

Doing Theology Together

A model of paired reflection
for priests and headteachers



Participant booklet
with notes for facilitators

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Introduction

The dynamic between theology and education is fascinating. So often, educational discourse is informed by reference to an academic theological perspective, being constructed as an external voice ‘speaking into’ education and applying theology to educational policy and issues. It appears that theological reflection, rooted in the everyday, is relatively uncommon as a practical activity of education professionals.

The model described in this booklet is the product of a small-scale qualitative research study in Church of England primary schools. It is intended to facilitate the practice of practical theology at school level, by an intentional focus on leadership priorities for vision and ethos within a church school.

It is an ordinary, inquiring theology, engaging priests¹ and headteachers² in paired theological reflection directly connected to their local context. In doing so, it seeks to draw each one closer to the heart of the vital relationship between church and school; helping to envision how the school might become part of the church’s expressed narrative and more prominent in its missional life³ – and similarly, how the church and parish might become more deeply rooted in the vision and practice of the school.

¹ This term is used to mean the principal local priest or minister linked to a school, according to its religious designation

² Headteacher could be Executive Headteacher, Headteacher or Head of School, whichever is appropriate to context

³ Moynagh, M. (2012) *Church for Every Context*. SCM Press.

Chapter 1 What underpins the model?

School and parish partnering in God's work

A core idea underpinning the model described in this booklet is that school and parish serve a shared community; accordingly, there ought to be space in which individuals holding key leadership or ministry roles can take part in theological conversation. The model anticipates that God has equipped priests and headteachers with spiritual gifts for discerning and voicing God's will - meaning the process values specialist theological insight but is not steered by it. Instead, it prioritises active listening; noticing and naming the presence and movement of God in the local context.

Consequently, these reflective conversations are intended to express the essential nature of theology – a community offering itself to join in partnership with God's work.

A conceptual framework

The supporting conceptual framework used is Ordinary Theology⁴, which is grounded in the power of individual stories and establishes the possibility that a non-expert theology can offer a contribution to discussion that is equally valid to academic theology. It places an emphasis on both the contextual and practical nature of theology; the dialogue, interaction and movement between Christian tradition and doctrine and the lived experience. It has the potential to uncover a good deal about a person's development and theology as a process, including how use of language speaks reflectively of the divine⁵.

⁴ Astley, J. (2002) *Ordinary Theology: Looking, listening and learning in theology*. Farnham: Ashgate.

⁵ Astley, J. (2002) 'In defence of Ordinary Theology', *British Journal of Theological Education*, 13(1), pp. 21-35.

The method of inquiry outlined in Chapter 3 is rooted in a learning conversation between priest and headteacher, where theological truth is received through a personal process and encounter. Ordinary Theology champions *everyday* theology and is a statement of human worth and dignity; the purpose of this model is not to draw out an intellectual view, but to discern and discover the ‘extraordinariness’ and value of what is ordinary in others. It is a model of empowerment; ascribing equal significance to each participant’s spirituality, values and ideas as they seek and explore shared truths about the Kingdom of God, as well as implications for their Christian life and ministry.

Facilitation

The *Doing Theology Spiral*,⁶ from which this process of theological reflection is adapted, is imagined as a group activity with a designated leader (usually a church minister) taking a facilitating, mentoring role. The leader guides the group and draws participants into an encounter with God, with the purpose of engaging them in a process of faith formation.

The model outlined in this booklet differs in that it views priest and headteacher as broadly self-guiding, with the focus maintained on their personal narrative and insight. However, it does include (and advocate) a role for facilitation; to guide and observe, and where appropriate plan practical arrangements to support discernment. In this setting, facilitation should adopt the following features:

- Neutrality: guiding fruitful conversations and ensuring a collaborative experience where both participants have a voice
- Familiarity with the process: enabling flow between activities, keeping aligned with the overall method

⁶ Green, L. (2009) *Let's Do Theology: Resources for Contextual Theology*. London: New York: Bloomsbury Continuum.

- Patience: introducing different questions as the dialogue changes and adapts
- Active listening: being curious, taking a genuine interest in the current realities described by the participants

Understanding dispositions and prior experiences

When people engage in discussion, how they approach a topic or feel about their contributions is influenced markedly by the expertise or status they feel they hold, such as qualifications and knowledge, as well as values and beliefs from personal and professional experiences.

