

**Using a model of paired theological reflection between priests and headteachers,  
in the context of Christian vision and leadership in church schools,  
what practical ideas emerge about developing missional activity across their shared community?**

## **1. Introduction**

Educational discourse is often informed or evaluated by reference to an academic theological perspective; thus, a theology of education is found alongside multiple other applications of theology (Hull, 1977). Yet theological reflection, rooted in the everyday, rarely exists as a practical activity of education professionals. This is evidenced in the availability of a 'large body of literature concerning the various models of leadership that might speak to Christian leaders, but little specific to guide their practice' (Spencer and Lucas, 2019, p.58).

My original doctoral research (completed in 2020) sought to fill this conspicuous gap, exploring insights from paired reflection between priests and headteachers in two Church of England primary schools as they developed leadership priorities for Christian vision and ethos. The study used 'Ordinary Theology' (Astley 2002a) as a conceptual framework alongside a method based on Green's 'Doing Theology Spiral' (2009), whilst Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and capital (1977) helped to examine social influences on individuals and reveal their dispositions.

Patterns within data from individual narratives were recorded and meaning derived through a process of narrative thematic analysis. This analysis raised questions about the accessibility of theological language and how theology might be understood as everyday or practical, as well as revealing that participants valued engaging in conversations that developed a sense of shared ministry. This draws our attention to the heart of the relationship between church and school; imagining how the school becomes part of the church's expressed narrative and more prominent in its missional life (Moynagh, 2012) – and similarly, how the church becomes rooted in the narrative and life of the school.

The study concluded that the richness of experiences and insights gained by priests and church school leaders through developing new situations, informed by theological reflection and the needs of a shared community, can be transformational, strengthening the connection between school and parish and enhancing the school's ability to live out its distinctive Christian vision. Consequently, I committed to refining an approach to paired theological conversation as an ongoing learning event; to guide the practice of educational and church leaders connected to schools with a Christian foundation, and to explore further what practical ideas might emerge about developing missional activity across their shared community.

## **2. A shared community: the partnership between parishes and schools**

Insights from the *Faith in the Nexus* research report (Bowie et al., 2020) remind us that for many church school families, church attendance is not a priority – yet they find a sense of belonging to church *through* school and consider themselves to be part of the Christian family. This can easily lead to disengagement if parish priests do not work closely with the school. Sustaining the connection between school and church thus requires strategic prioritisation (Bowie et al., 2020); deliberate, strong and active engagement through a positive relationship.

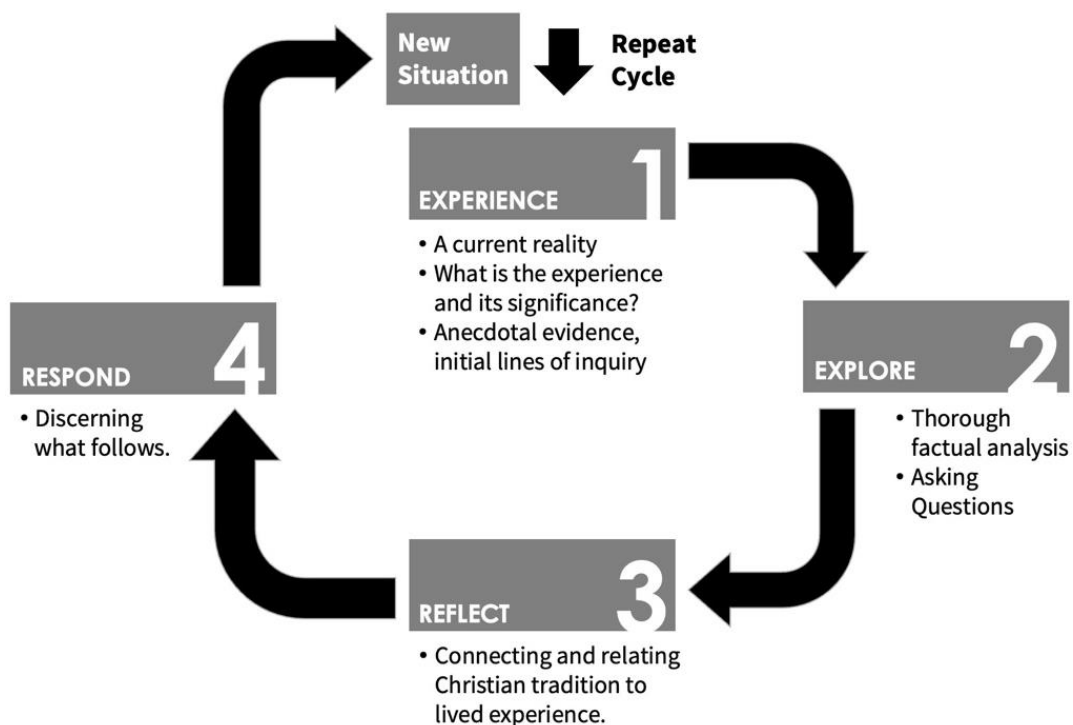
Within the Anglican setting, the expectation is that parishes work in partnership with a church school to discern vision, identity and purpose, motivated by the Church's 'gospel-inspired obligation to seek fullness of life for pupils and adults in its schools' (National Society (Church of England and Church in Wales) for the Promotion of Education 2023, p4). Developing, driving and living out a theologically rooted Christian vision, informed by context, is a shared ambition imagined for both the educational setting and the specific needs of the community.

