Doing Theology Together in a 'Baptist way'? An Evaluation of the Potential of Curriculum-Embedded Collaborative Research Projects

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Abstract:
In the autumn of 2020, students who were enrolled in the course 'Doing Theology' at the Dutch Baptist Seminary engaged in a small research project on the effects of the covid-19 pandemic in baptist communities and on the spiritual life of its members. The research was done as an experiment in collaboration with a number of churches, church leaders as well as regional coordinators of the church fellowship. The stated aim was to help churches reflect on the effects of the current crisis, while also giving students first-hand fieldwork experience in actual communities. As such, the experiment attempted to join the academic triad of education, research and valorisation in a curriculum-embedded collaborative research project. This article discusses and evaluates its potential for baptist ways of doing theology.

Keywords:
Collaborative research; practical theology; communal discernment; curriculum-embedded research

Introduction

The Dutch Baptist Seminary provides ministerial training for students pursuing ordination in baptist churches in the Netherlands.[1] The Seminary is embedded at the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam and has

[1] More particularly, the Seminary is part of the Dutch Baptist Union, which is in the process of merging with the Alliance of Baptist and CAMA churches. The CAMA churches (internationally known as CMA or Christian Missionary Alliance), bring in their own 'missionary' DNA. In this article I will refer to these churches together as 'baptist' with the small 'b', reflecting the usage by James McClendon to denote a family of churches, rather than those that self-designate as 'Baptist'.

integrated curricular programmes with other theological institutions. Its primary aim is to provide training for leaders in baptist churches, focusing on ministerial and personal formation, knowledge of the baptistic traditions, and the ability to 'do theology', or 'theologically reflect' amidst the challenging Dutch post-Christian context.[2] An emphasis is placed on the ability to interpret today's world and its everyday life in light of the theological sources of Scripture and tradition (at the Seminary, this is referred to as 'leadership by interpretation'). Especially in light of the rapidly changing culture, 'interpretation' is understood as a dynamic and creative process, requiring openness and inquisitiveness. It aligns with concurrent ideas on the task of academic institutions to train 'reflexive' practitioners and 'reflexive' researchers who are used to the idea of being 'life-long learners'. Or, as it is explained at the Seminary, seeking to foster a curiosity or an appetite for research (*onderzoekszin*), while at the same time pursuing this as a form of 'discipleship' in a faith community of learners (*leergemeenschap*).

Around 2009, the Seminary moved to the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam with the emphatic invitation of finding and voicing a particular 'Baptist way' of doing theology.[3] In order to heed this invitation, the Seminary staff have been inspired especially by the theology of James Wm McClendon — or to be more precise his *theological method* — to define this 'Baptist way', noting three elements in particular:[4]

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[2] In the curriculum, this translates into a focus on three core competences of ministry: following, understanding, and leading, which are derived from the three 'acts' of pastoral ministry (prayer, scripture, and spiritual direction) according to Eugene H. Peterson, *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987).

[3] See the conversations in Teun van der Leer, ed., *Zo zijn onze manieren! In gesprek over gemeentetheologie* (Barneveld: Baptisten Seminarium, 2009); especially too, Parush R. Parushev, *Doing Theology in a Baptist Way,* Keynote Lecture, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, 16 April 2009 <https://www.baptisten.nl/images/seminarium/publicaties/artikelen/artikel_baptistway_parushev_h1.pdf> [accessed 11 October 2021].

[4] See on this Henk Bakker, *De weg van het wassende water: Op zoek naar de wortels van het baptisme* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2008), pp. 13–14, and Henk Bakker and Daniel Drost, *Andersom: Een introductie in de theologie van James Wm. McClendon* (Amsterdam: Baptisten Seminarium, 2014); see also in this issue, the article by Henk Bakker, 'A Learning Community in Progress'.

1. A focus on 'lived theology', that is, a theology that occurs in visible and tangible practices of faith and in an ethical living.[5]
2. A strong ecclesial orientation: theology is embedded in the 'convictional', gathered community of followers of Christ, together discerning the will of Christ.[6]
3. A hermeneutical, narrative perspective that seeks to align 'congregational life with the biblical story', or in McClendon's famous adage (the baptist vision): 'this is that, then is now'.[7]

Whether these characteristics are typically 'Baptist' or 'baptistic' is a matter of debate that will not be addressed here. For the purpose of this article I note at least that they can be situated in broader developments in the social sciences and theology in general.[8] The direction pointed towards, inspired by McClendon, is the aim to study ecclesial practices in a critical, appreciative and faithful way, as both socio-cultural as well as theological phenomena.[9] While McClendon can be seen as a theologian who was a brilliant and unconventional frontrunner in

[5] See James Wm McClendon, *Ethics: Systematic Theology*, *Volume 1*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), pp. 167–182; see also Henk Bakker, 'The Munificent Church: The Drama of Tangible Ecclesial Transformation', *American Baptist Quarterly* (2014), 366–378.

