

Anglia Ruskin University

A historical assessment of how the Church of England
has used empirical research
to inform its engagement with pastoral policy and practice.

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Abstract

Over the twentieth century the Church of England focussed primarily on quantitative information to describe both the social composition of the nation it served and its public presence there. By the beginning of the twenty-first century religious affiliation had become more a matter of individual choice and religious practise had significantly declined. As the Church of England has sought to reinterpret its role in a religiously pluralistic society, statistical collection has been cautiously enhanced and supplemented by qualitative researchers. Yet current day social commentators in this area of national life have been slow to interpret these broader reflections of church life. Observers still prefer single statistic measures of the strength of the church while theologians and religious sociologists have appeared nervous in their interpretations of religious indicators within the wider (multi-faith) social and cultural context.

This literature review will trace the development of the Church of England's use of empirical research, with particular focus on changes since the turn of the current millennium, as confidence has grown in its ability to appropriately utilise professional research methods. It will also trace the emerging use of practical theology in the life of the Church. We will consider the different purposes for which the Church has embraced empirical research and reflect on the extent to which an engagement with practical theology has developed. Three main aspects to the public life of the Church of England where there has been significantly different use of empirical research over recent years will be explored through the contribution of two leading practical theologians in their fields who work closely with the Church and two major official Church reports. For the majority of their working lives Professor Robin Gill has been a leading contributor to the secularisation debate and Professor Leslie Francis a prolific exponent of congregational studies. The strategic reports "Faith in the City" and "Faithful Cities" published by the Church ten years apart in 1996 and 2006 illustrate the Church's developing engagement with community and neighbourhood social capital.

This literature review will reveal gaps between the developing use of empirical research across the Church and its engagement with practical theology, gaps that are restricting the Church of England in its use of empirical research findings for policy making and to inform its pastoral practice. This distance between practitioners in empirical research and practical theologians can only be effectively bridged in ways relevant to particular pastoral contexts. This review will present the case for research to be carried out to investigate the nature of these gaps and to make proposals for closer cooperation so that, in particular, practical theology can more fully inform empirical research. The examples examined here reveal encouraging signs of healthy dialogue between experience and theology in different pastoral areas of Church life which if developed more fully, offer the Church of England the ability to negotiate with confidence its changing role in the public life of the nation.

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Personal context

Public opinion is influenced for better or worse by the media and the Church has long been an object of curiosity and frequent misunderstandings among social commentators. Working with the national and regional press makes me acutely aware of the widening communication gap between society and the Church. As a Church of England minister exercising ministry in both London and Devon I am also aware of the gulf that separates different wings of the Church. My employment with the national Church as Head of Research and Statistics straddles the complexities between local church life and the national institution. It considers the tensions between public and private religious practice through researching and reporting, for example, the changing nature of local congregational life and the increasing diversification of ministerial deployment in different pastoral opportunities in which the established Church operates. I am frequently tasked with presenting professional research based accounts of church life to sceptical audiences of opinion formers and policy makers both within the Church and outside it. As I seek to interpret the signs of churches developing new forms of pastoral practice for the twenty-first century I find myself exposed to a raw provisionality that has yet to be theologically evaluated. Much of the quantitative information collected has been only recently designed for the modern day church and is just beginning to be qualitatively and theologically qualified with the result that there is frequently an ambiguity in interpretation. The resulting apparent insecurity is frequently interpreted by social commentators as symptomatic of a declining Church.

The developing dialogue in the Church between experience and theology

The writer of the closing biblical book of Revelation encourages the Church to listen to what the Spirit says to the churches. In a changing world listening and learning has been readily assimilated into secular policy making. It will also inform the evolving vocation of the Church but the institutional Church has not always found that its structures and bureaucracy facilitate such adaptation. One particular widely used model of pastoral engagement is a cycle of movement from experience to exploration to reflection to response and action (Green 1990, p.39). Through this “pastoral cycle” churches have in recent years begun to embrace the praxis of practical theology. Laurie Green encourages churches to use inter-disciplinary skills to mix stories and facts, to analyse and map what we know but not to fall into the danger of analysis paralysis (p.58). His concerns are pertinent for the institutional Church today, which, as we shall discover, has begun to bring qualitative and quantitative research skills together but has yet to develop a complimentary process of theological reflection. The Church institution appears reticent to discover for itself that the praxis of the pastoral cycle is “to be contemplative, instructive and transformative” (p.105). Barnard and Pritchard broaden the scope of practical theology to point out that it is an encounter with God in the world (*Missio Dei*), both traditional and spiritual, a dialogue and a “bottom up” theology. For Barnard and

Pritchard engagement through practical theology will reveal new patterns of being Church, a renewed place for religion and society and as such is a theological method for the changing times of the modern day. They observe that this praxis “underlines that faith is essentially a transformative activity, serving the manifestation of the kingdom” (p. 57). The need to contextualise theology has become more and more acute in a “pluralistic society in which different faiths, religions and humanistic, sit side by side in various states of co-operation or competition” (Barnard & Pritchard 2006, p.3).

