

Unveiling the Silent Narratives: A Multidimensional Analysis of the Stellenbosch University Faculty of Theology Building and its Impact on Teaching Church History

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Abstract

This article delves into the intricate history, contextual significance, and contemporary implications of the building housing the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University. Over decades, the edifice has garnered attention for its historical and architectural attributes, underscoring its role in the broader narrative of Stellenbosch, a significance predating and exemplifying colonial history. In addition to the architectural and spatial dimensions, the myths and symbols associated with the building are explored, adding layers to its complex history. The intersection of these historical elements with its current use within Stellenbosch University prompts a compelling inquiry into whether and how the structure influences teaching and research, particularly in the domain of church history. The article engages with the history of the building that houses the Stellenbosch University Faculty of Theology and attempts to find out if elements of this complex history finds expression in the different church history modules taught in its confines. The authors first work through historic and current source material that share information of the histories of the mentioned building and then work through the course content and foci of the different church history modules, attempting to find teaching links. The authors further engage with broader contextual debates related to visual redress and the contextualisation of symbols in the vicinity of the building. As such this article aims to address the pivotal question: Do the historical backdrop and current realities of the building shape the teaching of church history within its walls?

Keywords: church history; curriculum; Dutch Reformed Church; *kweekskool*; theology

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Introduction

There are many stories, architectural versions, histories, and myths associated with the building at 171 Dorp Street in Stellenbosch.¹ As is the case with many old buildings in historic towns, it also boasts an array of prominent uses linked to these historic eras and architectural versions. Aspects of the history and uses of the buildings are well documented; thus this article highlights some of the stories and histories linked to this building and its precinct.

Some of the uses of the precinct and building include a refuge for the First Nations people on the historic island which is the source of the current plot, the original Stellenbosch,² the juridical seat of the people (Drostdy) in the European settlement that became Stellenbosch, and as a prison linked to the Centre for Justice of that time. Today the building and its surrounds is best known as the Stellenbosch University (SU) Faculty of Theology, a building bequeathed by the people of Stellenbosch (1846) to the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) as part of the church's decision to start a seminary (1858/9) (Bosman 2018, 356–357). The building remains the property of the DRC.

From a historical vantage point, the building is commonly known as the *kweekskool*,³ an Afrikaans word referring to its use as a building where ministers of religion are trained (theological seminary), and it predates the establishment of a faculty of divinity or theology in the building (1963).⁴ Nel (2021) reminds us that it is traditionally accepted that the DRC theological seminary, established in 1859, was the stimulus for the establishment of the predecessor of SU, the Victoria College (Nel 2021, 222). The role and prominence of the building and its use also influenced basic and higher education in Stellenbosch and its surrounds. Although the building is still often referred to as the *kweekskool*, it is a historic depiction of the building and its story.

In his introduction to the chapter on the origins of the theological seminary, Pieter Coertzen shares six distinctive marks associated with the story of the seminary. He notes:

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- 1 In 2012, renowned South African writer André P. Brink released a slave novel with the title *Philida*. The novel tells of the life of a Cape slave who lived on a farm outside Stellenbosch (the current Solms Delta Farm) from 1820–1935. In the novel Philida runs away from her masters and is captured and imprisoned in the buildings on the precinct of the current Faculty of Theology in Dorp Street. It is uncertain whether this is indeed a true depiction of events, but it should be noted that the site also historically housed a prison. See Coertzen (2009a).
 - 2 The original Dutch name of the island, as documented by Simon van der Stel, was Wildebosch, later named Stellenbosch. See Coertzen (2009a). It is argued that the name Stellenbosch historically only referred to the original Eersterivier island on which the Faculty of Theology is currently located. For an overview of this history, see Vos (1984) and Brink (2012).
 - 3 Throughout this article the word *kweekskool* will be written in italics. The authors will make use of the term to refer to the historical phases and uses of the building.
 - 4 In the book *Stellenbosch University Buildings* (Cloete and Breedts 2018), it is shown that this building currently represents the third theological seminary, which was occupied on 16 May 1905.

