

Lynn Rhodes, Pacific School of Religion



Lynn Rhodes is Associate Professor of Ministry and Field Education at Pacific School of Religion. She has been there since 1983. Before that she taught at Boston University School of Theology in field education, and was a research associate in women's studies at Harvard Divinity School as well as a campus minister. Her areas of interest and research include feminist interpretations of ministry practice and vocation and economic justice.

Pacific School of Religion has recently undergone a curriculum revision for the MDiv program. Our overall mission is to provide leadership for historic and emerging faith communities in the work of doing justice and acting with compassion in a changing world.

We have developed four educational “principles” for all MDiv courses. We understand education as critical reflection upon traditions, sacred texts, history, teachings, and practices. All knowledge is contextually situated. We are accountable for leadership formation in partnership with our communities of accountability. Our foundational courses are interdisciplinary and team taught. One is called “Theology and Ethics in Christian History.” Hebrew Bible and New Testament are taught in a unit with the first semester focused on an overview of the history, archaeology, cultures, societies, and religions that shaped and influenced the Bible. The second semester focuses on “Interpreting Sacred Texts.” The foundational course for the “practical fields” is called “Frameworks for Critical Engagement in Ministry.”

We have attempted to refocus field education around the belief that the center of ministry is located in the daily work and lives of baptized Christians. Thus, we are not student-centered, but faith community-in-the-world centered. Congruent with our educational principles, field education asks students to learn how to assess contexts, name their communities of accountability, be critically reflective theologians, and develop flexible modes of leadership as they encounter the realities of specific communities.

We are reframing the work of clergy as the support team for the central work of all Christians in their daily lives. The question of clergy function and role depend upon contexts, resources, the issues of the times, and the particular needs and gifts of the congregants. We are trying to move from student-centered education to education for communal accountability and faithful witness in the world. The development of theological imagination and formation focuses on the ability to be critical theological practitioners who are flexible and able to change roles as contexts and issues shift. There is no model of ministry that can address the complex and ambiguous nature of our changing world. There is incredible need for leaders who can lift up the vision from wherever it comes, practice communal discernment, change roles as needed, be critical thinkers with knowledge of historical resources of the faith, and attune to present conditions.

This makes it very difficult to define or shape pastoral/vocational identity for specific roles or leadership functions. We try to develop education that encourages people to reflect critically upon contexts and their own self understanding and upon discernment issues of ministry within communities of accountability. We try to counter the “lone ranger” model of ministry while committed to prophetic work. In our understanding of “communities of accountability” we include local faith communities within the larger context of our accountability to our earth and sustainability, to all marginalized communities, and to those labeled the “least” in our country and the world.

Teaching Practices/Strategies for Practical Theology and Field Education

As field education faculty, I have co-taught the “Frameworks for Critical Engagement in Ministry” for the past two years. The purpose of this course is to introduce the students to theories of reflective practice by engaging them in contexts and texts that address issues of suffering and hope. This course is taught in the first year as an introduction to the methods of critical theological reflection that inform preaching, worship, education, pastoral care, community leadership, arts, and spiritual formation. Our faculty present their praxis models of interpretation in teams. For instance, the faculty in worship and in sociology of religion gave a joint presentation on lament. They presented a psalm and hip hop. The psalm was presented as voiced by a woman who was raped by a friend and the hip hop was presented by young street artists. The discussion was on ritual practices of lament and theological understandings of lament as a form of resistance in times of suffering. This course is the practical theology field attempt to provide common language about the ways preaching, worship, education, the arts, spirituality, leadership, and pastoral care relate, inform, integrate, or challenge.

In the second year our field education classes are shifting from student-centered to community-centered learning. We are moving from the emphasis on individual call theology to theology of discernment of the common call that is given to all Christians. The issue is how to discern what that means in particular contexts, with particular resources, education, and gifts. In this sense there are no “special calls.”

