

# Susanna Wesley Foundation 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Symposium

Wednesday 26<sup>th</sup> March, Southlands College, University of Roehampton

## Projects featured at the symposium

*See biographies pdfs for information about researchers*

### Methodist Learning Project

This project began with a desire to explore the lived experience of learning in the Methodist Church, particularly given the emphasis that had been placed on learning a few years previously by the *Fruitful Field* report. A theological action research project covering eight different sites across British Methodism and its ecumenical partnerships, the project explored how 'ordinary' people learned and grew in faith, seeking insights for wider reflection on the growing literature and emphasis on 'discipleship' and 'formation'. Working with two local churches, a charity supporting rural ministry, a 'learning network', a circuit, the local preachers training course and two Methodist theological education colleges, we developed an account of, what we came to name, 'faith learning'. This is the very ordinary way which people learn and grow in faith through everyday experiences, relationships, encounters and conversations. This was not to say that courses and formal patterns of learning had no place, but that they seemed most significant when they supplemented and supported the kind of learning going on in the informal conversations and everyday life events, big and small.

Outputs thus far include a [special issue](#) of CMS's Anvil journal, edited by James Butler and a forthcoming [book](#) by Clare Watkins and James Butler.

### Edgy Learning – Learning faith from the edges

'Edgy Learning' is a seven-site theological action research project. It asks what Christian faith looks like in 'edgy' places. Research that explores ideas of how people grow in faith and pass on faith often focusses on more typical congregations and churches. The Methodist Learning project focussed in these spaces finding that much learning for faith takes place in the informal spaces, in the peripheries, in the everyday conversations and experiences of life. This project takes a more purposeful turn to these 'edgy' spaces asking what more we might discover about faith and its learning. We worked with 7 sites of 'edginess': two in socioeconomically edgy areas, one working with prison leavers, a church which had to a commercial High Street property, an online group for people with disabilities, a city centre chaplaincy and a network of African diaspora churches. The project has looked at what it means to create space for faith and faith conversations, how faith develops and is passed on, the role of leaders, and the sustainability and replicability of such work. The findings are currently being written up in various forms.

### Developing reflective learning on diaconal identities in work with refugees and asylum seekers

Churches and Christian organisations have played significant roles in responding to those seeking asylum and refuge within other countries. This work has often proved challenging, not least due to the complexity of issues and harms affecting those claiming asylum and the increasing numbers involved, as well as the wider social and political dynamics, including prejudice and discrimination being faced.

This project brought together a group of seventeen Christian practitioners who were working with refugees and asylum seekers within local communities to learn from each other. These practitioners were recruited from different national and local contexts across North, Central and Eastern Europe, including the UK. The focus of the project was to support these practitioners in reflecting on how their professional/personal identities affect their work.

To do this, an international organising group initially piloted the adaptation of an existing Community Action-Based Learning for Empowerment (CABLE) approach\* to support participants' individual and

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collective learning. We used action research together to see if this adapted CABLE approach could support reflective and comparative learning in relation to diaconal practice with refugees and asylum seekers. The programme involved an in-person residential learning event in Durham with individual preparation and online group activities before and after this event.

The learning activities used throughout this approach were designed to support personal and group reflections by the participants. These reflections focused on how participants' biographies and identities affected their motivations to engage in this work, and how their biographies and identities affected their interactions with others and local contexts within this work. Further discussion was incorporated on challenges and dilemmas within this work, as well as how practitioners saw Christian aspects affecting this work. These discussions included a focus on understanding this work as a form of diaconal ministry; diaconal ministry focuses on engagement with those who may be marginalised and excluded by wider society. Such ministry seeks to challenge this exclusion by building relationships and learning between those affected, the Church, and wider society.

To share the learning more widely from this pilot learning project, we gathered perspectives from participants throughout the process, including recording selected group discussions, gathering notes and from evaluation forms, with approval under Durham University's ethics procedures. We are now writing up the resulting learning based on what practitioners said about the topics, and their perspectives on the learning process. We are also developing a resource for others who may wish to run similar learning programmes.

The project Principal Investigator was Dr Andrew Orton at Durham University. The organising group involved: Oksana Prosvirina, Research Associate on this project with Durham University and also Research Coordinator and Senior Lecturer, Interdiac (International Academy for Diaconia and Social Action in Eastern and Central Europe); Rev. Dr Heidi Zitting, Senior Lecturer at Diakonia University of Applied Sciences (Diak), Helsinki, Finland; Petra Brooke, Senior Advisor, Salvation Army, Norway, and member of The Salvation Army International Theological Council; Rev. Mag. Tony Addy, Head of Education and Programme Consultant, Interdiac. The project was initially inspired by Deaconess Annamarika Väekäs, Deaconess Foundation, Finland at a CODE Forum event.

