Celebrating 25 years!

From the Principal

It is an enormous privilege to serve the Institute as its fifth Principal at this special Jubilee time. As I am writing this, I am thinking of a quarter of a century of theological learning and teaching, prayer, stewardship and community life that have marked each of the Institute’s 10,000 days of existence. I am thinking of my predecessors. I pay tribute to them as well as to all past and present staff, students, friends and benefactors. Collectively, they have made this place unique (I am not using this word lightly). My ten months in the post confirm what I have known but can now confidently say: one of the unique features of the Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology is its intellectual, spiritual and practical hospitality.

Dr Anna Abram

Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology
Margaret Beaufort is saturated with generosity of spirit. Creative pastoral practice and transformative human encounters are part of its fabric. All this, I believe, provides a solid ground for dealing with the shaky reality of theological education in our country. Let’s face it, theological education is not popular; student numbers are rapidly decreasing, while notable theological institutions are closing. Yet, this is the time when theology is most needed. Perhaps not any theology but the theology that listens, adapts and renews itself in the process.

Our Institute’s Silver Jubilee falls at a time of unprecedented change in the world where such issues as political upheavals, inequalities, migration, technology, climate change, population profile, gender and sexuality call for deeper reflection and new approaches. My own experience of dealing with change has led me to see that theology offers endless possibilities for rethinking our understanding of the world.

In Poland, in 1990 during the period of transition from communism to democracy, I was invited, as a student of theology, to teach ‘religious education’ in a secondary school. The education system there had been deprived of religious discourse for over 40 years. It was then that I learnt that theology not only provides religious literacy but also, badly needed then, the language of healing. It is this language which initiates us into a deeper understanding of the common good.

More recently, in my previous post at Heythrop College, University of London, I discovered that theological ethics in conversation with other disciplines can become a powerful vehicle for engagement with social, political, medical, business and other professional fields. It is relevant to all human activities. I believe that our Institute’s theological brand, with our expertise in areas of theological anthropology, ethics, philosophical theology and pastoral care, has much to offer to the Church and society at large. Our theology, while Roman Catholic, is done in the ecumenical and inter-religious spirit of the Cambridge Theological Federation and in dialogue with other disciplines. It is this kind of theology that has a future.

Finally, I have come to discover that one of the best services that theology can perform involves personal vocation. This is about helping people to discern their deepest calling. It seems to me that many people who have come to value what we offer at MBIT have experienced the very personal discovery or re-discovery of what makes them flourish as human beings and what sort of things they ought to be doing in order to see and love God in all things. So, for me, this year is a celebration of every single individual who has played a role in the collective transformation of the life of the Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology. May our Institute and each one of us continue in the same transformative spirit for many years to come, ad majorem Dei gloriam, for the greater glory of God.

Above: some of the staff team: Anna, Thea, Féirdia (with Méabh), Ela, Amy, at the launch of the Margaret Beaufort Association.
‘Yes, I am fond of history’.

‘I wish I were too. I read it as a duty, but it tells me nothing that does not either vex or weary me. The quarrels of popes and kings, with wars or pestilences, in every page; the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all – it is very tiresome.’ Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*.

In this twenty-fifth anniversary year, the idea of a history of the Margaret Beaufort Institute is being mooted. Should such a history emerge in time, we can presume that at the very least it would avoid the tiresomeness of ‘hardly any women at all’. But, gentle reader, what kind of history might entice and engage those beyond the immediate circle of the ones already committed to the Institute? Let me pose, but leave aside for the moment, the question of whether it is too soon for history-telling, and instead think aloud about what such a history might contain and how it could be constructed. A history of any institution is, of course, not simply a chronology – although it is useful for the sequence of events and people to be provided. Nor is it any person’s memoir, although it might well include many memories.

If the task were mine, how might I frame this story?

