

# PrD in Practical Theology

## Stage 1B

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### **Developing a model of empirical research in the Church of England as an agent of change for pastoral policies.**

#### **1. Towards a model of working**

"We don't know what's going on. There may be a lot below the radar where people are doing things on their own".

"It's a great concept but will churches perceive it as relevant to them?"

"There's little research in this area and we're not sure how to support church leaders".

Such comments are becoming increasingly frequent when I meet with national church advisors. Even where the issues are topical the questions posed demonstrate a lack of awareness of what is happening in the practical local setting and how this connects with wider issues facing the Church in England today.

In a rapidly changing world there is no shortage of challenges to the Church. Local churches are gradually becoming open to change and the national church seeks to place these changes in the context of the wider shift in public faith. Local churches, dioceses and the national church are interlinked but as differing priorities bring growing tensions they each appear to be increasingly uncomfortable with this mutuality. Evaluations and re-evaluations at every level of church life absorb energy. Our churches are feeling exposed, staring at an uncertain future in a nation that questions their role. They look to the national church to provide guidance or at least reassurance. Tensions between inherited forms of church life and new ways of living as Christian believers are becoming more acute. How do we evaluate what we wish to preserve and to promote, the treasures we discard and the new challenges we embrace for the future?

Research in the Archbishops' Council is in its infancy having emerged in 2000 from a traditional Statistics Unit. Its remit is to support professional empirical research in the context of the mission and ministry of the Church today. Gradually the department is developing new directions and providing pointers for a Church that has responded across the turn of the millennium to its changing circumstance by moving towards a primarily mission orientated focus adopting the popular strap line of being "mission-shaped" (Church of England Mission and Public Affairs Council 2004). Whereas the Statistics Unit was focussed on the maintenance of the established Church, the Research and Statistics department has moved towards a research and development function often seen in commercial companies. Some feel this will benefit the Church's role in the nation making it more accountable, efficient and strategic. Others question how appropriate to the inherent nature of the Church such a consumer approach can be.

This paper seeks to highlight emerging questions in the use of empirical research by the Church. There are few local or national decision makers in the Church who would now claim, as was heard did when the Research and Statistics department was initiated in 2000, that the development of the Church's use of empirical research is unnecessary. The debate has moved towards developing an engagement that promotes reflection, interpretation and development. Empirical research continues to be used by the Church to evaluate success and failure, viability and sustainability (for example, Jackson 2002). It is beneficially utilised for financial and deployment planning and, on occasions, as a social research tool to explore the presence of the Church as a voluntary body in the life of the nation (for example, Church Heritage Forum 2006). But these approaches neglect the inherent religious identity of the Church, the backdrop to its attitude towards all these aspects of its ongoing life.

In my role as a professional researcher for the Archbishops' Council, I feel several tensions whenever I am asked to design a research exercise for local or national church pastoral advisors. Two particular and recent research exercises serve to illustrate the issues involved. They were each undertaken in partnership with different national mission-based advisors who brought very different expectations and contributions to the tasks. One research exercise made appropriate use of secular professional social and market researchers while the other relied entirely on the experience of the church professionals involved. This paper will consider in turn each approach of "church research" to these pastoral situations. It will compare and contrast the explicit and implicit values brought to the research exercises that beneficially point towards a future model of working to effect change while holding integrity of pastoral practice.

## 2. The Church and empirical research

### 2.1 Biblical precedent

Empirical research does not generally attract much attention in the Church until it is forced onto the agenda by outside observers. The Church resists attempts, for example, to debate its health according to the strength of its public following. It is wary of exercises that endeavour to count its adherents preferring to highlight instances of biblical precedent that appear to indicate this not to be a Godly system of measurement. Jesus in his parables indicated the value to God of the individual: "the one lost sheep", "the lost coin" and "the single sinner who repents" (Luke 15: 1-7). He told his listeners "you are worth more than many sparrows" (Matthew 10: 31) and "more valuable than the birds of the air" (Matthew 6: 26). His ancestor, David was reprimanded for his pride in the number of fighters in his army while Gideon's army was deliberately reduced in number to display Gods' power. The biblical narrative would indicate that the kingdom of God cannot be judged on the basis of numerical strength, the lost are sought on an individual basis. Indeed, Abraham bargained with God over Sodom and Gomorrah until he promised that "for the sake of ten, I will not destroy it" (Genesis 19: 32).

