Opportunities and challenges faced in training Ministers of Religion through Open and Distance Learning: The case for Zimbabwe Theological Education by extension

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Abstract

In recent years some evangelical churches in Zimbabwe, such as the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe and the Anglican dioceses of Harare, Manicaland, Masvingo and Central Zimbabwe, have resorted to training ministers of religion through Open and Distance Learning (ODL). This is done through Zimbabwe Theological Education by Extension College (TEE) which started as an affiliate college of the Joint Board of Theological Education by Extension of South Africa. Presently Zimbabwe Theological Education by Extension is an associate college of Zimbabwe Open University. ODL has never been a norm for evangelical churches in Zimbabwe. From the time of their inception in Zimbabwe, then Rhodesia, evangelical churches introduced denominational theological institutions, like United Theological College, which was started by the Methodist Church as Epworth Theological College and changed the name when other denominations which included the United Methodist Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church and United Church of Christ joined the theological college as well as Gaul House, an Anglican initiative for local ministerial training. These colleges use the conventional teaching method. From 1980 most of the evangelical churches in Zimbabwe experienced phenomenal growth which could not be matched to the numbers of church ministers. As a result they looked for ways through which they could address the challenge of ministerial shortages and ODL was adopted. The purpose of this paper is twofold, to interrogate the role of ODL in the context of training ministers of religion and to explore the opportunities and challenges experienced in using ODL as a method of ministerial formation. In this paper the researcher proffers two major arguments. The first is that ODL promotes the initial professional education of ministers of religion. Secondly the researcher submits that ODL provides space for continuing professional development for ministers of religion.

Key Words: Theological Education by Extension, Open and Distance Learning, ministerial formation

Background to the study

In Zimbabwe, there is an acute shortage of ministers of religion among most evangelical churches. The term evangelical has been preferred for this study rather than mainline or mainstream so as to minimise confusion and misconceptions which may arise through use of the terms in academic circles. The term mainline has often been used in a way that presents some denominations as superior to others. Evangelical refers to denominations which emphasise on biblical Christianity and preaching. The phrase minister of religion is used to refer to priests and reverends in the evangelical churches.
It was noted that the traditional, residential method was seemingly incapable of producing enough ministers of religion, swiftly enough, to cope with the rapid growth that was happening in the church. The shortage of trained and qualified ministers of religion has led to a situation where some circuits or parishes are manned by untrained lay pastors or deacons. This shortage of ministers of religion as well as cost of training a minister and replacement in the field compelled some evangelical churches to consider training ministers of religion through Open and Distance Learning (ODL), which is a paradigm shift. It is a shift from the traditional model of ministerial formation through conventional theological training colleges. The conventional theological training is a three year residential training programme where trainee pastors are removed from their church and community contexts and educated through intensive lectures and seminars at a theological college. Pivotal on the programme of this style of educating is realising an academically high level of knowledge and preserving an already 'complete' theology.

Theological Education by Extension (TEE) as a form of ODL seeks to educate the potential ministers of religion while they go about their ministry rather than removing them from their communities. The purpose is training people in the ministry rather than training people for the ministry. This TEE seeks to educate the potential church leaders while they go about their ministry rather than removing them from their communities and hoping that they would go back. In other words, the entire ethos is training people in the ministry rather than training people for the ministry.

The new paradigm was considered as an effective way of increasing the quantity of trained and qualified ministers of religion. Just as the case is with any other ODL programmes where quality has always been an issue (Chakwera and Saiti 2005), the same has been with training ministers of religion through the model. Right from the beginning churches who used this new paradigm shift aimed to increase the quantity of ministers of religion but without compromising on the quality of education.

In this paper, the researcher focused on finding out how ODL is being used in training of ministers of religion, how effective the model is in addressing issues related to the shortage of ministers of religion and what opportunities and challenges are faced in using the model. The assumption of the study is that if training of ministers of religion through ODL is effective and producing desired results for the few denominations using it, then it is the key to solving the critical shortage of ministers of religion in the whole Christian community in Zimbabwe.

