

GUIDE TO THE DOCTOR OF MINISTRY LEARNING PROJECT LOUISVILLE PRESBYTERIAN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

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WHAT IS REQUIRED FOR A DOCTOR OF MINISTRY PROJECT?

According to The Association for Theological Schools in the United States and Canada (ATS), the primary accrediting agency for LPTS, in order to earn a Doctor of Ministry Degree the candidate shall “make a contribution to the understanding and practice of ministry through the completion of a doctoral level project/thesis.” Specifically this is spelled out in the ATS standards:

F3.1.3 The program shall include the design and completion of a written doctoral-level project that addresses both the nature and the practice of ministry. The project should be of sufficient quality that it contributes to the practice of ministry as judged by professional standards and has the potential for application in other contexts of ministry

F.3.1.3.1 The ministry project should demonstrate the candidate’s ability to identify a specific theological topic in ministry, organize an effective research model, use appropriate resources, and evaluate the results, and should reflect the candidate’s depth of theological insight in relation to ministry.

F.3.1.3.2 Upon completion of the doctoral project, there shall be an oral presentation and evaluation. The completed written project, with any supplemental material, should be accessioned in the institution’s library.

The nature of that research and the professional standards by which it is evaluated are left to the discretion of the degree granting school.

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WHAT IS THE LPTS LEARNING PROJECT AND REPORT?

The Doctor of Ministry at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary (LPTS) is a professional degree that enhances “the development and acquisition of skills and competencies, including methods of pastoral research, that are required for pastoral leadership at its most mature and effective level” (ATS Standards F.3.1.1.3). The written project is envisioned as a learning experience for the D. Min. candidate, the candidate’s ministry setting, and the church at large.

As the candidate's community of faith faces a changing world and a transforming faith, the project proceeds from discernment about what needs to be changed or learned, to a decision about a call to a particular practice of ministry that can be introduced, enhanced, or examined to meet that need. The decision-making process includes the strategy or design of the research or inquiry into that area of action. The project is concluded with careful theological interpretation of the experience and its outcomes. Recent LPTS Learning Projects have included case studies of pastoral transitions in large churches, elements of effectiveness in new church developments, church transformation programs in a church in Taiwan, the impact of worship space changes on the life of a congregation, the creation of a new liturgical service for ordination in the Roman Catholic tradition, and an ethnographic study to determine the presence of hope in pastoral conversations with patients in a mental health hospital.

The LPTS Learning Project, named "learning project" instead of "thesis" in order to focus on the interpretation of the practical theological learning involved, ordinarily includes the following **qualities**:

1. Addresses a particular problem or topic emerging in the ministry of the candidate;
2. Promotes learning through the growth of faith, knowledge and skill of both the D. Min. candidate and the partners in the candidate's context for ministry;
3. Engages in research or inquiry that promotes change in the church or in the practice of ministry to more faithfully respond to God's redemptive call;
4. Points to potential application of the theoretical and practical results to other practitioners in other contexts.

The Project Report provides the candidate an opportunity to think clearly about the experience of a practical theological project and to articulate that clear thinking in describing and interpreting the problem, in designing, and implementing the Learning Project and in discussing its results. The Learning Project is intended to be a transformative experience for the professional practitioner and for the church. The Learning Project Report is evaluated by the faculty member guiding the project who is the candidate's advisor, and serves as first reader. In addition, a second reader, perhaps from a different faculty field of study than the first reader, is invited to participate in the project evaluation as early as possible. The evaluation of these two faculty members constitutes the validation that the project has met the criteria and a degree is conferred.

METHODS AND PURPOSES OF D. MIN. RESEARCH

Based on these assumptions, candidates in the Advanced Practice and Interim Ministry tracks will use methods and designs of research appropriate to the chosen topic of inquiry. As an interpretive project, flexible, qualitative and constructive research designs and methods are encouraged. Pastoral Care and Counseling candidates at times have a need for more fixed designs and quantitative analysis of data (see page 8, B (4) viii). Following the stated qualities of learning projects (1-4 above) research will ordinarily be limited to one or more of the following three purposes of research:

- Examination and interpretation of a particular experience of a current or ongoing practice in ministry
- Comparison of two or more experiences of practices or situations for ministry
- Action Research which proposes
 - change or progress in a particular practice of ministry,
 - enhancement in understanding of a particular area of Christian practice,
 - improvement in the context or system in which ministry is practiced.

