

ANGLIA RUSKIN UNIVERSITY

TOWARDS THE DEVELOPMENT OF  
PRIEST RESEARCHERS  
IN THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

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ANGLIA RUSKIN UNIVERSITY  
ABSTRACT

FACULTY OF ARTS, LAW AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

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The Church of England is living through a time of significant change in attitudes towards local church ministry, congregational participation and pastoral practices. As it seeks to respond with integrity to changes in contemporary society the Church's dialogue with empirical social research is beginning to develop more fully. This thesis focuses on a pioneer national project to explore the effectiveness of pastoral ministry in contemporary church weddings. The social science research methods used in this project revealed insights into the ministry of contemporary church weddings with the intention of shaping responsive parochial wedding policies. This thesis considers the potential for further local enquiry by individual marrying clergy to understand the *ordinary theology* (proposed by Astley) of their communities using methods of ordinary research alongside a shared reflective practice. It highlights the socio-theological interface within reflective empirical theology by pastoral practitioners in the Church.

A model of participatory action research incorporating online clergy forums and change agent groups is explored to stimulate parochial and institutional change among clergy in partnership with each other. The role of *priest researchers* is proposed and identified in other pastoral contexts to examine factors that motivate clergy to participate in the development of pastorally responsive national policies. A methodology of personal diaries, focus groups and one to one interviews is used to explore the responses of clergy to participating in reflective praxis.

The findings point to key factors in developing pastoral practice and policies involving the place of ministerial development and attitudes towards collaborative working. A typology of pastoral ministry is developed towards identifying priest researchers in the Church. The research affirms the contribution of pastoral practitioners towards the development of pastorally responsive national policies but the nature of parochial deployment and clergy relationships with each other and the Church institutions frequently preclude much of this contribution.

Keywords: Change agent groups, ordinary research, participatory action research, priest researcher, reflective empirical theology, reflective praxis.

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*April 2014*



# Towards the development of 'priest researchers' in the Church of England

## **1. The developing role of social research in the Church**

### **1.1 Introduction**

This thesis explores the interface between empirically based social research and theological reflection, and its potential contribution towards the future of the Church of England. It considers a partnership between parochial clergy to be responsive to contemporary society as the Church formulates changes in pastoral practice and policies. The national Church Wedding project offers the opportunity to investigate the response of parochial clergy to social research findings and their willingness to participate further in establishing the Church's response<sup>1</sup>. This case study enables the research to explore the contribution parochial clergy can beneficially bring to this task and the response of the Church institutions to such a model of pastoral policy development.

The Church of England is a mix of local, regional and national organisms that come together in a complex pattern of relationships. In Chapters 1 and 2, I locate myself in the organisation of the Church as an *insider researcher* to reflect on the influence of empirical social science research methods on the Church and parishes. In Chapter 3, the nature of the Church Wedding project for the Church and the reaction of parochial clergy to this project will be explored. The research question is formulated for specific research in this thesis into developing a model of participatory action research towards establishing an on-going tool for the participation of parochial clergy in the responsive development of pastoral ministry. The research task is designed in response to the influence on the Church of developments in the academy in the interface between

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<sup>1</sup> The term "Church" is used in this thesis as in many official Church of England documents to refer to the institutional and corporate body, the collegiate coming together of local Church of England churches across the nation.

sociology and theology. The nature of processes to effect change in the Church are considered along with the evolving relationship between parochial clergy and the Church institutions, and attitudes towards the ministerial development of pastoral practice. These conceptual frameworks and theological perspectives are outlined in Chapters 4 to 6.

Change agent groups are facilitated among marrying clergy to utilise reflective praxis and action research methods, and the experience is contrasted with the participation of *priest researchers* in other areas of church life. Chapters 7 and 8 develop the grounded interpretative methodology of this research, which incorporates my own experience as a professional priest researcher to offer an auto-ethnographic contribution (Appendix 9). Online methods, telephone and face-to-face interviews come together as different modes of enquiry. Chapters 9 and 10 provide an inductive analysis of the findings and a typology of clergy profiles emerges to offer insights towards the development of the fuller utilization of priest researchers for the future role of the Church in the nation. Emerging themes from the research findings are brought together in Chapter 11 and point to the potentially beneficial contribution of reflective empirical theology offered by local theologians. The discussion in Chapter 12 prompts the Church to consider how to more actively involve and support the role of priest researchers in policy development. In the concluding Chapter 13, a model of *Theological Action Research* (Cameron, et al., 2010) is nuanced to offer the Church a vehicle for the development of pastoral ministry through the participation of priest researchers who locate themselves in their parochial context along the insider-outsider continuum.

## **1.2 My professional context in the Church of England**

This thesis was primarily undertaken while I was employed at the Archbishops' Council of the Church of England. The Archbishops' Council is one body within the National Church Institutions (NCIs) and my role as Head of Research and Statistics was to coordinate empirical research across these institutions and the dioceses of the Church of England. The role took me into policy discussions in the House of Bishops, in meetings of the General Synod, in various Council and Board meetings of the Archbishops' Council and to a number of diocesan based policy forums, which involved clergy and

lay people of the Church of England. It also involved formal presentations to ecumenical bodies and I became Chair of the Churches Together in England Statistical Gatherers. Topical findings from our research generated considerable public interest and I was regularly invited to contribute to academic seminars, Church based conferences and interviews on local and national media. The core team of empirical researchers in the Research and Statistics department remained small but was expanded when necessary by the employment of suitably qualified researchers with specific specialist skills. This model of operation was considered to offer a professionally rich and beneficial mix of experience and expertise on a limited budget.

I came to this post in the year 2000 coincidentally as the Archbishops' Council was formed from the Church of England Central Board of Finance. This new body was partly in response to an expressed need to broaden the national administrative function and to offer an executive body alongside the policy making bodies of the House of Bishops and the General Synod. The Archbishops' Council was designed to act alongside the Church Commissioners, the Pension Board and the offices of the two Archbishops to provide administrative support to the wider Church (Archbishops' Commission on the Organisation of the Church of England, 1995). The relationship is one of mutual support as the Archbishops' Council seeks to act on behalf of the forty-four dioceses that currently make up the Church of England and to co-ordinate matters of national concern sharing policy, legal guidelines and good practice. After eleven years in this post, having overseen the significant enhancement of empirical research into national Church life, I moved on to a more local diocesan-based post in the south west of England. By this time the five national institutions had settled into a working partnership but the Archbishops' Council, in particular, still remained a controversial entity for many in the Church.

I came to my national post as an experienced and qualified statistician and social researcher serving also in local parishes as a self-supporting minister. I was ordained in 1996 and subsequently exercised ministry in both the south west and south east of England. Whilst working at the Archbishops' Council I continued to exercise local and cathedral ministry in rural and central London settings, which brought added

dimensions to the role as Head of Research and Statistics. Towards the end of 2011, I moved to a pastoral role in the Church of England as an ordained parochial priest in Truro diocese and canon pastor at the cathedral. I had completed the fieldwork for this thesis and fresh employment in the Church of England has enabled me to reflect from a particular (diocesan) perspective on my experiences as an empirical researcher for the Archbishops' Council. I anticipate that the fruits of this thesis will benefit those seeking to develop processes of ministerial training and development, in addition to my successors as they continue to develop the relationship between empirical research, the Church and dioceses of the Church of England.

My new working context in a more local setting within the Church of England is facilitating a wider perspective on my professional experience at the Archbishops' Council. It provides a pastoral context where empirical research can be applied to practical policy making and to theological reflection. This is welcome on a personal level as an opportunity to observe the intense politics of policy making in the Church of England. I am maintaining contact with Church research in two national forums and building on parallel experience teaching in higher education to share expertise in Research Methods in socio-theological enquiries.

### **1.3 The changing role of Church researchers**

My role at the Archbishops' Council came into being as a result of a national review of the statistical parochial collection processes of the Church of England requested by the Archbishop of Canterbury (Archbishops' Council 2000). The post was developed from that of *Head of the Statistics Unit* as the remit of the department's work programme was enhanced to include both qualitative and quantitative research. A consultant panel of reference was formed to offer advice and expertise from a range of academic and commercial professional skills. At a time when budget cuts were frequent our continued resourcing was at times controversial but the department quickly became a valued source of information. It was utilised particularly by bishops and policy makers across the Church in need of increasing amounts of evidence to resource fast changing public debates and Church policy reviews.

The work programme of the newly reconfigured department escalated at a significant rate so that by 2011 the annual church based statistical collection schedule had expanded and embraced parallel exercises in qualitative areas of interest and measures of wider public attitudes towards the Church. The work was financially sponsored by divisions of the Archbishops' Council and other bodies, and my role was to manage and coordinate this process and the delivery of the research programme. The core research team remained at a largely constant level with the exception of a single permanent staff reduction, which was partly countered by attracting a formal, on-going contract with Methodist Church partners to complement the core research programme. As the work grew in diversity and magnitude, increasing amounts of contract work was commissioned and independent researchers were employed for specific projects.

However, almost as quickly as the Church had begun to actively support and promote research conducted by internal Church researchers it began to reconsider this model. The turning point came with a major cross-departmental project initiated in 2006 to explore concerns in the national trends in statistics on church weddings. Qualitative research had at this time become a significant attraction and the design of the national Church Wedding project involved mixed method research (including one to one/paired/group interviews, surveys and questionnaires) among couples getting married for the first time in church. To gather feedback from a socially representative sample of wedding couples it was decided to utilise an external market and social research company who could bring their expertise towards defining the potential church wedding market in England. The company contracted to undertake this task brought a background in defining market segments and developing market strategies in the commercial world, and their research team quickly established a strong working relationship with the Archbishops' Council project group. The *outsider research team* brought an apparent evidential objectivity to their task at the expense of a working appreciation of the research context (Coghlan and Brannick 2010). They offered professional research based insights from a more distant stance, while the nature of the project funding meant that a greater variety of resources could be focussed on delivering the results in a faster timeframe.

The use of triangulation and mixed social research methods utilised by the external professional research team in the Church Wedding project were soon sought by Church colleagues for other areas of pastoral concern. But as the Church sought to respond to its changing context amidst national economic pressures, the increased complexity of its research challenged the internal resources available. In the event, the core research staffing in the Research and Statistics department remained constant so that as the agenda of research topics grew external Church researchers were employed for specific projects under the management of the department. Increased working in partnership with Church policy advisors brought closer coordination but the Research and Statistics team came under increased pressure to achieve results more quickly. Projects were considered for independent external contractual arrangements and the internal Church research expertise came under review.

The capacity to continue to develop a model of Church research within the Church by *insider researchers* had diminished under the pressures of delivery and agendas of change. External research providers became directly sponsored by policy makers with varying degrees of reference to Research and Statistics professional personnel. The attitude of management had travelled full circle over the first decade of the twenty-first century leaving Research and Statistics staff focussing for the major part on the development of the annual statistical collection from the parishes. Colleagues in other areas of the NCIs undertook the management of the broader mandate of research, largely limiting the input of the internal professional research team to complementary statistical production. As several research projects came to completion, I moved to a more local area of ministry, which offered the opportunity to reflect on this experience of developing Church research to offer fuller contextualised insights and interpretations.

#### **1.4 The contribution of pastoral practitioners**

When policies are reviewed in the Church of England clearly defined procedures are routinely exercised. Consultation between national “leadership” bodies and local parishes is conducted through the synodical system consisting for the most part of elected representatives to the Houses of Laity, Clergy and Bishops (Podmore 2005). This system is modelled along parliamentary lines and is not conducive to sharing

systems of good practice or for responding to matters of pastoral concern. During my time at the Archbishops' Council it proved challenging to share the fruits of contemporary empirical research in forums that were designed to be debating decisions. One other consequence of the dominance of this decision-making system was the lack of reference to the clergy practitioners who would be required to engage with its findings at a local pastoral level. Areas of concern might be voiced but parochial clergy were rarely directly involved in pastoral policy reviews. Elected committees usually utilised expert advisors to develop policies, which were considered by the nationally elected body of the General Synod before being passed to the dioceses, deaneries and parishes for implementation.

As the place of social research in the Church grew, a number of pastoral contexts emerged where parochial clergy and other ministers felt unable to contribute to debates that involved the use of research to inform changing pastoral practice. Paper 2 written in preparation for this thesis is entitled "Developing a model of empirical research in the Church of England as an agent of change for pastoral policies" (Appendix 2) and was published in the journal *Practical Theology* (Barley 2010). It offers a potential model for incorporating the local congregational voice in two such areas of policy review of which the most prominent example for the Church was the Church Wedding project. Here the national project team sought to share their recommendations for good pastoral practice with parochial clergy through a two year programme of diocesan based road shows. The road shows were jointly sponsored with individual dioceses and invited the participation primarily of experienced priests who were actively involved in the pastoral ministry of church weddings. Feedback from these clergy indicated some frustration at the few opportunities offered during the road shows to share pastoral experiences and to engage in mutually informed discussion. They found the sharing of information by the project team and, in particular, the findings of research among wedding couples beneficial but they wanted to engage with the project team and to be offered the opportunity to reflect together as practitioners at a local level.

As the Church Wedding project developed, questions regarding aspects of professional practice became controversial and pointed towards the need for a proper framework for

debate. The payment of professional musicians at church weddings, for example, caused considerable disagreement among clergy. A fault line emerged between those primarily orientated towards establishing mission opportunities for the local church and those more concerned to finance the maintenance of their church buildings. Many clergy felt that individual churches should negotiate professional fees of this nature in order to be pastorally responsive towards wedding couples while others wanted the Church to continue to promote consistent national fee levels. The project highlighted the importance of transparency regarding wedding fees but differences in missiological outlooks affected the pastoral priorities of local church congregations and impacted on local practices regarding fees and other pastoral policies.

The Church Wedding project uncovered a number of experienced clergy expressing openness towards reflecting further on key pastoral issues arising in their local ministry. This highlighted the need for engagement with parochial clergy and other local Church of England ministers as pastoral policies are developed in response to the changing contemporary culture. The national decision making processes of the church cause tensions in pastoral ministry at a local level that are not easily resolved. As clergy exercise their pastoral ministry, there are few apparent conduits for any feedback to reach the ears of diocesan and national policy makers, their bishops and advisors. In the fast moving religious context in which the Church of England finds itself at the beginning of the twenty-first century, pastoral policies are in danger of gradually becoming distant to their practice. In the ministry of church weddings this has come into sharp focus as clergy endeavour to maintain pastoral and theological integrity while applying official Church guidance promoting traditional marriage and family life amidst a growing public acceptance of diverse and complex personal relationships.

## **1.5 Research design**

This thesis focuses on the contribution of parochial clergy to the development of pastoral practice and policies in the Church of England. It considers their potential role in empirically-based social research to inform the decision making processes of the Church. In order to understand the current gap in knowledge it is important to appreciate the wider background to the role of empirical research in the Church. These



theoretical aspects are initially considered in Chapter 2 by tracing the developing relationship between the Church and empirical social research towards identifying more fully (in Chapter 3) the gap in knowledge. The case study of the national Church Wedding project emerged from Paper 2 (Appendix 2) as a pastorally pressing context in which to explore this gap in knowledge to formulate the research question and thus to pursue its exploration through the research in this thesis.

The wider theoretical context for this research was initially proposed in Paper 3 (Appendix 3) and is discussed more fully in Chapters 4 to 7 to provide the conceptual framework for this thesis. Chapter 4 considers the development of empirical theology in the academy and its influence on the Church. It complements the study of three key voices from the academy for the use of empirical research by the Church in Paper 1 (Appendix 1). Chapter 5 reviews the nature of the Church in organisational terms and suggests appropriate models for effecting institutional change in pastoral practice while Chapter 6 outlines the changing attitude of the Church towards continuing ministerial development for parochial clergy. Each of these conceptual explorations point to the potential for a model of participatory action research by parochial clergy and the contribution of what this thesis suggests can be termed “priest researchers”. Chapter 7 brings this theoretical argument together to suggest a partnership between research mentors and parochial clergy to utilise ordinary, everyday research methods as proposed in Paper 2 (Appendix 2) to explore the *ordinary theology* in contemporary society (Astley 2002).

The theoretical construct of this thesis provides the platform for the design of the empirical research for this thesis in Chapter 8. The methodology is designed to complement the approach of the research utilised by the Church in the Church Wedding project and to explore the use of theologically reflective emancipatory action research to effect individual practitioner and organisational change. Following the experience in the academy of utilising participatory action research with teacher researchers, electronic diaries, online discussion forums, individual and group interviews are used to create change agent groups or action learning sets. The schedule of this research permitted one cycle of action research over the 2010 wedding season and the response

of the participating clergy is compared to that of priest researchers in other areas of pastoral ministry. These findings are recorded in Chapters 9 and 10 leading to the integration into the research design of my personal autoethnographic contribution (Appendix 9).

For the Church, the Church Wedding project reveals a pressing need for a mechanism to incorporate parochial clergy and other local church professional practitioners in the development of national pastoral policies. The themes emerging from this research process in the context of the Church Wedding project are discussed in Chapter 11 and their implications for the Church to listen to the voice of its clergy considered in Chapter 12. The concluding chapter suggests a way forward to enrich the development of pastoral practice and policies in the Church through the experience of pastoral practitioners and priest researchers. The Church is actively pursuing a stronger relationship with empirical research and the findings should be set against the developing attitude of clergy and the Church to such enquiries. In Chapter 2, I initially place this in the context of the history of Church research, which has primarily involved the relationship between the Church institutions and the academy. An appreciation of this story will enable a fuller understanding and commentary as issues emerge from the research in this thesis towards bringing the contribution of parochial clergy to institutional debates regarding the development of pastoral policies.

## **2. The Church of England and empirical social research**

This thesis is located in the experience of Church of England clergy as they seek to offer pastoral ministry in their parochial contexts at the beginning of the twenty-first century. It explores the relationship between the national Church and local pastoral ministry as each seeks to respond to emerging evidence of changing social and religious contexts. Contemporary public debate often expects sociological and theological evidence to be traded on both sides but Bartholomew, a professor of statistical and mathematical science, reminds us that the argument should extend to include the interplay of history and the social sciences: “It is certainly to history and human experience that theologians have usually appealed for empirical support for belief in a providential God” (Bartholomew 1984, p.9). It is pertinent to these debates and to this thesis to consider the Church of England’s *espoused* and *operant* responses to evidence emerging from empirical social research<sup>2</sup> (Cameron, et al., 2010). This chapter considers the development of the place of empirical social research in the national and local life of the Church of England and as it impacts on the role of Church researchers. It traces the expansion of social research to enhance statistical collection with qualitative enquiry and to go beyond their use as management tools to explore matters of pastoral concern. It reflects on the nature of the contributors in pastoral policy reviews to emphasis the omission of parochial practitioners highlighted towards the end of Paper 2 (Appendix 2).

### **2.1 The development of Church research**

In the latter years of the twentieth century, the Church of England wrestled with the widespread popular perception of it as an institution declining in public popularity. Bishops and other church leaders were concerned that measures used to quantify and reflect traditional areas of parish life were showing the churches in a poor light. These statistics had developed over the twentieth century in response to the growing desire to monitor the financial health of parish churches alongside their “membership” and ministry levels (Torry 2005, p.130). This growing body of parochially-based statistics

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<sup>2</sup> I use the terms “espoused” and “operant” respectively as defined by Cameron, et al., to distinguish between the voices of theology promoted by practitioners that, in the former case, are articulated through practices “informing and forming both formal and, ultimately, normative theologies” and, in the latter case, through practices that are “themselves bearers of embodied theology” (p.56).

was regularly collated by the Statistics Unit in the national body of the Church of England Central Board of Finance and published as statistical supplements to the annual yearbook (Central Board of Finance of the Church of England/Archbishops' Council 1978 onwards). Three compilations of these *Church Statistics* remain frequently employed sources of historic data up to the 1960's (Central Board of Finance of the Church of England 1959, 1962 and 1965). They were published to illustrate the numerical strength of the parochial church system across the dioceses of the Church of England and made little reference to the presence of the Church in other areas of national and local community life.

The Church of England was also being prompted to monitor its public following by government policy makers and official statistical sources. The Royal Statistical Society co-sponsored a series of volumes with the Economic and Social Research Council detailing United Kingdom sources of statistical information on areas of economic and social activity. The volume on religious statistics revealed a paucity of comparable measures of religious membership and participation alongside a growing wealth of occasional statistics on public attitudes towards religion (Barley, et al., 1987). Official government statistics at the time relied heavily on the UK Christian Handbook, which compiled a variety of statistical evidence to reflect religious involvement across the nation. It, in turn, relied significantly on survey statistics and other local statistics collated by individual denominations. It was regularly published until 2008 and latterly included estimates of religious adherence and practice in its companion volume *Religious Trends* (Brierley and Wraight, 2008). With the 2001 national census, the UK government re-initiated its own collection of statistics on religious identity following its single collection in the 1851 census. In parallel, the academy has sought to develop its monitoring of religious following through the British Social Attitudes Surveys implemented by the National Centre for Social Research and the University of Manchester has also initiated British Religion in Numbers to collate and update sources of religious statistics. Nevertheless, the availability of religious statistics remained uncoordinated across the Christian churches and, further afield, the only definitive global statistical calibration of all religious statistics was compiled and updated by Barrett, Kurian and Johnson to include all recognised religions (2001).

## **2.2 Enhancing statistical collection**

Over the first decade of the twenty-first century the range of statistical collection by the Church of England was actively developed to inform a growing public debate on the place of churchgoing in contemporary society. There was widespread scepticism at the variety of results and church debate emerged on the merits of differing measures of churchgoing (Thomas 2003; Jackson 2002). Complementary national surveys sponsored by the Archbishops' Council also highlighted the changing profile of churchgoing in modern Britain and revealed that further research was needed to provide a greater understanding in this area of local church life (Barley 2006/7).

The Archbishops' Council began to focus its attention on more qualitative sociological studies to understand the changing attitudes of the public towards religion and contemporary spirituality. A turning point came with the publication of an academic study into religion and spirituality in the market town of Kendal in northern England (Heelas and Woodhead 2005). The study uncovered a wealth of spiritual practices alongside a steady decline in traditional churchgoing particularly among women of middle years. The process of the individualisation of belief systems was identified as a contributor to the undermining of the moral basis of the Christian tradition and resulting in the coexistence of secularization and sacralisation. Separate research among young people was sponsored in the academy by the Archbishops' Council who became keen to understand the emerging spirituality among younger generations (Savage, et al., 2006, Collins-Mayo, et al., 2010). These qualitative studies involved semi-structured interviews among young people aged fifteen to twenty-five years of age and its report highlighted the key finding of a private "unchurched" spirituality among this generation.

Congregational studies in Britain, however, continued to be the prime source of evidential decision making in the Church. They focussed on numerical assessments to calibrate the health of a local church and much of the design for these numerical exercises originated from research by the German church growth consultant Schwartz (2005). Dioceses quickly grasped these tools for promoting self-sustainable models of church and parallel English resources grew in popularity. Church growth books based

on statistical assessments of congregational strength became popular (Jackson 2005) and individual churches were invited to participate in training courses promoting this model of Healthy Churches supported by the Archbishops' evangelistic initiative "Springboard" (Warren 2004). This development was widely supported across the Church of England dioceses and also influenced by the international Church Growth movement (Gibbs 1981). It utilised the research programme of the Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California and developed, for example, the Engel scale of Christian faith conversion, which significantly influenced missiological thinking in Britain at this time although the religious context was very different (Berger, Davie and Fokas 2008, Davie 2002). The Church was largely reliant on sociologists of religion and historians who were only beginning to identify the uniqueness of the British religious context discussed further in Chapter 4, section 4.3 (Garnett, et al., 2006).

The Commission on Urban Life and Faith brought together the Church Urban Fund and social researchers based in the academy to encourage local churches to consider the social profile of their neighbourhood and to quantify their contribution to community life (Commission on Urban Life and Faith 2006). This pointed the Church towards a more localised and contextualised approach to its mission in the nation. Churches were challenged to be more intentional about their mission outlook and to assess the potential for local mission using a process of Mission Action Planning, MAPping, in parish life (Chew and Ireland 2009). This approach to developing local strategies for mission sought to bring together theological reflection with an assessment of available resources with local neighbourhood needs. It offered a framework for processes of strategic planning around the mission of the local church through appraising particular situations rather than imposing any rigid formulae, and it has similarities to the *pastoral cycle* (or hermeneutic circle), which has been found helpful in applying theological insights to concrete situations (Chapter 4, section 4.5). The Research and Statistics department, for its part, developed digitised mapping based tools with diocesan colleagues to compare official government and local church data at various levels of geography. This computer based resource offered a perspective for church planning and brought together discussions regarding church finance and other local resources. The potential to provide insights into strategic mission and ministry planning, however, proved to be limited by resources within individual dioceses for its use.

Two aspects of the annual collection of parochial statistics that were attracting Church interest at this time were the impact on the mission of the Church of England of its cathedrals and of new forms of church/congregation planting. A national church report *Mission Shaped Church* (Church of England Mission and Public Affairs Council 2004) became widely used across the dioceses and the Fresh Expressions movement was initiated by the Archbishops to support new forms of church life. The Fresh Expressions movement initiated new churches under diocesan guidelines but its critics expressed concern, for example, at its independence from local parishes and its dependence on current models of church (Hull 2008). Its emergence from the Church Growth movement also attracted criticism of its “free market capitalism ... to attract them to church” (Davidson and Milbank 2010, p.83). To evaluate both these phenomena in church life, methods of statistical collection were enhanced and developed to research these growing areas of church life more closely. Individual case studies and other pieces of research undertaken into, for example, cathedral visitors and particular Fresh Expressions of church are gradually contributing to the interpretative task (Mobsby 2007; Williams 2007). The Church has found it challenging to offer fuller stories around popular headlines of church decline to a society that demands statistical evidence (Goodhew 2012).

### **2.3 Informing pastoral policies**

As qualitative and quantitative social research methods were gradually coming together in the development of official Church research, they provided fuller evidence to inform mission planning at a local level. Management tools were enhanced with the inclusion of case studies to illustrate and contextualise particular situations. Media communications released by the Church reported statistics and stories to inform popular opinion of Church decline. This mixed approach was also taken towards other research including an evaluation of the licensed ministry of the Church of England. The Research and Statistics team were commissioned by the Division of Ministry of the Archbishops' Council to consider the changing nature of licensed clergy deployment across the Church of England. Initial explorations were conducted into particular statistical trends evident from the national Crockfords licensed ministry database and

the initial quantitative research by the Research and Statistics team into clergy deployment provided management information that prompted the Division of Ministry to commission further exploration of the motivations and attitudes of clergy towards their deployment. Consequently, small focus groups were convened in conveniently located centres across England to gather feedback from the different categories of licensed ministry. A number of pressing issues emerged during the fieldwork including the need for specific research involving women clergy. This use of qualitative research to enrich statistical analyses brought additional insights to human deployment planning and strategy.

The provision of church based statistics also challenged a number of church commentators in the areas of, for example, local church ecumenical partnerships, rural ministry and the occasional offices where church policies meet with local church practices and the accepted rites of passage of local neighbourhoods. In these areas of pastoral ministry it was felt that the statistics traditionally collected had not provided sufficient light on the emerging issues for policies in these areas to be meaningfully reviewed at a national level. Exploratory research was suggested to highlight some of the major issues involved and, in contrast to the ministry deployment research, qualitative research was designed alongside further quantitative enquiries. The Church was developing the use of a variety of research methods and, over the first decade of the twenty-first century, it came to utilise the contribution of triangulation through, for example, individual and small group interviews, questionnaires and public surveys using telephone, online and postal communication tools.

In common with many other institutions, voluntary bodies and charitable agencies, the Church of England found itself subject to significant budget and resource constraints as the second decade of the twenty-first century began. This forced an evaluation of the planned research projects and methods were adopted that focussed on quantifiable deliverable aims and objectives. Research projects came to be judged against measures of success that could be numerically calibrated, for example, increased numbers of church weddings and attenders at church services. This approach built on traditional church counts that could be quickly calibrated but opportunities for further sociological



and theological reflection were neglected. Research findings that endorsed existing practice were highlighted while those that challenged the Church's traditional practices and values were not always fully addressed. Following initial research, for example, into the pastoral ministry of church weddings, the number of church weddings increased. However, connections with policy alterations alongside the 2008 Church of England Marriage Measure and of revisions in parochial fees on clergy pastoral working practices and wedding numbers were largely left for individual dioceses and parishes to separately consider.

Staff employed by the Church Commissioners had been involved in discussions to varying extents around the more recent research exercises managed by the Research and Statistics department. Their concern to promote the numerical growth of the Church resulted in a public invitation for tenders for Church Growth research projects in the areas of church attendance, chaplaincies and the occasional offices. Although qualitative explorations were considered in this research stream the emphasis was on factors behind numerical growth. This arm of the Church was concerned at the continued viability of a parochial model that offers every resident in England access to Church of England ministry through their own local church. As noted in Chapter 1 section 1.3, the internal research expertise was reviewed and invitations to propose suitable research were extended to the academy and to independent research agencies. It sought to contribute fresh models of church growth for the changing social situation in which the Church finds itself at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In challenging times the major national instruments of the Church prefer to be informed by quantifiable success stories to show churches in a good light in public debate.

The impact of this new stream of research on the work of the Research and Statistics department and on the role of the Church Commissioners in national and local church life has yet to be fully seen but the hard evidence of statistics remains a dominant feature of Church policy making. This chapter has traced the development of social research methods within the National Church Institutions (NCIs) to respond to enquiries into areas of pastoral ministry of the Church. The enhancement of statistical collection with qualitative enquiries has been progressed by the Research and Statistics department

but qualitative enquiry remains the lesser partner in social research endeavours. Of further immediate concern to this thesis is the paucity of possible contributions by clergy and other professional church based practitioners in the development of social research in the Church. This chapter has demonstrated the external sources of research expertise that have been regularly employed to explore issues of interest to the NCIs. Observations from such *outsider* researchers have both informed and been informed by complementary *insider* reflection. However, partnership in the research endeavour between national Church policies and the church at a local level has been neglected. At a time of significant social change for the Church of England the parochial clergy, have the potential to offer valuable insights. This thesis seeks to explore the potential for a research partnership with parochially based clergy and the following chapter uses the pastoral context of contemporary church weddings to explore this enquiry. It reflects on the possibility of pastoral practitioners in the Church making a contribution to the development of pastoral policies and practice, and developing the necessary skills of reflective practice and participatory research to do this. It concludes by drawing insights from this particular parochial context towards the development of pastoral ministry to propose the research question for this thesis.

### **3. Researching pastoral practice and policies**

This chapter will explore the potential among parochial clergy to participate in empirical research which reviews pastoral practice and policies in the Church. The preceding chapters have outlined how Church research has developed in the Church of England over recent years; how the Church has become more receptive to the influence of empirical research and welcomed its contribution to debate and decision making. They have highlighted the omission of clergy in this process and the strategic role that the national Church Wedding project has played in identifying this issue. This chapter considers further background to this project and the place of empirical social science research methods within the review of church wedding policies and practice. Empirical social research played a prominent role in the project's design and the research findings provided a number of opportunities for theological reflection. This chapter initially considers the growing capacity for such social research among the Research and Statistics team and NCI colleagues and its impact on the design of this project.

#### **3.1 Using empirical research in pastoral policy making**

The response of the Church to the work of the Research and Statistics department (outlined in Chapter 1) illustrates concern for a professionally led empirical research function in its national and diocesan life. My initial reflection on two research projects that identified some of the tensions for the Church in utilising methods of social research is provided in Paper 2, Appendix 2. The journey these research teams and I travelled suggested an engagement with the *ordinary theology* of the general public with whom churches come into contact (Astley 2002). Paper 2 entitled "Developing a model of empirical research in the Church of England as an agent of change for pastoral policies" (Appendix 2), promotes a conversation between theological and sociological aspects of pastoral ministry. Whilst a professional research and development function can contribute to this conversation, the distance from parochial life presents a challenge for it to be directly responsive to congregational and community perspectives. Paper 2 proposes that practitioners of *ordinary research* have the potential to gather appropriate information on the impact of pastoral practice in different localities. The interplay of pastoral policies and practice points to evaluations that comment on congregational life and faith, that give voice to ordinary theology and encourage churches to respond to it.

The involvement of the Church with recognised sociologists of religion from the academy has also not traditionally been very well developed. Paper 1: “A historical assessment of how the Church of England has used empirical research to inform its engagement with pastoral policy and practice” (Appendix 1) demonstrates the isolation of two pioneer church researchers, Gill and Francis. When I came into post at the Archbishops’ Council, sociologists of religion in the academy preferred to concentrate on the development of new religious movements and to monitor multi-cultural influences. Discussions for the 2001 UK government census question on religious identity attracted few contributions from the academy. Sociologists of religion have come to welcome independent on-going surveys on religion as fundamental data of key interest to the religious identity of a changing society and on which they can offer commentary on changes over time, for example, the European Values Study (2013). Chapter 4 demonstrates how the work of Martin and Davie has done much to broaden the involvement of sociologists in debates concerning public attitudes towards religion and the Church. However, the Church does not always readily look to such commentators to inform its formation of pastoral policies. Discussions in recent years on contemporary funeral ministry, for example, appeared to be reluctant to directly utilise the expertise of two renowned experts from the academy on death studies (Davies 2008b, Walter 2008).

### **3.2 The gap in research experience**

The growing concern of the Church for empirically based research has resulted in a lack of engagement with professional researchers and pastoral practitioners located in the academy and in parochial church life. Chapters 1 and 2 have referred to several research designs with the potential to utilise the participation of parochial clergy and there was one additional piece of research that brought a further dimension to this issue. This research into the deployment expectations of ordinands was conducted by me and an ordained colleague who brought research skills to his work in the area of selection for ministry. The ordinands and recently trained clergy who were interviewed voiced little loyalty to the Church institution and revealed considerable inflexibility over their deployment. During the reporting of these findings, Church policy makers questioned

the findings and criticised the *priest researchers* conducting the research for getting too close to the research subjects and, consequently, presenting biased findings.

The voices of prospective and serving clergy made uncomfortable reading to the Church and the institution showed unease in handling the contributions of its pastoral practitioners. It was nervous of their direct input to policy making and suspicious of this model of insider research. It preferred to defer clergy input to General Synod debate. Here the House of Clergy can contribute to the final stages of policy making but not as a significant contributor towards the design and shape of pastoral policies, which are shaped at committee or working party stage. Church politics thus becomes interwoven with the development of pastoral policies and the voice of its clergy becomes diminished. The Church has yet to find appropriate mechanisms that will incorporate parochial clergy in its formation and review of pastoral policies and it is this gap in research experience that this thesis seeks to explore.

### **3.3 The Church Wedding project**

The national Church Wedding project presented the most prominent context of enquiry in which empirical social research pointed to the participation of pastoral practitioners. Reactions across the Church and among marrying clergy to the project positively facilitated the opportunity to explore the gap in research experience identified above for this thesis. As indicated in Paper 2 (Appendix 2) the place of empirical evidence was key to the project design and captured the attention of clergy and policy makers. The project had been prompted by concern at the statistical trends in church weddings and by the increasing complexity of wedding provision in contemporary society. The numbers of church weddings was decreasing and the rules for eligibility were becoming more and more questionable. Liturgical provision was successfully revised by the General Synod with the publication of Common Worship materials in 2000 but the incidence of older brides and grooms, population mobility and tensions in clergy deployment were challenging national church policies which were under review prior to the 2008 Church of England Marriage Measure. As the Church reconsidered appropriate ecclesiastical rules for contemporary church weddings attention was given to the pastoral contact with wedding couples.

Explorations by policy advisors of opportunities for ministry in contemporary church weddings were beginning to highlight significant pastoral concerns and in 2006 the Archbishops' Council commissioned the national Church Wedding project. The project team was cross-departmental involving a variety of professionals and led by a media professional. It was initially funded for two years with the aim of promoting the role of the church in contemporary weddings. The Church Wedding project was a departure from previous research enquiries for the Archbishops' Council in that for the first time a national enquiry was specifically designed to respond to empirical research into public attitudes towards churches and the Church. Overall, this more outward perspective to the project offered a rich base on which to explore the place of empirical social research in the review of pastoral policies. It was agreed that the research would focus on the attitudes towards a wedding held by couples that were planning to get married in church and to compare these attitudes with those who had decided to marry elsewhere. The decision was taken to place additional boundaries around the project by focusing on couples aged between 20 and 45 years of age where it was a first marriage for each partner. To make the project manageable within the available resources, more controversial issues for pastoral ministry as divorce, remarriage and civil partnerships were excluded from the project remit at this stage.