Since priest and headteacher will be reflecting theologically and within the context of leadership, ministry and education, it is important that they share dispositions and prior experiences beforehand (see p.7). This will help them understand how each might be positioned and influenced, whether consciously or not, within the different topics of conversation. Developed appropriately by facilitation, this could explore views and assumptions about their vocation to children and young people and the interplay between church, school and home, without blurring the unique roles each might play in the outworking of any priorities discerned as a response to their inquiry.

Embracing individual positions of faith

Through design, this model fully embraces participants who do not self-identify as Christian:

- In Lectio Divina, the text is seen as a gift to be received and sharing is invitational
- Using an inquiry process and individual narratives, participants are 'doing' theology by listening and being open to encounter

- The element of critical discourse encourages deeper learning about the Christian theological vision underpinning a school's educational work. It seeks to reveal something of how participants' understanding of God and the Christian faith connect with school leadership issues.

Moreover, the character of their role in leadership and ministry within the church school community means that priests and headteachers regularly address questions of identity and faith-inspired leadership; in topics relating to school governance, the organisation of the curriculum and discussion about Christian character and well-being, to name but a few.

Chapter 2 Preparation

From this point, the booklet is written as if the reader is either a priest or headteacher (having agreed as a 'pair' to follow the model together), with additional notes for facilitators.

First things first!

To reiterate, this model for paired reflection is designed to include two *participants* (a priest and a headteacher) alongside a facilitator. The anticipated arrangement is that:

- a. Both priest and headteacher share an educational and geographical community i.e., the church or faith school is situated in the parish or area in which the priest exercises their ministry. It is likely that there is already a strong school/church connection in terms of Christian character, pastoral care and governance
- b. A willing facilitator has been arranged who is familiar with the participant booklet, particularly the features of facilitation (p.4) and method of paired reflection (Chapter 3)

Please don't be concerned if your context does not match exactly. Endeavour to follow the steps and method below as closely as possible and make adaptations as appropriate.

Understanding participants' dispositions and experiences

Once you are both ready to begin the process of inquiry and reflection, arrange a preliminary session to explore your experiences and dispositions. At this stage, you may find facilitation is helpful; to notice and gently question any dialogue which reveals particular viewpoints on education or theology, or perceived personal expertise or status.

Consider using the following discussion starters:

Activity 1

In turn, spend up to five minutes each saying something of how you got to where you are at this present time. This may include both professional and personal paths and how you discerned your ministry or vocation, as well as any connections with church(es) and/or engagement in the local community served by the school. Afterwards discuss:

- *What did you hear and how did it make you feel?*
- *What does this reveal about the experiences, training, reputation or dispositions you come with in the fields (areas) of education and theology?*
- *What do you notice about your local or political standing?*
- *How might these reflections be used to enhance your inquiry approach?*

Activity 2

Discuss one of the following questions:

- What does it mean to think in a theological way?
- What is meant by faith-inspired leadership?

- *What did you notice about each other's views and responses?*
- *How might this affect you as you position yourselves in the topics of conversation, acknowledging your own dispositions and starting points?*

Chapter 3 Method of paired reflection

Introduction

The structure of the ‘Doing Theology Spiral’⁷ leads and encourages the ‘doer’ in discernment, moderation and reflection, based on a four-phase cycle: a process of hearing, exploring, reflecting and responding. Adapted to an educational context, it seeks to create a joint learning endeavour, a dynamic of reflection and action from which developmental praxis might emerge.

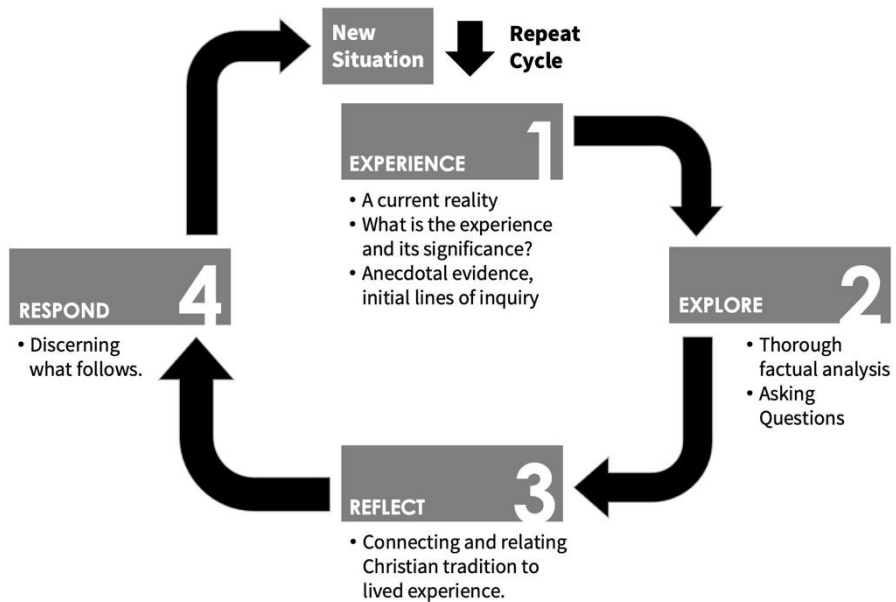


Diagram (i) The Doing Theology Spiral

⁷ Ibid.

