



# Research, practice and the professional Christian minister

**Stephen Skuce**

---

**SWF Published Papers reference:**

Part 02 / Chapter 01 / Article 08

This article was produced for the Susanna Wesley Foundation, part of the University of Roehampton. Further SWF published papers are available from our website: [www.susannawesleyfoundation.org](http://www.susannawesleyfoundation.org)

020 8392 4462  
SWF@roehampton.ac.uk

Southlands College  
80 Roehampton Lane  
London SW15 5SL

# Research, practice and the professional Christian Minister

*For generations Christian ministers have pursued academic degrees and undertaken research with a number of motivations. For some it is the quest for knowledge and understanding, for others it is to gain a qualification, and perhaps more recently it has included thinking about the practice of ministry. The terminal degree is normally the PhD. This, in my opinion, is one of the problems for the past and present generations of professional Christian ministers.*

*This paper will consider the importance of the professional doctorate due to it enabling research that is focused on professional practice resulting in practice based outcomes as well as outcomes contributing to scholarship. A case study of the development of the Cliff College Professional Doctorate (PhD in Missiology) will illustrate this journey.*

---

## **Context**

Established by the Methodist Church in 1904, although not always within the mainstream of the denomination, Cliff College developed in the early 1990s from a traditional Bible College to a college whose academic programmes were validated by the University of Sheffield and then to the University of Manchester from 2004 onwards. The move to Manchester resulted from the desire to develop a small research programme into something much larger, and Manchester was able to facilitate this.

Today Cliff College, one of the two centres of the Discipleship and Ministries Learning Network of the British Methodist Church, has approximately 250 university related students with approx. 50 on a full-time BA Theology course, approx. 80 on a part-time BA in Mission and Ministry, approx. 90 on a MA in Mission programme, and as of June 2014 there will be 19 on a MPhil/PhD programme and 8 on a PhD Miss (Professional Doctorate) programme. It is the journey towards the professional doctorate programme and the rationale for its development that I wish to comment on.

### What's Wrong with a PhD?

Not much is the answer. I am happy to have one, as will many here and for centuries the PhD has been considered the final academic award that recognises an individual as a member of a scholarly community. At times we have been fixated on the PhD's 'original contribution to knowledge'<sup>1</sup> and so success was to have made what might be considered the definitive contribution on a subject, albeit recognising the preciseness of that subject, and that someone might well come along in a year or two's time and further develop knowledge. Increasingly the scholarly community recognises the outcome of a PhD as entry into the academy more than the latest definitive thinking and so the candidate demonstrates 'a deep knowledge and understanding of the field of study, and originality of thought either in the creation of new knowledge or in the novel application of existing knowledge'.<sup>2</sup> Rather than the definitive word, the candidate demonstrates 'a systematic acquisition and understanding of a substantial body of knowledge that is at the forefront of an academic discipline or area of professional practice'.<sup>3</sup> More modestly, candidates will have 'moved their subject forward, used research methods in a competent manner and generated some new knowledge within their subject area'.<sup>4</sup>

A particular issue, which may or may not be a problem, is that some practitioners, after gaining a PhD, are attracted into further academic work and teaching. Why this may be a problem is that some excellent practitioners become much less involved in practice. An outcome of PhD study may be a reduction in practice excellence rather than an increase.

### What is the Professional Doctorate?

While the first professional doctorate type programme was established as far back as 1894 as an EdD in the University of Toronto,<sup>5</sup> it is since the 1990s that there has been significant diversification in UK doctorates leading to such awards as Doctor of Engineering, Doctor of Business Administration, Doctor of Education, etc. The professional doctorate 'has grown out of recognition of the need, and demand, for professionals to study part-time alongside their job, and to base their project within their workplace'.<sup>6</sup> There is a different professional doctorate structure compared to the traditional PhD which usually requires a single 80,000 word thesis to be assessed. The professional doctorate, and its close companion the practice-based doctorate, usually

---

<sup>1</sup> QAA Doctoral Degree Characteristics, Sep 2011, p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> QAA Doctoral Degree Characteristics, Sep 2011, p. 23.

<sup>3</sup> NUS/QAA The UK Doctorate: A guide for current and prospective doctoral candidates, 2011, p.3.

<sup>4</sup> Fulton, Kuit, Sanders and Smith, *The Professional Doctorate* (Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Smith, N-J, *Achieving your Professional Doctorate* (Maidenhead: McGraw Hill, 2009), p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> Fulton, Kuit, Sanders and Smith, *The Professional Doctorate* (Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 9.

have a small number of stages that are assessed, at least provisionally, through the duration of the study, with a smaller final thesis. So, a coherent portfolio equivalent to 80,000 words is examined rather than one thesis.