An opening chapter could reveal the significant and challenging building blocks that comprise the Institute’s DNA. Its origins in 1990 in the desire of the Cambridge Theological Federation (CTF) to add a Catholic house of study for the more complete expression of ecumenical practice was, and continues to be, no parochial matter. It inspired Catholic theologians in the Divinity Faculty of Cambridge University – at that time numbering seven, more than at any time since the Reformation – together with the superiors of the male and female religious houses in the city, the long-established IBVM (now CJs), the Canonesses of St Augustine, and the Dominicans, plus a new house of Jesuits. When these theologians and Religious responded to the CTF’s hand of friendship, they found themselves inevitably engaged with large questions about the purpose that such a house of study and prayer might serve in the life of the Catholic Church. Who and what would it be for? The four long-established houses of the CTF were dedicated to theological education for the ordained ministry. Since no new seminary would be opened in Cambridge and it was unimaginable that any existing seminary would move there, who could a Catholic equivalent institution be for? Perhaps it could be for Religious? In the early 1990s only the most optimistic founders would have imagined a future for that idea, but those who served on the Institute’s Founding Board were, full of hope for the contribution Catholic women could make

thank God, hope-filled and glass-half-full individuals. Their discussions and negotiations gradually led them to identify qualified Catholic women in general, among whom it was expected women Religious would be significant, as most likely to benefit from the courses in theology for ministry on offer in the Federation.
The Founding Board of lay theologians, friars, religious sisters and brothers were full of hope for the contribution Catholic women could make to the Federation and to the life of the Catholic Church in England - and perhaps elsewhere. It was an ambitious project launched without what might be called ‘a business plan’, or even an obvious source of funding.

So big themes lie embedded in this story of origins, waiting to be placed in their full context and traced out over twenty-five years of life: ecumenical relations in concrete and institutional form; the remarkable story of lay engagement with theological education in the post-Vatican II era; the continuingly contested nature of women’s discipleship and ministry in the Catholic Church; and the willingness of women’s religious congregations to support other Catholic women’s formation and education.

The context, unsurprisingly, was never a static one. There have been, for example, three popes and papacies, each with its own very distinctive style and approach to the implementation of the Second Vatican Council. Staying with church history, the first ordination of women in the Church of England in 1994 was a defining moment. And this is not to mention such wider contexts as the maturing of a digital revolution that has profoundly affected communication and the nature of higher education, or the advent of student fees in England which have had a negative impact on part-time and mature student access to higher education. These twenty-five years have seen a transformation of the environment within which the Institute has put into practice the foundational building blocks of ecumenism, theological education for lay people, and formation of Catholic women for discipleship and ministry.

If these building blocks structure one part of the story I would want to tell, another derives from the people who made and inhabited it. Over time the students and staff, principals, directors and governors who studied and prayed together have forged a particular spirit. Its key components are a sense of community that is not dependent on shared living, a liturgical confidence that came from regular responsibility for prayer, an intellectual vigour that is open to the breadth of Catholic thinking and practice, and a strong commitment to hospitality. The Institute’s move from rented flats in Wesley House (crucial for its ecumenical learning) to rent and then buy Lady Margaret House from the Canonesses of St Augustine in 2003 was not only to provide a regular source of much needed income but a location for the practices of hospitality. And of itself this purchase, and the fund-raising necessary to garner £1.8 million for such an unlikely cause, has a pivotal role in the history. Community and hospitality, intellectual life and money are the themes animated by the Institute’s people.

To write such a history with its ‘warp’ of structures and its ‘weft’ of people would naturally require analysis of the minutes of meetings, the records and archives of the Institute, its newsletters and its curricula. But it would also need the active involvement of individuals who have stories, not only of their time at the Institute but, more importantly, of their discipleship and ministries afterwards – in families, parishes, retreat houses, prisons, schools, hospitals and workplaces in Britain and elsewhere. Indeed, part of the purpose of such a history is that it would record these testimonies for posterity and assist in our understanding about the purpose, significance and wider consequence of lay formation and education, in this case of women.

And this brings me back to the parked question of timeliness. Is it too soon to write any kind of history of the Margaret Beaufort Institute? A longer and later perspective has much to recommend it. Yet to publish a history now is to make a claim on the Institute’s behalf: a claim for what it has done, often unseen, and what it might do in the future if it was to be more widely known. A book says this is who we are, getting on with God’s work in the vineyard. Perhaps this is the time to say so.
Why Theology? Why Women? Why Now?
Dr Amy Daughton

Some months ago I was asked to write a piece for the Bible Society’s journal The Bible in TransMission. The question was what could Catholic social teaching (CST) contribute to a conversation about populism? Populism is, in some ways, a pretty dreadful word. It smacks of triviality and so runs the risk of de-fanging its object. In reality political populism represents the increasing polarisation of political life and the radical impoverishment of public discourse, both causing real harm, especially to minoritised populations.

