

# Re-Viewing Social Presence in Light of Jesus' Friendship with Implications for Online Theological Education

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**Abstract:** *Gener presents Christian friendship as a biblical and theological model for increasing social presence in online theological education. As more schools adopt technologically mediated distributed education, a concern for the academic and spiritual formation of students arises. Gener argues that Christian friendship, as modeled by Jesus, counters a tradition in which the teacher remains distant from the student and can lead to increased social presence, thereby making teaching and formation more effective.*

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## Introduction

In the process of adopting online learning, Asian Theological Seminary sought to strengthen its foundations and practices through a study of best practices and case studies focused on implementation. Online education is often criticized for a perceived lack of relationality in the learning process. However, the development of social presence, informed by Christian friendship, may prove effective for learning and spiritual formation in theological education.

The first section of this article provides an overview of the concept of social presence, its contours, its necessity in online learning, and its openness toward the language of friendship, especially Christian friendship. Next, we will examine a biblical Christian understanding of friendship, especially as it correlates to social presence in online learning. Attention will be given to the theme of friendship in the Gospel of John. Finally, lessons and action points will be presented based on a correlational approach to appropriation in online theological education (hereafter, TE).

## Social Presence in Online (Theological) Education

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A beginning assumption of this study is the possibility that “theological education could be better online than face to face” (Ulrich 2010, 18). The qualifier *could* is crucial. It is not that online TE is essentially superior. “Either medium may be the better choice for a particular student, instructor, course, or institution... The quality of instruction currently offered in each medium varies widely, leaving much room for improvement.... The more important challenge is to improve teaching and learning in whatever media we use” (Ulrich 2010, 24).

Looking deeper into the field of online teaching and learning, we see that one crucial component to successful practice is social presence. Social presence is a popular theoretical construct used “to describe and understand how people socially interact in online learning environments” (Lowenthal 2010, 125). Gunawardena and Zittle define it as “the degree to which a person is perceived as a ‘real person’ in mediated communication” (2007, 92).

Early in the history of computer-mediated communication (CMC), research in conducted in the late 1980s and early 1990s concluded that CMC was inherently anti-social and impersonal. These studies, however, focused on CMC in business settings. More recent research on CMC in educational settings at the beginning of the 21st century shows different results:

*Based on their experience and research... participants in online discussion, using text alone, are able to project their personalities into online discussions and create social presence (Swan, 2003; Swan & Shih, 2005). They found that online learners are able to present themselves as being “real” as well as “connect” with others when communicating in online learning environments by doing such things as using emoticons, telling stories, and even using humor... This new line of research sparked a renewed interest in the sociability of online learning, social presence, and CMC as evidenced in the increased amount of literature focused on social presence (Lowenthal 126).*

In the past fifteen years, social presence has become a central concept in the field of online education. In varying degrees, researchers have shown a “relationship between social presence and student satisfaction” (Lowenthal 2010, 126). Based on a global study by the Association of Theological Schools on online seminary programs, “social presence is the key for the success of students from context dependent cultures” (Shore 2007, 92). Social engagement was particularly evident in some non-Western cultures.

*It took several email attempts with limited response before realizing that the students' emails contained lengthy greetings, praises to God, and inquiries about health and family. While these introductory items seemed superfluous to the American recipients – possibly even intrusive into one's personal life – they formed the backbone of relationship building for the Ghanaian students. Caring about one's health and one's family members showed care for the person and the rest of the areas of their life, including their studies. When US administrators and faculty began adjusting their email communications to include some of these niceties, the response level increased dramatically. This same approach also helped to improve the communication and relationship building with the administration of Heritage Christian College [in Ghana] (Thompson and MacLeod 2015, 3).*

Lehman and Conçeição (2010) move beyond using the term “social presence” and suggest instead the notion of “a sense of presence” in online learning. Adopting the 2001 study of Biocca et al., the concept of presence is restated and expanded by Lehman and Conçeição in terms of two interrelated phenomena: *telepresence* (the sense of “being there”) and social presence (the sense of “being together with others”).

