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## **Transforming a Local Church Congregation through Action Research**

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**ABSTRACT** This article proposes action research as a valuable and appropriate approach to initiate and effect change in local church congregations. It begins with a review of action research and local church contexts, suggesting that action research may be a helpful and relevant methodology for church leaders to consider. The author then considers a case study of how action research has been implemented in his own congregational context. In conclusion, the author reflects on some of the possibilities and problems associated with using action research in a church.

Over the past 50 years, action research has been applied to a variety of disciplines and practices, including education, social services, health care and police work (Kingsley, 1985; Carr & Kemmis, 1986; East & Robinson, 1994; Kemp, 1997; Adlam, 1998). One social situation where action research has not been used extensively is in church contexts, particularly at the level of the local church congregation.[1] With the exceptions of West's (1993) study of local non-stipendiary ministry within the Church of England and Fetterman's (1997) very brief case study of adult education administration in his church, action research appears to have been rarely employed in congregational contexts (Martin, 2000). In part this may be a reflection of the lack of qualitative research about local church organisation, community culture, and leadership in general. It may also be symptomatic of the fact that most clergy [2] are educated in theological colleges or seminaries.[3] Many theological college/seminary faculty are educated in the humanities (theology or biblical studies) but have no social science research background. Other faculty, in the disciplines of practical/applied theology and religious education, may come with extensive field experience, but lack knowledge of social science research techniques, particularly qualitative approaches. Few clergy – or faculty – have graduate education in the social sciences (Martin, 1998, 1999). A concept of 'pastor as researcher' or 'pastor as reflective practitioner' is absent from pastoral education programmes and literature on pastoral practice.

Over a period of 8 years, I worked to integrate action research into my work as a pastor in a local church congregation, a Baptist church (Baptist Union of Western Canada/Canadian Baptist Ministries) in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. The church was located in a lower income community within the city. The congregation had many skilled and gifted lay leaders who desired to be active in shaping and creating the church's future. After being introduced to action research during doctoral work at the University of Alberta, I deliberately introduced the methodology into our congregational life. In this article, I want to propose action research as an appropriate and helpful approach to local congregational research and pastoral work, and to demonstrate how we have implemented action research into the life of the church where I worked.

### Action Research: in a church?

Emily Calhoun writes:

*Schoolwide action research is a fancy way of saying, 'Let's study what's happening at our school, decide if we can make it a better place by changing what and how we teach and how we relate to students and the community; study the effects; and then begin again'. (1994, p. 1)*

For our congregation, I paraphrased her description: 'Let's study what's happening at our church, decide if we can make it a better place by changing what and how we do things and how we relate to one another and to the community. Let's study the effects. Then let's begin again'.

Of course, this is a very pragmatic definition of action research. But as the starting point for a discussion about action research in a church congregation, pragmatism is helpful. To me, what is specific about action research as a form of inquiry is that it is a collaborative activity by people involved and committed to the social situation in which they are located (in our case, our congregation) for the purpose of improving some aspect of a practical situation and their understanding of it. This does not reduce action research simply to a problem-solving technique to make people's lives easier. Action research may, in fact, make things more complex as layers of meaning are exposed and new potentialities and possibilities emerge. I appreciate Sumara & Davis's (1997) reminder that action research, as a complicit activity, enlarges the space of the possible. On the one hand, action research may uncover new, unexpected challenges. On the other hand, using action research to improve the lived practice of a congregation may also introduce new possibilities.

Local churches are different from some of the other social situations in which action research has been employed. Rarely do academics come to churches to conduct research. What research is conducted within local churches is typically either led by the church leadership itself (using whatever skills they might have) or by a denominational office (usually

quantitative in nature). The issue of relationships between specialised academics and subjects being studied, thus, is normally not significant in local church contexts. At this stage in the pioneer field of congregational research there has been no 'hijacking' of research by academia, as James McKernan (1996) suggests has occurred in education. Congregational research is still very much the activity of practitioners. Most research is by local church people for local church purposes – towards self-understanding, improvement of programmes, and community service (Ammerman et al, 1998). This provides a natural link to action research, concerned explicitly with the objective of reflecting on everyday practice and analysing it in order to come to some decisions about what the future should look like (Wallace, 1998).

