Answers on a Postcard: Photo Elicitation in the Service of Local Ecclesial Strategy

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Abstract

This article reports the findings of a practical Theological Action Research project in a Church of England diocese in the UK, using photo elicitation. This image-based approach resulted in findings that echoed existing diocesan strategies, but also highlighted other issues that may otherwise have remained implicit, specifically the mode of mission and concerns regarding growth and survival. The visual data itself is analysed, revealing that the images do not always function as direct signifiers, but instead were generating creative, intuited responses. From the data, four mirrors were developed to reflect back to the groups their responses. This approach enabled local strategies to emerge from within espoused theologies, but also to make explicit their coherence or departure from the normative missiologies of the diocese. Finally, the authors suggest that the exposure of church leaders within training to qualitative research methodologies is releasing a new kind of leadership to emerge.

Keywords

visual research – mission – participation – ministry training – leadership

1 Introduction

Recent years have seen a shift toward a democratisation of knowledge for professional practice. For Practical Theology, this has entailed a turn to empirical, often qualitative and ethnographic, methods for generating knowledge regarding ministry practice. Scholarly theologians are now joined by people from all walks of life as 'knowers' when it comes to issues of faith. Turning to the empirical taps into contemporary thinking around everyday religion¹ and ordinary theology² and influences the teaching and training of future church leaders.³

This movement has energised an interest in developing creative, qualitative research methods that are able to elicit stories of faith and spirituality. Goto has explored how using art within theological reflection enables a 'decentring' which can lead to 'an expanded notion of reflecting that gives form to the sayable and in ineffable'.⁴ Radford has outlined how 'creative arts-based' research methods are not only generative in terms of eliciting existing conceptions from participants, but the process of working with these creative expressions actually functions to generate theological knowledge that may have been previously unknown, even to participants themselves.⁵ Bennett et al. observe that creative arts approaches move beyond being a 'useful' research method and enables practical theology to engage with homiletics, liturgy, sacred music and spiritual discipline as 'creative practices' in and of themselves.⁶

This article explores how photo elicitation methods, designed for research projects, are being adapted to draw out missiological conceptions and visions from church goers to be used by leaders to develop missional strategies across geographic regions. In this case, the ministry practice is a mission action plan meeting, designed to make decisions that shape a church's missional activities. Is it possible that this very meeting could be a 'creative practice'?

1 Nancy Ammerman, *Everyday Religion: observing modern religious lives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

2 Jeff Astley, *Ordinary Theology: Looking, Listening and Learning in Theology* (London: Routledge, 2017).

3 See for example Mary Clark Moschella & Susan Willhauck (eds.), *Qualitative Research in Theological Education: Pedagogy in Practice*, (London: SCM, 2018).

4 Courtney Goto, 'Reflecting Theologically by Creating Art: Giving Form to More Than We Can Say', *Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry* 36, p. 80. <http://journals.sfu.ca/rpfs/index.php/rpfs/article/view/426/413> [accessed 6 April 2020].

5 Clare Radford, 'Creative arts-based research methods in practical theology: constructing new theologies of practice', *Practical Theology*, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1756073X.2020.1727626> [accessed 6 April 2020].

6 Zöe Bennett, Elaine Graham, Stephen Pattison, and Heather Walton, *Invitation to Research in Practical Theology*, (Abingdon, Oxon, and New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 152–154.

Once upon a time, it was not uncommon for magazines to invite people to respond to a question or issue by asking readers to send ‘answers on a postcard, please’ to the magazine. In everyday parlance this has come to mean, ‘if anyone knows the answer, please tell me.’ Certainly, this practice speaks to the democratisation of knowledge which now has become commonplace on social media. This article presents a case study of how ecclesial strategic planning was informed by this practice of gathering communal wisdom. In this case, the actual image on the postcard was central to the process, a technique that is referred to as ‘photo elicitation’.

It is good practice within Practical Theology to acknowledge how those writing about a situation or practice are related to it. We hope that this approach lends a reflexivity – a self-awareness – of how our own vested interests are tied up within the arguments that unfold within the article. Sarah Dunlop, a researcher and theological educator, has used photo elicitation methods in her work for nearly twenty years. She has argued that using photographs within research expands the possibilities for reading the everyday theologies of people and institutions.⁷ This article tests and discusses this argument as it applies to knowledge within ministry practice. Jon Marlow, a researcher, priest and former Mission Community Development Advisor for a large, predominantly rural diocese in the Southwest of England, is the creator of the ‘Answers on a Postcard’ process. This project was central to his work with churches and groups of churches as it introduced and stimulated a conversation about vision and strategy. These, in turn, led to the writing of a locally owned Mission Action Plan that was both realistic and stretching and answers the question: ‘how are we called to be the people in God in this particular place at this particular time?’