*Telepresence in the online environment happens when learners have the impression of feeling that they are present at a location remote from their own immediate environment. Social presence means interactions with others in the online environment (Lehman and Conçeição 2010, 3)*

For Lehman and Conçeição, a sense of presence is really about “being there” and “being together” with online learners throughout the learning experience. This sense of presence relies on the “dynamic interplay of thought, emotion, and behavior in the online environment, between the private world (that is, the inner world) and the shared world (that is, the outer world)... and [that] is rooted in the interactive (that is, enactive) perceptual process” (Lehman and Conçeição 2010, 7).<sup>1</sup> A sense of presence thus involves social, psychological, and emotional dimensions.

Interestingly, it is “being there” that is seen as a primary element in the formation of students in theological schools (Carroll et al. 1997, 97). Carroll and associates express wariness toward new delivery systems that would eclipse this vital element: “We are afraid that the new formats make it less rather than more likely that students' minds, characters, attitudes, and commitments will be profoundly shaped by their educational experience” (278). Consequently, Shore highlights not “being there” as a deal-breaker for online TE:

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<sup>1</sup> This article will use the terms “social presence” and “sense of presence” interchangeably.

*If online teaching and learning does not seem to its participants to be teaching and learning accomplished by real people (that is, if social presence plays little or no role in the process), [then] churches and seminaries cannot afford it—regardless of whether it is otherwise cost effective... Theological seminaries and divinity schools cannot afford to lose the social connection of students to a community of learning because that connection is a key element in the formation of values, wisdom, and a lively and deep faith (2007, 93).*

The degree to which a person (student, teacher) is perceived as a real person is crucial in online learning. This recognition lies at the heart of the concept of social presence. And to the degree that theological schools seek to embody Christ's faithful presence, a lively social presence is needed to demonstrate that the professor is not just "phoning it in," but is real and really with the students in the learning process. This demonstrates that students will be taken seriously as real people with real concerns in the learning process.

Viewed in this way, social presence goes beyond standard ways of communicating that often include "learning and using students' names, listening to their opinions, offering respectful, engaged verbal and non-verbal feedback." Rather, real presence helps students "recognize that the professor has a personal stake in the subject she teaches" (Shore 2007, 93). Consequently, they will see and feel that "their teacher is also a person of faith" (Shore 2007, 95). Not only will there be avenues and practices for deepening faith, like posting praise reports and prayer requests or sharing about one's experiences of personal and gathered worship. In creating a deepened "relational climate," social presence will go beyond mere conventions of friendship. Paying attention to the relational climate *as experienced by the student* will ultimately *increase* participatory dialogue in online settings (Thompson and McLeod 2015, 3).

## Linking Social Presence with (Christian) Friendship

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Uniquely Christian presence in online learning relies on an understanding of Christian friendship. On the one hand, the language of a relational climate as experienced by the student calls for a theological foundation that goes beyond cultural conventions. On the other hand, authenticity and dependability are universal friendship conventions. Christians, however, grow into and imitate the friendship modeled by Jesus that lies both within and beyond secular conventions of friendship.

Linking social presence with friendship may create challenges as it promotes a sort of teacher-student friendship. Before turning to Scripture, it seems wise

at this point to briefly review the issues and challenges involved in associating teaching and social presence with friendship.

The notion of teacher-student friendship is fraught with controversy, especially concerning issues of partiality. Therefore, a case must first be made in favor of forming teacher-student friendships. However, since teachers write most of the literature on the subject, a protective self-interest may be at work. “For teachers, friendship with a student represents a challenge to the social order and a challenge to her own authority” (Shuffelton 2002, 212). In the same vein, “teacher-student friendships disrupt the usual paradigms that keep education under control” for parents and administrators (Shuffelton 2002, 212). Nevertheless, as Shuffelton argues, there are open spaces for learning that may be lost when teacher-student friendship is resisted. In fact, “teacher-student friendship does present several important benefits that make it sometimes worth the risk (2002, 212).<sup>2</sup>

Suspicion of teacher-student relationships may account for the lack of discussion about these friendships with regards to online TE, even though the call for social presence leads naturally to the theme of Christian friendship.<sup>3</sup> By avoiding the need for theological engagement, concepts of social presence could be swayed by mere cultural conventions. For instance, in calling for the need for more social presence in online learning, Thompson and MacLeod cite “niceties” as example of how professors increase relational engagement by showing acts of “care for the person and the rest of the areas of [his/her] life, including [his/her] studies (2015, 3). If niceties only require attention to etiquette, then the genuine care integral to TE is reduced to conventions of common courtesy. “Niceties” thus seem instrumentalist or mechanistic, and perhaps even superficial.

