

PrD in Practical Theology
Stage 1C Research Proposal

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1. Indicative title

Evaluating the use of practitioner action research in the development of pastoral practice in contemporary Church weddings towards an understanding of the use of empirical research as an agent of change for pastoral practice and policy in the Church of England.

2. Aim and focus of the study

This research proposal aims to utilise the pastoral experiences of local clergy as they engage with ministry in contemporary church weddings in order to explore the research question: “Can empirical research methods offer a model of personal development to enable clergy in the Church of England to respond to contemporary culture in such a way as to develop their own pastoral practice and to influence Church policy?” Clergy in dioceses already targeted for research by the national Church Wedding project will be invited to participate in models of contrasting personal development alongside their involvement in the project. Further research will evaluate differences in any changes in their pastoral practice and the reasons for this comparing them with other clergy in these selected dioceses not involved in the national project training programme.

The aims of the national Church Wedding project have been outlined in Paper 1B and the success of the project will be closely judged against these by the project sponsors, the Archbishops’ Council. The project specification requires research to compare the outcomes of these aims in specific dioceses among those clergy who participate fully in the project training and those clergy that do not. This doctorate research proposal is designed to add a further contrast from the experiences of clergy who utilise the project to explore work placed professional development. Over the main summer wedding seasons in 2010 and 2011, I propose to evaluate research methods found helpful by “teacher-researcher” colleagues in the teaching profession to explore whether there are similar benefits for work placed professional development of clergy to effect change in their pastoral practice. In particular, I plan to examine the potential for participatory action research methods to inform their professional development. In this I will collaborate with participating clergy as a fellow “priest-researcher” towards establishing ongoing methods for developing a wider corporate model of ministry in contemporary church weddings and to effect change in the pastoral policy of the Church.

3. Context for the research

3.1 Church research

Empirical research for the national Church of the Church of England is carried out and co-ordinated within the Archbishops' Council, the central administrative body of the Church by the Research and Statistics department. This was formed following a review of the Statistics Unit requested by the Archbishop of Canterbury in 2000. The resulting brief was to develop and co-ordinate the use of empirical research by the Church of England in the context of the Church's mission. Although research is a major feature of theological development across ministry training institutions, mission agencies, cathedrals and the academy the use of empirical research by the Church has been neglected. It has frequently been left to external observers some of which have an independent Christian stance (for example, the Christian Research agency¹) and some of which have a secularised perspective (for example, the British Sociological Attitudes Survey²). So the Research and Statistics department has found itself a largely unique role and its location in the Archbishops' Council enables it to provide a significant perspective on national Church life.

Paper 1A examines the context of the department's remit. It contrasts the use of empirical research by three prominent practical theologians operating in different contemporary pastoral areas of life in the Church of England. It concludes that there are encouraging signs of a growing dialogue between empirical research and practical theology. The international practical theologian Johannes van der Ven also argues against the not uncommon view that Christian empiricism is godless Christianity and has developed a model of empirical-theological investigation having five components:

1. development of problem and goal.
 2. induction
 3. deduction
 4. testing and
 5. evaluation
- (van der Ven 1998, p.114)

He discusses the growing use of empirical-theology as it dialogues with other religions and with the secularisation of society in western countries noting the examples of rites of passage such as births, marriage and deaths. He also observes the increasing acceptance of the professionalization of pastoral ministry and the democratization of the church in response to "the context of modern Western society (that) demands this" (p.40).

¹ www.christian-research.org

² www.britisocat.com

3.2 Clergy professional development

In changing times, professional development is gradually becoming accepted in the Church of England as integral to maintaining a competent level of ongoing pastoral practice. The new terms of service that clergy are being invited to embrace include this requirement. Every diocese now has a recognised Continuing Ministerial Development (CMD) programme which is recommended to clergy. Some of the resources offered are designed to encourage clergy to consider their changing pastoral contexts towards their own personal development and the corresponding adaptation of Church pastoral policy. However, CMD recognised by the Church generally embraces a learning style that takes the minister out of his pastoral situation to 'receive' professional training in skills that are subsequently explored alone once back in their local context. In contrast to many professions, clergy do not generally engage in recognised learning programmes "on the job" after the completion of their initial title post or training curacy.

