Theological education with the help of technology

Author:
Erna Oliver[1]

Affiliation:
[1]Department of Christian Spirituality, Church History and Missiology, University of South Africa, South Africa

Correspondence to:
Erna Oliver

Email:
olivee@unisa.ac.za

Postal address:
PO Box 31235, Totiusdal 0134, Pretoria, South Africa

Theology seemingly does not have a major impact on society anymore. However, Christianity did not only change and form the western world over the past 2000 thousand years, it still has a substantial role to play in society. This could be done through the development of theologies, the recognition that religious topics are still major segments in the publishing industry and the transforming potential of the Christian message on people. Although theological training finds itself in a difficult position, technology offers support to teaching and learning, cuts costs and offers solutions to a number of current problems concerning the effective formation of ministers. It is no longer necessary to provide theological training through a one-size-fits-all approach – a style that kept the pre-network society boxed. The aim is to motivate educators in theology to embrace the opportunities provided by the network society in aiding with the training of ministers by utilising current and future trends of development in technology.

Introduction
The ideal training model in the not-so-ideal world

Jesus called his disciples by name, one by one, out of their day-to-day activities and instructed them to stay close to him. He talked to them, told them stories, explained difficult concepts to them and taught them the basics of faith through his actions, his quotes from Scripture and through his encouraging words. He spoke to the public whilst the disciples listened. He taught through parables taken from everyday life and afterwards explained the deeper meaning of these stories to his disciples. He performed miracles that the disciples witnessed and left them feeling flabbergasted. He sent them into the world to practise their skills and competencies and provided feedback on their attempts. He revised and summarised all he taught them in order to prepare them for the final test when everything that he predicted would come true. He told them what was going to happen in the near future, but they did not believe him. Afterwards he comforted them and provided personal feedback, confirmation, counselling and encouragement to those who needed it. And then, finally, when the disciples 'graduated', Jesus renamed them and blessed them with his Spirit: They were no longer students or disciples, but became proclaimers of the truth – apostles – able and qualified to take on the world as his messengers of hope and salvation: ordinary people doing extraordinary work – changing both the lives and destinies of others.

This description is a simplified and unproblematic view of events that were certainly much more complicated, but it serves to depict an ideal way to teach and train people to become ministers. There is no perfect substitute for the 'leading-and-coaching-by-example'-model when it comes to theological education. Doing exactly what you preach to others, leading a flawless life, having constant face-to-face contact for long periods of time and always being near to guide and help and to correct mistakes, is definitely the ultimate theological training ideal. However, our Teacher is not physically with us anymore and the postmodern world we live in does not really support this kind of education and training.

The training of prospective ministers is increasingly under the spotlight and in the past few years a number of universities in South Africa have closed their theology faculties whilst others shrank their faculties into departments and disciplines (Mouton 2008:432) due to decreasing student numbers and the pressure to produce more graduates in other fields. It seems as if the technology-driven network society does not regard theology as a major influence and social power. The voice of the church and theologians is not considered important. Interviews with theologians seldom make news headlines. No one seems to care what the church and its office-bearers think about social issues, disasters that destroy lives and the way forward when it comes to issues where politics or finance play a major role. Is seems as if theology and theologians only make headlines when the reports are negative, like the religious conflict in the Sudan and the lingering trouble linked to religion in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan and Israel, or when theologians commit crimes, or are responsible for creating sensational scandals.

Instead of focusing on or netting the long list of problems – real and anticipated – that theological educators face on the one hand or the problems that the use and possible abuse of technology in the training of theology students present on the other hand, the approach to this study is positive and encouraging. This does not mean that the problems are discarded (e.g. the perception that theology is no longer worth studying or that it does not have a place in society anymore – the fight for survival of theology on the one hand, or the issues regarding the use of technology on the other hand, such as connectivity issues and the cost factor), but one of the lessons learned from the long and troublesome history of Christianity is that there is always a positive side to look at and there are constantly new and exciting theories or paradigms developing to explore possibilities that can overcome obstacles and expand the Christian influence in society.

