

## Toward A Multidimensional Understanding of Practical Theology for Ministry

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### **Abstract**

This paper argues for a multidimensional understanding of practical theology that is both academically responsible and useful for ministry formation. It begins by showing why practical theology resists a single, fixed definition, tracing its development through changing relationships among theology, lived experience, and ministerial practice. Engaging key conversations in the field, the paper proposes a working definition of practical theology as the discipline concerned with how theology is lived and how life is theologized. This account is developed through two complementary modes: a bidirectional mode, in which theology and experience mutually interpret and reshape one another, and an immersive mode, which attends to the entanglement of divine and human action within concrete practices. The paper also revisits the language of “applied theology,” arguing that it can still be useful when understood as a discerning, contextually accountable theological performance rather than a simple movement from theory to practice. In this way, practical theology emerges as a vital framework for reflective and faithful ministry.

**Key words:** practical theology, lived experience, bidirectional reflection, immersive praxis, ministry formation

## 1. Introduction

This paper is born out of the classroom. Specifically, it arises from my work teaching the field education seminar at my seminary, where students are immersed in the practice of ministry but do not always have the opportunity to take a full course in practical theology. Yet, as a practical theologian, I am convinced that students seeking ordination must at least know the basics of the discipline, and, more importantly, why it matters for their vocation.

The questions students encounter (about how theology is lived, embodied, and discerned in concrete contexts) are precisely the questions that practical theology addresses. For that reason, this paper introduces students without access to a full course in practical theology to its central contours—including a starting point for a bibliography of resources for those who wish to dig deeper—while also providing a framework that can serve as a practical “toolbox” shaping their ministries.

My aim is not to provide a single, exhaustive definition of practical theology, but to acknowledge its complexity, history, and multiple approaches while drawing out the major insights and takeaways that matter for ministry today. Practical theology has long wrestled with questions of identity: whether it is an academic discipline, a method, a clerical training ground, or a way of life. Each perspective adds important dimensions, yet seminarians and ministers often need something more immediate: a way to see how these debates translate into practices of ministry and the everyday witness of Christian life.

Thus, this paper seeks to distil insights from practical theology that help students and ministers navigate the realities of their work. By situating practical theology as both reflective and immersive, both dialogical and skill-forming, I propose a multidimensional account that equips practitioners with frameworks and practices without oversimplifying the field’s depth. This balance—between complexity and accessibility, between the academy and ministry—is what makes practical theology essential for field education and pastoral formation.

## 2. The Challenges of Defining Practical Theology

Defining practical theology is a challenging task for several reasons: its complex history and development, its attempt to heal the fragmentation of theological specialisations, and its multifaceted nature, which varies across academic and ecclesial contexts. Each of these factors contributes to the difficulty in arriving at a singular, comprehensive definition of the discipline.

### 2.1. Historical Complexity and Evolution

The historical evolution of practical theology plays a significant role in the challenge of defining it. Initially, practical theology was primarily understood as the application of biblical and theological norms to pastoral care and other ministerial tasks—a perspective that aligned it closely with what was traditionally termed “applied theology.” However, as Chang Kyoo Lee points out, practical theology has shifted its focus to investigating religious praxis itself (Lee, 2011, p. 293). This move has redefined the scope and objectives of practical theology. This evolution reflects broader changes within the field of theology, where the emphasis has moved from doctrinal application to critical engagement with lived religious practices.

Duncan B. Forrester further highlights this shift. He notes that the question of defining practical theology and whether it is a distinct academic discipline emerged only in the modern era, especially as universities began to emphasize rational principles and scientific methods (Forrester, 2000, p. 35). In pre-modern times, the study of theology was largely the domain of monastic communities, where it functioned as preparation for those entering clerical office. With the rise of the medieval university, theology assumed a privileged status, often described as the “Queen of the Sciences,” occupying a position of intellectual primacy within academic life. Forrester highlights that in both settings the discipline’s chief concern lay in shaping clergy and articulating the doctrinal foundations of the church (Forrester, 2000, p. 33).