[6] See James Wm McClendon, *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today's Theology* (Nashville: Trinity Press International, 1974), p. 35; also Ingeborg Janssen-te Loo, ed., *Samen ontdekken! De uitdaging van de vergader(en)de gemeente: samen de wil van Christus onderscheiden*, Baptistica Reeks (Barneveld: Unie van Baptistengemeenten in Nederland, 2016).

[7] McClendon, *Ethics*, pp. 26–34; see Parushev, *Doing Theology*, p. 4.

[8] Here, one can think of the turn to practice and culture (Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997); Karin Knorr Cetina, Theodore R. Schatzki, and Eike von Savigny, eds, *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory* (London: Routledge, 2001)), and parallelly in religious studies, the study of 'lived religion' (Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Nancy T. Ammerman, ed., *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006)). See on the narrative turn, e.g., Jaco S. Dreyer, 'The Narrative Turn in Practical Theology: A Discussion of Julian Müller's Narrative Approach', *Verbum et Ecclesia,* 35, no. 2 (2014), 1–9, and on the 'ecclesial turn' in contemporary theology, e.g., Daniel Drost, 'Diaspora as Mission: John Howard Yoder, Jeremiah 29 and the Shape and Mission of the Church' (doctoral thesis, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, 2019), pp. 20–26.

[9] See on this James Wm McClendon, *Witness: Systematic Theology, Volume 3* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994).

incorporating a number of nascent developments in his theology in his day,[10] it also needs to be noted that the debates have moved on.[11]

Increasingly, as a result of the search for a 'Baptist voice', the theological reflection on ecclesial practices has become a spearhead for the Baptist Seminary.[12] It has come to be reflected in a schematic quadrant (see Figure 1), that has been formative for Seminary policy. It expresses the aim to integrate the field of practice (the church fellowship), the research and educational activities of the Seminary, as well as the personal formation of students. In the curriculum, this integration is pursued in a number of ways: courses mostly have an interdisciplinary character in which a combination is sought between practice-oriented education (involving case studies) and theological theory. Education has also become more involved in research.[13]

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[10] In this regard, it is worthwhile mentioning the interesting chapter by Elizabeth Phillips, 'Charting the "Ethnographic Turn": Theologians and the Study of Christian Congregations', in *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, ed. by Pete Ward (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), pp. 95–106. Phillips traces the current popularity of ethnography ('the ethnographic turn') back to the work of McClendon and his student Theophus Smith (Theophus Smith, 'Ethnography-As-Theology: Inscribing the African American Sacred Story', in *Theology Without Foundations: Religious Practice and the Future of Theological Truth*, ed. by Stanley Hauerwas, Nancey Murphy, and Mark Nation (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), pp. 117–139).

[11] McClendon's theology can be criticised for example on the selective use of historical sources (see the article by Jan Martijn Abrahamse in this issue), and more generally, the postliberal theology he somewhat reflects is criticised for its linguistically oriented accounts of ecclesial practices, the lack of detailed engagement with actual fieldwork, the idealistic representations of the church, and the power issues involved in the production of theological knowledge. I do not have the space to engage these matters here, but for a discussion see Christian B. Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen, *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics* (London: Continuum, 2011); Pete Ward, ed., *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012); Pete Ward, *Liquid Ecclesiology: The Gospel and The Church* (Leiden: Brill, 2017); Nicholas M. Healy, *Hauerwas: a (Very) Critical Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014); much of these issues have been debated in the Ecclesiology & Ethnography network and its publications. On a critical discussion of McClendon's language of 'convictions', see David John McMillan, 'Convictions, Conflict and Moral Reasoning: the Contribution of the Concept of Convictions in Understanding Moral Reasoning in the Context of Conflict, Illustrated by a Case Study of Four Groups of Christians in Northern Ireland' (doctoral thesis, Vrije Universiteit, 2019).

[12] At the seminary, lecturer Eduard Groen has been a significant catalyst in this (Eduard Groen, *Geloofwaardige gemeente: Uitgangspunten van een baptisten gemeenteopbouw*, Baptistica Reeks (Barneveld: Unie van Baptistengemeenten in Nederland, 2011).

[13] The seminary staff themselves are also involved in a range of research projects, and participate in the 'kenniskring' — the academic research group of the Seminary, where each other's work is discussed — as well as in other interdisciplinary research groups.

Students engage too in an intensive period of internship, which also requires them to do small research tasks.