Theology still has a major role to play in society: if it was in the running, the Bible would still be considered a bestseller on booklists. Religious topics are amongst the fastest growing segments in the publishing industry (Mertes n.d.:1). Christianity brought positive changes to the world for more than 2000 years; it is responsible for, amongst other things, the invention of charity organisations, hospitals and care for those who cannot help themselves, whilst it provided a stimulus for scientific research (Hill 2005; Schmidt 2004; Sunshine 2009). New schools of theological thought like Liberation Theology, Black Theology, Social Gospel, Feminist Theology and Eco-Theology, are constantly developing with the aim of bringing justice to all people and providing guidance on the responsibility that Christians have towards earth keeping and other important issues.

A positive paradigm shift can help both theological educators and students to embrace the challenges and opportunities that the postmodern world offers, to take Christianity to a new level of positive influence on society. There are numerous options available in the world of technology to enhance the quality and impact of theological training; for example:

- Technology can erase obstacles like geographical distance and time differences.
- Learning can take place anywhere and anytime and no longer needs to be costly.
- Informal and non-formal learning and skills development could impact on society.
- Theological education could play a leadership role by equipping change agents that can bring positive change in society.

It could also be possible to utilise these opportunities to bring new life to theological training and up the student numbers. There is no need to be pessimistic about the seemingly overwhelming stream of possible problems. In order to succeed with the aim of training ministers that are competent and positive change agents, educators must act proactively by experimenting with the tools and resources available to them and ask how these can be helpful in reaching the set goals.

The unique world we live in

Theological instruction has a very long history dating back to ancient times. The oldest method of transferring knowledge and skill is of course by demonstration and repetition of difficult or complicated actions. This method is still in use today, but with time the so-called four revolutions that society experienced (Warschauer & Matuchniak 2010:179) all added tools which could be used for religious training. It is important to note that with most of these major developments, religious training was on the forefront of development, using the new technology and tools long before it became general practice and taking advantage of the new opportunities as soon as they became available.

What then is so different about the postmodern world? Not all people are aware of the fact that they are currently experiencing and living right in the middle of a global revolution. What is more, this is the 4th revolution of its kind. All four of these revolutions irreversibly changed the way in which society functions. And all of them impacted different people groups and different geographical areas in unique ways.

A revolution is an extremely stressful event because people are thrown out of their comfort zones, need to adapt (quickly) to unexpected and frequent changes, have no chance to see the bigger picture through hindsight and do not know where they will end up or if they will be able to keep up with development and the required changes. Being in the midst of a revolution also means that people do not know what will last and what will not, increasing the margin of error and the possibility of failure to a large extent. On the positive side, however, a revolution offers exciting times, opportunities for new developments, as well as out-of-the-box ideas to be tried and implemented. Alternative ways of doing things are available for those who seek to utilise them. People (including educators and students) are given the opportunity to explore and invent new ways of coping with old problems and frustrations.

Before exploring the current situation further, it is necessary to glance quickly at how the world got to this situation. The first social revolution happened so long ago that one finds it hard to imagine a world without using the tools it provided. The development of language bound people together and made it possible to transfer knowledge and skills without having to demonstrate them. Language, as the tool and medium of instruction, was one of the methods Jesus used to train and educate his followers. Today it is still used to train ministers and is one of the main instructional tools of the church used in Sunday services, formal training events and missionary work.

The second revolution came through the invention of writing skills. All the major activities of civilisations benefited from this development. Documentation made the lives of merchants, judges, historians, clergy, administrators, tax collectors, doctors and other professions easier.

Although Jesus himself seldom wrote, some of his apostles and their scribes and schools used this method to proclaim the gospel and reach people all over the ancient world. Those surviving documents are still the primary sources and foundation for our faith and proof that the tools that developed through the revolutionary periods in the history of civilisation can be useful for many generations to come and still be utilised fruitfully by younger generations (where the medium changed from pen and paper to electronic typing).

The third major social revolution started about 500 years ago in the West, although much earlier in the East (i.e. China). That was the invention of the printing press. The major effects of this revolution were the cutting of costs and the effective and rapid spreading of information in different languages to expand knowledge and make middle class people literate. The ability to substitute handwriting with printed text had a huge influence on opening up education and training to a much wider audience. Theology took up the challenge to use the new technology to its advantage even before the rest of society got a chance to understand the impact that the development would have on the world as they knew it. Although at first most books published on the presses were religious in nature, an 'information revolution' very soon followed when books on medicine, science, travel, music and other subjects spread ideas to make the populace literate. History showed that theology found a perfect match in this communication development. The enormous influence of the Reformation can be linked directly to the success of the printing press. The printed version of the Bible is still one of the top 10 selling books in the world and most ministerial training was book-based until the end of the 20th century.

