



## “LIVING” EDUCATION: ACTION RESEARCH AS A PRACTICAL APPROACH TO CONGREGATIONAL EDUCATION

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To cite this article: Bruce Martin (2000) “LIVING” EDUCATION: ACTION RESEARCH AS A PRACTICAL APPROACH TO CONGREGATIONAL EDUCATION, *Religious Education*, 95:2, 151-166, DOI: [10.1080/0034408000950204](https://doi.org/10.1080/0034408000950204)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0034408000950204>



Published online: 10 Jul 2006.



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# INSIGHTS FROM PRACTICE

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**“LIVING” EDUCATION: ACTION RESEARCH  
AS A PRACTICAL APPROACH TO CONGREGATIONAL  
EDUCATION**

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**Abstract**

Action research as an educational strategy suggests that educators engage in an intentional, collaborative cycle of observing, reflecting, planning, and acting. This approach deliberately attempts to bring theory and practice together in praxis. Action research may be helpful for religious educators who wish to improve their educational practice. This article focuses on ways in which action research might be employed by congregationally based educators.

Religious educators in congregations confront a myriad of questions, issues, concerns, and problems dealing with children, youth, adults, curriculum, and resources. We find ourselves asking questions like:

- How can I help people—of all ages—enjoy learning?
- How can I encourage more people to be involved in educational activities?
- How can educational leadership work together to discuss educational philosophy, to establish educational objectives, and to set educational priorities?
- How can we evaluate education in our congregation and improve the teaching and learning that occurs?
- In children and youth education, how can we encourage more parental support and involvement?
- How can we adapt curriculum to better meet the needs of learners in our particular context?

Questions like these present tremendous challenges to religious educators in congregational ministry. As I have struggled in the practice of educational ministry in congregations and as adjunct faculty at

a religious liberal arts college, I have regularly asked myself these types of questions.

Sometimes my approaches have appeared to be successful and have improved my educational ministry. At other times, the difficulties have seemed overwhelming. Issues seemed too complicated, questions unanswerable.

I have explored approaches to reflection, analysis, and research which appeared to have promise. As a congregationally based educator, I needed to find an approach that would help me work through significant challenges:

- to observe and reflect upon the issues in my context;
- to work through theoretical insights from religious education as they affected my work;
- to discern ways to improve my practice;
- to intentionally and meaningfully involve as many people as possible in educational leadership; and
- to provide an ongoing opportunity for further reflection and analysis.

In my research with faculty members in the faculty of education at a local university, I was introduced to *action research*, which encourages the educator to plan, act, observe, and reflect as part of an ongoing cycle. Action research attempts to integrate theory and professional practice into improved “praxis.” It is deliberately collaborative—educators work together to help one another understand and improve their praxis.

As I thought through these ideas, I decided I would apply them to my context—educational ministry in a congregation. The approach has not always worked as effectively as I might have hoped. But overall I have found that my educational practice has improved noticeably. In this article, I wish to introduce action research—to those who may not have been introduced to the concept—as a valid approach to religious education, particularly in a congregational context.

### WHAT IS “ACTION RESEARCH”?

Action research was pioneered in the 1940s by Kurt Lewin, a social psychologist concerned about the “theory-practice gap” he perceived between theories about society and actual social practices.

Lewin's concern was to contextualize theory in real-world contexts and to "democratize" decision making at a factory by involving workers (Lewin 1946). By the early 1950s, action research was proposed so teachers could become researchers in their own classrooms and thus improve their practice. Action research gave rise to a "teacher as researcher" movement, advocated by (among others) Stephen Corey, dean of Columbia University Teachers College (Corey 1953). More recently, action research has become popular among critical theorists in education and the social sciences who see its possibilities for social action and social transformation (Carr and Kemmis 1986).

Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) define action research as a cycle or spiral of research and action involving four phases:

1. *Planning*: educators and staff, congregants, lay leaders, colleagues, and community members collaboratively observe the realities of their situation and begin to ask "what ought to be"?
2. *Acting*: educators and co-participants implement a plan they have developed.
3. *Observing*: as they act, participants carefully observe and collect data.
4. *Reflecting*: the participants reflect and develop revised plans based on what they are learning from their planning, acting, and observing.

These four phases become part of a spiral in which revised plans are enacted, observed, and reflected upon. Through this ongoing process of planning, acting, observing, reflecting, re-planning, re-acting, re-observing, re-reflecting, and so forth, systematic, reflective, collaborative changes occur.

Figure 1 diagrams the action-research spiral (modified from Kemmis and McTaggart, in Carson et al. 1989, 4). The spiral aims to improve educational practice, understanding of our work, and awareness of the situations in which we work.

Action research, as Lewin describes it, is social science research. It engages the practitioner in systematic observation of and reflection on the current situation. As an educator, I am encouraged to take notes, to ask questions, to observe results, to conduct surveys and/or questionnaires, to study literature, to investigate other situations, and to employ other strategies common to social science research. I ensure that my research is thorough and has integrity.

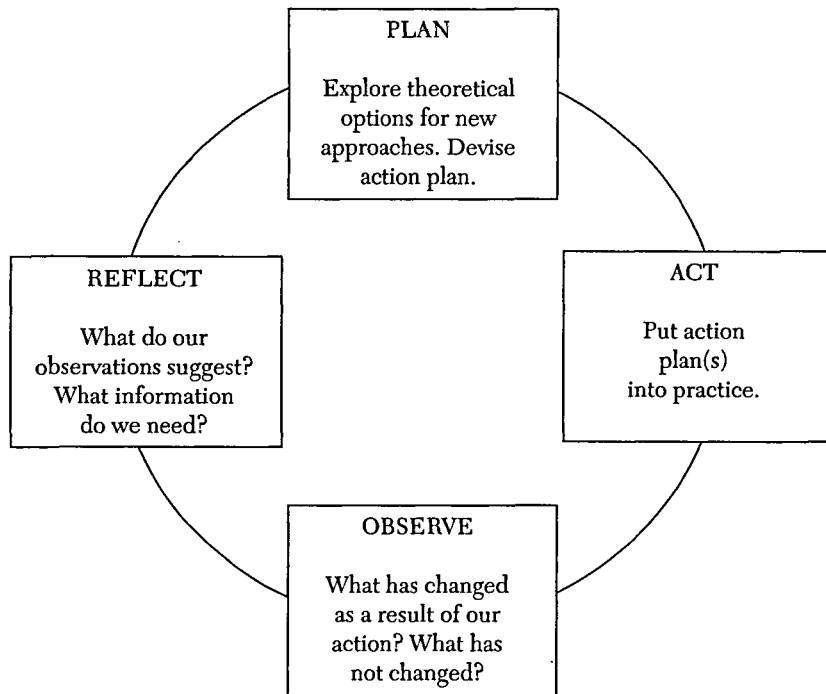


FIGURE 1. An Action-Research Spiral

*Research* is not a common word among many religious educators in congregational ministries. It evokes images of long questionnaires which few have time to complete. Skeptics think of piles of data with little value except as “scientific” proof-texts for a colleague’s degree program. Research implies theory (often simplified) that we often consider irrelevant to the daily (complex and contextually nuanced) lived relationships and enacted practice of religious educators.

But we can think of research in other ways. Religious educators conduct “research” all the time. As we plan our programs we reflect through critical reflection and prayer on the educational and spiritual needs of our congregants—research. We study our preparation materials—research. If we have concerns about specific learners, we try to discover underlying problems—research. In coordinating and leading educational ministries we read and discuss the ideas and experiences of others—research. It is easy to think of innumerable other examples of “on-the-job” research. We are researchers. We have to be! It is an essential part of our role.

