THESIS GUIDELINES
for
MA in Theology and Ministry,
MA in Pastoral Ministry,
and
MEd in Religious Education
PURPOSE

Upon completion of this project, students will have demonstrated that they are able to employ biblical, theological, and pastoral resources in a scholarly way around a pastorally relevant topic.

PRACTICAL STEPS OF THE THESIS PROCESS

STEP 1. REGISTER FOR TM888 (if necessary)

**TM888:** Students who are not taking courses or who are not taking a full course load AND who are working on their thesis should register for TM888. It designates a full-time status, keeps a student’s file active, and enables a student to retain access to libraries and other university services. There is no tuition charged for TM888. However, students are charged the registration fee every semester they enroll for Masters Interim Study.

STEP 2. ATTEND THE THESIS WRITING ORIENTATION

The Thesis Writing Orientation Sessions provide opportunities to discuss the process, raise questions, and identify strategies for completing your thesis. *Academic-year students should attend at least one full semester before they anticipate completing their thesis. Summer-only students should attend the orientation the summer before the year they anticipate completing their degree.*

STEP 3. MEET WITH A FACULTY MEMBER

Choose your faculty advisor based on the intended subject matter for your thesis. If you are unsure of with whom you’d like to work, consult your assigned course selection advisor or the Associate Dean for Academic Affairs. When meeting with your advisor, be prepared to discuss your program of study to make sure you are ready to graduate.

- Review program of study and your Agora course history to make sure that all course requirements, including Incompletes, have been met or will be met in the semester in which you take your oral exam.
- Review proposed outline.
- Refine the theme (questions and thesis) of your essays.
- At this or a subsequent meeting, the faculty member will approve bibliographic sources and proposal/outline, including the question you wish to answer in each essay and a tentative thesis statement.
• Finally, have the faculty member sign an Initiation Form and attach the degree worksheet, bibliography, and proposal/outline, including focus questions and thesis statements.

STEP 4. OBTAIN SIGNATURE OF ASSOCIATE DEAN
Submit Initiation Form and attachments to the Associate Dean of Academic Affairs for signature, on or before the deadline indicated on the STM Academic Calendar. The Associate Dean notifies you by email that your thesis proposal has been approved and provides the name and email address of your Thesis Consultant.

STEP 5. WORK WITH THESIS CONSULTANTS
In consultation with your assigned Thesis Consultant, establish goals and timeline/deadlines. This is often done best by establishing a date by which you hope to schedule your oral exam, then working backwards from that date to allow plenty of time to submit and revise each draft. (Keep in mind the times of the year when Consultants will not be available – particularly holidays and August.)

Consultants will review and critique drafts of essay(s). In most cases, drafts are sent as attachments to emails. If mailing drafts back and forth to a Consultant, please include a stamped, self-addressed envelope to speed up the process. (Unfortunately, STM staff cannot process faxes.)

Discuss any issues and concerns that block your progress in moving toward the completion of the thesis.

Please consult the Thesis FAQ document, which you will receive when you are assigned a Consultant for more information on working on drafts with the Consultant.

Remember that your oral defense will not be tentatively scheduled until a Consultant has reviewed at least one draft of your papers, checked to ensure that you have followed the steps of the thesis process, and deems that it is ready to go back to the faculty advisor so s/he may determine whether or not it is ready for defense. In some cases, your faculty advisor may send it back for corrections prior to defense. In rare cases, this may require a rescheduling of the defense.

STEP 6. PREPARE FOR ORAL PRESENTATION

• Register for graduation clearance through Agora.
• Check the STM Academic Calendar for thesis and graduation clearance deadlines.
• Present one unbound copy of your final draft to your faculty advisor and one to the second reader (usually the Thesis Consultant) at least 7 days prior to your oral exam’s tentatively scheduled date. (The Thesis Consultant will schedule your oral, and notify all who are involved.)

NOTE: No oral exams will be scheduled during holidays, in August, or between May Graduation and the beginning of the Summer Institute. Oral exams will be scheduled on a first come, first serve basis.

STEP 7. ORAL EXAM

Bring a copy of your written work to the oral exam for your reference.

STEP 8. AFTER THE ORAL

• Make any revisions to your written work that your readers have indicated are necessary.
• Check in with the Assistant Director of Academic Services to make sure you are all set for graduation.
• Turn in one bound copy to your Thesis Consultant who will then check to make sure requisite changes have been made, and turn it in to the Associate Dean for Academics for your file.

