Mobile Learning for Congregations[1]

RYAN TORMA

In the last few years, many new types of mobile technologies such as smartphones, tablet computers, and laptops have become available. Mobile devices are powerful tools that make it easy for people to access information, communicate, and share with others from wherever they happen to be: home, school, work, church, coffee shop, or even the dentist's office. During the last year, we have been working at Luther Seminary to create learning experiences that take advantage of some of the capabilities of mobile devices. Congregations can also take advantage of these devices to engage people who are away from the church building. In this article, I will share some of the techniques we have developed at Luther Seminary for creating mobile-friendly learning experiences, and ideas on how congregations can create similar experiences using available, low-cost, easy-to-use tools.

At Luther Seminary, more than a quarter of our students attend seminary through a distributed learning program. While living across the United States, these students do their work by taking a combination of online courses and traveling to the Luther Seminary campus for short, two-week intensive courses. To support the needs of these students, we now offer more than thirty courses per year

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Many people now have access to the web not only through their desktop computers but also through laptops, tablets, and smartphones. Congregations can take advantage of these new devices to create online learning activities that allow people to connect and grow in their faith not only on Sunday morning at the church building but by connecting online throughout the week.

that are entirely online and more than seventy courses that have some online component. Over the last year, we have worked to adapt our online course components to make sure they work not only on desktop and laptop computers, but also on tablets, smartphones, and, in some cases, a basic cell phone. As we have worked to make our online learning experiences at Luther Seminary mobile-friendly, we have discovered a number of learning formats, course structures, and sets of digital tools that can be easily adapted to a congregational model of online and distributed learning experience.

CONFERENCE CALLS

Whether students are participants in one of our distributed learning programs or are long-distance commuters, it is important that they be able not only to participate in the course work, but also in faith formation opportunities. Each student has the opportunity to participate in a discipleship group—a small group of students, faculty, and staff that meet weekly to read Scripture, pray, and share in conversation with one another. While our residential students and some commuter students participate in face-to-face groups on campus, many of our distributed learning and commuter students participate in conference-call discipleship groups. Participants in these groups are scattered throughout the country: Minnesota, Arkansas, Florida, California, and many other places. To participate, students are put into groups of four to six people with a member of the Luther Seminary faculty or staff. Group meetings are scheduled once a week, during which members call into a dial-in conference-call system and join in a conversation with their group. Groups read the Bible together, pray with one another, share devotional material (such as Luther Seminary's God Pause[2]), and discuss the biblical text and their faith and life.

Because these groups make use of the telephone as the primary means of communication, students can participate easily from their homes or offices or even via their cell phones while traveling. As most people have access to a phone, there are few technical barriers to participation. A congregation could easily and inexpensively make dial-in conference calls a part of their small-group and learning activities. People who live a long distance from the church, shut-ins, or people who are interested in Bible study over their lunch break from work are prime candidates for this type of interaction. To make this work:

- All participants need access to a phone.
- Congregations will need to provide access to a dial-in conference-call system. This may already be a feature of your church's phone system. If not, there are a number of services available at a reasonable cost. Contact your local telephone service provider or do an Internet search for services available in your area.

[2]Available daily at http://www2.luthersem.edu/godpause/daily_view.asp#today.

- Group leaders send out in advance the meeting times and the phone number for the conference-call system.
- Any resources, Bible readings, or curriculum materials should be made available to all members prior to the call.
- During the call, group leaders facilitate the conversation by asking questions and inviting participants to speak, read, or pray.

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For conference-call groups at Luther Seminary, we have found that small groups of four to six participants are best. At that size, groups are large enough for good conversation flow and small enough for all members to have ample opportunities to participate. It can be helpful to create a document with group members' names and photos. Being able to see names and faces helps everyone to know who is speaking during a call. For group leaders, when inviting others to read aloud from Scripture, to lead a prayer, or to share some thoughts, you can then invite that person by name to participate.

Conference calls are an important means of connection for Luther Seminary distributed learning students. The calls allow students to gather, study, and pray with one another even though they are separated by busy schedules and great distances. Conference calls can help congregations connect people who are separated by distance, health, or their schedules. Because most people who have access to a telephone know how to use it, dial-in conference calls are a simple way for congregations to get started in mobile learning.

