

Saint Paul School of Theology
DMIN550 Praxis Thesis Seminar

Spring and Summer 2009
June 29-30, 2009

Instructor: Nancy R. Howell
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Course Description

This seminar prepares students to investigate, research, and write about their field project. [Prerequisite: DMIN510] 1.5 semester credit hours

Course Learning Objectives

1. To review the process and importance of theological reflection as the foundation for ministry and to identify and articulate the theological doctrine(s) relevant to the praxis thesis.
2. To identify a research question or problem and to become familiar with methodological options relevant to praxis.
3. To demonstrate integration of theory (theology) and practice (ministry) by drafting a praxis thesis proposal, which functions as a point of discussion for the class meetings and with the student's committee.

Doctor of Ministry Program Learning Goals and Outcomes

1. The student will study rigorously to know and interpret the biblical, historical, and theological traditions and ecclesial practices of the Christian heritage, developing further as a theologian in the practices of ministry, and gaining further competency in critical, integrative, reflective, faithful, creative thinking and doing.

Selected outcomes—The student will demonstrate:

- Use of methodological competence to engage the biblical traditions creatively and critically
- Use of methodological competence to engage the historical traditions creatively and critically
- Use of methodological competence to engage doctrinal traditions creatively and critically
- Proficiency in research skills, and in reading, writing, and thinking critically, coherently, and with understanding
- Competency to integrate theory and practice in articulating and reflecting theologically on one's practices of leadership in ministry

2. The student will seek actively to deepen and update the understanding of the nature of persons, social institutions, and the natural environment, as a student leads and ministers sensitively in diverse contexts for the just transformation of the world.

Selected outcomes—The student will demonstrate:

- Astute proficiency in theologically understanding the nature of persons
 - Depth of knowledge of the nature and function of social institutions and astute proficiency in interpreting them theologically
 - Astute proficiency in leading and ministering in diverse contexts
 - An informed global outlook and demonstrated contributions toward the just transformation of the world
3. The student will attain purposefully understanding of and experience in the church, discerning and transforming the vocational identity, and further strengthening the academic competencies, practical skills, and spirituality necessary for sustained leadership in ministry and renewal of the church.

Selected outcomes—The student will demonstrate:

- Astute proficiency in theological, structural, and practical understanding of the church
 - Reexamination of vocational identity for leadership in ministry
 - Astute proficiency in academically informed understanding of leadership in ministry
 - Astute proficiency in communicating effectively through written, spoken, artistic, technological, and other forms of communication in varied contexts
4. The student will grow faithfully as a person in maturity and in reflective faith, through continuing study and a life of justice.

Selected outcomes—The student will demonstrate:

- Astute proficiency in thinking critically, coherently, and with understanding about the life of the faith
 - Demonstrated self-reflective and self-critical practices in leadership in ministry
5. The student will pursue intentionally spiritual formation for leadership in ministry through the diverse opportunities of the classroom, the wider seminary community, and ecclesial context, thereby engaging the academic and practical, the personal and communal, prayer and mission, and prophetic critique and evangelical witness.

Selected outcomes—The student will demonstrate:

- Astute proficiency in integrating the theoretical and practical

Required Texts

Myers, William R. *Research in Ministry: A Primer for the Doctor of Ministry Program*, 3rd ed. Chicago: Exploration Press, 2000.

Stone, Howard W, and James O. Duke. *How to Think Theologically*, 2nd ed. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006.

Saint Paul School of Theology Handbook.

Course Schedule

Monday, June 29

10:00-noon

Devotions
Introductions of instructor and students
Review of syllabus
Discussion of theology and theological method

1:00-4:00 p.m.

Workshop on draft proposals
Meetings with instructor

Tuesday, June 30

10:00-noon

Devotions
Discussion of research methods and the practice of ministry

1:00-4:00 p.m.

