The pedagogical challenges of teaching ministerial theology to students from non-traditional community churches[1]

Interim report, May 2018

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1.   Introduction

1.1   The context of the research

During the past decade or so several UK higher education institutions have introduced programmes, referred to herein as Ministerial Theology Programmes (MTPs), which provide theological training for persons without formal qualifications who are in, or are seeking, positions of church leadership. The majority of students who enrol in these programmes are from churches other than the historical mainstream denominations. These 'non-traditional community churches' (NTCCs) are for the most part charismatic and/or Pentecostal, with a membership predominantly drawn from black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) communities. In 2011, there were approximately 500,000 Black Christians in Britain and an estimated 4,000 black majority churches nationwide.[2] There are also a growing number of Latin American and Asian majority churches in Britain.[3] Many of these churches are independent congregations, although some are organised as a denomination or an informal network.

These students constitute a new and distinctive cohort among the total population of students in higher education. They come very largely from cultural backgrounds that are underrepresented in the wider student population. There is evidence that students from such non-traditional backgrounds, across all disciplines, have lower completion rates and attainment levels than mainstream, traditional students.[4] Furthermore, the large majority of MTP students are of

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[1] This research funded by the Susanna Wesley Foundation: susannawesleyfoundation.org

[2] www.bmcdirectory.co.uk (accessed 15 July 2011).

[3] In 2013, there were over 100 Korean and about 70 Brazilian congregations in Britain (Burgess, R., Knibbe, K. (2013) "Pentecostalismo in Europa: un quadro generale delle sue dinamiche", in Pino Lucà Trombetta (ed.), Cristianesimi senza frontiere: le chiese pentecostali nel mondo, Borla Editore, pp. 154-75).

[4] Universities UK (2015) *Patterns and Trends in UK Higher Education 2015*; Hancock, S., & Wakeling, P. (2019) Progression to and success in postgraduate study: interim evaluation report. Research Report. University of York, Department of Education.

mature age and face the personal demands of having to fit their formal studies into busy family and professional lives.

There are thus particular pedagogical challenges for the design and delivery of MTPs. Anecdotal evidence suggests that MTP students may find it confronting to subject their deeply-held convictions and familiar church practices to critical theological reflection. This impression was borne out by the findings of an earlier, small-scale pilot study[5] of one MTP.

1.2   Aims

The broad aim of the research was to build on these preliminary indications of MTP students' specific learning needs by discovering the extent to which they apply to a more representative sample of the MTP student population. Specifically, the aims were to:

i.   construct a model of the processes of learning by students and the effect of their learning in terms of students' intellectual and faith development; and

ii. identify particular pedagogical challenges raised by the nature of the student cohort and their processes of learning.

The original application included an additional aim: to describe the number and nature of MTPs across the UK. There was, however, insufficient time to pursue this aim, owing to unforeseen delays in appointing a Research Assistant.

1.3   Research questions

1.   What are the motivations for enrolling on an MTP?

2.   What are the processes of and strategies for learning employed by students?

3.   What impact do these processes and strategies have on students' intellectual and faith development?

4.   What are teachers' perceptions of specific pedagogical challenges arising from the nature of the student cohort and their processes of learning?

On the basis of the findings, we make some recommendations for the design and delivery of MTPs.

2.   Research methods

2.1   Participants

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[5] Garner, M., Burgess, R., & Eshun, D. (2015) Submitting convictions to critical enquiry: a challenge for higher education, *Occasional Papers on Faith in Higher Education* no. 1, pp 62-76. See also Burgess, R. (2014) Education for Conceptual Change: BME Students' Experiences of Learning Theological Reflection, *Developments in Academic Practice*, pp. 1-16.

Interviews were conducted with 40 students and 14 teachers on MTPs at three Higher Education institutions:

University of Roehampton [RU]

St John's College, Nottingham [St J]

Christ Redeemer College [CRC]

The research team held preliminary discussions with Queen's College, Birmingham, but it proved impracticable to include this institution in the research. Some anecdotal evidence relevant to the research questions arising from these discussions is referred to in the Discussion section below.

2.2   Data-collection instruments

2.2.1   Interviews

Interviews were conducted with a total of 40 students and 14 staff at the three institutions (see Appendix A). The sample in each institution was selected opportunistically. A general invitation to participate was issued by the researchers. The invitation was accompanied by a document stating:

a. the purpose of the research;

b. the length and general nature of the interview;

c. how the data were to be recorded;

d. how anonymity was to be safeguarded; and

e. participants' right to withdraw from the study at any time without prejudice.

All students and staff who volunteered were interviewed. Two structured interview schedules were designed by the research team. One was employed with students at all three institutions. A broadly similar schedule was employed with 10 staff members at St J and 2 staff members at CRC. Unstructured interviews were conducted with 4 staff members at UR. All interviews were recorded, with the participants' permission, and transcribed. The schedules are given in Appendix B.

2.2.2   Observations

Non-participant observations of two classes, and a questionnaire survey, were conducted at UR.

2.3   Analysis

The transcribed interviews were analysed thematically, and the themes arising were compared and consolidated at research team meetings. These thematic findings, and the numbers and percentages of each theme, are presented in sections 3.1 (interviews with students) and 3.2 (interviews with staff), along with excerpts from interviews where these assist in illustrating the themes.

The observation data are shown in section 3.3.

3.   Findings: students

3.1   Interviews

The findings are presented in the order in which the questions are given in the Appendix B, which is not always the same order, or with the precise wording, in which they were asked in any particular interview.

