

Research Projects

An investigation of 'new' models of church to engage a 'dis'-churched constituency

With fifteen years of experience in a variety of lay ministries, I am currently helping to lead an "alternative worship" community in Cheltenham. The Freehouse and Fuzzy are two (weekly) expressions of a local, alternative worship project run by a small group of Christians with a council of reference drawn from the broader Christian community in the town. Established in October 1996, the project provides an example of the broader alternative worship phenomenon.

The Freehouse and Fuzzy attempt to provide a shape and place for young adults who have fallen out of church settings to re-congregate. In conjunction with this, I am engaged in part-time theological study towards a MPhil/PhD aimed at elucidating the ecclesiological distinctiveness of this community and, perhaps, "alternative worship" more generally.

With our post-Christian culture fragmenting into ever smaller social groupings, questions about what it means to be the church are becoming more urgent. How is the church to present itself within its culture as something universal and yet particular to the religious experience of persons in a specific context? Is there only one ecclesiological form or myriad expressions of church dependent on cultural context?

In recent years in Britain there has been a growing move to experiment with what has become known (perhaps unhelpfully) as alternative worship. My research is seeking better to understand this movement by reference to one particular example of its expression and by drawing on theological resources not usually taken

together. In bringing liberation and post-liberal ecclesiological voices into a three-way conversation with this emergent alternative voice, I hope to generate the friction necessary for me to ask questions of this new emergent ecclesiology as to whether or not it can actually name itself as church in its context.

Until now my studies have been largely concerned with a text-based exploration of liberation and post-liberal ecclesiologies. I have focused my attention on one voice from each of these schools: Leonardo Boff from the liberation theological perspective – for his writing on the liberation base communities in Latin America; and Stanley Hauerwas from the theological post-liberal school for his writing on the Church as a community steered primarily by the particular narratives of the Bible.

I have begun to suggest significant differences between their ecclesiological accounts. That they arise in different cultural and geographical contexts has been of deliberate and especial importance. Ecclesiological comparisons can be drawn fairly easily. For instance, liberation ecclesiology's worldly commitment to understanding the place of the Church in its context can be contrasted with post-liberal theology's "selective participation" in the world and its commitment to the Christian community itself as the context for Christian meaning.

There are many more fruitful distinctions to be made.

Having started to build a comparative picture of their narratives of church life, I am currently beginning to bring liberation and post-liberal theological perspectives and differences into a three-way conversation with the emergent alternative worship voice of my research (generated with particular reference to The Freehouse and Fuzzy).

My empirical method is one of participant observation. The three ecclesial perspectives provide

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the critical framework within which I can be properly attentive to my own participation in the¹ community I am investigating.

I am drawing on the methodology outlined in James Hopewell's book, *Congregation: Stories and Structures* (1987) and am currently employing a world-view questionnaire he developed with the aim of beginning to establish the particular ecclesiological ethos of the Freehouse and Fuzzy community. This test will be followed by detailed interview work with a selection of the respondents.

The formal academic title of my research reads as follows: A critical, theological investigation of the ecclesiologies of liberation theology, theological post-liberalism and experimental church worship practice.

The sorts of questions driving my research are: "how do these three ecclesiologies construe the relationship between the Church and the world and what differences emerge from this comparison?"; "what are the major issues that emerge concerning the identity of the Church and its interpretation of its cultural context?"; and "how might the experimental practice of being alternative church be revised in the light of the critique of liberation and post-liberal ecclesiologies?"

I trust that, in time, my work might be of benefit to the broader church community. In forcing the intuitive and nascent ecclesiology of a particular alternative worship community to pay attention to voices from very different contexts (globally and culturally), I hope to be able to start asking the right sorts of questions about what it might mean for us to be the Church in our post-Christian culture.

Paul Northup

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Biblical interpretation among Church of England laity, with special reference to healing

The world of academic theology is exploding with books about how to use and interpret the Bible. Hardly a month goes by without a new scholarly tome on the theory and practice of biblical interpretation. Yet few scholars have tried to find out how ordinary Christians interpret Scripture and what things might influence their approach and conclusions.

This project began with an observation we've all made: different people can understand the same Bible passage in different ways. Why? Several years into this part-time study I'm aware that this is a huge and fascinating area with no single, easy answer!

I have narrowed my study to asking very particular questions: I'm not attempting a general survey of Bible reading. Instead, I'm trying to see if the way that someone interprets a Bible story is related to his or her experience, church background, attitudes and personality. I began by interviewing 30 to 40 people from various Church of England congregations and getting them to talk broadly about their experience of the Bible: how often they read it, what study aids they use and how it relates to their everyday life or experience. I concentrated on the area of healing because the Bible contains many stories about sick people being made well and most of us have prayed for healing at some time in our lives. So, in this area especially, most people's experience has a direct connection to Scripture.

From these interviews, I began putting together a questionnaire: testing hundreds of questions and finding ways of measuring how people interpret. The result is a booklet that asks

people to read a Bible story and then respond to questions covering a whole range of issues. It takes about 45 minutes to complete, so my subjects (not victims, I hope!) are people who already have some commitment to church and are interested in the Bible.

At the moment, I'm looking for Church of England congregations who would be willing to participate in the study, especially in the Midlands.

Initial results indicate that education and personality do seem to be related to how we interpret the Bible. The interaction of experience and interpretation is quite complicated because both can be shaped by our fundamental beliefs about God and Scripture. Unpicking these interactions is going to be an interesting part of this study.

But will this have any value for the "person in the pew"? One thing that has already come home is that even people who may not read the Bible very often believe it is important to their lives. And many people appreciate the opportunity to wrestle with difficult questions about the Bible – even if some church leaders would rather they didn't! If we are to make the Bible real for many people today, we have to understand how they make sense of it. Knowing that, we may be able to offer them an approach that recognises the sort of person they are and that values their experience of God beyond the Bible.

Andy Village

The Revd Andy Village is rector of two Church of England parishes.

If you know of a C of E congregation in the Midlands that might be willing to join this study, please contact him at:

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