

# “Living Church: Practical Theology as a locus for ecumenical learning.”

A short paper for the Conference:  
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Practical /pastoral theology describes a range of methods and concerns within contemporary theology, which have as their central concern the integration of faith and life, doctrine and practice.<sup>1</sup> This variety of approaches is, in some way, a contemporary response to the *dis*integration of theology from Christian practice, which (arguably) has affected ‘faith seeking understanding’ since the Enlightenment<sup>2</sup>. If it is the case that, in our own time, Christian life has been marked - even marred - by this inauthentic dichotomizing of faith and life, theology and practice, then it can be seen that this has been a fracturing which has patterned ecumenical endeavour in particular ways, and to the detriment of its effectiveness as a powerfully received force for positive change in the Church. It is, I believe, this fracture which lies behind Paul Murray’s recent comments on the ecumenical scene, which highlight the tendency to separate grassroots ecumenical activity from doctrinal agreement, and calls for a practical theological response.<sup>3</sup> It is this desire for such response that motivates this paper’s reflections.

These opening observations serve to highlight the fundamental suggestion of this paper: *that practical theology has a specific and crucial role to play in our ecumenical vocation to respond to the call ‘that all may be one.’* This suggestion will here be illustrated by looking at how one particular piece of theological research into Christian practices demonstrated (to me, at least) how practical

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<sup>1</sup> For example see Woodward J & S Pattison (eds.) *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*. (Blackwell 2000), ‘An Introduction to Pastoral and Practical Theology’ pp2ff) which sets out the field of practical / pastoral theology in these sorts of terms. The classic statement of correlative method can be found in Don Browning *A Fundamental Practical Theology Descriptive and strategic proposals*. (Fortress press 1991). His account of the revised correlative method in Woodward & Pattison (op. Cit.) can be found in “Pastoral Theology in a pluralistic age.” pp89-102.

<sup>2</sup> This is well described D Cornick in “Post-Enlightenment Pastoral Care: into the twentieth century.” in Gillian Evans (ed.) *A History of Pastoral Care*. (Cassell 2000) see p362

<sup>3</sup> Paul D. Murray “Receptive Ecumenism and Ecclesial Learning. Receiving Gifts for our Needs.” *Louvain Studies* (forthcoming) pp34, 36f.

theological methods and contextual specificities can enable reception of understandings across varying Christian traditions, by giving practically embodied theologies their own authoritative voice in our theological - and specifically ecclesiological reflections. The disciplined articulation of practical theological insights across denominations and traditions will here be presented in a way which suggests it has an important and helpful place in our future ecumenical growth. Reflection as Christians together on what is going on in our shared socio-cultural context, and how we are being called to respond, not only sheds fresh and creative light on present practice, but also leads to a renewed and differently-shaped sharing of our respective traditions, as we examine those traditions in the context of the living of church today.

### *ARCS - the research project, its methods, and its ecumenical significance and limitations*

First, we will need to set out, briefly, some basic background to the research which I am using to illustrate this.

This paper draws on the research carried out over two years by the ARCS (Action Research, Church and Society) team. This is a small, multi-disciplinary team, with members from three Christian traditions - Roman Catholic, Anglican and Salvation Army. Its work is based at Heythrop College, University of London, and developed in partnership with OxCEPT (the Oxford centre for Ecclesiology and Practical Theology, Ripon College, Cuddesdon.) The team has worked with seven ecclesial initiatives - Catholic and Anglican - all of which understand their work as, in some sense, 'evangelising', or 'outreach.'<sup>4</sup> The main learning points of this phase of the research has recently been made available through the report: *Living Church in the Global City: Theology in Practice*.<sup>5</sup>

As the title of the research project suggests, ARCS is concerned with 'reading' Christian practices through an approach which employs action research as a basic tool in disclosing and

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<sup>4</sup> The participating groups in this stage of the research were: CaFE (Catholic Faith Exploration); Housing Justice - Churches Cold Weather Shelter; Portsmouth Diocese (RC); Archdiocese of Westminster Agency for Evangelisation; Youth 2000; St. Mary's church, Battersea (Alpha); Diocese of Southwark (Anglican) Social Responsibility Network. Descriptions of these initiatives work and something of the research undertaken is described in *Living Church in the Global City: Theology in Practice* (see below) pp 11-22.

