’ ideas demonstrated the worth of formal theological study. While two students mentioned how lecturers had helped them through personal circumstances, the perception of lecturers’ character tended to leave a mixed impression upon those who mentioned it. While all respondents provided evidence of perspective transformation, for some the process was an unsettling, epochal one that consisted of deconstruction before reconstruction.

In summary, the formational dynamics discussed by both distance and on-campus respondents have much in common with transformative learning theory. The development of a more inclusive and discriminating perspective across all respondents was evident. The common perception of respondents that theological study is transformative provides important evidence that cognitive growth (traditionally expected from theological study), formation, and transformative learning are indeed intertwined. Greater understanding brought with it a sense of increased spiritual depth, in ways that complemented everyday formational experience. Both distance and on-campus respondents talked about formation in terms of their studies, and mentioned the development of perspectives that were evidence of transformation. Online tutors and on-campus lecturers were seldom mentioned as specifically assisting in transformation.

While both distance and on-campus respondents talked of transformational experiences and largely linked them to the cognitive aspects of study, on-campus
respondents with some form of residential experience were the only ones to describe transformation in terms of deconstruction and reconstruction. It could be that the on-campus residential experience is a particularly disorienting one, forcing a sudden and difficult transformational experience upon students. The findings indicate that transformation takes place in both on-campus and distance theological education contexts, but that the former may be more likely to experience transformation as an epochal, rather than incremental, process. Indeed, part-time study from within one’s church community appears to be as effective, and far less disruptive, for the purposes of perspective transformation.

**Perceptions of distance education.**

Respondents were asked to provide their impressions of what it would be like to study on-campus (distance respondents), or at a distance (on-campus respondents). As in the three themes discussed thus far there were clear differences across distance and on-campus respondents, so both groups are represented separately.

Distance respondents were appreciative of the opportunity to study theology, with some even indicating a preference for the distance option partly because of the positive experience they had enjoyed, and the ability to remain in their local church communities. When asked whether they would prefer to study on-campus rather than at a distance, most respondents (2D, 3D, 5D, 6D, 9D, 10D) said that it would simply not be possible and largely dismissed the suggestion:

Yeah, I’d love to [laugh]. Does that mean that I wouldn’t have to go to work and I’d just be a full-time student, wouldn’t have to care about feeding the family and that? [Laugh] I mean that would be great if I could spend the rest of my life doing that, with all my bills taken care of [laugh]. You know, I wouldn’t mind that way of living at all, I think (2D).
Well, if the opportunity was there it would be taken. But the factors that made it an opportunity would be huge to overcome. So, if all those factors that were restricting were overcome, and the opportunity existed, yeah, fine. But the actually fact is to make it an opportunity to be overcome would be nothing short of miraculous in my own scenario (3D).

As these comments demonstrate, most of the distance students would take up the chance to study on-campus if opportunity made it possible; however, on-campus study did not seem a strong preference. The convenience and accessibility afforded by the distance option more than outweighed any preference for the experience of on-campus tuition. Distance students were grateful for the opportunity to study theology without having to leave their church, or put aside responsibilities (such as dependents) they had. Respondent 7D said he would miss the flexibility distance study offered if he were to study on-campus. Respondent 5D indicated that she would prefer to study on-campus part-time, though she was also glad she was able to study after having had further life experience:

...without kids or with older kids, I think [studying on-campus] would be great. I think being on campus would be absolutely fantastic. I think that would be better than distance learning, and I think if I could be on campus and still be part-time that would be quite cool, ‘cause then I could still kinda fit the kids in after school and things like that...I couldn’t be in a lecture from, anytime from three o’clock to seven o’clock, it’s just a practicality thing. And in some ways I’m glad I didn’t do this theological stuff when I was younger…. But the kids are seven and ten and I just don’t think I could commit that amount of time.

Two respondents, 4D and 9D, both expressed an explicit preference for distance learning. Both mentioned age as one reason why they would be reluctant to study on-campus; 4D stated, “I think I would’ve been incredibly nervous, at my age, going into a classroom situation”. Respondent 9D had experienced both on-campus and distance theological study (the former at a regional centre that had subsequently closed, requiring her to become a distance student to finish her programme of study). She related her changing perception of distance education:
[Studying on-campus], you’d probably get more verbal support and you’d learn a lot more from other students but on a whole I’m quite happy with the distance learning and what I’m getting out of it and the support that I’m getting. I’m actually quite happy with the distance stuff now. It’s taken awhile to get used to it, I and in a way I almost prefer it, because I like the notes that I get. And I love the forums, the interaction with the tutor... I just think it digs in a little bit deeper... Would I grow more on campus? No, not necessarily. But I’m in my forties, and I think a lot of growth happens in everyday life.

Distance respondents, who tended to be older than on-campus respondents were, described the on-campus experience more in terms of being for younger people. Further, distance respondents perceived their life experience as providing a valuable foundation for studying at a distance. Most distance respondents were happy studying at a distance. Respondent 9D went as far as to suggest that distance “should be the preferred [way of theological study]”, reflecting on her experience and anticipating how distance learning might develop:

...if you’d asked me before I [had experienced distance education] I would have said definitely ‘no’, I definitely like interacting and talking to lecturers and I think if you’re a visual person lecturers are great. What I’ve found with distance learning is they put on those little video clips now, and that’s been a big help... we’ve had a few of those [Adobe] Connect Pro type workshop things [too].42

Interaction through communications technology was a common theme, with multiple respondents commenting positively on the power of online forums. Respondents 1D and 9D emphasised the depth of online conversation. In the words of 9D:

I find the discussions online very interesting, they’re actually a lot more in depth. So when I have something to say I actually have time to consider what I’m saying and the other person does too. So the discussion I have online with somebody in some of those forums, actually ends up being more in depth and I get more out of it and it’s all recorded for me, than if I just had a discussion verbally with somebody in class and come home and said, “That was really good, I wish I could remember exactly what they said”.

42 Adobe Connect Pro was used in a New Testament Greek language course.
Respondent 3D shared a bit about a particular online tutor who was overly critical in the forums, otherwise all other respondent comments related to the online forums were positive. While many mentioned the benefits of the online forums, some distance respondents also considered that the conversation that takes place on-campus might be more beneficial to them:

...if I was younger and had that opportunity [to study on-campus] I’d loved to have done it. I think being able to be immersed in that environment... [full-time] would be a wonderful experience. I mean, having people around you who you can bounce ideas off, listen to, learn from and commune with is a wonderful thing. I guess you do get a certain amount of it from an online forum, but actually being in that close up personal space... you can’t beat that to be honest (1D).

I could see a possibility that the [sort of] relationships we build up in the online forums would be a lot more enhanced [on-campus] ‘cause you would have the opportunity not just to speak of the subject issues, but also could speak of other things going on in people’s lives. If everybody was on campus that there’d be sort of like coffee groups or loose discussion over coffee after a lecture... There’d be more of a human aspect to it than there is online, [where] basically you have to keep to the subject (4D).

Well, I guess [that, on-campus] you would have the relational part of spiritual growth as an integral part of the study. ‘Cause at a distance, it’s very much all about me until you actually get to the weekly forum. Whereas if you’re on campus, you are getting to know the fellow students at the same time as you’re studying. You’re getting to know them as people, where you don’t in the forum. It must have a difference in the way that you actually process the material (10D).

For distance respondents there was clearly a difference between sharing ideas in an online forum where discussion is by necessity focussed directly on course matters, and sharing ideas in a freer-flowing and immediate way with people sitting across from them. In the context of the interviews, the difference between online and face-to-face sharing of ideas was not necessarily perceived entirely as deficit, even though the preference was for face-to-face conversation. Respondent 1D, quoted above, went on to add:
...when I did the Introduction to Theology paper a couple of years ago I think there was about 19 or 20 of us doing it, and the online discussions that went on then were just outstanding. So although you’re not sitting there face-to-face and, and with a group of people, you still do have contact on, on a very regular basis. So, no, I don’t think you’re totally disadvantaged [studying at a distance]. Maybe there are advantages to actually studying distance education.

This statement is similar to one made by respondent 5D, who also indicated that the effectiveness of distance education was surprising:

I was really sceptical about doing distance learning and getting any feel like you normally get in a tutorial where there’s conversation and stuff and the forum has actually been far better than I thought it would be... the forum is good, you get a lot more feedback and conversation than I thought we would’ve, to be honest.

The sole respondent to express any sense of isolation from others during study, 6D, was still appreciative of the opportunity distance study afforded. Respondent 6D also appreciated that distance study gave him time to remain in active ministry as he studied.

Distance respondents were unanimous in their estimation of formation being enhanced through distance study, even though many could see advantages to engaging more directly with other students. Only one respondent, 7D, perceived no actual difference between on-campus and distance formation, as he tended “to look to other things for spiritual growth rather than Laidlaw studies”. Distance respondents considered their personal community context too difficult to give up for the sake of on-campus study, and formation on-campus was not perceived as being as good. Distance respondents sometimes mentioned the differences between their community context and the “rarified” (respondent 9D) on-campus environment, a distinction reminiscent to that between *gemeinschaft* and *gesselschaft* (Tönnies, 2002).

There were various reasons provided by respondents for the perceived efficacy of formation during distance study, best described in the words of respondents themselves; each highlights the distinction between *gemeinschaft* and *gesselschaft* as the
context for study. The first point made about the efficacy of distance study relates to the authenticity of the *gemeinschaft* of church membership, compared with the *gesselschaft* of the on-campus experience. This was put well by respondent 2D:

In one sense [if I studied on-campus] I would be immersed more and so I would be talking with more people on perhaps, more of the topics that I was studying. There’d be that aspect of it, but I’d miss out on actually what I did have which was real people... just real, normal life happening at the same time, where [on-campus] is quite an academic and in a sense, a slightly artificial environment. So, I think in one sense you’d probably be quite enjoyable, but there wouldn’t, perhaps in a spiritual sense, be the necessary commitment to life and to the challenges that come up in that context. ...there’s gotta be some artificial element [to studying on-campus].

The contrast between *gemeinschaft* and *gesselschaft* can also be discerned in the response of 4D, characteristic of the second point regarding the efficacy of distance study. For 4D, the emphasis is on the formation implicit in local church ministry, which was a further factor of formation efficacy highlighted by distance respondents; 4D stated, “I wouldn’t have the time to be actually as involved in church life as what I am at the moment, so therefore [theological study on-campus] wouldn’t have the same impact on me.” The third factor of efficacy stems from the fact that many students opting for distance education do so because they already have ministry experience and responsibilities, and have less perceived need for an intensive time of formation. The on-campus environment was considered one that was more suited to those who lacked such experience. This again relates back to the critical distinction between *gemeinschaft* and *gesselschaft*, as respondent 9D verbalised:

If I lived on campus I would be in a rarified environment... I think we gain more actually being in our community and interacting with the people and then coming back online and saying and putting in our experiences, than possibly just all being together on the campus without that ministry experience to really be putting into.

One further point related to the efficacy of spiritual formation for distance students was noted by respondent 3D, who stated that leaving his context for on-campus study
would have meant he would have been an intern in a strange church rather than his home one:

…when I started the internship I [had] already taken a leadership in certain ministries, and if I was removed from that and then gone into a new church, a new setting, we… may have struggled to have been able to do those practical internship areas in another setting.

Once more, the distinction between *gemeinschaft* and *gesselschaft* community can be discerned. Distance education enabled respondent 3D to remain within his church for internship, making it possible for him to build directly upon his existing responsibilities rather than having to first build trust in a new church setting.

Distance respondents valued the opportunity that distance education gave them to study theology. While many distance respondents felt that interpersonal engagement would be better on-campus, they also saw online forums as providing sufficient exposure to others’ perspectives; many distance respondents were surprised at the effectiveness of the online forums. Most respondents could not imagine studying on-campus because of the commitment it would require. No distance respondent had a strong preference for studying on-campus; indeed, many preferred to study part-time at a distance in the midst of their life context, with one distance respondent stating that distance should be the preferred option for everyone. Most viewed their mix of real-life and study as optimal for their formation. The distinction between *gemeinschaft* and *gesselschaft* communities is evident in distance respondents’ description about the efficacy of their formation experience. The authenticity of the local church context, the active ministry that distance respondents were involved with, the recognition of the formation that ministry experience had already provided, and the benefits of existing local church relationships were all raised as beneficial aspects of formation by distance respondents.

Only one on-campus student had experience studying theology at a distance. Despite this, most on-campus respondents had strong impressions about the superiority of the
on-campus experience. Even the sole on-campus respondent who had experienced distance education, 2C, expressed a preference for on-campus tuition:

I think that there’s valuable things that you can’t get when you’re isolated by yourself learning, like interacting with other people, listening to other people’s opinions. Those things are important and I think if you’re just learning by yourself by distance you miss out on those valuable kinds of insights that other people have.

Respondent 2C did indicate that her academic performance might have been better studying at a distance. However she did not think that her formation would have been any better. Respondent 5C agreed that distance study would be isolating: “…you’re by yourself, in your own room, doing your own reading and I don’t get a lot out of my studies from the notes, it’s more the lectures and being able to talk about it with people that helped me to understand.” Respondent 10C mentioned the critical role of the lecturer, alongside other comments related to learning alongside others:

…the role of the teacher is so crucial…. I’ve learnt so much from just discussion, discussion has been probably the most beneficial thing for me…. I think the role of community in a theological college is very essential and I think if it’s something that you were to do on your own, you wouldn’t even learn as much. … when you have someone at the front of the lecture hall, who’s so passionate about what they’re teaching, that’s so encouraging…

Respondent 10C’s comments were strong despite his admission that “I haven’t done distance learning, [and] I don’t really know too much how it works”. Respondent 9C also had a strong reaction against the thought of distance study, based partly on the perception that distance education is best suited to cognitive development:

I just don’t know how you’d do spiritual direction or spiritual formation online. I mean the study papers probably are not a problem, where you’re studying a book, or studying history or Old Testament survey if you like, those things I can see working…. I just don’t know how [distance students] relate to [the 401.515 Spiritual Formation course]. I just feel that something would be lost, but it’s hypothetical ‘cause I haven’t actually done the distance learning module.
Respondents 9C and 10C were the strongest critics of distance education, though neither had experienced it. Some on-campus students stated that they would study at a distance under certain circumstances. Respondent 7C said he would recommend it to others as a means of theological study:

I’m training to become a minister and I think one of things I’d really emphasise for young people and men and women in my church, I’ll encourage them to study theology and potentially study theology within the church context wherever possible. And so that may be by distance, depending if there’s a theological college nearby [laugh].