Pilot interviews were undertaken by an independent research company and focussed on the attitude of couples towards getting married, towards having a wedding and towards having a church wedding. The project team wanted to understand the *barriers and drivers* for wedding couples in choosing a church wedding. The interviews were structured so that decisions at each stage of this wedding decision-making process were examined. Twenty-four couples of contrasting social profiles and living in four different areas of England were recruited by the research company and the interviews were video recorded and transcribed for analysis. Professional agreements of confidentiality were observed and couples were asked to indicate whether they were willing for their interviews to be used for clergy training purposes. These video clips proved to be beneficial to the analysis as well as for the dissemination of the project across the Church.

Individual couples were interviewed together as prospective brides and grooms. In addition some brides and grooms participated in gender-based focus groups. The sample was designed to provide a spread of location, ages, ethnic background and social class/income. A Latin Square sample design indicated below enabled each major axis of interest (ie age, gender, location and attitude towards a church wedding) to be considered separately although the restricted numbers did not permit the consideration of any interaction between these parameters.

### Qualitative research sample & recruitment criteria

	Cheam, Greater London 22 <sup>nd</sup> August 2006	Eastleigh, Hampshire 23 <sup>rd</sup> August 2006	Sutton Coldfield, Midlands 24 <sup>th</sup> August 2006	Leeds 29 <sup>th</sup> – 30 <sup>th</sup> August 2006	
Depth 1	MF, 28-35	MF, 20-27	MF, 36-45	MF, 28-35	In a relationship, not planning a wedding, not adverse to marriage but averse to church wedding
Depth 2	MF, 36-45	MF, 36-45	MF, 28-35	MF, 20-27	In a relationship, not planning a wedding, not adverse to marriage or a church ceremony
Group 1	Male, 28-35	Male, 28-35	Male, 20-27	Male, 36-45	In a relationship, planning a church wedding in the next year
Group 2	Female, 20-27	Female, 28-35	Female, 36-45	Female, 28-35	Married in a church ceremony within last year

(Henley HeadlightVision 2006 for Archbishops' Council)

The findings of the pilot study encouraged the project team to explore further the experience of couples that chose to have a church wedding. The couples interviewed were positive towards the church and towards the vicar. Grooms, in particular, valued their interaction with this marrying “professional”. They wanted their wedding to be special, personal and meaningful to them and they were serious in their desire to make their marriage promises in a proper manner and in a sacred place before God, their family and friends. Although they were rarely regular churchgoers and knew few in their local congregation, they often expressed the desire for their wedding to be in “their church”. Their affinity, for example, with the church in their neighbourhood or of their upbringing was strong and they felt it was “the right” place for them to be married. At this key moment in their lives they naturally turned to the church and expressed a loyalty to it. They also welcomed the relaxation of the eligibility rules that were being debated by the Church at that time prior to the 2008 Church of England Marriage Measure.

### **3.4 Evaluating church wedding ministry**

In 2008/9 the project team embarked on further exploratory research in two test dioceses which were chosen as being the dioceses of the Church of England recording the highest and lowest number of church weddings. Consequently, clergy actively involved in the ministry of church weddings in the diocese of Bradford and the archdeaconry of Buckingham in Oxford diocese were invited to hear the research findings and to test some wedding materials designed by the project team for the coming summer wedding season. These marrying clergy were also asked to bring their church wedding registers to the training day to enable the project team to contact couples married recently in their church. They were assured that any findings from the research among these couples would be anonymous and that any individual church or minister would not be identified. The external research company then contacted couples identifiable in the church registers to interview them confidentially about their experience of their church wedding and of any contact with the church before or after the wedding.

The findings of this stage of the research endorsed the pilot study and discovered a typical church wedding timeline of, on average, 2 ½ years during which local churches have the opportunity to build on their contact with each couple. Couples assessed their experience prior to the wedding day very positively and welcomed opportunities to consider how they might prepare for marriage. They viewed their experience of their wedding service and their wedding day even more positively and frequently considered it “special”. This left the majority of wedding couples feeling very positive towards the local church and its vicar but they rarely reported any continued contact following the wedding or of any specific follow-up by the local church. Local churches were reluctant to offer this aspect of pastoral ministry although brides and grooms responded positively to opportunities provided where they could share photographs or celebrate their married life at a special event perhaps with prayer on their first anniversary.

As the Archbishops’ Council considered further development of the wedding project it formulated measurable aims and objectives and set about establishing baselines to



initiate continued monitoring of trends over time. The three aims taken on by the project team were:

- A To increase the number of church weddings in the two pilot dioceses by 5%
- B To build in the general population the sense that the Church of England believes enthusiastically in marriage
- C To care for couples and their guests so well that more of them:
  - i. rate their experience as good to excellent
  - ii. recommend it to a friend
  - iii. stay in touch with church after the wedding day

The project team initially began to focus their attention on increasing public consciousness of church weddings. They invited local clergy and bishops to support and promote the Church's presence at national wedding fairs and an official website was initiated for couples and for clergy to access church wedding resources and information. An integral process to collect feedback generated very positive responses from both couples and clergy. National online surveys were also commissioned to ascertain public opinions of the Church of England's attitude towards marriage. These built on the findings of the initial qualitative research among couples and were also tested in quantitative exit surveys at national wedding fairs. Finally, clergy in the pilot dioceses were asked to use invitation cards among couples and their guests to promote continued contact with their local church and provide feedback. This particular aspect was of limited success but over the lifetime of this stage of the project, nationally sponsored surveys indicated the public's support for marriage had increased significantly by 7%.

The project team had discovered that the majority of clergy who participated in the pilot training events were very supportive of the project and I was asked to interview a group of key diocesan senior clergy to discuss in more detail their reactions to the project. One of the project team leaders observed the group interviews and subsequently reported his surprise at the strong personal pastoral integrity of the clergy in the group. They wanted to respond to couples in the same way they would wish to be treated themselves. The clergy each held senior diocesan posts and expressed initial concern at

the additional workload that the project involved for parish priests. Despite this they remained enthusiastic about the findings from the independent research among wedding couples and were challenged, in particular, by the seriousness with which the couples approached their church wedding. As these senior clergy considered the churches' welcome towards wedding couples, they began to question the theological boundaries placed on the project, which they felt compromised the church's mission in contemporary society.

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

“A theology of marriage ... that's the thing that I think would be a useful kick start and say this has got serious priority within sharing the good news of the gospel.”

### **3.5 Reflective practice**

Marrying clergy were encouraged to attend the training events of the Church Wedding project as part of their ministerial development. It is pertinent to this thesis to consider this dimension to their attendance and potential participation in further research.

Personal development is gradually becoming a more acceptable dimension to the “employment” of parochial clergy as they benefit from its widespread acceptance in associated secular professions (Working Party on Structure and Funding of Ordination Training 2003). The Division of Ministry of the Archbishops' Council has expressed a strong desire to offer professional ministry that maintains its integrity with the everyday faith of parishioners and congregation. Clergy frequently minister alongside secular professionals and want to be regarded as comparable colleagues. As they meet people at times of personal need and at important moments of their lives, clergy minister alongside medical personnel, civil registrars, undertakers, counsellors and teachers offering their own “professional” skills of ministry to body, mind and spirit.

The Research Proposal in Paper 3, Appendix 3 takes the example of the positive use by the teaching profession of participatory action research to enhance their classroom practice (section 4.6 and 5.1). It focuses on the role of parochial clergy in their everyday ministry and on their personal development in the area of pastoral ministry.

Chapter 6 considers these challenges for the Church in the context of the contemporary professionalism of the clergy and describes the educational background that has encouraged parochial clergy to undertake Continuing Ministerial Development (CMD) by designing their own programme with the agreement of senior diocesan staff and seeking financial assistance as necessary. They have also been expected to prayerfully and reflectively consider the development of their vocation and to explore means of supporting this.

Alongside the development of diocesan CMD programmes, diocesan *Terms of Service* negotiate with clergy to undertake regular reflective practice. Clergy are familiar with the notion of personal journaling and quiet opportunities for reflection as part of their spiritual practice but only in recent years have these been promoted as an ingredient in their ministerial practice. Theological training colleges and courses have incorporated reflective practice in their undergraduate programmes as they have sought academic accreditation (Reiss 2013). Gradually this has influenced the CMD programmes offered to serving clergy. In Exeter diocese, for example, clergy are offered the opportunity to join a reflective practice group convened by trained facilitators. Regrettably, the level of participation is not as high as expected and clergy appear reluctant to critique their personal practice with colleagues. Their *Terms of Service* prevent any compulsion in this area and, in reality, permit significant independence in ministerial practice.

### **3.6 Participatory research**

For clergy to directly participate in the review of pastoral practice and policies requires an appropriate mechanism for their involvement. As CMD is being introduced into the Church of England, clergy have been encouraged to undertake further academically accredited studies to develop their personal ministry. During my time as Head of Research and Statistics, I was invited to teach and lead seminars on social research methods for ministers (of any Christian denomination) undertaking academic Masters projects or Doctor of Ministry enquiries requiring empirically based research. Some are offered sabbatical opportunities by their dioceses to complete this. I have watched their confidence grow in this aspect of their studies as they are offered the research tools they will need to formulate a research proposal and to undertake the task. These tools are

frequently *ordinary research* methods to explore attitudes towards specific aspects of church life (Paper 2, Appendix 2) and are undertaken with the guidance of professional researchers. The enthusiasm of clergy towards their local (work place based) enquiry is often infectious and frequently generates more findings than anticipated so that they have to restrict their enquiries in order to deliver on schedule.

In the majority of these practice based enquiries clergy operate as participant observers monitoring an aspect of pastoral ministry or mission. Ministers come from chaplaincies and local settings that present pastoral challenges warranting further exploration and wider reflection. The majority formulate their research project around an area of their own pastoral ministry and offer the fruits of this to their academic institution.

Regretfully, the Church does not have any significant way of sharing the findings from these projects among colleagues across the dioceses. The Research and Statistics department was unable to attract funding to pursue this matter and many pastoral research studies undertaken by clergy remain uncoordinated and restricted in their availability beyond their place of origin. A particular instance of this was a project undertaken at the Church of England theological college of St John's, Nottingham by a curate who was sponsored by the Association of English Cathedrals and who sought guidance from research colleagues in the Archbishops' Council. Lack of resources have meant that the results and report remain confined to the college library.

The Church suffers from the lack of coordination of academically-based research studies which are complicated further by tensions in the position of those clergy that engage with participatory research. They often regard themselves as being within the institution of the Church as *insider researchers* although, at the same time, outside it in terms of their local employment. Even at a local level they can find themselves as outside the congregation they serve but loyal to its members and pastoral identity. The institution and local congregation members, in turn, can both regard clergy as outsiders leaving the priest to bridge both worlds and in danger of losing their sense of self. Researching clergy are taking on the role of researcher alongside their priesthood and this dual role has the potential for confusion and a feeling of detachment as they traverse the insider-outsider continuum (Coghlan and Brannick 2010, p.121).

Orsi brings his experience researching religious experience in Chicago to observe “the fieldworker in one’s own tradition faces difference that is at once both too little and too much, and that can be paralyzing ... In the end the people among whom we have gone either reject us ..., or we come to identify ourselves with them so closely that we lose the distance necessary for any understanding and we wind up celebrating and defending them” (2005, p.162). For Orsi differences in the “otherness” have to be acknowledged and religious fieldwork provides rich opportunities for experiments in “boundary crossing”. Coghlan and Brannick also emphasise that insider researchers can be too close to the issues, people and situations they are researching, a factor that has also diminished the voice of the clergy in the review of Church policies and thus emphasised the gap in knowledge at the heart of this thesis (Chapter 3, section 3.2).

### **3.7 The research question**

The involvement of clergy in self-directed exercises of personal enquiry within the framework of CMD suggests the potential for a capacity of pastorally-based research (proposed in Paper 3, Appendix 3). Project working in the NCIs has welcomed the place of empirical social research in pastoral policy making but incorporated little reference to the practice and experience of pastoral practitioners. Experienced clergy have the potential to offer practice based insights but, as demonstrated above, the Church has yet to provide mechanisms for the involvement of practitioners in the direct development of pastoral policies and practice. Changes in contemporary society present the Church with an urgent task to be pastorally responsive to the nation it serves. The potential benefits from listening to the insights and reflections of its pastoral practitioners await critical attention and research is needed into the factors that encourage or hinder the participation of clergy in the formation and development of pastoral policies.

The Church Wedding project offered a prominent case study for external empirical social research to partner with insider professional enquiry towards the formation of pastorally responsive pastoral policies. Having utilised empirical research among wedding couples to suggest changes in Church policies and parochial practice, the

project team proposed clergy training events across the dioceses. This dialogue with parochial clergy was supported by diocesan bishops and by parochial clergy. The majority of clergy participating in the project training events were active in parochial church wedding ministry and keen to be pastorally responsive to local needs. If they could be persuaded to contribute from their own participatory research as priest-researchers (Paper 3, Appendix 3), pastoral policies could be more effective in responding to local social changes. In the Research and Statistics department the Church has a resource that clergy can utilise to develop appropriate research methods and to be supported in their enquiries. The question remains as to whether the Church and the clergy have the capacity to respond positively to the need for local enquiries that utilise research methods to gather information towards policy development and review.

This chapter has highlighted the role of clergy in pastoral policy review and development to be an area of concern for the Church in two major aspects of church life. Firstly, clergy have the capacity to bring local theological reflection to contemporary sociological research to inform particular areas of pastoral concern. In the case study of church weddings, theological reflection was highlighted by senior diocesan clergy (section 3.4) as being required on the proposed enhancements resulting from socially representative research among some (first time) wedding couples. In their community-based ministries, parish priests can offer this professional capacity within an operant or lived contextual theology. Secondly, the Church of England brings together a federation or partnership of parishes in a process of pastoral policy that seeks to coordinate varying stances of missiological and pastoral integrity (Torry 2005, p.96). Clergy are in a position to bridge the divide between the institutions and the parishes so that pastoral policies are responsive to local theological positions. Thus the *main research question* emerging at the heart of this thesis can be summarised as:

**To explore factors that encourage or hinder the Church in developing a partnership with its parochial clergy as priest researchers to bring empirical exploration to socio-theological reflection in the development of pastoral policies and practice in response to changes in contemporary society.**

#### **4. Reflective empirical theology**

Previous chapters of this thesis have considered how the Church of England and the NCIs, in particular, have utilised empirically-based social research methodology in its official research function. Much of the commentary for NCI research enquiries has been conducted with reference to the academy which has brought the influence of sociologists of religion and practical theologians to this task (Chapter 2). In order to explore the gap in knowledge identified in Chapter 3, it is important to understand the wider development of empirical practical theology in relation to the pastoral ministry of the Church. This chapter seeks to further explore the international development of empirical theology and its influence on the Church to inform the conceptual framework for this thesis. In particular, the following chapter will focus on the impact of empirical practical theology on the Church of England, trace the broader research context of practical theology and consider what developments in this field can offer towards this thesis.

##### **4.1 Social Science and Practical Theology**

Practical theology has emerged in different forms across the world in response to its varying religious contexts. Friedrich Schweitzer notes this terminology has come together from Catholic studies in Pastoral Theology and the Protestant focus on Practical Theology (Miller-McLemore 2012). Writing in the series foreword of *Studies in Practical Theology*, Browning, Fowler, Schweitzer and van der Ven remark that “practical theology has become the focus of an emerging international discussion that can only be understood only by taking into account the various contributions from many countries and continents – North America, Europe, South America, Africa and Asia” (Heitink 1999, p.xv). Graham writing in the British context wants to emphasise it “as the study of Christian *practice*, and to locate pastoral theology as one of a number of practical theologies, distinguished by its emphasis on the theory and practice of the human life-cycle” (2009, p.xvii). They all argue that practical theology is reminding theology of its practical nature and that many of the great theologians of the past were, in fact, practical theologians. As they seek to bring together differing streams of practical theology Browning et al, in particular, define practical theology “as an

empirically descriptive and critically constructive theory of religious practice” (Heitink 1999, p.xvi).

The Dutch theologian, Heitink, in offering his comments on the history of practical theology notes that although Schleiermacher, writing in the nineteenth century is considered the father of practical theology, it was the Enlightenment and the subjectivization of religions pushing the Christian religion towards the margins that gave birth to the empirical approach to monitor the plurality of worldviews. As this had an increasing impact on societies, social scientists following the example of the classical sociologist Weber at the turn of the twentieth century brought a method of interpretative understanding of social actions to explain the causes and effects of these actions. It was a disciple of Friedrich Schweitzer, Nitzsch who while distinguishing between individual, church and society brought to practical theology the study of practice, experience and action. “The Christian faith acts in the world as a community and relates to it through the actions of the institutional church” (Nitzsch 1847 in Heitink 1999, p.47). He utilised a multi-method approach of various empirical instruments to examine the functional and rational approach of ‘being church’. Heitink considers that “the empirical shift in practical theology, which began with Nitzsch, slowly but surely permeated all practical theology” (p.49). Chapter 2 illustrates that the Church of England, for its part, has grown in confidence to engage with sociological and theological interpretation for its empirical activities. As Heitink notes, not only is practical theology increasingly inspired by empirical data but this, in turn, is also critiqued against normative theory about how the church should function.

There have been several different but parallel developments within practical theology most notably since the 1960’s in Germany, North America and the Netherlands. In North America congregational studies have dominated the study of local churches following the influence of Fowler and others who brought the social sciences to the interpretative, hermeneutical circle in order to explore the *praxis* of the church. Pastoral theology was moved into the areas of public theology and practical theology by Tracy and Browning respectively to focus both on the transformation of people and society. But this model of practical theology is not without its critics. Tillich brought the model



of 'critical correlation' to correlate psychological theory with systematic and dogmatic theology. This, Graham points out, is "once again divorcing theological formulation from the living human situation" (1996, p.71). She focuses on Browning's contribution to practical theology that goes "beyond a theology of pastoral acts and sets forth a theology of practical living" (p.86). He adapts the notion of *phronesis*, bringing theory together with practice, which for Graham makes a more appropriate location for practical theology than the model of moral reasoning Browning expounds (p.91). Graham points out that Browning's model of 'practical moral reasoning' "neglects the social and material dimension of *praxis*, of faith as doing or living the truth, rather than apprehending it intellectually" (p.88) and it has attracted the criticism of liberation and feminist theologians, such as Chopp, who regards it as "a purely academic way of doing theology" (Heitink 1999, p.119).

Browning's vision, in turn, of public theology in a pluralistic, postmodern culture shifts attention towards "critical enquiry concerned to question the fundamental vocation of the Church in the world" (Graham 1996, p.93). The British sociologist of religion Davie draws particular attention to the differing religious contexts of the comparative flourishing of the American churches to their sister churches in Europe who are largely regarded as "useful social institutions ... This is the real legacy of a state church history and inextricably related to the concept of vicariousness" (Davie 2002, p.44). Her insights regarding European vicarious religion, for example, provide interpretative tools for empirical data as she notes that by contrast Americans "seek and search on a much more open market" and actively contribute to their local churches to ensure their future (p.52).

In Germany the influence of the Protestant theologian Barth, from the first part of the twentieth century, remains strong. Practical theology brings a critical task to tradition so as to influence the church as it acts in the present and plans for the future. Across the latter years of the twentieth century there was a development of social science methods to examine praxis. Pastoral theology embraced a dynamic view of the church and the focus has been on the hermeneutical task. The concept of social action has been brought to practical theology. Otto, at the beginning of the twentieth century, is

credited with observing that society, religion and church were so interwoven that the church is influenced by social situations (Heitink 1999, p.114). Modernity and the process of individualisation have brought a differentiation of praxis within these spheres of pastoral theology and the development of practical theology. In recent years, an empirical critique through the Church Development movement has emerged. This seeks to evaluate in quantifiable terms the corporate life of individual congregations and to assess attitudes towards the world and faith against a missiological framework.

In the Netherlands pastoral theology was developed by Haarsma in the 1960's into a theological theory of action dealing with "God's activities, through human beings, in advance of God's kingdom" (van der Ven 1985, p.26 in Heitink 1999, p.121).

Theologians have since broadened the discipline to bring an hermeneutical approach to the studies of praxis of faith and faith communities. In contrast, Haarsma's successor van der Ven brought together theological and empirical social science methods to bring a central place to empirical-theological enquiry and the establishment of "empirical theology". Van der Ven acknowledged the acceptance by Schleiermacher and others that empirical research was necessary for theology but was concerned that "concrete empirical research, however simple, based on for example, descriptive statistics, is hardly to be found in the field of practical theology" (1993, p.27). At the Nijmegen department of pastoral theology he further developed the interface between social science methods and pastoral theology to focus, for example, on the role of statistical modelling.

## **4.2 Empirical (practical) theology**

The term *empirical theology* was developed alongside that of practical theology in distinct ways in the USA and in Europe. The "Chicago School" of sociology in the USA is associated with the development of empirical theology as the experimental measurement of human experience as the arbiter and justification of theological assertions. In contrast, the European approach prefers to describe empirical patterns in practical theology with little attention to the theology underpinning the empirical processes employed. It regards the investigation of human faith and experience of God as through the revelation of God within human experience and thus indirectly of God.

The formation of the International Society for Empirical Research in Theology (ISERT) in 2002 by practical theologians in Germany and the Netherlands brought beliefs and values into descriptive theological accounts. Practical theology conceived, in this way, “as an empirical discipline uses the tools and methods of the social sciences to map out the beliefs and values, attitudes and practices of individuals and communities” (Cartledge 2010, p.15).

Van der Ven’s empirical-theological cycle of research modelled empirical-theological testing in a cycle of theological proposals, induction, deduction and evaluation. He brings statistical testing methodologies to theological critique to establish normative praxis and to listen to the contribution of each human being, which he describes as being a matter of justice (van der Ven 1993, p.74). Consequently, his methodologies frequently involve surveys and quasi-experimental design to establish a descriptive and explanatory inventory. He applies primarily quantitative empirical assessments to questions of religious experience and practice, thus calibrating and modelling the praxis of the church. Typical statistical analyses involve factor analysis, the use of Likert scales and regression modelling with associated statistical hypothesis testing and goodness of fit analyses. One example of his empirical approach to practical theology involved the extent to which religious attitudes regarding God and Jesus influence societal values like economism, familialism, social criticism, hedonism and autonomy. Demographic and other social indicators were integrated into a regression modelling framework to offer their final conclusions (van der Ven and Beauregard 1999, p.49-66).

Cartledge has considered the dialogue between practical theology and the use of empirical social research methods within Pentecostal and charismatic studies. He recently examined the beliefs and values of Pentecostal adherents utilising qualitative data analysis to describe their *ordinary theology*. Kay, in turn, used a questionnaire survey to bring together the history, theology and social-psychology of Pentecostal ministers attitudes and views on matters of belief and ethics. He describes van der Ven’s approach as *intradisciplinary* at the interface between the disciplines of theology and social science methods. This process of *empirical theology* “entails theological reflection upon a particular problem, the translation of this problem into empirical

terms, the testing of those terms and theological evaluation and reflection on the results of the empirical work. Theology begins and ends the process” (Kay 2001, p.4). He notes that van der Ven provides clear guidance about the application of empirical methods “but much less guidance about theological reflection and interpretation” (p.5). Kay and Cartledge are concerned that the “framing of social science methods within theological reflection differentiates empirical theology from the sociology of religion” (p.8) so that this approach does not slip into being “just another branch of social science” (Cartledge 2010, p.15).

Empirical research methods embrace both the natural sciences and human sciences bringing positivistic and naturalistic views of the social sciences. These are often directly reflected in enquiries that, in their nature, adopt mutually complementary quantitative or qualitative approaches. Both have much to offer practical theology and Walton defends their use pointing out that “the overriding aim of empirical theology has not been to reduce, or abstract to statistical categories, the living human document - but rather to focus on human life as lived now and to emphasise the critical importance of human spiritual experience in theological reflection” (2013). She notes that taking an empirical approach affirms “that contemporary religious practice is important enough to be taken account in theological reasoning” (p.3) and considers the importance of recognising faith in the human art of making and manufacture, poesis.

Pattison, however, is cautious at the apparent collusion “with scientific mystification and mystique” (2007, p.265). He notes that practical theologians not only dialogue with the findings of social science disciplines but also allow social scientists to explore religious studies without theological input. He criticises the approach that assumes the “facts will somehow ‘speak for themselves’” observing that such an empirical paradigm “may find itself ignoring much that is humanly significant” (p.276). Orsi is also concerned that empirical work in religion “appears to endorse, in its initial suspensions of judgements and its refusal of the comforts of otherness - the religious worlds it describes” (2005, p.158).

Warnings too from Kay and Cartledge that theological reflection on both empirical methods and findings are equally important point to a model of reflection between theology and empirical social science in an interpretative hermeneutical cycle. Causal relationships, for example, present difficulties in interpretation without an understanding of the participants' "insider" perspectives. The place of social research methods in practical theological enquiry brings with it not only assumptions about the research object but also about the researcher methods and the researcher's view of the world. To what extent can the assumption be made, for example, that God acts in an objective and consistent manner with differing people in ways that undergird the use of normative statistical modelling? In a similar vein to Cartledge and Kay, Heitink concludes by expressing his view that "some testing methods pay insufficient attention to the unique character of theological data" (1999, p.232).

Bartholomew when Professor of Statistical and Mathematical Science at the London School of Economics challenged the role of statistical interpretation in noting that it could be justifiably claimed that "uncertainty rather than order is the characteristic of science" and "risk seems to be deeply embedded in the very nature of things" (1984, p.1,15). He argues that humans are continually learning from the world and that much uncertainty is a reflection of their ignorance. Whereas in the past chance was considered the enemy of true religion, we now know that evolution has not followed a determinate plan. A great many statistical laws of nature are "simply descriptions of patterns of aggregate behaviour which are explicable in terms of underlying processes" (p.128). There is work to be done developing a theological critique of the modelling process at each stage of the empirical-theological cycle and van der Ven encourages this continued exploration. In a later paper examining the attitudes of the Dutch public towards God's return, van der Ven begins to discuss theological interpretations of the conclusions within the contemporary social context of secularisation (2001, p.251- 270).

Van der Ven's influence on practical theology in Britain has influenced many intradisciplinary studies. Atfield and Parry, for example, from the School of Health and Population Studies at the University of Birmingham brought their analytical methodology to a study of parish statistics (2012, p. 321). However, the most

prominent British proponent of this approach to pastoral and practical theology is the empirical theologian Francis (Paper 1, Appendix 1). Francis frequently employs Likert scales to examine correlations between personal social-psychological factors and aspects of religious faith and practice. His modified Myers Briggs type indicator of psychometric testing utilises quantifiable assessments of responses to attitudinal statements that embrace the topic of enquiry. The Church has found it difficult to explore possible applications of this to church life without a theological critique of this approach and its findings.

Francis' impact in recent years on the Church has been particularly significant alongside with the growing influence of the Church Development movement in Germany (Chapter 2, section 2.1). Individual dioceses have utilised their methods and they came together, for example, in the national ecumenical survey initiative of the Church Life Profile at the turn of the millennium (Kaldor, et al., 1999). Although the criticisms levelled at empirical theology and outlined above remain pertinent to their enquiries, both present the life of corporate and individual faith in quantifiable terms and have prompted church, academic and popular commentators to seek further insights from both social and theological perspectives. Their model of empirical theology has, however, dominated the use of empirical (practical) theology across the Church at both national and local levels.

### **4.3 Reflective sociology and theology**

The effectuality of pastoral policies and their practice can be monitored and maximised if the process of their formation can be empirically reflective. How this is most effectively pursued within the Church is now the focus of this discussion. Sociologists of religion have for many years been reluctant to engage with mainstream faith positions in contemporary Britain, preferring instead to examine the propensity for new influences from other global religions and the growth of secularisation together with appraisals of the exodus from mainstream churches. Flanagan comments that this attitude emerged in the 1960s “when efforts to link sociology to theology were profoundly unfashionable, if not eccentric” (2001, p.151).

In the early years of the twenty-first century, I attended an (annual) conference of sociologists of religion that attracted only a few papers on contemporary faith in Britain. These focussed on Pentecostalism and the impact of the new Alpha movement in London. The work of the practical theologian Cartledge builds on earlier studies of the worldwide Pentecostal movement by the sociologist of religion Martin. Cartledge explores the operant and espoused theologies of the Pentecostal movement in Britain by “entering into the world of ordinary Pentecostal theology” (2010, p.17). He brings the concept of *ordinary theology* proposed by Astley (Paper 2, Appendix 2, section 5) as “contemporary anthropologists and sociologists use similar categories ‘lived’ (McQuire 2008), ‘everyday’ (Ammerman 2007) and ‘elementary’ religion (Stringer 2008)” (p.15).

To examine the lived theology of members of Pentecostal churches, Cartledge uses various triangulated data collection methods (participant observation, focus groups, surveys and documentary sources) to compare this with official theology and academic discourse Pentecostalism. His thesis is that this empirically orientated theology offers a mutually beneficial way to rejuvenate both the ordinary and the academic. He observes that this type of ordinary theology “is grounded in attitudes, values and commitments, experiences and practices of individuals and communities, often categorised as ‘folk’ or ‘common’ religion” (p.16). For Pentecostals the testimony of Scripture and the testimony of the faithful (community and individual testimonies) are important determinants of truth. In his earlier studies Cartledge reflects on this epistemology and how it relates to Pentecostal/charismatic spirituality (2003, p.41). In the context of this thesis, it is worth noting that it also holds the potential to review and critique the official theology.

The relationship between sociology of religion and practical theology begun to be brought together in Britain by David Martin who brought to his career as a sociologist of religion the perspective of an ordained member of the Church of England with parental roots in fundamental Methodism. Bernice Martin, a fellow sociologist of religion, acknowledges that her husband’s “dual use of theological and sociological insight has proved itself a powerful analytic procedure in strictly sociological terms” (2001, p.221). She writes: “David Martin’s understanding of human society comes ...

out of a long Christian tradition ... a cradle Christian and Protestant to boot” (p.206). His “tendency to run sociological and theological argument in tandem is the discomfort it often provokes in religious professional and theologians” (p.218). David Martin justifies his stance of bringing these two streams of the academy together by noting that “whereas sociology traces webs of connection theology reassembles those realities as a solid poetry concerned with imperatives of hope and cost” (p.220).

Another prominent sociologist of religion, Gill, (a key voice cited in Paper 1, Appendix 1) emphasises David Martin’s role in promoting conversations between sociology of religion and practical theology as an “enduring and thoughtful critic in both theology and sociology. Within both disciplines he remains an individualist” as he challenges current thinking on secularisation and liturgical change (Gill 2001, p.201/2). Percy, in turn, urges the church to embrace David Martin’s practical sociology and to promote social research in the controversial areas of, for example, Church of England confirmations and the parish church. He is enthusiastic towards the interpretative role of both theology and sociology to shed light on raw empirical data. “Sociology tries to offer empiricism married to imagination” (Percy 2001, p.186). Percy criticises “theologically minded detractors (who) miss the target when they claim theology will be diluted or compromised when it is placed in dialogue with sociology ... such sociology can prevent the costly generalizations or idolizations of the church, by offering observation grounded in social reality, not theology” (p.189). He views David Martin’s sociology as bordering on practical theology and urges the Church and theology to “take account of such voices if it wishes to be in any way ‘practical’” (p.187).

In more recent years interest in the local church, and in private and public spirituality and religiosity has grown in Britain. The dialogue between practical theologians and sociologists of religion has developed further and the academy is developing empirical research methods of enquiry that maintain the integrity of both disciplines (Graham, Walton and Ward 2005, Cameron, et al., 2005, Guest, Tusting and Woodhead 2004). This thesis seeks to respond to the momentum from the academy for the Church to bring sociology and theology together to promote a conversation between them. It considers



the use of empirical social research methods as a tool to facilitate this more fully and encourages the Church to, in particular, embrace *ordinary research* methods. The Church Wedding project initially conducted enquiries among wedding couples in a sociological framework and the interpretation of these findings has the potential to benefit from further socio-theological reflection of the *ordinary theology* that it discovered. The Church will also gain from the insights generated by this dialogue as it responds to this research by evaluating and reviewing pastoral policies and practice. Sociological and theological reflection on pastoral situations will be enriched as they respond to the actual lived experiences of those involved and insights from empirical information offer key contributions to this process.

#### **4.4 Empirical reflection**

Empirical social scientific research has become more widely used by the Church as evidence based decision making has become prominent in public life. This tendency towards empiricism is often justified as an objective approach to life in order to demonstrate its usefulness but it can “lose its capacity to nurture depth and wisdom” (Pattison 2007, p.281). Pattison criticises uninformed empiricism: “bean counting should not be substituted for understanding and working with living meanings and life-giving theological insights into the nature of existence” (p.280). He questions the scientific worldview and the values embodied within empirical methods citing Midgley’s example of the rainbow, which inspires contemplation and wonder for both its scientific analysis and its ‘spiritual’ phenomena: “Contemplation is in fact a genuinely central element in human existence” (Pattison 2007, p.285). The Church’s partnership with empiricism (Chapter 2) is taken up by Pattison who concludes by challenging its use in practical theology “that a mixture of the empirical and the reflective is probably the optimum way of trying to engage in creative and wise activity” (p.285).

Empirical reflection has become accepted as offering beneficial insights within practical theology just as in the social sciences. In their consideration of the place of qualitative research in the field of practical theology, Swinton and Mowat bring triangulation methods and reflection together to offer a deeper knowledge of the data. They propose

multi-method approaches to data collection and analyses that offer insights and bring more rigour, breadth and complexity to the data (2006, p.215). Reflection brings a dimension to findings and analyses that complement and enriches interpretation. Savage had also encouraged the Church to widen its use of empirical research among its intellectual armoury to aid reflection and evaluation of pastoral theology. Paper 1 (Appendix 1) details the relationship in recent years between the Church and three key voices in empirical reflective practical theology. Savage's description of pastoral theology in terms of a "disciplined reflection on the practice of the church" (2002, p.51) referred to its recent embracing of more reflective social sciences research methods. She supports multi-method approaches, for example, in-depth interviews, focus groups, ethnographic observations and questionnaire surveys. Her approach is more qualitatively rooted and her challenge to the Church in a time of significant change is to endorse the developing partnership of empirical research and pastoral theology so 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" (p.56).

Chapter 2 outlines the positive response of the Church to the promptings of the academy in terms of widening its use of social science research methodologies but the Church frequently finds itself challenged by the prominence of this approach to contributions made to public debates. Pattison questions the extent of the affinity of practical theology to the theoretical and empirical aspects of social sciences with his concern that theologians can be tempted to capitulate to social science. Nevertheless, he admits that practical theology can only benefit from knowing "the nature of people and situations as they are" (2007, p.272). Graham also notes that, in particular, "pastoral theology is an interpretative activity enabling faith-communities to give a public and critical account of their performative truth-claims" (2009, p.161). It is context specific and brings faith and truth together with practical action, phronesis or practical knowledge. She argues that the use of empirical or ethnographic methods to "focus on popular culture has rendered the lived experience of people faith a priority of study" because "culture is always revealing something of our humanity and potentially of God ... This casts theology as a process of enquiry and reflection – a practice – rather than body of truth or doctrine" (p.180/1). The relationship between empirical ethnographic research and the

theology of the church, however, remains a matter of debate and Ward, for example, brings together differing voices in the academy in a dialogue regarding the relationship between theological knowledge and ethnographic experiences (2012).