In Zimbabwe, the training of ministers of religion through ODL was introduced in 1973 through an ecumenical effort to provide theological education for African Initiated Churches (Daneel, 1989). Daneel, a Dutch Reformed theologian borrowed the concept of ODL for training ministers of religion from Latin America. He introduced it through the Theological Education by Extension programme. The programme aimed at providing ministerial formation for ministers of religions of the various African Initiated Churches who did not have theological institutions to train their ministers of religion. Their polity and ecclesiological structures were different from missionary churches such that they could not send their ministers of religion to be trained through the existing theological institutions even if such institutions would open their doors to them, which could not be contemplated at the time.

Daneel saw that the African Initiated Churches had a huge following that were led by non-trained ministers of religion and took it upon himself to initiate an ecumenical theological training programme for the various churches. He then introduced Theological Education by Extension as a model for training ministers of religion among the
churches. The programme addressed the identified gap but could not be continued after Daneel left due to lack of funding.

Training ministers of religion through ODL in Zimbabwe among evangelical churches started around 1980. Individual denominations like the United Methodist Church, Anglican Church, Reformed Church in Zimbabwe and others ventured into the possibilities of using ODL as a method of ministerial formation. At that time the denominations approached the Joint Board of Theological Education by Extension in South Africa individually and enrolled their students with the Joint Board. Upon realising that they had affiliated to the Joint Board as individuals, the denominations then came together and initiated the Zimbabwe Theological Education by Extension (ZimTEE) College in 1998 which would coordinate the training of ministers of religion through Open and Distance Learning. The denominations had realised that through ODL the problems of shortage of ministers of religion and the cost of training ministers of religion were being addressed. More students were enrolled through TEE than the conventional colleges. However, challenges were experienced in the coordination of ODL by individual denominations which led the Joint Board of Theological Education by Extension in South Africa advising the denominations to consider affiliating to other educational Boards or institutions.

At the inception of the ZimTEE College, those who appended their signatures to the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) were the heads of the Anglican Church in the Provinces of Central Zimbabwe, Manicaland and Masvingo, the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe, the Reformed Church in Zimbabwe and the Baptist Church in Gweru. In order to ensure that the quality of ministerial formation was not compromised, the ZimTEE College applied for affiliate college status with the Joint Board of Theological Education by Extension of South Africa. The qualifications attained by students through the Joint Board were a certificate and Diploma in Theology.

From 2010 ZimTEE became an associate college of Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). Through the associate relationship, the college has offered Diploma in Theology. ZimTEE College has produced prospective candidates for ZOU degree programmes. From 2016 the college has started enrolling students for the Certificate in Theology qualifications for lay preachers and leaders.

**Statement of the problem**

The shortage of ministers of religion has become a bone of contention in most evangelical churches in Zimbabwe since the country’s independence in 1980. Many circuits or parishes are manned by lay pastors or deacons who are not trained. The demand for trained ministers of religion among evangelical churches is rising in Zimbabwe. This is a result of some historical factors and current ministry growth. At the independence of Zimbabwe in 1980 most missionaries left the country leaving gaps in most churches, hence the acute shortage of ministers of religion. Ministerial formation was expensive and conventional theological colleges did not have enough facilities to accommodate large numbers of students. After independence Christianity spread like veld fire in Zimbabwe which called for more ministers of religion to deliver in the ever growing churches. There is also an increase in the demand of ministers of religion in the diaconal work and para-church organisations' work. Also, chaplaincy in institutions and uniformed forces has contributed to the critical shortage of ministers of religion. The question to be addressed in this paper is: Can Open and Distance Learning meet the demand for ministers of religion among evangelical churches both quantitatively and qualitatively?

In order to address this question, the study was carried out in Harare and Gweru. It was
guided by the following four research questions:
1. Why should theological colleges use ODL for training ministers of religion?
2. How has ODL met both the quantitative and qualitative demands for ministers of religion?
3. To what extent can the advantages of using ODL in training ministers of religion outweigh the challenges of the ODL mode of delivery?
4. What needs to be done to improve the effectiveness of training of ministers of religion through ODL?