The organisational structure of churches is different from many other social contexts. Typically – in schools, health institutions, police departments, social service agencies and other environments where action research has been employed – a hierarchical structure of power relationships, both among professionals and students or clients, exists. Theoretical and practical issues regarding these relationships need to be addressed. Most congregations are structured differently. Congregations may have one or several professional staff, but are overwhelmingly composed of volunteers. Although formal governance structures typically exist, in practice many congregations function quite democratically. In many instances, clergy may have 'official' power by virtue of their title or office, but in practice, leadership authority is often diffused throughout the congregation in some form of collaborative structure (Woods, 1996). A cross-denominational trend towards an increase in democratic governance and practice has been noted (Mead, 1994). While once pastors were viewed as the only ones who could deliver sermons, counsel people, provide leadership, and perform other duties in the church, a shift toward recognising the abilities, talents, and gifts of laypeople has led to a transition from what Woods (1996) calls 'official' leadership to 'gifted' leadership. This manifests itself in a new collaborative approach to church leadership in which the pastor is one leader among many; the pastor functions more as a 'consultant' or 'adviser' than as the expert leader (Callahan, 1990; West, 1993). Action research complements these organisational changes by providing a framework for congregations and pastors to define complementary, collaborative roles. Action research provides a paradigm for pastors to empower laypeople meaningfully in roles of leadership and responsibility.

During the past few decades, pastors have begun to talk about 'liberating' the laity (Stevens, 1985; Woods, 1996). The reality is that, in practice, laypeople are often, already, very involved in leadership. An action research model provides pastors and laypeople with a perspective that recognises and affirms the interdependent relationships that typically exist

between pastors and laity, and that truly empowers laypeople in the collaborative process.

Action research works well in a congregational setting by being deliberately transformative. Change is an essential component of action research. And change is (or ought to be) an essential component of congregational life in dynamic social communities. A tension all churches feel is maintaining the integrity of their theological beliefs, while being flexible in the strategies by which they share and practise those beliefs (Anderson, 1990). In many churches, initiating and facilitating change in practice is problematic. However, action research provides an approach to implement substantial organisational change through collaborative reflection and dialogue. The community-building, empowering nature of action research gives people a 'voice' and a say in the change process (Winter, 1998a). Change is not imposed by either the pastor or an elite leadership team, but through collaboration and negotiation. In volunteer organisations, like churches, such a collaborative approach to organisational transformation is not only very appropriate, but virtually essential for authentic change to be initiated and sustained.

For persons not educated or skilled in social science research, like many pastors and other church leaders, action research provides a starting point for congregational change. As mentioned earlier, in congregational research few academics and local church leaders have social science research skills; the word 'research' may even be intimidating and unappealing. One of the attractions of action research is that it makes sense to people who may not be familiar with social research. Before the process ever begins, people can see the potential benefits of action research because of the common-sense steps and the commitment to action in the model. Certainly, research skills are required to facilitate the process in an effective way. But people are invited into and included within the process by the straightforward approach.

The fact that action research deals with a particular church's questions and problems, not someone else's, makes action research attractive and appropriate for local churches. Individual churches are composed of, and thus reflect the personality of people from a particular community. Each church has its own story, its own issues, and its own concerns. Much literature aimed at church leaders, however, comes from and deals with a select group of 'successful' models (typically suburban, middle-class, Caucasian, and American churches). The frustration for church leaders in other congregations and communities is that while these models may be effective in particular contexts, the issues and solutions in other social and cultural situations may be very different. Action research insists that churches focus on improving their own practices by looking at their own situation-specific questions. While experiences of and models from other locations may provide helpful input, action research reminds

church leaders that their situation is unique and situation-specific planning and action is essential.

Philosophically, action research fits well into a Christian church context. Sumara & Carson (1997, p. v) argue that:

*Many persons interested in action research have failed to understand that action research is not merely an activity that one adds to one's life; action research practices, like Zen practices, like writing practices, are particular practices that require one's lived experiences be configured in particular ways. This does not only include one's beliefs, one's philosophies, one's attitudes to and about what constitutes research practices but, as well, includes the specific relational organization of one's living conditions.*

Their concern that action research 'fits' one's philosophical framework is important. Sumara & Carson link action research with Zen Buddhism; Chuaprapaisilp (1997) suggests that some aspects of Thai Buddhism offer support for concepts in action research, particularly the notion of 'mindfulness'. I would suggest that Christian concepts of servant leadership (Oden, 1983; Greenslade, 1984; Stevens, 1992; Wilkes, 1998) complement the principles of action research well, enabling pastors to redefine themselves as key collaborators in the action research process. One of the movements in pastoral theology, the discipline concerned with pastoral identity and practice, is towards a contemporary redefinition of the pastoral role. A strong theme that is emerging in recent literature is a renewed conception of leadership emphasising team-building skills, lay empowerment, and servant leadership (Stevens, 1985; Stowell, 1994; Fisher, 1996; Wilkes, 1998). Stevens (1992) speaks of a 'gracious conspiracy' whereby pastors and laypeople work together to create new possibilities. Such values complement an action research approach.