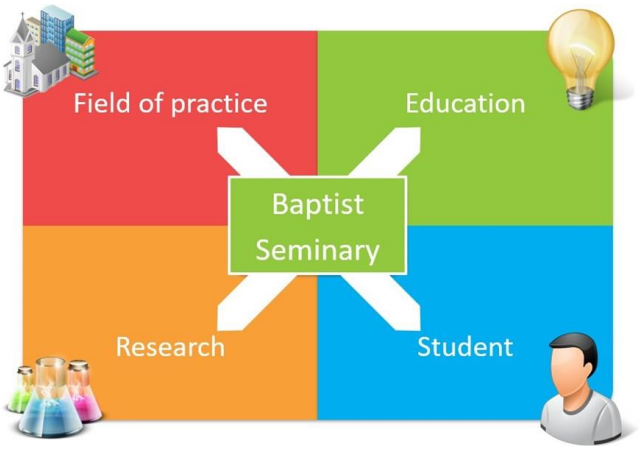

Figure 1: Seminary quadrant, which shows the aim to integrate the formation of students, the Seminary's research and educational activities, and the field of practice.

However, in this article I posit that currently there is an area of weakness in the implementation of this model, which primarily lies in the integration of *research* and the *field of practices*, thus the left side of the quadrant. Often these remain quite isolated fields, in which good research is not disseminated among practitioners and does not 'translate' into good practices (valorisation), while at the same time in-depth reflection on actual practices *together with* the field of practice remains limited. Although this is the aspiration, a number of hurdles are encountered, such as the challenge of motivating and equipping the field of practices to formulate manageable research projects (and address the *right* problems) or the challenge of managing the only very limited resources in terms of students, time, and funding. Vice versa, research that is being done is often stashed away, as the 'practical advice' at the end insufficiently captures the complexity of the actual reality, may not always 'suit' the best interests of those in charge, or simply is of questionable quality itself. Let me hasten to say that this is not merely a challenge for the Seminary, but for theological education and the academy in general. Knowledge valorisation, the quest of making

research useful for the field of practice — as a means to generate income and to legitimise the relevance of the academic enterprise — is high on the agenda of Dutch universities. I also contend that this is not merely a challenge for the Seminary, but also for the field of practice itself, namely the Dutch baptist churches. In the trying and rapidly changing context they face a range of adaptive challenges, such as changing patterns of ecclesial belonging, diverging theological, ethical and generational identities, and disintegrating functional organisational structures.[14] Churches often struggle to find new perspectives and ways of innovation.

In this article my aim is to examine whether 'collaborative research' in a curriculum-embedded form may be a promising lead for the Baptist Seminary to engage these challenges (that is, the 'valorisation challenge' for the Seminary, as well as the 'adaptive challenge' for the field of practices). I do so by evaluating a small curriculum-embedded collaborative research experiment in the 'Doing Theology' class of autumn 2020. As it has been the Seminary's first attempt in collaborative research, the evaluation has a heuristic and provisional character.[15] I reflect on the lessons learnt and look ahead at future possibilities, doing so especially in light of fostering a *baptist way* of doing theology collaboratively.[16] Before committing to that evaluation, however, a few words will be given on collaborative research in practical theology.

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[14] See in particular Miranda Klaver, Stefan Paas, and Eveline van Staalduine-Sulman, eds, *Evangelicals and Sources of Authority*, Amsterdam Studies in Theology and Religion (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 2016); these challenges will also be examined in a joint research project on evangelical Protestants in the Netherlands that the Seminary is undertaking together with the Radboud University Nijmegen.

[15] An exception to this has been the church development project 'Groentjes', discussed in the article by Wout Huizing and myself elsewhere in this issue. However, the approach there differs to some extent from the proposal of collaborative research in this article, as 'Groentjes' was not 'research driven'.

[16] A note of explanation here: in using the phrase 'doing theology', I refer to *a* way of doing theology that reflects the conversations above and reflects a particular interpretation of the baptist tradition. It is in no way my contention to argue that this is somehow *the* baptist way of doing theology, nor do I want to suggest that it is the only legitimate way of doing theology. At the Seminary 'doing theology' has come to entail a reflection on actual practice, in light of

Collaborative Research in Practical Theology

In the past two decades, a range of collaborative research methods have gained prominence in the academy. These have emerged in theology as well, although collaborative research is still in its infancy: the standard in theology remains for most research to be undertaken by 'solo researchers'.[17] In what follows, I draw on the excellent, recently published book *Collaborative Practical Theology: Engaging Practitioners in Research on Christian Practices*, by Henk de Roest of the Protestant Theological University, Groningen. Throughout the book, he uses an impressive range of examples from recent practical theological projects, and engages in an extensive discussion on the methodological implications and possibilities. His case can be summarised as a plea that the discipline of (practical) theology has much to gain by involving research subjects (practitioners) right from the start of a research project, and within the process: 'We need', De Roest suggests, a 'turn to the community' or a 'relational turn' to 'enable the valorisation of academic practical theology right from the start of a research project'.[18] While the word 'collaborative' may suggest many different forms of collaboration (such as collaboration in research groups or inter-institutional academic collaboration), De Roest narrows down the specific meaning of doing research together with practitioners: 'Collaborative practical theology does not and should not simply extract information from people, but rather should learn from and collaborate with people in order to be relevant for people.'[19] A number of rationales

theological sources; thus it seeks to integrate voices from Practical Theology and other theological disciplines.

