

Running head: FAITH THINKING FOUNDATIONS

Faith Thinking Foundations:

Online Religious (Meta)Literacy Education Within a Congregational Context

Rebecca L. Klemme Eliceiri

Liberation Christian Church / St. Charles Community College

[rkliceiri@stchas.edu](mailto:rkliceiri@stchas.edu)

### Abstract

Online religious literacy education framed within metaliteracy in a congregational context is a little-researched topic. Congregational religious education often focuses on in-person educational opportunities regarding static religious content and facts or devotional materials and methods. As such it seldom provides members with the educational processes, tools, and frameworks needed to explore their faith questions and other theological and religious topics for lifelong learning from an integrative critical-devotional perspective. Available literature within the subject area of online religious and theological education generally focuses on the educational endeavors of seminarians, clergy, and students within K-12 educational institutions, thus leaving unaddressed the unique concerns and potentials of serious online religious and theological education for congregational members. The current study addresses this omission via qualitative and quantitative evaluation of an online religious metaliteracy course, Faith Thinking Foundations, at Liberation Christian Church in St. Louis, MO, through narrative research, interviews, and surveys of course participants and other interested parties in their attitudes and experiences regarding the course. The author examines available literature for online education within the areas of religious and theological studies, including evaluation and assessment of online courses, religious, and theological curricula. The author proposes that serious online religious and theological education is worthwhile for laypeople as well as seminarians, clergy, and other religious scholars. Such education allows people of faith to further discover, affirm, and live out the purposes to which they are called in God's realm. This project, by examining the role that the Faith Thinking Foundations online course has in the lives of its participants, offers new insight on the potential of online religious learning for all of God's people.

*Keywords:* Liberation Christian Church, Faith Thinking Foundations, faith thinking, religious literacy, metaliteracy, information literacy, Moodle, MOOC, online education, religious education, Christian education

#### Faith Thinking Foundations:

##### Online Religious (Meta)Literacy Education Within a Congregational Context

Online education within the realm of religious studies and theology has become increasingly prevalent over the last decade or so. Sebastian (2010) remarked that during the 1990s, the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) “allowed for one-third of a degree program to be offered by distance education (via internet or extension) (p. 6), with Dart (2013) noting that in 2013 ATS began selectively allowing schools to offer complete M.Div. and other professional programs entirely online. He also reported from Dan Aleshire, executive director of ATS, that in the 2011-12 school year “nearly 20,000 of about 74,000 seminarians enrolled at ATS member schools have completed at least one online course while still on campus” (p. 14). The benefits of such education for students include the ability “to take classes wherever they are able to get access to the Internet. Students are also able to maintain their current home and job without the stresses of relocating for the purposes of continuing their educational journey” (Beaty, 2014, p. 14-15). Quinn, Foote, and Williams (2012) observed that online education has also yielded financial benefits for theological institutions, even in the midst of a challenging economic climate: “a survey of ninety-six institutions found that nearly all of their online programs were either profitable or broke even” (p. 163). However, as with many innovations in theological education, online theological education has not systemically “trickled down” into local congregations/faith communities. There is still little research regarding online Christian religious education (CRE)<sup>1</sup> in congregations, and

---

<sup>1</sup> Groome (1980) defines Christian religious education as “a political activity with pilgrims in time that deliberately and intentionally attends with them to the activity of God in our present, to the story of the Christian faith community, and to the vision of God’s Kingdom, the seeds of which are already among us” (p. 25).

even less such research involving metaliteracy, an emerging framework through which to more holistically view information literacy. This paper explores the need for and value of an online religious metaliteracy course in a faith community, Liberation Christian Church, considering available literature on related subjects, and evaluation of its recent Faith Thinking Foundations course.

### Literature Review

Most literature on the subject of online religious and theological education focuses on that of seminary and clergy education, and religious studies programs. Online CRE in congregations has been a little-studied area, and there has been virtually no research considering any type of religious or theological education from the perspective of metaliteracy. Even with the recent surging popularity of online religious and theological higher education, Quinn (2012) observes “there is neither substantive quality or quantity of studies that have been done to establish the current status of higher educational institutions who are actively involved in theological online education” (p. 15). Within college and university settings, Arroyo (2010) names a number of considerations for teaching religion online “using a transformative, postmodern pedagogy that is sensitive to black learning styles” and “offers practical suggestions for course design and deployment in online religion courses” (p. 35). Regarding MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses), Malesic (2013) argues against their presence within higher education as a misguided response to a need for greater educational equality, while an editorial in *America: The National Catholic Review* (2013) favorably considers their educational potential in Catholic higher education and parishes alike. Focusing on online CRE, Frye (2012) summarizes many different web-based avenues religious organizations use to offer formal and informal online education, and Stapleton (2014) studied the spiritual growth of laypeople when involved in online CRE.