I would propose that the encouragement in action research to collaboration and empowerment dovetail neatly with Christian commitments towards gender, ethnic and social equality.[4] And I would contend that the transformative nature of action research is complementary with the Christian Church's mandate to be 'salt and light' in the world through social improvement and transformation.[5] Unquestionably, throughout history the Christian Church and Christian leaders have not embodied these ideals in a consistent or comprehensive manner in many social contexts. But I am optimistic that action research has the potential to be a helpful tool towards that end. Certainly, I perceive no philosophical tension between action research and Christian theology. To the contrary, I see action research as complementary and consistent with Christian theological understandings and convictions.

### **A Need to Change**

A saying bantered about by pastors and other church leaders is this: 'What are the seven last words of the church? We've never done it that way before'. Change, in congregational settings, is often difficult. A substantial literature has developed suggesting that congregations have to adapt to social changes in order to remain relevant and proactive in society (for example, Anderson, 1990; Mead, 1994; Woods, 1996). Relatively little literature, however, exists on how to lead change in churches (Woods, 1994). In this section, I wish to introduce the concerns within our congregation that led to our development of an action research process. I will then describe how we incorporated action research into our congregational life, and I will discuss how we defined our study, planned, observed, reflected and continued in subsequent stages of action research.

Our involvement in an action research process developed as people in our congregation perceived that change needed to occur in a number of areas of our life together. For example, in terms of our educational programmes, our traditional Sunday morning Sunday School (for children from nursery age to teen age) was perceived to be valuable but insufficient, lacking the freedom necessary for creativity and exploration that students and teachers desired. Our adult educational opportunities, in the form of several groups that met midweek, were filling a niche as support groups, but lacked intentional curriculum and educational direction. At a long-range planning meeting to which all members of the congregation were invited, a clear dissatisfaction with the status quo in our educational programming was evident. At the same meeting, concerns were raised about our Sunday morning worship service. Because changes in our educational offerings were likely to affect our worship services (in terms of timing, service length, leadership, etc.), a wide-ranging discussion developed in which many aspects of our corporate life were examined. The discussion was critical but also creative and constructive as people offered suggestions as well as expressing their concerns. My role was to facilitate the discussion and distil key concerns from the cacophony of comments.

Several members of the church leadership – members of the Board of Deacons (the senior board in the church) and committee chairpersons – were uncomfortable with these perceived deficiencies. They appeared to take comments about the inadequacies of the church's programmes to be personal attacks on their leadership. Some leaders became defensive and even hostile about the possibilities of change. Other people from the congregation were anxious about the proposals for change because they were comfortable with the present situation. Although they may have admitted that new approaches might be beneficial for others, they recognised that the new circumstances would involve changes in their routines. Although these people claimed they were not opposed to change per se, they wanted assurances that any modifications would be positive for the church, not simply 'changes for change's sake'. Others were genuinely

excited about future possibilities. They dreamed of improving our congregation and its practice. Impatiently, they wanted to begin implementing new ideas as soon as possible. 'Anything is better than what we're doing now', one person commented to me.

About this time, I was exploring action research in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta. I wondered if I could apply this approach to the perceived need for change in our church. The aims of action research – to improve practice, the understanding of practice, and the situations in which those practices are carried out (Carr & Kemmis, 1986) – appeared to be appropriate for our situation. The methods of action research – collaborative inquiry – suited a congregational community with shared leadership; the approach was empowering of people in the church (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). The commitment to a continuous cycle – planning, acting, observing, and reflecting (Carson et al, 1989; Sumara & Carson, 1997) – provided the ongoing commitment to reflection and flexibility that would help us remain relevant in a dynamic social environment. As a paradigm to address the issue of change in our congregation, action research appeared to have potential.