17 See Henk P. de Roest, *Collaborative Practical Theology: Engaging Practitioners in Research on Christian Practices* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), pp. 15–49, 157. A number of academic publications have started to appear on this subject in theology, notably Helen Cameron, *Talking about God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2010); Elaine Graham, 'Is Practical Theology a Form of "Action Research"?', *International Journal of Practical Theology,* 17, no. 1 (2013), 148–178; Natalie Wigg-Stevenson, *Ethnographic Theology: An Inquiry into the Production of Theological Knowledge* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

18 De Roest, *Collaborative,* p. 184.

19 De Roest, *Collaborative*, p. 3.

are mentioned for involving practitioners and everyday believers in the research processes of Practical Theology. For brevity's sake, I summarise three of these, slightly changing the order set out by De Roest.[20]

Perhaps the primary reason for engaging in collaborative research is the quest for valorisation, the challenge with which De Roest starts his book, and what he calls the *utility-rationale*. Put simply, the question asked is 'who benefits from research?'[21] The argument is that much research focuses strongly on interpretation, while leaving 'action' or 'application' to an afterthought, placed *at the end of* or *after* the research.[22] Put differently, the task of valorisation within practical theology (knowledge dissemination and implementation) finds expression in a one-directional way from the researcher to the practitioners. Often, as a result, there is a mismatch in advice as it remains unrealistic and is not owned. While De Roest is not advocating for all research to have equal practical relevance, he notes that too often this dimension is insufficiently on the mind of the researcher. Thus, he asserts that the goals of practical theology 'are better realised and will be easier to disseminate or implement *in collaboration with* practitioners than without them', especially in a context where 'valorisation is deemed necessary, as it increasingly is today'.[23] De Roest proposes that

[20] In what follows I take what De Roest calls the 'emerging community rationale' and the 'innovation and professionalisation rationale' together. Besides the other two that are discussed in more detail below, De Roest also mentions the *Missio Dei* and the 'postcolonial' rationale. With the first, De Roest situates his take on Practical Theological as *missional* in nature, as it seeks to 'understand, evaluate and stimulate' the Christian community in its vocation towards living faithfully in the world, and seeking its flourishing' (De Roest, *Collaborative*, pp. 158–161), a point made among others by John Swinton and Harriet Mowatt, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM Press, 2006); Dorothy C. Bass et al., *Christian Practical Wisdom: What it Is, Why it Matters* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016); Miroslav Volf and Matthew Croasmun, *For the Life of the World: Theology That Makes a Difference* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2019). The 'postcolonial rationale' stresses the political dimension of research, and raises issues of the power relations involved, the reflexivity required and the empowering potential of research.

[21] De Roest, *Collaborative,* p. 33.

[22] This pattern shows itself for example in the pastoral cycle as developed by Richard Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008); see for a critical discussion de Roest, *Collaborative*, pp. 31–33; Pete Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology: Mission, Ministry and the Life of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), pp. 95–114.

[23] De Roest, *Collaborative,* p. 158.

practitioners, students, and senior researchers should work together in the generation and dissemination of knowledge, or in what he calls an upscaling of knowledge:

> The different activities involved in practical theological education, practical theological research and protestant practices are being connected. Knowledge will be *transformed* in ways that enable it to become useful, via a process involving scholars (having expertise as senior researchers), students and practitioners. By publishing the research, discussing it with experts, and discussing it in sessions with practitioners, knowledge will be codified and *enabled to circulate* in a wider collection of networks, creating a series of beneficiaries. Finally, knowledge will be *consolidated*, leading to improved skills.[24]

A second reason for collaborative approaches is found in the *epistemological rationale*. It is argued that practitioner knowledge is different from and precedes academic knowledge, in that it is tacit, vernacular, habituated, embodied and traditioned knowledge. Increasingly, such forms of knowledge are being studied and reflected on as forms of Christian practical wisdom.[25] 'Everyone who is or has been involved in the practices that may serve as research domains for practical theology can be a possible participant in the conversation about the divine reality that people experience in these practices.'[26] The argument then becomes that the discernment of theological truth requires the dialogical conversation with the field of practice in a continuous process of conversation, striving for 'consensus after consensus'.[27] Seeing practical theological research thus, brings it very close to the heart of baptistic visions of communal discernment.