(1) It was an institution that wanted to cater for both the mind and the heart. (2) It wanted to serve the Dutch culture and language. (3) It was a significant development in the field of education and was the alma mater of the later University of Stellenbosch. (4) The aim was to be an institution of reformed nature. (5) The Seminary started during a time of revival in South Africa – the teachers and curators not only supported these revivals but also encouraged it. (6) Right from the start the Seminary was part of an attempt to find answers to pressing questions in society and church. (Coertzen 2009a, 5)⁵

Stellenbosch was not the only place considered for the establishment of the DRC's theological seminary. Initially, Cape Town was considered, although the DRC Synod rejected this idea owing to their belief that it was a “den of iniquity” (Smuts 1979, 319). The offer to establish it in Paarl came too late as it was already agreed that it be housed in Stellenbosch (Smuts 1979, 319). The consortium of Stellenbosch residents lobbying for it to be in their town played a vital role in its establishment through acquiring the former Drostdy and proposing to the Synod that the historical building be of use for the Dutch–Afrikaans demographic as a *kweekskool*. This highlights the vested interest that residents of the town had in institutions based in Stellenbosch, and it can be argued that that this sense of ownership stems from this building. As such, its impact becomes clear.

The building(s) on the particular site have been built and rebuilt. This is connected to historically significant moments linked to the history of Stellenbosch, for example, devastating local fires and the needs associated with the use of the building.

Unlike the case for its history as a seminary, the Faculty of Theology today is an open faculty and various Christian ecclesial denominations currently train ministers of religion here, namely the DRC, the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) (1999/2000), the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa (UPCSA) (2002), the Anglican Church of South Africa (2012), and the Volkskerk van Afrika (2016) (Nel 2021, 225).⁶

One of the recent and most prominent engagements linked to the history expressed through the building was the Rhodes Must Fall (RMF) movement and later the Fees Must Fall (FMF) movement, where historic building names, spatial identities, art, photos on walls, and other symbols were criticised, scrutinised, and removed from university campuses in South Africa and subsequently elsewhere.⁷ SU was no exception, and the Faculty of Theology in particular was confronted during this period. Nel (2021, 226) reminds us that, on 4 April 2016, a then unknown group of students, who later referred to themselves as the Black Theological Collective, removed selected class photos with pre-identified individuals as a way to protest their “presence” in the building. Since these events, visual redress engagements followed which, among others,

5 Numbering by the original author.

6 For a brief overview of the building, the faculty, and some of the faculty's ecclesial training partners, see <http://www.sun.ac.za/english/faculty/theology/Pages/About.aspx>.

7 For an overview of FMF and RMF and their impact on university campuses and elsewhere in South Africa, see Booyens (2016) and Nettleton and Fubah (2020).

led to the contextualisation of the statues outside the building, namely those of the first South African theology lecturers, J. Murray and N. J. Hofmeyer on the one side, and the statue of Johannes du Plessis (also known as Pink Piet) on the other (Fataar 2021, 22–23).

As such, the building, its histories, and what it symbolises, have become contested, allowing for further reflection.

But the engagements and requests to bring about change in the faculty were not limited to changes, additions, and the contextualisation of symbols.⁸ The content of curricula, the programme offering, and the role and place of the faculty within SU and society at large have formed part of engagements and new strategies.

This article explores aspects of the history of the building and engages critically with the histories, uses, and memories linked to the building in relation to its current use. The authors ask whether the historical significance of the building and precinct as well as contextual changes have had any bearing on what is taught in the building and whether it impacts on the content of the church history modules taught in the faculty.

The authors explored historic documents linked to the architectural history of the building, the history of the *kweekskool* and of the faculty. An overview of church history module frameworks was also used. The lenses of visual redress at SU were used to interpret the foci in the church history modules. This was because the SU visual redress policy prompts transformation and engagements on visual symbols and changes in relation to teaching and learning and research. The policy states:

The vision of the Visual Redress Policy and the implementation of the various projects resulting from it are intended to inform teaching and learning at SU. The policy provides impetus for disciplinary and interdisciplinary conversations about visual redress activities on campus as regards the University's curricular and co-curricular offerings. Dialogue in teaching and learning environments about the policy and its implementation is meant to elicit critical awareness about visual redress projects being undertaken on campus, this being envisaged as a continuous process. The Visual Redress Policy is also intended to stimulate research possibilities and outputs at SU in collaboration with other universities, both local and global. (Stellenbosch University 2022, 2)

