

**MS 5P1170 Advanced Research in Practical Theology
Syllabus Winter 2025**

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Monday: 11:00 a.m.-12:50 p.m
Format: in person/livestreaming

Biography:

Dr. Phil Zylla is *Professor of Pastoral Theology* at McMaster Divinity College. His research interests include theology of suffering, pastoral care, and Christian spirituality. He is author of *The Roots of Sorrow: A Pastoral Theology of Suffering* and *Virtue as Consent to Being*. His current research is in the area of congregational spiritual formation. He is married to Melodie and lives in Ancaster, ON.

Course Description:

The past twenty-five years has witnessed a significant increase in academic research in the field of *Practical Theology*. The growth of this literature is a significant indicator of the emerging intellectual search to find foundational understandings that will support the advancement of the mission of the church in the world. Of course, this is not a new interest. The church has always deliberately reflected on its mission and its practices. However, the widely-felt need for expanding the nucleus of academic literature to support the theoretical interests of practical theology represent a new development in the field. This course is a call for constructive imagination and humility in approaching the great questions that emerge from what Edward Farley calls, “the ecclesial existence and the constitutive activities” of the church in the world. The course seeks to draw widely from various thinkers who have helped to shape the current (often contested) direction of *Practical Theology*. Participants in this course will be invited to embrace the intriguing challenge of developing informed and carefully researched contributions of their own, regardless of the complexity of such a task.

“The basic task that orients practical theology is to promote faithful discipleship. . . We speak of the purpose that sets the basic task of practical theology as supporting and sustaining lived discipleship. Rooted in Christian tradition, practical theology focuses on called people who manifest a particular faith through concrete ways of life.” Kathleen A. Cahalan and James R. Nieman, “Mapping the Field of Practical Theology” in *For Life Abundant*, 2008, 67.

“Practical theology is critical, theological reflection on the practices of the Church as they interact with the practices of the world, with a view to ensuring and enabling faithful participation in God’s redemptive practices in, to and for the world.” – John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 2016, 7.

Course Objectives:

Knowing

1. To identify and engage with key theorists in the field of practical theology.
2. To interpret current literature that supports academic research in the field of practical theology.

3. To develop a working understanding of practice-led research.

Being

1. To discern the personal trajectory of one's own life and ongoing contribution to research concerning the mission of the church in the world.
2. To deepen one's concern for the intellectual life of the church.

Doing

1. To evaluate some of the foundational literature in the field of practical theology in order to develop working assumptions regarding practice-led research in this field of study.
2. To locate oneself in the field of practical theology and to determine possible paths for on-going research.
3. To join and participate in a relevant academic society related to one's chosen area of focus in practical theology.

Required Course Textbooks:

Bass, Dorothy C. and Craig Dykstra, eds., *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2008.

Miller-McLemore, Bonnie J., ed., *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*. Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2014.

Moschella, Mary. *Ethnography as Pastoral Practice, 2nd Edition*. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, (2008), 2023.

Mudge, Lewis S. and Poling, James N., eds. *Formation and Reflection: The Promise of Practical Theology*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987.

Osmer, Richard R. *Practical Theology: An Introduction*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2008.

Swinton, John and Harriet Mowat. *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*. London: SCM Press, 2nd edition, 2016.

Ward, Pete.

Introducing Practical Theology: Mission, Ministry and the Life of the Church. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2017.

COURSE OUTLINE

January 6 Theme: On Becoming a Practical Theologian

Read: James D. Whitehead, "The Practical Play of Theology" in *Formation and Reflection: The Promise of Practical Theology*, Lewis S. Mudge and James N. Poling, eds., 36-54.

Thomas H. Groome, "Theology on our Feet: A Revisionist Pedagogy for Healing the Gap Between Academia and Ecclesia" in *Formation and Reflection: The Promise of Practical Theology*, Lewis S. Mudge and James N. Poling, eds., 55-78.

Introductions

Having read the articles for today, give us a brief introduction to who you are and what it means for you to become a practical theologian. What evidence is emerging as you reflect on this challenge?