Action research also insists on action. Its explicit intent is to catalyze changes in the educator's practice. In Lewin's mind, "There could be no research without action, and no action without research" (quoted in Sumara and Carson 1997, vii). As a professional engaged daily in educational work, this insistence on action appealed to me. I resonated with action researchers' commitment to theory as enacted in practice. Action researchers insist that theory provide specific, practical plans for implementation, and that action be critically reflected upon from theoretical perspectives.

As educators we are in "action" all the time. Our lives are filled with action—action with congregants, action with colleagues, action with members of the broader community. Our action, however, can become routine. As we gain experience in ministry we may fall into patterns that are simply "habits." We may find it easy to do things just because that is how we always do things. Only infrequently might we reflect on our actions and on creative possibilities for change. It is easy to keep things the same. We may feel "trapped" by tradition, and the "status quo" may seem the path of least resistance.

In my experience, action research has demonstrated the potential to expand possibilities, enabling me to escape the straitjacket of the status quo. Action research challenges me to integrate research with action, to bring theory and practice together. As I am introduced to new ideas—through seminars, discussions with colleagues and congregants, books, or journals—I am pushed to experiment with these concepts in practice. Thus I do research—I am constantly looking for new and better understandings of my work—but my research is intimately connected with practice. I do not simply employ a research method like surveys, questionnaires, and so on, but I approach my role with critical reflection, with a commitment to creative action, with a willingness to observe carefully and thoughtfully, to analyze results—and to continue planning. I commit to continual improvement of my professional practice, informed by consistent, careful research.

As a methodology for practitioners, then, this approach requires me, as an educator, to be learning continually about theoretical frameworks, and to be critically aware of my professional practice. From this dual appreciation of theory and practice, I can explore specific issues and begin to make improvements.

In a congregational context, one can envision action research as a cycle in which a practitioner (a pastor like myself, for instance) is encouraged to read widely and to think theoretically about educational

issues. I am also urged to observe carefully, to investigate and research diligently, and to reflect critically upon educational practices and activities. I am encouraged to involve others in reflecting—both on theory and practice. Then I attempt, collaboratively, to bring theory and practice together. Drawing upon my theoretical knowledge and research within my context, through observations and reflections, I would have discussions, devise a plan in collaboration, implement it, and research and observe the results. I would then revise the plan, implement the revisions, and observe. I would engage in a cycle of intentional change and reform in order to improve my educational ministry as I integrate new theoretical ideas and adapt to a changing context.

Action research encourages me to reflect carefully on what I am doing and why I am doing it. I seek to improve through genuine dialogue, and through authentic listening. In this way, action research becomes a collaboratively transformative process through which educational ministries can improve. It is also an approach through which I, as a religious educator, can redefine my ministry. I can reflect upon and grow in my understandings of myself as an individual, as a religious leader, and as an educator.<sup>1</sup> As such, action research can be understood as a “hermeneutics of practice” (Carson 1992).

### HOW IS ACTION RESEARCH DIFFERENT FROM WHAT I AM DOING ALREADY?

Many of us operate with a casual “plan, act, sense, and replan” approach to our everyday lives which looks remarkably similar to action research. As an educator I often think about what I am doing and about what plans I can make, and I evaluate my educational activities. I often talk with people in our congregation. Especially in a congregation like mine, in the “believers’ church” tradition, democratic decision making is highly valued and institutionalized.

The attraction, for me, of action research is that it does closely resemble my commonsense, familiar pattern of ministry.

Action research, however, is much more systematic and intentionally reflective than my everyday way. Action research insists that I

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<sup>1</sup>As I have grown in my understanding and practice of action research, I sense that it fits well with Groome’s (1980) “shared Christian praxis.” Both involve critical reflection, collaboration, and dialogue, with the objective of improving Christian education practice. Significantly, both have theoretical roots in the work of Paulo Freire and Jürgen Habermas.



critically observe the world around me. This reflection is a more systematic, much deeper, exploration of the context than I would normally undertake.<sup>2</sup> I need to ensure that changes are enacted and that results are carefully observed and recorded.<sup>3</sup> I need to reflect deliberately, systematically, and comprehensively on the consequences of change. This action is explicitly and intentionally collaborative.<sup>4</sup>

Action research can thus be thought of as a commonsense approach to religious education, undertaken with a more systematic, rigorous, reflective, and deliberately collaborative mind-set. It is a systematic, collaborative approach with the explicit goal of improving the quality of action. Action research is change that is deliberately negotiated, intentionally orchestrated, and carefully reflected on.