HOW TO ORGANIZE THE PROJECT

A) Getting Clarity about What Needs to be Done

- 1) **Assessing experience:** (Chapter 1 in the Project Report—see outline below)
 The D. Min. candidate takes stock of her own current experiences in a ministry setting and also engages in mutual discernment with participants in that situation in order to define an emerging problem and the practical changes needed to address the problem. Occasionally a candidate changes ministry locations during the course of the D. Min. program. When that happens, arrangements can be made with the Director of Lifelong Learning and Advanced Degrees to rethink the project for the new context.

Illustration of the Process

As an example of the D. Min. Learning Project, the project of Jean Hawxhurst (“Giving the Right Hand of Fellowship: A Curriculum to Assist Members of Theologically Diverse Congregations Understand Each Other,” D. Min. Dissertation, Louisville Seminary, 2003) is summarized in italics. Other examples will also be used to fill out other methods.

A member of the staff of a large United Methodist Congregation, Hawxhurst reflected on the experience of a Bible study group which discovered how theologically diverse they were and how, when that diversity threatened the security and cohesiveness of the group, the basic caring relationships that had already developed in the group through prayer and a common faith in Jesus Christ allowed the group to disagree and not destroy the group. Reflecting on that experience and applying it to a wide range of disagreements that threatened to split congregations within her denomination, she sought to learn more about that phenomenon and how she could create a curriculum and a process for other groups to learn how to build relationships and learn about different ways of interpreting the Bible.

- 2) **Interpreting the Problem Using Practical Theology:** (Chapter 2 in Project Report).

Based on the definition of the problem, the second step is a practical theology reflection on the problem drawing from the candidate’s faith tradition and on other human fields of knowledge:

- i) Interpretation drawing on one's faith tradition includes a brief summary of literature in scripture and theology relevant to the project, and the candidate's theological reflection on how that informs the project, including the key question, "where is God in this situation, and how do we participate in God's redemptive action there?"
- ii) Interpretation drawing on other fields of knowledge includes a brief summary of relevant literature from selected human sciences such as anthropology, economics, education, historiography, international studies, literary analysis, medicine, organizational sciences, phenomenology, political science, psychology, and sociology, and reflection on how that informs this project.

Hawxhurst suspected that the theological issue of Biblical interpretation was a key to understanding congregational divisions and how diversity can be unifying instead of dividing. She studied the interpretation and authority of the Bible drawing on current theological commentators and on the Methodist tradition, and identified three types of hermeneutic equally held in honor in her denomination. Then she explored models of knowledge from secular fields of sociology, adult education and group process to help her learn more about the phenomenon she was studying and to increase her knowledge and skill in designing and facilitating group educational activities.

B) Deciding to Act (Ch. 3 in Project Report)

1) The goal of the project

With a clear foundation in thinking about the project based on the dialogue between the faith tradition and other fields of human knowledge, the next step is to state clearly what the candidate and the candidate's partners in the project need to learn about the problem and, in most cases, what needs to change in the situation to participate in God's good work.

Hawxhurst set as her goal the creation and testing of a new curriculum of small group Bible study which would maintain the diversity of the group and at the same time strengthen the relational bonds of the group.

2) The research question (s)

The statement of goals leads to articulation of one or more questions that arise in the learning and the changing. Asking appropriate questions will focus the action of the project. The questions bring together what is already known and define the inquiry to suggest what might happen in practice if the proposed action is taken.

The Research Question for this study asked whether careful theological reflection and learning how to think critically about their own and others' perspectives on the Bible and on controversial issues, packaged in a carefully designed adult educational small group format, would allow participants to maintain their relationships in the presence of theological and social differences.

