

**The impact of theological
training on the personal
practice of prayer. An initial
investigation.**

A Report from the Common Awards
Research Network Seedcorn Grant project
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Project Leader:

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1. *The nature of the project*

The principle aim of this research was to examine the impact of theological training on the personal prayer practices of ordinands.

The first objective was to ascertain the practices that ordinands bring with them into training.

The second objective was to explore the ways that the practice of prayer has changed and is changing among those currently in training. Questions focused on the content of training to see whether new learning leads to new understandings of prayer and hence new practices. Are changes that can be discerned due to new theological perspectives or something else? For example, it might be that new learning that is unsettling has led to different ways of praying, but there may also be factors due to joining a new community of learning and discovering how others practise personal prayer.

The third objective was to note how changes are perceived by the students: whether they are excited, have a sense of prayer deepening or broadening out or whether there is a fear of losing something important?

The context of training was a key aspect of the research project and to that end it was important seek to involve both those in full-time residential training and those in part-time non-residential training.

By questioning students from different points in their training –those in their first year as well as those coming to the end, it was believed there would be a clearer picture of the impact that can be measured.

The project was undertaken during a period of study leave from Wycliffe Hall. Having gone through a complete three-year cycle of Common Awards it seemed an appropriate time to pause and take stock. In my role as Tutor for Spiritual Formation I am particularly interested in a holistic outcome from the theological training of ordinands. Wycliffe offers a number of pathways for ordinands: Durham Common Awards and the Oxford BA and MTh (the latter for theological graduates). In addition the college has a number of independent students studying theology in the Continuing Education faculty of Oxford, though these were not part of the research project. In order to provide some comparative research and to comply with the Seedcorn grant requirements ordinands from two other TEIs were interviewed along with the cohort from Wycliffe. St Stephen's House was chosen as a residential TEI from a different tradition and the Oxford Ministry Course provided the perspective of non-residential and part-time training. The students were self-selecting having received a general invitation to put their name forward to be interviewed.

Arranging the interviews was time-consuming and delayed by slow responses from college officials but eventually there were 3 from St Stephen's House and 5 from the Oxford Ministry Course in addition to the 9 from Wycliffe Hall. The interviews were conducted *in situ* in each TEI by myself and I took notes as we talked. These were then written up for analysis. (cf Appendix for full script).

17 students in total

5 students from OMC

9 students from WH (5 CA + 4 Oxford pathways)

3 students from SSH

2. *Headline outcomes*

- There is a huge variety of experience of prayer represented by the sample both before and during training in all traditions and TEIs. A wide range of prayer practices among students of all ages and traditions was evident. Some demonstrate a smorgasbord approach, mainly charismatics and part-timers. Individuals have been introduced to new prayer techniques/traditions but it is not always clear why its good to pray this way. A practice tends to be adopted because 'I like it.' or 'It suits me/my lifestyle.' Sometimes this took place during the discernment process. Part-time training includes weekends on prayer and spiritual traditions which are appreciated. One student thought there was no explanation given as to why a particular tradition of prayer might be useful while another thought there was.
- The impact of newer churches e.g. charismatic, is clear, especially among evangelical students. This results in less emphasis on traditional habits such daily office or a 'quiet time' and more on experimentation e.g. prayer walking, pilgrimage.
- Very few students in any TEI made immediate connections between prayer and study. The most clear connections came from students on the masters in applied theology. Study and formation, however, are often linked. Having made the connection between classroom and prayer it seems that a more integrated and formational landscape can develop. This would be a fruitful area for development within TEIs.
- RELATIONAL was the most frequent description of prayer. There was also an emphasis on relating to others in and through prayer. Most valued praying with others as much as praying alone. There was less informal conversation about prayer among students in residential training than anticipated. It was appreciated when it happened. Change and development came from exposure to others. It was clear, however, that a good deal of development had already taken place during the discernment process.

- The strongest sense of connection between formation and study was in the catholic tradition. This may also have been influenced by the fact that the three students interviewed were theology graduates on a masters in applied theology programme. There was, however, a clear indication of intentionality from the TEI which stressed the Sulpician method of formation through study, prayer and communal life. Others were less aware of the connection between study and formation/prayer. A number asked for help during the interview. Although some struggled initially with the question of how study had changed their prayer most came up with a sentence or phrase that summed up doctrinally what prayer meant to them.
- Part-time ordinands have to make connections at home and work in more explicit ways and this came across strongly in the interviews. While this could be good, it could also short-circuit the learning in favour of what is practical. e.g. one student had to work out how to manage her devotional life when her husband retired.
- No 'typical' ordinand emerged from among the evangelical students interviewed. This may reflect the wide spectrum from conservative to charismatic. Everything from tongues to daily office was mentioned as methods of prayer that were practised. Part-time students were also very eclectic with a wide variety of practices from the Jesus prayer to yoga. It is clear from the interviews that the natural reflectors benefit the most from their formation. e.g. one student has done her own integrative work by following up on prayer models. As might be expected, those on the masters of applied theology programme were also more clearly already making their own connections between their study of theology and prayer.