The first section of this paper explores the development of photo elicitation methods particularly in terms of their inclusive, participatory nature. The following section explains how the exploratory project, ‘Answers on a Postcard’ was conducted. Then, we outline the key results as they relate to existing conceptual frameworks for Church of England missiology. Before concluding, we discuss how this approach was uniquely able to shed light on the issues and yielded knowledge that could not otherwise have been accessed.

7 Sarah L.B. Dunlop, 2020. ‘Photo Elicitation’ in *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion* eds. Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler (London, Routledge) forthcoming.

2 Methodology

Photo elicitation is a visual ethnographic research method that has been increasingly used within the social sciences. Dunlop and others have developed this method for use within theology, particularly studies of lived or everyday religion. Essentially, photo elicitation entails using photographs to draw out conversation. Within a research setting, the researcher would display photographs during an interview or focus group and invite participants to comment upon them in a variety of ways. This section gives some background about the development of photo elicitation and why this method of facilitative conversation has become popular among researchers.

The term 'photo elicitation' was first coined by anthropologist John Collier in an article published in 1957. In his exploration of the experiences of people who had been resettled, he noted that whereas interviews that relied only on conversation seemed governed by the mood of the people being interviewed, using photographs enabled more precise and measured conversation. He attributes this to the very nature of requiring people to respond in some way to the images.⁸ Later, sociologist Douglas Harper became a proponent of photo elicitation. Based on his own research using archives of historical photographs and documentary-style photographs taken by himself, he observed that:

...images evoke deeper elements of human consciousness than do words; exchanges based on words alone utilize less of the brain's capacity than do exchanges in which the brain is processing images as well as words. These may be some of the reasons the photo elicitation interview seems like not simply an interview process that elicits more information, but rather one that evokes a different kind of information.⁹

He also noted that using images can help to draw out from people a new awareness about aspects of their life that they might otherwise overlook.¹⁰

Dunlop used photographs to explore the spirituality of young people in six different former Soviet countries.¹¹ Using a different archive of photographs for each location, but with similar categories of images, she and a team of

8 John Collier Jr., 1957. Photography in Anthropology: a report on two experiments. *American Anthropologist* 59: 843–59, p. 856.

9 Douglas Harper, 2002. Talking about pictures: a case for photo elicitation. *Visual Studies* 17(1): 13–26, p. 13.

10 Douglas Harper, 2001. *Changing Works: Visions of a Lost Agriculture*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

11 Sarah Dunlop, 2008. *Visualising Hope*. YTC Press, Cambridge.

local researchers explored with students how their spirituality and religious affiliation shapes their identity. Dunlop found that using images in this way enabled her to dig beneath the surface of national religious identity into the everyday lived religion of her participants. In a later study of Polish migrants to the UK, Dunlop observed that images broadened the research encounter beyond cerebral responses to a set of questions. Talking about the photographs led to conversations that tapped into the intuitive, emotive levels of life experience, enabling discussions of situations or events that might otherwise be overlooked.¹² Photo elicitation is able to bring to the surface insights that any other method would overlook. As Leonard and McKnight argue, photo elicitation methods 'tap into or bring to the fore memories, ideals or social worlds that may easily be missed, misinterpreted or seen as unimportant.'¹³

Dunlop argues that photo elicitation enables the curation of a space for participants to narrate their own stories as they respond to the photos.¹⁴ Thus meaning making happens collaboratively as people gather around a group of photos and talk about them. Harper put this quite succinctly when he observed, 'When two or more people discuss the meaning of photographs they try to figure out something together. This is, I believe, an ideal model for research.'¹⁵ Indeed, meaning making together occurs quite naturally as people respond to the images and share their thoughts in writing or through speaking. Furthermore, the researcher has relinquished the power to control the conversation, sitting beside people (rather than face-to-face) as together they look at the photos.¹⁶

3 Methods

Answers on a Postcard is a focus-group exercise which uses photo-elicitation to stimulate a conversation about what is important to church members in a Church of England diocese and how they see God at work, now and in the future. The exercise was intended to form part of a process whereby local leaders and church members corporately discern a vision and strategy for the next

¹² Sarah Dunlop and Pete Ward, 2014. Narrated photography: visual representations of the sacred among young Polish migrants in England. *Fieldwork in Religion*. 9(1): 30–52.

