

<b>Institution:</b> University of Roehampton		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 31 - Theology and Religious Studies		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Theological Action Research: Facilitating Change in Theological Understanding and Practice in Faith-based Organisations		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2006–2020		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Clare Watkins	Lecturer Reader	September 2014 – September 2017 September 2017 – present
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 2014-2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> N		
<b>1. Summary of the impact</b> (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p>Theological Action Research (TAR) is an innovative participative research process which integrates faith, practice and academic forms of knowledge to enhance academic theology and its teaching, but also faith practices in society and church life. Dr Clare Watkins pioneers TAR, which has informed the understanding and practice of churches and other faith-based organisations. Watkins' research has:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>expanded and enriched the provision of the Catholic Education Service and Marriage Care; and</li> <li>enhanced pedagogical practice and established an internationally recognised methodology which is now core to teaching and learning of practical theology in the UK and Europe.</li> </ol>		
<b>2. Underpinning research</b> (indicative maximum 500 words)		
<p>Dominant methodologies of practical theology in British and wider European scholarship have frequently worked with an approach which is 'correlative' – that is, one that lines up theological themes and practices side by side, in order to describe connections and disconnections. Such methods sometimes assume a separation of theology and practice, to the detriment of both practice and the theological academy. TAR processes are, by contrast, participative, relying on an assumed integration of theology and practice, and so offer a non-correlational methodology to produce a constructive theology (<b>R1</b>).</p> <p>TAR's participative methods include: co-designing research with practitioners; analysing ('discerning') empirical (qualitative) data through group conversations between both practitioner co-researchers and academics; and intentionally introducing theological 'voices' from normative church sources and formal academic sources to properly complexify and integrate a theological reading of the practices being studied. TAR encourages new ways of looking at ecclesial/ecclesiological and mission/missiological questions.</p> <p>Watkins' research argues that TAR methodology offers an alternative to the dominant correlative approaches of practice-engaged theologies which seek to set theology-as-theory in critical correlative relation to practice. Instead, the 'Four Voices of Theology' is offered as a framework of interpretation: the operant (what is practised); the espoused (what practitioners articulate about their practice); the formal (academic sources form theology and other disciplines); and the normative (ecclesial, or faith traditional sources (<b>R1</b>)). TAR involves distinctive participative and conversational processes, in which academic theologians, church people and faith practitioners work together as co-researchers. In this way, 'voices from practice' are treated as authoritative sources for ecclesiology (<b>R2</b>).</p> <p>Two important studies were published by Watkins giving more critical and detailed examples of TAR learning and the application of TAR methodologies in specific contexts and demonstrating how TAR research projects have worked to bring about change in theological understanding. The first study (<b>R3</b>) described research which opened up ways for Fresh Expressions practitioners,</p>		

who operate in new models of church that engage primarily with those who do not necessarily consider themselves to 'go to church', to envisage their understanding of church and so revise their mission. Accompanying this was an understanding of the ways in which these new expressions might re-conceptualise ecclesiology around a 'boundary-less' or 'porous' notion of church. This ecclesiological concept is developed further in Watkins' most recent monograph (R2). The second study (R4) is significant for using TAR, and specifically the framework of 'Four Voices of Theology', to present marriage and family life as an authoritative source of learning for today's church, demonstrating the importance of wider ecclesial learning through consultation with ordinary households, which live church in a 'secular key' due to their immersion in everyday life.

Watkins' publications work toward a greater theorisation of TAR, in which a non-correlative approach is emphasised, as a distinct and original contribution to the practical theological quandary of practice-theology integration (R1, R5). Her research (R5) suggests TAR as a remedy for the difficulties encountered in the dominance of ethnographic approaches to church. Whilst ethnographic ecclesiologies risk the reduction of ecclesiology to a detailed description of ecclesial reality, TAR gives a proper authoritative voice to the particularities of practice, whilst at the same time ensuring conversational critical and creative engagement between such a voice and those of normative and established scholarly authorities.

### 3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- R1** Watkins, C. (2016) An argument for *non-correlational* approaches in a Catholic practical theology, *Cahiers Internationaux de Théologie Pratique*, 8, pp.141-158.
- R2** Watkins, C. (2020) *Disclosing Church. An Ecclesiology Learned from Conversations in Practice*. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315142531>. Listed in REF2.
- R3** Watkins, C. (2014) The Challenge of 'Fresh Expressions' to Ecclesiology. Reflections from the Practice of Messy Church, *Ecclesial Practices*, 1(1), pp.92-110. <https://doi.org/10.1163/22144471-00101005>. Listed in REF2.
- R4** Watkins, C. (2014) Living Marriage, Learning Discipleship, Teaching Church. The Practices of Married Life as Embodied Theology for Today's Mission, *INTAMS Review*, 2014(2), pp.236-248. <https://doi.org/10.2143/INT.20.2.3066754>.
- R5** Watkins, C. (2015) Practising Ecclesiology: from product to process. The theological action research framework of theology in four voices, and the development of ecclesiology as a non-correlative process and practice, *Ecclesial Practices*, 2(1), pp.23-39. <https://doi.org/10.1163/22144471-00201009>. Listed in REF2.
- G1** Marriage Care research, relating to **R4**, was funded by the Plater Trust ([http://plater.org.uk/?page\\_id=328](http://plater.org.uk/?page_id=328)), 2015-2017.