Other on-campus respondents also indicated that distance study would a good option for them, provided they were a part of an affirming church. Respondent 4C said that she would have studied at a distance if she was involved in ministry in a church that supported her; a further two respondents indicated that they would consider distance study if they were in a supportive church or active ministry. Convenience and flexibility were further considerations for one on-campus student who indicated that, if she were not resident on-campus, she would likely study at a distance to save money on travel. The residential accommodation was also cheaper than local rent.

For the most part on-campus students had a perception of distance education that mirrored the negative stereotype of the literature reviewed in Chapter Two (Diekema & Caddell, 2001; Palka, 2004; Rovai et al., 2008; Sasse, 1998), with one respondent, 4C, refusing to entertain the thought of distance study at all:

I’d probably say screw it, I won’t do it [laugh]. I’m being very totally, brutally honest. I am not very good at self-motivated learning, which is ironic, because I want to go into a post-grad study. But I get stimulated by conversation, by hearing other people’s ideas, and I don’t get that as much from just reading their response on a computer screen.

Most on-campus respondents perceived distance study as being isolating and requiring more discipline than the more structured on-campus study they were experiencing, and commented that there was considerable value in being able to
discuss their studies with others close at hand. While most on-campus respondents considered their ready access to other students as beneficial, only one respondent considered the on-campus formational experience was likely to be superior to that experienced by distance students.

In summary, no distance respondent regretted studying at a distance and, while some expressed a preference toward studying on-campus, the majority simply could not consider it because of their circumstances. Further, most distance respondents were suspicious of the potential advantages on-campus study might offer over their own real-life community contexts. The on-campus community was thought to be better suited for younger people without ministry experience, or for those who were not active in church service.

By contrast, few on-campus students could see value in studying at a distance and none expressed distance study as a preference, even though only one of the ten respondents had experienced distance study. To on-campus students distance education was perceived as being isolated and impersonal, as opposed to the dynamic, interpersonal and more conversational on-campus experience. Some on-campus respondents did acknowledge the value of distance education experienced in the context of a supportive church, and expressed interest in recommending the combination of distance study in the church to others.

Perceptions of cognitive growth and spiritual formation.

Both distance and on-campus students talked about their study experiences in terms that echo Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning (Ball, 2012; Mezirow & Taylor, 2009; Mezirow, 1990, 1991, 2000), even though Mezirow’s theory was not introduced at any stage into the interview. No distinction is made between the responses of on-
campus and distance students in this section, because respondents were unanimous in seeing no distinction between cognitive and formational growth.

Respondent 9C provided clear examples in his interview of where learning new things about God was formational, and he stated that some lessons left him “undone at times spiritually” because of how they required him think more deeply. Respondents 2C, 6D and 8D all talked about their formation as having come from learning how to better study the Bible. The words of 2C are representative:

When you do exegesis...it kind of makes everything kind of very, a little bit dry. And it just loses it’s kind of personal message...and you don’t feel so much that God is kind of talking to you through it, because it...kind of loses its capacity to inspire. For me anyway.... [But] I think I managed to get both together.... I can do both, I can read a passage and exegete it in my mind, but I can also get the beauty out of it as well.

For the respondents who mentioned better Bible study, the Bible is a personal and authoritative book. Studying it, then, has personal and authoritative connotations. Respondent 2C also talked about having developed a cognitive “filter” through her studies that has resulted in “a lot of self-examination... you end up thinking a lot about how you think about God.” Exposure to others’ ideas, and coming to the understanding that “there’s not one single person that has it right,” resulted in her becoming more self-critical and discerning.

Many students (1D; 4D; 9D; 10C) made explicit mention of inviting God into their study times, evidence of linking study time with formation. The words of 4D:

I always pray [before I study], and it’s amazing how amazing that is. The insights that I get as I’m studying, sometimes I feel as if my mind is a sponge and I just absorb it...spiritually my whole relationship with God has just grown...it’s just an automatic thing...as I’ve been getting into doing the studies, you can’t help but have your focus on Jesus.

Here the connection with study and formation is considered absolute, study time being a time when you “have your focus on Jesus.” This was stated most clearly by
Respondent 10C, who simply stated that “... [my studies] are formational.” Other respondents stated explicitly that they saw no differentiation between cognitive growth and formation, such as 2D:

I’m not just thinking for the sake of it, a lot of it is opening up. I like questions, so I feel that it draws me closer to God in the sense of [having] an enquiring mind. It’s almost a meditation, I suppose...so, is it just cognitive and spiritual in opposition? I wouldn’t see a polarity there...people are often scared, I think, of a cognitive sort of approach, if you wanna put it that way. It’s that sort of, you know, just head knowledge and nothing to do with the heart. But...I see that as dividing up the self.

The prospect of any head and heart dichotomy was flatly rejected by respondents even where they had previously been warned about its possibility, as was respondent 4C:

...what I was told in churches before I got here is that the knowledge you get [is] so head knowledge that you lose all your heart. It’s just such a common phrase around here, ‘everyone’s losing their heart, they’re all becoming too head’. I think that that is a really false dichotomy...actually what you learn impacts what you know and what you know impacts how you feel about it, and so to disassociate the two and go one is head and one is heart is to not even realise how much what you know is held so closely to your heart.

Respondent 3C was the exception to considering head and heart to be unified, yet he did acknowledge that his studies had contributed to his formation:

I would say that I definitely have grown in a stage of faith according to Fowler. You could call it spiritual growth... [but] actually thinking about it, [for me it’s] probably more academic growth, because you start thinking and using your mind more. I’ve kind of stopped reading the Bible and praying as much as I used to and I’ve actually heard quite a lot of people have done the same at the College.

Respondent 3C’s reference to Fowler (1981) illustrates a perceived step change in faith development, despite the reduction of Bible reading and praying. In his interview, respondent 3C shared a difficult and personally demanding experience while studying at Laidlaw College (to do with residential community), which he was still working through.
Overall, respondents understood the distinction between head and heart (or cognitive growth and formation), and were emphatic that there was no difference based on their experience of theological study. For most, the study experience was devotional and holistic. Transformation came from a deeper understanding of the Bible and exposure to other ideas.

Formation and part-time study.

During interviews, five distance respondents made unprompted comments related to the formational benefits of part-time study. One on-campus respondent studying full-time also expressed her preference for going back to part-time theological study, because it provided her with more time for reflection. According to distance respondents, the general benefits of part-time study were related to the ability to read further, reflect more and remain grounded in real life. As 2D said:

I’ve tended to over read [my course notes] because I’ve done [my courses] at a fairly leisurely pace. I’ve done it at one paper per semester, and I’ve tended to read way beyond the requirements of the reading...if I try to imagine you could do all these papers in one year if you really wanted to, I mean there’s just no way that you’d have read the amount of material that I’ve read in a year, absolutely not.

Respondent 9D was in the position of being able to compare her part-time experience with those of another student studying full-time. She perceived her own advantage as having time for reflection, compared with her friend:

...I can go deeper, doing distance. If I’m on campus, I’ve been on campus there at [another theological college], and they were doing I don’t know how many papers, like they were doing it full-time and there was one girl particularly bright, very much like me and she was full-time...she was probably the brighter student of the two of us, but she couldn’t do justice to each paper that she was doing, from a pure time factor. So she wasn’t digging as deeply and interacting as deeply with the material, because she just had too many courses to do all at
once…[full-time students] don’t have the time to reflect on [things], ‘cause they’re too busy going to the next assignment and the next assignment and the next assignment.

The benefits of part-time study include being able to maintain important personal relationships and church involvement, as explained by respondent 6D:

I think if I could’ve gone through the Laidlaw study and not maintained [my personal long-term] friendships and not taken the time to actually get involved in a local church as much as I have, I don’t think the study would be as good…. the study is better when it’s really coupled with living it.

Two respondents were able to contrast the benefits of gradual, part-time study. Respondent 5D talked of moving from two papers per semester part-time to one:

…when I started doing two papers a semester I got really frustrated ‘cause I didn’t have the same time to let it really, sort of, sink in. And I found I was learning the stuff enough to pass the exam and sit the paper, but it was just like learning it…the study recently has been deeply contemplative for me. But I think I found that, if I’d done them all, like in one year, I wouldn’t have been able to pull from one paper into another paper.

No distance respondent regretted studying part-time. Indeed, as the comments above attest, most saw the ability to engage with their studies part-time as an advantage.

Summary of qualitative findings.

Findings from the interviews indicate strong differences across distance and on-campus respondents in the area of church community, with only two on-campus respondents indicating a sense of belonging to a church community and only five mentioning any involvement with a church. This was in marked contrast to all ten distance respondents, all of whom were involved in a church and had a sense of belonging. Distance respondents were typically very involved in their congregations, with some being provided with further responsibilities within their congregations.
Distance respondents also had opportunities to share their understanding and perspectives with others, sometimes in small groups and in online forums.

On-campus and distance respondents, in general, reported very different formational contexts. Distance students were more likely to identify ministry- and life-related experiences as being of formational significance, and indicated that their theological studies were influential. By contrast, on-campus students tended to think directly of their Laidlaw College experiences when asked to describe a formational event of significance. Significant formational experiences for both groups tended to identify with community contexts. Findings indicate on-campus students and distance respondents experienced different forms of community; the former were a part of the Laidlaw College gesellschaft community, whereas distance respondents participated in their church gemeinschaft community. The on-campus setting was perceived to be more suited to younger people.

Laidlaw College studies were perceived by respondents in both groups as being formational, with the 401.515 Spiritual Formation course seen as particularly significant. Both student groups described their formation in terms consistent with transformative learning theory, with distance respondents more likely to indicate an incremental transformation. Findings indicate that cognitive development, formation, and perspective transformation are intertwined in theological education.

Both groups also indicated a preference for on-campus education, though no distance respondent regretted their decision to study at a distance. Most distance respondents were unable to imagine having the opportunity to study on-campus given their life circumstances. Distance respondents appreciated the opportunity that theological distance education provided them, and appreciated the importance of their church community to their overall formation. Respondents from both groups also viewed part-time study as having advantages over full-time tuition.
Quantitative Analysis

The interview sample of on-campus and distance students provides insight into the settings and formational dynamics across both groups. All students perceived formational development across the time of study; the purpose of the quantitative survey was to determine whether on-campus and distance students differed in terms of spiritual maturity, and if so, how. The quantitative survey was also employed to ascertain whether full-time or part-time study, and demographic factors, might also influence spiritual maturity.

The CSPP (Christian Spiritual Participation Profile) instrument (Appendix B) was used to ascertain the spiritual maturity and spiritual growth trajectory of post first-semester degree students at Laidlaw College. The reliability and validity of the instrument is demonstrated in Thayer (2004). The CSPP instrument considers spiritual maturity from an evangelical Christian perspective based on participation in ten spiritual disciplines (worship, prayer, repentance, meditation, examen of conscience,43 Bible study/reading, fellowship, service, evangelism, and stewardship). The instrument also provides insight into a respondent’s disposition toward further spiritual growth based on the four additional factors of concrete experience, abstract conceptualisation, reflective observation, and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984; Thayer, n.d.).

The CSPP instrument was used to test five hypotheses:

1. There is no significant difference between the overall spiritual maturity of on-campus and distance education students, null hypothesis.

43 The examen of conscience “includes critical reflection on one’s own life and the conditions of contemporary culture, within the context of biblical values” (Thayer, 2004, p. 200). The discipline is also referred to as ‘prophetic critiquing’ in the instrument.
2. There is no significant difference between the spiritual formation trajectory profiles of on-campus and distance education students, null hypothesis.

3. Full-time students (on-campus and at a distance) have similar overall scores across the a) Fellowship, b) Service and c) Stewardship scales of the CSPP as part-time students (on-campus and at a distance), null hypothesis.

4. Students across various age groups report similar levels of spiritual maturity, null hypothesis.

5. Students report similar levels of overall spiritual maturity regardless of their length of time as a Christian (self-reported), null hypothesis.

Analysis for hypotheses three through five was at the five per cent level of significance. Again, the fellowship, service, and stewardship scales were selected for testing in hypothesis three because it seemed likely that these would be the scales most likely to be different across the on-campus and distance samples. They are also the only three scales dependent on Christian community. Analysis of variance and t-tests were applied to the data, to measure statistical relationships and compare across groups. A post-hoc Bonferroni correction was also applied to the ANOVA analyses of the fourth and fifth hypotheses to limit Type I error; Hochberg’s GT2 and Games Howell post hoc tests were also applied to confirm results. Additional relationships across the scales of the instrument and demographic data might also have been explored for relationships of significance, but this further use of the data goes beyond the scope of this particular study.