**Importance of the study**

This paper contributes to the literature concerning training ministers of religion through ODL by investigating the quantitative and qualitative contribution of the ODL mode of delivery to ministerial formation. The assertion that ODL cannot provide a formative experience for ministers of religion was one of the objections raised by critics of employing the model in theological training (Cannell 1999, Patterson 1996, Rovai, Baker & Cox 2008). There is also literature which defends the use of ODL in theological education such as Gresham (2006), White (2006) and Lowe & Lowe (2010a, 2010b).

This study was undertaken in an attempt to address the opportunities and challenges experienced in training ministers of religion through ODL. It also sought to respond to questions of quality and quantity in training ministers of religion through ODL. The findings of the present study contribute vital information to the theory and practice of training ministers of religion through ODL. The findings will also help to inform the ministerial formation policy makers and tutors on the potential of ODL in improving the quality and quantity of ministers of religion. This study serves as a stimulus for research interest in the area of training ministers of religion through ODL.

**Review of related literature**

**Concept of ODL**

The concept of ODL was defined by Saide and Saide (2008) as an educational process in which a significant portion of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in space and time from the learner. In this model the learning process is an organised educational activity which is based on the use of teaching materials, where constraints are minimised so as to improve access, in terms of time and space, method of study or a combination of these. In training of ministers of religion it is useful to comprehend ODL as a collection of methods for providing structured learning not as just a single mode of delivery. Important to note is that in ODL a student is not required to attend fixed classes at a centralised venue and in physical presence of a lecturer. According to Kangai and Bukaliya (2011), within the education sector Open and Distance Learning can be understood as an umbrella term embracing educational approaches which include print media, telephone, computers and television used to reach students in their schools, provide learning resources or enabling them to qualify without attending college in person. This study will appropriate Saide and Saide’s conception on the training of ministers of religion through ODL.

**Models of learning process**

Kangai and Bukaliya (2011) discussed three models of teacher education which dominate debate on training of teachers. While these models are about the training of school teachers, this study has applied the models to the training of ministers of religion. The first model is the apprenticeship model or school-based model. In this model the concept of mentorship is at the centre stage. The training of teachers should be based at a school with experienced classroom teachers mentoring students. This model lacks
uniformity. It does not produce the required product and the same is the case when the model is applied to the training of ministers of religion. This model did not work well for evangelical churches.

The second model is the college-based model. It claims that training must occur within a conventional training institution with the institution facilitating the learning process. This has been the traditional method used in conventional colleges for education, medicine, nursing and most training institutions including ministerial formation. The training of ministers of religion through the college based model takes a minimum of four years with some colleges requiring up to seven years. This model has two major limitations within the context of shortage of ministers of religion. It emphasises on theory at the expense of practice and takes too long for a student to complete the studies and start working in the face of a crisis of staff shortage.

The third model is the equal partnership model which involves the training institution, the school and the government. In this model the institution provides the teaching theory, the school facilitates teaching practice and the government provides funding. While this model has worked well for the teaching sector it does not work well for the training of ministers.

Of the three models presented above the college based model is the one which has been used by evangelical churches in Zimbabwe in training of ministers of religion. However the demand for trained ministers of religion due to the expansion of mission work and withdrawal of missionaries at independence in 1980 forced the evangelical churches to venture into a new model of ministerial training. The new trend in training of ministers of religion is shifting away from the conventional model to a more flexible one. This led to taking up Theological Education by Extension, which is ODL, as a model for ministerial training.

According to Daneel (1989, p.230) Theological Education by Extension “may be defined as an educational strategy which enables learning to take place at times and places which permit the student to continue his or her usual non-scholastic functions in society and which provides for synthesis of cognitive learning and practical experience.” Important to note is that emphasis is on structured interaction between the tutor and student as opposed to buildings, facilities and apparatus which constitute a theological institution. TEE as implemented by the mentioned evangelical churches in Zimbabwe is facing some challenges some of which threaten the very existence of the programme. Therefore, it is the task of this paper to examine opportunities and challenges faced in training ministers of religion through Theological Education by Extension.

