

Laity Minute September

I remember the exact moment when my Dean said to me, "We are starting a new Masters degree in marketing and we want you to teach several of the classes." "Wow!," I thought. What an opportunity. Grad students. New classes to prepare. How exciting!

"The entire degree is online," she stated.

Online. All. Of. It.

I pondered this for a moment and tried to make sense of what that meant. I had a colleague who taught online a little. Additionally, I knew most of my colleagues had an extremely negative view of online teaching. "It's not as rigorous." "The quality is sub-par." "It is not the same experience as face-to-face instruction." Hmmmm. Not sure about this.

"Sounds great," I said with a little hesitation in my tone. "I am excited to be a part of this new degree." My Dean smiled and said, "Wonderful. This is a super opportunity for us and our students."

When I talk to potential graduate students, one of the concerns I most always hear is, "I have not taken an online course before. What is it like and is it as good as being in the physical classroom?" Or, "I haven't been in the classroom for a long time and I'm a little nervous about this."

Their concerns are legitimate. It is a space with which they are unfamiliar and they are receiving a product in a way which is fairly foreign. How can they learn in an online environment? How can they receive the same quality education digitally as they would in a physical classroom? How can they make any kind of connection with their professor and other students? I get it. I felt the same way when the Dean asked me to teach online. I felt that I would lose the connection with my students. I was unconvinced I could give them a good educational experience.

I was so wrong. So very, very, very wrong. I currently teach 100% online. I have never been as engaged with my students as I am now. I get to connect with them in ways the physical space could not even think about providing. I have digital tools at my disposal that would never be possible otherwise. I have students in my classes who have been able to go back to school because of the flexibility of the online classroom. Students come from all over the country to my classes who never could have due to being in another location and time zone. The chance my Dean gave me that day changed the way I think about education in a positive way.

It changed everything.

I also remember the exact moment when I read the Bishop was going to close church due to the pandemic. I was sitting in our monthly UMW meeting. Church had to go online.

Online. All. Of. It.

I pondered this for a moment and tried to make sense of what that meant. I knew of a few churches who streamed their services online. Additionally, I knew some churchgoers had an extremely negative view of online church. "It's not as special." "It can't be of the same quality." "It is not the same experience as face-to-face." Hmmmm. Not sure about this.

No problem, I concluded. We can do this.

Now, here we are in the digital environment as a church. Again, the concerns are legitimate. It's a space with which many are unfamiliar to receive church worship. How can we learn and grow spiritually by sitting in front of a screen? How can we connect with each other?

I miss seeing everyone sitting in their usual pews. I miss hearing the squeak of the floor in certain spots as I walk across the red carpet. I miss smelling the candle as it is extinguished at the end of the service. I miss the stained glass as the sun filters through it and highlights the beauty of our sanctuary.

Online and in person education have their own unique positives and challenges. No question about it. However, just as my Dean gave me a new opportunity, we the church, have been given an opportunity, as well. This is a truly unique chance. A chance to become more and a chance to thrive as a church and as a congregation. We haven't lost the physical environment forever. In fact, we have gained a whole new space in which to connect, worship, and grow. We can serve people who would have never attended church had it not been online and given them flexibility. Geographic boundaries are gone.

So, as the online environment becomes a part of the modern church, let us embrace it in a positive way. Let us look back one day and say....

It changed everything.