¹³ Madeleine Leonard & Martina McKnight, 'Look and tell: using photo-elicitation methods with teenagers', in *Children's Geographies* 13:6, 629–642, pp. 630.

¹⁴ Dunlop and Ward, 2014.

¹⁵ Harper, 2002, p. 23.

¹⁶ Roman Williams & Kyle Whitehouse, 'Photo Elicitation and the Visual Sociology of Religion' in *Review of Religious Research* (June 2015), Vol. 57. Issue 2, 308–318, p. 306.

five years, particularly answering the questions ‘what do we feel God is calling us to in the next five years?’ and ‘what do we want to be known for as a church in five years’ time?’ The focus-groups themselves formed the initial stage of this process, with responses collated, analysed and presented to participants in a cycle of participatory action research.¹⁷ The research was carried out by members of the Diocesan Mission Community Development Team.

Groups were facilitated by a local leader, who began the session by asking participants to pick up two postcards from a researcher-generated archive of forty-six images,¹⁸ which were displayed on a table in front of them. Participants were asked to choose postcards which helped them answer the questions ‘What is important to you about your church?’ and ‘What do you see God doing in and through your church at the moment?’ Each participant was asked to choose a different postcard for each question, with each image chosen by only one person. (Some groups, however, found ways to share images and it was not uncommon to find two questions answered on the back of one card). The archive contained images chosen by the research team and professionally printed onto good quality postcards. The same archive was provided for each group.

The images chosen for the archive contained people of different ages, rural landscapes or the built environment and objects. Most were the researcher’s own photographs, with the rest used under Creative Commons licenses and downloaded from a range of image-sharing websites. The images were classified in a number of different ways to allow for an analysis of the way different postcards functioned as signifiers. Of the forty-six images, fourteen could be classified as an obvious metaphor for a biblical concept, ten were images taken in and of church buildings, nine showed metaphors for growth and eighteen contained people. Just over half (24/46) of the images could be classified as ‘active’ while the rest were passive. This range of ambiguous images was intended to allow people to be drawn to an image to which they were free to assign their own meanings and associations, rather than coercing participants into a limited range of responses.¹⁹

17 David Coghlan and Teresa Brannick, *Doing Action Research in Your Own Organization*, 3rd edn (London, Sage, 2010), pp. 44–45.

18 The rationale for choosing this number of cards was both pragmatic and financial. Forty-six A6 postcards will comfortably fit on the six-foot Gopak tables which can be found in church halls across the land, and would leave a choice of 16 postcards once a group of ten participants had chosen three cards each. The exact number in each pack, however, was selected to match the cost of a sandwich lunch provided at diocesan training events.

19 Printed on the back of each postcard was the diocesan logo, a title and copyright information, and tick boxes to indicate which question was being answered. [See photo 1]. The intention

Participants wrote their answers on the back of the postcard,²⁰ the physical action which gives the exercise its name. The facilitator then asked participants to share the images they had chosen and explain what they have written. The group did this one at a time, first all answering question one and then all answering question two. Unlike the focus groups used by Savage, et al. (in which young people were invited to select an image from a small archive of researcher-generated 'cultural icons and advertising images' and explain their choice),²¹ our participants were not invited to respond to one another at this point or to initiate discussion. This allowed responses to be democratised, and an equal weight given to the voices of those who are not usually heard in the decision-making process. The facilitator then asked participants to pick up one further postcard to help them answer two questions: 'What do you think God might be calling you to as a church in the next five years?' and 'What is your part in this?' Having shared their images and answers as before, the group were then encouraged to open up the discussion and build on their individual responses as they negotiated the answers to a series of questions about the focus of their current activity and how they imagined their future. The responses to the group questions were recorded by the facilitator and all postcards were collected, the responses written on the backs were typed up and submitted via an online survey.

Because the groups were self-facilitated and responses were submitted online, the exercise was easily scalable over a wide geographical area. At the point of writing, nearly 1000 people have participated in a focus group which used a variant of Answers on a Postcard, with 921 people in 128 groups completing the exercise as designed and submitting responses for analysis. There are further groups that had been planned, but the closure of churches due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the uncertainty about the activity of the church afterwards means that these groups may not now happen.

Once data were collected from all the groups in a given Mission Community or Deanery (typically between three and ten groups for the former and twenty to thirty for the latter), they were presented by a member of the

of the text was to aid with identification of photos for the purpose of analysis, not to limit the meanings and possibilities of the images. Hence, participants were asked to choose the images when they were face up, and only will have caught sight of the description later. The researcher team observed that the participants rarely referred to the titles in their discussion and responses.