A model or approach for theological conversation must therefore prioritise active listening for the presence and movement of God in the local context – and this listening and noticing by church and school leaders should value specialist theological insight, but not be steered by it. Rather, it anticipates that God has equipped a group of people with spiritual gifts for discerning and voicing God's will. This seems to express the essential nature of theology – a community which offers itself to join in partnership with God's work (Fraser, 2005).

This paper begins with the premise that there are rich possibilities for headteachers and priests that can be gleaned through an intentional, dialogic approach – of engaging in 'doing theology' together. It is through this focused, critical conversation about vision and leadership, rooted in careful reflection at local level about the shared community between school and parish, that a sense of mutuality and shared missional priorities and praxis might be created.

### 3. A model of 'doing theology'

The model used in my research study is based on Laurie Green's 'Doing Theology Spiral' – a four-phase cycle of Experience, Explore, Reflect, Respond. Detailed guidance for participants and facilitators is covered in the booklet, 'Doing Theology Together: A model of paired reflection for priests and headteachers' (Roper, 2024).



*Model based on the Doing Theology Spiral, Green (2009)*

*'Experience'* discerns the focus, a practical question or issue relevant to developing the school's Christian character or related to the interplay between church, school and home. It is about first impressions, building a picture of the participants' experience of this current reality and forming lines of inquiry.

*'Exploring'* is as a free-ranging conversation; sharing experiences and drawing on documents, data or research. It develops understanding and is where dialogue may begin to speak into local mission and school development priorities.

The *'reflecting'* phase adds to the mix between lived experience and the Christian faith tradition; being open to God's perspective and reflecting on instinctive connections which are surfacing, perhaps discovering where they are speaking prophetically as part of the local Christian story.

Finally, *'Responding'* determines what praxis follows: a call to action, an alternative perspective, or seeking a shift in attitude. Having sought to get to the heart of the matter, participants have an opportunity to determine what new praxis follows, to move from interpretation to committed action and response

### *Lectio Divina*

Each session begins with Lectio Divina (essentially, 'divine reading'), which sets an intention of letting Scripture interpret the contemporary situation and context. It seeks to move participants towards insight and reflecting about God, welcoming God's voice and acknowledging that God also communicates with us through what others might say.

It is an adaptable practice; mindful of people who may not self-identify as Christian, I established a few principles to help participants feel comfortable:

- It is about formation, not instruction; *a sense or feeling in the heart, not the head*
- The practice does not assume a position of faith; *the text is seen as a gift to be received*
- It is not formal bible study; *participants are 'doing' theology by listening and being open to encounter*
- They are invited to share; *although it is not compulsory*

## **4. Elements or principles underpinning the model**

There were four features or principles which underpinned the model of 'doing theology', drawn from my original research and key to the methodology used:

### *4.1 School and parish partnering in God's work*

The principle of partnership in ministry; that school and parish serve a shared community, especially of children, young people and families. By creating space for individuals in key leadership or ministry roles to take part in theological conversation and explore the correlation between their lived experience and the Christian tradition, it is possible to examine and envision the resources and gifts each might contribute to ministry and leadership within a church school community. Furthermore, by noticing the presence and movement of God in the local context, it is possible to imagine the ways in which people might connect and engage with God's work.