This chapter has highlighted how the analysis of empirical data offers insights to both practical theology and the social sciences but the Church's conversation with them could be improved with further reflection. Graham is keen that participation in culture like Scripture and any other conventional theological resource "becomes a source or conversational partner in theology's task of interpreting the Divine" (2009, p.184). She defends the approach of the report *Faithful Cities* (examined in Paper 1, Appendix 1) to explore *the soul* of a city (Commission on Urban Life and Faith 2006). Graham is concerned "to go beyond the statistical and target-driven to value the meanings and stories people invest in their actual inhabitation of space and place" (p.247) and she voices concern at the implication from social science explorations that Christian discipleship is a matter of consumer choice or pseudo-ethnic affiliation. Pattison, in turn, cites the example of Francis' analyses of the character and personality types within the ordained ministry, which has found that many ministers are not best suited by their personality to the roles they have to perform. He adds that "here, as elsewhere, the facts do not speak for themselves ... it is important in thinking about ministers and their roles not merely to think about organisational personal well-being, but also to think about theology, specifically here the theology of ministry and vocation" (2007, p.277). These voices from the academy encourage the Church to embrace the contribution of reflective empirical theology.

#### **4.5 Practical theology as action research**

Bringing reflection to the pursuit of practical theology enriches the process of each activity and has the potential for, in Scriptural terms, the renewing of the mind (Romans 12:2). Graham also notes its practical and transformational qualities, its ability to facilitate "theological wisdom that nurtures and underpins any human activity in the world" (2013, p.170). Swinton and Mowat were the first to highlight the connection between practical theology and the development of a change in action and practice, "changes in the way that Christians and Christian communities perform the faith"

(2006, p.255). From their medical context they consider practical theology to be a reflective discipline of revelation and discovery “but above all ... a *theology of action*” (p.255). Paper 2, section 7 (Appendix 2) considers the use of action research by Swinton and Mowat to develop professional practice. Similarly, in the social sciences the action researcher engages in a process of cyclical observation, reflection and action. They seek to change the world by understanding it more fully and to participate “to be schooled in the values that nurture their practice” (Graham 2013, p.170). As this applies, for example, to the professional practice of teachers and medical personnel, cited in Paper 3 section 3.2 (Appendix 3) praxis is constantly challenged, developed and revised in a continuing spiral of action, theory, reflection and revised practice. Swinton and Mowat remark on the similar reflective process of practical theology and its transformative, action orientated goals.

Bringing theological reflection and action together in this thesis offers a suitable tool for the involvement of clergy to effect changes and transformation in pastoral practice and policies. Graham also emphasises the potential to bring more than reflection on doctrine and practice but to facilitate the development of “theological wisdom”, a process that she describes as theological “attentiveness” (p.170). Practical theology can be seen alongside the social-scientific model of *action research*. They both empower the researcher to take control of the research process and, in the social sciences, action research becomes *participatory* and *emancipatory* through including the research subjects as co-researchers. Thus barriers are broken down between professionals and their colleagues so that both can work together to change practice for the common good. Action research has the potential to bring an increased pragmatism to practical theology to solve problems and establish good practice. For Swinton and Mowat “practical-theological action always has the goal of interacting with situations and challenging practices in order that individuals and communities can be enabled to remain faithful to God and to participate faithfully in God’s continuing mission to the world” (2006, p.257). Thus practical theology offers the opportunity to bring the action research cycle and theological reflection to the practical interpretation of experience in the world.

Practical theology brings the contribution of theological reflection to its application of action research from the social sciences. Heitink's criticism of van der Ven's model of empirical theology (section 4.2) points to the inclusion of theology at every stage of the research process not solely during the reflective stage. The widely accepted model of reflective praxis, the *pastoral cycle*, suggests the basis of a learning cycle of experience, exploration, reflection and action for such an approach (Ballard & Pritchard 1996, p.85). Cameron et al take up this challenge in their model of *theological action research* (TAR), which has the prime characteristic of a "fundamental conviction and commitment to the idea that the research done into faith practices is 'theological all the way through'" (Cameron, et al., 2010, p.51). This affects the underlying framework of the enquiry, the research methods chosen as well as the interpretation of the research process. The TAR model of practice-based research proposed by Cameron, et al., is designed to effect organisational change by bringing outsider expertise in empirical research and theological reflection to insider practitioner experiences. It offers a purpose built research process that depends on this partnership and incorporates socio-theological conversations.

Theological reflection can be brought to organisations using the TAR process through outsider researchers who listen to the experiences of insider teams aimed at bringing renewed theology and practice to the organisation concerned. The Action Research – Church and Society (ARCS) team based at Heythrop College, London designed this model as they sought to work with local churches, dioceses, para-church agencies and other faith-based institutions. They acknowledge that the research can only progress at the speed of the insider team, which is often influenced by practical factors and quite slow. Consequently, the ARCS team have only undertaken a small number of action research cycles to date (Bhatti, Sweeney and Duce 2012). This limits the practical impact of this model of theological action research to achieve organisational goals and suggests an adapted approach. TAR brings "a greater theological fluency" to the study of missiological issues and thus deserves consideration as a suitable approach to the study of the Church Wedding project (Graham 2013, p.163). Bringing outsider researchers into dialogue with insider teams introduces both benefits and tensions between external and internal experts (Coghlan and Brannick 2010). Without a common, contextualised language, for example, communications may be hindered and

even prove misleading while conflicting priorities may require arbitration by the organisation management. The impact of the agendas brought to the task by each side also have to be considered and tasks appropriately assigned to properly evaluate organisational change. As Graham points out the location of the outsider team may influence the outcome (2013, p.164).

Organisational change is itself an academic discipline that has received considerable attention in recent years. If action research is to be brought to the Church it is important to reflect on its use to bring about organisational change in different areas of professional practice outside the Church and to compare the research contexts. The following chapter considers the purpose and use of individual *participatory action research* and explores methods of effecting organisational change. Lessons can be learnt to benefit its use by pastoral practitioners as they seek to renew policies and practice across the Church. At this stage in my argument, it is helpful to note that participatory action research offers this thesis a method for bringing not only the involvement but also empowerment to the researcher's context as they control the research and renew their praxis and its theological framework.

## **5. Institutional change in the Church**

It has been demonstrated (particularly in Chapter 2) that the nature of the institution of the Church deeply affects the review of pastoral policies in the Church of England. This chapter reflects on the Church processes involved in effecting changes in policies and on the influence of the dynamics between the NCIs and parochial clergy to, in turn, effect change in pastoral practice. As the Church seeks to respond to changes in contemporary society, the negotiation of such processes are key aspects to the research question that is the focus of this thesis. It is also pertinent to consider processes to effect organisational change utilised beyond the Church. Models of organising and of organisational change from the academy are considered and, in particular, a model of emancipatory action research. The synergy between this approach and that of the TAR model described in Chapter 4, section 4.5 is explored towards a partnership between *outsider* and *insider* practitioner based researchers in the Church.

### **5.1 Policy making in the Church**

As the established church for England, the Church of England came together to represent the interests and religious needs for people of all positions of faiths (Avis 2008). It has a presence in Parliament and in local government, in education, hospitals, prisons and in the armed forces. Its parishes have legal standing in the local landscape with their churchwardens being local community appointments and their ministers registrars of the country. Churches and parishes come together in a federation arrangement for wider discussion and decision-making across deaneries and in dioceses. Church of England clergy now hold terms of service that require a more formal relationship with their diocesan bishop. The forty-four dioceses that make up the Church of England exercise a democratic national composition in the General Synod and the national House of Bishops. Bishops come together in a collegiate capacity but have autonomy of decision-making and policies in their own dioceses. Whilst, local churches rely almost totally on voluntary support and volunteer involvement only the larger churches and cathedrals need to register as separate voluntary organisations with the Charity Commissioners. The current system of proportional parish representation in the Church of England continues to mean that it is often dominated by its many small congregations in both urban and rural contexts.

The national face of the Church of England includes an administrative and policy making function that since the year 2000 has been vested in the Archbishops' Council (Chapter 1, section 1.2). Diocesan policies and bishops' offices are coordinated through its various arms, for example, the Division of Ministry, Mission and Public Affairs Division, and the Cathedrals and Church Building Division. Financial aspects of the Church are primarily coordinated through the Church Commissioners who maintain the corporate investments and directly remunerate parochial clergy and various aspects of diocesan life, and through the Pension Board who provide for clergy in retirement. Together with the offices of the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, these make up the National Church Institutions (NCIs). When national policies are reviewed they are effected and coordinated by the relevant wing of the NCIs but this has to respond to the views of the churches and people in some 13,000 parishes across the nation. The Church of England is consequently described as a *grass roots organisation*, which presents a particular challenge for coordinating consistent policies across the Church.

Effecting policy change in the Church of England is usually a gradual process that begins when a diocese brings proposals for consideration by the wider church at the General Synod. Communication of change impacts the Church at national, diocesan and parish levels and conversations can be long and slow moving. The Church Wedding project being considered in this thesis was initiated by the Archbishops' Council, which brought proposals to the House of Bishops and General Synod. It took two years for the project team to fulfil invitations to visit the majority of dioceses and bring its subsequent report to General Synod. The potential for change at a local parish level slowly opened up as dioceses were encouraged to take the initiative forward to promote good practice across their parishes. However, this delivery had mixed success and, in my own diocese for example, the initiative formally lapsed when the clergy coordinator moved to a new post. Effecting change in the parochial practices of church weddings was a process that relied on voluntary participation. It was left to individual clergy and congregations to make their own response to the project while the national project team was disbanded through lack of continuing finance. Some proactive clergy and parishes did succeed in changing their weddings practice but the potential for change was supported on less than a consistent basis across the Church.



The relationships between national, regional and local aspects of the Church of England make effecting change a more complex matter than for many charitable bodies and voluntary agencies with which it is in partnership. Whereas a voluntary organisation can negotiate change with its stakeholders, conversations in the Church of England only significantly embrace this dynamic in the context of its schools and other chaplaincies where the church has to work more formally in response to national legally based requirements. When the Archbishops' Council came into being, the Commission reviewing the central structures observed: "While many people participating in the Church's governance can stop things happening, few (if any) can make things happen. Power is negative rather than positive. The system places a great burden upon (and potentially gives too much influence to) the few who try to co-ordinate it's working and master its complexities" (Archbishops' Commission on the Organisation of the Church of England 1995, p.25). Power to effect change in the pastoral practice of local church weddings, in particular, was shared by the Archbishops' Council but exercised differently in each diocese.

The newly constituted NCIs have endeavoured to reduce the committee structure and increase the flexibility of response to diocesan priorities but there appears to be no escaping the bureaucratic processes involved in coordinating dioceses with very different priorities and circumstances, partly historic but also arising from their social context. The Church of England structures have become "leaner and fitter" since the Commission reported but it remains a truism that such structure "absorbs energies rather than releasing them. The whole process of dealing with an issue takes more time and more effort than in comparable secular organisations" (p.25). The limited duration of the Church Wedding project, for example, challenged the length of time these processes take to effect change in pastoral policies and practice so as to be adequately responsive to contemporary society.

## **5.2 Organising the Church of England**

The preceding section has highlighted the impact of the organisation of the Church of England on effecting changes in pastoral practice and policies. Conversations between parishes, dioceses and the NCIs are time consuming and involve volunteers and paid

staff, administrative and management systems. Decision making in the Church often feels remote from local parishes even though Church structures were designed to be responsive to parochial initiatives as outlined above. This section will examine the nature of the Church in contemporary organisational terms in order to reflect further on its ability to promote and coordinate change and on the location of power for shaping responsive pastoral ministry as it brings together the viewpoints of those inside the Church and outside it. It will consider the critique from the academy of the Church of England organisational processes and, in particular, of management orientated objectives to evaluate pastoral policies. The response of clergy to the Church Wedding project also confirms that attention is needed to the values and theologies espoused by the Church.

The Church Wedding project was initiated with an ethos of responding to consumer demand and to increase the number of church weddings (Chapter 3). It promoted a spirit of increased efficiency and consistency across the organisation of the Church. In this approach it could be said that it assumed that “what is good for the corporation is good for all of us” (Parker 2002, p.174). In Parker’s critique of organisations and their management systems he examines the modern day movement in western society towards corporate organisations and the notion of “impersonal networks”. He is concerned that the place of the individual and of community relations becomes secondary to the profitability of the organisation. “Even managers are increasingly becoming its victims, as they too are down sized or their functions contracted out in the name of profitability” (p.174).

Parker cites the typology developed by Starr based, in turn, on the work of Korten into *corporate colonialism*. Starr attempts to classify, what Parker terms, the growing anti-corporate movement into three categories: *contestation and reform* that prioritises social priorities over commercial competition; *globalisation from below* where accountability is to people instead of elites; and *relocalization* which focuses on the local economy (p.175). She offers examples of organisations in the voluntary sector where each of these approaches dominate and it is interesting to note that the Church of England operates in all of these manners as it supports society through local communities, the

individual and social priorities yet in the organising of itself it has in recent years embraced the framework of corporate management particularly at the NCIs (section 5.1).

Parker was writing in 2002 when a reader in Social and Organisational Theory at the University of Keele, and points out that the term *organisation* has “become a kind of shorthand that embeds all sorts of acts of organising into a relatively enduring pattern. So families, chess clubs, churches, universities, corporations and states are continually produced and reproduced through endless acts of ordering ... organising makes organisations and vice versa” (Parker 2002, p.183). His discussion of this background notes that “churches, universities, corporations, states and small businesses, hospitals and so on, have historically diverged considerably in their methods of organising. There has not been, until fairly recently, an assumption that only one organising principle is appropriate for all these different contexts” (p.184). Parker’s observation leads him to critique contemporary organisations that pay insufficient attention to ways of organising that do not depend on “the use of hierarchy, methods of appointment, conceptions of mission, degree of autonomy, professionalization, democratization of decision making, degree of bureaucratization and so on” (p.184).

Parker is also critical of the preoccupation with managerial language and the concept of ‘the market’ being brought into areas that were previously outside the market to ensure efficiency and customer satisfaction “towards the greatest good of the greatest number”, the ‘spirit of the age’ (p.186). He poses the question that seeing coordination and organising as patterning and arranging may be just as legitimate; efficiency needs finer definitions to consider the place of employees and society at large as well as the customer. For Parker, these are moral and ethical aspects that the Church should consider in its organising of itself and the managing of its systems. In promoting change in pastoral policies, this thesis has thus to consider how the Church evaluates benefits from policy changes both to those inside and outside the organising of itself.

Torry is a Church of England priest who has specifically reflected on the place of managerialism in religious and faith-based organizations. He endorses the diagnosis of

Roberts, “that the Church of England is suffering from a serious bout of ‘managerialism’ ... and the Church’s crisis of identity has encouraged the application of management techniques which are believed to have revived other types of organisation” (2005, p.95). Torry prefers to see the Church of England as a federation of parishes within dioceses and its national bodies as umbrella organisations rather than the headquarters of numerous local branches but he comments that even the clergy “have become operatives who are rewarded for delivering management objectives” (p.96). This approach is evident, for example, in aspects of the Church Growth movement and, in particular, in the work of the diocesan church growth consultant Jackson who has drawn comparisons between small churches and loss-making branches of a commercial chain of shops (2005, p.164).

Torry encourages the Church of England to maintain its distinctiveness and not to behave solely as a voluntary organisation. He turns his attention to clergy team ministries to argue that they, in particular, have brought a ‘quasi-bureaucratic’ dimension to the organisation of parishes neglecting their core theological values and focussing clergy on their congregations rather than the wider community. He is concerned that parishes are open boundaried and that the spiritual nature of this community is a reminder that it is foremost a church. Its clergy come together in a complex organisation and what must not be allowed to happen, Torry says, is that clergy become “bureaucratically-controlled employees” (2005, p.111). Considering the network of local churches he observes “each parish is its own voluntary organisation, with some parishes operating more like associations and some behaving more like bureaucratized voluntary agencies” (p.96).

In the current economic times in Britain, parishes across the Church of England often question decisions being made by their dioceses through diminishing finances and the methods being used, for example, for consultation regarding designating “redundant” church buildings for closure. The new Fresh Expressions movement within the Church of England is coordinated at a diocesan level and has voiced its concern that redundant church buildings should be considered alongside other non-parochial local initiatives. This is the type of decision making that Pattison has in mind when he cites “the

managerial temptation to denigrate the essential humanity of organisations” (1997, p.94). Diocesan and national planning exercises are often implemented through administrative systems that focus on the immediate financial issues and utilise data to forecast within current constraints. Pattison takes issue with the management mantra “*if you can’t count it, it doesn’t count*” noting that “in many organisations an emphasis on measurement constrains the scope of organisational attention in such a way that much of human value and significance is excluded” (p.96). Whilst the Church pays attention to the human values of society at large it appears neglected in its treatment of its own humanity as experienced through its clergy, volunteers and other staff. Redundant churches, for example, are usually allocated to neighbouring parishes but with little provision for the serving staff beyond legal necessities based on managerial procedures.

Pattison bemoans the Church of England’s continued attraction to this managerial approach which he traces to the era over the turn of the millennium under the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, Carey and Hope respectively. “Just as people in many organisations are beginning to see very clearly what the drawbacks of the wholesale implementation of managerialism are, the churches are falling into the same errors” (p.162). In my professional work for the Archbishops’ Council I was, for some time, in dialogue with MODEM, a voluntary agency that, when it was formed in 1993, had the “initial focus of putting ideas from leadership, management and organisation into the churches”. It has since enhanced its aims to reflect not only its initial full title, Management and Organisational Disciplines for the Enhancement of Ministry, but to incorporate its new title, Ministerial and Ontological Disciplines for the Enhancement of Management. Over the years, MODEM has come to consider “putting ideas from spirituality, theology and ministry into business”. The Church has still to reflect on this mutual conversation between management and ministry in its own processes, for example, in the development over recent years of short-term contracts and assessments for clergy that seek to measure success against specific measurable objectives.

Pattison is concerned that “the Church of England has instituted organizational managerial reform at the highest level based on a dialogue between Christian theology and organisational theory” (1997, p.159). He cites both the institutional Church report

*Working As One Body* (Archbishops' Commission on the Organisation of the Church of England 1995) and the influence of Handy who "seems to propound a kind of secularised Christianity where morality and hopes for the better, beneficent future are retained but there is no need for any particular kind of God" (p.143/4). Handy takes a scientific approach (utilising a mathematical sigmoid curve) to illustrate the optimum point of change as circumstances change and we travel personally and corporately along the dips and dives of life. He laments the loss of attention to people and cites the monastic tradition as promoting connections between people even using the confession in the Book of Common Prayer to define accountability. "It is better to look smaller, ... to smaller networks of portfolio people with time to give to something bigger than themselves" (Handy 1995, p.267).

Pattison suggests that management can be seen "in some ways as a faith or religious system in itself" (2007, p.84). It has "its roots in competitive capitalism" (p.85) and there is "a lack of concern about the rights and wrongs of capitalism and the realities of the exclusion and exploitation of the poor" (1997, p.144). He questions its suitability for a religious community that feels "it should exist principally for the benefit of the outsiders" and makes a stand for the inversion of systems of power (2007, p.86). He is not alone in observing that modern economics pays little regard to the disadvantaged. Groody in examining the criteria for a just society notes that "solidarity with the poor then inspires and provokes transformative action" but "while much of the trajectory of the global cultures tends towards an "upward mobility", liberation theologians see in the gospel a challenge to a "downward mobility" that expresses itself concretely in "the preferential option for the poor" (2007, p.193/4).

If religious communities are to maintain their values and integrity of action, Groody and Pattison want them "to take the time critically to examine the implicit and explicit values and theologies of management" (Pattison 1997, p.166) and to be more selective as to which aspects should be adopted. The Church's attention to its values and theologies are central to its considerations as it evaluates measurable outcomes to evaluate the church's response to contemporary culture. "What profiteth a church if it becomes a standard modern managed organisation at the expense of its quirky soul?"

(Pattison 2007, p.88). Pattison's hope is that pastoral care is "one of the few activities in the contemporary world that need not confine itself to aims and objectives. For the sake of religious integrity, it is to be hoped that it will embrace the freedom that allows it to do so" (p.103). Using Groody and Pattison's observations, the Church Wedding project, for example, is a candidate for such critique, which is a task the Church's local theologians are keen to undertake (Chapter 3, section 3.5).

### **5.3 Effecting institutional and organisational change**

In this section I shall explore vehicles for the implementation of organisational change in the Church. In particular, the development in the academy of models of participatory action research is considered to integrate local clergy into processes of policy review. The location of parochial clergy in relation to their organisation in the Church has the potential to bring the benefits of a model of emancipatory action research to policy making in the Church of England. This is seen to empower not only the clergy but also their organisation in collaborative exploration and review.

One of the mysteries of human life is that it is constantly changing and we are profoundly aware of its fragility. As we embrace change "it is easy to lose sight of this electable vulnerability in a culture which has become fixated with the avoidance of risk" (Whipp 2013, p. 69). In contemporary British society we live in the midst of inevitable change, which is increasingly reviewed against a global perspective. Morgan, an organisational theorist and management consultant, explains that change can result from small changes that have proved successful or from small changes coming together to become a significant force: "Many organisations encounter great problems in dealing with the wider world because they do not recognise how they are part of their environment" (1997, p.258). Perhaps this attitude of separateness from the world is also one of the reasons Christian communities have been slow to embrace change. As Pattison observes, "The Christian religious tradition has an ambivalent relationship with change. On the one hand, religion is often seen as a comforting resort and source of certainty during times of chaos and distress ... On the other hand, much of Christian religious tradition is itself obsessed with the future and with change ... changes that will change the world" (1997, p.118).

As we contemplate the speed of change in contemporary society, it often appears to accelerate with the changes and before too long to degenerate into chaos. Morgan builds on such observations to explain: “Exponential change is change that increases at a constant rate ... And the moral is easy to see. The change seems fine for a while but soon runs completely out of control, just as a constantly increasing rate of pollution or overfishing that begins by killing a few fish will soon kill them all” (1997, p.275). So change that has begun for the good can result in organisations feeling they are being “faced with the problem of surviving against the vagaries of the outside world, which is often constructed as a domain of threat and opportunity” (p.258/9). Morgan cites the examples of watchmakers and typewriter firms who have had to respond to progress and change while Pattison challenges any uncritical collusion with change. Resistance to change can sometimes be justified but “the very idea of change is often tacitly conflated with notions of progress and development. Change may then be regarded as an unequivocal good in itself, rather than an ambivalent means to an end” (Pattison 1997, p.122).

Managing change and steering the direction of change in an organisation can be very threatening for all involved but Morgan emphasises that with hindsight change is rule-bound. There is order in the chaos ... we can discern distinct rules or patterns of behaviour” (1997, p.300). His aspiration is that managing change should be seen as a “powerless power” empowering organisations towards an “open-ended evolution ...by learning to see themselves and the way they enact their relations with the broader environment, they create new potentials for transformation” (p.261). He argues that this requires rethinking the organisation and its context through “generating new understandings of a situation or by engaging in new actions” (p.270). He promotes skills of managing boundaries and feedback, and concentrating on small changes that may lead further but he notes that, in order to maintain competitiveness, organisations must be willing to innovate, which may undermine their successes. Morgan refers to this “creative destruction as a major paradox of social life. Evolution involved destruction. But destruction is a side-effect or consequence, not a conscious aim” (p.297). For the Church this discussion highlights the issue of winners and losers in the implementation of change and the unavoidable tensions in the development of an



organisation. It places at the centre of policy debate an evaluation of the aims of change both for those inside and outside the organisation.

Grundy gives attention to managers implementing change and contrasts a participative or devolved decision making process with “line management where decisions are handed down the line (and accountability reporting handed back up the line) through individuals” (1996, p.114). Managers, she suggests, need to be involved in discerning and interpreting the need for change as well as shaping their response. Zuber-Skerrit takes this approach to develop a model for organisational change and management development that depends on bringing together *emancipatory action research* by management teams with adaptations of Lewin and Beer, Eisenstat and Spector’s organisational change models. She contends that this fosters organisational learning and is the most effective way to achieve management and organisational development. It harnesses “theory grounded in experience and practice – by solving complex problems in totally new situations, collaboratively as a team or community of scholars” (1996, p.85).

Beer, Eisenstat and Spector consider organisational change to be more effectively established if it starts at the periphery with general managers and moves gradually towards the top management (Zuber-Skerrit 1996, p.93). They propose task driven interventions for organisational change where the diagnosis of a business problem prompts a new vision among stakeholders, team building and learning before its application and adaptation in other areas of the company, formal policies, systems and structures. “These steps develop a self-reinforcing cycle of coordination, commitment and competence” (p.94). They observe the synergy between this management approach and *participatory action research* where change is recognised “as a continuous, cyclical, lifelong learning process, rather than a series of programs; it is based on team collaboration, coordination, commitment and competence” (p.95).

Zuber-Skerrit brings this task alignment model together with an action research model of organisational change. She takes the idea from Lewin’s (1952) model of organisational change that the motivation to change in an organisation is initiated

through a disturbance, an innovation or an unfreezing that brings new information and insights (p.97). As the action research cycle proceeds from planning to acting to observing and reflecting, she utilises Beer, Eisenstat and Spector's (1990) task alignment model that defines the business plan, develops shared vision, provides strong leadership, spreads a shared vision, renews policies, structures and systems, receives feedback, monitors the revitalisation process, reflects on the results and draws conclusions. Paper 3, section 4 (Appendix 3) traces, in particular, the integration of reflective practitioner research into this cycle. These on-going processes have the potential to empower and transform the system as reflection precipitates real change and improvement. This is *emancipatory action research for organisational change*, which Zuber-Skerrit offers as "the most effective way to achieve organisational learning" (p.102).

Zuber-Skerrit's model of emancipatory action research involves "a move from the old model of the hierarchical, bureaucratic organisation to problem-orientated, task driven action learning organisation" (p.102). She offers it to change agents, managers, teachers and students for their own purposes and indeed it has come to be accepted practice in these fields to stimulate both organisation change and management development. This model has the potential to empower practitioners to offer their learning to the wider organisation for their consideration and reflection. It moves the emphasis from specific content to the process of organisational change "where teamwork, high commitment and new competencies are practised ... analytical skills, interpersonal skills, and skills to identify and solve practical problems" (p.102). It has the potential to liberate both managers and employees to engage in conversation that will promote mutual support and encourage the organisation to respond positively to changing circumstances. For the Church it offers a methodology suitable for exploration to effect organisational change through the personal development of clergy. It offers clergy who could (in organisational terms) be regarded as middle managers in the Church organisation, the opportunities to become agents of change and to grasp the power to bring moral and theological integrity to that task.

## 5.4 Pastoral ministry and organisational change

Organisations are composed of people who come together for a purpose and behave in a specific way. Their working practices are located within the ethos and the character of an organisation. “Knowing ... the character of an organisation can help us to know exactly where we are and how we might work within or against this position or character” (Pattison 2007, p.113). Although people are usually remunerated by the organisation for their work people do not work just for the money and want to be valued by their organisation, to have good relations with colleagues and to be performing a meaningful, valuable role. They want to know, for example, where the organisation is going and why. In voluntary organisations and public service, work is often more than just a job and on occasions perceived in vocational terms. This points to the humanity within organisations, which Pattison and others promote (section 5.2). For the Church it emphasises the integrity of its character as an organisation and the relevance of its foundational narratives.

Towards the end of the previous chapter, section 4.4, a model of theological action research (TAR) was suggested to bring theological reflection to an organisation through the on-going development of individual praxis (Cameron, et al., 2010). TAR involves a dialogue between insider teams and outsider researchers in a model of collaborative participant action research but it maintains a consultancy model where the location of the outsiders is not acknowledged (Graham 2013, p.164). In secularised companies Zuber-Skerrit worked with small *action learning sets* of five to six executive level participants that meet flexibly using networking and information technology to promote strategic alliances. She develops leaders in effecting change as she facilitates emancipatory action research in the workplace through team working, high commitment and creative response to business challenges. The introduction of theological reflection into Zuber-Skerrit’s model of emancipatory action research suggests a revised model with the potential to deliver organisational change through the development of praxis in a faith-based context. Bringing this theological measuring tool to bear on the ethos of a faith-based organisation suggests its potential transferability to the Church context.

The incorporation of theological reflection in Zuber-Skerrit's model of emancipatory action research suggests a model that could further empower the development of pastoral praxis across the "organisation" of the parochial clergy in Church of England parishes (section 5.2). My role, as an insider-outsider professional, has the potential to facilitate among pastoral practitioners the *pastoral cycle* of experience, exploration, reflection and action (Ballard and Pritchard 1996, p.85) within an emancipatory action research model after Zuber-Skerrit. Orsi underlines the tensions in insider-outsider research (Chapter 3, section 3.6) but encourages the exploration of local religious cultures remarking that "religions arise from and refer back to discrete social and cultural worlds" (2005, p.171). His remarks endorse the use of *ordinary research* methods (Chapter 3, section 3.1) as he points out that "understanding human cultures requires a different kind of enquiry" (p.169). Parochial clergy who actively minister in church weddings, for example, have the potential to be insider researchers and to come together in *action learning sets* to offer their experiences towards an organisational learning process among their colleagues. The combination of insider-outsider research dialogue could yield greater benefits to themselves and the Church as it mirrors the pastoral cycle process as a cyclical or spiral process enabling continued learning and enhanced practice.

Both Zuber-Skerrit and TAR bring insider teams together with outsider facilitators. The *outsider researcher* offers objectivity from a distance to the task of organisational reflection but at the expense of little direct awareness of the practitioner experience. In contrast, an *insider participant* may be challenged by tensions in practice between, for example, a variety of expected roles. When managers explore praxis they are expected to maintain commitment to the organisation and their location within it. They are also expected to develop an objective detachment from the topic under scrutiny while ensuring their observations positively promote organisational aims and objectives. Such tensions challenge the collaborative working on which the success of participatory action research depends. Coghlan and Brannick reflect on the perils of the insider-outsider continuum with reference to Humphrey, and Adler and Adler who encourage the insider researcher "to actively take charge ... to appreciate one's uniqueness as an insider-outsider and to cultivate the art of crossing between life-worlds" (2010, p.23).

In describing the insider-outsider role conflict, Coghlan and Brannick comment that this may lead the researcher “to experience role detachment, where you begin to feel an outsider in both roles” (p.119). As research manager to a sizeable organisation I continually moved backwards and forwards along this insider-outsider continuum sometimes to the suspicion of colleagues. While conducting focus groups among clergy, for example, I was on occasions aligned by them with the institution and when reporting their findings to policy makers concern was sometimes expressed that I was becoming too close to the participating clergy. This may be due to the different organisational cultures in which clergy and policy makers work rather than any differences in values and motives. But to develop action research partnerships for organisational change the insider and outsider participants must constantly be aware of their roles and liaise at strategic points in the research cycle. Coghlan and Brannick endorse Morton’s thinking that where organisations need to be challenged “action researchers may be confronted with having to put priority on one (role) over the other” (p.137).

The Church Wedding project disseminated empirical research findings through diocesan training events with the expectation that parochial clergy would take responsibility for integrating this learning into their continuing development of pastoral ministry. The participation of marrying clergy in emancipatory action research introduces the possibility of integrating local theological reflection into corporate learning and for this to continue beyond the timespan of this national project for as long as pastorally beneficial. This nuance of the TAR model has the potential to offer insights towards maintaining local theological integrity while challenging pastoral policies to become more responsive to changes in contemporary society and to the nation they serve. The use of such an enhanced model offers the potential to incorporate pastoral practitioners into the processes of policy review and to address the gap in knowledge highlighted in Chapter 3, section 3.2. It offers the potential to explore factors that influence this and thus examine the subsequent research question posed in Chapter 3, section 3.7. However, the appetite of parochial clergy for participation in such processes of exploration and learning is key to the success of such an approach to pastoral policy

review. The following chapter considers this question in the wider context of personal ministerial development which has come to be embraced by the Church (Chapter 3, section 3.5).

## **6. A learning Church**

The previous two chapters have considered the organisational potential of parochial clergy to engage in reflective empirical theology within a process of participatory action research so as to bring about change in their own practice and in Church pastoral policies. The place of pastoral practitioners in relation to such organisation change is a key factor in the pursuit of this model and this chapter considers the wider context in which clergy find themselves engaging in critical thinking and reflective practice. In further development of the conceptual framework for this thesis, this chapter considers their role as local theologians and their capacity to engage in shared reflective praxis and reflective research. It considers the receptivity of the Church to the professional thinking of its pastoral practitioners. In consequence, this chapter reflects on the expectations of the Church and contemporary society towards the ministerial development of parochial clergy in pastoral ministry and their potential to be agents of change to effect organisational change among pastoral practitioners.

### **6.1 Professional thinking**

During the Church Wedding project numerous couples and clergy expressed the expectation that clergy should practise their ministry in church weddings *professionally* and coordinate with other professionals involved in all the ingredients that make up the commercial wedding package. For prospective wedding couples, their attitude was one borne of the desire to purchase a professional service offered by the Church. For their part, clergy wanted their contribution to be seen as equally professional as the participating musicians, photographers, chauffeurs, caterers and flower arrangers etc. *Professionalism* became a watchword for the Church Wedding training events and one that was seldom questioned.

This contemporary view of clergy as religious professionals alongside various secular counterparts has not always been so and many clergy continue to challenge this assumption. When the tradition of the parish patron appointing a younger son to his estate church or chapel ceased, control for clergy appointments moved into the hands of the bishop (Hastings 1986). To be ordained as a clergyman or a member of another

religious order demanded evidence of a vocational calling to enter the church and clergy were required to demonstrate their commitment through the formal process of a *profession* of faith and duty. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, clergy are still required to demonstrate a vocational calling but their “employment” is on more temporal, closely defined grounds. The Ecclesiastical Offices (*Terms of Service*) Measure 2009 introduced into the Church of England a deployment agreement for parochial clergy that specifies the nature of their ministry and the expectations placed on them. This professionalisation of the clergy developed at a pace over the twentieth century. Clergy were traditionally the first professionals to educate, care and provide for those of whom they had pastoral responsibility. But as these specific professions emerged as separate entities in the late nineteenth century so clergy, in turn, became professionalised and trained in specific theological colleges rather than on the basis of academic study. Doctors, lawyers, teachers and other professions also developed tighter structures and training. People began to consider these professions as a matter of occupational choice and to follow accepted career paths.

In his discussion of this development of the Church’s professional class, Torry cites the requirement in contemporary society for professions to be accountable both to their own professions and to wider society. Whilst accountants, doctors and lawyers are clearly professionally accountable for their continued practice it is not so clear that clergy fall into the same category. Torry notes that clergy hold an independence of practice whereby they are accountable solely to their bishop, their consciences and God but his model of change management in the Church places clergy at the centre of the processes and systems.

Torry’s discussion of priesthood and professionals notes that professionalisation across many professions has become increasingly partial and diverse in that all professions have become open to public scrutiny in different ways. His reflection on the place of the clergy in this, is that they are increasingly seen as religious specialists and servants of voluntary religious organisations that make up individual denominations, agencies and so on. He looks forward to the time when “their role will be one of listening as well as telling, of narrative knowledge as well as of rational knowledge ... offering a kind of



professionalism which other professions are now beginning to understand” (2005, p.143). Clergy come together in a denominationally-based organisation, their career paths are less clear but they are called to fulfil specific functions. Their calling to “go into the church”, into this church based order and priestly organisation, has remained constant and the dependence of local congregations on their spiritual leadership remains. If the Church is to continue to survive, Torry concludes, clergy need to learn from the professionalism of others and take their responsibility to be “the crucible within which change occurs: within which the ideas and energy are generated for reform” (p.147).

Paper 3, section 4.1 and 4.2 (Appendix 3) begins to examine the place of critical reflection in the provision of professional development in the Church. For clergy to embrace professionalism in their role they need the capacity to exercise critical thinking towards organisational change within their congregations and among their colleagues. In a society that openly and willingly embraces change, it is interesting to observe that this has involved critical thinking becoming a significant aspect of contemporary education. Critical thinking and desk research skills are a major focus of school/compulsory age education programmes to prepare students for further explorations in higher education. The curriculum has embraced the acquisition of reflective writing skills and exploratory pursuits, and the Church has also taken this up in many of its training courses. Brookfield, a professor of adult and continuing education, has written in British, Canadian, Australian and American contexts. He views critical thinkers to be important for the “continued health of a democracy” and that “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” (1987, p.67).