**Participant description.**

The population of interest was those Laidlaw College degree students who had completed at least one full-time equivalent semester, or 60 credits, of study as at the first semester of 2010. The actual length of time each respondent had studied for, and
how many courses had been completed, were not captured in the survey. The cohort is considered a typical one for Laidlaw College in terms of proportion of on-campus to distance theological education students, and for demographics. There were 77 responses to the online CSPP instrument received from the population of 147 students, an overall response rate of 52.4%. Two groups were of specific interest: those on-campus, who attended lectures at the Auckland Laidlaw College campus and who formed part of the on-campus community, and distance students enrolled with the Laidlaw College Centre for Distance Learning who were not required to attend on-campus at any stage of their studies. The populations of interest were 101 on-campus students, and 46 distance students. Fewer respondents overall were distance students \((n = 31)\) however the percentage of distance respondents compared to the population of distance students was higher than that for on-campus students \((67.3\% \text{ of the distance population compared with } 45.5\% \text{ of the on-campus population})\). As shown in Table 4.5, distance respondents were more likely to be part-time and non-residential (that is, not living on-campus); one distance respondent, who had recently transferred from on-campus study to distance, was still resident on-campus at the time of the survey. This particular student was also studying full-time; because this particular respondent was not attending on-campus tuition, she was considered a distance student. It is not clear what proportion of on-campus and distance students were part-time or residential across the population.
Table 4.5

*Respondent Characteristics as Percentage of the Sample*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>On-campus ((n = 46))</th>
<th>Distance ((n = 31))</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Study characteristics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>9.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time</td>
<td>80.4</td>
<td>90.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residential status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resident</td>
<td>41.3</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-resident</td>
<td>58.7</td>
<td>96.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Distance student respondents tended to be older than on-campus respondents, as Table 4.6 shows. The proportions of age in Table 4.6 exaggerate the actual average age differences between the on-campus and distance student populations (in the first semester of 2010 the average age of distance students was three years older than for on-campus students).

Table 4.6

*Respondent Age as Percentage of Sample*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Age 17 to 24</th>
<th>Age 25 to 39</th>
<th>Age 40 to 65</th>
<th>Age 66+</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>On-campus students</td>
<td>34.8</td>
<td>32.6</td>
<td>30.4</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance students</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>25.8</td>
<td>67.7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Distance students also self-reported as being Christians for longer than on-campus students, as shown in Table 4.7.
Table 4.7

*Respondent Length of Time as a Christian (Self-Reported) as Percentage of Sample*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1 to 2 years</th>
<th>3 to 5 years</th>
<th>6 to 10 years</th>
<th>10 to 20 years</th>
<th>21+ years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>On-campus students</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>30.4</td>
<td>34.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance students</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>58.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Only one respondent (on-campus) reported being a Christian for less than two years.

**Descriptive analysis.**

For testing hypotheses one, two, and three survey responses were analysed based on each respondent’s discipline and growth factor scales. SPSS was used for applying Levene’s Test and *t*-tests across the independent samples of on-campus and distance students; results are summarised in Table 4.8 (all results to 75 Degrees of Freedom). Levene’s Test was used to test for similarity of variance across on-campus and distance results. For all factors, Levene’s Test indicated equal variances might be assumed (*α* = 0.05), so the equal variances assumed *t*-test for equality of means was applied.
## Table 4.8

*Independent Samples Tests across Discipline and Growth Factors for the On-Campus and Distance Sample*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discipline Factors</th>
<th>On-Campus M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Distance M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>t(75)</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>Effect size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prayer</td>
<td>5.17</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>5.05</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>0.916</td>
<td>0.362</td>
<td>0.103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repentance</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>4.88</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>1.458</td>
<td>0.149</td>
<td>0.167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worship</td>
<td>4.98</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>5.14</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>-1.060</td>
<td>0.293</td>
<td>-0.122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meditation</td>
<td>4.34</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>4.54</td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td>-1.326</td>
<td>0.189</td>
<td>-0.158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examen of Conscience</td>
<td>5.19</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>5.11</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.780</td>
<td>0.438</td>
<td>0.094</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bible Reading and Study</td>
<td>4.34</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>4.46</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>-0.743</td>
<td>0.460</td>
<td>-0.093</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evangelism</td>
<td>3.98</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>4.18</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>-0.852</td>
<td>0.397</td>
<td>-0.103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fellowship</td>
<td>4.36</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>0.199</td>
<td>0.843</td>
<td>0.022</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service</td>
<td>4.26</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>4.27</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>-0.029</td>
<td>0.977</td>
<td>-0.007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stewardship</td>
<td>4.27</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>-2.187</td>
<td>0.032</td>
<td>-0.253</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Growth Factors</th>
<th>On-Campus M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Distance M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>t(75)</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>Effect size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Concrete Experience</td>
<td>5.05</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>4.98</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>0.557</td>
<td>0.580</td>
<td>0.069</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective Observation</td>
<td>4.83</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>4.78</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>0.500</td>
<td>0.618</td>
<td>0.057</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract Conceptualisation</td>
<td>4.53</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>4.82</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>-2.300</td>
<td>0.024</td>
<td>-0.259</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active Experimentation</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>-0.199</td>
<td>0.843</td>
<td>-0.028</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Analysis indicates significant differences across the two samples in the areas of stewardship and abstract conceptualisation, both of which were greater in the distance sample. The effect size for both is considered medium, based on comparison against the on-campus group.

Results for the five hypotheses are as follows:
• **First hypothesis:** There is no significant difference between the overall spiritual maturity of on-campus and distance education students, null hypothesis.

Averaging the ten discipline results of prayer, repentance, worship, meditation, examen of conscience, Bible reading and study, evangelism, fellowship, service, and stewardship for each respondent gave an indicator of overall spiritual maturity based on discipline participation. Assessing overall spiritual maturity in this way (average of ten factors) assumes that all ten disciplines are of equal importance in determining spiritual maturity. This averaging is consistent with the assumptions underlying the CSPP instrument, as “[t]he theory on which the CSPP is based states that spiritual growth can be enhanced by a balanced, in-depth use of all the modes because these learning models provide different ‘learning opportunities’ that God uses to transform us” (Thayer, n.d., p. 3). The CSPP instrument implies that all disciplines considered for hypothesis one are equally important, stating that those areas less strong in a particular individual’s case are those that need to be emphasised for further spiritual growth to occur (Thayer, n.d.).

Table 4.8 provides results across all factors. Table 4.9 shows the analysis of overall spiritual maturity.

Table 4.9

*Independent Samples Tests across Overall Spiritual Maturity (Based on Average Discipline Factor Measures) for the On-Campus and Distance Sample*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>On-Campus</th>
<th>Distance</th>
<th>t(75)</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall Spiritual Maturity (Discipline Factors)</td>
<td>4.64 0.46</td>
<td>4.66 0.47</td>
<td>-0.229</td>
<td>0.820</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Based on this indicator the null hypothesis is not rejected; a \( t \)-test failed to reveal any significant difference between the overall spiritual maturity of on-campus and distance students.

- **Second hypothesis**: There is no significant difference between the formation trajectory profiles of on-campus and distance education students, null hypothesis.

Averaging the four growth factors of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation for each respondent was again used, to give an indicator of overall spiritual growth trajectory (taking the average assumes each of the four has equal importance for determining spiritual growth). Table 4.10 shows the analysis.

**Table 4.10**

*Independent Samples Tests across Overall Spiritual Formation Trajectory (Based on Average Growth Factor Measures) for the On-Campus and Distance Samples*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>On-Campus</th>
<th>Distance</th>
<th>( t(75) )</th>
<th>( p )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall Spiritual Formation Trajectory (Growth Factors)</td>
<td>4.62 0.46</td>
<td>4.68 0.45</td>
<td>-0.500</td>
<td>0.619</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on this indicator the null hypothesis is not rejected; a \( t \)-test failed to reveal any statistically significant difference in the overall spiritual growth characteristics of on-campus and distance students.

- **Third hypothesis**: Full-time students (on-campus and at a distance) have similar overall scores across the a) Fellowship, b) Service and c) Stewardship scales of the CSPP as part-time students (on-campus and at a distance), null hypothesis.
Recall that 19.6% of the on-campus and 9.7% of the distance sample were full-time students, making up 15.6% of the overall sample. Table 4.11 shows the analysis for the fellowship and service scales.

Table 4.11

*Independent Samples Tests across Fellowship and Service Factors for Full-Time and Part-Time Respondents*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Full-Time</th>
<th></th>
<th>Part-Time</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>t(75)</td>
<td>p</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline Factors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fellowship</td>
<td>4.32</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>0.439</td>
<td>0.662</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>4.45</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>2.067</td>
<td>0.042</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For the stewardship scale, Levene’s Test indicated equal variances across the full-time and part-time groups cannot be assumed ($\alpha = 0.05$). The $t$-test for this factor, shown in Table 4.12, therefore does not assume equal variances, and has 65 degrees of freedom.\(^{44}\)

Table 4.12

*Independent Samples Test across Stewardship Factor for Full-Time and Part-Time Respondents*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Full-Time</th>
<th></th>
<th>Part-Time</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>t(65)</td>
<td>p</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline Factor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stewardship</td>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>4.78</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>3.525</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Tables 4.11 and 4.12 indicate the following:

\(^{44}\) The $t$-test assuming equal variances for the Stewardship factor has the same $p$ value, $p = 0.001$. 
a) The first part of the third hypothesis relating to fellowship scores of full-time students being similar to those of part-time students is not rejected, as a $t$-test did not reveal any difference between the fellowship ratings of full-time and part-time students.

b) The second part of the third hypothesis relating to service scores of full-time students being similar to those of part-time students is rejected. Part-time students self-report higher Service discipline than do full-time students.

c) The third part of the third hypothesis relating to stewardship scores of full-time students being similar to those of part-time students is also rejected. Again, part-time students self-report higher values than full-time students do.

The null hypothesis is not rejected for the fellowship factor, though it is rejected for the service and stewardship factors. The medium effect size, in favour of part-time respondents reporting higher service and stewardship, indicates that part-time respondents have a better-rounded participation across all spiritual disciplines than do full-time students.

- **Fourth hypothesis**: Students across various age groups report similar levels of spiritual maturity, null hypothesis.

The only participant in the 66 plus age group was removed for the purposes of analysis as an outlier, leaving 76 respondents. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) confirmed significant differences between groups, with $F(2, 73) = 8.85, p < 0.05$. The results (after the application of a post hoc Bonferroni correction) confirmed that the main differences were between the 17 to 24 and 40 to 65 age groups ($p = 0.000$), with no significant differences between the 25 to 39 age group with these other two age groups (Table 4.13).
Table 4.13

*Analysis of Variance Comparing Spiritual Maturity across Age Categories*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Base category</th>
<th>Comparison category</th>
<th>Mean Difference</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age 17 to 24</td>
<td>Age 25 to 39</td>
<td>-0.228</td>
<td>0.273</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Age 40 to 65</td>
<td>-0.502</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age 25 to 39</td>
<td>Age 17 to 24</td>
<td>0.228</td>
<td>0.273</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Age 40 to 65</td>
<td>-0.274</td>
<td>0.055</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age 40 to 65</td>
<td>Age 17 to 24</td>
<td>0.502</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Age 25 to 39</td>
<td>0.274</td>
<td>0.055</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The means between the 17 to 24 and 40 to 69 age categories were significantly different at the 0.05 level. Results for this comparison were confirmed applying Hochberg’s GT2 and Games Howell post hoc tests (more conservative tests where equal variances are assumed, and not assumed respectively). The fourth hypothesis is rejected when comparing the youngest (17 to 24) and older (40 to 65) age groups, with the latter self-reporting higher levels of spiritual maturity.

- **Fifth hypothesis**: Students report similar levels of overall spiritual maturity regardless of their length of time as a Christian (self-reported), null hypothesis.

No respondent indicated they had been a Christian for less than one year, and the only participant in the category of between one and two years was removed for the purposes of analysis. Table 4.14 displays the mean discipline scores and standard deviations by length of time as a Christian.
Table 4.14

*Analysis of Variance Comparing Spiritual Maturity across Length of Time as a Christian*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Base category</th>
<th>Comparison category</th>
<th>Mean Difference</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Christian 3 to 5 years</td>
<td>Christian 6 and 10 years</td>
<td>-0.378</td>
<td>0.406</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Christian 10 and 20 years</td>
<td>-0.278</td>
<td>0.873</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Christian 21+ years</td>
<td>-0.433</td>
<td>0.106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian 6 and 10 years</td>
<td>Christian 3 to 5 years</td>
<td>0.378</td>
<td>0.406</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Christian 10 and 20 years</td>
<td>0.101</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Christian 21+ years</td>
<td>-0.055</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian 10 and 20 years</td>
<td>Christian 3 to 5 years</td>
<td>0.278</td>
<td>0.873</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Christian 6 and 10 years</td>
<td>-0.101</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Christian 21+ years</td>
<td>-0.155</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian 21+ years</td>
<td>Christian 3 to 5 years</td>
<td>0.433</td>
<td>0.106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Christian 6 and 10 years</td>
<td>0.055</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Christian 10 and 20 years</td>
<td>0.155</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The analysis of variance (ANOVA) with Bonferroni correction found no significant differences between groups. Neither the Hochberg GT2 nor Games-Howell post hoc tests indicated any differences. As there were no reliable or significant differences across individual groups, the fifth hypothesis is not rejected by the survey results of this study. A further ANOVA with years as a Christian as an independent variable also showed no significant difference, with F (4, 71) = 1.84, p = 0.13.
Summary of quantitative results.

In terms of the five stated hypotheses drawing on data gathered using the CSPP instrument, the data supports the following conclusions:

- There is no difference between the overall spiritual maturity of on-campus and distance education student at $\alpha = 0.05$. The null hypothesis that there is no significant difference between the overall spiritual maturity of on-campus and distance education students is not rejected.

- There is no difference between the formation trajectory profiles between on-campus and distance education students at $\alpha = 0.05$. The null hypothesis that there is no significant difference between the formation trajectory profiles between on-campus and distance education students is not rejected.

- Full-time students (on-campus and at a distance) have lower overall scores across the service and stewardship scales of the CSPP than do part-time students (on-campus and at a distance) at $\alpha = 0.05$ however there is no difference across the fellowship scale. The null hypothesis that there are no significant differences between full-time and part-time students is rejected across service and stewardship scales, and not rejected for the fellowship scale.

- Students in the 40 to 65 age group report higher levels of spiritual maturity at $p < 0.05$ when compared with the 17 to 24 age group. The null hypothesis that students across various age groups report similar levels of spiritual maturity is rejected.

