

Doing Ethnographic Ecclesiology: Findings and reflexive considerations on a 6-year study

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Abstract

Based on a recently completed PhD² this paper outlines the approach taken, draws out key findings and reflects on the process of doing ethnographic ecclesiology.

Keywords: *ecclesiology, ethnography, Assemblies of God, leadership, organisational culture*

Introduction

The first few words of this paper are penned mid-July as I anticipate my PhD graduation ceremony in just five days time; the concluding milestone, the final hurdle, the culmination of a circuitous and at times tempestuous doctoral journey spanning almost a decade. Drawing on that study, I seek to share in this paper and the proceeding discussion, some of the more interesting findings, insights and questions that the research surfaced, as well as reflect on the experience of doing ethnographic ecclesiology in the hope of provoking rich discussion and debate. In presenting and discussing a paper such as this, it is possible that a level of cathartic therapy may creep in; when such instances become a little too blatant or indulgent I beg your forgiveness. It is hoped that, amongst friends and colleagues interested in ecclesiology and ethnography, the narrative and personal style of this paper will be, if not welcomed, at least sympathetically tolerated.

The Study

The original idea of the study was to explore how the culture of the Assemblies of God in Great Britain (AoG) influences its leadership and, in turn, how the leadership of the movement might intentionally shape culture. The base-premise drawn from one of the founding fathers of organisational culture Edgar Schein was that few organisations form accidentally or spontaneously but usually by an individual or group who recognise that their combined effort will achieve more through coordinated effort than the individual alone can: thus it is the founding leaders who purposefully or unwittingly create organisational cultures. Although organisational culture is shaped over time by new leaders and new thinking, according to Schein it is the beliefs, values, and assumptions of those founders of organisations that are by far the most important for cultural beginnings because, even in the most mature organisations, many of the contemporary assumptions can be traced back to the beliefs and values of founders and early leaders.³

The impetus for the study came from a deeply held personal belief discovered through studying an MBA in the 1990s and born out through the experience of my leadership roles; that the most important thing that a leader can occupy themselves with is organisational culture. This belief was predicated on work by Schein who argues that the concept of organisational culture:

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² Authority and Authenticity in the Leadership of the British Assemblies of God: An exploration of an emergent ecclesial organisational culture, 2018

³ Schein, Edgar H., *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 4th ed. (California: Jossey-Bass, 2010), p.232.

Helps to explain some of the more seemingly incomprehensible and irrational aspects of what goes on in groups, occupations, organisations, and other kinds of social units that have common histories.⁴

The problem and main challenge of the study, as I was to discover, is that culture is an empirically based *abstraction* where powerful forces operate outside our scope of awareness. Consequently, the extremely appealing nature of culture (that it ‘lifts the fog’ on the frustrating, annoying, paradoxical aspects in the life of organisations) is equally matched by its challenge: to excavate the implicit, unspoken, below-the-surface assumptions, habits, rituals, values and beliefs that hold the clues to understanding ‘what is really going on’ in organisations. To compound matters, culture sits across disparate academic fields that have different, often contradictory philosophical, epistemological and ontological stances. Just to make matters more challenging, organisational culture has not historically enjoyed the same level of theological academic interest and debate as it has in social science, business and anthropology.⁵

The Genesis

I consider there to be a piece of vital, beautiful, divine orchestration that began the process of study worthy of mention. I still remember walking into my office at work and turning over the Oswald Chambers inspirational day calendar my wife had purchased for me. The date was 11th February 2009 and the scripture was Isaiah 26:3:

You will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you

As I read Oswald’s brief paragraph the last sentence arrested me:

Your mind is the greatest gift God has given you and it ought to be entirely devoted to him

I had the strongest sense of God’s Spirit urging me to “Use your mind for me” and some bond inside was gently but spectacularly broken. I sensed (almost physically) that deep-seated concerns (about the dangers of ‘intellectualism’ to the Spirit and the ‘clergy laity divide’ caused by ordination) planted in those tender years following conversion had been in an instant divinely uprooted. I knew in that moment I was being asked to do two things: to fully commit myself to the PhD process that I had been begrudgingly exploring; and to apply for ordination training. These two parallel strands proved to be a stroke of divine genius and without such a profound encounter that carried as much certainty as I have ever had in my Christian walk, I doubt I would have ever embarked - let alone had the grace to complete - what proved to be such a difficult and demanding journey. Until the completion of the PhD I could only begin to glimpse what, in hindsight, was a beautiful orchestration of timings throughout the process of study.