John Astley, in turn, challenges the Church to embrace ‘ordinary theology’ by observing and listening to attitudes and praxis rather than dogma, theory and theological speculation. The values and attitudes held by ordinary people reflects religious belief as much as their behaviour and praxis. He encourages the Church “to meet people in their own context and listen to them” (Astley 2002, p.29). Astley and others promote the place of empirical research in adult theological education: “Parish/congregation/circuit and other placements, and hospital and other sorts of visiting life experience will provide the bulk of it making explicit the ordinary theology that they will see and hear along the way” (p.29). Jarvis points out the relevance of this approach in a non-churchgoing society “where we really do not know where many people learn answers to their religious questions” (Jarvis 2002, p.17).

The acceptance of the place of empirical research alongside theological reflection has to some extent been assumed since the eighteenth century church reformers. Swinton and Mowat remind us that for John Wesley it was experience alongside scripture, tradition and reason form the “quadrilateral model of theological sources of revelation the four principle sources of Christian truth”(Swinton & Mowat 2006, p.78). They explore action research and participatory research as contributions to practical theology and encourage a mutually critical conversation between practical theology and qualitative research so as to retain “the integrity of both disciplines” (p.253). They remind us too that “in a rapidly secularizing social context “both reason and experience, as they are worked out within particular situations, provide us with questions which we then need to address to Christian scripture and tradition” (p.78). In recent years the Church could be said to be formalising its courtship with practical theology but the question remains as to how this marriage can be incorporated at a national and institutional level. Stephen Pattison warns the Church of the danger of acting as a management organisation in assuming that “if you can’t count it, it doesn’t exist” (Pattison 2007, p.78). “The Church needs to be set in relation to a distinctively religious view of the world” (p.108) and Pattison reminds us too of the biblical injunction for social justice (citing, for example, Isaiah 58:6-7). Practical theology “should combine faith with facts to evolve a humanising response” (p.283) and “seek to be transformational” (p.284). Pattison could be commenting directly on institutional church when he observes “Practical theology should endeavour to nurture human wisdom, insight and understanding. Facts and evidence are important but they are not in short supply. If anything it is meaning which needs attention” (p.285).

Statistics for Mission

The location of empirical research in the life of the Church has traditionally been confined to church administration. The Statistics Unit of the Church of England, for example, has for many years gathered data from Church of England parishes for ongoing financial, membership and attendance assessments to be made thus accumulating data that goes back to the late nineteenth century. The Unit has collated clergy numbers and their demographic profiles to make projections for national ministerial allocations to the dioceses. Yet it has traditionally been the task of individual dioceses to bring this information into their local pastoral planning and policies. Little data has been held centrally and there has been little co-ordination concerning, for example, building resources as again these are also managed locally in conjunction with the Church Commissioners and other heritage bodies.

In 2000 a review commissioned by the Archbishop of Canterbury reported to the General Synod of the Church of England. At the time the review did not attract much attention but it proved to be the turning point in the Church's use of empirical research and statistics for the new millennium. It was entitled *Statistics for Mission* (Archbishops' Council 2000) and it recommended fundamental changes to the collection of parochial statistics with an emphasis on their application to the church's mission imperative. Estimates of 'usual Sunday attendance', for example, were replaced by congregational counts throughout the month of October each year. Hitherto, the primary purpose of the statistical collection had been to service the maintenance and financial provision of the church but a desire to understand more fully the declining numbers of churchgoers and changing patterns of church attendance caused a re-evaluation of the counts and an appraisal of their suitability. The enhanced range of statistical measures proposed by the review sought to more fully reflect the different social practises of church affiliation around the country.

