Thesis Guidelines for the MA in Theology and Ministry

2017-2018 Revised Edition

Find this document on the STM website, MA Degree page at:
http://www.bc.edu/schools/stm/acadprog/academicprograms/stmdegree/matm.html
THE PURPOSE OF THE THESIS

The School of Theology and Ministry asks each student in the MA degree program to write a thesis that explores a topic of theological and ministerial interest for the student and gives the student an opportunity to demonstrate their learning. The thesis starts with the assumption that students enter the MA program with a desire to prepare themselves theologically, pastorally and spiritually, for functions of ministry or faith-based service. During coursework, spiritual formation, and contextual education, students engage theological and pastoral source materials and have on site ministerial experiences. The thesis draws these diverse modes of learning into one focused area that can enhance the student’s informed practice of ministry.

In particular, the thesis invites students to demonstrate their ability to converse with biblical scholarship, the historical tradition of the Church, contemporary theology, and pastoral resources. This engagement is expected to be of the highest scholarly standards and will integrate these various modes of reflection around a particular thesis of pastoral interest to the student.

THE PEOPLE INVOLVED

- **The Student** -- The thesis reflects your theological interests and ministry goals. While your Faculty Director and Thesis Consultant are there to encourage you to do your best work, it is you who are most invested in the quality of the thesis, in the ministerial context, and in the theological positions that you articulate.

- **The Faculty Director** -- The Faculty Director is the person with whom you most want to be in conversation about your topic. They are there to help you identify the topic and name its theological, ministerial and pastoral expressions. They also help determine how successful you have been at demonstrating your ability to engage biblical, theological and ministerial scholars in pursuit of your topic. The Faculty Director must be a member of the Department of Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry (DREPM)\(^1\).

- **The Thesis Consultant** -- The Thesis Consultant is a doctoral student who helps you along the way as you write the thesis. Along with a DREPM faculty, they will provide an orientation to the written thesis and the oral defense. Their primary role is working with you in the editing process. The purpose of this editing process is to help you produce your best work and to prepare you for a successful oral defense. The Thesis Consultant serves as a gatekeeper for the defense, indicating when your thesis is ready, and also serves as a second reader on your defense. Please note that Thesis Consultants are not proofreaders or editors in the sense of correcting your writing. While they may suggest when this kind of work is needed, their primary task is to attend to the academic quality of your theological and ministerial writing.

\(^1\) see [appendix 3](#) for a list of the DREPM faculty members
• **The Academic Dean** -- The Academic Dean provides final approval on all thesis proposals, assigns the Thesis Consultants, and receives the final defended copies of the thesis.

• **Other Helpful People/Resources**
  
  *Research librarians at the Theology and Ministry Library*
  Can assist you with finding good resources for your thesis. They can also help you evaluate the usefulness of resources as you engage in the research process.

  *Writing Companions Corner (WCC)*
  The writing tutor at the WCC can help with the mechanics of writing -- thinking about organization, good writing techniques (for example, writing strong introductions or thesis statements), and helping you evaluate your writing. Please note that the WCC tutor does not proofread or correct grammar and spelling errors.

  *The Connors Family Learning Center in the O’Neill Library*
  can provide help with the mechanics of writing and, in particular, can help students for whom English is not a primary language. More information is available here: [http://www.bc.edu/libraries/help/tutoring.html](http://www.bc.edu/libraries/help/tutoring.html)

**THE TIMELINE**

Below please find three different timelines for the thesis process, each corresponding to the student’s intended graduation term. Please note, these are general guidelines; students should always consult the STM Academic Calendar and their faculty advisor for exact dates.

### MAY GRADUATES

The thesis project starts in the fall semester, prior to the semester of your graduation term.

### SEPTEMBER - OCTOBER

- **Attend thesis orientation workshop**
  At this workshop, the writing process is discussed in detail and students are able to engage in a guided brainstorming of ideas. This workshop also introduces you to the Thesis Consultants who will serve as your guides through the thesis process. *Attendance is highly recommended.*

- **Brainstorm some ideas about your thesis topic.**
  Thesis ideas will help you determine who you want to work with as a Faculty Director and what format you want to pursue. Thesis Consultants can help you in this part of the process.