January 13 Theme: The Nature of Practical Theology

Read: John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 2nd edition, 2016, Part I, Theoretical Foundations, 3-94.

Kathleen A. Cahalan and James R. Nieman, "Mapping the Field of Practical Theology" in *For Life Abundant*, Dorothy C. Bass and Craig Dykstra, eds., 62-85.

Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, "Five Misunderstandings about Practical Theology." *International Journal of Practical Theology*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 2012, 5-26.

Edward Farley, "Interpreting Situations", in *Formation and Reflection*, Lewis S. Mudge and James N. Poling, eds., 1-26.

Online Threaded Discussion –

Post to the [course at Avenue to Learn](#) a 200-250 word summary of insights gained with respect to the field of practical theology. How is your understanding being shaped? What clarifications have you made? What definitions of practical theology are you encountering in your reading? What is the confluence and dissonance that you are noticing? What is your own emerging definition of the field of practical theology? What new questions are being provoked?

January 20 Theme: Methods in Practical Theology

Read: Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, ed., *The Wiley Blackwell Companion for Practical Theology*. 2014, 1-266

*****each course participant will choose one of these essays (methods) to reflect on and to summarize in a 750 word (double-spaced) document.*****

n.b. In this part of the course you will become familiar with a wide range of methods that can be employed in practical theological research. Read for general familiarity the whole section, but focus on a primary method chapter that you have been assigned. Follow the assignment instructions and prepare a 750 word executive summary for your colleagues for posting to the course for all participants to read. Post using course drop box.

Due: Feb. 3, 2025

January 27 **Theme: Introducing Practice-Led Research**
Read: Practice-led Research articles
Post online: “What is practice-led research?”

McNamara, Andrew, “Six Rules for Practice-led Research.” *Journal of Writing and Writing Courses 14 (Special Issue): 1-15* online:
<http://www.textjournal.com.au/speciss/issue14/McNamara.pdf>

Carole Gray “From the Ground Up: Encountering Theory in the Process of Practice-led Doctoral Research,” *In Theory? Encounters with Theory in Practice-based PhD Research in Art and Design*, AHRC Postgraduate Conference, De Montfort University and Loughborough Universities, UK, 26 June 2007.
 online: <http://carolegray.net/Papers%20PDFs/ngnm.pdf>

Linda Candy, “Practice Based Research: A Guide.” CCS Report (Sydney: Creativity and Cognition Studios, University of Technology, November 2006).
<http://www.creativityandcognition.com/resources/PBR%20Guide-1.1-2006.pdf>

Carole Gray, “Inquiry Through Practice: Developing Appropriate Research Strategies”, 1996, in P. Korvenmaa (ed.) *No Guru, No Method? Conference Proceedings*, Research Institute, University of Art and Design. Online:
<http://carolegray.net/Papers PDFs/ngnm.pdf>

Lelia R. Green, “Creative Writing as Practice-led Research”, 2006. *Australian Journal of Communication*, 33 No. 2/3, 174-188.

Michael A. R. Biggs and Daniela Buchler, “Rigor and Practice-based Research”, 2007. *Design Issues*, 23, No. 3, 2007, 62-69.

Stephen Kemmis, “Action Research as a Practice-based Practice”, 2009. *Educational Action Research*, 17, No. 3, 2009, 463-474.

February 3 **Theme: The Bible and Practical Theology**

Read: Pete Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology*, Chapter 2.

Prepare for a discussion about Ward’s perspective on evangelical participation in practical theology. In particular our discussion will focus on the role of the bible in practical theology.

February 17 **No class MDC Reading Week**

February 24 **Theme: Embracing the Vocation of a Practical Theologian**

Review the various societies related to practical theology and identify one or two That interest you. Bring a summary of the work of these societies to the class session and be prepared to discuss plans for engagement including upcoming events and sessions of these groups.