When the University of Berlin was established in 1809, it set a new standard for higher education by grounding its work in scientific rigor and the pursuit of universal reason. Within this academic environment, theology was compelled to defend its relevance, and

Friedrich Schleiermacher emerged as a pivotal voice in articulating its role (Forrester, 2000, p. 35). Theology had to justify its place within this new framework and Friedrich Schleiermacher was a key figure in this endeavour. Schleiermacher proposed that theology was both a scientific discipline and a practical one. His structure of theological study drew on a tree metaphor in which philosophical theology formed the roots, historical theology constituted the trunk or body, and practical theology emerged as the crown. In this model, the three areas were organically connected, with practical theology representing the “crown of theological study” (Forrester, 2000, p. 35; Dole, 2024, p. 400). He emphasized that practical theology was the “technique” of church leadership in an attempt to combine a scientific spirit with ecclesial interest (Forrester, 2000, p. 36).

Forrester shows that Schleiermacher’s model was critiqued for reducing practical theology to a mere form of applied theology in which the discipline implements the theories drawn from philosophical and historical theology. Forrester argues that this perspective limits the scope and influence of practical theology and confines it to the management of church affairs (Forrester, 2000, p. 36). Instead, practical theology should engage critically with the church’s structures and the broader society. This tension remains relevant today as theologians continue to grapple with the proper place of practical theology in the modern academy and its role in addressing both the needs of the church and the broader societal context.

In summary, the evolution of practical theology from its monastic roots through the modern university’s demands for scientific rigor complicates the task of definition, as it requires accounting for a wide range of historical developments and concerns that fall under the umbrella of practical theology

## 2.2. Not Another Specialty

Another significant and interrelated challenge in defining practical theology is its resistance to being categorized as just another theological specialty. Terry Veling, drawing on the work of Edward Farley, notes the fragmentation within the broader field of theology, where various disciplines have become increasingly specialised. This specialization has led to the question: “So what does practical theology specialize in?”

(Veling, 2005, p. 3). The irony, as Veling suggests, is that practical theology does not seek to specialize in the conventional sense. Instead, it aims to *heal* the very fragmentation that has occurred within theological education and discourse.

Velling argues that practical theology seeks to reintegrate theology into the “weave and fabric of human living” (Veling, 2005, p. 3). This reintegration positions theology not merely as an academic endeavor and specialty but as a way of life embedded in the everyday experiences of individuals and communities. This understanding of theology challenges traditional academic boundaries and the obsession with specialisation. Velling characterizes practical theology by its commitment to bridging the gap between theological wisdom and the lived experiences of believers. The aspiration to heal fragmentation and foster a holistic approach to theology makes practical theology inherently difficult to define within the confines of conventional academic categories.

To bridge the gap between theological wisdom and the lived experiences, Veling advocates for a theology that is attentive to the “joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the people of our time” (Veling, 2005, p. 8), especially the marginalized and suffering. In order to do that, he argues that practical theology must be seen as a craft more than a how-to method, where the emphasis is on developing a “relatedness” to theology through lifetime (Veling, 2005, p. 16). This necessitates engagement that becomes a way of life rather than a detached intellectual exercise. This idea is highlighted by his reference to *phronesis*—a term borrowed from Aristotle and used by Gadamer and then by many practical theologians—the concept of practical wisdom that is acquired through years of engaging with the wisdom of a craft, practices, and disciplines until it becomes ingrained (Veling, 2005, p. 16).

### 2.3. Different Enterprises and Different Approaches

Another difficulty in defining practical theology is the diverse ways the term has been used across different contexts and different approaches to engage with it. Bonnie Miller-McLemore identifies four distinct enterprises within practical theology: 1) a discipline among scholars, 2) an activity of faith among believers, 3) a method for studying

theology in practice, and 4) a curricular area of subdisciplines in seminaries (Miller-McLemore, 2012a, p. 5). She notes that each of these dimensions reflects a different aspect of practical theology's identity and function. As an activity of faith, practical theology is concerned with the lived experiences and practices of believers by showing what faithful living looks like in faith communities. As a method, it provides tools in the seminary and theological schools for studying theology in practice and doing theological reflection. As a curricular area, practical theology encompasses a range of subdisciplines within seminary and theological education (preaching, worship, education, pastoral care, administration, etc.), each with its own focus and methodological approach. Finally, as a discipline among scholars, practical theology engages in rigorous academic inquiry.

To complicate the issue even further, engaging with these enterprises does not follow one approach. In her rich article, "Three Approaches to Practical Theology, Theological Education, and the Church's Ministry," Kathleen A. Cahalan argues that the revitalization of practical theology in North America, spurred by the decline of mainline Protestantism, has resulted in at least three distinct approaches (Cahalan, 2005). These approaches were developed in response to Edward Farley's critique of the "clerical paradigm," which had reduced practical theology to mere professional training for ministers, and his call to recover theology as a form of practical wisdom, or *habitus*.