- **Identify a Faculty Director for your thesis.**
  This Faculty Director must be from the Department of Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry (DREPM); this person does not necessarily have to be your
faculty academic advisor. The person you choose should be someone who you think can best help you write a good thesis. This could be someone who shares an interest in your topic or whose expertise lines up with your topic. It could also be someone with whom you already have a good working relationship.

☐ Schedule a meeting with this faculty member.
The meeting should happen sometime in October at the latest. For this meeting, be prepared to outline your general ideas of what you want to write about and ask the faculty member if they are willing to serve as your Faculty Director. In this conversation, the Faculty Director will provide you with a template for the thesis proposal or refer you to use the suggested proposal framework found in Appendix 1 of this handbook. A well-constructed proposal becomes the firm foundation for a successful thesis-writing process.

OCTOBER - NOVEMBER
☐ Draft your thesis proposal
A framework for your thesis proposal is presented in Appendix 1 of this handbook for your reference. Use this to construct your proposal, or consult with your Faculty Director for suggested guidelines. For additional help, feel free to contact the Thesis Consultants.

☐ Submit thesis proposal to Faculty Director for approval
The final version of the thesis proposal must be approved and signed by the Faculty Director in order to be submitted to the Academic Dean by the date on the academic calendar in early November (check the STM Academic Calendar). Once the Academic Dean receives the thesis proposal, she will verify the proposed topic and assign you to a Thesis Consultant.

NOVEMBER - DECEMBER
☐ Meet with the Thesis Consultant
Be prepared to talk about your thesis proposal and your plan for completing the project.

JANUARY
☐ Submit First Version* of your Thesis
The first version of your thesis is due to your Thesis Consultant by the due date on the academic calendar in late January. *See note on page 7 to know what is expected of your first version.

FEBRUARY - MARCH
☐ Edit Thesis in conversation with Thesis Consultant
During February and March, you and your Thesis Consultant will engage in an editing process that will help you move your thesis from the first version to a version that is ready for the defense. This will usually involve helping you tighten
up your theological and scholarly arguments and helping you make your ideas more clear. It may involve the Thesis Consultant returning a thesis to you so that you can rewrite a section, attend more closely to the style sheet, or add something that is missing. In all of this, the goal is to get you and your thesis ready for the defense.

☐ Prepare for and Defend your Thesis
The oral defense for the thesis happens when your Thesis Consultant tells you that your thesis is ready to be defended. You will then send the final version to the Faculty Director and, if the faculty member agrees, will schedule the defense. The defense must happen before April 1, the university deadline for a May graduation.

APRIL
☐ Revise and Submit Final Copy of your Thesis
After the defense, you will have some time to make any minor revisions that are needed, as indicated by your Thesis Consultant and/or Faculty Director. You will then submit a PDF version of the written thesis to the Academic Administrative Assistant.

☐ Celebrate a Job Well Done

DECEMBER GRADUATES
Note the compressed timeline, which makes urgent your attentiveness to the quality of all versions and to the need for timely revision.

ONE YEAR - 8 MONTHS PRIOR TO GRADUATION
☐ Attend a thesis orientation workshop
Ideally, you will attend a thesis orientation workshop in the Fall semester a full year before you intend to graduate, but plan to attend one no later than the summer before you plan to graduate.

At this workshop, the writing process is discussed in detail and students are able to engage in a guided brainstorming of ideas. This workshop also introduces you to the Thesis Consultants who will serve as your guides through the thesis process. Attendance is highly recommended.

AUGUST - SEPTEMBER (of the year you plan to graduate)
☐ Submit your thesis proposal to the Academic Dean
No later than September 1st in the semester in which you wish to graduate.

SEPTEMBER - OCTOBER
☐ Submit First Version* of your Thesis
The first version of your thesis is due to your Thesis Consultant no later than the first Monday of October. *See note on page 7 to know what is expected of your first version.*

**NOVEMBER**

☐ Edit Thesis in conversation with Thesis Consultant
This will usually involve helping you tighten up your theological and scholarly arguments and helping you make your ideas more clear. It may involve the Thesis Consultant returning a thesis to you so that you can rewrite a section, attend more closely to the style sheet, or add something that is missing. In all of this, the goal is to get you and your thesis ready for the defense.