At another congregational meeting, to which all were welcome, I introduced the action research cycle, briefly described the process, and I invited people to interact with me about whether or not this could be a model that we would wish to try. I began this presentation with trepidation. Our congregation is located in a community with low levels of formal education and socio-economic status, and high levels of transience and social pathology. While several of our key leaders have university degrees, only one had any training in social science research (a child psychologist). Most of our congregation had no formal education beyond the high school level. Several had not graduated from high school. I was concerned the presentation of a 'model' for facilitating future changes would be received with scepticism. I deliberately avoided the term 'action research', suspecting that the word 'research' would be threatening. Instead, I introduced the concepts, officially, as an 'action model for renewing our congregation'.

I was pleasantly surprised by people's enthusiastic response. People were attracted to the intentionality of the process – for the first time we had a framework for strategic, thoughtful planning and action. People appreciated the openness of the process – their voices would be heard and valued, and they could be meaningfully involved in the process. People liked the commitment to improvement, but also the opportunity for observation and reflection ('In case we make a mistake', one person commented, 'We can always go back'). People actually responded warmly to the potential for 'research' – for investigating our community more fully, for understanding ourselves more completely, and for studying the literature and other case studies more purposefully.

As a community, we began the process by collaboratively defining the specific aspects of congregational life we wished to address (more creative



children's programmes, more substantive adult opportunities, and modified worship service format). These were generated from our initial meeting, plus small group meetings with different committees, organisations and individuals in the church. We began to plan. The Board of Deacons led the process, but invited all who wished to participate to interact in the process. We wanted to make the planning stage transparent, accessible and inclusive. We brainstormed through various possible actions we could take. We investigated models from other churches in our community, in our denomination, and the literature. After a period of several months, we devised an action plan for a new service time and format, a new children's programme, and adult classes. The changes were discussed and ratified at another general congregational meeting.

The plan was put into action when the changes went into effect on 1 January. Some of the effects were anticipated: the new programmes proved helpful and were well received. As expected, some grumbling occurred over an earlier start to our worship service. Other effects were unanticipated: some individuals felt personally devalued because their involvement was reduced in the new format. One person commented:

*I feel like I don't have a place any more. You don't need me. I have been active here for over 20 years and now you don't want me.*

While that individual's perceptions and conclusions were inaccurate, his feelings were genuine – and completely unexpected. Our physical facilities, which we believed adequate, proved awkward and limiting. We needed to make some improvements.

I encouraged people to monitor effects of the changes – to take notes, to pass on comments and other feedback to the Board of Deacons and myself, and to record their personal feelings and observations. I intentionally asked questions of all members of the congregation, like:

*How are you feeling about the changes?*

*What do you feel are the benefits of the changes?*

*What are your concerns about the changes?*

*What is your vision for the future?*

I made notes of the comments that I heard. In a congregational context, some of the observation techniques proposed in action research literature – video and audiotaping, journals, etc. – are not easily employed. However, by encouraging people to observe and record comments, impressions and observations, and by my own intentional informal interviews, we gleaned much useful feedback. After 6 months of living with the changes, we circulated an open-ended questionnaire, inviting people to respond to questions such as:

*Please share your constructive comments about our adult elective courses.*

*Please share your constructive ideas about our children's programme.*

People responded well to the questionnaire. Comments revealed a mixture of emotions about the new programmes, combined with some constructive ideas that furthered the reflection process. Some of the comments included:

*I feel the fellowship that has developed through these [adult courses] has been excellent. I hope we continue to offer these. I would like to see us offering a third elective as personnel permit – could be on a topic such as women's health issues, financial management, issues for seniors. Perhaps canvassing the congregation for specific topics. Also publicizing more what we do to the community. Offering courses on conflict/divorce/single-parenting, etc.*

*[The new children's programme] provides more opportunity to learn/enjoy music that is specifically age appropriate. May need more parent involvement to manage children in coffee times/after courses and provide program leadership/assistance.*

*Any organization, we are not an exception, needs to continue growing and changing. Our church should consider encouraging the younger generation to be more involved in leadership and worship programs. With the current change in worship style we are heading in the right direction.*

*The balance of traditional and contemporary music [in worship services] has to be maintained ... I would like to see us integrating new music – perhaps one new song per month (a guideline other churches are using). Opportunity for youth to introduce new songs which may be livelier and appealing and meaningful to them. Would like to see more freedom to pray/share/emphasize lyrics or themes in worship with repetition of parts of songs, pause for quiet meditation, etc.*

We collated all the responses, publishing them anonymously, for all members of the congregation to read. This allowed people to hear others' voices. Those who strongly supported the changes were able to hear from those with concerns. And those who were reluctant to embrace the changes had the opportunity to understand the enthusiasm of those excited by our new approach. To gain more feedback, we had a congregational meeting in May to allow others to express their impressions of the changes, and to dream about their ideas for the future.