A Brief History of the Building

Beginning in 1687, the evolution of this building can be discussed in phases from its inception as a Drostdy⁹ to its current purpose as the SU Faculty of Theology. Birthed in isolation on a small island in the Eerste river, this property, housing different buildings of prominence in Stellenbosch over the years, tells a story of establishment, change, and

8 Given the author's primary role, he is involved directly in some of these processes.

9 *Drostdy*: Court of justice under the jurisdiction of the *landdrost*.

influence. It could be argued that the richness of the story should also be shared through teaching in the building.

The history of this property and building is best understood through the lens of four major phases: Drostdy, private residence, *kweekskool*, and Faculty of Theology. Each of these phases was determined by the purpose it served over time. In the inception phase, the Drostdy phase (1687–1827), the building fulfilled an overarching purpose of presiding over matters of law and order. This phase also endured rebuilding and structural changes embodied by four subsequent versions of the Drostdy.

First Drostdy (1687–1707)

In 1679, the area formerly referred to as Wildebosch was named Stellenbosch after the incumbent commander of the Cape, Simon van der Stel (Fairbridge 1918, 42). Disputes regarding farm boundaries were an issue of which van der Stel was aware, and resulted in his recommendation to the Council of Policy¹⁰ that there be a form of local governance in the area, prompting the establishment of Stellenbosch as a district on 31 August 1682, instituted by the formation of a Court of Heemraad¹¹ comprising four landowners in the area, although a *landdrost*¹² was only appointed in 1685. The *landdrost* and *heemraden* system continued until 1827 (Smuts 1979, 148). Initially, the district of Stellenbosch comprised all of the interior at the Cape but the jurisdiction of the *landdrost* and *heemraden* of Stellenbosch was limited to Stellenbosch and Drakenstein, with the establishment of Swellendam in August 1745.¹³

The building of the “Houses of God and of the Company,” in the form of the church and Drostdy, were commissioned by Van der Stel on 29 July 1686 (Smuts 1979, 63). The U-shaped, thatch-roofed Drostdy was completed mid-1687, on a small island in the Eerste river, after which the first *Landdrost* of Stellenbosch, Johannes Mulder, took up residence in the Drostdy (Fransen and Cook 1965, 45). This was the first public building in Stellenbosch, accompanied by the church, completed in October of the same year.¹⁴ This Drostdy would serve as the judiciary body of all disputes pertaining to boundaries,

10 *Council of Policy*: What the government in the Cape was called during the period of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) occupation (Fairbridge 1918, 43–44).

11 *Court of Heemraad*: Members of council with local jurisdiction over petty civil cases (Thompson 2000, 47).

12 The *landdrost* was responsible for the distribution of land, receiving taxes, compiling of annual returns regarding inhabitants and property, education, promoting agriculture, and religious adherence. He was also in charge of the police and prisons in the district over which he presided as well as overseeing the welfare of slaves and the Khoikhoi people. Along with the *heemraden*, he formed a committee for solemnising and registering marriages (KAB NO. 2/2 *Inventory of the Archives of the Magistrate of Stellenbosch*, 1683, 7; Böeseken 1966, 212–213).

13 KAB NO. 2/2 *Inventory of the Archives of the Magistrate of Stellenbosch*, 1683, 7.

14 Johannes van der Bijl, *Die Goedeienaars van Stellenbosch 1693–1860*, 27. Frans Smuts Collection (MS 229). Stellenbosch Museum Archives.

roads and other cases not exceeding the amount of 50 *rijksdaalders* (Smuts 1979, 148).¹⁵ It was the first building of local governance in South Africa.¹⁶

Second Drostdy (1709–1710)

Just more than 20 years later, the building had deteriorated, resulting in the demolition of the upper level in 1707 to avoid its collapse. The rebuilding of the initial structure in 1709 was as a single-storey thatch-roofed building with cobblestone floors. This is regarded as the “Second Drostdy.” In December 1710, the Drostdy was the catalyst of a fire since the incumbent *landdrost* sent a slave to fetch an ember from the kitchen to light his pipe. However, a south-easterly wind blew the coal into the thatch roof, igniting it and spreading to the church, along with most of the houses in town. This was the first of a number of conflagrations to affect the town in years to come. Four years later, the houses were rebuilt but not the church or Drostdy (Stellenbosch Town Council 1929, 62).