20 After the first cohort had completed the exercise, we began to use large post-it notes placed on the back of the card, so that the cards could be re-used.

21 Sara Savage, Sylvia Collins-Mayo, Bob Mayo, and Graham Cray, *Making Sense of Generation Y: The World View of 15- 25-year-olds* (London, Church House Publishing, 2006), pp. 96–98.

Mission Community Development Team to a representative group of local decision-makers. The images themselves were used as a framework for doing this, with the most commonly selected postcards shown at the start of the presentation. Having introduced the findings, the facilitator asked a series of discussion questions based on an analysis of their responses. For example, where the responses had indicated a predominately attractional mode of mission (see below), the subsequent discussion might ask what they were willing to change to make their services and activities more accessible to visitors. The feedback from this conversation could then be added to the analysis and collated responses from the initial focus groups and distributed to all participants.

4 Findings: Visual Data

Although the written responses are the primary data presented back to the participants, a discussion of the images which were chosen and the way they related to the written responses merits consideration as we observe the opportunities photo-elicitation offers to qualitative research.

Consistently across the diocese, the most popular image was one showing five arms belonging to people of different races [Photo 1]. Each hand holds

PHOTO 1 The Front and Back of Postcards used for photo-elicitation. Image shown is *Diversity* by Wonder Woman 0731 and is licensed under Creative Commons BY 2.0 and available at <https://www.flickr.com/photos/wildrose115/27623264486>

their neighbour's wrist to form a circle and the image was entitled 'Diversity'. From the 2763 postcards selected during this exercise, this image was chosen 156 times, which was unexpected given the almost totally homogenous ethno-racial makeup of the church communities who took part. This image is also a good example of how photo-elicitation can be used to open up a question rather than lead participants into a predictable response. Various interpretations of this particular image are illustrated in these descriptions of what is important to participants about their church: "It is multi-racial, inviting to everyone", "We are all working together to keep our church ecumenical. We have to hold on tight to each other" and "[We are] connected and part of a group in a welcoming environment".

A thematic analysis of other images and the written responses they elicited showed a similar breadth of interpretation. In the set of 46 postcards there were four images which contained the faces of children or teenagers and a further four which showed hands that were clearly identifiable as young people [Photos 2 and 3]. If the images were leading participants to a particular interpretation, then we might expect the majority of responses submitted on the back of these postcards to contain references to young people. What we

PHOTO 2 (left) Postcard images showing the faces of children and teenagers. *Nativity* is © Jon Marlow and used with permission, *Texting in the Rain* by Garry Knight is licensed under Creative Commons BY 2.0 and available at <https://www.flickr.com/photos/garryknight/8331105136>, *Colours* is used under Pixelbay Licence and *Whisper* is used under license.

PHOTO 3 (right) Postcards showing the hands of young people. *Conkers* and *Praying Hands* are © Jon Marlow and used with permission, *Worship* is used under Pixelbay Licence and *Playing the Guitar* by Randall van Gurchom-Colijn is licensed under Creative Commons BY-NC-ND 2.0 and available at <https://www.flickr.com/photos/randallvangurchom/3698969319>.

did observe was that over half of the responses (157/283) on the four postcards showing young people's faces did not mention children or young people at all, suggesting that these images were not a direct signifier for ministry among younger people. Some of these responses were: "[God is calling us] to grow with others", to "make a greater impact on our local community" and to "pass on the good news of Jesus to friends spreading the word with joy and urgency". The remaining 45% did mention 'children', 'young people', 'the younger generation' or 'families'. Typical responses included those which expanded the above sentiments to include young people: "[God is calling us to] spread the word. Encouraging everyone, especially youngsters to join us", "Draw different groups into the church family, in particular young people", or those which simply said, "attracting young people" and "reaching out to younger people".

