

# *A Formation Ecology for the Digital Age*

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**O**n March 27, 2020, in a place where thousands usually gather to catch a glimpse and hear words of hope, the solitary figure of Pope Francis stood in St. Peter's Square. Grappling with pandemic conditions, he offered prayer and supplications to God on behalf of humanity in an extraordinary blessing. Millions watched and joined in prayer, all virtually.

This Urbi et Orbi prayer service reserved for the church's most solemn occasions was moving, simple and straightforward. Yet, it stood in stark contrast to most papal liturgies that are full of pageantry and crowds of people gathering to celebrate. It was a defining moment for the future of the church and our faith experience. This shift to a virtual prayer gathering also signaled a shift in our experience of communal prayer and our relationships with one another. In Catholic health care facilities, we, too, have seen many defining moments during this pandemic. These have included staffing challenges, capacity spikes and changes to the ways we carry out formation, which has moved to rely more on virtual and digital platforms.

We must recognize that life has changed in many ways, even as the vaccines continue to move us forward. If we only focus on "getting back to normal," we will miss a significant opportunity. The COVID-19 pandemic has allowed us a different lens to examine our paradigms — some are calling it The Great Reset. We wonder about

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the pandemic's long-term effect on the ministry. The last year has provided challenges, dialogue and opportunities for innovation in how the people of Catholic health care experience ministry formation.

While the possibility to examine our established ways of doing things existed before the pandemic, COVID accelerated the timeline. It has uncovered further questions, new audiences and new longing to connect meaningfully with one another. It calls for us to rethink formation's role in mission integration, ministry identity and leadership development to move intentionally beyond gathered programming to an ecological approach to formation.

Formation, which is personal, professional and organizational, is not a particular program or event. It is a person's journey with meaning, purpose, and spiritual and material matters in dialogue with the organizational story. The pandemic heightened the need to shift from specific educational formation programs to a formation ecology — the overall and incarnational experience of the ministry, to embody the ministry through our presence and in acting as Jesus would act.

## **MOVE FROM FORMATION PROGRAMS TO FORMATION ECOLOGY**

A formation ecology recognizes all the elements of our ministry — employment practices, organizational practices, spiritual practices, ways of communicating, artwork in our facilities and

more — are part of individual and organizational spiritual growth, enhanced meaning and purpose in our work. When we change one element in formation, it affects other aspects of the formation ecology.

In Catholic ministry, we experience three different phases of ministry engagement.

Ministry engagement begins with the incarnational experience in the one-to-one, face-to-face encounter with another person. Human nature draws us toward personal interaction and sharing stories about the common institutional story, such as our practical day-to-day realities, prayer routines, spiritual practices, moments of connection or environmental surroundings. Integral to this experience are strong Catholic identity, leadership, clear communication channels, operational clarity, transparency and encounters with others.

We then move from our most ideal incarnate state to an intermediate state. The intermediate state focuses on other aspects of the environment, such as art, culture, digital and virtual resources. These additional tools enhance the formation process, leading to reimagined personal encounters with patients and families, as well as with coworkers.

Beyond the intermediate state, there is an utterly “discarnate” state, to borrow a term from Marshall McLuhan. This occurs when we are present through means like our voice or our image, but not physically occupying the space. The work of McLuhan, a convert to Catholicism and a Canadian philosopher, is integral to media studies. When we explore meaningful virtual formation, it’s helpful to explore the context of the disembodiment of an embodied ministry.

When we put all these levels together, we can see there is a formation ecology that can move us to greater mission integration. However, this still leaves us thinking about formation and its “end goals.” How do we address paradigms regarding the human person, communication, community, culture, and the person’s formation process or formation ecology of our ministry?

### **MOVE FROM COMMUNICATION TO CONNECTION, COMMUNITY AND COMMUNION**

In the 1971 pastoral instruction *Communio et Progressio*, we are called to move from communica-

tion to connection, community and communion through social communication tools. These days, such tools include everything from phones to teleconferencing to social media platforms.