Commentators within the Church and outside it were split as to whether these developments were a step in the right direction or signs of desperation by a dying church. The newspaper headline "Anglican Church in meltdown", for example, resulted from one assessment of the developments by a church growth expert (Gledhill 2002). As the place of empirical research was being established within the Archbishops' Council, one General Synod member was heard to bemoan on the Synod floor that the church had lost its way "It even has a Research and Statistics department!" There was widespread scepticism as to whether these changes would enable the church to begin to understand and address the fundamental changes in religious participation that had progressively taken over during the latter part of the twentieth century and were gathering at a pace. But slowly over the following years a transformation has begun in the role of empirical research in interpreting the changing life of the Church of England. Churches have been encouraged to discover for themselves their changing pastoral contexts (for example, Cameron et al 2005). Different and changing patterns of churchgoing and private religious practice have become more evident (see, for example, Barley 2006/7) and have begun to stimulate a more healthy debate across the religious and secular divides together with a wider understanding and acceptance of the nuances behind participation in public and private religious life in modern day Britain. Religious sociologists (for example, Bruce 2002 and Davie 2007) have tentatively sought to bring these different sources

of quantitative data together to interpret developing trends but theological contributions have been minimal.

There are some encouraging signs of this process of theological reflection on empirical research beginning to become more evident and widespread. In 2004 the Church published a report that proved to be pivotal in inspiring churches to engage in new ways with the changing social context of the nation. *Mission-shaped Church* focussed its attention on church planting (Church of England Mission and Public Affairs Council 2004) and was consequently criticised for restricting itself to a theology for a missionary church. John Hull sought to provide a broader theological framework for fresh expressions of church working towards the kingdom of God. He distinguished between the church and mission, questioning the report's inherent "theology of apartheid churches" (Hull 2006, p.14). Hull expresses his disappointment in the lack of prophetic edge and concludes that the report confines itself to "church-based mission" (p.36). There are other signs of the Church beginning to re-evaluate theological frameworks. Recently, for example, an exploratory research based consultation between the national Church and practical theologians in the fields of modern day ministry and mission contributed a strategic approach towards further exploration.

One practical theologian who is actively considering the place of the national Church in modern society is Daniel Groody who is a Holy Cross priest and assistant professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame, Chicago. His consideration of traditional Catholic social teachings and spiritual praxis under the spotlight of current globalisation trends provides a helpful model for wider religious interpretation of modern day sociological evidence. His exploration of the biblical mandate for justice is set against the backdrop of the global community, Catholic liturgy and modern day spirituality (Groody 2007). Groody himself describes his approach as taking pastoral reality and engaging in the theological equivalent of participant sociology to reflect on what the evidence gained through interviews, surveys and participant observation means for our relationship with God (Groody 2008). He uses head and heart, the written and living text, to construct a fresh theological worldview while acknowledging the subjective dangers that the Church community must judge. One such exploration challenges the Church to listen to God in the desires of one's own heart of a "just do it" culture (Groody 2004). This methodology rooted in sociological evidence offers a possible framework for the wider Church to gain fresh insights into its contribution to the western world in this era of widespread change.

Secularization debate

The historic development of the relationship between the Church of England and empirical research began with the first systematic collection of numerical data on religious practice in the 1851 Census of Religious Worship (Mann 1970). The Victorians wished to monitor churchgoing across the towns and villages of Britain and were surprised to discover that a large proportion of the population was not in church on census Sunday (30 March). They wanted to provide sufficient churches to accommodate all the neighbourhood residents so denominations vied with each other for bigger buildings and the statistics collected were used to achieve these ends. The social and religious expectation was that everyone should be able to worship God each Sunday in their local church. Christian commitment required regular weekly church attendance.

Robin Gill's commentary (Gill 2003) on the results of the 1851 national religious census and subsequent ones (for particular localities) carefully demonstrates that as the population moved from the villages to the towns and large churches were built to accommodate them so empty churches in both rural and urban areas often preceded a decline in churchgoing. Gill is careful to outline the limitations of collecting estimates of church attendances by clergy and to allow for the effects of the growing provision of Sunday Schools but he uses the census churchgoing statistics to pitch Christian churches into competition and to challenge the institutional churches as to their future. Whilst undermining various myths about churchgoing decline across the twentieth century and acknowledging the lack of interest by sociologists and social historians in understanding churchgoing statistics or in researching the behaviour behind the data, Gill observes that Christian denominations themselves "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). Gill's observation was made following the revision of church attendance statistics in 2000. Such hasty comment has served in recent times to discourage the Church from developing further exploration in this area although historically many would agree that the Church of England has put more energy into collecting data than analysing it. Indeed, it was not until 2005 that a doctoral study was published by Mandy Robins (Robins 2005) using the historical data of the Church of England to analyse the church's numerical growth and decline in the second half of the twentieth century.

