

Pamela D. Couture, Saint Paul School of Theology



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Saint Paul School of Theology (SPST) was born as a pedagogical experiment. In the early 1960s its charter faculty envisioned “a seminary like no other.” It built the curriculum around the integration of theory and practice, interdisciplinary work, team teaching, and critical reflection on practice. Social activism and community formation infused the learning environment. SPST’s ethos drank heavily from faculty activism on behalf of peace, racial reconciliation, sexual equality, and class interpretation. Its literature has long stated: “John Wesley, Dorothy Day and Martin Luther King Jr. would understand” its pedagogical mission. These saints would also understand the current community’s work to respect theological diversity and define itself in ways that defy the “liberal conservative continuum” that is so convenient for many of its constituents.

Such an environment embodies social tensions. How might the discipline of practical theology describe those tensions, as lived in the pedagogical experiment at SPST? Over the years my work has drawn heavily on the practical theological thought developed at University of Chicago, the International Academy of Practical Theology, the Association of Practical Theology, and the Society for Pastoral Theology. Practical theology helps me identify five tensions in the

pedagogical experiment at SPST.

Applied theology or practical theology? Practical theologians distinguish themselves from applied theologians. Integration at SPST began primarily as applied theology: determining one's best theology and identifying how that theology can be embodied in a practice of ministry in the church or in the world. Practical theologians begin by understanding a situation or practices through "thick description," using qualitative, quantitative, ethnographic, or anthropological methods. Practical theologians investigate the theories and theologies embedded in these practices, theologially interpret them, and propose strategic action. The applied theologian trusts that the validity of the theology will yield good practice; the practical theologian uses practice yielded by theology as the norm that tests the integrity of theological interpretation. SPST's faculty has a long tradition of team-teaching experience in which all reflect on practice. Whether a professor's theological reflection on practice is derived by applied theological methods or practical theological methods does not neatly divide between those located in the "classical" and "practical" disciplines. Some faculty in "classical areas" use practical theological methods; some faculty in "practice of ministry" areas use applied methods.

Theology and science. Practical theology developed a dialogue between theology and the sciences, especially psychology, sociology, anthropology, biology, and economics. Practical theologians may engage original research, such as congregational studies, or may evaluate and theologially interpret the scientific research of others. Scientific research is brought into conversation with theology through empirical (Van der Ven) or hermeneutical (Browning) methods. SPST has engaged science throughout the curriculum.

Theology for the church and for the world. Practical theology has generally tried to hold together preparation for leadership in the church and in the world. Leadership for the church is associated with courses in the "practices and arts" of ministry—preaching, worship, religious education, pastoral care, leadership and administration, evangelism, mission, congregational studies, community formation, and spirituality (Ballard and Pritchard; Wright and Kuentzel). Leadership of the church in the world is often associated with ethics, though most faculty would agree that every practice and theory can be analyzed to reveal its ethic (Browning, Forrester). As a seminary of the United Methodist Church, SPST educates future ordained and lay leadership in practices that are related to leadership internal to the church, and, reflective of its history, SPST helps the church speak to the world. For example, the MDiv requires "Engaging World Religions" so that all students explore interfaith dialogue. The Cleaver Program, honoring alumnus Emmanuel Cleaver II, a United Methodist pastor, mayor of Kansas City, and, now, United States congressman, explores the church's relationship to the political world. In this sense, it creates "public theologians" (Martin Marty).

Meaning, power, and diverse voices. Practical theology interprets the relationship between the critical interpretation of meaning and the analysis of power relationships in practices and systems. Some practical theologians have sought to discern, articulate, and publicly express the meanings inherent in practices in critical correlation to theology and Christian tradition (Browning, Viau). Other practical theologians have analyzed how power operates within theology and Christian tradition (Poling). Some legitimize practices to the exclusion of scripture and tradition (Graham). Some use narrative methods to bring forth unheard voices of marginalized people and their theological affirmations (Ackerman, Andrews, Bon-Storm, Lartey, Miller-McLemore). SPST engages all these strategies but one: scripture and tradition are critically engaged but cannot be de-centered. Our students come to us shaped in various understandings of scripture and return to communities for whom scripture and tradition are normative. Our students must grapple with the ideology and spiritual power of scripture, tradition, and the church, and how these authorities shape the life of the congregations they lead.

Public criteria, spiritual formation, and aesthetics. Early discussions of practical theology sought “publicly warranted” criteria for theology (Tracy) and the development of *habitus*, “a disposition, power, act of the soul itself” (Farley). SPST assists Christians to make their case for their beliefs and actions in public in dialogue with those who do not hold those beliefs — within and beyond Christianity. Curricular outcomes also stress the importance of students’ spiritual formation, as individuals and in community. Spiritual formation reflects students’ education in the classroom, as classes directly and indirectly shape students’ spirits, and it occurs as students participate in community worship, governance, meals, and other forms of community life. Spiritual formation often seeks aesthetic expression in music and visual imagery (Ballard and Couture, Viau). As technology infuses pedagogical practice, the aesthetics of the learning environment will become increasingly important. Spiritual formation in Wesleyan tradition, in ecumenical tradition, and in opposition to or contrast with these traditions can be found among students, faculty, and staff at Saint Paul.

SPST’s current pedagogical experiment. The MDiv curriculum implemented in 2005 sustains SPST’s historic pedagogical values but recognizes that the learning environment has changed. Most theological disciplines today are inherently disciplinary, and faculty articulate the way their discipline does interdisciplinary work. Team-taught interdisciplinary courses culminate the curriculum, bringing this interdisciplinary work to fruition. In the past, the theory-practice integration model was depicted by some as courses labeled “theological” on one wing and courses labeled “practical” on an opposite wing, hinged by ethics that was sometimes considered theological and sometimes practical. This model of interdisciplinary integration has yielded to new combinations of interdisciplinary work that have for the first time allowed biblical professors to team teach with persons in other fields and professors of specific practices to teach with one another. These opportunities recognize that all practices have theories, and all

theories engage practices. In these Advanced Praxis Courses, new forms of theological reflection will emerge.

In the Contextual Education sequence, students reflect on their experience in communities and congregations in SPST's immediate surroundings and students' ministry sites in urban, suburban, and rural settings. SPST is a neighborhood anchor in a low-income, inner-city community. Formerly, community immersion experiences led by now retired faculty took sheltered students where the genteel church was likely not to tread. Now, we teach in a different cultural situation than did those faculty. Students come to us exposed to all possible terrors. We have learned to deconstruct the heightened social fears that are evident in current American culture. Now, we gradually introduce our students to the sensations of our community. The same skills equip students to interact with the suburban and rural communities in which they minister.

Reading the theoretical literature I reviewed for this article, I was struck how often practical theologians agreed that no one method would fit all times, all places, all situations. At SPST, faculty have helped students integrate their educational experience using many methods, some represented in literature on practical theology, some not. As faculty have introduced students to practical theological methods, some students have experienced a shock of recognition. Practical theological methods as developed for the last 30 years have helped students to integrate their entire pedagogical experience — the formal curriculum, community life, and other experiences they are having at SPST.

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