

**Toronto School of Theology Guidelines for the Preparation and Ethics Review of  
Doctor of Ministry Thesis Projects Involving Human Subjects**

The Doctor of Ministry Program at the Toronto School of Theology is a professional program whose primary intent is the professional development of the researcher/practitioner with the secondary purpose of contributing to a body of knowledge in the field of pastoral practice.

While every Doctor of Ministry Projects requires ethical and academic oversight by the Toronto School of Theology, some projects also may need to be submitted to the Research Ethics Board at the University of Toronto, subject to the UofT Guidelines on the Use of Human Subjects in Research.

This document is an attempt at being more explicit about the type of DMin research that needs to be vetted through the UofT Research Ethics Board and DMin research that would come under the jurisdiction of the Toronto School of Theology.

Professions in Pastoral Ministry are governed by codes of conduct that students have the responsibility not only to become familiar with but also to put into practice during the course of their program, and especially while they are in the project stage of their program. The Toronto School of Theology has the responsibility of informing Doctor of Ministry students of their professional codes of conduct and in setting up an Ethics Review Committee to oversee students' research projects.

As a professional-development based program, the DMin is both drawing from knowledge generated by scholars and practitioners through past and current research conducted in the field of pastoral ministry, and building on practitioners' hands-on experience of the objective and systematic collection of facts on which they make professional judgments and interventions.

While evidence gathering aimed at such professional intervention and professional growth is governed by professional codes of conduct, research involving the use of human subjects must undergo research ethical review.

Practitioner-based inquiry differs from research mainly with regard to intention or finality, nature and means of intervention, and audience. The finality of evidence gathering, directed towards obtaining new knowledge in order to advance professional intervention and growth, is the improvement of the practices of a professional who is part of a community of professionals (such as clergy) and citizens (beneficiaries such as congregation). The finality of research is the generation of new knowledge and sharing it with a broader audience for the benefits of society (such as a book or peer-reviewed journal).

There are three types of research that are eligible for Doctor of Ministry action-based research projects, program evaluation (a practitioner is evaluating the effectiveness/viability of programs), reflective practice (a practitioner uses feedback from participants and self-journaling to reflect on and improve his/her own practice of ministry), and research aimed at publication (the practitioner wishes to publish an article, handbook for the purposes of sharing knowledge). The chart below illustrates the conditions upon which to determine the necessity of a UofT Ethics Review in the case of the Doctor of Ministry Research Projects

	Program Evaluation	Reflective Practice	Research
Who is the main focus of the project?	The organization	The researcher/practitioner	The participant(s) (with a view to understanding and disseminating knowledge about particular populations)
What is the intent/purpose of the project?	Analyze/improve existing program within the organization	Professional development of the researcher/practitioner	Contribute to body of knowledge
What documents will come out of this project?	Internal documents for the organization e.g. reports, policy documents, unpublished thesis	Course work paper or thesis that is not published or made publicly available beyond local archive	Documents for publication as handbook, article, newspaper item etc.
Where and to whom will these documents be disseminated?	Internal within the organization only	Internal within the academic environment i.e. course instructor, thesis committee	Public document
Ethics Review?	Exempt	Exempt	Required

In the case in which a DMin Thesis Project is intended to be incorporated into a public document (i.e. as a book, handbook, journal article,) that project will require a UofT Ethics Review and come under the ERO guidelines for research with human subjects. **However**, whether or not a DMin Thesis Project requires an external ethics review by the REB, no DMin project is exempt from ethical oversight governing the collection of data from human subjects.

### **Issues to be addressed in the Ethics Review of DMin Projects.**

Two main issues that arise from the unique nature of the minister/congregant/pastoral relationship is the power-over relations, which affect a participant's freedom to participate, and the issue of confidentiality that stems from the differences in the

expectation of confidentiality that a congregant/client might have from their minister, as opposed to the expectation of confidentiality that a research participant might have from a researcher. These issues must be addressed by the student in preparation for an ethical review and oversight of the student's thesis project either by internal or external examiners.

The following guidelines established by the REB at the University of Toronto cover situations that pertain to power-over relations and expectations of confidentiality and must be followed in all DMin projects.

