

**Community Interaction Policy: Concept**  
**Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University**

*A. How does the Faculty of Theology understand "community"?*

For Christian theology the notion of "community" is of central importance. In recent years it has been used worldwide (in Greek *koinonia*, in Latin *communio*, in English communion, community, fellowship) as the single most important term in ecumenical circles to reflect on the nature and calling of the church and on the nature and destiny of humanity. For this reason the notion of community is regularly studied and discussed in theological circles – and even forms the direct or indirect theme of doctoral dissertations in the Faculty!

In the broadest sense, the Faculty shares a comprehensive (theological) sense of the term "community" as the *oikos* (or household) of life, as the inter-relatedness of all life in the purposes of divine love. In particular, this involves the whole human community as the universal household of beings endowed and graced with human dignity. It is therefore already an ideological-critical term, over against any and all forms of exclusion and marginalization.

In a more specific sense, "community" refers to the *oikos* (or household) of faith, as the ecumenical body of all churches and believers together, bound together with a common identity and mission. For the Faculty, this sense of being part of this ecumenical community has become a very important conviction and commitment in recent years – after decades of a much more particularist self-understanding – and it is explicitly reflected in the present statement of vision and mission of the Faculty and in the values professed and self-consciously embodied in the Faculty.

In theological circles, however, the conviction of being "contextual" and of doing theological work in specific socio-historical contexts has also become central, and the Faculty most certainly shares that conviction. In many ways it could be seen as the contemporary expression of the central Protestant notion of "calling" (*roeping*), which was always intended to underline the importance of the here and now, of the concrete opportunities and challenges, needs and limitations, of very concrete and particular circumstances and people.

For that reason, the Faculty understands itself very deliberately as contextually grounded and committed to specific communities. Theology is being done not primarily as a universal endeavour, irrespective of the realities of the immediate communities, but in the closest interaction possible with such communities and contexts, in fact as an integral part of these communities themselves.

In this contextual sense, the Faculty understands "community" both in the (traditional sociological) senses of *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft*, in other words in the sense of the more objective, structural, political and economic *societies* and in the sense of more subjective and informal communities (in the plural) or groups of people sharing their lives with one another. The academic activities of the Faculty (teaching, research, and specific interaction) accordingly deal with both society and communities in these senses.

For this reason, expressions like "Africa", "Southern Africa" and "South Africa", references to specific religious, cultural and language groups in many African countries, and the realities of many local communities in South Africa and often the Western Cape appear regularly in the theological activities of the Faculty. Together, they constitute a hermeneutical "horizon of understanding" of crucial importance in doing theology in this Faculty.

Put differently, the Faculty does not understand "community" as any single and specific community in any particularist and exclusive sense of the word, on the contrary, the practices of community interaction in the Faculty are informed by complex notions of community – ecological, ecumenical and contextual, diverse and inclusive, not homogenous and exclusivist.

## ***B. Types of community interaction of the Faculty of Theology***

### **1. Historical perspective**

When theological training was first founded in Stellenbosch 150 years ago, the motive was to provide education to and through the church – which was a major vehicle for education and social upliftment at the time. Today the Faculty still has formal contracts with various churches to train their students for the ministry. Our partner churches send their students and contribute financially, and are also involved in the Faculty's management and programmes. Students, particularly those planning to go into the ministry, are involved in practical work in congregations and communities. In fact, the entire Licentiate programme is based on practical work in congregations. But most other programmes also include practical components.

Hence the very nature and origin of this Faculty is based on community interaction.

But in time the Faculty realised that community interaction should not just be an inherent part of our activities – a more determined and structured approach is a moral imperative.

For instance as early as 1998 the faculty appointed a lecturer to address social issues by adding a social component to the theological compendium through the design of a curriculum for Theology and (community-) Development. This discipline already employed the principles of community interaction on three levels of the programme, viz. second, fourth and sixth year students. In this programme the lecturer, students and the community are constituted as partners in capacity-building and knowledge generation.

As members of the Faculty of Theology of Stellenbosch University we are very aware of our privileged position in a country where by far the majority of people do not have the opportunity to equip themselves through education to achieve their full potential. To the contrary, an overwhelming portion of our population is subjected to (and suffers severely as a result of) social ills like poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, violence, HIV/aids and its impact, discrimination and victimization, dysfunctional family and social structures, ecological decline, moral degeneration etc.

This awareness is reflected in all the specific modes of our community interaction – teaching, research, interpretation, projects, as well as the many activities of specific bureaus, units and centres, all committed to forms of community interaction.

### **2. Specific modes of interaction**

#### **2.1 Accessible education**

As faculty we believe that we contribute to combating many social problems on an ongoing basis – by the simple act of education. Education at its best affects and has an effect on direct recipients, but also has a wider ripple effect. The interchange of information, insights and skills hopefully leads to a general “upliftment”, not only equipping people for improving their

physical/material situation, but also heightening understanding, which affects the way in which people approach issues like responsibility, relationships, morality etc.