CONFERENCE CALL AND WEBINAR

The basic conference-call group can be expanded by adding a shared visual component through webinar software, such as Adobe Connect.[3] In the online language courses at Luther Seminary, students and the instructor meet once or twice a week in small-group conference calls. Like the discipleship groups, students dial into the conference-call system to practice speaking the language with one another, discuss their learning, and ask questions. In addition, the instructor hosts an Adobe Connect webinar session where the instructor is able to make slide presentations, share a view of his or her computer desktop, or give students the ability to lead and share visual presentations. To access the webinar meeting room, the instructor sends an e-mail to the students with a link to the meeting room website. Students listen and speak through the dial-in conference call and are able to participate visually through Adobe Connect. In addition to being available through

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[3]Luther Seminary has chosen Adobe Connect as our webinar software. However, there are many software companies that provide similar types of services.

desktop and laptop computers, Adobe Connect also has an app for Apple and Android smartphones and tablets.

While it is possible to run the audio through Adobe Connect rather than through the telephone, we have found that the audio quality for group discussions is sometimes poor, with significant lag time and echo problems. This is due in part to the fact that some students access the webinar through a slow Internet connection, causing students to lose access to the group or experience a significant amount of lag time in the audio or video. The audio quality of the phone is much higher and does not suffer the same connection problems as the Internet sometimes does. Using the phone also offers a fallback in case of a failed Internet connection. If a student is participating by phone and the Internet connection is lost, the student will still be able to participate in the group even if he or she cannot see the video.

Congregations could easily and affordably include the webinar component to add slide presentations or share documents during a conference-call session by using Adobe Connect or another webinar provider. To make this work:

- Participants need access to a telephone, an Internet connection, and a computer, tablet or smartphone.

- The group leader needs a subscription to a webinar service, such as Adobe Connect. He or she then creates a meeting in the software and sends the participants the conference-call telephone number, a link for the webinar meeting, and the time and date of the meeting.

- At the meeting time, participants join the conference call and then log into the webinar through their computer, smartphone, or tablet.

- If participants need access to materials before or during the meeting, those should be sent out or shared in advance.

Adding a webinar component to conference calls is a relatively easy and low-cost way for instructors to share visual components during their presentations.

ONLINE COURSES

Online learning has become an important mode of learning at Luther Seminary, and we now offer more than seventy courses per year that either have an online component or are entirely online. However, none of our online courses are independent self-study courses. At Luther Seminary, we believe that learning happens best when students and instructors gather with one another in shared learning experiences. For this reason, all online courses at Luther Seminary bring students and instructors together in a shared learning community over a set period of time, typically as six- or thirteen-week courses during our regular semesters.

Each online course has its own course website that houses course materials, assignments, and online discussion boards where students post and reply to messages. While the learning activities in our online courses take a number of formats,

a common format is one of asynchronous presentation and discussion. In this type of course, the course is broken up into thirteen units—one unit per week of the course. Each week students are presented with a number of items and tasks:

- reading assignments
- a pre-recorded five- to ten-minute video minilecture from the instructor
- discussion question prompts from the instructor
- a space for online discussion

    This is often done in small groups of four to six students, where each student is asked to write an opening statement that addresses the instructor's discussion prompt. Each student is then asked to respond, at minimum, to each of the opening statements of all of the other people in the group. Some courses may substitute small group conference calls instead of online discussion groups.

- feedback from the instructor on the week's discussion either as text, audio comments, or video comments.

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Congregations can use online courses in a number of ways. They can create Bible studies or learning events for working people who can participate over their lunch break. They can maintain relationships and build community with shut-ins or people who frequently travel. Online courses might also be helpful for pastors of multi-point parishes to create learning events with a community when the pastor isn't able to be present in a given week.

While creating online courses is more technically involved than a basic conference-call group, it is certainly within the capability of most congregations. By using inexpensive tools, congregations can create online courses that work well on laptops, tablets, and smartphones. However, there are a few notable differences between desktop computers and mobile devices. By keeping these differences in mind, you will be able to provide a good user experience for people using desktop computers, mobile devices, or both.

Browsing the Web

Browsing the web with either a desktop or a laptop computer is a similar experience. To interact with a website you would view the page on your monitor, use your mouse to point and click on text or images, and use your keyboard to write

text. However, there are a few key differences to note when browsing the Internet using smartphones and tablets.