<sup>5</sup> *Living Church in the Global City: Theology in Practice*. D Bhatti, Helen Cameron, Catherine Duce, James Sweeney, Clare Watkins. (2008).

The report can be downloaded from [www.rcc.ac.uk/index.cfm?fuseaction=research.content&cmid=142](http://www.rcc.ac.uk/index.cfm?fuseaction=research.content&cmid=142); or hard copies can be requested from Catherine Duce, at [c.duce@heythrop.ac.uk](mailto:c.duce@heythrop.ac.uk).

understanding these practices, and enabling further reflection upon them. What is characteristic and crucial, however, to this project is that it is primarily and consistently *theological* in its approach and methods. Our premise has always been that the practices we work with are, themselves, and from the outset, bearers of a theology - a theology articulated in part by an 'espoused theology', voiced by the practitioners. It has also become clear that many Christian practices embody 'hidden' or implicit theological messages or beliefs - or operant theologies. Part of our work with the participating agencies has involved the disclosure of these operant theologies, with them, and reflection on any tensions that arise between what is espoused and operant, and how these relate to the wider theological tradition.

This desire to discern and reflect upon the theology that is being *lived* in these evangelising practices has formed our approach. On one level we can be seen as having adopted a straightforward method of 'theological reflection': the reading and description of experience (experienced theology); reflection on this experience (theologically and sociologically); reflection back with practitioners, and the identification of learning points; and the incorporation of this learning into renewed practice.<sup>6</sup> However, there are certain distinctive characteristics to our ARCS method in employing this reflective cycle. First of all, we should note that this work is *theological 'all the way through'*. It is not so much that 'practice' is described and then reflected on by 'theology'; rather, the first task is to struggle to understand more clearly the theology embedded and articulated in the practice (using sociological as well as theological readings), before an articulation of that theology in terms of espoused, operant, formal and traditional (normative) is explored. Further more, this exploration is not seen as something done by theologians for the practitioners; but it is carried out both by practitioners, and the research team, and shared between these groups.

The *group nature of the reflections* is also an important factor, and one with particular significance for ecumenical learning. Because the 'theological reflections' are carried out discursively, through conversation between people of different academic backgrounds, and church backgrounds, the variety and integrated complexity of insights that emerge is striking. Here there can be no sense in which 'theological reflection' is employed so as to give a single clear 'answer' to or reading of a situation; instead, a rather more questioning, opening-up kind of reflection can be offered, in which the possibilities of a diversity of 'proper' theological and

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<sup>6</sup> For a standard description of this kind of reflective cycle see Paul Ballard & John Pritchard *Practical Theology in Action*. (SPCK 2006. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. pp 81-95

Christian responses is seen. The effectiveness of this ecumenical group reflection (which is, perhaps, in some tension with the confessional emphases of much practical theology<sup>7</sup>) will be seen in more detail in the major example given in this paper.

For now I simply highlight its importance for a receptivity (interdisciplinary as well as ecumenical) of varied reflection. In particular, the different Christian traditions represented in the research team have ensured, at significant points, that the practised theologies we reflect on are understood in a variety of lights. Though the extent of our ecumenical work is, as yet, limited, we believe there are 'hints' for ecumenical learning within practical theological work, which suggest a rich potential. This is a potential not only for a greater richness of theological reflection within practice; but also for a renewed form of learning and understanding across our traditions, as faith-full practice leads us to encounter in new ways, the perspective of a variety of Christian standpoints. In this work we may glimpse, perhaps, something of a response to the vexed, and perennial question: What prevents Christian communities learning?