Several articles have also addressed online graduate theological education. Satyanarayana (2013) reports on the use of online education in a variety of Christian degree programs. Ogilvie (2009) summarizes the many considerations involved in teaching graduate-level theological courses online,

Delamarter, Gravett, Ulrich, Nysse, and Polaski (2011) discuss teaching biblical studies online, and Gresham (2006) provides a profound theological basis for online educational methods. Pate and Hall (2005) and Brunner (2006) discuss the use of blended courses to enhance student learning, while Tauber (2012) discusses the differences between the in-person and online versions of a Foundations of Jewish Education course. McGarrah Sharp and Morris (2014) consider the role of empathy and connection while teaching an online pastoral care course, and Doehring (2013) describes an online course for clergy on the topic of self-care. Badke (2007) chronicles the trial-and-error process of creating a one-credit online information literacy course for the Associated Canadian Theological Schools. Ruth (2006) details the process of converting a course from an in-person to online format.

Literature regarding the assessment and evaluation of online religious and theological education is also sparse, which may coincide with institutions' reliance on ATS accreditation standards for guidance. An Association of Theological Schools (n.d.) interview with Ryan Murnane on assessment only briefly addresses online education. Reck's (2012) article on the subject of CRE curriculum in general, not specifically online courses, notes that "[h]istorically, there has been a lack of serious evaluation of Christian religious education material" (p. 28), possibly because the business of CRE has "become driven by the market to produce and make a profit without seriously examining the material that we are producing" (p. 28). Reck surveys the few CRE assessment and evaluation models currently available and provides her own evaluation tool at the end of the article. In sum, while there is a fair amount of recent literature addressing subjects related to the current study, there appears to be no literature drawing all of these elements together.

### **A Metaliterate Approach to Missional Christian Religious Education**

Several Christian religious educators, including Farley (1985, 1988), Groome (1980), and Seymour (2014) rightfully lament the lack of intellectual rigor too often present in CRE. Myers (2002) notes that academics who "ignore the demands of practice" (p. 9), faith-based activists and social

workers who neglect “the disciplines of critical theological and political reflection” (p.9), and laity who “ignore both the insights of the academics and the challenges of the activists” (p. 10) are all “profoundly impoverished by their isolation from each other, and the holistic mission of the church languishes” (p. 10). Myer’s summary of this unfortunate compartmentalization of church life points to the clear need for empowering and relational CRE that encourages all Christians to intelligently and proactively explore and claim their voices and ministries within God’s realm.

Seymour’s (2014) response to the need for a more robust and integrated vision of CRE builds upon Groome’s (1980) definition of CRE, introducing the concept of “missional Christian education” with its goal to empower “all to ‘true humanity’ and [call] the wider church to partner with God in restoring ‘new creation’” (p. 117). It explicitly engages Freire’s “problem-posing education, where people are invited to engage the realities of their lives, mutually consider those realities, and cooperatively act for change and humanization” (p. 118) on a theological level. Seymour believes “the responsibility of Christian education is to empower believers to be fully engaged in the nuanced and critical tasks of theological understanding” (p. 94), and that believers can only be so empowered if they have access to “the textual riches, methods, and insights of theological education” (p. 94).

Metaliteracy comprehensively reframes information literacy theory, moving “knowledge acquisition beyond search and retrieval to include the production, distribution, and communication of information in open and online environments” (Jacobson & Mackey, 2013, p. 90), incorporating “a metacognitive perspective, encouraging learners to think about their own thinking and to continuously reflect on their experiences in these environments” (Jacobson & Mackey, 2013, p. 85). Metaliteracy’s flexibility in encountering “where the world is, as it is, not as I would like it to be” (Alinsky, 1989, p. xix) aligns well with Seymour’s approach to CRE, as it encourages critical analysis of and dialogue with all information one might encounter. Its focus on real-life information creation and usage harmonizes well with the voluntary, self-motivated, lifelong learning environments generally found within CRE, which

often have no formal educational standards or accrediting agencies. Metaliteracy thus provides CRE with a flexible framework in which to situate educational endeavors.

Christian religious (CR) educators such as Seymour (2014), while not necessarily acquainted with metaliteracy, affirm the importance of process in education. Seymour observes that “a theological education process empowers us to think and discern the deepest commitments of our lives, commitment to God and to God’s creation” (p. 100). Such attention to process in CRE, particularly when it is situated within metaliteracy, helps its participants develop a better understanding of how to become lifelong, self-motivated learners with an active and resilient faith life.

### **The Four Goals of Metaliteracy in Dialog With Missional Christian Religious Education**

Metaliteracy as considered by Jacobson & Mackey (2013) is a “comprehensive model for information literacy to advance critical thinking and reflection in social media, open learning settings, and online communities” (p. 84). Reflection upon the four metaliteracy learning goals (Forte, Mackey, Jacobson, O’Keefe, & Stone, 2014) and their associated objectives from a theological praxis orientation provides a way in which to more intentionally integrate metaliteracy into Seymour’s concept of missional CRE. The following sections offer insight as to how metaliteracy’s goals align with Seymour’s (2014) vision of missional CRE.