The Church has come to justify its resistance to attempts to count its strength with reference to biblical precedent. Yet Moses conducted a number of counts of his fighting forces, of the priests, of the first-born and of the tribes who were to ensure the priestly tasks were conducted as God commanded (Numbers 1 - 4). Solomon's instructions for the building of the temple and his palace involved numerical precision and numbers are frequently used to symbolise religious truths throughout the biblical records. Numbers are not an anathema to God. Of course, empirical research and planning does not have to involve numbers. Martyn Percy has observed that a candidate here for a biblical precedent might be Jesus' parable of The Sower where a quarter of the seeds were tested in four different growing conditions and monitored to plan a strategy for future sowing (Percy 2009). The weeds and the tares too are grown together in God's fields until the harvest when they are segregated to identify the best disciples (Matthew 13: 24-36).

## 2.2 Modern day tensions

The Church's unease with numbers and empirical research can also be seen alongside its troubled relation over recent centuries with the scientific endeavour. The anniversary of the birth of Darwin in 2009, for example, has brought renewed debate over his relationship with the Church. In questioning whether the Church's continued unease with science is due to its perception of science as secular, Paul Ballard notes that incarnational theology would encourage the watching of God at work in the world (Ballard 2007). Stephen Pattison helpfully distinguishes between attitudes towards science and the use of empirical research: "In many ways, it is the scientific worldview and values embodied within empirical methods that are more problematic than the methods themselves" (Pattison 2007, p.282). Used responsibly, empirical research can provide the tools for identifying and interpreting patterns of God's work in the world, the *Missio Dei*.

Qualitative and quantitative research methods are each used extensively as tools for modern day management, commercial and social research practices. Here too church and empirical research do not easily come together which for Paul Avis means that "the body of empirical material that is currently available is flawed by lack of theological sensitivity" (Avis 2003, p.316). Robin Gill commenting on his extensive experience analysing religious social statistics has found that Christian denominations "seldom make much use of this information and recently the Church of England has become more wary about even collecting the data" (Gill 2003, p.15). Pattison encourages the Church to address this gap: "Facts and evidence are important, but they are not in short supply. If anything, it is meaning that needs attention. ... As humanistic scientists, it must be the concerns of practical theologians to try to cleave to the big picture and to nurture meaningful connections." (Pattison 2007, p.285).

The Church's unease with modern day use of empirical research has also led to a distance between it and professional empirical researchers together with an attitude towards their investigations that swings unpredictably between suspicious distain and unquestioning acceptance. But in recent years, as the Church has tentatively begun to engage in its own social research there have been signs that it is growing in confidence in evidential public debate. Bringing fresh insights based on factual evidence has enhanced the Church's stature. Its growing ability to nuance research findings is becoming beneficial to its survival. A comparison, for example, of the Church of England's individual place on the Census Diversity Advisory Group for the 2011 UK government census in contrast to its reliance on academic representation for the 2001 census serves to illustrate this positive development.

The reluctance by the Church to engage with empirical research has also meant that its policies and decision making has frequently been prey to anecdotal evidence. In recent years the distance between the social attitudes of those in the Church and those outside it has grown with the consequence that anecdotal evidence (albeit from professional Church based practitioners) has become increasingly misleading. As the emergence of the two research studies considered in this paper reveal, the current exploration of empirical research is injecting fresh confidence to embrace professional praxis. John Reader encourages this engagement noting the impact of globalisation as "likely to be fundamental and deep rooted, challenging the very frameworks and concepts that are familiar to the practice of Christian ministry." (Reader 2008, p.17) He questions the specific frameworks against which social and religious commentators examine current empirical evidence noting cultural shifts, "the blurring of boundaries between the different traditions and religious resources" (p.62), and proposes an "evolutionary or developmental understanding of human consciousness and spirituality" (p.75).

Against this background it is not surprising that organisational efficiency has not been an aspiration of Christians across the world though it has become a modern day reality that challenges the western Church. Chris Grey observes that "The modern world is the world of efficiency in which the focus is upon the best means to achieve particular ends." (Grey 2005, p.41). He continues "Traditional studies of organisation only consider efficiency from the partial viewpoint of those who have an interest in a particular kind of efficiency. Normally this means the powerful ...As soon as we shift position, efficiency can look quite different....What we do organizationally, including studying them, is always about ethics and politics." (p.123 & 124). The Church has been attracted by modern day management and organisational models but Stephen Pattison sounds a note of caution when he comments that "Unfortunately, just as people in many organisations are beginning to see very clearly what the drawbacks of the wholesale implementation of managerialism are, the churches are falling into the same errors and mistakes" (Pattison 2000, p.162). He encourages the Church to examine the implicit and explicit values and theologies of management (p.166) before it finds itself "unable and unwilling to stand out against problematic cultural norms and values" (p.164).

