



## **Youth Ministry: Imagining More Building Faithful Ministries through Practical Theology**

### **Specialty Doctor of Ministry Track**

**Faculty Mentor:** Dr. Benjamin T. Conner, Professor of Practical Theology and Director of the Graduate Certificate in Disability and Ministry

**Length & Launch:** A three-year program of 36 credits launching in January 2024, with an additional year for the writing and defense of the project-thesis.

**Locations:** Western Theological Seminary, Holland, Michigan – three seminars  
Virtual – three seminars

#### **Applicant Profile**

*Those who apply for this cohort will explore the theology and practice of youth ministry by using practical theology as a critical lens that provides insights for imagining more faithful ministry. While a wide range of proposed studies may apply, we seek to build a cohort with women and men whose research interests intersect in meaningful ways such that deep and rich lifelong conversation partnerships and friendships are cultivated.*

#### **What is the D.Min. Program?**

The D.Min. Program at Western Theological Seminary involves “a formational process that issues in an intellectual product.” The goal of the program is for students to refine and extend the practice of ministry for leading the church (broadly understood) in mission. In the program, learning is communal, being cohort-based around a particular theme, yet is also largely self-designed around specific interests within the larger framework. Grounded in the practical theological method, the D.Min. offers professional, doctoral education that conveys pastoral wisdom.

#### **Four Accents of the D.Min. Program**

There will be four accents that will run like threads through the seminars. They represent four critical capacities for continuous learning in ministry, and they set the pace for the way your D.Min. program will develop. In what follows, these accents are indicated and your preparation for each is expected.

1. **Self-Awareness.** D.Min. outcomes are closely related to one's autobiography since “all research, is to some extent, autobiography” (John Swinton). In each year of study, you will be invited to reflect on who you are as a person and the things (events, people, locations, relationships, etc.) that have formed you, considering each year how one aspect of your story shapes your ministry and drives your academic curiosity. The first autobiography is an autobiography of loss, the second an ecclesial autobiography, and the third an autobiography of vocation. The autobiographies invite you to explore who you are, what/who the church is, and how you are called to lead.
2. **Practical Theological Interpretation.** A D.Min. program is a practical theological journey. From start to finish, it entails critical reflection on divine praxis, ecclesial praxis, and societal praxis. It seeks to construct faithful patterns and strategies for church life and ministry in light of God’s ongoing redemptive ministry in the world for the sake of the healing and reconciliation of the world. We will engage the social sciences in diverse ways in order to support the church in faithfully fulfilling her mission. Engagement with models of practical theology will provide students with possible frameworks and methods for their project proposals.
3. **Qualitative Research.** Most D.Min. projects explore and generate knowledge about human experience through qualitative research. Qualitative research attends closely to the perspective and experiences of persons and communities. Such research is narrative based and assumes that interpretation and meaning-making are key characteristics of human beings. Students will learn how to incorporate qualitative research into practical theological interpretation. Your final project proposal will include a statement of qualitative research methodology.
4. **Ecclesial and Ministry Imagination.** Ministerial identity and practice are intimately bound up in what we believe about what the church is and what it is for—the church’s identity, mission, and structure. What is typically defined as “parachurch” is simply another expression of the church universal. We will continue to engage resources, practices, and ideas that will stimulate our imagination for the church for the sake of the world. The D.Min. is a program one undertakes for the sake of the flourishing of the church.

#### **D.Min. Outcomes (generally)**

The D.Min. program at WTS is invested in helping students:

- grow in self-knowledge and a deeper understanding of how God has called and formed them
- integrate insights from social sciences and theological disciplines into ministry leadership
- discern the religious and cultural traditions of ministry contexts
- increase skill in ministry leadership
- expand capacity for working with others
- contribute a pastorally sensitive and intellectually disciplined artifact to the church to enliven the practice of ministry

## Description

This D.Min. program creates the space and time necessary for leaders to develop the concepts and seek the habits, skills, and practices necessary for leading a ministry made up of people with all kinds of abilities and at all life stages, but especially adolescence. The primary focus of this program is to develop a better understanding of youth ministry in the US, advance a contextualized practical theology of youth ministry, and to work out the implications of both for Christian youth ministry.

## Objectives

- To produce doctoral level research for the church or other parachurch organizations in the area of the practice and theology of youth ministry;
- To allow practical theology to provide a critical lens for evaluating Christian theology and practice;
- To build a cohort-community of eager and earnest learners committed to building relationship and encouraging one another;
- To develop an effective and efficient model of learning among a peer learning community;
- To encourage personal and organizational transformation for vibrant and sustained ministry.

**Launch Date:** January 2024

**Core Readings:** The following books provide the concepts that undergird this D.Min. program and will be engaged throughout the course of study. Additional readings will be added once the cohort is assembled and shared research interests are identified. Students are expected to read roughly 3500 pages per year, most of which *students select related to their own research interests*.