**Goal one: evaluate content critically, including dynamic, online content that changes and evolves, such as article preprints, blogs, and wikis.** Jacobson and Mackey (2013) remark that critical thinking abilities remain vital but need “to be expanded and honed in order to face increasingly multifaceted and complex information packaging and delivery” (p. 87). The decentralization of authority that comes with new information formats may help break down some of the barriers between theology and CRE, encouraging the theological give-and-take between scholars and laypeople that Groome (1980) imagines: “Theology [...] should arise from the faith of a community reflected on in light of the Story/Vision and not from a group of scholars isolated from the community to reflect on the

community's behalf" (p. 229). It is important to remember that the whole people of God are theologians in some way, and to consider that theological reflection occurs in a variety of formats and places.

This goal and its objectives invite the church to re-examine its epistemological foundations from the perspective of lifelong holistic learning. In much the same manner that Jesus fearlessly, lovingly, and critically engaged with the world around him, metaliteracy encourages learners to expansively and critically engage with any and all information, rather than eschewing information encountered outside of more formally vetted sources. This goal's second objective, "Distinguish between editorial commentary and information presented from a more research-based perspective, recognizing that values and beliefs are embedded in all information" (Metaliteracy Learning Objectives, 2015), encourages people to recognize information's contextuality and many genres.

**Goal two: understand personal privacy, information ethics, and intellectual property issues in changing technology environments.** While information use, sharing, and attribution has never been a particularly straightforward endeavor, in the current information landscape users must be especially savvy in online environments where sharing and duplication are easy but not simple. Additionally, Objective 3, "Use technology to build a positive web presence" (Forte et al., 2014), helps people contemplate their role as "netizens" and the implications thereof. People of faith when online are often confronted with the dilemma of how much of their personal and faith journeys to share in online settings such as social media, blogs, and other formats. As they discern what to share and create content based on those decisions, they need to know how to ethically incorporate others' work into theirs and attribute that work, as well as their rights and other responsibilities as content creators.

The freely-available online book, *Love to Share* (2008), provides additional insight into this goal from a religious/CRE perspective, searching for fair ground in copyright debates. It encourages the ecumenical community neither to shun nor completely embrace free market capitalism regarding intellectual property. It asks Christians to consider that "creative producers who seek to bear testimony

to the resurrection of Jesus and proclaim God's good news cannot be limited by the rules of the marketplace" (p. 27).

**Goal three: Share information and collaborate in a variety of participatory environments.**

"Metaliterate learners must strive for independent, democratic participation, while being open to the free flowing contribution of others" (Jacobson & Mackey, 2013, p. 90). The participatory spirit of metaliteracy is particularly hospitable to missional CRE because it recognizes the need for both individual and collaborative participation and learning. This goal, particularly with Objective 6, "Effectively communicate personal and professional experiences to inform and assist others; and recognize that learners can also be teachers" (Forte et al., 2014), recognizes the importance of mutuality between teachers and students, one of Freire's (2000) key concepts, in which all proactively and simultaneously take responsibility for learning and growth processes.

This goal also relates to theological reflection as articulated by Seymour (2014), which encourages Christians in faith community to connect their life stories with those of Christian tradition as that tradition challenges beliefs or provides them with new insights. This goal provides a more formal framework in which to consider the dialogical nature of missional CRE, encouraging both personal and communal theological reflection.

**Goal four: demonstrate ability to connect learning and research strategies with lifelong learning processes and personal, academic, and professional goals.** Groome (1980) asserts that education always has consequences, "either to control people by integrating them into conformity with existing society or to liberate them to deal critically and creatively with their reality in order to transform it" (p. 176). Freire (2000) emphasizes the importance of student agency, collaboration, and metacognition in educational processes: "The students – no longer docile listeners – are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher" (p. 81). Metaliteracy provides congregations with greater

intentionality in educational efforts, envisioning all people as lifelong learners, encouraging them to set their own goals, and to learn in ways that help them to achieve those goals.

Objectives 2, 4, 6, 7 and 8 address assessment's importance as part of the learning process. Reck (2012) comments upon the "lack of serious evaluation of Christian religious education material" (p. 28). Religious congregations often lack specific educational goals related to the broader purpose of their educational programs; they are generally less assessment and evaluation-driven than educational institutions. Well-respected works within CRE often have very little to say about assessment and evaluation of the educational methods they espouse. While there is much about religion that goes beyond the realm of measurement, helpful benchmarks that can be measured should be. Well-designed assessment and evaluation can provide faith communities with data on the value of programs, feedback that can help them determine whether or not to continue a particular educational program or strategy, and input on adjustments to make.