Workshop on draft proposals

**If committee chairs are available, students are encouraged to meet with them on June 29 or 30.

Course Requirements

1. *Class participation.* Students are required to be involved in discussion of texts and in presentation of course material and praxis thesis proposal drafts. Students must participate in all class sessions on June 29 and 30.
2. *Second draft proposal.* Students are required to revise the praxis thesis proposal for presentation on June 30. The workshop on June 29 should prepare students for the revisions.
3. *Third draft proposal.* Students are required to submit a third draft of the proposal in July on a date designated by class consensus.

Grading

The course is graded Credit (CR) or No Credit (NC). Advance assignments and June and July course requirements count equally in determining the final grade.

Because students are likely to continue revisions of proposals with committees, all comments will be crafted to suggest how to engage the chairs in conversation about the proposal. Anticipate that committees will require further revisions of proposals.

Criteria for Evaluating Course Work

Regardless of whether you write a paper, answer an essay question, voice an oral presentation, or create any original project, the academic context requires that certain minimal requirements characterize your work. While there are subjective components in the grading process, most professors are concerned that you become well educated in four basic qualities of excellent academic work:

1. Demonstration of an empathetic understanding of the content of texts and resources.

Your topic should not only be well researched in the library, through interviews and observations, and/or from assigned readings and class discussions, but you should be able to provide a fair description and a clear understanding of texts and resources. This is apparent in the ability to describe and discuss precisely and accurately what an author has written or a speaker has said. Evaluation, response, and critique follow accurate representation of another's ideas—earn the privilege of criticizing a viewpoint by showing that you really understand it.

2. Clear critical thinking that provides appropriate specific evidence for conclusions.

Use the most precise historical, empirical, or contemporary data or information to support the claims of your thesis and paragraphs. Conclusions follow from and are supported by evidence. Be sure that your evidence is relevant, accurate, and detailed. Adherence to clear critical thinking, relevant and accurate evidence, and logical organization constitute sound arguments. Even creative writing requires logical relationships among ideas to assist your readers in following the plot or main point.

3. *Creativity that moves beyond reporting someone else's ideas.*

Your creative addition to academic discourse might include questioning, evaluating, applying, criticizing (positively or negatively), developing, or responding. You might see a connection between two or more ideas. You might see information from a unique perspective. The minimal requirement of academic work is correctly repeating what is read or discussed. Excellent work moves beyond repetition to unique insights, organization, correlations, and theses. Work to find your own scholarly and professional voice.

4. *Flawless grammar, spelling, and form.*

Excellent written work is conscious of proofreading and good communication. Oral presentations are equally accountable for careful expression. A brilliant thesis can be lost in a paper or project that obscures its ideas with careless communication. Your readers and listeners should not have to guess what you mean—help them by speaking and writing well.

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Advance Assignments

**Nancy R. Howell
Professor of Theology and Philosophy of Religion
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Developing the praxis thesis proposal is a process, and the primary goal of the course is to equip students to write a praxis thesis proposal. Steps in the process include our meeting together on June 29 and 30, but our work must be progressive and intentional prior to the on-campus seminar meetings. Expect to spend part of July revising and crafting your praxis thesis, as well. You must be active during the spring semester in order to complete the course successfully.

Step 1

Assignment: If you don't already know, learn which two faculty members constitute your praxis thesis committee. Contact the chair of your committee and establish a working relationship. Your contact, of course, may be by email, telephone or appointment. Report to me on Moodle* the results of your meeting by **March 15, 2009**.

Purpose: The purpose of contacting your chair is threefold. First, come to an agreement with your chair about his/her involvement in the process of drafting your proposal during the seminar. Indicate that I will be able to accommodate the committee's preferences. Second, discuss with your chair the content of your proposal with emphasis on appropriate theological resources and the project itself (which may be a field project or a more theoretical investigation). Third, please request recommendations for reading from your chair. The recommendations must fit the theological approach to your praxis thesis and must support the methodology of the field project or ministry issue to be addressed. For example, you should be reading specifically in the work of a particular academic theologian or theological movement, AND you must read academic works that support your method (which might include congregational analysis, ethnographic studies, statistical studies, or sociological/psychological research techniques) AND you must read within a particular practical professional field of ministry (such as Christian religious education, homiletics, pastoral care, worship, church leadership, etc.). Not only will this conversation generate an initial reading list for the praxis thesis, but the list will inform work for the seminar and your praxis thesis bibliography.