In the parallel world of education, there has been a long established expectation that teachers will seek to develop their professional practice on an ongoing basis and they are increasingly encouraged to undertake this within their work place contexts. To understand the impact of their teaching skills and thus to address areas of development they research their contexts before engaging in individual and corporate praxis. The term 'teacher-researcher' is an accepted role for a contemporary educational practitioner wishing to develop their professional practice. In this role teachers acquire simple research skills. They are taught to observe and document, to interview, to survey and even to triangulate their research design to gain different perspectives. Working alongside colleagues they utilise critical friends and group reflective techniques. In all this there are particular challenges for teacher-researchers as they endeavour to examine their teaching skills "on the job". Technical tools can be acquired but their use may be disrupted by the dynamics of the classroom that requires their full attention or emotional involvement making it difficult to achieve the research "distance" necessary. Ideally participant observers, for example, "become part of social situations in order to investigate them. However, for teacher-researchers the prime task is not observation but teaching ... (which) may sometimes conflict with it". (Altrichter, Posch & Somekh 1993, p.84).

3.3 Church wedding research

In the minds of most people it is perhaps obvious to observe that the Church of England clergy are key to church weddings. The Church and the nation do not generally appear to question this though some individual churches and clergy may. Recent research conducted among marrying couples in Britain has shown that clergy continue to be for them an attractive and vital pastoral ingredient in church weddings. Clergy are in practice also the central focus for the practicalities of a church wedding. They act as master of ceremonies coordinating the desires and needs of the

wedding couple, their guests and families, the church congregation and the wider community, the diocese and the Church institution as well as any other professionals particularly those involved on the wedding day. Clergy can make or break a church wedding for couples and there are many anecdotal stories to confirm both scenarios. Growing concern across the Church for the place of contemporary church weddings in Church life led in 2006 to the preliminary exploration of a national Church Wedding project. The project involves a mixed team of professional staff in the Archbishops' Council with skills in communication, evangelism, liturgy, training, publishing and social research. It was an innovative project designed to be "culturally facing" and focussing its initial attention on couples and their guests at church weddings.

The development of the Church Wedding project was led by research and was initially motivated by the falling number of church weddings in the Church of England. Couples considering marriage were contacted by an independent, secularly based, social research company. Using a mixed quantitative and qualitative research model they sought to uncover "the barriers and drivers" for a contemporary church wedding among wedding couples each marrying for the first time. The Archbishops' Council in sponsoring the project set three measurable aims focussing on increasing the number of church weddings, increasing their endorsement by the Church and increasing their role in encouraging church affiliation (specified in Paper 1B). These project aims sought to promote church weddings as a tool for strengthening the place of the local church in the pastoral support of contemporary weddings. The ongoing research stream planned within the project was thus designed to discover factors in society contributing to the declining trends in church weddings and how church weddings could be better used to further the mission of the church.

Parish clergy (together with their congregations) are pivotal in the provision of church weddings and so training events are being offered by the project team for clergy actively exercising pastoral ministry in church weddings. Findings from the initial research among couples are shared by the project team with clergy at specific training events that are designed to effect change in their pastoral practice. Church of England clergy are bound by the parliamentary Marriage Measure which was last revised in September 2008 (Lake 2009) but within this Church framework they are independent practitioners. The training events seek to influence their church wedding practice to respond to contemporary society and the project team question whether this can be achieved with a single shift in (social) perspective within the Church or whether this will require ongoing support. Feedback from clergy has demonstrated that the Church Wedding project would benefit by incorporating individual clergy praxis in their pastoral context alongside an opportunity for theological reflection to answer such questions as: How can clergy attending the training events and using the project resources maintain their mission integrity in adapting their pastoral strategy

to meet the changing needs of contemporary church weddings? What further support do clergy seek as they minister within the demands of contemporary social attitudes in Britain?

3.4 Clergy wedding research

Within the Church Wedding project team the research function has developed from researching marrying couples and wedding congregations into researching the effectiveness of the project resources and training events for clergy. I am conducting group interviews of parish clergy active in church wedding ministry who have attended the two day training events sponsored by their diocese. The research interviews are being held at the beginning and end of the main summer wedding season in 2010 to enable an evaluation of the immediate impact of these training events and the project resources on clergy pastoral practice with reference to the project aims agreed with the Archbishops' Council. A parallel baseline survey will provide relevant information regarding parish profiles towards discussion in the group interviews (Appendix 2). This research stream is designed to be parallel but independent of the project training events with no involvement from the main project team or diocesan staff so as to encourage honest participation and to assure clergy of confidentiality and anonymity.