The fire of 1710 sparked the introduction of new fire regulations in Stellenbosch and in the entire Cape Colony, an example of the influential roles these buildings fulfilled. One of the regulations implemented as a result of the fire was forbidding anyone, regardless of status, from smoking in the street and blowing coals from their pipe or moving along the street with any flammable materials. The following year a jail was built on the western side of the building, where executions would also occur (Smuts 1979, 168–170).

Third Drostdy (1718–1762)

Repair work only began in 1715, with the new building completed on 1 November 1718, marking the birth of the third Drostdy. Aesthetically, it portrayed a Cape Dutch architectural style with its symmetrical façade and a narrow gable. The back wings were extended, adding to its U-shape design as with the first Drostdy. In 1731, a stone wall was constructed on the Drostdy grounds, serving as an embankment to protect the building against rising water from the Eerste river (Smuts 1979, 163). The third Drostdy stood for 44 years before burning down in October 1762, aside from one or two rooms which had flat roofs.

Fourth Drostdy (1767–1827)

The rebuilding began in 1763, this time an H-shaped building with the façade reflective of a traditional Cape Dutch farmhouse portrayed by a Rococo gable, a balustrade at the eaves, and scrolls above the windows.¹⁷ The rebuilding was completed in 1767 and so

15 For a definition of the historic term *rijksdaalder*, see <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/rijksdaalder>.

16 “*Die Kweekskool: Terrein en Geboue*,” p. 1. Dutch Reformed Church Archives.

17 “Verklaring van die Teologiese Kweekskool, Geleë te Dorpstraat 171, Stellenbosch,” *Government Gazette*, 21 September 1979, p. 11. SAHRA Archives.

the fourth Drostdy served its purpose until 1827.¹⁸ It too had a thatched roof. It included a large dining hall, courtroom, and carriage house behind the building, including stables for 40 horses (Hofmeyr 1985). In 1803 the thatched roofs were replaced by flat roofs and the building was given an upper storey (Fransen and Cook 1980, 135). This is more reflective of the current building.

Private Residence (1827–1859)

During the final stages of the *landdrost* and *heemraden*, tensions grew between the incumbent and British authorities, particularly about legislation regarding slaves and the use of the English language in proceedings, resulting in the *landdrost* and *heemraden* system ceasing on 31 December 1827, when it was replaced by a magistrate and civil commissioner (Smuts 1979, 64). The abolishment of this system was a turning point in the life of this building as it would come to serve as a private residence for the next phase of its life. The former *landdrost*, Daniel Johannes van Ryneveld, would become the new civil commissioner and continue to live in the former Drostdy until he moved to a house on the corner of Van Ryneveld and Dorp Street in 1841 (Smuts 1979, 361).

Theological Seminary of the DRC/*Die Kweekskool* (1859–)

The building served as a private residence until August 1846 when the land on which the Drostdy was located was sold for £1250 and transferred by the incumbent government to ten shareholders.¹⁹ A consortium of Stellenbosch residents pooled money to acquire the building, intending to donate it to the DRC to be used as a seminary. They approached the DRC Synod, who finalised its acquisition on 20 September 1853.²⁰ This was greatly significant to the residents of Stellenbosch, especially the consortium that acquired the historical building, who were adamant that this institution be established in their town, highlighting that it was proposed to serve the Dutch–Afrikaans demographic in South Africa.

