

THE FUTURE OF DISTANCE EDUCATION
THE PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

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PAST

A famous Argentine singer whose name is Mercedes Sosa sings the following words in one of her most well-known songs, "Change the superficial, change also the deep, change the way of thinking, change everything in this world." Change is a part of life. He who refuses to change is destined to become outdated and irrelevant. Although we believe that we have a God of whose love is perfect and does not change, we also believe that this same God has shown us in both the Old and New Testaments that he reinvents himself in his approaches to human salvation.

Historically, the Christian church has had problems with change, from whether to allow drums in music ministry, to the clothes pastors should wear. It would seem we always arrive late to adopting the practices that the rest of the world considers to be normal. Of course, specifically, we are not referring to sinful attitudes, but social, cultural, and technological advances that can be of great advantage to the Kingdom of God. A clear example of this is demonstrated in our approach to biblical and theological education.

We fondly remember the days when our seminary professors travelled 8, 12, or 16 hours to get to one of our education extension centers staying the entire one or two weeks of class teaching students on that educational zone (usually in the evenings). Meanwhile, they sacrificed their work, their ministries, and even more importantly their families. Of course, this is nothing to condemn, rather we should be giving a standing ovation to these heroes of the faith who devoted so much to the proliferation of the teachings of the cross. Later came travel via airplanes. Distances and hours were reduced, but the economic investment was extraordinary for our institutions. A large portion of annual budgets was invested in airline tickets that took professors to one country or another. Clearly, airline travel did not solve the absence of the professor in his or her local church nor in their home either.

Later, a tool arrived that changed everything: a technological device that was as incredible as it was unimaginable. Videoconferencing equipment had been used by large companies. They were installing videoconference rooms at different points around the globe to be able to speak with audio and video to their executives on the other side of the world. Absolutely incredible! I clearly remember one occasion when *Seminario Nazareno de las Américas* requested a visit from one of the largest brands of this type of equipment leaving us dazzled with the possibilities. The representative even showed us an "intelligent" mat on which the professor was walking and moved the camera while the professor was always in the foreground. They also left us amazed at the high costs involved in installing equipment like that in our facilities. Considering that we had at the time hundreds of centers on the region, it was impossible to pay for it. This presented us with a challenge which the church has encountered many times: How can we take advantage of these available technological advances while

adjusting the budgets of our institutions? This is where we exercised one of the most beautiful attributes that God has given us: creativity.

It started with prayer and research. After a while we discovered that used equipment existed at much more affordable prices and that we could achieve the long-awaited desire to be able to communicate with students and professors from different places around the world. This is how after many years of working and investment, *Seminario Nazareno de las Américas* in coordination with the regional office of theological education for Church of the Nazarene in Mesoamerica developed a videoconferencing network from the United States to Argentina, and from Costa Rica to the smallest islands of the Caribbean. After much work and effort, we were able to provide training for pastors and leaders to more than 20 centers in North and South America connected at the same time. It was a beautiful time to see how God used this technology to advance his mission in the world.

Even though this equipment was practical and economical, there were still some challenges. Among them was the need for people with specific technological knowledge for its operation and the rigorous installation work that required the configuration of access ports, telephonic equipment, etc. With the passage of time, more companies began to emerge that offered basically the same thing but in a much simpler format. Each person could connect with another person via their computer or cell phone and talk via videoconferencing as if they were together.

We started this essay saying that the church has had problems with change. This moment in time was no exception. For a long time, we maintained the belief that in-person classes were a necessary requirement even if the professor was on the other side of the world. Obviously, we recognize that nothing is equal to in-person education, but the practicality of videoconferencing from the offices or homes of students was increasingly gaining ground. Suddenly, exceptions began to arise. A student had to take care of a sick mother but did not want to miss the course being offered. So, we offered the student the option to connect from their home. Another student had a very complicated work schedule and needed to connect from work. How could we say no? As other students began to see the practicality of being able to study from their own locale, and little by little the exceptions became the rule.