### **The Potential of Online Metaliterate, Missional Christian Religious Education**

Online education has grown exponentially in the past decade, as has overall internet usage. Fully 42.3% of the world and 87.7% of North America is online (Internet World Stats, 2014). While Freire (1984) warns educators about using technology for technology's sake, the strategic use of online education may benefit congregations in regard to connecting people with different schedules and locations. Indeed, MOOC environments may be a more natural fit for CRE than for institutional credit-bearing courses, as CRE generally hasn't been provided or taken for credit, students drop in and out of both MOOCs and CRE at will, and there is an emphasis in MOOCs on students evaluating each other.

Religious attitudes about online education in any form, including MOOCs, vary quite a bit. Some religious educators dislike MOOCs because they believe MOOCs create a false sense of equality at the same time that they may actually encourage inequality in the current educational landscape. The editors of an *America* editorial (2013), however, see MOOCs as an opportunity for Catholicism to reinvigorate

faith through helping young people learn more about Scripture and theology. Online missional CRE may provide people divided by schedules and distance with online space in which to collaboratively explore the reconciliation and integration of faith, intellect, and activism, leading people toward more authentic discipleship.

**Faith Thinking Foundations: Online Metaliterate Missional Christian Religious Education**

Liberation Christian Church's (n.d.) mission is "to love God and God's people, to lead people in relationship with Jesus Christ, to be Christ's disciples by learning about his life and ministry, and to participate in God's mission to liberate people from sin and sinful structures." One of the values through which Liberation (n.d.) purports to live out its mission is that of scholarship:

We believe that Christ commanded us to love God with all our heart, soul and mind. Therefore we commit to be thinking people of faith. We will critically study the Bible and the traditions of Christian faith with illumination of the Holy Spirit. (Mark 12:29, Mark 7:13).

Liberation strives to accomplish this education via weekly worship, Bible study, new member classes, other occasional learning opportunities, and its online library. However, this 50-member, six-year-old church has consistently struggled to nurture an integrative devotional-critical-activist faith in its members.

The journey toward the online version of the Faith Thinking Foundations course began in the summer of 2013 as an eight lesson, freely-available, self-paced, online course titled "Information Salvation." The course integrated progressive theological and library and information science concepts, processes, and methodologies. My intent in developing the course was to provide an open learning opportunity for people with faith questions to explore them using some of the foundational concepts, processes, resources, and tools that have helped people better understand research, reality, and God. While I learned about those concepts through spending ten years of my life in seminary and library school, I hoped to shorten the process for faithful people with busy lives and different vocational goals.

Upon completion of the site, I explored additional ways in which to reach people of faith with the material, particularly at the congregational level, considering ways in which metaliteracy could provide students with a more robust framework in which to explore faith questions in the world. With the support of Liberation's pastor I taught an in-person version of the class as a five-week learning series held during Liberation's regular Bible study time. Upon completion of the in-person course I received the following major points of feedback: the course as a whole was very interesting but also quite "heady": the course content was occasionally too intense for laypeople to process in that short of a time period. Attendees also wished for a greater connection between biblical and course themes to help them better integrate the concepts into their worldview.

### **Methodology**

**Goal.** As the course transitioned from an in-person to online format I wondered how it would function as an actively-taught (rather than self-paced) online course. Would people would find the online format more easily accessible based on their schedules and locations, and could it provide the Liberation community with additional virtual space in which to gather and build community? I wanted to learn if the online FTF course would be a worthwhile means of empowering students to learn missional CRE concepts from a metaliteracy perspective that effectively addressed the issue of low attendance encountered during the in-person course.

**Participants.** Study participants consisted of a total of 21 voluntary, self-selected, non-compensated members, friends, and guests of Liberation between the ages of 25 and 75. Eleven participants enrolled in the course, three of whom were affiliated with Liberation. Ten study participants did not enroll in the course but completed a short survey regarding course interest and reasons for not taking the course. As Liberation's classes are generally open to all who wish to participate and the nature of CRE lends itself to open invitation, I advertised the course with print fliers, e-mails, and social media (Facebook and Twitter) to Liberators, friends, and guests of Liberation alike. Students enrolled in

the course via a short survey, and upon submission of the survey received a login for the course site. Consistent with Freire's and metaliteracy's concept of student-teacher mutuality, I participated in the course as teacher-student through typical teaching activities such as posting weekly announcements as well as participating in weekly course discussion.

**Apparatus.** The course was offered as a voluntary educational opportunity via Moodle course management software outside of Liberation's weekly learning group. I e-mailed weekly announcements to students, and provided students with a syllabus in PDF format as a "road map" for the course. Students were asked on a weekly basis to read and meditate on the week's scriptural passage, read the short weekly introduction and the readings, provide an initial post to the week's discussion question, write a response to one person's initial post, and complete a step on their project which involved their research, response, and sharing that response to a faith-related question of their choosing.

All surveys for this study were offered via Google Forms. The six-question course sign-up survey collected basic contact information, education level, as well as reasons for taking the course and a space with which to note any other relevant information. At the end of course, students completed a 21-question course assessment/follow-up survey asking for education level, personal goals for taking the course, personal experience of course content, what it helped them learn, if it helped them meet their learning goals, how much time they spent on the course, what they liked best and least about the course, instructor help and efficacy, and additional thoughts. Participants not taking the course completed a five-question survey regarding why they were not taking the course, what might convince them to take it in the future, course suggestions, age range, and education level.

