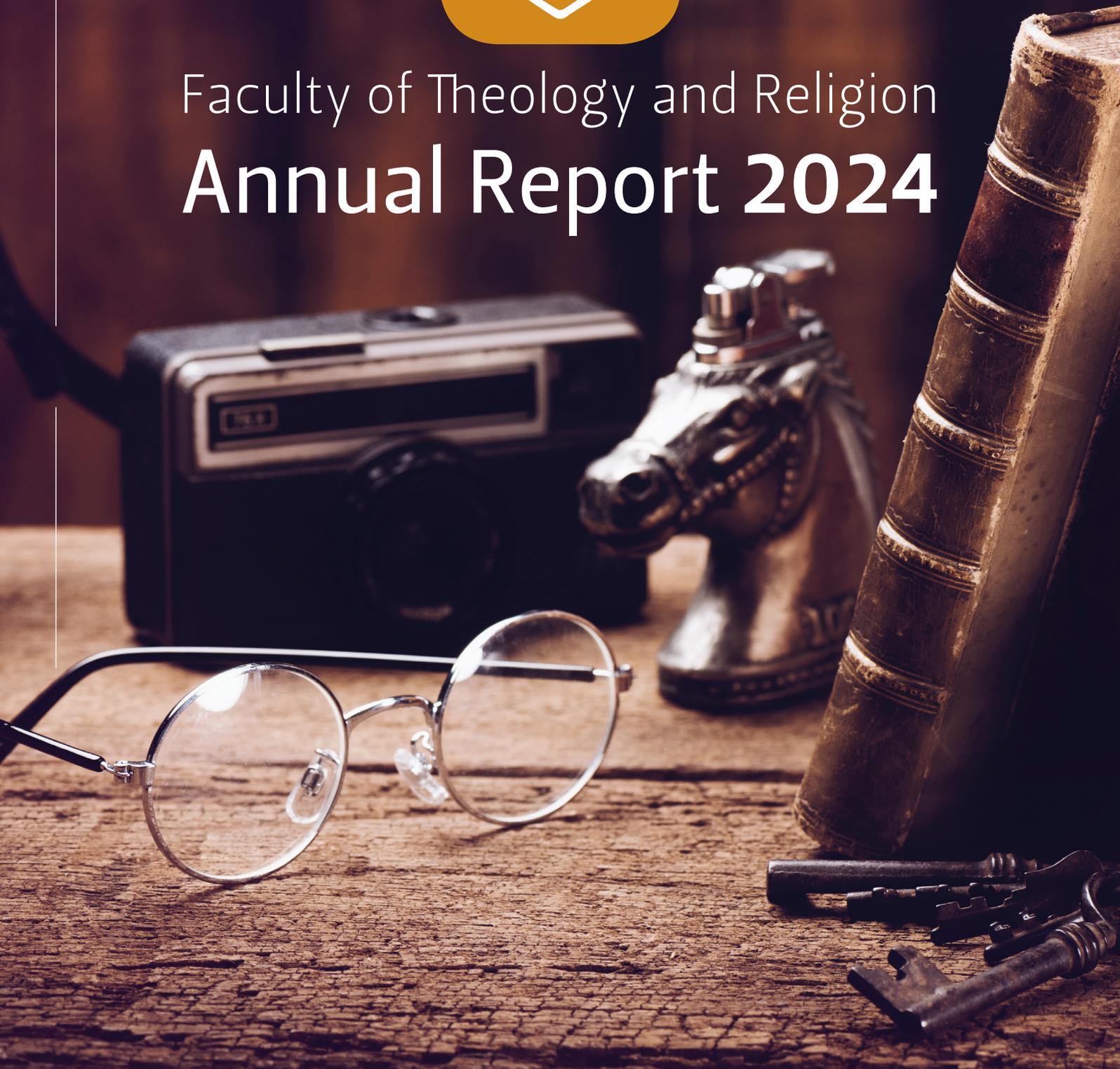




Faculty of Theology and Religion Annual Report 2024



*Inspiring excellence. transforming lives
through quality, impact, and care*



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UFS
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FACULTY OF THEOLOGY AND RELIGION ANNUAL REPORT 2025

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THEOLOGY

THEOLOGY BUILDING

OFFICE FOR INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

FACULTY OF THEOLOGY AND RELIGION

GOVERNANCE AND POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION

Faculty of Theology and Religion
Office for International Affairs
Governance and Political Transformation



AIC	African Initiates Churches
ALP	Academic Leadership Programme
BDiv	Bachelor of Divinity
CHSSA	Church History Society of Southern Africa
CLF	Christian Literature Fund
Copesco	Community Outreach and Public Engagement Scholarship Committee
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
DRC	Dutch Reformed Church
EABS	European Association of Biblical Studies
ETLS	Educational Technology and Learning Spaces Committee
FAAO	Faculty Academic Advising Office
FEST	Forschungsstätte der Evangelischen Studiengemeinschaft
FESCO	Faculty Engaged Scholarship Committee
FGP	Future Generation Professoriate
FSC	Faculty Student Council
GHREC	General Human Research Ethics Committee
HCT	Historical and Constructive Theology
HELM	Higher Education Leadership and Management
ISBL	International Society of Biblical Literature
JSEM	Journal for Semitics
MDiv	Master of Divinity
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
MTh	Master of Theology
NCLS	National Church Life Survey
NRF	National Research Foundation
NTSSA	New Testament Society of Southern Africa
OTSSA	Old Testament Society of Southern Africa
PGDip	Postgraduate Diploma
REAP	Research Excellence Accelerator Programme
RSG	Radio Sonder Grense
SACC	South African Council of Churches
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SAYAS	South African Young Academy of Science
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
SLP	Short Learning Programme
SNTS	Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas
SOTS	Society for Old Testament Study
TRRR	Transatlantic Roundtable on Religion and Race
TSSA	Theological Society of Southern Africa
UCDG	University Capacity Development Grant
UFS	University of the Free State
Unisa	University of South Africa
URCSA	Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa
USA	United States of America
UWC	University of the Western Cape
WCC	World Council of Churches





2024 Annual Reflections

This year invited us into greater clarity, collaboration, and a renewed understanding of what it means to be a faculty rooted in theology yet deeply responsive to the world around us. Under the leadership of Professor John Klaasen, the Office of the Dean held together the threads of vision and implementation, ensuring that our work remained anchored in our Strategic Plan, responsive to our people, and aligned with our identity.

From key faculty engagements to student-centred initiatives, 2024 was about purposeful engagement. We supported strategic projects, activated new networks, and strengthened internal coherence, while navigating a changing higher education landscape.

The Office of the Dean focused on:

- Strengthening internal operations and supporting colleagues in their academic and administrative roles.
- Creating platforms for dialogue and academic exchange through Theological Day, benchmarking sessions, and faculty-wide planning meetings.
- Expanding postgraduate programmes and international collaborations.
- Partnering with community projects such as the Heidedal Child and Youth Care Centre initiative, reminding us that theology lives beyond lecture halls.

At the heart of all these efforts was a commitment to Vision 130, our core values, and the faculty we are becoming: inclusive, excellent, public-facing, and steadfast in our pursuit of transformation.

Marketing and Communications

Strategic Storytelling in Motion

In 2024, Mr Lethabo Machabaphala led faculty marketing. Marketing was about more than promotion it was about cultivating presence and ensuring that our faculty was seen, heard, and felt across platforms, events, and communities. The Marketing and Communication portfolio focused on creating visibility that builds meaningful connections – connections that, in turn, drive applications, partnerships, and impact.

Guided by the University of the Free State's (UFS) Vision 130 framework and the faculty's Strategic Plan, we supported a range of projects that amplified our theology-in-action voice.

Highlights from 2024:

Digital Campaigns with Purpose

- Ran targeted LinkedIn and Facebook advertisements for undergraduate and postgraduate applications, with a focus on quality leads and authentic messaging.
- Implemented a renewed website storytelling strategy, updating programme pages, student testimonials, and lead-tracking integrations.
- Supported faculty interviews, write-ups, and visual assets that were shared across institutional platforms and external networks.

On-the-Ground Visibility

- Represented the faculty at Institutional Open Days in Bloemfontein and Qwaqwa, local career exhibitions, and mini open days in Durban and Cape Town.
- Co-hosted and branded Grade 9 to 12 evenings, Connect2Kovsie events, and Career Exploration Days, positioning theology as part of early subject and career decision-making.
- Coordinated all communication and branding for Postgraduate Virtual Open Days, converting expressions of interest into applications.

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Faculty Events, Identity & Brand Alignment

- Supported the design and storytelling of key events including Theological Day, the Faculty Awards Ceremony, and the Publication Fair.
- Ensured all internal and public-facing materials reflected the faculty's voice – grounded, excellent, African, and transformative.

Community Partnerships & Alumni Engagement

- Worked closely with the Dean's Office and FESCO on the Heidedal Child and Youth Care Centre initiative, developing concept notes, posters, and campaign visuals.

In essence, 2024 was a year of embodying – rather than merely expressing – who we are as a faculty. Whether online or on the ground, from application forms to student testimonies, we continued to shape a brand that reflects our values: rooted in theology, driven by purpose, and in constant dialogue with the world around us. Marketing is not simply a department; it is the story we live. Over the past year, that story deepened, expanded, and reached more hearts than ever before.



As the Shepherd Centre, we have persevered regardless of the challenges that we face, and 2024 was no different. This year we focused on expanding our building stakeholder relations and solidifying our ties to the religious community that we serve.

Staffing

The Shepherd Centre is permanently staffed with Miss Sinovuyo Mogwasi who is the project coordinator making sure operationally the Centre runs smoothly. As the Faculty received a new Dean this year, so did the Centre as now we have Prof John Klaasen as the new Head of the Centre. Ms Mogwasi went on maternity leave on July and Mr Neo Kekana took over her duties for the remainder of the year, and he did an amazing job in making sure the Centre was functional.



Mr Neo Kekana

Short Learning Programme Offering

When it comes to our SLP offerings, we weren't able to offer any programme for the year due to low applications numbers. This motivated us to push our marketing in preparation for the 2025 offering, and we trust we will see the fruits of our labour next year in this regard.

Stakeholder Relations

The Shepherd Centre undertook a rigorous marketing campaign to attract more participants for our 2025 intake. The marketing campaign included a visit to the following congregations to forge strategic partnerships with the Centre:

The Anglican Church Diocese of the Free state

At the beginning of August, the Dean, Prof John Klaasen and the acting Shepherd Coordinator Mr. Neo Kekana went to visit the office of the Bishop of the Diocese of the Free state. The two Shepherd Centre representatives met with the Bishop, Reverend Dintoe Letloenyane and Reverend Itumeleng Pooe. The Dean began the meeting by formally introducing himself and the vision he has for the Faculty of Theology and Religion and Shepherd Centre. Mr. Neo Kekana then followed after the Dean by giving a short presentation on all the Short Learning Programmes (SLPs). The presentation was then followed by discussions on the administration i.e. mode of teaching, bursary opportunities and the benefits of completing all the courses. The meeting was fruitful because at the end, the bishop's office invited Shepherd Centre to present at the Diocese Retreat in Modderpoort Free state.

