

**Disability and Ministry:
Imagining More Faithful and Inclusive Congregational Ministries**

Those who apply for this Doctor of Ministry cohort will demonstrate interest in exploring disability as an embodied reality and as a critical lens, offering insights for imagining more faithful and inclusive congregational 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 academic product. The goal of the program is for students to refine and extend the practice of ministry for leading the church 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" (Swinton in Ward, ed., 84). In each year of study, you will be invited to reflect on who you are as a person and the things (events, people, 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 norms 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. 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 of the *Disability and Ministry D.Min.*

Disability is a complex phenomenon: it represents a lived experience, a socially constructed group of people, and a critical analytical lens for examining cultural values and practices. As church leaders (of all abilities) challenge congregations to become more welcoming spaces for people with disabilities and their families, the church will need to reexamine her theology and ministry practices in order to receive the gifts and challenges that will accompany being an inclusive church.

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 church made up of people with all kinds of abilities. The primary focus of this program is to develop a better understanding of disability in the US, advance a practical theology of disability, and to work out the implications of both for Christian ministry in a specific context.

Objectives of the *Disability and Ministry D.Min.*

- To produce doctoral-level research for the church in the area of disability and ministry;
- To allow the experience of disability and insights from those with disabilities to provide a critical lens for evaluating Christian theology and practice;
- To build a cohort community of eager and earnest learners committed to building relationships 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 9–11, 2025

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. *Students can also expect to select 1000-1500 pages per year for their own research interests.*

Practical Theology and Research Methods

- Richard Osmer *Introducing Practical Theology* (2008)
John Swinton & Harriet Mowat *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (2006)
Tim Sensing *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (2011)

Ecclesiology

- Pete Ward, ed. *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (2012)
Lesslie Newbigin *The Household of God*
Stephen B. Bevans *Models of Contextual Theology, Revised and Expanded* (2003)
Sarah Barton *Becoming the Baptized Body: Disability and the Practice of Christian Community* (2022)
Rebecca F. Spurrier *The Disabled Church: Human Difference and the Art of Communal Worship* (2019)
Andrew Draper, et al. *Disabling Leadership: A Practical Theology for the Broken Body of Christ* (2023)

Disability Studies

- Miriam Spies "From Belonging as Supercrip to Misfitting as Crip: Journeying Through Seminary" *JDR* (2021)
Simi Linton *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity* (1998)
Kim Nielsen *A Disability History of the United States* (2012)
Lennard J. Davis, ed. *Beginning with Disability: A Primer* (2018)
Alice Wong *Disability Visibility: First Person Stories from the Twenty-First Century* (2020)
Rachel Adams, Benjamin Reiss, and David Serlin, eds. *Keywords for Disability Studies* (2015)

Disability Theology

- Benjamin T. Conner *Disabling Mission, Enabling Witness: Exploring Missiology through the Lens of Disability Studies* (2017)
Nancy L. Eiesland *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (1994)
David McLachlan *Accessible Atonement: Disability, Theology, and the Cross of Christ* (2021)
Thomas E. Reynolds *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (2008)
John Swinton *Becoming Friends of Time: Disability, Timefulness, and Gentle Discipleship* (2016)
Erin Raffety *From Inclusion to Justice: Disability, Ministry, and Congregational Leadership* (2022)

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. Three of the six seminars will be in Holland. The three winter seminars will be held online via Zoom. Students are expected to cover costs for transportation and housing.

Tentative Schedule

Launch	January 9-11, 2025	online
2 nd Seminar	July 9-13, 2025	Holland, MI
3 rd Seminar	January 8-10, 2026	online
4 th Seminar	July 8-12, 2026	Holland, MI
5 th Seminar	January 7-9, 2027	online
Final Seminar	July 7-11, 2027	Holland, MI
Commencement	<i>April 29, 2028</i>	WTS

Year 1 – Establishing a Grammar

Students will engage practical theology, missiology, disability studies, and ecclesiology and develop a contextual disability practical theology from and for 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.

Seminar 1: DM850, Introduction to the program; Developing a contextual disability theology (Online, January 9-11, 2025)

Assignments:

- Autobiography of loss, prior to first intensive
- Precis on readings (in syllabus)
- Monthly calls connection, questions, and progress
- 3-5 page essay: Elements of a disability practical theology

*Seminar 2: DM851, Disability, ethnography and missional discernment (July 9-13, 2025 Holland, MI) Special guest: **John Swinton** speaking on research methodology and methods*

Assignments:

- Precis on readings (in syllabus)

- Monthly calls connection, questions, and progress
- Participate in the *2025 Center for Disability and Ministry Symposium*, theme *Missing Voices in Disability Theology*
- Final Year One Project: Moving toward a thesis.

Year 2 – Disability, Theology, and Pastoral Imagination

Students will engage literature on disability studies and disability theology. Students begin to reimagine Christian theology and practice through the lens of disability. Students will write an autobiography of ecclesial tradition prior to the third seminar.

Seminar 3: DM860, Engaging Disability Studies (Online, January 8-10, 2026)

Assignments:

- Ecclesial autobiography
- Precis on readings in disability studies (in syllabus)
- Monthly calls connection, questions, and progress
- 5-7 page essay: What disability studies has to say to the church

Seminar 4: DM861, Developing Disability Theology (July 8-12, 2026, Holland, MI)

Assignments:

- Precis on readings in disability theology
- Monthly calls connection, questions, and progress
- Outlining your thesis proposal
- Participate in the *2026 Center for Disability and Ministry Symposium*, theme *Children with Disabilities and Worship*

Year 3 – Ecclesiology and Research Methodology

Students will refine their ideas about disability and ministry by writing an article for submission to an academic journal. Students will write an autobiography of vocation. The winter Seminar will be dedicated to developing the thesis proposal.

Seminar 5: DM870, Research Methods (Online, January 7-9, 2027)

Assignments:

- Vocational autobiography
- Recorded lectures on Canvas about doing research with human subjects
- Monthly calls connection, questions, and progress
- Optional 15-20 page essay for submission for an article in *DSQ (Disability Studies Quarterly)* or *JRD (Journal of Religion and Disability)*
- Finalizing thesis proposal

Seminar 6: DM871, Thesis Proposal Seminar (July 7-11, 2027, 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.

- **Develop and facilitate** the *Center for Disability and Ministry Symposium*
- By February 1, 2027, students will submit a finalized thesis proposal to the DMin committee if they have not already.
- Students spend fall and winter writing. Desired completion date, early spring 2028 with an April 29, 2028, graduation date.

UPDATED 8/22/2023