**Course goals and topics.** The course had three goals over its eight weeks. Students would be able to:

1. Integrate faith, intellect, and social justice on both personal and communal levels
2. Understand and articulate the integration of faith, intellect, and activism

3. Demonstrate an awareness of this integration via reflective work (class discussion, blog, Facebook posts, art, music, etc.) and completion of an integrative project (student-chosen, instructor-approved) to be shared with the class and relevant organizations upon completion.

The course included a weekly biblical passage that spoke in some way to the weekly course theme. It covered multiple topics at the intersection of religious/theological literacy/CRE and metaliteracy, chosen because they represented my understanding of the most important tools, resources, and processes that people of faith need for a fully integrated faith-intellect perspective.

The course began with an introductory week that summarized the importance of faith thinking, allowing students to become acclimated to the rhythm of the class. We then moved to research – both general research skills as well as particular basic religious and theological research skills such as biblical exegesis. The next week we considered information stewardship, including the ways in which we personally use, store, and share information, as well as some of the broader issues of who has access to what information, and why some have access to information while others do not. We also discussed information discernment and evaluation, theologically considering the authority and value of various sources. Toward the end of the course we explored information evangelism, particularly relating to how students would share their completed projects and what they had learned from the course with others. In our final week we discussed assessment and evaluation of the course, students' experience of the course, including projects, and my performance as instructor. Student participation in the course assessment and evaluation process is an important part of a metaliterate educational approach that allows student perceptions and ideas to shape future course manifestations.

**Assignments/project.** Students were asked to read chapters from *The Information Literacy User's Guide*, a free online textbook from SUNY, as well as occasional journal articles, and respond to weekly online discussion questions. Students also explored a faith question of their choosing in weekly increments using the methods and tools we covered in the course.

## Results

**Assessing and evaluating the course.** Participants provided a number of reasons for wanting to take the course in the introductory survey, including a general interest in the subject matter as a whole, spiritual growth, growing an in-depth relationship with Christ, continuing reflection on ministry and feminist spirituality, how faith is discerned and what holds people back from exploring faith, as well as uncertainty as to why they wanted to take the course. Regarding educational levels of course participants, 27% had a bachelor's degree, 54% had a master's degree, and 18% a Ph.D. or some other post-doctoral education.

Out of the ten people who completed the survey for those not taking the course, 20% said they had schedule conflicts that would prevent them from taking it, 90% said they had too many other commitments at the present moment, 20% were uninterested in the subject matter, and 10% would rather take an in-person course.<sup>2</sup> Educational levels of that group were slightly different than those of whom signed up for the course: 10% had some college, 20% a bachelor's degree, and 70% had a master's degree.

Of the eleven people who originally signed up for the course, five participated in the course in some way, four did so for multiple weeks, and one saw the course through to the very end, completing and turning in the project as assigned. Four out of the five course participants completed the final survey for the course. I also interviewed two Liberators: one of whom was a course/survey participant who wanted to discuss the course more conversationally, and one non-participant who expressed interest in discussing the course. 75% of final survey respondents had Master's degrees; 25% had a PhD. 50% were affiliated with Liberation. The non-participant I interviewed had some college. Aspects that course participants most enjoyed about the course were: the space for creativity, the way the course was structured, the readings, that the course included people outside of Liberation, and that everyone

---

<sup>2</sup> Respondents could choose multiple reasons for not taking the course.

shared their stories about the roles in which faith thinking had played in their lives. Students found course readings, the concept of visual literacy, and discussion of Zotero the most helpful ideas they would carry with them going forward.

Regarding student learning goals, students hoped to open up more theological dialogue, learn better research and resourcing skills, become more creative about God-talk, grow in deeper understanding and more intentional study of the Word, learn strategies from religious and theology for exploring Big Life Questions, explore the Bible, theology, and theologians, and to finish the course. Students met their goals through exploring different perspectives and encountering new tools for learning, and created space in which to encounter and consider different perspectives.

Students least liked about the course that there was not enough instructor feedback and that they did not or could not finish the class (75%). If they could change one thing about the course they would add more instructor feedback into the course structure, and more interaction in the form of videos or synchronous instructor chat. Both people interviewed about the course felt very strongly that course themes and material had an application within church life and in particular would like to integrate several course concepts into Liberation's Nurture Team, which helps some Liberation members further explore their call. When questioned about what would have encouraged full completion of the course, all who did not fully complete the course mentioned the role that life circumstances and pressures outside of the course played in their lack of course completion.