- Students report similar levels of spiritual maturity regardless of their length of time as a Christian (self-reported) at $p < 0.05$. The null hypothesis that students report similar levels of overall spiritual maturity regardless of their length of time as a Christian is not rejected.
The CSPP instrument reveals no differences between on-campus and distance respondents for level of spiritual maturity, nor any evidence that on-campus students are developing spiritual maturity at a rate any different to that of distance students, at \( \alpha = 0.05 \). The data indicate that any actual differences in spiritual maturity across student groups are more likely explained by the full-time or part-time nature of the student and by the degree of personal maturity or life experience (across students aged 17 to 24, compared with those 40 to 65), than by mode of study. While the influence of on-campus study on spiritual maturity cannot be fully discounted, the qualitative interview findings indicate that it is not likely.

These findings, as they stand, appear to challenge the assumption that this particular cohort of full-time, residential on-campus students are advantaged in terms of their formational experiences, and that distance students experience an impoverished spiritual development for the duration of their study. Furthermore, the data demonstrates that part-time students experience a more complete participation in spiritual disciplines than full-time students do, whether on-campus or at a distance. These themes are explored further in Chapter Five.

**Summary of findings**

Findings indicate that third generation theological distance education provides an alternative to on-campus education that does not necessarily compromise formational outcomes. Consideration of interview data suggest that theological distance education, deliberately designed to complement a student’s church or relational contexts, may even be a more genuine means of addressing formational concerns than on-campus education. Distance respondents talked of the benefits of belonging to a *gemeinschaft* community during their studies and of an integration of their studies into incremental
transformative learning. They perceived themselves as being spiritually formed as they studied; the comparison of their CSPP results with those of on-campus students also indicates that their spiritual growth is more rounded and is no less likely to continue than that of their on-campus counterparts.
Chapter Five

Discussion and Conclusion

This study is concerned with the formational experiences of on-campus and distance theological education students enrolled in degree studies with Laidlaw College. The study was prompted by concern, expressed in literature, that distance theological education students are disadvantaged in terms of their formational experiences. Subsequently, the formational experiences of on-campus and theological distance education students who had completed at least one equivalent full-time semester of undergraduate degree study with Laidlaw College were compared. The research questions for this study are, again:

1. How do post first-semester theological students, studying on-campus and at a distance, compare in their spiritual maturity and disposition toward further maturity?
2. How do post first-semester students regard the contribution of their formal study experience to their formation across the term of their studies?

Interviews were undertaken to explore the contribution of theological studies to formation, with particular emphasis given to respondents’ experiences of community and transformative learning. The findings of interviews indicate that formal theological education is, by nature, transformative and formative. Both on-campus and theological distance education respondents reported evidence of perspective transformation, with on-campus students more likely to experience transformation in epochal terms.

Thayer’s (2004) Christian Spiritual Participation Profile instrument indicated no significant difference between the spiritual maturity of on-campus and distance
students of post-first semester theological students, nor any difference in their respective disposition toward further spiritual development. Part-time students had higher scores for spiritual maturity in the areas of service and stewardship, and older students reported higher levels of spiritual maturity across the 17 to 24, and 40 to 65 age groups. The distance sample had a higher proportion of part-time and older students, though it is unclear what these characteristics contribute to the overall findings. What is clear is that, in this study, those students self-selecting for theological distance education already tended to be mature believers, and tended to study alongside strong church involvement. It could be that those seeking to invest their time and resources formally into a theological degree are already likely to be mature Christians with a high level of spiritual maturity, motivation to study, strong spiritual growth orientation, and openness to further formation. Demographic patterns of enrolment suggest that the trend towards older, part-time, and spiritually mature students in theological education is likely to continue.

This discussion draws on the literature already examined, and synthesises the findings of this study across key themes. Discussion centres on what the findings indicate about formation across the on-campus and distance student respondents; the assumptions made about the on-campus theological education student experience; and a consideration of the relationships between transformative learning, formation and theologia as they relate to theological education. A section reconsidering theological distance education in the light of this study’s findings is then followed by a suggested vision for theological distance education.

**Formation across On-Campus and Theological Distance Education Students**

The quantitative data in this study demonstrate no overall differences between the overall spiritual maturity and spiritual formation trajectory between on-campus and
distance respondents. Some differences were found across age, and full-time or part-time status. Qualitative interviews confirmed that all students, regardless of study mode, had experienced transformative learning due to their theological study in ways similar to other studies (Ball, 2012; King, 2009; Mezirow & Taylor, 2009; Mezirow, 1990, 1991, 2000; Nichols & Dewerse, 2010). This study finds that formation and transformation were characteristic of all interviewees, across both on-campus and distance, and part-time and full-time status. Age, community belonging, the full-time versus part-time nature of study, and the timeframe of transformation (epochal versus incremental) experienced by participants are themes of formation raised by the findings.

The results of the CSPP found differences in spiritual maturity across the younger and older age groups (17 to 24, compared with 40 to 65), possibly because of the stages of spiritual growth that would normally be expected when comparing across these age groups (Fowler, 1981, 1993). Differences in spiritual maturity across proximal age categories (17 to 24 and 25 to 39, and 25 to 39 and 40 to 65) were not significantly different. The CSPP instrument is not specifically designed to measure Fowler’s stages, though the finding of no apparent differences in maturity across the age groups deserves some comment, particularly in that some differences across the 17 to 24 and 25 to 39 groups might have been anticipated. The lack of apparent difference may be attributable to the similarities of evangelical faith that all participants shared, and that together all participants likely shared Stage Three to Stage Four characteristics. The lack of apparent difference may also be influenced by the fact that Stage Five (Conjunctive Faith) of Fowler’s model is not reached by all (Fowler, 1981, 1993). It might also be that the age categories were not discerning enough to identify those stage changes likely to take place around the age of 22 years. It is also probable that changes in Stages of Faith are not discernable using the CSPP instrument.
The finding of no significant difference in spiritual maturity across the on-campus and distance samples could also be the result of differences in average age across the two groups. As previously noted, though, the average age of distance students in 2010, the year the CSPP instrument was applied, was only three years more than the average age of on-campus students. Regrettably, the generous age categories used in the CSPP do not permit a more nuanced analysis of the age differences across the on-campus and distance samples in this study. In general, though, distance students are older than on-campus ones, and older students are likely to have progressed further along Fowler’s stages of faith. It is likely that those students seeking to study at a distance, and those who study on-campus later in life, are already mature believers.

In interviews, respondents reflected that the on-campus environment was more suited to younger people without financial pressures, family responsibilities or ministry experience, and who were open to forming new friendships. Young people are typically at a similar stage of faith development (Fowler, 1981, 1993), so share similar characteristics of faith and development of perspective. Pastoral support is viewed as critical during the time of transition across Stage Three (Synthetic-Conventional Faith) to Stage Four (Individualistic-Reflective), which indicates that efforts to generate on-campus community and pastoral care are prudent. It is clear from the literature, though, that the demand for theological education is increasingly from older students (Ball, 2012; Klimoski, 2005; Lindbeck, 1988; Palka, 2004; Shaw, 2005; Thoennes, 2008; Werner, 2009a). Insight into the dynamics of this shift in age can be seen from some of the interviewees for this study.

The perception that the on-campus setting was best suited for younger people was more acutely felt by older respondents, in particular respondents 2C and 8C (the latter a resident). Both of these on-campus respondents found it difficult to fit in because they were somewhat older than the typical full-time student in their early twenties. While some distance respondents indicated that they would have enjoyed the on-
campus environment, it was clear that the responsibilities that came with their own life stage - including families – meant that they could not access on-campus tuition. Distance respondents also tended to reflect on the value of the life experience they had gained as older adults, and to see the influence of their daily lives on their formation.

Further research into the relationships across age and on-campus versus distance theological education groups would provide interesting insight into the dynamics of formation. It is possible that younger students benefit more from a full-time, on-campus experience than do older adults whose life circumstances make part-time and distance education more suitable, and provide them with a broader life experience as the context for their on-going formation.

All distance respondents reported an involvement in and commitment to a church fellowship. Commitment ran deep, to the extent that even those distance respondents who indicated they were going through a difficult time in their church context still expressed a dedication to remaining in their church. In contrast, on-campus interviewees seldom belonged to any church congregation. Those that did seek church association while studying on-campus found it difficult to establish a sense of belonging and meaningful fellowship. Only one on-campus respondent indicated a successful adherence to a church, and he was very busy in its service. Many on-campus students sought community in the Laidlaw College context, either through on-campus events or among Christian friends (who were usually themselves Laidlaw College students). The actual experience of community was mixed for on-campus respondents.

On-campus respondents sharply distinguished between Laidlaw College and church communities, the former broadly perceived as the primary and academic community and the latter an optional community that respondents were generally too busy to belong to. On-campus respondents were also the only ones to make negative or cynical comments regarding church fellowship. Some on-campus respondents indicated that the Laidlaw College community experience was far superior to that of the churches
they had experienced. The findings of this study support the assertion that theological distance education students in the interview sample were more likely to be involved in and committed to church fellowship, and were more likely to appreciate the contribution church fellowship made to their formation. On-campus students in the sample were more likely to distinguish between church and College communities and disparage the former, a rather alarming tendency given the importance of church fellowship to formation (Cannell, 2006; Estep et al., 2008; Hall, 1988; Hill, 1998; Kelsey, 1992; Kemp, 2010; Maddix, 2009; Shaw, 2005) and the role of theological education as servant to the church (Dietterich, 2005; Kelsey, 1992; Noelliste, 1993; Werner, 2009a).

Many distance respondents expressed gratitude for the support they received from their church. Further, most had opportunity to discuss their studies with others in their church, either directly in preaching or teaching, or indirectly through small group fellowship. Most distance respondents were involved in some form of church service, and three had the direct support of their local church leader. While one on-campus student was heavily involved in a local church since relocating for on-campus study, his experience was more aligned with giving service than receiving support. Relocating for on-campus study tended to alienate the on-campus sample from the opportunity to benefit from church support and interaction during their studies. Some on-campus respondents indicated that they purposefully left their churches in order to study on-campus, with two stating that they were already on the verge of leaving their local congregations anyway. The advantage enjoyed by distance students for the purposes of formation, given their overall Christian ecology and participation in the alleloun activities of fellowship (Lowe & Lowe, 2010a, 2010b), is clear from the interview data.

Distance respondents valued the sharing of perspectives online, with several commenting on the depth of online discussion. For distance students, this online sharing of ideas formed a valuable study community characterised by a sharing of
perspectives that were frequently challenging and extending. This online study community complemented their church adherence. When distance respondents sought engagement with others in their church congregations, they found that they had to provide some explanation of what they were studying and how they had arrived at their understanding. Typically, such explanations would enrich small group discussions. Small group contexts were the most frequent means of distance students sharing their studies with others in their church, though some distance respondents also had opportunity to contribute to larger church services. On-campus students appreciated the opportunity to discuss course-related issues directly with one another, and several distance respondents indicated that this would also be their preference. The data support the assertions that engagement with others’ ideas is possible in both online forums and in the on-campus context, and that the preference right across the sample was for the face-to-face sharing of course-related ideas and perspectives. It is clear that distance students did not lack opportunity to discuss theological ideas across the duration of their studies.

While many on-campus respondents were positive about the ability to ask questions and academically interact with peers, not all interviewees were positive about their on-campus community experience. As mentioned earlier, many on-campus respondents were not able to establish themselves in a church and so sought to meet their need for fellowship in the on-campus context. Some interviewees expressed perceptions of being alienated and lonely, while others mentioned having made good friends. This variability is also characteristic of the residential on-campus experience. The data support the assertion that on-campus community was perceived beneficially by the study participants as a venue to discuss academic ideas. However, the on-campus setting had mixed reviews as an interpersonal community. In Tönnies’ (2002) terms, the data suggest that the on-campus community is an effective gessellschaft community however the gemeinschaft experience of on-campus respondents is variable at best. Distance students were able to enrich their gemeinschaft (church) community
with the online *gesselschaft* one, the latter used primarily for the sharing of perspectives.

Analysis of the quantitative data from the CSPP survey indicates that part-time students were found to have a more complete formational experience than were full-time students. This was largely because part-time students are more able to participate in Christian service and stewardship, two of the factors in the CSPP, alongside their study activity. Distance students are more likely to study part-time alongside life commitments such as children, employment, and church service. Increasingly, part-time study is also characteristic of the on-campus student population (Klimoski, 2005; Shaw, 2005). This finding indicates that, for the sample surveyed, part-time students have a more complete formation experience across their period of study than do full-time students.

Furthermore, interview respondents frequently referred to the pace of part-time study enabling them to reflect on the concepts they were learning about as they went about their day-to-day life. In contrast, it was observed that full-time students tended to go from assignment to assignment. Reflection is a vital part of Banks’s (1999) missional approach to theological education, and reflection coupled with academic dialogue is widely acknowledged as a central activity for learning theology and engaging effectively with higher education outcomes (Estep et al., 2008; Kelsey, 1992; Lamoureux, 1999; McEwen, 2012); reflection is also a central component of transformative learning (Ball, 2012; Mezirow & Taylor, 2009; Mezirow, 1990, 1991, 2000). All but one of the distance interviewees were part-time, compared with three on-campus interviewees.

Few respondents made mention of reflection in their interviews, however the importance of those comments that were made by interviewees, and the links respondents made to the effectiveness of online discussion, indicate scope for further research. The data support the assertion that part-time respondents from this study
were more likely to express study behaviours related to reflection, though more research is needed to explore the quantitative benefit of this behaviour and its subsequent link to transformation in theological education.

All respondents were unanimous in their impression that spiritual growth was occurring for them. Descriptions of formation were aligned with the theory of perspective transformation (Ball, 2012; Mezirow & Taylor, 2009; Mezirow, 1990, 1991, 2000), in that respondents talked about their development in terms of becoming more discerning of their and others viewpoints. There was no absolute distinction made by any respondent between cognitive and spiritual growth. Theological study tended to complement the church involvement of distance respondents, and broadened their opportunities to serve in the church. Such opportunities provided evidence of formation taking place in the context of the congregation. On-campus respondents tended to describe their most significant formational experience in the time since beginning theological study, and therefore as having taken place in the context of Laidlaw College. By contrast, distance respondents were more likely to talk about their own involvement in church service.

