

Faith and families, a doctor of ministry course

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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If you know me or have heard me speak, you've probably heard this story. I have told it hundreds of times. I grew up Southern Baptist and attended Moody Bible Institute. I felt a call to go into ministry, but I was frustrated because the only ministries that seemed open to me were teaching the women's Bible study or playing the organ. I don't know how to play the organ, and though I love teaching women's Bible studies, my call felt broader.

In my irritation, I would frequently talk with Sue Duffy. Sue was an elder at Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago. She was quadriplegic, so I often helped her with small things, like filling out tax forms or running to the drug store. Sue would laugh at the fundamentalist shenanigans, and she would always say, "Carol, it doesn't have to be that way." Eventually, Sue encouraged me to go to a church with a woman pastor. I attended LaSalle Street Church, where I listened to a woman preach, and thought, *There are no bolts of lightning piercing the sanctuary. The church is still standing. And, She's a wonderful preacher!* I can still recall a number of her sermons, decades later.

As she preached, I slowly began to imagine that I could do the same thing. I realized that Sue was right. It didn't have to be that way. There were other ways of being Christian, and so I began to grow into a broader understanding of being a Christian and my call as a pastor.

Fast forward, twenty-five years later.

I'm in my backyard on a beautiful summer day, writing this story for my next book. My email notification pings and so I check it. It's an email from a professor at Dubuque Theological Seminary, asking if I would like to teach a Doctor of Ministry course with her. She had been reading my column in the *Christian Century*, and thought that we would make a good team. Since the D.Min. is a practical degree, she wanted to teach the course with someone who has been a pastor more recently.

Then she wrote that she hadn't been a pastor for 20 years, since she served LaSalle Street Church in Chicago.

It was the very same Pastor Huizenga, who is now Dr. Annette Huizenga, an Assistant Professor of New Testament. She is now working on a *Women's Bible Commentary* on the Epistles.

And we are going to be teaching a D.Min. together. [Here](#) is some information about the structure of the work. The site still focuses on 2015, but the contact information is the same. Please Contact Dr. Richard Schaefer if you're interested in joining the cohort. Here is a course description for our program:

This Doctor of Ministries program explores the church's faith and practice as it relates to families. Church leaders regularly work with the joys and frustrations of family life. Overloaded with stress, burdened with financial debts, and pressured with commitments, many families look for way to be in community with one another, but churches don't always know how to minister with them. Younger generations form families later in life, if they do so at all. Furthermore, the definition of "family" is evolving, as some denominations and our society welcome a more inclusive idea of loving relationships.

In light of these changes and challenges, this program is designed to give practical and theological grounding to our struggles by examining New Testament passages that speak to family life in the Greco-Roman context. We will look at the evolving definition of "family" and how our understandings of marriage, gender roles, sexuality, elderly care, economics and parenting affect our congregation's present and future ministry. Taking a special interest in the theological intersections of households and house churches in the New Testament, we will consider how those communities—and our own—might function as "the family of God."

Each student will develop a project that considers how to incorporate the idea of "family" within their own congregation. In light of generational trends, economic shifts, and community ethos, the student will examine the ministry setting, identify a need, reflect theologically, and use his or her pastoral imagination to inform the church's message, structure, and worship.