Students agreed that course goals were clear and the course was well-organized, the course readings and project contributed to their learning, and that the course instructor was available, effective, and helpful. Students cited the instructor's accessibility, good instructions, and explanations when considering instructor helpfulness and effectiveness. Students spent between one and five hours each week on the course, averaging 2.3 hours per week. All students at least partially agreed that the online format of the course was helpful, though 50% noted there were also issues with the course being

online, particularly regarding occasional difficulties in accessing readings or not having an available computer with internet access. The person interviewed who did not take the course mentioned he would prefer either a blended or completely in-person course format.

Educational levels may have played a role in course participation. Those who most heavily participated in the course had masters' degrees or above. While I originally envisioned a more widely distributed range of educational levels, having conceived of this class as a democratizing force regarding faith and intellect, this version of the course may particularly resonate with highly educated people who continue to hear God and Jesus calling them. Even as Zuckerman, Silberman, and Hall (2013) explore the possibility that higher levels of intelligence lead to less need of religion, it is also possible for education concerning faith and religious beliefs to evolve in ways that honor both God and human intelligence. It is worth considering why this version of the course interested fewer people with less formal education.

**Additional observations.** Those who understand the point of the course have enthusiastically supported and readily discussed the course and its themes with me. For the many others who appear to have difficulty understanding it I will continue to work on articulating what I am doing in more layperson-friendly terms. Several key questions remain: is religious literacy truly for all people, or a more niche area for specialists? Should religious people be interested in this course, is it a problem if they are not, and if so, whose problem is their disinterest? Do people with bachelor's degrees or less education feel intimidated by the language I am using to discuss the course, the subject matter, or the course format? Are course delivery/educational methods a hindrance, or is it that few laypeople are interested in this area of study? All the above questions bear further investigation.

Time was an additional factor in course non-participation, both with course participants and those interested but unable to take the course. An eight-week course, while long enough to provide students with a good foundation to faith thinking, may have been too extensive a time commitment for those with a casual interest in the course material.

Another important point of feedback from the final survey was the desire for a stronger instructor presence: course participants suggested the use of technology such as Skype to encourage a greater sense of community within the course. Additionally, to encourage greater future course participation I must continue to embrace the metaliteracy goal of sharing information and translating course concepts to people in a variety of ways so they make more sense to those without graduate-level theological and library science education.

**Recommendations.** The experience of teaching this course and considering survey results and interviews have yielded worthwhile information. It is apparent that some members and friends of Liberation Christian Church are truly interested in becoming more religiously literate within a metaliteracy framework. Most of the people interested enough to take the course are already highly educated; the reason(s) for this warrant further exploration. It could also be worthwhile to consider teaching both beginning and advanced sections of this course, or, in the interest of time commitment, divide course components into stand-alone workshops. In future versions of this class I would use more course materials that engage multiple learning styles, particularly those of a more visual nature. I would also maintain a more intentional presence to students and be available for synchronous discussion.

As the Pew Research Center's (2015) recent report notes the continued decline of Christian church affiliation in the United States, particularly within mainline Protestantism, there is ample opportunity for CRE to help people of faith navigate complex shifts happening within religion. The Faith Thinking Foundations course, as one such endeavor, may provide people of faith with tools, resources, and strategies to live a robustly intellectual, activist faith that is sustainable throughout life's many seasons. For this course to fulfill these possibilities, it must provide participants with clear reasons for including it in their already-busy schedules, ways to truly commit to the course, and the means to connect with other participants, including the instructor.

I recommend that CR educators who are interested in missional, metaliterate approaches to CRE make themselves visible and available for conversation with clergy and laypeople about these topics. CR educators in this realm need to learn to translate and articulate these concepts in everyday “layperson” language and may consider surveying their congregations to ascertain particular educational interests and needs before undertaking this endeavor. Congregations should also consider how online education may align with their goals for CRE, carefully considering the topics, instructional materials and their formats, and ways in which to encourage community within online courses. It is possible that congregations may want to attempt a hybrid in-person/online course to test out the respective benefits and drawbacks of online education before embarking upon a fully online course.

### **Conclusion**

This study of one church’s experience with an online religious metaliteracy course provides beginning considerations of the value of online metaliterate, missional CRE in congregations. While the above-discussed offering of the Faith Thinking Foundations online course is not the final word in this type of education for Liberation Christian Church, it moves toward the praxis-oriented pedagogy that Liberation needs to communally embody its vision “to liberate lives and to liberate communities with every breath of our being” (Liberation Christian Church, n.d.-a). Other congregations may find this effort helpful as they seek to empower and equip members for their respective ministries as activated disciples of Jesus. While in-person CRE continues to provide church members with a valuable sense of community and connection, clergy and other CR educators may also consider the role that online metaliterate, missional CRE may play in their congregations. Helping laypeople integrate this type of education into their lives may further encourage them to courageously explore and live the faith questions that help them find and make meaning in their individual and communal lives. As the church continues its search for educational strategies that help its members “respond to the demands of the Kingdom in their own personal, social, and political contexts,” (Groome, 1980, p. 99), online religious

metaliteracy education will hopefully continue to play a role in the integration of the church, the seminary, and the streets.