#### *Ecclesial Learning through Practical Theology: two major themes for a longer paper*

In a longer paper there are two major and overarching themes which might helpfully be explored with regard to the kind of ecumenical learning the ARCS research has suggested. The first of these we might term "ecumenical learning through shared ecclesial challenge and call.". Here, the careful reading of context and practice, and of espoused and operant theologies, has revealed the ways in which different ecclesial traditions, facing shared contextual challenges, also come (through different routes) to an appreciation of a common call. They also, it seems, very often encounter common difficulties in responding to that call: in our own reflections on Anglican and Roman Catholic initiative, there has been a consistent and common ecclesiological difficulty, which may be described, classically, in terms of the dominance of the *ad intra* over the *ad extra*. A second common call to learning concerns the experience of the dysfunctional operation of the theology of order(s), and the tension of 'community'/'mission' among the great majority of groups concerned. The disclosing of these realities through shared learning in practical theology opens up a way for learning across the traditions, and with the traditions together, which is *focussed on the common call, rather than our similarities and differences per se.*

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<sup>7</sup> There is, perhaps, a risk of missing the ecumenical in Stephen Pattison's otherwise very helpful insight concerning the 'confessional' nature of practical theology. Stephen Pattison *A Critique of Pastoral Care*. (Third edition. SCM 2000.) p235-6.

Our second fundamental theme for ecumenical learning in the project is rather more methodological, and would require considerable space for its discussion. Put simply, it concerns the way in which the ARCS research has drawn us into consideration of how the Christian 'tradition', which frames and sources our shared theological reflection, might be articulated and understood in ways which better enable a genuinely ecumenical way of theological reflection. The various operative notions of 'tradition' - both historically received and living in contemporary practice - have a fundamental role in both enabling and inhibiting practical theology as an ecumenical enterprise.

As I say, these two basic themes are the subject of a longer paper. At the heart of what I want to present here, however, is a very particular example of specific ecumenical learning, which gives a concrete focus to both these more fundamental foci. It is to this I will now turn.

### *Specific learning through ecumenical theological reflection - an example of receptive learning in sacramental theology*

As a particular example of receptive learning, this learning point in our research must necessarily take the form of a kind of story - a particular narrative of learning. As such I am telling it in my own voice, whilst recognising that this is a genuinely team event, about which all involved will have something to say.

The ARCS team was working with data drawn out from one of the initiatives we were working with. This initiative was one of the parishes involved in Housing Justice - a national, ecumenical Christian charity concerned with housing and homelessness.<sup>8</sup> The Catholic parish is part of a network of seven parishes - Anglican and Roman Catholic - in Islington, who work together to provide accommodation to homeless people on nights from January to March each year. Our work with this parish had provided data from groups of both volunteers in, and guests to, the church-based night shelter, as well as interview transcripts from conversations with church leaders, and the night shelter co-ordinator.

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<sup>8</sup> *Living Church i the Global City...*(op. cit) p 13

The research with this parish was to be focussed on two over-arching questions, formulated by the practitioners: How does the practice (of providing night shelter to the homeless) influence the theological outlook and faith practice of those involved? And how might on-going theological reflection on this work be better enabled in the participating churches? These questions led us to identify and reflect upon a number of points of theology which appeared to be coming to light in the words of all those involved - volunteers, guests, and leaders.

My own reflections, coming at the material as a Catholic theologian, included a questioning of the data with regard to themes of sacramental theology - and specifically (given the parish context and practitioner questions) themes of Eucharist. Indeed, in a number of the initiatives with which we have worked - especially those in the Roman Catholic tradition - sacramental theology, and an emphasis on Eucharist was a central theme. For Youth 2000, for the Portsmouth diocesan renewal process, and for many involved in CaFE, the Mass and an approach based on eucharistic language and understanding is a vivid and dominant espoused theological theme. Given the ecclesial provenance and focus of these groups this is, perhaps, unsurprising. What was striking in the case of the Catholic Housing Justice parish was that here the theme of sacrament / eucharist was emerging from an explicitly social justice, or *ad extra* focus for faith practice.