Robin Gill has been active in the field of practical theology since the 1970's and now holds the Michael Ramsey chair in Modern Theology at the University of Kent at Canterbury. He first wrote of the 'myth of the empty church' in 1993 (Gill 1993) developing a research interest in the sociological study of churches. He was the first modern day practical theologian to interpret historical statistical records maintained by local and national churches. In a contribution to an assessment of religious belief and practice in Britain today, Gill justifies his preference for measures of attendance rather than membership. He also utilises other independent reference sources (for example, Currie et al 1977) to conclude "that churchgoing decline began among Anglicans soon after 1850, among many Free Church members soon after 1870, and among Roman Catholics soon after 1960" (Gill 2003, p.24). His assessment is unique for the sociological insights it offers but Gill is reluctant to offer much theological comment. This has left the way open for historians such as Adrian Hastings

(Hastings 2001) and Callum Brown (Brown 2002) to develop the interpretation of longitudinal church statistics. Both have separately sought to utilise churchgoing trends in order to pinpoint the pivotal moment in the nation's slide towards secularization and they have been encouraged in this task by religious sociologists led by Steve Bruce (Bruce 2002) and David Voas (Voas 2003). They have assumed a direct causal relation between churchgoing, affiliation and belief as instanced by one contribution entitled "The Demise of Christianity in Britain" (Bruce 2003).

For many years Robin Gill stood alone in bringing the changing patterns of churchgoing to the attention of practical theologians. There was a paucity of any further exploration of the theological context until Paul Weller a professor of inter-religious relations, utilised the same statistical data alongside government census results as he examined the case for the continued establishment of the Church of England (Weller 2005). With perspectives drawn from the Baptist Christian tradition he proposed public provision for a broader mix of religious plurality including the secular. Fellow historians Garnett, Grimley, Harris, Whyte and Williams have recently challenged the secularisation debate further taking Callum Brown and several other commentators on the fortunes of religion over the last fifty years or so to task over their preoccupation with monocausality (Garnett et al 2006). They express misgivings with the statistically and institutionally focused approach which ignores the persistence of the sacred in peoples' lives often referred to as 'implicit religion' (Bailey 1998). They too observe that the secularisation thesis upheld by many has ignored growing evidence of religious plurality. They endorse Brown's exploration of 'discursive Christianity' (Brown 2002) but wish to look wider at "not just observance and belief, but its wider influence on society and culture" (Garnett et al 2006, p.6). They remind us that sociologists Berger, Cox, Martin, Davie and others have now moved from the secularisation thesis finding it "deceptively value-laden but also inadequately narrates the rise and fall of religion without allowing for the possibility of transformation" (p6). The debate seems ripe for a fuller theological reflection of the empirical evidence available.

In 1999 Gill brought his other research interest in Christian ethics into the developing churchgoing debate. Gill utilised results from the British Social Attitudes Survey and other national surveys to demonstrate that "there may indeed be a process here, with different regularities of churchgoing being associated with different moral attitudes" (Gill 1999, p.47). He confirmed other survey findings that "the drift from the churches is happening at a younger and younger age" (p.90). In addition, he presented evidence that conventional Christian belief is declining faster among the young. Gill interpreted the survey results against the Pauline background of belief and "the fruits of this work of Christ in humankind" (p.123) ie the manifestations of belief. He also examines the theory expounded first by religious sociologist, Grace Davie, that whilst Christian 'belonging' has declined in Britain, Christian beliefs nonetheless persist but Gill finds this to be a residual belief in God (p.63). He concludes "the staple ingredients of regular worship act as carriers of the distinctive Christian culture of faith, hope and love" (p.230).

Gill's study provides a salutary note to the consequences for society of the continued decline in churchgoing. He is alone in bringing theological insights on the nature of personal belief and practise to the public debate of the (changing) relation between belief and churchgoing in modern day England. Religious sociologists have dominated the secularization debate and have continued to use traditional measures of churchgoing as a direct indicator of the strength and health of Christian faith with little regard for the changing underlying faith profile of society and religious practice. Gill's research has sought to encourage reflection on the impact of changing religious practice to individual faith and belief. He has brought practical theology to the attention of religious sociologists as they reflect on faith in Britain today. The Church has suffered from the lack of confidence among many practical theologians to engage with longitudinal faith based statistics in the way Gill has meticulously done to interpret changing patterns of faith and practice.