- Tablets and smartphones have smaller screens than desktops and laptops.
- Tablets and smartphones rely on touch interfaces.
- Formatting video to play on tablets and smartphones can be challenging.

Device size

Smartphones and tablets are smaller in size and have smaller screens than desktops and laptops. While this is great for portability, it also means there is much less screen space for text and images in a web page. If you have browsed the web from a smartphone, you have likely seen a website that was designed only for the desktop. These large and busy pages often do not fit well on the small screen of the phone and you are forced to zoom and pan to find what you want to see on the site. You may have been lucky enough to experience a website that has been designed to work well on both your desktop and on your mobile device. These sites commonly have a version that looks one way on your desktop, but when you view the site with a smartphone or tablet, the site is reformatted to fit on the smaller screen of your mobile device. When creating online learning experiences for mobile devices, it can be very helpful to users to have a mobile-friendly version of your site. By creating a mobile version you make it much easier for people to read and view the content on your site easily from their mobile device (see the discussion of this below).

Touch interfaces

When you interact with a tablet or a smartphone, you are normally doing so through a touch-based interface rather than a keyboard and a mouse. Instead of pointing, clicking, and scrolling with a mouse, you swipe, flick, pinch, and touch the screen with your fingers to operate the device. This difference in touch is important in online learning for a few reasons. First, fingers are larger and less accurate than a mouse pointer, so when designing web pages for mobile devices it is very helpful to make the buttons and text large so that people can easily hit the button with their finger or thumb. Second, when using a mouse on a desktop computer, users can often hover their mouse pointer over a link or navigation item to get more information or see more menu options. There is no hover possibility in touch interfaces, so any information or navigation that exists as hover events in the desktop version of the site needs to be transformed or changed so that users with a tablet or smartphone can access and use the information.

Video

A third major issue in adapting online learning environments for a mobile environment is in playing audio and video on web pages. When viewing video on a desktop or laptop, you commonly will use a video player software tool that is created using the Adobe Flash Player web-browser plug-in. The Flash Player is free and works well in most browsers, making it very easy for people to view audio and

video on a web page. However, many mobile devices do not support the use of Adobe Flash and rely instead on the video player software built into the smartphone or the tablet. Unfortunately, the precise formatting needs between devices and software platforms vary, and the necessary encoding settings are not well documented. All of this means that finding right encoding settings to have your video work on most devices can be very challenging. However, there are some website and video hosting tools that have worked out these details and make it very easy to post mobile-friendly web video.

WORDPRESS.COM: A GREAT TOOL FOR CONGREGATIONS

You may be feeling overwhelmed by the possibility of even creating a basic website that works on a desktop computer, not to mention all of the significant technical challenges that go into making a site usable on smartphones and tablets. However, be not afraid. WordPress.com makes it very easy to create beautiful websites without having to know how to write any computer code. WordPress's many visual design themes display according to the device on which they are being viewed. For example, if you view the site with a laptop, you will see the full site; if you view it with a smartphone, you will see a site that is designed to fit on the small screen of the smartphone. While you can create a basic website on WordPress for free, by upgrading the account you will be able to upload video to the site that will automatically be encoded to work properly on most laptops, tablets, and smartphones. Creating a mobile-friendly site for a congregation is as easy as going to WordPress.com, creating an account, choosing a theme with built-in mobile designs, and adding a subscription that allows you to upload video. With this basic set-up, you will have all you need to create great mobile-friendly learning environments for a cost of around $100 per year.

> *WordPress.com makes it very easy to create beautiful websites without having to know how to write any computer code*

Creating your online course

To create an online course, you will need to have a website that will house the online content and interactions of your course. Because WordPress is easy to use and has built-in designs to display desktop and mobile-friendly pages as well as the ability to host mobile-friendly video, it is a great choice for congregations wanting to create online courses. While many other website creation and hosting systems exist, I will, for the purposes of this article, assume the use of WordPress. If your congregation already has a website that uses WordPress and has installed mobile-friendly themes, you can create a subset of pages on your site to house your online course. If your church doesn't have a website or has a website that is not using WordPress, you don't need to change your main site; simply create a site on WordPress that houses your online courses and link to it from your existing site.

Once you have created your website on WordPress.com, do the following to create an online course:

- Design the structure of your course.