The churches’ support for the democratic foundations of modern day citizenship in the western world over the nineteenth and twentieth century has, in no small part, been through the clergy playing pivotal roles in educating and facilitating critical thinking among people under their pastoral and spiritual care. This priestly class has frequently been instrumental in empowering people to take responsibility for bringing about

change in their personal and corporate circumstances. This is exemplified in, for example, the political debates for the abolition of the slave trade, in the worldwide equal rights movement and most recently in the key contribution of the Church and clergy (most notably, for example, Archbishops Tutu and Huddleston) to overturn apartheid in South Africa. Clergy have played crucial roles for the wider good of society and individual wellbeing as they have sought to promote critical thinking and bring professionalism to their wider educative task. Graham points out that this is wider than instrumental or theoretical knowledge. She refers to the practical wisdom, the *phronesis*, that brings together intellectual and moral aspects in “the practice of virtue, the cultivation of excellence” (2013, p.171). The pursuit of excellence of *phronesis* offers clergy the ability to critically reflect too on their own priesthood and on their openness to respond to the wider expectations of professional thinking in their own contemporary pastoral practice.

As Brookfield examines the situations of adult learners, he proposes the workplace as the most suitable place to both develop and practice critical thinking. His view of critical thinking as “frequently a context-embedded skill” leads him to suggest that it “stands more chance of being used, and of affecting how people think and act in real life, if it is developed in the contexts in which it is going to be applied” (1987, p.160). In particular, he promotes critical thinking in the workplace as “one of the chief ways in which we affirm our identity” and the role modelling of critical thinking as holding “the greatest promise for the development of this capacity in the workplace” (p.160/1). The churches involvement through history in liberation movements has frequently been on this basis, meeting people where they are in their experience of day-to-day living. Adding Brookfield observations to Torry’s consideration of the role of professional practitioners offers critical thinking as a tool by which clergy in their parochial contexts will not only be enabled to bring a professionalism to the task of change management but to affirm both their own priesthood and the identity of their congregations in contemporary society.

## 6.2 Reflective praxis

With the increased attention in contemporary society on the notion of professionalism has come a greater expectation on professionals to critically reflect on their own practice. In public life Church of England clergy come into continual contact with other reflective practitioners in the worlds of education, medicine and other public institutions. Much of current thinking about reflection-in-action has come from the influential educator Schön, who was a major contributor to the development of the theory and practice of reflective professional learning in the twentieth century. His thinking around the themes of learning societies and life-long learning have significantly influenced contemporary adult education and professional development. Schön highlights what he calls the demystification of professionals and their place in contemporary society as a provider of services. Reflective conversations with clients will uncover the limits of the professional's expertise and they can become reflective practitioners "in situations of uncertainty, instability, uniqueness and conflict" (Schön 1991, p.308). In a changing society where the Church and clergy continually find themselves re-evaluating their place in the private and public lives of their parishioners, the contribution of reflective practitioners has the potential to inform pastoral praxis.

In some practices and professions, practitioners make use of university based and other researchers. These bring learning to the particular practice but they operate in a different world to the practitioner and these worlds can be divergent. Schön observes that when reflective practitioners themselves become learners the relationship between research and practice becomes immediate. "There is no question of an "exchange" between research and practice or of the "implementation" of research results ...reflection-in-action is its own implementation" (p.308/9). *Reflective research* as he names it, can be carried out by practitioners and be "triggered by features of the practice situation, undertaken on the spot, and immediately linked to action" (p.308). The key to this, for Schön, is that practitioners become aware of their own frameworks and the variety available to them. They are empowered to engage in critical thinking and "to reflect-in-action on their previously tacit frames" (p.311).

In the Church much parochial pastoral practice is formed through parishes and passed on through training incumbents to their curates. University researchers make their contribution but the overriding influences are from different schools of theological tradition that promote varying pastoral practices. Schön's model of the reflective practitioner could be appropriate for the everyday practical theologians that make up the clergy workforce if they can be empowered to see its potential for the increased effectiveness of their pastoral ministry. As the agenda of reflective research is generated from the experience of the practitioners it must be of the kind they could undertake. Schön, consequently, suggests a number of different options:

Groups of practitioners may support one another in reflective research ... the reflective researcher may take on the role of consultant to the practitioner. Reflective research may become a part of continuing education for practitioners ... The researcher may stand to the practitioner in a relationship of participant observation. The practitioner may take time out to become a reflective researcher, moving in and out of research and practice careers (p.233/4).

The tensions of insider-outsider roles in institutionally-based reflective research have previously been noted (in section 5.4) and Schön emphasises this dynamic as the reflective practitioner necessarily comes to challenge "the stable system of rules and procedures within which he is expected to deliver his technical expertise" (p.328). His suggestion is that a supportive learning system is constructed for the mutual exchange of these reflections, which is "conducive to the continual criticism and restructuring of organisational principles and values" (p.336). For Schön, this will enrich the provision of "reflection-in-action (that) is essential to the process by which individuals function as agents of significant organisational learning and ... is at the same time a threat to organisational stability" (p.338). If clergy are to become reflective practitioners they will need confidential forums where they can develop their practice in partnership and in a spirit of mutual exploration. The facilitator will need to flexibly offer research support and critique, to move from fellow practitioner to reflective researcher in an on-going continuum.

Bringing reflection-in-action to the continuing development of ministerial professionalism also has the potential to encourage clergy to be agents of change (section 5.3) and to promote life-long learning in the Church. The models of

participatory action research considered in previous chapters suggest “a deeper *habitus* of waiting, listening and reflecting” rather than “the ‘quick fix’ of ameliorative action” (Graham 2013, p.177). Graham notes the role of first person reflexivity in the model of participatory action research to bring about “the intellectual and moral dimensions of *phronesis* (that) cannot be separated” (p.171). She considers the work of McClure and Leach to revisit Farley’s model of practical theology and emphasise its place in the pursuit of *phronesis* or practical wisdom through the “retrieval of the concept of *habitus* as a disposition or set of values acquired by immersion in the practices of faith” (p.165). Farley brought to theology a focus “in the self-critical reflections on forms of Christian practice” which resulted in a schism between *theoria* and *praxis* (Graham 1996, p.95).

Graham, in seeking to address this, acknowledges the value laden system of action research and suggests that the pursuit of *habitus* “as a discipline concerned with the processes of Christian formation for discipleship – comes closest, perhaps, to a model of learning in order to inhabit an acquired and emergent system of practices that cultivates the virtues and our capacity to recognise and pursue the good” (p.169). For Graham bringing theology to action research brings “the practice of ‘attentiveness’ to a situation, undertaking modes of enquiry and discernment that not only lead to practical strategies but result in the cultivation of practical wisdom” (p.177). Such attentiveness brings a partnership of action and reflection, a formational and a pastoral role of listening and using responsive tools of social analysis that provide substance to practical discipleship and what Farley terms a “hermeneutics of vocation” (p.177).

In the world of Christian religious education Groome has been at the forefront of bringing theological reflection to the processes of religious education and pastoral ministry and he, like Schön, focuses on the need for *shared praxis* among those in ministry. For Groome learning can be promoted through a process of shared reflection on practice towards the development of reflective praxis. In synergy with the approach of participatory action research (Chapter 4, section 4.5), he describes shared praxis as a process of “present action, critical reflection, dialogue, Story and the Vision that arises from that Story” (1980, p.184). Groome subsequently summarises the Church’s whole way of being in the world as having faith education consequences.

Shared praxis then has the potential to be a way of being with people rather than any pedagogical method, it facilitates mediation between the human condition and God's saving will for the world and "can provide a framework through which a minister can develop his or her own consistent approach" (Groome 1991, p.296). For Groome, "all ministers, regardless of their specific function, need a keen 'educational consciousness' ... An approach like shared praxis to functions of ministry has the advantage of encouraging attention to faith education consequences because of its dynamics and commitments" (p.297). He brings the active, reflective and creative aspects of praxis into "a participative and dialogical pedagogy in which people reflect critically on their own historical agency in time and place and on their sociocultural reality ... with the creative intent of renewed praxis in Christian faith towards God's reign for all of creation" (p.135).

### **6.3 Theological learners**

Groome pioneered the bringing of shared praxis to religious education and pastoral ministry, and contributed considerable theological thinking to this task. He cites Aristotle's approach to praxis as a cyclical and holistic process beginning with "historical engagement and employing practical reason" (1991, p.45). However, he aligns his approach most closely with Aquinas who had a profound influence on Catholic religious education and whose mode of "faith knowing" brought together "reflection on life experience in light of Scripture and tradition. ... Aquinas has been called the first great empiricist. But avoiding naïve empiricism, he insisted on the role of intellect on knowledge and in enabling will to chose according to 'right reason'" (p.57/8). This knowing begins with attention to experience and interpretation. For Groome it requires critical reflection that "promotes a dialectical relationship between people and their place (and time)" and he poses the question "what kind of discourse and community does this suggest for an event of pedagogy?" (p.106).

Groome's analysis of shared praxis in pastoral counselling can be broadened to other areas of pastoral ministry and to offer insights for shared learning experiences in pastoral practice. He notes that it requires of participants the engagement of their whole

being, of their self and not just their mind towards the quest for spiritual wisdom which has evolved over Christian history beyond “a technical skill” and “a practical mode of living” to “an ethic of life, to personification as a divine partner and something truly of God” (p.31). His suggestions for its facilitation include the use of probing questions, activities, active and empathetic listening which are the skills of qualitative research that he reminds researchers are never “value free” and should be evident to the group. Groome encourages educators to see themselves as “the ‘leading learner’ and that, especially in the journey of faith, we are all brother and sister pilgrims together” (1980, p.223). As he turns his attention to the educative role of ministry, he challenges clergy to see that critical reflection on present action “requires courage and risk taking and confronts the educator as much as other participants”. This process uncovers “the origins, ‘reasons’ and consequences of present praxis” and participants “become aware of the ‘tinted lenses’ through which we interpret it, we are being prophetic”. In this Groome views the educator and participants as one. In his or her pastoral ministry the minister, in particular, “has responsibility to be a prophetic presence in the community, to encourage and be open to the prophetic gifts of all participants” (1991, p.210).

Schön and Groome harness mutual learning as reflective praxis becomes a shared activity and a learnt way of living and being. Reflective praxis can also be potentially costly in terms of self and relationships. For clergy there is an art in leading learners so that together they learn to keep their faith alive to the circumstances they find themselves in. Groome observes that ministers bring the art of theological educators to their communities which requires “the discipline, preparation, self-investment, and imagination required of any fine artist” as they work together with another Creator “who gives the increase from our ‘sharing faith’” (p.450). This model of critical thinking and shared praxis has the potential to stimulate their continued theological learning in the workplace as they reconcile their experiences of ministry with reflective praxis.

In much public debate the Church of England is expected to engage in a learning partnership with contemporary society and in the academy Jarvis, Nash and Nash also, in turn, point the Church towards becoming an active learning organisation in

contemporary society. Jarvis, in particular, quotes Bruner who understands the *ekklesia* of the New Testament to be a learning organisation (2004). He urges the Church to return, in this sense, to its roots if it is to survive and so that its proclamation relates to the people to whom it is addressed. The Church still has much to learn from the framework of its belief systems and Jarvis has proposed different models of learning in this relationship, which include being able to “reach out to people in their questions with its questions” and exposing our own “quest for a religious understanding of the world and ourselves in it” (p.150). As the Church develops its ability to engage with reflective theology, Jarvis’ vision is that the Church becomes a learning company “through the training, action and work-based learning ... (of) clergy and laity” (p.150). The models of *shared reflective praxis* and *reflective research* explored in this chapter come together to offer the Church the ability to respond to culture as it learns to listen to the contribution of theologically reflective practice through pastoral ministers.

Learning with those around us is, in the view of Jarvis, an incarnational process and “is at the centre of the research process”. Jarvis was located at the School of Educational Studies at the University of Surrey, where he preferred the notion of collaborative research through practitioner research and action research. He poses the question as to “how our faith helps or hinders learning” (2002, p.16/17). He suggests that small scale, in-depth qualitative research skills from the social sciences and education should explore where people “in a non-churchgoing society, such as the United Kingdom ... learn answers to their religious questions” (p.17). In a further article, Jarvis considers the place of the church in a learning society. He reviews the pressures from a rapidly changing society for everyday educational programmes to keep up with this learning. He notes “a growing convergence between understanding the relative truths of contemporary society and faith” but also its fragmentation which means that “knowledge is no longer static ... and authoritative answers are less likely to be accepted” (2004, p.137).



One of the beneficial aspects that Jarvis observes in our learning society is the aptitude for *reflexivity*<sup>3</sup>. The “complexities of the contemporary world make decisions based on certainty virtually impossible ... every decision and subsequent action involves a risk”. “People must decide for themselves, adjust to social changes and keep on learning, either by doing and reflecting on the outcomes or thinking and planning before the action takes place” (p.141/2). This learning society, Jarvis says, is based on a consumer market where the nature of teaching has been altered and with it our understanding of the mission of the Church. The authoritative preaching of the Church thus becomes part of its crisis in society where “churches are out of touch with the religious questions of today” (p.145). To keep abreast of this rapidly changing world, organisations need to become learning organisations which embrace “both continuity and change” and where “all members of the organisation are equally participants in its processes” (p.145/6).

Jarvis’ prompt for the Church to read “the signs of the times” (Matthew 16: 2-3) and reference culture in reflection mirror suggestions towards individual reflective ministry and critical thinking. Nash and Nash outline specific tools for the promotion of reflective praxis by Church practitioners. They suggest the identification of action to follow individual and group reflection, concluding with the challenge “what do we need to learn, do, become ... to enable us to take that action?” (2009, p.155). Nash and Nash utilise several models of theological reflection based on the pastoral cycle reminding readers of its development by liberation theologians. They describe various spiritual practices to provide structure around discernment and reflection, and to promote regular reflective praxis and learning in pastoral ministry. Their approach is to enhance the effectiveness of individual pastoral ministry as clergy bring theological reflection to their praxis so as to contribute to corporate learning by the wider Church.

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<sup>3</sup> The meanings given to the terms ‘reflective’ and ‘reflexive’ in published work are not always consistent. I use being ‘reflective’ to mean looking thoughtfully at something – usually at some length, with the benefit of hindsight, and with a critical eye. I use ‘reflexivity’ or being ‘reflexive’ to mean specifically looking thoughtfully at one’s own self – at what I am like, at how I see what is outside of myself, how I affect it, or how my seeing of it affects how I present it.

## **6.4 Ministerial development**

One of the major items on the Church's agenda as it was moving into the twenty-first century, was a review of the structure and funding of ordination training. The review group took the theme of being a "Learning Church". It was chaired by the Bishop of Chichester and took several years to consult the wider church, the Archbishops' Council and the House of Bishops before submitting its final report in 2003. Bishop Hind writing in the Preface to this report recorded his hope that the recommendations would "make a major contribution to 'formation for ministry within a learning Church' for many years ahead" (Working Party on Structure and Funding of Ordination Training 2003, p.vii). The review built on previous reviews for the House of Bishops in the early nineteen nineties into theological training, which came to be referred to as "the Lincoln" and "the Hereford" reports after the bishops who chaired the reviews. Bishop Hind defended his group's wider consideration of formation with reference to theological argument of "the nature of the Church as a single body with many members and an infinite variety of gifts supplied by the Holy Spirit" (p.viii).

The Hind review group began their work by noting "the appetite for significant change, albeit change that builds on existing strengths" (p.1) and took a radical approach to its task. It drew on the insights and expertise of a wide range of people and institutions including the dioceses, training institutions, ecumenical partners and institutions of higher education. The review group openly acknowledged the "demand from congregations and from parishioners for ministry exercised to a professional standard" and, whilst referring to the Church's "honourable tradition of emphasizing the special calling and pastoral nature of the ministry", it proposed a norm for ordained ministry of graduate status in theology for ministry (p.24). As the report considered the wider issue of theological training across the church, it underlined that "it is inseparable from faithful and believing discipleship. Theology as such is vital for every Christian and that even though clergy might properly be expected to be 'theologians' this is not a 'professionalism' that belongs to them alone" (p.7).

The Hind Report sought an educative framework to sustain the life of the Church: "For the Church to flourish it will have to become more fully a learning Church – a body that

promotes a dynamic and reflective discipleship for all its members” (p.36). To emphasise the urgency for this task it reflected on a statement from the 2001 Kanuga report commissioned by the Anglican Primates meeting:

Theological education is fundamental to the renewal of Anglicanism today. It is the means by which wisdom – the learning of the Church by the power of the Holy Spirit – is developed in the Church, and directly serves the practises by which the Church sustains itself in its mission in the world (p.30).

The review group also considered a range of possible theological communities “that integrates the person, understanding and competence” and does not see formation “as being concerned solely with questions of spirituality and discipleship ... alongside ‘education’ (= academic study) and training (=learning for ministry)” (p.29). It promoted the use of informal and formal forms of learning through congregations and parishes, educational and training institutions as a dynamic and continuing lifelong process.

This acceptance of life-long learning by the Church is in tune with developments in wider society for on-going adult personal and professional development (section 6.1). The Hind Report ushered in major changes to Anglican ministerial formation in line with those in other professions. Clergy and other lay ministries now undertake Initial Ministerial Education (IME) that begins with formal theological training and continues into the first training post. It is a marriage of separate ministerial study and reflection with practice based development and assessment. Once licensed into active (diocesan) ministry, clergy are expected to undertake Continuing Ministerial Development (CMD) and to give an account of this to their bishop as part of a programme of regular Ministerial Development Review (MDR). Dioceses are developing systems of guidance and support for this but the responsibility for participation lies directly with individual clergy and ministers. Diocesan frameworks are in their infancy but clergy are now trained to become accustomed to shaping and integrating CMD into their ministry.

As the Hind Report developed the theme of a Learning Church and made proposals for redesigning ministerial education for the beginning of the twenty-first century, it referred to the importance of theologically-based research in promoting enquiry and discovery across the Church. It encouraged the Church to take ownership for this rather

than relying on academic and other institutions, and it broadened its consideration to specific issues that “initially arise out of its mission to the world” (p.72). Research of this nature might be commissioned by the Church itself through its various bodies and institutions, for example, the House of Bishops, the General Synod, NCI departments or dioceses. It might attract research scholarships or government postgraduate funding. It could be linked to training institutions and be a source of “revitalizing the relationship between the Church and our training institutions”. The report also cites the possibility of “research that is directly related to the practice of ministry, for example, using an action-research model” and related to training institutions and partnerships (p.72). It sidestepped the contribution of the NCIs and, in particular, the Research and Statistics department but it encouraged the Church and the clergy to engage with theologically based research as part of their learning.

Since the Church has begun to implement the recommendations of the Hind Report, more clergy are being encouraged to undertake university based postgraduate studies. A number of theological institutions have created masters and taught doctorate level ministry courses and I have tutored research methods on some of the academic and diocesan-based courses. My strongest involvement is with students studying the Doctorate in Ministry course provided at King’s College, London. Students frequently come to this course with considerable professional experience in chaplaincy or parochial ministry. They are keen to reflect theologically on their experiences and are required to undertake a piece of empirical research as part of their dissertation. The reaction of these students to their exploratory task is generally one of apprehension and reticence, but as they develop confidence in their ability to undertake such an enquiry their enthusiasm and creativity noticeably increases. Students readily acknowledge that without the course requirement specifying the use of social science research methods they would not contemplate conducting their own enquiries.

This lack of instinct for enquiry about issues of faith was noticed by Groome and given theological attention in some detail by Hull. He notes a spirit of passivity towards many contemporary issues of faith and is concerned at the fear of growth in many adult lives. He challenges adult religious educators “to make the future more attractive than

stagnation in the present” (Hull 1991, p.169). In his discussion Hull bemoans that piety has taken the place of learning:

The view of the ancient Israelites who held that it was an offence before God to conduct a census of the people is widely shared by pious religious people today. Numbers, they believe, do not matter. Plans do not matter. Statistics, facts and finally beliefs themselves no longer matter. All that matters is the feeling of being in a group which is doing the will of the Lord (p.133).

Hull’s observations were borne out during a piece of research I managed for the Archbishops’ Council into clergy deployment. My researcher colleagues and I discovered that many clergy judged the appropriateness of their deployment by how “comfortable” they felt with their congregation and the requirements placed on their ministry. There was little evidence of a pastoral mandate that challenged this feeling to any significant degree and the research team was left considering how the biblical record of the Hebrew prophets would challenge this attitude among those who find themselves ministering in inhospitable neighbourhoods and communities.

Hull concludes by challenging the Church to consider how “the rise of modern education has implications for theology and the life of faith” (p.209). He points out that Christ’s model of ministry challenges the view that it is “superior to teach and inferior to learn” (p.213). The Church, clergy and people, can grow in vocation as they embrace life-long learning with the potential to enhance faith and discipleship. In a changing universe, Hull notes that knowledge is not fixed or static. Christ was not only the authoritative, all knowing teacher but is portrayed as a child in the Temple to be the “questioning learner”. “Ideas of God are necessarily influenced by human experiences” (p.219) and such learning brings freedom, surprises and discovery. Learning through life brings wisdom and the ability to change. Hull portrays contemporary congregations as people who “will complain of not being able to understand a preacher who encourages them to think, but the one who gives them a cosy feeling of being in a familiar, warm cocoon of accepted beliefs is admired and appreciated” (p.65). His observations challenge the Church to be more Christ-like and become a place of enquiry and learning to be more in tune with contemporary society. In the Scriptures we find Christ portrayed as ready to engage in debate and willing to concede and learn from others (Mark 7:24-30). If the Church is to embrace change in response to contemporary

society, its clergy and people will need to be willing to move from their comfort zones and to be open to learning from signs of God's mission in the world, the *Missio Dei*.

This chapter has explored models of pastoral reflection for the Church and its appetite for learning from pastoral experience. It has highlighted the contribution offered by local theologians and their deeper habitus and attentiveness to the development of pastoral responses towards contemporary society (Graham 1996). As the Church listens to those inside and outside its institution at a time of significant change, it is seeking to develop and support those at its grass roots to be more pastorally responsive. The mechanisms by which the consequent insights from its pastoral practitioners can be intergrated into further policy review have yet to be fully examined. The following chapter proposes a means by which the pastoral responses of contemporary society can be evaluated by the Church utilising the insights and experiences of its parochial clergy. It brings the contribution of empirical research to benefit the development of shared praxis across the Church and considers the skills needed to do so.

## **7. Priest researchers**

The theoretical areas considered in chapters 4 to 6 of this thesis provide the conceptual framework from the academy for the exploration of the research question posed at the conclusion to Chapter 3. The contribution that theological reflection offers to the empirical social science research methods considered in Chapter 4 suggests a model of bringing theological reflection to participatory action research in pastoral practice. The place of insider-outsider teams to effect organisational change in the Church was developed in Chapter 5. This chapter reflected on the potential of the organisation of the clergy to participate in a model of pastoral policy development adapted from Zuber-Skerrit's model of emancipatory action research (1996). The role of ministerial development in a learning Church was explored in Chapter 6 and the suitability of reflection-in-action and reflective research to encourage the development of shared praxis by parochial clergy in the Church was considered. Chapter 7 now brings together the theoretical findings from these earlier chapters to reflect further on the role of parochial clergy in contemporary society to participate in pastoral policy and practice development through a model of participatory action research. It considers their capacity to contribute to collaborative exercises of research into pastoral practice. A model of pastoral policy review is proposed that incorporates *priest researchers* who are professionally trained to reflect theologically and to employ professional modes of enquiry and reflection in a variety of changing pastoral contexts.

### **7.1 The listening church**

The conceptual framework for this thesis considered in previous chapters has emphasised the place of clergy in a changing Church as it seeks to respond to contemporary society. Many Church debates are conducted in the public gaze and the Church is being encouraged to both contribute and to listen; to contribute to and to learn from changing attitudes in society (Brown M. 2010, Draycott & Rowe 2012). For this to be effective local pastoral practitioners will benefit from being open to learn from each other and in sharing pastoral praxis (Chapter 6). For its part, the Church will benefit from being open to listen to the prophetic insights that clergy bring as they gather information and become reflective practitioners and researchers in their parish communities (Chapter 4).

As the Church of England is subject to its changing sociological, cultural and religious context in England, it has also to grasp the significance of its place in the wider global religious community. Reader points to the deep rooted impact of globalization, one that is causing “the blurring of boundaries between the different traditions and religious resources” (Reader 2008, p.62). Speaking as a practical theologian, he notes that this is challenging “the very frameworks and concepts that are familiar to the practice of Christian ministry”, including the nature of pastoral care and community activity (p.17). If the Church is to respond positively to the impact of globalisation on the changing nature of religious belief and practice across the nation it will need to reconsider the shape of pastoral policies and practice. The widespread decline in contemporary churchgoing has encouraged the Church to adopt an increasing missional perspective in its relationship with the nation (Church of England Mission and Public Affairs Council 2004) and as the international theologian Bosch observes, “authentic evangelism is always contextual” (1991, p.417).

Since the Second World War the Church of England has developed differently in the private and in the public lives of its citizens. The historian, Brown, offered insights from literature as he sought to identify the impact of sociological trends on religion in Britain (Brown C. 2002). In considering statistical trends, sociologists of religion in Britain have come to distinguish between three key axes of religious adherence to include public surveys on religious belief and affiliation alongside others on religious practice (and participation). Voas and Ling, for example, have brought together dimensions of religious identity, belief and practice to propose the growing incidence of the “fuzzy faithful” (2010). Papers from the disciplines of psychology and the sociology of religion have also been brought together with the title of “Religion and the Individual” (Day 2008). Weller, in examining the breadth of the consequent evidence, notes “the nature and extent of religious belief, belonging, participation in worship and secularization is not straightforward to portray in a statistical way since the results obtained from various surveys are highly dependent on the form in which the questions are asked.” (2005, p.111) Nevertheless, he concludes that three main faith aspects of the contemporary socio-religious reality, “Christian”, “secular” and “religiously plural” form a significant part of the religious landscape of contemporary England and the United Kingdom.



As different exercises involving empirical research have explored the changing roles of private and public religious life in contemporary Britain, sociological and theological commentators have been challenged by the apparent tensions. Despite the decline in churchgoing, people will attend church on significant occasions and a personal spirituality is developing outside the mainstream Christian churches. This has been described as having the potential to change the shape of western religion and create new religious identities (Heelas & Woodhead 2005, Lynch 2007). Hunt observes “the traditional sacred space of our culture retains some hold over people even when they have no desire to attend for formal worship (2003, p. 165). In particular, wedding couples, for instance, frequently want to mark this important day of their lives in the sacred space of their local church (Barley 2009).

## **7.2 Cultural conversation**

Donovan’s account of his years living with the Masai people is a seminal theological critique of pastoral attentiveness within an alien culture. He is challenged, for example, to baptise the whole tribe rather than just those making an explicit assent to faith in Christ and cannot bring himself to tell them that the sacramental signs in life are restricted to just two or seven signs. “There was no area of Masai life that was not touched by their traditional religion and now they saw Christianity continuing and fulfilling that process. Their entire life was sacramental” (1982, p.152). In a similar manner, this model of pastoral cultural conversation challenges the Church of England in its relationship with the nation and the individuals within it. God’s missionary activity in the world, the *Missio Dei*, prompts the church to seriously consider its response to cultural changes and to become pastorally attentive to the (newly emerging) needs of contemporary British society.

Since the beginning of the twenty first century corporate values within British culture have continued to change at a rapid pace and the gulf in values between the nation and the established Church is growing. To speak into this pluralist culture requires the Church to listen to the religious, moral and cultural conversations within it, both private and public. Whilst the Church must maintain its religious integrity it is challenged to earn the credibility to be heard if it is to have an effective pastoral ministry and mission.

Many sociologists of religion have come to regard contemporary British society as secularised in its religious values and practices although not secular in its identity. This dichotomy is a source of tension for the Church of England in its dealings with the nation and with individual lives within it. Davies observes, “individuals achieve meaning within the broad bands offered by their society and by their personal temperament” (2008a, p.8). As individuals are socialised into society they construct private and public religious values from experiences and inherited frameworks. “The very process of socialisation involves the inculcation of values.” (p.10). Davies identifies “cultural intensification” as key to understanding western religion. This he defines to be both a category embracing a wide variety of behaviours and a process “in which the values of a group are brought to a behavioural focus and emotionally appropriated” (p.7). Understanding such cultural values, as Percy in turn points out, “needs to conceive of theology as a mode of cultural conversation; speaking, listening, interpreting and belonging within the world, even as it seeks to be an agent of transformation by virtue of being “other worldly” (2009, p. 192).

In post-modern Britain where multi-cultural influences are creating an increasingly pluralist society, religious conformism is fragmenting. People of different faith traditions are adapting their own frameworks and are not deterred by mixing religious concepts influenced by the spread of global belief systems. “Whereas until the ‘60s’ it was ‘natural’ for people to turn to Christianity, it is becoming ‘natural’ for increasing numbers to turn to alternative spiritualities of life” (Heelas and Seel 2003, p.242). The result is that religious identity has also become more individualised, incorporating personal preferences rather than inherited norms:

Great value is attached to the development, cultivation and exploration of subjective-life ... we live in a subjectivized consumer culture propounding expectations of well-being ... The wider cultural current of inner spirituality may very well become more important than declining traditional religion (p.242).

Sociologists of religion now identify a trend towards a consumer approach towards faith choices and away from any sense of conformity or obligation (Davie 2007, p.143-147). Secular frameworks are being adopted by many but sociologists comment: “consumerism has certainly not squelched the desire for meaningful identity. Despite century-old predictions that religion would fade away, most individuals still report that religion is one of the most important parts of their identity” (Bell 2008, p.127). Bell

notes a lack of conceptual clarity in defining the term “identity” but he points to “ good evidence that a person is composed of identity domains such as ethnic, sexual or religious, each with their own potentially differing identity statuses” (p.127).

Niebuhr’s writings on the theological engagement of social ethics and culture highlight the tensions for the church in its religious conversations with society. His model of differing theological positions for the church’s mission in the world has been critiqued by Guenther and others (Guenther 2005). Niebuhr comments on cultural engagement “that no single man or group or historical time is the church; but that there is a church of faith in which we do our partial, relative work and on which we count ... the world of culture - man’s achievement - exists within the world of grace - God’s kingdom” (2001, p.256). Percy points out that in this kind of understanding “theology itself then begins to emerge as a form of empathetic conversation with contemporary culture, rather than a mode of expression that simply resists it, or perhaps seeks to impose its own different definition upon the world” (2010, p.32).

### **7.3 Reflective ministry**

This thesis has observed that pastoral responses to culture emerge from a lived experience seen through the lens of theological reflection in a pastoral cycle of observation, reflection and action. It has highlighted the potential of such “attentiveness” to bring “theological wisdom” to develop clergy also as local theologians (Graham 2013, p.170). Christian ministers need to develop as reflective practitioners if they are to understand and respond more fully to their pastoral context. Their response will be more meaningful and sensitive towards cultural changes if they consider the integrity and rigor of their observations. For this they need to consider more objective methods of observation collection and enquiry such as those formulated within the field of social sciences. Nash and Nash bring practices to establish processes for theological reflection in ministry with a critical attention to culture. In this pursuit they note that Christian ministry must utilize insights and observations from the social sciences, psychology, sociology and other related disciplines. They highlight Williams’ observation for individual Christian priests:

This ‘seeing’, then, has to involve a fair bit of literacy about the world we’re in – literacy about our culture (cultures rather), about how our contemporary emotions and myths work, about the human heart. The priest’s obligation to maintain such literacy is not just to do with the need to speak to people in the language they understand, in a missionary context; it is grounded in the need to show believers the world they live in and help them to respond not instantly or shallowly but with truthfulness and discernment (2009, p.105).

The concept of prescriptive pastoral ministry is no longer a feasible option for the Christian minister. Pastoral ministry is interwoven with the mission of the church and Lyall supports its “essential messiness” as it responds “imaginatively and pastorally to human need ... to set people free to take decisions which are right for them in this life and at the last to stand faultless before the God of all grace” (1999, p.143). Everyday situations arise that require adaptability and flexibility to individual needs that often emerge from initially similar contexts. The diversity of pastoral contexts even in the most self-contained parishes of the Church of England requires the priest to reflect theologically and practically. Nash and Nash bring together several models of theological reflection to encourage reflective ministry. They note the similarity to the pastoral cycle (Chapter 4, section 4.5 and Chapter 5, section 5.4) for bringing together experience, observation, exploration, reflection and response. They cite a triad for theological reflective practice and lifestyle bringing together:

- i. The voice of God and our Christian heritage
- ii. Our own beliefs, personal and professional values and theory from our discipline
- iii. Experience (2009, p.41)

Bringing these sources of reflection together points to a ministry where “who we are is more important than what we do and developing a Christ-like character should be given at least equal weight to developing ministry skills” (p.5). As ministers discover more about themselves they will learn more of their personal formation as priests. They also have the potential to bring this learning to the Church for the evaluation of pastoral practice and policies.

## 7.4 Ordinary research

In contemporary society there remains a persistent and significant pulse of implicit religion and many continue to seek spiritual meaning for their lives. There is a growing body of empirical evidence that there is a continued openness to God's presence in the world and young people who have no experience of church and religion voice a private spirituality within a loose Christian framework (Barley 2006/7, Collins-Mayo, et al., 2010). One of the negative factors in local church life has been the widespread indifference to participation in community living the significance of which has been strikingly noted by Putman (Putman 2000). Many who have been brought up with connections to church and faith have drifted away and lost any pretence to an explicit faith (Francis & Richter 2007). Priests interact with both implicit and explicit religion in contemporary pastoral ministry but within the community of faith Clark-King suggests their role is to conduct the "ordinary theology" of those bringing their instruments of faith and seeking God's harmony in their lives. She highlights Astley's model of "ordinary theology" within local church life as explicit religion, a religious theology that he defines as "the (non-academic) theological assertions and theologizing dimension of conventional, customary and common religion" (Astley 2002, p.94).

The Church of England's model of mission and ministry centres on the offering of priestly ministry in every locality across England. Ballard defines their task as *pastoral theologians in residence* "to help the whole community, severally and together to develop habits, tools and skills that will enable something of the divine reality to be discerned and acknowledged" (2001, p.133). As priests interpret the nature of what Jesus is recorded as referring to as "the signs of the times" (Matthew 16: 2-3), there is a persistent challenge to speak into that context creatively and with integrity. For Ballard this involves the skills of the artist who also operates within the constraints of their cultural setting and "who tries to help people see what is there, to catch a vision and to shape both perception and action" (p.133). Williams too reflects too on this similarity: "There has to be in every priest just a bit of the poet and artist – enough to keep alive a distaste for nonsense, cheapness of words and ideas, stale and predictable reactions" (Nash & Nash 2009, p. 105).

Priestly ministry includes the task of understanding and interpretation, contemplation and theological reflection rooted in the context in which priests minister. To minister effectively as pastoral theologians in residence, priests must theologically inhabit the social context of their pastoral ministry and interpret it as participant observers of that culture. Williams goes further to observe that in interpreting culture to and for the Church the priest also “interprets the Church’s teaching to the world outside (and is) someone who has the gift of helping people to make sense of each other. Communities ... need nurture, they need to be woven into unity” (Percy 2010, p.7). Bringing the skills of an artist to paint a pastoral picture of theological integrity and to hold individuals within it together in a creative mix the priest has to give understanding and attention to the different contributions. This resonates with the approach of Groome to shared reflective praxis (Chapter 6, section 6.3) and Clark-King reflects further on the artist analogy to offer a picture of the priest as a conductor. Priestly ministry becomes an act of listening to different instruments play their part in the community orchestra and endeavouring to harmonise an everyday, practical theological symphony (2004).

Clark-King found herself in this position as she listened to women parishioners tell their stories and as she sought to make the church relevant to their experiences. She offers the concept of clergy as *conductors of the choral theology* that emerges as people endeavour to seek God and make theological sense of their everyday lives. The priest builds trust and relationships with the various parts of the parochial orchestra but to establish any harmony the players must listen to each other too. For Clark-King clergy have a vital role to play “to ensure that all the members of the choir listen to each other” (p.212). As clergy go about their pastoral ministry they have the potential to encourage people to listen to the other and inhabit their world, to bring God into that dialogue and to reflect on the emerging theological harmony borne of everyday life. Clergy “naturally inhabit a position between the academy and the pews ... They live among the people ... they hope to enter into their hopes and anxieties and learn the best language in which to speak to them about the reality of God” (p.212).