## 4.2 *A Framework of Ordinary Theology*

Ordinary Theology (Astley, 2002a, 2002b, 2013a, 2013b, 2016) is used as an encompassing conceptual framework for two key reasons. Firstly, it is focused on the learning done by adults and the shifting of their beliefs and attitudes, identifying learning from individual experiences which bring about enduring change (Astley, 2002a). It is contextual and has the potential to uncover a good deal about a person's development and theology as a process, including using the concepts of God-talk, or how someone is speaking reflectively of the divine (Astley, 2002b). Secondly, because it is grounded in the power of individual stories and helps to define the nature of theology as everyday; narrative and story engaging participants as they seek and explore shared truths about the Kingdom of God, as well as implications for their Christian life and ministry.

Furthermore, Ordinary Theology establishes the possibility that a non-expert theology can offer a contribution to discussion that is equally valid to academic theology; it 'embraces an orientation towards God that involves, and is an expression of, learning how to live before God' (Astley, 2002a, p.55). Ordinary Theology places an emphasis on the interaction and movement between Christian tradition and doctrine and the lived experience, providing a basis for exploring theology within the conversation between a priest and a headteacher. It is also a statement of human worth; the basis of this learning conversation is not to draw out an intellectual or expert view, but 'to discern the "extraordinariness" – in the sense of the value – of what is ordinary in others' (Astley, 2016, p232).

## 4.3 *Facilitation*

Within the model, participants are broadly self-guiding, but including a role for facilitation establishes a flow and guides the process, introduces questions and ensures both voices are heard.

## 4.4 *Embracing participants of different faith positions*

By design, the model embraces participants who do not self-identify as Christian. It uses an adaptation of the practice of Lectio Divina (see Section 3) and focuses deliberately on the use of an inquiry process and how individual narratives carry theology. In addition, critical discourse about the school's Christian vision will naturally reveal something of how an understanding of God and the Christian faith connect with school leadership issues.

# 5. Case Studies

## 5.1 *Context*

One Form Entry Church of England (VA) Primary School, connected to a parish of three churches within a wider benefice, in a village edging a commuter town. The unique role of 'Chaplain in Mission' has been developed between parish and school leaders and is fundamentally outward facing.

At its inception, the main foci for the chaplaincy role were:

- a 'seamless continuum' of pastoral care from birth to old age
- ministry for parents, children and young people in the parish
- support of the emotional and spiritual well-being of children, families and staff
- to offer opportunities for prayer and worship
- to support faith journeys and build bridges
- to support staff development in planning and leading worship

The process of paired reflection benefits from this context, as there is already an integrated vision for the school and whole community together, the school's theme of 'Jesus the Vine' emphasising an organic interweaving of school and church. The Chaplain's role is not over-defined and the time allocation and venues for emerging parochial and chaplaincy work are adaptable, according to what is required or most appropriate.

#### *Facilitated session(s)*

A biblical text was chosen for Lectio Divina: Mark 4:21-32 - A lamp under a bushel basket, and Parables of the growing seed and the mustard seed. Participants considered the sense of growth which should be open to all people in the community, including staff and parents. They also reflected on shared experiences of Covid-19 and the importance of human interaction in education and the church; that what you receive and feel from being together is so different to online meetings.

Thinking about the mustard seed reminded the priest and headteacher of a '*current reality*' of being in an age of anxiety; the seed is vulnerable, yet through growth it (and thus the Kingdom) becomes a shrub with birds nesting in its branches. They both expressed a desire for children to cope with an anxious world.