### 4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Watkins' research (R1-R5) has shaped changes in the activities of the practitioners and organisations who undertook TAR shared projects, expanding and enriching their activities.

#### i. **Expanding and enriching the activities of the Catholic Education Service and Marriage Care**

From 2012 to 2014, the Visions for Educational Leadership project, led by a team of researchers including Watkins in collaboration with the Catholic Education Service (CES), sought to build the theological and ethical capacity of existing and emerging leaders in Catholic schools in England and Wales. Employing the TAR approach (R1-R5), Watkins worked with more than 100 school leaders from seven dioceses (Westminster, Southwark, Plymouth, Menevia, Birmingham, Lancaster and Hexham & Newcastle) to generate qualitative data from over 70 individual interviews and focus groups across the dioceses. In November 2014, the *Visions for Educational Leadership* Colloquium brought together major stakeholders, including senior school leaders across the Catholic state-funded sector, diocesan education advisors, members of the CES and the responsible bishop, to address the conversational, action research methods Watkins had used in exploring questions of vocation, formation, and spiritual support with them for the previous two

years. Implementing these action research methods, delegates resolved to found 'a Centre for Catholic Leadership Formation, to serve as a focal point for the leadership development activities of Teaching Schools, higher education institutions, diocesan education services and the CES' (IMP1). These resolutions have since found expression in *Formatio* (<http://www.formatio.org.uk/>), a charity which works to form, nourish and sustain leaders of Catholic education by providing opportunities for professional development and Catholic formation (IMP2). Through *Formatio*, Watkins' work benefits the 2,200 Catholic schools, academies and colleges in England and Wales, who are responsible for educating over 850,000 pupils (<https://www.catholiceducation.org.uk/about-us>).

Building on her work with the Catholic Education Service, between August 2015 and October 2016 Watkins collaborated with national charity Marriage Care to explore how their faith identity and foundation was, and could better be, integrated into their practice as a faith-based charity working in a secular environment. The project resulted in notable benefits for the charity, its volunteers and the couples who receive marriage preparation guidance through it. Most notably, Watkins' contributed to a new organisational language which has shaped and strengthened the charity's mission to share relationship skills and knowledge with couples regardless of their ability to pay. As Marriage Care's Chair of Trustees has observed, 'what was needed was a re-alignment with Catholic theology... Dr Watkin's research [R4] provided this opportunity in a gentle, intelligent but firm way' (IMP3). As Marriage Care's CEO also attests, 'Dr Watkins' research has enabled Marriage Care to find a language that conveys the organisation's unique contribution to the life and mission of the Roman Catholic Church (*Deeply Catholic: Deeply Human*) and has given confidence in proclaiming the theological significance of relationship education, formation and support' (IMP4). This language has enabled the charity to affirm their Christian ethos and has 'built a confident narrative within Marriage Care's volunteer body that has enabled them to promote their work to clergy and laity alike' (IMP4). As a result of this 're-alignment', the charity re-wrote, edited and developed new material for their one-day marriage preparation course 'Preparing Together', which focuses on theological understanding of Catholic marriage and is attended by 3,000 couples each year (approximately 12,000 couples since the course was reworked). According to the Chair of Trustees the realignment has also enabled the charity to maintain the patronage of the Catholic Church which is essential to the charity's functioning as approximately 95% of their clients come from the Church (IMP3).

Marriage Care also worked with Watkins' research to develop a novel online formation course in relationship care, related theology and lay leadership (see Modules 1-6 on <https://www.marriagecare.org.uk/courses/>) as a training resource for the charity's volunteers. These modules are used as part of the 'core induction of new members of staff and volunteers' (IMP4). The online resource has proved invaluable to the training and confidence of Marriage Care's more than 400 volunteers across England and Wales, the 5,000 client couples who have received counselling from Marriage Care since the courses' launch, the charity's wider network of more than 100 Catholic bishops and clergy, and the more than 40 Christian groups and congregations to whom the course will be marketed (IMP3).