This all might seem rather gloomy, but the resources of Catholic theology offer the genuine possibility of enriching our common life in fundamentally plural ways. The principle of subsidiarity requires us to think responsively to particular situations, to work out the best level and sphere of life that will help us mutually work for change. That requires real dialogue and creative, diverse responses. At the same time, CST understands all human persons to have a destiny beyond themselves, a truly common good, rightly lived together in solidarity. So it is constantly relating local issues to a vision of human flourishing. This tradition of Catholic theology calls us to both practical wisdom and civic imagination.

It would be difficult to propose a more profound role for theology in our contemporary life! What I’m suggesting is that it is theologically significant to be both creatively attentive to real concrete difficulties, and to send our minds soaring away to reimagine our shared life together in new ways. Such questions are fundamentally about who we are. There is a beautiful reflection in Thomas Browne’s Religio Medici, written in the mid-seventeenth century: ‘live up to the dignity of your nature. Let there be no doubt at the end of your life that you have been human’. That is theology’s central concern.

It struck me, as I concluded that piece of work and sent it off, that while these concepts of practical wisdom and civic imagination certainly served to explain my hopes for political theology, they also frame the research of the Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology as a whole.

The Institute is geared toward vision and action, as aspects of theological research that inform each other. For example, in the early part of 2018, two symposia are being held at the Institute: one on pastoral discernment and another on the spirituality and theology of aging. Such topics are necessarily about the fragile reality of life, and looking beyond it to the ideas that shape our practice in its midst.

Thinking globally, the large international grant from the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation (discussed by its Co-Director, Catherine Sexton, overleaf) is to consider the nature of religious life – with and for its practitioners. This is a sprawling project of collaborative research. It is balanced by the local activism of those students, such as Mary Watkins, who are the leadership behind our continuing Fairtrade College status, designing and curating events, and joining public protests against Sainsbury’s decision to forego Fairtrade sources for their own label tea. One cannot talk about stewardship, or gift, or relationship, in a theological register, without that conversation being driven by those enacting such visions in their ministry—religious and lay.

We are finding ways for the vision to resource the action too, by introducing new teaching forums for spirituality and ethics for those volunteering and working in prison service (see calendar on the last page), and discussion groups for our research students on theology, historiography and the arts. Those researchers include psychotherapists, a children’s hospice chaplain, the founding member of a new religious community, and more.
Awake, Lyre and Harp

How shall I be in the world towards the one first of all mornings on earth this morning? Being thrown backwards on my self the whole having said or being about to say gathers and breaks on the tip of my tongue.

The blest, the best that has been said or sung unlikely rose up one particular day resounding within one particular self whose words are in me, singing for all they’re worth of this like glorious dawn I am towards.

When considering such questions therefore it is not difficult to find reasons for ‘why theology?’, nor to find reasons to study it now. In the introduction to a Reader in Political Theology, which I have co-edited with Dr Anna Rowlands, and Dr Elizabeth Phillips for Bloomsbury, we write that:

‘Delving into the ways in which Christians across history have approached, shaped, meditated upon, and resisted the politics of their times and places helps us to see patterns as well as possibilities; it gives us realism as well as hope’.

It is hope and realism that together also answer the question of ‘why women?’, which I continue to encounter when I explain where I work. To be sure, one might wish to argue that women can contribute with and alongside men in co-gendered spaces, especially in this year of 100 years of (some) women’s suffrage. Of course, our students already do just that, in their professional, voluntary and academic enterprises. What they also do is use the Institute as a place of nourishment for self-understanding in the light of the realism and hope by which they navigate those spaces, and which is also the heritage of women in our Church tradition (see the women of the San Prassede mosaics above). Realism about the challenges—worse for some women in our global sorority than for others—and hope about what women do achieve.