3.1.1   Motivation to enrol on the course

Nineteen respondents (47.5%) gave a desire to learn as their motivation. Seven (17.5%) expressed this in terms of a calling from God, including two who felt called to leave another university programme and enrol in MTP:

> *My purpose for enrolling on this course is because I felt a deep desire to pursue more knowledge of God … because of the calling that I felt within me to serve in a particular way*

> *I wanted to further my education, having the call of God upon my life, I wanted to show myself approved unto God, a workman needing not to be ashamed but rightly dividing the word of truth*

> *I had been admitted to the University of Kent to do Business and IT and around July this year, I just felt that wasn't where I was supposed to be … I felt a strong calling, like there was a steering in my heart towards ministry and theology*

> To 1*earn more and go deeper into theology and the Bible—I'm not learning enough in my church*

Others spoke in terms of acquiring specific skills for use in ministry:

> *The pastor told me he could see that I had a ministry … because I'm one of the leaders in the Church. Being a leader you shouldn't be leading people without the tools for the trade*

> *I needed some course structure for my call in ministry and I was very concerned about staying balanced … because I have seen people burn out in ministry*

> *It was to do with my leadership role in the worship team. I wanted to improve my leadership skills, to gain more experience in leadership*

> *I came back to school to polish up because in order to work in [Ghana] as a minister, you need to be abreast of what is going on, what is right and what is wrong.*

Five respondents had more instrumental motivation in enrolling on the course: 3 'to get a degree', and two as a form of ordination training.

3.1.2   Prior experience of formal education

Twenty-eight (70% of the sample) had completed secondary education: 25 (60.25%) had continued post-secondary studies, in which 13 (32.5%) acquired a formal qualification; 12 (30%) did not complete.

The qualifications obtained were Vocational (7; 17.5%); Bachelor's (3; 7.5%); Bible College (3; 7.5%).

Although participants were not asked if they were 'first-generation' students (i.e., the first in their families to attend university), 3 volunteered the information that they were.

3.1.3   Experience of Christian ministry

Respondents reported being engaged in a wide range of ministries, of which the main kinds were as follows. Eight, all male, were pastors (20%); 9 (22.5%) were pastors' wives. Eight (20%) described themselves as leaders. Half of these were leading children's and/or youth ministry; the others led cell groups, worship, or men's groups. Four (10%) were involved in community-oriented work. Only one reported no experience of ministry.

3.1.4   Plans following the completion of the course

Twenty (50%) of the respondents stated that they would continue in their present ministry. Ten (25%) said they aimed to move to a new form of ministry. Of these, 7 indicated the form of this future ministry; some mentioned more than one possibility. Ministries specified were: pastor and/or chaplain; children's and/or youth work; international mission; starting a school; teaching; and general church leadership. Six (15%) hoped to pursue further studies: in theology, counselling, and possibly nursing.

3.1.5   Challenges experienced on the course

Only 4 respondents (10%) reported having experienced no serious challenges to their studies. From the remaining 36 (90%) interviews two major themes emerged:

   i.   the academic ethos in higher education, which requires one to submit one's beliefs and assumptions to critical examination;

   ii.   the difficulties of combining study with family, work, ministry, and other external responsibilities.

Each theme occurred in 20 interviews; 4 included both themes.

Examples of (i) were:

> *At uni we are taught to think academically rather than spiritually*
>
> *Learning about the Bible on the course has challenged my beliefs and what I've learnt since becoming a Christian*
>
> *I've been challenged by secular approaches which contradict the Bible*
>
> *It's difficult compared to Bible College, which is more like learning in a church setting*
>
> *It made me think, is this really the Bible I know? … How can I read other books to understand the Bible [it should be] the other way round*
>
> *The reflecting! In first term I almost reflected myself into depression*

Examples of (ii) were:

It's hard combining my role as a mother, professional nurse and a student; I sometimes have to work overnight to complete assignments

I've got three young children and it's a challenge dealing with their school work as well as my own

At this moment I am not doing the required 50 hours [of study per week] … because it's a combination of family and studying

I used to love reading when I was a teenager … but now I've got two young children … by the time they are settled, you sit down to read and after two pages, you are out cold.

I find it so tiring that I say, God help me

One respondent, who reported having no specific challenges himself, suggested (ii) as the main reason why a number of his colleagues found the course challenging:

I believe it's nothing to do with the tutor but more to do with their own personal circumstances … other commitments may be a reason

The only other challenge reported by more than one person (3; 7.5%) was the style of worship practised in the MTP.

3.1.6 Feeling like giving up the course and reasons for continuing

In the light of these challenges, 20 (50%) of the respondents reported that they had considered giving up. In addition to the two main themes discussed in 3.1.5, other motivations mentioned included the behaviour of other students (talking in class, arriving late); financial difficulties; a decision not to become a pastor; and a desire to return to previous studies. Each of these responses was given by, at most, two respondents.

Among those who reported that they had considered giving up, diverse motivations were given for continuing; no significant theme was identifiable. For example:

I want to be a good role model for my children, you don't just give up when things get tough

The bigger picture, getting the qualification to do what I feel like I'm called to do, that's what I reflect on. Also the ability to accomplish that which is set before me

The zeal to go deeper in the word of God and inner conviction kept me going on this course

Of the 50% who had not considered discontinuing their studies, almost all admitted to having experienced challenges, but had never thought of giving up.

I really enjoy [the course]. The challenges are only because I am married with three kids, involved in ministry as well

The problems I have are because of the work-load. Blending ministry and at the same time doing course work, essays, lectures, but it has been good.

You have to keep walking because it's an individual journey and if you don't, it just becomes a big barrier in the way

3.1.7   Disagreeing with tutors' views

Two main categories of response were provided in roughly equal proportions. One was selectively to appropriate any new knowledge, whilst continuing to disagree with the views. The other was to seek to broaden one's understanding by learning from alternative views. Several respondents from both groups noted the importance of asking questions, to seek clarification and/or to challenge a particular view.

Twelve (30%) respondents said they had not encountered any views expressed by tutors with which they seriously disagreed. Of these, four felt there were no real differences in views:

There is not actually much difference, it's just the practice of holiness is embodied and practised in everyday life

Some interpreted tutors' expressing confronting views as a pedagogical device:

I initially felt that some lecturers who challenged students' faith and knowledge were not Christian. But later understood this as a teaching strategy to challenge them to think.