To analyze these developments, Cahalan employs a typology from philosopher Paul Lakeland, who describes three responses to the crisis of modernity: the late modern, the countermodern, and the radical postmodern. Each of these philosophical stances, she contends, has a corresponding approach within contemporary practical theology, offering a unique vision for Christian life, ministry, and theological education in a post-Christendom context (Cahalan, 2005, p.63-94).

The first approach Cahalan identifies is the "late modern," which she finds best represented in Don Browning's work on a "fundamental practical theology." This model seeks to salvage the project of modernity by grounding Christian ethics and action in a form of practical reason (*phronesis*) that can be publicly articulated and defended.

Using a revised correlational method, it puts the Christian tradition in critical dialogue with contemporary culture and the social sciences to shape the common good (Cahalan, 2005, p. 67-73).

The second approach is the “countermodern” position, exemplified by the work of Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra on Christian practices. This approach rejects the modern project and instead looks to the past, specifically to the retrieval of traditional Christian practices like hospitality, testimony, and keeping Sabbath, to form a distinct and coherent Christian identity in a fragmented world. Crucially, these practices are not merely human endeavors but are understood as the very locus of divine action. They are defined as things Christian people do “in response to and in the light of God’s active presence for the life of the world” (Cahalan, 2005, p. 75). In this view, ordinary activities become “tangled up with the things God is doing in the world” and therefore “share in the mysterious dynamic of fall and redemption, sin and grace” (Cahalan, 2005, p. 78). It is an approach that emphasizes the cultivation of a Christian “way of life” grounded in the community’s narrative and traditions (Cahalan, 2005, p. 74-80; Volf & Bass, 2001; Bass, 2010; Bass et al., 2016).

The third and final approach corresponds to Lakeland's “radical postmodern” category, which Cahalan aligns with liberating, feminist, and contextual theologies. Using the work of feminist theologian Rebecca Chopp as a primary example, this approach critiques all “totalizing” metanarratives—both modern and premodern—for being oppressive and universalizing the perspectives of dominant groups. Instead, it prioritizes praxis, beginning with the concrete, lived experiences of marginalized communities and aiming for emancipation, justice, and the transformation of oppressive structures. For these theologians, all theology is contextual, and its task is to reconstruct Christian symbols and practices in ways that promote human flourishing for all, especially those on the margins of church and society (Cahalan, 2005, p. 80-86; Chopp, 1995; Schreiter, 1985; Schreiter, 1997; Bevans, 2002).

### 3. Practical Theology Between Academy and Ministry

These varied perspectives—historical, philosophical, and methodological—illustrate how practical theology has continually been contested and redefined. Yet at the heart of the debate lies an ongoing concern with how practical theology relates to ministry and to God’s action in the world in ways that bear fruit outside the academy. It is precisely this concern that Edward Farley sought to address in his influential work *Theologia*, where he argued that theological education and practical theology were captives of a clerical paradigm (The “clerical paradigm” depicts theological education as primarily professional training for ministers, reducing theology to clerical skills rather than a broader, integrative pursuit of knowledge of God. See Farley, 1983).

While his diagnosis resonated with broader attempts to rethink the discipline in light of modern academic pressures and the fragmentation of theology, I join Miller-McLemore in contending that it ultimately misidentified the core problem. As she notes, this diagnosis is a fallacy and “a poor diagnosis for all that ails theological education...[It] has become a mono-causal analysis that has led us to overlook other diagnoses” (Miller-McLemore, 2012b, p. 13-14). Her sustained engagement with the tension between the academic and clerical paradigms has shaped much of her work across articles and books.

To address this misunderstanding, Miller-McLemore proposes two corrections. First, she suggests that the problem is not the clerical paradigm but what she calls “the academic paradigm” or the “cognitive captivity of theology.” It is not “just the ‘clericalization’ but an equally troubling ‘academization’ of theology” that practical theologians and theological educators need to tackle (Miller-McLemore, 2012b, p. 14). Knowledge must include theories and arguments but should also encompass what is not articulated and theorised. Miller-McLemore joins Charles Taylor, who sees that some aspects of knowledge (particularly knowledge that shapes practice) are “unarticulable” (Miller-McLemore, 2012b, p. 14).

