NOTE: The course will start at 9:00 am and end by 4:30 pm on Monday through Thursday, and 9:00 am to 12:00 noon on Friday.

Seminar Description

This seminar considers how ethnography might be employed as a pastoral discipline. Students will be introduced to the process of applying systematic ethnographic methods in a congregational setting. Ethnography typically involves the observation and study of people in their natural settings. Here we focus on churches and their contexts (neighborhoods, districts, towns, cities).

Ethnography’s potency resides in its ability to undermine assumptions and give voice to those who have been previously muted. It allows for reinterpretation and restructuring in a way that nurtures the creation of better maps and better stories. Along the way, though, ethnography may yield more complicated and less linear explanations of congregational culture(s).

The course will also introduce students to the scholarship of engagement through a central, culminating project that will engage the students in the study of a local congregation. These original ethnographic studies of congregations will give particular attention to two aspects: (1) the nature of a church as a social institution and (2) the vision of society that is implicit in the practices of the congregation. Throughout the course we will be building a theoretical and analytical “toolbox” for considering the church as a social institution embedded within a wider societal context. The “toolbox” will, hopefully, allow students to attend to the actual life of the church and, in turn, process those patterns and habits through a theological lens that allows for strengthened congregations.

Course objectives

Upon completion of the course students should be able to

1) Explain and utilize the basic research methods of ethnography (including participant observation and interviewing), particularly as appropriated and employed in the field of congregational studies.

2) Implement ethnography for understanding the church as a social institution (thinking critically yet charitably about the church as a social institution).
3) Analyze data systematically (coding) and, in turn, be able to effectively communicate a compelling narrative based on that evidence (organizing the data into a coherent story).
4) Appreciate and explain the implicit sociological visions that are “carried” in ecclesial practices.
5) Reflexively use ethnography to interrogate one’s own predispositions and, in turn, give “voice” to those that form the congregation and its context.

Required Reading


Seminar Requirements

1) Pre-seminar (written assignments due January 9)
   a. Complete required reading
b. For each reading, compose 4-5 discussion questions. These should be typed and organized in a single document. Have one copy for the instructor and one for your reference during the class.

b. Write a 4-5 (double-spaced) paper in which you begin the process of considering your congregation ethnographically. The paper should be a discussion of some of the following: the congregation’s location (both socially and geographically), its theological tradition, its worship style, the architecture of the edifice, the polity it utilizes, the subcultures that exist within, significant aspects of its history, its identity.

d. Attend a worship service in a congregation with which you are unfamiliar. Think of this as a self-guided field trip where you begin to think ethnographically. Take “field notes” (observations about what you are seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, and tasting [communion elements? fair trade coffee? lemonade? cookies?]). Pay attention to the physical setting (neighborhood, edifice, sanctuary, fellowship space), the people (who are they? how are they dressed), worship style, dominant stories, relational patterns, central identity, authority. Using your field notes, write a 4-5 page reflective paper about this initial foray into ethnography. Through our class you will become better equipped to conduct ethnography, this process is an exercise in getting you into an unfamiliar situation so that you can begin the same kind of observation within your own church.

2) During the seminar (written assignments due January 13)

a. Write a 2 page (double spaced) paper in which you discuss the following (not graded, for seminary purposes):
   i. Who you are: what is your biography? What issues/assumptions do you bring with you?
   ii. What issues do you see as most compelling within your field of study and your congregation?
   iii. Describe your context: what is the social, theological, and geographic location of your congregation?

b. Write a 2 page (double spaced) reflection paper in which you consider the following: Some might identify a tension in the relationship between ethnography and Christianity. That is, ethnography tends to be coming from a position of not-knowing, entering the field with an inductive approach to finding the answers. Christianity, on the other hand, tends to operate with a sense of “sent-ness” – that there is a truth/answer/wisdom that we have to offer. How do we best reconcile these two seemingly contradictory positions?

3) Post-seminar (due April 1)

a. Write a 20-25 page (double-spaced) ethnography of your congregation. The data for the paper will include your field notes as participant observer and transcripts from your interviews with leaders
and attenders. The process of researching and writing this paper will become clearer throughout the week.

b. Some details on paper organization: the main paper (15-18 pages) should include an introduction to the site, statement regarding the issue being considered, literature review, discussion of evidence, and conclusion. The paper should also include two appendices (which can be more informally written and regarded as reflections where you discuss how this process has changed you, what dangers you might see in the process, and any other compelling insights you might have): 1) a methodological appendix in which you reflect on the ethnographic process and 2) a theological appendix in which you reflect on the theological implications of the study for your congregation (both appendices should be 4-5 pages).

4) **All** written assignments should be completed using [Turabian, 8th edition](#), format (per seminary expectations).

5) Any students who cannot complete the assignments by the final due date listed on the syllabus should be in contact with the professor to discuss a new due date. There is one 30-day grace period for turning in assigned work (which will include a one letter grade reduction). If more than 30 days is needed, the student must complete a “Course Extension Form” listing the final due. The form will also be signed by the professor and submitted to the registrar.

**Seminar Schedule**

1) **Monday (Key outcome: Reflexivity and biography as crucial to good ethnography)**
   a. Introductions
   b. Ethnography as a research discipline
   c. The inductive process
   d. *DisLocation*
   f. *Elliot Liebow, Tally’s Corner*
   g. *Scharen, “Introduction” (Explorations in Ecclesiology and Ethnography)*

2) **Tuesday (Key outcome: identifying the boundaries of your field research)**
   a. Congregations as cultures/locating a congregation
   b. Participant observation
   c. Field notes
   d. Ethics
3) Wednesday (Key outcome: identifying good questions and becoming comfortable with an inductive approach)
   a. Dimensions of church identity and culture: activities, artifacts, accounts
   b. Semi-structured interviewing
   c. Mulder and Smith, “Understanding Religion Takes Practice: Anti-Urban Bias, Geographical Habits, and Theological Influences”
   d. Edwards, *The Elusive Dream*
   e. Marti, *A Mosaic of Believers*
   f. Designing an ethnography

4) Thursday (Key outcome: figuring out how to make sense of data)
   a. Congregational ecology
   b. Coding and analysis
   c. Literature review
   e. Fiddes and Ward, “Affirming Faith at a Service of Baptism in St. Aldates Church, Oxford”
   f. McRoberts, *Streets of Glory*

5) Friday (Key outcome: reflections on individual ethnographic projects)
   a. Crafting and grounding the narrative
   d. Wrap up

Seminar Evaluation

1) Pre-seminar assignments: 25%
2) Participation and seminar-week assignments: 25%
3) Final post-seminar paper: 50%

Grading Scale

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Bibliography

1) Ethnography


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2) Ethnography and the church