The 28 (70%) respondents who had found tutors' views confronting were asked how they responded. The large majority were prepared to question or challenge the tutor, and found this a valuable learning experience:

I would question it, I am one of those people, I speak up a lot. I would try to query it to get a deeper understanding of where the tutor is coming from

We do challenge and question it. Sometimes we ask questions and reach a point of asking the tutor to give more evidences of what they are teaching

Obviously, I had questions here and there within my own faith and denomination but I wanted to focus on what I was able to learn

I never used to ask questions, but now that has been awakened in me. And what I can say is that I cannot judge anything I see or hear until I get the reasoning of the person who is actually doing it or saying it

Others took the opportunity to reconsider and modify their own views, without openly challenging the tutor:

When I disagree, I go and search it for myself. It's a learning process because to me, education is not a year or two-year thing, it is an eternal thing

[After a class on ministry] I said to my friend, do you know all these problems we say we encounter being ministers we have brought on ourselves?

Something that you've known for a long time for someone to come and tell you one day that this is not right, you tend to be a little bit emotional

but then when you sit down, you think it's good, it's for my good; let me do what he says

He was now making me think logically and I was never taught to think about the Bible with my logical mind so that was a challenge

Four (10%) said they did not challenge the tutor:

I keep my mouth shut. I've learnt that if someone disagrees with me, I'll say what I want to say and keep quiet because I don't want conflict

When the teacher explains it to me, I will not disagree with it because at the end of the day, they know better

I don't ask questions because it's new and I don't want to offend anyone

Obviously I had questions here or there … but I wanted to focus on what I was able to learn

3.1.8   Disagreeing with other students' views

The responses in this theme were largely similar to those reported in 3.1.7. The same two main categories of response were provided in roughly equal proportions. The only noticeable difference was that that 6 respondents (15%) said they wanted to avoid conflict among the group by not challenging their peers with whom they disagreed.

3.1.9   Positive learning experiences on the course

Twenty-six participants (65%), stated they had learned to develop a critical and/or more deeply informed attitude towards faith in general, and to Scripture in particular; and/or had learned the value of hearing different perspectives.

This is a new approach from a scholarly level which I did not have … I would consider scripture the surface and I would consider scholarship the foundation because you have to go deeper … to understand scripture better

I've been brought up and the values have been instilled in me from birth. Now seeing it from someone else's view who is also a Christian but a different denomination, it's just interesting

This is academic and so you will disagree with some of the things you are studying. Therefore, your mind has to be broader to have a wider scope of the understanding of the word of God and also of books and of people … you've got to have an open heart so you can be able to learn

The other responses given by more than one participant were: enrichment of ministry (6; 15%); reading (4; 10%); giving oral presentations (4; 10%).

Whatever the specific learning they mentioned, several respondents felt that they had also benefitted more generally; for example:

I think I feel I have something to contribute for the first time ever. I think education gives you the confidence to have a voice

You are aware at times that you are black and Pentecostal, but you know where it fits into the tradition … You have to deal with race and social

structures so this is helping me to form these sorts of discussions. How we can work more to heal society

My approach to leadership has changed. I've learnt it's not necessarily about standing in front of people and saying, 'I'm a leader and you should look up to me or do as I say'

3.1.10 Positive experiences of teaching on the course

Approximately half of the respondents mentioned group discussions and/or and (one-to-one) tutorials as valuable teaching strategies; for example:

It helps to learn better when you work as a group because you hear different experiences from other students

Tutorials can also be helpful because you get a better understanding than when you are taught in class

[In tutorials] you can ask questions … my first language is Afrikaans so there are sometimes these big words that I wonder what they mean

Some gave a more general response (such as, *the teaching approaches are good*) that probably includes the above. Other specific aspects of teaching singled out for mention included:

i.   Approachability of the tutors:

Even in the class, [they] are quite approachable and I don't feel nervous if I have to ask a question when I don't understand which I find is very positive. I feel [they] can empathise with us as people that have been out of school for so long, [they] understand our struggles and are very patient

It's not like [the lecturer] is sticking to a script where you are left with questions unanswered. Any time we raise a question, he tries as much as possible to answer it

ii. Systematic and simple presentation:

[The lecturer] has broken the subject down to be very simple. Without that we'd be lost

iii. Diaries and reflective journals:

The diary is the most important … you can't have something to reflect on without the diaries

The journal exercise was helpful, as I am more of a practical person

[The journal] helped me to grow and move on from all these little demons I had from back home

Particularly with the aid of examples:

The written examples were very helpful … to be able to follow the examples …a lot of the reflections can be quite close to home and you get a bit emotionally distracted and … get totally off the point. When I have an outline I know I have to stick to it … to be grounded

When I looked at the … pages which showed us how to do the journal, the book and the website … I understood what to do

iv. Group presentations

Presentations because others also presented and I helped fit into my mind what was not there by just watching [them]

v. Worship

Although only two respondents mentioned the liturgical approach to worship, given the background of the large majority of the students on MTPs, their responses are instructive:

The approach to teaching which I find helpful is worship … my approach to worship is singing and praying. I've never had a reflective approach to worship and that has allowed me to see the quietness in a new way because I am coming from the noise

I have really learned to embrace the quietness [in worship]. It is something I wish we did more in our context. I really appreciate the reflection time you have in that quietness. Even lighting candles, I really embrace it

vi. Mentoring

A distinctive aspect of the programme at UR is that each student is asked to invite a trusted individual outside the university to act as a mentor. Only half of the 24 UR interviewees were asked specifically about mentoring; all reported they had found having a mentor to be a very positive experience. For example:

[He] encouraged me to press on … and was not so much guiding as being supportive

We discussed about ministry and it was very encouraging. She has also done theology so she was really helpful

I see my mentor as a genuine man of God and he has assisted me in every possible way to grow in my spiritual life

One respondent reported that the mentor had helped with assignments:

My mentor is a teacher. He sometimes proof-reads and provides feedback on my assignments

Another had a negative experience of mentoring:

She is too busy to meet me on a regular basis so not helpful

3.1.11 Experiences of assessment

One or more questions relating to assessment were asked in all but one (i.e., 39) of the interviews. Only half of the answers (20; 51%), however, were informative. For five respondents (13%), it was too early in their courses to have had much experience of assignments, and a further 36% of the responses were vague or largely irrelevant. The picture that emerged from the usable answers is as follows.