I have been concerned, for instance, about educational aspects of our congregation's worship services. In the past we have routinely discussed our concerns and opinions at various board and committee meetings. Sometimes small elements would change. We might, haphazardly, observe the results and consider whether the changes had been worthwhile.

Using the systematic methodology of action research, we formed a group that focused on worship services. This group read extensively on the theology of worship and about worship traditions. We learned as much as we could about the worship tradition of our particular congregation. We also spoke with as many members of the congregation as possible, using structured interview questions. Congregants

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<sup>2</sup>Thomas Groome helpfully discusses critical reflection as involving three faculties: (1) critical reason to evaluate the present—we need to observe and understand the aspects of our everyday experience that are taken for granted; (2) critical memory to uncover the past in the present—understanding why things are the way they are and evaluating whether our philosophical foundations are appropriate; and (3) creative imagination to envision the future in the present—a creative reflection on how things might be (1980, 184–97).

<sup>3</sup>Observation can take a variety of forms, including field notes (or teaching log), journals (educator's or students'), interviews and discussions, questionnaires, documentary evidence (assignments, etc.), video or audiotape recording, and case-study descriptions. For further discussion see McNiff 1988 and Kemmis and McTaggart 1988. In a congregational context I have found audiotaping and journaling helpful tools to use regularly. To promote meaningful dialogue I encourage members of the congregation to take notes, to journal, and to engage regularly in discussions.

<sup>4</sup>A discussion group of key educational leaders and participants meets monthly in our congregation. In the meeting we reflect on our reading and thinking, trying to expose ourselves to new theoretical ideas; discuss our observations of educational activities; reflect; plan; and set goals for the coming month. These will be observed and discussed at the next meeting.

were invited to express their ideas about worship. We also encouraged one another to observe the services closely and to note aspects that had educational possibilities. As a group we discussed our reading, interviews, insights, and observations.

As a group we made several specific recommendations for how to enhance the educational value of our worship services. For instance, since the congregation has many people without a strong church heritage, we suggested that we simply and succinctly introduce worship elements, such as communion. If we were to sing a hymn representing a specific context, the idea was to introduce that story.

These ideas were implemented, and the group was committed to observing the results. We met again with as many members of the congregation as possible, using other structured questions. We continued to read about worship and to learn from other worship traditions.

After three months of study we revisited our changes, evaluating the merit of some of the new ideas. We proposed modifications. The result was a new set of recommendations, refocusing and sharpening the changes we had originally implemented.

The group has continued its systematic review of worship—observing, recording, interviewing, and discussing our progress. We continue to modify worship based on our observation, reading, and reflection. We have had little opposition because members of the congregation have felt included in the process.

Other groups have begun to use action research to study adult education ministries, outreach programs, and summer children's ministries.

My experiences have helped me appreciate several benefits to action research in a congregational context.

*Action research is practical.* Action research provides a practical way for me to understand and deal with real-life issues in my church and community, undergirded by a concern for systematic study and reflection. This is not abstract research. As a "hermeneutics of practice," action research provides a framework that sensitizes me to real issues in *my* church. It helps me see and better understand *my* problems. "Action research is carried out by people directly concerned with the social situation that is being researched" (Altrichter, Posch, and Somekh 1993, 6). In religious education that means that I take responsibility for coordinating the improvement in *my* practice, *my* self-understanding, and *my* ministry in *my* context.