Observation has been the part of the process with which I, as a person educated in social science research, have been most dissatisfied. In my previous research projects, in graduate programmes in social geography and education, the nature of the projects and social relationships between myself (as researcher) and my subjects enabled me to use a variety of well-established research techniques. I conducted structured and semi-structured interviews that I audiotaped for future transcription and

analysis; I charted layouts; I used sociometric methods; I used surveys and questionnaires; I used participant journals and social histories. As pastor of a local church conducting research in and for the congregation, however, the relationship was different. The intimate pastor-congregant relationship is built upon principles of vulnerability and confidentiality. I had to be very aware I did not violate this trust. I had to clearly identify to people when I was asking research questions about our process of change and when I was relating to people, in confidence, as pastor. I found people anxious to know what role (pastor or researcher) I was assuming as I talked with them. People wanted to know which comments I was passing on as part of the evaluation of change, and which comments were said confidentially. I was surprised to discover that I had to 're-earn' the trust of some members who suspected my dual motives. I became very aware that in participant research, conversation, as a form of research enquiry, becomes ambiguous and ethically problematic unless the nature of a specific conversation is clearly identified.

Other techniques – audiotaping, participant journals, life histories – were perceived to be too invasive to be used. Sociometric strategies and charting did not suit our circumstances. The leadership was willing to accommodate open-ended questions on the questionnaire, but did not wish to have closed or scaled items. Our observation, then, was more ethnographic than research with which I was involved previously. I appreciated Sara Delamont's insights on ethnography:

*the researcher values the views, perspectives, opinions, prejudices and beliefs of the informants, actors or respondents she is studying, and is going to take them seriously. This does not mean being naïve or credulous – informants may lie to you, or be deluded or misinformed themselves. But it does mean paying attention to the outlook of the people in the setting or culture you are studying. Your job is to find out how the people you are researching understand their world. (1992, p. 7)*

Part of my task as the facilitator of the research task was to encourage our leadership to 'pay attention to the outlook of people', to hear what congregants were actually saying. I found that both myself and the lay leaders tended to react – positively or negatively – to comments they heard about the changes without exploring more deeply the meaning church members were really expressing. We struggled to detach our own emotions to hear, genuinely, what was being said and probe more deeply into people's understandings of *their* experiences. Learning to observe in a critical fashion has been a challenging experience both for me and for our leaders.

Richard Winter (1998b) comments that theory in action research is 'a form of improvisatory self-realisation' where theoretical resources are not predefined but are shaped by the research process itself. That has been our experience. During these 6 months, I encouraged our leaders (and myself) to continue investigating models in other churches by talking to other people,

reading, and visiting other congregations. I provided our Board of Deacons with reading material on other possibilities and foundational principles for congregational growth and change. Using the model of 'policy governance' developed by John Carver (1997), I challenged our board to be more proactive in observation, reflection and planning. We learned together how to do action research in a church congregation.

After another congregational meeting at which we shared our thoughts, feelings, impressions and dreams, the leadership team (Board of Deacons, committee chairs, and others who wished to be involved), reshaped and replanned our programmes. We made modifications to address some of the concerns. We tried to be proactive, creating what we believed to be positive new initiatives to improve our programmes further. Purposely, we included all who wanted to be involved in the process. When we came up with a plan, we ensured that the entire congregation had the opportunity to hear and discuss the proposals before we introduced them. These changes were then introduced.

We are now in the process of observing the effects of this second set of changes. We are committed to a process of ongoing observation, reflection, planning, acting etc. While I need to keep pushing to ensure the cycle keeps moving, people are genuinely pleased with the model we are using. One of the realities of congregational life is that this is a slow process. We have been at the process of intentional change for over 2 years, and we are just enacting our second action plan. Because churches are volunteer organisations, individuals have limited time available for planning meetings, roundtable discussions, intentional observation, and reflection. As the only full-time staff in the church, I can get frustrated, wanting the process to proceed more quickly. However, in order to ensure the necessary collaboration occurs, I have had to be patient. Also, because church activities tend to take place weekly (at most), the effects of change can take several months to become apparent. In some congregations, attendance varies tremendously seasonally, so changes enacted in May might not even be known to a large portion of the congregation until October. To allow for reasonable feedback, a planning team must wait until the next year before planning further changes. I have found a key role I can play is simply to keep our action research spiral going. Because things can appear to move so slowly, it is possible for the process to stop. In hindsight, the process has tended to proceed more by intermittent stops and starts throughout the year (stopping at Easter, summer and Christmas; starting in January, late spring and fall) than as a steady motion. To date, the process has never been paused longer than a couple of months, but the potential for that certainly exists. I have had to keep pushing.