On 1 November 1859, the theological seminary was officially inaugurated by a ceremony in *Die Moederkerk*²¹ with an attendance of 1300 people inside the church, which only had a capacity for 800, and an additional 800 people outside the church, of whom representatives from the Anglican, Rhenish, Wesleyan, and Lutheran churches were in attendance. It was a momentous event, one which put Stellenbosch on course to

18 Letter by the National Monuments Council, “Theology Seminary, Stellenbosch,” 18 August 1981. SAHRA Archives.

19 Transfer Deed no. 140, 20 September 1853. Surveyor General Archives. The 10 shareholders were: Mynhardus Jacobus (3 shares), Pieter Hendrik Faure (2 shares), Jacobus Christiaan Faure (2 shares), David O’Flenn (2 shares), Daniel Johannes van Ryneveld (2 shares), Johannes Brink (1 share), Eduard Bernhard Hoffman (1 share), Chrisman Joel Ackerman (1 share), Christian Ludolph Neethling (1 share), Richard Hurtley Daneel and Nicolaas Gabriel Vos (1 share)..

20 Erf Register: “Formerly Part of the Drostdy Lands,” Erf: 1188. Deeds Office Archives.

21 *Die Moederkerk* refers to the DRC Stellenbosch, a congregation established in 1868 (www.moederkerk.co.za).

become a university town. *De Gereformeerde Kerkbode* wrote: “It may be the Dutch Reformed Church has never experienced a day like this” (Smuts 1979, 322–323).

During the period of inception, the inherited appearance of the single-storey building was maintained, except for the words *Soli Deo Gloria* painted on its gable.²² In 1868, the building underwent a transformation under the supervision of architect Carl Otto Hager.²³ The structure was enlarged to be a double-storey building; the flat roof was replaced with a pitched, Welsh-slate roof. In addition, a three-cornered pediment was added as well as the plasterwork of a sun with the anchor of hope in its centre, symbolising the motto of the seminary, located underneath it: *SOL IUSTITIAE ILLUSTRANOS*.²⁴ This motto was adopted from the University of Utrecht, pointing to the Dutch influence on this institution since its inception. In 1905 the building underwent further changes when the outbuildings flanking its forecourt were demolished, including the jail, while the gateway and gates installed in 1763 were preserved.²⁵ A statue still preserved in the garden of the theology faculty in Stellenbosch was unveiled in 1913, portraying the first two lecturers at the seminary, John Murray and Nicolaas Jacobus Hofmeyr.

As the pioneer institution for higher learning of the Dutch–Afrikaans population group, *Die Kweekskool* would come to serve as the forerunner of institutions of higher learning in Stellenbosch, such as Stellenbosch Gymnasium, Victoria College, and the current SU, highlighting the influential role it fulfilled in the history of Stellenbosch and the future of the town. This building continued to serve as a theological seminary until after its agreement with SU was formalised.

Theology Faculty at Stellenbosch University (1963–)

The theological seminary became a fully-fledged faculty of theology at SU in 1963, with its professors university-appointed and taking up a seat in the university Senate, while students enrolled at the seminary became students at the university.²⁶ At the official opening of the Faculty of Theology at SU, the incumbent rector, H. B. Thom, expressed appreciation on behalf of the university towards the DRC, from its small beginnings in 1866 until the present. This sentiment of gratitude informs one of the role the seminary fulfilled in the town as setting the stage for what was to follow.

22 *Soli Deo Gloria*: To the glory of God alone (*Archaeological Site Report: Theology Seminary, 171 Dorp Street, Stellenbosch*, SAHRA archives).

23 National Monuments Council, “Theology Seminary, 171 Dorp Street, Stellenbosch,” SAHRA archives.

24 *SOL IUSTITIAE ILLUSTRANOS*: Sun of Justice Illuminates us (Smuts 1979 315).

25 *Die Kweekskool: Terrein en Geboue*, p. 2. Dutch Reformed Church Archives.

26 H. B. Thom, *Verklaring Deur die Rektor I.S. Verhouding Universiteit en Kweekskool*, 27 February 1963, p. 1. Stellenbosch University Archives.

In 1974 a library and auditorium were added to the main building. The historic gateway and gates to the property were declared a national monument on 2 November 1973.²⁷

The evolution of this building tells a story of four major phases: from a Drostdy to a private residence, a theological seminary, and finally to its current function as the SU Faculty of Theology. These phases dictated the engagements that took place in this building, a vessel for its functions, but also impacted the role it played in Stellenbosch and South African history. With roots running deep into the seventeenth century, this allows for myths associated with the building over time.