*Exploring* this reality, they identified what was going well in terms of missional activity:

- Sharing their vision about wider community, seeking to 'grow out'. For example, the school extends invitations to previous/retired staff to attend events, giving the example of a Macmillan coffee morning
- The context of Messy Church worship where parents can worship with children
- A new music group (ages 7-17) to lead worship in the church

They *reflected* that an element of each of these serves to help parents grow in faith, plus it feels like the connection with the wider community is growing. The priest recalled how baptisms and a confirmation emerged from a previous 'Exploring Christianity' group, and would like to try something similar again, or increase opportunities to speak about matters of faith, plus life events such as baptisms, weddings and funerals.

Participants also noted a crossover in the interactions that involved (or could involve) the school well-being leader and chaplain. This emerged as an element of the school's present focus on building a well-being team and an inclusion group for parents, to particularly help and grow confidence within vulnerable families.

Their *response to develop missional activity* was rooted in well-being and service, with a clear focus on growing faith in the community; seeking ideas of how to create a 'porous boundary' through which it is natural for people to come in and out of the school community. They also agreed to infuse a commonality of rich vocabulary, rooted in the school's Christian vision and ethos, around all of these connections.

## 5.2 Context

Two Form Entry Church of England Primary Academy, parish of two churches within a wider benefice, in a coastal town.

### *Facilitated session(s)*

Participants spoke about a desire to be welcoming, inclusive and at the heart of the community. Part of the school's Christian vision is to 'nurture, encourage and support all children, adults and their families to be the best as God intended' (extract from school website, January 2024) – with the New Testament character nicknamed 'Barnabus', the son of encouragement, a core biblical reference point. The priest and headteacher identified their *experience* of developing the school/parish partnership and their outlook of encouraging one another in relationships, which they strive to do daily as a school.

They *explored* the current reality of their partnership and ways in which the school and local church provided opportunities for all members of the two communities to worship together. Subsequently, they began to imagine the school as the focus for a new worshipping community, *reflecting* on how a request from pupils to learn more about the Eucharist had led to annual confirmation services, with 23 children and members of staff baptised and/or confirmed by the Bishop during a service in November 2023.

Their *response to develop missional activity* comprised three areas:

- a) Parental engagement: whether evidenced by attendance at worship in church or school, or by more parents coming forward to receive a blessing during communion services
- b) Enabling and engaging staff, developing their skills and confidence in leading worship, especially for Festivals and Feast Days
- c) Opportunities for discipleship/growing wider faith for both parents and staff and for parents to introduce 'faith at home'

## 5.3 Context

Two Form Entry Church of England Primary Academy, parish of 3 churches within a wider benefice, in a coastal town

### *Facilitated session(s)*

The biblical text chosen for Lectio Divina was Luke 8:4-15, The Parable of the Sower. Discussing the seed choked by life's worries, participants were reminded of the social issues faced by families and felt a sense of the school's responsibility.

They recognised that children don't necessarily make their choices, so it can feel like evil is affecting their lives, especially when families become isolated and face poverty and/or significant financial or relational issues. Participants highlighted that the school needs to be good soil, providing the right environment to thrive, although it cannot be everywhere all the time and offset so many external influences.

From this *current reality* emerged ambitions of 'regathering people' and 'providing good soil to families'. The headteacher and priest shared *experiences* relating to the idea of perseverance, offering examples of staff with personal issues (where the team has gathered around them) and a recent Ofsted inspection, during which the headteacher and team showed that they will continue to do what is right for the community. The priest was drawn to the phrase 'some seed fell along the path', implying some are left behind. He noted that in Jesus' ministry, some are left behind and some leave him behind, but also that parables on their own are imperfect; we must remember to see them alongside others (e.g. the expression of love and compassion in the Parable of the lost sheep).