The most significant modern day organisational managerial reform in the Church was implemented following the publication of *Working as One Body* (The Report of the Archbishops' Commission on the Organisation of the Church of England, 1995). It created the current national structures and moved the Church towards a hierarchical model of management with resulting tensions with the Church's collegiate grass roots presence across the country. The pain of this tension is particularly evident as the Church

finds itself needing to respond to external pressures and embrace change at almost every level. It is, however, becoming more willing to utilise research towards this end and this paper will examine two areas of pastoral change that have looked to empirical research for guidance. The Church as a network of local churches is subject to many pressures to which it can respond utilising directed or undirected means of change. This paper will consider whether a typology of organisational change can be helpful towards an understanding of the Church's use of empirical research for its own purposes. The research stories told here point towards a Church beginning to create its own model of pastoral change that embraces empirical research for its own benefits.

### **3. Church weddings for better or for worse**

Marriage is declining in popularity in England today and church weddings have declined even more markedly. The Church of England now conducts two-thirds fewer weddings than it did in 1970 against an overall fall in numbers of a third in the same period. By way of contrast, research over recent years has discovered that approximately half the adult population reported that they had attended a local place of worship in the previous year for a wedding (Barley 2007, p.24). These quantitative social attitude surveys commissioned on a regular basis by the Research and Statistics department reveal that the nation continues to value local churches for weddings, funerals and other significant events in the life of individuals and local communities.

This significant pastoral potential has been endorsed by the warm response the Church has received at wedding fairs and other public events. Local church leaders, however, are far from enthusiastic and some question their role in providing the sacred element to the rites of passage in modern day England. Their response is more passive and tends towards the view that "you'll know where to find us if you want us". A clergy research discussion group admitted that they felt under resourced and some voiced their concern that such public services were a distraction from the real pastoral endeavour.

*"We are not wedding brokers; we are part of the wedding show. We have a unique element ... to bring God onto the stage."*

*"The care of marriages is not my core business; it comes on the edge of it and it's not the Church's core business."*

*"A theology of marriage ... would be a useful kick start and say this has got serious priority within sharing the good news of the gospel."*

In 2006 exploratory research was carried out among couples about to be married to discover the pastoral opportunities offered by modern day weddings or, as it was subsequently titled, "the barriers and drivers" for a church wedding. In London, Leeds, Hampshire and Sutton Coalfield semi-structured interviews were conducted with prospective brides and grooms who were each marrying for the first time. A number of interviews were video recorded and proved to be very useful among local decision makers inexperienced in interpreting research findings. The qualitative findings were further incorporated into an online quantitative survey and a face-to-face survey at two national wedding shows in the north and south of England.

This mixed method approach was particularly fruitful in discovering the attitude of couples towards a church wedding and the widespread ignorance of the place of church weddings in the life of the nation. A new Marriage Measure became law in September 2008 and provided an opportunity for using the research to clarify the eligibility of couples for a church wedding (Barley 2009). The relation between Church and public in this particular pastoral context had become understood on both sides as one of vendor and consumer. So the Church Wedding project team focussed on practical considerations that would promote church weddings and the Archbishops' Council set specific measurable objectives that began to link with local church life, namely to:

**Attract** 5% more couples over two years to chose a church wedding.

**Build** public perception that the Church of England is an enthusiastic believer in marriage.

**Care** for couples and their guests so that more rate their experience as good/very good/excellent, recommend and come back to church on another occasion.

(National Church Weddings Project team 2008)

With the help of clergy from two specific areas of Bradfield and Buckinghamshire (chosen to reflect the range in incidence of church weddings across England), further research was carried out among couples at different stages of their wedding journey. This second stage, three phase structured research revealed the unique value that churches bring in the personalisation of weddings and in the welcome and after-care afforded towards couples. The vicar emerged as a pivotal element towards its success in the eyes of the couples, whereas for the clergy practical issues of working pressures and customisation surfaced. The research project pointed towards the fact that couples were being 'lost' to the Church because parochially based clergy were almost entirely focussed on their own congregations and had few networks beyond their boundaries.

The research into church weddings began to take the project in a new direction when it became apparent that couples did not generally associate a church wedding with churchgoing. On the other hand, clergy, local churches and the Archbishops' Council measured success in just these terms. Couples, clergy and the national Church were speaking different languages. Grooms admitted as much when they acknowledged that they responded to questions about churchgoing with answers they felt would secure the church wedding they and their partner sought. Couples, however, regretted that the local vicar did not take their spiritual seriousness or their sense of belonging to their local church seriously.

It emerged from the research that brides and grooms were surprisingly open to a pastoral engagement whereas churches are often reticent to offer this fearing it will be misinterpreted. The role of church hospitality in modern day weddings has become confused rendering a variable and fragmented pastoral practice which is felt to be unsatisfactory not only among the majority of clergy and churches but also among many couples and the wider public.