Myths, Symbols, New Stories and Histories

As mentioned, the stories linked to the building have many facets and angles. In this section mention will be made of some historical links that impact on the building and its stories. The section is subdivided into subsections highlighting the various, often untold histories of the building and precinct.

First Nations People

One of the stories and histories linked to the precinct and specifically to the old island on which the building stands, is that, according to legacy, it served as home to First Nations People, the Khoekhoe, who linked their heritage to the land realities of the region. The Cochoqua people link their story to that of the regions including Stellenbosch.²⁸ Nel (2021) reminds us of his engagements with the late Khoe Chief, Karel King, further linking the story of King's people, the Cochoqua, to the precinct of the Faculty of Theology. For King, engagements about the history of the precinct were also a conversation about justice, ownership, and restitution (Nel 2021, 231). This remains an ongoing discussion.

Slavery

The history of Stellenbosch is intertwined with the lives, stories, and heritage(s) of slavery. Much has been written about the cultural, political, and economic history of slavery in South Africa, including its impact and link with Stellenbosch and surrounds (Visser 2022, 80–114). Although the Dorp Street building that now houses the SU Faculty of Theology never officially housed slaves, the history of the building and its uses are intertwined with the politics, economy, and understanding of justice over time. An example of the intersecting history of this building and slaves was its housing of proceedings in 1780 regarding a regulation requiring the children of European and Khoisan-slave ancestry, “free bastaard Hottentots” (Elphick and Giliomee 1989, 32) to carry passes in the streets of Stellenbosch (Jeffreys and Naude 1944, 15–16). It could

27 “Declaration of a National Monument.” *Government Gazette*, 2 November 1973, p. 10. SAHRA Archives.

28 For an overview of the histories, stories, origins and land of the Khoe people of South African, see Boezak (2017).

be argued that a study of the building in its many manifestations includes aspects linked to the history of slavery in Stellenbosch. In this regard, the documented role of slaves in the building and maintenance of many historic buildings, the history of the old Rhenish Mission Church close to the Faculty of Theology, the historic slave lodge at the corner of Van Rhyneveld and Van Riebeeck streets in Stellenbosch as well as the history of Pniel—a community within the borders of the Stellenbosch Municipality—should be acknowledged and linked to that of the precinct.²⁹

The histories of both the Khoe people of the region and of the slaves of Stellenbosch and surrounds can be counted as part of a rediscovery of the story of the SU Faculty of Theology. In a search for visual representation, redress, and harnessing the history of the building in relation to its current purpose, it is prudent to take this into account.

RMF, FMF, and Visual Redress at SU

As mentioned, transformation-related curricular changes that impacted and were impacted by visual redress did not start with the onset of FMF. In this regard, Nel (2021, 230) reminds us:

This visual redress imperative emerged over a longer historical timeframe. While the current process flows from the challenge of the Black Theological Collective and gives urgency to the call for decolonising the Faculty, a stream, it could be argued, flowed in the year 2000 when a group of 38 black undergraduate students and three lecturers, namely Profs Russel Botman, Dirkie Smit and Hannes Adonis joined the Faculty.³⁰

This challenging new phase in the history of the faculty is shared by Combrinck, Müller, and Hartney (2009, 50), in the negative sentiments and outcries by students of the URCSA in 2000 when they shared their sense of unwelcomeness and difficult adjustment to a culture, environment, and space very different from the seminary and experiences of the University of the Western Cape (UWC).

The history of the building that houses the SU Faculty of Theology³¹ was increasingly scrutinised, especially during the RMF and FMF periods (2015–2016). Given the history of the building and specifically the early era of theological training, the old class photos, at that stage hanging on the walls of the central corridor of the old building, attracted critical attention in that the majority of the faces represented an era where mostly white DRC ministers and missionaries received training in the old seminary.

29 For an historical overview and the impact of slavery in the Cape Winelands, see https://www.westerncape.gov.za/general-publication/places-slave-remembrance-western-cape?toc_page=4.

30 In this regard Nel (2021) quotes Plaatjies-Van Huffel and Taljaard (2017).

31 The SU Faculty of Law, housed in the Old Main Building, also came under scrutiny during the RMF and later the FMF protests owing to symbols and photos on the walls of this historic building. For an overview of the history of the Old Main Building, see Fataar and Costandius (2021).

