**Yale Divinity School**

***Practicum***

**The Context of Ministry**

The context and social location of ministry can tell us many things. Sometimes we will find congruence between the culture and needs of a community and the ministries at work there. Other times we may discover that ministry is disconnected from particular characteristics of its context. In either case, how a faith community or service agency or school interacts with its context can indicate explicit and implicit values and anxieties. Our ministry’s location does not determine its vitality or destiny. But we should not conclude that we could ignore our context. Quite the opposite—the more seriously a ministry site takes its vocation to place, the more exciting and significant is its work.\*

The goals of this exercise are for you to learn something of what it means to analyze or "read" a ministry context in its social situation, and for your group to learn more about the context where you are practicing ministry this year. Through the year you will learn more and gain deeper impressions and thus come to have a better "read" on the place, and you’ll revisit this exercise later this year to reflect on what you’ve learned. You should think of this as a work-in-progress. The purpose is not to identify “what is wrong with this place,” but to learn how to engage in more committed and informed ministry for both inner and outer transformation. Ultimately, your question is, “Given the social contexts and structural dynamics, how will I minister here?”

Gather data about your ministry context by 1) talking to several persons, 2) reviewing some documents that are significant to the organization, 3) walking around and paying attention to sensual cues (visual, sound, odor). Recordshort answers to about ten of the most relevant questions below. These are guiding questions to help you think critically about your ministry context. **Be *prepared* to identify one or two issues of significance and to *share* in Practicum what you’ve discovered and its implications for the practice of ministry.**

**Guiding Questions**

Wider Context

1. What is around your site? Is the setting rural, suburban, urban, residential, commercial?
2. What is the condition of the spaces and buildings? What socioeconomic factors are present (evidence of affluence, poverty, education, etc.)?
3. What evidence of cultural and political activity do you see (arts events, town meeting notices, etc.)?
4. What is the religious composition of the community? What other religious activity do you detect, if any?
5. How does your site’s building fit into or contrast with its neighborhood?
6. What number and sort of people do you see (age, gender, ethnicity, race, etc.)? Are there people who would be invisible in demographic material, such as persons who are homeless, undocumented, or disabled?
7. What is the natural environment like? How does your site interact with that environment?
8. What anchor institutions surround you in the community? What kind of relationship does the site have with the community’s other anchor institutions?
9. Talk to someone in the community. What do they like most about being there? What do they like least? What do they think the community’s challenges are…where is it headed?

People, History, and Space

1. How do your worshipers/students/clients compare to community members? How much similarity is there between the demographics of those involved in your ministry and the community? If there are differences, how would you describe them?
2. Who is this ministry expected to serve? What metaphors are used to describe the site and its work?
3. Where at your site do people seem to feel most comfortable? Which persons seem to feel most comfortable or welcomed?
4. What is the physical condition of your site?
5. What sacred symbolism is present, and where?
6. Talk with a thoughtful, long-time member of the congregation or organization about the site’s history and relationship to its place. What is their perspective on your site’s role in the community as they see it, and how it has changed over time?
7. What is the history of this place, its "glory days", heroes or saints, antagonists, turning points?
8. Where is there a space for you to find solitude when you are there?