The Approach

Although my quest for doctoral study commenced in 2008/9, through several false starts⁶ it was not until January 2011 when I finally registered on a PhD with King’s College

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Although organisational culture has been more prominent in church leadership of late, it tends to take its premise from popular rather than academic sources

⁶ Two instances of doctoral courses that I had worked towards were pulled through validation issues just before registration

London (under the tutelage of Pete Ward) that the doing of ethnographic ecclesiology commenced. Although ‘doing ethnographic ecclesiology’ sounds quite grand and planned, in all honesty there was no conscious realisation of this at the time; rather it seemed – almost by osmosis - to sneakily and slowly infiltrate the research and the researcher.

The practical tasks of the research stage were straightforward: An emic-ethnographic approach was taken to provide a rich understanding of AoG through a variety of qualitative ethnographic tools: *historiography* researching and writing on the history of the AoG from the advent of UK Pentecostalism in the early 1900s to the present day utilising Critical Incident Theory (CIT)⁷; *interviews* with the AoG National Leader, his team, AoG Pentecostal scholars and local AoG church leaders that explored how participants within the culture understood, perceived and attributed meaning to their experiences; and *participant-observer* ‘researcher as instrument’ immersive autoethnography drawn from the ‘lived experience’ of the researcher who had been part of a local AoG church leadership team and engaged in the AoG probationary ministry process.

The conceptual task of exploring organisational culture was less straightforward as it involved drawing from the fields of organisational studies, sociology, and ecclesiology which alone would easily devour the entire word count of this paper. Suffice it to say that approaches that bring such previously discordant disciplines together are not entirely new but have been sufficiently scant to leave a paucity of methodological foundations, something the growing and important academic work in *Ecclesiology and Ethnography* over the past decade has begun to address.

A way of thinking of organisational culture in the thesis was the idea of ‘gaze’⁸ which was used to ‘probe deeper’ into AoG organisational culture, bringing ecclesiology and polity into focus in the context of historic-cultural factors. Oviedo argues that organisational culture plays a central role in the development of any organisation but cannot be over-simplified when relating to its presence and influence in a religious institution.⁹ Together with gaze, an idea was borrowed from the French wine-growers term *terroir*. Terroir has no English equivalence and means the ‘complete’ environment of the vineyard’s many unique parts that taken together give the wine its unique character:

It is an alchemy of the soil and its underlying geology, its altitude and microclimate, the direction it faces, how well watered it is, whether it is on a hillside or in a valley, the history of the terrain and how the soil has been worked down the centuries, even how near it is to a main road..... To make good wine, it is not enough to be proficient in the mechanical crafts of winemaking or understand the chemistry of fermentation: you

⁷ CIT has been utilised across a diverse range of disciplines including intercultural organisation studies and seeks to identify incidents that have critical significance, see Spencer-Oatey, Helen, "Critical Incidents. A Compilation of Quotations for the Intercultural Field," in *GlobalPAD Core Concepts* (<http://go.warwick.ac.uk/globalpadintercultural>: University of Warwick, 2013).

⁸ The Oxford English Dictionary defines the verb gaze as “to look fixedly, intently, or deliberately at something”. The definition of gaze has evolved from just a “look” into an “intent” look (i.e. the intent behind the gaze becomes crucial for its definition) and gaze can be thought of as a dynamic medium bridging the gap between the observable and the orientation of the observer

⁹ Oviedo, Lluís, "Testing the Effects of Organizational Culture on a Catholic Religious Order," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 23, no. 2 (2008).

have to know about the geology, meteorology, botany, social geography and cultural history. You need to know the *terroir*.¹⁰

Terroir carries with it not only the unchangeable long-history facets of the land and the slow development of the geology over time but the unpredictable contemporary effect of weather changes and of course the way the vineyard is cultivated. Such a picture recognises (as The Wine Society of 1894 so insightfully posits):

Gifted growers often make excellent wine in lesser vintages, just as, in outstanding years, mediocrity can prove a stronger force even than Mother Nature.¹¹

McGrath observes an obvious parallel with terroir and church¹² that when applied to AoG yielded rich results ‘drawing out clues’ to more deeply understand its heritage and contemporary terroir, ultimately helping to see, understand and point to ‘why things are as they are today’.