Methodology

The paper used a mixed methods design which is appropriate when “the researcher seeks to elaborate on or expand on the findings of one method with another method” (Creswell 2009, p.14). The numerical contribution of ODL in training of ministers of religion exposed through quantitative investigation was supplemented by qualitative interviews with beneficiaries of using ODL mode for theological education. The use of a mixed methods approach for this paper has shown that there is quantitative significance in using ODL for training ministers of religion. For this study, a quantitative investigation in isolation is considered incomplete. A mixed methods approach has significant precedent in a study that seeks to address theological education, as qualitative factors help to further explain the findings of quantitative research (Hill, Sarazin, Atkinson, Coussineau & Hsu 2002; Moberg, 2002)

This study is both quantitative and qualitative as shown above. Here, quantitative research is used to answer questions about relationships among variables with the
purpose of explaining, testing and controlling phenomena. It is used to test, confirm or validate the hypothesis that ODL addresses adequately the critical shortage of ministers of religion being experienced by most evangelical churches in Zimbabwe. Hancock (2007) described qualitative research design as a framed tool that seeks to explore or develop explanations of social phenomena, how people are influenced by events, why people behave the way they do and how opinions and attitudes are formed. Hence qualitative research enables individuals to get the gist of the social world and comprehend why things are the way they are.

The researcher is a lecturer with the Zimbabwe Theological Education by Extension (ZimTEE) and has ten years experience in theological education through ODL. Data collection for this presentation was through ZimTEE documents and interviews. The qualitative research method was used in this presentation. The documents analysed were retrieved from ZimTEE College in Gweru at the Anglican Province of Central Zimbabwe Diocese office. The researcher interviewed current students, graduates from the college, tutors and administrators. The targeted sample was 40 interviewees but at 25 the researcher realised that data saturation had been attained, where no new and relevant information was emerging and further interviews were no longer adding to findings but repeating what had been said before (Saumure & Given, 2008). Interviewees were selected randomly from those involved in ZimTEE as students, tutors and administrators. The presentation and discussion of the research findings was guided by the research questions of the study.

### Discussion of research findings

Presentation of the research findings is based on the responses given to the four research questions. The first research question of this study was, why use ODL for training of ministers of religion? Responses given by interviewees on the reasons for using ODL in ministerial formation are shown below in Table 1.

The denominations participating in ZimTEE have realised that ODL is a fitting tool to address the critical shortage of ministers of religion as seen through 92% in Table 1 above. However, none of the interviewees agreed to the suggestion that ODL replaces conventional theological training method. Both methods should be used to complement one another in addressing the shortage of ministers. One of the church leaders retorted excitedly that his denomination was in crisis, they needed more pastors yet they could not afford training costs for their conventional college. ODL was introduced at the right time.

A common strategic issue for denominations participating in ZimTEE is to train more ministers of religion. To this end ODL is the most appropriate and desirable approach. As seen from table 1 there are reasons that are forwarded in support of ODL as a method for training ministers of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>N0</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To address the critical shortage of ministers</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To provide in-service training for ministers</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low training cost for ministers</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To increase opportunities for continuous professional development</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To provide more practice in ministerial training</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
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</table>
religion. According to the ZimTEE national administrator,

ODL is flexible, cheaper than the conventional method; it provides for increased opportunities for continuous professional development and allows students more time to practise what they learn immediately since the learning process occurs in the context of their work. Students implement what they learn on a daily basis.