## **Guidelines for Research Involving Power-Over Relations and Confidentiality**

### **Power-over Relations**

To be ethical research, participation must be voluntary. If the researcher is in a power-over relationship to potential participants, they may not feel entirely free to refuse to participate. Conversely, potential participants may also perceive positive inducements for their participation (e.g., gaining advantages or earning favour with the researcher). Even when the research is of a non-sensitive nature, the REB requires researchers to mitigate the power-over relationship with potential participants. The safeguard(s) that should be employed in a particular study depends on the design and nature of the research. These safeguards must be clearly explained in the application. Simple assurances such as "there will be no negative consequences" are not sufficient. The Tri-Council Policy (TCPS) states:

*Article 2.4(e) reminds researchers of relevant ethical duties that govern potential or actual conflicts of interest, as they relate to the free and informed consent of subjects. To preserve and not abuse the trust on which many professional relations reside, researchers should separate their role as researcher from their roles as therapists, caregivers, teachers, advisors, consultants, supervisors, students or employers and the like. If a researcher is acting in dual roles, this fact must always be disclosed to the subject. Researchers should disassociate their role as researcher from other roles, in the recruitment process and throughout the project.*

For a researcher who is in a dual-role (e.g., pastor and researcher), one way to "dissociate" the two roles is to exclude the pool of participants over whom the researcher has a direct power-over relationship. Or, the researcher may decide to include participants in the study only after the researcher is no longer in a power-over position. Depending on the nature of the research, this may not always be feasible, and the researcher may choose to go forward with the study with participants over whom he/she has power. In such cases, the student's thesis supervisor (in the case of internal review) or the REB (in the case of external review) needs to be "convinced that a dual role is justified and that ethical problems encountered in the dual role can be overcome" The REB requires dual-role researchers to put safeguards in place to reduce potential inducement, pressure and

coercion. Simple assurances such as, there will be no negative consequences, are not accepted as substitutes for safeguards.

### **Safeguards**

The safeguard(s) or combination of safeguards that should be employed in a particular study depends on the research design and the nature of the research. Two frequently employed strategies are (1) third-party recruitment and (2) third-party data collection. At a minimum, third-party recruitment should be employed. More safeguards depending on the nature of the research may be required. For some studies, in addition to third-party recruitment, third party data collection may be appropriate.

Third-party recruitment occurs when the dual-role researcher requests another person who does not have a power-over relationship to potential participants to recruit them (e.g., explain the study, provide an information letter) and (if relevant) collect signed consent forms. As well, the third-party is usually the designated person participants' contact if they wish to withdraw from the study.

In some research designs, third-party recruitment completely eliminates the possibility of the researcher ever knowing who chose to participate and who did not. In other designs, a researcher may learn the identity of participants only after the researcher is no longer in a power-over relationship (as in the case of school chaplains).

If the researcher collects his/her own data while there is still a power-over relationship, the researcher may know the identity of the participants, but third-party recruitment, at a minimum, puts a distance between the researcher and the potential participant. Depending on the nature of the study, the Ethics Review Committee may approve collecting data from participants while the researcher is still in a power-over relationship provided they use third-party recruitment.

In summary, if you are a dual-role researcher, you are required to:

Explain why the dual-role research is justified and that ethical problems encountered in the dual role can be overcome. That is, you have no reasonable alternative.

**Please Note:** Convenience is not sufficient grounds for conducting power-over research. Explain the nature of the power-over relationship, how it will be explained to participants and what safeguards will be put in place to prevent inducement, pressure and coercion during participation.

Declare this dual-role in your recruitment and informed consent materials.

Inform participants that their decision to participate or to decline participation will not affect their access to services, grades, employment status, etc.

Ensure that at a minimum third-party recruitment is used. Ensure that you have explained how you will prevent inducement, pressure and coercion during the recruitment stage of the research.

## **Confidentiality**

Below are explanations of anonymity, confidentiality, exceptions to protecting a person's identity, and privacy.

**Anonymity:** No one, including the principal investigator, is able to associate responses or other data with the individual participants. Anonymity means that there is no way the researcher can ever link the data to the participant. For example, anonymity is possible in circumstances such as mail-in questionnaires that have no identifying information on them

**Confidentiality:** Treatment of information that an individual has disclosed in a relationship of trust with the expectation that it will not be divulged to others in ways that are inconsistent with the understanding of the original disclosure without explicit permission to do so. Confidentiality refers to the protection of the person's identity and the protection, access, control and security of his or her data and personal information during recruitment, data collection, dissemination of data and findings and storage. The obligation to maintain confidentiality extends to the entire research team. Personal information and data disclosed to a researcher must be held in confidence unless the participant explicitly waives this right and is fully informed of the potential harms this might engender.

