Theological education in prison challenges how we consider its goods and purposes in growing non-traditional contexts. As the number of seminaries working in prison contexts grows, we must investigate and critique how white normativity is at work in both theological education and the US criminal justice system. This poster will explore these themes in three ways: 1) historically by looking at the long and complicated relationship between RE and the formation of women’s prisons in the US, 2) contextually by presenting original data from in-depth qualitative research from currently incarcerated women, and 3) critically by offering initial proposals for more effective TE programs in women’s prisons.

Summary of Research

What is your topic?
The topic of this poster explores the meaning and purposes of theological education in a U.S. women’s prison.

What is your research question and methodology?
The driving question of this research is: What good is theological education in prison? I explore this question using a quasi-ethnographic qualitative research method including focus groups and in-depth interviews with currently incarcerated women, and participant observation of prison theological education classes. We cannot understand what good theological education is in prison apart from the lived experiences, perspectives, and wisdom of those who engage in theological education in prison. As such, this project privileges and foregrounds the voices of incarcerated-students and volunteer-staff as primary and authoritative. Through qualitative research (focus groups and in-depth interviews) and years of participant observation, the voices and expertise of the invisible women take epistemic priority.

This is a practical theology project, a critical and sustained theological reflection into the act of higher theological education as a practice in carceral spaces. It situates the practice historically and contextually via a current case study that thwarts categories and challenges both the purpose of theological education in carceral spaces and in the world today.

What theories inform your research? What are your core references?
Theological and sociological theories of goodness, justice, and redemption inform this research. The current working hypothesis of this research claims that theological education in prison is a redemptive project committed to the flourishing of human life by encouraging the scholarly and spiritual investigation of God’s divine Yes for life in the face of overwhelming no’s. Flourishing is not only understood economically but also (and predominantly) relationally (God, self, others).

Liberation theologies are central references as this research explores the goals of RE in prison. I claim that theological education falls short as a liberation project if it does not have something to say to the oppressive nature of the current criminal justice system and if it is not involved in the work of critique and change. One way that theological education serves a liberative project is through exploring and dismantling its historical proclivities to either 1) conform women using white, middle-class bourgeois feminine ideals or 2) view prisoners as non-reformable units of labor production.
*How is this research innovating the field of religious education?*

This research challenges how we understand the goal and goods of theological education beyond traditional professional models. It also fills a gap in scholarship about how RE has/does function as part of the US criminal justice system. Since the 1970’s and the age of mass incarceration, there has been a steady increase in the number of seminary and faith-based higher education programs in prisons. Despite the increase in activity, there have been few critical resources for those committed to this work. What we have instead is a paucity of guidance for students and administrators seeking to engage this work faithfully and effectively as we simultaneously seek to reimagine theological education in places it was never designed to go in the first place.

*What is the status of the research at the time of the proposal (e.g. finished ethnographic research, at beginning of reading)?*

At the time of this proposal, the reading, writing, and observation research has been in process for over a year. Focus groups and in-depth interviews will begin in the end of May with all interviews scheduled to be completed by the time of the November meeting.