The Shepherd Centre coordinator together with Mr Lethabo Machabapala the Marketing Officer for the Faculty

of Theology and Religion went to Modderpoort during the month of October to present the SLPs to the entire Diocese clergy (Priests). The Bishop welcomed us with warm hands and allowed us to present the SLP to the clergy. Similar to the first engagement, the presentation was followed by a lengthy discussion of how the administration of the courses. The engagement was an hour long and it was productive as it sparked interest from the clergy. We are hopeful that the Anglican Church and Shepherd Centre will forge a strong partnership in 2025.



Assemblies of God (Back to God) Phahameng Bloemfontein

The Acting Shepherd Centre Coordinator and Dr Daniel Andrew went to visit the Assemblies of God (AOG), in a similar attempt of trying to market the Shepherd Centre to local churches. We were welcomed by Pastor Lungisani Sele, Dr. Lerato Pitso and Mr. Andile Silo. We got a warm welcome and Dr. Daniel Andrew began the meeting by giving a brief background about the Faculty of Theology and Religion and explaining its vision. Mr. Neo Kekana then proceeded to give a brief presentation about the SLPs. The presentation was met with a lot of enthusiasm and the church showed great optimism towards forming a partnership. In addition to the possibility of encouraging the AOG members to join the SLP, the AOG delegates asked the faculty to sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in which the students would be able to do their practicals at the church. Therefore, the meetings were successful and they will yield to partnership in 2025.

Apostolic Faith Mission (AFM)

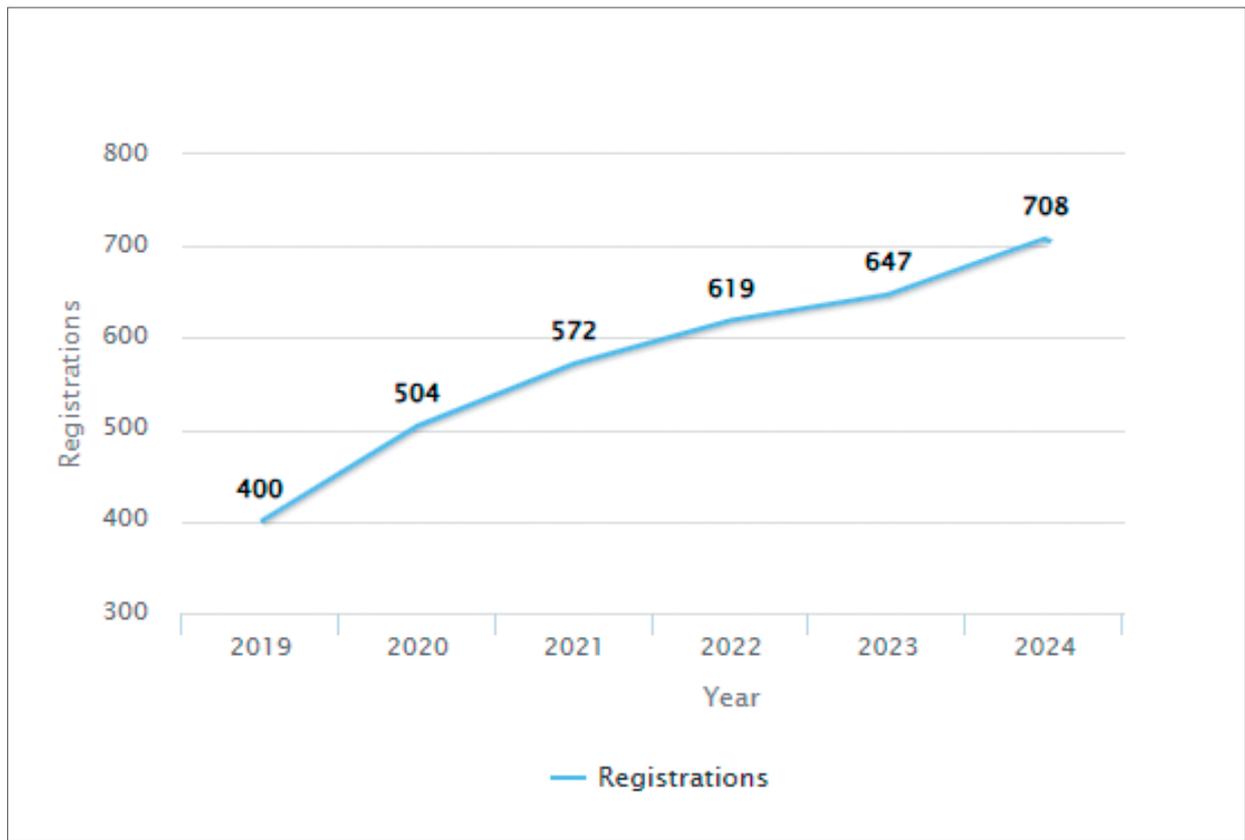
The Shepherd Centre was invited to present at the AFM elective conference in September. The representatives from the Shepherd Centre were the Dean Prof John Klaasen, Mr. Neo Kekana the Acting Shepherd Centre Coordinator and Dr. Daniel Andrew a Pastor in the AFM and Lecturer at the Faculty. The presentation took a similar structure to the previous visits to other churches. Dr Andrew introduced the Dean, who gave a brief background about the faculty and invited the church to be a part of it. Mr Neo Kekana gave a brief introduction about the SLPs and what they are offered. There was no time for questions due to time. However, the SLP booklets were left at the back for them to grab after the meeting. This engagement was also positive because in January 2025 we got an enquiry from members who wanted to enrol for the courses.

Methodist Church of Southern Africa (Bloemfontein)

The Acting Shepherd Coordinator Mr Neo Kekana and Dr Jacob Mokhutso a lecturer and Reverend in the Methodist took the initiative to set up a meeting with the District Bishop of the Methodist to also forge a partnership. We were welcomed warmly by the Bishop's secretary. Unfortunately, the Bishop was not available and it was decided to postpone the engagement for 2025. We are hopeful that we will be able to form a partnership with the Methodist church as well.

Learning and teaching within the faculty – and across the university as a whole – play a pivotal role in shaping the intellectual and professional development of students, while also contributing to academic advancement and societal progress. This report highlights key achievements from the 2024 academic year, most notably a record-breaking enrolment of 708 students – the highest in the faculty’s history. This milestone reflects the growing interest in our programme offerings, demonstrates their expanding appeal, and affirms the faculty’s ongoing commitment to providing a high-quality learning environment for a steadily increasing student population.

Student Enrolments



<https://info.ufs.ac.za/PowerHEDA/dashboard.aspx>

Although the faculty achieved record enrolment, the overall graduation rate declined to its lowest since 2020. While this remains an area requiring sustained attention and improvement, the faculty nevertheless reached a significant milestone.

Graduation rates in the Bachelor of Divinity (BDiv) have historically been low; however, the programme has recorded 150% growth since 2020. The 37 graduating final-year students represent a notable achievement for the faculty, reflecting the dedication of both staff and students in fostering a supportive learning environment.

Creating Theology Together

Another highlight of the year was the successful hosting of six Creating Theology Together student engagements. This initiative provides a collaborative space for students to participate in theological discussions, exchange ideas, and learn from one another. Through these workshops and seminars, students not only deepen their academic understanding but also become part of an emerging community where knowledge and ideas are exchanged in a dynamic and supportive environment.



Creating Theology Together Event (27 September 2024)

Student Leadership

We are proud of our newly elected Faculty Student Council (FSC), who assumed their student leadership roles and hit the ground running. Following the resignation of the Academic Adviser, the FSC played a pivotal role in supporting the FAAO by streamlining student enquiries and maintaining clear communication between students and the faculty.

Their proactive efforts to bridge this gap in student support are both commendable and deeply valued. Additionally, the faculty congratulates our final-year student, Mr Moses Davids, on his election as the SRC Academic Representative at the Bloemfontein Campus. This accomplishment reflects Mr Davids's leadership qualities and his dedication to the academic well-being of the student body. We are confident that he will continue to serve as a strong and effective voice for his peers in this new role.



The Faculty Student Council from the left, Mr Tembinkosi Masango (Chairperson), Ms Ayesha Ndlovu (Treasurer), Ms Ncubeko Msesele, Ms Asandile Mbuku (Deputy Chairperson), and Mr Tumisang Phejane (Marketing and Liaison)

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“In studying the past, we find not only our roots but also our compass – guiding us to build faith that speaks to each generation’s quest for meaning, justice, and hope”.

It has been a successful year for the Department of Historical and Constructive Theology (HCT). The profile of the department is clearly on an upward trajectory, reflected in the growing number of postgraduate students. Prof Henco van der Westhuizen and Dr Calvin Ullrich were responsible for all the Systematic Theology modules, both undergraduate and postgraduate, while Dr Eugene Fortein and Dr Pascal Pienaar oversaw the Church History and Polity modules at both levels. The department also drew on the expertise of three part-time lecturers: Rev Jan Lubbe, Rev Cobus Hamman, and Thabiso Khoeli.

Staffing and Research Activities

Dr Fortein was appointed as Head of Department at the end of 2023. Since assuming the role, he has actively contributed to academic and ecclesial discourse, delivering the following papers:

In April 2024, Dr Fortein was one of the speakers at the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) Ecumenical Partnership Conference, held in Durban from 10–14 April. The title of his paper was ‘The ecumenical contribution of the Confession of Belhar’.



In June 2024, Dr Fortein was the keynote speaker at the annual conference of the Theological Society of Southern Africa (TSSA), hosted at the University of Pretoria from 19–21 June. He was also elected as Conference Secretary (as part of the Executive Committee) at the TSSA’s annual meeting. The title of his address was ‘Treat the people’s needs as holy! Demanding Biko’s egalitarian democracy’.



In August 2024, Dr Fortein attended the annual meeting of the Church History Society of Southern Africa (CHSSA), hosted by Great Zimbabwe University from 15 to 17 August. The theme of the conference was ‘Storytelling in the History of the Christian Churches in Southern Africa’. Dr Fortein presented a paper titled ‘The story of Allan Aubrey Boesak: The making of a prophet’.



In terms of research outputs, Dr Fortein contributed to the 50th special edition of *Studia Historiae Ecclesiae* with an article titled 'For Hannes Adonis: Demolishing walls'.

Additional research outputs during the year included:

- 'The church and forced migration/removal: The Elandsloof case', *Studia Historiae Ecclesiae* 50(3). <https://doi.org/10.25159/2412-4265/15892>
- I will not restrain my tongue: A black spirituality of liberation – part of a collaborative project with Stellenbosch University titled *Spirituality and Justice*.
- Youth resistance in South Africa: Reflections on the struggle of the "Born Free" Generation – part of a collaborative project with the Transatlantic Roundtable on Religion and Race (TRRR).

In March 2024, he contributed to the groundbreaking volume *Liberating black theology: Emerging South African voices*. His chapter, 'Holy black rage: An inconvenience for whiteness', was included in the publication, which was dedicated to Allan Boesak – who also wrote the foreword – and launched at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) on 12 March 2024.



Dr Fortein organised a conference to mark the 30th anniversary of the URCSA under the theme "Thirty URCSA/ Thirty Years of Democracy". The programme featured a public lecture by Prof Allan Boesak, with contributions from speakers such as Nico Koopman, Christian Landman, and Leepo Modise, among others.