Evaluations from course participants demonstrate how the course has given them new knowledge and skills, equipping them to help couples navigate challenges in their relationships. One participant attested to their 'greater understanding of relational poverty and also the effects of our upbringing on how we form relations in later life'; another that, 'the links with the catholic tradition and learning has helped me with my own family life and also my work as a relationship counsellor'; and another: 'This course has helped me to reflect on grace and sacramentality in everyday life and helped me to relate this specifically to marriage' (IMP5). In their annual report covering 2016-17, Marriage Care Trustees reported that the updated and revised course shaped by Watkins' research (R1-R5, but especially R4), 'continues to provide a benchmark in preparing couples for marriage... [providing] unique opportunities for couples to encounter an organisation known as the smiling face of the Catholic Church' (IMP6).

- ii. **Enhancing pedagogical practice and establishing an internationally-recognised best practice for training and teaching practical theology**

Through a TAR project with Queen's Foundation, Birmingham, one of England's oldest theological colleges preparing candidates for ordained ministry in the Church of England, Watkins' research (R1-R5) has enhanced and enriched the College's pedagogical practice. The project was set up as an opportunity to analyse in depth the process of adult learning provided and facilitated by Queen's with renewed thought given to key formation questions around 'inclusivity' and 'deconstruction'. For the members of staff and students who participated the project was seen as *'enhancing our practice and our understanding of pedagogical practice and the values which undergird it'* (IMP7). The college's Director of Research states that the project has delivered tangible benefits, including enhanced knowledge of how learning affects students' development and practice; a deeper understanding of the importance of diversity in the learning environment; and a new appreciation for the part played by cognitive dissonance and disruption in the learning process. Watkins' research (R1-R5) has *'enhanced and consolidated [the] pedagogical and theological practice'* of the college's 20 staff and given them a *'greater confidence to do what we do with a conviction that it is making a genuine contribution to students' learning'*, strengthening pastoral support for the more than 200 students completing their ministerial training and theological studies at Queen's Foundation (IMP7).

Watkins' research (R1-R5) has also enhanced and shaped the training of theological practitioners while they are studying at university level across Europe, with TAR being increasingly recognised as an essential perspective for students in the UK, the Netherlands and Sweden. In this context TAR training takes place alongside academic research, accessing practitioners in the educational context of university study to provide training in practical theology, which is in support of their non-research practice. Watkins has delivered substantial TAR training sessions in relation to masters and doctoral-level research to researchers and practitioners at Roehampton, Anglia Ruskin University, Durham University, Sarum Theological College and Church Missionary Society. A Professor of Practical Theology at Durham University comments that, *'Dr Watkins along with her collaborators have generated one of the most influential methodological frameworks in the discipline of Practical Theology. It is widely seen as an alternative to the pastoral cycle by our students'* (IMP8). Adoption of Watkins' research as best practice has also spread across Europe. In 2015, Watkins was invited by the Protestant Theological University in Amsterdam to share TAR methodology and approaches with faculty and students. According to the University's Chair of Practical Theology, the 'four voices' approach has had particular resonance (IMP9). TAR has also proved significant for practical theological training in Nordic countries, with a cohort of doctoral researchers and faculty, numbering around 25, visiting the University of Roehampton in Spring 2019 to receive further training in TAR methods from Watkins. According to an Associate Professor at the Stockholm School of Theology, the training sessions provided by Watkins *'have been important occasions [for] networking and participating in constructive conversations in Theological Action Research'* (IMP10).

##### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- IMP1** *Visions of Education Leadership Colloquium Report* dated November 2016, see page 3.
- IMP2** *Catholic Education Service Strategic Plan 2019-2021*, see page 8.
- IMP3** Testimonial from the Chair of Trustees at Marriage Care dated 20 November 2019, demonstrating the impact of Watkins' research on the organisation's language and the ensuing development of online learning modules for staff and volunteers.
- IMP4** Testimonial from the Chief Executive Officer of Marriage Care dated November 2019, demonstrating new practices taken up by the charity in response to Watkins' TAR project with them, including new confidence experienced by volunteers.
- IMP5** *Personal Formation for Counselling and Facilitation: Lay Leadership in the post-Millennial Age: Final Report to the Charles Plater Trust*, 2019 (please see pages 7-10 for example feedback from course participants).
- IMP6** Marriage Care Annual Report and Accounts 2016-2017, see page 2.
- IMP7** Testimonial from the Director of Research at Queen's Foundation (Methodist training) dated 14 October 2020, demonstrating changed practitioner activities based on TAR project carried out at Queen's.

## Impact case study (REF3)

- IMP8** Testimonial from Professor of Practical Theology, Durham University dated December 2019, illustrating the impact of Watkins' TAR training on student views.
- IMP9** Testimonial from the Chair of Practical Theology at the Protestant Theological University, Amsterdam dated June 2020, showing impact of TAR training held there.
- IMP10** Testimonial from Associate Professor at the Church of Sweden Research Unit and Stockholm School of Theology, Sweden dated March 2020, showing impact of TAR training held there.