There are a growing number of reputable national religious surveys in this area (for example, the regular British Social Attitudes Surveys and the recent Opinion Research Business national religious attitude surveys) waiting for practical theological reflection. Paul Avis laments that these surveys and "the body of empirical material that is currently available is flawed by lack of theological sensitivity there are cultural constraints on the ways people think and express themselves on matters of belief." (Avis 2003, p136). These surveys reveal, for example, that although Christian belief is diminishing personal prayer remains a widespread Christian practice while many churchgoers read their Bibles infrequently and only attend church on special occasions. There is a growing gap in modern day society between believing, belonging and participating (Davie 1994). Cathedral worship is more popular and yet Christianity in the public space appears to be in demise. On the other hand privatised religion and its role, for example, in the social fabric of society and in the rites of passage of individuals plays a significant but insufficiently understood role in people's lives. David Hay and Kate Hunt have begun to explore this area of enquiry by listening to the spiritual experiences of those who do not go to church. Their findings present a challenge to re-interpret religious praxis for today. As awareness of church and the place of public religion is diminishing they highlight that "without a shared language, spirituality will continue to be privatised" (Hunt 2003, p.168).

Daniel Groody's praxis of practical theology may prove to be helpful here. Like Gill, Groody starts with the reality of chilling statistics but he brings both theological and spiritual reflection to turn them into a hope-filled vision of God's love for the world. In particular, he presents the Church with the challenge of globalisation and of liberation theology, "not just orthodoxy (right doctrine) but orthopraxis (right living) right living and sustained reflection allow one to accurately perceive the truths of reality" (Groody 2007 p.190). Groody takes modern day experiences and asks what can be learnt of God in them. He listens, for example, to the resonance between the Eucharist and the plight of modern day immigrants (Groody 2006) and reinterprets their shared spiritual language. Groody may have diagnosed the issue here for the institutional Church when he observes that "Liberation on the religious level invites not only the oppressed to undergo conversion but the oppressor" (Groody 2007, p186).

Congregational studies

Independently of the place of churches and religion in the public space, consideration of the place of religious groups as networks of membership organisations has developed within a stronger sociological framework. The first significant congregational studies in the UK appeared in the 1950s. They have developed very differently to their counterparts on the other side of the Atlantic which have been more community orientated due to the different role of religion in American society. The separate development in the UK of extrinsic and intrinsic studies, external and internal perspectives of local congregational life is well documented by religious sociologists Linda Woodhead, Matthew Guest and Karin Tusting. Since the 1970s congregational studies in the UK, in contrast to America, has focussed much more on intrinsic concerns that describe congregations for their own sake and neglect their linkage. The authors note that the emergence of practical (or pastoral) theology in the 1970s encouraged an examination of the congregation as “the core site of Christian experience” (Guest et al 2004, p.8) but, with the exception of feminist theological enquiry, this has for the most part moved away from extrinsic perspectives. Organizational studies and Church Growth (or Church Health) studies have only developed selectively while examinations of the socio-economic characteristics of congregations have dominated. One of the most interesting recent combinations of qualitative and quantitative research in the field of congregational studies was carried out at the turn of the millennium by Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead. It proposed three alternative typologies of congregational life, religions of difference, religions of humanity and spiritualities of life. (Heelas & Woodhead 2005) In Kendal where the study was conducted, the first two forms of congregations “demanded a high degree of conformity and deference and had suffered massive decline since the 1970s. By contrast, holistic forms of spirituality almost uniformly devoted to resourcing subjective life, were found to have exploded since the late 1980s” (Guest et al 2004, p.18). Woodhead, Guest and Tusting discuss why intrinsic studies dominate and regret the lack of interest in congregations as contributors to social cohesion and social capital. Helen Cameron, for example, is alone in drawing attention to aspects of organisational membership to be found in congregations (Cameron 2003) and Timothy Jenkins offers unique (ethnographic) insights into the development of community religious identity and practice (Jenkins 1999).

A major contributor to congregational studies who has been one of the most significant influences on the Church of England in this area is Leslie Francis. In 1985 Francis practised as a social psychologist at the Culham College Institute for Church Related Education. He charted the statistical decline of rural Anglican congregations and surveyed their clergy to uncover common factors that influenced numerical growth. Parish profiles and an in-depth deanery study supplemented the quantitative data to provide material for discussion regarding the central place of children and young people in the life of the church. Francis resisted any attempt to discuss or contextualise his findings hoping instead “that local churches will be able to use these questions as a vehicle through which to assess their current work and to plan realistically for the future” (Francis 1985, p.153). This approach sets the tone for much of Francis’ contribution to congregational studies and indeed others have followed in a similar model, see for example, the Rural Church Project (Davies et al 1991). Francis has focussed considerable attention on the rural church but each study has been a self-contained exercise seeking to describe and understand

congregational profiles for their own sake and to promote self-evaluation by the local church. *Church Watch* (Francis 1996) and the *Rural Churches Survey* (Francis & Martineau 2002) are two prominent examples. These local church toolkits have encouraged congregations to reflect on their pastoral practice without any reference to theological frameworks to provide an appropriate formative reflection.