    Determine the number of units your course will have and how many weeks it will run. It can be helpful to have the course occur over a set period of time with a set date to begin and end. The set dates will help people make time in their schedules to participate in the course.

    Determine whether you will have readings, video lectures, or other assignments for the course.

    Determine whether the course will include online discussions or conference-call discussions.

    Have a group of people go through the course together and discuss the same unit in a given week in order to help participants stay on task and keep discussions lively.

- On your WordPress site, create one page for each unit of the course. For each unit-page, create and enter unit introductions, reading assignments, video minilectures, and any discussion prompts. If your course will have online discussions, make sure that comments are enabled in WordPress for each unit-page.

To create a video lecture:

- You will need a basic video camera—you might use the video features in a small digital camera, a smartphone, or any other kind of digital video camera.
- To make minor edits to the video, you will need basic editing software. Windows Live Movie Maker is a great free option for people with Windows computers; Apple iMovie is a great option for Mac users.
- Shoot your video. When shooting your video, try to do it in a well-lit, quiet space. Preparing some notes or a script beforehand will also help your presentation go well.
- Edit your video, make any changes, cuts, or transitions.
- Upload the edited video to the media section in WordPress.
- Insert the link from your WordPress media library into your unit page.

To participate in the online course, students will need to:

- have the link to the course website
- have access to a desktop, laptop, tablet, or smartphone, and access to the Internet
- have access to any books or other materials needed for the course
- visit the course website each week of the course to access course materials, get assignments, and watch the video minilectures

- participate in the class discussion either through a scheduled conference call time, or by posting in the comments section on each of the unit-pages for the course.

While most online courses at Luther Seminary are thirteen weeks long and take place during our regular semesters, we have other half-semester courses that are six weeks long, and still others that meet for just one month. For congregations, the exact number of weeks is not important; what does matter is that there is a beginning and an end to the course and that during the course there are structured activities and participation deadlines. The start and end dates will help parishioners make time in their schedules to participate. Weekly structures and deadlines will give students guidance on what to do during the weeks of the course.

> *we have found that the social dislocation of online learning can be eased by being very specific about what students are expected to do in a given week and how students will be expected to interact with one another*

Online learning can be a new and disorienting experience for some people. Most people have grown up in face-to-face educational systems and have some level of comfort and knowledge of how to act and participate in face-to-face courses. Because online learning takes place in such a different mode, it can be difficult for parishioners to know how to participate or interact with others in the course. At Luther Seminary, we have found that the social dislocation of online learning can be eased by being very specific about what students are expected to do in a given week and how students will be expected to interact with one another. For example, in our online discussion prompts, we specify the number of words that a student should write for their opening statement and their responses, as well as the day of the week that the opening statement is due and the day of the week all responses are due. While this may appear legalistic, the specificity helps students understand the amount of participation that is expected and when their participation is needed in order for the conversation and the course to stay on schedule. Instructors can also help students by sending encouragement and feedback through e-mail or by inviting phone conversations. Both e-mail and telephone are personal modes of communication that people are often very comfortable using. By providing support with e-mail and phone, instructors can help students develop the confidence to succeed in their online learning.

Online learning is a significant means to gather, share, and learn with people who would otherwise be unable to meet face to face. By making online learning environments mobile friendly, the possibilities for connection are expanded. Through their smartphones or tablets, students can access learning materials and interact with other students from wherever they happen to be. By using

WordPress, with its mobile-friendly themes and video hosting tools, congregations can easily create online courses that work well on desktop and laptop computers as well as tablets and smartphones.

IN SUMMARY

Access to mobile technology is expanding rapidly. Many people now have access to the web not only through their desktop computers but also through laptops, tablets, and smartphones. These devices make it easy for people to access information and connect with others from wherever they happen to be. Congregations can take advantage of these new devices to create online learning activities that allow people to connect and grow in their faith not only on Sunday morning at the church building but by connecting online throughout the week. By using tools and services such as dial-in conference calls, Adobe Connect, or online courses using WordPress, congregations can easily create learning activities that work well on desktops, tablets, and smartphones. Through mobile-friendly distributed learning, congregations can connect people in prayer, study, and learning in new and exciting ways both throughout the week and across great distances. ⊕

RYAN TORMA is director of learning design and technology at Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, Minnesota.