March 3 Theme: Conducting Research in Practical Theology**Book Study:** Mary Moschella, *Ethnography as Pastoral Practice*, 2nd ed.**March 10 Theme: Shaping the Commitments of Practical Theology****Book Study:** Pete Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology: Mission, Ministry and the Life of the Church*, 2017, 1-188.

“Practical theology has a purpose and a reason; it is meant to produce something. It is mistaken to see the main product or result of practical theology as primarily an academic paper, a thesis, or even a book. Practical theology is not just a class taken as training for ministry; it is about changed lives. So the purpose and eventual product of practical theology should be the transformation of individuals and communities.” Ward, *Practical Theology*, 167.

March 17 Creative Proposal Class Presentations

Prepare a presentation of a practice-led research creative proposal related to your larger dissertation aims and plans. Plan for 10 min. presentation time and 10 min. discussion time.

March 24 Theme: Practical Theology as Theology**Book Study:** Richard Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction*, 2008, 1-218

“Practical theological interpretation involves four key tasks: the descriptive-empirical, the interpretive, the normative, and the pragmatic. It is helpful to conceptualize these four tasks with the image of a hermeneutical circle, which portrays interpretation as composed of distinct but interrelated moments . . . the four tasks of practical theological interpretation interpenetrate.”

- Richard R. Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction*, 11.

April 2 Theme: Advanced Research in Practical Theology – New Directions**Optional Consultations this week:** Sign up for Zoom OR in-person 30 min. consultations with Dr. Zylla - by appointment**COURSE REQUIREMENTS:****1. Method in Practical Theology –****15 marks**

You will be assigned one method chapter from *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology – Part II* (89-255). Write a 750 word executive summary of this method and its implications for practice-led research projects. An executive summary means a critical and abbreviated summation of the core themes of the chapter. Pay special attention to the bibliographical references used in the article and offer direction for others who might want to use this method. Your executive summary should be crisp, accurate, thoughtful and frame for others, the essence of the method and its primary contributors.

Submit to course assignment Dropbox.

Due: February 3, 2025

2. Locating Yourself in the Field of Practical Theology 25 marks

One of the key goals of this course is to sift through the general field of practical theology in order to locate yourself as a practical theologian. It is essential that you come to terms with your own vocational history, your sense of personal mission and identity, and discover the approach that will sustain you as you enter into the field as a professional practical theologian. This should be written in a **12-15 page essay** which includes the following elements:

- a. autobiography – Describe your vocational, intellectual, ecclesial and spiritual history.
- b. Give an account of your intellectual and spiritual mentors.
- c. Describe your current understanding of practical theology and practice-led research.
- d. Summarize your educational path [including your current program].
- e. Describe your current relationships and plans in respect to ecclesiastical bodies and academic societies.
- f. What are your five year goals in the field of practical theology (looking ahead)?
- g. Outline concrete plans that you are making to establish your voice as a practical theologian.
- h. Include significant interaction with the readings of the course, especially the methodological choices that you are forming as a practical theologian.

Due: February 24, 2025

3. Critical Book Study 10 marks

You will be assigned to a critical book study Group (Ward, Moschella, or Osmer). Write an 5-7 page critical assessment of the textbook your group has been assigned to review. Post your paper to the group discussion and be prepared to engage in critical dialogue with others. What are the key arguments put forward by the book? What is the proposed approach to practical theology? How can the book be used to support research in practical theology? In what ways does this approach support practice-led doctoral research? What are the differences in this approach from other volumes that we have reviewed in this course?

n.b. ALL THREE TEXTS ARE REQUIRED READING FOR ALL DPT COURSE PARTICIPANTS. Only one will require a critical written review.

Mary Moschella, *Ethnography as Pastoral Practice*, (2008), 2nd edition, 2023.

or

Pete Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology: Mission, Ministry and the Life of the Church*, 2017.

or

Richard Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction*, 2008.

Each summary should include:

- a. a description of the primary contribution of the book/chapters to the theoretical lense of practical theology
- b. a brief summary of the primary insights gained from reading the book/articles and their wider import
- c. a brief statement about how this supports your own work in practice-led research.

