Theological Reflection:

Reflections on the challenges of using the pastoral cycle in a faith-based organisation

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to reflect upon my experience of using the pastoral cycle with colleagues in the UK Headquarters of The Salvation Army. I am attempting to hold myself to account for the aspirations I shared in my plenary presentation at last year’s BIAPT. For new readers, I have been for the last 22 months the Head of Public Affairs for The Salvation Army. That role involves promoting and defending the work of the organisation in the political and policy sphere in the interests of greater social justice for those we serve. I come to this role from fifteen years working as an academic in practical theology. I accepted the new role with a stated commitment to help The Salvation Army, which is both a denomination and a large service-providing charity sound genuinely faith-based in its public pronouncements.

In this paper I want to rehearse three experiences that have been influential on my approach and then describe the joys and challenges of doing theological reflection with colleagues. Then I will evaluate what I have done using ideas presented in last year’s plenary. Finally I will draw some conclusions about the way forward.

Influences on my approach

In this section I will talk about three experiences that have been influential in my approach to theological reflection. Very happily each of them involves BIAPT colleagues and so it will be a pleasure to acknowledge their hard work as I proceed.

Faith-Based Facilitation (Judith Thompson)

I have long felt that if theological reflection is not built into the ordinary working practices of individual ministers and faith-based organisations it will never take root and so retain the status of ‘something we learned at college’. An opportunity to embed the pastoral cycle came when I was approached by Major Dean Pallant who works at the International Headquarters of The Salvation Army and was at that time reviewing the health ministry of The Salvation Army across the world but in particular in South Asia, the Indian sub-continent and Africa. He was concerned that international development work and those who fund it had built a secular individualistic world view that left little room for faith in the planning and evaluation of development projects. He invited me as Director of OxCEPT to work with him to look at how practice in facilitating development work could be
enhanced. I involved Judith Thompson who had recently published the excellent SCM Guide to Theological Reflection. Judith did the hard work of understanding the brief and producing a text in English that was suitable for second language users. I’m afraid I got the international travel and facilitated three workshops in Hong Kong, South India and Kenya to test the materials.

I took away a different lesson about the pastoral cycle from each workshop. The Hong Kong workshop made me aware of how powerful scriptural narrative is in engaging the imagination in theological reflection. Invited to act out the story they were using the group from Papua New Guinea had script, cast and extensive props assembled in a few minutes whilst Australian delegates were still getting over their embarrassment. Working in remote locations with no resources the PNG delegates were used to doing all their planning through interactive groups and used impromptu drama to explain the bible in the absence of readily available hard copy in the local language. The workshop in Conoor, India assembled delegates from across the country who were involved in health ministries. I had asked delegates to come with a bible in their birth language as well as the translation they would normally use. Amongst 36 delegates there were 12 languages and small groups eagerly looked at how passages differed between these languages and the English and Hindi they shared across the group. They knew the text well and were able to look at how some languages shared the same root for a significant word. They were quick to suggest additional texts to open up the issues we were exploring. By the time of the workshop in West Kenya the Faith-based Facilitation resource had been developed and the aim was to test a translation into Swahili and French. Delegates came from across Africa and the barriers between Anglophone and Francophone delegates was soon broken down by the intermittent power supply. While we waited for the generator to kick in each group taught the other songs in their own language. One of the valuable ideas we had taken from Judith Thompson’s book was that insights or ‘kairos moments’ can occur at any stage in the process but need to be attended too. We weren’t sure how well this concept would cross languages but got a group to enact the Emmaus Road story. The idea of using scripture as preparatory to kairos moments was recognised by all present.

This was an inspiring experience which my colleague Dean Pallant has written up in his recently published book ‘Keeping faith in faith-based organisations’. The resource Judith wrote has now been translated into seven languages and is freely available on the International Salvation Army website.

Theological Reflection for Human Flourishing

(Victoria Slater, John Reader with Chris Rowland – some participants are also here)

A conversation with Chris Baker and John Reader of William Temple Foundation identified a shared interest in bridging the gap between pastoral practice and public theology. We resolved to set up an action learning event with the following aims.

