In *Practical Theology: An Introduction*, Richard Osmer provides a foundational understanding of the four core tasks that comprise practical theology: the descriptive-empirical task, the interpretive task, the normative task, and the pragmatic task. Respectively, these tasks address the questions “What is going on?” “Why is this going on?” “What ought to be going on?” and “How might we repond?”[[1]](#footnote-1) Though addressing the tasks in this particular order is perhaps wise, Osmer notes that “practical theological interpretation [is] more like a *spiral* than a circle,” with interconnection between the distinct tasks being both necessary and inevitable.[[2]](#footnote-2) And before examining these particular tasks in the above order, Osmer briefly explores the metaphor of the congregational leader as an interpretive guide, one who engages both the art and science of interpretation well in order to collaboratively lead the congregation through unfamiliar territory.[[3]](#footnote-3) In order to serve as an effective interpretive guide, the congregational leader will need to competently participate in practical theology’s four tasks, all the while engaging in cross-disciplinary exchange.

The descriptive-empirical task, what Osmer terms “priestly listening,” is the ability to attend well to people and situations in order to develop an understanding of what is happening in a given circumstance. It can be done informally, semiformally, or formally. Informally, priestly listening entails developing habits of observing, listening, and contemplating. Semiformally, it includes the use of specific methods and practices to draw one’s attention to particular things. Formally, it involves the use of empirical research to investigate certain events, trends, or contexts. When done well, the descriptive-empirical yields insight into the concrete reality of what is really happening in a certain situation.

The interpretive task carries the insights gained in the descriptive-empirical task further, to the point of answer the natural next question: why? Osmer calls this “sagely wisdom.” Ranging from simple thoughtfulness to wise judgment to highly developed theoretical interpretation, the interpretive task draws on personal and informational resources to explore the causes underlying a given situation. Wisdom is not easy to come by, as Osmer notes, and a congregational leader’s effectiveness at the interpretive task requires an acknowledgement of Jesus as God’s wisdom revealed and a willingness to both familiarize him/herself with the broad range of theories pertinent to any situation and to assess the merit and applicability of those theories.

Now that a basic understanding of what is going on and why has been established, practical theology turns to the task of understanding what *ought* to be happening. This is the normative task, or, in Osmer’s terms, “prophetic discernment.” According to Osmer’s continuum, such normalizing can be accomplished as sympathy (participation in God’s pathos), discernment (pursuit of God’s guidance), or theological and ethical interpretation (the application of theological and ethical norms and theories). By engaging in these practices, the congregational leader can discern what should be occurring in a given situation.

It is in the fourth task of practical theology, the pragmatic task of “servant leadership,” that the congregational leader will establish—in light of what has already been learned—what pragmatic steps should be taken. Osmer examines three forms of leadership, each focused on different aspects of leading and on different ways of effecting change.[[4]](#footnote-4) The emphasis of task competence is to perform leadership tasks of a particular role in an organization well. The emphasis of transactional leadership is to influence others through tradeoffs. The emphasis of transforming leadership is to guide an organization through “deep change” in identity, mission, culture, and operating procedures. A certain context might call for any one or all of these forms of leadership, but, Osmer maintains, to be effective and spiritually faithful, each of them should be carried out as a form of servant leadership, reflecting the characteristics of Christ.

To finish out his exploration of the tasks of practical theology, Osmer concludes with a brief examination of the place of practical theology in the academy. He looks at pedagogies of practical theology. And he notes promising trends in the academy that include but are not limited to the field of practical theology. He ends with a note of hope that this book will improve the interactions between practical theology and other academic fields, as well as the conversation between practical theology and the church. In my own estimation, *Practical Theology* has done exactly that.

1. Richard R. Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Osmer, 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Osmer does not claim that only congregational leaders engage in the tasks of practical theology, though given the inherent inability to address every situation, his illustrations in the book apply do typically portray such pastors and teachers. However, he is generally using “congregational leader” as shorthand for those who are participating in practical theology, regardless of their context. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The following explanations are taken from Osmer, 178. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)