In this context of paired reflection, the method is centred around conversation and relationship between you as school leader and priest, starting from personal experience. Initially, a facilitator guides you in identifying a contemporary practical question or educational issue relating to your context, then the ensuing flow of the cycle is intended to capture how you endeavour to talk, using theological language, about the school 'focus' you have discerned.

There are also ways in which this method could translate into an ongoing narrative record:

Reflective journals can be used to record reflections outside of the sessions, providing another dimension about what is going on in your experience. Journals are an invitation to reflect on how you were feeling, your experiences of God and any sense of God's activity, as well as the bearing of theological conversation and your school/church context and culture on any thinking about Christian vision and ethos.

Recordings (audio or video) to support ongoing reflection, allowing you to listen back after the conversation, perhaps seeing things afresh and picking up different cues and nuances. It also means that the narrative record is reviewed; as priest and headteacher, you both have an opportunity to check the meaning of what you contributed and make additions or amendments to your stories.

Session timings

Whilst there are several phases of the cycle, broadly matched by Steps 2-4 below, the timings, location and frequency of the sessions are entirely at your discretion. Some people delight in the opportunity to explore and reflect, whilst others are keen to establish action points and responses. Some suggested guidance emerged from the original research study:

- *Being away from the school site in a mutually agreed, calm space is preferable, as it emphasises the reflective and strategic nature of the conversation*
- *Be attentive to how your conversation is progressing and determine when to move through the different steps of the cycle. However, ensure that sufficient time has been given to consider how local practice is informed - or challenged - by the local Christian heritage of the community*
- *It is good practice to undertake Step 1 at the beginning of each session, whichever part of the cycle you have reached*

Step 1 | Rooting each session in Scripture

As priest and headteacher, you may already have established habits when meeting for discussion, such as praying together, thinking about aspects of the school's Christian character, or revisiting and considering scriptural texts used in Collective Worship. Since this method of paired reflection intentionally moves participants towards insight and reflecting about God, yet without assuming a faith position, it is worthwhile offering some guidance on how to let Scripture interpret your contemporary situation.

Lectio Divina

One adaptable method is Lectio Divina (essentially, 'divine reading'). Lectio Divina is underpinned by the belief that the reading of Scripture allows God to speak, and that God also communicates with us through what others might say. It is about formation, not instruction; a sense or feeling in the heart, not the head.

- Principles

It is important that you feel comfortable engaging in Lectio Divina, so within the context of this model of reflection:

- There is no assumption of a position of faith; *the text is seen as a gift to be received*
- It is not a search for theology or doctrine through formal bible study; *you are 'doing' theology by listening and being open to encounter*
- Participants are invited to share; *although it is not compulsory, and no comment is made on what each other shares*

- Process

Select a passage from the Bible

An alternative might be to choose an extract from a book/publication which relates to Christian ethos in church schools, or which will stimulate theological reflection.

Listen

One person reads the passage or extract for the first time. Allow the text to come to you; try to listen for a word or phrase that stands out, attracts you or makes you wonder. You are each invited to say that word or phrase aloud.

Ponder

The passage is read for a second time.

Continue to carefully ponder the word or phrase from the first reading, or listen for something else attracting your attention. Why is this speaking to your life or connecting with you?

Do not worry if you get distracted – it may be part of your response to leave it awhile for further reflection! After a minute or two of silence, try to frame a sentence that begins to say aloud how this word/phrase is resonating with you. You are invited to share your responses with one another.

Consider

The passage is read for a third and final time. As it is read, what do you feel is being called from you? Is there something you need to consider, resolve, relinquish or take on as a result of what you have listened to and pondered?

Step 2 | Theological conversation – ‘Experience’

This is the beginning of the cycle. In the ‘Experience’ phase, you are discerning the focus for discussion, which should be a practical question or educational issue relevant to the development of Christian vision or ethos within the school, or related to the interplay between home, church and school. It is a task not to be rushed; priest and headteacher must both be committed to the focus, agreeing that it defines a current reality for the school that is both manageable and could be examined through theological conversation.

