

REIMAGINING THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION FOR CONTEMPORARY SOCIETAL IMPACT IN THE DIGITAL ERA IN THE APOSTOLIC CHURCH THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY AMUMARA

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Abstract

This study investigated the imperatives of reimagining theological education at The Apostolic Church Theological Seminary Amumara (TACTSA), to ensure contemporary societal impact within the digital era. Addressing a widening "theory-practice gap," the research considered the need for a curricular shift through the integration of digital literacy with social relevance. Anchored on a tripartite framework of Digital Fluency, Contextual Social Impact, and Ecclesial Innovation, the study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach using asynchronous, text-based digital interviews conducted via WhatsApp. Structured interview questions were administered to 80 purposively selected stakeholders. Data were captured through direct digital export of chat logs, ensuring a verbatim record of participant responses for analysis. Findings reveal that while TACTSA maintains a robust foundation in Apostolic doctrine, the current pedagogical model is "grossly deficit" in practical digital application. This leaves graduates ill-equipped for digital discipleship and addressing contemporary societal pathologies such as cybercrime and mental health. Our analysis pinpointed specific systemic and mental roadblocks to change, most visible in a 'parochial' refusal to adopt emerging technologies. These forces actively stall institutional maturing. Consequently, the study finds that TACTSA must adopt a "Digital-Missional" framework, transitioning toward a hybrid pedagogical model that balances Pentecostal traditions with technological proficiency. Recommendations include the immediate adoption of hybrid teaching models and the allocation of dedicated grants for digital innovation. These steps shift the institutional focus from viewing technology as a 'secular' distraction to embracing it as a fundamental tool for growth and as vital vehicles for global evangelism in a connected world.

Keywords: Theological education, digital fluency, public theology, innovation, tactsa

Introduction

The global landscape is currently undergoing a profound metamorphosis driven by the rapid evolution of digital technologies—a shift that has fundamentally altered the modalities of human interaction, pedagogical engagement, and religious expression. This study investigates the extent to which theological curricula at The Apostolic Church Theological Seminary Amumara (TACTSA) have adapted to these shifts, exploring the integration of digital literacy into ministerial formation. This transition necessitates a radical reappraisal of traditional theological training frameworks. As Castells (2010) persuasively argues in his analysis of the "network society," the digital era represents far more than a mere upgrade in communication tools; it signifies a tectonic shift in the fabric of social organization and identity construction. The fundamental problem arising from this shift is the "relevance gap" created when religious identity is formed in a fluid, digital environment while theological training remains tethered to static, analog structures, leaving ministers ill-equipped to provide guidance in a decentralized network.

Within the Nigerian context, the intersection of faith and technology has moved beyond mere convenience to become a core necessity for ministerial effectiveness. For historically grounded institutions such as TACTSA, this technological paradigm shift presents a dual reality: it serves as both a significant challenge to traditional methodologies and a providential opportunity to broaden the reach of the Gospel. As the digital era redefines how communities interact, the traditional "cloistered" approach to ministerial training is no longer sufficient. To maintain institutional relevance, theological education must transcend the "ivory tower" isolationism of the past and embrace a missional model that prioritizes contemporary societal impact (Banks, 1999; Joubert, 2022). Failure to address this shift risks institutional obsolescence, where graduates become "ecclesial relics" who are doctrinally sound but functionally incapable of engaging a tech-savvy generation. This lack of adaptation leads to a disconnect where the church loses its voice in public discourse, ultimately diminishing its influence on national morality and social transformation.

The Apostolic Church Theological Seminary Amumara has historically served as a critical bastion of Pentecostal scholarship and ministerial formation in Eastern Nigeria. However, the institution currently stands at a strategic crossroads. While TACTSA has successfully maintained a reputation for academic rigor, an observable dissonance has emerged between classical classroom theories and the complex digital realities of the 21st-century mission field. Many graduates emerge with profound exegetical skills but lack the "digital fluency" required to navigate a "phygital" (physical plus digital) environment. Campbell (2013) highlights this tension, finding that digital media specifically challenges traditional religious authority by democratizing access to sacred knowledge, thereby requiring leaders to negotiate their status through digital engagement rather than just office. Similarly, Jenkins (2018) argues that for the "Global South" church to thrive, it must move beyond traditional Western-centric models and adopt "participatory cultures" where the Gospel is mediated through digital storytelling and social networking.

