



The Word

DIGITAL WITNESS

Two Divine Word College students stepped outside their comfort zone in Epworth this spring to put their communications skills into practice at a professional conference in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Sr. Hilda Alonyo, LSMIG and Sr. Comfort Nguyongo, SON shared a paper about their experiences in a podcasting class. Their instructor, Assistant Professor of Communications and English Dr. Joshua Young, entered them as presenters at the Central State Communication Association Conference.

The paper is titled, “The Word Digitized for the Modern Church: Exploring the Empowering Potential of Podcasting.” In it, the students discuss the potential of podcasting for mission, the benefits of podcasting for missionary education, and the barriers to effectively engaging with the technology.

In the fall, the sisters took Dr. Joshua’s Digital Public Witness class. At the end of the semester, they realized that the lessons they learned could be used as tools for missionaries to reach more people. Dr. Joshua asked all of his students if they were interested in sharing their experiences by writing an autoethnography – a qualitative research method that connects personal experience to cultural, social, and political understanding. Recognizing the scarcity of research on podcasting in higher education and limited articles on the experiences of international content creators and women, he encouraged them to share

their insights. “I also know that when students present at academic conferences, they’re more likely to be accepted to graduate studies and to receive better financial aid offers,” Dr. Joshua said. “Sr. Hilda and Sr. Comfort were the only students who wanted to take on the challenge.”

REACHING THE MASSES

During the class, Dr. Joshua asked students to create their own podcast episodes. Sr. Hilda remembers feeling a mixture of excitement and fear as she prepared for the first recording session.

“Thankfully the hard work paid off when I saw a positive reaction, as many listeners tuned in and left comments saying how much they enjoyed the program. This feedback drove all subsequent episodes during the semester,” she said. “It motivated me to keep making content that audiences would appreciate. I was glad that my attempts were not for nothing, and I was pleased to create something that resonated with people.”

For Sr. Comfort, the Digital Public Witness class helped develop her communication and writing skills. It also boosted her confidence in engaging with fellow students on diverse topics. “The experience of being a content creator and podcaster gave me a strong sense of belonging and a different perception of podcasting channels,” she said.



(left to right) DWC student Sr. Comfort Nguyongo, SON, President of Central States Communication Association (CSCA) Dr. Ahmet Atay, Executive Director of CSCA Dr. Tiffany Wang, DWC student Sr. Hilda Alonyo, LSMIG and Assistant Professor of Communications and English Dr. Joshua Young. Sisters Comfort and Hilda are seen here receiving their certificates for presenting as part of the Undergraduate Honors Research Conference.



Originally from Nigeria, Sr. Comfort used to tune into Catholic podcasts. However, she gradually lost interest as she found it challenging to grasp the speaker’s accent or reading pace. “But with recent developments and the involvement of other people on the podcasting channel, one would now have the ability to tune in to any station of their choice for a better understanding and reception of the message,” she said.

SHARING THEIR FINDINGS

Podcasts offer a cost-effective, accessible, and convenient way for listeners to engage at their own pace. During their research, the sisters delved into the potential of podcasts to tackle gender role imbalances in religious leadership. Reflecting on their own experiences as women facing such disparities in religious settings, they saw podcasting as a platform to bring attention to these issues and collaborate on finding solutions.

With the guidance of their instructor, the two sisters got to work writing their paper. They used a shared file as they researched after the fall semester and throughout Christmas break. The finished paper was 25 pages long. Once it was complete, Dr. Joshua submitted it and was pleased to learn that it was selected for its exceptional undergraduate research. The sisters were asked to present it at the conference’s Undergraduate Honors Research Conference, which included a panel featuring student

papers. Four other college students, along with their instructors, also presented papers at the panel.

The students from Divine Word College were the last presenters to share their paper. Sr. Hilda said with each passing presentation, her nerves diminished. When it was time for her and Sr. Comfort to present, they felt fully ready. Standing together with their notecards, they shared their experiences smoothly, receiving positive feedback at the end.

Dr. Joshua says that he was very proud of the sisters. Afterward, people in attendance asked for links to the podcast so they could listen and learn about the Church’s mission and Divine Word College from the students.

“What struck me is how Sr. Hilda and Sr. Comfort really lived the mission while attending the conference,” Dr. Joshua said. “They never seemed to meet a stranger. They are true missionary disciples.”

Even though the class and the presentation are finished now, Sr. Hilda said she may explore more podcasting opportunities in her future now that she has graduated.

“The whole experience presented a valuable learning opportunity, giving me the confidence to pursue my passion for podcasting further in the future,” Sr. Hilda said. “Following this experience, I look forward to developing more material for future episodes while continuing to explore meaningful topics through this medium.”