At the same time, action research insists on rigor and on uncover-

ing accurate information. Thus action research gives me encouragement, through dialogue, to explore solutions, to try out ideas, to observe the results, and to reflect on new approaches. As a spiral, action research suggests that change is an ongoing process. I never "arrive at" perfect practice. In a changing world this helps me appreciate that I need to be flexible and open-minded. My congregation is an ever-changing group of diverse individuals. What worked with the individuals in the church five years ago may not be relevant to congregants today. Many of the names and faces are the same, but their circumstances, spiritual maturity, and educational needs have changed. Others have left. New people have arrived. Action research is deliberately flexible and able to adapt relatively quickly and easily to a changing context. At the same time, action research encourages me, through habitual study of the congregation, to ensure that programs and approaches are relevant; this idea seems practical and realistic.

*Action research deals with my questions and my problems, not someone else's.* "Action research starts from practical questions arising from everyday educational work . . ." (Altrichter, Posch, and Somekh 1993, 6). One of my frustrations in congregational ministry is the subtle encouragement to look at what has worked in other contexts and to take that as a model. But, invariably, what works elsewhere does not work in my context. Questions and problems in my community are different. The personalities are different. I need an approach that acknowledges that my ministry setting is unique, with a complex set of relationships, structures, and traditions. I need an approach that sees me as an individual with unique gifts, skills, and limitations. Action research provides that.

One the one hand, action research encourages me to read widely and to learn from others' experiences. But it insists that I also "read" my congregation through careful study and observation. By deliberate collaboration, I explore the merits of other approaches and my understandings of my own context. Together we seek to create an educational ministry, informed by broader theory, that is tailored to our context.

*Action research starts now.* Action research is not a complex methodology requiring technical expertise. It is more a state of mind in which, in our work, we intentionally and systematically reflect, plan, act, and observe. Thus action research requires more of a mind-set than technical skills. The researcher needs to be familiar with social

science research strategies such as questionnaire design, taking field notes, and so on, but equally important are qualities of wisdom, insight, discernment, humility, flexibility, teachability, and creativity. Therefore, with careful attention to attitudes, we can begin to use action research immediately. Through dialogue we can begin the planning process, we can take action, and we can observe and reflect upon the results.

Action research has been proposed as “a living practice” (Sumara and Carson 1997) through which educators use planning, action, observation, and reflection to define who they are as educators and to determine how they relate to their colleagues and students (or, in a congregational context, with congregants). Action research is not another activity in educators’ overly busy lives. Rather it is a way of approaching education in order to engage in research—the cycle of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting—on an ongoing basis. Action research becomes part of an educator’s identity. Sumara and Carson suggest that action research not only improves an educator’s practice, but that it also improves the educator as an educator, and the educator as a person.

By proposing action research as a practical approach for religious educators, I am not suggesting that we add one more item to hectic schedules. Rather, action research has encouraged me to consider a new approach to the work I already do. In trying to find practical ways to “live” my ministry, I try to bring my concern for theory and practice together in a cycle of planning and doing that helps the congregation develop an authentic, reflective living practice. I try to be more deliberately observant and reflective. I am trying to think, creatively and continually, about new ideas for ministry. I am trying to be more collaborative and to develop skills in observation and critical thinking among the congregation. I am not “doing” more than I did previously, but I am doing it differently.

*Action research is “research in action.”* Because action research has “action” as its explicit goal, religious educators are not involved simply in passive observation and data collection. Action research is action-oriented. We become participants in a process which helps us understand our contexts, act in new ways, and reflect on the results. Because of action research, circumstances ought to change—immediately. The result should not be a pile of data and the nagging question, “So what?”

In my congregation, we emphasized change to worship services

as the explicit goal. We insisted that study and discussions result in a few practical plans that could be implemented immediately. Participants were excited to see their group work move quickly from reflection and discussion into concrete action. As these steps were enacted, people were thrilled to see their time and effort make a difference.