The central problem addressed in this study is that TACTSA has yet to fully institutionalize digital-age pedagogy capable of preparing ministers for "Public Theology." Current academic assessments of Nigerian theological institutions suggest that a preoccupation with denominational preservation often supersedes the need for socio-technological engagement (Omenyo & Atiemo, 2012; Nche, 2020). This lack of reimagining limits the seminary's capacity to produce leaders who can authoritatively influence the digital public square. Furthermore, the socio-economic challenges within the Nigerian landscape—ranging from economic instability to the rise of digital misinformation—require a curriculum that empowers ministers to act as agents of social transformation. Scholars like Agbiji and Swart (2015) assert that the Nigerian church's role in social development is hampered when its leadership training ignores the socio-economic exigencies of the modern age. Consequently, this paper proposes a comprehensive framework for reimagining theological education at TACTSA, focusing on digital integration and societal relevance. This framework is anchored on three strategic pillars: Digital Fluency, Contextual Social Impact, and Ecclesial Innovation. Through this reimagining, TACTSA can transition from a traditional training center into a hub for transformative leadership in the digital era.

Conceptualization

In this study, we construct a conceptual framework predicated on three intersecting dimensions: Digital Fluency, Contextual Social Impact, and Ecclesial Innovation. We argue that these constructs provide the necessary analytical pillars for a comprehensive

reimagining of the curriculum and pedagogical approach at The Apostolic Church Theological Seminary Amumara (TACTSA). Our thesis posits that for theological education to maintain its relevance in the 21st century, it must move beyond the limitations of traditionalism by synthesizing technological proficiency with prophetic social activism and "traditioned innovation" (Jones, 2014).

Within the current academic discourse, we distinguish digital fluency from basic digital literacy. While literacy denotes the functional ability to operate tools, fluency represents the cognitive capacity to manipulate digital environments to co-create meaning and articulate complex theological truths (Resnick, 2017; White, 2023). For TACTSA, we contend that digital fluency must involve an ontological understanding of how digital mediation alters human identity and spiritual formation. As Campbell (2013) observes, the digital realm is not merely a tool but a "social space" where religious authority and community are constantly renegotiated. Consequently, we propose that a reimagined curriculum should empower students to engage in "digital apologetics," ensuring that the "Apostolic Vision" is articulated effectively within the digital public square (Cloete, 2015; Akande, 2020). By fostering this fluency, TACTSA transitions from being a consumer of technology to a producer of digital theological content that speaks to a hyper-connected generation.

The second pillar, contextual social impact, serves as the ethical compass of this framework. we argue that theological scholarship is moribund if it remains insulated from the socio-economic exigencies of its immediate environment. For TACTSA, situated in Amumara, Mbaise, this necessitates a curriculum that bridges the gap between the "ivory tower" and the "marketplace." This alignment follows the trajectory of African Public Theology, which insists that the seminary must function as a catalyst for societal flourishing (Kalu, 2008; Agbiji & Swart, 2015). Stinton (2016) reinforces this by suggesting that theological education must shift from a purely "pastoral-internal" focus to a "prophetic-external" one.

In the Nigerian context, we posit that the seminary's mission must include equipping ministers to dismantle systemic "giants" such as endemic poverty, governance deficits, and the moral crisis of "Yahoo-plus" (digital fraud). This is consistent with the view that the church in Africa is a primary agent of social capital and moral reconstruction (Ilo, 2017). By integrating these realities into the curriculum, TACTSA ensures its graduates are not just ecclesiastical administrators but agents of tangible transformation in the Mbaise region and the broader Nigerian state (Nwachukwu, 2021).

The final dimension, ecclesial innovation, involves the creative preservation of The Apostolic Church's core identity while adapting its methods for a hybrid world. we define innovation here not as a rejection of the "Apostolic Vision," but as its revitalization through "entrepreneurial ministry" (Roxburgh, 2015). This aligns with the concept of "liquid church," where the essence of the Spirit's move is maintained even as the structures of delivery become more fluid and adaptive (Ward, 2017). To achieve this, TACTSA must develop a curriculum that encourages ministers to navigate the shift from purely physical to hybrid liturgical environments without losing theological integrity (Ganzevoort & Roeland, 2014).

The synergy between digital fluency, contextual social impact, and ecclesial innovation creates a "trialectic" that fundamentally transforms TACTSA's educational output. This conclusion is rooted in the "integrative model" of professional education, which suggests that when technical skill (digital fluency) is wedded to social purpose (contextual impact) and adaptive leadership (innovation), the result is a resilient and

relevant professional identity (Sullivan, 2005). Through this integrated framework, we argue that TACTSA will produce "digital disciples" who are not merely reactive to change but are proactive creators of a vibrant, Spirit-led witness in a shifting global landscape.

Methods

The Apostolic Church Theological Seminary Amumara (TACTSA) is located in Obibi Amumara within the Ezinihitte Mbaise Local Government Area of Imo State, Nigeria. While historically rooted in the dense socio-cultural traditions of the Mbaise people—notably celebrated through the Oji Ezinihitte festival—the area has evolved into a modern semi-urban hub. This contemporary setting, characterized by increasing digital penetration and social mobility, provides a unique backdrop for examining the intersection of indigenous ethics and global theological trends (Anyanwu, 2016).