Clark-King’s study of working class women in Newcastle upon Tyne focussed on their everyday theology, which was not confined to traditional perspectives. She concluded

that “insight and wisdom are not confined to academia and the Church has a great resource in its pews if only it can learn to utilise it” (p.11). Astley has offered the term *ordinary theology* to describe the everyday language in which ordinary people reflect on their experiences of God in their lives (Paper 2, section 6). He distinguishes such God talk from similar terms such as common theology, popular and folk religion and firmly roots ordinary theological reflection in the foundations of faith and the traditions of the Church (2002, p.94). Other similar concepts, Astley maintains, generally lie outside the Church although they may relate to it and are characterised by a form of spirituality. Towler, a developmental psychologist who developed an empirical theory of faith development, writes similarly and describes such religion in Britain as “the underground religion of the common people” (p.90).

The task of listening and interpreting the ordinary theology of those around them, of ordinary people, can bring the priest to a point of critical reflection, observation and discovery. If the pastoral ministry is not to be unduly influenced by the dominant voices and players in the orchestra the priest should listen and assess the contribution of each to the whole. To some extent the task is one of refining the community performance so that each contribution is in its proper place and time. This listening and reflective process is the stuff of ordinary everyday enquiry and exploration. It requires the priest to have skills at their disposal to objectively assess situations and contexts, cultural norms and stances. Paper 2: “Developing a model of empirical research in the Church of England as an agent of change for pastoral policies” (Appendix 2) offered a concept of *ordinary research* to enable such a process, which is informed by professional (empirical) research practices but can be carried out independently of them. In an assessable way ordinary research brings the tools of objective analysis and enquiry to offer clarity to the pastoral task. Priestly ministry enquiring into their social and religious context can discover a greater pastoral integrity as it is informed through the interpretative skills of both the theologian and the social scientist (Swinton & Mowat 2006). Local practical theologians can, in turn, become more culturally literate as their pastoral colleagues utilise the skills of ordinary research to become *priest researchers* (a concept proposed in Paper 3, section 4.5, Appendix 3) for enquiring into their social and religious context.

## **7.5 Research mentoring**

Donovan's pioneer model of pastoral ministry among the Masai tribe points to the unique contribution of a lived experience by the priest among local people learning from their cultural situation (1982). Pastoral ministry in contemporary Britain is becoming similarly challenged and pastoral practitioners find themselves in new sociological territory across the nation. If the integrity of such enquiries is to be maintained the professional design of accessible ordinary research skills will be central to such exercises. For such pastoral pioneers their aspiration to marry professional expertise with theological integrity can benefit from appropriate research mentoring that promotes individual professional development while undertaking reflective praxis on the effectiveness of Church policies.

The national Church Wedding project sponsored by the Archbishops' Council between 2006 and 2011 provides an opportunity to explore the potential that priest researchers offer to national pastoral reviews. The following chapter outlines the empirical research methodology proposed in this thesis to examine this issue in the context of this project. The research seeks to explore the suitability of enhancing the use of empirical research in this particular project in partnership with colleagues who might be open to develop further as reflective practitioners into priest researchers. In the field of education, teachers' action research is a form of on-going professional development for teachers by teachers rather than being done to teachers by outside "experts" (The Open University 2008). It is a form of systematic enquiry undertaken by individuals or groups who share a passion for improving their own and others' teaching and learning to support students in school. Researching teachers are frequently supported by a process of research mentoring. This has been developed by Fletcher to facilitate mutual learning through self-study and co-enquiry rather than being restricted to the passing on of information (2007). Research mentors contribute to the process as "experts" whose skills, values and understanding complement and enrich one another's practice. Fletcher proposes the use of electronic communication methods by teacher research mentors and for clergy this model of mutual learning offers a potentially attractive, efficient and practical approach warranting further exploration (2005).



In my work as Head of Research and Statistics for the Archbishops' Council, I was asked to support several priests as they have explored and researched the context of their pastoral ministry. For the most part they have been lone practitioners who have come to an impasse in one particular aspect of their pastoral ministry. Their professionalism has been evident in the concerns they have expressed at the tensions that have become evident between national policies and local practices have encouraged them to conduct their own explorations. A few have accredited their enquiry within the academy but all have expressed frustration with the apparent inability of the Church to consider their findings. These *priest researchers* have not, on their own, been able to discover a designated or prescriptive means of communication between national policy makers and local pastoral practitioners, which highlights a key issue at the heart of this thesis emerging from this theoretical exploration of the research question.

As pressure grows on clergy to interpret “the signs of the times” around them, there is also a desire to speak prophetically into the religious debates emerging across the nation. The sociologist of religion, Davie, has commented that she cannot recall a time in her lifetime when there has been such a level of public religious debate in Britain (2011). Priests are appropriately located to engage theologically in their day-to-day ministry with all the tensions in private religion and spirituality that such debate produces. When pastoral policies of the Church are felt to be insufficiently responsive the “professional” opinion of the clergy is frequently sought out by enquirers. Parochial priests and social science research mentors are experts in their own fields whose prophetic voices together bring a theological integrity to the task of policy making. Together they have the potential to encourage priests as reflective researchers to listen to the everyday stories of faith of those to whom they minister.

The Church Wedding project offers the opportunity to explore and support the use of shared praxis by priest researchers as they respond to the cultural developments around them and as they seek to inform a Church that can benefit from their professional listening skills. At a time when ministerial resources are limited, the potential involvement of parochial clergy in the research question posed in Chapter 3 is of strategic importance to the Church. This chapter has brought together the theoretical

exploration of this research question to establish the conceptual framework for this thesis. Empirical research is now proposed to examine the emerging proposal at the heart of this thesis. Research is needed into the potential for parochial clergy to develop the ordinary research skills of priest researchers to participate in pastoral policy and practice development through a model of theologically reflective emancipatory action research. This chapter has proposed a model of pastoral review for the Church informed by priest researchers engaged in reflexive shared praxis towards organisational change and the development of pastorally responsive policies and practice. The following chapter describes the proposed methodology, its schedule and the processes undertaken to explore this research issue in the particular case study of the contemporary national Church Wedding project.

## **8. Research methodology**

Chapter 3 demonstrated the gap in knowledge for the subject of this thesis with reference to the national Church Wedding project. This project continues to present an opportune case study in which to explore the research question and to consider the role of participatory action research methods emerging from the exploration of the conceptual framework for this study in chapters 4 to 6. Chapter 7 affirmed the potential that priest researchers among parochial clergy could offer towards the development of pastoral practice and policies. The research design now focuses on their participation in further theologically reflective empirical research, bringing together models of emancipatory action research (Zuber-Skerrit 1996) and theological action research (Cameron, et al., 2010).

### **8.1 Partnering in research with parochial clergy**

The schedule for the next stage of the research for the Church Wedding project had been planned across 2010 to 2011 and the research for this thesis was integrated into this schedule:

- i) In the spring of 2010, the Church Wedding training events presented the opportunity to conduct focus groups among marrying clergy invited by senior diocesan staff. The dioceses selected by the project team for their pilot events provided the most pragmatic opportunities for further research because of the willingness of the team to schedule focus groups alongside their training presentations. The focus groups offered this thesis the opportunity to explore the response of clergy to the empirical research findings in the project and the clergy's capacity for continued participation in reflective policy development (Appendix 4).
- ii) Across the spring and summer of 2010, marrying clergy who had attended the pilot training events were encouraged by senior diocesan staff to bring learning from the training events into their pastoral practice of church weddings. This offered the opportunity to initiate participatory action research among participating clergy. Electronic research diaries were distributed for clergy to

record their individual experiences and suggestions for further personal enquiry (Appendix 5).

- iii) In order to promote participation and to monitor progress with the diaries, telephone interviews were planned for the middle of the summer wedding season in 2010. These were designed to be semi-structured to encourage clergy to reflect on their practice in church weddings over the time that had elapsed since the training events (Appendix 7). Practical issues would be shared with the project team and the clergy invited to focus groups scheduled for the conclusion of the summer wedding season.
- iv) The end season focus groups were intended to initiate *action learning sets* (Chapter 5, section 5.4) within each diocese so that clergy could work collaboratively in the development of their church wedding ministry. Clergy were asked to bring their (confidential) research diaries and to be willing to discuss issues emerging from them in an anonymous framework (Appendix 7). At the groups I offered permission forms approved by the Anglia Ethics Committee to clergy for their continued participation in the research towards this thesis (Appendix 6). Following the success of Fletcher, I offered my continuing contribution as a *research mentor* to these diocesan groups (Chapter 7, section 7.5).
- v) For the first cycle of the participatory action research I designed online diocesan based clergy forums of which I would act as moderator. This would facilitate the emancipatory aspect of this participatory action research exercise to effect organisational change (Chapter 5, section 5.3).
- vi) The research for this thesis was designed to be concluded at the end of the spring and summer wedding seasons in 2011. This would allow reflection on the first action research cycle and planning towards the second cycle. After the model of shared reflective praxis (Chapter 6, section 6.3) focus groups were planned for each participating diocese to bring together mutual learning for consideration at wider parochial clergy forums and thus to effect organisational change in policies and practice. Clergy would be encouraged to continue in their participation in the diocesan-based action learning sets through the online

discussion forum and regular feedback would be shared with the project group and other pastoral policy making forums.

As the research progressed it became clear that the capacity of marrying clergy to conduct participatory action research was limited and the research design was adapted to consider and compare this finding with the experiences of a number of priest researchers separately in touch with the Research and Statistics department in other areas of pastoral ministry. Each of the pastoral contexts in which these priest researchers practised was unique and, consequently, individual (one to one) semi-structured interviews were arranged (Appendix 10). My own situation as a professional priest researcher also offered the opportunity for reflection through an auto-ethnographic contribution (Appendix 9). A fuller examination of the research methodology, the rationale and experience of it together with the consequent adaptation of the research design for this thesis is the focus of the remainder of this chapter.

## **8.2 The Church Wedding project**

The response of parochial clergy to the pilot training events of The Church Wedding project had been positive (Chapter 3, section 3.5) and suggested their continued involvement in research connected to the project would be valued by themselves and their dioceses. This section traces the nature of the empirical research utilised by the project team and the participation of clergy in the project to provide background information towards the research design for this thesis and the assessment of its findings.

The Church Wedding project had been designed by the Archbishops' Council to explore pastoral tensions in the policy and practice of the Church of England in contemporary church weddings (Chapter 3, section 3.4). It offered an opportunity to explore the response of the Church and parochial clergy to an empirical sociological assessment of one particular aspect of pastoral ministry. The project was based on an epistemology centred on empiricism and the training events sponsored by the Church incorporated the findings of qualitative social science research methods among couples considering

marriage in church or elsewhere and couples that were newly married in a church. In the pilot dioceses there has been an evident increase in wedding numbers during the duration of the pilot project in these two very different areas of England, Bradford diocese in the north, more multi-cultural and less prosperous than Oxford diocese in the south with a greater proportion of professional occupations. These increases had to be seen against the backdrop of continuing decreasing national numbers across the Church despite a relaxation in the legal stipulations, which were formally adopted by the House of Bishops in October 2008 following parliamentary procedures for the new Church of England Marriage Measure. The first measurable aim of the project had been fulfilled with all the signs pointing towards positive outcomes for the remaining two aims.

Over two further years the project team visited the majority of dioceses to offer training events to the clergy and to share the research findings. They continued to promote diocesan clergy involvement in national wedding shows and further develop the official weddings website for couples and for clergy to access church wedding resources and information. National surveys revealed an increased positive response among the public achieving the second measurable aim of the project. Feedback gathered by the team continued to be particularly positive towards involvement in the wedding shows, towards the project web site and the training events. However, one of the major questions posed in the third project aim set by the Archbishops' Council remained unanswered. *Would this project succeed in attracting more people towards church?* Early signs indicated a positive response from parishes actively involved in the project but in order for this to be more widespread there needed to be a review of pastoral practice among parochial clergy and thus of pastoral policy towards church weddings in the Church of England.

The clergy invited to the main diocesan training events had been selected by senior staff in each diocese as those who were active in the ministry of weddings. Usually these events attracted thirty to forty stipendiary parochial clergy who gathered together for two consecutive days with the support of senior diocesan staff. They were shown video clips of couples being interviewed by external researchers about their experience of a church wedding. The project team encouraged discussions among the clergy regarding

some of the practical and pastoral issues for local churches and feedback from clergy attending these training days was very positive:

“I thought it was the best thing the Church has given me in my 27 years of being ordained.”

“The wedding project is the best £40,000 the Church has spent in a long time.”

### **8.3 The response of marrying clergy**

Dioceses found the training events so popular that single training days were also offered to other clergy interested in the topic. The hope was that, in this way, the majority of parish clergy would interact with the findings of the research and the key issues identified by the project team for the mission of the Church. Indeed, interest in the project did spread and some clergy in neighbouring dioceses began to express frustration that they were not directly involved. Debates on common pastoral concerns grew. The findings of the research among couples, for example, resulted in a review of the parochial wedding fees and of guidelines for the employment of church organists. These two controversial aspects of wedding ministry came to be debated at General Synod with the assistance of video clips from the research interviews among couples.

The diocesan training events focussed on sharing the findings of the research among wedding couples sponsored by the project and disseminating to clergy examples of good practice in church wedding ministry from the perspective of promoting the wider mission of the Church. As this further two year programme began it was agreed to conduct parallel research into the impact of the training on the everyday pastoral ministry of participating clergy. The Research and Statistics department was asked to explore the experience of clergy as they sought to implement the findings of the project in their individual parish contexts. The project team selected four dioceses that they felt represented a range of national contexts and exploratory focus groups were held at the diocesan training events for marrying clergy. The dioceses of Manchester, Wakefield, Worcester and the remainder of Oxford diocese agreed to participate in closer consideration through this research of pastoral issues arising from the project for parish priests and congregations. Senior staff in these dioceses were particularly supportive of this initiative and encouraged the involvement of their parish clergy.

The four dioceses chosen by the project team and used for the research in this thesis were deliberately chosen because of their differences in sociological make-up, geography and religious identity. They all cooperated fully with the Church Wedding project team and were enthusiastic promoters of the clergy training events. In terms of Church of England identity, the dioceses of Manchester and Wakefield are located in the northern province and they encompass a wide range of religious faiths. The modern city of Manchester is now the second largest city in Britain while Wakefield has a more traditional church context. In the southern province, Oxford diocese is the largest diocese in terms of churches and fourth largest in terms of land area in the Church of England. Together with Worcester diocese it has better employment and economic contexts than their northern counterparts. Worcester has both rural and urban communities with strong traditions while Oxford attracts professional commuters centred on the M4 motorway corridor between Bristol and London.

The Church Wedding project team specified that, in pursuing the third aim of the project, the further research among marrying clergy who had attended the training events should centre on the parochial context:

- i) To discover factors that influence a vicar's engagement with church weddings in terms of their established mind-set, for example, churchmanship, CMD training, local relationships, media perceptions, congregational and episcopal priorities.
- ii) To build a picture of the barriers to "staying with church" for couples and their guests including issues around congregationalism and referral to other congregations.

At the initial training events held in the four research dioceses in March 2010, clergy were invited to participate in small focus groups to explore their reactions to the project findings and materials. The focus groups provided the opportunity for ministerial interchanges in an environment that was separated from the project team and senior diocesan staff. Clergy were assured of confidentiality and requested to maintain this themselves by restricting personal interactions during the research exercise to diocesan based colleagues. The discussions were well attended, were enthusiastic and wide ranging although clergy strongly defended their own pastoral practice. For some this was borne of professional principles while for others it emerged from practical necessity



if, for example, they worked with colleagues in a team ministry or had sole pastoral charge of a group of churches.

The interview schedule utilised in the clergy research group discussions was semi-structured and is provided in Appendix 4. It was designed to cover current parish wedding ministry, assessments of the training event and any concerns regarding changing pastoral practices. An accompanying questionnaire established baseline information regarding the parish context, the strengths and weaknesses of its wedding ministry and clergy reactions to the training event and materials. The interviews were recorded with the permission of the participating clergy and analysed using content analysis and NVivo computer software (Babbie 2010). The results revealed clergy willing to enhance their wedding ministry but reluctant to consider alternative approaches. Towards the conclusion of the interviews clergy were invited to participate in further research over the forthcoming wedding season. Whilst about half of the attenders in each diocese willingly gave time to share experiences in the focus groups on the training day, the majority expressed a resistance to take on any additional workload connected with the project. At this stage there were also indications of a general reluctance to afford time to participate in the further development of the project although they enthusiastically offered immediate suggestions from their pastoral experiences.

#### **8.4 The potential for participatory action research**

The Church Wedding project officially concluded with the diocesan training events but the response of the clergy at the focus groups pointed towards further exploration for this thesis. The project had taken a grounded empirical approach to the collection of evidence and attitudes towards pastoral ministry in church weddings (Swinton and Mowat 2006, p.45). Gathering evidence and listening to the stories of clergy consequently continued to be the basis of the further research to explore the potential of clergy to participate in policy reviews from their pastoral praxis. The research was designed to take an inductive approach towards establishing patterns to offer insights into the research question (Chapter 3, section 3.7). It sought to examine areas of concern and offer nuances to facilitate a fuller understanding of the diversity of

parochial contexts in which clergy minister. It took a qualitative, social constructivist approach, an epistemology “that sees people as builders and interpreters of meaning” and of relationships that they co-author (Graham 2013, p.156). The four dioceses of interest that had been selected as representative by the Church Wedding project team continued to be utilised rather than seeking, for example, to represent different ideological positions or to establish statistical calibrations and trends. The interactions between clergy at the diocesan training events had shed light on the complexities of pastoral practice in contemporary church weddings and had prompted interpretations that had positively informed the national process of policy review.

Informed by the research process of the Church Wedding project the research design for this thesis took a complementary approach. Clergy in the (diocesan) project focus groups had willingly reflected together on their pastoral experiences but to bring more immediate reflective practice to the research process for this thesis they needed personal tools to record and prompt reflection on their praxis. They needed the on-going ability to evaluate at each stage of their pastoral practice and to initiate corresponding developments. Their pastoral practice could thus gain the potential to develop from this permitting each experience to interact and refine previous practice in a cyclical process that suggests a model building on the pastoral cycle towards action research (Chapter 4, section 4.5). Reflection, evaluation and action followed by further reflection, evaluation and action and so on. In this cycle of research individual practice is integral to the learning process as clergy reflect on their personal experiences and apply local learning to their individual pastoral context. Paper 3, section 5.1 (Appendix 3) highlights the democratisation inherent in this process. In this manner clergy participate in their own research and as they offer their insights to the wider Church both they and the Church have the potential to benefit from this model of cyclical *participatory action research* focussed on local pastoral contexts (Cohen, Marion and Morrison 2000, p.231).

In order to initiate the development of a participatory action research model for church wedding practitioners I invited the marrying clergy who had attended the training events in the four research dioceses to reflect on their wedding ministry over the forthcoming summer 2010 wedding season and to come together for an evaluation at its conclusion.

In this way the clergy would bring shared reflective praxis and learning (Chapter 6, section 6.2) to their participatory action research. As proposed in Paper 3 (Appendix 3), a semi-structured reflective diary was offered in which to record their experiences and reflections of preparing and conducting weddings. The diary (Appendix 5) was intended as a tool to facilitate private open-ended reflection on their personal encounters with couples before the wedding day, on the ceremony itself and as a result of any subsequent contact. This approach was designed after experiences in the academy to initiate action research through *change agent groups* in the teaching profession. It offered the opportunity for clergy to pose questions and to privately discern the strengths and weaknesses in their own practice (McNiff and Whitehead 2006, Altrichter, Posch and Somekh 1993, Bartunek 2003). From a research perspective a journal or research diary “enables you to integrate information and experiences which, when understood, help you understand your reasoning processes and consequent behaviour and so anticipate experiences before embarking on them. Keeping a journal regularly imposes a discipline and captures your experiences of key events close to when they happen and before the passage of time changes your perception of them” (Coghlan and Brannick 2010, p.27).

The research diary was designed to provide a platform for further enquiry and individualised research constructs. My experience with students designing research studies on the Doctor of Ministry course at Kings’ College, London encouraged me that clergy could be motivated to discover more about their pastoral context. I anticipated that diaries would generate areas of personal reflection and examination to enhance individual professional practice. The diaries were not intended to be analysed by anyone other than the participating priest and clergy were requested to keep the identity of the couples confidential by, for example, using first names only. Permission forms for both the clergy and couples were offered and agreed with the Anglia University Ethics Committee (Appendix 6). Clergy were subsequently contacted by telephone and email during the main summer wedding season of 2010 to encourage their participation in this exercise, to ascertain any potential matters requiring immediate attention and to invite them to share emerging issues at a focus research group as the summer wedding season concluded.

The response from clergy at this point was disappointing although sufficient numbers participated to facilitate an evaluation across the four selected dioceses. Busy clergy proved to be challenging to contact by telephone but they responded positively to brief telephone discussions on the wedding project. In total eighty of the eighty-eight clergy contacted by telephone provided immediate feedback but only twenty-five clergy attended the diocesan based focus group discussions convened in September 2010. These numbers were equally spread across the four dioceses and included male and female clergy of varying lengths and types of experience in parochial ministry. London based focus groups were also offered but with little effect. The telephone interviews were recorded with the respondents permission and analysed using content analysis to collate themes emerging from the interviews. The interview schedule (Appendix 4) collected a mix of quantitative and qualitative information through open and closed questions to ease the interviewers task and provide an element of consistent comparisons across the results (Irvine 2010). The focus groups, in turn, incorporated further qualitative information gathering using a semi-structured interview schedule (Appendix 7) and were recorded (with clergy permission) for analysis as before.

At the conclusion of these discussions, when asked whether they were willing to continue their involvement over the following weeks of the projects the majority were reluctant to engage in any further face-to-face interactions. They cited pressure of work as the major factor restricting their involvement and time spent travelling was resisted. Although the venues had been suggested because of their centrality to each diocesan operation clergy expressed reluctance to travel beyond their local areas even at the diocese's expense. In contrast, it has to be acknowledged that clergy declined any form of monetary recompense or gift of appreciation for their participation. Whilst their attendance at the initial training events was at the personal invitation of their bishop and senior diocesan staff any further involvement was entirely voluntary. All this mitigated against any concern to actively participate and contribute further to the development of church wedding praxis.

## 8.5 Exploring change agent groups

Recruiting clergy to participate in shared face-to-face methods of enquiry did not attract sufficient levels of participation to proceed with this method of gathering findings for further cycles of the participatory action research process. In addition, the logistics of telephone contact with busy clergy was also challenging to coordinate. Many of the resources offered to clergy participating in the Church Wedding project were electronic including a national purpose built web site, online wedding diary and email communications. Clergy had responded very positively to this approach and the administration of the project research stream had also been successfully carried out through personal email communication. It was consequently in synergy with the project ethos to utilise electronic means of communication in exploring research tools that would minimise inconvenience to the clergy. In order to expand on the disappointing response to the reflective diary and the focus groups while maintaining an element of interaction between clergy as they engaged with the challenges of contemporary wedding ministry, an electronic diocesan based “Basecamp” was constructed where clergy could share experiences with myself and diocesan colleagues in a secure environment. My role was to act as a facilitator and *research mentor* after the experiences of Melrose and of Fletcher (Chapter 7, section 7.6) who brought research evaluators, developers and mentors rather than outside ‘experts’ to the on-going professional development of teachers through teachers’ action research (Melrose 1996, Fletcher 2005).

Fletcher’s positive experience of online research forums resonates with the situation of other busy and distant professionals including parochially based clergy. As an insider colleague, I bring professional research expertise in church wedding ministry and as marrying clergy we would be participant observers of church wedding ministry, the fruits of which we would offer other outsider church professionals to inform policy review (Chapter 5, section 5.4). Electronic discussion forums have been beneficial in other areas of Church research, for example, in enabling professional practitioners to share good practice in applying Geographical Information Systems to church situations. In these exercises participants have been individually invited to participate and requested to observe confidentiality rules under the guidance of a central administrator.

The success of this approach encouraged the consideration of a similar discussion forum for clergy to encourage their participation in research for this thesis.

Early in 2011 personal electronic invitations were sent to all marrying clergy who had attended the training events in the four dioceses of interest. They were invited to participate in a closed “Basecamp” discussion forum regarding pastoral ministry in contemporary church weddings (Appendix 8). The same approach was used for each of four distinct discussion forums in the dioceses of Manchester, Wakefield, Worcester and Oxford. Assurances of confidentiality and of anonymous reporting continued to be maintained, and the majority of the diocesan clergy who were contacted responded positively to these invitations (Hewson and Buchanan 2013). These personalised invitations included an initial introductory request to reflect on the number of weddings that they had conducted in the months since the training events. One year on from the project training events, they reflected on the recent trends and on signs of growth/decline, in particular, highlighting increasing financial pressures and the improved dynamics of their church response to wedding couples. I sought to build on this response by posing the question of whether any issues had arisen for them as a result of the training events and whether there were any areas of interest that they wanted to explore and research among the couples with whom they had contact. The discussion questions were designed to stimulate reflection on a pastoral cycle with the potential to develop towards a model of participatory action research using action learning sets (Chapter 5, section 5.4) or change agent groups (section 8.3). The question framework is included in the online forum schedule in Appendix 8.

In this manner four diocesan based closed online forums were initiated at the beginning of the spring/summer 2011 wedding season with myself as the forum moderator for each diocese. The purpose of the online forums was to gather experiences of wedding practice that I could also report anonymously to the project team. Members of the project team and individual senior diocesan clergy had no direct access to the forums although they could be consulted by participating clergy if necessary. I could support professionally any local enquiries and provide research advice. In the event, as conversation strings developed it became clear that these clergy were not very

responsive towards initiating ordinary (everyday) research exercises and my role evolved into one of a participant observer. The online forums were also slow to establish themselves but, after a month or so of stimulating debate through the introduction of different topics, activity on the sites began to grow. One cleric, in particular, expressed her delight at the opportunity to swap ideas but it took time to encourage other colleagues to participate.

The online forums were open throughout the main 2011 wedding season but the number of clergy contributing over this time was not as high as I had hoped. Of the eighty-two clergy invited to the diocesan forums, twenty-four clergy actively participated. The general pattern of contributions was sporadic and the majority preferred to share experiences of particular interest or an item of good practice. The level of reflection was surprisingly low despite my prompting and my intention to develop these forums to be creative places that could stimulate local research questions did not materialise. Some questions and concerns from my own wedding ministry elicited responses sharing past experiences but the interchange soon ceased and contributions lacked a willingness to discuss in any depth. One particular issue raised within the forums centred on how, for example, to involve reticent grooms and family members but responses were brief and centred on integrating children into the wedding ceremony. The discussions ran cold and it proved challenging to stimulate a spirit of further enquiry.

Being mindful of the warning from Brookfield that his presence as a facilitator sometimes inhibited critical thinking, I sought to follow his advice by absenting myself for a period from these forums. However, by their very nature these written exchanges were subsequently available for open review and so I was unable to replicate his experience of totally withdrawing from the discussions (Brookfield 1987, p.237). His discovery during small group sessions that even his silent presence inhibited learning was a factor I was unable to negate. Even when I did not actively participate, the forums preferred to discuss practical questions rather than deeper issues of pastoral practice although one cleric notably initiated a brief exchange about the possibility of weddings in Lent when the church would find it difficult to accommodate wedding

flowers. Clergy were reluctant to engage in open discussion with their colleagues and appeared defensive of their own pastoral practice. Online discussions were usually short and restrained.

This experience of stimulating online discussion on the pastoral ministry in church weddings was in contrast to the response of clergy to the Church Wedding project research (Chapter 3, section 3.5). I finally sought to stimulate further interaction by sharing recent survey research finding regarding the retention of people to church through the occasional offices, baptisms, weddings and funerals. This aspect of the Church Wedding project was key to the evaluation of its success through the third project aim (section 8.2) and was in synergy with the research findings shared at the project training events. Although this parallel research information stimulated an immediate expression of interest from several clergy it generated limited discussion of their own experiences. With one or two notable exceptions, the clergy participating in these online forums were reluctant to contribute reflections from their experiences in this area of ministry. Most appeared content with their personal pattern of ministry and displayed a generally passive response to the ministry of church weddings in their local neighbourhoods. A few clergy shared particular local mission initiatives connected with the occasional offices but their colleagues did not respond to this to any significant extent. Clergy were reluctant to critique pastoral concerns or their experiences in particular aspects of church wedding ministry.

The online forums were in place across the main spring and summer wedding season of 2011 and in the autumn I posted a closing message requesting final observations towards the research report. This attracted a number of responses expressing their appreciation of the Church Wedding project and some that expressed wider concerns but there was little concern to explore these areas further:

“Certainly exposure to the Wedding Project has improved my approach to enquiries”.

“Where else can most couples come across someone who can help them reflect on damaging and painful episodes that do affect current relationships?”



“My relationship with our organist nearly broke down over the issues of choir and organist at weddings ... (she) believes the increasing variety is due to me. Later this year we’ve got my first wedding with neither organist or choir ... also a wedding communion ... where the bride wants the rings passed round ... so that everyone can bless them!”

The wedding forums were designed to build on relationships between clergy built up in individual dioceses and at the clergy training events. I was known to them as an ordained professional researcher and I took the step of including in my closing message a request for suggestions for my own continued research on their behalf. Exchanges continued to be limited to observations on the training events and their personal wedding ministry but they did not develop any theological depth in their concerns or the potential to explore further change in wedding ministry. The forums had been disappointing in their ability to generate reflective praxis by the clergy and any steps towards the wider development of pastoral ministry in church weddings. My attempt at developing an online community of pastoral practitioners in church weddings had been less successful than my interactions with *priest researchers* in other areas of pastoral ministry had suggested. A fuller discussion of this will be the subject of the following chapter but to make such comparisons further research was needed into the attitudes and contexts of the priest researchers who prior to this research had made separate contact with the Research and Statistics department (Chapter 7, section 7.5).

## **8.6 The experience of priest researchers**

The research I conducted among marrying clergy was disappointing and revealed a poor appetite among parochial clergy for formal professional development and, in particular, action research. I had contacted clergy who had been invited to participate in the Church Wedding project because of their active involvement in church weddings but this in itself did not appear to stimulate an interest for professional development in this area of ministry. Even when opportunities for development were easily accessible, at their convenience and experiential, the reluctance of clergy to participate in practitioner reflection prevented the exploration of participatory action research among these professional practitioners. The diary, personal telephone interviews, focus groups and

online forums provided varying tools for their exploration but none of these proved sufficiently attractive to engage significant participation from individual clergy.

In other areas of my professional context, I have been encouraged by priest researchers who were successfully combining pastoral ministry with their enquiries and who were keen to offer their research findings for wider scrutiny towards shaping the on-going development of official policies. Indeed, one or two had submitted their findings for publication across the Church and received a positive response from their church colleagues. The contrast between this and my experience of research among clergy into church weddings appeared to suggest that the capacity to engage reflectively with research does not readily transfer more widely to those grappling with the pastoral tensions of contemporary parochial ministry.

In my professional context managing and offering consultancy advice to a number of Church research projects, I had direct access to these active priest researchers. Their journey as researchers had the potential to offer insights into the place of a priest researcher in the Church. In particular, what had stimulated and equipped their ability to examine aspects of their pastoral context, what did they bring to this process and what deterred other priests from engaging in similar exercises? The Church Wedding project had initially focussed on the *barriers and drivers* among wedding couples for a church wedding and found them open to engagement with the church. My research question for this thesis had developed to focus on the issue of:

**The *barriers and drivers* among parochial clergy to reflect as priest researchers on their engagement with wedding couples and other recipients of pastoral ministry.**

My attention turned to these priest researcher colleagues who now became case studies in the focus of my research into participatory research in Church of England pastoral ministry. I approached them individually to ascertain their willingness to share insights into their circumstances and the motivations for their research. All five priest researchers with whom I had professional contact were parochially-based and willingly agreed to participate in individual semi-structured confidential interviews (Appendix 10). They brought engagements with self-directed research into the occasional offices,

self-supporting ministry, social and ethical issues. The interviews were conducted face-to-face with the exception of one held on the telephone and all gave permission for the interview to be recorded for my own personal research purposes. The interviews were transcribed and analysed using a grounded research approach of content analysis to listen to their experiences and offer pointers towards a fuller understanding of the potential for priest researchers among pastoral practitioners in the Church of England (Corbin and Strauss 2008).

One immediate conclusion from this research experience could be that the potential for clergy to effect changes in pastoral policies in response to cultural developments they meet in their professional practice appears to be limited by the clergy themselves. Their parochial context, diocesan relationships, spirit of enquiry, theological stance towards pastoral ministry, character and personality, for example, might all contribute to the willingness of clergy to participate in shared reflective praxis and reflective research of the nature explored in this thesis. But as noted in Chapter 1, section 1.4, the ethos of national policy making in the Church of England does not for its part encourage their involvement and is largely responsive to guidance from appointed experts. Clergy and other pastoral practitioners are not accustomed or trained to participate in pastoral policy reviews in the Church. The benefits of a change in the Church's attitude towards the involvement of parochial clergy in policy review could be considerable. The following chapters offer a comparison between the different subjects of this research together with a fuller analysis of the research findings to also provide insights into this research experience.

## **8.7 The experience of a professional priest researcher**

My own role in the Church Wedding project and in the Research and Statistics department brought together priestly vocation and professional application. My professional background and experience as a social researcher and statistician was a direct requirement of the post. My position as an ordained minister in the Church of England, however, brought an additional dimension and a combination that was not replicated elsewhere in the Church. The Church relies on those who can bring theological and sociological reflection to pastoral ministry but it also needs

commentators who can bring these skills to the formulation and interpretation of empirical research. In this sense I have felt a vocation to be a “professional priest researcher”, a role that has become directly relevant to this particular research study. My own experience as a researcher of pastoral policies and practice in the Church is pertinent to the potential involvement of priest researchers. To varying extents I have found myself like them to be considered as an insider researcher communicating research “inside” the Church of England but “outside” the policy making processes of the NCIs. My research for this thesis has benefitted from an exploration of the synergy between my own journey as a Church researcher and the experiences of other priest researchers based in parochial contexts.

I have spent most of the seventeen years of my ordained ministry located in urban and rural parochial contexts. During my time working for the Archbishops’ Council I have also exercised voluntary roles in formal, cathedral based ministry and in coordinating the NCI staff chaplaincy. My experience of pastoral ministry, although primarily parochially-based, has been varied and regular. In particular, it has involved work place ministry, cathedral visitor ministry and a ministry in the occasional offices including church weddings and the preparatory discussions with couples and their families. As the Church Wedding project and the research for this thesis has evolved I have found myself reflecting on the response of the clergy alongside my own pastoral practice. My personal reflections as a researcher are by way of being a participant observer of the Church Wedding project but my personal experience of being a priest researcher also offers an autoethnographic contribution to this research. I have taken the opportunity to include a reflection on my personal experience as a priest bringing professional research expertise to the Church of England. This secondary information also provides an alternative methodological approach for bringing the stories of priest researchers to this research but it was not considered sufficiently responsive to the emerging issues of this thesis for the more central research among priest researchers. My new deployment in cathedral ministry provides an informed but more distant platform from which to offer this contribution. The autoethnographic reflections on my experience of the developing conversation between empirical research and the Church during my employment by the Archbishops’ Council are offered in Appendix 9.

This chapter has presented my experience conducting empirical research in pursuance of my research question (Chapter 3, section 3.7). It has outlined the adjustments made in response to the varying levels of participation among parochial clergy. The engagement with clergy in the research process was disappointing although they warmed to discussion of external research findings. As this research process has proceeded it has become more evident that my own experience is relevant to the research question under exploration. The motivations and responses of practising priest researchers are key to the pursuit of the research question. Before these can be examined, compared and contrasted, a fuller interpretation of the attitudes and responses of priestly colleagues to developing shared pastoral practice in church weddings is required. This is the task of the following chapter, as this thesis addresses the potential for participatory action research as a tool to develop contemporary pastoral ministry.