It is clear that each one of these three revolutions added to the toolkit available for teaching and training and that religious training played a pioneering role in implementing and expanding these developments. Indeed, one needs to understand the changes brought about by the developments in communication technology to be able to fully understand the impact that theology had on history. As in the case of the earlier revolutions, the fourth revolution requires a paradigm shift on the one hand, but on the other, does not abandon or discard the benefits and tools gained from the past developments. The fourth revolution will most probably add on a large number of tools available for use by theological educators. It is difficult for us to imagine a world without books and for most people who are theological educators, it is also difficult to work without the help of computers and the Internet. These technologies, as well as others that are currently developing (like smart phones), could become standard tools used for theological training; recognising that the fourth revolution is far from over, there could soon be a much larger number of tools available for use by both theological educators and students.

The fourth revolution, the one that we are currently experiencing, is living in the network society. This causes adaption troubles at all levels of society, including educ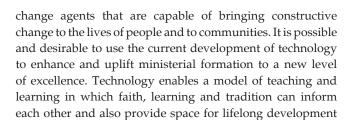ation and theology. Rapid change, information overload and the use and abuse of technologies are all part of this transformation. Digital citizenship is an ongoing issue – educators and students need to be informed and trained regarding issues surrounding copyright and plagiarism. It is a challenge to use technology for active learning and avoiding the pitfall of duplicating what could be done without the use of technology. There are also concerns that technology is interfering with our ability to think for ourselves (Carr 2008).

Surviving and coping in the network society requires the ability to adapt to frequent, high impact changes, the skill to navigate, evaluate and extract useful data from enormous quantities of information and the expertise to use technology effectively. Castells (2009) is correct in noting that although not all people are included in the network society, everyone is affected by it. People have trouble adapting to the pace with which change is confronting them at all levels of their lives and therefore it is understandable that there is reluctance to change in education and training circles.

It is true that the success of the printing press combined with the success record of structured, print-based, contact education that some theologians and educators are used to (this will of course change as the network spreads into basic education) tend to make some people prejudiced about the opportunities that multimedia can offer to ministerial training. However, theology cannot and must not lag behind: it should embrace the new developments just as it did with previous major changes and be at the forefront of development, using the changes to advance the spread of the Good News and benefit from the numerous opportunities that can be explored. The goal of ministerial formation is to prepare ministers for their actual pastoral work through acquiring knowledge, developing academic, professional and life skills and cultivating a lifelong, self-directed learning and development mind-set. If these goals are reached effectively, ministers will become change agents who are able and willing to create positive change in the social and religious lives of the communities they live and work in (Oliver 2013). The impact of the Christian religion could be expanded.

The use of technology in aid of theological training should therefore not be seen as a side-line issue. Naughton (2012:9) is convinced that there is an important lesson to be learned from the development of communication technology that supports the network society: people tend to over-estimate the short-term impact of new technologies and they also underestimate their long-term implications. By looking at the long-term implications that the communication tools that were developed during the first, second and third revolutions had on the history of Christianity, it is imperative that theological educators should investigate and use technology to their advantage, regardless of whether they teach at seminaries, colleges, residential universities, or distance institutions.

Ministerial training is about the development of the whole person (Naidoo 2012), knowledge, transferable skills, competencies, capabilities and, ultimately, developing

change agents that are capable of bringing constructive change to the lives of people and to communities. It is possible and desirable to use the current development of technology to enhance and uplift ministerial formation to a new level of excellence. Technology enables a model of teaching and learning in which faith, learning and tradition can inform each other and also provide space for lifelong development and interaction.

Some suggestions on how to embrace the use of technology for ministerial training

Accept that we are living in a network society

It is not so much the 'what' that we teach (content) that needs to change; it is 'how' (means through which) we do the training that is in urgent need of change (Bates 2010:22). The content of theological training is more or less set through tradition and confession, amongst other things. There are, of course, constant new developments of theologies focusing on specific needs and issues in society (such as Liberation Theology, Black Theology, Social Gospel, Feminist Theology and Eco-Theology) and these must be incorporated into theological curricula. The means through which this teaching and learning takes place in the 21st century requires a mind shift from both theological educators and stakeholders such as students, church leadership, laity and management of educational institutions.