*"They (the couples) understand that we are the God end of the wedding but we often get embarrassed and shy about that."*

*(parish vicar)*

Clergy were clear that they bought the sacred into this rite of passage but were far from certain that this was an important element in the pastoral ministry of the church. The response of couples suggested an evaluation of the local church experience for themselves and their guests. The nature of the marriage covenant and the pastoral engagement emerged as key issues in considering the need for improved pastoral practise in church weddings.

The design of the national Church Wedding project is primarily influenced by different pieces of outward facing empirical research. Yet despite these limitations (designed to make the project manageable) clergy sought to engage with their personal professional praxis. They wrestled, for example, with the tension of wanting to promote traditional marriage as *"the gold standard"* within a pastoral context of inclusivity towards other committed relationships.

*"There's loads of relationships out there that could do with God in them. How do we help them to find that God bit?"*

*"This transcendent relationship is held very highly even if it's not held in the traditional form. The love between two people is a very high value in our culture."*

The national Church Wedding project continues to be a successful and ambitious project whose success is being judged against specific measurable objectives. It is built on a rich evidence base and has added considerable practical understanding to this particular pastoral ministry in England today but the research journey has uncovered significant remaining theological questions that need to be considered alongside the wider mission of local churches across the nation. The project highlights a clash of cultures between a management orientated approach to research in the Church with measurable aims and objectives and local church based responses to a theological exploration of current emerging pastoral contexts. It presents the Church with the challenge to bridge these two approaches and address the impact of its findings on other areas of the Church's pastoral ministry so that lessons learnt can be shared across the wider Church.

#### **4. Partnerships towards unity**

A different covenantal relation was of interest to national and local ecumenical officers during 2006/7. As part of the work of the first quinquennium of the Anglican- Methodist Covenant the Joint Implementation Commission (JIC) recognised the need to find ways of enabling the vision and the potential of the Covenant to be taken up and implemented locally. To develop a better understanding of what this collaboration might entail, the JIC commissioned a modest pilot research study, designed to explore factors that enable and inhibit deep and enduring covenant relationships between deanery and circuit in three locations across England where such partnerships were already developing.

The research measures for ascertaining the effectiveness of local covenant partnerships and for examining the factors that influence them for the better or worse were provided by previously established marks of covenantal commitment in a local context:

- Gracious giving and a grateful receiving.
- Deliberate choice and purposeful.
- Energised by the "constant love" that we recognise in God, and by the koinonia of the Holy Spirit – showing mutuality and Christ-like self sacrifice.
- People who can forgive and who are forgiven, people of openness.
- People who can hope in the darkest of places, people of expectancy.
- People who know they are healed, people of solidarity.

(Research team to the Joint Implementation Commission of  
the Anglican-Methodist Covenant, January 2009)

Perhaps because the project was designed to be an exploratory study the research team (of three experienced ecumenicalists assisted by two Church researchers) felt able to bring academic rigor to bear on situations that they knew from first hand experience would reveal a wide range of insights. The journey towards this excited each one to commit further towards bringing situations they knew closely into the spotlight of this covenantal endeavour. Three local Anglican-Methodist partnerships known to the team were selected for exploration using a documentary review and semi-structured interviews with key local church officers, clergy and ministers. A short structured congregational questionnaire was designed alongside this to add the perspective of people in the pews. Each interviewer visited an ecumenical partnership of which they had little direct knowledge and the analysis was shared thereby bringing previous local experience of other team members to the interpretation. The research process itself provided insights into the tensions between national and local relationships. The interviews uncovered a great deal of insecurity and fear of the outsider among local participants as they manage what for many is 'decline'. Some refused to cooperate but after considerable effort three interview locations were successfully achieved although the congregational survey was only undertaken in two of these locations (and to very different extents).

As the research proceeded it became clear that the local ecumenical partnerships being studied depended largely on the motivations, the personalities and the relationships between their active members. The research process differed to the national Church Wedding project in that it was an exploratory qualitative piece of work to explore the local dynamics of this particular ecumenical endeavour. But findings also began to emerge that called into question the fundamental framework within which the ecumenical relations had been encouraged to operate. There appeared to be, for example, little understanding among the local partnerships of the practical theological concept of the term "covenant". Indeed, as the research team reflected together it became clear that the national commission had neglected an examination of its implications for the ecumenical endeavour. So the extent of the research broadened and the team found it beneficial to incorporate further reflective research practice into their reporting.

Interim results from the research were shared at a national Church research forum and attracted debate among professional ecumenical advisors. In particular, it was felt by many that the initial construct of the research had encountered difficulties because the interplay between deaneries and circuits was increasingly becoming problematic. The practical configuration of both the Methodist Church and the Church of England were changing quite independently so that their local churches and their ministers operated in different ecumenical paradigms. This encouraged the research team to consider afresh the research design and in their concluding report to the JIC they sought a wider examination of local level Christian relations, one that

encompassed not only successful partnerships but those where “they have been attempted and ‘failed’, or where they have been proposed and have come to nothing” (Research team to the Joint Implementation Commission of the Anglican-Methodist Covenant, June 2009).