Francis moved to Bangor University to practise practical theology and his prolific production of quantitative survey reports has attracted much attention across the Church. Indeed, it has influenced a generation of church based policy makers to accept this model of religious social research enquiry as providing adequate formation towards developing pastoral practice with little sociological or theological reflection. In 1998, for example, an exploratory small scale survey of church leavers attracted much attention among commentators who were not encouraged to appreciate the limitations of the study. Philip Richter and Leslie Francis conducted telephone interviews across Greater London with striking results. Against the backdrop of the apparent relentless decline in churchgoing, *Gone But Not Forgotten* (Richter & Francis 1998) uncovered the multi-faceted patterns underlying church-leaving. Subsequently, the study was extended in geography and scope in *Gone for Good?* (Francis & Richter 2007). This concluded with a brief theological reflection on the implications for pastoral practice. Drawing on a theology of individual differences the authors propose a “multi-plex” church where participants can move between congregations to meet their needs. The implicit underlying assumption of a consumerist approach to churchgoing remains unacknowledged. Francis and Richter encourage the formation of increasingly diverse expressions of church with little regard for the inevitable challenge of holding this together in a theological framework that will in turn prescribe the nature of these expressions. Their model of enquiry is descriptive with scant regard for emerging formative issues. The inadequacy of this approach is highlighted by a detailed survey of Catholic congregation members, parish priests, bishops and other Catholic church workers (Knights & Murray, 2002). Not only do they creatively reflect on the model of evangelisation emerging (likening it to the buddleia bush) but they utilise the emerging issues to stimulate reflection on differing theological models or locations of evangelisation evident in the church today.

Francis, however, is consistent in his empirical research approach as he pursues other areas of Church life (for example, Francis & Robbins 2005, Francis & Craig 2006). He has been a long standing advocate of psychometric testing examining, for example, the psychological type profile of churchgoers and volunteers (Francis et al 2007, Francis & Pegg 2007). His particular concern here has been to investigate “burnout” and “stress” among church leaders. His empirical tools for the latter have been sophisticated, for instance, using the original and modified forms of the Maslachi Burnout Inventory (proposed by Maslachi & Jackson in 1986), which he advocates on the basis of its use among other caring professionals (Rutledge & Francis 2004). This inventory which developed from twenty two to thirty dimensions utilises Likert scales to “predict” emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and personal accomplishment. Francis also utilises the Revised Eysenck Personality Questionnaire to assess extraversion, neuroticism, psychoticism and lying (Turton & Francis 2007) and the Oxford Happiness Inventory to examine happiness and well-being (Randall & Francis 2002). These combined measurement tools are lengthy and

there is little attention to their interpretation in a religious context and the suitability of the selected measuring tools employed.

Numerous church based researchers and policy makers have readily adopted Francis' methodologies without proper reflection (for example, Sterland et al 2006) but there has been some reluctance to formally adopt psychometric testing within vocational and deployment assessments without fuller theological reflection. John Lloyd, for example, signals the dangers implicit when personality typing is used for spiritual formation and uncovers its derivation from Jungian philosophy. He is content for personality typing to be used as descriptive tools but expresses concern that it can restrict personality, discounting "that for Christians obedience takes precedence over all considerations of personal preference" and assessments "must ensure that this does not erode its Christ-centredness" (Lloyd 2007, p. 122). The limitations of Francis' descriptive approach are further illustrated by Helen Thorne, Sara Savage and Eolene Boyd-MacMillan as they in turn consider quantitative and qualitative data in order to reflect theologically on women's priesthood (Thorne 2000) and alternative psychological models for emerging patterns of Christian ministry and leadership using four different inventories of temperament, interpersonal values, team roles and conflict styles (Savage & Boyd-MacMillan 2007). Kate Bruce also demonstrates the benefits of bringing together mixed qualitative methodology and theological praxis to explore the effects of creative writing on people's images of God (Bruce 2007). The Church, for its part, is beginning to acknowledge its need for practical theological reflection in ministerial training (Bunting 2006). Savage encourages the Church further towards increasing formative debate explaining that "empirical research begins to answer the question for the Church, 'where are we now?', while theology and pastoral theology address the question of goal, 'where are we going?'. Both endeavours are needed for the Church to find her way." (Savage 2002 p.56).

