

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: University of Winchester		
Unit of Assessment: D31 (Theology & Religious Studies)		
Title of case study: Informing the bioethics policy of European Protestant Churches		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2009-2016		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Neil Messer	Professor of Theology	28/09/09 - present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: August 2013-present		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p>This case study demonstrates the links between Neil Messer's expertise in theological bioethics and his contribution to the policy and practice of the European Protestant churches on ethical questions. This is focused through the Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE). In 2013 Messer was appointed to the CPCE's Expert Group on Ethics because of his reputation in theology and bioethics. He edited and co-authored a Guide to the Ethics of Reproductive Medicine, the Expert Group's main task from 2013-18. This has been the subject of a colloquium at the European Parliament, influenced CPCE's further work on ethical questions, been used as an educational resource in member churches, and informed their policy and practice.</p>		
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)		
<p>Neil Messer has an international reputation in theological ethics and bioethics, reflected in numerous publications. Examples particularly relevant to this case study, produced during his time at the University of Winchester, are listed in section 3 below. Messer's research programme in bioethics and related areas is to develop a distinctively Protestant theological approach to bioethics, drawing on theologians such as Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer (3.4 ch. 1; 3.3 ch. 4; 3.1 ch. 3). Often this requires a theological reframing of bioethical issues and debates (3.4 ch. 1). Messer's theological approach to bioethical debates so reframed is expressed, for example, in the "diagnostic questions," which he has developed and refined over a number of years, for evaluating technological projects and practices theologically and ethically (3.4 pp. 32-43; 3.1 pp. 162-5). This theological approach to bioethics has been worked out in numerous publications on a wide range of bioethical issues, including human genetics, embryology and cloning (3.4 chs 3, 4), reproductive medicine (3.2), the ethics of biomedical research involving human participants, human embryos and non-human animals (3.4 chs 4-6), healthcare resource allocation (3.4 ch. 7), the care of patients with disorders of consciousness (3.1 ch. 5), and assisted dying (3.4 ch. 8). Messer has also explored the relationship between this kind of theological bioethics and public ethical and policy debates on bioethical questions (3.4 ch. 2; 3.5). The latter topic was also the subject of an AHRC Collaborative Doctoral Award (2011-14) for which he was PI and lead supervisor.</p> <p>On the strength of his research profile and reputation in theological bioethics, Messer was appointed in 2013 to the Expert Group on Ethics of the Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE), described more fully in section 4 below. The Expert Group's main task during the period of this case study was the production of a major Guide to the Ethics of Reproductive Medicine, which Messer edited and co-authored. His theological approach to bioethics, outlined above, informed his contribution to the design and shaping of the Guide as a whole, and particular sections were directly informed by various specific aspects of his research. These included:</p>		

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- His work on the relationship between Christian theological bioethics and public bioethical debate (3.4 ch. 2; 3.5).
- His work on human embryo research, cloning and human-animal hybrid embryos (human admixed embryos; 3.4 chs 3, 4)
- His work on the analytical use and limitations of the concept of “personhood” in bioethics (3.4 pp. 19-43; 3.1 pp. 128-42).

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

3.1. Messer, Neil. 2017a. *Theological Neuroethics: Christian Ethics Meets the Science of the Human Brain*. London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark. Submitted in REF2

3.2. Messer, Neil. 2017b. “Bioethics and Practical Theology: The Example of Reproductive Medicine.” *International Journal of Practical Theology* 21, no. 2: 291-314.

<https://doi.org/10.1515/ijpt-2017-0029>

3.3. Messer, Neil. 2013. *Flourishing: Health, Disease, and Bioethics in Theological Perspective*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

3.4. Messer Neil. 2011. *Respecting Life: Theology and Bioethics*. London: SCM Press.

3.5. Messer, Neil and Paddison, Angus. 2013. “The Bible and Public Policy: What Kind of Authority?” In *The Bible: Culture, Community and Society*, ed. Angus Paddison and Neil Messer, 189-207. London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark.

Outputs 3.3, 3.4 and 3.5 were reviewed by external assessors and secured 2* or higher. Output 3.1 secured 4* from two external reviewers and 3.2 secured 3* from two external reviewers.

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

Context: The Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe

The Communion (formerly ‘Community’) of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE, or in German GEKE) is an ecumenical body of 94 Lutheran, Methodist, Reformed and United Church denominations in over 30 countries, representing around 50 million Protestant Christians. The European Baptist Federation also has links with CPCE.

Initial impact: production of a CPCE Guide to the Ethics of Reproductive Medicine.

In 2013 the CPCE Council mandated its Expert Group on Ethics to produce a guide to the ethics of reproductive medicine for member churches. Messer was appointed to the Expert Group on the strength of his international research reputation in bioethics. He became the lead author and editor of this document, entitled ‘Before I Formed You in the Womb...’: A Guide to the Ethics of Reproductive Medicine from the Council of the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (5.1; hereafter the Guide).