Thus, the Margaret Beaufort Institute seeks to maintain a space for women’s flourishing, particular to their experience, attentive to their concrete actions and visions of mutuality, a powerful, imaginative sign of what women can contribute to the global theological conversation.

Laura Kilbride attended our theology classes while completing her PhD in English and is now a Fellow at Peterhouse.

The Institute, depicted by Mari Kelly-Gross, BA (Hons), graduate and co-president of the Margaret Beaufort Association.
Over the last five years, MBIT has been involved in several exciting and ground breaking research projects, exploring women’s religious life in the UK and Ireland. The projects, funded by the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation and running since 2013, have involved MBIT working collaboratively with Durham University’s Centre for Catholic Studies (CCS) and the Religious Life Institute at Heythrop College.

The initial project, the Religious Life Vitality Project (RLVP), involved over 200 sisters from 18 active congregations in the UK and Ireland and looked at where sisters identify vitality in their religious life. We found that the sisters participating see most vitality in their ministry, reflecting not only a revitalised emphasis on serving the most marginalised, but also their appreciation of the shift to more diversified and individualised ministries. Linked to this we heard sisters celebrating the movement away from an institutionalised form of religious life to one with relationship, and more human ways of being together at its heart. Sisters spoke clearly of a desire for a more connected life, as they talked about the desire for union through their prayer lives, in their spirituality, with others in their community and with the world.

Although membership of religious congregations has declined significantly over the last 60 years, and over 70% of participants were aged over 70, we have seen sisters living a form of ‘creative diminishment’, modelling a response to difficult change which holds lessons for other parts of the institutional church. We saw this acceptance of the difficult realities now faced by religious life as itself a sign of the activity of the Spirit. Sisters’ responses to the challenges of aging were spiritually powerful: living loss and relinquishment through turning outwards to others, pointing to a form of spiritual self-giving which is perhaps the result of living less institutional lives and perhaps simply the fruits of lives of prayer. One of the participants, reflecting on the findings, spoke of this:

‘We are re-clothing ourselves with reaching out to trafficked people, we are re-clothing ourselves by looking, looking to the refugees and asylum seekers and quite honestly that is mounting the cross and I just think that that to me is a sure sign that we are alive to the way Christ acts in our world’.

Above all we found sisters keeping their eye on the prize. While searching for union and connectedness, they do not turn inwards in a negative way. Ministry is still central, as is their focus on the development and expansion of their charisms within the church and society more broadly with and through increasing numbers of lay partners and associates.
In 2015 we were able to present our findings to an important international conference in London - ‘The Nun in the World’. As we then also presented our findings to the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, they told us that they really liked our approach: the way we worked with sisters, placing their lived experience and their theological voices at the centre of the work. They asked if we would be willing to expand the work to sisters in East and Central Africa, so that they too could have the experience of taking part in such research. This was an exciting proposal, but we were acutely aware of being ‘outsiders’ – in so many ways: “Take off your sandals for the place where you are standing is holy ground” (Ex 3:5).

We therefore wanted to tread lightly and asked for a year to explore with sisters what such a project might look like. Throughout 2016 we made contact with key networks of sisters in East Africa, the International Union of Superiors General (UISG) in Rome, and the Leadership Conferences of sisters in countries ranging from Kenya to Zambia. We emphasised that we were seeking their opinion and not coming in with a hypothesis of our own. We wanted the work to be driven by their ideas and interests. The project was to be participative, with and for sisters.

These conversations resulted in the ‘Kasisi consultation’ (image below) where myself, Sr Gemma Simmonds CJ and Sr Pat Murray IBVM, Executive Secretary of the UISG, met with 17 sisters from five countries at Kasisi retreat house, outside of Lusaka in Zambia. We shared the stories from our first project, and sisters shared their concerns and issues, and we worked together to identify a theme and topic for the research project. We worked hard, and discussions were honest and sometimes painful, but accompanied by beautiful liturgies, much singing, some dancing, and a wonderful day together in a nearby safari park.