Finally, a useful find towards the end of the process was Neil Ormerod’s work¹³ that helped locate the theology / sociology debate. Although my approach had developed without knowledge of Ormerod’s methodology, there were uncanny similarities between his suggestions and the thesis.

Findings of Interest

Although the research was limited to the study of AoG in the UK, as the work progressed a sense of its potential relevance for a wider audience began to emerge. A tentative ‘toe in the water’ with a paper delivered to the European Pentecostal Theological Association (EPTA) conference last year¹⁴ - generated not only a surprising amount of interest but a clear ‘resonance’ with delegates from a diverse range of denominations (albeit from a similar Pentecostal stable). It was not just the findings, but some of conceptual responses developed in the thesis that seemed to spark the imagination and it is to these that we now turn our attention.

Local Autonomy

The influence of organisational culture indeed was found to flow right back to the founding of AoG in 1924 and its pre-formation in the broader development of UK Pentecostalism in the early 1900s. The initial structures, systems, values and beliefs that were generated (in some cases purposefully in others unintentionally) created the primary construct in which culture was formed reflecting the overall assumptions of the founding leaders and which, in many respects, continue to shape the movement today as it approaches its centenary anniversary. AoG was formed as the last organised movement within UK Pentecostalism motivated by a desire to bring together the remaining independent UK assemblies. It initially

¹⁰ Sadgrove, Michael, *Wisdom and Ministry: The Call to Leadership* (London: SPCK Publishing 2008), p.84.

¹¹ Wine Society, "The Wine Society", <http://www.thewinesociety.com/shop/VintageChart.aspx>.

¹² McGrath, Alister E., "The Cultivation of Theological Vision," in *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, ed. Peter Ward (Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), p.122.

¹³ Ormerod, Neil, *Re-Visioning the Church: An Experiment in Systematic Historical Ecclesiology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014).

¹⁴ Recently published: Foster, William D, "Pentecostal Roots: Considerations of the Effect of Pentecostal Foundations on Organizational Culture and Leadership of the Assemblies of God Great Britain," *Journal of the European Pentecostal Theological Association* 38, no. 2 (2018).

consisted of a number of small assemblies that desired to ‘preserve the Pentecostal Blessing’ and protect themselves from error but did not find a place in established denominational structures; rather being subjected to hostility by them. Neither did they wish to join the existing two Pentecostal organisations (Elim and Apostolic Faith Church) due to a fear of centralised autocracy and abuses of the apostolic and prophetic offices respectively.

This concern over centralisation / organisation beyond the local level has been an all-pervading facet of *local autonomy*, which is by far the most prominent aspect of its culture. At its foundation, AoG was fundamentalist-primitivist in its approach to scripture with a staunchly anti-denominational stance: believing that organisation other than at a local assembly level was unscriptural. The resultant local autonomy culture was labelled by interviewees as AoG’s greatest strength and weakness. Similarly, the concern over the apostolic and prophetic offices so embedded itself in the culture that sixty decades later when those leading the movement believed it was important to establish Ephesians 4:11 five-fold ministry, making headway in this direction was severely restrained by cultural inertia.

Other characteristics

The laity-led movement, popular in the working-class industrial headlands, birthed from a strong desire for ‘experience’ (Spirit baptism) and phenomenon (speaking in tongues) had a pre-millennial immanent eschatology, all giving rise to an ‘immediacy’/reactive posture and a strong anti-intellectual thread; often it seemed that baptism in the Spirit was all the equipping needed for ministry and leadership. Initial ecclesial differences (such as Pentecostalism’s UK founding father, Anglican Minister Rev Alexander Boddy’s desire for Pentecostalism to be part of the mainstream denomination) and doctrinal tensions (disagreements over speaking in tongues as the initial evidence of Spirit Baptism, differences of opinion over conscientious objection and conflict over finance/salary for central roles) meant that potentially valuable contributors and voices were absent from the shaping of AoG polity. There was also a very strong focus on overseas missions, which meant that other gifted ministers were lost from the UK scene.