The first step on the journey to the successful incorporation of technology into the curriculum is to accept the fact that opportunities are lurking everywhere. At this stage, we are still only at the threshold of what is possible. Just like the theologians and religious teachers who experienced the previous social revolutions and grabbed the opportunities available to them, the mind-set of those who are involved in theological education should be inquisitive and explorational, open to prospective high impact tools and trends (e.g. social media and its possible use for educational purposes), even before they are well tested and proven.

Experience has already taught us that there is more than one way to provide excellent theological formation. South Africa has a variety of institutional types where theological training is done, ranging from seminaries to distance universities and all the other options in-between. Learning styles (Fleming & Mills 1992) and teaching theories differ at these institutions and even from one academic or student to another.

Each person has his or her preferred style of learning, but most people are able to learn effectively using all styles. The R2D2 model of Bonk and Zhang (2006) incorporates all four learning styles:

- reading (verbal and auditory learners)
- reflecting (reflective and observational learners)
- displaying (visual learners)
- doing (hands-on experimenting learners).

This model was developed for use in the network society and can be very useful in developing theology programmes or transferring existing course material and programmes to the online or electronic supported environment. This is, of course, only one of several useful models available today.

The major teaching and learning theories are:

- Pedagogy is a teaching theory based on transmission of information and skills from a master (normally an adult or older person) to a student (normally a child or younger person).
- Andragogy is a learning theory based on transaction; in other words, it addresses the immediate, practical needs of context-dependent learners (Knowles 1970).
- Heutagogy is a learning theory that focuses on self-directed, flexible learning (Hase & Kenyon 2001).
- Recently another teaching theory, academagogy (Winter *et al*. 2009), was developed to allow academics to select and use the most appropriate learning and assessment style for each required learning experience and activity in the curriculum.

The network society with its large range of communication opportunities also opens up these theories to be used and combined in unique ways to support theological training and to support students in all aspects of their formation (both theoretical and practical aspects, as well as life skills and learning skills).

The variety and number of tools that are currently available, as well as those that are constantly being developed and generated, certainly provide every educator with excellent opportunities to optimise his or her level of teaching and training support. There is no need to use only traditional teaching methods such as face-to-face or classroom teaching. Technology can be used to supplement classroom activities, expand online teaching and introduce blended learning opportunities as well as to build mentor–mentee relationships. Technology has proved itself already as a means through which a sense of belonging and care can be created even in spite of geographical distances or time differences.

Richardson (2005:556–557) predicts a 'freeway' to the future for theology by using the prefix 'inter' as a philosophical framework. He argues that theology will flourish if the discipline ensures that it is interdenominational, interfaith, intercultural, international, interdisciplinary and interactive. Most of these characteristics are important for all theological disciplines and they can help to link the different disciplines to one another. More importantly they will ensure a link between theology and other academic disciplines, as well as society in general. Technology and the mind-set of the network society can provide opportunities for interaction, broadening the audience for theology. The focus on interaction can provide a public platform where important issues can be raised and dialogue can take place. Theology will then once again be in its rightful place: in the public domain, able to positively influence and change people and transform structures.

However, accepting the network society as our given environment also means that educators and trainers will find themselves in the shoes of students. Unlearning and relearning (a classic example of this process is when a person acquires a different brand cellular phone and needs to unlearn and relearn how to operate the new device efficiently) will hopefully develop into educators becoming lifelong, self-directed learners. Theologians are no longer dependent on the limited methods used in the past to provide sound theological education. However, the majority of theological educators will have to actively unlearn their dependency on printed material and face-to-face instruction to enable them to use technology effectively. Theological educators should realise the enormous possible impact their effective use of technology could have on a technologically savvy generation. One example of how this network of influence can be broadened by providing the same mentoring or teaching expertise and knowledge that were traditionally only kept within the classroom walls (or course content) in an open online environment.

Be creative and daring

There is no use in listing different tools available to aid and enhance teaching and learning, because before these pages would go to print, the list would be outdated. However, if educators need help in identifying or choosing the right tool for the right job, they can visit the following website: www.educaterstechnology.com (click on either 'all categories' or 'all resources' to get started). Most tools listed can be modified to suit various needs and different envisioned outcomes. Educators should use what is available in creative ways. It is possible to 'bring' experts to the classroom at no cost when using technology. Open Education Resources could save time and money for both educators and students.

