

The Research Institute for Theology and Religion: Fifty years of research excellence (1975–2025)

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The Institute for Theological Research was launched on 01 May 1975. Its first Director was the late Professor Willem Vorster, who was an internationally renowned New Testament scholar. Firstly, the focus of the Institute was to vigorously engage the six departments of the then Faculty of Theology (now University of South Africa [UNISA]) in theological research programmes. Secondly, the Institute aimed to hold annual symposia on topical theological issues. Willem Vorster and Jansie Kilian (d.2021), senior researchers at the Institute, arranged 16 of these annual symposia, and published the articles beforehand in well-edited books until the untimely death of Vorster on 10 January 1993.

Professor Cornel du Toit (d.2021) was the second Director of the Institute for Theological Research and remained in that position for 25 years until his retirement in 2019. During his directorship, the name of the Institute was changed to the Research Institute for Theology and Religion (RITR). The focus of Du Toit's research was the relationship between science and religion. He edited a variety of conference proceedings of the South African Science and Religion Forum as well as the Forum for Religious Dialogue, which he headed under the auspices of the RITR.

In 2020 Prof Victor Molobi became the Acting Head of the RITR, and after his retirement, Prof Wessel Bentley became the Head Director from 2023 to date. Currently, the permanent members of the RITR, apart from Prof Bentley, are Prof Elijah Baloyi, Dr Linda Naicker, Puleng Rammutla and Maudretta Phukuile.

Names come to mind of people who worked permanently at the Institute and whose footprints are embedded in its history. They are Ingrid Victor, Nonnie Fouche, Elmarie Benadé, Khumo Makgeledise (d.2021) and Dr Lieb Liebenberg. The C.B. Powell Bible Centre attached to the Institute and placed the names of Prof Pieter de Villiers, Prof Francois Swanepoel and Nan Muir (d.2024) on the table. Professor Inus Daneel (d.2024) and Rev David Olivier lead specific projects at the Institute. Professor Ferdinand Deist (d.1997) and Eben Scheffler acted as Director when Willem Vorster was on academic leave.

I was a senior researcher at the Institute for the 25 years between 1996 and 2021, when I retired. I joined the Institute in 1978 as a research assistant while doing my BD (Baccalaureus Divinitatis) at UNISA. In 1980, I was appointed as a junior lecturer in the Department of Church History and rejoined the Institute in 1996 as an Associate Professor, promoted to Full Professor in 2002. This, in short, is to say that I have lived through the history of the Institute as a research assistant, a colleague in the Faculty of Theology, heading church history projects in the Institute, and finally as a professor for almost the full duration of its existence.

This Special Collection entitled *The Research Institute for Theology and Religion: Fifty years of theological and religion research* contains 16 articles. The invitation to contribute academic articles to this Special Collection focused on articles dealing with aspects of theological and religious research in Southern Africa during the past 50 years. Therefore, there are only five articles that deal with the history of the Institute and/or with some of its researchers, that is, Vorster, Du Toit and Landman.

What was the impact of the Institute for Theological Research/Research Institute for Theology and Religion? Besides the regular publication of books and research articles, the Institute has aimed to offer a truly ecumenical voice to matters of concern in society. This impact cannot be measured, except for the way in which the research publications have influenced and shaped discourses in church and society.

Although the RITR went through a period of financial turmoil and faced closure (especially after its five-year external review in 2019), it appears that it has turned the corner and is quickly

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becoming an internationally recognised institution for theological and religious research. With only three fulltime academic staff members in 2024, the RITR managed to forge relationships with international scholars (who became Academic Associates of the RITR) and produced over 150 research outputs in a single year. The five-year external review of 2024 confirmed this positive turn and was full of praise for the quality of research produced by the Institute.

In its research planning for 2025–2028, the RITR has identified and is working on three distinct research niche areas:

- African Indigenous Knowledge and Faith Systems

- Feminist, Womanist and Bosadi Theorisations
- Science and Religion

These niche areas will not only be interrogated from the Christian perspective but also with the Institute's intentional aim to foster greater interfaith dialogue, will provide a platform for a truly ecumenical and interfaith voice, which speaks specifically to the challenges faced in the African context.

I invite you to share the 50th celebration of the Institute's existence through this collection of articles.