Conventions had been the main events that brought those from local AoG churches together but a shift in emphasis away from the initial focus on Spirit Baptism to larger-scale evangelistic and Divine healing campaigns both changed the emphasis of the movement whilst concomitantly producing a rapid growth in assemblies that outstripped the capability of local leadership and the central administration apparatus. The anti-organisational aspect of culture meant that there was not a strong or well-developed foundation to its constitution and over the decades, the patchwork of additions and changes became burdensome and impenetrable to many.

The Precarious Denomination

By the 1950’s signs of growing concern could be identified and in 1960 Donald Gee (Chair and one of the original founders) warned that the movement was failing to grow, was in dire peril and needed the equivalent of an “act of divine surgery”, identifying a number of areas where change was necessary. However, the AoG central administration existed to serve the local assemblies rather than to provide leadership and so the nature of decision-making through full-participative democracy meant that, rather than a paucity of leadership there was

a plethora of leaders all pulling in different directions.¹⁵ Therefore, limited progress was made in agreeing areas of change and then attempts to enact that change were subsequently thwarted and reversed. This period is redolent of a comment the fictional Prime Minister Jim Hacker makes to his wife Annie:

No-one has control. Lots of people have the power to stop something happening – but almost nobody had the power to *make* anything happen. We have a system of government with the engine of a lawn-mower and the brakes of a Rolls-Royce.¹⁶

Ironically, whilst the AoG apparatus often impeded progress and constrained central innovation to a few large projects¹⁷ there was great scope for diversity and innovation within the local autonomous assemblies.

It was only towards the turn of the century that more radical organisational change occurred and a move from administration towards leadership commenced. In the 1990s the Movement suspended its constitution and placed the leadership in the hands of its new General Superintendent and his team who took on the colossal and painful challenge of adopting new organisational approaches and repurposing the movement (which inevitably polarised opinion). By 2008 when the General Superintendent of 13 years suddenly and unexpectedly stepped down, a new legal structure of incorporation and Directors had been created although the full extent of implementation only occurred when the new National Leadership Team (NLT) was formed in 2011 (following appointment of a new National Leader in 2010). In the following years, almost a century of the conference-based democratic voting apparatus that dealt with AoG ‘business’ was removed as the NLT took full grasp of their Director responsibility and undertook a ‘mandate to lead the movement’. The two-tiered leadership system (of NLT and Board of Directors) was restructured into a monocacy/polycracy, ‘Regions’ were disbanded and a new ‘Areas’ and ‘Zone’ system created, the HQ was relocated and amalgamated with the Bible College and a symbolic representation of this change in leadership style was signalled by the term ‘Apostolically Led’ in the strapline *Apostolically Led, Relationally Connected Missionally Focused*.

Analytics

Although great detail on analysis cannot be included in a paper of this length, it is worth outlining the sorts of issues that arose. Concepts of power, democracy, identity and creative resistance were important themes in analysis. When AoG rejected existing modes of authority in favour of a scriptural primitivism, an accompanying rejection of tradition, theological scholarship, polity, church structures and governance occurred. Although dramatic changes in UK legislative frameworks meant that AoG has had to increase its authority in areas of policy and compliance, the staunch belief in local autonomy and rejection of central control leaves AoG with very little power in its relationship with its local churches and ministers. Whilst much had changed at AoG central level, at local level things ‘on the ground’ were hardly affected, however, this does not necessarily mean that all was well. The events surrounding the sacking of the Principal of the Bible College in 2016 was, some felt, symptomatic of the asymmetry of power in the new leadership configuration and culture,

¹⁵ Linford, Aaron, "Presidential Address," in *AoG General Confrence* (Morecambe1963b).

¹⁶ Lynn, Joanathan and Anthony, Jay, *The Complete Yes Prime Minister: The Diaries of the Right Hon. James Hacker* (BBC Books, 1989).