NOTE for Summer-Only Students:

Summers-only students follow the same procedures and guidelines as do academic-year students to complete their thesis, with the following nuances:

Summers-only students intending to complete their degree should meet with a faculty advisor at least one summer before defending their thesis, and have their proposal and bibliography formally approved and filed with the Assoc. Dean, Academic Affairs by the end of the summer before the summer in which they intend to defend.

Summer students intending to defend their thesis in a particular summer must submit a first draft to the Thesis Project Consultant on the first day of that Summer Institute.
DESCRIPTION OF ROLES

FACULTY ADVISORS:

1. Faculty meet with students at the beginning of the process to review thesis proposals and outline(s), discuss themes, and approve bibliography. Students are encouraged to meet with DREPM Faculty with whom they have had a class or with whom they have worked in some other way and whose area of expertise is related to the student’s own academic and ministerial interests. When appropriate to the topic, students may petition the Department Chair to work with a faculty member outside the DREPM. In this case, the second reader on the project must be a DREPM faculty member.

2. After the initial meeting and as their own schedules permit, Faculty Advisors may continue to meet with students to explore ideas for papers, provide recommendations for readings, etc. However, the Thesis Consultants do the reading and critique of drafts.

3. After the Consultant thinks the thesis may be ready for defense, the Faculty Advisor makes the final determination.

4. The Faculty Advisor serves as the first reader on the defense.

THESIS CONSULTANTS:

1. The role of the Thesis Consultant is to assist Faculty Advisors in guiding students as they complete their thesis. Thesis Consultants do NOT begin working with a student until they have in hand an Initiation Form with all required attachments and signatures. The degree to which Thesis Consultants are needed will depend upon the student’s background and ability.

2. Consultants can have office hours at the STM and are available to meet with students by appointment to review and offer feedback on essay drafts. For their “first” drafts, students must present papers that are well-articulated and coherent with well-defined themes and a complete bibliography.

3. Consultants can be contacted through email or through their mailboxes at the STM. Because Consultants are appointed for one summer or one year at a time, a student may need to work with more than one Consultant.

4. Normally, Consultants serve on their students’ oral exam committees as second readers.

Revised February 11, 2014
A Description of the THESIS OPTIONS
for M.A. and M.Ed. Students

OPTION A

Most students choose Option A. Option A consists of three essays responding to three questions concerning:

- Theology
- Religious education (M.Ed.) or pastoral ministry (M.A.)
- a pastoral program

The essays on theology and religious education/pastoral ministry should be eight to ten (8–10) pages in length, supplemented by notes, appendices, and bibliography. The pastoral program essay should be five (5) pages in length, double-spaced; notes and bibliography may be appended.

In keeping with the thesis genre, the three papers should be cumulative, reflecting the same theme or issue throughout, and developing a position that ranges from biblical and theological foundations to pastoral or educational practice, and on to programmatic implementation.

The oral component is approximately forty-five (45) minutes long, not including ten (10) minutes at the end for faculty to determine a grade, fill out appropriate paperwork, and inform the student of the grade.

The Questions for Option A

Question One: Theology Question

Choose a significant theological topic or theme that is of pressing relevance to the pastoral life or religious education mission of the church. Drawing upon your own ministry and experience and informed by biblical and theological scholarship, write an essay that reflects systematically on this issue, offering your own convictions about it and their pastoral or educational relevance.

NB: Your essay should include the following components:
1. **Identification:** Illustrate the importance of this topic in contemporary theology and Church life, indicate some of the main issues it raises, and your own thesis statement in its regard.

2. **Development:** *This is the body of the paper.* Construct an informed and cogent theological position around your thesis in which you draw upon Scripture, tradition, and at least one contemporary theological perspective.

3. **Position and Implications:** In conclusion, draw together and clarify your own thesis position, and reflect on some assumptions and possible implications for your ministry.

Length of essay: eight to ten (8–10) pages or 2,400 - 2,750 words, not including notes, bibliography, and appendices.

**Question Two: Ministerial Question**  
(for M.A. in Theology and Ministry or MA in Pastoral Ministry)

Continuing the overall theme of your thesis, and drawing upon both scholarly literature and your own life convictions, write an essay that reflects on your thesis from an explicitly pastoral perspective and from your own understanding of the nature and purpose of ministry. A suggested format for your essay would be:

1. **Identification:** State your understanding of the nature and purpose of ministry. Then, suggest how your thesis topic relates to your sense of ministry, indicating its importance and the issues or concerns that it raises for pastoral practice.

2. **Development:** From a pastoral perspective, and drawing on relevant scholarly resources in pastoral studies, continue to develop your thesis with special attention to its implementation and implications in pastoral practice.

