



Theological Education as “Being With” the Future Church: Applied Research Among Local Leaders in an Australian Baptist Denomination

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Background

Organizations in changing contexts face uncertain futures. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic is changing the shape of the church. Such changes have implications for theological education and ministerial resourcing.

Purpose

In 2021, Whitley College and the Baptist Union of Victoria (BUV) commissioned research to clarify how a theological seminary might serve stakeholders. A posture of listening sought to understand how local ministry leaders envisioned the church and were responding to change.

Methods

A mixed-methods approach was utilized. Denominational literature, along with recent ecclesial literature, was examined. A mix of randomized and purposive selection resulted in fourteen individual interviews and eight focus groups ($n = 47$).

Note: A complete report was presented to Council, Whitley College, 50 The Avenue, Parkville VIC 3052, Australia in July 2021. The raw data was collected for the purposes of this study alone. The author is willing to collaborate with other researchers in further research into organizations in changing contexts, particularly in areas of theological education and leadership development.

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Participants came from BUV churches of all sizes, with 15 females and 32 males, 15 LOTE (Language Other Than English) and 32 native English speakers, and 8 who identified as lay. All interactions happened under the denominational Code of Ethics. A range of questions explored perceptions of the future church and experiences of leading in change. The interviews, ranging in length from between 60 to 105 minutes, were recorded. Participants confirmed a de-identified summary for thematic analysis.

Results

Every denominational participant was unanimous that the future church would be different from today's church. These local ministry leaders were seeking different types of relationships with organizations. Seminaries would be valued as they participated with the local church in learning relationships. Participation included academic research, which was appreciated as an essential resource, notably if it undertook contextual social research and empirical research into generational and multi-cultural realities, church vitality, and best practice in leadership. Those interviewed requested equipping in innovation, leading change, mission as neighborhood placemaking, and faith formation across generations.

A feature of the focus groups included the articulation of aspects of God seen as essential in the leading of change. One participant named God as patient, while several described God as creative in the midst of change. Another participant drew on a quote by British author and speaker Adrian Plass, "God is nice and he likes me" (2005: 10). These named attributes of God indicate that local church leaders are working with grassroots theologies in their leading of change. A distinctive theology of mission was present among LOTE participants. This theology focused on nurturing a second generation who, in time, might contribute across cultures in neighborhood witness.

Conclusions and Implications

A changing world presents significant opportunities for theological colleges and seminaries to re-invent themselves. Providers of theological formation have a significant role in resourcing the future church, particularly as they attend to collaborative and relational partnerships. Theological ethicist, Samuel Wells (2018) argues for the priority and value of "being with"; imitating Jesus who spent thirty years "being with" humanity as a child and carpenter. This research revealed multiple grassroots invitations for colleges and seminaries to position themselves as "being with" local churches. Research partnerships in local ecclesial sites have the potential to deepen conversations between theory and practice. Cultivating teaching partnerships would allow grassroots leadership theologies to inform theories of leading change and enhance the diversity of voices in the learning context.

Together, these changes point colleges and seminaries toward a renewed focus on local contextual theologies, empirical research, and grassroots partnerships. Such

participation requires accompanying the local church, not as a problem to be fixed or a base for recruitment, but in a shared human quest to learn in change.

References

- Plass, A. 2005. *The Sacred Diary of Adrian Plass, Aged 37 3/4*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
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