On a more practical level, we are extremely concerned with ensuring that any student with the ability and the will to study at the Faculty be empowered to do so. This often entails much financial, academic and social support, but is rewarding. We try to nurture our students and are often pleasantly surprised by how much potential is unlocked in this way.

We feel a particular vocation to make theological training at our faculty accessible to students from other countries in Africa. It is no accident that more than two thirds of our students are post-graduate, and a large number of our post-graduate students are from elsewhere in Africa. In this way the Faculty contributes substantially to equipping church leaders in Africa – and churches are still important and powerful vehicles for social and economic aid and reform.

For a faculty that consisted of only white male students and lecturers until relatively recently, the diversity profile is encouraging, with students and personnel across racial, gender and ecumenical boundaries studying and working together.

## **2.2 Research**

Much of the education we offer deals specifically with social problems and injustices. We are, after all, the Faculty of Theology, and traditionally the church and Christians are pertinently charged with relieving suffering and righting social injustice. The present climate of intense interest in such subjects world-wide also contributes to the fact that the Faculty does research on various levels dealing with a wide spectrum of precisely such subjects, from family violence to sustainable futures to the impact of HIV/aids on societies to ethical leadership to male sexuality. Various research projects are joint projects with academic institutions and churches worldwide, ie the Human Dignity Project with the Protestant Theological University in Kampen, Netherlands.

As the first step to addressing a problem, is obviously seeing/understanding the problem, this is clearly a positive contribution. If one bears in mind the Faculty of Theology's impressive research outputs per capita (the highest of all the SU faculties by a very big margin), this adds up to a substantial contribution to the larger body of information and knowledge about these ills and their effect on individuals and communities.

## **2.3 Assessment/Interpretation**

But while many academic institutions may judge that researching problems, ie finding the facts, is an adequate contribution to the process of addressing them, this Faculty considers that it is just as important, if not more, to follow this process to its logical conclusion where possible.

We work on the principle of: See, judge, act. Collecting information is only the first step. It is just as important to assess and interpret the information. And to then take well-considered action to address the issues.

In practice the relationship between Christian theology and social justice has not always been as clear as it should have been. (Historically this Faculty was guilty of the perpetuation of social injustice through the deliberate withholding of education opportunities from certain sectors of the community.) This awareness constantly challenges us to self-critical reflection and accountability.

But in fact all research carries an enormous responsibility to research and present facts scientifically correctly, but to also interpret the facts in a fair and balanced manner. The further we travel along the path of understanding our problems, the better we are able to address them effectively.

## **2.4 Public practices and concrete projects**

As academic institutions, university faculties may not seem well placed to act upon this information (particularly a faculty dealing with such a “theoretical” field of knowledge). Academic institutions after all lack the capacity and financial resources for anything much more than teaching and research. But in fact knowledge has a certain momentum of its own. The process of understanding very often spontaneously (or with a little help from friends) leads to action. The increasing networking and cross-pollination of churches, academic institutions, big business, education, government, NGO’s etc nationally and internationally also generates a surprising amount of practical potential, leading to involvement in the addressing of suffering and injustice on various levels.

But with its strong commitment to community interaction, the Faculty of Theology takes this process further through deliberate strategies to strengthen and enhance its capacity for involvement.

## **2.5 Bureaus, units and centres**

The focus of the *Bureau for Continuing Theological Education and Research* has always been on research and congregational/community development. The congregational development component was recently renamed *Communitas (Iziko lokuCetyiswa kwamaBandla)*, while the original research division is being redefined. This bureau is ideally placed in terms of community interaction. Not only does it do intense relevant research in congregations and communities, but it offers ongoing teaching and support to church and community leaders and members.

The focus of the Unit for Religion and Development Research has gradually shifted from religious research to community involvement and development, including training and job creation. The Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology stimulates public debate and plays an enormous role in facilitating networking and co-operation on national and international level. With the recent relocation of Training for Youth Ministry from Wellington to the Faculty, with SPACE, a centre for Youth Ministry, in its wake, our capacity for interaction specifically in terms of youth work, will increase dramatically.

The Faculty is presently working to increase the capacity of these centres, in order to increase our capacity for community interaction.

## **2.5 Personal interaction and the formation of public opinion**

Besides research and structured community focused projects based at the Faculty, many members of the staff and students are also involved (on a personal level) in a wide spectrum of community projects, from assisting struggling congregations, churches and religious communities, to youth work, ecology projects, outreach programmes, building etc.

In particular, many staff members are regularly involved in contributing to the formation of public opinion in society and in communities – some write regular columns in newspapers, some frequently participate in debates in the public media or are frequently invited to speak publicly, several publish popular books. From the perspective of public theology, such contributions to the formation of public opinion are regarded as very meaningful.