¹⁷ For example pioneering radio broadcasts

provoking strong opinion and grave concerns over the reason for (and process of) the dismissal with sharp criticism of both the way the decision had been made and implemented as well as issues around the subsequent review process. Although a successor to the National Leader had been nominated earlier that year with unanimous support from the NLT, the conference vote did not carry which can be seen as act seen of creative resistance.¹⁸

The analytic of authenticity was used in the thesis to consider the place of social character, particularly the implications for leadership of the changing social construct away from a dominant industrial-mechanised bureaucratic culture to an interactive knowledge-service based economy coupled with the social-cultural shift in family structure which has decreased the emphasis on traditional 'parental' modes of leadership authority. The resultant cultural crisis of the Church¹⁹ - not least with its place in society radically altered in the post-Christendom / post-Christian era – raised the paradox of why churches of all places would be seen as inauthentic and brought into focus the challenges of authentic Christianity.

Authentic leadership for the AoG was considered in the context of both the local church and the dynamic of the national *apostolically led* paradigm, considering the increasing emphasis on Ephesians 4:11 five-fold gifting for AoG church polity. The place of leadership as a theological and Biblical designation was explored and its interplay with the concept of ministry considered.

Images

Amongst the ideas in the recommendations of the thesis was that of images and metaphors. Morgan in his book *Images of Organisations* recognises that the metaphor of the 'organisation as machine' is one of the dominating concepts of organisation:

Mechanisation has influenced virtually every aspect of existence in the modern world and increasingly we have learned to use machines as a metaphor for ourselves and our society and to mold [*sic*] our world according to mechanical principles...which is nowhere more evident than in the modern organisation."²⁰

As such it is understandable to see how ill-fitting and restricted such a mechanistic worldview might be when considering organisations whose *raison d'être* has a broader spiritual narrative.²¹ The strong underlying theme of resistance to meta-organisational forms in the AoG - in part fuelled by a blue-print ecclesiology approach to scripture and a disconnect to the broader Christian tradition – was surfaced by the thesis. Ormerod highlights the critical difference between a developmental and a primitivist approach to Church:

If we view the Church in the New Testament as a prototype from which everything else develops rather than an archetype to be endlessly repeated, the significance of the New Testament is less pressing. To adopt a biological metaphor, one does not understand the growing tree by examining the seed. To understand the growing tree, one must examine

¹⁸ Courpasson, David and Dany, Françoise "Cultures of Resistance in the Workplace," in *The Sage Handbook of Power*, ed. Stewart R Clegg and Mark Haugaard (London: Sage Publications Ltd, 2009).

¹⁹ Drane, John, *The McDonaldization of the Church: Spirituality, Creativity and the Future of the Church* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd., 2000a), p.18.

²⁰ Morgan, Gareth, *Images of Organisations* (London: Sage Publications, 2006).

²¹ This may also explain why moves in the past decade in some churches and denominations to assimilate management and leadership practices adopted from commercial organisations has created great polarisation between those enthusiastic proponents who see it as the holy grail essential to revitalise and repurpose churches and objectors who rail against inappropriate managerialism.

the soil in which it is planted, the variation of the seasons in which it develops, the droughts and floods that threaten its survival and so on. The seed can only tell us so much.²²

Ormerod's statement resonates with the idea of terroir and can be powerfully liberating to imagining new ecclesiologies. The need for other metaphors (that might help re-imagine denominations) is illustrated by Morgan who shows that in the last decades of the 20th century the dominant organisational 'machine' metaphor came under challenge and alternative ways of imagining organisations started to be offered such as organisations as; organisms (living adaptive systems and species); brains (learning and self-organisation); cultures (that create the social reality they inhabit); political systems (serving interests with conflict and power relationships); psychic prisons (humans trapped in a web of their own creation); flux and transformation (recognising the unfolding nature of change); and instruments of domination (the ugly face of organisations that are slowly killing us).²³