De Roest also mentions the *emerging community rationale* and the *innovation and professionalisation rationale*, which I take together here, as both referring to the performative potential of the collaborative research

[24] De Roest, *Collaborative,* p. 17 (emphasis original).
[25] See Bass et al., *Christian Practical Wisdom.*
[26] De Roest, *Collaborative,* p. 167.
[27] De Roest, *Collaborative,* pp. 166–167.

process.[28] Thus, it is argued that besides generating knowledge, the research process itself may cause 'new practices, new relationships, new perspectives and new discourses' to emerge. Likewise, discussing challenges in communities of practice may lead to innovation of practices and the overcoming of stuck 'crises of routines'.[29] De Roest relates this to a conviction that 'community is the source of theologising' a conviction deeply cherished by baptists:

> In the church, groups are formed in time and space for common tasks, mutual care and sustainable memberships. In this way, the practice of collaborative research groups is likely to support the idiosyncrasies, the inherent characteristics of ecclesial community formation. As part of ecclesial practices, groups and particular in-depth groups have an effect on ecclesial learning, but they also set things in motion. Ecclesial practices are highly conversational and constantly in-the-making.[30]

As such doing collaborative research may itself be seen as a possible way of church development.

I will return to these three arguments for collaborative research in the reflections below. Following the focus of this article to look at the potential for collaborative research embedded in a curricular course, I now turn to describing the actual research experiment that was conducted. This educational embeddedness and the involvement of students, is itself mentioned as a promising lead in collaborative approaches, as De Roest notes: 'In the last five years, not only in theology, but also in the social sciences and humanities in general, in order to become a reflective practitioner, a tendency to instruct students to conduct practice-oriented research can be observed.'[31]

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[28] See on the turn to performance in social sciences, Norman K. Denzin, *Performance Autoethnography: Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Culture*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2018).

[29] De Roest, *Collaborative,* p. 34.

[30] De Roest, *Collaborative,* p. 164.

[31] De Roest, *Collaborative,* p. 295. De Roest also states, 'Furthermore, I would suggest that there are also possibilities for actually *conducting research in a class setting*, by interviewing practitioners, holding focus groups, having an expert panel, etc. […] Next, both graduate and undergraduate students in a theological seminary, faculty or divinity school can learn to conduct empirical research with professional practitioners and with everyday believers. Supervising a student can in this case be defined as both teaching […] and research.' (De Roest, *Collaborative,* p. 183)

A Practical Collaborative Fieldwork Assignment: Covid and Ecclesial Belonging

Students enrolling at the Baptist Seminary start with the course 'Doing Theology' (bachelor year 3 or 4, EQF level 6).[32] These students come from a range of theological educational backgrounds, which makes it challenging to assess and build on their previous knowledge, although a basic knowledge of theology is presupposed. The course 'Doing Theology' is designed as an introductory module, a 'pressure cooker', initiating students to the Seminary's way of doing theology in a nutshell. Thus, it aims to create a shared point of departure from which all subsequent courses draw. An introduction is given to 'our' interpretation of a 'baptist way' of doing theology, focusing on themes such as lived theology, communal discernment and narrative hermeneutics, while also the larger contextual debates (such as secularisation) and missiological developments (*Missio Dei* theology) are explored.[33] As a way of enabling students to be acquainted with the terminology, a Seminary glossary — a summarised, conceptual framework — is provided.[34] As an integrated part of the course, students are required to do a small fieldwork assignment in baptist churches as a form of theological reflection *in actu* — practising it both in the church

[32] The course was tutored by Jan Martijn Abrahamse and myself. The aims are stated as threefold, translated as follows: (1) The student explains how the concepts of lived faith, narrative theology and *Missio Dei* form the basis for the way of doing theology at the Baptist Seminary; (2) The student reflects on the way their biography shapes their theology, view on church and the world, and their own role; (3) The student describes lived faith in an ecclesial practice in its context, by using qualitative research methods, and the student is able to reflect on this process (observation, interpretation, reflection).

[33] Students read the Dutch version of Stefan Paas, *Pilgrims and Priests: Christian Mission in a Post-Christian Society* (London: SCM, 2019) and parts of the recent book on secularisation by Herman Paul, *Shoppen in advent: Een kleine theorie van secularisatie* (Utrecht: Kokboekencentrum Uitgevers, 2020).

[34] See 'Glossarium, Baptist Seminarium':
<https://baptisten.nl/images/seminarium/documenten/Glossarium_2020-2021.pdf>
[accessed 2 April 2021].

and in the classroom. In this section, I will give a brief description of this fieldwork assignment.

In previous years the fieldwork was primarily prompted by an educational aim: to introduce students to the empirical study of ecclesial practices, to learn to reflect theologically, and to familiarise themselves with the setting of baptist church life.[35] In 2020, however, fuelled by the ideals of collaborative research, some of the staff members of the Seminary decided to pursue a more experimental project. On the one hand this involved an attempt to embed the experiment in a piece of ongoing research on the changing patterns of ecclesial belonging. On the other hand, and perhaps as central focus, a 'valorising' aim was pursued to seek collaboration with a number of churches, so as to involve them in the process of reflection through the students' work.[36] As such, it was envisioned as an experiment in collaborative research. As the course only lasted six consecutive weeks with some additional time for examinations, the research had to be planned and prepared in advance with a certain level of rigidity.