The second research question addressed by this study was, how has ODL met both the quantitative and qualitative demands for ministers of religion? The research started by examining the quantitative output of ODL as implemented by ZimTEE. All tutors who participated in the study agreed that their denominations were close to covering the gap which had been created by the critical shortage of ministers of religion. One participant pointed out that ZimTEE has invaded the theological education field and within a short time there will be no space to deploy students who graduate from conventional theological colleges. ODL appears to be the best tool to bring down the critical shortage of ministers of religion. The two denominations which are training their ministers of religion through ZimTEE were able to increase the number of students enrolled annually. Denominational administrators of the two denominations under study confirmed that the number of students they sent to their conventional theological colleges during the period under study was far too less than those they sent to ZimTEE. The table below shows how ODL has contributed to the numerical growth of ministers of religion for the two denominations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intake</th>
<th>Admitted</th>
<th>Passed</th>
<th>Failed</th>
<th>Drop outs</th>
<th>Graduated</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1999-2002</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000-2003</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001-2004</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002-2005</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003-2006</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004-2007</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005-2008</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006-2009</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007-2010</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008-2011</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009-2012</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010-2013</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011-2014</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012-2015</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The figures above show that from 1999 to 2006 ODL was very popular with an average enrolment of 40 students per year. From 2007 to 2011 the enrolment of students dropped by 47.5% and a sharper drop of 72.5% in enrolment of students in 2012 – 2015 intake. According to the ZimTEE coordinator, ODL is the best way to alleviate the challenge of the shortage of ministers of religion. This is confirmed by the statistics above. From 1999 to 2006 the enrolment was high and the students studying through ODL were assigned parishes or circuits which they served while studying. This reduced the demand for ministers of religion in the two denominations under study. The enrolment of students continued to decrease as years went by because the need for more ministers of religion also decreased due to students who studied while serving. The Methodist Church in Zimbabwe TEE coordinator accredited the high enrolment of students in the first eight years and sharp decreases in the following years to the contribution ODL made in reducing any shortage of staff. He explained, ODL courses are by extension, which means the college goes to the students in their local setting instead of the students leaving their locality to go to the college. This makes the training cheaper and time effective because students don’t have to travel everyday or look for accommodation. The training is also contextual because the students learn within their environment and context and can therefore apply what they are learning to their situation. Denominations are able to send more students to an ODL college as compared to a conventional one.

On the quality and effectiveness of ZimTEE the major issue is how the institution assesses its own quality (Mydal, 1994). Focal questions to this part of the study include how ZimTEE as an ODL institution assesses its quality effectively? What systems and procedures are in place for assessing what the college offers? For quality assurance ZimTEE has benefited from the Joint Board of Theological Education by Extension of South Africa from 1999 to 2009 and ZOU’s systems from 2010 to 2015.

In ZimTEE quality assurance is undertaken in two ways. First, it is undertaken by ZOU to which ZimTEE is an Associate College. The application for accreditation by ZOU is a clear indicator that quality assurance is of major concern at ZimTEE. ZOU staff visit ZimTEE for appraisal of library facilities, quantity and quality of tutors and modules. ZOU also sets the grading and assessment system for ZimTEE. Examination papers and scripts are moderated by ZOU and the Diploma offered by ZimTEE is a ZOU Diploma.

Second, the internal quality assurance measures at ZimTEE are effected through a number of internal controls. There is team
approach in production of learning materials and an internal moderation of assignment questions, examination draft questions and examination scripts. Students are expected to come together for tutorials at the ZimTEE study centres at least three times a year for periods of between one to two weeks. ZimTEE examiners are required to visit all ZimTEE study centres while tutorials are in session at least once annually. In terms of enrolment ZimTEE gets students who are seconded by the participating churches who have 5 ‘O’ Levels including English just as what happens with conventional theological colleges.

The challenge pointed out by most tutors interviewed is on assessing the progress of students through the follow up programme. Students serve in their denomination’s parish or circuits. Tutors have to be granted permission from the denomination’s authority in order to assess students. It was pointed out that in some cases this has proved difficult to come by and students end up not being assessed at their work places.

The third research question addressed in this study was ‘to what extent can the advantages of using ODL in training ministers of religion outweigh the challenges of the ODL mode of delivery?’ This study has shown that there are noticeable advantages in training ministers of religion through ODL. Among the advantages ODL is forwarded as a suitable method of training ministers of religion that reduces the shortage of staff significantly. Student ministers carry out their studies while staying in areas they are serving without being withdrawn from communities to seminaries. This addresses the shortage of ministers as the students add on to the number of ministers of religion already in service.

From both ODL students and tutors it was clear that ODL enables student ministers to apply acquired knowledge and skills immediately since they are in constant contact with church members in parishes of circuits that they serve. In this way, student ministers consolidate ministerial formation theory with practice there and then and thereby addressing the challenges of staff shortages.