Reflexivity

Parallel Tracks: PhD and Ordination

I have already mentioned the sense of divine orchestration of registering the PhD in parallel to commencing ordination / probationary minister training at the same time as a new AoG NLT was being assembled, but it is worth reflecting on the nature and benefits of this remarkable timing. My first weeklong probationary ministers *Inspire* conference²⁴ in mid-2011 was the first time that the newly formed NLT had been together at such an event and the rewards for a budding ethnographer were numerous. Firstly, the NLT used the conference to share with probationary ministers their developing thinking, priorities, values and future leadership / direction for the movement. Secondly, in a desire to model a new authentic style, the NLT scheduled sessions where they shared difficulties they had faced in their own leadership journey including open-mic Q&A which offered real 'insider' insight. In my experience this level of disclosure had not been the norm; the AoG Senior Pastors I knew were often put on a pedestal by their congregants and strived to be impeccable role models not prone to shows of public vulnerability. Other probationary participants (who had the benefit of attending previous probation conferences) shared with me their surprise at this approach and saw it as a welcome "breath of fresh air". Thirdly I had the opportunity to talk to a number of the NLT about the history of the AoG; one in particular held a PhD with part of his thesis given over to a short study of the history of the movement. Fourthly, fellow probationers from across the nation represented a broad range of peers who, on an informal basis, shared and exchanged views and experiences. Finally, the probationary process with its intense weeklong annual conferences gave me unparalleled and extended access to the members of the NLT in a context where they were keen to build relationships with their probationary ministers. This 'connecting and relating' to the most senior gatekeepers of the movement gave crucial 'access' and 'opportunity' to my field of interest: easing the way to

²² Ormerod, p.ix.

²³ Morgan.

²⁴ Each probationary minister has to attend at least two of these annual conferences as part of their training

enlist their approval and support for the PhD study and, later on, to participate in interviews themselves.²⁵

I received full ministry status in June 2013 and although my plan was to complete the PhD in the minimum period allowed (4 years part-time), this was not to be. Our young family went through a period of distressing circumstances that lasted almost a year, a restructure at King's (resulting in a loss of my original supervision team), a major faculty restructure at my University, a critical leadership crisis at my church and a promotion for me at University (a double edged sword that saw an increase in responsibility and a shift in reduced PhD support) inevitably caused around a two year delay to the completion of the PhD. These events also catalysed a transition in my own Christian spiritual journey through an experience that Hagberg and Guelich²⁶ term 'the wall' which sees a change from a stage termed 'productivity' to what the contemplatives call the 'inner journey'.²⁷

Although these circumstances were extremely challenging, the result on the PhD completion date was not without its own benefits for the study. During that time, major leadership difficulties in the AoG - sparked by the NLT's decision to sack the Principal of their Bible College in 2016 - led to: a series of unprecedented leadership challenges; failure to confirm the new National Leader at annual conference the following year; and a whole host of leadership issues played out on a semi-public stage. As a full minister I was now included in all of the communication from the NLT (and from the various groups / individuals providing challenge and opposition to the NLT). Although these events were deeply sad and severely upsetting for the individuals involved, they provided a rich seem of 'content' for the PhD and also served to surface issues that had been identified in the thesis, thus adding weight to its findings. Equally, my own personal journey with a new mode of contemplative spirituality and interest in spiritual formation (generally alien to the AoG culture) opened up alternate perspectives and paradigms for interpretation. This was complemented by a shift that had been happening in my own perspectives: as the PhD unfolded, its critical nature seemed to prize open a door of permission for questioning. I found that the hard edges of the quite 'conservative fundamentalist' views pervading my conversion began to soften and open as I journeyed on the doctoral process and as my personal/devotional reading material began to broaden.²⁸ Had my own plans not been confounded by the delays these rich seems would have been excluded and the study the poorer for it.

Inside-Out

This parallel track leads into considerations of the 'insider' aspects to the ethnographic study. Sackmann²⁹ places different research methods used to analyse organisational culture on a continuum. At one end there are the highly structured objective approaches such as

²⁵ Whilst the training had this agency of enabling, that was not its prime purpose.

²⁶ Hagberg, Janet and Guelich, Robert A., *The Critical Journey: Stages in the Life of Faith*, 2nd ed. ed. (Wisconsin: Sheffield Publishing Company, 1989).

²⁷ See for example: Rohr, Richard, *Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Self* (London: SPCK, 2013).

²⁸ For example: McKnight, Scot, *The Blue Parakeet: Rethinking How You Read the Bible* (Michigan: Zondervan, 2008).; Bailey, Kenneth E., *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2008).