Thus, a few months later, all students and professors were already connecting from their personal devices and from their homes or offices. Of course, we missed not being together. How could we not miss sharing and breaking bread together? These are such important customs for Latinos and Christians in general. However, we had to recognize that videoconferencing via technology also brings many important benefits. People for one reason or another were unable to travel to a center to take their classes. Now, through their computers or cell phones they were better able to study and prepare themselves to serve the Lord.

Along with the innovation of the videoconferencing mode of imparting classes, the vast majority of seminaries in Latin America made an agreement to begin in 2010 what is known as *Seminario Nazarene Virtual* (SNV)¹, a strategic alliance to teach 100% online the course of

¹ For more information on *Seminario Nazareno Virtual* go to <http://www.nazarenovirtual.net/>

study for ordination for the Church of the Nazarene. This also revolutionized the way we were able to contribute to the formation of our leaders and pastors. Through independent education, everyone has access to classes. Regardless of work schedule, profession, place of residence, or other obstacles, now everyone can study. SNV has also been an example of how education should be continually updated.

As a simple example, we can see that when we started this initiative, a basic, free technological platform was used. Later, thanks to agreements reached with an important university in the United States, it was possible to migrate to more robust and professional platforms. Currently SNV works with one of the most influential and advanced learning platforms in the world.

PRESENT

In 2020 something happened that would change everything. The COVID-19 pandemic wreaked havoc in practically all the countries on our region. Many of our seminaries and institutions of biblical formation and theology had to suspend their in-person programs completely. Suddenly, many of the leaders who had resisted the change toward teaching virtually had to abruptly venture into videoconferencing and online education. With mistakes and stumbles, they managed to adjust their course offerings to reach students who were unable to meet in-person due to pandemic restrictions.

Curiously, a great majority of those who had vehemently opposed distance education through technology were now enamored by the new possibilities of these learning platforms. As years passed and pandemic restrictions were lowered, students wanted to gather for other events, but most of them wanted to continue studying online through available technologies. Today there is no one who does not recognize the practicality and versatility that videoconferencing and online education brings to us as a church. It really is a format that is here to stay for a long time.

Despite being a tool of blessing, it also presents us with important challenges and question for the future. What are the long-term implications for new leaders and pastors that have never been face to face in the same place with their professors and colleagues? How will independent studies affect the future of the church? The answers to these questions do not necessarily have to be negative. Perhaps quite the opposite. It is important to pause from time to time to assure ourselves as a church that we are educating our leaders holistically and giving them the appropriate tools for the future.

FUTURE

What will happen with Christian education in the future? This is a question each seminary leader must ask themselves periodically. When we stop innovating and transforming, we begin to lose relevance in the world. As a church we always want to be at the forefront of advances to take maximum advantage of technology for the advancement our mission on earth.

So, what does the future look like? We can see without a doubt the growth of augmented reality applications. We are also increasingly hearing about the Metaverse², NFTs and similar concepts. Large companies such as Facebook have made strong moves to target these virtual worlds.

For these reasons we can expect that in 5 to 10 years, theological education could be taught through the Metaverse: each student with his or her augmented reality device, sitting in a virtual classroom, speaking through their avatars with professors and colleagues. We might also have NFT books and materials where people can buy and use books in the virtual world. Of course, this would not be limited to gathering in a virtual classroom. We could also take students on trips with us to historical places such as Jerusalem or Egypt, all through virtual reality devices. Virtual reality really will be a technology that will completely revolutionize the field of education opening a world of possibilities for teachers to strengthen the teaching-learning process. Until then, each seminary teacher and leader should be studying and learning about the virtual world that is already gaining strength globally. If we begin soon, perhaps we will not arrive late this time, and we will be able to get much more out of this technology while we look forward to the next innovation that the future brings us.

On the other hand, the economic challenges for theological institutions will continue to be part of our reality. Each institution will have to search for creative ways to generate resources to sustain its programs. We must also invest our resources more wisely trying to make the biggest impact possible on our mission with the fewest available resources. This is where technology becomes a key piece of our education. With the same professor and the same investment, we can reach many more people through the internet. May the Lord help us each day to be strategic and courageous looking toward the future.

² For more information on the Metaverse and related technologies the following page is recommended: <https://www.iebschool.com/blog/el-metaverso-origen-definicion-y-la-apuesta-de-facebook-tecnologia/>