3. **Position and Implications:** In light of the above, articulate how your thesis will influence your own practice of ministry in your context.

Length of essay: eight to ten (8–10) pages or 2,000 – 2,750 words, not including notes, bibliography, and appendices.

**Question Two: Religious Education Question**  
(for M.Ed. in Religious Education)

Continuing the overall theme or issue of your thesis, and drawing upon both scholarly literature and your own life convictions, write an essay that reflects on your thesis from an explicitly religious education perspective and from your own understanding of the task of educating in faith. A suggested format for your essay would be:
1. **Identification**: Situate your thesis theme within the context of religious education, indicating its importance and the issues or insights that it suggests for educating in faith.

2. **Development**: *This is the body of the paper. Develop your thesis* in dialogue with relevant contemporary religious education, theology, the social sciences and church teaching.

3. **Position and Implications**: In light of the above, articulate the implications of your thesis for religious education and how this will influence your work as an educator in faith.

Length of essay: eight to ten (8–10) pages or 2,000 – 2,750 words, not including notes, bibliography, and appendices.

**Question Three: Pastoral Program Question**

The pastoral program question is an opportunity to demonstrate how best to implement your thesis through pastoral service or education in faith in concrete programs. The focus of the proposed program may be on education, liturgy, social ministry, spirituality, counseling, administration, or whatever will demonstrate the programmatic implementation of your thesis. Your essay should develop:

1. **The rationale and purpose of the program.** This should articulate clearly what one’s assumptions are concerning the program, what one hopes to accomplish, and why it is an appropriate pastoral service and implementation of your thesis.

2. **A concise description of the program,** including the people for whom it is intended, the content of the program, and the process which will be followed, all to clearly reflect your overall thesis. *This is the body of the paper.*

3. **A statement of anticipated outcomes and means of evaluation.**

Length of the essay: five (5) pages or 1,250 – 1,375 words.

Appendices may be used to provide further information on the proposed program.

**OPTION B**

This option requires faculty approval and approval from the Associate Dean. **Option B is a fifty to seventy-five (50–75) page thesis on a topic of theological and educational or ministerial significance.**

The criteria by which approval is granted for the candidate to do Option B:

- Demonstrated excellence in graduate study
- Demonstrated ability to pursue independent studies
- Demonstrated ability to engage in extensive research and writing

Revised February 11, 2014
The oral examination for Option B is one hour, not including time for grade determination and paperwork.

**OPTION C**

Option C provides for the creative expression of original insights and understandings on a thesis of theological, ministerial, or educational significance. Students whose talent has been publicly recognized may use this gift to generate an original and comprehensive response to the ministerial or educational perspectives generated by their studies for the degree. The project may be in the area of the creative arts, multi-media, or field-based. A written component is required that clearly demonstrates the student’s thesis, drawing upon theology, ministry, or religious education and pastoral praxis in a creative and original way. The theoretical foundations of the issue chosen for development in this way will be made clear in both the written essay and the oral review of the thesis.

Option C theses require the approval of two faculty members, who agree to serve as advisors and oral examiners. The faculty members meet to review the proposal and decide to approve or reject it. The written proposal submitted by the student must outline the purpose of the thesis and a plan for its execution. It must also contain a statement showing how the thesis will demonstrate the student’s synthesis of theology and ministry or religious education.

Option C requires a written component of 12-15 pages exploring the foundations of the thesis. If the thesis involves a performing art such as dance or music, a public presentation is to be included. If the thesis involves a fine art such as painting or icon writing, a public showing is to be included. Public presentations and showings should include an educational component in which the student suggests the ministerial significance of what is being presented.

A one-hour oral review of the thesis (including the paper, presentation or showing, and creative process) is required and needs to take place within two days of the public presentation of the project. The thesis will be evaluated according to the strength of the paper, presentation or showing, and the student’s reflection on the process itself.

The criteria by which the faculty grant approval for the candidate to do Option C:

- Demonstrated excellence in graduate study
• Creative or artistic talent that has been recognized through some public means (e.g., performance, exhibition, or publication), and a demonstrated ability to use this talent to express theological and educational/ministerial understandings.