Four different dioceses have been selected by the project team as representative of the dioceses involved in the first diocesan training events. In each of these dioceses approximately thirty clergy who are active in church wedding ministry were invited to a two day training event in their diocese and subsequently to become involved in a qualitative evaluation of the project. A survey and (recorded) focus groups are being analysed using professional research methodology and the emerging patterns reported to the project team. Clergy are participating in the training events at the request of their bishop but professional research recruitment practise has been followed to invite further participation in the research. Clergy have been given a confidential telephone and email contact for queries and can withdraw at any stage of the research exercise. To encourage continued participation and ascertain common concerns a short (confidential) telephone interview is being carried out part way through the 2010 summer wedding season. Closing survey and diocesan based 'focus' group discussions are planned for the end of the main wedding season in the autumn of 2010. Whilst this "before and after" group based evaluation will measure the immediate effect of the proposed resources and training events on clergy pastoral practice in church weddings, it will not be able to address in any depth the impact of individual contemporary social and pastoral contexts in which individual clergy minister. What is needed is an opportunity for clergy to reflect on their own church based circumstances and to incorporate this into their personal CMD.

4. Theoretical perspectives and interpretations

4.1 Reflective practice

In the contemporary western world critical thinking, that is the ability to look at the world through different eyes and to consider that things could be different, is valued highly as integral to a healthy democratic society. Freedom to express individual critical thinking has become a human right and thus "helping adults become critical thinkers should be a fundamental concern of educators, trainers, community workers, social activists, counsellors, therapists and others in the helping professions" (Brookfield 1987, p.67). The work place is one context in which critical thinking can be effectively developed and Brookfield emphasises this to be "one of the chief ways in which we affirm our identities" (p.161). Critical thinking at work liberates those involved to participate in shaping the future. As such it points towards Christian moral values in the worth of the individual in democratic debate. Brookfield challenges facilitators of critical thinking to consider their effect on learners by addressing the question "How does what I am doing contribute to my participants' becoming critical thinkers?" (p.236).

Contemporary professions in the western world have absorbed this aspiration of equipping critical practitioners to confidently engage in reflective practice; the business world, management, teachers, nurses, psychotherapists and others in caring professions being prominent among them. In the world of education, for example, universities officially recognise such engagement on the part of their tutors and many teachers in statutory education are trained to develop in this manner as education professionals (Altrichter, Posch & Somekh 1993). At first sight it appears to be an anomaly that clergy who are often included alongside educational and caring professions have made little use of reflective practice in their everyday interactions. An exploration of this alignment of their "professional" role must await the proposed research. Here it is sufficient to note that clergy value opportunities for private critical thinking and have traditionally found reflective diaries helpful as journals in their spiritual life but they do not readily utilise reflective practice as practitioners and still more rarely engage with colleagues in such a process. However, in changing social contexts situations of pastoral practice by lay and ordained ministers open up questions that readily offer opportunities for reflective practice. How am I doing? Who is benefiting from this? Could I adapt my approach to be more helpful to them? How does this relate to other areas of my (pastoral) ministry? Critical reflective practice offers the opportunity to collect information and evidence towards evaluating pastoral practice against professional standards.

4.2 Practitioner research

Critical reflection in a professional context results in action and reflection processes which can interact in different ways. It opens the professional to critique. Schon and Argyris developed a three stage model that describes how practitioners reflect during and after their actions:

- tacit-knowing-in-action during routine professional actions
- reflection-in-action when “confronted with unexpected, new and ambiguous situations”
- reflection-on-action when “professionals critically analyse or justify retrospectively their actions” (cited in Kroath 2002, p.53)

They demonstrate that reflection-in-action can encourage practitioners to take time out to become reflective researchers moving in and out of research and practice or alternatively a reflective researcher may act as a consultant to the practitioner.