Due: March 3, or March 10 or March 24

3. Presentation of Individual Creative Proposal for Professional Practice 20 marks

Each course participant will create a proposal related to professional practice in his or her chosen focus area in the Doctor of Practical Theology program. The proposal should be creative and draw from the experience that the participant has in the practice. A sign-up list will guide the presentation date on Zoom.

Due: March 17, 2025

Class Presentation:

Present your creative proposal for research to the class for input and feedback. For your presentation, you can use the screen to present a powerpoint or other type of presentation. Each presenter will have approx.10 min. to introduce their topic and 10 min. for discussion.

4. Essay in Practical Theology 4000 words 30 marks

Write an academic essay (4000 words) that critically engages both theory and practice in your area of focus. Draw deeply from course material and locate your essay in the larger discussion of the field of practical theology. Describe the theoretical lenses that supports your primary research and offer detailed consideration of the methods employed. The essay should reflect:

- a. A carefully selected meta-practice that is relevant to the participant's own vocation experience and research direction.
- b. A thoughtful articulation of problems and issues related to research in this area of practical theology and potential solutions.
- c. Skill in selecting and appropriating methods that will yield productive research in this area.
- d. Location of this topic within the wider field of practical theology.
- e. Demonstration of capacity to contribute to practice-led research on the chosen topic.

Due Date: April 7, 2025

Late Papers: Late assignments will be docked 2% each late day. (Extensions will only be granted in exceptional circumstances such as extended illness, etc.). Papers submitted after April 5th will receive 0 as per College academic rules.

Spacing: All assignments are to be double-spaced.

Contacting the Professor: Dr. Phil C. Zylla

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Consultation with Professor: by appointment - contact me directly by email zyllap@mcmaster.ca to set up an in-person or online meeting.

Academic Honesty

Academic dishonesty is not qualitatively different from other types of dishonesty. It consists of misrepresenting the ownership of written work by deception or by other fraudulent means. In an

academic setting this may include any number of forms such as: copying or using unauthorized aids in tests, examinations; plagiarism, i.e., submitting work that is not one's own (regardless of the means of its production) but passing it off as if it is; submitting work for credit in a course for which credit is being or has already been given, unless the previously submitted work was presented as such to the instructor of the second course and has been deemed acceptable for credit by the instructor of that course; aiding and abetting another student's dishonesty; giving false information for the purposes of gaining admission or credit; giving false information for the purposes of obtaining deferred examinations or extension of deadlines; forging or falsifying McMaster University or McMaster Divinity College documents.

A special note about AI: You are expected to do your own thinking and to write your own papers, etc., and not to have AI do this work for you. There may be value in using an AI tool to help you locate and collate resources or to help you "tidy up" your English grammar, usage, and mechanics, especially if English is not your native language. However, using AI to create content for you and then submitting that content as if you created it is considered plagiarism (i.e., submitting work that is not one's own as if it is one's own) and is a violation of the academic honesty policy.

AODA

In accordance with the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA), the content of this course is intended to be accessible to all students who are enrolled in the course, including those with disabilities. If a student requires accommodation to participate fully in this course, that student is to contact SAS at McMaster University, who will then work directly with the McMaster Divinity College Registrar to negotiate reasonably appropriate accommodation for the student. The MDC Registrar will communicate with faculty regarding necessary accommodations. Please note that an accommodation is not retroactive and must be requested in advance to allow sufficient time for implementation.

Gender Inclusive Language

McMaster Divinity College uses inclusive language for human beings in worship services, student written materials, and all its publications. It is expected that inclusive language will be used in chapel services and all MDC assignments. In reference to biblical texts, the integrity of the original expressions and the names of God should be respected, but you will need to use gender-inclusive language for humans, and you will need to quote from a gender-inclusive version such as, for example, the following: NRSVue (2022), TEV/GNB/GNT (1976), CEV (1995), NLT (1996), NIV (2011), and the CEB (2011).