In the area of engaged scholarship, Dr Fortein facilitated a workshop for the URCSA Presbytery of Upington, focusing on the relevance of the Belhar Confession. The event, held in Upington, provided a space for reflection and dialogue on the Confession's significance for church and society today.

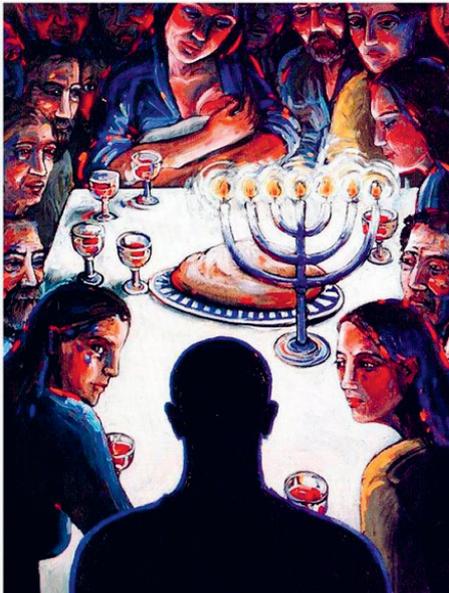


He also served as preacher at the Sunday service.

In 2024, Prof Henco van der Westhuizen was appointed as a consultant for the World Council of Churches' (WCC) Faith and Order Commission, contributing to preparations for the Sixth World Conference on Faith and Order in Alexandria, Egypt.



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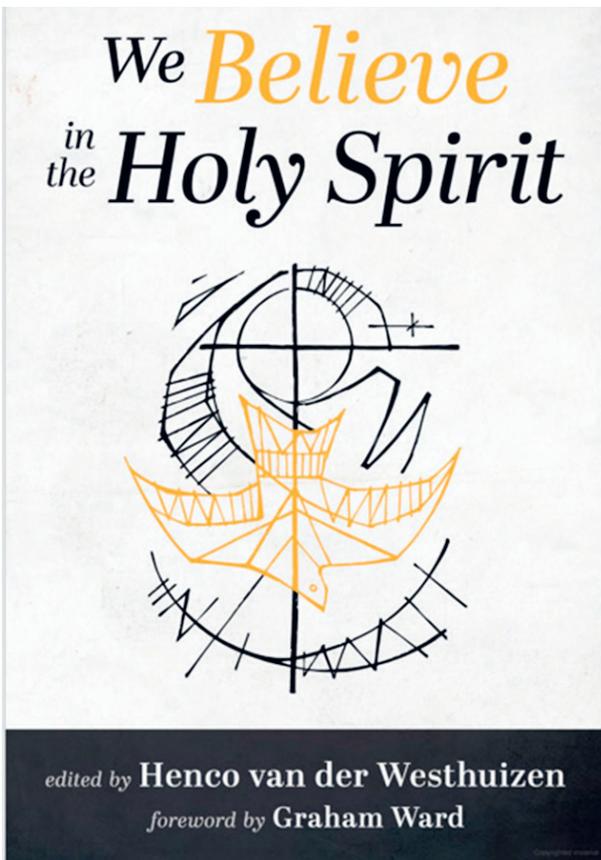
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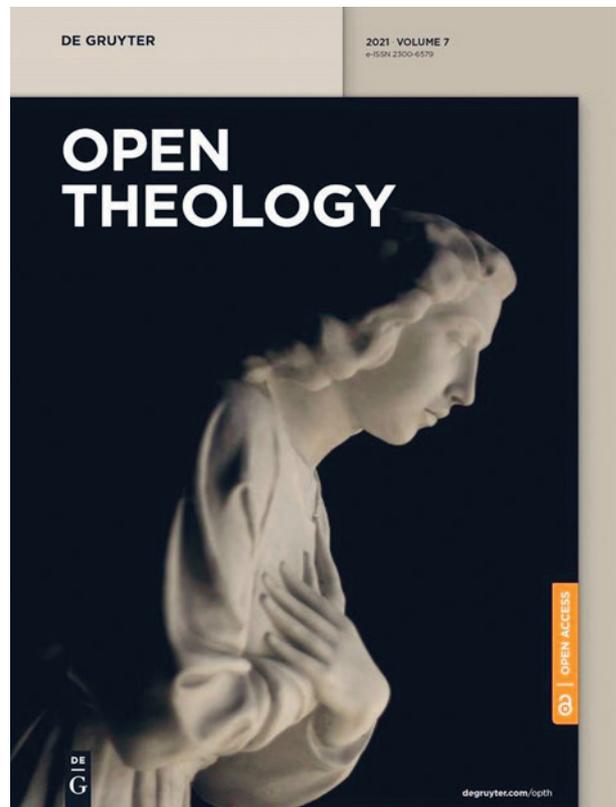
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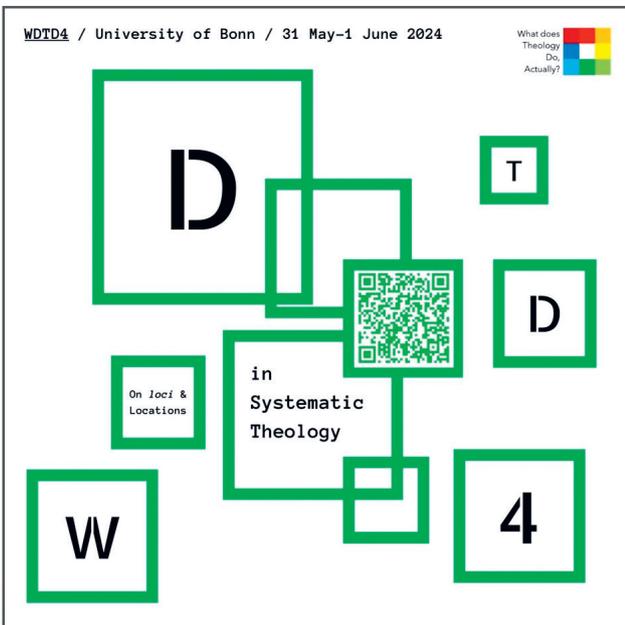
Prof van der Westhuizen continues to serve as the editor of the Journal of Systematic Theology (www.journalofsystematictheology.com).



He also edited the volume *We believe in the Holy Spirit*, published by Wipf and Stock.



Furthermore, Prof van der Westhuizen participated in the multiyear project *Inductive Theology*, hosted by the Universität Zürich and the Forschungsstätte der Evangelischen Studiengemeinschaft (FEST). The 2024 meeting took place at Heidelberg University, Germany. As part of this project, he published a paper in *Open Theology* 10(1), <https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2024-0020>.



In June, he delivered a paper on theological agency at 'What does theology do, actually?' held at Bonn University, Germany.



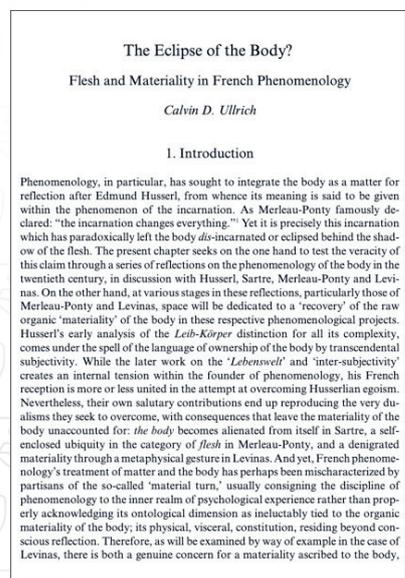
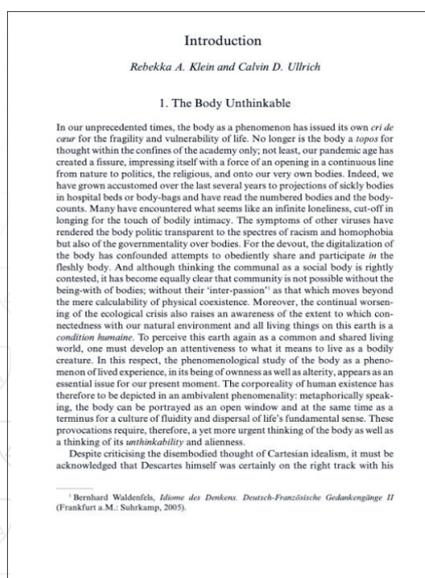
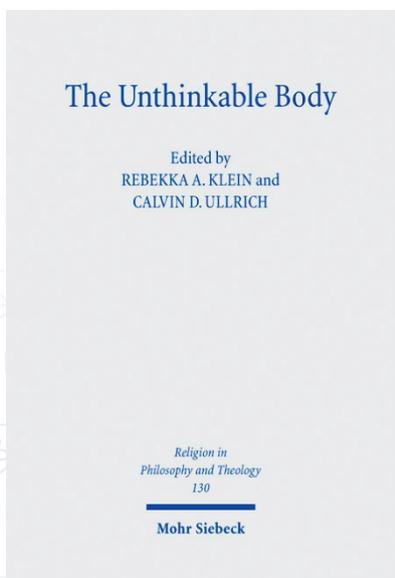
In October, Prof van der Westhuizen was invited to the triennial meeting of the South African Council of Churches (SACC), where he serves as Chair of the SACC Theological Commission.



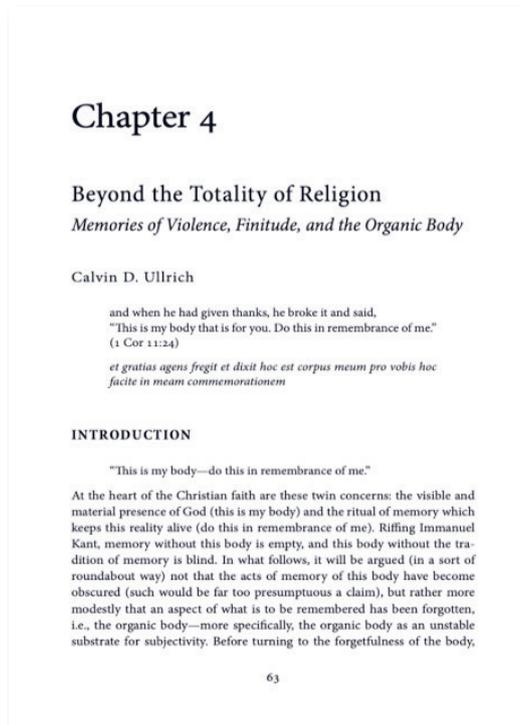
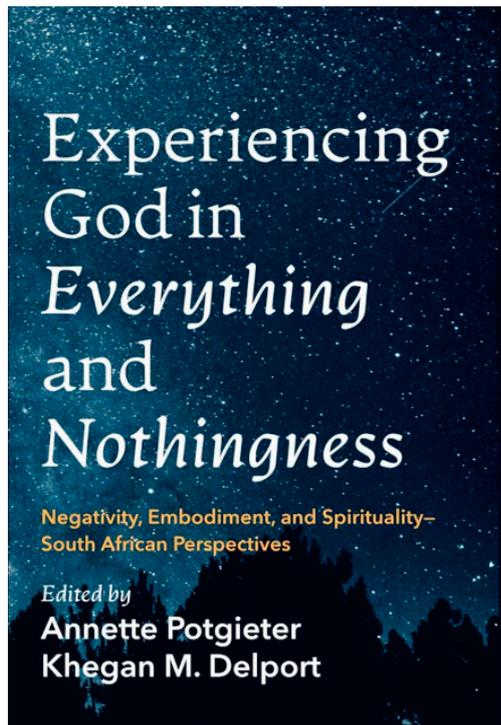
In November, Prof van der Westhuizen delivered a paper at the International and Ecumenical Conference ‘Towards Nicaea 2025: Exploring the Council’s Ecumenical Significance Today’, held at the Ecumenical Institute in Bogis-Bossey, Switzerland.