Reading: In preparation for this assignment, read ALL parts of the *Saint Paul School of Theology Handbook* regarding the proposal and the praxis thesis itself. Familiarity with the protocol and policies for movement from the praxis thesis seminar to praxis thesis proposal

conference to praxis thesis writing to praxis thesis conference will expedite your progress through the program as you anticipate the larger context of each stage of the work.

Step 2

Assignment: Write a 1000-word essay (about three pages) describing your ministry identity. Write a coherent essay that addresses the following questions:

- How do you understand your call to ministry (in distinction from your ministry setting)?
- If you had to write a one-sentence “mission statement” to describe your vocational identity, what would that sentence be? Write and explain the sentence.
- What biblical or theological passage best reflects how you understand your ministry?
- What leadership style do you bring to your ministry? (For example, how do you understand power dynamics, relationships, authority, etc. in relation to your leadership?)
- What are the most important characteristics of your ministry identity? These characteristics often are strengths or goals in your ministry.

Please double space the essay and post it as a Word file on Moodle* no later than **March 1, 2009**.

Purpose: The praxis thesis should reflect your intentionality and self-awareness about ministry—about yourself rather than your ministry setting (which will enter the discussion later). Your ministry identity must be consistent with the theology, method, and project in order for your praxis thesis to be authentic to your ministry. I will use this essay to reflect on the coherence of your work and how ministry identity shapes the formulation of your proposal.

Reading: Chapter 7 “Vocation” from Howard W. Stone and James O. Duke, *How to Think Theologically*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 97-112.

Step 3

Assignment: Write a 1000-word essay discussing and describing a theological doctrine or theme. Limit the scope of the selection, and select the doctrine or theme based on your current hunches about the project or issue that you want to address in the praxis thesis. You must engage an academic theologian or theological movement, which should already be identified in step 1 above. Post the double-spaced essay on Moodle* as a Word attachment no later than **April 20, 2009**.

Purpose: Each praxis thesis must have a theological foundation or context for the field project or ministry issue to be addressed. The theological content of the project is critical because theology is what sets our work in the church apart from the work of psychologists, sociologists, politicians, and community organizers (to name a few lay vocations) who also serve persons and

communities. Because your participation in the Doctor of Ministry program signals your intention to be a leader in the church and the community, you must demonstrate ability to provide a theological rationale and location for the ministries that you undertake. In a later assignment, this essay will provide the theological ingredient of a draft praxis thesis proposal.

Reading: Howard W. Stone and James O. Duke, *How to Think Theologically*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006). In addition, read one theological text approved by or recommended to you by your advisor (see step 1).

Step 4

Assignment: Write a 1000-word essay describing the problem that you want to address in your praxis thesis. Literally write a one-sentence detailed and complex question summarizing the query that will drive your research and writing. The essay should briefly establish the context (church and community) within which your inquiry arises. The bulk of the essay should explain what you are trying to learn and examine in a particular ministry setting. Post the essay as double-spaced Word attachment on Moodle* no later than **May 15, 2009**.

Purpose: In this essay assignment, I want to learn the true focus of your Doctor of Ministry project. The assignment does not ask you to develop a method, analysis, field project, or model of ministry (those come later), but requests that you become focused enough to articulate what puzzle you're trying to solve or what challenge you're trying to meet for the church and her ministries. Keep in mind two things. One is that your problem must be advanced as a question with power to affect, inform, and influence other church leaders and their contexts. The praxis thesis is meant to have broad importance, even though the research question arises in your own context. Second, note that the Doctor of Ministry program permits you to select one of three approaches to your work: (a) develop and test a model which investigates a practice with implications for the larger church; (b) investigate a context that suggests an unidentified or unaddressed need in a congregation or denomination, and propose a strategic model for meeting that need; or (c) analyze an existing practice or need in the Church (which may include but would not be limited to social justice in the community). While this short essay asks you to stop short of describing the full project, the writing will indicate the crux of your inquiry. I indicate the three options so that you may write a research question with awareness of the possibilities for your praxis thesis. From this essay, we will work to select one of the three options. The selected option will direct us toward the method, theory, disciplines, and project details that will be important in your proposal and praxis thesis.