Opinions were divided concerning which kind(s) of assessment were regarded as helpful to learning. Four respondents (10% of the total sample) nominated essays. The reasons given included:

> *You get to express yourself*

> *They make you read, do research and look what you need to answer the questions*

One respondent noted:

> *In the first year essays were difficult because we never wrote essays before but as we went further we improved*

Three (7.5%) found group and/or individual presentations most helpful, because they:

> *Allow you to learn from others and they challenge your own thinking*

> *Group oral presentations allow for group discussion beforehand and for each member of the group to bring their views to bear on the final presentation*

> *[Individual] presentations because I like to share my thoughts. I enjoy preaching and teaching*

The same number of respondents, however, felt that presentations were the most difficult form of assessment; only one of these gave the reason for his answer:

> *I invariably have to write the whole script myself as for other group members English is often not their first language*

Two respondents found portfolios the most helpful form of assessment:

> *Contextual reflections are helpful. Bringing the surrounding event into perspective is the most important part of it.*

One other respondent felt, however, that this was the most difficult assessment, because of

> *The amount of work required to document everything ... and also the organisation of the materials was a challenge*

One respondent appreciated the variety of forms of assessment:

> *I think [the best form] is a mix. Sometimes the oral presentations are quite helpful but I think it's more of a balance*

Concerning the best help that had been provided with assessment, five (12.5%) mentioned clear guidelines with examples of good answers:

> *When you look at the example that has been given, you know that this is what the lecturer wants so you are able to do the work better*

> *Some people think that the reflective assignment is very difficult but we had some examples on Moodle*

Two found feedback on drafts and/or final assignment particularly helpful.

Seven respondents (17.5%) suggested ways in which assessment could be improved. Four felt (10%) that group presentations were unsatisfactory:

> *There should be individual marks for group presentations*

> *Some students do more work than others in the group, which is not fair*

> *I can't see where the merit is in forcing us to work together*

> *We should able to choose group members, especially those who live near you to facilitate meeting for preparation*

Two suggested there should be

> *More leniency in the assessment and follow-up of students*

A further two asked for more support with IT for assignments.

3.1.12 Effect of the MTP on ministry

In response to the question regarding the effect of studies on participants' approach to ministry, the major theme (16 responses; 40%) related to adopting a more open-minded and critical approach to understanding and/or teaching the Scriptures. For example:

> *Before, I could maybe open anything from the Bible and quote anything but I am no longer doing this … I realise you could be misleading people totally using the Bible*

> *You teach people not just to get what they are told. You must question everything*

> *I grew up in a Christian home and know the Bible, but it's just having that foundation, that deeper knowledge rather than just 'knowing' the Scriptures*

> *Sometimes people just get a passage and preach on it but if I take a verse now, I read the whole book so I get a background information about a verse. I … think about it understand it and ask what it says to you first. What will it say to the audience? How do I share this in a way that it's not threatening?*

In a similar vein, three further respondents (7.5%) referred to having become more open-minded towards other Christian traditions:

> *It has really allowed me to have a broad look at Christianity rather than Pentecostalism … it has really opened my mind to a broader spectrum of Christian faith*

Some 6 respondents (15%) felt that the course had encouraged them to take a more human approach to ministry. For example:

> *[As a pastor] you need to be more human, you don't need to be more spiritual*

> *[The course] has really helped me to be more human and more open about my weaknesses. Most Pentecostal ministers are holy, anointed, and that's how they end up stumbling. Being here has helped me to accept God's grace for my weakness*

> *We must buy into the culture of the community we are living in today, we must see things from their own perspective*

A further 6 said their studies had given them confidence to speak in church. For example:

> *I talk to people a lot now really about things I may not have discussed with them [before] ... If we are discussing something in the church this has really given me something to talk about because I am becoming so confident and I am getting a lot of knowledge here and I want to share it with everybody*

> *I have confidence about introducing new ideas to church*

> *It has to do with confidence and how I approach particular issues, subjects in the Church but mainly it has helped with how I approach leadership, with more confidence and more understanding ... when you compare it to leadership in the workplace*

This confidence was particularly important for female students:

> *As a woman in a Pentecostal church, I think I feel I have something to contribute for the first time ever. I think education gives you the confidence to have a voice*

> *As a young female pastor in an African Pentecostal church. 'This course has helped me a lot*

Notwithstanding the personal benefits of confidence, 7 (17.5%) respondents reported having encountered some resistance to new ideas on the part of church members and/or leaders:

> *Some listen and are receptive; others are not, in which case you speak out and then leave it.*

> *I am free to make changes though conflict will arise ... when I am talking to my bishop, I have to do it differently because he doesn't see the different directions, he only sees it one way*

> *It's very difficult to break certain barriers, certain things you've learnt you want to change ...the only thing I can do is to pray that God will give me the opportunity to fit what I've learnt into the Church*

Five respondents (12.5%) said that the course had helped them to clarify their future in ministry. For example:

> *My idea of Christian ministry hasn't changed but given me more idea of what I want and in which area I will like to work ... I would like to go into women's ministry or vulnerable people or young people. Before, I wasn't too sure*

Four (10%) stated that they had developed a better understanding of pastoral ministry. For example:

> *This course has helped me a lot. I'm a church leader leading grown-ups and it's tough ... it has helped me to identify with them*

> *I'm a Sunday school teacher, if I see a child ... I would say 'are you alright?' ... but now, I want to dig deep, I ask if there is a problem. I find myself offering a word of advice or a word of prayer which before I wouldn't have really bothered to do*

> *We've [husband and wife pastors] given up a lot of our thinking and give people room. We now realise that it is a process. Another example are*

homosexuals, we realise that a person that is gay can still be a Christian. They have their struggles but church is where we can give God the chance to change people

3.2   Questionnaire

In the academic year after the interviews were conducted, a questionnaire was distributed to students from years two and three on the UR programme (see Appendix C). A total of 83 usable questionnaires were returned (a response rate of 100%). The questionnaire did not attempt to probe any responses in depth, as had occurred in the interviews: the aim was to obtain a set of data concerning: the demographics of the whole cohort; their current and intended future roles in their churches; and their experience of learning and teaching. Eighty-three completed questionnaires were returned; the results broadly confirm the picture obtained from the interviews. Not all responses are reported here: those which turned out to have no particular salience (such as How long have you lived in Britain? What city/town do you live in?) are omitted. The major responses are summarised below.