☐ Prepare for and Defend your Thesis, no later than November 15

**NOVEMBER - DECEMBER**

☐ Revise and Submit Final Copy of your Thesis
After the defense, you will have some time to make any minor revisions that are needed, as indicated by your Thesis Consultant and/or Faculty Director. You will then submit a PDF version of the written thesis to the Academic Administrative Assistant.

☐ Celebrate a Job Well Done

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**SUMMER ONLY STUDENTS - AUGUST GRADUATION**

**NEXT TO LAST SUMMER IN PROGRAM (or earlier, if possible)**

☐ Attend a thesis orientation workshop
At this workshop, the writing process is discussed in detail and students are able to engage in a guided brainstorming of ideas. This workshop also introduces you to the Thesis Consultants who will serve as your guides through the thesis process. *Attendance is highly recommended.*

☐ Submit your thesis proposal to the Academic Dean
This happens before the end of the summer session in your next-to-last summer.

**SEPTEMBER - MAY**

☐ Correspond with a Thesis Consultant to plan your progress
Engaging in this process over the course of the academic year gives you the best chance to write a thesis that will truly be beneficial for your ministry and will be ready to defend during the busy summer session so that you will be able to graduate on time. Please note that, as a summer-only student, you may end up working with more than one Thesis Consultant.
MAY - JUNE (of your final summer)
   □ Submit First Version* of your Thesis
      The first version of your thesis is due to your Thesis Consultant no later than June
      1st. (*See note on page 7 to know what is expected of your first version.) Because
      of the intensive nature of summer study, earlier submissions are encouraged. This
      submission should not be your first contact with your Thesis Consultant. You
      should have stayed in touch with your Thesis Consultant during the year.

JULY - AUGUST (of our final summer)
   □ Prepare for and Defend your Thesis, no later than the last day of summer
      session

   □ Revise and Submit Final Copy of your Thesis
      After the defense, you will have some time to make any minor revisions that are
      needed, as indicated by your Thesis Consultant and/or Faculty Director. You will
      then submit a PDF version of the written thesis to the Academic Administrative
      Assistant.

   □ Celebrate a Job Well Done

A Note about Versions or Drafts:
The version of the thesis that you send to the Thesis Consultant in January (or October or
June) should be a final draft. While you will work with the consultant to polish your writing
and refine your arguments, you should only send the Consultant what you consider to be
finished work, your best work, the kind of work you would send to a professor. If you want
the Consultant to review an outline, a rough draft, or a portion of the thesis (and, generally,
they are happy to do this as time permits), this rough draft must be sent well before the
deadline for the first version. Incomplete theses that are sent to a Consultant will be returned
so that they can be finished, which makes completing the editing process and defending
during the semester more difficult.
THE FORMAT AND CONTENT

STANDARD THESIS

The thesis consists of three essays that are knit together into one consistent theme addressing one overarching pastoral question or issue.

**ESSAY 1: A Theological Question** - This essay deals with a theological question related to the overarching theme of the thesis. *(8 - 12 pages; 2400 - 2750 words in length)*
The essay must demonstrate the ability to work with:
A. The Bible and biblical scholarship
B. The Church’s historical or documentary tradition
C. A contemporary theology or theologian

**ESSAY 2: A Pastoral Question** - This essay addresses a pastoral question related to the overarching theme of the thesis and connected to the focus area of the student. The essay must include a scholarly discussion of a ministerial theme or concern with information about the context in which that issue is to be addressed. *(8 - 12 pages; 2400 - 2750 words in length)*

**ESSAY 3: A Project Proposal** - Drawing on the biblical, theological and ministerial work already done, this essay proposes a project that the student could or will do in an actual ministry situation. *(5 pages; 1250 - 1375 words in length)*
The essay must include:
A. An explanation of the purpose of the program (what praxis it seeks to promote) and how it relates to the theological and ministerial foundations established in essays one and two.
B. A description of the program (how it will unfold in a pastoral situation)
C. A statement of the anticipated outcome and a means of evaluation (what will hopefully happen as a result of the program and how success will be determined).