The field education material and strategies now focus on leadership preparation that encourages seminarians to learn how to analyze contexts of ministry and to do critical theological reflection upon ministry practices. They are asked to develop parish teaching committees as centers of theological reflection upon the faith community and the congregants’ daily lives and work.

We have changed the focus of parish teaching committees from the task of evaluating the work of the seminarian to articulating the congregants’ understanding of their own ministries and how that relates to their experiences of the faith community. For example, when a student preaches, the questions include the more general topic of how sermons relate to the daily lives of the congregants.

In our field education program we are doing more of our teaching with the teaching parish committees. We are working with them to provide resources and orientation towards their own theological reflections upon their experiences of the faith community and how that informs and shapes their daily lives. They become the people with whom the student engages the common issues of ministry.

The questions then shift from how well one preaches to what role does preaching have in people’s daily lives. What kinds of community interactions support, nurture, and challenge Christian witness in the daily work of congregants? What does it mean to develop more faithful living and working practices for the whole community and the individuals within it?

In addition, all students in field education participate in small weekly reflection groups. When it is possible, the group meets on the sites of ministry. This, I have found, is a powerful way to de-center the individualistic focus on the seminarian. When the whole group is introduced to the context and encounters the diversity of ministry sites, they become much more sensitive to the importance of context and the diversity of experiences. We encourage them to make connections between their sites and the larger communities.

Each student presents a critical incident in their ministry. All students reflect upon that incident in class. They are not to answer the questions or issues raised by the writer of the paper, but to identify their own issues of ministry raised by that incident. If they cannot identify any issues for themselves, they are not allowed to speak. This has become a critical aspect of the class. Each situation of ministry becomes the whole groups' issue. After all the questions of theology, ministry practices, and contextual analyses are raised, the whole group decides which questions to address. The teaching goal is to provide experiences of communal discernment and new insights. I try to get them to think about the theological assumptions, issues, and questions that underlie their ministry practices.

The final paper for field education is their theology of ministry. In this paper they integrate their theology of ministry with their practice of ministry. The paper is written in draft form for group discussion. After the discussion of the paper, the student rewrites the paper and then explains to the group what new insights the student had after the group discussion. When a student does a "draft" paper, she/he is much more willing to examine it in discussion. It is a concrete way to emphasize that theological insight is never complete and that people with very different theological positions can inform and shape each other's theology.

Another critical aspect of field education is the teaching/learning with field mentors. I meet with them six times a year. This is critical for the integration between field and seminary classes. We engage in formation for mentoring through dialogues, other faculty presentations, and mentors' wisdom.

How do we recognize integration when we see it? The immediate feedback for integration comes from the evaluations that the student, the field mentor, and the teaching parish or teaching agency provide. These evaluations are based on the learning objectives that each student develops each semester. It also comes from the content of their theology of ministry papers. I also keep in touch with graduates — they are the greatest source of knowledge about what was helpful in integrating what they learned in seminary and what they are experiencing in their ministries.

We understand integration begins when seminarians make connections between their work and the work of their faith communities; when they see complexity and different perspectives with real openness; when we are taught by them to see their communities in greater complexity; when they can hold ambiguity and passionate commitment together; when they gain courage to face destroyed lives and communities and find connections to others and God that sustain them

in their work; when they have self knowledge that is transparent to others; and when they can articulate for others a theological understanding and a practice that shapes their vision and is still open to further insight and discernment.

We hold ourselves accountable for educating for ministries of justice and compassion. We are far from having an integrated approach, but we are learning about it through team teaching and through accountability to our common principles of education. Integration is a very fragile thing. Often we are in the midst of chaos and diversity and challenge that remind us daily that we are really living in ambiguity and great diversity of experience. We are committed to the well-being of each other, our communities, and the whole of creation. Our school is struggling to understand what it means to live less fearfully in such a time as this, with more courage, less arrogance, and more passion, and with intentional critical reflection upon context and diversity of knowledge, experience, and historical resources.