



**CHURCH of REFUGIA:
Preparing the church for sustainability and crisis resilience**

Specialty Doctor of Ministry Track

- Faculty/Mentors:** Rev. Dr. Ron Rienstra, Dr. Debra Rienstra (Calvin University)
- Guest Instructors:** Gifted guest lecturers with a variety of relevant expertise will participate in each of the six teaching units, addressing topics like environmental activism, faith-based farming, eco-theology, history of evangelicalism, etc.
- Length & Launch:** A three-year program launching in May 2022
- Location:** Western Theological Seminary, Holland, MI
- Seminar Schedule:** May 9-13, 2022
Mid-October, 2021
Other dates in 2023-2024 TBD, likely mid-May and mid-October
- Reading:** Regular reading assignments will shape the learning experience

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Purpose of the program:

This Doctor of Ministry track challenges pastors to reshape their ministry and formation practices to resist an imperial model for the church and instead grow toward a refugia model. Refugia are small pockets where living things survive in the midst of crisis. We can think of them as micro-countercultures that prepare for regrowth and renewal. This biological phenomenon has profound resonance for the church, since we worship a God who is often at work in hidden places, preferring to work with the small, the least, the marginal. At this hinge point in history, when we face a climate crisis that compels us into rapid transition toward new ways of organizing our lives, our economies, and our communities, the church has often failed to lead. Meanwhile, the church faces its own period of crisis with declining membership and declining commitment to traditional church life. Political division and disintegration in the broader culture (especially but not exclusively in the United States) has riven the cultural fabric, including in our churches. Meanwhile, the COVID crisis has both exposed and exacerbated underlying systemic problems. In the midst of our weariness and bewilderment, how can we resist the temptation to cling to systems of power and instead focus on identifying and creating refugia, joining with others to participate in God's work of renewal? Participants will explore the characteristics of the church of refugia, experience a variety of examples, and dream together about how to reshape the life of faith for a period of upheaval and transition. Particular emphasis will be placed on both theory and practice, drawing from ecotheologians, literary writers, activists, and practicing pastors. This Doctor of Ministry track seeks to prepare leaders who can inspire gospel communities and help nurture a new kind of refugia church.

Rationale for this program and its structure:

In October of 2018, and again in August 2021, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released Special Reports urging government and industry leaders of the world to take every step to limit global average temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. This would require “rapid and far-reaching” transitions in our entire infrastructure—energy, agriculture, transportation, manufacturing, trade—our global way of life. Even allowing temperature rise to reach 2 degrees Celsius would multiply the devastating effects of climate change not only in terms of species extinctions, but also in terms of flooding, storm activity, ocean rise, ocean acidification, drought, disease, forced migrations, and economic and political disruption.¹ The report, reiterating the urgency of the Paris Agreement in 2015, estimated that we had twelve years to change course, to make a hard turn with this massive ship of human power before unavoidable feedback loops and relentlessly exponential effects would sink us into irreparable disaster.

While this crisis certainly demands technological and cultural change, theologians and faith leaders across religions and cultures have discerned that we must also address the spiritual issues that have led us to this crossroads. A “spirit of domination” is at the root not only of an abusive extraction economy but also of racism, militarism, misogyny, and other systemic ills, all of which compound one another. Sadly, the church has often succumbed to this spirit of domination, seeking power at the expense of Christian witness. The church of empire, in other words, must be unmasked and countervailed. To do this we will need to build refugia capacities: the ability to lament, observe limits, gain knowledge, and cooperate compassionately with one another and the earth. We will have to find and create refugia, not only in the biomes of the earth, but simultaneously in our human cultural systems and in our spirits. A refugium is not a place to hide, but a place to begin again.

This program is cohort-based to facilitate enhanced learning. Participants will join with other pastors and people from faith communities throughout North America in the quest for greater imagination and creativity. We will endeavor to create a refugium community among our group, sharing our discoveries and strengthening each other’s learning and problem-solving.

This specialized Doctor of Ministry track requires that each participant develop a project that combines theory and practice and is suited to their context and interests. A written thesis will incorporate research and experience arising from the project. Regular assignments will guide participants as they develop their project, and ongoing support from the mentors will assist participants in completing their thesis. Given this model, participants are encouraged to seek support from their congregation, faith community, or other source.

¹ IPCC, “Special Report: Global Warming of 1.5 C,” Headline Statements, Section B, and passim.
<https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/>.

Methodology:

This Doctor of Ministry track is by definition exploratory and experimental. Regular assignments during the first two years of the program will build familiarity with reflection, past and current, on the relationship among God, humans, and the earth. The third year (and any additional time) is focused on reading and writing particular to each participant's project/thesis.