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1 This work was funded by NORAD the development funding arm of the Norwegian Government plus donated income from Norwegian Salvationists.
1. To enable those who work in business, healthcare, schools and regeneration to reflect upon their pastoral encounters
2. To enable those who work in ministry to reflect upon their institutional encounters when they go into businesses, hospitals, schools and regeneration projects.
3. To generate encounters between these two groups that identify points of solidarity and tension through a process of theological reflection
4. To generate resources that can be published and used to facilitate further encounters between Christian practitioners.

The event took place in April 2010 and the resulting book was published in March 2012, *Theological Reflection for Human Flourishing: Public Theology and Pastoral Practice*. We decided to use the pastoral cycle as the format for the event because we assumed it would be well known to participants and would provide a framework within which discussions could take place. We were fortunate in securing the services of Professor Chris Rowland to facilitate the session on engaging with scripture. However, our assumptions proved flawed. Those of a certain age had been trained before the teaching of theological reflection had been standard practice and so were not familiar with the pastoral cycle. No one had brought a bible with them and despite excellent input from Chris there were some sharp questions about why Christian practitioners might use it. Chapter 6 of the book summarises this part of the experience but here are the headlines.

First, there was a fear of getting stuck behind the text – of not being sufficiently expert in the historical and critical study of the bible to make use of it in reflection upon practice. Second, there were honest doubts about the salience of the text for the context in which some of the practitioners worked. It you were trying to make imaginative connections with a prisoner or mental health patient would you not turn to popular culture before turning to the bible which would be a strange text. Third, some practitioners had concerns that this text could be seen as somehow a trump card or closing down the conversation in a plural context. If we don’t share these scriptures what power are you trying to exert by referring to them. Chris helpfully diffused some of these concerns by pointing to a thematic reading of the New Testament. But they were diffused rather than dissolved.

*H+ Making Good Sense of the Bible*

(Ann Holt Bible Society, Andrew Rogers)

In moving to work for The Salvation Army I was interested to explore how I could get colleagues to engage in theological reflection on the many social issues the organisation tackles as a charity. I was looking for a language that was neither patronising nor baffling but did justice to the centrality of scripture in the doctrinal basis of the denomination. The transition from academic life into a busy headquarters was not easy but I gain two impressions very quickly. Firstly the level of internal secularisation was greater even than I had anticipated (Chaves 1993). Just as the development world was imposing its world view on the international Salvation Army, so the world view of risk and regulation which attends the provision of any form of social care these days was the dominant discourse. However alongside that, the second impression was equally powerful that many of my colleagues were working for the organisation precisely because they wanted it to articulate a
Christian world view. I was faced with the same lack of confidence in using scripture but I was also aware of an immense cultural savvy that was an assumed part of everyday life.

I was a trustee of the Bible Society from 2008 to 2011 and so aware of the excellent work of Bible advocacy going on under the leadership of Ann Holt. The survey evidence shows that both the use and salience of the bible are declining in UK churches and that cultural references in wider society to the bible are still present but less common. With the help of Andrew Rogers, the Bible Society researched this problem, devised a course in hermeneutics for ordinary Christians and piloted the material in a range of Churches. I was fortunate to secure a place on the first course to train facilitators to use this material called H+: Making good sense of the Bible. I could see immediately that although the course was designed for local churches it could also be used in the work place. My hunch was that it would help people get over the hurdle that turning to scripture in theological reflection required an expertise they didn’t possess. I ran the first course intensively over ten lunchtimes for eight heads of department in August 2011. I ran it again over ten weeks at the beginning of 2012 and I’m currently seeking nominees for a third course starting in October.

The course takes participants through the three different hermeneutical positions: behind the text, in the text and in front of the text. This builds to a session on the pastoral cycle where participants can put their knowledge into practice in reflecting upon homelessness. Its effect was as hoped, a sense of confidence that theological reflection is something that employees can take part in.

