



# **Spiritual Formation and Relational Neuroscience**

## Specialty Doctor of Ministry Cohort

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**Faculty Mentors:** Geoff Holsclaw, Ph.D. and Cyd Holsclaw, PCC

**Length:** A 36-credit degree comprised of six in-person seminars over three years, plus completion and defense of the Doctor of Ministry project.

**Location:** Western Theological Seminary, Holland, MI

**Seminar Schedule:** August 4-8, 2025  
January 19-23, 2026, 2025  
+ four more seminars in August and January

**Guest Instructors:** Between the week-long seminars we will digitally host guests and experts on clinical psychology, traumatology, and neurotheology, as well as those steeped in spiritual formation and monastic theology.

**Purpose:**

This Doctor of Ministry cohort will foster the dynamic interaction between relational neuroscience and spiritual formation so that students can experience transformation in their spiritual lives and be resourced to help the transformation of others. Focused on nurturing a secure attachment with God as a means for integrating relational neuroscience and spiritual formation, this cohort will prepare students to minister to a culture that is both suffering within a mental health crisis while also having deep spiritual longings for connection.

## **Rationale:**

Our cultural moment is marked by diverse spiritualities, contested ideologies, and a growing mental health crisis. Pastors and church leaders are pressed to be (or faulted for becoming) spiritual gurus, political activists, and trauma-informed professionals. At a sociological level, we live within a “therapeutic culture” of popular advice about bolstering self-esteem, boosting productivity, creating your best life, and finding your true self. Within these cultural pressures it is easy for church leaders to lose the meaning of the gospel and the processes of spiritual formation.

Discipleship in the West has often emphasized what we know (knowledge) and what we do (will). But this emphasis has failed to form us into life with God. And it fails to align with the new insights of relational neuroscience that our embodied and relational life, shaped by our primary attachments, influence what we know and how we act.

Unfortunately, the growing emphasis on spiritual formation and the recovery of spiritual practices of silence, solitude, scripture reading, and meditation, only indirectly shape our embodied- emotional life and our primary attachments.

What is needed is an integration of the insights of relational neuroscience regarding our relational lives and primary attachments, and the ancient wisdom of the spiritual formation tradition. Relational neuroscience—as a broad field of investigation—integrates the various fields of cognitive science, neurobiology, developmental psychology, and attachment theory to create a new paradigm of human relational development (pioneered by Daniel Siegel and Allan Schore). By integrating relational neuroscience and spiritual formation we seek to help make students more resilient in a world full of trauma and more able to love others in a world full of division.

This Doctor of Ministry cohort in Relational Neuroscience and Spiritual Formation combines ancient wisdom and contemporary research to cultivate holistic and relational models of spiritual formation, training pastors and leaders to be flexible and adaptable as they guide others on the paths of life with God. This cohort will focus on attachment theory as the place for integrating the insights of relational neuroscience and spiritual formation.

## **Framework:**

Each year will revolve around two annual seminars, one in August and one in January. We will have multiple guest lecturers, working from differing contexts and with distinct voices, to help us integrate relational neuroscience and spiritual formation in our own unique settings.

## **Schedule:**

**Year One: Attachment and Faith in God.** In addition to helping students determine their projects, the first year of our cohort will focus on attachment theory and theological anthropology. This will lay the foundation of the D.Min. cohort, with possible readings being:

- Robbie Duschinsky, *Cornerstones of Attachment Research*
- Amir Levine and Rachel Heller, *Attached: The New Science of Adult Attachment and How It Can Help You Find—and Keep—Love*
- Cyd and Geoff Holsclaw, *Does God Really Like Me? Discovering the God Who Wants to Be With Us*
- Stanley Grenz and John Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context*
- J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1*
- Susan Grove Eastman, *Paul and the Person: Reframing Paul's Anthropology*
- Stanley Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self*
- Volf and Crisp, *Joy and Human Flourishing*
- Various articles

**Year Two: Spiritual Formation and the Hope for Change.** The second year will combine the spiritual pathways of the ancient tradition of spiritual formation and the neural pathways opened up by relational neuroscience. This will prepare students to implement their projects, with possible readings being:

- Louis Cozolina, *The Neuroscience of Human Relationships: Attachment and the Developing Social Brain*
- Lisa Feldman Barret, *Seven and a Half Lessons about the Brain*
- Todd Hall, *Relational Spirituality: A Psychological-Theological Paradigm for Transformation*
- Wilder, E. James and Michel Hendricks. *The Other Half of Church:*

*Christian Community, Brain Science, and Overcoming Spiritual Stagnation*

- Robert Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation*
- Jared Patrick Boyd, *Finding Freedom in Constraint: Reimagining Spiritual Disciplines as a Communal Way of Life*
- Janet O. Hagberg and Robert A. Guelich, *The Critical Journey: Stages in the Life of Faith*
- Evan Howard, *A Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation*
- Catherine Wright, *Spiritual Practices of Jesus: Learning Simplicity, Humility, and Prayer with Luke's Earliest Readers*
- Greg Peters, *The Monkhood of All Believers: The Monastic Foundation of Christian Spirituality*

**Third Year: Mission as Love for Others.** The third year will move the neuroscience and spiritual formation into mission by focusing on the connections between theology, therapeutic culture, and trauma, and creating communities of care and transformation. The deeper focus of this final year, however, will be helping each cohort member to refine their project. We will dedicate the bulk of this final year to writing, using our intensives as opportunities to share what each student has gleaned and present their respective writing and projects with each other, with possible readings being:

- Gabor Mate, *The Myth of Normal: Trauma, Illness, and Healing in a Toxic Culture*
- Diane Langberg, *Suffering and the Heart of God: How Trauma Destroys and Christ Restores*
- Jennifer Baldwin, *Trauma-Sensitive Theology: Thinking Theologically in the Era of Trauma*
- Nikolas Rose, *Our Psychiatric Future*
- Ole Jacob Madsen, *The Therapeutic Turn: How Psychology Altered Western Culture*

**Final Project:**

For their thesis, students will write a substantial, original work of at least 5 chapters, to be presented before the faculty advisor and readers.

**Mentor Bios:**

Geoff Holsclaw is founder and director of Grassroots Christianity, which seeks to grow faith for everyday people. He is the co-host of the *Embodied Faith* podcast, which is exploring a neuroscience-informed spiritual formation. Geoff is the author of *Transcending Subjects: Augustine, Hegel, and Theology*, co-author

of *Prodigal Christianity: 10 Signposts into the Missional Frontier* (with David Fitch), and co-author *Does God Really Like Me?: Discovering the God Who Wants to Be With Us* (with Cyd Holsclaw). He is affiliate professor of theology at Northern Seminary and has over 20 years of pastoral experience, currently pastoring in Grand Rapids, MI.

Cyd Holsclaw is an author, spiritual director, and pastor. She is a trauma-informed, Jesus-centered, integrative coach focused on embodied practices and building a secure attachment to God. She co-hosts the *Embodied Faith* podcast and is the co-author of *Does God Really Like Me? Discovering the God Who Wants to Be With You* (with Geoff Holsclaw).

**Tuition, Costs, and Fees:**

Tuition rates remain fixed for the duration of the three-year program, with an additional cost if students need further time to complete their final projects.

This cohort will be subject to the 2025/2026 tuition rate, which will be set in February 2025. For current D.Min. tuition and fees please see [this page](#).

Students are responsible for all travel, food, and lodging costs associated with attending the six required seminars.

**Projected Schedule:**

<b>Course</b>	<b>Dates</b>	<b>Location</b>
Launch <i>DM850</i>	August 4-8, 2025	WTS
2 <sup>nd</sup> Seminar <i>DM851</i>	January 19-23, 2026	WTS
3 <sup>rd</sup> Seminar <i>DM860</i>	August 2026	WTS, or possible monastery retreat
4 <sup>th</sup> Seminar <i>DM861</i>	January 2027	WTS
5 <sup>th</sup> Seminar <i>DM870</i>	August 2027	WTS
Final Seminar <i>DM871</i>	January 2028	WTS
Commencement	April 2028	WTS

**Questions? Please contact the following:**

*Cohort information:*

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*Application & Admission:*

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*D.Min. Program:*

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