First-year assignments will focus on analyzing the current crisis and deconstructing problematic theology. Second-year assignments will focus on building knowledge and imaginative capacity, exploring new theological themes, and refining plans for the project and thesis.

Participants will meet at WTS or some other meaningful site in late May and mid-October. Additionally, distance coaching sessions will take place in November, January, February, March and August.

During each intensive, we will reflect on assigned reading and writing, engage in group activities, converse with guest speakers, and assist one another in our ongoing project/thesis work. We will also share "sightings" of refugia in faith communities and in broader culture. In the second and third year, meeting at alternative sites will also enhance our own experience of refugia.

This D.Min. cohort will also have the opportunity to help in the development of a book manuscript about this topic, to be authored/edited by Debra and Ron Rienstra.

Description of the Instructional Units

DM850 Unit 1-S: Church of Empire, Church of Refugia (May 9-13, 2022, WTS)

This unit focuses on the nature of the climate crisis, particularly the ways in which the church has been complicit in a culture that valorizes domination and exploitation of people and the earth. The governing questions for this unit are: What is going on? How do I see this happening in my community? We will also begin to explore what a church of refugia might look like and launch our ongoing practice of “sightings.”

Reading list prior to beginning the D.Min. track:

- McKibben, Bill. *Eaarth*.
- Bouma-Prediger, Steve. *For the Beauty of the Earth*.
- Rienstra, Debra. *Refugia Faith: Seeking Hidden Shelters, Ordinary Wonders, and the Healing of the Earth*, intro and ch. 1

Reading list for unit 1-S:

- DuMez, Kristin. *Jesus and John Wayne: How Evangelicals Betrayed a Faith and Fractured a Nation*
- Jennings, Willie. *The Christian Imagination* (excerpts)
- Berry, Thomas. *The Great Work*.



DM851 Unit 1-F: Controlled Burn: Theological Deconstruction for an Era of Climate Change (Mid-October 2022, WTS)

This unit introduces a methodology for practical theology (Richard Osmer) to guide students’ writing. We will also begin a process of theological analysis and deconstruction. We will explore theological themes including anthropocentrism, the spirit/matter split, stewardship and its discontents, and environmental injustice, among others. The governing questions for this unit are: Why is this going on? Is my community aware? We will also survey how the church has responded to crises at previous periods in history.

Reading list for unit 1-F:

- Osmer, Richard, *Practical Theology: An Introduction*.
- Pope Francis, *Laudato Si (On Care for Our Common Home)*, Encyclical.
- Kathleen Dean Moore, *Great Tide Rising*
- Rienstra, *Refugia Faith*
- Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass*.*
- Woodley, *Shalom and the Community of Creation*
- Packet of historical reading



DM860 Unit 2-S: Planting the Seedlings: Theological Reconstruction / Regeneration (Spring 2023, WTS)

In this unit, participants will work to expand their “domain knowledge” and imagination while building out a bibliography for their project. We will repack our theological toolboxes with reflection on themes including the inherent value of more-than-human creation, gratitude and reciprocity, humility and lament, the cosmic Christ, the scope and purpose of redemption, and the ethics of transition. The governing questions for this unit are: What ought to be going on? Where do we see this happening already?

Reading list for unit 2-S:

- Brown, William P. *Sacred Sense: Discovering the Wonder of God's Word and World*.
- Hiebert, Theodore. *The Yahwist's Landscape* (excerpts).
- Powers, Richard. *The Overstory*.
- Each students' own reading



DM861 Unit 2-F: Refugia Spirituality (Fall 2023, Camp Fowler, Lake Pleasant, New York)

This unit focuses on forming a refugia faith through renewed spiritual practices, including the synthetic discipline of corporate worship. We will consider the need for “moral community” and, with the help of ritual theory, consider practices such as prayer, sabbath-keeping, knowledge-building, attention and wonder, lament, citizenship and cooperation, and healing. We will also re-examine familiar worship resources through the lens of refugia and be introduced to new or unfamiliar worship resources and practices that refocus our imaginations and emotions. The governing questions for this unit are: How should my community respond? What resources do we have and what do we still need?