Bookstore

All required textbooks for this class are available from the Hurlburt Family Bookstore located beside the entrance to the Nathaniel H. Parker Memorial Chapel of McMaster Divinity College. To purchase in advance, you may contact the bookstore manager, Bernice Quek, by phone at 416.620.2934 or 416.668.3434 (mobile); or by email at books@readon.ca. The Hurlburt Family Bookstore also carries other books and merchandise and is open throughout the academic year during posted hours.

Disclaimer

This syllabus is the property of the instructor and is prepared with currently available information. The instructor reserves the right to make changes and revisions up to and including the first day of class.

Selected Bibliography for Advanced Research in Practical Theology

Alsup, Wendy Horger. *Practical Theology for Women: How Knowing God Makes a Difference in Our Daily Lives*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008.

Alves, Rubem A. *The Poet, the Warrior, the Prophet*. London: SCM, 2002.

Ammerman, Nancy Tatom, et al. *Congregation & Community*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997.

Ammerman, Nancy T., et al., eds. *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1998.

Anderson, Herbert, and Edward Foley. *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals: Weaving Together the Human and the Divine*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2001.

Anderson, R. S. *The Shape of Practical Theology: Empowering Ministry with Theological Praxis*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001.

Andrews, Dale P., and Robert London Smith Jr., eds. *Black Practical Theology*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2015.

Arens, E. *Christopraxis: A Theology of Action*. Minneapolis, MI: Fortress, 1995.

Ayres, Jennifer R. "Cultivating the 'Unquiet Heart': Ecology, Education, and Christian Faith." *Theology Today* 74 No. 1 (2017) 57–65.

Ballard, Paul H, and Stephen R Holmes, eds. *The Bible in Pastoral Practice: Readings in the Place and Function of Scripture in the Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 2006.

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Bass, Dorothy C., et al. *Christian Practical Wisdom: What It Is, Why It Matters*. Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 2016.

Bass, Dorothy C., ed. *Practicing our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*. The Practices of Faith Series. Minneapolis, MI: Fortress, 2019.

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- Browning, D. S., ed. *Practical Theology*. San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1983.
- Browning, D. S., et al., eds. *The Education of the Practical Theologian: Responses to Joseph Hough and John Cobb's Christian Identity and Theological Education*. Atlanta, GA: Scholars, 1989.
- Bush, Joseph Earl. *Practical Theology in Church and Society*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2016.
- Cahalan, Kathleen A., and Gordon S. Mikoski, eds. *Opening the Field of Practical Theology: An Introduction*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014.
- Cairns, Ben, et al. "Sharing God's Love or Meeting Government Goals? Local Churches and Public Policy Implementation." *Policy and Politics* 35 No. 3 (2007) 413–32.
- Cameron, Helen. *Just Mission: Practical Politics for Local Churches*. London: SCM, 2015.
- _____. *Resourcing Mission: Practical Theology for Changing Churches*. London: SCM, 2010.
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_____. *Living Stories: Pastoral Counseling in Congregational Context*. Minneapolis, MI: Fortress, 1998.

_____. "Methods, Models, and Scholarly Types: Reflections on Thesis and Dissertation Writing in Pastoral Theology." *Pastoral Psychology* 63 (2014) 551–60.

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Capps, D., and Gene Fowler. *The Pastoral Care Case: Learning about Care in Congregations*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice, 2001.

Chaves, Mark, and Bob Wineburg. "Did the Faith-Based Initiative Change Congregations?" *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 39 (2010) 343–55.

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Dames, Gordon E. "Practical Theology as Embodiment of Christopraxis-servant Leadership in Africa." *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 73 No. 2 (2017) 16 February.

Dreyer, Jaco S. "Practical Theology and the Call for the Decolonisation of Higher Education in South Africa: Reflections and Proposals." *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 73 No. 4 (2017) 6 November.

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Killen, P. O. C., and De Beer, J. *The Art of Theological Reflection*. New York: Crossroad, 1994.

Lavallee, Marc Henri. "Practical Theology from the Perspective of Catholic Spirituality: A Hermeneutic of Discernment." *International Journal of Practical Theology* 20 (2016) 203–21.

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