Social capital

In the fields of religious sociology and congregational studies we have observed a paucity of theological reflection but happily the attention of practical theologians towards the contribution of the churches towards the social fabric of society has been altogether more encouraging. The concept of 'social capital' made famous in America by Robert Putnam (Putnam, 2000) has been widely adopted in Britain by academics and policy makers alike but the churches contribution to this debate in England began long before this term became well known. In 1985 the Church of England brought its concerns in this area to public attention with the publication of the landmark report on 'urban priority areas' called *Faith in the City* (The Report of the Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on Urban Priority Areas 1985). The report sought to interpret social indicators of poverty and deprivation so as to challenge Church and State to have faith in the city. It considered theological priorities for the Church and State in what some have observed to be politically naïve expectations of government intervention.

A huge amount of involvement was unleashed by *Faith in the City*. Government was challenged by the Church's involvement and the Church Urban Fund which resulted still remains a significant player in funding urban social provision. The theology of the report attracted criticisms of being too close to liberation theology and in 1986 Chris Sugden and Michael Paget-Wilkes challenged what they perceived as a lack of theological reflection on two of the underlying concepts in the report, namely, of "good news for the poor" (Sugden 1986, p.7) and "that the strengths of the Church of England are to be found in middle-class congregations" (Paget-Wilkes 1986, p.11). Ten years later, in 1996, Elaine Graham sought to bring to our attention the tensions within the report of a State Church "predominantly middle-class in membership, attempting to 'keep faith' with those most badly-hit by an increasing polarized society" (Graham 1996, p.191). She pointed out the unquestioning use in the report of a statistical portrait of 'urban priority areas' based on a statistical device known as a 'Z score'. This measure correlates indices of multiple deprivation and is used in isolation to designate certain districts 'urban priority areas'. She examined the theological notions that she observed at the heart of the report: the 'kingdom of God' and 'koinonia', or community and she observed that the report "seems to want a 'kingdom' theology without too great a rupture of the existing order" (p.184).

Graham also painted a useful social, political and theological background to *Faith in the City* noting how 'out of date' earlier Christian social thought appeared. She began to demonstrate how practical theological reflection could develop the debate and she examined, in particular, the work of one of the major contributors at that time, Harvey Cox, concluding that he and many others viewed modern cities as "the cradle of human liberation and the triumph of liberal values" (p173). Meanwhile the Church sought to 'correct' the apparent preoccupation with urban deprivation producing the report *Faith in the Countryside* (Report of the Archbishops' Commission on Rural Areas 1990) but, in lacking the cutting edge of its urban sister, this report has not had the same impact.

On the 21st anniversary of *Faith in the City*, the Church of England sought to update these findings. *Faithful Cities* (The Report from the Commission on Urban Life and Faith 2006) brought together new government deprivation statistics and other independent social research findings. The Commission built on the Church's hands-on experience over the intervening years to broaden the debate on social deprivation, towards social and personal well-being and it introduced the concept of 'faithful capital', the contribution faith based organisations bring to their neighbourhoods. Having a statistician on the secretariat seconded from the government enabled the report to evaluate a variety of attempts towards quantifying this faithful capital alongside stories of Christian involvement in community life. It brought to the attention of the Church research into indicators of personal well-being particularly among young people and it concluded by recommending action by the Church particularly in the areas of clergy training and in its mission among young people. This represented one of the first major occasions where practical theology has been utilised successfully to point the Church towards a vision of itself within modern society. Much of the information assembled has been subsequently used for government lobby and to promote public awareness of the contribution churches make to their local communities both by their presence and in terms of social capital.

The theological reflection in *Faithful Cities* benefited from the presence of Elaine Graham as a member of the Commission and an entirely different model of exploration was developed through core themes running through the report. It sought to build on the liberation theology incorporated in its predecessor but to make the theological basis for the report ‘practical’, ‘ordinary’ and ‘everyday’, following in the footsteps of theologians such as Jeff Astley, Robert Beckford and Anthony Reddie (p.15). Alongside this theological approach stood a sociological viewpoint of Britain as ‘post-Christian’ and ‘post-secular’ with religious faith remaining a significant part of the nation’s landscape. Peter Robinson who is involved in the teaching and practice of urban theology in Newcastle saw two major theological imperatives for the Churches in the report: to practise contextual theology and to reflect on God’s gift of humanity, human dignity, relationships and goodness (Robinson 2008, p.38) but he acknowledged that the theology incorporated into the report is subtler than its predecessor. He highlighted the implicit assumptions of hospitality and of enabling neglected voices to be heard while noting the significance of the move away from the term ‘urban priority area’.