Throughout the project insights and connections in the research findings were established that took the research team by surprise and required experienced interpretation by themselves and other colleagues. A new way of working emerged and the exploration uncovered further aspects to the research question alongside the stated objectives. The pilot research team benefited from reflection and evaluation at every stage of the research story. It was a rich and particularly successful pilot study brought fresh insights and raised questions that extended the understanding of local ecumenical partnerships of all involved.

## **5. Ordinary theology**

Modern day Britain has developed over the last forty or so years into a pluralistic society that is questioning its Christian Roots (Garnett et al 2006, p.6). This presents many challenges to the traditionally held theological positions and pastoral attitudes of the Church. Ordinary people are seeking to explore their own personal religious values and the traditional Church is just one voice in the spiritual marketplace (ref Barley 2006). As the theological educator, Jeff Astley, reflected on the faith formation of his students he discovered that progress and dialogue was considerably more straightforward when the students “were allowed to name the influences in their own way, putting aside the clean-cut convenient categories of traditional academic theology” (Astley 2002, p.14).

Astley offered the concept of “ordinary theology” and defined it as “the theology and theologizing of Christians who have received little or no theological education of a scholarly, academic or systematic kind” (p.56). He accepted that this by necessity would be a deep and messy process but highlighted the doctrine of creation that brought the apostle Paul to the point where he acknowledged as humans “we have these treasures in earthen vessels” (2 Corinthians 4: 7). This, Astley observes, is how we “learn and know and be, and therefore we can only learn and know and be *religiously*, in this human, messy and muddy way” (p.15). Astley’s concept of “ordinary theology” points towards taking seriously “a theology that is grounded in the challenges and fulfilments of ordinary life and its ordinary religious concerns” (p.52). He reminds the Church that “being the church in the world involves being open to the world’s changes. Ordinary theology is the species of Christian theology most likely to reflect them and best placed to respond to them. *It is the church’s front line*” (p.162).

In a Church embracing pastoral change, Astley's ordinary theology is a helpful tool. In a society that has lost many of its inherent religious values, engaging with the ordinary theology of ordinary people enables churches to hold meaningful conversations and to better understand modern day mission in the market place. Such conversations bring the voices of the religious professional and the lay congregation together in a constructive dialogue. Astley makes the important distinction between explicit and implicit religion but, although he utilises Robert Towler's definition of common religion as the "underground religion of the common people", "not under the domination of a prevailing religious institution" (Towler 1974 cited in Astley 2002, p.90), he firmly locates ordinary theology within explicit religion as "the ('non-academic') theological assertions and theologizing dimension of conventional, customary and common religion" (p.94).

Meaningful pastoral engagement involves looking, listening and learning from ordinary people and "ordinary theology" defined in this way facilitates that exchange. But looking at people's lives and how they live, listening to what they say, evaluating and learning threads of commonality is the stuff of empirical research. Social scientists have developed tools for such enquiry that can be utilised in practical theological praxis just as they are in the exploration of modern day religious sociology. Astley encourages the use of empirical research in this endeavour citing Hans van der Ven's observation that "empirical methodology provides practical theology with the techniques and instruments to order, analyze, interpret and evaluate the religious convictions, beliefs, images and feelings of men and women (towards) ...ecclesiastical and pastoral considerations" (van der Ven 1993 cited in Astley 2002, p.158).

As the research projects considered in this paper have progressed they have each encountered the everyday theology of ordinary people and pointed towards the integration of Astley's "ordinary theology" into the research model. Empirical research among couples approaching church for a wedding revealed that their spirituality should be taken more seriously, they are open to church but not to traditional "churchgoing". The clergy provide a first class personalised service but are themselves challenged as they bring couple and congregation together. When they consider the even wider congregation a further dilemma emerges. How can they promote Christian marriage as "the gold standard" in a society that honours many other committed relationships and in a church which seeks to welcome all comers? Divorce and remarriage, civil partnerships and cohabitation are all on their horizons as they seek to reconcile inherited Christian standards with modern day missional perspectives. The suggestion of an exploration

of the biblical model of covenant relationships bubbled up from within the research based conversations. The clergy emerged as the reluctant "gatekeepers" in terms of giving permission for couples to enjoy a church wedding and gain an experience of modern day church. The project became orientated towards their professional praxis which, in turn, pointed towards an engagement with modern day "ordinary theology".