5 Findings: Written Data

Although the responses to all the questions were fed back to participants in an action-research loop, only the responses to the individual questions 'what

might God be calling your church to in the next five years?’ and the group question ‘what do you want to be known for as a church in five years’ time?’ were coded and analysed. This was partially due to the capacity of the researchers, and also so that the data had a forward-looking perspective and could prompt practical steps forward motivated by a shared picture of the future. Because these responses articulated what participants, both individually and corporately, said they felt called to, they could be taken together to describe the *espoused theology* of mission within the group. Espoused theology has been identified by Cameron et al. as one of the ‘four theological voices’ which need to be attended to by anyone undertaking scholarly Theological Action Research. It describes the ‘theology embedded within a group’s articulation of its beliefs’ rather than ‘the actual practices of the group’ (operant theology) or any scriptural, canonical or liturgical texts (normative theology) or academic resources (formal theology) used to explain or expound their belief.²²

Looking at the full range of responses to these questions about calling and the future, four dominant themes emerged through a process of coding following Charmaz’s theoretically generative approach.²³ This was an iterative process, starting with an *initial coding* which analysed responses from the first 50 groups and generated as many codes as were needed to describe the full data-set. These were then examined and rationalised in order to list *focused codes* which were ‘the most significant or frequent initial codes that make the most analytical sense’.²⁴ This list was then used as a codebook for all subsequent responses, allowing the researchers to ‘sift through [the] large amounts of data’ generated in subsequent groups.²⁵ Of the four dominant themes, two are new schema which are derived from the data alone, and two are existing frameworks which were appropriate to describe the responses we received.²⁶

22 Helen Cameron et al., 2010. *Talking About God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology*, (London: SCM Press), p. 54.

23 Kathy Charmaz, 2006. *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis*, (London, Sage).

24 Robert Thornberg and Kathy Charmaz, 2014. ‘Grounded Theory and Theoretical Coding’, in *SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis*, ed. by Uwe Flick (London, Sage, p. 158).

25 Ibid.

26 In addition to the four dominant themes which were presented back to participants in the action research loop, the focussed codes also included categories about ‘buildings and facilities’, ‘change, reflection and risk’, and ‘people and resources’. These were not included as part of the feedback data so that subsequent conversations could focus on missional activity, rather than the practical resources supporting that mission.

5.1 *Mode of Mission*

When asked about how they imagined the future of their church, participants espoused three modes of mission, Attraction, Engagement and Vicarious Religion.

Attraction and Engagement are refinements of a statement by one Mission Community that their strategy was twofold, “come to us” and “go to them”. The attraction mode is where churches want to see people join the existing congregation in their services and activities. It is seen in the desire to be: “Drawing different groups into the church family, in particular young people”, “getting the next generation to join us”, or simply to be “filling these empty chairs”. The motivation for this desire is also varied, from the enrichment that new people bring (“Bringing in more young people with ideas that will be welcomed by the church”) to the more self-interested (“Try to interest more children and young people to attend and contribute to help with cleaning, flower arranging etc.”). Much of the focus was around attracting younger people, children and families, and about 20% of those who espoused the attraction mode also recognised that this would require making changes to the worship of the church (“To be more creative in our thinking and our doing. Maybe a freer worship service, maybe an opportunity for greater creative thinking”).

Although the attraction mode was by far the most prevalent among groups, this was usually accompanied by the engagement mode of mission. The Church of England report *Mission-shaped Church* locates this as a broad spectrum of ‘starting point[s] in mission [...] from relational evangelism to many forms of social engagement.’²⁷ Engagement, in this context, is participating in groups, activities and programmes which already exist outside the church, or seeking to develop these in partnership with members of the local community. One respondent described the engagement mode by saying: “We need to be at the centre of the community. We need to talk more openly about faith with all faiths”. Others were equally emphatic: “[We need to be] out of the church building! To find ways of being church - Jesus’ hands and feet - in our community” and “Being out and about - not just letting people come to us”.

The third mode, Vicarious Religion, is defined by Davie as ‘the notion of religion performed by an active minority but on behalf of a much larger number, who (implicitly at least) not only understand, but, quite clearly, approve of what the minority is doing’.²⁸ Although contested as a category for the

27 Mission and Public Affairs Council of the Church of England), *Mission-shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of Church in a Changing Context* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004).

28 Grace Davie, ‘Vicarious Religion: A Methodological Challenge’, in *Everyday Religion*, ed. by Nancy T. Ammerman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 22.

sociological exploration of religious affiliation in Britain,²⁹ the concept was clearly espoused in our data as a reason for congregations continuing to meet, even if they had no regular interactions with those who lived and worked in their locality. Responses expressed this view by saying: “We feel it is important to keep bell ringing, the bells keep the church in the consciousness of the village”, “[God is calling us to] keep faithful and weather the dark night of this age, to be here still when needed” and to be an “Icon of the community”. Some respondents used vicarious religion to avoid active engagement saying, “Our laws are based on the Ten Commandments, so God reaches out to the people in this way”.