Using the pastoral cycle in a faith-based organisation – the case of Community Services

(Jim Sweeney, Clare Watkins, Catherine Duce)

The purpose of the Public Affairs team which I lead is to promote and defend the work of The Salvation Army in the political and policy sphere in the interests of greater social justice for those we seek to serve. If we are to do this adequately I feel we need statements which articulate our theological rationale for the different services we provide in a language which is accessible to the political and policy audience but does not shy away from the Christian tradition.

I have used the people who have done the H+ course as a pool from which to draw participants who will work together to undertake the pastoral cycle on an area of our work commissioned by the person who leads it. So far we have done Homelessness and Community Services and we plan to do further cycles on High St Betting (the Salvation Army campaigns rather than provides in this area!) and our services to older people.

Last year I had the privilege of speaking at one of the plenaries of this conference about my understanding of the Community Services work of The Salvation Army and its need for an espoused theology. I drew upon the four voices of theology – a model of theological reflection that has emerged from the ARCS project. I tried to show how the activist nature of The Salvation Army needs to be complemented by a more reflective mode that engages with doctrine and scripture and produces an espoused voice which whilst being provisional articulates the theological rationale for the organisation’s work.
The paper took the form of a personal reflection on my own experiences of volunteering for my local church at Christmas. Community Services is the name that The Salvation Army gives to the social action of the local church. In my reflection, published in Practical Theology 5, I identified four things I would wish to espouse:

- Being both supportive of and subversive of family life
- Being both compliant and compassionate
- Being pastoral, practical and political
- Seeking well-being not just symptom control.

I was delighted when Capt. Elizabeth Hayward asked if we could do the pastoral cycle with some colleagues who had done the H+ course to produce a statement that expressed our rationale for engaging community services. A group of eight of us met over four sessions to work through the cycle.

The hand-out gives you the draft statement that has emerged from that process. The statement is on the front and the bible passages that were used in developing the statement are on the back. I’ve left in the annotations that reached me once the first draft was circulated. (Give time to read it).

My summation of it would be that it focuses on inclusion, belonging and treating people holistically. It doesn’t deal with the need for regulatory compliance nor does it articulate a political dimension to the work. It is not for me to impose those agendas. I suspect in classic Salvation Army fashion they will emerge in practice and be incorporated in future reflections.

**Evaluation**

I now want to stand back and evaluate the work I have done on theological reflection.

*How effective is this statement as espoused theology?*

This statement has yet to make it into the public domain. I hope that it will appear in a short report on our Community Services work by the end of the year.

It has proved its effectiveness with the staff involved in raising their confidence in what we are trying to do in Community Services. The group that worked on the statement included colleagues from the Community Services team but also fundraising, older people’s services and employment services. This range of perspectives exposed different understandings of what was being done in particular the difference between doing things with people and for people.

It has also raised confidence that the bible can be put at the heart of what we say about the organisation something which is both embedded in its doctrinal statements and in it symbolism.

On the basis of the work done with the ARCS project I would say that it will only have proved its worth as a piece of espoused theology when it is challenged by practitioners and falling short of what they are doing and so create the demand for a fresh cycle of theological reflection. My best estimate is that we are still quite a way from the sort of embedding of this work that would enable this to happen.
How does it measure up to my six criteria for PT?

In my paper last year I proposed six criteria for Practical Theology and so finally I want to look at how this piece of theological reflection has matched up.

1. Transformative of belief or action or both
I would say that the main transformation is a shared belief that the kairos moment can be discerned but not predicted or controlled. In some respects it can be seen as the same as the ‘light bulb’ moment experienced in any facilitation when the group starts to produce together more than its individuals could produce alone. What makes it particularly Christian is its intent and its reference to scripture as normative. However, these moments are tentative and fragile and need further practice to be consolidated.