Both distance and on-campus students specifically mentioned one particular course in Laidlaw College’s degree programmes, 401.515 Spiritual Formation, as having had a significant formational influence. Elements of the Spiritual Formation course challenged students to reflect on their relationship with God and their Christian experiences. Respondents also mentioned theology courses as having influenced their spiritual growth. This finding indicates that formal study in itself has the potential to contribute to formational outcomes, and further brings into question a cognitive and affective divide in theological education.

Distance respondents tended to describe the formational benefit from their studies as an on-going process complementing their spiritual growth through church service, and everyday life. The formational process described by distance respondents seemed
to be both effective and constructive. On-campus respondents were more likely to consider their formational development solely through the filter of their on-campus studies. Some from the on-campus group, each of whom was at one stage residential, were the only respondents to describe their formational development in terms of being deconstructed and reconstructed. These terms are reminiscent of epochal, or sudden and dramatic, transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000) whereby a particular event triggers a shift in understanding and perspective. It is possible that the disorientation for a residential student from their regular gemeinschaft ecology into the gesselschaft on-campus environment contributes to the epochal shift. In contrast, distance respondents and other on-campus interviewees talked of their transformation more in incremental terms, that is, as a progressive development that could be discerned but not necessarily traced to a particular event, in the context of their regular gemeinschaft community. Distance respondents in particular talked of their studies in terms of providing cognitive challenge, with course materials and online forums revealing ideas and perspectives that required them to think differently.

On-campus respondents talked about the richness of engaging with others’ opinions, and the value of being in a setting where questions and dialogue were encouraged. Respondents typically expected spiritual growth to occur as they studied, and such formational growth was universally experienced across all respondents. Many respondents used language indicating perspective transformation, whereby they became more discerning, more accepting of others’ views, and more self-critical in terms of their own beliefs. The data support the assertion that formation in the sense of perspective transformation is evident across both respondent groups. For distance students formational development was unanimously considered a process over the longer-term.

Whether one mode of study ought to be considered better than the other for the purposes of transformative learning is beyond the concern of this study. What is
significant is that transformative learning took place for all respondents. Further research into the respective benefits of epochal and incremental perspective transformation in theological education, and the role of community in perspective transformation, would provide valuable insight into which might be considered preferential. Additional research might also explore whether epochal and incremental transformation might be connected to development across Fowler’s (1981, 1993) stages of faith. Direct investigation into transformative learning across both on-campus and theological distance education would provide a useful addition to literature.

**Assumptions about the On-Campus Theological Education Student Experience**

Objections to theological distance education surveyed in Chapter Two, it has been demonstrated, underestimate the potential of distance study in the context of the church. Frequently, critics of theological distance education make assumptions about the on-campus context that the findings of this study call into question. The assumptions of community; the central importance of faculty modelling character; the embodied nature of on-campus theological education; and distance education as being a pragmatic rather than optimal approach to falling enrolments (Amos, 1999; Diekema & Caddell, 2001; Kuligin, 2007; Naidoo, 2011; Palka, 2004; Patterson, 1996; Rovai et al., 2008; Sasse, 1998), require further discussion.

As mentioned in the literature review, use of the term community in theological education literature is extremely unhelpful (Abercrombie et al., 2006). The term is frequently used in ways so vague that it is difficult to determine its significance. Applying the framework of *gemeinschaft* and *gesselschaft* (Tönnies, 2002) to discussion about community in theological education unlocks a deeper appreciation of community and its experience across on-campus and theological distance education.
Perhaps the best summary of the assumption for on-campus community is found in Rovai et al (2008), who argue that without a deliberately configured on-campus community students may not experience the interpersonal modelling of character deemed essential to Christian formation. The findings of this study indicate that the community experienced by on-campus students can actually vary greatly, and that on-campus community can struggle to match the authentic *gemeinschaft* frequently enjoyed by distance students. Even those respondents to this study who were residential described their experience of community as being less than what they had hoped for. Sometimes, as described by Respondent 7C, the on-campus community can be divisive and isolating.

Differentiating between *gemeinschaft* and *gesselschaft* (Tönnies, 2002), it is clear that the on-campus theological education setting is far from an optimal one for Christian community. The on-campus community will always fall short of what constitutes *gemeinschaft*. Indeed Coe (2000), in an article discussing intentional formation in the classroom, comments that “Clearly the classroom is an abstracted artifact of human experience which cannot include the full range of toils, joys, life experiences, and service which are parts of the whole process of growth” (p. 98). The on-campus setting may well provide community activities for its students, but such activities will always be characteristic of, and limited to, *gesselschaft* society. In this study, very few on-campus respondents were actually members of a church, which immediately limits their exposure to *gemeinschaft*-based fellowship for the duration of their studies. Distance students, by way of contrast, tended to have deep ecclesial connections and therefore a stronger sense of *gemeinschaft*. All distance interviewees were involved in their church and had a sense of belonging; only one distance respondent was not active in some form of service within the church at time of interview.

It could be that, when discussing community in theological education literature, *gesselschaft* rather than *gemeinschaft* is being referred to; that is, the sense of belonging
to an academic community is meant. In terms of formation, the relative value of gesselschaft must surely be less than that of gemeinschaft, because it is the latter that best resembles the church (Tönnies, 2002). The assumption of a superior community experience for on-campus students is questionable given their relative dearth of gemeinschaft. While on-campus community aspires to gemeinschaft, various factors work against it. The temporal nature of the community has already been mentioned; also mentioned is the role of relative age in the on-campus setting. The residential experience is also removed from the usual family context of the church, a context that provides a richer gemeinschaft dynamic.

The assumption of constructive community in the on-campus setting must be challenged. For the interview sample of this study on-campus community proved extremely variable; in general, the on-campus environment is likely capped in its ability to reflect true Christian community because students are bought together under artificial (gesselschaft) conditions. On-campus students encounter a temporary, members-only community largely made up of a demographic cross-section of the Christian community, rather than one optimal for formation and brought together for the express purposes of allēlon (Lowe & Lowe, 2010a). The church consists of a demographic range of Christian believers, often in the context of their families. While the immediate, face-to-face interpersonal community on-campus is valued for the purposes of academic discourse, and many likely make long-term friendships in the on-campus setting, it is difficult to defend the belief that the on-campus community is a formational context superior to that of the church.

Those who hold the on-campus seminary model in high regard tend to claim the importance of faculty role-modelling Christian character as a key to student formation (Palka, 2004). Regular and substantive interaction between students and faculty is an important element of accreditation from the ATS (Association of Theological Schools, 2012b). Critics, though, claim that faculty are typically too busy to provide such role-
modelling, and that faculty are appointed based on their academic credentials rather than the ability to provide pastoral support to students (Glennon et al., 2011; Hill, 1998). The one study found relevant to this thesis concerned with faculty role-modelling reports a mixed experience by students (Birkholz, 1997).

In the present study, two respondents mentioned the support of faculty members in times of personal struggle, associated with their most significant formational experience across the duration of their study. There was no further mention of faculty serving as spiritual models, though Respondent 8C did talk of the value of a spiritual retreat organised through a Laidlaw College contact. While there is no evidence here that faculty are not serving as spiritual models, it seems that the significance of this modelling was not perceived as being of crucial importance to respondents. On-campus students tended to emphasise the value of their studies in their formational growth, rather than the value of modelling by faculty. Further research exploring the relative contribution of on-campus faculty role modelling on student formation in theological education would be useful, particularly as a comparison with the role modelling of online distance tutors complemented by the role modelling of church members. Such an approach would be consistent with the consideration of a student’s overall community ecosystem (Lowe & Lowe, 2010b).

The suggestion that theological distance education is disembodied has its proponents (Basney, 1999; Diekema & Caddell, 2001; Kelsey, 2002; Sasse, 1998) and critics (Gresham, 2006; Hess, 2005a; Kemp, 2010; Lowe & Lowe, 2010a, 2010b). The findings from this study indicate that, far from having a disembodied experience of study, distance respondents enjoy supportive church relationships alongside the sharing of theological perspectives with others through online forums. Theological education for distance students took place alongside daily life responsibilities and long-standing *gemeinschaft* community. As such, the formation experiences of distance students could
be said to be embodied and incarnational, to an extent not enjoyed by those on-campus students not associated with a church. Shaw (2005) suggests that

...seminary professors should be considering ways to harness those student activities that are apparently not about seminary classes and worship - work, church placements, relationships, families, shopping for groceries, getting the car fixed - and incorporating them into the process of formation and learning theology. Shouldn’t seminaries and professors be trying to develop a truly incarnational model of theological education? (p. 93).

The gesselschaft community characteristic of on-campus tuition raises questions about the embodied and incarnational aspects of the on-campus study experience. This is particularly the case if on-campus students are not participants in church communities, as was the case for the majority of interview respondents in this study.

Several authors have suggested that distance education is little more than a pragmatic or utilitarian move by administrators, implemented to either cater for part-time students or as a knee-jerk reaction to changing demographics and patterns of demand (Cagney, 1997; Cannell, 1999; Delamarter, 2006; Harrison, 2004; Lumsden et al., 1999; Patterson, 1996). Poor course completions and classic correspondence, characteristics of Nipper’s (1989) first or second generation of distance education, implemented without vision or strategy, are typically assumed by critics.

This study finds that theological distance education can be an intelligent, theologically- and pedagogically-aligned, and even optimal form of theological education characterised by Christian formation and transformative learning. Distance respondents were part of genuine church community; they were active in their church fellowships; and their studies were perceived as being inherently formative. While the implantation of theological distance education can be unimaginative and aimed at stemming falling enrolments, it might also be implemented in ways that optimise the formational experience of students.
If students enrolling in theological distance education were required to provide evidence that they have the support of their church before being accepted for study, as is the case with Laidlaw College’s Centre for Distance Learning, the potential exists for students to enjoy the fruits of deeper theological knowledge alongside an enhanced formation experience through their church *gemeinschaft* communities. Under such conditions, theological distance education might be seen to be a preferable, rather than a pragmatic, means of theological study. For most distance respondents to this study, on-campus study was simply not accessible. Choosing distance study was therefore usually a pragmatic decision; the data from this study indicate that pragmatism did not equate to a compromised educational experience.

Distance respondents appreciated the opportunity to study and the flexibility that their study option afforded them. Far from being academically isolated, distance interviewees reported on the value of online forums as opportunities to engage with their peers. Overall, distance respondents perceived that the on-campus environment would be a better interpersonal setting, but there were exceptions. Several respondents mentioned the value of remaining active in the church during study, and one distance respondent expressed appreciation for study notes and media resources. By contrast, two on-campus respondents found it difficult to imagine distance education as a valid alternative to what they were experiencing. They perceived distance study as isolating, impoverished for discussion and relevant only for theoretical subjects, despite a lack of experience with distance learning. Few on-campus respondents were more willing to consider distance as an option.

The data from this study support the assertion that theological distance education was valued for its accessibility, and that distance respondents compared it to on-campus tuition not in terms of impoverishment, but of opportunity.
Formation in Theological Education

There can be no question that theological education is, in itself, formative. In theory, whenever a Christian studies theology there is a personal investment in the ideas encountered (Wood, 1985). Real-life also continues alongside theological study, providing opportunities for the development of Christian character at every turn (Vanhoozer, Anderson, & Sleasman, 2007; Wilhoit, 2009; Willard, 2002). The findings of this study demonstrate clearly that on-campus and theological distance education students experienced formation as a direct result of their studies, calling into question whether formation should be considered an additional requirement for seminaries. With that acknowledgement, most respondents remarked on the influence of a specific Spiritual Formation course as being a particular contributor to formation.

The ATS insists that seminaries deliberately pursue formation to ensure that the MDiv degree functions to “prepare persons for ordained ministry and for general pastoral and religious leadership responsibilities in congregations and other settings” (Association of Theological Schools, 2012a, p. 39). Ironically, until recent exceptions were provided for, the ATS was more likely to accredit on-campus seminaries who may remove students from congregations as the students study, than it was to accredit a theological distance education provider careful to ensure students remain in their gemeinschaft context. From a formational perspective, the community of learning experienced by a gesselschaft-based on-campus student might be considered inferior to that of the gemeinschaft-based distance student who is also sharing his or her perspectives with peers online.

This study finds that students in both on-campus and theological distance education settings experienced formation as they study. The dynamics of formation differ in terms of timeframe and community context, but formation is easily discerned across both groups. The formational contribution of theological education is intertwined with
the transformative learning approaches typical of higher education (Ball, 2012; Mezirow & Taylor, 2009; Mezirow, 1990, 1991, 2000), such that it is unlikely the two modes of study might be distinguished.

This study has assumed transformative learning theory as being directly linked to Christian discipleship and formation (Ball, 2012). Both transformative learning theory and Christian formation are concerned with personal growth, the former in developing meaning perspective, and the latter in Christian maturity. Interview respondents in this study interpreted their increased understanding of theology and greater discernment as evidence of formation. This study shows that transformative learning and formation can be usefully combined to confirm the contribution of theological education to discipleship.

Transformative learning theory and Christian formation both have personal development and change as their outcome. Transformative learning theory describes this change in terms of the individual developing a more inclusive, discerning, and self-critical understanding of the world. A change through transformative learning is evidenced through an individual’s decisions and actions (Mezirow, 1990). Christian formation is concerned with the shaping of an individual’s character, relationship with God, way of thinking, and service as an expression of God’s love (Association of Theological Schools, 2012b; Klimoski, 2005; Naidoo, 2008; Reissner, 1999; Schwanda, 2011; Smith, 2005; Wilhoit, 2009). Transformative learning is associated with higher education, while formation is more the process of discipleship as the development of self, in response to life’s everyday events.