Apart from the outcomes, a further difference is that the DProf usually has a greater level of taught components in the areas of research methodology and so can be undertaken more easily by a cohort. Additionally, it is 'normally located within the candidate's profession'<sup>7</sup> with employment in the discipline normally a requirement and one potential outcome is that 'the candidate's research may result directly in organisational or policy-related change'.<sup>8</sup>

### **So what is still wrong with the PhD?**

The issue is, I think, linked to abstract knowledge and reflection on practice. The two are not necessarily in opposition, but are also not necessarily good partners. As Smith comments, 'There has been some critique and questioning of the PhD as a suitable preparation for the transferable wider skills required in the contemporary workplace'.<sup>9</sup> I am a modest part of that critique. The general problem is that the humanities PhD is somewhat focused on abstract knowledge without the need for practical outcomes. In itself, that is not a problem. However, when it seeks to engage with the practice of Christian mission or ministry, it does become problematic. A PhD is a good vehicle for historical missiological research, or to understand mission from a particular theological, denominational or Biblical perspective. However, this in itself does not necessarily impact the personal practice of mission, nor inform future and wider practice and policy. In many subject areas this is not a significant issue. Within missiology, which I personally define as 'reflection on the practice of Christian mission', there is a disconnect.

For some years an American qualification known as the Doctorate in Ministry (DMin) has gained a foothold in UK. This is a good professionally based qualification but has suffered from a perception that it is significantly below the academic level of a PhD, a perception that I share. Consequently, the DMin was not considered an academically robust direction to explore for Cliff College. It had a further problem in that it normally defined 'Ministry' as located within employed and ordained (or equivalent) practice. It was a qualification for the ordained rather than ordained and lay people, consequently it perpetuated a divide within the Christian community that some traditions find problematic, and does not reflect current developments with many denominations where lay people, in an employed or voluntary role, are increasingly senior voices and practitioners.

---

<sup>7</sup> QAA Doctoral Degree Characteristics, Sep 2011, p. 15.

<sup>8</sup> QAA Doctoral Degree Characteristics, Sep 2011, p. 15.

<sup>9</sup> Smith, N-J, *Achieving your Professional Doctorate* (Maidenhead: McGraw Hill, 2009), p. 5.

### **What was introduced at Cliff College?**

The Cliff College PhD in Missiology is a PhD that follows a professional doctorate format and has four outcomes that are all assessed by two Examiners at the completion of the project. In year 1 a 12,000 word literature review is produced, followed by an up to 12,000 word peer review journal article in year 2, with a 12,000 word introduction to a research project in the third year, and then a 40,000 word thesis in years 4-6.

The subject focus is missiology and so students are required to be involved in Christian mission. While many are clergy, mission partners or para church staff, there was quite a bit of debate with the university to ensure that the definition of professional included lay people engaged in Christian mission as a normal part of their faith and not connected to full or part-time employment. The interpretation was professional meant working at a professional standard. Winning this debate was crucial in creating a programme that was inclusive and for the people of God rather than just religious professionals.

### **How was it introduced?**

Without covering the labyrinthine process of university approval for a new programme there are two points of note:

- 1) Without support of key people, this programme would not have been approved. At one point a key figure was unsupportive and there was no progress. This was, in part, because a similar type of programme existed within the university. Staff changes made development possible.

The 2009/10 five year university validation review for Cliff College resulted in an unconditional revalidation. The university panel was somewhat impressed with the College and one of the review outcomes was the appointment by the university of Prof Helen Rees Leahy, Professor of Museology, to work with myself to create the programme. As a validated College it is unusual to be invited to attend a university Faculty committee. I was asked to attend the committee that would decide on approval of the programme, and gratified for the positive outcome whereas an internal professional doctorate was rejected. I have a suspicion I was asked to attend and answer questions before this committee to shame the internal programme leader. I will readily confess that the Cliff PhD in Missiology bears an uncanny resemblance to the university's PhD in Museology.

### **Why introduce?**

- 1) I noticed MA students in missiology not progressing to PhD study. Most of these missiology graduates were practitioners who studied in order to reflect on practice and help improve their practice and that of others. The more abstract outcomes of a traditional PhD were not appealing to such a constituency.

- 2) I wanted to enable reflection on missiological practice at doctoral level.
- 3) I wanted to develop a programme that was in concept part-time study, rather than a full-time programme that could be taken in a part-time way. Consequently, ongoing reflection on practice is integral to the PhD in Missiology which cannot be taken full-time.
- 4) I also recognised that for some studying with a cohort was important. The cohort gave a shared sense of identity, encouragement to be successful and peers to work with. Peer learning is increasingly part of PhD study, but it is integral to a professional doctorate.

### **Evaluation**

It is too early for substantive evaluation, but what can be noted is that such a programme does generate research on practice, does seem to support practitioners, and encourages further practice and reflection, rather than a move away from practice. If this continues, many of the aims of the PhD Miss will have been realised.

---

### **References**

QAA *Doctoral Degree Characteristics*, Sep 2011

NUS/QAA *The UK Doctorate: A guide for current and prospective doctoral candidates*, 2011

Fulton, Kuit, Sanders and Smith, *The Professional Doctorate* (Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013)

Smith, N-J, *Achieving your Professional Doctorate* (Maidenhead: McGraw Hill, 2009)