The second correction to the clerical paradigm diagnosis is to restore faith in the role of skills and rules in theological education. Educators like Bernard Lee and Thomas Groome build on Aristotle's typology of "*theoria* (contemplative knowledge of truth), *phronesis* (knowledge of how to live well), and *techne* (knowledge of how to make things)," placing *phronesis* at the center. Miller-McLemore advocates for a holistic approach that does not dismiss the role of *techne* and still values the role of the "know-how." She summarizes her corrections saying, "Short-hand use of the clerical paradigm to capture the plight of contemporary practical theology and theological education overlooks the equally troubling problem of intellectualism that distorts how religious knowledge is learned, conveyed, and practised. Creative work on theological knowledge must grapple with how it is enacted in the world" (Miller-McLemore, 2012b, p. 15).

#### **4. A Working Definition for Ministry**

In light of these ongoing debates between academy and ministry, and the need to move beyond both clerical and academic captivity, I propose a working definition of practical theology oriented toward ministry. I define practical theology as the theological discipline concerned with how theology is lived and how life is theologised. This definition holds together two complementary ways of engagement: a reflective, bidirectional movement between lived experience and theological reflection and meaning-making, and an immersive attentiveness to those moments where divine and human realities are already entangled in practice

##### **4.1. Bidirectional Mode of Practical Theology**

As one mode of engagement—the bidirectional—practical theology unfolds through a dynamic movement in both directions: from the concrete, everyday experiences of individuals and communities toward theological reflection and meaning-making, and from theology, biblical studies, ethics—with their various disciplines, fields, and subfields—toward shaping and informing lived realities.

This bidirectional engagement applies both within and beyond ecclesial contexts. On one hand, practical theology attends to traditional ministerial practices such as preaching, pastoral care, Christian education, and counselling—contexts where theology

is deliberately embodied, enacted, and transmitted. On the other hand, it also explores how people make meaning and encounter the divine in ordinary, non-institutional spaces: in relationships, in suffering, in justice-seeking, in the mundane. It holds together the clerical and the everyday, the formal and the informal, without conflating or isolating them.

Practical theologian Pete Ward has described this integrated dynamic with clarity. He cautions against constructing practical theology as a discipline that must begin with either doctrine or experience; it should not conform to a singular starting point. Ward insists that theology and practice must be held in mutual tension: “If theology can be practical, then practice is also theological” (Ward, 2017, p. 10). For Ward, practical theology does not move in a straight line but is situated within a “web of interrelated possibilities and issues” (Ward, 2017, p. 10). Drawing on Rowan Williams, Ward reminds us that theologians always begin “in the middle of things” (Ward, 2017, p. 10; Williams, 2000, p. xiii). We do not speak from nowhere. We speak from within communities, histories, faith convictions, and practices that shape how we understand God and discern God’s call. Practical theology, therefore, is less about finding a single starting point and more about learning how to live, think, and respond faithfully from where we are.

This integrated approach also reflects the four tasks of practical theology as outlined by Richard Osmer, when these tasks are understood not as linear steps but as interwoven dimensions of a single theological process. The descriptive-empirical task attends to what is happening; the interpretive task seeks to understand why; the normative task engages Scripture, tradition, and theological reasoning to ask what ought to be; and the pragmatic task considers how communities can respond in faithful practice. Taken together, these tasks resist compartmentalization and instead illuminate the dynamic, interdependent nature of practical theology (Osmer, 2008).

Richard Osmer describes practical theological interpretation as involving four core and interrelated tasks, framed by four guiding questions: What is going on? Why is this going on? What ought to be going on? How might we respond? The descriptive–