Some included the likes of D. F. Malan (1874–1959), Jacobus Daniël (Koot) Vorster³² (1909–1982), G. B. A. Gerdener (1881–1967), and Jacobus Stephanus (Kosie) Gericke (1911–1981).³³

Also of interest is that the introductory chapter on the history of the Faculty of Theology in the SU centenary publication (2018) focuses on the stories of two individuals who also appear in the old class photos, namely Nicholas Goezaar (the first brown student admitted to the faculty, appearing in the 1876 class photos), and Daniel Gezani (the first black student in the faculty, appearing in the 1884 class photo) (Bosman 2018, 342–344).

Nell remembers a seminal moment in the history of the Faculty of Theology, namely the mentioned student protests during RMF and FMF, and specifically its effect on symbols, cultures, language, and belonging in the context of the faculty. He notes:

During the night of 4 April 2016 a small drama was enacted in the passages of the Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University. In the early hours of the morning, students removed the class photos of previous years in the passages of the building, placed them on the floor, and in some instances rearranged them. Those of us who arrived there early in the morning to lecture stopped dead in our tracks. (Nell 2018, 1)

For Nell, this act led to a new chapter in the history of the Faculty of Theology, showing that some students experienced alienation and exclusion through the memorabilia and physical appearances in and around the building, strengthened by practices experienced by both staff and students (Nell 2018, 1–4).

Sharing his sentiments on the impact of the history, its symbols and stories amid ongoing change and transformation at the Faculty, Nel notes:

The traditional narrative of the history, as indicated briefly above, however, remains present in the statues, artefacts in the church archives and the official history books, but also in the stories told by these statues, pictures and plaques on the walls. It is the traditional narrative of the *Kweekskool*³⁴ – not the Faculty of Divinity, nor the call for an inclusive public theology of sorts, based at a public university, with various partners. These questions raised, also in the introductory narratives, are intimately tied to the current local contestations and research dilemmas by students and Faculty members, and as suggested earlier, communities beyond the university. (Nel 2021, 225–226)

This prompted workshops under the SU banner of Visual Redress, inviting students, staff, and other role players to make sense of the visual symbols and culture represented in the building, and had as outcome, among others, the contextualisation of the statue

32 Koot Vorster was the brother of B. J. Vorster, prime minister of South Africa from 1966 to 1978.

33 For an overview of the DRC's journey with apartheid, see Kinghorn (1986).

34 Italicisation as part of the quote.

of Murray and Hofmeyer, as well as the statue of Du Plessis in the gardens of the faculty (Fataar 2021, 4–5).³⁵

Does the History of the Building Shape the Teaching of Church History?

Nel helps us to understand that redress as an aspect of transformation has had many phases influenced by various factors at the Faculty of Theology (Nel 2021, 220–226). Citing minutes of faculty board meetings as well as faculty-focused strategic sessions Nel also helps us to understand that visual redress as transformation prompted and activated discussion and processes that brought about curricular changes at the Faculty (Nel 2021, 226–230). It can be said that the conversations about visual identity, representation, and redress had a direct effect on curricular changes at a time when the idea and practice of decolonising the curriculum was central to conversations in higher education—also at SU.

Given this, and the history and various uses of the building over time, the question can be asked: To what extent does the history of the building and its surrounds impact the teaching and learning in the building, especially in the modules of church history?³⁶

To evaluate this question, the 2023 course frameworks for Ecclesiology 143 (2022), Ecclesiology 211 (2023), Ecclesiology 352 (2023), and Ecclesiology 432 (2024) are used as a framework for this discussion: not an in-depth evaluation of the modules but rather an attempt to determine whether the content described in the course frameworks engages with the history of the building and its precinct at all. As such, the question is whether students have the opportunity to better understand and to analyse the space(s) of their education critically.³⁷ The authors also include some suggestions.

Ecclesiology 143 (2022) helps students to grasp church history in the period from the early church to the Middle Ages, including themes like the birth of the early church and the context of the time; the impact of the Roman Empire on Christianity; the life, world, and impact of Constantine on Christianity; the first Confessions; the church fathers; and the Crusades. The focus of this module is clear and does not include content on the South African context pre- or post-European settlement.