### References

- Alinsky, S. D. (1989). *Rules for radicals: A practical primer for realistic radicals*. New York: Vintage.
- Arroyo, A. T. (2010). It's not a colorless classroom: Teaching religion online to black college students using transformative, postmodern pedagogy. *Teaching Theology & Religion*, 13(1), 35–50.
- The Association of Theological Schools. (n.d.). Good assessment practices call for logic and simplicity: An interview with Ryan Murnane. The Association of Theological Schools. Retrieved May 2, 2015, from <http://www.ats.edu/uploads/resources/publications-presentations/documents/good-assessment-practices-call-for-logic-and-simplicity.pdf>
- Badke, W. (2007). Associated Canadian Theological Schools: Building an online graduate information literacy course without a blueprint. *Public Services Quarterly*, 3(3/4), 19–35. <http://doi.org/10.1080/15228950802110429>
- Beaty, A. J. (2014). Exploring educator perceptions of need, sustainability, and impact of global online theological courses. *International Journal of Information and Communication Technology Education*, 10(2), 14–24.
- Bernnard, D., Bobish, G., Hecker, J., Holden, I., Hosier, A., Jacobson, T., ... Bullis, D. (2014). *The information literacy user's guide: An open, online textbook*. (G. Bobish & T. Jacobson, Eds.). Geneseo, NY: Open SUNY Textbooks, Milne Library (IITG PI). Retrieved from <http://opensuny.org/omp/index.php/SUNYOpenTextbooks/catalog/book/170>
- Brunner, D. L. (2006). The potential of the hybrid course vis-à-vis online and traditional courses. *Teaching Theology & Religion*, 9(4), 229–235. <http://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9647.2006.00288.x>

- Dart, J. (2013). Seminaries expand online options. *Christian Century*, 130(20), 14–15.
- Delamarter, S., Gravett, S. L., Ulrich, D. W., Nysse, R. W., & Polaski, S. H. (2011). Teaching biblical studies online. *Teaching Theology & Religion*, 14(3), 256–283.
- Doehring, C. (2013). New directions for clergy experiencing stress: Connecting spirit and body. *Pastoral Psychology*, 62(5), 623–638. <http://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-013-0512-1>
- The Editors. (2013, May 27). A new thing. *America: The National Catholic Review*, 5.
- Farley, E. (1985). Can church education be theological education? *Theology Today*, 42(2), 158–171.
- Farley, E. (1988). *The fragility of knowledge: Theological education in the church and the university*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- Forte, M., Mackey, T., Jacobson, T., O’Keefe, E., & Stone, K. (2014, September 11). Learning objectives: Developing metaliterate learners. Retrieved October 14, 2014, from <http://metaliteracy.org/learning-objectives/>
- Freire, P. (1984). Education, liberation and the church. *Religious Education*, 79(4), 524–545.
- Freire, P. (2014). *Pedagogy of the oppressed: 30th anniversary edition*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA.
- Frye, S. B. (2012). Religious distance education goes online. *New Directions for Adult & Continuing Education*, 2012(133), 13–22. <http://doi.org/10.1002/ace.20003>
- Gresham, J. (2006). The divine pedagogy as a model for online education. *Teaching Theology & Religion*, 9(1), 24–28.
- Jacobson, T. E., & Mackey, T. P. (2013). Proposing a metaliteracy model to redefine information literacy. *Communications in Information Literacy*, 7(2), 84–91. <http://doi.org/10.7548/cil.v7i2.255>
- Internet World Stats. (2014, June 30). World internet users statistics and 2014 world population stats. Retrieved May 4, 2015, from <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>
- Liberation Christian Church. (n.d.-a). About us: Our mission. Retrieved May 2, 2015, from <http://liberationcc.org/#/about-us/our-mission>

- Liberation Christian Church. (n.d.-b). About us: Our values. Retrieved May 2, 2015, from <http://liberationcc.org/#/about-us/our-values>
- Malesic, J. (2013). A Catholic case against MOOCs. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 60(3), A64.
- McBride, M. F. (2012). Reconsidering information literacy in the 21st century: The redesign of an information literacy class. *Journal of Educational Technology Systems*, 40(3), 287–300. <http://doi.org/10.2190/ET.40.3.e>
- McGarrah Sharp, M., & Morris, M. A. (2014). Virtual empathy? Anxieties and connections teaching and learning pastoral care online. *Teaching Theology & Religion*, 17(3), 247–263. <http://doi.org/10.1111/teth.12211>
- Myers, C. (2002). Word and World: A people's school. *The Clergy Journal*, 8–11.
- Ogilvie, M. C. (2009). Teaching theology online. *Australian eJournal of Theology*, 13(1). Retrieved from [http://aejt.com.au/2009/issue\\_13/?article=158325](http://aejt.com.au/2009/issue_13/?article=158325)
- Pate, R. H., Jr., & Hall, M. P. (2005). One approach to a counseling and spirituality course. *Counseling and Values*, 49(2), 155.
- Pew Research Center. (2015). *America's changing religious landscape: Christians decline sharply as share of population; unaffiliated and other faiths continue to grow*. Pew Research Center. Retrieved from <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2015/05/RLS-05-08-full-report.pdf>
- Quinn, M. E., Foote, L. S., & Williams, M. L. (2012). Integrating a biblical worldview and developing online courses for the adult learner. *Christian Scholar's Review*, 41(2), 163–173.
- Satyanarayana, P., & DK Meduri, E. (2013). Use of distance education by Christian religion to train, edify and educate adherents. *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education*, 14(2), 35–43.
- Sebastian, D. (2010, March). *Trends in Theological Education in North America*. Presented at the Church of God Theological Administrators' and Instructors Forum, Fritzlar, Germany. Retrieved from <http://www.anderson.edu/sites/default/files/migrate/sot/faculty/SebastianTrends.pdf>