Bringing practitioner research into church culture is no easy matter but the experience of teachers in schools is encouraging. Many teachers have post-graduate qualifications that necessitate quite sophisticated research skills. They are able to bring these skills to practitioner research and augment those traditionally incorporated into the action research repertoire. Kroath suggests that reflection-in-action may involve investigative activities which can be developed into research if four criteria proposed by the American psychologist Cronbach are observed:

- reviewability where data can be reviewed by external observers
- logical-empirical proofability where results are grounded in evidence
- methodology critique where the researcher provides self-criticism
- speculative or imaginative outcomes but with some practical or heuristic value (Kroath 2002, p.48)

Goodwin and Groundwater-Smith discovered that “schools can be sites of reflective practice enabling staff and students to develop understandings of teaching and learning hitherto unexplored and of interactions and expectations relevant to particular locations and times” (Goodwin & Groundwater-Smith 2002, p.35). They cite two instances where schools sought to embed school based enquiry into the norms and values of the school. And conclude that as teachers engage with practitioner research they alter and improve “their own professional lives but those of their students also” (p35).

For teachers practitioner research is often ethnographic but it is grounded in evidence. Teachers find themselves located in their research which as Vernon Trafford observes can be a challenge. “Practitioner research provides a new perspective on the purpose and act of research. It liberates researchers from orthodoxies that constrained the choice of research design

and method. It has relocated research fieldwork to being 'at home' and so it places researchers as participants in the midst of their research field" (Trafford 2002, p.195). Instances where teachers have engaged with practitioner research frequently involve the participation of a mentor who as they share experiences acts to "gently suggest ways forward and ask questions of them which help them to clarify their thinking about practice" (Mockler 2002, p.111). This involvement of other teachers encourages constant engagement with critical reflection and the development of a "learning community" where "teachers leave the ranks of the senior, wise priesthood, the learned and become first class members of that community of learners" (p.113).

For professional clergy to become a learning community would require a change in mindset although there are signs that the contemporary pluralistic pastoral context in which they minister is promoting such continued in-service training. Enzinger observes that everyone has a history of schooling and suggests the benefits of involving other professionals to bring outside perspectives "to engage with practitioner research without separation along professional lines" (2002, p.83). Here the CMD of clergy and teacher in-service training may have similarities in bringing the involvement of other professional to contribute helpful external perspectives. "Practitioner research (as well as reflecting) that is undertaken in a trans-professional way offers new approaches to learning and teaching in a democratic way" (p.84).

4.3 Emancipatory action research and organizational change

The organizational context for clergy involved in this research is the subject of topical debate in the Church of England and clergy are keen to have their voice heard over what many perceive as the management orientation of their church leaders. Torry and others in the field of social and organizational theory are concerned at the managerial model that is growing in popularity in the Church (Torry 2005). Alongside this debate the work of Zuber-Skerritt an educationalist with research interests in higher education and management education is of interest. She builds a model of practitioner research that brings professional development together with organizational development utilising a framework of emancipatory action research. In this model she incorporates:

"critical (and self-critical) collaborative enquiry by reflective practitioners being accountable and making the results of their enquiry public, self-evaluating their practice and engaged in participatory problem-solving and continuing professional development" (Zuber-Skerritt 1996, p.85).

Professional development of this nature transforms any authoritative power of the manager or leader into power sharing or 'empowerment'. Zuber-Skerritt endorses movements from hierarchical and bureaucratic models of organizational change to change efforts that allow the work itself to govern "who works with whom and who leads" (p.94). In bringing this together with action research she emphasises process over specific content, recognising "change as a continuous, cyclical, lifelong learning process rather than a series of programs" (p.95).

Zuber-Skerritt establishes a model of emancipatory action research for management and organizational change by adapting and extending two classical organisational change models by Beer et al and Lewin into a participatory action research model. She highlights the role of reflection and disturbance to examine stages of equilibrium in beliefs, values, attitudes and behaviour. Zuber-Skerritt offers this to action researchers, change agents, managers, teachers and students for management and organisational development. The conceptual hypothesis of this research proposal is that this model of emancipatory action research also offers opportunities for clergy to collaborate towards organisational development in their professional practice. In this research proposal I plan to utilise the pastoral provision of church weddings to evaluate the use of participatory action research as a tool to effect pastoral change in the Church through the professional development of its clergy.

4.4 Shared praxis

For clergy to influence pastoral policy changes in the Church of England they will need to consider shared praxis. Zuber-Skerritt's model of emancipatory action research brings individual praxis together to enrich it and to work towards organisational policy development. In the field of religious education, Groome uses educational practice to demonstrate how life and faith can be brought together with a model of Shared Praxis. He points to critical reflection on purposeful human activity as bringing about change. Although Groome's work is largely intended for a US based educational context he outlines its relevance to the wider setting (1991, p.295). In particular, he emphasises the educational setting of all ministry including its pastoral and social aspects. His model of Shared Praxis incorporates five modes of engagement where teachers and participants become partners in learning willing to empower rather than control.