## **9. Findings from marrying clergy**

The previous chapter has outlined the adaptation of the research methodology to respond to the immediate responses of marrying clergy to the enquiries through telephone and face-to-face interviews and online forums. The major question remains as to why the majority of these experienced clergy were reluctant to take part in their own research. As the subsequent research explored the attitudes of the priest researchers who were seeking professional support it was noticeable that they were in contrast to the attitudes of the marrying clergy. The clergy who had attended the Church Wedding project training events continued to be assured of confidentiality and offered professional research support and guidance but none of the approaches explored encouraged a significant willingness to be involved in further explorations. In contrast, the priest researchers who had contacted the Research and Statistics department came seeking support and were very willing to participate in further research (Chapter 8, section 8.5). This chapter will reflect initially on the responses of the marrying clergy in the research for this thesis and develop a framework of clergy *ideal types* to enable a fuller understanding of their responses. It will consider their aptitude for reflective practice and their response to the Church Wedding project. The following chapter will make comparisons with the findings from the subsequent research among the priest researchers who approached the Research and Statistics department. These comparisons are offered towards the identification of key themes in response to the (adapted) research question emerging from the theoretical exploration (Chapter 8, section 8.5).

### **9.1 Parochial models of pastoral ministry**

Although my personal interaction with marrying clergy had revealed their enthusiasm for this professional ministry, the research process uncovered a persistent reluctance to reflect together at a personal level. In the focus groups clergy were wary of engaging with each other or with a critical friend even on a confidential basis. They preferred to exercise their personal ministry from their own individual perspective without the benefits of insights from colleagues. They voiced personal aspirations that their ministry would connect with changing contemporary culture while showing little willingness for their pastoral practice to be critiqued in that light. Their attitude towards changing pastoral practice was guarded and frequently defensive. In fact, their

espoused values of mission in contemporary society often appeared to be at variance with their operant values which frequently had been inherited through their training incumbent or acquired through church party politics and had changed very little over the years of pastoral ministry (Chapter 6, section 6.2). One particular example concerned the imposition of church musicians and music while expressing a willingness to personalise the wedding service. With one or two notable exceptions, the majority of clergy who participated in this research preferred to extract from the Church Wedding project tools of pastoral practice that endorsed their current practice. They were reluctant to engage in direct engagement with others of alternative approaches or future developments, frequently citing the lack of congregational support and the uniqueness of their parochial context.

Despite the different diocesan contexts (Chapter 8, section 8.2) in which the clergy involved in the research for this thesis conduct wedding ministry, their reluctance to participate was very similar. Listening to the clergy who agreed to participate in my research a number of similarities and differences emerged in their attitudes towards the Church Wedding project and the ministry of church weddings. Clergy in these four dioceses offered distinctly different models of pastoral ministry that appeared to present as distinct profiles or *ideal types*. The German sociologist, Weber, first proposed the use of such “*ideal types*” as analytical tools in an abstract model involving a constructed ideal that provided clarity in a more systematic interpretation of the real world (Scott and Marshall 2009). Weber, in particular, developed three authority types that have been utilised by, for example, Torry in his analysis of religious organisational structures: the charismatic, the traditional and the classical or bureaucratic (2005, p.97). In formulating four clergy ideal types for this research analysis, they come together to different extents in individual church wedding practitioners to offer particular insights into the mixed reaction of clergy towards the empirical social research shared at the clergy training events and to the prospect of a partnership in their own local enquiries.

The clergy profiles were formulated from the telephone interviews, focus groups and online forums in which clergy had interacted with me and with each other within their diocesan contexts. A social constructivist approach was taken to listen to the local

context in which clergy engaged with the Church Wedding project and to incorporate researcher reflections alongside evidence from the transcripts of the interviews. Clear fault lines emerged between the clergy, which influenced their response to the Church Wedding project and their response to my subsequent enquiries. These clergy profiles have acted as background comparative tools that enable a fuller interpretation and understanding of the clergy responses to this particular pastoral issue. This thesis suggests they can be summarised as distinct profiles of pastoral ministry, namely that of “*Community priest*”, “*People priest*”, “*Progressive priest*” and “*Professional priest*”.

The clergy profiles developed to assist this research analysis must be seen against the backdrop of their diocesan contexts but it would be wrong to restrict them to individual dioceses. The most prominent examples did emerge from different dioceses but many clergy portrayed aspects of more than one of these profiles. Wakefield diocese, for example, has the mission statement “Transforming Lives, Transforming Congregations, Transforming Communities” while Manchester diocese has initiated several national campaigns, for example, *Back to Church Sunday*. Its mission statement is “Run the Race, Look to Jesus”. The models described below entitled the *People priest* and *Progressive priest* were strongly present among the clergy contacted from these northern dioceses. In the south, Oxford diocese has a strong professional population with the mission statement “Living Faith” and Worcester diocese promotes among urban and rural communities priorities to “Deepen prayer, Renew public worship and Equip people to share their faith”. The *Professional priest* and *Community priest* models were more strongly evident in clergy from these dioceses. The following sections of this chapter will describe each of these clergy profiles as they emerged from this research exercise before considering their differing responses to empirical social science methods and the research for this thesis.

## **9.2 The People priest**

Pastoral ministry was of prime concern to those who presented primarily as *People priests* and who judged the impact of their ministry against its effectiveness in the lives of individuals. In this research they were frequently independent practitioners who



gained mutual benefits from pastoral interactions and, if they were working in a clergy team, could be possessive of personal pastoral relationships. They were open to directed learning and professional development of their pastoral skills. Although their perspective was constrained by their parochial context they were willing to be imaginative at a practical level in the ministry. One such cleric was attracted by the potential impact of the Wedding at Cana story in the gospels that the clergy training events reflected on. He adapted his wedding ministry to include this story in the wedding service and a post honeymoon visit with a bottle of wine together with an invitation to share their photos at church.

*People priests* may minister in rural or urban situations but they were often constrained by the lack of parish resources and finances. They were supported by their congregations who readily looked to their leadership and guidance. They could be traditional in their missional stance and strongly clericalised while not attaching great importance to regular churchgoing. They were keen to support the lives of individuals and to promote the place of faith in the everyday world. Several *People priests* incorporated the family members (and children) of wedding couples into the wedding service through the giving of the rings, through music making and readings. They sought to establish committed relationships with the wider family and friends over time and renew these at key points in people's lives. They may stay in a particular parish for years, getting to know different generations at times of personal crises and through ministry at baptisms, weddings and funerals. The families in contact with *People priests* may express a close allegiance to the church but this is vulnerable at the time of an interregnum because of the particularly personal nature of the priestly pastoral relationship.

In their working lives the *People priests* had good relations with colleagues and a strong diocesan identity. They were in good standing in their dioceses where they contributed from their experience but they preferred to be a follower rather than a leader. They welcomed diocesan and national initiatives and were open to adaptation rather than wholesale revision, preferring to judge these against their own experience of pastoral ministry. They lacked confidence in engaging in personal praxis and often came to judgements about the suitability of pastoral approaches from their religious and relational instincts. They were

more comfortable drawing people to church over the course of an individual's life and often took a relaxed, reactive approach towards sharing faith with others.

### **9.3 The Community priest**

In this research there were clergy who were concerned with the lives of individuals but primarily as it affected the place of the church in the local community. I have called these *Community priests* because they primarily sought to promote the role of the church in the locality and gave priority towards their public ministry in their parochial context. They valued the traditions of the church and tended towards a passive, more comfortable relationship regarding the faith positions of individuals in their congregation. They were keen that congregation members took the church into community affairs and events, and supported their vicar's public role in civic life. They were often independent practitioners who reflected less on their personal ministry as opposed to the impact of church policy making on its credibility in the public square.

The *Community priests* in my research displayed strong social consciences and often critiqued church policies against a backdrop of justice and inclusivity. At the Church Wedding project training events, for example, some expressed considerable concern at the impact of the apparent inconsistencies in church fees. They were primarily concerned at the practical outworking of church policies and frustrated that their wider experience was not being directly used by the diocese. They had a strong sense of collegiality with colleagues but felt side-lined by the diocesan structures and senior diocesan staff. Their parochial location generated a perception of isolation from the decision making processes of the church and an inability to influence policy making. This in turn resulted in a lack of involvement with diocesan initiatives and a feeling of being disadvantaged in their pastoral ministry.

The *Community priest* was receptive to diocesan and national initiatives and readily reviewed them against their social and theological frameworks. At the training events, for example, a number of priests were suspicious of the consumer approach they saw being adopted by the project team. Project materials and pastoral approaches were being designed to find favour with wedding couples and place church weddings in a

good light. The project team sought to promote the place of the church in the wedding market place and, in particular, at wedding fairs. This challenged the image of the church in the wider community and was perceived by some to be in opposition to the values that their local churches espoused.

#### **9.4 The Progressive priest**

A number of marrying priests were primarily concerned by the decline in allegiance to Christianity across the country. I have termed these *Progressive priests* in their concern for declining churchgoing numbers and their focus that churches and church life become relevant in contemporary life once more. They listened closely to the voices of those who have been disaffected by church and of those who have no experience of church, frequently using the terms adopted by church evangelists of “dechurched” and “unchurched” respectively (Church of England Mission and Public Affairs Council, 2004). The Church Wedding project also shared this focus and, in particular, the desire of unchurched couples for sacred and for spiritual aspects to their wedding. The *Progressive priests* were particularly receptive to these views and keen to engage with popular culture. When a video, for example, was shown of the entry of one bride to modern day Rap music they were challenged to consider the theological implications of this approach rather than dismiss it out of hand as others of their colleagues did.

The *Progressive priest* is open to change and challenge, and is frequently frustrated by the traditions and bureaucracy of the church. They are motivated by the desire to make faith relevant to people’s lives in contemporary culture. They are dynamic in their approach to ministry and self-motivated from their own experience of the church. They exercise a creative ministry and are not deterred from challenging apparent institutional boundaries. They were usually prominent among the clergy that brought creative ideas to the Church Wedding project. One *Progressive priest* brought his experience of creating a wedding couple prayer board in his church and another of initiating wedding prayer partners/buddies in her congregation. They are frequently actively supported by their congregations but struggle with the limited resources at their disposal to implement their ideas as fully as they would like. In the Church Wedding project

several relied on church wedding administrators as partners in wedding ministry. They are accustomed to taking the lead and working alone in their priestly ministry.

The *Progressive priest* usually presented as being confident of their ministry and primarily a person of action who does not have the time to be as reflective as their colleagues. He or she focuses on taking the church out to contemporary culture through, for example, local wedding fairs and other public opportunities. They found a good rapport with the Church Wedding project team who came from professional communications backgrounds and several became involved in the project as it gained momentum in other dioceses and as it was promoted through the media. They were keen to take the learning from wedding couples into other occasional offices of the Church and other areas of pastoral ministry.

## **9.5 The Professional priest**

The final distinct clergy profile that was apparent from the research among marrying priests involved clergy who responded primarily on an intellectual level to the challenges of pastoral ministry. I describe them as *Professional priests* because of their preoccupation with sustaining their professional integrity. They were often confident in intellectual debate, well read and competent independent reflectors. They were stimulated by the challenges of the Church Wedding project but questioned its internal consistency and practical application. They sought to validate proposals against personal experience, their parochial context and wider reflection. They were not intimidated by any apparent liberalism of the project findings nor deterred to challenge institutional expectations, but curious to explore its implications.

The *Professional priest* related most directly to colleagues and local church clusters. They were competent priests, loyal to their inherited profession and resistant to external impositions. This resulted in a reluctance to engage with institutional initiatives so the Church Wedding project team had to work hard with diocesan officers to attract these clergy to the training events. At the training events they often were quick to critique the proposals and challenge senior diocesan staff regarding the consistency of their

missional stance regarding practical issues, for example, church fees. These priests were accustomed to self-directed learning and were busy, focussed, independent professionally minded ministers.

In their churches *Professional priests* frequently ministered alongside competent lay ministry teams with a similar professional approach. They led these teams confidently and collaboratively incorporating their experiences and contributions to mutual advantage. Their congregations were often strong and self-sufficient enabling the priest to delegate appropriate tasks. These clergy questioned, in particular, the preoccupation within the Church Wedding project with the role of the vicar and sought a more nuanced interpretation of the research among wedding couples that would incorporate lay ministry teams.

## **9.6 The place of empirical social research**

The positive reactions of both the marrying clergy and their senior colleagues to the research findings of the Church Wedding project noted earlier in this thesis (Chapter 3, section 3.4; Chapter 8, sections 8.1 and 8.2) point to a willingness among clergy to bring learning from sociologically-based studies into their daily praxis. It could also be said to be indicative of a Church that is moving on from some of its previous reticence to engage with pastorally-based empirical enquiries in this way (Paper 1: “A historical assessment of how the Church of England has used empirical research to inform its engagement with pastoral policy and practice” in Appendix 1). This section reflects further on these initial clergy responses using insights from the clergy ideal types developed in this chapter. Themes are identified towards ascertaining the capacity among marrying clergy for reviewing their own pastoral practice in the light of empirical research findings.

The majority of marrying clergy contacted at the beginning of the research for this thesis expressed receptivity towards empirical social research findings and reflected positively on points of learning for their own pastoral practice. They were keen to apply the research findings to their own pastoral context but shared reflections centred on the

practicalities rather than including any significant theological reflection. These marrying clergy were pleased to have the opportunity to learn and engage with social research findings and were quite comfortable with the use of social science research methods in this area of pastoral ministry. They appeared, however, uncertain in their ability to challenge the research findings and generally defensive of their existing praxis.

The four dioceses involved in the clergy research had very different sociological make-ups one being in the north of England while the others were more centrally located. Each diocese had varying proportions of rural and urban parishes, differing proximities to cities and differing ranges of social deprivation. The largest diocese, Oxford, operated in three archdeaconry areas each of very different social compositions while the other dioceses, Wakefield, Worcester and Manchester were smaller with two separate archdeaconry areas. Clergy frequently found their experiences of wedding ministry to be at odds with those of other colleagues and even with those in the same diocese. Younger clergy were prominent among those who were most enthusiastic to review their wedding ministry and there were no apparent distinctions between the outlooks on the basis of gender. Among the eighty- eight marrying clergy attending these diocesan training events, men and women appeared equally committed to wedding ministry and responded enthusiastically.

Although the clergy came from different pastoral contexts the majority found the social research findings had elements that resonated with their own experiences and were grateful for the additional insights it brought “giving an interesting feel to the training.” They considered that the opportunity to consider the impact of their wedding ministry had beneficially raised its profile among their pastoral priorities and also challenged their approach to other aspects of pastoral ministry. A small number of clergy who predominantly revealed aspects of the *Professional priest* profile expressed concern that the training events shared the research findings in a manner that felt more like “preaching rather than teaching as an event, it was about selling us something.” Those presenting primarily as *People priests* could also be a reticent. They were not against

the need to review wedding practice but wanted a more gradual process to assimilate changes in pastoral approaches:

“I am open to different ideas but it is about building on what we do rather than revolution.”

The findings shared at the training events prompted many of the marrying clergy to reflect in the focus groups on their own practice and with an open attitude towards adapting to the changing social culture around them. Recent changes in legal procedures for church weddings following the Church of England Marriage Measure 2008, had increased the number of couples requesting church weddings for some parishes and for others the number of banns to be read without the prospect of a wedding. As clergy reflected on this they expressed an initial willingness to consequently adapt their pastoral practice.

“It has been hugely helpful ... in terms of admin there’s a huge gain, in terms of pastoral contact probably a loss.”

Some marrying clergy suggested that they could be used as ‘wedding mentors’ bringing their considerable experience in wedding ministry to the training of parish incumbents. One, in particular, gave voice to the consequent concern that national policy was being altered without any reference to parochial practitioners.

The findings from the project-based research surprised these marrying clergy and prompted them to reconsider their relationship with a wedding market that was growing and diversifying across wider society. Wedding couples generally valued the role of the vicar and wanted church websites to provide easy comparisons of facilities and consequent charges. Parochial fee policies highlighted tensions in mission and maintenance strategies and whilst the project team promoted greater clarity and consistency in charging, *People priests* and *Community priests* wanted to maintain flexibility to respond to local concerns. Tensions between different mission and maintenance strategies emerged but there was agreement that parish policies should not be perceived to be “undervaluing what we do” and clergy felt challenged by the research to take the needs of the couples more seriously:

“The thing that stood out for me from the research ... about why they were coming to the church and their frustration with feeling that their deep seated reason however inarticulate wasn’t being taken seriously by us.”

The positive response of the marrying clergy to the social research findings was matched by their senior diocesan colleagues. At the pilot focus group conducted among some senior clergy in the diocese of Bradford (Chapter 3, section 3.4), they supported the wider dissemination of the research findings so as to bring “more confidence” to the churches’ wedding ministry. As experienced marrying clergy themselves they reflected more broadly on the place of weddings in the ministry of the church and challenged the church to consider a more fundamental reappraisal of its mission strategy to the nation. They felt affirmed by the research findings to initiate wider pastoral policy development so that they could “be proactively involved rather than just reactively involved”. The research findings prompted these senior clergy to reflect with considerable honesty on their own personal relationships and the necessity for the church to be open to responding to relationships outside traditional marriage. The senior clergy displayed openness and confidence in their relationships with colleagues that was not apparent in the parochial clergy focus groups.

### **9.7 Explorations in reflective practice**

The research over the summer of 2010 revealed clergy who were willing to participate in reflective practice but only to a limited extent (Chapter 8, section 8.3). They contributed views and reflections when contact was initially made but recruitment to further focus groups and arranging individual telephone interviews proved to be more problematic than anticipated. Wedding ministry was just one aspect of their pastoral ministry and there was widespread reluctance to participate in further involvement with the Church Wedding project. The personal diary tool was not very attractive to them and whilst they were willing to respond to individual email exchanges, they were reluctant to engage to any significant extent in further reflection on developing practices. Although experiences in wedding ministry were shared, clergy were guarded in any participation in reflective praxis and defensive of established pastoral practices particularly if other lay or ordained colleagues participated. They appeared reticent to offer additional time to developing this aspect of their ministry and gave the impression that their priorities for personal development lay elsewhere.



This section explores in more detail the response of the parochial clergy to participate in further research and to reflect on their church wedding ministry. It was disappointing that throughout the 2010 summer wedding season clergy showed limited interest in the research diary and only twenty-five of the eighty-eight invited clergy attended the end season focus groups. The transcripts of the telephone interviews and the end season focus groups revealed very similar themes that are brought together here. The telephone interview schedule (Appendix 4) was designed to offer the opportunity for responses to be categorised by the interviewer so that the ensuing analysis was more accurate and consistent, but it became clear that this only provided immediate impressions and needed the support of a fuller qualitative assessment. This also enabled the parochial context of the comments to be more easily conveyed and for other aspects of further individual significance to be integrated into the analysis alongside findings from the focus groups.

The majority of clergy comments collated from the telephone interviews and focus groups endorsed the value of the church wedding research findings and the training days. Clergy felt affirmed by the training and, as one confirmed, able to “tweak some of the material and ideas” flexibly for their own situation. For several clergy the project “reinforced their thoughts on weddings rather than thinking of anything dramatically different”. They felt their pastoral practice had generally been endorsed and were more confident to develop their parish wedding policies to have more “emphasis on human contact rather than processes.” Their experiences of wedding ministry over the summer had provided additional credibility to the place of the research findings that they had noted from the training events.

The focus groups were not well attended and participants were most at ease discussing practical issues that affected their wedding ministry. The *Professional priests* among them expressed particular appreciation of lay support teams in their parishes. They were also concerned that the research findings shared with them at the training events appeared to contradict inherited pastoral wisdom in conducting church weddings and they expressed disappointment that further discussion with the project team was not possible. The research findings had encouraged parishes to be more open and

transparent in explaining their fees policy and to be consistent in their charging structures. It was the *Community priests* who were most concerned about the pastoral integrity of this issue and wanted a more localised approach to church wedding policies. Despite a few areas of controversy, the research actively served to motivate clergy to begin to reflect on the perception of those on the fringes of the church, an aspect particularly appreciated clergy who could be described as *Professional priests*:

“It’s helped me think about communication, and about issues of how we are really seen by other people ... the way the whole website’s been set up has made me think about other aspects of ministry in the same light.”

Although clergy were reluctant to participate in reflective research, they expressed a willingness to reflect on the social research findings and to consider theological aspects of the Church Wedding project. They felt challenged to reconcile the church’s traditional approach to marriage with changing attitudes towards marriage in contemporary society:

“I particularly liked the training session image of the Wedding at Cana; the theological message really spoke through.”

“Tied into our culture that ‘it’s our wedding we can have what we want’ ... personalisation is a really difficult area.”

Many clergy were grateful for the project materials and the insights that the social science methods offered but for *Community priests* this also raised concerns to address the “theological question about being consumer led ... whether we are being transformed by the world or transforming it ... There’s a lot of good stuff here but I think we might have lost sight of that question”.

## **9.8 Initiating participatory action research**

My participation in the clergy online forums had been in the role of an *insider researcher* offering professional support for any local enquiries the clergy wished to further but the marrying clergy were more comfortable using the forums to request practical information than to share pastoral practice. Even in the earlier focus groups the exchanges lacked depth in their reflection on local pastoral practices and my work-based research assistants spontaneously commented on the closed nature of the discussions. This outcome was in noticeable contrast to the senior clergy focus group

held at the beginning of the research for this thesis (Chapter 3, section 3.4). This raises the issue of whether parochial clergy have the capacity to engage with shared reflective praxis and participatory action research. Utilising the clergy ideal types suggested in this chapter, this section explores issues that contribute to clergy reluctance to become participant researchers.

My participation in the diocesan online groups alongside the marrying clergy was as an “insider” researcher, within the ordained ministry of the Church but my suspicion was that I was regarded as an outsider because of my alignment with the Church institution and employment by the NCIs. Despite their confidentiality, the online forums were dependent on relations between clergy in each diocese and on relations with local and national aspects of the Church institution. They did not develop into suitable contexts for reflection on shared praxis and the development of participatory action research among clergy. Their reaction to the development of church wedding ministry presented a particular challenge for the establishment of any on-going practice based personal development in the church such as that in which, for example, the teaching profession regularly engage. It also restricted the ability of parochial clergy to engage in local enquiries that will involve reflection and open critique of their pastoral practice, and thus to contribute to wider policy development.

The final contact with marrying clergy in the research for this thesis was through the clergy online forums that were in place over the spring and summer wedding seasons of 2011. Over this time a general picture of pastoral ministry emerged that focussed on longer-term aspirations of missional contact with wedding couples and depended significantly on the marrying priest who presided at the wedding. Clergy found themselves initiating a pastoral relationship with the potential to develop over time but with very different dynamics depending on whether the wedding couple settled in the vicinity of the parish. They observed that it was “unsustainable” for any one priest to maintain contact over this time.

For the local church, wedding couples can also become the point of contact for the wider family and, as several *People priests* observed, “you have to look at the whole life journey through wedding request to post baptism (in whatever order). It’s a time of huge change for the family members.” This longer timeframe for evaluating pastoral ministry in church weddings has significant implications for any participatory action research process. Clergy are concerned as to how this longer time frame is considered within their pastoral ministry and, from the point of view of initiating action research, brings other factors into play over time. Evaluating participatory action research may span a number of wedding seasons. The clearest example of missional success was offered, for example, by a priest who had been in post for over ten years:

“Of my last adult confirmation three or four were young women who were married here ...a bride’s father was confirmed ... and I have baptised both his daughter’s children ... quite a few unmarried couples who ask for their children to be baptised having had a positive experience of church later come to be married.”

The online wedding forums did not develop, as I had hoped, into creative places where pastoral practice or research issues could be discussed and developed in an open manner incorporating critical thinking (Chapter 6, section 6.1). The prospect of initiating participatory action research appeared slight and as explained in section 8.4 my best endeavours failed to facilitate more beneficial exchanges in this online medium where it is not easy to distinguish between passive observation by participants and their withdrawal from the forum. This chapter has shown that whilst marrying clergy had the capacity to reflect positively on the findings from social research they were reluctant to participate in longer term research into this aspect of pastoral ministry because of its complexity and its interaction with other areas of parochial ministry. Marrying clergy were enthusiastic in their response to the Church Wedding project and its empirical research findings but insufficiently motivated to participate in an active way in shared reflective practice. This finding will be compared in the following chapter with the experience of priest researchers in their chosen areas of reflective practice. These findings are then explored further in Chapter 11 to suggest themes that contribute to the responses of parochial clergy to engage in participatory action research.

## **10 Findings from priest researchers**

The research undertaken in this thesis to initiate participatory action research among parochial clergy appears to indicate that the potential to develop priest researchers across the church is limited. This was apparently at odds with my experience of priest researchers who had sought my professional support (Chapter 8, section 8.5) and so I was particularly keen to explore further the coming together of priesthood and research in ministry. This chapter will examine the personal experiences of these priest researchers from their explorations. It will focus on their motivations and responses to their research, to shed further light on the differing responses of the marrying clergy.

All five of the priest researchers who approached the Research and Statistics department were engaged in participatory research in their own parochial ministry. This presented a synergy with the marrying clergy who had been the subject of this research. The priest researchers were self selected and then recommended by their dioceses rather than sampled for any particular attributes. Although the marrying clergy were invited by senior staff to participate because of their interest in wedding ministry, they had also to a certain extent chosen to attend the wedding training events. Both samples involved the subjective selection by the dioceses and the participants and thus make interesting comparisons, which this chapter begins to explore with primary reference to the research experiences of the priest researchers.

### **10.1 Authentic ministry**

Each of the priest researchers I interviewed had set out in their research to make more sense of their personal pastoral ministry and to effect change that was responsive to practical need and theological reflection. They were keen to stimulate reflective practice within the framework of the pastoral cycle of on-going action, reflection, change, action, reflection, change etc (Ballard and Pritchard 1996). One priest researcher summarised this as “a chance to actually think through at a reasonably deep level, reasonably rigorous level ... to reflect on your own practice and certainly it shook my practice up a lot.” They all found the research journey worthwhile and were grateful

for the opportunity to learn more about their context and to make a difference to pastoral ministry:

“It totally changed our parish practice which is what I set out to do and that’s contextual ... This is practical theological research and I started in my context and then a reflection. I looked at my results and put it back into my parish practice.”

My individual interviews among those who presented as case studies of priest researchers revealed significant motivations for their research undertaking. One had suffered a personal spiritual crisis that suddenly impacted on her ministry. A close member of her family died in tragic circumstances and she found her theological outlook significantly challenged. The other four clergy experienced significant but not so urgent crises during the course of their personal pastoral ministry that they wanted to explore further. One commented, “It feels like it’s kind of tailor made really ... It feels very right on so many different levels”. Three of these clergy found their ministry was taking them beyond the traditional parochial model of stipendiary priesthood into contexts primarily based in the wider community as self-supporting clergy, interim and community priests. In one case difficulties in the diocesan working situation prompted her to focus her energies on study in a new context and she temporarily moved post to achieve this.

In each case the felt need of the clergy was to gain a fuller understanding of the tensions in play in their ministerial contexts so that they could respond with integrity. The remaining priest was a successful parish vicar who in reviewing the parish baptism policy wanted to understand a growing demand from couples seeking infant baptism for their children. All five of these men and women were seeking a theological position that they could inhabit with integrity along with the changing nature of their pastoral ministry. They were doing this “for the kingdom” rather than their personal career and their prime aim was “let’s use it”. They expressed a burden to bring fresh insights to the Church’s theological stance as it related to their particular contemporary context. In the words of one priest: “How can I find out whether if I move it’s going to be authentic or any more authentic or with integrity?”

Four of the priest researchers that I interviewed integrated their research task with the acquisition of an academic qualification at masters or higher educational level while the remaining cleric was professionally located as a researcher in an academic institution. They all consequently found professional research resources to be accessible and this considerably eased the formation and execution of their self-directed professional research exercises. In two cases the pursuit of an academic qualification initially presented the opportunity for practice based research and the topic had to be chosen with the requirements of the academy in mind. The remaining three priest researchers were initially motivated by their research question and subsequently became attracted by the prospect of an academic framework to place their enquiries on a firmer footing. They were all experienced practice based reflectors who wanted to take the opportunity to consider their research question in a professionally rigorous manner. They brought research skills from previous professional training and employment to their prospective task that was directly related to their working lives.

These parochial clergy all expressed an interest in contextual theology “as the basis of where this kind of dissertation is coming from ... (to) start looking at context and listening to it.” They recognised that they brought to their tasks analytical skills that would be inherently prominent in their quest and instrumental in bringing their findings into a final shape: It is “partly to do with the enquiring mind ... partly the context of doing the MA which was good and inspiring but partly just being pragmatic ... because that is where we are working.” One of the priest researchers was challenged by the need to understand research methods and admitted “it is quite daunting”. She was concerned at the prospect of learning methodologies in order to conduct her (small scale) research project. Another found her own scientific background a mixed blessing although she couldn’t understand why others couldn’t seem to narrow down what they were thinking of researching.

As their research findings came together, these priests put their findings into practice to develop their own ministry. They each expressed a common hope that their findings “would inform my ministry wherever I am.” They also grew in enthusiasm to share the

fruits of their endeavours and influence wider pastoral policies. Before contacting me for professional support, they each consulted senior diocesan staff but found themselves largely isolated in their quest and challenged to take the lead in disseminating the proposals emerging from their research. One remarked that she was considering whether her ministry might change direction to “produce some of those resources ... having identified” this issue. Four subsequently changed their posts and their research proved formative in this journey. For three of these priests their research was confirmation of the steps they were already considering but, notably, one was challenged by his research to establish a consultancy practice to share good practice and support reflective praxis in a particular area of social and community ministry. He reflected on this journey acknowledging that “it’s been quite hard but ... it includes this kind of reflective learning ... (it) isn’t to go in and give a lecture ... it was actually ‘Let’s think this through. How does this connect with what you do?’ ... a supportive learning role really.”

## **10.2 Church and colleagues**

Each of the priest researchers were located in a context of collaborative ministry where they regularly met with clergy colleagues and ministered within a team of lay/ordained people. Two of these priests were each under the supervision of a more senior colleague, a further two led a small team of lay colleagues and the remaining priest worked in a small clergy team. Their relationships appeared open and mutually supportive, places where questions could be posed and tensions in pastoral ministry discussed. One emailed her local clergy colleagues asking for their advice “asking a question not saying that’s what happens here”. These clergy initially felt very affirmed and supported by senior clergy in their diocese as they embarked on their exploration but over time this support waned. Two of the clergy moved out of diocesan-based ministry altogether while one moved to another location. One who stayed in the same ministry reminisced of the choices before her and wished she was “slightly more affirmed by the diocese ... (but) institutional indifference doesn’t really put me off because I think its hard work”.



One of these priest researchers attended one of the Church Wedding Project training events in her diocese and expressed disappointment that there was no opportunity to share good practice. She had approached the project team about her own (innovative) experience in church weddings but they “didn’t want to hear”. This response was typical of the wider experiences of these priest researchers but is of particular interest because of the research ethos that was prominent in the Church Wedding project. In general, the researchers felt encouraged to carry out their studies even attracting financial assistance from their dioceses but the Church institution was reluctant to absorb the results of their research or to promote it on a wider pastoral canvas. I invited one researcher to share her findings at my annual national Church research conference and one diocese commissioned further work after another researcher found a means of publishing her findings but both of these researchers were particularly tenacious in promoting their findings and received further support from diocesan colleagues. The remainder were less forthright and found it difficult to share their reports any further after gaining academic accreditation. The consequence has been that these research topics have had limited dissemination across the wider church and the researchers involved have not directly undertaken any further significant research: “it’s hard to pitch yourself against your institution if you’re not getting your affirmation anywhere else”.

The depth of personal motivation for the researchers behind each piece of research largely dictated whether individual clergy actively promoted their findings and engaged with wider pastoral practices. Their research brought all of them clear benefits for their own pastoral practice and they expressed satisfaction at the completed task in different ways. One realised it had resolved a spiritual tension as well as adding a greater integrity to her pastoral practice: “it’s changed my integrity and my standing before God actually.” Another benefited from “a chance to actually think through at a reasonably deep level ... to reflect on your own practice and certainly it shook my practice up a lot”. The frustration they felt in their efforts “to make a difference” to the pastoral practices of the wider Church was palpable.

I became sympathetic to the tension with the Church institution described by these parochial clergy because of my own workplace experiences. Some years previously I had been asked by a bishop to establish a research library for the Church where individual research reports (from academic studies and personal quests) of wider interest to those in ministry could be stored and shared. On several occasions I had sought suitable funding for an appropriately located research library but none was forthcoming. There are numerous reports in different theological and university libraries that would be of interest to policy makers in the Church but there is no direct means of coordination. The priest researchers experienced the same frustration as this bishop and I, namely that the Church was reluctant to directly sponsor such an initiative and suitable funding was in short supply.

### **10.3 Personal vocation**

The priest researchers each came to their research with high expectations that they felt were more than fulfilled. On a personal level they found deep satisfaction and fulfilment bringing the rigour of enquiry to their ministry. Their sense of vocation was clearly renewed and their enthusiasm for the task infectious. They were each at a stage in their ministry where they were keen to explore and develop their pastoral practice further. One, for example, looked back on the benefits that her research had brought her personally and remarked: “Since I have started dabbling in this I’ve just been totally reenergised for my parish ... it’s actually quite good to get out of the parish and into the kingdom.” Another valued the opportunity to update his learning since initially training for ministry and “did it because of the content and the chance to be equipped to do the thinking and reflecting and learning ... the learning’s been good.” Two priest researchers were prompted by personal crises in their lives that impacted on their ministry. They wanted to engage with some wider thinking that would help to place their experiences in a wider theological context and provide opportunities for spiritual growth that would be “of use to other people”. The benefits of bringing research into their ministry had gone beyond the everyday professional ministry into their own spiritual health. They found the unique combination of research and study reinvigorated their sense of vocation as well as their ministerial practice and “so much part of what restores me.”

Several priest researchers brought with them experiences of the teaching and medical professions where in-service training, study and research was integrated into the professional lives of practitioners and there was an expectation for on-going study and research. They expressed surprise that there was no apparent appetite for anything similar among clergy:

“In general practice ... everybody had a specialist interest and they would take a half a day out of the week to do it ... but I came to church and ... these people are just doing parish ministry every day ... there are good clergy ... all sorts of things we’ve got gifts at ... (but) there’s no inspiration to do that”.

“They don’t like thinking very hard and it must be partly they are not trained for (research) ... A lot of them are very good pastors (but) ... they don’t think.”

The priest researchers sought to bring standards of professional practice to pastoral ministry but they all felt isolated among their colleagues in this aspiration and regretted there was no appetite for enquiry among their parochial colleagues or desire to build on their research findings with further work. The priority among parochial clergy to maintain the day-to-day existence of parish life left little appetite for their own personal development. The youngest of these priest researchers expressed her guilt in taking time out from parish ministry to explore issues of good practice. She was concerned at the perception this gave of her commitment. Her town centre church was open daily and parish life was so busy that “it feels a bit decadent almost to be going ... it’s a perception ... you’d have to drop something ... that’s when you need permission to do it”.

Although very busy people, the priest researchers interviewed were keen to have a fresh approach that responded to the changing nature of particular aspects of their pastoral ministry and they recognised this required critical thinking:

“It’s more about types of people ... people who quite like research are more independently minded ... teachers go into teaching ... they are often quite questioning people ... questioning people question through religion.”

They also expressed frustration at the lack of enquiry in the church: “The system’s not really geared towards allowing people the space to reflect and research.” Their desire was to respond appropriately to their changing context and encourage colleagues to do the same.

“For a priest to get an honest assessment is quite hard ... how do you know what the issues really are ... a lot of parish clergy are very cushioned.”

In contrast to the marrying clergy, priest researchers gave priority to their research and to the opportunity for theological reflection on praxis. The sense of envisioning that the priest researchers got from their research was in some cases quite dramatic. One of the priest researchers set up a reflective practice group with his team colleagues and invited a critical friend to journey with the group. The group discussed issues of pastoral practice with reference to theological themes, which was highly successful. Over time they experienced the pastoral cycle as mutually supportive and offering the ability to reconcile their differing experiences of pastoral praxis. It proved very difficult to replicate this experience in subsequent contexts of ministry and the opportunity his research presented to conduct further research subsequently invigorated him to share his expertise with others. Another observed “it’s about doing stuff that energises and excites people and uses their real deep gifts”. Several of the priest researchers had indeed surprised themselves with their abilities of enquiry and felt colleagues could similarly undertake tasks of ordinary research.