The issue of covenant theology relates also to the awareness and understanding of the Anglican-Methodist Covenant. The JIC pilot research report posed the question "Does the Covenant mean our Churches should be promoting a distinctive model of partnership based on covenantal theology, which seeks to go beyond other ecumenical partnerships, or should this distinction be dropped?" (Research team to the Joint Implementation Commission of the Anglican-Methodist Covenant, June 2009). Local partnership participants sought a dialogue with the national JIC, a dialogue that engaged with their everyday experience of Christian partnership in the gospel, a dialogue of "ordinary theology". The research team, for their part, uncovered inherent suspicion of the research process and in the national covenant initiative together with the need to explore how the Christian theology of 'success' and 'failure' is interpreted by ordinary people. If the JIC are to take their mandate from the Churches forward it seems that they cannot avoid the need for theological reflection and an exploration further into the ordinary theology of ecumenical relations.

## **6. Ordinary research**

"Ordinary theology" appears sometimes in the most unlikely of places. In her study of white working class women in four modern day Christian congregations in Newcastle, Ellen Clark-King sought to discover their faith and spirituality. She discovered the women were not confined to traditional perspectives and engaged with their own ordinary theological reflection:

*"Peter's mother was always at the door with her arms open. And I used to think "Ee, you're just like God – always welcoming people""*  
(Clark-King 2004, p.67).

Their everyday theology was based on experience and as Clark-King listened to these women and their faith stories she sought to bring together the academy and the congregations: "insight and wisdom are not confined to academia and the Church has a great resource in its pews if it can only learn to utilise it" (p.11).

Clark-King proposes a vision of Church incorporating a "choral theology" with "the Church singing not with one voice but many ... each singing the lyrics to the music that their experience of God has written into their Christian faith ... as well as the music that has come down to us from the experiences of Christians who have gone before" (p.210). "The traffic in theological thinking needs to go both ways if it is to be truly profitable – all parts of the choir need to listen to one another if they are eventually to sing together" (p.215). Like Astley, in his exploration of "ordinary theology", she acknowledges the messiness of this, the inevitable "jumble of noise" but points towards the creation of a harmony that draws "nearer to that divine tune that resonates throughout the universe" (p.210). For Clark-King it is the clergy that have a vital role to play in this choral theology as conductors "to encourage members of the choir to listen to each other" (p.212). Clergy "naturally inhabit a position between the academy and the pews ... They live among the people ... they hope to be able to enter into their hopes and anxieties and learn the best language in which to speak to them about the reality of God" (p.213).

Clark-King observes how this resonates with an image of clergy provided by Rowan Williams when he focuses on their responsibility as interpreters "not someone who interprets culture for and to the Church or interprets the Church's teaching to the world outside, but someone who has the gift of helping people make sense to and of each other" (Williams 2004 cited in Clark-King 2004, p.213). Clark-King lived alongside the women on the St Anthony's estate utilising participant observation and semi-structured interviews often in the home settings of the women. Her research involved "honesty and self-awareness or reflexivity" depending on a relationship that "respects the researched as much as the researcher" (p.25). If clergy are to be interpreters or conductors of ordinary theology they too will need equipping with the appropriate research tools that bridge the gap between the academy and the church, between decision makers and congregations.

In areas of local church life that have focussed on the size and vitality of the congregations a variety of research toolkits have developed in recent years. Some focus on a social evaluation of the church and neighbourhood (for example, Commission for Urban Life and Faith 2006, Croft, Hedley & Hopkins 2006) while others evaluate the health and strength of the congregation (for example, Cottrell & Sledge 2003, Benson & Roberts 2002, Warren 2004, Francis & Martineau 2002). Handling and interpreting the ordinary theology of ordinary people is often most effectively carried out by ordinary clergy but, in a similar manner, they need the tools to facilitate their task. As they live and minister alongside congregations, clergy are beneficially placed to fully interpret the research against the context of the researched but they need the skills to converse with "ordinary theology".

They need the means to gather their evidence, so they need the stuff of what is best perhaps termed “ordinary research”. To conduct and understand the ordinary theology around them clergy need to be equipped to listen to ordinary theologians and to interpret, connect and reconcile the emerging choral theology. Such tools and skills in the hands of these local practitioners provide the means to uncover a depth of “ordinary theology” that can remain hidden to the outsider.

There is synergy here with the role that educationalists have established for participatory action research as a tool for professional praxis and the ongoing development of educational schemes and materials. In the Anglican-Methodist Covenant pilot research the research team proposed a method that enabled local church leaders to evaluate their local ecumenical partnerships, to explore factors of ‘success’ and ‘failure’ so that the JIC could develop further its covenantal model. They suggested participant observation and a participatory action research model which could be utilised by any participating local ecumenical partnership. But different empirical research techniques are appropriate to different enquiries. Clergy were encouraged by the evaluations given by couples of their wedding journey and the project team turned their attention to observational techniques that would ascertain the experience of the wedding guests of church and of the sacred on the wedding day. Clergy and other local church leaders need to become proficient users of a variety of empirical research techniques in a manner that is appropriate to their local situations and that informs their professional praxis. Developing a toolkit of ordinary research methods will enable them to uncover ordinary theology in their context and move towards a better understanding of their role within the life and faith of the church today.