3.2.1   Demographic make-up

The demographic profile of this cohort is different in significant respects from that of the wider non-postgraduate student population.

Age: the large majority (62%) of respondents were aged between 40 and 59 years; the average age was 48. Only 2% were younger than 30.

Gender: 56% female; 44% male.

Marital status: As might be expected in this age profile, 69% were currently married, and further 14% had been married (now divorced, remarried, or widowed).

Ethnicity: A very large majority (89%) were African, and a further 6% were Caribbean. Only 1 respondent was White British.

Education (highest level prior to entering MTP): 47% had a diploma or other post-school qualification; 41% had completed secondary school (approximately 36% had been out of education for a number of years); 7% had a degree, and 5% had partially completed a degree.

3.2.2   Church engagement

Denomination: 85% were Pentecostal or charismatic; 8% other Protestant, and 5% Roman Catholic.

Employment: Approximately two-thirds (68%) of the respondents were in employment; 30% were pastors (of whom 19% combined pastoral ministry with secular employment). The most common occupations were healthcare support workers, security officers, business entrepreneurs, and teaching assistant/school support workers. Evidence from informal conversations with students suggests that one of their reasons for coming on the course is to get a good degree which they hope will enable them to improve their future job prospects.

Major ministry after completing MTP: There was a wide range of responses to this question (respondents could select more than one option). The four most frequent responses were an intention to enter (or continue in):

    i.   pastoral ministry (50%);

    ii. further studies third (38%);

    iii. chaplaincy (27%);

    iv. school teaching (18%)

A follow-up question asked respondents to specify more closely the kind of Christian ministry in which they envisaged engaging in future (respondents could select more than one option). Thirteen forms of ministry were specified, each of which was given by a minimum of 10%. Those indicated by at least 25% were: preaching and/or teaching (34%); pastor (33%); women's ministry (29%); evangelism (27%); and counselling (25%).

3.2.3   Learning and teaching on the MTP

A little under one-fifth (18%) had considered giving up the course (the question did not ask for reasons).

Question 11 asked respondents to estimate the number of hours outside class time they devoted to their studies. The answers were as follows:

    i.   <3   5 %

    ii. 4-6   20%

    iii. 7-9   30%

    iv. 10-12 27%

    v. >12   18%

In response to the question, which approaches to learning and teaching students found most helpful (more than one response was allowed), a large majority (82%) nominated lectures. Small group work, tutorials, and reading outside class were each approved of by approximately one-third of respondents (37%, 33%, and 33%, respectively). One-quarter (25%) nominated plenary discussions.

The final question asked which form(s) of assessment had been most helpful (more than one response was allowed). Of the three assessments employed on the course, the most helpful was essays (69%). Oral presentations and reflective journals were nominated by approximately one-half (54% and 47%, respectively).

3.3   Observations

Non-participant observations were conducted in two modules at UR, namely Navigating Church History (1st year) and Theologies of World Christianity (3rd year)—abbreviated as NCH and TWC, respectively. Observations were made under five headings:

    i.   Size and make-up of class;

    ii. Teaching approach;

    iii. Pedagogical strategies and student engagement;

    iv. Students' dealing with disagreement;

    v. Discussion of assessment.

The findings are summarised under these headings below

3.3.1   Size and gender make-up of class

NCH: There were 35 students in the class, all of whom appeared to be of Afro-Caribbean origin; male and female in approximately equal numbers.

TWC: 27 students, of whom 19 appeared to be of Afro-Caribbean origin, 3 white and 3 Asian. The gender breakdown was 17 female and 10 make.

3.3.2   Teaching approach

NCH: (Experience and anecdotal evidence indicate that students find this module difficult, as the content is complex, and quite removed from their contemporary context of ministry.) The approach was largely predominantly didactic, although an opportunity was given for discussion: in small groups after a video, and at the end of the class for comments and questions.

TWC: The teaching was more didactic than participatory, though there was an atmosphere of openness; students could interrupt with their comments and questions, which the tutor promptly attended to.

3.3.3   Pedagogical strategies and student engagement

NCH: The class covered a considerable amount of complex content. Three strategies were employed: a lecture supported by Powerpoint; a video; and small group discussions.

During the lecture, the tutor mainly read quite rapidly from his notes, making good eye contact with students, but occasionally varied the delivery with extempore, including humorous, remarks. He commented several times on the difficulty of the material. The PowerPoint slides were very crowded, and not always easy to read. Nonetheless, the students appeared quite attentive, some took notes; others took pictures of PowerPoint slides on their phones. One student followed handout notes on the Moodle site.

The video concerned Darwin and evolution, making the point that reading Genesis as myth and metaphor is part of tradition of the church. Students were very attentive to the video, which was likely to have been challenging for the students, many of whom were likely (as indicated elsewhere, in some interview responses) to hold conservative views of the Bible.

Following the video, the students were divided into groups to discuss it, and these groups appeared to work well. The tutor visited each group, and there was some input from each group into the plenary discussion that followed.

At the end of the class, little time was allowed for students' questions and further discussion. There were a few contributions from the students, and the tutor then stimulated discussion by asking them questions.

TWC: The tutor spoke extensively, using PowerPoint. He provided advice to students about how to improve their ministry, including how to grow their churches numerically and how to keep members. He frequently related the lecture content to students' own practices, and presented a number of practical examples drawn from real-life experience.

The students listened attentively throughout. Some three-quarters had electronic devices, on which they took notes and/or recorded the lecture. The remainder did not take notes: one student remarked to the observer that the PowerPoint presentation would be uploaded on Moodle so there was no need to take notes.