The institution's trajectory reflects a systematic transition from a sectarian training center to a mainstream academic institution. Founded on January 25, 1975, as the Apostolic Bible College (ABC) to serve the then-Igbo Field of The Apostolic Church Nigeria, it initially focused on foundational ministerial training. Recognizing the shifting demands of global Christian ministry, the college was upgraded to a theological seminary in 1997 (Igbani & Iheakaghchi, 2025). This evolution culminated in 2008 with the National Universities Commission (NUC) granting TACTSA affiliation with the University of Uyo. Successful accreditation cycles in 2011, 2018, and 2023 have since solidified its standing as a regulated university college.

Today, TACTSA operates a robust academic ecosystem comprising approximately 220 undergraduate and postgraduate students, supported by a faculty of 30 lecturers, including three professors and nine PhD holders. With satellite centers in Aba, Umuahia, and Owerri, the seminary has expanded its geographic and pedagogical reach. As Igbani & Iheakaghchi (2025) notes, the institution is currently navigating a pivotal shift: balancing its traditional mandate of spiritual formation with the academic and technological rigors required of the digital era. This dual identity makes TACTSA an ideal case study for reimagining theological education in a contemporary societal context.

To investigate the perceived societal impact of reimagined theological education at The Apostolic Church Theological Seminary Amumara (TACTSA) within the digital era, this study utilized a qualitative research design. Specifically, a phenomenological approach was adopted to capture a comprehensive understanding of the participants' lived experiences, unique perspectives, and the meanings they assign to contemporary ministerial training. Interviews were administered asynchronously using the WhatsApp mobile messaging platform. This method was chosen to provide participants with the flexibility to reflect on questions and respond at their convenience, a technique known as Mobile Messaging Interviewing (MIMI). Structured interview guides were sent to respondents' mobile devices after obtaining digital informed consent. Participants submitted their responses in text format directly through the encrypted messaging interface.

Since the data were generated in text-rich format, the raw interview data were digitally exported from WhatsApp and compiled into a formal textual database. To maintain the integrity of the phenomenological 'lived experience,' the text was preserved verbatim, including original syntax and digital nuances (such as emphasis), then cleaned of metadata and anonymized for thematic analysis. The data were collected from a purposively selected sample of 80 respondents. This diverse group of stakeholders included: 20 Undergraduate Students; 10 Graduate Students; 15 Lecturers; 10 Ex-students; 10 Serving Pastors; 10 Technology Experts; 5 School Board Members.

Research Questions

The information gathered from these interviews was processed using thematic analysis. This involved a systematic procedure of identifying, coding, and categorizing recurring themes and patterns within the data. The resulting analysis is structured around the following research questions:

1. To what extent does the current TACTSA curriculum address the specific digital and technological challenges faced by modern-day ministers?
2. In what practical ways can digital tools be leveraged to enhance and expand the "Apostolic Vision" of the seminary?
3. Beyond traditional theology, which contemporary societal issues (e.g., digital ethics, unemployment, mental health) should be prioritized in a reimagined curriculum?
4. What do you identify as the primary technological, financial, or traditional barriers to integrating comprehensive digital education at TACTSA?
5. How might digital tools influence the development of essential ministerial skills like biblical interpretation and critical thinking? What steps should be taken to mitigate potential negative effects?
6. How should a "21st-century Apostolic Minister" be defined today in terms of required skills and their impact on society?

Discussions

Thematic analysis reveals a consensus on the extent the current TACTSA curriculum addresses the specific digital and technological challenges faced by modern-day ministers. That while the TACTSA curriculum maintains a robust foundation in Apostolic doctrine and biblical exegesis, it remains "grossly deficit" regarding digital integration. Respondents identified a significant "theory-practice gap," noting that ICT instruction is limited to basic computer appreciation rather than practical applications like online evangelism, media editing, or digital discipleship. Three critical themes emerged: a lack of practical skills for "hybrid" ministry, insufficient engagement with digital ethics, and a shortage of tech-savvy faculty. Consequently, while graduates are spiritually sound, they are inadequately equipped for modern societal impact. The findings suggest an urgent need to transition from theoretical theology to practical, technology-assisted ministerial training to ensure relevance in the digital era.

