

Reflections of a Church Researcher

My professional journey on the Church Wedding project team was an interesting experience. I have taken the opportunity to record some reflections on my experiences participating as a social researcher listening to the experiences of the team alongside the findings of the project based research. This offers an auto-ethnographic contribution to this thesis and to the research findings, in particular, from the priest researchers. It acknowledges my *insider role* on the project team and my direct identification as a fellow wedding practitioner.

The Church Wedding project team was enthusiastic in its use of social research to describe different experiences of contemporary church weddings. Qualitative research findings from semi-structured interviews among first time wedding couples were bringing positive aspects to the otherwise negative stories and statistics emanating from the churches. Colleagues in the National Church Institutions (NCIs) were therefore suspicious and concerned when I sought to explore further the experience of marrying clergy. They wanted the training events to be as positive as possible and after some initial curiosity they did not overly encourage this aspect to the research programme. For the first time they felt challenged in their willingness to consider the experiences and views of the professional practitioners alongside the results of research among attracted to the edges of the church. The team had been keen to listen to the voices of wedding couples and their guests but were reluctant to listen to clergy and their congregation members who they considered to be out of touch with their wider communities and the needs of contemporary society. The main focus of the project was to deliver recommendations on schedule and to bring closure to the project whereas the clergy observations, in particular, suggested a further phase to consider so as to reflect on their responses.

Colleagues in the project team also resisted practical and theological reflection around church wedding practices and policies. Some of the practical issues that had generated differing views of church missiology had practical implications for the wedding day itself. These include the professional partnership with organists and photographers, fee charging policies and other differing practices regarding, for example, scheduling alongside other services, flowers and bell ringers. During the clergy training events it became evident that bishops and clergy perceive these issues differently and that the conversation between them is limited. For their part the project team, having been funded directly by the Archbishops' Council, wholeheartedly promoted episcopal priorities that were driven by the desire to increase both the number and the impact of church weddings on society at large.

The parochial clergy who attended the training events, in turn, showed resistance towards any “central” coordination and sought to localize the suggested enhancements to their church wedding ministry. Frequently, as sole professionals in this particular parochial ministry they make independent decisions about changing aspects of their pastoral practice. They are reluctant to share reflective practice and do not warm easily to participating in discussion forums. Despite the availability of a number of practical wedding ministry instruction books, clergy are largely self-taught in their wedding ministry following initial guidance from their training incumbent. There are no significant systems to disseminate good practice and their learning is predominantly self-directed.

In my position as a professional church researcher in the field of pastoral ministry in church weddings I found myself representing the NCIs to the clergy and the clergy to the Church institutions. My position was often misunderstood by each side, which hindered creative conversations. Clergy considered me to be part of the Church institution while the NCIs accused me of aligning myself too closely with the clergy. This has left this church researcher feeling isolated at the edge of the Church alongside some of the more active and thinking clergy. My role as a priest researcher gave me authority as a fellow professional but many clergy viewed my perceived agenda for change with suspicion. Frequently, the parochial clergy, whilst acknowledging their deployment by the institution, operated independently from it keeping their ministry “below the radar” and beyond critique. It is noticeable that they and the institution respond more positively to research from beyond Church boundaries that, although less informed, is seen to be more independent and authoritative.

Caught in the tensions of institutional church research, my position has felt analogous to the Hebrew prophets who spoke from the edge of the Jewish institution of their day. Some insights from Rowan Williams have been helpful at this point:

“The church is always renewed from its edges rather than the centre. There is a limit to what the institutional church can do: institutions have their own dynamics and their own problems, and renewal tends not to come from central planning (it was St Francis who went to the Pope Innocent III not the other way round).”

(Williams R, Silence and Honey Cakes: The wisdom of the desert, Lion Publishing, Oxford 2003 p109)

St Francis was above all a pastoral practitioner who sought to bring the faith of the church to the everyday lives of the people of his day and to identify with those on the edge of the church. His experience is typical of many who down the ages have been burdened by the need to renew the Church. Frequently, pastoral practices have been resilient to change until challenged through contact with those beyond the institution. This would suggest that pastoral policies may be informed but not very frequently

renewed from the centre of the NCIs. The role of the church researcher perhaps becomes more akin to that of the religious prophet speaking to each side that, in turn, test this message against other competing voices from society and the church.

Since the closure of the Church Wedding project, the NCIs have taken the step of developing research partnerships with external research bodies. Some have little knowledge of the Church and the lack of involvement of church researchers has already been noticeable from the research questions they have posed. The story of contemporary research in the NCIs indicates that prophetic voices within its midst are not always welcomed and church researchers have on a number of occasions been left feeling like John the Baptist, the prophet with “a voice crying in the wilderness”. The experience of evangelists brought together in the seminal volume “Mission Shaped Church” (Church of England Mission and Public Affairs Council 2004) describes the parallel story of church evangelists. The *mixed economy church* that has come to receive mainstream acceptance could hold parallels for mixed method research using both insider and outsider teams. Early research into church planting and more recent research into clergy deployment, ministerial expectations and training experiences illustrate a continued resistance across the Church to the views of contemporary society that challenge the status quo.

The journey of this professional church researcher as Head of Research and Statistics for the Archbishops’ Council over the duration of this project reflects in a particular way the journey of institutional church research over recent years. On a private retreat I found it helpful to reflect this in a poem which comments on the evolving relationship between the church institution and church research and continues to hope for the renewal that relationship.

“The journey of a church researcher”

I brought my mind, heart and spirit,
as companions on my journey.
Now I retrace the path we travelled
towards truth pursued so rightly.
Secure in our knowledge we followed together a single vision,
the yellow brick road for Church and heaven.

All we sought now seems a distant dream;
a message tested, we ponder.
Priest and prophet, their presence does call
from the wilderness, to uncover,
reconnect to the times, point and pray;
seeking together God’s pattern in “*The Missio Dei*”.

Journey we on as pilgrims of The Way,
lost yet found, we wrestle.
Like Jacob climb the ladder of knowing,
Keen to persevere in the struggle.
Prayerful wisdom like salt can spread its flavour,
bring fullness of life, health to savour?

We follow dreamers and prophets of old;
Joseph and Miriam encountered rejection,
Elijah and Jonah fled for safe haven,
all had a future in God's restoration.
Searching for signs of God's kingdom
brings seers to the edge for revelation.

Bridging two worlds carries a cost, proffers
a pearl of great price;
in their vocation church and nation each reconciles
the espoused and habited voice;
Research serves well to listen and tell
of God's treasures: *"All shall be well"*.

Lynda Barley