## Reflection

'The process has not been without pain', reflects Michael West candidly on his experiences of action research (1993, p. 365). I must confess that I can identify with his honest evaluation. My life as a pastor has become harder and more complex through the process of action research. However, it has also been exciting to see new possibilities emerging.

One of the things that I have noticed is that my professional role, as pastor, has changed substantially. Pastoral theologians have been noting that these changes are occurring. They contend that pastors need to be more proactive in redefining their role (Martin, 1998). Action research has involved me in the exercise of creating a new, meaningful professional identity and pastoral role. However, that process has been challenging. In a traditional pastoral paradigm of 'official' leadership, pastors were the professionals who provided direction and ministry for their congregations. In the emerging 'gifted' leadership paradigm, pastors share leadership and ministry with people in the churches. 'Giving up' leadership authority is a change I knew would happen through action research; philosophically, I welcomed it as a necessary part of empowering laypeople. But the actual transition was painful. As a congregation, we have made decisions about our life together that, if I were the sole decision-maker, would have been made differently. Although I expressed my opinions, I went along with the collaborative consensus. I resisted the temptation to try to use my 'official' power in an inappropriate way.

Not receiving the credit for changes has also been challenging for me. As we reviewed our changes, people were excited: 'We said we'd do it – and we did it!' I felt like saying, 'OK, you came up with specific ideas, but I provided the process'. I felt marginalised in the process. Of course, I have been an integral part of the journey all along and I am continuing to push the process forward. But I recognise that now, instead of being the leader in front of the congregation (and receiving the credit), I am leading from behind. I am still leading, but I am leading by pushing the process of planning, implementing, observing, reflecting rather than being the one who is doing all the work in the church. In my journal I wrote:

*In my head, I know we have made the right changes. It is great to see people taking the initiative and providing leadership. But in my heart it's hard to take. I feel left out. I feel almost like they're moving on ahead of me and I'm running to catch up. On the other hand, I'm still needed, to help keep them running. To help keep them running in the right direction.*

I was concerned that the church would not need me any more as lay leaders emerged. In retrospect, my role has not been made redundant, but has been transformed. Instead of being the one who does everything, I have become more of a coach, helping others do many of the activities I used to do. I help other people become competent teachers. I coach others how to provide

basic counselling. I work with others to design and lead a meaningful worship service.

This has changed perceptions of me by some people in the congregation. Some people would like the pastor to be more 'upfront.' One person commented that he would like to see me doing more teaching because 'that's what we pay you to do'. Other people, however, are thriving in the new roles that they have found. And I have found myself busier than ever, mentoring, encouraging, and helping these people. I have found myself spending more time with the lay leaders in the congregation – helping them grow – and less time actually doing much of the work of the church. To that end, I find myself reading and studying more in the areas of leadership and practical ministry so that I can nurture those skills in others.

I do still have much contact with all people in the congregation. As noted earlier, however, at times I have found the ambiguity of my role as pastor-researcher confusing both for myself and for congregants. I have found it difficult to balance the intimate, confidential nature of pastor-congregant relationships with my role as observer for the purposes of improving our congregational practice. I must clarify the purposes of my conversations with people to avoid ethical problems and mistrust.

More than I had expected, I have grown, personally and professionally, through this experience. Personally, I have been stimulated and challenged by the insights others have brought forward. I have been encouraged to see individuals developing skills and abilities in leadership. I have sensed an enthusiasm among people who feel their voices are valued, whose ideas are valid, and whose dreams become enacted. Professionally, I have learned new skills in team leadership and ethnographic research. This has been a stretching experience. There have been times when I have felt like a novice, barely able to provide the leadership, resources and skills the congregation has needed. However, the humility these experiences have brought has furthered the collaborative, community-creating nature of the action research process. As we have learned together, we have grown together, and led together. I am learning more and more what it means to work as a collegial team.