The suggestion to involve a number of churches in a reflective, explorative process on the effects of the covid-19 pandemic was born in a conversation I had with regional coordinators.[37] They were enthusiastic about the collaborative approach, and committed to facilitating the relational arrangements with church leaders, churches and students. They solicited eight baptist churches to participate, and through church leaders, involved about five to ten church members from each church.[38] Before the actual class started, these church members were invited to fill in a brief online questionnaire (made and

[35] In 2018 to 2019, students mapped and reflected on the church small group work in their own churches; in 2019 to 2020 the focus was on secularisation and the 'backdoor' of the church.
[36] To the valorisation may be added the 'interest' to make the work of the Seminary and the national body more visible in actual church life, through doing a project with churches.
[37] Regional coordinators function in the Unie-ABC fellowship as a sort of church consultant with a role to connect churches within a broader region. As such they have much relational knowledge of what is going on in individual churches.
[38] Each regional coordinator was asked to solicit the cooperation of a church. In some cases, they sought to connect two churches in one place, in line with their role to connect churches within the same region.

coordinated by myself in advance to keep the project manageable), followed up by a student-led focus group conversation.

During the first class of the course the 'relational arrangements' were made: matching one or two students to a regional coordinator, and to one or two churches.[39] Students were given the results of the questionnaire to shape a first impression on the effects of covid-19 on church life. As most of the students were only vaguely familiar with fieldwork, the steps were outlined in the course syllabus (including some instructions to help them analyse the data). They were then tasked to organise a focus group conversation with the church members within a four-week timeframe to discuss their initial findings in more depth, adding experiences and narratives. Preparation for this focus group was (mostly) carried out in pairs, and in coordination with the regional coordinator and church contact person. Most students succeeded in organising the focus group within that time frame, which allowed us to use the final classes to reflect on the findings together in light of theological and sociological theory. After the final class, students rounded up their fieldwork assignment by writing a blog-post for the churches they had visited in order to present their findings.

I framed the exercise as an *experiment*, which involved over sixty people (church leaders, regional coordinators, students, church members, teaching staff), although not all who filled in the initial survey ended up actually participating in the focus groups. Through carefully written instructions to the churches, online Zoom conversations with the regional coordinators as well as class instructions to the students, I tried to be as clear as possible on the steps to be taken, the expectations, the aims and the required consent and privacy protection of

[39] This was a crucial moment in the actual start of the course; before that moment the exact number of students was unknown; moreover, matching students to churches — sometimes in pairs — required the negotiation of their mobility and distance to the relative churches. One student approached me in advance of the course to ask whether they could also do the same research in their own church, as they functioned as a leader there. I decided that this was acceptable, as long as they also undertook to cooperate with another student in that student's fieldwork.

participants.[40] After the practical assignment, I asked students, regional coordinators, and church leaders to give their feedback on the experiment. Students did so in written reflections, regional coordinators through an evaluative online conversation, and church leaders through email.

Lessons Learned and a Provisional Evaluation

In this section, I briefly summarise the evaluations from stakeholders of the experiment, to be followed by my own reflections, both on the concrete experiment, and in the more general light of the potential of curriculum-embedded collaborative research projects.

What stands out from the evaluation of the students is that the experiment was perceived as both challenging and instructive. Challenging, as the whole course for them was an experience of being thrown into the deep end, with challenging reading assignments, a first acquaintance (for most) with forms of qualitative fieldwork and unfamiliarity with how to write a popular blog for a church audience. Instructive, in that much of what they learned throughout the course was new, and the various pieces of the puzzle — how the different methodological, fieldwork and theoretical elements fit together — came together gradually, as the course progressed. The clear instructions for the fieldwork as well as the availability of a glossary were mentioned as helpful. For students, the focus-group evening, the actual conversation with participants, was the part of the research they enjoyed the most. This enthusiasm for the focus groups was shared by the participating regional coordinators. They valued the relational collaboration that in a

[40] In the last decade regulations for doing fieldwork have tightened, requiring the researcher to heed General Data Protection Regulations, seek informed consent and safeguard participants' privacy. As religious opinions (the core of practical theology) are categorised by law as the most sensitive 'personal data', fieldwork cannot be undertaken without heeding the research ethics involved. For this present research, this required being specific as to how data would be used, as well as safeguarding privacy. I regarded sharing data with students and involving them in the research project also as an opportunity to introduce them to the topic of research ethics.

sense also aligned with their own function in the church fellowship. One of them remarked that for them it expressed well the hallmarks of the Seminary: doing theology from the church, starting with the lived faith. However, regional coordinators were less positive in their assessment of the actual knowledge generated and the quality of the blog-posts. A significant difference in quality was noted, and in general no convincing or new observations were made. This latter point was also made by the church leaders who remarked that the relational collaboration as well as the possibility to contribute to the learning process of students was valued, however the learning output, expressed in the blogs, was not very helpful. In general, my own reflections align with the evaluations from these stakeholders. I will proceed with discussing some of them in more detail by relating them to the three rationales for collaborative research as mentioned above.