When strategizing about approaches to online formation, it makes sense to embrace a “digital-first” strategy. That’s because thinking first of the virtual or digital experience requires us to intentionally create new experiences that lead to personal and incarnational encounters. They won’t

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be fully successful if we treat online formation as merely a supplement to in-person experiences. We have to rethink virtual offerings to make them more meaningful. For instance, one benefit of electronic communication is that it has allowed us to quickly connect groups and individuals across the health ministry, to hear and understand stories of patients and employees. Such communication can help us identify needs — material, spiritual and emotional — and provide resources to under-resourced communities.

The rapid development of virtual and digital formation forced us to explore our overall formation ecology and look at current formational biases, processes and programs. For effective electronic formation, we are rethinking a great deal, including the need for better visuals. We’re addressing when it’s more effective not to have visuals, when to have a call without information on slides. We’re also giving more thought to group size, when it makes sense to have a lot of people on a call and when we should be more intentional about small groups.

In the current moment, digital communication and content might lead us to believe that the purpose of communication is just the transmission of information. But communication is about so much more — building connections, community and ultimately communion among people. In a time of pandemic, building a community needs

other avenues when coming together in person isn't possible. This is also true when we are trying to bring together a health ministry located in very different geographies. We must hold in tension that community exists in both a virtual context and a face-to-face context.

#### **DIGITAL AND VIRTUAL FORMATION: A DILEMMA**

When we address formation via digital and virtual structures, we often focus on the content, which is a valid focus. However, the "formation ecology" also should be a significant focus. Ministry formation is a discipline of study and integral to mission integration. It is a discipline with its own processes and methodologies that integrates "what" we do with the "why" of Catholic health care's mission. One of the methodologies of ministry formation is the importance of formation being in dialogue with another discipline. Ministry formation in Catholic health care can be in dialogue with the methodology of delivery, in this case, the delivery of communication. As McLuhan says, "The medium is the message." He points out that the content is shaped by the medium that is used to deliver the message. McLuhan is interested in the formal cause of the medium and not the efficient cause. In the case of digital and virtual formation, I believe we should be doing the same thing. As a reminder, the material cause is the beginning of a thing, as wood is for a table. A formal cause is related to the design of the wood being changed to eventually become a table.

We need to sufficiently explore the formal cause of digital and virtual environments, how to shape the experience for meaningful and worthwhile outcomes. While many issues should be addressed when moving to digital and virtual formation, let's focus on the use of videoconferencing technology, to gather people for formation group meetings that have historically been face to face.

The McLuhan tetrad is a way of understanding some of the effects of media on a particular environment. Each tetrad answers the following four questions:

■ **Enhances:** What does the medium improve?

■ **Retrieves:** What original idea or ground is being brought back by the medium?

■ **Reverses:** What happens when the medium is pushed to its limits?

■ **Obsolesces:** What does the medium make obsolete?

We can say that videoconferencing — such as Zoom or Webex calls — can enhance a sense of group feeling. Video calls allow the group to remain connected. However, when pushed to their limits, these group calls become another part of the "noise" overload, failing to connect and instead fueling isolation in people. This is true with much larger video conference calls. The virtual tools can retrieve or call to mind a Campfire Prayer Service. At a Campfire Prayer Service, a small group sits around a glowing light sharing stories and spiritual beliefs. In using these tools, what is made obsolete or unnecessary is the particularity of place, namely the office.

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used for formation are the same devices used to accomplish work responsibilities and/or to check in on other online distractions, like Facebook, Twitter, etc. Online engagement with digital technology is part of the attention economy that favors division and individualism. The online environment is a shift in thinking and presence, from focused attention to multitasking. There's a shift from a quiet medium of face-to-face communication to a noisy medium, from the warmth of human interaction to a cool blue glow of the screen.

The online tools and environment can shift the ways in which participants in a formation encounter experience it, and its receptivity. The discarnate communication over teleconferenc-

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ing links, where we are not physically gathered together, calls into question the dilemma around the incarnational reality of the ministry we are charged with bringing to life. The medium, by its very nature, modifies the content. How will this discarnate reality of digital/virtual formation affect an incarnate ministry's culture? How can a discarnate means enable new incarnate connections, community and communion?

In his Apostolic Letter *The Rapid Development*, St. Pope John Paul II, while praising the use of various forms of digital communications media for formation and evangelization, reminds us of the cultural implications.

