Standard 4: introducing the master's degrees in theological education

By Lester Edwin J. Ruiz



Within the ecosystem of accredited theological education in the US and Canada, master's degree programs serve as the foundation for forming leaders, scholars, and practitioners who serve the church, the academy, and the world. Theological schools accredited by the Commission on Accrediting of The Association of Theological Schools ("the Commission") offer these degrees in a variety of modalities and configurations, each aligned with their institutional mission, theological commitments, and educational capacities.

Standard 4 of the *Standards of Accreditation* outlines the shared expectations for master's-level education in these schools, emphasizing clear learning outcomes, rigorous evaluation, and holistic formation. These programs are more than academic exercises; they are formational pathways designed to nurture intellectual depth, spiritual maturity, vocational clarity, and ecclesial or public leadership.

Three primary categories of master's degrees are recognized: the Master of Divinity (MDiv), the Master of Arts (MA), and the Master of Theology (ThM or STM). Each degree offers a distinctive purpose, structure, and pedagogical logic grounded in the theological and educational vision of the institution.

Master of Divinity (MDiv)

The Master of Divinity remains the normative professional degree for pastoral and ecclesial leadership across many Christian traditions. It is deeply rooted in the church's historic commitment to prepare leaders who are theologically grounded, spiritually formed, and vocationally equipped for ministry in a variety of settings. Requiring a minimum of 72 semester credits, the MDiv is both comprehensive and integrative.

The degree is intentionally structured around four interrelated dimensions of theological formation:

1. It engages students in the study of religious heritage, encompassing sacred scripture, theological traditions, church history, and ecumenical or interreligious perspectives as appropriate to the school's commitments.
2. It cultivates an awareness of cultural context, inviting students to reflect theologically on global realities, social structures, cultural pluralism, and multifaith engagement.
3. It emphasizes personal and spiritual formation, nurturing integrity, emotional maturity, ethical discernment, and a disciplined spiritual life.
4. It equips students for religious and public leadership, fostering practical skills and reflective practices needed for ecclesial, denominational, and civic leadership.

The MDiv also includes supervised ministry experiences, such as internships or field education placements. These

are not ancillary but central to the curriculum, providing spaces where vocational identity is discerned and tested. These placements must be contextually appropriate, intentionally supervised, and regularly assessed to ensure they serve both the student and the community.

As a whole, the MDiv program and its specific learning outcomes are subject to regular review and improvement, embodying a commitment to ongoing reform in theological education.

Master of Arts (MA) and related degrees

The Master of Arts represents a diverse and adaptable set of academic and professional programs, each of which must be anchored in a clear purpose aligned with the institution's mission and resources. MA degrees may serve one of three primary purposes:

1. As academically oriented programs designed for those pursuing theological study for personal enrichment or further academic work.
2. As professionally oriented programs that prepare individuals for ministry or other service.
3. As integrated programs that combine academic and professional goals in a balanced manner; each program must make explicit which of these orientations is primary.

These degrees are known by a variety of names, such as Master of Theological Studies (MTS), Master of Arts in Religion (MAR), Master of Religious Education (MRE), Master of Church Music (MCM), or other nomenclatures reflecting specific concentrations (e.g., MA in Theology and the Arts). While this flexibility accommodates ecclesial, academic, and cultural differences, schools must report any nomenclature changes to the Commission to maintain accurate accreditation records.

MA degrees include clearly articulated learning outcomes appropriate to graduate theological education. Academic programs often culminate in a capstone project or thesis, while professional programs require supervised ministry or contextual education. Hybrid programs may offer either option, as long as the learning experiences



align with the program's educational goals. As with other master's degrees, the MA program and its outcomes are regularly evaluated, with results used for institutional learning and curricular improvement.

Master of Theology (ThM)/ Master of Sacred Theology (STM)

The Master of Theology or Master of Sacred Theology stands apart as an advanced degree designed for those who already hold a Master of Divinity or an equivalent graduate theological degree. It offers students the opportunity to deepen their academic engagement with a specific theological discipline, often in preparation for doctoral studies or advanced ecclesial scholarship. Requiring as few as 24 semester credits, the degree assumes prior graduate-level theological training and builds upon that foundation.

The ThM/STM is characterized by its academic rigor and disciplinary focus. At least half of the coursework must be taken at the advanced level, shared with other academically oriented students such as those in ThM or PhD programs. Where appropriate, language requirements support the student's area of specialization. The degree typically culminates in a substantial thesis that demonstrates the student's ability to conduct scholarly research and contribute meaningfully to theological discourse.

As with other commission-approved degrees, the ThM/STM must have clearly defined learning outcomes, and the program must be evaluated regularly to ensure its effectiveness in meeting those outcomes. The focus on scholarly preparation does not preclude spiritual formation or vocational discernment; rather, these are often integrated into the research and mentoring relationships that characterize this level of study.

Distinct but complementary

Together, these master's degrees represent a full-bodied ecology of theological education, each serving the church and the world in distinct but complementary ways. The MDiv prepares leaders for pastoral and public ministry; the MA equips individuals for ministry, service, or further study; and the ThM/STM offers advanced preparation for academic vocation or ecclesial teaching. All three are shaped by a vision of theological education that is rigorous, reflective, contextually aware, and formational.

Under the framework of the ATS Commission Standard 4, these programs reflect a shared commitment to educational excellence, theological depth, and faithful leadership in the life of the church and the broader society.



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