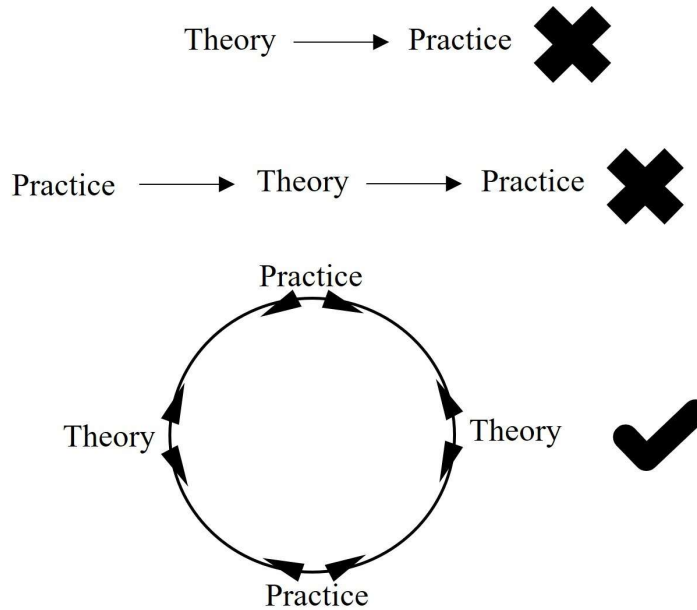
empirical task seeks to gather information—formally or informally—that reveals the patterns, dynamics, and relationships shaping a given situation or context. The interpretive task draws on theories from the arts, sciences, and other disciplines to explain these patterns, attending to cultural, social, psychological, and systemic factors that illuminate why events unfold as they do. The normative task brings theological concepts, ethical principles, and the wisdom of Christian tradition to bear in order to interpret the situation faithfully and identify “good practice” that can guide the community’s life. The pragmatic task focuses on developing and enacting strategies of action that are both faithful and effective while engaging in reflective evaluation as these strategies “talk back” in practice. Osmer emphasizes that these tasks are best understood within a hermeneutical circle, in which each task interacts with and reshapes the others, making practical theology a dynamic process that moves between empirical description, critical interpretation, theological–ethical reflection, and concrete action (Osmer, 2008).

My approach is to embrace that complexity by not following a linear method or tidy progression but by engaging in a lived theological process—rooted in tradition, attentive to lived experience, and shaped by communal wisdom. I move away from approaches that insist on a fixed starting point—whether in applied theology, which moves from theory to practice, or in fundamental practical theology, which follows a practice–theory–practice pattern—unless the latter is understood without a rigid point of departure, or with one that already holds both dimensions together. I do not seek to resolve the tension between theology and practice but to inhabit it faithfully, trusting that discernment emerges in and through the life of the church as it listens, responds, and bears witness to God’s presence in the world.

#### 4.2. Immersive Mode of Practical Theology

Yet practical theology is not merely a bidirectional exchange governed by *rational* or *linear* processes. It resists framing experience and theology as two distinct poles. Instead, it recognizes that praxis itself—often embodied in the mundane, the broken, and

**Figure 1. An Immersive Model of Practical Theology**



the everyday—can be the locus of divine action, without always necessitating head-driven cognition or rational analysis. Human experience is not simply a source for theology, nor theology merely a framework applied to life; rather, they are often intertwined in ways that blur the boundaries between divine and human action, between reflection and response.

This immersive dimension of practical theology resonates especially with what Kathleen Cahalan describes as countermodern and radical postmodern approaches. In the countermodern retrieval of practices, exemplified by Bass and Dykstra, ordinary acts such as hospitality or Sabbath-keeping are not simply human activities but places where divine action is already at work. Likewise, in radical postmodern and contextual theologies, as seen in feminist and liberative perspectives, theology begins from the lived experience of marginalised communities and attends to the ways God’s presence is entangled with struggles for justice and human flourishing. Both of these approaches affirm that practical theology need not begin with abstract reflection but can trust that

the divine and human are already interwoven in the concrete, the broken, and the everyday.

In summary, practical theology can be described in two complementary modes. The first is the bidirectional or reflective approach, where movement flows back and forth between lived experience and theological reflection and meaning-making—experience generating theological insight, and theology in turn shaping life (without getting stuck on where one must begin). The second is the entangled or immersive approach, which attends to those moments where divine and human realities are already interwoven in praxis itself, without requiring rational mediation. Both modes are legitimate and necessary. No one is better than the other. Practical theology involves moments of reflective movement, but it also honours the immediacy of entangled praxis. It holds these ways of knowing and living together without reducing the discipline to one or the other.

#### 4.3. A Word on *Applied* Theology

As shown above, recent discussion has rightly pushed back against an older, linear view of *applied theology* that treats practice as the mere implementation of abstract, universal truths. In that scheme, theology lives “up there” and practice “applies” it “down here,” reducing practical theology to an instrument for translation.

Hermeneutical and practical-theological accounts have shown, however, that understanding is always already oriented toward action, and action is theory-laden; *application* belongs to understanding itself rather than following it as a second step.

At the same time, dropping *applied* language altogether risks collapsing theology into a form of absolute relativism, where meaning becomes entirely contingent on context and theology loses what is transcendent and is rendered entirely anthropocentric. Practical theology requires a disciplined interplay between lived particularities and guiding norms.