One of the 'sacramental' notes struck in the data was the way in which a strong sense of 'feasting' was in evidence. The eating together of volunteers and guests was clearly a vital and enjoyable element of the work of the shelter, contributing to a warmly felt and expressed sense of friendship. At least for some the 'eucharistic' over-tones of this were clear:

*"At St James we are lucky that we have a big kitchen. That is also part of it - elements of communion - with the cooking, with the sharing, with the breaking of bread, so there is a lot of symbolism around that we all share in. A lot of volunteers who come here feel that this is what Christianity should be about, they may not want to call it Christianity or may not want to go to Church. In fact, we are finding that we are getting people volunteering and enjoying the community who have no wish to go to Church."* (Volunteer)

One of the other Catholic reflectors, and an Anglican voice in the team helped me to see, further, the richness of the superfluity of this *ad extra* sacramentality: here was not a basic minimum but something more generous, celebratory and lavish. This was a feasting, not just feeding:

*"...look at the link with the local pub which brings a really nice joint of beef and organic juices over, and the local parishioners who bring over the most amazing puddings. Last week was a date and apricot with Greek*

*honey and cream - the most delicious thing; and these are homeless people. It's not all slopped out; it's presented beautifully.*" (Volunteer)

The celebration of food and eating together expressed by these volunteers, and reflected, too, in the experience of the guests, raised for us (and a few of the volunteers themselves) a striking parallel with Eucharist, and the sacramental more generally. The Salvationist perspective in the team highlighted for us all the *natural* continuity between Christian understandings of Eucharist, and this kind of social action, or active charity. The relative novelty - in terms of our wider research - of this treatment of the sacramental in an *ad extra* context, was thus readily rooted in an aspect of Christian tradition which was more immediately at home with a sense of the sacramental as beyond (or other than?) the liturgical. For here this particular initiative was presenting us with these sacramental themes within a non-liturgical context, where the majority of participants (guests and volunteers) were not (regular) church goers.<sup>9</sup> It was a Salvationist perspective which most clearly gave an account of the embedded (or operant) theology of this contextually Catholic practice.

What was, for me, more significant, was my own awareness of a certain tension that began to be felt, through the reading of these practices, when considered within the traditional articulation of Catholic sacramental theology. On the one hand, as my Salvation Army co-reflector's insights reminded me, what we were seeing in this data was a vibrant and encouraging living out of that 'eucharistic living' which so much of more recent Catholic Church teaching has been at pains to emphasise.<sup>10</sup> Such an ability of 'the other' to remind us of the fullness and complexity of our own tradition is, in itself, noteworthy. At the same time, this teaching in Catholic thought has consistently stressed that this eucharistic action in the world, has an essential and pragmatic connection with the liturgical offering of the Eucharistic sacrifice in the Mass. The question that arises out of my 'solitary' RC reflection is one of how the sacramental / eucharistic language and practices of the night shelter were, and might better be, linked in to the liturgical life of the parish in whose very church the activity was going on. A specific area of reflection then arises - from a Catholic point of view - as to how such eucharistic 'resonances' within these faith-full, and *ad extra* practices, connected with or related to, the explicit and liturgical sacramental practices of

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<sup>9</sup> About two thirds of the volunteers were reckoned not to be church attenders, with a fair proportion not identifying as Christian at all

<sup>10</sup> So see John Paul II's encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (2003); and Benedict XVI's Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis* (2007), whose reflections on the Eucharist culminate in a final chapter on the importance of *living* the mystery of the Eucharist.

the church *ad intra*? The sharpness of this question was especially felt in my own reflections in an observation from one of the (practising Catholic) volunteers:

*“Occasionally [the shelter co-ordinator] will ring me up to say can you come down here early because we’re short of numbers. I will just miss Mass, or come out of Mass early. I could stand there through Mass, and I enjoy Mass, and I’m there for different reasons and values but I’d much sooner do this if I had a choice between the two - in terms of the importance. It’s all very well saying you love God but if you’re sat upstairs knowing that down below they are rushed off their feet in the kitchen that would just be ridiculous.”* (Volunteer)

From a strictly formal / normative point of view there are some interesting - even troubling - points in this quote for the reflector working out of a Catholic tradition: What does it mean to say that attendance at Mass, and service are the poor are lived out “for different reasons and values”? What are we to make of the expressed sense that “in terms of importance” the choice would be unquestioningly for the shelter work, rather than that liturgy which is “the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed...the font from which all her power flows”<sup>11</sup> ? Here faith-full Catholic practice seemed, in some way to be challenging Catholic doctrinal orthodoxy.

For myself, as a Catholic theological team member, a problem of lived theology seemed to be apparent here. What I saw was a theologically flawed gap between the true sacramentality of the night shelter work, and the true ecclesial sacramentality of the sacred liturgy. Such a gap was in danger of separating these realities one from another, to the detriment of the lived theology of both: the danger was that the Mass became an optional ritual, and that the sacramentality of the practices became attenuated through their lack of connection with the sacrament of Christ’s own self. Furthermore, such are the politics of much Roman Catholicism, that I could sense the risk of having to identify with *either* a liturgical *or* a social action agenda, and the danger that reflecting back to the practitioners themselves would communicate the opening up of such a fissure. My own reflections began to ask questions of how the (*ad intra*) parish practices might be changed so as to make these connections clearer, and more vibrant. Typically (and in a very Catholici way), I began to consider the catechetical as providing the answer. In this way my attention began to be drawn, inexorably, back into those very *ad intra* ecclesiological concerns that I so often lamented obscured the missionary call of the church - a call which was being so vividly lived out in these practices.

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<sup>11</sup> Second Vatican Council’s Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 10

At this point the different sacramental traditions of the research team came into play as offering an important depth and complexity of perspective. In particular, the Salvationist tradition was not only able to recognise very quickly the way in which such action for justice was properly eucharistic, and sacramental, but was also able to suggest to my Catholic anxieties that this activity was such an embodying of the heavenly banquet that the “temple” of the liturgical might properly have become unnecessary (at least, in any particular circumstance.)

The vividness of this last suggestion was especially epiphanial in my receiving it. As a Catholic I was familiar with the idea of the liturgical celebration of Eucharist as the “source and summit”, the superlative action of the Church. Going to Mass was the single most important thing a person can do in the week. I was also, as a Catholic sacramental theologian, very much formed by ideas of ‘eucharistic living’, and the liberationists’ critique of our ‘pagan insistence on the altar’. The sense that the Mass finds its fulfillment beyond or after liturgy is a sound Catholic instinct, all be it rather weakly proclaimed in the main. What my Salvation Army colleague’s reflections alerted me too is the real, authentic, (and so authoritative) correlation of liturgy and active love which allows *each* of them to be spoken of as a “foretaste” or “pledge” (*pignus*) of our future glory. In this way the true unity of these *ad intra* and *ad extra* sacramental practices become focussed not so much on what people do after they are sent out from the eucharist, but rather what God, in Christ, is making of us (in both these places) as He call us to His own future (the *eschaton*).

What began to happen for me, through this moment of receptive learning was - and continues to be - a subtle but, I think, significant, reshaping of my Catholic concern about these practices. Our practice of ecumenical theological reflection highlighted and re-emphasised that aspect of contemporary Roman Catholic thinking on sacramentality and ‘eucharistic living’ which is present in our tradition, though often un-emphatic. Furthermore, the Salvationist theology provided a way of speaking of the integrity of liturgical and active-love practises which led my Catholic instincts away from the tendency to read this question in terms of ‘either / or’, or even ‘both / and’, and enabled the possibility of reflection back to the practitioners which gave a fresh and God-centred way of discerning the living relation between what was going on ‘downstairs’ in the church's night shelter and what takes place ‘upstairs’ around the altar. Here the Salvation Army’s tradition of embodying grace in active charity *without* (freed from?) liturgical sacramental norms, brought about a certain reshaping of the Catholic concerns and questions, and a re-articulation of those aspects of the Catholic tradition which emphasise connection between