The absence of Christian friendship from the literature on TE, even from discussions on social presence and improving relational climates, raises questions about the hesitation or suspicion toward teacher-student friendships.

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<sup>2</sup> It is in light of these benefits that teachers and students can become some sort of a friend to one another. Understood in the Aristotelian senses of civic and character friendship, Shuffelton notes three benefits of teacher-student friendship, based on her experiences of teaching younger students (although the implications extend beyond her context). First, it enables teachers and students to flourish in an institutional environment that can often feel very impersonal. Second, such friendships can teach students practical life lessons on friendship. Finally, supportive interactions with a friend beyond the student’s peer group can be self-affirming.

<sup>3</sup> Although mentoring and hospitality are increasingly discussed in theological education, friendship itself seems toned down as an overall theme. For a major study on hospitality in theological education, see Soh Hui Leng Davina, “The Motif of Hospitality in Theological Education: A Critical Appraisal with Implications for Application in Theological Education” (Unpublished Dissertation for the AGST Alliance, 2015).

It is, therefore, important to revisit the theme of friendship both historically and biblically to regain our biblical-theological bearings.

## A Brief History of Friendship in Christian Theology and Practice

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The concept of *philia* provides insight for a better understanding of the nature and development of friendship in Christian practice, especially in TE. Carmichael summarizes influential traditions of friendship that prevailed in Christian thought and practice until the medieval period. In the classical tradition, friendship is specific, reserved, and idealized:

Such friendship elects with great care whom it will love and is partial, exclusive and contingent on worthiness, unlike the universal love commanded by Christ. Nevertheless, classical friendship was sufficiently broad that the New Testament writers drew on its language, and the great theologians of the fourth century who were still steeped in its traditions integrated them into their understanding of love in Christ (2004, 3).

In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Aelred and Aquinas further developed a doctrine of love as informed by Cicero and Aristotle. The concept of *philia*, however, fell out of favor during the Reformation. From that time until our contemporary period, we observe a striking “inhibition of its use” in Christian theology (Carmichael 2004, 2). In the early 20th century, this inhibition reached its apex in the highly influential work of Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, which posited a sharp break between the revealed Judeo-Christian religion of the Bible and natural pagan “Hellenism.”

Carmichael states that for Nygren, “*Agape* is God’s freely given love; *Eros* is the possessive, calculating love exhibited by human beings. *Philia* (friendship) is really a subset of *Eros*: egocentric desire is the basis of friendship” (2004, 26). For Nygren, friendship falls within the category of *Eros* as opposed to *Agape*:

*“Eros is acquisitive desire and longing....while Agape is sacrificial giving.” Agape and Eros are different kinds of love, and function as “fundamental motifs” permeating and controlling two contrary worldviews. According to Nygren, Agape was taught in its purity by Paul and is discernible in the first three Gospels (Synoptics); but when John speaks of Christians loving one another he weakens down unmotivated Agape, contaminating it with Eros (Carmichael 2004, 36).*

Nygren’s thesis, though extreme, has held considerable influence such that Oppenheimer has described it as “part of our mental furniture” and that “its influence on less technical Christian moral thought seems to continue unabated” (1983, 104).

A more objective, fresher look at the history of *philia* and at the biblical witness would provide better grounding. As Liz Carmichael points out, the New Testament writings were in direct contact and interacted with Greek culture and thought. “The New Testament was written in the ‘common’ Greek of the late Hellenistic period, into which the new word *agape* had been born, not as a completely fresh coinage but evolving within the semantic family of the verb *agapan*, which was in full classical use” (Carmichael 2004, 36).