### Practical Theology and Research Methods

Richard Osmer	<i>Introducing Practical Theology</i> (2008)
John Swinton & Harriet Mowat	<i>Practical Theology and Qualitative Research</i> (2006)
Tim Sensing	<i>Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach for Doctor of Ministry Theses</i> (2011)
Pete Ward	<i>Introducing Practical Theology: Mission, Ministry, and the Life of the Church</i> (2017)

### Ecclesiology

Pete Ward, ed.	<i>Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography</i> (2012)
Lesslie Newbigin	<i>The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church</i> (1953)
Stephen B. Bevans	<i>Models of Contextual Theology, Revised and Expanded</i> (2003)
Ralph Winter	"The Two Structures of God's Redemptive Mission"

Rebecca Spurrier

*The Disabled Church (2020)*

**Youth and Vocation**

Dori Baker and Joyce Ann Mercer

*Lives to Offer: Accompanying Youth on Their Vocational Quests (2007)*

Kathleen A. Cahalan

*The Stories We Live: Finding God's Calling All Around Us (2017)*

Robert Epstein

*Teen 2.0: Saving Our Children and Families from the Torment of Adolescence (2010)*

Katherine Turpin and Anne Carter Walker

*Nurturing Different Dreams: Youth Ministry across Lines of Difference (2014)*

Patrick B. Reyes

*The Purpose Gap: Empowering Communities of Color to Find Meaning and Thrive (2021)*

**Youth Ministry Theology**

Benjamin T. Conner

*Amplifying Our Witness: Giving Voice to Adolescents with Developmental Disabilities (2012)*

Kenda C. Dean

*Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church (2004)*

Andy Root

*The End of Youth Ministry? Why Parents Don't Really Care about Youth Groups and What Youth Workers Should Do about It (2020)*

Almeda M. Wright

*The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans (2018)*

**Seminar Intensives:** The D.Min. intensive serves to cultivate a group of adult learners (cohort) with and for the church who gather twice annually for three years to share learning, grow in intellectual fellowship, and set aside time for reading and writing. The D.Min. intensives include a series of six seminars, one occurring each winter and summer for three of the four years. The fourth year of the D.Min. is devoted entirely to writing. Of the six seminars, three will be hosted on Zoom and three hosted at WTS. Students are expected to cover costs for transportation and housing (though the seminar leader will make every effort to make the retreats affordable)

**Planned Schedule**

Launch	January 2024	Virtual
2 <sup>nd</sup> Seminar	August 2024	WTS
3 <sup>rd</sup> Seminar	January 2025	Virtual
4 <sup>th</sup> Seminar	August 2025	WTS
5 <sup>th</sup> Seminar	January 2026	Virtual

Final Seminar	August 2026	WTS
Commencement	April 2027	WTS

### Year 1 – Establishing a Grammar

Students will engage practical theology, missiology, youth ministry, and ecclesiology and develop a contextual practical theology of youth ministry rooted in their ministry location. Students will write an autobiography of loss prior to the first seminar and submit it via Canvas. Lectures from the seminar leader along with discussion groups with peers will supplement the readings and will also be available on Canvas.

***DM850 Orientation Seminar 1: Introduction to the program; Developing a Grammar; and, Developing a theology of youth (January 2024, virtual via Zoom)***

Assignments:

- Autobiography of loss, prior to first intensive
- Precis on readings (below)
- Monthly calls connection, questions, and progress
- 5-7 page essay: Elements of a practical theology of youth ministry

Readings:

- Newbigin, *Household of God*
- Dean, *Practicing Passion*
- Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*
- Winter, “Two Structures of God’s Redemptive Mission”

***DM851 Orientation Seminar 2: Youth, ethnography and missional discernment (August 2024, WTS in Holland, MI)***

Assignments:

- Precis on readings (below)
- Monthly calls connection, questions, and progress

Readings:

- Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*
- Epstein, *Teen 2.0*
- Ward, *Ecclesiology and Ethnography*
- Resources on Canvas about “youth” “adolescence” and “teen”

### Year 2 – Youth, Theology, and Pastoral Imagination

Students will engage literature on youth and theology of youth ministry. Students begin to reimagine adolescents through the practices of defamiliarization. Students will write an autobiography out of their ecclesial tradition prior to DM860.

**DM860 Research Seminar 1: Engaging Theology of Youth (January 2025, virtual via Zoom)**

Assignments:

- Ecclesial autobiography
- Precis on readings in disability studies
- Monthly calls connection, questions, and progress
- 5-7 page essay: What does youth ministry have to say to the Church?

Readings:

- Conner, *Amplifying Our Witness*
- Root, *The End of Youth Ministry?*
- Wright, *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans*
- Select articles and videos on Canvas

**DM861 Research Seminar 2: Developing My Theology of Youth Ministry (August 2025, WTS in Holland, MI)**

Assignments:

- Precis on readings in disability theology
- Monthly calls connection, questions, and progress
- 5-7 page essay: My theology of youth ministry

Readings:

- Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology*
- Baker and Mercer, *Lives to Offer*
- Cahalan, *The Stories We Live*
- Select article on Canvas

**Year 3 – Vocation and Research Methodology**

Students will refine their ideas about youth ministry. Students will write an autobiography of vocation. The winter Seminar will be dedicated to developing the thesis proposal.

**DM870 Thesis Seminar 1: Research Methods and Vocation (January 2026, virtual via Zoom)**

Assignments:

- Vocational autobiography
- Recorded lectures on Canvas about doing research with human subjects
- Monthly calls connection, questions, and progress

Readings:

- Sensing, *Qualitative Research*
- Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*
- Turpin and Walker, *Nurturing Different Dreams*
- Reyes, *The Purpose Gap*

**DM871 Thesis Seminar 2: Thesis Proposal Seminar (August 2026, WTS in Holland, MI)**

This Seminar is dedicated to clarifying and articulating a research question for the refinement and extension of Christian ministry from within the student's context. The seminar will be devoted to learning additional research methods and methods for theologically focused, social scientific research.

- By September 1, 2027, students will submit a finalized thesis proposal to the DMin committee.
- Spring 2027 graduation date.

**DM940 Thesis-Project**

Under the director of the faculty mentor and assigned reader(s), the student designs, develops and writes a thesis-project linking his/her ministry context to the specialized field of the D.Min. track.