*Action research is community building.* Dialogue—telling and listening—builds community, and action research insists on dialogue. Only through authentic self-disclosure—of understandings of the present, memories of the past, and visions for the future—can plans be made and changes enacted. Through honest communication we get to know one another better and can care for one another more effectively. Community is created; faith is enacted.

For those who prefer a "top-down" leadership style, action research is problematic. But for those of us who recognize that the role of congregational leaders is being redefined (Mead 1991, 1994; Woods 1996), action research makes sense. Through this approach, many become genuine co-participants in decision making and leadership and find meaning as co-creators of new modes of action. Action research is not a hierarchical approach, but is intentionally inclusive and empowering. It is not research "done to" people; it is research by leaders and congregations in authentic cooperation and dialogue. We work together. We learn together. We affirm one another's giftedness and experience. We grow together as a community of faith.

About the same time that I was introduced to action research I read Thomas Groome's *Christian Religious Education* (1980), which introduces the concept of "shared Christian praxis." Praxis, Groome suggests, is essential because it recognizes and values the importance of community in Christian education. Action research, which appears to complement his notion, has helped enact this theory in a congregational context; the result has been a transformed vision for ministry.

As we have involved people in intentional group research and planning, new relationships have emerged, along with a stronger sense of community. It has been exciting to see people become meaningfully connected in community life.

### **ACTION RESEARCH AS "ENLARGING THE SPACE OF THE POSSIBLE"**

The reflection component of action research may help educators see new—perhaps unexpected—possibilities for the future. Drawing

on complexity theory, Sumara and Davis (1997) speak of action research as “enlarging the space of the possible.” They argue that most academic research seeks to reduce complex systems and realities to simpler terms and understandings (“simplicity”). My background, before ministry, was in geography. Geographers, like most scientists, use a variety of models to simplify complex systems. Whether models of plate tectonics, maps of global temperature ranges, or systems models of soil formation, geographers attempt to simplify complex realities through simplicity. Even highway maps are examples of geographical simplicity—reality is “simplified” (side roads, lanes, drive-ways, and other “minor” features are omitted) so motorists can find their way along major routes.

Action research, Sumara and Davis suggest, is an example of “complicity,” in which relatively simple things become more complex when they interact. This phenomenon, they suggest, happens almost inevitably when we introduce change in social relationships. It is not the case that “the more things change, the more they stay the same.” Rather, “the more things change, the more complicated they become.” Like ripples on a pond, one small change can result in a range of social changes. Something new—and often unexpected—emerges.

Action research, as a “complicit” activity, enlarges the space of the possible. As things change, new possibilities emerge. As we become aware of why we do things the way we do, we open possibilities for new ideas. As we allow ourselves to think differently, we may discover new possibilities, new visions of the future never before perceived.

For example, in our (Baptist) church worship group we discussed the Lord’s Supper. What ought to have been a meaningful worship experience with profound educational potential had become a dull, empty ritual. Through planning and dialoguing with congregants about their experiences and our worship,<sup>5</sup> we developed small changes. We discovered, as we observed and reflected on the changes that occurred, that ideas and possibilities for further changes became apparent. We had discussed some of these possibilities previously but thought they might be too radical. By starting small, however, we created a climate in which larger changes were possible. Among other revisions, we changed the format for the Lord’s Supper, the participants, and the timing in the service. Other possibilities that had never occurred to us became apparent when we saw the responses to the first set of changes.

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<sup>5</sup>I found Groome’s “five movements” helpful in generating discussion and insights.

As we reflected critically upon "why we do the things we do," we discovered new freedom to change. We discovered new ideas. We had enlarged the space of the possible and improved our practice as a church.

### **ACTION RESEARCH AND IMPROVEMENTS IN EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE**

As I try to "live" this cycle of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, I have seen my practice change. In one sense, I "do" the same activities I have always done. But I am more intentionally collaborative, more deliberately active, more systematically observant, and more critically reflective. I am (in a good sense) more critical.