### ***C. The nature and purpose of the Faculty's interaction***

Broadly speaking, it may be possible to summarise the nature and purpose of the Faculty's community interaction under three theological commitments that most members of the Faculty are actively committed to, namely contributing to unity, reconciliation and justice. All three convictions are to be understood against the background of forms of community interaction, also by earlier members of this Faculty and University, in the country's past.

Of course, each of the three notions could be fleshed out in much more detail in order to demonstrate concretely the nature and purposes of the interaction.

Very generally, it could be said that the commitment to unity takes the many forms of division in our society, local communities, cultural traditions, and understandings of self very seriously. We suffer from many forms of prejudice and racism, as well as other forms of exclusion and marginalization. In the teaching and instruction of the Faculty, in the classes and modules, ranging from the content of the courses to the curricula of the programs, ranging from the language of instruction to the welcoming of others (partners and visitors, as well as students from elsewhere), in our dealings with present and potential future partners, and in many other ways, the Faculty is seriously engaged in attempts to overcome the many divisions of the past and the present.

In similar ways, the commitment to reconciliation is practiced in many and diverse ways, again in teaching activities, but also in much postgraduate work, and in many forms of direct community interaction through projects and practical initiatives. The bureaus, units and centres attached to the Faculty are all involved in very concrete work in this regard, of which their many conferences, publications and research reports are ample evidence.

The commitment to compassionate justice and to addressing the deep and systemic injustices of our society and of many local communities is of extreme importance for the activities of the Faculty. Through many forms of direct involvement, through research, through participation in the work of civil society, churches and church groups, agencies and activist groups, many members of the Faculty concern themselves with an agenda of social, political and economic justice, and of standing beside the suffering, the helpless and those in need.

Not only the bureaus, units and centres, but for example also the academic Department of Practical Theology, through almost all its scholarly activities in fields like Pastoral Care, Youth Ministry, Development Studies, and many others, is deeply involved in embodying these commitments of the Faculty.

### ***D. Giving effect to the University's objectives of self-renewal and redress***

It is possible to formulate the aforesaid in a different way by describing it in terms of the present commitment of the University to the Millennium Goals. Theology is by its own nature involved in a pedagogy of hope, and more specifically in furthering human dignity, alleviating poverty, strengthening democracy, contributing to human security and supporting sustainable development. In other documents already submitted to the University, these activities of the Faculty have already been spelled out in more detail.

The need for redressing past injustices in the Faculty is of extreme importance and taken very seriously. Although intentions may have changed and earlier commitments may have been transformed, the real and practical limitations, often related to the remaining perceptions of the Faculty in many circles, often related to the composition of staff and to financial

restrictions and limitations, do not allow a very small faculty to change overnight, but remain challenges that this Faculty takes very seriously.

### ***E. Principles, processes and monitoring mechanisms assessing ongoing community interaction***

In many ways, principles and processes monitoring the ongoing community interaction of the Faculty have already been in place for a long time, precisely since this is not a new development within theology, but forms an integral part of the very nature of doing theology.

Teaching theology, including developing the curricula and content of theological programmes, has never taken place without the intense involvement of the partner churches. The contracting churches are deeply involved in a variety of structural ways in the continuous evaluating of existing modules and the planning and implementing of new curricula. Initiatives are continuously being taken to involve more churches in these bodies of consultation.

The relevance for society, churches and communities as well as the scholarly quality of postgraduate work is of course always monitored in a variety of direct and indirect ways. Many African churches from a number of African countries continue sending their students here (often designated church and community leaders and academic lecturers), which in itself demonstrates a form of evaluation, appreciation and ongoing trust.

The quality and relevance of the research done is similarly constantly monitored and evaluated directly and indirectly – directly, by peer review and publications, but perhaps even more importantly indirectly, by the eagerness with which many respected universities and scholars worldwide seek to co-operate with the Faculty, to visit us or work here, and frequently invite local theologians to speak at important international and inter-disciplinary consultations and conferences.

The different bureaus, units and centres all have their own mechanisms for monitoring the quality of their own activities and specifically for getting continuous input from civil society, from local communities and from particular churches and congregations.

The regular publication of opinions of members of the Faculty – in newspapers, by participation in the public media, in leadership roles in denominations, in public events, in popular and scholarly books and papers, in sermons and speeches – of course in itself calls for evaluation, criticism and response. It is certainly not as if the Faculty of Theology is not interacting publicly with society and communities, like the biblical city on the hill.

Transparency, openness and hospitality, inclusivity, accountability and in particular respect and human dignity are amongst the values the Faculty and its bureaus, units and centres cherish and deliberately attempt to implement.

### ***F. Conclusion***

As Faculty of Theology we hope and strive to embody what is good about the Christian faith, which includes actively working to relieve suffering and injustice and bring hope and understanding to our world. Community interaction should increasingly be our “business as usual” and we continually and consistently work towards this goal.

The scope for community interaction is unlimited. The Faculty is only limited in its response to this challenge by its own limited resources. But our dreams are big!