Definite parallels exist between transformative learning and Christian formation, but a clear articulation of the relationship across the two has not yet been made in literature. The theory of transformative learning is already contributing to theological education (Fleischer, 2006; Gorman, 2001; Leslie, 2004; Nichols & Dewerse, 2010; Spear, 2005), and studies such as this one that assume the equivalence of transformative
learning and formation do provide a practical lens for considering theological education practice (Ball, 2012). It is likely that the contribution of theological education to formation might be better understood, and stand to be more explicitly investigated, should more detailed research exploring transformative learning and Christian formation be done. More discernment across the two concepts is likely to unlock a richer sense of what formal theological education contributes to discipleship, and how it does so. The findings of this study suggest that transformative learning is a legitimate contributor to and indicator of Christian formation, specifically in the study of theology.

Related to transformative learning and Christian formation is Farley’s (1983) description of theologia, as theology directed toward the development of a wise approach to living. The findings of this study suggest transformative learning theory and formation are likely effective synonyms, apparent across both on-campus and distance student samples. Interviewees indicated that they had developed a more discerning and self-reflective understanding of perspectives. Transformative learning and Christian formation are outcomes that shape the individual in ways that influence their approach to life.

Distance education has a natural opportunity to express theological education in terms of theologia. The gemeinschaft enjoyed by distance respondents through their on-going church involvement, and the way in which many respondents were able to apply their theological studies in service to their church while they studied, are both relevant to linking theological studies directly to community life. In contrast, on-campus theological study, because of its gesselschaft characteristics, has the potential to separate the gaining of theological knowledge from the church setting where it is best explored and applied.

The pursuit of theologia is considered here in the context of where and how theology is studied, rather than the actual curriculum of theological study. This is apt, given
Farley’s (1983) original analysis based on the removal of theological study from the context of the Christian church as living community. The findings from the qualitative interviews of this study reveal that both on-campus and theological distance education students experienced transformative learning and formation. According to Farley’s critique of theological education, theological distance education students are better placed to benefit from theological education as *theologia*, more because of the part-time and church-based nature of their study than any particular facet of the curriculum.

The objective of theological education is to develop theological perspective, such that graduates are able to approach situations with a discriminating and discerning response (Farley, 1983; Wood, 1985). That distance education has the potential to develop critical thought is not challenged in literature, and is acknowledged even by writers in theological education (Cannell, 1999, 2006; Patterson, 1996). As such, theological distance education can be said to be transformative in the educational sense of Mezirow (1990, 1991, 2000); indeed, the findings of this study indicate that, for the sample interviewed and even after only one full-time equivalent semester of study, transformation is characteristic of both on-campus and theological distance education. While aspects of transformation are addressed directly through theological education as a pursuit, aspects of character and service in the church would benefit from the student being actively involved in *gemeinschaft* discipleship, that is, service within a Christian community.

Discipleship, as determined by literature, takes place in Christian community (Cannell, 2006; Collinson, 2005; Llovio, 1985). The church is a community of disciples, concerned with expressing the Christian faith in daily life. As such, the church is the most authentic context for discipleship and Christian formation. Theological education assists with the well-being (*bene esse*) of the church, and the continuity of the church’s tradition and mission; the church and theological education ought to be inseparable, intertwined and mutually beneficial (Collinson, 2005; Dietterich, 2005; Estep et al.,
2008; Kelsey, 2002; Overend, 2007; Sweeney & Fortosis, 1994; Tenelshof, 2000). The church is both the critical focus of and ideal complement to theological training and discourse. Separated from the church, theological education loses its legitimacy as a means of formation and its contribution to discipleship, even though formation is a definite outcome of on-campus theological study. Theological distance education has the potential to link local church discipleship with the academic goals of formal learning, and to combine the benefits of *gemeinschaft* community (church) with *gesselschaft* membership (seminary) in an online community for the exchange of ideas. With the distinction made between *gemeinschaft* and *gesselschaft* (Tönnies, 2002), it is clear that the optimal form of Christian community for discipleship is the former. The local church *gemeinschaft* is the ideal setting for fellowship and the expression of *allēlon*, or one-anothering, that “reciprocal exchange of behaviors, attitudes, and actions [through which] we influence one another toward Christian development” (Lowe & Lowe, 2010a, p. 291).

Theological distance education is well placed to develop *theologia* in the context of the church, while at the same time increasing access to higher education and directly benefitting the church. In terms of Kelsey’s (1992) distinction between the Athens and Berlin models, Banks’s (1999) missional (or Jerusalem) alternative, and Edgar’s (2005) confessional (Geneva) model, theological distance education need not be limited. Indeed, it may well be more flexible than its on-campus counterparts. The character formation of Athens is a normal part of ecclesial life; the theoretical emphasis of Berlin is characteristic of formal education itself; distance students based in their church are capable of participating in Jerusalem (missional) activities as they study; and the participation in tradition emphasised in the Geneva (confessional) model can be built into the distance experience.

Just over a decade ago, in an article considering the potential for online theological education, the perspective of Stanley Hauerwas (prominent American theologian and
Christian educator) was anticipated (Thomson, 2003). Would Hauerwas approve of theological distance education, online? Thomson (2003) writes that:

I suspect his view would be that so long as theological education of ministers is about formation rather than simply information, about bodies rather than disembodied spirits, about politics rather than about individualism, about the richness of ordinary Christian practices rather than about abstract ideology, then ‘online theological education’ will be a creative means of enabling bodies to be in the best places for this identity construction. It will enable ministers to be more flexibly and richly trained in and by the whole Church and will enable geography to be the servant of ministerial formation (p. 56).

That theological distance education is not widely understood or appreciated seems primarily to be the result of a lack of vision in its implementation and potential, or of an under appreciation of transformative potential for distance learning and higher education. It may even be the result of a misunderstanding of the nature of theology and theological education. The distance students interviewed for this study were motivated to study in order to further their Christian service; they also understand their Christian heritage, and grow in their faith. That they were achieving all three goals is testament to their motivation and the innate power of education for the transformation of the individual. A vision for theological distance education, one that deliberately builds on the strengths of the distance learner and their local church context, is lacking. In conclusion, this study proposes a paradigm for theological distance education that recognises the role of the church and the contribution of formal education to formation.

**Conclusion: Reframing Theological Distance Education**

Overall, it seems likely that objections to theological distance education reflect either a preference held by faculty and administrators for on-campus seminary, a lack of understanding or experience with sound distance education practice, or an insufficient
consideration of the contribution that theological education makes to discipleship. It is clear from the literature and the findings of this investigation that objections to the formation of distance students apply to theological education at large (Cannell, 2006; Glennon et al., 2011; Hill, 1998; Naidoo, 2008), and should not be projected solely onto distance education. Furthermore, it seems that the role of the church in formation, while always acknowledged as important in literature (Cannell, 2006; Estep et al., 2008; Hall, 1988; Hill, 1998; Kelsey, 1992; Kemp, 2010; Maddix, 2009; Shaw, 2005), is not adequately considered as a criteria for the accreditation of theological education, nor is the church’s role in the formation of theological distance students sufficiently appreciated.

Theological distance education is often criticised on the grounds that it is a pragmatic, disembodied, cognitive, and isolating mode of study. The distance is emphasised over the education, often for reasons that at first glance appear theological. The data of this study support the conclusion that theological distance education should instead be considered in a more appreciative manner. Theological distance education can be framed in terms of its complementarity to ecclesial fellowship and community; its contribution to formation and affective learning; its facilitation of part-time study, with the benefits part-time study brings; its attractiveness as a study option for mature believers; and its congruence with the core tenets of theological education itself.

As indicated in the literature review, the role of the church is one of many tensions currently facing theological education. It is clear that the church ought not to be separate from theological study, nor students from the church. The church is the natural setting for discipleship, as it is the *gemeinschaft* community where the *allēlon* of the Christian faith is experienced. The findings of this study are clear on the differences between the church involvement of distance and on-campus respondents. Distance respondents were committed, long-standing and active members of a local church fellowship (with one exception where a respondent had just changed churches).
A distinction can be made between the *gemeinschaft* community of the local *ecclesia*, and the *gesselschaft* community of the academy. Through the use of online discourse, it is possible for theological distance students to benefit from both the authentic fellowship and discipleship inherent in their church belonging, and the exchange of ideas and perspectives of their peers and online tutor (Nichols, 2011). Across distance respondents, the value of everyday *gemeinschaft* complemented by an online *gesselschaft* can be discerned. In the distance environment, each student in his or her own genuine community and ministry context was able to benefit from the intellectual interaction in the online forum without requiring it to be anything more than a place for the sharing of ideas. Some distance students perceived the contrast of on-campus community as a poor substitute, particularly because distance respondents were already well ensconced in church communities. There was also an impression (from respondent 9D, also shared by some on-campus respondents) that the on-campus community was more suited to young people.

In the findings of this study, theological distance respondents were appreciative of the ecclesial fellowship they could maintain as they studied. Many respondents also mentioned the benefits of the online community as a means of experiencing different perspectives, which provides the means by which students might experience alternative presentations of the ‘Christian thing’ (Kelsey, 1992). The theological distance education students interviewed in this study enjoyed ecclesial fellowship and community in ways on-campus interviewees did not.

When it is accepted that transformative learning encompasses both cognitive and affective learning outcomes as claimed by Mezirow (1990, 2000), the formational potential of theological distance education is beyond question. Transformative learning takes place through theological education, regardless of mode of study. In the interviews for this study, on-campus respondents tended to cite on-campus examples of significant formation taking place; distance respondents tended to cite church-based
examples. The data from the CSPP instrument used in this study support the claim that there is no significant difference across either the spiritual maturity or formation trajectory profiles of distance and on-campus students. In the subsequent qualitative interviews, all distance respondents indicated that they had experienced spiritual growth and provided evidence of having developed a more inclusive and discriminating perspective, with most indicating that this had taken place alongside their studies. Active membership and (frequently) increasing participation in their local church is likely a major reason why distance students perceive their study as a complementary, rather than prominent, feature of formation.

In literature it has been established that it is possible to instructionally design courses such that affective and formational outcomes are emphasised (Coe, 2000; Graham, 2002, 2003; Nation, 1991; Setran et al., 2010; Smith, 2005; White, 2006; Wickett, 2005). Both distance and on-campus respondents mentioned the Laidlaw College course 401.515 Spiritual Formation as having had a particular influence on affective learning. That the course is offered at a distance does not seem to have diminished its ability to bring about affective learning, even if a distinction across affective and cognitive outcomes should be made; the course’s instructional strategies emphasise the affective domain and contribute to formation, as proposed by White (2006).

Finally, distance respondents in this study were more likely to describe their spiritual growth in terms of a process. Some on-campus students talked in terms of destruction and reconstruction, which imply an epochal transformation (Mezirow, 2000). The transformation experience of distance respondents appeared to be as significant as that of on-campus students, even though each transformation was incremental in nature. The fact of transformation seems similar with Mezirow’s framework, even though the dynamics of that transformation might be said to differ. To Mezirow (2000), whether a transformation is epochal or incremental is a difference solely in method; the key is that transformation is the result. Further investigation into the comparable dynamics
of perspective transformation across part-time and full-time, distance and on-campus students is warranted. However, it is clear that transformation takes place in both distance and on-campus theological education, and in both on-campus and distance settings.

Comment has been made already that the student body for theological education is increasingly older and part-time. Such students tend to have an already mature Christian faith and strong links to their local church. In Fowler’s (1993) stages of faith, such believers are more likely to already have a Stage Four (Individuative-Reflective) perspective of their faith whereby they have a personal faith that is open to new ideas. By contrast, younger students aged approximately 18 through to the mid-twenties tend to have a Stage Three (Synthetic-Conventional) faith that tends to shun new ideas and relies on conformity to others’ beliefs. It is generally this age group that would experience a sense of being deconstructed and reconstructed as they spiritually transition from a Stage Three to a Stage Four perspective.

Elements of the qualitative interviews support Fowler’s transition across stages. For example, Respondents 4C, 8C, and 10C all talked about their spiritual growth in terms of being deconstructed and reconstructed, though it is acknowledged that respondent 8C is in the 40 to 65 age group. It could be that distance students, because they tend to be part-time and mature believers, have less imperative to be spiritually formed as a transition from Stage Three to Stage Four because their faith is already characterised by a Stage Four perspective. In other words, student self-selecting for distance study may bring with them a spiritual maturity that can be built on, rather than established, through theological education (alternatively, the transition may happen from Stage Four to Stage Five). The self-selecting theological distance education student tends to be older, spiritually mature, serving in their local church, and motivated by a desire to explore their faith openly. The formational needs of such students are very different to those of students at Fowler’s Stage Three.
Revisiting the core purpose of theological education, it is suggested that theological education ought to:

1. build on the understanding of theological education as *theologia*;
2. be concerned with the development of informed critical thinking;
3. be designed for the cognitive development of all Christian believers (not just a clerical elite), on the assumption that cognitive development is ultimately formative; and
4. take place within the context of the local church.

Theological distance education provides the opportunity for theology to be studied within the context of the church, the ideal setting for Farley’s (1983) *theologia*. Farley (1983) maintains that a reclamation of theology as *theologia* (practical theology, concerned with wisdom as a way of life) is essential if theological education is to find its true purpose and relevance to the church, and therefore serve the whole people of God. Such reclamation would be characterised by the united development of faith, sapiential knowledge, and critical reflection and inquiry based on life in the world. In such a setting, academic learning and formation of the individual through authentic fellowship are fused together, removing the stark disjointedness of theology as a subject and formation as an activity, which seems so prevalent in on-campus settings. Shaw (2005) discusses the difficulties that on campus seminaries face in attempting to cater for the community needs of both full-time and part-time students, and writes about the value of considering the seminary dispersed, rather than gathered. Shaw recognises that part-time theological education students tend to view their church communities as more meaningful than on-campus seminary communities. Shaw (2005) asks:

When learning about the scriptures, church history, systematic theology, and all those seemingly abstract things they learn about in a classroom, what
questions do both students and faculty have which would enable the students to understand that what seems so abstract and disconnected from the real world has always, in fact, emerged out of real, live, dynamic, bubbling contexts?... Surely we can bring to life the theological debates of the past in two ways: first, by putting them in context rather than teaching them as a set of abstract ideas, and second, by making analogies with the debates of our own day... Life experiences provide us with the questions we need to put to the text (pp. 97-99).