²⁹ Sackmann, Sonja A., "Uncovering Culture in Organizations," *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* 27 (1991).

questionnaires, structured interviews, checklists etc. At the other there are the unstructured inductive modes of inquiry as ethnographic studies through participant observation and in-depth interviews with individuals and groups. Methods such as document analysis and group discussion sit between the two. The ends of the continuum represent the two opposite perspectives, the “insider” and the “outsider”. Schein states:

If we combine insider knowledge with outsider questions, assumptions can be brought to the surface, but the process of inquiry has to be interactive, with the outsider continuing to probe until assumptions have really been teased out and have led to a feeling of greater understanding on the part of both the outsider and the insiders.³⁰

Natalie Wigg-Stevenson highlights the slightly different approach of *objectified participation* taken by Loïc Wacquant an ethnographer who became a boxer to fully immerse himself in the field of boxing in order to study it “inculcating himself with a pugilistic habitus.”³¹ Although for me the parallel tracks of PhD and probationary ministry had commenced at the same time, I had already inhabited the ministry field for a number of years as a lay church leader. Nonetheless, the probationary minister training without doubt placed me ‘deeper’ into the field and provided unique ethnographic immersion. The ministry training became a vital primary research tool that added to my local church experience and provided an enriched layer of insight with a new ‘close up’ window into the national AoG leadership landscape. When I entered the process of ministry training, I did so as an ethnographer in the full knowledge that I was both participant and observer, however, my primary orientation was a belonging to and inhabitation of the field, whilst conscious of it as a source of study.

Like Wacquant and Wigg-Stevenson, I sought to produce knowledge generated from possessing and being possessed by the habitus that coheres between the academic researcher, the practising minister and the ordinand trainee. I was able to hold up a mirror to church and denominational culture, but I inhabited it in such a way as to detect ‘under the skin’ subtleties that may have otherwise eluded more objective observation. As an ethnographic researcher who was not only participating and observing but also fully immersed in my field, I was well aware of the role I would play in the research. My ‘membership’ of AoG as a probationary (and then full-status) minister allowed an immersive experience beyond a local church level. I was conscious that by conducting the research, discussing it with / interviewing members of the NLT, the importance and prominence of the key themes of my research - culture and leadership - might be heightened. Due to the nature of inquiry, this was not a major issue and I judged my pre-thesis influence to be quite nominal: I was not part of the NLT, was not engaged in action research and at the first *Inspire* conference it was clear that, to a degree, culture and leadership were already ‘on the radar’ of the NLT.

The most surprising thing I found in the study (and there were many surprises) is how difficult it seems to be for theologian scholars outside the world of ethnography to enter into this “different world” as Fiddes puts it.³² Anecdotally it seemed far easier for colleagues who were companions of the ethnographic method but outside of theology to accept the approach

³⁰ Schein, Edgar H, "Organizational Culture," *American Psychologist* February (1990).

³¹ Wigg-Stevenson, Natalie, *Ethnographic Theology: An Inquiry into the Production of Theological Knowledge* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan 2014), p.60.

³² Fiddes, Paul S., "Ecclesiology and Ethnography: Two Disciplines, Two Worlds?," in *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, ed. Peter Ward (Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012).

than for those within the world of theology who were perhaps on less friendly terms with ethnography. Colleagues from ethnographic background felt the “best bits” were the personal biographical elements whereas those from theology / social sciences really struggled to read the thesis “in its field” and the challenges I was presented with were about trying to make the thesis fit their construct, effectively trying to strip out anything that was autoethnographic. It was interesting that in these instances, the defensive alarm that Brittain talks about³³ was not so much sounded by theologians over the relationship between social sciences and theology but rather arising from the nature of the ethnography in this study.

Where Next?

Although the aim of the study was always to try and bring new insight and perspectives to benefit the AoG, the significant turmoil around its leadership and the processes implemented to begin to resolve matters means that there has been neither the structures, appropriate people or quite the right context in which to engage (although things are just beginning to settle now and a new leader may be appointed next year). Nonetheless, something about the PhD seems to have ‘chimed’ across a broad spectrum of other denominations and I am hoping that the approaches I have had will grow into an opportunity for ideas from the study to begin to find new leases of life in any denomination that could benefit.

³³ Brittain, Christopher Craig, "Ethnography as Ecclesial Attentiveness and Critical Reflexivity," in *Explorations in Ecclesiology and Ethnography* ed. Christian B. Scharen (Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012).

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