5.2 *Pray, Grow and Serve with Joy*

The diocesan Bishop’s vision is to ‘Grow in prayer, Make new disciples and Serve the people of Devon with joy’.³⁰ Although these are fairly generic aspiration in the Christian church it would be expected that, if this vision is truly embedded in the parishes of the diocese, these categories would emerge when participants are asked about the future development of their church.

In responses from individuals and groups, participants mentioned some aspect of the diocesan vision 341 times. This wasn’t simply parroting the vision statement but expressing a sense of calling to its individual components. Fifty-five responses expressed the desire to ‘Grow in Prayer’ with very pithy comments such as “More prayer” as well as the more developed “I think God is calling us to deepen our prayer lives and relationship with Him - church will no longer just be a social and caring community but a deeply faithful one too”. A similar number mentioned a commitment to be ‘Serving with Joy’, with several participants deploying biblical phrases and metaphors in support of this. Typical responses were: “Feed my sheep! We need to look after others in the community, regardless of whether they are church-goers” and “Coming alongside people - help lift peoples’ burdens”.

By far the most prevalent aspect of the diocesan vision which appeared in the responses was ‘Making new Disciples’. This could be subdivided into personal growth and attracting new believers. In the coding, new believers were categorised into the four focus areas in the 2019 diocesan strategy refinement: ‘children and families, young people aged 17 to 25, people over 55 and those on the fringes of church’.³¹ Of these, children, families and schools accounted for

29 Steve Bruce and David Voas, ‘Vicarious Religion: An Examination and Critique’, *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 25 (2010).

30 ‘Our Vision’ <<https://exeter.anglican.org/who-we-are/vision-strategy/>> [Accessed 25 November 2019].

31 Ibid.

75% of the responses mentioning new disciples. ("Full of young families - not just worship but doing things together. A vibrant place", "A Youth group that is made up of 50% church family children and 50% non-church family children. A group who know Jesus is Lord and tell their friends" and "Is God leading us towards more children's involvement in everything? Involving their parents? Giving them more responsibility in organising worship / encouragement to be God's people".)

5.3 *Growth and Survival*

When asked to imagine their church in the next five years, a number of participants expressed the view that they would be pleased if the church would "still be here" or "still keep the door open" in five years' time. The reaction to this challenge could be seen in a sliding scale of five responses, from the desire to grow, through to accepting the perceived inevitability of decline and eventual closure. Between these two poles was the desire to be "faithful" and "fruitful"; the intention to "keep doing what we've always done"; and the acknowledgment that people were "exhausted" and "limited" and so unable to sustain the mission and ministry of the church as it currently was. The survival strategy was seldom limited to just one category, but the overall mood could be discerned by looking at the distribution of responses, particularly how far they extended down the spectrum away from growth.

In coding responses, we regarded 'growth' as a survival strategy to be different to the 'attraction' mode of mission. Although some responses could be coded in both categories, growth was expressed as a more general concept and was seen in sentiments such as: "God's calling to this church is to spread the seeds of Christianity in this area and to bring about growth to a sustainable level" or "New growth sprouting to bring new life in too". Participants also saw growth as a broader aim than simply adding to the congregation, expressing this by saying: "I believe God wants the church to grow so as to make a difference in the community in which it exists, this may or may not be numerically, but certainly to grow spiritually" and "Encouraging growth in depth and numbers". As noted above, attraction was a more specific aspiration to see new people, especially young people, joining the congregation at worship services.

In comparison with the other three themes, survival strategy was more polarised between urban and rural contexts. Churches in towns and cities were unlikely to be thinking in terms of terminal decline and closure, but this was a real concern for those in more rural areas. Noting some exceptions, the expectation around this spectrum is that a desire for growth would be normative for churches. As such, the questions which accompanied the feedback were intended to stimulate conversation about practical steps towards growth

and engender confidence that growth could actually happen. Questions also challenged churches to see how maintaining the status quo could hinder changes that would lead to growth. This section in particular demonstrates how this exercise is differentiated from a pure research project, whereby the responses are all that is required. Here the researcher is also a missional leader, co-creating vision with the agenda of developing the ministry of the church.

5.4 *The Five Marks of Mission*

The five marks of mission express the 'Anglican Communion's common commitment to, and understanding of, God's holistic and integral mission'.³² They are:

- 1 To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom.
- 2 To teach, baptise and nurture new believers.
- 3 To respond to human need by loving service.
- 4 To transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation.
- 5 To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.