*A note on length and style:* Not included in the page counts listed above are the title page, an introduction (if appropriate), appendices (if desired), and the bibliography. Formatting should follow the STM Style Guide ([http://libguides.bc.edu/academicpapers_stm](http://libguides.bc.edu/academicpapers_stm)).

ALTERNATIVE THESIS OPTIONS

On rare occasions, the standard thesis may not be the best format for meeting the twin goals of encouraging the student to explore a topic of personal pastoral interest while also demonstrating the type of learning that has gone on throughout the program. For these circumstances, there are two possible alternative thesis options. These options tend to require additional planning with and involvement by Faculty Directors.
**Extended Research Thesis**

The Extended Research Thesis involves writing a much longer thesis - fifty to seventy-five (50-75) pages with chapter and section headings as appropriate. This option is most suited for students who have already demonstrated the ability to do exceptional work in theology and ministry, to work independently, and to engage in a much more extensive research and writing project. Only students who are absolutely sure that the topic they want to explore and the method they want to use needs fifty or so pages should write this type of thesis. Students who are interested in writing an Extended Research thesis should speak with their Faculty Director about this option well before the deadlines for proposals.

**Artistic/Performance Thesis**

This option allows students to engage their theological and ministerial interests through aesthetic expressions. Students whose artistic/performance abilities are already recognized may use these talents to generate a meaningful and comprehensive response to their thesis questions. The theological and ministerial work is just as rigorous (and, in many cases, more rigorous) than with a Standard thesis. An Artistic/Performance thesis may use creative arts (visual, musical, or movement), multi-media, or field-based work to explore a topic of theological and ministerial significance. A public performance or display that includes an educational component is required. Consideration of pedagogical process for this public event is an essential element of the total project. In addition to the performative element of the project, a student must submit an accompanying twelve to fifteen (12-15) page paper that explores the theological and ministerial foundations of the performance. Two Faculty Directors are required for this thesis option; one of those Faculty Directors may be from a department other than the Department of Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry. The Thesis Consultant works with the student only on the written component of this culminating exercise.

**THE ORAL DEFENSE**

The defense of your thesis is the final stage of the process. Once your Thesis Consultant has determined that your thesis is ready for the defense, they will tell you to send it to your Faculty Director. Check with your Faculty Director as to whether they want the thesis sent online or presented in hard copy or both. If the Faculty Director agrees that the thesis is ready for the defense, the consultant will arrange a mutually convenient time. Ideally, the defense is not a “defense” so much as it is a conversation with your thesis as the focus of attention. To that end, the Faculty Director and Thesis Consultant will ask questions to get the conversation started. These questions will be based in your thesis and will generally seek to move beyond the thesis. Below are listed some common questions regarding the defense and what happens after.

- **How long does a typical Defense last?**
  - Standard Thesis: Plan on 45 minutes for the defense and an additional 10-15 minutes for determining passing status and filling out paperwork.
○ Alternative Thesis: For either option (Extended Research Thesis or Artistic/Performance Thesis) Plan on one hour for the defense and an additional 10-15 minutes for determining passing status and filling out paperwork.

● What are the criteria used by faculty readers to evaluate a thesis and its defense?
  ○ Clarity - Does your thesis have a clear overarching question and a response to that question? Are your arguments logical and consistent? Do you use the data and scholarly resources in appropriate ways?
  ○ Consistency - Is the flow of argument from one essay to the next clear and consistent? Is the overarching question addressed throughout the thesis?
  ○ Implication - Have the ideas been well thought out? Can you extrapolate from your ideas (see other ways that your ideas might play out)? How might your ideas work in a different context?
  ○ Command of the literature cited - Have you used your sources well and appropriately? Do you demonstrate that you understood your authors’ theological positions?