Groome outlines helpful connections between the tasks of ministry and education. His model of Shared Praxis offers experiences from the field of education that can benefit the personal development of clergy. The synergy in their tasks will enable clergy to learn from the professional skills of educational colleagues. In particular, Shared Praxis within participatory action research offers clergy skills to develop their pastoral ministry as

priest-researchers. As clergy develop their ministry through Shared Praxis alongside methods of participatory action research opportunities for mutual learning and empowerment will emerge. Incorporating educational skills within Shared Praxis and emancipatory action research will increase its potential towards informing corporate learning and policy development in the Church.

4.5 Priest researchers

My involvement in reflective practice during a pilot study to evaluate three local ecumenical partnerships (ref Paper 1B) encouraged me to integrate critical reflective practice into other empirically based social research projects. At that time a significant exploration into ministerial vocational development requested by the Division of Ministry was underway led by myself with the support of an experienced researcher and a research assistant. The opportunity to reflect individually and together on emerging themes provided additional depth and rigour to the analysis and deductions. This reflective practice brought additional confidence to the interpretation of the findings which proved beneficial for the wider reporting process across the Church.

It was during a subsequent formal work based assessment that the Director of Ministry offered the observation that I exercised a dual vocation as a "priest-researcher". As I have lived with this insight and its challenge it has proved liberating for my personal development and my professional work but it has also left me with some dilemmas. I am not alone as a social researcher in seeking to uncover the spiritual and the religious in the world. Such research is becoming more fully recognised in the academy and in the public square enabling more confident evidence based faith debates to gradually emerge. A prophetic calling within priesthood to reconcile and to point humanity towards God also points towards making connections and uncovering Godly insights in the world. Might it benefit all clergy to consider the benefits of an element of research in their calling, the need to discover and articulate God's revelations in the world? In contemporary British society might other clergy personally benefit and grow in 'professional' confidence if they discovered the researcher within their own priestly calling?

One of the most significant contributions to the Church's attitude towards mission has been the example of Vincent Donovan who towards the end of the twentieth century lived among the Masai people. As he uncovered opportunities in their culture for the Christian gospel, he discovered God already at work among those people (Donovan 1982). Donovan lived among six different Masai groups for a year in an experience that could best be described in research terms as an example of ethnographic research. His theological reflections have challenged traditional missional thinking in the Church and pointed to more holistic methods of sharing the Christian

gospel. In many parts of Britain where inherited Christianity has faded, the missional stance of the contemporary Church points to a similar role for clergy seeking to uncover God's revelation in their part of God's vineyard. As the Church develops such enquiry and as it contributes its own insights within contemporary religious and social contexts it will grow in confidence in its missional engagement. Specifically it is to be hoped that a calling may emerge within priest and people to observe, to discover and to make connections, to develop an engagement on a day to day level with contemporary social research.

4.6 Ordinary researchers

If clergy are to utilise action research methods as priest-researchers to develop their own professional practice it has to be acknowledged that the value system against which observations will be measured may be different to those of other professionals. Theological reflection must be integrated into the reflective process. Cameron has sought to bring together practitioners and the academy in a model of *Theological Action Research* (TAR) that promotes collaborative working between practitioners, theologians and researchers. TAR brings to practical theology "a conversational approach to doing theology" (Cameron in press) where theological questions are posed, data is collected and theological reflection leads to further action. However, whilst the academy may offer a rigor and a normative theology in this process there may also be the inherent risk of the academy dominating it. This may be of particular concern where the theology of ordinary people is of prime interest and where "ordinary researchers" (*as proposed in paper 1B*) may be better placed to make at least initial interpretations. Just such an example has been cited by Longley in a comment piece on Catholic Sexual Teaching. He comments that a "merging of Catholic Social Teaching and Catholic Sexual Teaching into one body of principles has happened in practice at the grass roots, without happening in theory among theologians and church leaders" (Longley 2010) and offers the example that "A relational theology of marriage, which explored how Christ was present in the sacramental relationship, would dovetail with the insight of Catholic Social Teaching that God is our ultimate common good."