No opportunity was given for structured participation, such as activities or small-group work, by the students. Nonetheless, there was an atmosphere of freedom to speak, and students sporadically interjected comments and questions throughout. The tutor listened closely, and responded fully.

3.3.4   Dealing with disagreement

NCH: The only openly expressed disagreement occurred in the small groups, in which number of students rejected the views of evolutionists and the 'old earth' approach. None of these was apparently challenged.

TWC: No controversial issues were discussed in the class, possibly because it was the last one for the module, and disagreements may have been dealt with earlier in the term.

3.3.5   Discussion of assessment

NCH: The only reference to assessment occurred at the end of the class, when the tutor mentioned the reflective part of the assignment.

TWC: The tutor explained the demands of writing a dissertation, with particular reference to the differences between an essay and a dissertation.

4.   Findings: staff

A total of 16 structured interviews conducted with staff members: 9 St J; 5 CRC; and 4 UR. (Owing to a malfunction of equipment, some of the St J interviews were not recorded, and written notes were taken by the interviewer.)

Questions focussed on five topics:

i.   The influence of experience in ministry on MTP pedagogy;

ii. The influence of academic on MTP pedagogy;

iii. Comparison of students in MTP and in other disciplines;

iv. The effect of academic studies on students' ministerial practice;

v.   Appropriate pedagogy, including assessment, for MTP

The findings are presented below; except where there are systematic differences, no distinction is made between the staff from the three institutions.

4.1 The influence of previous experience in ministry on current teaching and assessment in the MTP

The participants had a wide range of experience in ministry, including serving as ordained ministers in traditional denominations, and extensive youth work. Much of this occurred outside the UK. All felt that this experience is highly formative in teaching current students, as it engenders understanding of and empathy with the situation of the students and the congregations in which they minister, which the participants saw as facing issues similar to those which they themselves had experienced. All regarded themselves as equals with students in their experiences of and concerns for the practice of ministry.

4.2 The influence of previous academic experience on current teaching and assessment in the MTP

All of the respondents had experience of teaching in Higher Education, including many years in MTP. Approximately one-third (5 of 16) had experience teaching academic theology in other institutions; two had occupied very senior posts. Five did not begin their academic life as theology students or lecturers: they had taught other disciplines and took theology as a second or third degree.

Most respondents explicitly expressed an awareness of the difficulties of MTPs, which largely arise from the differences between MTP students and those in other disciplines (see the following section). Because of the lecturers' own backgrounds, however, they cannot entirely identify with the experiences of the students, in particular of those who find their studies challenging their faith, and of those with underdeveloped academic skills.

4.3 Similarities and differences between MTP students and those in other disciplines

The main similarities that participants saw as common to all disciplines were: the need to develop critical and analytical skills; the influence of the level and style of previous education on learning practices; and deference to the superior expertise of the tutors (which the tutors attempt to minimise).

All mentioned some significant differences resulting from the typical demographics of the two disciplinary cohorts. Because of their considerably higher average age, many MTP students struggle to cope with the conflicting demands of academic study and of work and family life. Furthermore, they are in positions of leadership in churches, and feel the weight of expectations on them from and congregations (often including their families). This last point was, in the opinion of many respondents, particularly noticeable in students from African and Caribbean Pentecostal churches, who constitute the largest part of the MTP cohort.

A related matter, noted by about one-third of the respondents, was the effect of seniority on group dynamics in the class. Students who are lead pastors, and are accustomed to having their ideas unquestioningly accepted by their congregations. These people tend to exercise, whether consciously or not, some authority over other students, for whom it is normal to defer to leaders' authority.

Both groups find it difficult to learn to exercise the critical questioning skills essential to academic success.[6] This difficulty is compounded by the fact that the open access policies of the three institutions mean that many MTP students have limited, and rarely recent, educational qualifications. The respondents noted that there is a much higher proportion of students who lack essential academic study skills, particularly in writing, in MTP than in other disciplines.

One consequence of the above, commented on by six respondents, is subtle forms of disengagement on the part of a number of students who find it hard to cope with the intellectual, spiritual, and physical demands of their studies. For example, the pilot study[7] identified a practice on the part of some students to avoid the demands of thinking critically about the bases of faith and the interpretation of Scripture. These students said they say or write 'what the lecturers expect', rather than express their own contrary ideas. Disengagement can occur at all levels, not only in the first year. Several of the respondents felt that it is particularly prevalent in theology, but others suggested that other subjects, such as politics, may be similar in this respect.

Contrary to the researchers' expectations and the anecdotal reports of other staff members who were not formally interviewed, there was little mention in the interviews of open conflict arising in classes. This may be due in part to the negative response of disengagement, but also to more positive attitudes. The include students' desire to avoid falling out with their colleagues (3.1.8, above) and the realisation by many that they can learn from others' beliefs and concepts (3.1.9, above).

4.4 The impact of academic studies on ministerial practice

Virtually all respondents commented that, among many students who do learn to think more critically, there is a concern about the possible detrimental effects of their new attitudes on their positions in their churches—for some even on their livelihood as pastors. These students feel that they have limited power to bring about corresponding changes in the members of their congregations. Some staff members said they expect that the students either keep their new ways of thinking to themselves or put their new ideas and insights into practice in a small way. Nonetheless, some one-third noted that, when a new insight[8] articulates strongly with, and brings about growth in, students' own spiritual experience, it has a considerable and more overt effect on their ministerial practice.

4.5 Views on appropriate pedagogy, including assessment, for MTP classes

All respondents expressed the view that problems arise if the teaching is not practice-oriented; they stressed the pedagogical importance of starting from, and building on, the students' own experience. On this basis, tutors can identify the students' learning needs and introduce new concepts and techniques

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[6] One of the researchers, who lectures in Education, reports a similar tendency in school-based cohorts.

[7] See Garner, M., Burgess, R., & Eshun, D. (2015) Submitting convictions to critical enquiry: a challenge for higher education, *Occasional Papers on Faith in Higher Education* no. 1, pp 62-76.