Strategic digital integration is viewed not as a compromise of the "Apostolic Vision," but as a vital catalyst for its global expansion. Respondents identified four primary practical avenues: Pedagogical Modernization, Digital Evangelism, Heritage Preservation, and Institutional Efficiency. Practically, implementing Learning Management Systems (LMS) and hybrid classrooms would allow TACTSA to transcend geographical barriers, training the "five-fold ministry" on a global scale. Leveraging social media (YouTube, Facebook, X) and livestreaming services were highlighted as essential for making Apostolic teachings accessible to "digitally native" audiences. Furthermore, respondents emphasized Digital Archiving, suggesting that digitizing sermons and doctrinal materials is crucial for preserving institutional heritage for future generations. The seminary can thereby transform technology into a "vehicle for mission." A strategy that ensures the Apostolic message remains contextually relevant, amplifying its societal impact in a connected world.

A reimagined TACTSA curriculum must transition from purely doctrinal instruction to a holistic, socially responsive model. Respondents identified four primary priorities: Mental Health and Wellness, Digital Ethics, Socio-Economic Empowerment, and Practical Governance. The demand for mental health literacy was paramount, with

participants noting that ministers must be equipped to handle depression and burnout—both within the congregation and themselves. Digital Ethics emerged as a critical need to address "online behaviour," cyberbullying, and the moral implications of technology. Because 21st-century believers are more logical and practical, the curriculum must bridge the gap between the pulpit and contemporary societal pressures to ensure ministers remain relevant and impactful.

Thematic analysis identifies three primary barriers to innovation at TACTSA: structural, financial, and ideological. Technologically, respondents emphasized poor infrastructure, specifically inconsistent power supply and weak internet connectivity in the Amumara region. Financially, the high cost of hardware and digital platforms remains prohibitive for the institution. However, the most significant hurdle is ideological resistance. Participants noted a "parochial" or "archaic" mindset among leadership, driven by fears that technology might secularize theological purity or dilute spiritual formation. Furthermore, a critical human capital gap exists, as many faculty members lack the digital competency required for modern instruction. TACTSA's digital transition is hindered by a cultural disconnect between traditional Apostolic dogma and the demands of the digital era. Overcoming these barriers requires both institutional investment and a theological re-evaluation of technology as a vital ministerial tool.

Respondents agree that AI, digital libraries, and original language software provide unprecedented access to global scholarly resources, fostering deeper research and broader theological exposure. However, a dominant concern is the "copy-and-paste syndrome," which risks fostering intellectual laziness, dependency, and superficial engagement with Scripture. To mitigate these negative effects, the findings suggest a "balanced formation" model. This involves prioritizing digital discernment and "Slow Theology," where technology supplements rather than replaces personal study and spiritual meditation. Positioning technology as a research aid can enable the seminary to ensure that graduates remain both technologically competent and spiritually grounded, preserving the intellectual and devotional integrity of Apostolic ministerial training.

The 21st-century Apostolic Minister ought to be a hybrid leader—spiritually grounded and doctrinally sound, yet digitally competent and socially responsive. Respondents highlight that modern impact necessitates a shift from traditional "pulpit-centered" ministry to holistic engagement, encompassing community transformation, ethical leadership, and digital discipleship. Essential competencies identified include digital literacy, cultural intelligence, and emotional awareness, enabling ministers to navigate physical and virtual spaces effectively. In the current status quo many ministers remain "geographically confined" due to technological illiteracy. A reimagined minister must integrate Apostolic authority with technological rigor to achieve meaningful societal impact in a connected world.

Conclusion

This study has critically examined the imperative of reimagining theological education at The Apostolic Church Theological Seminary, Amumara (TACTSA), for contemporary societal impact. The findings underscore a significant "theory-practice gap"; while the institution maintains a robust and commendable foundation in Apostolic doctrine and biblical exegesis, the current curriculum is largely insufficient in addressing the digital and technological exigencies of 21st-century ministry. The findings identified lack of practical ICT integration, the exclusion of pressing societal issues—such as mental health,

digital ethics, and economic empowerment—and a pervasive traditional resistance to technological adoption as primary barriers to institutional relevance.

The research establishes that for TACTSA to fulfill its "Apostolic Vision" in the digital era, it must transition toward a hybrid pedagogical model that balances doctrinal purity with technological proficiency. There is need for a fundamental shift in institutional mindset—moving from viewing technology as a secular distraction to embracing it as a vital vehicle for global evangelism and social transformation.

A 21st-century Apostolic minister must be redefined as a leader who is spiritually grounded, intellectually rigorous, and digitally competent. Integrating digital tools into the fabric of theological formation can produce graduates capable of navigating the complexities of a connected world, ensuring that the Apostolic message remains both timeless in its truth and timely in its delivery. The seminary stands at a critical juncture where hybrid instructional models and allocation of dedicated funding for digital initiatives must be mandated. These steps transition technology from a "secular" distraction to a core pillar of institutional evolution. Embracing these strategic reforms can amplify TACTSA societal impact and preserve its heritage for a digitally native generation.

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