In the world of contemporary education it is assumed that professional practitioners bring sufficiently informed academic ability to the immediate task of action research. The academy, education inspectors and advisors are not directly involved until later in the reporting process. It is similarly anticipated that priest-researchers will find that as they use participatory action research methods they gain in confidence as "ordinary researchers" using, for example, everyday research methods of participant observation, surveys and interviews (ref Paper 1B). They are then well placed to listen to the "ordinary theology" of the people around them (Astley 2002) and as their personal professional development increases their confidence and

ability to interpret “ordinary theology” will also grow. The democratic process within action research is enhanced if it is pursued collaboratively with colleagues and for priest-researchers this has the potential to mutually enrich their priestly vocation. A regular coming together of priest-researchers to share and discover insights from individual explorations will maximise its potential to benefit the pastoral practice of others and to develop wider reaching pastoral policies.

5. Research design

5.1 Participatory action research

Participatory action research offers professionals the opportunity to actively reflect on and develop their practice. It facilitates praxis among colleagues with the potential to progress corporate policies in response to changing circumstances. Among teachers, where participatory action research has become a feature of professional development and reflective practice, its benefits are widely acknowledged to include:

- the improvement of professional competence in the quality of teaching and learning
- curriculum development
- collective development of the profession
- advancement of educational research

(Altrichter, Posch & Somekh 1993, p.207)

Participatory action research also democratises research by bringing policy makers and practitioners together with equal rights and responsibilities. Reflection takes place within action and incorporates practical challenges to theory and accepted practice. Theory and practice come together and evolve together in response to changes in context such as in contemporary education. All this is not far from the situation clergy find themselves in seeking to adapt their pastoral practice in response to changing moral and social standards in contemporary society. Reflective practice and the participatory action research model offer possibilities to explore the research question posed in this paper. The national Church Wedding project, in particular, provides an opportunity to research whether clergy can in such a mutually supportive research environment, develop ordinary research skills that will enhance their personal development and contribute to the development of corporate models of best pastoral practice that, in turn, will point towards developing connections with Church policy.

5.2 Pastoral development toolkit

The Church Wedding project is planned to run over two summer wedding seasons in 2010 and 2011. It will thus provide the opportunity to develop findings emerging across the wedding seasons. In four of the dioceses involved in the project based research clergy are being invited to participate in diocesan focus groups to reflect on their experience using the project training and resources. This research proposal focuses on encouraging clergy involved in the project research in two of these dioceses to form reflective clergy groups to interact among themselves across these months (at their convenience) so as to develop a tool for personal pastoral development in the area of church weddings. It is anticipated that, due to the busy schedules of many clergy, this will require an on line electronic form of communication. I propose to participate in this democratic process as a fellow "priest-researcher" encouraging the process to consider pointers towards curriculum development and offering fellow clergy participants ordinary research skills of, for example, surveys, interviews and participant observation.

Utilising a model of participatory action research will not only facilitate the design of personal pastoral development toolkits but also the formation of *change agent groups* towards curriculum development. At the conclusion of the project in the autumn of 2011 I intend to evaluate the success of the groups in terms of group members' personal praxis and their impact on the church wedding policy of their individual dioceses. I will evaluate the outcomes against those from fellow clergy in the remaining two project research dioceses where an essentially "before and after" research engagement took place in addition to those in the project not involved in any research enquiry. To preserve confidentiality and to ensure equal representation particularly if group participants vary in their engagement with the process, group members will be invited to provide written individual reflections and to discuss these by telephone with myself on a one-to-one basis.

This research proposal is designed to offer ordinary clergy the possibility of developing their skills as ordinary researchers towards the design of a personal toolkit for developing pastoral practice in the area of church weddings. To encourage clergy participation I shall explore providing references towards CMD accreditation in their dioceses. I will evaluate common threads emerging towards a church wedding pastoral development toolkit that could be offered to other clergy and dioceses wishing to examine the use of contemporary church weddings in the mission of the Church. I will consider how this experience can be beneficially offered towards a more general pastoral toolkit that enables clergy to respond in their professional practice to the ongoing changes in social attitudes in contemporary society.

6 Research methodology

6.1 Pastoral diary

The pastoral contexts in which clergy minister in England are becoming increasingly diverse and the Church Weddings project team have found it a challenging task to provide examples of good pastoral practice that accommodate the range of social situations in which clergy find themselves ministering today. As I have talked with clergy attending the Church Wedding project training events it has been very apparent that they are keen to contribute from their wealth of experience towards a collaborative model of further research. They are keen to build a coalition of thought that is pastorally responsive and can contribute towards the missional development of Church pastoral policy. The particular context of each participant quickly generates different research questions from which the instincts of "priest-researchers" began to emerge. Questions include: How do we honour and bless different committed relationships in the church? How do we support couples with very different (financial) expectations of a church wedding?