It should be kept in mind that not everything will work for everyone. Some tools are more suitable for education than others and there are technology-based tools that are more suitable for practical training whilst others enhance the theoretical gain of knowledge. Some tools can be used effectively in contact class situations whilst others improve distance communication (and today, distance could mean adjacent rooms in the same building). Not all tools are focused on teaching or learning. Some innovative and helpful tools are instruments that simplify administrative tasks (like reminders), and others focus on student assessment or skill building. Most technology based tools are able to create different levels of connecting with students and peers which offer a positive experience to teaching and learning. The bottom line is to take advantage of what is at hand and to use it effectively (fit for purpose) in specific teaching environments and settings.

Focus on the possible advantages and seek solutions for possible obstacles

One of the major advantages of being part of the network society is that education and learning is no longer done in isolation. Help and advice, motivation, resources, opportunities to develop and exercise skills, support and feedback (public, group or denominational) are always at hand for both educators and students. Education is taxing and requires self-discipline and inspiration. Constant support and motivation can be provided through the use of technology. Self-directed and independent learning does not mean – and no longer needs to imply – unsupported learning. Technology provides the tools for excellent, constant student support.

Technology also assists educators to save time and work smart. Education with the help and support of technology provides and opens up choices to both educators and students. Open Education Resources, to name just one group of resources, provide a world of cost cutting, high quality possibilities (many of these resources can be rewritten and altered to suit individual needs). Multimedia resources cater for all levels of learning as well as all learning styles. Updates, corrections, announcements, just-in-time-communication and other important information can be made instantly available to everybody concerned. It should be kept in mind that technology must be used in support of teaching and learning. Technology does not substitute any aspect of teaching and learning.

Formal qualifications will in the near future require at least basic digital literacy and, therefore, students will have to demonstrate their ability to use technology efficiently during their studies. Lifelong, self-directed learning or heutagogy (Hase & Kenyon 2001) is becoming an essential part of day-to-day life, whilst transferrable skill competencies are valuable assets that open opportunities for job creation and community upliftment. The core of theology training is not just about personal and faith development of ministers, but also to equip them with knowledge, skills, and values that can be transferred to others to improve their lives and circumstances. Technology is a powerful tool that can be used together with teaching and training to enhance progress and to ensure that positive change agents are developed and supported through the duration of their studies.

Learning and teaching can be fun. Most students enjoy the idea of (collaborative) knowledge creation as an essential part of the learning experience which is in stern contrast to the knowledge hoarding models that usually preceded technology-based education. Furthermore, learning and teaching can and does happen anywhere. Students and educators have the freedom to work when and where it suits them and fits into their schedules. They no longer have to travel to educational institutions or other facilities on a regular basis. Technology opens up independent, flexible opportunities to learn without geographical and time constrains. It provides 'just in time' learning opportunities and provides answers to questions that the 'Gutenburg-world' could not. The use of technology-based education can also assist disabled students and provide open access to higher education for a larger number of students. Even though the focus is on theology

training by using technology, both students and educators acquire IT skills and competencies.

Although this is not always true, technology can help to cut the cost of education, especially when it is done in a mobile format. Using technology for educational purposes can also lower printing costs and tuition prices and contributes towards creating an eco-friendly environment.

However, the use of technology in the educational environment also provides its fair share of obstacles and problems. The iron triangle of access, costs and quality (Daniel, Kanwar & Uvalic-Trumbic 2009) that bars education from empowering masses also influences technology being used in education. It is clear that all three of these issues will have a negative effect on education for some time to come, regardless of whether technology is used or not. The challenge is to use technology effectively to counter-pass or bypass some of the constraining effects.

Not all tools that technology provides can or should be used for educational purposes and it is often difficult to determine if or how certain tools can be used effectively. This can often only be determined through trial and error which could result in wasting a lot of time and money and could also be very frustrating for all parties involved. Most important here is to remember that there is no longer any need to follow a 'one-size-fits-all' approach that was imposed through the limitations of the pre-network society.