I have discovered only one other example in the literature of a Christian educator/pastor trying to employ action research as "living practice." Michael West, an Anglican clergyman, writes of his experience as a facilitator of change with a team of lay priests and deacons. He was involved with a formal program of local non-stipendiary ministers (LNSMs), in which gifted laypersons perform many traditionally pastoral functions. West reflects on changes that occurred in his own thought and practice:

The whole process has perhaps inevitably become something of a voyage of discovery for me. Initially as a Christian minister and subsequently also as a researcher my association with LNSM has led me to reflect on every aspect of my professional work and the knowledge that underpins it. As a parish priest working alongside two LNSM ministers, I have had to redefine my own role in the parish in which I work, moving from "minister" to "team leader." This process has not been without pain. I had been developing the skills associated with building and leading teams over many years and was committed to collaboration. However, moving from an "individual" ministry to a "shared" ministry has involved other changes. Firstly it has demanded of me a fundamental shift in the pattern of my working day, moving the location of my work away from its traditional home in the vicarage and its study to a newly constituted shared area of work we have designated the "parish office," the very title of which symbolizes the greater emphasis on administration, which is a practical consequence of collaboration. And perhaps inevitably, it has raised issues of my own professional status and role in the parish, and it has done so in the context of such a practical question as whether or not a visit to a parishioner at home or in hospital from an LNSM priest is equal to that of the Vicar or "does the Vicar need to call as well?" And similarly, "who should do the weddings, funerals and baptisms of "church" people or well-known local parishioners?" It would be easy to allow LNSMs to become second-class priests in

the parish in which they work, but enabling them to operate on an equal footing brings the occasional allegation that I don't "care enough" to come myself, or am not "concerned enough" to do the service myself, from those less familiar with the concept of LNSM. This is still painful. Also, working with people who were once "parishioners" and are now clergy, who are more effective than I am in various aspects of ministry and are the focus of various parish activities that no longer center around me, is a constant salutary reminder that collaboration is not just engagement with the mind but is also a powerful engagement with the emotions!

As researcher I also began to work with the theoretical perspectives that challenge traditional church belief systems and demand an engagement between theology on the one hand and [with] those disciplines on the other hand, [so] that each [would] make a contribution towards theories of learning and meaning making. . . . (1993, 365–66)

This reflection reveals many of the ways in which educators grow personally through action research. First, "living" with an action-research approach helps educators reflect on their role. West's honest thoughts are significant. He is excited, on the one hand, to live his practice in a collaborative way. But he also notes the many difficulties with integrating his beliefs into his practice—both external difficulties and internal struggles. Change is complicated; "complicity" is apparent. West notes many unexpected and unintended repercussions from his changing role and from the introduction of these lay priests. Significantly, however, there is a sense throughout West's discussion that these changes are part of a constant self-improvement, which is creating positive changes for his personal and professional identity. He is growing into a new role, which is stretching him in new ways.

Also apparent in West's discussion is his concern to integrate theory with practice. Action research gives him the opportunity to "live" his ideas through careful planning, acting, observation, and reflection.

The result of these changes, at the time of West's writing, was an improvement in the parish ministry. He highlights many problems and a need for the ongoing cycle of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. But gifted laypeople are involved in meaningful ministry, and parishioners and communities are benefiting from their gifts. The effect is undeniably positive.

## CONCLUSION

The essential aims of action research are to *improve* and to *involve* (Carr and Kemmis 1986, 165). Action research intends to im-



prove educational practice, to improve our understanding of our practice, and thus to improve the settings in which we minister. It also intentionally involves people in the planning, acting, and reflecting process, so that those affected by change become involved.

Action research is helping me understand my practice more fully. I find myself conversing at a deeper level with congregants, pastoral colleagues, and others outside the church, while developing specific plans and putting them into practice. In participating in the process of observing, reflecting, re-planning, and re-acting, I am growing in my knowledge of my congregation and its people, learning more about my role as an educator, and developing a more detailed understanding of who I am.

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Article submitted: February 1998

Article accepted: October 1998