Following the example of the teaching profession I have begun to harness these enquiries with the introduction of a reflective diary. In two of the research dioceses of the Church Wedding project I have offered a simple, semi-structured pro-forma. It is designed around the framework of the Church Wedding project training events namely the three distinct stages in the interaction between wedding couples and their local church in a church wedding. These are the Preparation, the Ceremony and the Follow-up (Appendix 1). Using research carried out by the secular wedding industry the project team have discovered that together these stages last on average 2 ½ years. Although I am not anticipating such a lengthy process, I have invited clergy to commit to complete a reflective diary at key points on their wedding journey with particular couples and to discuss it with me part way through the main wedding season in 2010. At this one-to-one (telephone) discussion I propose to use a semi-structured interview to briefly evaluate with each cleric how this research diary has facilitated their theological and other reflection on their pastoral contacts and to what extent this process has contributed towards identifying personal priorities for praxis and the formation of research questions (Appendix 1).

This research proposal focuses largely on two of the four dioceses under evaluation by the project team. The use of reflective diaries in these two dioceses will separately collect the empirical evidence needed to begin this aspect of the research and provide comparison with the other two dioceses so as to evaluate the impact of diary reflection itself on individual pastoral practice. Towards the end of the 2010 main summer wedding season I propose to invite clergy who have successfully used the reflective diary to

share their experience in a face to face research discussion group in their diocese. This evaluative process will be alongside a discussion on the value of the Church Wedding project itself to their experience as a professional wedding practitioner. I plan to facilitate a critically reflective discussion among these clergy to consider how the insights generated by their diaries could be used to aid their continuing professional development over the next wedding season. The clergy groups will to a large extent be self-selective of those who conduct substantial numbers of church weddings but their experiences offer beneficial insights for colleagues with less frequent engagement with church weddings. In this manner I hope to establish these groups as diocesan based *change agent groups* with a view to developing the pastoral practice of clergy colleagues across the Church and thus Church of England wedding policy.

6.2 Change agent groups

Clergy from the two dioceses involved in the participatory action research will be encouraged to engage in shared praxis over the remainder of 2010 and 2011 by means of two separate electronic diocesan clergy discussion forums. They will learn and reflect on the use of everyday research skills of surveys, interviews and observational techniques in their local church context among couples each marrying for the first time. Across this period I intend to keep a research diary of the life of the diocesan clergy groups. Bartunek recorded the life of a professional teacher change agent group over a period of seven years until its natural demise using her research diary to provide the material for a critical reflection on the process and its outcomes. She describes how this group empowered teachers by raising the voice of the professional teacher and positively challenging its hierarchy and other colleagues. Conflict, engagement, communication and collaboration were essential ingredients in the effectiveness of the group to effect change. The vitality of the group depended on its identity, actions and stakeholder relationships. To effect organizational change Bartunek found that "it is crucial to play close attention to the experiences and dynamics of the change agent group" (2003, p.231). All the group members "felt it made a substantial difference in their lives". "In virtually all cases they gained in courage and confidence", some involving themselves in "professional initiatives they would not ordinarily have taken" (p. 272).

Within the field of clergy CMD there is a method growing in popularity of *action research sets* that work to facilitate professional development. Ministers come together to share and consider issues of personal pastoral practice. Each participant has a designated amount of time to share significant matters of mutual interest and at each group meeting the chairing (facilitating) of this exchange is rotated around the group. Over time levels of trust within the group grow so that the discussions move into a deeper level of personal development. I intend to explore with CMD colleagues the feasibility of developing the Church Wedding (electronically based) change agent groups into action research sets to deliver ongoing

professional development. The democratic nature of this group exploration facilitated from within the group could provide a freedom of action to clergy that is more responsive to their local contexts. At the conclusion of this research I will facilitate the commitment of members who may wish to continue to meet informally as *action research sets* without my continued involvement. The exclusion of an external facilitator precludes outside interventions and their potentially normative influences. It emphasises that all participants are equal contributors responsible for process moderation and takes up the model of emancipatory action research proposed by Zuber-Skerritt, a model that liberates clergy to "stand together outside the situation in order to critique it, to illuminate debate and act for change." (Melrose 1996, p.54)