Ecclesiology 211 (2023) focuses on the sixteenth century reformers to the present day, including themes like the life and work of Martin Luther and John Calvin and their impact on theology in the South African context, the theology of Karl Barth, feminist

35 The authors would like to acknowledge the work of Prof. Elmarie Costandius in Visual Redress-related work at SU for many years. Prof. Costandius tragically passed on early in 2024.

36 For an overview of who taught church history and its variations of time in the faculty, see Coertzen (2009b).

37 For an overview of the content, requirements, outcomes, etc. of the various programmes taught at the SU Faculty of Theology, see <https://www.sun.ac.za/english/Documents/Yearbooks/Current/2024-Theology.pdf>.

movements, and Liberation and Black Theology. This module prepares students to grasp the history of various ecclesial traditions, and prepares the way for more contextual discussions.

In contrast, Ecclesiology 352 (2023) has a clear focus on South African church history from the late seventeenth century at the Cape to the twenty-first century. Some of the themes include land labour and slavery at the Cape Colony, justice and punishment of the VOC, the power of African women (with a focus on Krotoa), the London Missionary Society among the Khoikhoi, the infamous DRC Synod of 1857, and Christianity and African Nationalism.

This module allows for deep contextual discussions and could easily also engage the histories and stories of the building and its surrounds. Engagements on Krotoa could link well with visual redress at SU and could also help students to understand the history of the island and the role and place of the First Nation People in Stellenbosch over various periods.

A discussion on slavery could link with the periods of the building leading to its becoming a theological seminary. The history of separate education in the building could be discussed in relation to the impact of the URCSA decision to establish its seminary at SU.

Ecclesiology 432 (2024) focuses on historiography and sociocultural movements and church history, including themes like doing and writing history differently, rethinking archiving, etc. It provides the platform for further research and invites students into the world of historiography and its links with the expanding field of church history. This module could help students to engage with the most recent history of the building and the faculty, for example, the RMF and FMF period as well as the period of visual redress. In doing archiving differently, students could continue the process of contextualisation and expanding symbols in the building and its precinct.

From the perspective of this overview of these ecclesiology modules, it is clear that the course content speaks to the changing realities of the sociopolitical contexts, history, and higher education in South Africa. The authors want to argue that there is room in the ecclesiology modules 352 and 423 to link the histories of the building and precinct, the current SU Faculty of Theology, with course content and learning outcomes. Given this exploratory study, it might already be the case. However, exciting possibilities exist to expand the module outcomes further to engage practically with the histories of the building and with its current realities. This might prompt interdisciplinary possibilities for teaching and learning and research.

Nell (2018) recalls the power of interdisciplinary work in a decolonial setting, noting:

Ideas were exchanged about ways to bring about structural change by changes to curricula, course content and degree structure. Cross-pollination of courses in the

humanities to disciplines not usually associated with socio-political context was suggested. Next to *what* we teach, *how* we teach emerged as a dominant theme. (Nell 2018, 5)³⁸

Closing Remarks

The stories, histories, and complexities of the building that currently houses the SU Faculty of Theology is intriguing in that it is strange to think that the building is still in full-time use as a faculty and does not fulfil the role of, for example, a museum. Perhaps this is exactly the nexus of complexity and possibility as the building presents itself as a living source presenting the intricacies of the histories and current realities of both the precinct and elements of the broader South African society.

This article has highlighted aspects of the histories associated with the current SU Faculty of Theology and asked whether these histories co-shape what is taught in church history modules in the building. This article found that this link is not made and that there are indeed various promising possibilities in utilising the histories of the building to teach, learn, and assess in especially some of the core church history modules taught at the faculty. As such, history and space can create a learning platform that engages with elements in the curriculum intersecting with the current contextual realities of the higher education space.

If the building remains central to teaching, specifically theology, it can be argued that it should engage actively with its history in terms of what is taught. As shown, the discipline of Church History through at least two of the four modules taught over various years of study can fulfil a central role, not only in engaging further with the stories of the building in relation to its history, but also in guiding the faculty and SU in engaging openly with its histories in relation to its function(s) of teaching, research, and social impact.

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