The approach suggested by Shaw is relevant to the four characteristics of theological education listed earlier, and is perfectly compatible with distance education. That distance education can develop informed critical thinking is well-attested in literature (Moore, 2007a), and is also evident in the experiences of the distance students in the sample for this study.

Distance study is also broadly accessible by all Christian believers because of its suitability for part-time and independent study, the latter accentuated with the use of asynchronous communications media for the online sharing of perspectives. That distance students already tend to be active within their church, a characteristic that might be made a compulsory condition of distance enrolment, completes an approach to theologia that full-time, residential on-campus study cannot match. With a new appreciation of theological distance education’s potential articulated, it is appropriate to reconsider the assumptions in literature made about on-campus theological education.

Toward a Vision for Theological Distance Education

It was remarked in the literature review that theological distance education is typically implemented without any sense of vision. The reframing of theological distance education suggested earlier in this chapter, alongside the challenges to those assumptions about on-campus theological education, suggest that theological distance
education might be an optimal form of providing theological education. This concluding section provides a vision for theological distance education, based on the various themes raised in literature (Chapter Two), and on consideration of the findings of this study.

The findings of this study suggest that spiritual formation and perspective transformation from theological study cannot be separated from the learner’s context and demographics. For the distance student the context is more likely to be that of church involvement, which provides opportunities for theological distance education. This context indicates that insistence on a face-to-face encounter for the purposes of formation (such as required for TEE and hybrid learning) is unnecessary, provided students are required to have a strong church connection as a condition of enrolment. Theological distance education should purposefully seek to build gesellschaft community to complement gemeinschaft community; provide intentional education activities designed to encourage reflection; and recognise that students are transformed as a result of formal theological study. Findings also suggest that, ultimately, it is the encounter with theological ideas and education through a well-designed formal education experience that proves formational for theological education students.

A vision for theological distance education ought to rest on the key themes identified in the literature of Chapter Two: it should be based on discipleship, and be partnered with the church; be characterised by fellowship; be readily accessible; and result in Christian growth. In terms of Farley’s (1983) theologia, it should also recognise the sapiential knowledge (that is, applied wisdom) that theological study was originally concerned with, that is, it should recognise that theology is lived, relevant, and personal rather than detached, historical, and academic. Farley suggests a model that provides the Christian tradition as a point of reference but which is based on the situation as a concrete opportunity for learning (see also Kemp, 2007; 2010). Further,
the tradition itself is both affirmed and critiqued in such a way that tradition is de-absolutised, even though it remains the reference point for interpreting the situation. Finally, a vision for theological distance education should incorporate Kelsey’s (1992) observation about the ‘Christian thing’ being expressed across different Christian traditions and faith communities. Theological education should seek to acknowledge the pluralistic situatedness of learning to understand God truly (Kelsey, 1992). There is potential for a richness of having students reflecting on and sharing their own situatedness, and reporting on what they find to the benefit of others in their situatedness. Such an educational model both recognises and exploits pluralism, enriching participants’ appreciation of God at work across various settings while also implying that God’s activity sovereignty transcends an objective, worldly context.

A vision for theological distance education is as follows. Note that a theological distance education student needs to be situated within a church for this vision to be realised, hence the opening term.

‘Situated theological distance education’ places the curriculum in the congregation, in that it provides geographically dispersed students with the opportunity to experience perspective transformation within their everyday ecclesial context. Done well, the theological distance education experience requires the student to engage with insights from academic thought, students across congregations and Christian traditions, adherents to their church, and different expressions of the Christian faith that drive them toward reflection and a deeper understanding of what it means to be ‘in Christ’. The education experience seeks to build wisdom and maturity in its participants, through the mechanism of theological knowledge substantiated through reflection. Far from being a deficit model of theological education, distance study has at its core a commitment to church service and fellowship; a dedication to developing theological perspective; and a natural tendency to form its adherents spiritually.

This vision emphasises the outcomes (transformative learning and formation) over the means (such as use of online forums, courses specifically dedicated to spiritual formation, etc.), adding to its applicability and flexibility. Rather than prescribing a particular approach, the vision suggests a particular orientation toward theological
distance education. It requires theological distance education providers to ensure students are involved within a church context as a condition of enrolment, which in turn provides opportunity to draw from the church context for assessment purposes, integrate content with context, and require students to link academic knowledge to practical service.

Ultimately, the mistake made by those critical of theological distance education is that they have tended to overlook the potential for theological education deliberately embedded in a student’s ecclesial context, and have underestimated the transformative power of higher education. Once the potential of the local ecclesia is identified and enhanced to complement theological distance education, a powerful means of empowering the local church and transforming the theological student results.

The findings of this study strongly suggest that expecting a comprehensively formational Christian education experience through formal education is as unrealistic and unnecessary for on-campus education as it is for distance learning. Indeed, on-campus education is at a distinctive disadvantage when it comes to Christian education if it is accepted that formation best takes place in gemeinschaft community. While residential on-campus theological education holds the potential to alienate students from their normal local church context and limit them to the relationships possible in a gesselschaft society, distance education students can maintain those gemeinschaft ‘faith as life’ connections crucial for Christian education.

It is largely because of the following assumptions that accreditors of theological degrees view distance education with suspicion:

1. Distance education is considered a pragmatic, rather than ideal, form of instruction.
2. Distance students are not perceived to benefit from the mentoring and modelling of their educators.

3. Distance education is understood as commodifying learning, and is not considered to address the affective domain.

4. Distance education is not considered a formative means of education.

In literature the distinction between on-campus and distance learning is largely presented as one of ‘community’ vs. ‘isolation’, ‘cognitive, affective and formational’ vs. ‘solely cognitive’, and ‘embodied’ vs. ‘disembodied’ study. The evaluation of how each of these dichotomous pairs apply to theological distance education is highly questionable, particularly given the potential for in-church or church community-based (gemeinschaft) theological study to surpass the artificial community and relationships that exist on gesselschaft campuses; theories of holistic development that suggest cognitive transformation in higher education encompasses affective outcomes; and an acknowledgement of the embodied nature of church association.

Insistence on spiritual formation as a separate means of addressing issues of student character development alongside theological study, often as a dedicated course of study within a theological qualification, reinforces theology as an academic discipline rather than the pursuit of sapiential knowledge (theologia). Theological distance education, if performed in and tailored for the context of the local church, has the potential to link theological education to theologia once again.

Werner (2009a) talks of making theological education more accessible “for all parts of the Christian family,” including those from the “South and North, East and West, women and men, people from poor and affluent backgrounds” (p. 82). Such accessibility requires theological education that is scalable, flexible, and cost-efficient,
all of which can be characteristic of distance education.\textsuperscript{45} In addition, it appears that theological distance education can also be at least as transformative as its on-campus counterpart.

**Contribution of the study**

In the literature review, it was noted that distance education is frequently dismissed as a valid approach to theological education because of concerns surrounding the formational experience of distance students. Various voices in literature are challenging the hegemony and perceived benefits of the on-campus theological education experience. Very few primary studies into the formational outcomes of theological education have been undertaken, with none seeking to compare the formation of on-campus and distance students.

This study finds that distance learners in theological education do, in fact, undergo a formation experience at least as significant as those who study on campus when the broader church adherence of distance learners, and their motives for self-selecting distance education, are considered. Further, this study finds evidence of transformative learning in both on-campus and distance samples, providing a point of reference for further work in the area of transformative learning in theological education.

The findings of this study bring primary data to bear on criticisms of theological distance education, and the hesitancy by accrediting agencies such as the ATS to accredit qualifications such as the MDiv solely by distance education. Consideration of the nature of formation, of the nature of higher education as a transformative

\textsuperscript{45} Note that distance education as described in this study will likely require adaptation for use on non-Western contexts; factors such as those raised by Fluegge (2010) concerning Western-style theological distance education in Africa are likely to apply elsewhere.
experience, and of the seminary community compared with the church community reveals that many concerns about theological distance education are likely based on taken-for-granted assumptions and an over-estimation of the on-campus seminary experience.

**Limitations of the Study**

The limitations of this study are in the areas of evidence for transformative learning, and control for student demographics. Primary findings are also limited to an evangelical understanding of spirituality and formation.

First, the extent to which the on-campus and distance students in the sample experienced transformative learning is not explicitly measured, even though evidence of transformative learning can be discerned in the interview data from both on-campus and distance participants. Such evidence is secondary to the main concern of this thesis, which is a comparison of formation across the two groups. Dedicated work investigating the transformative nature of theological distance education would be a further useful addition to literature.

Second, the demographic characteristics of the on-campus and distance students interviewed in this study may have influenced the results. For example, distance students tend to be older and part-time; both of these factors are likely to be significant for the purposes of formation, in that older students are more likely to be more spiritually mature and part-time students are more likely to have a broader life experience during study. Older, part-time students will tend to have a longer Christian heritage and are motivated to study for different reasons than are young, full-time students, and the former are more likely to be characteristic of distance learners. This study is not and cannot be a pure comparison between formation across on-campus
and distance modes of theological study. The students themselves bring particular formational dynamics with them such that neither group begins from the same starting point. Neither has this study investigated any effects of gender on formation, as gender is not mentioned in literature as a demographic characteristic that might differentiate between findings.

**Further research**

Several avenues of research might corroborate and extend on the findings of this project.

A longitudinal study of on-campus and degree students over the period of their study, perhaps with a pre- and post-test of spiritual maturity, would provide richer insight into the dynamics of formation; particularly interesting would be analysis of the part-time and full-time experiences of students in each group, over time. This might involve the application of the CSPP instrument at particular intervals, complemented with interviews of some participants.

Investigation into the transformative nature of theological education is yet to be applied to theological distance education. Indeed, no such study applying to distance education in general was found in the literature review for this study. Such research, potentially using the Learning Activities Survey (King, 2009; Nichols & Dewerse, 2010) and deliberately focusing on reflection as a learning strategy, would provide a useful benchmark for transformative learning across distance theological education.

The potential for social presence in online community to strengthen *gesellschaft* and *gemeinschaft* community in theological distance education is another promising avenue for further research. Related to this might be further work investigating the
influence of faculty role modelling as a means of formation for theological education students.

The worth of theoretical work into the relationship between spiritual formation and transformative learning has already been mentioned. Some work, including this study, suggests overlap across the two concepts as they relate to theological education. Such theoretical work would provide pedagogical insight for theological educators, particularly those concerned with distance education.

Finally, larger-scale use of the CSPP across on-campus and distance theological education student populations would provide opportunity for analysis based on respondent demographics. The influence of age, length of time as a Christian, and potentially gender, likely contribute to spiritual maturity in ways of relevance to theological educators.

**Closing Reflection**

Objections to theological distance education based on the matter of formation are typically based on two questionable perceptions: an optimal on-campus experience, and an impoverished distance learning experience. Critics of distance education mistakenly tend to overlook the formational outcomes of theological distance education. Furthermore, the link between formation and transformative learning is not clearly articulated in theological education literature.

A subsequent research question for further study then becomes, in what ways do the formational outcomes of on-campus and theological distance education really differ? It is possible that the formational contribution of theological education is a direct result of transformative learning. This would indicate that the formational dynamics
of theological education rest in the process of study itself, and are not dependent on a residential or classroom experience.

Theological distance education can be seen to have the potential to provide a formal theological education grounded in discipleship. Far from being a pragmatic response to declining revenue, dwindling student numbers and increasing demand from part-time learners, a shift to distance education might facilitate a form of theological education that is ultimately more theologically defensible and genuine. An education designed to facilitate the knowledge of God and, through that, wise living (theologia), can occur in the church context. The challenge is to design educational experiences that encourage students to critically reflect on and apply theological knowledge in their everyday community of believers.

Suggesting a theologia–based theological distance education strays somewhat toward the more holistic term ‘Christian education’, and away from its formal ‘theological education’ expression. However, the fact that theological education can (or indeed ought to) take place in the context of non-formal and informal Christian education is significant to this study. In recognising the subsumed nature of theological education, the seminary is freed from any requirement to replace a student’s existing non-formal and informal Christian education networks. In the terms used earlier to distinguish between formal, non-formal and informal Christian education, the primary goal of formal theological education is the development of faith as perspective, and not faith as life. This is not to suggest that seminaries should avoid encouraging student fellowship or that faculty should be aloof from their students. Rather, the main function of the seminary or Bible College is to offer the sort of formal education that seeks to complement rather than replace Christian education in its non-formal and informal expressions. Formal theological education, then, need not be expected to offer a complete expression of Christian community nor should it be expected to offer a comprehensive Christian experience. Rather, the purpose of theological education is
to provide believers with the opportunity to critique their own and their community’s Christian experience from a broader perspective that seeks to transcend the vernacular (Glennon et al., 2011; Kelsey, 1992; Smith, 1988). The potential of theological distance education to provide theological study free from the expectation of having to facilitate Christian community and experience is clear, particularly if such study is characterised by transformative learning.
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Appendices
Appendix A: The Christian Spiritual Participation Profile instrument

Included with permission of the author, Associate Professor Jane Thayer.

The Christian Spiritual Participation Profile*

A Measure of Participation in 10 Spiritual Disciplines

by Jane Thayer

Contents in this file

Christian Spiritual Participation Profile (CSPP)

Instructions on interpreting

Sample of an individual’s profile based on the CSPP

Manual Scoring Sheet for the CSPP

A blank chart to use in the assessment of groups

Detailed information about the development of the Christian Spiritual Participation Profile, its reliability, and its validity can be found in the following article:


The Christian Spiritual Participation Profile survey sheets are available in scannable form. Scanning, analysis services, and printed profiles of those filling out the survey are available. For information about these services or any other questions about the CSPP, please contact Jane Thayer at thayerja@andrews.edu.