To develop the transformational or emancipatory paradigm Zuber-Skerritt portrays the role of the facilitator as a process moderator (1996a, p.4) and prefers this to be a responsibility shared equally by participants. Melrose describes how in this paradigm the teachers "stand together outside the situation in order to critique it, to illuminate debate and act for change." (1996, p.54) Thus a collective, dynamic evaluation empowers the group to be an agent for change. This research proposal, however, has by necessity had to restrict the life of the Church Wedding change agent groups and respond to the busy work schedules of most clergy. Consequently I propose for these groups to be electronically based virtual discussion forums and to facilitate these myself while allowing others to take the lead for aspects of the process as they offer. To redress this balance, I shall invite members to provide confidential written individual reflections on this process and to discuss these using one-to-one telephone survey techniques and concluding research group discussions in the two dioceses.

6.3 Ethical considerations

My work place research practice is governed by the Code of Practice of professional research associations and consequently the baseline for this research is being carried out with attention to professional guidelines and standards of good practice. Such practices will continue into the doctoral research. Issues of confidentiality will be addressed by the use of Christian names only in research group interviews and any data store. Reporting will ensure participant anonymity and respondent identities will be stored in a separate confidential secure area of the Archbishops' Council computer servers. These are backed up daily to an off site store and are password protected. Completed survey forms, interview recordings and their transcripts will be similarly stored in a secure cupboard only accessed by research colleagues. They will be stored for at least two years following the successful submission of the research thesis. The requirements of the Anglia University Ethics committee will also be followed and clergy participants recruited using the university research consent and participant information forms (Appendix 2). Clergy attending the national Church wedding project training events will be offered the opportunity to voluntarily

participate in this research and can withdraw at any stage. Similarly clergy will be expected to allow wedding couples to participate on a voluntary basis. Given the close professional and pastoral work context attention to clergy confidentiality will be paramount both for them and the wedding couples.

7. Outline plan of study

I anticipate collecting the research data over the two year period from 2010 to September 2011. This will enable a full action research cycle once clergy have formulated an initial church wedding pastoral toolkit. Analysis and interpretation of findings will take place in 2011 and 2012 alongside further theoretical research and drafting the text.

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Anglia Ruskin University

PrD in Practical Theology

Stage 1C

Research Proposal

Lynda Barley

SID: 0716477

July 2010

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<u>Contents</u>	<u>Page</u>
1. Indicative title	1
2. Aim and focus of the study	1
3. Context for the research	
3.1 Church research	2
3.2 Clergy professional development	3
3.3 Church wedding research	3
3.4 Clergy wedding research	5
4. Theoretical perspectives and interpretations	
4.1 Reflective practice	6
4.2 Practitioner research	7
4.3 Emancipatory action research and organizational change	8
4.4 Shared praxis	9
4.5 Priest researchers	10
4.6 Ordinary researchers	11
5. Research design	
5.1 Participatory action research	12
5.2 Pastoral development toolkit	13
6. Research methodology	
6.1 Pastoral diary	14
6.2 Change agent groups	15
6.3 Ethical considerations	16
7. Outline plan of study	17
References	18
Appendix 1: Reflective diary and telephone interview schedule	
Appendix 2: Baseline interview schedule, consent and information forms	

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Abstract

The Church of England is living through a time of significant change in attitudes towards local church ministry, congregational participation and pastoral practices. Empirical research has, for the most part, been utilised in the Church as a management tool and at best an ambivalent attitude has persisted towards evidence based decision making and the evidence driven society of the western world. As pastoral contexts change radically at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Church's dialogue with empirical research is beginning to develop more positively.

This paper proposes research to explore the suitability of practitioner led research to enable clergy to engage with the everyday theological reflections of their wider congregations and church community, 'Ordinary Theology' as first proposed by Jeff Astley. The national Church Wedding project is explored as a pastoral context for the development and evaluation of a practitioner action research toolkit for parish clergy to gather their own empirical research and to theologically reflect on their pastoral practice in contemporary church weddings. The research proposal focuses on participatory action research as an agent of organisational change in pastoral policies and seeks to monitor the changing pastoral practise in church weddings of its priest researchers. It will evaluate how such a shift towards local decision making can inform policy formation to reflect a Church that is moving towards primarily being responsive to issues surrounding contemporary mission.