Open and Distance Learning also provides student ministers with opportunities for a flexible study programme. Students determine their study progress with tutors being there to assist them. It also emerged that ODL provides student ministers with opportunities for both initial and continuous ministerial training. Graduates of ZimTEE have opportunities to go for further studies through ZOU and other universities.

Although there are advantages and great potential to reduce the critical shortage of ministers of religion through ODL the model has challenges as well. Challenges faced by ZimTEE in employing the model include administration, facilities, student assessment and perceptions towards ministers of religion who studied through ODL. In some cases learning materials do not reach students in the intended time. This is due to some local centres delaying collection of materials from national centre or students who collect the materials from the local centre late. The policy of ZimTEE is that students should get study materials by January, the first month of the academic year.

Library services are another challenge raised by interviewees. Library facilities such as books, e-books, computers and journals are very important for ODL to be effective. ZimTEE has limited library facilities and inadequate resources. Some students find it difficult to access library resources since each local centre is expected to run its own library. Students who are close to the national centre have more chances of accessing library resources.

Another challenge pointed out was on student assessment. Tutors are responsible for assessing students’ study progress. In some cases the process is hindered by delays because of church authorities’ negative
attitudes towards ODL. They either deny or delay access to students. Students are deployed by their denominations under a bishop or superintendent of the Anglican Church or Methodist Church in Zimbabwe respectively. If the superior has a negative attitude towards ODL he or she becomes an obstacle to the timely assessment of the student under his or her charge. This can be alleviated through ZimTEE taking full control of the students and entering into a Memorandum of Understanding with participating churches that stipulates the supervision and assessment procedures.

The last challenge pointed out relates to perceptions. In the beginning ministers of religion who studied through ODL faced a lot of stigma at the hands of some ministers who trained through the conventional model, church leaders and church members. They were viewed as semi-trained, hence not qualified enough. This has since improved and needs to be addressed continuously.

However, in spite of the challenges raised above, this paper has shown that the advantages of using ODL mode of delivery in training ministers of religion outweigh the challenges. The fact that the two denominations under study were able to reduce the critical shortage of ministers of religion in a short period posits the positive contribution of the mode of delivery to ministerial formation.

The fourth question for this study was ‘what needs to be done to improve the effectiveness of training ministers of religion through ODL?’ The challenges raised above need to be addressed adequately to improve the effectiveness of ODL as a model for ministerial formation. Areas singled out for attention included student assessment. ZimTEE administration should work on winning the support and confidence of all participating denominations so as to build up strong partnerships which will improve capacity for supervision, resource mobilisation and elimination of stigma. It was pointed out that ZimTEE should improve library facilities and resources.

**Conclusion and recommendations**

This study has shown that ODL is contributing significantly to the reduction of the shortage of ministers of religion for denominations that make use of the facility. Statistics above show that within eight years the denominations which are using it reduced the shortage of ministers of religion significantly and started to reduce the enrolment of students. It is a flexible and effective method of ministerial formation. The model provides initial and continuous professional development for ministers of religion. The challenges faced in employing ODL as a method of training ministers of religion can be addressed which may lead to improved effectiveness. This study commends ODL as a model for ministerial training that can be used by any progressive church that aims at ministering effectively. The researcher therefore proffers the following recommendations for consideration by ZimTEE administrators and church leadership:

ZimTEE should consider spreading its wings by inviting more denominations to participate in ODL and contribute to the reduction of ministers of religion in the church.

There is need for ZimTEE to work out a comprehensive student assessment system that is discussed with and accepted by member churches.

As an effort to improve on library facilities it is recommended that ZimTEE negotiates and enters into an arrangement with ZOU for ZimTEE students to get ZOU identity cards so that the students access ZOU library facilities.
ZimTEE should introduce e-learning for theological formation to enhance the effectiveness of the model.

Churches that are having a shortage of ministers of religion or facing financial challenges in training ministers of religion should consider ODL as a method of ministerial formation.

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Connexional Bookshop. Who is the author? Title of publication? Year of publication?