3. *The Questionnaire and its analysis*

Research Questions

1. What habits of prayer did you bring with you into training?
2. How has your prayer changed/developed/remained the same so far during training?
3. What are the theological principles that ground you in prayer now?
4. What new insights from the content of your training have you gained that are impacting how you pray?
5. Are these insights explicitly linked with prayer in the class room context?
6. What have you learned from fellow-students about their personal practice of prayer and how does this impact your praying?
7. Does the liturgical and corporate life of prayer in your TEI connect with your personal life of prayer?

Question 1: What habits of prayer did you bring with you into training?

A very wide range of Christian experience and church background emerged from the interviews in all three TEIs. Some students had begun in one tradition and moved to another prior to sensing a call to ordination. Some had come to faith relatively recently while others had grown up in Christian households. Few mentioned having been taught to pray.

While all saw the importance of personal prayer, fewer had a strong sense of the importance of corporate prayer, though the place of corporate worship more generally was emphasised by those from the charismatic tradition. Regular experience of liturgical prayer was less evident until the discernment process began, though the majority had started to use the daily office by the time they started training, mostly on their own.

The grounding with which students started to train remained important in all cases. Even those who had discovered new ways of prayer still valued the original foundations of personal prayer they had received.

A number of students confessed to having no real discipline of prayer prior to training.

There was a remarkable range of creativity in patterns and habits of prayer that students brought with them into training.

Prayer Apps are widespread and found to be very useful.

Q - How might this creativity and rich experience be incorporated into their new learning?

Question 2: How has your prayer changed/developed/remained the same so far during training?

The biggest change was the corporate experience of saying the Daily Office. For many this was a positive experience. Some felt that it squeezed out the spontaneous prayer they had been used to when meeting with other Christians and they missed this. One student (in his 3rd year), commented that he could not see the link between personal and corporate prayer.

Some students were challenged by altered practical circumstances: fitting in study with family life, pressure from academic work and so on. One student remarked that he now

says the Daily Office with his new baby in his arms. First year students on the whole continued to hold on to the practices that had sustained them to date.

Question 3: What are the theological principles that ground you in prayer now?

This question frequently required some thought but most responses had to do with an attribute of God that sustained them.

Questions 4 & 5: What new insights from the content of your training have you gained that are impacting how you pray?

Are these insights explicitly linked with prayer in the class room context?

These two questions tended to merge in the conversation during interviews. Most first year students struggled to answer these questions and needed some prompting with suggestions as to how study might inform prayer. A number felt that study ought to be impacting prayer more and in positive ways but wanted explicit help to do this. One student commented that he recognised the tension between having connections made by the tutor for the students and making their own.

There was a clear divide between first years and second and between those who started training with a theology degree already. Second years and theology graduates were better able to see the connections between what they were doing in the classroom and how this was impacting their vision of God and experience of prayer. Those who could choose topics for study were best placed of all to do this. For example, one student in residential training was very articulate about the way training in its totality had formed him.

Question 6: What have you learned from fellow-students about their personal practice of prayer and how does this impact your praying?

This question yielded the most interesting responses from the interviews. Every student regarded the fellowship and example of others as crucial to their spiritual growth and well-

being. Many have learned from observing the prayer habits of fellow students in all three TEIs. Most have had at least some informal conversation about prayer, though some were clearly cautious about this as needed to be offered rather than sought.

Question 7: Does the liturgical and corporate life of prayer in your TEI connect with your personal life of prayer?

4. Outcomes

Objective 1

Asking ordinands to describe how they had learned to pray and what practices they brought with them into training yielded a rich landscape of prayer. It would be worth considering how this could be integrated into training from the beginning and developed further theologically and practically.

Objective 2

For all the students interviewed the opportunity to talk about their prayer in relation to the overall training was welcomed.

Although some students made immediate connections between their studies and personal prayer, there was a clear divide between those who had been in training longer and/or who already had a theology degree when they began. In most cases the influence of worshipping, talking and learning with others was the greatest influence on a developing prayer life. There was a positive desire to make better connections between study and prayer and the recognition that they needed help to do this, at least in the initial stages.

Objective 3

Personal prayer was valued by all students interviewed and there was a general sense of desire to grow in this area. All students recognised that there was more to discover and every interview conveyed energy and determination to discover more. Of course the students were self-selecting and might therefore be deemed to be committed to personal prayer, but even where struggle and dryness was admitted to, there remained a sense of commitment to growth.

Questions for further research

The place of liturgical prayer among ordinands from charismatic evangelical backgrounds would be a fruitful area for further research.

The study could easily be widened to include students from other TEIs. CMS and St Mellitus in particular could yield useful insights into other training contexts.

Based at Wycliffe I anticipate further conversation with the students involved in the interview process. Areas for development include:

- Questions around integrated learning and spiritual formation. What would help them connect study and prayer?
- The relationship between corporate (liturgical) and personal prayer.
- I will also circulate this report to colleagues and set up a conversation to discuss ways to integrate formation and academic input in different subject areas. How could the classroom context raise awareness and assist students practically to develop learning and prayer in an integrated way?
- Discussions are under way for the setting up of a day on ministry and prayer at Wycliffe with the possibility of inviting participants from all three TEIs involved in the research.

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