3) **Types of Action Appropriate to D. Min. Research**

Since the D. Min. is a practical, professional degree, the research is not limited to discussion of theory, but is intended to combine theory with practice to transform the learner and the learner's context in ministry. Minimally this means action is called for which will enhance the skills of the student as a practitioner. The following are examples of the ways practices of ministry can be engaged for examination, comparison or evaluation. This list is illustrative. Other types of transformative action can also be considered.

i) **Program Design and Evaluation**

A common activity in ministry is the design and implementation of a program or project. The program would have a goal or outcome, and program design includes the specifics of the program including choices of activities, use of human, physical and financial resources, and timelines. Research can determine program effectiveness by evaluating either a program already in place and ongoing or completed, or to evaluate a new program from its inception. Evaluation could also focus on the need for a particular program. The researcher can examine either process involved in the program to determine whether the way the program is carried out is appropriate to its goals and values, or outcomes of the program to evaluate the extent to which the goals are being achieved. A range of evaluation methods available to the ministry researcher can be chosen for their appropriateness to the particular program and situation.

Hawxhurst's project is an example of this kind of research. Based on an identified need in her congregation's experience, she designed and implemented a small group study process designed to bridge theological and political differences. Before she implemented the program, she sought an evaluation from a panel of experts. She used a self-report pre-test and post-test with participants and also asked them to evaluate the class as it went along through discussion. Finally she asked another group of experts to evaluate the value of the program to other congregations beyond her own.

ii) **Collaborative Decision Making for Action or Change**

Religious organizations are good settings for collaborative decision making for action or change because of their voluntary, participative nature. Boards, committees, classes, task forces and teams are all part of the ordinary operating procedures. Leaders can readily enlist the efforts of some kind of ongoing or created, formal or informal group to discuss the problem and work together to find ways to change the situation.

Dunbar ("Gathering Around the Lord's Table," D. Min. Dissertation, 2005) developed a way for a congregation to study together worship space design and mutually determine the way a new worship center would be designed and furnished. This allowed a potentially divisive issue in the life of a church to become a unifying experience and the resulting worship space was both innovative and satisfying

iii) Political/Power Analyses

Power and social control are always present in ministry settings and a practitioner benefits from a careful assessment of power. Some transformation actions involve addressing centers of power and persuading them to allow the action to take place. In some situations, change takes place by removing or replacing power centers. This kind of research can use sociographic or ethnological methods to identify the centers of power and recommend actions that either verify the locus of power or promote a shift in power in the ministry setting in order for some ministry goal to be achieved.

The presence and continuing powerful influence of former pastors was part of the study of Anne Fisher ("A Study of Pastors Who Follow Long Pastorates," D. Min. Dissertation, LPTS, 2003), although her primary focus was on the practices of larger churches in transition from one pastor to another.

iv) Force-field Analyses

Similar to power analysis, force-field analysis looks at two kinds of power in a situation. One is the power that can support or promote the objective of change and the other is power that resists or opposes change. Force-field analysis helps an action researcher determine where to focus the action so as to more likely achieve the ministry goal—either work to strengthen the supporting powers or weaken the opposing powers.

v) Structural Analysis and Challenge

A sociological/psychological study of a congregation or of another faith organization could include a description of the formal and informal organizational structures operating in the system with indications of how the emotional and political connections among them function. With an evaluation of the degree to which the structures help or hinder the organization from its ministry and mission, the research could include action to challenge and improve the structures. (For a mapping methodology, see Sawyer, *Hope in Conflict, Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2007, Chapter 4*)

vi) **Narrative Assessment**

Narrative research is growing in use in ministry studies. Gathering stories, collecting use of language and drawing meaning from the images and symbols of a congregation can be a rich source for research. Interpretation of stories as texts of a community involves identifying themes, mood, characters, plots, and development. Research action includes challenging the standard ways a system interprets its own story and helping members of a group or organization re-interpret its stories to move toward hope for transformation to better accomplish its mission and its values.

vii) **Case study**

Assuming that it is possible to generalize from the particular in human systems, the researcher can engage in a case study of a particular situation, observing the responses to a particular action or set of actions. The advantage of a case study is that the researcher can make detailed and in depth observations about the situation and its history and context in order to draw interpretations about the possible implications for the case to other situations.