● What is the grading system for a master’s thesis?
The STM follows the grading system of Boston College for all MA thesis options. The grade takes both the written thesis and the oral defense into account. There are three (3) possible grades:
  ○ Pass with Distinction
    ○ The student presents a substantive, exceptionally well-crafted, focused thesis that is of significant theological and pastoral interest.
    ○ 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, the thesis is marked by clarity, creativity, and an engaging style.
    ○ The thesis clearly articulates and develops the student’s unique position and demonstrates the student’s creative ability to integrate scholarly sources with their own ministerial and pastoral perspectives.
    ○ During the oral defense, 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.
  ○ Pass
    ○ The student is able to clearly identify significant theological, ministerial, and pastoral issues of interest to the student.
    ○ The student develops a thesis that draws upon relevant scholarly research in addressing these issues.
    ○ The thesis is consistent with scholarly standards of writing.
    ○ The student clearly articulates his or her own theology of ministry and pastoral practice.
    ○ During the oral defense, the student is able to engage the ideas presented in the thesis and to discuss the implications of his or her research.
- Fail
  - The student does not draw upon relevant and appropriate scholarly research in addressing significant theological, ministerial, and pastoral issues OR fails to articulate clearly her or his theology of ministry and pastoral practice. Note: if your thesis is approved as ready for defense by your Faculty Director, it is highly unlikely to receive a fail grade, unless it transpires that the thesis is not truly your own work.

- **What happens after the defense?**
  - You may be asked to make some minor revisions before submitting a final copy. Your Thesis Consultant will describe these after the defense.
  - On very rare occasions, your thesis may not be officially passed until you have done some significant revisions to address a major gap in your thesis. If necessary, this will be explained by the Faculty Director.
  - In most cases, when the thesis is in its final copy, it will be submitted electronically (as a PDF file) to the Academic Dean (via their assistant) who will maintain permanent copies of all student theses.

**WRITING GUIDELINES AND TECHNICAL DETAILS**

Please note and follow carefully the guidelines listed below when drafting your proposals and writing your thesis.

- The thesis is not a reflection paper. While it should demonstrate your own opinions and perspectives about your themes, it must demonstrate the ability to engage these in a scholarly way in conversation with the scholarly literature.

- The length requirements are strictly enforced:
  - Standard:
    - Theology essay: 8-10 pages, 2400-2750 words
    - Pastoral essay: 8-10 pages, 2400-2750 words
    - Project proposal: 5 pages, 1250-1375 words
    - Title page, introduction (optional), appendices (optional), and bibliography are additional.
  - Extended Research:
    - 50-75 pages, not including title page, appendices (optional), and bibliography.
  - Artistic/Performance:
    - 12-15 pages, not including title page, appendices (optional), and bibliography.

- The format and presentation of the thesis should follow the protocols of the STM Style Guide, which can be found at [http://libguides.bc.edu/academicpapers_stm](http://libguides.bc.edu/academicpapers_stm). The foundation of the style guide is the most recent edition of Kate Turabian’s *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations.*
○ When using Turabian, you may choose parenthetical citations, footnotes, or endnotes. Generally, the preference in scholarly theological writing is for footnotes, but the choice belongs to you. Your Faculty Director may specify which she or he prefers.

○ While not addressed in Turabian, the convention in theological writing is to cite Scripture and Church documents in text even when using a footnote or endnote format. The bibliography should clearly state what version of the Bible is being used and what collection (or online source) of Church documents is being accessed. See the STM Style Guide for specifics.

○ In rare circumstances, it may be more appropriate to use APA style. These exceptions should be determined in consultation with the Thesis Consultant and with the approval of the Faculty Director.

- Every effort should be made to maintain a consistent writing style and tone across all three essays in a Standard thesis. The three essays of the Standard thesis should be combined into one continuous document, with each essay treated as a section in the thesis. Use of section headings should follow the format described in the STM Style Guide. Pages should be numbered continuously through the thesis.

- Your bibliography should reflect your substantial work. While there is not a minimum number of resources, the thesis process requires that you read both deeply and widely. All books and resources cited in your essays belong on the bibliography; do not put books or resources on the bibliography unless they are cited in the essays. The bibliography should be one continuous list; do not separate by media type or by the various parts of the thesis.

- Double-space the text; block quotations and footnotes or endnotes are single-spaced.

- Use a standard 12-point font, such as Times New Roman, and standard one-inch margins. Insert page numbers.

- Include one cover page for the whole thesis. It should include: thesis title, your name, the semester in which you are defending, and Faculty Director’s name.
APPENDIX 1 - Proposal Framework - Standard Thesis

Student Name:
Faculty Director Name:

Identify the overall issue or topic that you are addressing in your thesis.