At a congregational level, the changes have been both exciting and painful. Among the positive aspects have been some of the changes that have been enacted. Perhaps even more substantive has been the personal growth among individuals in the congregation who have had the opportunity to discover, develop and hone their skills, abilities and gifts. But there has also been pain. Not all people in the congregation have seen the changes as positive. On both the questionnaires and at the meetings several people have expressed discontent with the changes that were enacted. Significantly, these people are willing to support and be involved in the process as long as they feel their voices are heard and their concerns respected. The commitment, in action research, to observation and reflection has been critically comforting to these people. But not all people

in the congregation have been willing to be part of the process of collaborative change. At least one couple chose not to be involved in the planning process and were very agitated by the changes implemented. When they were invited to interact constructively in the process – through the ongoing meetings for observation and reflection – they withdrew completely from the life of the church. In a letter to the Board of Deacons, they expressed feelings of deep hurt, anger and betrayal at what they felt was a deliberate attempt to devalue and embarrass them. Their perceptions were objectively unfounded and inaccurate, but subjectively authentic enough to motivate them to move to another, very traditional church. Personally, I found this disappointing and frustrating. However, I am learning that transition – no matter how carefully orchestrated – may be problematic for some people. Some people will choose not to be part of the process, no matter how strongly they are urged to be. And when changes occur, they may complain that they had no opportunity to express their concerns. Their charges may not be accurate, but that is how they feel. And their feelings may lead them to act in ways that I may not anticipate or appreciate.

A challenge for some people has been the recognition that this is a long-term process. Some felt that the action research experience would be a once-and-for-all process that would solve our problems. After one cycle we would be 'done'. However, what we have discovered is that action research must be an ongoing cycle of planning-acting-observing-reflecting for us to remain relevant to a dynamic neighbourhood with high levels of transience. We are learning that we will never arrive at a 'perfect practice' but must be in a continual cycle of reflection, planning, acting and observing. Initially, some people were disappointed and discouraged that 'we didn't get it right the first time'. I have tried to help people understand that we need to see constant change as an essential part of our corporate identity as we interact with transitions in our community and congregation.

Perhaps even more significantly, we have discovered that action research is messy: it exposes issues and concerns that we did not know existed or were relevant to our work – both in the church and in the community. As our understanding of our community and our church has increased, so has our knowledge of questions that we wish to address. We have found ourselves, in the second cycle of action research, identifying new concerns we want to explore. We have also discovered aspects of our church and neighbourhood we wish we did not know! The increasing layers of complexity we have uncovered have made our life together more complicated. But we also are aware of more possibilities for potential action that we never perceived previously. The 'space of the possible' has been enlarged through our experiences.

Overall, we are pleased with our journey into action research as a congregation. It addresses our concern to improve our practice as a congregation. It has been empowering for laypeople in the church to provide input and to take initiative in the process of change. As a congregation, we

have benefited by hearing many voices speaking about our dreams and our fears. Personally and professionally, I have been challenged and I have grown in my self-awareness and in my pastoral practice. Life has become messier and more challenging – and more exciting – both for the congregation and for myself. We see new possibilities. We are dreaming new dreams. We are changing.

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### **Notes**

- [1] In this article, the terms 'church', 'congregation' and 'local church' are used synonymously to refer to a local religious community.
- [2] The terms 'clergy', 'pastors', 'ministers' and 'priests' are used synonymously in this article to denote professional religious workers serving in local churches. The terms reflect preferences in denominational nomenclature rather than substantive functional differences.
- [3] The terms 'theological college' and 'seminary' (reflecting denominational and institutional preferences) are used synonymously in this article to refer to the educational institutions that educate clergy. Most clergy in major denominations have an undergraduate degree (often in an unrelated discipline, although some have degrees in religious disciplines) plus a professional graduate degree.
- [4] For example, in Galatians 3.28, Paul emphasises equality of race, social position and gender as he writes, 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (New International Version). The radical equality proposed by Christian ethics is discussed in Carmody & Carmody (1993) and Crook (1999).
- [5] Jesus's agenda included radical social change, characterised by social harmony and equality (Sanders, 1985). For example, in Matthew 5.13-16, these words of Jesus are recorded: 'You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men. You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven'. Later, in Matthew 25.31-40, Jesus is quoted as saying, 'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the King will



say to those on his right, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?" The King will reply, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me" (New International Version). For a fuller discussion of Christian social ethics, see Carmody & Carmody (1993) and Crook (1999).

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