Reading list for unit 2-F:

- Rienstra and Rienstra, *Worship Words*, chs. 5-6.
- Bass, Dorothy, *Practicing our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*.
- Aaron Niequist, *The Eternal Current*.
- Rasmussen, Larry. *Moral Fragments and Moral Community*.
- Tish Harrison Warren. *Liturgy of the Ordinary*.
- Paul Galbreath. *Leading Into the World*.
- Anna Woofenden, *This is God's Table: Finding Church Beyond the Walls*
- Packet on Ritual Theory



DM870 Unit 3-S: Pilgrimage Refugia (Spring 2024, Isle of Iona, Scotland)

The Iona Community is a long-standing refugia group arising from the Celtic spiritual tradition, a tradition with a history of wise theological reflection about the earth. For this unit, we will make a pilgrimage to the Iona Community's gathering place, the Isle of Iona, where St. Columba established a monastic community in the sixth century. This tiny wind-swept island off the coast of Scotland has long been acknowledged as a “thin place” between heaven and earth. Monastic presence there persisted through the middle ages, with the modern Iona Community dating from the early 20th century. During our stay on the island, we will join the community for daily worship in the abbey and guided meditative walks. With our cohort we will share meals and fellowship, discuss progress on our projects, and receive group feedback. We will also have time for writing, reading, prayer, and exploration of the island.

Reading list for unit 3-S:

- Iona Abbey Worshipbook
- Student's specialized reading lists



DM871 Unit 3-F: Future Shapes, Forms, Organizations (Fall 2024, Evolving Faith Conference)

This unit invites us to imagine different ways of being the church. By attending and reflecting on the Evolving Faith Conference, we will expand our understanding of how gospel communities are changing shape. What did we learn from our months in quarantine from the Corona virus? What can we learn from communities like Evolving Faith, which self-consciously appeals to those on the margins of the church, those in need of “Refugia”? What does it mean that groups like this meet in person only once per year? What might our reflections on refugia and work on our projects suggest for rethinking the structures and forms we take for granted?

Reading list for unit 3-F:

- Vera White and Charles Wiley. *New Worshipping Communities: A Theological Exploration*
- Participants read from their project’s bibliography



DM940 Thesis

With a final thesis, students demonstrate their ability to design, conduct, and reflect on a project that is biblically and theologically grounded, supported by the literature, and relevant to the practice of ministry. During the first two years of the program, participants will be developing their project with the support of the mentors and the cohort. The project should combine theory and practice, applying the concept of refugia in the participant’s present ministry context. Examples of these projects may include:

- Starting a community garden program on church property
- Creating worship resources based on the Psalms’ emphasis on creation
- Engaging a church in efforts toward “greening” an urban neighborhood
- Creating an inter-generational education program focused on the surrounding ecosystem
- Developing curriculum for a youth group that culminates in political action – a protest or lobby day, e.g.
- Design a preaching series on the Bible’s ecological motif

Students write a five-chapter scholarly paper that introduces, develops, and assesses the effectiveness of the project. Chapters might focus on the need and rationale for the project, the biblical and theological texts/theories that undergird the project, the issue the project addresses, and what was learned following completion of the project (or during initial work toward an ongoing project).

The doctoral project phase of the D.Min. program concludes with the presentation and defense of the thesis before the faculty advisor and readers.

Contact Information

Questions concerning this Church of Refugia Doctor of Ministry can be directed to the Doctor of Ministry office at Western Theological Seminary. See information at the WTS website <https://www.westernsem.edu/academics/degrees/doctor-ministry-degree/>

A Suggested Bibliography for Shared Reading

- Bauckham, Richard. *Living with Other Creatures: Green Exegesis and Theology*.
- Berry, Thomas. *The Great Work*.
- Bahnson, Fred. *Soil and Sacrament*
- Bass, Dorothy, *Practicing our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*.
- Bouma-Prediger, Steve. *For the Beauty of the Earth*.
- Brown, William P. *Sacred Sense: Discovering the Wonder of God's Word and World*.
- DuMez, Kristin. *Jesus and John Wayne: How Evangelicals Betrayed a Faith and Fractured a Nation*
- Galbreath, Paul. *Leading Into the World*.
- Grimes, Ronald. *Beginnings in Ritual Studies*.
- Hiebert, Theodore. *The Yahwist's Landscape* (excerpts).
- Jennings, Willie. *The Christian Imagination* (excerpts)
- Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass*.
- McKibben, Bill. *Eaarth*.
- Moore, Kathleen Dean. *Great Tide Rising*
- Niequist, Aaron. *The Eternal Current*.
- Osmer, Richard, *Practical Theology: An Introduction*.
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- Rasmussen, Larry. *Moral Fragments and Moral Community*
- Rienstra and Rienstra, *Worship Words*, chs. 5-6.
- Rienstra, Debra. *Refugia Faith: Seeking God in the Household of All Life*.
- Warren, Tish Harrison. *Liturgy of the Ordinary*.
- White, Vera and Charles Wiley. *New Worshipping Communities: A Theological Exploration*.
- Woodley, Randy. *Shalom and the Community of Creation*.
- Woofenden, Anna. *This is God's Table: Finding Church Beyond the Walls*.