More recent transformational re-readings that consider the Hellenistic background of the New Testament bring fresh consideration to how friendship is portrayed in the text.<sup>4</sup> The *topoi*, or cluster of meanings, found in Greco-Roman moral discourse indicate an understanding that reaches beyond the infrequent use of the specific word *philia* (“friendship”) in the text. Jonson concludes that a Christian rejection of the Greek ideal of friendship would be premature on two fronts:

*The first is the intriguing evidence that at least some Christians referred to each other as “friends.” The second is that the presence of common conceptions about friendship shows that friendship is a pervasive theme in the New Testament even when the term itself is not used. The themes commonly associated with friendship occur so frequently that ancient readers or hearers would have understood them within that context. It would have been odd, in fact, if the language of friendship had not been part of the earliest Christian lexicon (2004, 159).*

This transformational (not oppositional) stance toward Greco-Roman conventions of friendship fits well with the portrayal of Jesus’ friendship in the Gospel accounts.

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### The Friendship of Jesus as a Pattern for Discipleship in Action

Jesus’ friendship in the Gospel of John provides a theological basis for social presence in TE (O’Day 2004). Read transformationally, the Fourth Evangelist demonstrates how Jesus’ friendship both appropriates and moves beyond Hellenistic friendship conventions. Jesus’ friendship in John’s Gospel thus provides a model for cultivating faithful social presence in online learning. The Gospel itself succinctly models a transformational way of contextual theologizing. It also provides two practical steps that show how the friendship of Jesus could renew social presence in TE.

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<sup>2</sup> Johnson’s abstract states that “the writers of the New Testament transformed the Greco-Roman ideal of friendship into a communal ethos....” (158, emphasis mine).

Johannine studies trace the transformation of the message of Jesus of Nazareth shortly after he lived. Particularly in the Gospel of John, “everything that was essential was retained but cast in a new light. The Synoptic tradition was made new, without thereby losing its value or significance” (Léon-Dufour 2005) ix-x). The Gospel’s view of the friendship of Jesus is likewise contextual-theological, bridging the then and the now.

In the New Testament, John’s Gospel is a key text for the discussion of friendship. O’Day observes that “the vocabulary of friendship, especially the noun *philos* and the related verb *phileō* are found at key moments in the narrative (2004, 148). The Johannine discussion of friendship thus echoes Greco-Roman friendship in the Hellenistic world where both *agape* and *philia* are used to express the idea of love (Haraguchi 2014). The text also shows that the Evangelist employed *agapan* and *philein* interchangeably:

*In the Gospel of John, the noun agape occurs seven times (5:42; 13:35; 15:9, 10, 13; 17:26), while philia never occurs. The verb agapao occurs 37 times (3:16, 19, 25; 8:42; 10:17; 11:5; 12:43; 13:1, 23, 34; 14:15, 21, 23, 24, 28, 31; 15:9, 12, 17; 17:23, 24, 26; 19:26; 21:7, 15, 16, 20), while phileo occurs 13 times (11:3, 36; 12:25; 15:19; 16:27; 20:2; 21:15, 16, 17). It is noteworthy that phileo is also employed in reference to the love of God (John 5:20; 16:27). When it comes to the love of Jesus toward Lazarus, agapao (11:5) and phileo (11:3, 36) are used almost synonymously. Similarly, both agapao (13:23; 21:7) and phileo (20:2) occur without any difference in meaning concerning the love of Jesus toward the beloved disciple. We can safely conclude, therefore, that both verbs are employed interchangeably in the Fourth Gospel (Haraguchi 2014, 251-252).*

The expansion of *agape* to cover a much wider semantic field (including *philia*) is not unique to John’s Gospel, but is also detectable in other parts of the New Testament (Johnson 2005). Carmichael contends that in Koine Greek, the two words have become synonymous. *Agape* represents a virtuous or good love that is “not different from, nor opposed to friendship, but denotes the very love that makes true friendship possible” (Carmichael 2004, 39). Thus, contra Nygren, the Fourth Evangelist did not “weaken” *Agape* and contaminate it with *Eros* by using *philia*. Instead, one could say that John drew from and appropriated the Hellenistic understanding of friendship, and also transformed it in light of the uniqueness of Jesus’ friendship.