First, the *utility rationale* focuses the reflection on whether the field of practice may benefit from such forms of collaborative research. From the evaluations it is clear that the 'knowledge generation' and 'knowledge dissemination' was perceived rather ambiguously and as disappointing. The data that was generated by students, as well as contextual factors proved to be so divergent and of different quality, that no clear patterns were observable, and as such no 'upscaling' or knowledge circulation was possible (see above). Reflecting on this, I note a number of factors: firstly, the limited research experience and differing abilities of the students; in general, they were pre-occupied with doing the research 'right', while trying to figure out what was expected of them, rather than being open to the questions emerging from the field. Secondly, the data was very limited and fragmented (as was the actual time spent in 'the field'), which to some extent is a given in such a small curriculum-embedded research project, but severely limits what can be derived from it. As one of the students lucidly comments, 'I have learned that we should not be too quick in drawing conclusions: do not hang an elephant on a spider web.' Thirdly, I note that the explorative nature of the research with its wide scope — that is, exploring the effects of the covid-19 pandemic in baptist communities

and the spiritual life of its members — is difficult to manage for relatively inexperienced researchers. Theorising only started during the final classes, and as such did not really influence the fieldwork. Finally, the rigid time frame allowed for little opportunity for interventions from the tutors in the research project to reflect on the research process. Taken together, it could be said that while the experiment was 'practice-oriented', it was 'theory driven' and 'research informed' only to a very small extent. For future projects, it might be helpful to delimit the number of stakeholders to two or three churches, and to help students focus the research by asking them to test a particular hypothesis. It would also require a much more focused research question, a clear and simple theoretical framework and more guiding interventions during classes.[41]

To what extent is the practical wisdom of ordinary church members used in this research experiment (the *epistemological rationale*)? I make two reflections here. I evaluate positively how, especially through the focus groups, ordinary believers were invited to take part in the conversation, share their experiences and stories in a somewhat open and safe environment. Students remark that they struggled with these perspectives, as they were more diverse and sometimes conflicting, than they had expected. On a positive note, the experiment has fostered an awareness of the complexities of everyday church life, and an appreciation of the expression of the lived theology in a church. As one student notes in their reflections, 'I gained more appreciation for the everyday church life. The creativity of how people adjust to new situations is encouraging. Church life is something that happens on the level of ordinary church folks who authentically try to shape faith in times of crisis.' Likewise, an interesting conversation developed during class when a rather uncharacteristic answer in a questionnaire was discussed. A disabled person, who for some time had not been able to

[41] In terms of interventions during class, I am thinking of educational forms that instruct students in the intricacies of doing research, such as the preparation of a focus group, reflecting on a video recording of a focus group, reading a verbatim report of a focus group together, or arranging discussions with church leaders and regional coordinators *in class* to reflect on research findings together.

attend their church in person, mentioned how one of the effects of the covid situation was that, as no one could visit churches physically anymore, for them the fellowship had become more equal. Some time was spent in class discussing this as an expression of lived theology, as an ordinary voice which had something important to contribute and which was worth listening to. On a more critical note, I observe that although the vernacular knowledge and practical wisdom of ordinary church members was 'tapped into', the research design did not allow it to be 'utilised'. Put differently, the church members remained 'research subjects' rather than 'co-researchers'; they were not engaged in or empowered to contribute to envisaging better ways to cope with the covid-19 situation. It would be interesting to see subsequent experiments more as Action Research,[42] drawing much more on the practical wisdom and problem-solving capacity of a group of church members. This point also relates to the power mechanisms at stake in research, that is, the question of who gets to decide on the research that is being done, who is doing the representation, which voices are heard and which voices not. It would at least be worthwhile in new projects, to spend more time in the classroom to reflect on these issues.[43]

Considering the above points, and noting how the innovative potential of the focus group was not really used, it was rather surprising to note the almost unanimous positive appraisal of the focus group conversation among all stakeholders. Here, it is worthwhile to reflect on the *performative* rationale, of what occurs when a group of people comes together to discuss a shared challenge. In one focus group, members from two different baptist churches in the same city became uneasily aware of the fact that they did not cooperate together at all, agreeing to try to do so more in the future. Similarly, in another focus group, a student was able to listen to a few people who shared their

[42] Action Research is a particular research methodology that seeks to effect social change through simultaneously doing research and taking action. See for an overview Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury, eds, *The SAGE Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice*, 2nd ed. (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2012).