Protection of a participant's identity may need to extend beyond personal identification to that of organizations, institutions, etc. In some studies, particularly in the social sciences, protecting participants' confidentiality is sometimes the key safeguard used to minimize risks.

Participants have the right to a full disclosure of how their data will be kept secure and protected. This includes where and under what conditions it will be stored, who will have access to the data and whether those with access to the data have signed a confidentiality agreement with the researcher or not (e.g. transcribers).

When confidentiality is to be protected, research data must be stored in a secure manner. This may include removing specific identifiers (e.g., contact information, combination of social factors which would make it easy to identify the participants) and using codes or pseudonyms. You should also take care to prevent data being released in a form that would permit identification of participants.

**Exceptions to Protecting Identity:** In certain circumstances, (e.g., oral history), it may be appropriate to use participants' names in reports or publications. In such instances, a participant's permission for the use of his or her name must be documented in the consent.

**Privacy:** Having control over the extent, timing, and circumstances of sharing oneself (physically, behaviourally, or intellectually) with others. The researcher ensures that the

research participant determines when, how, and to what extent information about him or her is communicated to others.

### **Limits to Confidentiality**

If confidentiality cannot be assured, potential participants must be made aware of the limitations and the possible consequences in the consent process..

Possible limits to confidentiality and the requirement to breach confidentiality should be anticipated, addressed and explained to the participants. Researchers need to fully inform themselves about all laws and regulations which may affect or limit their guarantees of confidentiality. In determining potential limits to confidentiality or obligations to breach confidentiality, below is a list of questions to consider regarding limits to confidentiality:

- Could the dissemination of findings compromise confidentiality?
- Are you conducting group interviews? The participant should be informed about limits to ensuring confidentiality of the information shared in a group interview (e.g., focus group)
- Is the use of a data/transcript release form appropriate? When the anonymity of participants is compromised (e.g., when they have provided direct words that would make them identifiable), or when culturally sensitive or personally identifying information is gathered, participants should be given the opportunity to review the final transcript and be requested to sign a transcript release form wherein they acknowledge by their signature that the transcript accurately reflects what they said or intended to say. Participants have the right to withdraw any or all of their responses.

### **Waiving Anonymity and Confidentiality**

For some kinds of research (e.g., oral history) anonymity may not be necessary, possible or desirable. In such studies, research participants may not seek nor want confidentiality. The right to remain anonymous or to be identified lies with the participant. You must confirm the participants' wishes in the consent process. As the researcher, you may request participants to waive their right to confidentiality so that they can be identified within the release of findings (e.g., thesis). While participants can waive their right to confidentiality (protection of identity and their data), you need to be clear how privacy will be protected. In some studies if participants waive their right to confidentiality, it is still important to extend the protection of privacy to them. For example, for participants who will be identified in the dissemination of the research findings, it is ethically appropriate to have the participants review their interview transcripts and delete sections that they do not want to be made public through dissemination. This affords them the protection of privacy while still waiving their right to confidentiality. In other studies, for example in critical research, the researcher may not want to extend this privacy protection to the participants. Nonetheless, you are obligated to protect a participant's privacy at minimum by informing the participants that if they waive their right to confidentiality that anything they might reveal during the research may be disseminated in the research

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findings (e.g., the researcher needs to assure the participants are aware of this possibility). As well, you need to inform participants that they may withdraw from the study.

### **The Obligations of the Doctor of Ministry Program at the Toronto School of Theology**

The Doctor of Ministry Program, in order to fulfill its obligation of ensuring that all DMin Research projects conform to ethical guidelines shall set up an Ethics Review Committee. This committee will ascertain whether the project needs to be referred to the Research Ethics Board at the University of Toronto, or whether an internal ethics review will satisfy the requirements of ethical oversight of research with human subjects as it pertains to the UofT guidelines. Projects that involve participants in the dissemination of knowledge for a particular population, especially in relation to at-risk populations, and will be disseminated as a public document such as an article, newspaper, handbook, or book shall be referred to the Research Ethics Board at the University of Toronto. The TST Ethics Review Committee will review projects that are directed towards an analysis and improvement of existing programs, are involved with the professional development of the research-practitioner, and/or are to be disseminated within the student's organization or academic community. In such cases, DMin research falls under the headings of program evaluation and/or reflective practice as per the chart on page two of this document.