There is a growing stream of contextual enquiry incorporated into theological training but several of the priest researchers observed that although many clergy are now entering the ordained ministry from professional backgrounds, ordination training appears to suppress any instincts for continued enquiry. One priest researcher suggested that each ordinand should have a research supervisor who could partner the student as they sought to contextualise their ordination training. “I’d love to give myself a job just to promote this stuff,” she enthused. Diocesan provision, in turn, for continuing ministerial development was generally felt to be too prescriptive and there could be more encouragement to pursue personal areas of ministerial interest. One underlined the benefits of one to one professional supervision and recounted that although she was kept very busy in parish life, “if I hadn’t taken this hugely crazy leap ... I wouldn’t have been able to survive.” The priest researchers appeared to regard exercises of reflective research alongside other opportunities for personal and ministerial development in their potential to refresh and reinvigorate their parochial vocation.

#### 10.4 Reflective research

Being a researcher set in their own parochial setting introduced different dimensions for these priest researchers in their pastoral ministry. As one articulated, “a priest researcher could add value to a parish priest because of the transferrable skills, having the skill of identifying the local culture”. However, if they are to bring a wider context to their research they may need the opportunity to stand apart or to experience another congregation than their own and this can be difficult to achieve in practice. Alongside this, there are also tensions between equipping the theological development of clergy and the development of their professional ministry. Clergy are post holders working in partnership with their congregations in their parochial setting. They are not employed, for example, to provide certain professional standards of pastoral, spiritual or religious care in the manner of, for example, sector ministries in hospital, prisons and schools. The priest researchers felt that the term *research* in their pastoral contexts was limiting and wanted to consider opportunities offered by the models of parochial theologians and prophets:

“Research implies work ... (they) haven’t got time for that. We are the only theologians in our community and prophets, prophecy is interpreting the times ... it could be called prophetic reflection.”

As the clergy reflected on the type of professional development utilising research skills, several commented further that it was primarily about developing their practice “as a professional rather than my vocation”. One felt that she had particular skills as a participant observer and frequently felt that she was on the margins of situations in which she ministered. She felt separate from the Church as institution and did not feel part of its organisation. This benefited her research skills at the expense of her pastoral ministry and she expressed a conflict of interests as she sought to research her own congregation. She was being encouraged to conduct sociological research and empirical theology among those for whom she had a vocation to pastor. Which role would take priority in situations of particular pastoral need? Vocational development, however, does appear to be one of the results of this research based approach to personal development. Four of these parochial clergy moved onto other posts and one became a very effective champion for her area of pastoral research but their prime motivation was

to improve the professionalism of their pastoral ministry. They were open to change and prepared to consider a calling to a more prophetic ministry.

The separation that these clergy experienced as they undertook their research study and brought fresh theological reflection to the findings was very evident. It was a test of their character as to whether they continued to pursue their quest and, in turn, bring their learning to the wider church. They described their reflective stance in distinctive terms and felt that “people who quite like research are more independent minded ... they like a problem, they like to tussle.” In terms of the *ideal types* explored in Chapter 9, these priest researchers would all consider themselves as seeking increased professionalism in their pastoral ministries. They were independent thinkers who readily and openly critiqued their pastoral situation. They brought a strong sense of theological integrity to their ministry and correlated most similarly to the *Professional priests*, ambitious for their ministries and for the mission of the Church in contemporary society. They, however, placed themselves on the edge of the Church both observing it and participating in it. One expressed the separateness of priest researchers in positive terms as being “both insiders and outsiders”. She spoke for the others as she explained that this gave her a confidence to “not to get bogged down by (it)” and to be “critical friends and vigorously thinking friends ... absolutely priceless.”

These priest researchers reflected on the use of *outsider* researchers and were sceptical about using external business and management consultants to access “doing what we do better as a church”. The interplay of theological reflection and praxis was vital and the danger of “adopting business models for things in recent years has been ... rather badly directed ... the values on which they run are so utterly different from the values on which the church runs ... I don’t think management consultancy maps onto the church. It’s just a categorical error ... it’s (just) visible success ... it’s easy, it’s satisfying and people go for it”. They found the experience of ministering as a priest researcher daunting but absolutely essential in a time of change for the church. These clergy had embraced the need for critical thinking in pastoral ministry. The church “needs them in

exactly the same way it needs theologians. It needs people to think ... about everything you do and everything you are.”

Interpreting twenty-first century culture in a fast changing society presents significant challenges to the majority of parochial clergy. The priest researchers felt discouraged that so many of their colleagues were, in their view, “not really prepared to change their own way of operating”. They reflected on the relationship between clergy and their parishes, the places where they have been called to serve observing “the average parish priest is interested in their own context” and that “ownership is hugely important in every aspect of church ministry”. The parish of one priest researcher had been actively involved in her enquiry and the experience had been “hugely holistic in terms of the people who help ... they understand what we’re doing now.” In contrast, the Church Wedding project was critiqued by these priest researchers as being a “very top-down” model at a time when pastoral ministry was becoming increasingly unique to different social contexts as they sought to respond to the local culture. “How”, for example, “do people in your culture and your community do hospitality?” Such research questions for these priest researchers makes ministry in contemporary society “much more exciting than it used to be.”

### **10.5 A professional priest researcher**

My own experience working as a *professional priest researcher* for the NCIs has become increasingly relevant to this thesis. I have listened to the experiences and the questions of colleagues exploring and applying research findings to their pastoral contexts. My role has been to offer professionally based research interpretation but not to assess the suitability of findings without contributions from other “professional” colleagues with expertise in other practices and disciplines. Church policy makers were reluctant to debate social research findings in public and wanted specific advice from sociological evaluations and patterns. Discussion gradually uncovered a fundamental reluctance among them to accept the role of research to listen and to reflect views from across the whole spectrum of attitudes and opinions.

The Church Wedding project generated insights for contemporary pastoral ministry to which both the diocesan and national institutions of the Church and experienced parochial clergy brought considerable reflection. My participation in the project had been to ensure that professional social research skills were brought to bear with theological integrity on this specific area of pastoral ministry. I was responsible for the design, implementation and interpretation of the research but it was not this that was questioned by colleagues. Both my project team colleagues and the marrying clergy attending the training events wanted to apply the findings from the research to develop local pastoral programmes and it was this application that proved to be challenging. In general, the project team were content to respond sympathetically to the views of the wedding couples and their families, to make mission needs a priority while experienced parochial clergy raised practical issues and questions concerning the wider theological integrity behind their agendas. The project team wanted quick results and implementation, which they saw as being hampered by critical questioning.

The pragmatic and theologically reflective stances of marrying clergy attending the training events created a distance between them and the project team. The majority of those fitting the description of *Progressive priests* were most likely to continue to be enthusiastic about the practices recommended by the project team but even they appeared to view my research role within the project team as aligned with the central institution of the NCIs. I gradually found myself in the middle of pastoral debates, representing the NCIs to the clergy and representing the marrying clergy to the project team and other colleagues at the NCIs. As my research among marrying parochial clergy developed, the project team became reluctant to accommodate research findings from this aspect of the project and I found myself positioned by them alongside those they viewed as “difficult” clergy. Although I reported both positive and negative reactions from the clergy, I felt criticised for representing their views without any filtering and for getting too close to the clergy. Both sides of the research conversation did not want contact with each other and neither wanted research to significantly disturb them.



Parochial clergy also showed resistance towards any perceived “central” directives and they too sought to filter the messages emanating from the research findings. The majority judged the suitability of suggested enhancements to their pastoral ministry against its impact on their existing practices. They considered whether they were “comfortable” (in theological, practical and sociological terms) to adapt their pastoral practice through their own perception of whether their parochial context demanded it. Pressure of work and local dynamics in churches meant none showed particular keenness to embrace radical change in their parish policies. Even in team ministries parochial clergy work for the most part as sole practitioners and only the more inexperienced curates in training referred to evaluating parish policies with fellow clergy. Clergy are largely self-taught in their wedding ministry frequently relying heavily on the practices of their training incumbent with whom they served their curacy. A number utilise insights from individual pastoral publications and the project team asked me to contribute research findings to one such book (Barley 2009). In this way and utilising the endorsement of the diocesan bishops, the project team sought to influence a wider field of clergy including those who had not attended the training events. Both approaches, however, were viewed with suspicion by many clergy who regarded their ministry as autonomous and to be independent of their colleagues across the diocese and the Church.

In a few instances, clergy attending the project training events had already engaged actively with changes in the place of weddings in their neighbourhoods and were keen for the project team to consider these experiences alongside their own recommendations. Two *People priests*, in particular, were convinced of the successes of their personal adaptations to their contexts and a prominent *Progressive priest* felt his experiences to be more relevant to his context. When the project team expressed a reluctance to listen to the experiences of these clergy they became less enthusiastic towards the project itself and to my approaches to engage with further research. The closed nature of the diocesan online forums attracted some sharing of good practice but clergy were reluctant to participate in further theological reflection on their experiences and other contextual evidence. My role in the project team as a professional priest researcher appeared to be simultaneously both an advantage and a disadvantage. I

brought a professionalism to the use and interpretation of empirical findings and I could contribute a deeper level of understanding to the pastoral experiences reported by fellow clergy. However, I was viewed with suspicion by members of the project team as being too closely aligned with the marrying clergy and by the marrying clergy as being in association with the project team.

My own experience and that of the priest researchers I interviewed has highlighted the tensions of traversing the insider-outsider continuum that was acknowledged in Chapter 3, section 3.6 and Chapter 5, section 5.4 (Coghlan and Brannick 2010). This chapter has uncovered the enthusiasm of priest researchers for their task and their potentially insightful contribution to the development of reflective pastoral praxis. It has identified characteristics of priest researchers alongside the varying profiles of marrying clergy that were presented in this research with a view to the potential development of parochial clergy. The following chapter seeks to compare the responses of the marrying clergy with the experiences of the priest researchers and to explore the emerging themes with a view to developing the use of shared reflective practice in pastoral ministry. It points to key factors in the use of participatory action research by pastoral practitioners in the Church.

## **11. Themes revealing the clash of cultures**

Chapters 9 and 10 have outlined the findings from the research in this thesis to explore the research question initially posed in Chapter 3. This was developed in Chapter 8 in response to theoretical perspectives brought together in Chapter 7. Interviews with priest researchers have shed light on the potential of the direct involvement of practitioners in reviewing pastoral practice and policies. This chapter brings together the themes emerging from the research findings for further consideration of the potential to develop priest researchers in the Church. Several significant factors have emerged in this thesis in the responses of parochial clergy to the development of church weddings and to on-going research partnership in this area of pastoral ministry. My own experience as a professional priest researcher has reinforced some of these factors. This chapter reflects on the evidence emerging from the research for this thesis towards developing the use of empirical research by pastoral practitioners to facilitate pastorally responsive policy development.

### **11.1 Institutional perspectives**

In different ways the clergy attending the Church Wedding training events preferred to formulate their own individual models of pastoral practice and did not express any compulsion to embrace models of good practice sanctioned by their bishops and senior diocesan staff. Several referred to the initial training they had received as ordinands and curates, which they preferred to rely on. Thus theological outlooks were also shaped by these experiences and theological party lines often established prior to or during training were perpetuated. Within each diocese those most at ease during the training events and willing to participate in the project research were of similar theological outlooks. Different theological outlooks towards the place of church weddings in diocesan priorities dominated each diocese and served to highlight the *ideal types* utilised here and formulated from the research experience in Chapter 9.

For a variety of reasons the relationship between clergy and their diocese has a strong influence on their attitude towards engaging with a national and diocesan led project of this nature. Among *Professional priests*, for example, there is an evident distance

between themselves and their dioceses that is based on the essential independence of their ministry. Parochial clergy are licensed by their bishop into a office of a certain spiritual character but without explicit legal obligations as employees. As primarily sole practitioners they prefer to ensure the personal integrity of their individual ministry without necessarily making any significant contribution towards the collaborative practice of a professional class. They limit their professionalism to the development of their ministry in terms of its practical wisdom, its phronesis and with reference to their own approach to party theological positions.

Among *Progressive priests* frustration was expressed that the diocesan institution does not relate easily to contemporary society. There is a disjuncture that these priests are seeking to address and they feel their role is to inform the institution. They frequently expressed frustration at the training event focus groups that there was little opportunity to offer input to the project. Both these priest profiles locate themselves on the edge of the institution and are content to cast themselves in a more prophetic light. They identify with the scriptural acknowledgement that prophets are not always welcome in their own context (John 4:44) and, whilst they cooperate fully with colleagues in terms of building positive working relationships, they are comfortable to be independently minded in their professional response to diocesan and national proposals.

In contrast, a number of the *Community priests* and *People priests* welcomed any suggestions to enhance their pastoral ministry and, in fact, looked to the dioceses and other national church agencies to provide these. They are content to be led by those with a wider perspective and they critique proposals against their practical application and effectiveness in the local church. Their response to the Church Wedding project was more positive than their colleagues and they warmed particularly to the insights offered by the findings of the research among wedding couples. The *Community priests*, in particular, evaluated the research findings against their own social context and both priest profiles were reluctant to use materials and proposals without suitable adaptation to their local contexts.

It was noticeable that parochial clergy attending the training events did not, in general, express any significant enthusiasm for ministering in partnership with each other in pastoral contexts (section 11.4). They felt that working in clergy teams restricted their ministry in church weddings and they preferred to work with lay colleagues either as administrators or in embracing suitable approaches in wedding preparation. This has ramifications for any exercise in which shared praxis is incorporated into participatory action research and TAR (Chapter 5, section 5.4). When it came to working alongside professional photographers, florists and musicians the majority of clergy came to see this as a necessary factor in their communication with contemporary culture. The project research among wedding couples had revealed this to be less about the commercialism of church weddings and more about making the day special to individual couples. Clergy wanted to bring “the God bit onto the stage” but only a few *Professional priests* welcomed the opportunity to build longer term working relations with other professionals outside the local church.

The research also indicated that the *priest researchers*, studied in Chapter 10, did not have straightforward relations with their diocese and senior staff. They perceived their task to be one of pitching their own pastoral integrity against institutional indifference and a lack of support from senior diocesan staff. They found that parochial colleagues also showed little interest in their research findings, which left them feeling isolated and unable to share on a wider canvas the insights they had gained into good standards of pastoral practice. The institutional Church and their priestly colleagues appeared adverse to change and unwilling to engage in critical debate on the research experiences of these priest researchers. This mirrored my own experience as a *professional priest researcher*. The institutional Church preferred to disseminate good practice with little direct research among practitioners. Its appetite for evidence-based decision making and management relations did not extend to local parish consultations. It appeared to prefer external, outsider research delivered quickly and enabling it to filter research findings and to maintain control of the dissemination through training events and other means of communication. It appeared to lose confidence in priestly insider research, which it perceived as being too reflective and resistant to change but this resulted in reports of empirical social research findings that, for example, lacked reflection and attention to the core ethos of the Church.

My professional role as a Church researcher has enabled me to see some of the pressures on diocesan senior staff and the wider Church institution. The Church Wedding project was one of a number of research projects that were planned over this time and the momentum was strong among policy makers for swift delivery of results. My experience as a Church researcher for the Church Wedding project appeared to be in synergy with the priest researchers whose presence in the Church was one towards which it was ambivalent. In Appendix 9, I identify this same attitude towards church researchers and the preference across the Church for research findings from outsider research. The location of priestly researchers in the NCIs caused suspicion rather than increased confidence. They were aligned with parochial clergy who they considered resistant to change. Statistics for management purposes were understood and utilised by NCI personnel but evaluations and dialogue with parochial clergy regarding interpretation and pastoral policies was being sacrificed on the altar of speed and financial constraints. The power to promote findings of good pastoral practice remained almost entirely with bishops together with the central managers of the NCIs and it proved challenging for researchers including those from the academy to be invited into their forums of debate.

The influence of clergy was limited to their own locality and the distance they felt from decision making processes prevented an open exchange of praxis without the initial prompting of the NCIs. Parochial clergy for their part (with the notable exception of priest researchers) were generally reluctant to partner with their dioceses. Consequently, the communication gap between clergy, their dioceses and the NCIs remained and the role of priest researchers consigned to the nature of independent consultancies. An institution under pressure had backed away from building a partnership with clergy to explore its pastoral relationship with the nation and reverted to its previously preferred model of outsider research and statistics for management purposes.

## 11.2 Local theologians

Local theological reflection does not yet appear to hold a secure place in the pastoral practice of individual clergy and consequently inhibits their ability to develop as priest researchers. It is also a key ingredient into bringing action research methods to the review of pastoral practice and policies (Chapter 4, section 4.5). The “attentiveness” that Graham emphasised as emanating from the process of action research is not obviously evident among these local theologians (Graham 2013, p.170). Marrying clergy gave a mixed response to the theological questions of ministry that arose, for example, from a focus at the training events on the account of Jesus at the wedding at Cana. At stake was the place of weddings in the mission of the parish churches. For some clergy weddings are treated as necessary baggage and as part of the role of the established church in England. Others wanted time to consider how the mission potential of church weddings could expand to include the wedding congregation alongside the wedding couple, their families and friends.

For *Professional priests* theological reflection was a greater priority than for their colleagues. Marrying clergy frequently lacked the confidence and the time to reflect on this themselves, and they appeared to seek the reassurance that such reflection would be consistent with their own personal theological party line. In the focus groups younger and more recently trained clergy expressed a willingness to initiate theological discussion among local ordained chapter colleagues but reported difficulty establishing such conversations. The reluctance of more experienced clergy to review their pastoral practices and review their local (contextual) theological stance was a barrier hindering the development of pastoral ministry in church weddings across the Church.

Clergy attending the training events were greatly encouraged by the central place given to the role of the vicar by the wedding couples. Many felt empowered to make changes in their churches’ pastoral practice and thus warmed to the task of bringing theological integrity to their wedding ministry. The variation in parochial contexts in which to develop pastoral policies significantly influences the ability to respond to contemporary

society. A number had inherited parish wedding policies from their predecessors and circumstances prevented any significant review and slowed implementation.

“I feel more confident ... now there’s a team to back up and support.”

“The project training event was a stimulus to do more.”

“Now have a different approach to weddings ... attempt to find out more about the stories of the couples ... learnt about the importance of continuity.”

Clergy attending the training events were also generally particularly conscious of the growing distance between the parish church and parishioners. They welcomed the insights shared at the diocesan training events from the research among wedding couples but their reaction to this was, in different ways, related to the varying clergy ideal types formulated in Chapter 9. *Community priests* and *People priests* were ready to embrace the challenge of reaching out to their communities and taking the church into the everyday life of its citizens. They were greatly encouraged by the research findings shared at the Church Wedding training events from wedding couples and felt affirmed in their ministry. They responded to the project’s prompt to personalise weddings and were keen to initiate work with their parishes to formulate imaginative ways of communicating appropriately with their parishioners. They preferred to work on an individual basis adapting their pastoral practice to the circumstances of those they came into contact with. Systems and policies did not hold much appeal to them although their own theological and pastoral integrity was paramount.

*Progressive priests* were similarly enthusiastic in their response to the research among wedding couples and wanted to be more ambitious than the project team proposals. They expressed a sense of urgency with the task ahead and offered their assistance in promoting the project and the church’s welcome for wedding couples. Some became involved in staffing church stands at wedding fairs and broader church projects, for example, the national Back to Church Sunday campaign. Frustrations were expressed with the slow pace of change in the churches’ attitudes towards mission across the nation. These priests were keen to experiment with new approaches, to adapt church policies to fit the changing times and for effective practice to lead theological reflection.



*Professional priests*, in contrast, were often more reflective than their colleagues and sought to balance the demands of the wedding couples with the inherited wisdom and traditions of the church. They questioned whether the church could satisfy the demands of contemporary society without further theological reflection and wanted to consider the constraints on the personalisation of weddings. They appreciated the focus at the training events on the Wedding at Cana and wanted a wider theological debate about the church's involvement in the public rite of passage that is weddings. This willingness to critique the findings from the research among wedding couples revealed the potential to be reflective practitioner and priest researchers. They brought a variety of theological positions to their ministry of church weddings and sought reassurance that the proposed changes in pastoral practice did not undermine these.

It was noticeable that a few *Progressive priests* engaged with the online forums to the greater extent than their colleagues. This may be partly the result of the nature of this contemporary medium being used to communicate issues arising from the Church Wedding project but they were also more willing to evaluate different pastoral approaches and to share their experiences. Their colleagues appeared content to let them do this and remained passive in their responses. Evaluations were driven by the reactions among the wedding couples and their families, an approach that was similar to the practice of the project team. *Professional priests* continued to want an increased theological dialogue that they considered was lacking and they were reluctant to move forward without this. I had hoped such theological debate might develop to some extent in the online diocesan forums but discussion did not develop to sufficient depth, which could be attributed to the lack of personal stimulation and sufficient immediacy for these clergy.

*Community priests* and *Peoples priests* were keen to share stories of their practice but they were more comfortable taking a case-by-case approach to their pastoral ministry. There was little evidence that they saw any need to establish common threads or patterns emerging from these encounters. The term *research* appeared to hold unhelpful secular connotations for the majority of these marrying clergy and to be the deterrent that the priest researchers had suspected. Some were suspicious of social science

research methods being utilised in the church while others did not have the confidence to explore how the research findings could be applied in their circumstances. Parochial clergy were reluctant to participate in and learn from this new area of activity. Busy clergy did not want to take on any more work for, what they perceived to be, its own sake and yielding little benefits for their personal ministry.

“The training event was very helpful and rejuvenating ... (I have) too much other stuff to think about apart from implementing the project.”

The strong relationship between parochial clergy and their congregations was also a factor in their response both to the Church Wedding project itself and to the suggestion of involvement in further research. Several clergy worked closely with administrators and other congregation members, and expressed their disappointment that the project training events were not formally open to these lay colleagues. Whilst this close relationship may be of pastoral benefit in the parish it served as a deterrent in exploring change. These clergy were more likely to rely on congregation colleagues to verify the suitability of pastoral practice and were reluctant to engage in theological reflection in their own context. Working with lay people in church wedding teams brings advantages in widening the scope of the parish's wedding ministry but it makes considering and implementing change more challenging:

“Not many people from the church congregation want to get involved on the day itself ... it would actually be quicker to do the task myself.”

The *priest researchers* in this research were also nervous about undertaking their own pastoral explorations and they all sought academically-based support from professional researchers or practical theologians. Once this partnership was established they took to their task and displayed the ability to conduct quality research exercises and enthusiastically engaged in theological reflection. Their confidence grew noticeably both in completing their research exercise and in consequently developing their own pastoral practice. They became more competent pastoral practitioners with the ability to listen to their pastoral context and to respond appropriately in the manner of the model of the pastoral cycle (Chapter 4, section 4.5). They were keen to share this experience and encourage others to consider similar personal development. In contrast, the reluctance of the clergy participants in the online discussion forums to utilise my

professional support was disappointing and their lack of confidence to actively pursue local theological reflection was a significant factor in their lack of interest in personal research enquiries.

### **11.3 Pastoral crises**

Marrying clergy were generally not as open in their pastoral practice to challenge and implementing change as the *priest researchers* who each felt a significant disjuncture between their professional pastoral ministry and their personal pastoral experiences. In some respects this may not be surprising as the marrying clergy were individually invited to the training events because of the significant number of weddings they undertook. They were often content and felt competent in their wedding ministry while those who did not conduct many weddings were only invited to parallel taster days. The latter group were not offered the same opportunities to actively develop their wedding ministry and so prospects for professional development that may have encouraged them to undertake more weddings were not explored. The priest researchers, in contrast, felt that their theological integrity in particular pastoral situations was challenged to such an extent that they sort to understand the differences and design an appropriately professional response. It seems that a pastoral crisis of some sort focussed these clergy on the need to engage in practical theological enquiry in their own parochial contexts and to be willing to review parochial policies to any significant extent.

The areas of research attracting the attention of the priest researchers were different but offered similarly shaped opportunities for exploration. Two focussed on challenges they experienced from exercising a parochial ministry in other occasional church offices. They questioned how funeral and baptism ministry could be more effective in developing local pastoral contacts in their neighbourhoods. The remaining three had moved into new areas of ministry and, in encountering change, wanted to understand its opportunities more fully. Each experienced tensions in their professional practice that necessitated a fundamental review of their pastoral context. By different means these priest researchers came to the realisation that they needed to effect such enquiry themselves and began to look for external support to approach the task. The only one

who did not connect this with a formal course of study involving an element of local exploration was herself an academic lecturer competent in appropriate research skills. She sought support from a computer based research assistant and linkage with similarly based research while the others required more fundamental guidance with research design. I came into contact with these potential priest researchers to support their research design in the context of the Church and found them to be very receptive to my professional research advice. Their zeal to complete their task was infectious and, in several cases, I became involved in promoting their cause on national research platforms.

The difference in outlook between these different researching clergy and their colleagues centred on various changes, which had impacted significantly on their pastoral ministry. The priest researchers were all parish based and came from various categories of clergy from self-supporting (assistant) ministry to the leader of a parish team whereas the majority of clergy invited to the Church Wedding project training events had pastoral charge of several churches. The latter were leaders of parishes and appeared reluctant to engage in second hand initiatives that come from shared experiences. In exercising their leadership roles in parochial ministry they described themselves as fundamentally sole practitioners who were accustomed to instigating pieces of work rather than participating alongside others in collaborative studies. Their leadership roles extended to areas of enquiry into pastoral practice where they preferred to be the prime decision maker to sanction or challenge the parochial status quo. It would seem that unless they personally experienced a pastoral disjuncture in the parish's pastoral policies and practice, in a similar manner to the priest researchers, they were unlikely to consider further exploration of their local context.

The *priest researchers* I interviewed brought enthusiasm and commitment to their pastoral research, which was in noticeable contrast to the reaction of priestly colleagues who had attended the Church Wedding training events. Almost all were stipendiary parochial clergy but their attitude towards research enquiries was different to that of the marrying clergy contacted for this research. Whilst marrying clergy initially responded with enthusiasm to the findings of the wedding project research among wedding

couples, they were reluctant to explore areas of difference and of challenge to their own pastoral practice:

“The ministry team didn’t react well ... they found it hurtful.”

“No real backing support from the church.”

“Results didn’t match up to my experience ... haven’t used any of the literature from the course.”

The support I offered the marrying clergy appeared to be insufficient to encourage their participation in further research in their parochial areas and indeed, my employment context may not have made it very welcome (Chapter 10, section 10.5). The marrying clergy were largely content to continue with their current wedding policies making small adjustments to their pastoral practice, which did not have any major impact on them or their parishes. A few focussed their energies for the first time on post-wedding follow up and many endeavoured to provide greater pastoral continuity between each couple and themselves or a clergy colleague. However, there was little appetite for exploration into the fundamental questions of building church allegiance and participation in their context from such pastoral encounters. They were content to make minor adjustments to their parochial policies and to rely on their personal experiences and previously learnt responses to theological and pragmatic challenges.

There are various formal opportunities offered by the Church for parishes to evaluate their pastoral ministry in their locality. Many dioceses are requiring their parishes to formulate *Mission Action Plans* in response to the changing church resources and pastoral context in which the church finds itself. Clergy and congregations vary in their reactions to this task and a number of diocesan sponsored toolkits have grown in popularity together with an independent resource (Church Maps 2013). Clergy that are strongly outward focussed have often already been engaged in similar informal mission planning exercises while those who are content in their current engagement with the wider community are reluctant to embark on such enquiries and to explore the full potential of these exercises. A similar response seemed evident among both the marrying clergy and the priest researchers, in that clergy preferred to set their own agendas for change rather than respond to pressures from elsewhere in the Church. Parochial leadership is predominantly autonomous and clergy carry this philosophy

strongly into their pastoral practice. They are reluctant in their response to external initiatives unless it coincides with their own parish priorities.

The momentum to consider changes in pastoral practice and policies appears to develop from local pastoral crises. Clergy invited to the focus groups were considered by themselves and their dioceses to be successful in the pastoral ministry of church weddings and did not display any obvious appetite for in-service training. They were personally selected for invitations to the training event and thus motivated to attend because of an associated status in the eyes of their colleagues. Whilst this meant they were eager to participate in the project they did not feel any significant need to change their pastoral practice. They were open to research findings that developed their established expertise further but they were reluctant to investigate new avenues and fresh approaches.

My experience working alongside clergy on a number of work place research projects confirms this experience in the pastoral area of church weddings. Clergy were generally responsive to external research findings but their enthusiasm to participate in further explorations is constrained by their pastoral circumstances and dependent on the support of their congregations. By the very nature of their role clergy are concerned to build and maintain positive relations with their congregation, the parish and parishioners. The incidence of practice-based masters and doctoral programmes involving local church and parish studies are another indicator that there are clergy who can be persuaded to explore issues of particular and immediate concern in this way. The key to their participation in local context based enquiry lies in its perceived relevance to their own priorities in the life and witness of the local church.

Several clergy observed that many of the social research findings in the Church Wedding project could be applied more widely in parallel pastoral situations. However, the project team and the Church were reluctant to discuss this further with clergy in public. Whilst the Church encourages clergy contributions on matters of church order, resources, ethics and liturgy, it appears reluctant for this approach to be integrated into pastoral policy reviews. If clergy can be persuaded to contribute from their own local

crises in pastoral ministry in the manner of priest researchers, there could be mutual benefits in learning and the development of phronesis for both them and the Church.

#### **11.4 Continuing ministerial development**

The concept of personal and professional development is a recently introduced phenomenon for parochial clergy. Their colleagues in sector ministry including schools and hospitals are accustomed to this aspect of their professional employment but parochial clergy are not so employed. Their status as office holders with or without a stipend brings an element of selection and choice to their engagement with on-going ministerial development. Recently introduced *Terms of Service* for parochial clergy bring expectations of continual ministerial development, which are monitored by regular ministerial development reviews. All this is new to clergy and their responses are beginning to shape personal and professional development opportunities accessible in their parochial settings and subject to the growing pressures of their wider deployment across, in many cases, several parishes. Parochial ministry is a locally, practice based deployment and it is commonly accepted that clergy struggle to maintain their theological study once they have moved into their first incumbency after training. Diocesan staff reported that the attitude of parochial clergy towards personal development is similarly relaxed and it is challenging for bishops to stipulate anything beyond legal developments and requirements.

Wedding couples expressed increasing respect and appreciation of marrying clergy as they get to know them. Their professionalism generally builds positive pastoral relationships and so it is, at first sight, surprising that some would challenge the concept that they are a professional priesthood operating according to accepted standards of established good practice (Chapter 6, section 6.1). Clergy have been called to a vocation in life which is paramount and for some does not sit easily with the connotations of a professional class. Whilst they seek to bring a moral and ethical integrity to their pastoral practice they do not generally feel constrained by any standards of professional practice agreed across the Church. This autonomy of the parish priest is fundamental to the parochial structure but it can frustrate the sharing of good practice and the establishment of pastorally responsive policies. The Church

Wedding project research revealed the expectation among the public for consistent and professional pastoral contact. This challenged the marrying clergy to consider its implications for their personal ministry and how they should respond to the recommendations of the project team.

Some of the *Progressive priests* brought insights from successful experiences involving particular congregation members establishing positive relationships with wedding couples. After hearing findings from the project research among wedding couples, they wanted to include lay congregation members in further post wedding approaches. They were often an integral part of their church's professional wedding provision.

*Community priests*, similarly, sought to involve wedding couples in church life but were content for this to be integrated into relationships across the wider congregation and the on-going life of the parish. Both of these priest profiles embraced the reality of working with fellow professionals in the community and appeared to be flattered that their input was considered to be similarly professional. *Professional priests* were most likely to be sole practitioners but to complement their ministry with the support of a professionally minded team of lay people. Some were reluctant to lower their own professional integrity in order to, as they saw it, accommodate popular culture and they sought to put their church wedding policy on a formal professional basis. They were more likely to offer a consistent wedding package to all couples than to make individual arrangements for particular couples. In contrast *People priests* sought to personalise the wedding service to offer an individual package that accommodated the needs of each couple. Negotiations with fellow professionals became reactive and they were less likely to have formal wedding policies and rely on lay congregation members in their church wedding ministry.

It was noticeable that marrying clergy who participated in the Church Wedding training events expressed varying attitudes towards their dioceses' invitations to attend. Some were flattered that they were considered by senior staff to have a successful wedding ministry while others expressed concern that senior clergy would be monitoring their future wedding practice following the training. They broadened any judgments made on their wedding ministry to indicate the proficiency of their overall parochial ministry



and were reluctant to open this to the project teams recommendations. Diocesan staff did not often fully explain their processes for selection, which left some clergy feeling uncertain of the diocesan expectations placed on them as chosen wedding practitioners. This uncertainty did not encourage their participation in the project events and in the subsequent research exercises. The concept of life-long work based learning was not apparent in their thinking in the manner it was expressed among the priest researchers. Those whose outlook towards this was more positive had frequently followed postgraduate studies after ordination training or were accustomed to (secular) work based on-going learning and professional development prior to ordination.

The priest researchers contacted for this research wanted to preserve their professionalism and to maintain the theological integrity but they were not so wedded to established pastoral standards and practices, and more responsive to change. They were prepared to be at the forefront of change and became frustrated when their research findings were not taken sufficiently seriously by their diocesan senior staff. On the Church Wedding project *Professional priests* and *Progressive priests* were most enthusiastic about attending the training events. The latter were open to learning new ideas and content with pastoral practice that was “fit for purpose” while the former engaged in deeper considerations that could be integrated into their on-going professional development. Both lacked the zeal for further exploration that was evident among the priest researchers but they were open to considering the experience of others. Their colleagues were more reluctant and wanted to verify findings for themselves in their own church community. Few had experience of reflective practice and the majority appeared to lack the confidence to undertake this.

The place of reflective practice and ministerial development is not established among the parochial clergy many of whom still regard it with suspicion. In recent years it has become an integral aspect of ordination training and parish based post ordination training, with the prospect that over time it will grow in acceptance among parochial clergy. Ministry in a fast changing and diverse society requires the ability to respond to local pastoral contexts but the clergy’s ability to undertake such parish based ministerial development and reflective practice is only just beginning to establish itself. As this

development includes opportunities to integrate reflective praxis into day-to-day pastoral ministry, the potential impact of priest researchers may also be more fully tested.

This chapter has brought together the themes emerging from the research in this thesis, which took the example of the Church Wedding project to explore the research question posed in Chapter 3 (section 3.7). Factors have been identified that both encourage and hinder the Church in developing a partnership with parochial clergy as priest researchers to bring empirical exploration to socio-theological reflection in the development of pastoral policies. This research has demonstrated the strategic position of parochial clergy as local theologians who increasingly find themselves in pastoral crises as they seek to relate their ministry to the everyday lives of their parishioners and to contemporary society. Their attitudes towards their continuing ministerial development and their perspectives on the institution of the Church influence their capacity to engage in critical thinking and shared reflective practice. If the Church is to respond effectively to contemporary society in its pastoral policy reviews it will need to negotiate with its pastoral practitioners and reflect more fully on this relationship. Consideration of how the findings from this research can enable the Church to reconsider the emerging role of priest researchers and to integrate their prophetic voice into the review of pastoral practice and policies in the Church is the focus of the following chapters.

## **12. Discussion towards developing the clergy voice**

The themes arising from my research findings were brought together in the previous chapter and point to the contribution of priest researchers in bringing the voice of pastoral practitioners to the review of pastoral policies and practice. This chapter seeks, from these findings, to discuss how their role can be promoted more fully across the Church. As the research for this thesis has been undertaken it has uncovered a complex relationship between parochial clergy and the institution of the Church. The relationships too between parochial clergy and with their congregations have influenced their response to the research. This chapter considers the impact of these working relationships and the capacity of parochial clergy to engage in change agent groups and participatory reflective praxis that are a prerequisite for the emancipatory action research model, which I have explored. It will consider the prevalence (or lack) of collaborative working and aspects of the nature of parochial deployment that impact on shared pastoral ministry. It will reflect on the varied response of clergy to reflective praxis and in their capacity to reconcile operant and espoused theologies in the area of church weddings.