He also presented a paper titled ‘The Word of God is living and active’ at a joint seminar hosted by the WCC and UWC under the theme of ‘Decolonising the Bible in the Midst of Colonial Legacies and Idolatrous Powers’. The seminar was held in Cape Town from 18 to 23 November 2024.

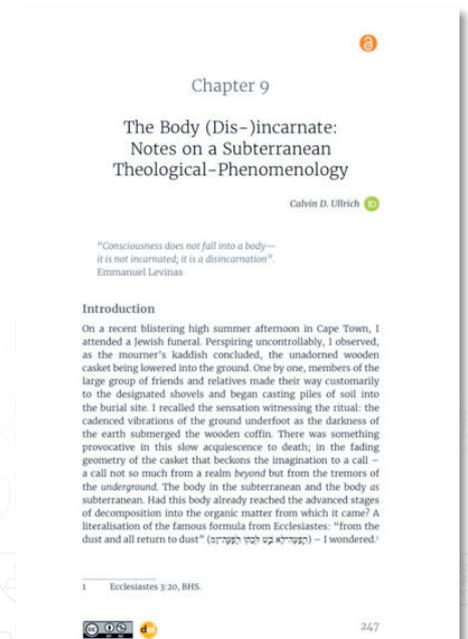
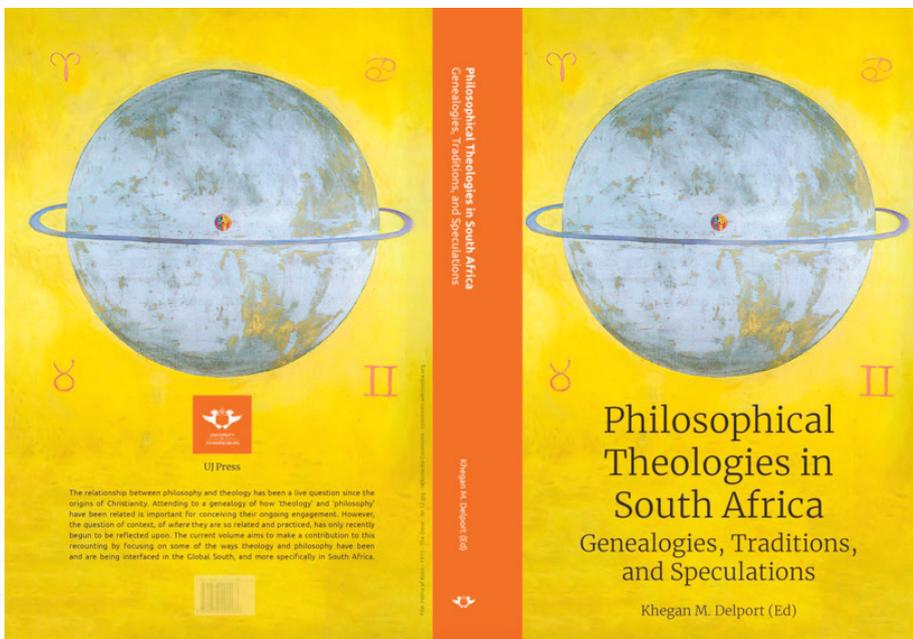
In 2024, Dr Ullrich made a wide range of scholarly and professional contributions. He continued to work on his forthcoming monograph, developed as part of his Habilitationsschrift at the Goethe Universität Frankfurt. He also completed the editing and proofs of a newly published co-edited volume, *The unthinkable body: Challenges of embodiment in religion, politics, and ethics* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2024). In addition to co-editing the volume, he wrote the introduction and contributed a chapter titled: ‘The eclipse of the body? Flesh and materiality in French phenomenology’.



During the year, Dr Ullrich published two additional book chapters. The first appeared in the volume *Experiencing God in everything and nothingness* (Wipf and Stock), edited by Annette Potgieter and Khegan Delpont, with his contribution titled: 'Beyond the totality of religion: Memories of violence, finitude, and the organic body'.



The second chapter was published in the volume *Philosophical theologies in South Africa: Genealogies, traditions, speculations* (UJ Press), edited by Khegan Delpont, under the title 'The body (dis-)incarnate: Notes on a subterranean theological phenomenology'.



Dr Ullrich was also an active participant at four academic conferences in 2024, presenting papers on a wide range of themes:

- ‘Marian materialism(s)? Between Beattie, Rose, and Malabou’, at the Encountering Mary, Mother of Jesus, in South Africa. Christian Theological Reflections on Mary: Past and Present Conference, Bloemfontein, 4–6 June.
- “‘My lived experience’”: Affective phenomenology and the politics of excess’, at the Theological Society of South Africa, Pretoria, 19–21 June.
- ‘Worshipping with Belhar: The affective arrangement of the liturgy’, at After Thirty Years – URCSA and Democracy, Bloemfontein, 27–29 August.
- ‘Apatheism and the political theology of apatheia’ at Sovereignty – God, The Nation, and the People: An International Colloquium (International Online Symposium), 18–19 October.

In addition to these scholarly contributions, he published an opinion piece in *The Conversation: Africa* in May, reflecting on the idea of a ‘secular state’ and its role in the religious landscape of South Africa.

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What is a secular state? How South Africa has tried to separate religion and politics

Published: May 24, 2024 2:45pm SAST

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South Africa is often referred to as a 'secular state'. What's the background?

The primary feature of a secular state is political secularism, which is the attempt to draw **distinctions** between state and religious institutions and their activities. According to this definition, political secularism did not exist in South Africa at the time it was established as a unified country in 1910. In other words, no meaningful differentiation was made between the mechanisms of statecraft and religious institutions. Instead they were **conflated** as a violent politics of racial rule

Recognition of Dr Ullrich's growing academic profile came through him receiving a Y-1 rating from the National Research Foundation (NRF). Building on this achievement, he submitted a substantial proposal conceptualising a new interdisciplinary research project, provisionally titled *Affective Communities: Faith, Life, and the Church*. To support this initiative, he applied for funding under the NRF's "Support for Y-rated Researchers" instrument, with the outcome expected by late 2024 or early 2025.

Further to this, Dr Ullrich was nominated by the UFS to become a member of the South African Young Academy of Science (SAYAS). He also prepared and submitted two proposals on behalf of the Faculty of Theology and Religion, advocating for the establishment of a UFS Research Chair and Research Centre, both of which seek to secure dedicated funding for these strategic initiatives.

Dr Pascal Pienaar has made notable scholarly and community contributions during 2024. In the area of publications, she authored several articles in leading journals. These include:

- ‘South African women missionaries in the diamond fields and their work amongst migrant workers’, *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, 2024, which examines the role of women missionaries in the diamond fields in the early 19th century and their interactions with migrant workers.
- ‘Faith in conflict: Examining the varied available chronicles of churches’ responses to the South African Border War and their enduring legacies’, *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, 50th edition, 2024, which investigates how different churches responded to the South African Border War, with a particular focus on conscientious objection and the role of chaplains.
- ‘Faith in times of turmoil: Narratives of the changes in personal faith experienced by South African Christians as a result of their involvement during the South African Border War’, is forthcoming in *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* (2024/25). This paper draws on personal narratives to examine how involvement in the Border War reshaped the faith of South Africans.

In terms of conference participation, Dr Pienaar presented her research at high-profile gatherings. At the Encountering Mary, Mother of Jesus, in South Africa Conference held at the UFS in June 2024, she delivered a paper titled ‘Maternal archetypes: An investigation of perspectives of Mary, Mother of Jesus, as a framework for understanding the development of the Afrikaner Volksmoeder in South African history’.



Later in the year, she presented ‘Faith in Times of Turmoil: Narratives of the Changes in Personal Faith Experienced by South African Christians as a Result of Their Involvement during the South African Border War’ at the Church History Society of Southern Africa Conference, hosted by Great Zimbabwe University in August 2024.

In addition to these outputs, she is in the process of transforming her PhD thesis, ‘The missionary women of the Huguenot Seminary: A case study in vocational formation through education’, into an academic monograph. This book will provide an in-depth exploration of the training and missionary work of women educated at the Huguenot Seminary during its first year of operation in the late 19th century, while engaging contemporary perspectives on gender roles and decolonial history. The manuscript is progressing well and remains on track for completion in 2025.

Looking ahead, Dr Pienaar continues to expand her research portfolio. She is preparing two further articles – one focused on faith and conflict, and the other on women’s roles in historical religious disputes – which she plans to submit for publication by the end of 2024.

Alongside her academic work, Dr Pienaar plays an active role at St Paulus Lutheran Church in Bloemfontein, where she is involved in several community projects.

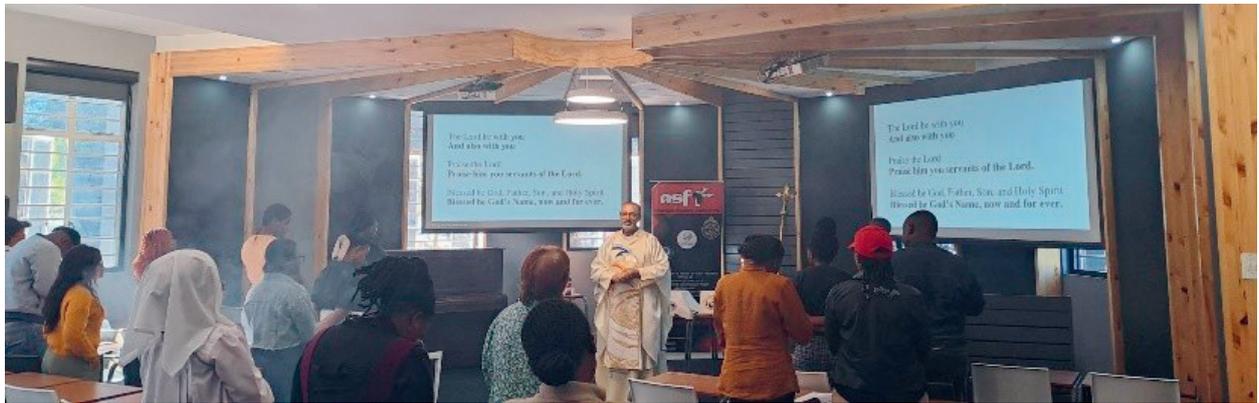


A Year in Review: Enriching Faith, Scholarship, and Community

The year 2024 has been a remarkable one for the Department of Practical and Missional Theology. Our commitment to impactful teaching, rigorous research, and community engagement has been strengthened through the collaborative efforts of our dedicated faculty and department members. This report offers a comprehensive account of our collective achievements while also recognising the significant individual contributions that have shaped and advanced our shared mission.