Consider the following key passage in John where *agape* is viewed as the love of the true friend Jesus:

*No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father (John 15:13-15, NRSV).*

Not only does the friendship of Jesus assume a central place in John's Gospel, but the friendship of Jesus also becomes an abiding pattern for discipleship in succeeding generations. Indeed, "friendship is one of the ways in which the revelation of God in Jesus is extended beyond the work of Jesus to the work of the disciples" (O'Day 2004, 148). Jesus calls the disciples "friends" and enjoins them to acts of friendship. This is the call for a continuing appropriation and transformation of friendship in Christian belief and practice, including in TE, today.

Two Johannine sub-themes on friendship seem relevant in renewing teaching and social presence: the offer of Jesus' life, and Jesus' boldness in speech and action.<sup>5</sup> Regarding Jesus' love for others that is embodied in the gift of his own life, the idea of laying down one's life for one's friends recalls classical (Hellenistic) maxims of friendship. What is unique about Jesus' love, however, is the fact that Jesus enacted what the philosophers only talked about – he laid down his life for his friends (Jn. 15:13; also 10:11-18). "This makes all the difference in appropriating friendship as a theological category. The pattern of Jesus' own life and death moves the teaching of John 15:13 from the realm of abstraction to an embodied promise and gift" (O'Day 2004, 150). In Jesus, speech and action are intertwined (e.g., 14:10). Hence, Jesus can be trusted.

What he receives from God, Jesus passes to his disciples in words and in works (5:19-24; 10:38; 12:49-50; 17:7-8). As the Word-made-flesh, Jesus integrated speaking and acting which he also urged his disciples to embody, through the power of the Spirit. Jesus' disciples are "urged to live the same way Jesus has lived, to be the kind of friend that Jesus has been. He is not simply asking them to be good citizens or moral exemplars. He is commanding them to embody the very promises that he has embodied for them (O'Day 2004, 152).

Interestingly, the label "friend" is never used to describe Jesus in John's Gospel, though he has lived a life of friendship even without that title. However, Jesus directly calls his disciples "friends." This friendship is grounded in his life of love and their conduct.

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<sup>5</sup> Here, I follow O'Day's perceptive study of these themes.

*Jesus calls the disciples his “friends” (philoí), if they enact his commandment (15:14) – to love one another as Jesus has loved them (v. 12), to lay down their lives for their friends (v. 13). Jesus’ gift of his life for others embodies friendship’s highest attribute and defines the meaning and extent of “love” (O’Day 2004, 152).*

The second sub-theme of Jesus’ friendship in John’s Gospel is boldness of speech and action (*parresia*). *Parresia* signifies direct speech in contrast to flattery, plain or frank speech as instruction spoken in love, and freedom of speech as a mark of a true friend.

In contrast to the classical friendship conventions regarding *parresia*, Jesus’ direct speech was not an attempt to flatter God to gain divine favor as one would a “patron.” Rather, as God and Jesus are true friends (“The Father loves [*philei*] the Son,” 5:20) in a relationship of full reciprocity and mutuality (10:30), Jesus’ interest was not self-seeking, but was rather in pursuit of God’s glory (12:27) (O’Day 2004, 153).

The second meaning of *parresia* can be observed in Jesus’ instruction of the disciples (11:14; 16:25, 29). His openness (“plain speaking”) in revealing hard truths to them was for their own welfare, that they might recognize God’s glory and come to believe (cf. 11:15). The same is true with his eschatological teaching (16:25), which links instructional teaching with the Father’s love for the disciples and the disciples’ love for Jesus (16:26-27). Because Jesus loves his disciples as friends and gives his life for them, “he speaks plainly and openly and tells them everything about God (15:15; 16:25)” (O’Day 2004, 156).