Once the focus is agreeable, share first thoughts or impressions. Begin to build up a picture of your experience of this matter and form initial lines of inquiry.

Examples of a ‘current reality’:

- *Our most recent festival service in church felt more like a performance to parents than an act of collective worship...*
- *Our governors need to understand more deeply how the school’s values are based on explicitly Christian teaching*
- *The communities of home, church and school rarely focus together on social action projects or tackling injustice*

Facilitator:

- Guide participants in the process of discerning the focus and forming lines of inquiry, asking questions to encourage discussion.
- Before **Step 3**, propose the idea of sourcing additional information for analysis and discussion e.g., documents, pictures and statistics, or use of a reflective journal. In addition, how might they capture the voice of stakeholders (especially children and young people)?

Step 3 | Theological conversation – ‘Explore’

The ‘Explore’ phase is designed to provide time to move on ‘from those impressionistic anecdotes into factual analysis – from generalized sketches to specific description.’⁸ It is intended as a free-ranging, extended conversation; exploring the lines of inquiry that you determined regarding your ‘current reality’, making use of any materials collected between the sessions, and sharing your experiences across church and school.

‘Exploring’ is the place where you develop understanding, and your dialogue may begin to speak into local mission and school development priorities. Perhaps you will make intuitive connections between your everyday experiences and Christian faith traditions or heritage. You may also discover new truths and meanings which could inform or change policy and practice in the context of Christian vision and ethos.

During this step, ask:

- *Are there any links or common threads, relating to this focus, to be discovered between church and school?*
- *How are we using theological language and concepts?*
- *Placing our current reality and experiences alongside the Christian tradition, what ‘ordinary’ beliefs have been uncovered which are theologically significant?*



Facilitator:

- The facilitator is there to make observations and ask questions for clarity, ‘holding’ the space which enables the participants to engage in conversation
- Plan for practical arrangements to support discernment (such as making notes or recordings)



⁸ Ibid., p.60

Step 4 | Theological conversation – ‘Reflect’

The reflective phase of the cycle adds to the creative mix between your lived experience and the Christian faith tradition. It is the place to be open to God’s perspective and to reflect on instinctive connections which are surfacing. Where these connections resonate and lead to intuitions, albeit open to change and reconstruction, you might discover (as missional leaders of a shared community), where you are speaking prophetically as part of the local Christian story.

During this step, ask:

- *What have you noticed about the activity of God?*
- *What knowledge have you built that could be in alignment with the will of God, and how might you respond?*



Facilitator:

- Guide the participants in examining how everyday, ordinary theology is being applied to bring insight to their original focus/current reality
- Assist in planning for the next phase, in which participants place their theological conversation and reflection at the heart of their response



Step 5 | Theological conversation – ‘Respond’

Having sought to get to the heart of the matter, you now have an opportunity to determine what new praxis follows. You are moving from interpretation to committed action and response, mindful that ‘theology is understood as the product of the continual dialogue of these two aspects of Christian life’⁹.

Seeking to partner with God and articulating what you take away from the process of inquiry and reflection is crucial to the expression of Christian vision, as well as a shared missional life between church school and parish.

During this step, ask:

- *What is your response? Is it a call to action, sharing an alternative perspective, opening up questions for study or seeking a shift in attitude?*
- *How does this faithfully reflect hope and love for your community?*



Facilitator:

- Guide participants towards the goal of making a response
- Repeat the actions/responses you have heard to the participants
- Notice when the cycle is completed, and the participants have been brought to a ‘new situation’



⁹ Bevens, S. (2002) Models of contextual theology. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, p. 72

Epilogue

This booklet describes a learning model based on conversation and relationship, imagining equality in participation and requiring you to engage in honest exploration. It encompasses a level of risk for both priest and headteacher; as an open, inquiry-based process it would be impeded by any desire to try to maintain a professional detachment¹⁰.

Thus, there is the possibility of exposure to vulnerability as each participant opens themselves up and draws deeper into the life of their shared community. Yet the richness of experiences, insights and responses as you develop new situations from learning and doing theology together could be truly transformational in the connection between parish and church school.

¹⁰ Savage, H. (2013) 'Ordinary Learning' in Astley, J and Francis, L.J. (eds.) *Exploring ordinary theology: everyday Christian believing and the church*. Ashgate, pp. 199-208.

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