Undergraduate Teaching

Our undergraduate programme flourished in 2024, with a strong emphasis on practical theological training and research development. A highlight of the year was the transformation of HMS10 into a dynamic teaching and worship space, which has become the heart of our Coram Deo events. Under the leadership of Dr Martin Laubscher, the venue now serves as a central hub for practical theological education, providing students with a dedicated environment to cultivate their preaching skills through both personal reflection and public expression. Between March and May, more than 160 sermons were delivered under his supervision, a testament to the growth and commitment of our students as they continue to master the art of preaching.



Dr Laubscher also acknowledged the vital contribution of Ms Judydy Ngwenya, fourth-year class leader and student assistant, whose leadership fostered collaboration, encouraged peer support, and upheld high standards within the HMS10 space.

Adding further depth to the chapel environment, Prof Johan Cilliers generously gifted his painting “Vulnerability” (2011). This thought-provoking piece provides an inspiring focal point for students and faculty alike, resonating deeply with the theological reflections that underpin our work and serving as a visual reminder of the humility and empathy integral to ministry.



Painting by Johan Cilliers

Alongside this, Dr Joseph Pali led several key modules, including Christian Leadership in an African Context (TPCL 1415), Grounding of Mission and Mission in Practice (TMIS 2614), and Introduction to Practical and Missional Theology (TPMT 1522). His student-centred approach integrated real-life contexts, media sources, and service-learning components. The courses focused on decolonisation and emphasised African and global leadership.

In Studies in Practical Theology and Ministry (TPTH 1724), he guided students through foundational concepts in congregational studies, pastoral care, and homiletics, inviting local pastors to contribute real-world insights. The Missiology discipline, under the leadership of Dr Daniel Andrew, also made significant strides this year, providing students with a comprehensive foundation in mission studies across all undergraduate levels. First-year BDiv and Higher Certificate students were introduced to the missional basis of the Bible, the historical development of mission, and critical themes of decolonisation and reverse mission.

This approach encouraged students to consider mission from biblical and post-colonial perspectives. In their second year, the focus shifted to ecumenical diakonia and evangelism, deepening their understanding of cross-denominational service. Third-year students engaged with the *missio Dei* and its implications for liturgy and ecology, highlighting the intersection of mission and environmental stewardship. Finally, fourth-year students examined the multi-religious context of South Africa, gaining the tools to navigate religious diversity through a missional framework.

Prof Juanita Meyer facilitated three undergraduate modules, including the Methodology course co-led with Prof Jan-Albert van den Berg, which is central to introducing students to theological research. The course demonstrates the department's leading role in establishing research foundations at the undergraduate level across all theological disciplines.

Pastoral care modules, TPAS3722 and TPAS4822, enabled students to engage in meaningful in-service learning. Collaborating with the Marthie du Plessis School and ENGO childcare homes, students facilitated narrative therapeutic workshops that supported children in developing positive narratives and theological perspectives. Upon completing of the programme, students received certificates of participation and completion (signed by the UFS and the respective partner organisations), recognising their contributions and the skills they acquired.



Marthie du Plessis Workshop, 2024



Engo Workshop, 2024

Postgraduate Teaching

Our postgraduate teaching programme saw a year of dynamic growth, focusing on practical application and advanced theological study.

Dr Joseph K. Pali contributed significantly to postgraduate education through his teaching of *Congregations: A Missional Focus on Serving the Community* (TPCS6814) and *Christian Leadership in Complex Societies* (TPCL7926). These modules provided students with advanced engagement in contextual ecclesiology, congregational identity, and leadership in response to societal challenges such as sustainable development and climate action.

Prof Juanita Meyer led the Research Methodology module for honours students, equipping them with essential research skills. Her responsibilities also encompassed the Pastoral Care and Counselling module in the structured Master of Theology (MTh) programme, which included an intensive two-day workshop at Aurora Rehabilitation Centre. During the workshop, students facilitated Bible studies with in-patients and completed an assessment on substance use and abuse, resulting in certification from SANCA Aurora and the UFS.



Aurora MTh Group, 2024

The Postgraduate Diploma (PGDip) in Theology programme, coordinated by Dr Martin Laubscher, featured an Ecumenical Tour to the Eastern Free State, giving students hands-on exposure to theology in practice. The tour not only deepened their understanding of missional work but also broadened their engagement with local communities, enriching their learning experience beyond the classroom.

Dr Daniel Andrew supervised students in both the Honours and PGDip programmes, with a particular focus on congregational leadership, decolonial mission, and missional diakonia. His mentorship enabled students to pursue meaningful research and translate their learning into real-world theological applications.

Across the department, 25 PhD students received supervision, three of whom submitted their theses in 2024, along with five research master's students, 11 structured master's, and three Honours reports. In total, 44 postgraduate students were supervised during the year, clearly demonstrating the department's commitment to advancing the university's Vision 130 strategy

Engaged Scholarship: Research

Our faculty engaged in a wide range of research activities, reflecting both the depth and diversity of practical and missional theological inquiry.

Dr Martin Laubscher was granted research leave to work on two projects, “Belhar Blues” and “Boesak’s Preaching Life”, both exploring themes of justice, peace, and reconciliation. During this time, he was elected as an International Board Member and Secretary of the Societas Homiletica Conference in Groningen, extending the department’s influence on the global stage. He also contributed to national and international conferences, including as a keynote speaker at the Second African Homiletics Society Conference, where he explored Allan Boesak’s contributions to African Christian preaching and the decolonisation of theology. Dr Daniel Andrew has been actively engaged in research and international collaboration, contributing significantly to missional and ecumenical studies. His current work examines reverse mission and diakonia in partnership with scholars from institutions such as UFS, UWC, and VID Specialized University, while also exploring the role of UWC in shaping ecumenism in South Africa. In addition, he is investigating the intersections between religious and political agency and their impact on the *missio Dei*, analysing how these dynamics shape mission practice in complex societies.

On the global stage, Dr Andrew attended the Nicaea Conference of the Bossey Institute in Geneva in November, where he delivered a paper and engaged with an international community of theologians. Earlier in the year, he participated in the Missions Conference with his colleague Nico, sharing significant data on global mission trends and presenting his research on evangelism. These contributions highlight Dr Andrew’s dedication to advancing the discourse on mission, ecumenism, and the intersection of theology with social issues.

Prof Juanita Meyer attended the International Society for Pastoral Theology meeting in New Brunswick, New Jersey, United States of America (USA), establishing valuable connections for future collaborations.

Dr Joseph Pali made substantial contributions to departmental growth, advancing programme initiatives and strengthening both research and education. His leadership in mission-in-practice and Christian leadership has significantly expanded the department’s programme offerings. He also produced notable publications, including ‘Role of

active citizenship in the midst of increasing societal challenges in South Africa’ in *Missionalia*, and ‘Markers and tools to facilitate decolonisation of theological education in Africa’ in *Religions*. Dr Pali’s scholarly engagements included presentations at an international conference in Germany, where he examined the role of congregations in reforming power structures, and at the IAMS conference in Stellenbosch, where he explored mission as vulnerability in township congregations. His national presentations addressed themes such as the church and littering and women and leadership in the URCSA.

Prof Jan-Albert van den Berg undertook a dedicated research sabbatical from January to June (2024). During this period, he completed a research visit to Princeton University in the USA, engaging with scholars and consulting resources that enriched his studies. He also attended the American Academy of Religion’s Annual Meeting in San Diego, California, in November 2024, where he presented his findings and took part in scholarly discussions. These activities have significantly advanced his ongoing work in (auto)biographical pastoral theological reflection. As an outcome, he published an article titled ‘Finding rhythm within a polyphonic (auto)biographical pastoral reflection’ in *Acta Theologica*, offering a distinctive perspective on personal narrative within pastoral care. As Prof Kobus Schoeman approaches retirement at the end of 2024, the Department of Practical and Missional Theology bids farewell to a distinguished scholar and expert in theological empirical data methodologies and congregation studies. His work has significantly shaped our understanding of congregational vitality and leadership, leaving a lasting legacy that will influence future research and practice in practical theology.

Prof Schoeman’s most recent research project, *Congregational Ministry and Leadership – Exploring Vitality (2023–2025)*, has been undertaken in collaboration with Dr Joseph K. Pali. This study explores the critical role of congregations as faith communities and examines how leadership fosters both spiritual and social capital within society. Employing a revised National Church Life Survey (NCLS) methodology, the project investigates the defining qualities of healthy congregations – including internal, inspirational, and outward attributes – and their potential to serve as builders of social cohesion.

Now in its third wave (2014–2015, 2018–2020, and 2023–2025), this research extends across mainline, township, and, more recently, diverse denominational congregations – including African Initiates Churches

[AICs], Charismatic/Pentecostal, and mainline – across at least six Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries. It employs a mixed-methods approach, combining surveys and in-depth interviews with congregational members and leaders to generate insights into the functioning and ministry of these communities. The findings are expected to contribute to a contextual, missional ecclesiology that recognises faith communities as transformative agents within their societies.

Prof Schoeman's recent publications in leading academic journals reflect his commitment to practical, mission-oriented theology. In addition to these publications, he has presented papers at international conferences, including the ISSR 37th Conference in Taipei (2023), where he addressed congregational transformation amid the pandemic, and the ISERT Conference on Empirical Theology and Postcolonial Theory in Germany (2024), where he explored the theme of inclusive congregations.

As he concludes his academic career, the department honours Prof Schoeman as a mentor and scholar whose dedication to advancing congregation studies and practical theology has left a lasting impact. While his expertise and guidance will be greatly missed, his legacy in congregation vitality research will continue to shape and inspire the field for years to come.

Research Fellows

The department's carefully selected Research Fellows have contributed to a range of publications, while staff members regularly serve as external examiners for postgraduate students at other universities and review academic articles for scholarly journals.

Engaged Scholarship: Community Involvement

Our department is widely recognised for its active engagement with the broader community, enriching both academic and public spheres.

Dr Martin Laubscher conducted and published an interview with Sanggu Yang in *Acta Theologica* and contributed insightful book reviews and homiletical aids, offering valuable theological resources that serve a broad and diverse audience. Similarly, Prof Meyer conducted an interview with the renowned South African pastoral theologian, Prof Julian Müller, for publication in *Acta Theologica* (June 2024). From the PGDip programme, Dr Laubscher also organised the well-established Ecumenical Tour for PGDip students and remained actively engaged throughout the year in substantive theological scholarship by conducting interviews with theologians, writing book reviews, and developing homiletical aids.

Our Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) colleagues are frequently invited to lead worship services at congregations in and around Bloemfontein. Prof Meyer was invited to speak at a Dames Tee at DRC Estoire, where she engaged with and served the local women's faith community. She also serves on the UFS Senate Research Committee, helping to uphold the department's commitment to excellence and integrity

in research ethics.

Dr Joseph Pali engaged in community-focused initiatives, facilitating educational events and cultivating partnerships with local pastors to translate practical theological insights into lived practice. His public engagements demonstrated a sustained commitment to active citizenship and leadership within township communities.

Dr Andrew has been actively involved in the WCC's Commission on Faith and Order, where he attended his first in-person meeting in Indonesia.

As the Faculty Research Committee Chair, Prof Juanita Meyer coordinated the faculty's Annual Publication Fair in October 2024, which has become a landmark event showcasing the faculty's research initiatives and connecting staff and students with key university stakeholders. *Acta Theologica*, Christian Literature Fund (CLF), the Postgraduate School, and the UFS Sasol Library were among the featured exhibitors, fostering an environment of networking, collaboration, and academic growth. This event now serves as a platform for increasing research visibility and supporting our faculty's publishing efforts.

