

# Union Theological Seminary enables digital capacity building with *Pathways* project

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*Union Theological Seminary (UTS), based in New York City, confronted the challenge of transitioning in-person gatherings to virtual and hybrid formats. The need to embrace digital tools and technologies was the catalyst for UTS to create the Technology, Innovation, and Digital Engagement Lab (TIDEL), a collaborative venture launched last year as a Lilly Endowment Inc.-funded *Pathways for Tomorrow Initiative* project.*

## **Project origins**

In 2021, the UTS-based RISE Together Mentorship Network set out to create a dynamic and engaging virtual experience for hundreds of women of color in ministry. After the Network's biennial conference, UTS reflected on the many technical, logistical, and financial resources needed to put on the event. After sharing the experience with others, it became clear that UTS wasn't alone. Most small, faith-based organizations—churches, seminaries, and faith-based nonprofits—had to be facing similar challenges when trying to embrace technology. Smaller organizations often aren't equipped with the expertise, financial resources, or even product knowledge to leverage technologies to serve their missions. Considering the successful, albeit resource-intensive conference, the question became: how could smaller organizations collaborate across all dimensions of technology-driven innovation?



"By tapping into the collaborative spirit of the RISE Network and its partnership with UTS, we championed engagement in technology and learned how to better enhance connection, community, and peer mentoring in faith-based organizations," said RISE Executive Director Lisa Rhodes.

Out of this reflection emerged TIDEL, launched by UTS along with Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School, New York Theological Seminary, Kairos: The Center for Religion, Rights and Social Justice, and the RISE Women of Color in Ministry program. TIDEL began as a recognition of the critical need for IT capacity-building in smaller faith-based organizations and communities. The goal was to create a dedicated space for learning, collaboration, and access to the resources that would allow these organizations to access and experiment with technologies and learn from peers and experts in and beyond the faith-based world.

At the same time, UTS was working on a grant proposal for Lilly Endowment Inc.'s *Pathways for Tomorrow* Phase 3 grant, led by David Gastwirth, UTS vice president of online education and learning innovation. The themes of innovation, collaboration, and adaptation that were central to the call for proposals aligned with the vision for TIDEL and the larger goals of UTS in pursuing the *Pathways* Phase 3 grant.

UTS has long been a leader in reimagining theology and spiritual practice in response to cultural, technological, demographic, and social changes. As early as the 2000s, UTS was at the forefront of exploring how digital technologies could reshape ministry through its New Media Project. The project sparked critical conversations about the role of digital platforms in shaping religious life and theological education, providing a foundation for the kind of work TIDEL would later undertake.

### **TIDEL launch**

With generous funding from Lilly Endowment Inc., TIDEL brought on a fellowship director, Gabby Cudjoe Wilkes, and TIDEL was officially launched in fall 2023 with the TIDEL Leadership Fellowship Program. TIDEL was intentional in advertising the program to diverse audiences well beyond the networks of the partner organizations. Nearly 200 individuals applied, ultimately leading the program to expand its size.

The TIDEL Fellowship Program is committed to empowering leaders. Due to its guiding philosophy that innovation is collaboration and cannot thrive nor be sustained when done in silos, all applicants are required to apply in pairs. TIDEL also placed a high emphasis on design thinking tools and methods to guide the work of technology-driven innovation. The goal was to locate leaders across the nation who meet organizational challenges

with innovative solutions. TIDEL was less interested in whether applicants held tech expertise and more interested in whether applicants had the capacity to think broadly about new ways to respond to old problems.

Cohort 1 of The TIDEL Fellowship officially launched in December 2023. It now supports 41 fellows from 20 different congregations, faith-based organizations, and theological schools. The fellowship teams are embedded in cohorts, each with a designated mentor. All fellows have already completed a design thinking course certified by AIGA (The Professional Association for Design). TIDEL Fellows engage in hands-on learning in design thinking and project management, and they participate in collabor-

ative projects that explore new ways to incorporate technology into lifelong learning, hybrid ministry and congregational engagement, mentorship, and digital communities.

### **Ongoing work**

With a full year under its belt, six months remain for the inaugural TIDEL cohort. Teams are piloting a variety of technologies and working with a diverse array of consultants and developers.

One pair is using Memory

Fox to help generations of women-identified leaders pass wisdom on to each other via a storytelling archive. Another pair is using Squarespace to create a centralized digital hub to help food pantries update their inventory for food-insecure populations. Several TIDEL fellowship pairs are launching Mighty Networks with their congregations and organizations to facilitate digital connectivity that goes beyond traditional social media platforms and video conferencing tools. Some of the pairs are using the Zoom Events platform options to expand possibilities for synchronous digital engagement alongside in-person church services and events. The list of technologies being



used goes on, including podcasting software, customer relationship management systems, and a variety of EdTech tools. By embedding pairs working on similar projects within cohorts, fellows are learning not only from the leadership team but also from one another.

In addition to the Fellowship Program, TIDEL runs a Speakers Series that has already reached hundreds of viewers from across the globe. The series brings together thought leaders, technologists, and digital ministry innovators to discuss how digital tools can be used to deepen spiritual life, enhance educational engagement, and advance social justice.

Looking to the future, UTS hopes to expand opportunities for seminary students and alumni, as well as other faith-based leaders to learn about digital ministry, innovation, and the opportunities, challenges, and ethical issues at the intersection of faith and technology. Plans are underway for Cohort 2 of the fellowship, with feedback and lessons learned from Cohort 1 already being incorporated into future plans. TIDEL is not just about adapting to digital change—it's about leading it, in service of a more just, inclusive, and innovative future for faith-based communities everywhere.



(Top row, L to R): TIDEL Fellows at the summit, TIDEL Fellow Audrey Akins Williamson, TIDEL Fellow Jenn Louie; (Bottom row, L to R): TIDEL Design Challenge Leads Heidi Campbell, Lisa Rhodes, and Riley Jones, IV, TIDEL Fellowship Director Gabby Cudjoe Wilkes, and UTS Vice President of Online Education, Learning Innovation/TIDEL Team Lead David Gastwirth.



David Gastwirth is Vice President of Learning Innovation and Strategic Initiatives at Union Theological Seminary (UTS) in New York City. Gabby Cudjoe Wilkes is Director of the TIDEL Fellowship Program, a collaborative initiative based at UTS.