Nelson ("A Community Based Model of African American New Church Development in the Presbyterian Church," D. Min. Dissertation, LPTS, 2002), described his experience as developing pastor and that of his new urban congregation in a predominantly white denomination in the south, and was able to draw valuable interpretations on that experience with recommendations to his denomination and other old-line denominations.

4) Identifying Tools of Evaluation

After an action is chosen, the researcher selects a way of gathering information in order to evaluate the results of the research action. Among the possibilities are:

- i) **Written materials** from the situation can be used and evaluated for their content and for the extent of change. For example, journal entries of participants or requested essays before, during and after the study can be sources of information on which to base evaluation on how the research question is played out in the situation.
- ii) **Surveys** have been traditionally used to gather information from participants or observers to evaluate outcomes in a research situation. A good survey looks easy to create and use, but that is an illusion. In order to collect valid and reliable information a researcher needs to follow a lengthy process of developing and testing the questions, administering the survey and coding and analyzing the data. Use of a previously validated survey with proper permission can be a shortcut.
- iii) **Tests** of knowledge or skill can be developed to indicate how much participants may have learned in a process of action research. These may not be as complicated as surveys, but still require care for reliable information.

- iv) **Interviews** of participants or observers, with careful preparation of questions ahead of time provide helpful information about processes of change in a ministry setting.
- v) **Focus groups** are group interviews with the advantage of enhanced information gathering due to the interaction of group members. The questions for these also need to be carefully prepared and tested.
- vi) **Expert evaluation** can be sought from non-participating experts who can observe or receive information for their own expert evaluation.
- vii) **Evoking meaning** is a narrative based research approach particularly effective in religious research. Some key ways of using narrative assessment to gather information about a given situation and its changes are:
 - (a) Identifying language and key metaphors
 - (b) Recognizing plots and moves—twists, turns, thickening
 - (c) Intuiting significance
 - (d) Characters, including voices not heard
 - (e) Setting, locale
 - (f) Identity
 - (g) Observing individuals or situations
 - (h) Mutual or collaborative evaluations—empowering, community organizing techniques.
- viii) **Quantitative Experimentation** can be chosen in order to evaluate programs and experiment with new techniques in pastoral care and counseling and church leadership. More fixed designs of action, selection of subjects, and more careful control of variables can be practices in this kind of research action. These options are more fully described in Seminar IV for PCC Track candidates.

5) **Expected outcomes**

Following the description of the project activities, the prospectus and the report helpfully list one or more expected outcomes to the proposed action to be taken. These can be changes in the situation or changes in people's attitudes or behavior, or new understandings of how God works in a particular faith setting. These might be listed in theological categories such as redemption, transformation, healing, creation or increase of knowledge and community, reconciliation and forgiveness, or justice.

Hawxhurst stated her expectations that theologically diverse groups would be able to use the curriculum she devised and even in face of open conflict with each other would be able to come to a better understanding of the Biblical perspective of each other and continue or deepen their relationships.

6) **The Scope and Limitations of the project**

Time and resources almost always require reducing the scope of any particular project in the D. Min. program. These limitations are identified, along with the particularities of a situation that might influence the outcome. For example, a project may be done in a particular congregation with its unique geographic, cultural and economic context, its own history and denominational tradition. In this section, also, the assumptions, biases, and subjectivity of the researcher can be noted as limitations.

Hawxhurst noted that her learning project was conducted in her own congregation, which was large, growing, suburban, and relatively homogeneous in terms of race and class. All of the participants in her study groups already had a relationship with her as a pastor which also could have limited the applicability of the outcomes to other situations

7) **Ethical considerations**

As a religious enterprise, the D. Min. carries the expectation that ethical issues will be taken into account in the project. The appropriateness of the method in the light of the researcher's faith tradition is a valid subject of reflection in theological research. The biases and power of the researcher are noted, for example. The way the project takes care of the safety and confidentiality human participants in the project is also identified.

Louisville Seminary has a Research Review Policy that defines the relative risks to participants in academic research. A copy of that policy is attached to this paper.

C) **Interpreting the Experiences in the Project** (Ch. 4 of Project Report)

When the strategies are implemented and the evaluative information is gathered, the researcher next reflects carefully on the outcomes in the light of the original practical theology and new insights gained from the project itself.