*Copyright © 1999 by Jane Thayer
Interpreting the Christian Spiritual Participation Profile

The Christian Spiritual Participation Profile (CSPP) reports on the frequency and depth of your participation in ten basic Christian practices: worship, prayer, repentance, meditation, prophetic critiquing, Bible study/reading, fellowship, service, evangelism, and stewardship. Christians engage in these practices, sometimes referred to as spiritual disciplines, for the purpose of worshiping God, learning of his will, and placing themselves where he can transform them. Your personal profile has two sections: (1) your participation in the individual disciplines and (2) your use of the four basic learning modes for spiritual growth.

The Ten Disciplines
The line graph at the bottom of the Profile shows the relative frequency of your participation in the ten disciplines. For example, you can see how much you participate in prayer as compared with service—or any other discipline. What you cannot do is compare your scores with someone else’s scores because people understand the terms “very frequently,” “frequently,” etc. (used on the answer sheet) in different ways.

I believe that most of the disciplines are familiar to most Christians; however, you may want to know how the test designer defines a few of them. “Meditation” is pondering God’s word and applying it to your own life. “Prophetic critiquing” is observing your culture (and your own life) and evaluating it by principles in the Bible—both naming problems and providing hope. “Service” refers to helping that you give to people in need. “Stewardship” includes responsible use of the gifts God has given you, including health, talents, and financial resources.

The Four-sided Figure
The four-sided figure at the top of the Profile indicates how well you are using four ways or modes of learning that are involved in spiritual growth. According to experiential learning theory (Kolb 1984), people learn in four different ways: concrete experience (your own personal experience); abstract conceptualization (reading or listening to others’ experience); reflective observation (critically thinking about your experience); and active experimentation (doing something). The spiritual disciplines have been classified according to the primary mode of learning that they use. The scale for Growing Through My Relationship with God measures the concrete experience mode. Disciplines associated primarily with this learning mode are prayer, repentance, and service. The scale for Growing Through the Word measures the abstract conceptualization mode. Disciplines associated primarily with this learning mode are Bible reading/study and meditation. The scale for Growing Through My Relationship with Others measures the active experimentation mode. Disciplines associated primarily with this learning mode are evangelism, fellowship, service, and stewardship. The scale for Growing Through Critical Reflection measures the reflective observation mode. The discipline associated primarily with this learning mode is prophetic critiquing. A small number of items from the disciplines statistically factor into learning modes that they are secondarily associated with. For example, the item, “I depend on God to help me accomplish the work he calls me to do,” has been classified in the discipline of service. Service is primarily associated with the Growing Through My Relationship with Others mode. However, because factor analysis associates the item with the Growing Through My Relationship with God mode, it has been placed in that scale.

The Profile can help to foster Christian spiritual formation by pointing out the learning modes that you may be under-utilizing. If, for example, you are low on the Growing Through My Relationship with God Scale, you are probably not devoting much time to your personal relationship with God. If you are low on the Growing Through the Word Scale, you are spending little time reading and studying the Word of God. If you are low on the Growing Through My Relationship with Others Scale, you probably are not interacting much with other people or putting into practice some of the biblical principles that you probably believe in. Or, if you are low on the Growing Through Critical Reflection Scale, you are probably not often using the Word of God to point out problems in society or to find hope in difficult situations.

The more nearly square the four-sided figure is, the more balanced is your use of the four learning modes. The bigger the figure, the more depth you have in your use of the four learning modes. The theory on which the CSPP is based states that spiritual growth can be enhanced by a balanced, in-depth use of all the modes because these learning modes provide different “learning opportunities” that God uses to transform us. A balanced approach would correct the excesses of both the pietist and the social activist. –Jane Thayer, 1999

C:MyField\SPPCSPP\inter.pdf
Sample Profile
ID: 3419

Christian Spiritual Participation Profile

Growing through my relationship with God

Growing through my relationship with others

Growing through critical reflection

Growing through the Word

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prayer</th>
<th>Repentance</th>
<th>Worship</th>
<th>Bible Reading</th>
<th>Meditation</th>
<th>Prophetic</th>
<th>Critiquing</th>
<th>Evangelism</th>
<th>Fellowship</th>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Stewardship</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
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<td>4.50</td>
<td>3.14</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>3.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Scoring Sheet for the Christian Spiritual Participation Profile

Directions: Transfer the numbers you recorded on the Christian Spiritual Participation Profile questionnaire to this grid. Add each column and divide by the number of items in the column to find the mean. Then plot the means for each of the columns to find the pattern. Use this pattern to plan your spiritual growth.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pray</th>
<th>Repentance</th>
<th>Worship</th>
<th>Meditation</th>
<th>Examine of Conscience</th>
<th>Bible Reading &amp; Study</th>
<th>Evangelism</th>
<th>Fellowship</th>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Stewardship</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>34</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>40</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>49</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
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<td>41</td>
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<td>M =</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

T = Total. Add the total of the numbers in the column. M = Mean or average. Divide the total by the number of items.

Pray | Repentance | Worship | Meditation | Examine of Conscience | Bible Reading & Study | Evangelism | Fellowship | Service | Stewardship |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</tbody>
</table>

Plot the mean of each discipline by placing a dot under each discipline at the point that represents the number of your mean. Then connect the dots. This will indicate the strength of your participation in each discipline as it relates to the others. It can indicate where you might want to focus your attention for spiritual growth.

©2004 Jesse Thayer
## Christian Spiritual Participation Profile

Chart showing participation in the spiritual development modes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spiritual Development Mode</th>
<th>Strong * Intentional Participation</th>
<th>Weak ** Intentional Participation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growing through a relationship with God</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growing through a relationship with others</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growing through a relationship with the Word</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growing through critical reflection</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Strong Intentional Participation is set at 4.0 and higher.
**Weak Intentional Participation is set at 3.99 and lower.

This report form was designed for reporting on the scores of a group of people. For each scale, record the number of people who score 4.0 and higher in the Strong column. State the percent of total number of people. For each scale, record the number of people who score 3.99 and lower in the Weak column. Then state the percent of total number of people in each category.
Appendix B: Information Sheet

THE IMPLICATIONS OF STUDY MODE ON SPIRITUAL FORMATION OF THEOLOGICAL STUDENTS STUDYING AT NZQA LEVELS 5, 6 AND 7

INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS

Thank you for showing an interest in this project. Please read this information sheet carefully before deciding whether or not to participate. If you decide to participate I thank you. If you decide not to take part there will be no disadvantage to you of any kind and I thank you for considering my request.

What is the Aim of the Project?

This project is being undertaken as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Philosophy degree. The aim of the project is to compare spiritual formation across various student groups, particularly on-campus and distance education students (note that comparison between people and denominational groups is not a focus of this study). The researcher, Mark Nichols, is an employee of Laidlaw College.

What Type of Participants are being sought?

Only students studying toward an undergraduate programme in theological studies at Laidlaw College are asked to participate. Of these, only students with 60 or more credits toward their qualification and who are currently enrolled (Semester One, 2010) are being approached.

What will Participants be Asked to Do?

Should you agree to take part in this project, you are asked to complete an online survey about aspects of your own spiritual formation. The online survey will take about 15 minutes. If you want to, you can receive a copy of your spiritual profile results however this will require you to provide your student ID number in the survey. If you choose to receive a copy of your results, it will be sent to your student email address once the timeframe for participating in the online survey has closed (end April). Your ID number will only be used as the basis for sending you your individual result.

During the survey you will also be asked if you would like to talk further about your spiritual formation in a follow-up telephone interview. This is entirely optional, and details about the interview are included in the online survey. The interview will explore various matters relating to your spiritual formation across the period of time you have studied with Laidlaw College.

Please be aware that you may decide not to take part in the project without any disadvantage to yourself of any kind, and you may withdraw from participation in the online survey and this project at any time and without any disadvantage to yourself of any kind.

Can Participants Change their Mind and Withdraw from the Project?

You may withdraw from participation in the project at any time and without any disadvantage to yourself of any kind.
What Data or Information will be Collected and What Use will be Made of it?

Only the information you provide in the questionnaire will be collected. Your responses will be combined with those of other students, and comparisons between various student groups will be made. Please note that these comparisons will not be across any denominational or people groups.

The results of the project may be published and will be available in the University of Otago Library (Dunedin, New Zealand) but every attempt will be made to preserve your anonymity.

You are most welcome to request a copy of the results of the project should you wish. Again, this will require you to provide your student ID number on your survey.

The data collected will be securely stored in such a way that only those mentioned below will be able to gain access to it. At the end of the project any personal information will be destroyed immediately except that, as required by the University's research policy, any raw data on which the results of the project depend will be retained in secure storage for five years, after which it will be destroyed.

Reasonable precautions will be taken to protect and destroy data gathered by email. However, the security of electronically transmitted information cannot be guaranteed. Caution is advised in the electronic transmission of sensitive material.

What if Participants have any Questions?
If you have any questions about our project, either now or in the future, please feel free to contact either:-

Mark Nichols (Researcher) or Dr Bill Anderson
E-Learning Specialist, Laidlaw College University of Otago
mnichols@laidlaw.ac.nz, 09 8379752 bill.anderson@otago.ac.nz, 03 4795809

This study has been approved by the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee. If you have any concerns about the ethical conduct of the research you may contact the Committee through the Human Ethics Committee Administrator (ph 03 479 8256). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated and you will be informed of the outcome.
Appendix C: Interview Consent Form

I understand that:

- The project has been authorised by the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee as project 10/014.
- The interview will involve discussion of my spiritual formation experiences, not necessarily limited to my time as a student with Laidlaw College.
- My participation in the interview is completely voluntary.
- I am able to stop my participation in the interview at any stage.
- I can refuse to answer any question put to me.
- The interview will take about 45 minutes of my time.
- The interview will take place by telephone at my convenience.
- The interview will be recorded and transcribed by a third party. The recorded interview and transcription may be made available to the interviewer’s PhD supervisors but will not be distributed further.
- My identity will remain anonymous to all with the exception of the interviewer. My name will not appear in any transcript or filename associated with the interview.
- The interview is solely for the purposes of the researcher’s PhD study, though I acknowledge that other publications may result from the study as well, and I might be anonymously quoted in those other publications.
- This consent form will be kept in a secure place and will be destroyed after a five year period.

I consent to interview for the project “The implications of study mode on spiritual formation of theological students studying at NZQA levels 5, 6 and 7” under the conditions listed above.

_____________________________________ (Respondent name) ___/___/_____ (Date)
_____________________________________ (Respondent signature)

Please return this signed form in the enclosed envelope or return to:
Mark Nichols
c/- Laidlaw College
Private Bag 93104
Waitakere 0650.
Appendix D: Interview Guide

How do post first-year students regard the contribution of their formal study experience to their spiritual formation across the term of their studies?

READ TO INTERVIEWEE – please do not assume that I am interested solely in the influence of your studies on your spirituality. This does not mean that I am not interested in answers coming from your formal study experience. Rather, I am interested in your entire experience of spiritual growth and development since you started studying at Laidlaw College and not just any relating to your studies.

Confirm: You have been studying with Laidlaw College for x years?

Lead-in and covert questions (Carspecken, 1996):

1. **Major spiritual formation encounters (recent, holistic context).**
   - Lead-off question: *Tell me about a significant encounter you have had or behaviour you have been involved with at any time over the last x years that caused you to grow spiritually. What happened? Tell me as much as you can.*
   - Seek for an example related to/not related to Laidlaw study, depending on the example given.
   - *How would you describe the difference between the two examples?*

2. **Involvement in community and relationships with others.**
   - *Christian community is an important aspect of faith development. What can you tell me about your experience of Christian community over the last x years?*
   - Experience of Christian community, emphasis on local church.
   - Relationships with significant ‘others’ in the faith, emphasis on depth.
   - Influence of Laidlaw study on church and significant relationships.
   - Ability to talk about Laidlaw studies with members of Christian community.

3. **Overall benefit of theological study.**
Think of a typical day at Laidlaw College [or, for distance students, a typical study session]. What happens to you during that time? How are you personally changed or developed? Please tell me everything you can about it.

Aspects indicative of cognitive/spiritual growth.

Relationships or significant encounters with lecturers/tutors, other Laidlaw staff, or other students.

4. Direct examples of perceived formation through studying with Laidlaw College.

You have now completed several courses at Laidlaw College. What would you say to prospective students about how their Laidlaw study will change them?

The emphasis of cognitive development or spiritual growth.

Expectations for spiritual growth during Laidlaw College study.

5. Direct comparison with perceived on-campus and distance study.

I want you to think back to when you first enrolled with Laidlaw College, and I’d like you to imagine that you could not study on-campus but had to study part-time at a distance [or, for distance students, you had the opportunity to study full-time on-campus]. What would your response be, and what factors influence your response?

Impact on spiritual formation.

Cognitive/academic impact.

6. What else can you tell me about your spiritual formation experiences since starting formal theological study?

Indications of behavioural change since commencing study.

Additional question for ALL participants:

7. What do you think has made the most difference in terms of your spiritual formation over the last x years?

Additional questions for distance learners:
8. Anyone in your church or Christian community you were able to talk with about your Laidlaw studies? (If not in Q2).
## Appendix E: Qualitative coding categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Sub-categories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘Extra-College’</td>
<td>In-church ministry, Purposeful activity, Personal crisis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>Non-denominational, Other students, Freedom to explore, Linking coursework to formation, Better than church, Bible encounter, Thinking in different ways, Formation encounter, Formation classes, Formation retreat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive as spiritual</td>
<td>Old ideas insufficient, Self-awareness, Character development, Certainty, Discernment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formation as process</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Category: Community

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-categories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Church</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Category: Perceptions of distance

- Accessibility and flexibility AND could not attend on-campus
- Limited growth on-campus
- Isolation
- Interpersonal deficit
- Disempowerment
- Cognitive benefit
- Power of forums