I suggest this metaphor as a way to hold the tension: Practical theology is not like adding colours to a blank sheet. The page is never blank: it already bears textures, shapes, and colours—histories, cultures, powers, wounds, hopes. Indeed, the paper is alive and has agency: it receives, resists, and redirects the stroke. Nor does theology simply impose a finished picture from outside. Rather, the divine colouring intermingles with what is already on the page, and faithful work requires skilful discernment of both palette and paper. In this sense, there is an applied dimension, but it looks like skilled, accountable performance rather than a one-way descent of ideas:

1. Normative colours and shapes: The artist—the theologian, the worshipping community, indeed the Spirit—works with a palette that includes Scripture, tradition, doctrinal claims, and communal practices. These provide real guidance that prevents the image from dissolving into anything-goes improvisation.
2. Skills required in the applying: Drawing on a marked page calls for virtues like judgement, patience, improvisation, the capacity to hold tensions, and communal discernment that test what fits this scene.
3. A responsive, non-passive page: The paper embraces or pushes back. Its grain—the given textures of place, suffering, kinship, justice-seeking, and the everyday—reshapes the artist's hand and sometimes the palette itself. The result is a dynamic interplay of divine initiative and human response in which both vision and rendering are refined.

Rehabilitated in this way, *applied* does not name a pipeline from theory to practice but the craft of rendering a fitting image under accountable norms within a living context. It safeguards theology's normative, transcendent, and God-centered character, while also recognizing that faithful performance is always local, dialogical, and improvisational—where divine and human action are already entangled in the work of drawing.

## **5. So What? Why This Matters for Practitioners?**

For ministers, practitioners, and students in field education, practical theology provides tools, practices, and skills that shape faithful ministry and responsive leadership in lived contexts.

1. **The Bidirectional (Reflective) Approach:** This approach equips ministers with the language and frameworks needed to engage in ongoing dialogue between life and theology, experience and doctrine, reality and tradition. On the one side, practitioners are invited to closely attend to the concrete reality of the lives entrusted to their care: their hopes, wounds, communities, and practices. On the other side, they are called to engage the resources of Scripture, tradition, and ethics. The reflective task is to put these in conversation so that each interprets and reshapes the other in ways that honour both the particularity of lived experience and the guiding wisdom of the Christian tradition. Following Osmer's framing, practitioners learn to ask: *What is going on? Why is it happening? What ought to be? And how might we respond in action?* This process is important for both the lives of those they are serving and for the minister's own life and praxis, since discernment cannot be separated from the minister's ongoing formation.
2. **The Immersive Approach:** At times, ministry calls for practices that do not rely on reflection, rational explanation, or explicit theological framing, but that trust God's presence within the embodied rhythms of life. Facilitating silence, hospitality, shared meals, lament, etc., creates space for divine action that is not mediated through immediate cognitive reflection. In the messiness of such practices—where things may not appear polished or resolved—God is at work, shaping lives and communities. For practitioners and students, this means cultivating trust in the Spirit's activity beyond what can be neatly named or analyzed.
3. **Applied Skills in Practice:** Practical theology also emphasizes the cultivation of ministerial skills as forms of theological performance (what some call *arts of ministry*). Good listening, thoughtful preaching, wise administration, and effective teaching are not “merely practical” but deeply theological acts. They demand learning good skills but also cultivating virtues such as attentiveness, patience, and discipline, which together sustain faithful practice. For students in field education, developing these skills is itself an entry point into the craft of

practical theology—where theological vision and lived performance are inseparably joined.

These dimensions should reinforce that practical theology is not any one of them in isolation, but all of them held together. It is multifaceted, involving reflective dialogue, immersive practices, and ministerial skills, each contributing to the whole. To practise theology means engaging in this full, interwoven reality where life and theology, Spirit and community, reflection and practice are never separated but always mutually entangled.

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper, I have traced how practical theology resists simple definitions, drawing on its history, its role in healing fragmentation, and its diverse approaches today. I proposed a working definition that holds together two complementary modes: the bidirectional movement between life and theology, and the immersive attentiveness to places where divine and human action are already entangled.

My contribution is to frame these two modes together as a multidimensional account of practical theology. I want to show that ministry requires both reflective movement and trust in God's presence within the immediacy of life. By holding together these ways of knowing and living, I resist the temptation to privilege one over the other, and instead affirm practical theology as a space where reflection, practice, skill, and divine encounter remain inseparably linked. For ministry, I see practical theology less as a recipe and more as a way of inhabiting the world with attentiveness, discernment, and improvisation. My aim is not to close the conversation but to join it, showing students and ministers that practical theology is a continuing dialogue where theology and life meet and unfold.

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