We are dealing with a complex problem, because the culture itself, prescinding from its content, arises from the very existence of new ways to communicate with hitherto unknown techniques and vocabulary. (3)

The new vocabulary they introduce into society modifies both learning processes and the quality of human relations, so that, without proper formation, these media run the risk of manipulating and heavily conditioning, rather than serving people. (11)

### THE MOVE TO DIGITAL AND VIRTUAL FORMATION

Early on in the COVID-19 pandemic it became clear that we could not carry out our traditional face-to-face gatherings for formation. Further formation programs were put on hold for revamping or reenvisioning while we developed the virtual and digital formation programs to meet the current needs. At St. Louis-based Mercy, a group of mission and formation leaders began researching and collaborating, moving our formation efforts quickly to a digital and virtual space. As we were

developing our online approach, the team was obliged to revisit our formation paradigms to better understand our proposed outcomes and how to meet them.

Early on, each health care leader involved in the process seemed to have his or her own notion of what was needed to move online successfully. Ideas fell into three general categories derived from Heidi Campbell's article for the University of Notre Dame's Keough School of Global Affairs, "Distancing Religion Online: Lessons from the Pandemic Prompted Religious Moves Online." They are:

■ **Transfer** — we attempt to replicate what we do in person and put it online.

■ **Translation** — we adapt some aspects of our formation efforts to respond to the constraints of virtual only, creating challenges in building community and engagement.

■ **Transformation** — we embrace what technology could facilitate to build community, "true connectivity over feelings of isolation," meeting the needs of our coworkers and leaders, engaging with them in practical ways.

Each of these three categories presented a moment to revisit our paradigm and our usual patterns. We continue to explore how to best do formation work virtually. For instance, one outcome for new leader formation is to "define what is expected of Mercy leaders to sustain the Mercy mission and health care ministry including the role of mission as a partner." This one outcome became more specifically defined by the nature of the medium and in looking for new ways to engage the whole person. It was then made into eight new outcomes, several that included intentional opportunities to meet with someone locally. These changes solidify a commitment to revisit our formation paradigm regularly.

### MOVING FROM FORMATION PROGRAMS TO FORMATION ECOLOGY

Borrowing from environmental studies and Pope Benedict XVI's image in his 46th World Communications Day letter, *Silence and Word: Path of Evangelization*, he invites us to consider the impact of what I am calling the "formation ecology" for Mercy's health ministries.

When messages and information are plentiful, silence becomes essential if we are to distinguish what is important from what

is insignificant or secondary. Deeper reflection helps us to discover the links between events that at first sight seem unconnected, to make evaluations, to analyze messages: this makes it possible to share thoughtful relevant opinions, giving rise to an authentic body of shared knowledge. For this to happen, it is necessary to develop an appropriate environment, a kind of 'eco-system' that maintains a just equilibrium between silence, words, images and sounds.

#### **AS WE ADVANCE**

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged and changed the formation ecology, and there is no going back. There is no return to a pre-COVID formation strategy because our new experience has shown us a way forward to integrate in new and innovative ways. The digital-first method for formation is just beginning to evolve. Now is not the time to pine for the old normal but to continue innovating and moving to a more in-depth dialogue.

- What are we learning from the present moment?
- What do we do next?
- How are we deepening our connections within the various ministries within our health

system and building stronger communities and, ultimately, communion?

- How do we transmit an incarnational ministry tradition in a discarnate reality, where we engage with people through virtual and digital means?

- Does the medium we are using provide "counter formation" to the content we are trying to instill in our communities?

- How are these tools continuing to shape us and our cultures?

- How are we being made in the image of technology and its ends versus the image of God and the ends of humanity?

- What new rituals and practices and/or the rediscovery of older ones support a shift in a formation ecology?

Many learnings are coming from this time of innovation. Instead of focusing on "getting back to normal," now is a time to enter into dialogue and create a formation ecology that defines our ministry's future. This is not the work of mission and formation leaders alone; this is the work of all of us responsible for continuing to bring to life the healing ministry of Jesus.

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JOURNAL OF THE CATHOLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES

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Reprinted from *Health Progress*, Summer 2021, Vol. 102, No. 3  
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