Finally, freedom of speech, regardless of the cost, marks true friendship. We see in Jesus one who has practiced free and frank speech despite personal risk, even in the face of the authorities (7:25-26). By speaking openly and directly “about his disciples and his teachings” (18:19-20), Jesus embodied the courageous candor of true friendship. “Jesus has not held anything back in his self-revelation but has spoken with the freedom that marks a true friend. His open and honest words are more important than any personal risk” (O’Day 2004, 156). Indeed, Jesus’ entire life and ministry display *parresia*, demonstrating how word and deed converges in a life of boldness and openness.

The model of Jesus’ friendship with the disciples provides an example for teachers that extends into social presence in TE. Recent scholarship demonstrates how biblical writers have appropriated and transformed Hellenistic ideals of friendship, enriching the meaning to include the deeper love demonstrated by Jesus, the master teacher, for his disciples. This model provides insight for TE today.

New understandings of the biblical text and its historical context have countered the inhibited treatment of friendship in Christian theology and practice since the Reformation. These understandings enable Jesus' model of friendship to function as both a norm and an invitation for disciples to embody and enact Christlike friendship for succeeding generations. The following reflections may validate and cultivate social presence as TE moves increasingly into online environments:

1. The New Testament encourages a dynamic transformational approach to biblical faith and practice. We have seen how the Gospel of John, as a case in point, has shown how the friendship of Jesus draws from classical conventions of friendship, but also adapts and transfigures them in light of the grace of God he embodies. Moreover, Jesus enjoins his disciples to embody and enact his friendship, calling for continuing appropriation of Jesus' friendship for generations to come.
2. While there are valid reasons to be wary of establishing teacher-student friendships in the practice of (theological) education, there are also some benefits. In discussions of online TE, social presence figures as a key component for its success. To improve social presence and create a learner-attuned relational climate for online TE, I have turned to Scripture for a biblical-theological grounding for and perspective on social presence as the experience of Christian love expressed through friendship. The Gospel of John provides a fundamental theological orientation as well as basic suggestions for improving the relational climate of teacher-student interaction online.
3. The abiding message, presence, and friendship of Christ take on digital forms through the Church's engagement with digital media, which includes online TE. Improving TE through revitalized Christian social presence is an effort to re-read Scripture and to re-enact Christ's friendship toward a more lively sense of online presence and interaction for the sake of transforming leaders for God's educational purposes.
4. In John's Gospel, the promise and gift of Jesus' friendship can be "repeated" in transformational practices of speech and actions, through the power of the Spirit of God. Jesus' offer of his own life meant that as the Friend who has promised, he can be trusted. He called his disciples "friends," urging them to be the kind of friend that he has been to them. Viewed through the lens of Jesus' friendship, social presence in online TE comes with the promise and gift of repeating *his* kind of faithful and self-giving friendship through digital teaching and learning.

5. As was seen in John's Gospel, Jesus' friendship is characterized by a boldness in speech and action that can infuse social presence in online TE with proper confidence rooted in Christ. Guided by Jesus' frank, honest, and open speech, the relational climate of online TE will thus veer away from utilizing control to exert power over someone (whether student or teacher), or from gaining favor through flattery. Rather it will be governed by what mattered to Jesus: seeking only the glory of God and taking care of his "sheep," in spite of personal risks. It will be an online presence that is attentive to boundaries, clear expectations, and care in TE as befits the disciple-friends of Jesus, the Word-made-flesh, who is full of grace and truth (Jn. 1:1, 14).

## Conclusion

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Social presence, the sense of "being there" and "being together with others," has documented value in the success of online education. In addition to its pragmatic value, social presence veers toward Christian friendship both as modeled and as commanded by Christ. Developing selfless, open, frank, and God-glorifying relationships between teachers and students have biblical and theological merit. This counters the conventional suspicion of friendship that has permeated Christian theology and practice over the last five hundred years. In contributing to social presence as grounded in Christian friendship, teachers and students must engage in speech and actions appropriate for disciples of Christ.

Others will offer further practical suggestions for the cultivation of social presence as rooted in Christian friendship. However, the online environment and the perceived "face to face" engagement do not necessarily proscribe the development of real presence and even friendship between the teacher and student. Such engagements increase student participation and learning, and do so in a way that embodies Christ's love for his disciples – both have value for TE today.

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