Theology Essay

- What theological question do you propose to address as foundational to your thesis?
- Briefly (in a sentence or two), what is your working thesis statement for the theology essay?
- On what Scriptural source(s) will you draw in answering this question? (You might choose a particular passage to interpret or a group of texts)
  - Why have you chosen this source, and how will it help to advance your thesis?
  - What biblical scholars will you draw on to help interpret your Scriptural sources?
- On what historical movement, figure from the Christian tradition, or document(s) from the Church’s heritage will you draw?
  - Name specific works that will help you to explore your thesis within the Church’s history and tradition.
  - How will this aspect of the Church’s history or tradition advance your thesis?
- What contemporary theologian or theological movement will you explore?
  - Name specific sources that will inform your thesis.
  - How will this theologian or theological movement help you to answer the theological question that you have posed?

Bibliography for Theology Essay

Ministerial Essay

- How will you elaborate on your thesis from a pastoral perspective? What will be your context?
- Briefly (a sentence or two), what is your understanding of what ministry is?
  - What sources will help you to explicate that understanding of ministry as it serves or reflects your thesis?
- Given your context and understanding of ministry, elaborate on how your thesis pertains to or will be implemented within ministerial practice
- What is your primary resource texts (or bibliography) for crafting this ministerial essay within your overall thesis.

Bibliography for Ministerial Essay

Project Proposal

- Informed by the theology and ministerial essays, what pastoral program do you propose to describe and implement? (With whom, how, and to what end?)

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# APPENDIX 2 - Thesis Initiation Form

## MATM

### Thesis Initiation Form

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<td>Email</td>
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<td>Preferred Phone</td>
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<td>Name of Faculty Advisor</td>
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### Degree

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<th>MAPM</th>
<th>MEd</th>
<th>MA/MSW</th>
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### Thesis Option

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<th>Standard</th>
<th>Extended Research</th>
<th>Artistic/Performance</th>
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<td>✓ check one</td>
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Attachments included with this Form:
- Bibliography
- Proposal/Outline, including Question to be answered in each paper and tentative thesis
- Degree Program of Study

Please choose and complete one of the following options:
- I plan to take my oral exam
  - Fall semester: 20__
  - Spring semester: 20__
  - Summer session: 20__
- I am uncertain when I plan to take my oral exam*

*Please inform your Thesis Consultant as you are able to identity a target time period

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**Signature of Faculty Advisor**  
**Date**

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Please submit form to Associate Dean, Academic Affairs to have Thesis consultant Assigned

**Name of Thesis Consultant:**

**Associate Dean, Academic Affairs**  
**Date**

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APPENDIX 3 - DREPM Faculty

Colleen M. Griffith, Professor of the Practice of Theology
Areas of Interest: Historical spirituality, contemporary spirituality, theological anthropology with a special focus on a theology and spirituality of the body, method in spirituality, constructive theology, feminist theology.

Thomas H. Groom, Professor of Theology and Religious Education
Areas of Interest: the history, theory and practice of religious education, pastoral ministry and practical theology.

Theresa A. O'Keefe, Associate Professor of the Practice of Youth and Young Adult Faith
Areas of Interest: Youth and young adult faith, developmental theory, feminist theology, ministerial and educational formation, Catholic Jewish dialogue.

Hosffman Ospino, Associate Professor of Hispanic Ministry and Religious Education
Areas of Interest: Pastoral/Practical Theology, Religious Education Theory, Philosophy of Catholic Education, U.S. Latino/a Theology and Hispanic Ministry, Multicultural Studies

Nancy Pineda-Madrid, Associate Professor of Theology and Latino/Latina Ministry

Barbara Anne Radtke, Instructional Designer
Areas of Interest: Christology, the sacramental life of Catholics today, the challenges of being church in a digital age, the impact of technology on the mission of the Church, and the meaningful incorporation of digital technology in theological education and adult religious education.

Jane E. Regan, Associate Professor of Theology and Religious Education
Areas of Interest: Adult faith formation, leadership theory, total community catechesis, adult development, leadership for change.

William D. Roozeboom, Assistant Professor of Pastoral Care and Counseling
Areas of Interest: Counseling; pastoral care; neuroplasticity; family pastoral care;