WRITING GUIDELINES FOR THE THESIS

1. The thesis is designed to elicit both informed personal opinion and familiarity with good scholarly resources. It is not solely a research project nor a reflection paper, but a synthesis of both.
2. Option B lays greater emphasis on detailed scholarly research.
3. The length restrictions for option A and B should be strictly observed:
   - 8–10 pages for Theology and Religious Education/Ministry essay
   - 5 pages for Pastoral Program essay
   - 50–75 pages for Option B

Notes, bibliography, and appendices are additional. Alternatively, the essay length may be determined by word count for the text only of each essay, as follows:
   - 2,000-2,750 words for Option A Theology & Religious Education/Ministry essays
   - 1,250-1,375 words for Option A Pastoral Program essay (minus appendices)
   - 12,500-20,625 words for Option B

If this practice is followed, footnotes may be used. The word count must be stated at the end of each essay.
4. The format and physical condition of manuscripts should be consistent with scholarly standards. The latest edition of Kate Turabian’s A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses and Dissertations or APA guidelines should be followed. Either the endnote/footnote or parenthetical format for citations is acceptable using Turabian. Whatever style is chosen should be consistent throughout the thesis.
5. While not addressed in Turabian, it is common for theological writers to use a parenthetical reference in the text rather than a separate note for each scripture and church document citation, e.g. (Ex. 15:2-4) or (Lumen Gentium #16). However, an initial footnote or endnote should identify the Bible translation or the particular document collection being used in all citations; and the book or document being cited should always be clear from your text.
6. Special attention should be given to style consistency among the three essays written in fulfillment of Option A.
7. Substantial bibliographic resources should support the thesis.
8. **Double-space** text; blocked quotes and notes are single-spaced.
9. Use standard **12-point typeface** in text.
10. Use **standard margins** of 1- to 1 1/4- inch left and right margins, and 1-inch top and bottom margins.
11. Include one cover page for the entire thesis. Include overall title, name, semester or summer, and Faculty Advisor.

### THE ORAL DEFENSE

1. No one except for the student and committee members may be present for the oral defense.
2. The purpose of the oral defense is to engage the student in an **analysis** of the thesis as dealt with in the essays. Accordingly, he or she might anticipate discussion centering around concerns such as the following:
   - **Clarity of the essays.** Does the writer’s thesis emerge clearly? Are there ambiguities? Are data and sources correctly used? What assumptions seem to be operative? What conclusions have been reached?
   - **Consistency of the essays.** Is the flow of argumentation logical? Is the thesis reflected and carried throughout all three essays.
   - **Implications of the essays.** Have the thesis been well thought through? Can the writer extrapolate from the conclusion drawn? What difference might the writer’s insights make if applied in a particular context?
   - **Command of the literature cited.** Have sources been utilized appropriately? Do the essays reflect an understanding of the chosen work’s theological position? Have opposing views been cited with regard for their different standpoints?
3. Every effort is made by the committee members to establish an atmosphere in which discussion can take place with genuine dialogue and respect.

### EVALUATION OF THE THESIS

1. Both written and oral components of the thesis are taken into account in assigning a grade.
2. The grading system for a master's thesis is established by the University. There are three categories for grades: PWD (Pass with Distinction), P (Pass), and F (Fail).

3. On occasion, the committee members may request revision of the written component after the oral and before submitting a passing grade.

4. The thesis will be assessed according to the following criteria:

- **Pass With Distinction:**
  
  NOTE: There is no way for the Thesis Consultant or Faculty Advisor to indicate definitively whether or not a thesis meets the criteria for Pass with Distinction before the oral exam is completed.
  
  - The student presents a substantive, well-crafted, and focused thesis that is of significant theological and pastoral interest. (Note: this criterion addresses the issue of Identification.)
  
  - The student demonstrates an exceptional level of clear and critical understanding and integration of significant scholarly resources addressing the specific topics or issues of the thesis.
  
  - In addition to being consistent with scholarly standards of writing (e.g., see Turabian or APA guidelines), the thesis is marked by clarity, creativity, and an engaging style. (Criteria 2 and 3 address the issue of Development.)
  
  - The thesis clearly articulates and develops the student’s unique position and demonstrates the student’s creative ability to integrate scholarly sources with her or his own ministerial and pastoral perspectives.
  
  - During the oral exam the student offers an especially articulate and confident presentation of the written thesis and perceives the relevance of her or his positions to pastoral situations. (Criteria 4 and 5 clearly address the issues of Position and Implications.)

- **Pass:**
  
  - The student is able to identify significant theological, ministerial, and pastoral issues; develop a thesis that draws upon relevant scholarly research in addressing these issues; and clearly articulates her or his own theology of ministry and pastoral practice.

- **Fail:**
  
  - The student does not draw upon relevant scholarly research in addressing significant theological, ministerial, and pastoral issues, or fails to articulate clearly her or his theology of ministry and pastoral practice.