Throughout the year, our staff served on various committees at both faculty and institutional levels, reflecting a strong commitment to holistic academic initiatives.

The faculty committees include:

- Faculty Board and Staff Committees
- Faculty of Theology and Religion's Research Committee
- Teaching and Learning Committee
- Postgraduate Examinations Committee
- The Bursary Committee of the Faculty
- Academic Committee
- Faculty Management Committee
- Faculty Financial Committee
- UFS Community Outreach and Public Engagement Scholarship Committee (Copesco)
- Faculty Engaged Scholarship Committee
- Editorial Board Acta Theologica
- Editorial Board UFS Theological Explorations

The institutional committees include:

- Senate Members (UFS)
- Senate Research Committee
- General Human Research Ethics Committee (GHREC)
- Doctoral Degrees Committee
- Senate Conference Organising Committee (2023–2024)
- Educational Technology and Learning Spaces Committee (ETLS) Committee
- UFS Employment Equity Committee





Undergraduate Teaching

Despite the many changes faced by the department this year, we remain extremely proud of the dedication and hard work of our team. Particular recognition is due to Dr Mokhutso, who led the department with great fortitude during the first half of the year. The recently submitted undergraduate marks, with an improved overall pass rate, are a testament to this. The academic year began with a firm commitment to Vision 130 and, with this in mind, we were intentional about advancing our strategies of decolonisation, contextualisation, and Africanisation within our curriculum.

To achieve this, we ensure that our study guides, teaching materials, and classrooms reflect the African context and its issues. For example, in modules such as Lived Religions; Contemporary Expressions of Religiosity in Africa (TRER1524); and African Traditional Religion and Christianity (TTRC2624), we have included materials and topics grounded in the African context.

In our teaching, we also moved away from traditional lectures to a range of innovative methods, such as flipped classrooms and blended learning supported by online tools. This approach increased students' participation and developed their cognitive and analytical skills.

Postgraduate Teaching

Under the guidance of Dr Mokhutso, two female students are preparing to submit their master's mini-theses. Given the low number of female postgraduates across theology disciplines, this is commendable. In addition, several female candidates have expressed interest and are in the process of finalising their PhD applications. On a brighter note, despite some challenges, Mr Thabiso Khoeli successfully submitted his PhD, and we look forward to celebrating his achievement at graduation.

With Prof Dube's arrival, the department strengthened its postgraduate supervision by increasing consultation time with both master's and PhD students. True to the proverb "iron sharpens iron", co-supervision has become the norm, aimed at improving both the number of postgraduate students and the overall quality of our graduates.

We also introduced monthly postgraduate seminars, where selected students present their research and receive feedback from academic staff and peers. This initiative has been very well received, as it creates a supportive space for students to share their research, insights, and challenges. Importantly, it has had a direct impact on postgraduate throughput and the quality of research produced. During our last session, two of our PhD students presented their work and received valuable feedback from our postdoctoral researchers, Dr Humbe and Dr Masengwe. The subsequent discussions were friendly, collaborative, and collegial. We are deeply grateful to both Dr Humbe and Dr Masengwe for their support in teaching and their valuable contributions to the department's research output.

Staffing

The department has three full-time staff members: Prof Dube, Dr Mokhutso, and Mrs Ellis, fondly known as "our Mom". We are especially grateful to Mrs Ellis, whose experience and dedication ensure the smooth running of our daily operations – without her, we would truly be in proverbial darkness. Dr Mokhutso has also been a valuable asset, particularly in matters related to teaching.

We further extend our heartfelt gratitude to Mr John de Victor and Mr Thabiso Khoeli, who have served as teaching assistants over the past year, making important contributions to both our academic programmes and student support.

Research Activities

On 24 July 2024, Prof Hendrik Pieterse of Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary presented a paper on the theme 'Intercultural Theology as Ecumenical Theology'. Earlier in the year, on 20 March 2024, Dr Mokhutso participated in a Human Rights Celebration in collaboration with the Humanities. The theme of the event was 'Exploring the Interplay of Theology and Humanities in Shaping a 30-year Democracy in South Africa: Towards a Just and Inclusive Society', where he presented a paper titled 'Religion & democracy: Interactions, tensions, possibilities'.

From 19 to 21 May, Dr Mokhutso also took part in the TSSA conference, held at the University of Pretoria. This

gathering brought together both local and international scholars, providing an enriching platform for collaboration and scholarly exchange. At this event, he presented a paper titled 'Ubuntu: An antidote to the service delivery crisis and political instability in South Africa'.

Looking ahead, we are in the process of organising similar research activities for the coming year.

Public and International Engagements

As the year draws to a close, we take pride in the wide range of public academic engagements undertaken by our colleagues. A key highlight was Dr Mokhutso's participation in the inter-religious forum hosted by the University of Pretoria. Building on this momentum, preparations are already under way to host a similar event within our department next year.

In addition, on 23 August, Dr Mokhutso served as the guest speaker at Phahameng Primary School in Bloemfontein for the school's Career Day.



#Phahameng Primary School @ the inter-religious week

In recent weeks, we have welcomed delegates from various religious organisations. Of particular significance was the constructive discussions held with African Hidden Voices, a Johannesburg-based organisation that engages in and publishes research on African spirituality and maintains strong international links. We are finalising a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with them and look forward to collaborating in ways that will enrich both our research and our teaching.



African Hidden voices

Plans are also under way to launch the Ancestor Day celebrations, scheduled to coincide with the African numerological day on 8 and 9 May. If successful, this event will bring together a wide range of religious and cultural practitioners to our faculty. In addition, we have engaged in constructive conversations with representatives from the Church of Scientology and the Bahá'í Faith, both of whom have expressed eagerness to collaborate with us.

In conclusion, we are proud of this year's achievements and look ahead to the coming year with great hope and excitement.



Scientology





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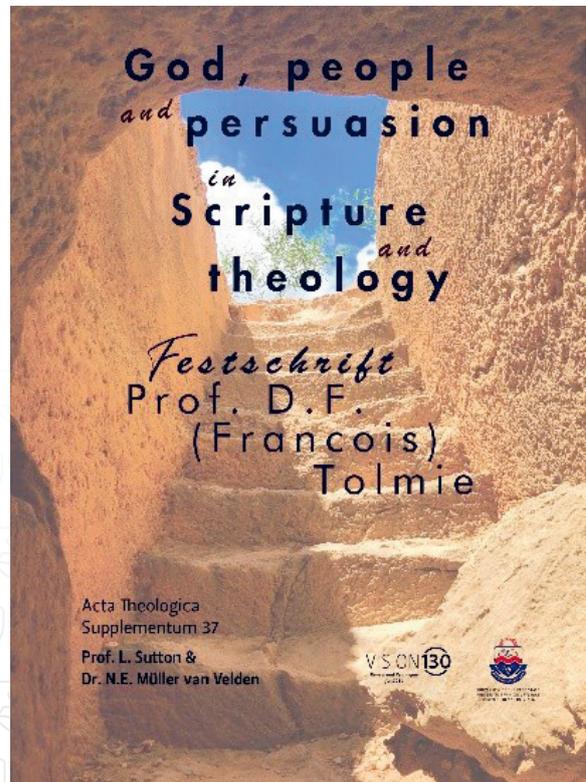
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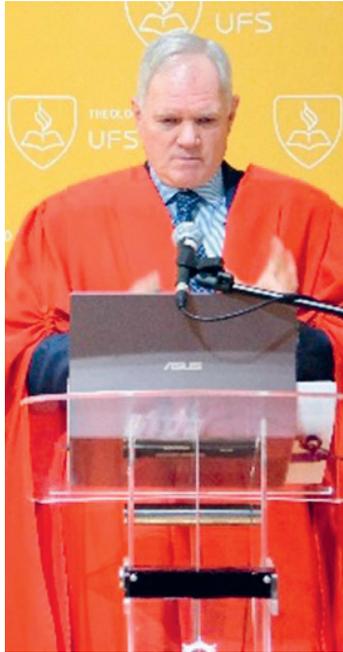
The Department of Old and New Testament Studies, (front, from left) Ms Marina van Biljon and Prof Lodewyk Sutton; (back, from left) Dr Annéli Machin and Dr Nina Müller van Velden

The Department of Old and New Testament Studies had a productive academic year, participating in in-person classes, public lectures, conferences, and both local and international travel for research. Farewell was also part of the year as Prof Francois Tolmie retired at the end of July 2024. His many years of service were acknowledged at his valedictory lecture on 12 June 2024, which included a beautiful function and the presentation of a Festschrift. The Festschrift, titled ‘God, people, and persuasion in Scripture and theology’, was edited by Prof Sutton and Dr Müller van Velden.

Professor Tolmie is widely regarded as the historical memory of the faculty, having dedicated his life to this institution – first as a student and subsequently as a Professor of New Testament Studies. In the later years of his career, he also held the position of Dean of the Faculty of Theology and Religion and served for many years as the Head of the Department of Old and New Testament Studies. He is renowned for his exceptional editorial skills, characterised by a meticulous focus on detail and precision. Internationally, he is esteemed as both a Johannine and a Pauline scholar, a distinction that few scholars can claim. Those who are acquainted with him attest to his practice of treating individuals with the utmost respect, noting that it is hard to find a more humble person.



In recent weeks, we have welcomed delegates from various religious organisations. Of particular significance was the constructive discussions held with African Hidden Voices, a Johannesburg-based organisation that engages in and publishes research on African spirituality and maintains strong international links. We are finalising a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with them and look forward to collaborating in ways that will enrich both our research and our teaching.



Prof Tolmie delivering his valedictory lecture



The Department of Old and New Testament Studies at Prof Tolmie's valedictory lecture

The department was pleased to welcome Dr Slindile Thabede as a new postdoctoral researcher this year. She previously held a postdoctoral fellowship at Stellenbosch University and specialises broadly in gender studies in the Old Testament. She is currently conducting research for the department's DHET-funded project, 'Embodiment and Ancient Texts'.



Dr Slindile Thabede

The department's vision for the period 2021–2026 remains:

In the Department of Old and New Testament Studies, we focus on studying and interpreting the Bible (the Old and New Testaments) and Early Christian Greek Literature. The literature (texts) is studied intensively, in its original languages and sources, applying its message contextually (authors then and readers now), responsibly and ethically to our current situation at the Faculty of Theology and Religion in Africa and globally, through internationally recognised research, teaching and learning that develop globally competitive graduates while also serving the communities of faith

A hybrid approach to teaching and learning was implemented throughout the academic year, combining face-to-face and online instruction, alongside continuous assessment across three disciplines: Old Testament, New Testament, and New Testament Greek and Early Christian Greek Literature. We extend our gratitude to the part-time lecturers in the department: Ms Hermiene Ferreira, Rev De la Harpe le Roux, Dr Andries Hoffman, Dr Erika Senekal-Van der Berg, Dr Riaan Stander, and Prof Fanie Snyman.

The department's academic staff is also responsible for acting as supervisors for multiple postgraduate qualifications, including honours, master's, and PhD candidates. A new Short Learning Programme (SLP) to introduce learners to biblical interpretation (hermeneutics) has also been completed, titled 'Interpreting the Bible: A Historical Overview and a Practical Execution' (TBIB1602s).