## **7. Effecting pastoral change**

Swinton and Mowat conclude their exploration of practical theology and qualitative research by examining the specific synergy between action research and practical theology. “It is in the action-orientated dimension of the use of qualitative research methods that we most clearly see and understand what it means for qualitative methods to be *converted* in order that they can be used in the service of Practical Theology and ultimately God” (Swinton & Mowat 2006, p.258). Action research in particular, they observe, seeks “to incorporate the research subjects as co-researchers. They are empowering methods which are designed to ... allow individuals and communities to take back control of every respect of their lives including the research process” (p.257).

A variety of empirical methods can be effectively used in action research from questionnaires, diaries, interviews, case studies, observational data and experimental design to biographies, ethnography and field notes. They are, in short, empirical methods for ordinary researchers conducting "ordinary research" where they are. And as action research moves from practice (action) to theory, to critical reflection on practice, to revised forms of practice developed in the light of this spiralling process change is inevitable. Action research enables professional development and praxis but Zuber-Skerritt has imaginatively taken action research further to devise an eight stage model of emancipatory action research for organisational change (Zuber-Skerritt 1996 cited in Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2005, p.235). An examination of the theological and organisational appropriateness of this approach to the Church must be deferred to a future paper. It is sufficient here to observe that such "ordinary research" can be equally utilised to effect individual or organisational change.

Modern day society appears to be constantly embracing change in the assumption that it is inherently for the better but, as Stephen Pattison observes, "The Christian religious tradition has an ambivalent relationship with change". On one hand it seeks comfort in the certainty of religion and yet it has "an inspired hope that changes, and will change, the world" (Pattison 1997, p.118). For Pattison "Change is a sign of life. It is an inevitable part of the lives of all individuals and organisations at some level, to greater and lesser degrees" (p.130). Yet he takes issue with the management approaches of Charles Handy and others with their "inevitable pull here towards quantity rather than quality" (Pattison 2000, p.137). Pattison makes the timely reminder that "What we least expected and certainly would not have wanted if asked, can be most fruitful" (p.167).

Martyn Percy makes reference to the nature of the Church in this debate as he notes a mixed economy of change model in place, one that is "a mixture between local decisions, or even protests, and central strategies that are part of corporate or catholic organization" (Percy 2000, p.177). Like Grey (2005), he questions where the power lays in management organisational models adding that "Local congregations have rights and interests, as much as the diocesan hierarchy may" (Percy 2000, p.177). Percy's vision is of "interdependency as a necessary condition for Church life ... with systems of exchange and empowerment that foster the federation (family), enable solidarity to flourish, yet are ultimately focused and directed in the common good" (p.188).

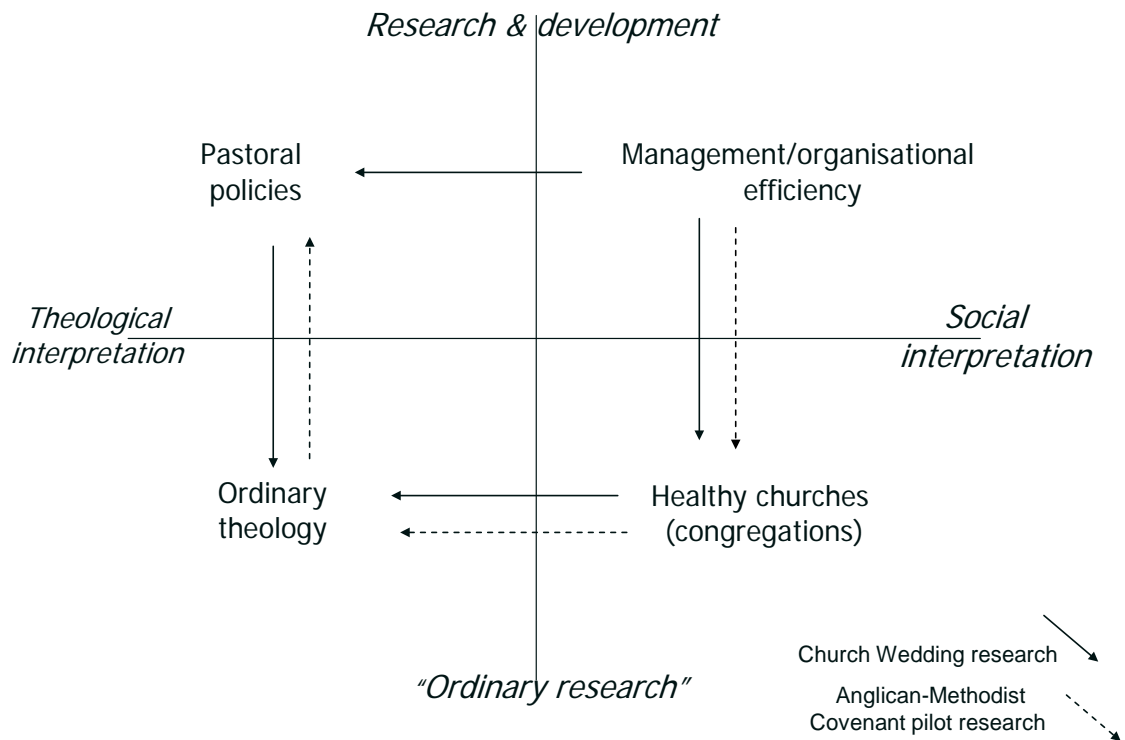
As the Church negotiates pastoral changes in response to its changing operation in today's world it needs the role of research even more than in the past but this role must evolve in response to changing circumstance too. The research projects considered here move the interpretation of empirical research towards a stronger consideration of their social and theological contexts. To effect pastoral change these, in turn, have suggested a different style of research from the inherited managerial style research and development approach.