All five of these marks could be identified in the response data. Two correspond to categories which have already been identified ('making new disciples' as mark two and 'serving with joy' as mark three) and the other three emerged as new categories. Particularly prevalent was the first mark, with participants variously talking about "good news", "hope", "light" and using other Christian imagery to describe the somewhat intangible concept of the "gospel" which the church has to offer to the world. Simple responses which used this language included the desire "to bring God's light to the parish", "to be a light for God in the area we are in" and to be "building the kingdom of God". Others expressed an imperative to be propagating this message ("Passing on the good news of Jesus to their friends spreading the word with joy and urgency") and many pointed to human agency combined with divine enabling ("Through the Holy Spirit reach out into our community and find new and exciting ways to share the gospel"). What was common in nearly all of the responses in this category were that they relied on biblical imagery and Christian vocabulary to express this calling, making responses like these typical: "God is calling the people of his church to build on the foundation of Jesus Christ" and "to get us more confident to be fishers of men".

32 Anglican Communion Office, 'Marks of Mission' <<https://www.anglicancommunion.org/mission/marks-of-mission.aspx>> [Accessed 25 September 2019].

Using this schema as a source of normative theology³³ beyond that espoused by the participants themselves meant that the analysis did not merely amplify their aspirations but could identify omissions in their missiological understanding. While groups were able to describe 'responding to human need with loving service', they were far less likely to address the root causes of injustice. Similarly, comments about the 'integrity of creation' were limited to what churches hoped to do to minimise their own environmental impact, rather than anticipating engagement with movements seeking to change policy such as Extinction Rebellion or Christian Climate Action. While churches with limited resources are bound to take a pragmatic approach to the limits of their action, it seems appropriate to challenge parochialism in this area and follow the example of Bonhoeffer, to whom this charge is widely attributed: "We are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice, we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself".³⁴

To this end, the discussion questions included with the analysis of this theme included the challenge to rectify such gaps, alongside the task of identifying practical steps which they could take together. Since the group discussions had already included a question about next steps, the feedback could ask participants to review this list and decide which of these steps would lead them closer to becoming the church God was calling them to be.

6 Discussion

When presenting the results and analysis, we called these themes, *The Four Mirrors*, as they provide categories for reflecting the responses back to participants and inviting them to critique their practice. The Four Mirrors are:

- 1 Mode of Mission
- 2 Diocesan Vision
- 3 Survival Strategy
- 4 The Five Marks of Mission

Of these, mirror three was presented as a scale of five responses and the others were subdivided into the different sub-categories explained above. The image of a mirror was chosen instead of the more ubiquitous 'lens' to reinforce the action-research emphasis of the project. The responses are the property of the participants, not the researchers, and the analysis invites participants

33 Cameron and others, p. 54.

34 The Dietrich Bonhoeffer Institute, <<https://tdbi.org/dietrich-bonhoeffer/notable-quotes/>> [Accessed 25 November 2019].

to interpret and apply the collated responses, rather than telling them how to view them.

Having noted this, it should be said that mirrors are not only used to reflect back an image. In the case of a film set, reflectors are used to direct light onto the scene and these four mirrors also function in this way. Two of the 'mirrors' were presented as sources of normative theology (Diocesan Vision and the Five Marks of Mission), the other results could also be used to critique the practice of the group by adding the voices of a larger group to the conversation. For example, groups that espoused an attraction mode of mission were challenged to think about how they needed to change what they offered to make it more accessible and relevant, and also to consider engagement as an additional mode of operation. These questions were asked in larger meetings which mostly comprised people who had taken part in a focus group and the ensuing conversations were minuted and used as part of the data used for strategic action planning.

Answers on a Postcard functioned as a tool for making explicit the *ordinary theology*³⁵ found within a group of church members and their leaders. Using photo-elicitation helped to spark insights which might not have surfaced in a purely verbal or written answer to the question and the physicality of writing on the postcards themselves helped to concretise these insights into statements which could be shared, and data that could be collected.

As might be expected there appears to be a greater degree of consistency between the data from groups which had been facilitated by a member of the diocesan Development Team. By contrast, locally facilitated groups were more likely to contain mislabelled responses and missing data and it was also observable that some groups had adapted the exercise by missing out questions or varying the template of the group.

Participants were generally very positive when they reflected on the focus-groups and their impact. This was seen when researchers were promoting Answers on a Postcard in meetings where there were some people who had already participated in the exercise. Such people often offered an unsolicited endorsement along the lines of, "When we heard about this, we gave a collective sigh, but we found it really engaging and the ensuing discussion was extremely fruitful". This suggests that the photo-elicitation element of the exercise was key to drawing out the responses as participants often had a jaded view of such discussions from previous consultation exercises. One Vicar also commented to me later that members of his church council still referred to

35 Jeff Astley, *Ordinary Theology: Looking, Listening and Learning in Theology*, (London: Routledge, 2017).

the images they had chosen when talking about related topics, suggesting that the conversation stimulated by the images had greater longevity than a purely verbal discussion.