Departmental staff participated in several training sessions during the year. Ms Van Biljon, the departmental manager, along with all academic staff members within the department, undertook training on Blackboard Collaborate.

Prof Sutton completed the following training courses:

- Academic Staff Orientation (Faculty of Theology and Religion, UFS), 6 February 2024.
- Fruits – Feedback & Assessment Webinar (UFS), 19 March 2024.
- Study Guide Session Theology and Religion (UFS), 28 May 2024.
- What every new reviewer should know about peer review, South African Journal of Science, 9 September 2024.
- Foundations of Leadership (FoL 1), Higher Education Leadership and Management (HELM), 16–18 October 2024.
- 2024 Annual Postgraduate Progress Report: How to Complete Session (UFS), 8 November 2024.
- BI Platform for Financial Reporting training (UFS), 12 November 2024.

Dr Müller van Velden completed the following training courses:

- Academic Staff Orientation (Faculty of Theology and Religion, UFS), 6 February 2024.
- Graduate Attribute: Digital Skills Mapping (UFS), 17 May 2024.
- IT Training on venue use TLG21/120 (UFS), 27 May 2024.
- Futures Literacy Lab Workshop: The Future of Theological Training in Africa. Hosted by Huguenot College, Wellington, South Africa, 27–30 September 2024.

Dr Machin completed the following training courses:

- Academic Staff Orientation (Faculty of Theology and Religion, UFS), 6 February 2024.
- Dr Steve Harris – Surviving to Thriving (UFS), 1 March 2024.
- Marion Scher – Beat the Bully (Mental Health Week Event) (UFS), 15 May 2024.
- Graduate Attributes: Digital Skills Mapping (UFS), 17 May 2024.
- IT Training on Venue Use TLG21/120 (UFS), 27 May 2024.
- Introductory Training Session: New Library Discovery System “Primo” by Exlibris (UFS), 11 September 2024.
- Prof Frans Maruma – Relationship between Burnout and Resilience (UFS), 15 October 2024.
- October Cybersecurity Assignment (UFS), 25 October 2024.

Members of the department hold a variety of leading roles in academic societies and on editorial boards:

- Prof Sutton serves as Treasurer of the Southern African Society for Near Eastern Studies (SASNES). He is also a member of the editorial boards of *Acta Theologica*, *Journal for Semitics (JSEM)*, and *UFS Theological Explorations* (book series), for which he is the series editor. In addition, he is an advisory member of the International Society of Biblical Literature (ISBL) Group: Place, Space, and Identity in the Ancient Mediterranean World.
- Prof Tolmie is a board member of Engo. Until the end of July, he also served on the editorial boards of *Acta Theologica* and *UFS Theological Explorations*. He currently serves on the boards of the *Colloquium Ioanneum* and the *Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas (SNTS)*.
- Dr Müller van Velden serves on the editorial boards of *Neotestamentica* and *Acta Theologica*. She is Chairperson of the Executive Committee of the New Testament Society of Southern Africa (NTSSA) and serves on the Steering Committee of both the Synoptic Gospels Programme Unit and the Bible and Empire Programme Unit for the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL). She is also a member of the Sesquicentennial Task Force for SBL.
- Dr Machin serves on the editorial board of *UFS Theological Explorations*.

Beyond these leadership roles, department members are regularly involved in national and international peer reviewing of articles, as well as internal and external moderation and examinations.

The department produced a number of publications during the year.

- Sutton, L., 2024, 'A chiastic opus to the Creator of heaven and earth – earth and heaven: A spatial reading of Psalm 148 and Colossians 1:15-20', *Acta Theologica*, suppl. 37, 56–76.
- Ferreira, H., & Sutton, L., 2024, 'Ecological hermeneutics as a current trend in Old Testament research in the Book of Psalms', *Acta Theologica* 44(1), 306–321.
- Müller van Velden, N.E., 2024, 'Memory, Jesus, and Mary Magdalene: Whose memory matters?' *Acta Theologica*, suppl. 37, 121–144.
- Sutton, L., & Müller van Velden, N.E., 2024, 'Festschrift for Prof. D.F. (Francois) Tolmie God, people, and persuasion in Scripture and theology', *Acta Theologica*, suppl. 37.

Department members also contributed actively to academic discourse throughout the year by delivering papers at a range of national and international conferences.

Prof Sutton presented the following papers:

- 'Mothers and dead children: A social-spatial reading of the narratives of Naomi, a Jewish mother, and Mary', at the Encountering Mary, Mother of Jesus, in South Africa Christian Theological Reflections on Mary: Past and Present Conference, UFS, South Africa, 4–6 June 2024.
- 'A suffering body communicates the desecration of core beliefs. Reading Psalm 69 from a spatial bodily perspective', at the European Association of Biblical Studies (EABS) Annual Conference, Sofia University, Bulgaria, 15–18 July 2024.
- 'Remembering 2 Maccabees for today: A spatially sensitive reading of the moral injury suffered', at the ISBL, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, the Netherlands, 28 July–1 August 2024.
- 'Reading Psalms 146-150 in relation to Inclusivity and Exclusivity', at the Old Testament Society of Southern Africa (OTSSA) Annual Conference, Unisa, 10–13 September 2024.
- 'Book of Maccabees: A spatially sensitive reading of the moral injury suffered, creating a new lived experience', at the SBL Annual Meeting, programme unit Space, Place, and Lived Experience in Antiquity, San Diego, California, USA, 23–26 November 2024.



Prof Sutton delivering his paper at OTSSA



Prof Tolmie presented the following paper:

- 'Born of a woman: Making sense of a phrase in Galatians 4', at the Encountering Mary, Mother of Jesus, in South Africa Christian Theological Reflections on Mary: Past and Present Conference, UFS, South Africa, 4–6 June 2024.

Dr Müller van Velden presented the following papers:

- 'A bird's eye view of the Acts of the Apostles: Birthing the early church in violence?', at the annual conference of the New Testament Society of Southern Africa, Wellington, South Africa, 9–12 April 2024.
- 'Mary, mother of Jesus as depicted in 'The Chosen': A meeting-point of texts, traditions, and screens', at the Encountering Mary, Mother of Jesus, in South Africa Christian Theological Reflections on Mary: Past and Present Conference, UFS, South Africa, 4–6 June 2024.
- 'Metaphorical birth-language in the Gospel of John: Revisiting the maternal body', at the European Association of Biblical Studies (EABS) Annual Conference, Sofia University, Bulgaria, 15–18 July 2024.
- 'Metaphorical birth-language in the Gospel of John: Revisiting the maternal body', at the New Testament Symposium, ETF Leuven, Belgium, 24 July 2024.
- 'Mary, mother of Jesus, in the Synoptic Gospels and beyond', at the ISBL, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, the Netherlands, 28 July–1 August 2024.



Dr Müller van Velden and Prof Sutton presenting their papers at the EABS

Researchers in the department also attended several other academic conferences in 2024.

Prof Sutton attended:

- Society for Old Testament Study (SOTS), Winter online conference, 4 January 2024.
- Encountering Mary, Mother of Jesus, in South Africa Christian Theological Reflections on Mary: Past and Present, UFS, South Africa, 4–6 June 2024.
- European Association of Biblical Studies (EABS) Annual Conference, Sofia University, Bulgaria, 15–18 July 2024.
- Joint Meeting of SOTS, OTW, and OTSSA 2024 – Intertextuality as Reinterpreting Texts, ‘s-Hertogenbosch, the Netherlands, 24–26 July 2024.
- ISBL, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, the Netherlands, 28 July–1 August 2024.
- SANES Annual Conference 2024, Unisa, 10–13 September 2024.
- OTSSA Annual Conference 2024, Unisa, 10–13 September 2024.
- SBL Annual Meeting programme unit Space, Place, and Lived Experience in Antiquity, San Diego, California, USA, 23–26 November 2024.

Prof Tolmie attended:

- Encountering Mary, Mother of Jesus, in South Africa Christian Theological Reflections on Mary: Past and Present, UFS, South Africa, 4–6 June 2024.

Dr Müller van Velden attended:

- The annual conference of the New Testament Society of Southern Africa, April, Wellington, South Africa.
- Encountering Mary, Mother of Jesus, in South Africa Christian Theological Reflections on Mary: Past and Present, UFS, South Africa, 4–6 June 2024.
- European Association of Biblical Studies (EABS) Annual Conference, Sofia University, Bulgaria, 15–18 July 2024.
- New Testament Symposium (ETF Leuven), 24 July 2024, Belgium.
- ISBL, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, the Netherlands, 28 July–1 August 2024.
- Mary as Inter-Religious Symbol – Annual Inter-Religious Conference, Oxford for Religion, Public Life, and Security in Africa, September, University of Pretoria, Pretoria.

New Testament Symposium

SHAPING RESEARCH THROUGH DIALOGUE

**24 July 2024
@ ETF Leuven**

Join us for a dynamic dialogue on cutting-edge research in New Testament Studies

Engage with leading experts in the field in a conversational style

Explore innovative approaches to studying the New Testament, including Social Identity Complexity Theory; Cognitive linguistics; Genre; Ecology; Gender criticism

Experience the vibrant city of Leuven, Belgium, with its charming historical sites and relaxed social atmosphere



Enquiries:
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At the International Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature (ISBL): (from left to right) Prof Sutton, Dr Müller van Velden, Ms Hermiene Ferreira (Old Testament PhD candidate), and Dr Slindile Thabede (ONS postdoctoral fellow)

Prof Sutton served as Acting Dean for the Faculty of Theology and Religion from 1 February to 31 March 2024, overseeing the transition between the Acting Dean and the newly appointed Dean, Prof John Klaasen. During the year he was also awarded a University Capacity Development Grant (UCDG) for a cluster project titled 'Embodiment and Ancient Texts'. Co-led with Dr Müller van Velden, the project seeks to promote internal multidisciplinary dialogue, engagement, and research on embodiment.

As part of their national and international engagements, members of the department undertook a research visit to the Wright Library at Princeton Theological Seminary, USA, in January



Research visit to the Wright Library at the Princeton Theological Seminary, USA

Prof Sutton is a member of the Future Generation Professoriate Group (FGP) at UFS.

In July, Dr Müller van Velden undertook a further research visit to ETF Leuven in Belgium. She is also a participant in the Research Excellence Accelerator Programme (REAP) and the Academic Leadership Programme (ALP) 2024/2025 at UFS. In addition, she co-organised the conference 'Violent Texts, Violent Contexts, Violent Interpretations: Annual Meeting, New Testament Society of Southern Africa (NTSSA)', held in collaboration with the Gender and Sexuality Subgroup, NTSSA, and Huguenot College from 9–12 April 2024 in Wellington, South Africa.



ANNUAL CONFERENCE

Programme

9-12 APRIL 2024

Andrew Murray Centre for Spirituality

Wellington, Western Cape, South Africa

Violent Texts
Violent Interpretations
Violent Contexts

Hosted by
The Gender and Sexuality Subgroup
and in collaboration with



huguenote kollege

Dr Müller van Velden organised the conference Encountering Mary, Mother of Jesus, in South Africa Christian Theological Reflections on Mary: Past and Present, hosted by the department at UFS from 4–6 June 2024.