[8] A specific example cited was Wesleyan reflection.

accordingly. An example, given by three respondents, was to make theological reflection accessible for students by basing it on their current practices.

Concerning assessment, some half of the respondents felt that it should be similarly linked to an experiential base. This is, however, less practicable in some modules owing to their nature and subject-matter. The perception was frequently expressed that the main difficulties students encounter with assessment arise more from the pressures described in 4.3 above, and from the fact that for many English is not their first language, than from their predominantly Pentecostal spirituality and cast of mind (see point 5 in 3.1, above). Notwithstanding this view, one particular problem with assessment, identified by about one-third, was that many students attempt to answer assignment questions by citing proof texts rather than by analysis and critical thinking.

5. Discussion

In this section, we discuss the findings in relation to the research questions, under three headings:

  i.   Factors influencing students' engagement with MTP;

  ii. The impact of MTP on students' ministry;

  iii. Implications for pedagogy in MTPs.

5.1 Influences on engagement with MTP

Three of the research questions were related to this topic:

  1. What are the motivations for enrolling on an MTP?

  2. What are the processes of and strategies for learning employed by students?

  3. What impact do these processes and strategies have on students' intellectual and faith development?

The aim of these questions was to explore in depth the influences on students' engagement with the programme, the process of learning, and hence the attainment of desirable outcomes, in terms of both successfully completing the programme and developing a deeper and more critically informed approach to ministry. The findings indicate two main themes under this heading.

One is the motivation for enrolling on the programme (research question 1), which the almost half of students interviewed expressed as a desire 'to learn' or 'to gain more knowledge'. In one sense, this is an entirely predictable response from anyone who chooses to enrol in an educational institution, but interpreting what it means for any individual, and thus assessing the influence of motivation on the programme outcomes, is not straightforward.

For students whose initial motivation was described in terms gaining of more knowledge and/or skills, and particularly for those who said to was to get a degree, it could result in a passive approach to their studies. There can be the danger that their whole focus will be on acquiring information or even simply on passing their assignments. It was evident, however, that, as the course

progressed, a large majority of the students had experienced learning in a more active and transformational sense (research questions 2 and 3). They had begun to question their assumptions and to adopt an informed, critical stance towards their own and their congregations' beliefs and practices. The value of learning from alternative perspectives was mentioned (see 3.1.7, above), and how they dealt with views they disagreed with (3.1.8 and 3.1.9).

An appreciation of the value of active learning was further indicated in the responses to the question about positive learning experiences (3.1.9). Half of the respondents had come to appreciate the value of developing a critical approach to Scripture and/or faith. and encountering different perspectives and practices. Related responses, expressed in more general terms, were 'enrichment of my ministry' and 'learning through reading'. Finally, the most commonly cited positive teaching experience (3.1.10) was 'group discussions and tutorials'. By contrast, in the questionnaire data, lectures were the most frequently mentioned.

The second significant influence on students' engagement with the programme was their educational background (sections 3.2.1; 3.1.2). Approximately half of the total sample (including interviews and questionnaires) had had some experience of post-secondary education. The large majority, whatever their prior education, had been out of formal education for a number of years. A limited educational background and/or a long time out of formal education were the challenges most commonly cited in their current MTP studies (3.1.5).

5.2   The impact of MTP on ministry

It is evident that the programme had resulted in some form of deep learning for the majority of interviewees, whatever their initial motivation had been for enrolling on the course. The extent to which these learning experiences had changed students' views of and future approaches to ministry (research question 3; sections 3.1.3 and 3.1.4) suggest that approximately one-quarter of participants do not intend to return to their current form of ministry: they will either go on to further study or move to a new ministry. A number of students, mostly women, regarded their increasing confidence in their ministry as a significant impact of the programme.

Some further evidence of potential development in students' approach to ministry is found in the responses to interviews with teaching staff. It was noted that some students had already begun to adopt a different approach in their current ministry. Other students, however, felt that the established approach to faith and church practice on the part of their church leaders and congregations left little room for putting the students' newly-developed ways of thinking into practice. Nonetheless, the tutors believed that students' spiritual insights and growth developed through the programme would inevitably affect, albeit incrementally, their ministerial practice in positive ways.

5.3   Implications for teaching on MTPs

Research question 4 is:

What are teachers' perceptions of specific pedagogical challenges arising from the nature of the student cohort and their processes of learning?

All tutors stressed the importance of a practical orientation to pedagogy in MTPs, in which all aspects (including, as far as is practicable, assessment) must begin with and build on the students' extensive experience.

6 Summary

The research investigated the pedagogical challenges in the design and delivery of MTPs. A number of MTPs have been introduced in recent years in various HE institutions. Their object is to provide theological training for leaders in churches which are outside the historically mainstream denominations, and which have no tradition of professional ministerial training. A large majority of students on MTPs are mature-age, from minority ethnic community churches, and from theologically conservative backgrounds. They thus constitute a new and distinctive cohort in Higher Education, for whom the established norms of university education and pedagogy cannot be assumed to be appropriate.

The research builds on the findings of a preliminary pilot study and provides an empirical base for evaluating the extensive anecdotal evidence relating to teaching on MTPs. Specifically, established: the students' motivations for undertaking this form of study; the challenges they face in successfully completing the programmes; their specific learning needs; and the learning strategies they adopt.

Appendix A: Numbers of interviews at the three institutions

Institution	Students	Staff
University of Roehampton	24: 9 1st year 10 2nd year 5 3rd year	4
St John's College, Nottingham	10	9
Christ Redeemer College	6	1
Total	40	14

Appendix B: Interview schedules

The interviews were semi-structured. The questions shown in the schedules were asked (although not necessarily in the precise form stated); where relevant, other questions were asked as they arose during any given interview.

STAFF

A   Teaching

1. What is your experience of teaching prior to teaching on this course?
2. Are there any specific challenges have you faced in teaching on the course?
3. What are your positive experiences in relation to teaching on this course?
4. Do disagreements relating to the students' faith arise in your classes? If so, how do you deal with them?
5. What approaches to teaching have you found most effective?
6. Has your approach to teaching changed as a result of your experiences on the course?