Seymour, J. L. (2014). *Teaching the way of Jesus: Educating Christians for faithful living*. Abingdon Press.

Stapleton, D. L. (2014). *Astonishing technological faith: Individuals can grow spiritually when Christian education is taught through distance learning*. Drew University, Madison, NJ.

Tauber, S. M. (2012). An introductory course in Jewish education. *Religious Education*, 107(5), 455–475.  
<http://doi.org/10.1080/00344087.2012.722475>

World Association for Christian Communication, World Council of Churches, & Spirituality and Worship. (2008). *Love to share: Intellectual property rights, copyright, and Christian churches*. Toronto, Ontario; Geneva, Switzerland: World Association for Christian Communication ; World Council of Churches. Retrieved from <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/programmes/unity-mission-evangelism-and-spirituality/spirituality-and-worship/love-to-share.html>

Zuckerman, M., Silberman, J., & Hall, J. A. (2013). The relation between intelligence and religiosity: A meta-analysis and some proposed explanations. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*.  
<http://doi.org/10.1177/1088868313497266>

Appendix A

**Faith Thinking Foundations Registration Form**

First and Last Name \*

E-mail Address \*

Phone Number \*

Education Level

Why are you interested in taking Faith Thinking Foundations? \*

Please provide any additional information you believe is relevant:

\*required

## Appendix B

### Survey for Those Not Taking the Faith Thinking Foundations Course

Why are you currently unable or uninterested in taking the Faith Thinking Foundations online course? \*  
(Check all that apply.)

- I have other commitments that conflict with the dates in which this course is offered.
- I have too many other current commitments to take the course.
- I am uninterested in the subject matter.
- The course description or subject matter was unclear.
- I would rather take an in-person course.
- The instructor is not qualified to teach this course.
- Other:

Is there anything that would encourage you to take the Faith Thinking Foundations course, or a similar course, in the future? \*

- The course offered at a different time of the year.
- The course offered for a different length of time.
- A more flexible course time option (i.e. self-paced).
- A better-defined course subject.
- A different course focus.
- A different teacher.
- Offering Faith Thinking Foundations as an in-person course.
- Other:

What other suggestions do you have for the Faith Thinking Foundations course?

Age range \*

- Under 18
- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 64-75
- 75-

Highest Level of Education Completed \*

- Elementary or junior high school
- GED or high school diploma equivalent
- High school
- Some college
- Associates (2-year) or technical program
- Bachelor's (4-year) degree
- Master's degree
- Ph.D., Doctorate, or other post-graduate degree

## Appendix C

**Faith Thinking Foundations Final Survey**

What is your education level? \*

- Some high school or less
- High school diploma
- College degree
- Master's degree
- PhD

Are you a member of or otherwise affiliated with Liberation Christian Church? \*

- Yes
- No

What goal(s) did you hope to meet by taking this course? \*

Do you feel like the Faith Thinking Foundations course helped you to achieve your reason/goal for taking the course? \*

- Yes
- No
- Other:

Were the goals of this course clear to you? \*

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Was the course well-organized? \*

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Was the online format of the course helpful for you? \*

- Yes
- No
- Other:

Did the project and course discussion help you to achieve your goals for this course? \*

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Did the course reading and project contribute to your learning? \*

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

How did the project and course discussion help you to achieve / hinder you from learning and achieving your goals for this course? \*

What did you like best about the course? \*

What did you like least about the course? \*

If you could change one thing about the course, what would it be? \*

If you signed up for, but did not participate in, the course, why not, and would anything have encouraged you to participate in the course?

If you began but did not complete the course, why not, and would anything have encouraged you to complete the course?

Was the course instructor available and helpful? \*

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Was the instructor effective? \*

- Strongly agree
- Agree

- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Why was or was not the instructor helpful and/or effective? \*

On average, how many hours per week did you spend on this course? \*

What is the most helpful piece of learning or tool you will take from this course into your daily life? \*

Are there any other thoughts you would like to share about your experience taking this course?