2. Connects the pastoral, practical and political
There has been a strong connection of the pastoral with the practical in this pastoral cycle. A sense that the pastoral care that results from the provision of community services is mutually dependent upon intentional good practice. I think courtesy of the Coalition government connections to the political will emerge. An example of political awareness is one Divisional Director of Community Services who is encouraging churches to record the reason whenever they give out a food parcel. He is then processing the data to see what the issues are that are bringing increasing numbers of people to our doors seeking food. The data from one community centre shows that 55% of requests are due to delayed benefit payments. The planned introduction of Universal Credit in October 2013 will make all benefit payments in a single lump sum to one member of the household monthly in arrears. This is generating huge energy around how low income households will adapt. My team are planning how to lobby around this issue.

3. Methodologically self-aware
After a brief reminder at the beginning of each set of meetings the group are now comfortable with the three hermeneutical positions and the pastoral cycle. I’ve hinted at the four voices of theology but got some baffled looks and so I’m holding back until confidence builds. The tension between the espoused and operant voices has been evident in the conversations and turning to scripture as a way of exploring those tensions has felt appropriate.

4. Seeking dialogue with ‘others’
At one level a conversation between employees of the headquarters of a faith-based organisation could seem a very in-house and monochrome affair. However, the headquarters of TSA is no different to that of other faith-based organisations with tensions between ordained ministers and employees and tensions about what sort of input can be expected from employees of other faiths or none. This parallels with the work the ARCS project did with CAFOD and is anecdotally confirmed in other similar settings. Each course so far has been predominantly employees but involved officers who were comfortable with peer learning. In the first course all employees were Christians and some of those also, like me, were Salvationists. In the second course not all staff members identified as Christian and one identified as of Muslim origin but currently an agnostic. We also had a staff member who has worked extensively overseas and so was able to offer interpretations of well-known passages from other cultures. We found, as did CAFOD that these differences greatly enhanced the discussion.
5. Pedagogically apt
Nominated bible passages were printed out on paper rather than using bibles as a way of levelling out the very different levels of biblical literacy in the group. Participants showed huge generosity in accommodating different levels of biblical literacy showing skill in being facilitated. However, as one group member pointed out I am an experience teacher, trainer and facilitator and so experienced in negotiating bumps in the road. The skill of facilitation is much under-valued in the life of the church and sadly not yet routinely taught to those entering ministry. At its simplest I had to ensure that sessions started and finished on time having achieved their aim. In an over-busy working environment participants need to know that the session will start and finish reliably and they will come away having achieved something worthwhile for their investment of time.

6. In dialect but grammatically correct
Having participants from a range of Christian traditions and none helped greatly in ensuring that distinctive beliefs and characteristics of The Salvation Army were expressed in a comprehensible way.

These criteria have been a helpful way to check progress. The exercise has highlighted for me the value of a diversity of voices in the pastoral cycle sessions.

Conclusions

In conclusion it feels as if I have made some small but significant steps in the first two years. I have had to come to terms with the fact that theological reflection is much harder work in the work place than in the classroom. I thought all those eager students were pleased to see me but of course there were other more coercive factors getting them into the room on time. Finding space to do this has involved a lot of relationship building and then drawing heavily on that trust to create theological reflection sessions that are felt to be worthwhile.

Levels of biblical literacy are definitely lower than my comparative experiences with The Salvation Army in the two thirds world. However, hermeneutical skills are high and it is really a case of bringing those to people’s attention and persuading them to apply them to the biblical text and not just popular culture and organisational politics.

I have deliberately sought to do this work at the margins. I’ve not tried to make it official policy or mandatory. I remained convinced that theological reflection relies upon kairos moments and so people have to come into the room open to recognition.

The subjective turn (Heelas and Woodhead 2005) has been a key force in eroding Christendom and legitimising relativism. However it has equipped ordinary people with hermeneutical skills that can be put to the service of theological reflection. The key is to offer a vision of scripture and tradition as a living partner in the conversation.

I hope I have also demonstrated what an amazing network BIAPT is. I could not have done any of the things described without the intellectual, practical and emotional input of the colleagues mentioned. The place to conclude is to say how much I am in their debt.
Please return the hand out – I have permission to share it but not to put it into the public domain.

Words 3600

References


Websites

H+ Making good sense of the Bible  [www.hplus.org.uk/](http://www.hplus.org.uk/)