

THEOLOGICAL ACTION RESEARCH

Helen Cameron

Abstract

Theological Action Research has been developed within practical theology which is a sub-discipline of theology that takes a particular interest in the lived experience of religion. It is also interested in methodologies that enable religion to be studied as beliefs, practices, and identities. The chapter explains the origins of Theological Action Research and then a worked example is given explaining the different phases involved. The messiness of engaging with faith organizations and practitioners with their own agendas and timetables is highlighted. The chapter concludes by showing how the approach has been used and developed by members of the original research team, other researchers, and students. The chapter references the key literature on the methodology and in particular two books which give a detailed guide to its implementation.

Key Words: methods, Theological Action Research, practical theology, participatory, lived religion, conversation

C4P1 I am a researcher and doctoral supervisor in the discipline of practical theology who studies what people of faith do and what they say about what they do. My particular passion is working in participatory ways with people to investigate their beliefs and actions so that they can become more effective in responding to their context and more faithful to their religious tradition. I was a member of the research team that developed Theological Action Research and am currently co-leading a project that makes use of it at the Centre for Baptist Studies, Regent's Park College, Oxford.

C4P2 Practical theology is a sub-discipline of theology which takes a particular interest in the lived experience of religion and so is also interested in methodologies that enable it to be studied as beliefs, practices, and identities. The origins of Theological Action Research are explained in what follows, and then a worked example is given explaining the different phases involved. The messiness of engaging with faith organizations and practitioners with their own agendas and timetables is highlighted. The chapter concludes by showing how the approach has been used and developed by members of the original research team, other researchers, and students. The chapter references the key literature on the methodology and in particular two books which give a detailed guide to its implementation.

C4S1

INTRODUCTION

C4P3

The original team of researchers who developed theological action research were trying to understand the ways in which Roman Catholic and Church of England churches engaged with their local communities in the diverse city of London. We were able to partner with twelve different churches and faith initiatives over a period of four years helping them ask questions and undertake research about what they did. As the research progressed we encountered three problems that led us to gradually evolve this approach.

C4P4

First, we noticed that the organizations and people we partnered with were both passionate about their faith and also reticent in using faith language to describe what they did. They were concerned about alienating people from a different faith or non-faith identity and they were uncertain whether they had a voice in working with academics who they saw as experts in faith language. This made us curious about the role of theology (language and ideas about God) in the research process.

C4P5

Second, we noticed that one of the questions potential partners asked us about doing some research was whether it would have any real impact or whether it would result in a report with recommendations that sat on a shelf. We were asking for their time and energy and they wanted to know how that would benefit the work they were doing. This made us sensitive to the power dynamics in the relationships we formed.

C4P6

Third, we became aware of the assumptions we were bringing from our previous experience as researchers, namely that belief and action were two separate things which could be studied independently of each other. For our partners, however, their faith identity, faith practices, and the language of belief were an integrated way of life. This was most evident when we witnessed their worship, but we wondered how it also informed their community engagement. This made us sensitive to and questioning of our own faith identities and how they informed our practice as researchers.

C4P7

At an early stage we were attracted by action research with its commitment to partnership between academics and practitioners, inviting practitioners to set the research question and then working together to gather and analyse data and propose changes to practice. We continued to debate as a research team how adequately we were addressing the problems we were noticing. We realized that we were outside the practice we were studying and that the ownership of that practice needed to remain with those who were inside it. What we had in common with the faith practitioners was that we also had faith identities and so were comfortable that the research served the purposes of the practitioners which, coming from the Christian faith, we described as 'serving God's mission'.

C4P8

The definition of Theological Action Research (TAR) we arrived at was:

C4P9

A partnership between an insider and outsider team to undertake research and conversations answering theological questions about faithful practice in order to renew both theology and practice in the service of God's mission (Cameron et al. 2010, 63).

C4P10

This definition raises an important question about whether this approach is only suitable for researchers who have a faith identity, a question I will return to at the end of the chapter.

C4S2

A WORKED EXAMPLE

C4P11

This worked example comes from the original ARCS Project which started in 2006 at Heythrop College, London, and then in 2007 became a collaboration with Ripon College Cuddesdon, Oxford. In 2010 the research team published a book, *Talking About God in Practice*, which describes the methodology in detail with templates of documents used during the research process. This example comes from Chapter 12. In 2020 a further book was published by Clare Watkins, *Disclosing Church: An Ecclesiology Learned through Conversations in Practice*. In that book, 'Account of Practice E' (Watkins 2020, 158–168) deals with this same case. This second book both describes the original project and draws from it theological ideas about the nature of the church (ecclesiology).

C4P12

I will use 'we' and 'our' when referring to the work of the academic team of researchers (also the co-authors of the 2010 book) who were outside the practice and initiated the research.

C4S3

Exploratory phase

C4P13

Real life is messy and faith organizations are often part of complex networks which require time and conversations to understand. Because TAR seeks to work in partnership with faith practitioners it is necessary to take time to build relationships and keep checking whether there is the energy to commit to the research and move on to the next stage. Often a personal approach or existing relationship starts the process. In this example, we were approached by the Chief Executive of the faith-based charity Housing Justice who was already known to one of the team, seeking support in helping this organization reflect theologically on its work. Housing Justice had two roles, firstly to raise awareness and mobilize churches of all denominations to address the issue of homelessness and inadequate housing, and secondly, to act as a voice for the churches to advocate with politicians for justice for those without a settled place to live. Conversations with the Chief Executive and her colleagues identified the area of practice that they wished to focus upon with us, which turned out to be their work as the umbrella body supporting Cold Weather Shelters in London.

C4P14

It took further conversations to understand Cold Weather Shelters. They were formed of groups of seven churches who each undertook to provide a place to sleep one night a week during the months of January to March for people who would otherwise sleep on the streets. Housing Justice had taken on the task of offering advice and support to the groups of churches who ran them. The question that interested Housing Justice was: how does the involvement of the churches in the Cold Weather Shelter influence their theological outlook and the faith practice of the volunteers who run them? As outsiders to their work we were happy that this question fitted within our overall remit to explore the relationship between London churches and their local community.

C4P15

Housing Justice identified one of their Cold Weather Shelters who were interested in taking part in research, and we met with the coordinator of that shelter. From this conversation the importance of hearing the voices of the guests who stayed at the shelter was built into the research.

End of Excerpt

This is the accepted manuscript version of the article. In keeping with the publisher's self-archiving policy¹, up to 25% of this version is permitted in an institutional repository. The final version is available online from Oxford University Press.

¹ <https://academic.oup.com/pages/authoring/books/author-reuse-and-self-archiving>