B   Theological reflection

1. Do you seek to develop students' capacity for theological reflection?

If YES:

1a. What do you understand to be the meaning and purpose of theological reflection?
1b. How do you seek to develop it in students?
1c. Do the students find theological reflection easy or difficult to practise?
1d. Are you aware if they find engaging in theological reflection helpful? If so, in what ways?

C   Assessment

What types of assessment have you found most effective? In what ways?

D   Impact on churches

Do you feel that the course has influenced students' approach to Christian education in their ministry? If so, in what ways?

STUDENT

A   Background and motivation

1. Why did you decide to enrol on the course?
2. What is your educational background?
3. What church do you belong to?

4. In what ways are you involved in Christian ministry?

5. What do you want to do after you complete the course?

6. How do you think the course will benefit your Christian ministry and/or future career?

7. Have you ever felt like giving up the course? If so, why? What has kept you going?

B   Experiences of learning and teaching

1. What challenges have you faced on the course, which have affected your learning and attainment?

2. Roughly how many hours each week do you set aside for independent studies?

3. Since you started the course, have you ever doubted your faith or the faith of other students and staff?

If YES:

>3a. Was there a particular incident, statement, or topic within the course that led you to doubt?

>3b. How have you dealt with these doubts?

4. How do you deal with views expressed by your tutors and peers that you disagree with?

5. Have you found it helpful listening to the views of those from other Christian traditions?

6. What positive learning/teaching experiences have you encountered since starting the course?

7. What negative learning/teaching experiences have you encountered?

8. Which modules have you found most helpful? Why?

9. What approaches to teaching have you found most helpful?

10. What academic support outside the classroom have you found most useful?

11. In what ways, if any, has your Christian life, faith and/or ministry changed as a result of being on the course?

12. What challenges, if any, have you encountered applying what you have learnt to your context of ministry?

C   Learning theological reflection

1. What do you understand to be the meaning and purpose of theological reflection?

2. Have you found engaging in theological reflection helpful? If so, how has it benefitted your life and ministry? To what extent have you engaged in TR in your context of ministry? Will you continue to do so after you have completed your studies?

D   Experiences of the assessment process

1. What types of assessment have you found most helpful? Why?

2. What types of assessment have you found most challenging? Why?

E   Impact on churches

1. How has your experience of teaching and learning on the course influenced your approach to Christian education in your context of ministry?

2. To what extent do you provide opportunity/encourage laypeople in your churches to engage in theological reflection and reflective practice?

Appendix C (Questionnaire)

This survey is being given to Ministerial Theology students at Roehampton. It is part of a research project on the learning experiences of students on Ministerial Theology programmes in the UK. Please help by completing the questionnaire. Your answers will be treated in confidence.

PART A. INSTRUCTIONS:

Please tick the appropriate boxes and write answers where requested.

1.   What is your name?...

2.   Are you male or female?   1   male   2   female

3.   What is your age in years?..

4.   What is your marital status?

1   single   3   widowed   5   divorced/remarried

2   married   4   divorced/separated   6   separated/not divorced

5.   What is your nationality?

If dual nationality, you may tick more than one box.

1   African (specify country)....................   5   Asian (specify).......................

2   Afro-Caribbean   6   Latin American (specify) ....

3   black British   7   other non-white (specify) ....

4   white British

6.   Do you have children?   1   yes   2   no

7.   Before coming on the course, what was the highest level of education that you completed?

1   primary school   2   secondary school   3   diploma   4   degree

5   other (specify) ....

8.   How long have you lived in Britain? ....

9.   What city/town do you live in? ....

10.   Are you a church pastor?   1   yes   2   no

11.   Do you have an occupation apart from Christian ministry?

        1   yes   2   no   If so, please specify...

12.   What is the name of your church? ....

13.	Which of the following descriptions best applies to you? (please tick only one)

1	Pentecostal	2	Charismatic	3	Protestant	4	Catholic

14.	Which of the following best describes your Christian ministry?

You may tick more than one box.

1 pastor	6 children's work	11 small group leader
2 worship leader/group	7 youth work	12 ushering/welcome team
3 media department	8 evangelism	13 hospital visitation
4 prayer ministry	9 women's ministry	14 social outreach
5 counselling	10 preaching/teaching	15 other (specify)...................

15.	What do you want to do after you complete the course?

You may tick more than one box.

1 Pastoral ministry	4 Chaplaincy
2 Further studies (specify)......................	5 Other (specify)........................
3 School teaching	6 Don't know yet

16.	Have you ever felt like giving up the course? 1 yes	2 no

17.	Approximately how many hours per week do you spend studying outside class?

1 < 3	2 4-6	3 7-9	4 10-12	5 > 12

18.	What approaches to teaching and learning have you found most helpful?

1 lectures	2 plenary discussions	3 small group work

4 reading outside class	5 tutorials

6   other (specify).................

19.	What types of assessment have you found most helpful?

1 essays	2 reflective journals	3 portfolios

4 oral presentations	5 other (specify)......................................

PART B. INSTRUCTIONS:

Please circle the appropriate answer and answer for all the items below (where AS = Agree Strongly; A=Agree; NC=Not Certain; D=Disagree; and DS=Disagree Strongly).

Since coming on the Ministerial Theology programme, which of the following is true?

My ministry skills have improved	AS	A	NC	D	DS
My academic skills have improved	AS	A	NC	D	DS
I am able to understand the Bible better	AS	A	NC	D	DS
I reflect more critically on my ministry practice	AS	A	NC	D	DS
I reflect more critically on my church tradition	AS	A	NC	D	DS
I have questioned some of my long-held Christian convictions	AS	A	NC	D	DS
I am more involved in serving my community	AS	A	NC	D	DS
I find feedback on assignment drafts helpful	AS	A	NC	D	DS
I find tutorials helpful	AS	A	NC	D	DS

Please indicate your willingness to be interviewed for the project

1   yes   2   no

If yes, please provide your contact tel. no……………………………………………………