Sisters identified three challenges to the way they live religious life in Africa today and the future:

- What are we recruiting sisters for? For what role in society?
- How to balance the need for financial sustainability of congregations with our commitment to serve the poorest through our mission?
- Where do sisters fit in the local Church? What can we offer?
We then worked together to identify a research question which is rooted in the lived experience of the sisters themselves: What are sisters saying is the essence of women’s Religious Life in Africa today? What are the best practices for ensuring the understanding and living of this, and for communicating this essence to sisters in formation?

And so the project ‘Religious Life Africa: a sustainable future?’ was born. Our methods are ostensibly simple. Each sister provides up to five statements about her understanding of the essence of religious life. As a next step we will ask sisters to reflect in groups on their responses, to keep their voices and ideas at the heart of our later theological analysis. Margaret Beaufort Institute has welcomed Dr Maria Calderon-Munoz as a researcher to this Africa-based project, and she is working with sisters within the participant congregations to gather this data. The result of all this work is that we have over 500 sisters from over 60 congregations participating across seven countries. Many are based in rural areas with little internet connection, so we are making creative use of WhatsApp to reach participants.

The project is still at an early stage but we are already seeing interesting similarities and contrasts to the earlier work in the UK and Ireland. Ministry is a key indicator of vitality for British and Irish sisters, and is central to the essence of religious life for the sisters in Africa. The vows may be more prominent in the African context, whereas continuity of charism was of concern for sisters in the Vitality project. Overall the aim is to contribute to a growing global dialogue, and recognition of a global sisterhood. The picture emerging from Africa probably reflects the relative youth of religious life there and the reality of ministry in response to the complex face of poverty. However, we see the sisters’ wish for a religious life informed by African values, and their desire to belong to and speak into the global family of women religious.

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Light from Light

Sr Pavlína Kašparová OP, PhD student, discusses her work exploring and creating art installations...

Light: the essence of life, the agent which makes things visible, and a symbol of goodness. All these things attract other artists and theologians, as well as me. This transparent and innocent matter of light can serve also as a medium for making art. This is why I have tried to research various ways of using it.

After working with more traditional techniques of painting, I began to use and mix reflective materials with acrylic colours, and now I have moved on to exploring reflection in photography. This includes some experiments for which I have chosen the theme of the Crucifixion. Jesus on the Cross does not only represent a human being in pain, but also the Holy Sacrifice which is closely connected with His Glory.

The medium of light can help with expressing these transcendent truths. I prefer to find a more old-fashioned way of producing effects. In my photograph included above, you can see the very first result of these experiments. The human body represented at two different magnitudes expresses how the goodness of Jesus transcends His Humanity. The green light covering part of His Body symbolises the eternal effect of His Sacrifice. I am still at the beginning of this journey, but I am looking forward to what I will discover next.
Women in Rome
Mari Kelly-Gross, Kate Scotland

In 2017, in the glorious September sunshine, twenty-one Margaret Beaufort associates embarked on a pilgrimage to Rome. The lives of women prophets, mystics and martyrs were brought to life through the incredible knowledge and expertise of our wonderful guides: Dr Susan O’Brien and Professor Janet Martin Soskice.

Using sculpture, art and architecture to animate history and faith, Susan walked us through the life of Mary Ward. Our ‘Susan day’ culminated in evening prayer at the Venerable English College where Ged gave an insightful talk about Mary Ward’s life. Susan set the perfect pace; we were not tourists but pilgrims, with time to stand and stare.

Janet shared her extensive knowledge of Christian art, history and theology with us unreservedly. In her company we explored the lives of many saints including St Monica and St Catherine of Siena. Our ‘Janet day’ ended with Mass in the Chiesa di Santa Chiara.

We travelled in the spirit of the Margaret Beaufort Institute as an extended family: in friendship, laughter, learning and hospitality. We made many new friends, including Uta Sievers, who gave us a talk on life in the Vatican today. We also caught up with old friends such as Fr Tony Currrer, who celebrated Mass with us, and Fr Augusto Zampini-Davies, (2014 Cardinal Hume Scholar), currently in Rome, who joined us for supper on our last night.