FACULTY OF THEOLOGY AND RELIGION
UNIVERSITY OF THE FREE STATE

INTERDISCIPLINARY CONFERENCE

HOSTED BY THE DEPARTMENT OF OLD AND NEW TESTAMENT STUDIES

**Encountering Mary, Mother of Jesus, in South Africa
Christian Theological Reflections on Mary:
Past and Present**

PROGRAMME

4–6 JUNE 2024

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FACULTY OF THEOLOGY AND RELIGION

CALL FOR PAPERS
INTERDISCIPLINARY CONFERENCE

**Encountering Mary, Mother of Jesus, in South Africa
Christian Theological Reflections on Mary: Past and Present**

4–6 JUNE 2024

UNIVERSITY OF THE FREE STATE – BLOEMFONTEIN CAMPUS
HOSTED BY THE DEPARTMENT OF OLD AND NEW TESTAMENT STUDIES

PROJECT BACKGROUND

Mary, mother of Jesus, has throughout Christian history played an important role in the formation of Christianity as it is understood today. In the New Testament writings, Mary forms part of the beginning and end of Jesus' life, embracing his earthly life in the Gospel of Luke and his ministry in the Gospel of John. Mary at the Annunciation becomes the Mother of the Word and the bearer of the body of Christ, which in the Fourth Gospel she is traditionally understood to be an integral part to the start of his ministry and subject to Christ's crucifixion. Orthodox and Catholicism claim that one cannot fully understand Christ without knowing about Mary, whereas Protestantism and especially Reformed groupings in many contexts – to this day – appear to strongly react or even resist deep engagement with Mary. Aside from her role as virgin mother during the birth of Jesus Christ, it would appear as if Mary has been removed from the right hand of Christ, and consequently, with her the role women have played in the history of Christianity.

Building on Scriptural foundations, the theology of Mary becomes much more complex given the depth of reflection she has inspired: she is traditionally mother and metaphorical bride, yet also visionary, disciple, witness, leader, and comforter. In those various roles Mary has influenced not only early Christian traditions and doctrines; she continues to play a vital role in the lives of millions of Christians around the world up to this day. Despite these varied positions within the Christian tradition, Mary remains an intriguing figure and symbol also outside of the Christian tradition, as popular culture continues to demonstrate.

INTERESTED?

Please submit a title and abstract of no more than 250 words, a short biography, institutional affiliation, and contact details to theologyevents@ufs.ac.za by 15 February 2024.

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Building on Scriptural foundations, the theology of Mary becomes much more complex given the depth of reflection she has inspired: she is traditionally mother and metaphorical bride, yet also visionary, disciple, witness, leader, and comforter. In those various roles Mary has influenced not only early Christian traditions and doctrines; she continues to play a vital role in the lives of millions of Christians around the world up to this day. Despite these varied positions within the Christian tradition, Mary remains an intriguing figure and symbol also outside of the Christian tradition, as popular culture continues to demonstrate.

CURIIOUS TO EXPLORE

- This conference is particularly interested in Mary's place in the South African Christian landscape. As organisers, we are curious about questions such as:
- When and where does Mary feature in Christian faith communities in South Africa?
 - How was and is she portrayed in Christian theology and doctrines?
 - How is she represented in spaces where faith formation takes place (e.g. catechism)?
 - What language, imagery and content surrounds Mary – inside and outside of Christian self-neg?

JOIN THE CONVERSATION

We therefore invite papers that explore Mary, mother of Jesus, in varied ways, which may enrich an understanding of her within a South African context. The welcome proposals from a wide range of theological and related disciplines (such as systematic theology, ethics, biblical studies, church history, homiletics, liturgy studies, pastoral care, youth ministry, visual arts, and archaeology) that speak to understandings of Mary in Christianity – past, present, and future. We aim to facilitate discussions between different disciplines and welcome both established and emerging scholars.

The conference will take place from 4 to 6 June 2024 at the Bloemfontein campus of the University of the Free State.

CONFERENCE ORGANISERS

Dr Nina Müller van Velden
nmullervanvelden@ufs.ac.za

Ninako Oberholzer
ninako.oberholzer@ufs.ac.za



Speakers of the Encountering Mary, Mother of Jesus, in South Africa Christian Theological Reflections on Mary: Past and Present Conference

Members of the department remain actively engaged in public life, regularly preaching across churches in the Bloemfontein area. Both Prof Sutton and Dr Müller van Velden also contribute nationally through their membership of the DRC General Synod's Committee on Translation and Interpretation of the Bible (ATBV), where Prof Sutton serves as secretary and Dr Müller van Velden as a member.

Prof Sutton's contributions include:

- Presented Bible schools for the DRC Universitas.
- Participated in a four-part radio series on "Konflik in die Midde-Ooste deur die eeue" for Radio Sonder Grense (RSG).
- <https://www.rsg.co.za/rsg/omny/konflik-in-die-midde-ooste-deur-die-eeue-deel-1/>
- <https://www.rsg.co.za/rsg/omny/konflik-in-die-midde-ooste-deur-die-eeue-deel-2/>
- <https://www.rsg.co.za/rsg/omny/konflik-in-die-midde-ooste-deur-die-eeue-deel-3/>
- <https://www.rsg.co.za/rsg/omny/konflik-in-die-midde-ooste-deur-die-eeue-deel-4/>
- Presented a programme on Norse mythology: "Só glo ek die verhaal van godsdiens" (9 Junie 2024). <https://www.rsg.co.za/rsg/omny/so-glo-ek-die-verhaal-van-godsdiens-9-junie-2024/>
- Contributed to "Die dae van die week 2" (September 2024). <https://www.rsg.co.za/rsg/omny/die-dae-van-die-week/>

Dr Müller van Velden's contributions include:

- Co-presenter at the Women's Ministry Synodical Camp, Dutch Reformed Church Free State Synod (February 2024).
- Presenter at the "Bron" Bible School, Kopanong Student Ministry.
- Member of the Dutch Reformed Church Free State Synod Curatorium Executive Committee.
- Member of the Dutch Reformed Church General Synod Curatorium Executive Committee.
- Chair of the Dutch Reformed Church General Synod Lecturers Council.
- Chair of the Dutch Reformed Church Free State Synod Lecturers Council.
- Coordinator of the Workgroup of the General Synod Task Team for Doctrinal and Ethical Matters, tasked with compiling a report on reproductive health for the DRC General Synod.
- Contributed a sermon study to the Word and Worship 2024/2025 lectionary publication

Dr Machin's contributions include:

- An article titled 'Grieks is nie Grieks nie', published in Vrypos (DRC Free State) 2024, 22(14).



Under the guidance of Dr Müller van Velden, the department launched the Thursdays in Black campaign within the faculty. This global initiative, led by the WCC, seeks to raise awareness about gender-based violence and to mobilise collective action against it. As the campaign explains:

“In every country, gender-based violence is a tragic reality. This violence is frequently hidden, and victims are often silent, fearing stigma and further violence. We all have a responsibility to speak out against violence, to ensure that women and men, boys and girls, are safe from rape and violence in homes, schools, work, streets – in all places in our societies. The campaign is simple but profound. Wear black on Thursdays. Wear a pin to declare you are part of the global movement resisting attitudes and practices that permit rape and violence. Show your respect for women who are resilient in the face of injustice and violence. Encourage others to join you” (WCC, n.d.).



Department participating in the UFS Women's Day Breakfast





Office of the Dean

Authored Books:

Culpepper, R.A., *The people of the parables – Galilee in the time of Jesus*, Westminster John Knox Press.

Chapter in Books:

Klaasen, J., 'African identity, personhood and missional innovation', in H. Mbaya (ed.), *New frontiers in contemporary missiology: Southern African perspectives*, pp. 1–22, UJ Press, Auckland Park, Johannesburg.

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Historical and Constructive Theology

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Iheanacho, V.U., 'The equipoise between faith and reason in Roman Catholic intellectual tradition', in J. De Gruchy, R. Venter & C. Lombaard (eds.), *Philosophical theologies in South Africa: Genealogies, traditions, and speculations*, pp. 33–66, UJ Press, Johannesburg.

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Ullrich, C.D., 'Beyond the totality of religion: Memories of violence, finitude, and the organic body', in A. Potgieter & K.H.M. Delpont (eds.), *Experiencing God in everything and nothingness: Negativity, embodiment, and spirituality – South African perspectives*, pp. 63–77, Wipf and Stock Publishers, Eugene, OR.

Ullrich, C.D., 'The eclipse of the Body? Flesh and materiality in French phenomenology', in R.A. Klein & C.D. Ullrich (eds.), *The unthinkable body: Challenges of embodiment in religion, politics, and ethics*, Mohr Siebeck.

Journal Articles:

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Iheanacho, V.U., "'Africans and Christians": Transitioning from missionary-guided to a self-determining local church', *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 50(2), 1–24.

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Resane, K.T., 'Theological ethics expressed through Setswana proverb: Another way of decolonising theology', *In die Skriflig/In Luce Verbi* 58(1), 1–6.

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Villegas, D.L., 'Catherine of Siena on persons created in God's image: Basis for a spiritual path', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 80(1), 1–8.

Old and New Testament Studies

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Hoegen-Rohls, C.A.M., 'The reception of John 7:53-8:11 in Otfried von Weissenburg's *Liber evangeliorum* (9th century)', in A.R. Culpepper & J. Frey (eds.), *Revelation and conflict in John 7 and 8*, pp. 213–236, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen.

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- Kraus, T.J., 'Manuscripts of the apocalypse of Peter: Some crucial questions', in D.C. Maier, J. Frey & T.J. Kraus (eds.), *The apocalypse of Peter in context*, pp. 34–48, Peeters, Leuven.
- Labahn, M., 'Raum und Raumwechsel in Johannes 7–8: Johanneische Theologie in Bewegungsbildern der Erzählung und den Worten ihrer Handlungsträger', in A.R. Culpepper & J. Frey (eds.), *Revelation and conflict in John 7 and 8*, pp. 23–48, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen.
- Labahn, M., 'Becoming "new" in God's Kingdom: Spiritual transformation through beatitude in Jesus' proclamation of God's coming kingdom – A speech-act reading of Matt 5:2-12/Luke 6:20-21', in A.L.A. Hogeterp, D.F. Tolmie & J.G. van der Watt (eds.), *Spiritual transformation in the New Testament and related literature*, pp. 119–136, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen.
- Labahn, M., 'A narrow gate to the Johannine Gospel? Rethinking the relationship between the Johannine prologue (John 1:1–18) and the Gospel of John in terms of the theories of paratext and of "discourse universe"', in S.E. Porter & D.I. Yoon (eds.), *The Johannine prologue and its resonances* pp. 105–130, Brill, Leiden.
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- Lampe, P., 'Faktoren im Konstruktionsprozess biblischer Gottesvorstellungen und der Kategorienfehler, von Konstruktionen auf der epistemischen Ebene vorschnell auf ontische Realität zu schließen', in N. Brieden & J.M. Hoff (eds.), *Gott – nur ein Konstrukt?*, Verlag Herder, Freiburg im Breisgau.
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- Lampe, P., 'Spiritual transformation mirrored in Paul's letter to Philemon', in A.L.A. Hogeterp, D.F. Tolmie & J.G. van der Watt (eds.), *Spiritual transformation in the New Testament and related literature*, pp. 233–244, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen.
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