liturgy and life. In particular, the Salvation Army tradition alerted me to the possibility of a connection of liturgy and life which is not simply ecclesial (and so perennially tempted into the political), but *eschatological*, and so more clearly demonstrative of a theology of Holy Spirit, and Divine call.

*So what - if anything - happened here?*

In presenting this account I am left with a series of questions. In the first place, it might be asked whether I had, in fact, truly 'learnt' anything in this. After all, if I'd been asked to give some kind of account of Salvationist 'sacramentality', or, indeed, to critique over-liturgical Catholic readings of sacrament, before this exercise in practical theology, I would probably have got the outlines of the thinking about ok. I could (couldn't I?) have got this out of books. However, to assess so simply and baldly what 'learning' might be seems to me to have missed some important points, both for practical theology and for receptive ecumenism. My own personal reflection on what made this learning point significant leads me to suggest three things, which should encourage us to explore further the ecumenical possibilities of practical theologies for ecumenical learning.

First, I think this is a method or approach which offers a constructive response to the question of *ecumenical reception*. Repeatedly, in this conference, and in bilateral dialogues and ecumenical groups, it is lamented that the significant leanings and achievements of agreed statements have not been effectively received into the life of our church communities. Given what we know about how adults, in particular, learn and appropriate learning,<sup>12</sup> it seems pertinent to suggest that these practical theological research experiences offer a vision for enabling such reception. For, whilst it remains unrealistic to imagine parish study-groups or lecture series as effective ways of ecumenical reception, it does appear that Christians involved in apostolic work together *and reflecting theologically on this work*, might touch the realities of the ecumenical call more vividly. The great gift of practical theology, and theological reflection in particular, is that it can enable the proper re-integration of "Life and Works" with "Faith and Order." Reflective practice presents itself as a privileged place of ecumenical learning.

A second point concerns the way in which this ecumenical theological reflection then releases *possibilities for the insights of 'the other' in the transformation of one's own familiar practices*. The light of the 'disinterested' (i.e. not 'politically / ecclesially involved') ecumenical partner's

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<sup>12</sup> We might usefully refer to Professor Jeff Astley's contribution to this conference in this regard.

understanding, sheds a fresh light on a particular community's practice, which can then illuminate possibilities for changes in practice, 'authorised' by a richer, and differently emphasised reading of Christian tradition. The reception, through theological reflection, of what is a characteristically Salvationist reading of sacrament in *ad extra* ecclesial action enables development of practice which brings together our fragmented Christian tradition in concrete, or embodied, ways.

Finally - and, for me, most significantly - this experience of receptive learning demonstrates the fruitfulness of a learning about, and from, the other in a *context of shared concern, and shared conversation*. That is to say, whilst ARCS is an ecumenically constituted research group, we do not function as ecumenical dialogue partners; we are not in conversation as distinct identities, or bearers of traditions. Rather, our subject matter - to parallel the insights of scriptural reasoning - is reflected on "for God's sake".<sup>13</sup> Our questions are not about *each other*, but about what God might be doing in this work, in these faith-full practices with which we are equally concerned. In turning our gaze outward, away from the face-to-face of mutual interrogation, we discover a world of the action of the Spirit, which has a claim on all our attentions, all our traditions, all our disciplinary affiliations. It is here, in this kind of conversation, that we are best enabled to hear - *as if for the first time* - the authentic voice of the other, as it struggles, with our own, to articulate the mystery of God's work which confronts us all.

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<sup>13</sup> See David Ford and Peter Ochs in their presentation to this conference.