*Exploring and reflecting* quickly moved to a *response* stage, with an ambition of extending opportunities for providing 'good soil' to families. Key characteristics of such activities were identified as being:

- tackling the locally identified issue of family isolation, gathering up the 'loose seed'
- employing a hybrid of school/church teams in terms of provision
- to reach children, they must be accessible to parents
- an adaptation of something already happening, or which could be reignited from past engagement which has disappeared and just needs capacity to run
- incorporating a way in which parents and children sit and celebrate in worship together
- offering 'subtle' support, such as providing information about food banks
- enhancing for parents, a place to belong that they can also remember in the home

Parish and school originally planned to provide one after-school session with a Christmas theme, which due to eagerness and popularity soon became two, capped at 60 children per day. School staff walked children to the church, at which point parents took over the responsibility for supervision. Support was offered by the church congregation in the shape of prayer and donations, in addition to time; a combination of church members and school staff planned storytelling, craft activities, decorating baubles for the church Christmas tree and refreshments, with worship around the Crib. Each child and family took away a 'goody bag', including a leaflet about the church and other social support groups.

In the New Year, the priest and headteacher reflected on the sessions, expressing delight and thankfulness, one noticing that 'When you step out for God, amazing things happen, you see God's hand of blessing and answers to prayer'. They described a sense of gathering; including the presence of some parents who may not usually have attended, or tend to be guarded or absent from contact with the school. The priest noted that Christ-like ministry often impacted just on one person, in one place and on one occasion; this could be the individual parent who has (post-Christmas) been trying to improve things for their child, or the pupil that came to speak to the vicar about baptism.

## 6. Learning

The initial question posed sought to explore, through a model of theological reflection between priests and headteachers, what practical ideas might emerge about developing missional activity across the communities of school and parish. I have expressed my learning from participant engagement in terms of further learning about the model used, and insight and reflections from missional activities which were either planned or implemented.

### 6.1 *Further learning about the model*

- 6.1.1 One priest (who has been in post for 15+ years), reflected how the model and process had, for the first time in his experience, encouraged conversations with a school leader to go beyond the 'usual' pastoral and operational topics
- 6.1.2 It enables the priest and headteacher to share a vision about the wider community, including how together they might grow faith
- 6.1.3 It gives permission for schools to think missionally in their community
- 6.1.4 It can help to formalise thinking about developing the school as a worshipping community, particularly how to secure parental engagement in opportunities for discipleship
- 6.1.5 The process offers an opportunity to bring in research and new thinking, which can inform and determine the aims to be embedded
- 6.1.6 Dialogue about potential missional activity helps to identify where capacity can be found and the likely balance of input from school and parish

### 6.2 *Insight and reflections from missional activities*

- 6.2.1 Throughout the planning, implementation and evaluation stages of any activity, the outcome should be focused on what value there is in this individual encounter; a deep and profound commitment is required to follow Jesus, but many of his connections were fleeting
- 6.2.2 A collaborative approach to mission can create both capacity (in terms of personnel and the ability to plan/run events) and encouragement, becoming an opportunity for blessing. It is also worth remembering that in many communities, children and adults still see the parish church as 'their church'
- 6.2.3 From a church school perspective, capacity and cohesion can be generated by rooting the activities as an expression of the school's Christian vision. As part of this, empower and engage staff, developing their skills and confidence in understanding spirituality and leading creative and inclusive worship
- 6.2.4 It is important to reflect on who is part of the shared community between church and school; think about building wider relationships, imagining how the (often unintentional) boundaries created can become more porous to encompass present and past connections
- 6.2.5 Tapping into church 'memory' of past successful events or imagining an adaptation of something already happening, can reignite a congregation's hope and ambition to connect with children and young people, especially when working in partnership with a proactive and energising school team



- 6.2.6 A development of missional activity, which starts with collaboration between a single church and school, can be to imagine how such activities could be widened to more families within the locality, regardless of which school the children and young people attend
- 6.2.7 Coming together intergenerationally, in a space (particularly a church setting) where faith and spirituality are explored openly, may be an unfamiliar experience for children outside of their association with school. To encourage participation, it is essential to create a safe environment in which activities are accessible to both children and parents, and all are offered an opportunity to try something different
- 6.2.8 Children and young people can assume a role as leaders, by incorporating acts of worship with familiar patterns, language and music, in which they can model participation and celebrate together with their parents
- 6.2.9 Finally, within any missional activity, create opportunities for discipleship/growing wider faith for both parents and staff and for parents to introduce 'faith at home'

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