In the South African context, connectivity, affordability, bandwidth and Internet speed, unstable and interrupted network services, difference in digital literacy levels and inferior infrastructures are constant subjects of concern for the use of technology. These challenges should not be seen as unsolvable. It should rather be investigated and handled by focusing on individual needs and possible solutions. Research has already proved that the 'digital divide' is not as big or wide-ranging as people normally assume. In a study done in 2012 amongst students in theology at the University of South Africa, it was determined that more than 90% of the students used cellular phones. The study did not indicate whether the students could also use these devices for study purposes, but it did indicate that it could be possible to incorporate mobile technology into teaching support (Oliver 2012:176). Research done by Liebenberg, Chetty and Prinsloo (2012) investigated UNISA students' access to technology and their capabilities in using the technology within the discourse of the so-called 'digital divide'. The conclusion is drawn that this term cannot be linked to a simplistic understanding of these issues and that the level of access and capabilities amongst students are indeed varied and complex. There is no clear distinction between 'haves' and 'have-nots' when it comes to technology.

As soon as educational institutions start to use technology widely to aid teaching and learning, there will be a need to change some structures. This should only be done after thorough research, the implications are worked out and an implementation plan is drawn up to the satisfaction of all stakeholders. This would also involve costs for the institutions and in some cases also for staff members and students. Issues such as intellectual property rights, the training and retraining of academics, as well as choices regarding hardware and software acquisition are all aspects that need to be covered in the planning phase. However, it is not necessary to wait for institutions to adopt policies and practices formally regarding the use of technology for educators in theology to embark on this journey using what is already at hand. As and when structural changes are introduced by the management of the institutions, educators can transfer their support and service to students to the more formal institutional based systems if needed.

Conclusion

This serves as a motivation for educators in theology to move ahead and embrace the opportunities provided by the fourth revolution in aiding the training of ministers by utilising current and future trends of developments in technology. Although it is not possible to train ministers under ideal conditions, the current changes in society provide opportunities to reflect on how we got to where we are and also to experiment with and motivate one another on possibilities and opportunities to take theological training to new heights and expand the influence that theology could have on society by using the available spaces and tools to voice issues, spark public debates and get more people involved with theological issues.

After the first revolution, instruction (theological training included) was done through the means constructed by that revolution – language. When the second revolution occurred, people adapted and education also adapted to incorporate the written word. The third revolution was started by the use of the printing press which had a huge influence on education and training. Theology implemented this tool to its advantage even before the rest of society understood the implications that this development would have on the world. It seemed as if theology found a perfect match in this era. Theology used the past revolutions to its advantage. This can be done again; and if theologians are informed and encouraged to grasp the opportunities provided, both students and society can gain from the pace-setting support to challenges of living through the fourth revolution.

The possible advantages and impact of the fourth revolution could outnumber the tremendous impact that the third revolution had. It is now possible to provide higher education of the best quality and standards (by using Open Educational Resources, multimedia and mobile technology, amongst other things) without the ever present issue of a lack of funds or resources playing a limiting role. Theology training at higher education institutions can be opened up to large student numbers (no more restrictions to classroom space or accommodation facilities), to geographically isolated students and also to disabled and part-time

students. If theological educators are on the forefront of utilising technology, the past can repeat itself: theology can once again become a major influence in society due to the proactive use of the opportunities provided by the revolution in technology. Theology can provide the means through which people will be able to adapt to changes by supporting them with a most trusted tool – that of faith.

It is possible to accommodate diversity in ideology, tradition and spiritual formation as well as the choice of technology and the use of various teaching and learning models and learning styles. Heutagogy (lifelong, self-directed learning) is not only possible but also desirable for both students and educators. The skills learned and competencies gained through heutagogy can also be transferred to other people (in congregations and communities) to enhance positive change. This would result in empowerment, not only of the ministers, but also of the communities in which they serve and work. There should not be a one-size-fits-all approach. On the contrary, technological developments open a variety of choices and blended learning opportunities.

Real and assumed challenges and problems regarding the use of technology in theological training are abundant and will probably not decrease in the near future. The way around this is to focus on and use what is supportive and helpful and efficient on the one hand and to seek solutions and invent new tools to overcome the problems on the other hand. Technology provides powerful tools that can be used by educators and students to reshape the way in which the message of salvation is brought to the world. Theology must once again, through the means provided by technology, move to be on the forefront of transformation and positive change.

Although theology training currently finds itself amidst turbulent and chaotic changes brought about in society by the fourth revolution, and the future for theology is often painted in dark colours, this should serve as further motivation for theological educators to take the bold step to embrace the changes and developments available to create a future for a technology-driven society that would go beyond our imagination today: To develop and guide ministers of religion in such a way that they and those whom they interact with would become lifelong students and positive transformation agents in the service of the Lord, influencing society to change for the better.

Acknowledgements

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