Our wonderful memories of Rome are filtered through a lens of sunshine and gratitude for the company of such an extraordinary group of people.
New Members of the Institute Team

Dr Anna Abram
Principal

Prior to joining the Institute in April 2017, I was at Heythrop College, University of London where I taught ethics and served as Head of Pastoral and Social Studies Department. My current project is on the theme of moral imagination. Occasionally, I dip in to practical fields such as market economy, gerontology and media ethics. I value inter-disciplinary engagements and passionately support the dialogical model of inquiry which is practised so well at this Institute. Ignatian spirituality has been my home for many years and it has influenced my approach to theological formation which I see as the formation of the whole person as she takes part in the divine life with everything she is and does.

Dr Férdia Stone-Davis
Tutor in Theology

Joining at the end of September, I am still new to the MBIT community. My research interests centre upon music and its relation to philosophical and theological anthropology, ethics, epistemology and world-making. I am excited to be a part of a small, dynamic team that is supportive of interdisciplinary work, and I look forward to enriching the academic life of the Institute as well as being an ambassador for it. My research interests are reflected in my book *Musical Beauty* (Wipf and Stock), edited volume *Music and Transcendence* (Ashgate), and edited *Contemporary Music Review* journal issue ‘Home: Creating and Inhabiting Place through Music Activity’.

Ged McHale,
Spiritual Director

At heart I am a Contemplative. It’s written into my being, part of ‘the word which has been planted in me and can save my soul’ (James 1:21). For 22 years I lived this vocation as a member of an enclosed Carmelite community. Now I live it as Ged outside the enclosed monastic setting, in the context of spiritual accompaniment in Cambridge and the Margaret Beaufort Institute. I am present as the word is made flesh. What could be more exciting than that?

Thea Reimer
Communications Intern

My role is designed to stop the Margaret Beaufort Institute from being the best-kept secret in theological education and research. The exciting and vital work that MBIT is doing, as well as the prophetic way it lives its mission, are too important for it to remain a 'hidden' gem. I'm here to make sure that we be increasingly strategic about our communication and that we fold more dynamic social media platforms into these communication strategies. This means I'm tasked with building meaningful, human connections while getting the word out about this invaluable and Spirit-filled place.
Stay Connected and Spread the Word!

1. If you have had a positive experience of being part of our community, make sure the women in your life and in your parish get a chance to be part of it as well. Make sure they know about us and the various study opportunities we offer.

2. We will soon be rebuilding our website. You can also stay updated on events and courses by following us on Facebook: @MargaretBeaufortInstitute and Twitter: @MBITheology. If you aren’t on these platforms, check we have your current email.

3. Share our content on Facebook and on Twitter so the wider communities we all connect with online get a chance to know us and what we are about.

4. Review us on Google and on Facebook, to push us further up on Google searches.

5. Don't be a stranger! Let us know where you are in the world and what you are doing.

Worship with us on Thursday evenings in term. Let us know how we can pray for you.

Jubilee Calendar of Events, 2018

For further information, booking and fees (where applicable) please contact us!

Thomas Merton: Model of Discernment, Personal Care, Pastoral Presence, and Social Justice

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Prof Sir Roger Scruton, On Human Nature
Public Lecture and Reception

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Teresa of Avila Colloquium—Beyond Teresa
A joint event with St Mary’s University Twickenham

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Living Theology
A Jesuit programme brought to Margaret Beaufort Institute

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Douglas Hollick, Férdia Stone-Davis
Silver Jubilee Concert

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Dr Barbara Jatta, Director of Vatican Museums
Silver Jubilee Lecture and Reception

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Jubilee Mass and Celebration
With student exhibition, staff contributions, and more
Further details to come

Women who Changed the Church
A public seminar series to include Margaret Beaufort, Mary Ward, Alix Le Clerc, Hildegard of Bingen and more

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Spirituality, Religion and Ethics in the Prison Service
Training course for volunteers, officers and chaplains working in prison contexts

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Closing Silver Jubilee Retreat
Organised by the Margaret Beaufort Association

Who’s who

Dr Anna Abram
Principal

Dr Amy Daughton
Director of Studies
Director of Research

Dr Férdia Stone-Davis
Tutor in Theology

Ela Wolbek
Administrator

Mr Mel Kanellas
Bursar

Mrs Lynda Turner
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Mr Neil Warmsley
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