Leading experiments in AI for theological education and the church

By Anna Robbins

As soon as you mention Artificial Intelligence (AI) in conversation, people seem to respond with strong and diverse opinions. AI is useless, or AI is revolutionary. AI will bring efficiency and support, or AI will take over. AI will transform the workforce, or AI hallucinations will lead us astray. AI will enhance our research and communication, or AI will kill critical thinking, higher education, and the church. One thing is sure today, you cannot ignore the presence and power of AI.

Acadia Divinity College (ADC) has leaned into cultural engagement and futures thinking for a long time, through the MacRae Centre for Christian Faith and Culture. More recently, our Futuring Lab has used AI tools in futures research, leading us to experiment with AI in education. Thoughtfully engaging with significant cultural change including AI enables us to participate in shaping a future that aligns with both faith and innovation.

The introduction of large language models, such as ChatGPT in 2022, has underscored the potential of AI to reshape learning, while also raising ethical and theological questions about technology's role in human life and ministry. In response, ADC is fostering a holistic approach to AI that emphasizes meaningful conversations, responsible experimentation, and practical applications in theological education.

We are experimenting with what's possible to determine what is desirable for the future of AI in ministry preparation and the church.

Enhancing the role of educators

The potential for harnessing the power of AI in education is immense. Our goal is to develop AI-powered tools that enhance, not replace, the role of educators. Faculty can use these tools to engage students more effectively, while students gain hands-on experience with technology that is likely to be central to their future ministry contexts. This initiative underscores our commitment to integrating technology in a way that respects and amplifies the educator's role, aligning AI's utility with the educator's calling.

Continuing education for alumni and ministry leaders

As part of our mission to prepare graduates for an AI-driven world, ADC is also introducing micro-credentialed courses for alumni and ministry leaders. These short courses will provide focused training on the implications

The Association of Theological Schools
The Commission on Accrediting

10 Summit Park Drive, Pittsburgh, PA 15275-1110
T: 412-788-6505 • F: 412-788-6510 • www.ats.edu

COLLOQUY ONLINE
JANUARY 2025

1

of AI for ministry, offering practical skills and theological insights to help leaders navigate the ethical and operational challenges that come with this technology. By equipping our graduates with a balanced perspective on AI, ADC ensures that they are prepared to engage with it thoughtfully in their ministries, utilizing these tools to support their calling rather than detract from it.

AI literacy for current students

Additionally, ADC is embedding AI literacy within our curriculum to better prepare current students for the realities they will encounter in an AI-infused world. This training goes beyond technical know-how. It emphasizes the ethical and theological dimensions of AI and enables our students to approach technology critically and thoughtfully, ultimately helping them to develop a grounded theological perspective on AI's role—one that is informed by ADC's commitment to social justice, ethical integrity, and spiritual formation.

Broader conversations with churches and educational institutions

At ADC, our engagement with AI goes beyond the immediate needs of our students and extends into broader conversations within the theological education community and beyond. We are partnering with churches, educational institutions, and other organizations to foster a collaborative approach to AI that addresses the broader implications of this technology.

Together, we aim to move the conversation beyond narrow concerns, such as plagiarism, to embrace a hopeful vision of how AI might support the Church in its mission to serve and uplift communities. In this spirit, ADC is also actively exploring the theological, ethical, environmental, and legal implications of AI.

By engaging these complex issues, we seek to model a holistic and responsible approach to technology, one that honours both the commitments of Christian faith and the evolving needs of our world.

In this rapidly changing landscape, Acadia Divinity College remains steadfast in its commitment to equipping students for transformative ministry. By integrating AI thoughtfully into theological education, ADC is preparing graduates to serve their churches and communities with integrity, compassion, and a deep sense of purpose. As we embrace this new technology, ADC continues to lead as a centre of theological education that is as forward-looking as it is rooted in faith, empowering students to navigate the future with wisdom and grace.

Anna Robbins *is President of Acadia Divinity College and Dean of Theology for Acadia University in Wolfville, Nova Scotia. She also serves as Secretary of the ATS Board of Directors.*

The Association of Theological Schools
The Commission on Accrediting

10 Summit Park Drive, Pittsburgh, PA 15275-1110
T: 412-788-6505 • F: 412-788-6510 • www.ats.edu

COLLOQUY ONLINE
JANUARY 2025

2