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# FOREWORD

This Supplementum reflects the challenge of integrating theory and practice in theological education and beyond. The starting point of our discussion was an international conference on “Integrating theory and praxis in theological education”, hosted by GBFE at Forum Wiedenest, near Cologne, Germany, from 25 to 26 August 2020. GBFE is a network for research and higher education in Europe ([www.gbfe.eu](http://www.gbfe.eu)). The conference partner was the University of South Africa, Pretoria ([www.unisa.ac.za](http://www.unisa.ac.za)). The occasion of the conference was the celebration of 20 years of partnership between the two institutions.

Issues and topics such as the contextuality of theology, empirical research and empirical theology, as well as the proper relation of action and reflection have been at the core of these 20 years of collaboration. We learned from each other.

It was the intention of the conference to bring together scholars from a variety of disciplines related to the Christian faith and theology, in order to reflect on issues pertinent to the relation and the integration of theory and praxis in academic research, writing and teaching.

However, the question of a genuine relationship between theory and praxis, of reflection and action is relevant beyond the collaboration of a South African University with a European network of theological institutions.

Miroslav Volf's recent manifesto on the renewal of theology, published together with Matthew Croasmun under the title *For the life of the world* (2019), contains a sobering analysis of the crisis of theology and issues an urgent call for its renewal. At the heart of the argument is

the ultimate question: What does theology contribute to life? It is a call for a “theology that makes a difference” in the world (see subtitle of the book).

It is in the framework of this larger conversation that the contributions of this volume address issues related to the integration of theory and praxis.

The theme chosen for this conference and for this publication touches on many foundational issues:

- Bridging the gap between the practice of faith and theological theory through research and teaching in theology. Critical reflections on ideals, achievements and failures.
- Understanding theology as “practical science” (*Handlungswissenschaft*). Reflections on epistemological and methodological issues.
- Research and reflection across the borders of disciplines (interdisciplinary studies). This includes both opportunities and challenges.
- The role of the Bible and the Christian tradition in contextual theologies. This includes issues of normativity and relativity.
- The opportunities and/or challenges of doing theology missionally and contextually.

The chapters of this Supplementum reflect topics presented at the conference. The authors had the opportunity to improve on their papers after receiving feedback at the conference and critical feedback from the peer-review process.

The contributions of this volume address the main topic from a number of perspectives. The introductory chapter by *Ott* addresses foundational issues of theory and practice from a supervisor’s perspective.

The ensuing five contributions explore educational aspects from various angles: *Oliver* and *Lombaard* engage with the educational challenges posed by cultural shifts towards a digital society. *Naidoo*, *Kgatle* and *Stengel* focus on the integration of practical and theoretical aspects in the educational process.

These articles, dealing with more general educational topics, are followed by contributions relating the topic to various disciplines:

- Two chapters explore the topic from the perspective of Biblical Studies (*Stenschke* and *Hagel*).
- *Barentsen*, *Kessler* and *Knecht* address themes that relate to leadership studies.

- *Schroeder's* contribution focuses on music education as part of practical theology.
- A missiological perspective is added by *Ehmann*, followed by a chapter on theological issues relative to development studies from *Kroeck*.
- Finally, *Stavnichuk's* article adds a contribution from the perspective of systematic and ecumenical studies.

The summary statements presented at the conference by the listening team (Prof. L. Kretzschmar, Unisa, and Ms M. Winter, GBFE) highlight the significance of a genuine interaction between theorising and acting, as addressed in all presentations from different angles. The conversation turned out to be particularly fruitful, because it involved experts from various cultures, educational institutions, academic disciplines and professional contexts.

We thank all authors for their contributions and hand over this special issue to a wider readership with the hope that these contributions may stimulate the ongoing search for relevant (theological) education. As an outcome of the conference, several areas could be identified and deserve further reflection and research:

- The potential for the integration of theory and practice in different educational formats such as face-to-face education or distance education.
- The need for an appropriate awareness of complexity in our analysis of the contexts, problems, and systems which theological education seeks to address – particularly as our contexts and lives are in a state of change.
- The challenge for theological teachers to develop a well-thought out, meaningful theological input that addresses both these contexts and systems, but be open-minded so as to learn from students and other colleagues and revise the content and methods of what they are teaching.
- The need for a relational style in our teaching – “the medium is the message”. Who we are speaks louder than what we say. We are part of communities; we influence them, and they influence us.
- The task to challenge and support students to be active learners, engaging with the material offered, the teachers, each other and the contexts in which they live. This enables them to grow in faith and action, contribute to the lives of others, and challenge the theological teaching of their lecturers.

- Theological educators and researchers who engage in relevant action-reflection processes are challenged to look beyond their institutions and their fields of specialisation, bearing in mind the next generation of reflecting practitioners.

Some of these insights have inspired the contributors in the revisions of their papers. The output of the conference certainly provides impulses for further research and reflection.

Our special thanks goes to Forum Wiedenest and their staff, who managed to run a hybrid conference in a perfect manner, and to *Acta Theologica* and its executive editor, Dr Lyzette Hoffman, for including these contributions in a special issue of the journal, as well as for the competent guidance in the editorial process.

May 2021

The guest editors, Bernhard Ott, Switzerland, and Volker Kessler, Germany, are members of the GBFE Board and linked to University of South Africa (Unisa) as Extraordinary Professors.