Reading: William R. Myers, *Research in Ministry: A Primer for the Doctor of Ministry Program*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: Exploration Press, 2000). In addition, read one book on method and one in your professional field of ministry—in step 1 you and your advisor should have identified some good options for this reading.

Step 5

Assignment: Write a first draft of the praxis thesis proposal. The draft proposal (about ten pages) should follow the specified instructions and proposed outline in the *Saint Paul School of Theology Handbook*. The essay must include a working thesis statement. A good working thesis statement tells more than the topic or a list of the contents of a paper. A working thesis integrates in ONE SENTENCE the theological rationale and expected conclusions about the ministry project. Note the differences between the following weak and strong thesis statements:

Weak working thesis: “The project is about the doctrine of God and clergy power.”

Weak working thesis: “The praxis thesis discusses the doctrine of God, the problem of clergy misconduct, and how power dynamics and boundaries must be redefined.”

Strong working thesis: “Process theology offers a relational definition of power that informs a model of church leadership, reflecting and respecting the power of laity in such a way that the dangers of clergy misconduct are minimized and constructive working relationships in the church are enhanced.”

A working thesis gives shape and focus to your work in progress, but is typically revised as your research and writing develop. Return to the three short essays on ministry identity, theology, and the research question. Think about how to turn the research question into a working thesis statement. As you write, draw from the essays and integrate their insights into a coherent and comprehensive draft proposal. Please post the double-spaced Word attachment on Moodle no later than **June 20, 2009**.

Purpose: The June 29-30 class meetings will include peer discussion of the praxis thesis proposal drafts. In addition, I will meet with individuals to discuss drafts. Following the June meetings, you will continue to revise and develop your proposals with me during the month of July 2009. Our goal is that you will have a strong draft to take to your praxis thesis committee, with whom you will shape a final draft acceptable for the praxis thesis proposal conference.

Reading: *Saint Paul School of Theology Handbook* on the praxis thesis proposal.

Required Texts

Stone, Howard W. and James O. Duke. *How to Think Theologically*, 2nd ed. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006.

Myers, William R. *Research in Ministry: A Primer for the Doctor of Ministry Program*, 3rd ed. Chicago: Exploration Press, 2000.

Saint Paul School of Theology Handbook

Turabian, Kate L. *A Manual for Writers of Terms Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, 6th or 7th ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996 (or later edition). [All assignments must conform to Turabian's manual of style. Please use footnotes or endnotes in your papers.]

Additional sources on theology, method, and professional field of ministry (cf. step 1).

***Moodle**

Moodle is the course management software used at Saint Paul School of Theology. Moodle functions as a virtual classroom, and we will use the software to enhance course work and to optimize and minimize the time you need to spend on campus. The Moodle course will be available sometime during the first week of February 2009.

You will be able to use Moodle:

- To find course information (advance assignments, syllabi, resources, etc.),
- To post course assignments,
- To provide group feedback on assignments,

To enroll in the Moodle course, use the following instructions:

1. Visit <http://saintpaul.fishersnet.net/moodle>.
2. Select our course from the Spring 2009 menu: Praxis Thesis Seminar (DMIN550). [The course advance assignments are relevant to the spring semester, but your registration is, of course, for summer 2009.]
3. On the login page, either use your existing username and password or, if you've never used Moodle, create a user name and password of your choosing (by clicking on Create New Account).
4. You will be asked to enter an enrollment key, which is PTS2009.
5. Start using the site. As the semester progresses, the site will grow—so you should visit the site weekly.

If you have questions about Moodle or the course in general, please contact Nancy R. Howell at howellnr@spst.edu.