### **12.1 Parochial deployment**

The research findings of this thesis have revealed clergy to be slow to respond to institutional initiatives but it is equally noticeable that the Church is reluctant to liaise with parishes. Most changes in pastoral policies are achieved through national review panels that operate through electoral structures (Chapter 5, section 5.1). The Church Wedding project initially refrained from encompassing the wisdom of pastoral practitioners because the Archbishops' Council sought deliverable results within a tight timeframe. The project team felt that if parochial clergy were involved they would delay the implementation of the project findings and dilute its application because of the diversity of theological party politics (Chapter 12, section 12.3). The project was restricted in its pastoral remit and the pressure for measureable outcomes and successful delivery were paramount (Chapter 3, section 3.3). Research for management purposes was reluctant to entertain the practical complexities of contemporary parochial ministry. Several clergy expressed concern that they were being taught or "sold" the project findings (Chapter 9, section 9.6) and that contributions from the clergy were not

encouraged. The “distant’ attitude of the project team towards the marrying clergy reinforced the separation clergy felt between themselves and the Church. Despite my reassurances clergy were reluctant to continue to participate to ensure that learning continued in their diocese after the formal life of the project and the ability of pastoral ministry to continue to learn from reflective praxis was reduced.

Church of England clergy find themselves aligned to the Church institution as public attitudes towards it are changing around them. The majority of marrying clergy in this study take loyalty to their local parish seriously as being the prime place where they exercise their vocation to priesthood. The attitude of their congregation towards the diocese and the wider Church influences them significantly. My personal experience of local clergy chapter meetings has often included situations where this has been only too apparent and generated considerable discussion concerning, for example, archdeacons visitations and synodical government elections. Local congregations can have strong expectations of their clergy, which frequently dominate their priestly ministry and they can find themselves endeavouring to fill the gap between congregation and diocesan expectations. It was apparent in the marrying clergy who attended the focus groups that this bridge building role of the parochial priest is one marrying clergy embrace with varying degrees of enthusiasm. Chapter 11, section 11.1 outlined the differing relationships between clergy interviewed in this research and their diocesan senior staff. The distance both they and the priest researchers felt from diocesan structures and processes meant that clergy were generally more supportive of their parish priorities rather than any institutional ones.

The Church Wedding project came into being in response to a significant pastoral crisis perceived at the national level of the Church (Chapter 3, section 3.3). The project shared insights emerging from social science research methods among wedding couples that were well received by parochial clergy. Marrying clergy were willing to incorporate individual points of learning from the project training events into their established wedding ministry but most were reluctant to consider anything further (Chapter 11, section 11.3). The project was not designed to engage to any significant extent with clergy who conducted only a few weddings and were ambivalent towards

the place of church weddings in their pastoral ministry. A more enthusiastic response towards the proposals for enhancing church wedding ministry may have been evident if this approach had been taken. Given the positive but sporadic reception from marrying clergy towards the training materials it would be interesting to explore whether other clergy (without strong wedding ministries) would be receptive to considering more significant changes in their pastoral ministry in response to the research among wedding couples.

The changing attitudes of the Church towards pastoral ministry to the nation is more challenging for experienced, older marrying clergy to absorb than for younger clergy and others who have been more recently trained to respond to changes in British society. It was not uncommon at the focus groups to hear the cry from experienced marrying clergy: *“This is not the Church I was ordained into”*. Practical theology is now an integral aspect to Church training for ordination and the newly ordained are encouraged to undertake postgraduate studies that relate to aspects of their parish ministry. The Church has responded to changes in contemporary education so that ordinands have transferable skills and accreditation, and embrace on-going ministerial development. Institutional expectations are reducing the independence of parochial clergy and moving towards a model where senior clergy exercise increased managerial oversight (Chapter 5, section 5.2). Clergy are being encouraged to respond to changing institutional expectations at a time when their relationship with the Church is being itself challenged by pressure from their congregations and the wider public.

Some of the positive responses from clergy attending the wedding project training events were in appreciation of the contact with senior diocesan and national staff, and the endorsement this generated of their wedding ministry. Several remarked how unique this method of in-service training was and how the personal invitation to participate had been an encouragement to their pastoral ministry (Chapter 11, section 11.4). As a method of communication and support for the pastoral ministry of parochial clergy, the training events were a success and a model for exploring other areas of parish ministry. However, their use to initiate the on-going development of pastoral practices and policies needs further consideration.

## 12.2 Reflective praxis

The marrying clergy who attended the focus groups were reluctant to reflect on their pastoral praxis. They appeared to be primarily pragmatic in their approach to pastoral ministry and comfortable with their inherited phronesis. This was particularly so with those who, in terms of the ideal types proposed in Chapter 9, displayed the characteristics of *Community priests* and *People priests*. They were primarily concerned to forge connections with individuals or the wider community in ways that attracted people to participate in local church life. *Progressive priests* reflected on the effectiveness of their wedding ministry but it was still in a primarily pragmatic framework. Their aim was to establish channels of communication that positively accommodated the needs of wedding couples and they readily welcomed insights from the research among wedding couples shared at the training events. It was left to the *Professional priests* to reflect in any depth regarding the professional integrity of their pastoral practices. Most then discarded such challenges because of time pressures but a few showed some potential as *priest researchers* to initiate further research and reflective praxis. Among the ideal types explored in this research, it was the Professional priests who were most open to significant challenges to their pastoral ministry. They expressed interest in study opportunities and possessed the capacity to potentially develop as priest researchers.

The evidence emerging from the research for this thesis suggests that potential *priest researchers* form a self-selecting minority of *Professional priests* who find personal satisfaction in exploring questions of praxis, discovering new understandings and offering their findings to the Church. They are willing to learn ordinary research skills to achieve this aim if the Church can offer professional support. The participation of clergy in postgraduate studies during post ordination training and in Continuing Ministerial Development (CMD) has encouraged many clergy to consider studying areas of ministry of particular interest to them. Those that I have encountered while teaching at Kings College, London bring a professionalism to their ministry that they seek to maintain and promote in their public role. They are motivated to gain a fuller understanding of contemporary society for their ministry and willing to engage with empirically reflective research to investigate this. Clergy who undertake part-time study

whilst in full-time ministry deployment remain in the minority and they are frequently ambitious for their future ministry rather than motivated to continue further agendas of research.

Parochial clergy are not generally offered a natural pattern of career progression in the manner that frequently occurs, for example, for chaplains in sector ministry and for more senior roles in the Church. They seek posts that necessitate greater responsibilities but the development of their service to the Church is largely left for each individual to negotiate. The recent introduction of regular ministerial reviews may inform this process but the system being introduced models primarily an institutional response to the expressed concerns of individuals. Clergy select their own reviewers from a diocesan pool and suggest their own objectives for their future ministry. Career paths are not publicly discussed although clergy showing particular potential are frequently championed by their bishop and referred to the preferment list. To progress within the Church institution relies essentially on individual motivation and planning. It is all too easy to settle into a pattern of ministry that is comfortable and familiar. During the training events for the Church Wedding project, clergy who were open to change and progression frequently responded creatively to the challenges of contemporary ministry. They came from all four *ideal types* (Chapter 9) and in the online forums they shared ideas for enhancing their wedding ministry and involving their congregations.

The capacity to reflect on praxis and to revisit their theological stance towards developing ministry in response to changes in contemporary culture was not as prevalent among the parochial clergy in this research as the Church Wedding project team had anticipated (Chapter 3, section 3.3). Only a few Professional priests offered to explore further areas for professional development and this was on an ad hoc informal basis. Several Progressive priests wanted to continue the professional development of their wedding ministry, for example, by getting involved with supporting the Church's presence at wedding fairs or introducing practical changes to their parochial policies and practice. Their aim was to communicate more effectively with prospective wedding couples and with their church congregations. There was little appetite for independent

reflective theological praxis and further accreditation with academic institutions did not hold a particular attraction for the majority. Most had followed formal degree studies and those who did undertake postgraduate research felt constrained by the pressures of parish ministry to limit their studies.

A similar response emerged from the *priest researchers* who had each initiated their lines of enquiry for pragmatic reasons and its impact on their personal ministry rather than any altruistic academic gain. They brought professionalism to their work in terms of critical thinking and high standards of personal integrity (Chapter 6, section 6.1) so they could offer their learning to the wider Church with confidence. Academic recognition was an ingredient into this along with contact with the professional research arm of the Church. They sought my endorsement of their work, my research guidance and the facilitation of further dissemination of their findings to bridge the gap between Church, their parish and the academy but their prime motive was to make a difference to the pastoral practice of the Church.

### **12.3 Operant and espoused theologies**

A frequent expression used to describe the Church of England is that it “a broad Church” and consequently one where differing theological stances necessarily coexist. The Church’s history is dominated by fierce public debates when alterations are proposed in canonical laws, policies and practices. In recent years, for example, the opening of official categories of ministry to women has been a particularly divisive debate that has not been entirely resolved. Parishes hold different patronages from their historic sponsors and these usually have a particular theological outlook. Theological party politics have grown in the Church and particularly come to a focus in its decision-making structures. Churches align themselves across the evangelical, anglo-catholic spectrum encompassing liberal, central or conservative agendas with charismatic or mainstream outlooks. Such groupings are keen to ensure their representation in Church forums and policymaking. Theological institutions and chaplaincies maintain their loyalties to particular theological streams of church and perpetuate this affiliation through the clergy they train and appoint to their staff. Parochial clergy thus come to be



deployed across parishes to reflect the locally dominant theological party positions and to exercise the consequent pastoral outlook in their ministry.

Theological party politics were not as prominent during the life of the Church Wedding project as the project team had anticipated but as marrying clergy reflected on their wedding ministry they became receptive to the task of articulating the tensions they experienced between their espoused and operant theologies (Cameron, et al., 2010). Busy clergy are frequently challenged by their desire to maintain an integrity between their pastoral experiences and inherited praxis. Several remarked that their pastoral ministry was primarily responsive to pastoral crises rather than exercising any strategic intentions. Local clergy chapters are commonly accepted to be, for the most part, places where such discussions are not encouraged because of the party politics operating across the deanery mix of theological outlooks. Yet they are places where differences in pastoral practices can significantly impact on neighbouring churches and clergy. One of the priest researchers observed that parochial clergy are generally reticent in bringing theological reflection to their own pastoral practice. Marrying clergy contacted in this research welcomed the space that the training events offered, away from their parishes, to theologically reflect on issues that affected their everyday pastoral ministry. Their ability to develop theological wisdom and “attentiveness” appeared restricted by their parochial contexts where practical considerations dominate day-to-day ministry as parochial clergy increasingly find themselves responsible for several parishes and lacking priestly colleagues or congregational support (Graham 2013, p.170).

Opportunities for shared reflection among parochial clergy on operant theologies, such as the church’s welcome and its nurture of wedding enquirers, may need to be facilitated in order to fulfil their potential to develop theological reflection on practice. The TAR model considered in this thesis is designed to provide such facilitation and to explore and reconcile theological tensions through insider-outsider partnership in reflective action research (Cameron, et al., 2010). It offers outsider involvement to encourage the participation of insider practitioners partnering with them in reflective research towards organisational change. The addition of priest researchers to this

endeavour sharpens this exploration and grounds it in the parochial experience. This enhancement of the TAR model has the potential to develop pastorally responsive policies and practice on an ongoing basis. It points towards the reconciliation of espoused and operant theologies through a closer examination of the lived experience in pastoral ministry. Church weddings are a topical and pressing area of pastoral ministry where practitioners and policy makers have benefitted from shared reflective practice but it has by its nature restricted the examination of action research methods. The annual round (at best) of wedding seasons for most clergy means that cycles of research are slow and pastoral continuity becomes a challenge that impacts on the pastoral experience of both minister and couple. There are few clergy who conduct weddings as frequently as in years past and the prevalence of multi-parish posts challenges the available resources. To explore the enhanced TAR model suggested by this thesis more fully points towards its application in other areas of pastoral ministry where action research cycles can be effected in a shorter timespan, for example, in baptism ministry or confirmation preparation.

Marrying clergy attending the research focus groups frequently described a cognitive dissonance between their often long-standing wedding policies and practices, and changes of attitudes in society towards church weddings. They expressed confusion and concern at the growing distance between their changing pastoral practice and their established policies. Questions were raised concerning the place of the church in the growing commercialisation of the wedding market, the rise in divorce rates and the increasing numbers of children born out of wedlock. All this meant that marrying clergy were receptive to the findings of the research among wedding couples and attended the training events hopeful for some clarity to come to their personal wedding ministry. They brought their personal experiences and were very willing to share these to benefit the project team in its continued work and colleagues across their diocese.

There was considerable discussion about the moral and theological integrity of combining a wedding and infant baptism in the same service, a discussion that found its way into the national newspapers. A parallel discussion concerning wedding fees, however, displayed a larger gap in engagement with theological reflection. Several

churches took a commercial approach to their charges for weddings and to their employment of organists but expressed concern to promote the mission of the church in their parish and to connect more effectively with prospective wedding couples. Others wanted to offer this rite of passage service to the community at minimal cost but did little to encourage wedding enquiries.

The training events had the potential to facilitate beneficial interchanges regarding the outworking of theological aspects to wedding ministry and, at one in particular, the strong clergy characters in the room successfully pursued a particular agenda. The project training team responded nervously to this exchange and, on future occasions took steps to avoid what they saw as potential distractions from the main aims of the training event. The project was mandated to work across the theological party divides present in the Church but it was reluctant to draw attention to them in case they disturbed the effectiveness of the training being co-sponsored by individual dioceses and the NCIs. This approach also reinforced the level of authority that the NCI project team brought to the training events so minimising the voice of the clergy. Local theologians looked to the project team for permission to bring their contributions to the development of pastoral practice and policies so as to develop a stronger and broader theological integrity for themselves and the project. The training event forums found it difficult to encourage critical thinking and promote a meaningful dialogue between theological positions. The contribution of “prophetic reflection” on the empirical research findings so valued by the priest researchers (Chapter 10, section 10.4) was thus marginalised and insights from reflective praxis examining the operant and espoused continuum of socio-theological reflection remained unexplored. The training events became consequently constrained in their potential to offer the opportunity to review parochial pastoral policies in an independent and informed environment.

## **12.4 Collaborative working**

There has been a major shift across the dioceses in recent years for parochial clergy to embrace team working. Clergy deployment has been steadily reconfigured to bring parishes together in plurality and to appoint team rectors and team vicars across resulting benefices. Clergy and congregations have responded to this with mixed

enthusiasm and initial discussions at the clergy focus groups following the Church Wedding training events spontaneously involved interactions to establish an understanding of their local pattern of clergy deployment. Clergy operating in team ministries felt less freedom to develop their wedding ministry and described working relations that were not always mutually supportive. Those who had sole charge of a parish or parishes were viewed with some envy by others and the potential benefits of collaborative working were not openly recognised. These marrying clergy wanted to develop their leadership skills and secure greater responsibilities to progress their personal priestly vocations. They did not display any particular motivation to initiate steps towards working in partnership with priestly colleagues and their dioceses were content, for the most part, to leave this to local (deanery) clergy dynamics.

Although clergy were reluctant to work together, they were more open to working with their congregations to mutually support their pastoral ministry. Several of the marrying clergy had administrative support from congregation members in the ministry of church weddings. One or two administrators participated in the focus groups on behalf of their vicar and found the training events unappreciative of their role in the life of a busy church. The marrying clergy expressed a reluctance to enhance their administrative practices to, for example, send first anniversary cards or invitations to services, and were very reliant on congregational support. The subsequent low level usage of the wedding diary on the Church Wedding project website confirmed this finding. Clergy are more open to collaborative working with their congregation than with clergy colleagues and several relied on congregation members for continued contact with wedding couples who settled in their parish. The focus of the Church Wedding project on the role of the vicar added to clerical working pressures and considerable anxiety was expressed by marrying clergy who were otherwise very supportive of the development of church wedding ministry. Clergy participating on the online research forums wanted to discuss these pressures but remained reluctant to share their priestly ministries and pursue collaborative ministry beyond their congregations.

The reluctance to engage with priestly colleagues in developing their wedding ministry extended to the engagement of marrying clergy with me. During the focus groups

clergy had warmed to my empathetic ear as a priest who understood their parochial vocation and ministries but this status appeared confused with my role as an independent facilitator and research mentor to the subsequent online forums. The online conversations centred on my interventions and questions and did not succeed in taking on a momentum of their own. I engaged in a number of email correspondences outside the forums but the clergy did not appear confident to explore issues of concern together within their forums. As a professional priest researcher my presence on the clergy forums may, in fact, have discouraged their involvement. The success that Fletcher had as a research mentor in developing teacher researchers (Chapter 7, section 7.6) stands as a challenge to this research and the Church (Fletcher 2007). The Church's conversation with empirical research in pastoral ministry developed positively in the Church Wedding project but clergy lack confidence to engage with each other in its evaluation. This reluctance to engage in shared praxis prevents the benefits of reflective practice receiving wider consideration and development in the manner of participatory action research.

Marrying clergy in this research displayed little capacity to participate in change agent groups towards effecting organisational change in the pastoral practice and policies associated with church weddings. Zuber-Skerrit's model of organisational change appears to hold limited attraction for the Church and its parochial pastoral practitioners (Zuber-Skerrit 1996). In contrast, the ARCS team's model of *theological action research* (TAR) explored in Chapter 4, section 4.4 brings external research expertise and theological reflection to explore practitioner research questions. They report success in this insider-outsider partnership working with agencies, dioceses and churches with mutuality in this process as each "side" develops respect in the complementarity of their contributions. The outsider researchers were able to lead the insider team in this model of participatory action research bringing a theological dimension to its reflection. The model of facilitating participatory action research by clergy in this thesis had also assumed their role as local theologians. The reluctance of the clergy to engage in theological reflection (Chapter 12, section 12.3) may also be a factor in their capacity to participate in theologically reflective participatory action research. The TAR model may offer more appropriate theological and research support for busy parochial clergy who lack confidence in undertaking ordinary research in a

collaborative framework. At risk is the democratisation of the research process to facilitate locally responsive institutional change (Chapter 5, section 5.3), which is offered through participation by priest researchers in *emancipatory action research* (Zuber-Skerrit 1996). This research has confirmed the potential for reflective research among clergy who actively minister in other areas of pastoral ministry. Further research is needed to examine whether the integration of such priest researchers into the TAR model has the potential to offer practical benefits that might encourage clergy to bring reflective praxis to the development of pastoral practices and policies.

This chapter has discussed aspects of parochial ministry that influence the involvement of parochial clergy in reviewing pastoral policies and practice. It has highlighted tensions that deter the Church from listening to the voice of its parochial clergy. The findings point to the identification and nurture of priest researchers who bring specific skills to this task. The TAR model offers a process by which insider and outsider researchers can mutually support each other to formulate pastoral policy proposals in response to social changes in contemporary society. For this to be explored in the context of the parochial pastoral ministry, the Church needs to grow in confidence to engage with shared pastorally based reflective practice. A change in working culture is needed between the Church and parochial practitioners in the review of pastoral policies and practise. The concluding chapter of this thesis takes up this challenge to propose recommendations that will enhance the Church's ability to benefit in this endeavour from the priest researchers in its midst.

### **13. Recommendations towards developing pastorally responsive ministry**

The potential that priest researchers offer the Church is confirmed by the research for this thesis but the ability of the Church to benefit fully from their contributions is subject to a number of factors discussed in the previous chapter. The research question posed in Chapter 3 prompted research into one particular aspect of pastoral practice, namely, church weddings as a case study of parochial pastoral ministry. Factors have been identified that potentially transfer into other areas of pastoral policy development to promote the utilisation and formation of priest researchers in the Church of England. For dialogue between insider and outsider researchers to be more fully fruitful, the Church has been challenged to develop further its ability to listen to the clergy voice. The further development of the *theological action research (TAR) model* proposed in this thesis necessitates the ability of both the Church and its pastoral practitioners to respond to its priest researchers. The inclusion of the prophetic contribution that priest researchers offer can be beneficially nurtured within the Church to develop the integrity and appropriateness of its pastoral responses to contemporary society. Recommendations towards this aspiration will be discussed in this chapter before concluding with a closer examination of the profile of the priest researcher emerging from this research.

#### **13.1 Reflective practitioners**

Both the project team and the marrying clergy attending the diocesan Church Wedding project training events expressed reluctance to bring theological or sociological critique to the empirical research shared at the training events. The project team felt this would undermine their key messages and extend the training process while the clergy did not feel qualified to undertake this. For the Church it has always been a priority that developments in pastoral practice and policies are informed by their theological integrity. Parochial clergy have the potential to bring critical thinking (Chapter 6, section 6.1) to the review of pastoral policies so as to liberate the Church to respond with theological integrity to contemporary society. However, if empirical research is to be harnessed to provide social indicators that inform such debates so that theology becomes empirically reflective, the Church will need to develop commentators who can

critique findings and proposals, and display an aptitude for interpreting “the signs of the times” (Matthew 16: 2-3).

The Church Wedding project confirmed the significant role that the complementary use of qualitative and quantitative social research offers the design of pastorally responsive ministry. The findings served both to challenge and endorse the role of the vicar in church weddings. Marrying clergy were particularly responsive to its messages and, a year after the training events, were still considering practical aspects of the research findings for their pastoral practice. Feedback from the parochial clergy attending the training events reported the project based social research into wedding couples to be the most successful aspect of the in-service training in re-establishing their confidence in contemporary church wedding ministry. The use of empirical social research within the review of pastoral policies and practice successfully facilitated critical thinking by the marrying clergy but this did not transfer significantly to their individual reflective practice and towards an exploration of Zuber-Skerrit’s emancipatory participatory action research model (1996). Shared (online and face to face) discussion was slow to generate further interest in reflection or the exploration of issues of concern. The potential contribution of participatory action research methods to the corporate reflective endeavour to respond to local priorities in pastoral mission is consequently restricted.

This thesis has shown that the Church’s pastoral ministry can benefit as parochial clergy develop the ability to engage in *reflective practice* to bring critical thinking to maintain their own professionalism within their personal pastoral ministry (Brookfield 1987). However, until clergy can be stimulated to embrace reflective practice their involvement in pastoral policy reviews can only be limited to that of contributing local phronesis with little wider connectivity. Their participation to enhance shared pastoral praxis in parochial contexts depends on their willingness to bring methods of theologically reflective diagnostic checking to the development of pastoral strategies. Outsider researchers, such as in the TAR model, may stimulate this but the experience of this insider-outsider researcher in the area of church weddings has not been encouraging. Institutional factors, particularly those uncovered in Chapter 11, section 11.1 also



remain significant hurdles for participatory action research methods among clergy to be effective tools for the development of pastoral policies and practice across the Church.

### **13.2 Professionalism**

The introduction, in recent years, of Continuing Ministerial Development (CMD) into the *Terms of Service* offered to parochial clergy has emphasised the on-going developmental nature of their ministry. There is now an expectation that clergy will undertake regular development of their ministry the priorities for which are agreed in official diocesan ministerial development reviews (MDR). The increasing professionalisation of the clergy examined in Chapter 6, section 6.1 offers opportunities for research involving case studies and other social research methods in particular areas of ministerial interest. The small but steady increase in research exercises conducted with the support of the academy is evidence of this potential attraction for parochial clergy. Such studies will inform both the priest's and the diocese's mutual learning but if the Church maintains the expectation of largely self-directed CMD, clergy will need the research tools to undertake the task. The reluctance of parochial clergy to mirror professional colleagues in education and medicine, for example, and undertake supported pieces of enquiry into aspects of their pastoral practice challenges this model of professional development being applied to priestly ministry in the Church. This suggests a synergy between learning through reflective research and practice, and the development of self-directed tools of evaluation and enquiry. It makes the provision of ordinary (everyday) research resources and reflective practice foundational ingredients into diocesan CMD programmes.

Professional development and professionalism in the workplace often accompanies the managerial approach to effecting organisational change highlighted in Chapter 5, section 5.2 (Parker 2002, Torry 2005, Pattison 1997). Whilst they display an adversity to the embracing of managerialism by the Church discussed there, marrying clergy in this study were keen to bring professionalism to their pastoral practice. Some were more orientated than their colleagues towards the particular individuals and communities they served and keen to provide a strong personalised service. There were others contacted through this research who were predominantly concerned to maintain a

consistent integrity in their ministry and to develop a professionalised approach. These *Professional priests* (Chapter 9, section 9.5) wanted the opportunity to reflect on the training events and consider its ramifications for their current pastoral practices. They were not attracted to make church weddings more popular for their own sake and suggested the parallel consideration of other related aspects of pastoral ministry, for example, baptisms and services of blessing. They were more likely to express an interest in continuing conversations towards the development of Church policies and showed the potential to be *priest researchers* in their locality. Parochial clergy bridge the parish-institution dynamic as insiders and outsiders simultaneously during policy reviews. If their professionalism can be developed on an ongoing basis through CMD, the Church will discover a source of prophetic reflection towards its future.

The clergy profiles proposed in Chapter 9 to aid the analysis of the research findings have been useful in identifying the priestly traits that are more likely to predispose parochial clergy to engage in theologically informed reflective practice and be open to exploring its impact on their pastoral practice. This application of Weber's *ideal types* has also uncovered the varying priorities that parochial clergy bring to their pastoral ministry and which influence their response to pastoral initiatives (Scott and Marshall 2009). The Church could benefit from recognising this rich diversity in its parochial workforce and encouraging clergy to share this expertise and good practice in wider forums. The development of shared praxis in the Church could offer constructive forums in which pastoral policies and practice could be reviewed and the need for further exploration and research discussed. Whilst *Professional priests* proved to be those most likely to positively respond to the development of priest researchers the insights of their parochial based colleagues, for example, *People priests*, *Community priests*, *Progressive priests* will make important contributions to collective learning and the increased professionalism of the Church.

### **13.3 Developing priest researchers**

The incidence of priest researchers in the Church has been shown in this thesis to emerge from occasions of pastoral crisis but priest researchers report resistance to their research findings among their colleagues and from senior diocesan staff. In part this

reflects the reticence across the Church to share learning and good pastoral practice and it also reflects a lack of awareness of the potential benefits of research findings to wider pastoral experiences. Dioceses may have the potential to adapt pastoral policies to changes in contemporary society within their parochial clergy. The identification of priest researchers and their role in policy development could be harnessed for the greater good of the Church by supporting their enquiries and creating opportunities for the dissemination of their research findings among their colleagues. The Church could enhance its ability to respond to changes in contemporary society by recognising the gift to it of the role of priest researchers and proffering them a higher profile in policy discussions. In terms of practical theology, priest researchers offer the possibility of bringing insights towards “a pearl of great price” in the building of the kingdom of God in the world (Matthew 13: 45-46); a pearl that has to be sought out, discovered, matured and cultivated as the grit of their research slowly rubs against the protective shell of the Church. At a time of change in contemporary society the Church can grow in its vocation to serve the nation from the listening and reflective research of priest researchers to inform its future life. This prophetic role can also become more mutually beneficial with the encouragement of colleagues, senior staff and policy makers.

This thesis has shown the benefits of using empirical social research to bring about institutional and parochially-based change in the pastoral ministry of the Church in church weddings and has highlighted that such explorations have the potential to benefit from professional social researchers and those clergy willing to exercise ordinary (everyday) social research skills from the academy, *priest researchers*. The Church of England’s developing missional stance encourages it to engage with the *Missio Dei* and listen to the needs of contemporary society (Church of England Mission and Public Affairs Council 2004). The experiences of priest researchers examined in this research encourage the Church to be open to models of participatory research involving pastoral practitioners. The training of clergy in more recent years often involves a short parish placement enquiry using survey and other research tools among the congregation and neighbourhood. With more support, ordinands could transfer their acquired skills in ordinary research into their subsequent parish deployment. As dioceses encourage parochial clergy to participate in CMD, the potential of locally based participatory action research to evaluate and develop the effectiveness of pastoral practice and

policies will become more evident. The example of teacher researchers considered in this thesis (Chapter 7, section 7.5 and Paper 3, section 4, Appendix 3) challenges clergy to come together in exercises of shared reflective research (Chapter 6, section 6.3) to explore the potential that emancipatory action research offers for organisational learning in the Church (Chapter 5, section 5.3).

My own experience as a *professional priest researcher* locates me alongside the experience of the priest researchers. I was professionally concerned, for example, that my interactions with marrying clergy were not more fruitful. My professional experience working within the NCIs has provided insights into the processes for policy making but risked an alignment with the Church institutions by the clergy. My place as an insider researcher for the Church may render parochial clergy less forthcoming to my approaches than to those of an external outsider researcher. The use of participatory research by parochial clergy and, in particular, on-going participatory action research looked to the support of an external research team who can offer sociological and theological expertise. My experience of conducting insider research as a professional on the edge of the Church is described in Appendix 9. It illustrates the prophetic role and distance from the Church that this frequently necessitates (Williams 2003). The ensuing isolation has felt enriched by the scriptural illustrations cited in this reflection of prophets similarly wrestling with insights for future praxis. My experience of being located on the edge of the Church has not always been comfortable but this has not detracted from the validity of this priestly vocation. I have come to see through the research for this thesis that the insider-outsider continuum requires spiritual resilience of priest researchers as well as skills in ordinary social research. Priest researchers can be more effective resources in the Church as their colleagues, the institution, dioceses and parishes learn to recognise and support this vocation more fully. Whether institutional support is coordinated by the Research and Statistics department is a decision for my successors but recognition of their synergy with professional Church researchers is paramount.

As the NCIs continue to develop and support the use of social science research methods to evaluate pastoral practice and policies, further research is needed to establish a

working partnership with parochial and diocesan colleagues. A model based on *theological action research* (Chapter 4, section 4.5) may offer appropriate interaction with an external team of researchers and theological reflectors but this thesis has demonstrated the importance of the challenge for the Church to incorporate the reflective praxis of pastoral practitioners and priest researchers if it is effectively to influence pastoral practice and bring about institutional change.

#### **13.4 A typology of priest researchers**

My research has demonstrated the potential benefits to the Church of identifying priest researchers to engage in shared reflective research using ordinary (everyday) social science research methods. In section 13.2 the profile of priest researchers was briefly considered most analogous to that of the ideal type among parochial clergy of Professional priests (Chapter 9, section 9.5). This section takes the comparison further to describe potential priest researchers that senior diocesan staff can beneficially support and develop as they consider and implement reviews of pastoral policies and practice.

The priest researchers interviewed in my research were concerned to continue learning to develop their pastoral ministry in their day-to-day deployment. The pastoral crises they encountered motivated them to explore and incorporate new learning. The professionalism they brought to this task challenged their pastoral integrity and generated a willingness to work collaboratively with colleagues offering complementary skills in research and interpretation. This distinctive feature made them more open to research methods of participatory action research. The priest researchers in this study all became involved in further accredited academic studies and regarded their pastoral explorations as integral to this as well as of benefit to their current pastoral ministry. They appeared more secure in their pastoral ministry and in their willingness to be open to challenge than many of their marrying colleagues. Their relationship with their diocese was not noticeably different but they were more self-motivated to respond to the social changes around them. They brought skills in reflective practice and readily took responsibility for their own ministerial development.

The priest researchers were all keen for other parochial clergy to be trained in the use of ordinary (everyday) social science research methods and in reflective practice. They wanted to promote critical thinking among their priestly colleagues and a readiness to be challenged by the contexts of their pastoral ministry. For them professionalism was important and involved self-directed reflective praxis and life-long learning from their encounters in pastoral ministry. However, in contrast to Professional priests they displayed a spirit of enquiry and a desire to make pastoral ministry more effective in its response to their community. Their location as insider-outsider researchers (Chapter 13, section 13.2) appeared to stimulate an intellectual and theological curiosity alongside a pastoral heart.

Like Professional priests, priest researchers are independent thinkers who seek to bring insights to corporate pastoral policy making but they are also willing to more actively challenge received wisdom and seek justification of pastoral strategies. In a similar vein to the Zuber-Skerrit model of emancipatory action research (Chapter 5, section 5.3), they support the emancipatory power of research to liberate the pastoral practitioner in their practice and to inform corporate policymaking (Zuber-Skerrit 1996). Priest researchers show a resistance to institutional processes and procedures; their ambition is to effect changes in pastoral practice that will promote the role of the Church in the eyes of contemporary society. Their location in the Church does not make them highly visible to senior diocesan staff who may consider them overly questioning and challenging towards diocesan policies. As dioceses create a culture of critical thinking among clergy to develop their reflective praxis and pastoral responsiveness, priest researchers will grow in confidence to critique findings from their enquiries with colleagues, senior staff and policy makers, and dioceses will find in them hidden treasures of the kingdom of God (Matthew 13:44).

### **13.5 Concluding remarks**

This thesis has brought together my professional life as a social researcher with my vocation to priesthood. It has explored the partnership between these two worlds in the changing pastoral setting that the Church of England finds itself in at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The identification and support of the *priest researcher* role

within the Church has the potential to play an increasingly beneficial role in promoting pastorally responsive parochial ministry. As the Church cultivates the use of reflective praxis and social science research skills among clergy, their contribution can become more meaningful. I look forward to being able to contribute from this thesis to encourage and support the identification of priest researchers and their integration into the development of policy and practice in the future.

The case study of the Church Wedding project examined in this thesis highlights different responses of parochial clergy towards developing their personal integrity of practice and has signalled a contribution to local and national public life that is at odds with a secular professional class. This has sharpened the distinction between clergy and other professionals in society particularly in terms of continuing ministerial development. As the role of empirical social research has broadened in the Church to include a wider range of qualitative studies, it is encouraging that clergy are receptive to the messages of social research but they require training to be more effective as local theologians and develop agendas of reflective pastoral practice and enquiry. An increased focus on the use of higher education establishments within programmes of ministerial development (CMD) to encourage parochial clergy to develop skills in self-directed learning and enquiry using ordinary (everyday) social science research methods will continue to facilitate reflective praxis and the emergence of priest researchers.

There is more research to be carried out to fully explore a model of social research that enables the Church to incorporate and respond to the phronesis of pastoral practitioners. My research question in this thesis sought to explore factors that would encourage the Church to develop a partnership with priest researchers in the review of pastoral policies and practice. I discovered that the organisational structure of the Church and patterns of deployment of parish priests deter such a partnership. In addition, the attitude of many parochial clergy towards ministerial development and professionalism, and their capacity for reflective praxis are key factors in encouraging the contribution of priest researchers to bring ordinary research methods to the development of pastoral policies and practice. The *insider model* of emancipatory action research considered in this thesis revealed reluctance among policy makers and parochial clergy to contribute in

shared exchanges from their own experience (Zuber-Skerrit 1996). In contrast, the insights that priest researchers offer pastoral practice challenge the Church to consider their participation in the process of pastoral policy reviews.

Priests who are sympathetic to the development of professionalism in pastoral practice also offer opportunities for a fuller clergy dialogue but clergy approached for this study were very protective of their time. This research suggests that clergy are most likely to be open to both research and socio-theological support in a model of on-going participatory action research that facilitates their participation at key moments but does not rely on continual involvement. It highlights the need to identify suitable partnerships between insider and outsider teams of researchers and practitioners, to offer on-going possibilities to be explored. An enhanced model of, for example, theological action research (TAR) to utilise priestly reflective praxis and enquiry alongside consultant research expertise may offer a pragmatic way forward (Cameron, et al., 2010). The research for this thesis suggests a model of pastoral policy review that looks outside the Church institutions to incorporate opportunities for clergy participation and to listen to their pastoral experiences.

In response to my research question, the factors I have identified in utilising priest researchers to bring empirical exploration to socio-theological reflection in the development of pastoral policies and practice centre on developing the attitude of parochial clergy towards professionalism and professional practice, towards reflective practice, the nature of their deployment and the organisational structure and working relationships across the Church. The Church's pastoral policies and practice will be enhanced as it nurtures a growing partnership with priest researchers emerging in its midst. By developing theological "attentiveness" through its priest researchers the Church has the potential to positively develop its use of empirical social research in the review of pastoral policies and practice, and to bring the benefits of participatory action research methods to effect organisational change (Graham 2013, p.170). The interaction of local theologians and priest researchers at a local level offers prophetic insights towards equipping the Church to be increasingly responsive towards contemporary society.