[43] De Roest spends a whole chapter examining the limitations and constraints in participation, discussing the issue of power as well (De Roest, *Collaborative,* pp. 271–278).

disappointment over what had gone wrong in that particular church, thus providing a listening ear to an open wound. She was able to give this back to the church, in a pastorally sensitive, hope-giving way, in a well written blog, receiving a number of positive responses from church members.[44] Taken together, my interpretation is that the focus group serendipitously allowed for something *new* to happen, through its unique arrangement of different people coming together. As such it disrupted the normal flow of things — and perhaps also the power arrangements in a church — allowing each member to speak out. It was interesting to see students preparing this setting well, also by drawing on their own spiritual resources, so as to provide a safe but recognisable open space for conversation. Thus, they somewhat intuitively shaped their research, in line with what some practical theologians argue for, as a spiritual exercise.[45]

Concluding this paragraph, I note that much happened that I did not foresee when I designed the research project. On a critical note, the experiment lacked a 'theory-driven' approach, and thus insufficiently applied and generated knowledge. Likewise, it insufficiently allowed church members to help shape the research in various stages. Future experiments might need to be more focused, hypothesis driven, and allow for more conversation both in the field and in the classroom. On a positive note, I was surprised to see the performative potential in the relational collaboration that was sought. Likewise, I contend that for the students, the whole experience of being thrown into the deep end, of learning to conduct a fieldwork experiment in relational interaction with others, is itself a formative process that aligns well with the intended

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[44] On practical theological research as a pastoral response to a 'wound', see Scharen and Vigen, *Ethnography*, pp.65–68; also Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). Perhaps in such situations collaborative research has the potential to be a 'healing methodology'; see De Roest, *Collaborative,* p. 174.

[45] See Eileen R. Campbell-Reed and Christian B. Scharen, 'Ethnography on Holy Ground: How Qualitative Interviewing is Practical Theological Work', *International Journal of Practical Theology,* 17, no. 2 (2013), 232–259; Christian B. Scharen, *Fieldwork in Theology: Exploring the Social Context of God's Work in the World,* The Church and Postmodern Culture (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015); Graham, 'Is Practical Theology'.

goal of helping them to become 'reflexive practitioners', inquiring and curious about the actual life of the church.

A reflection that keeps haunting me is that while parts of the experiment were received well, none of those involved were unequivocally enthusiastic. This at least shows how difficult it is to manage expectations when it comes to research in practice (aligning with the obstacles mentioned in the introductory paragraph of the challenge to combine research and the field of practice). Moreover, the reflections in this article help me to realise that I myself have been overambitious in the aims of the project: I wanted too much, to involve too many people, and as a result, the experiment has lost in depth, detail and learning potential. Engaging the field of practice in research projects requires a lot of skill, reflexivity and awareness of the many intricacies involved. For follow up collaborative experiments, I intend to heed that remark, and reserve more space and attentiveness for reflection on these intricacies in the classroom.

Conclusion

In this article, I started out by noting how some of the baptistic core values, such as communal discernment, everyday lived theology (ethical lives) and a narrative, biblical hermeneutics, strongly co-align and resonate with developments in practical theology in recent decades. I contended that 'Baptist ways of doing theology' might have much to gain by learning from these approaches. My aim was to examine whether 'collaborative research' in a curriculum-embedded form may be a promising lead for the Baptist Seminary in bringing academic research and the field of practices closer together, sketching the two interrelated challenges of 'beneficial' academic valorisation for the Seminary, and the adaptive challenges that many baptist churches face.

By evaluating the research experiment on the effects of the covid-19 pandemic conducted in a Seminary course in the autumn of 2020, I noted a number of intricate complexities involved in the ideal of doing relevant, valorising empirical research, with only limited resources

available. How to enable such a project that can use and generate knowledge, and involve a number of stakeholders, with only limited research experience, is a puzzle that may not be easily solved. There are quite a number of hurdles to be overcome that temper the expectations of generating useful, high-quality knowledge through small curriculum-embedded research projects. Yet, while I have been problematising the problem, I see two important leads for the development of curriculum-embedded research projects within baptist education. The first is the performative dimension of collaborating with the field of practice; this experiment has shown that when students and teaching staff engage the field of practice in collaboration, a number of things happen as new situations emerge that offer potential for learning. Some of the 'things that happen' can be designed and discussed in advance through carefully chosen research questions and methods, others have a more serendipitous character — perhaps learning to be attentive to the latter is as important as the former. Thus, I conclude that for baptist educational institutions and churches there is much to gain by experimenting with forms of collaborative research, even if they are small. The other lead is that the skills acquired by students in such fieldwork may very well be exactly the kind of core competences that theologians today need. That is, the ability to initiate processes of *doing theology collaboratively*, creating safe spaces for honest conversation, listening attentively, negotiating relational dynamics, guiding these often messy processes heuristically, and doing so with an interpretative flexibility. Leaders who become skilled in that, might fit well in a baptist tradition, which holds dear the belief that discerning the truth communally is a relational process, of learning to inhabit and embody the ethics of Jesus, in which the outcome is not as important as the way in which it is done.