- a) **A formal description of outcomes:** this contains a brief and clear articulation of the outcomes of the project with reflection on them.
- b) The researcher next offers an **evaluation** of the meaning and purposes of the research experience and its outcomes based on the practical theology basis of the project.
- c) Whenever transformation is proposed or expected there is **resistance**. Part of the learning experience is reflection on resistance and the insights it sheds on the situation, the original concerns, and the expected outcomes.
- d) Then the more complete **theological reflections** on the project are spelled out in a few paragraphs, bringing together the practical theology in the earlier section and the actual experience, interpreting God's presence and grace and the meaning of the human experience in this particular situation.

- D) **Drawing Implications of What Has Been Learned for Future Practice** (Ch. 5 of Project Report) The last step in the process is to consider the broader implications of the research for the writer and for ministry in general including the following:
- 1) Revised goals or methods for future research or future use of this strategy.
 - 2) Critique of the rationale and research questions: after reflection on the outcomes, the researcher also critiques one's own rationale and research questions. This section represents a return to the beginning of the research cycle to redefine emerging problems and the fresh outlook on the practical changes needed to address the problem.
 - 3) Implications for further research: the fresh look at the problem also leads to conclusions about how the researcher or others might approach similar research in other settings in the future.
 - 4) Implications for other contexts of ministry: additionally the researcher imagines how the outcomes of her or his particular research might be helpful and useful in other contexts of ministry or ways in which difficulties in the situation might be informative to others.

OUTLINE OF THE LPTS D. MIN. PROJECT REPORT

The length of LPTS D. Min. Learning Project Reports will be about seventy-five (75) pages of written text, plus appendices and other parts of the report. If the objective of a learning project is to enhance skills needed for the practice of ministry, then it is helpful to the reflective practitioner to be able to articulate clearly and succinctly the experiences and the reflections of the project. Summarizing and focusing the writing into this size paper will enhance this skill.

CHAPTER ONE "The Ministry Situation—the need for the project (15 pages)

1. Introduction
2. Statement of the situation and the need
3. Background of the context and history
4. Definitions

CHAPTER TWO "Practical Theology Interpretive Basis for the Project" (25 pages)

1. Summary of literature from faith tradition and reflection on how it informs this project
2. Summary of literature from human sciences and reflection on how it informs this project.

CHAPTER THREE "The Strategy for the Study" (15 pages)

1. Goal of the learning project
2. Choice of research methodology relevant to the topic
3. Scope and limitations of the study and methodology
4. Activities and resources to be used
5. Expected Outcomes
6. Methods of Evaluation

CHAPTER FOUR “Interpreting the Learning of the Project” (10 pages)

1. Formalized reflection and articulation of the experience of the project
2. Evaluating the meaning and purposes
3. Where were the resistances to change
4. Values in ministry
5. Theological reflection

CHAPTER FIVE Implications of Learning for Future Practice (10 pages)

1. Revised goals and rationale
2. Theological Reflection on outcomes
3. Implications for further research
4. Implications for other contexts of ministry

FORM AND FORMAT

The LPTS Doctor of Ministry Project Report is to be written in a clear tone with good grammatical construction. The format for the report is the Chicago Style as described in Kate Turabian’s Manual (see below). The candidate for the D. Min. should also be prepared to fulfill the requirements of the LPTS Library regarding margins, paper types and submission deadlines. A digital version of the project report is also submitted to the library, as a Word document, for example.

RESEARCH RESOURCES

This paper was written using the following resources:

Anderson, Ray. *The Shape of Practical Theology: Empowering Ministry with Theological Praxis*. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2001.

Booth, Colum, and Williams, *The Craft of Research. Second Edition*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003.

Conniry, Charles. “Reducing the Identity Crisis in Doctor of Ministry Education,” *Theological Education*, Volume 40, Number 1, 2004, pp. 137-152.

Farley, Edward. *Practicing Gospel*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2003.

Robson, Colin. *Real World Research (2nd Edition)*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1993.

Turabian, Kate. *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations, Seventh Edition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

APPENDICES

1. Informed Consent Form
2. Research Review Policy of LPTS
3. Formatting Paper