As editor and lead author, Messer drafted some sections himself, played a major role in discussions and revisions of other group members’ drafts, and edited the document into a coherent whole. His theological approach to bioethics, described above in sections 2 and 3, informed the overall design and shaping of the Guide. A distinctive feature is its so-called ‘Protestant corridor’ approach to recognising both common ground and diversity in Protestant ethical reflection on these questions. Messer has been described as the ‘key architect’ of this approach (5.10). Specific parts of the Guide are particularly informed by Messer’s research and publications, including:

- Chapter 3, section 3.3.1 on natural law;
- Chapter 3, section 3.5 on the moral status of the human embryo;
- Chapter 3, section 3.7 on the Church and the public realm;
- Chapter 9, on research and novel therapies;
- Chapter 10, on reproductive cloning and artificial gametes.

The drafting process included consultation with member churches, ecumenical partners, legal and medical experts and representatives of European political institutions. Already at this stage, those involved testified to the value of the draft Guide for the churches and wider public debate. For example, a medical doctor and academic from the Netherlands described it as ‘a very valuable document ... which will support Christians of the Protestant Churches in Europe with ethical decision-making’ (512, p. 9).

Following its adoption by the CPCE Council, the Guide was published in June 2017. It has been disseminated online (<http://cpce-repro-ethics.eu/>) and a copy sent to every CPCE member church. By December 2020, 5,340 copies had been downloaded from the website (Source 9), one of the highest download figures for any CPCE publication.

Further impact of the Guide

Even in the relatively short time since its publication, the Guide has had further impacts on the CPCE’s public and ecumenical networks, the CPCE’s own work and member churches.

(i) Public and ecumenical impact

A colloquium on the Guide was held at the European Parliament in Brussels on 2 May 2018. The 30 participants included representatives of the European Commission, European Parliament, the State of North Rhine-Westphalia and Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox church organizations. One participant, representative of the (Orthodox) Church of Greece to the EU, described the Guide as ‘an important contribution to the dialogue that is currently unfolded between the Christian Churches in a crucial subject for the future of the human being,’ with an ‘exemplary’ approach to church ethical deliberation. (Source 3).

(ii) Impact on CPCE

At the CPCE General Assembly in September 2018, the CPCE Vice-President commended the Guide’s ‘Protestant corridor’ approach to ethical diversity as an important new approach for the European Protestant churches (Sources 2, 10). The Assembly asked the CPCE Council ‘to continue to promote the guide ... through: drawing together interested professional practitioners in consultation; the production of materials for local use regarding particular topics that arise in pastoral contexts; and the promotion through existing European bodies and networks’ (Source 5, section 3.2). It identified various topics arising from the Guide as subjects for further work, including the issue of ethical diversity among the churches as well as specific ethical questions (ibid.).

Subsequently the CPCE Council established a new Study Group on Gender and Sexuality, to which Messer was appointed because of his expertise in theological ethics and his prior work on the Guide. As its Chair confirms, this group was instructed by the Council ‘to apply a similar approach to this study work as in the guide on reproductive medicine’ (Source 10). This work is ongoing.

(iii) Impact on CPCE member churches and other churches

The Guide was presented and discussed at a gathering of CPCE Synod members and two annual meetings of the European Baptist Federation (Sources 2, 8). In addition to the original publication languages of English, German and French, translations into Estonian, Polish, Hungarian and Ukrainian have been published or are in preparation (Sources 2, 8, 9).

It has been used as a teaching resource for the training of students, pastors and church workers in Estonia, Ukraine, other parts of Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia (Source 8). Conferences and educational events based on it have been held by member churches in various countries, such as Hungary, Italy and Germany. In addition to church members, these have involved pastoral workers, healthcare professionals, ethics experts and others (Sources 2, 6, 7).

The Guide has informed public statements and documents from member churches. For example, a public statement by the Protestant Federation of France quotes it, adopting its approach and some of its conclusions (Sources 2, 4), and a resource document from the Austrian Protestant diaconal organisation draws extensively on it (Source 11, citing it as 'GEKE-Orientierungshilfe').

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

1. CPCE, 'Before I Formed You in the Womb...': A Guide to the Ethics of Reproductive Medicine from the Council of the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (Vienna: CPCE, 2017).
2. Statement from senior representative of CPCE.
3. Statement from senior representative of the Church of Greece.
4. Fédération Protestante de France, Interpellations protestantes sur l'Assistance Médicale à la Procréation et la Gestation Pour Autrui (13 April 2018).
5. Final Report of CPCE General Assembly, Basle, Switzerland, September 2018.
6. Programme of Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) conference on the Guide at Evangelische Akademie Villingst, Germany, 23-24 November 2017.
7. Email correspondence from Expert Group member, November-December 2018.
8. Email correspondence from Expert Group member and member of European Baptist Federation, 21-23 November 2018.
9. Email correspondence with a representative of CPCE Secretariat, 16 December 2020.
10. Statement from a senior representative of CPCE Study Group on Gender and Sexuality, 5 April 2020.
11. Institut für öffentliche Theologie und Ethik, 'Fortpflanzungsmedizin und Behinderung,' Argumentarium Nr. 4 (2017).
12. Website: CPCE Focus, Issue 27 (1/2016): report of consultation on draft text. Online at https://issuu.com/ecumenix/docs/geke_focus-27_web