The impact of the exercise was also evident when members of the research team visited Mission Communities where a significant proportion of members had taken part in groups. One particular example was an urban single-parish benefice where the newly appointed Vicar had hosted a series of seven focus-groups in his home over a meal. Thirty-six participants took part, which meant that enough data was gathered from this church to offer them a detailed analysis using the four mirrors and to structure a follow-up vision morning around the responses from Answers on a Postcard. The vision morning comprised three sessions: an introduction looking at welcome which was a common theme emerging from their responses, a session on stewardship and generosity

PHOTO 4 Flipchart produced during a vision morning, showing the categorised and ranked 'next steps' from the Answers on a Postcard focus-groups.

as finance had been identified as a constraint, and a final session on writing a Mission Action Plan. This final forty-five minute session invited members to categorise and rank the 'next steps' which they had suggested in the focus-groups and the top three were recorded for each of the three diocesan priorities, (pray, grow, serve with joy) and also for a section on welcome. These were then further refined by the whole meeting to two specific actions, to be implemented in the next twelve months, for each area [Photo 4]. The process of developing a Mission Action Plan often takes several sessions with committee work between larger meetings. Due to the nature of the responses gathered from Answers on a Postcard and the level of participation, this church heartily endorsed this plan after a relatively short period of discussion.

Schematising the analysis using the *four mirrors* also provided a common language for on-going discussion after the focus-groups. Clergy from one of the larger deaneries in the diocese used the schema to structure their Chapter meetings over four months, taking one of the mirrors at each session and inviting local practitioners who embodied good practice in that area to share their experience and facilitate discussion.

8 Conclusion

Finally, it is worth noting that an advantage of this approach is that the espoused theologies are gathered and accounted for and then put into conversation with existing normative theologies, in this case, missiologies. We saw how the process outlined above enabled local strategies to emerge from within espoused theologies, but also to make explicit their coherence or departure from the normative missiologies of the denomination or the diocese. This enabled a group to move beyond what might be seen as passive-aggressive relationships with top-down policies and programmes toward real engagement and discussion. Furthermore, the data collection and analysis aspect of these activities means that the communication of leadership is not merely broadcasting but can be in actual conversation with existing missional impulses from within parishes. This calls into question top-down approaches and encourages a more dialogical approach to the formation of mission community planning and strategies.

Curiously enough, the most popular image in the focus groups also functions as a metaphor for the methodology in the study itself. As an image, 'Diversity' could demonstrate what we as theologians and researchers are saying about the world as it could and should be. A semiotic reading of the image [see Photo 1] would reveal that this ring of hands could be a signifier of a circle of mutually dependant and equally important and valuable contributions to the group.

Answers on a Postcard seeks to be a tool which democratises different voices and allows them to contribute to a cycle of theological action research.

Henk de Roest has recently observed that practical theology's movement toward empirically driven epistemological frameworks opens up new and dynamic spaces for collaborative practical theology to emerge.³⁶ Theological knowledge no longer rests solely with the scholar or in academic texts but resides within the people among whom ministry happens. The Answers on a Postcard Project demonstrates that this shift is not limited to scholarly research but has been translated into ministry practice. In this case, the exposure of the practitioner to empirically driven epistemological frameworks and collaborative research methods within postgraduate studies enabled a new direction for how a diocese develops its missional strategy.

A key insight for theological education is that the pedagogies that drive how we train people for Christian ministry will affect *how* they lead and minister. The training that students receive in research methods and in reading qualitative and quantitative research then resources future ministry practice. Here we see that this participatory research approach moves beyond resourcing ministry into the very practice of leadership and group strategic discernment. The role of researcher and church leader are blurred and as we have seen, this opens up new possibilities for innovation in practice.

We noted at the beginning that recent years have seen a shift in conceptions of the locus of knowledge for professional practice. In this case, we have seen that the academy has resourced the methodology for the ministry practice of gathering people to discern local mission strategy. The generated knowledge from congregation members then was used to guide and resource future church strategy and practice. So, we see there is a flow from academy, to leadership, to congregants and then back again to leadership and now, with the publication of this article, back to the academy.

36 Henk de Roest, *Collaborative Practical Theology: Engaging Practitioners in Research on Christian Practices* (Leiden: Brill, 2019).