If pastoral change models are to respond to the critique afforded to management models of organizational change they must listen to the local voice in equal measure to that of the hierarchy. "Ordinary research" will be needed to hear the voice of the ordinary individual or congregation, an approach that embraces qualitative explorations alongside quantitative calibrations as it seeks to work towards the common good. A typology of organisational change offered by John Davies (2009) is a helpful concept for the dimensions of research that this paper has proposed to effect pastoral change in the Church of England, change that will work towards the common good. This is provided below with the directions of travel of each of the two research projects considered in this paper indicated on the typology.

## **8. Pointers for the future**

The journeys travelled by the two research projects considered in this paper can be summarised on this typology. Both projects began with a management approach seeking to improve the viability and efficiency of their particular areas of pastoral practice. They incorporated research methodologies to explore the changing social context in which their respective practitioners operate today. Empirical research led both projects towards local congregations proposing an evaluation of their health and engagement in respect of each of the local pastoral concerns. Thus both pieces of research found a dialogue involving relevant theological reflection to inform pastoral praxis and incorporating "ordinary research" methods to explore "ordinary theology".

## Dimensions of Church empirical research as an agent of change in pastoral practice



For the Anglican-Methodist Covenant pilot research this local engagement led finally towards a fresh consideration of pastoral policies and a mutuality between national and local decision making. In contrast, the Church Wedding project evaluated its pastoral policies to accommodate management aims and objectives before being led by separate research among clergy (as interpreters or conductors of ordinary theology) towards theological reflection on the interplay between local church experience and pastoral policies.

For each project an enhanced research process resulted from the interaction of the various dimensions of Church empirical research proposed in this typology. Each dimension offers a distinctive contribution and other research (for example, cited in section 1 of this paper) may continue to prefer one particular dimension but the Church will be better served at this time of significant pastoral change if it acknowledges the wealth of mutually enriching opportunities for fuller dialogue offered by different methods of empirical research.

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Anglia Ruskin University

PrD in Practical Theology

Stage 1B

Developing a model of empirical research  
in the Church of England  
as an agent of change for pastoral policies

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September 2009

# Developing a model of empirical research in the Church of England as an agent of change for pastoral policies.

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## Abstract

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Church of England is undergoing significant change in its structures and leadership, in its attitudes towards congregational participation and pastoral practices. Empirical research has traditionally, for the most part, been utilised in the Church as a management tool. At best an ambivalent attitude has persisted towards evidence based decision making and the evidence driven society of the western world but the Church is gradually recognising the need to utilise empirical research more widely for its own purposes.

This paper considers the theological values inherited by the Church today that underpin this attitude towards empirical research. It examines two national research projects designed to effect change in particular pastoral practices in the modern day Church focussing on their tentative use of empirical research. In examining the inherent values of these current research projects and the structures in which they operate, this paper highlights the limitations of management orientated research in the Church as it points towards the need for ordinary research by local church practitioners. A method of "ordinary research" is proposed that leads to a conversation with modern day public spirituality and "ordinary theology" as first proposed by Jeff Astley. Church policy makers are thus encouraged to engage with reflective practice towards developing a pastorally responsive model of change.

Utilising a typology of institutional models of change and transformation proposed by John Davies, patterns of research design emerge that are developed into a typology of empirical research in the Church that will effect change in pastoral policies. The two national research projects considered here reveal encouraging signs of a Church willing to develop its use of empirical research to establish a model of research in the Church that is pastorally responsive and a catalyst for professional praxis.

Developing a model of empirical research  
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