Robinson brought his scientific background and practical experience of social and economic regeneration to bear on the report. He saw emerging issues for the Church around bringing its distinctive contribution to communities in partnership with others. He questioned how this would alter the formation of its local church leadership and further encouraged the Church “to map the knowledge, aptitude and skills required to work in partnership, to analyze context critically and to work with communities(to) enable these patterns to emerge appropriately out of local vision and needs”(Robinson 2007, p.49). In this way, Robinson suggests that *Faithful Cities* might encourage local church leadership to engage in practical theology for themselves incorporating critical enquiry and evidence collection to inform the development of their pastoral practice.

Not everyone, however, agrees with the theological framework operating under the skin of the *Faithful Cities* report. Andrew Davey prefers to consider how Christians can shape cities through their everyday and prophetic faithfulness (Davey 2007, p.18). He concludes that social capital should not be the barometer of success but grace, the ability to be both salt and light. Elsewhere, he argues for “a transfigured, not a regenerated city”, a city that employs Christian based counter-cultural values and lifestyles (Davey 2008, p.46). Thus, a stimulating debate has been initiated that will enhance theological understanding of the churches vision for their contribution towards social capital in Britain today. Public awareness has also been beneficially informed through the ongoing dialogue between practical theology and the collection of empirical evidence. In contrast, the approach of the rural equivalent to *Faithful Cities* remains confined to a collation of the empirical evidence of contributions faith communities bring to rural community vibrancy (Farnell et al 2006).

Faithful Cities has already directly resulted in episcopally led church resources being introduced into faith based community discussions held with government. Questions are being asked as to whether the Church “has the capacity to take on more welfare provision(although) it needs to consider the principles involved” (Bradstock and David 2007, p.12) while qualitative research has been used to reveal an overall picture of the relationship between government and Church social policy makers (Davis et al 2008). It is clear to observers that practical theology is making a significant contribution to a healthy debate in this area of church life, a debate both formed by and being formed by emerging empirical research findings. As the concepts of social and faithful capital are being developed and interpreted by sociologists and practical theologians, the churches are being challenged to re-examine the basis on which they offer activities within neighbourhoods, the purpose of those activities and the measurement of their success. Practical theology is moving the Church to re-evaluate priorities within the incarnational mission agenda of the churches among their neighbours. In her sermon on the occasion of the commissioning of the first Bishop of Urban Life and Faith, Elaine Graham exhorts pilgrims on the journey of life and faith to “look around” and see the hospitality of the kingdom of God towards the making of a good city (Graham 2007, p.7). To help churches do this, the Church Urban Fund has sponsored a resource for local churches to evaluate their contribution to their neighbourhoods, the faithful capital they bring to community life (Commission for Urban Life and Faith 2006). Perhaps it will not be long before the Church of England in this area of public life is engaging with practical theology at grass roots, following the example of the Church in America sponsoring seminars with local church leaders to discern the vision for “Mission Focussed, Faith-Based Development” that utilises community analysis and land use decisions.

Concluding remarks

The Church is not short of empirical data though there is no doubt it could be maintained with more consistently. It is in need of practical theologians who will engage with the messages the data contains to inform a better understanding and formation of modern day faith in the lives of people in Britain today. The national report *Faithful Cities* presents a particular example of the beginning of such a model where reflective theology and empirical research has come together throughout its formation to stimulate a creative debate refocusing the future mission of the Church among its neighbours. Practical theologians such as Daniel Groody are formulating models of engagement for the Church with empirical evidence.

As the nation becomes increasingly pluralistic and more distant from its Christian roots, practical theological reflection will enable the Church to relate to the shifting sands in which it is called to exercise its vocation. The different areas of public life of the Church explored here have revealed to differing extents encouraging signs of a growing dialogue between empirical research and practical theology. Research is now needed among Church policy makers to explore how further developments in the varying conversations between empirical research and practical theology in different areas of Church life can be taken forward. There are pressing social issues for policy makers that would benefit from a closer engagement with practical theology.

Ongoing practical theological debates can not only properly interpret existing empirical data but shape its collection in the future. It was Karl Barth who in 1963 remarked in an interview that we will travel through life with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other, reading the newspaper through the message of the Bible (cited by Drane 2008, p. 142). A joint submission to the broadcasting regulator Ofcom by the Anglican and Roman Catholic bishops of Manchester and Westminster in June 2008 warned of the current danger of building a modern day 'Tower of Babel' in Britain today. With many competing voices in today's public spaces it is theologically informed evidence and praxis that will enable the Church to contribute a prophetic and pastoral voice with increasing confidence.

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