\* See: Addy, T. (2019) Community Practice and Critical Community Research: Perspectives from Conviviality and the CABLE approach, *Diaconia: Journal of Christian Social Practice*, Vol. 10, Issue 2, December 2019, pp.113-212.

## Methodist – Catholic Social Action Project

This project arose out of the experience of the significance of ecumenical work beyond the ecclesial setting and ecumenical friendship. To explore this, we turned to ecumenical social action work, and particularly focussed on how Methodists and Catholics work together. The project was initially developed as a four-site theological action research project, but in the end, it was a two-site project and a series of interviews of Methodist and Catholic friendship pairs. The struggles to find suitable sites for the project were themselves revealing of the realities of this ecumenical work, firstly that ecumenical work is typically more broad than just Methodist and Catholic, and secondly, proving a bigger challenge to the project, there was a resistance in such ecumenical spaces to name particular Christian traditions, because after all "we are all Christians". This instinct to downplay ecclesial tradition, was found not to be because it didn't matter, but actually people had found that for some it mattered a great deal, and was often something divisive. By exploring two sites with significant Methodist and Catholic work, and by listening to the experience of Methodists and Catholics who were friends, we began to name an 'everyday ecumenism', which we felt had some important insights to offer the wider ecumenical discussions. The report can be downloaded [here](#):

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## Faith Long Lived: Ecumenical Experiences of Saying Creeds among Older Christians in the Roehampton area

2025 is the 1700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Nicene Creed (AD 325), which is one of the most important statements of faith in the Christian tradition. This ancient creed remains central to Christian worship, practice and theology, with Christians across the world gathering – sometimes more than once daily – to recite or sing it as part of their liturgical traditions. Long before the Council of Nicaea, creeds were already being used as part of preparation for baptism, allowing Christians to affirm faith in their new religion. Given their importance in the Christian tradition, creeds have generated extensive scholarly discussion. However, what remains under-researched is the practice of saying creeds. Rather than focussing on what the creeds themselves say, the *Faith Long Lived* project set out to explore what might mean to say creeds. And we explored this question with older Christians in the Roehampton area. We worked with around 30 older Christians (from local Anglican, Roman Catholic, Methodist, Baptist, and Vineyard churches) who participated in surveys, interviews, and focus group discussion. The project sought to understand the experiences among these older Christians of saying creeds over the course of a long life. If creeds have a formative function, what impact does saying them over a significant period have on their faith and identity? We were particularly interested in the felt experience of reciting creeds – how participants physically engaged with them, how bodily expressions shaped their relationship with these texts, and what it means to say creeds even when you might not believe in the words being said. The project team consisted of Dr Ash Cocksworth (PI), Dr Andrew Rogers, Prof Clare Watkins, Dr Nick Ladd, Dr James Butler, and Dr Clive Norris.

Based on the empirical work, Ash Cocksworth is exploring the idea of creeds as ‘practice’. Moving beyond the standard definition of creeds as ‘statements of belief’, Ash is considering what it might mean to think of creeds as practice. He is focussing on the performance of saying creeds, the practice of not saying creeds, the idea of praying creeds, and the difference all this makes to the nature of belief. Ash’s article ‘Creeds as Practice: A Practice-Engaged Theology of the Creeds’ is forthcoming in *Ecclesiology*. The project has also informed the first chapter of his book, *Glorification and the Life of Faith*, which he co-authored with David F. Ford. As well as sharing some of the main insights from the project with church groups, Ash has presented academic papers related to the project at the University of Tübingen, Durham University, and the British and Irish Association for Practical Theology.

Andrew Rogers and Sunil Chandy are exploring the theological significance of singing a creed, considering its liturgical, affective and communal dimensions. This is aided by a lyrical and musical examination of a popular sung creed, informed by an interview with its internationally recognised Australian author. They are presenting this work at an international conference in June 2025, drawing out the significance of singing the creeds for ecclesial home-making. Their research will be written up as an article for publication in late 2025.

To resource our thinking, a series of external speakers spoke on the project’s themes as part of the 2022-23 Practical Theology Seminars convened by Ash Cocksworth with Rowan Williams, Professor Abby Day (Goldsmith) and Professor David F. Ford (Cambridge) each contributing stimulating papers.

## Online Communion

In January 2025, we started a new theological action research project in collaboration with the Faith and Order Committee of the Methodist Church in Britain to explore the theme of online communion in Methodist practice. The project is being led by James Butler and Ash Cocksworth of the University of Roehampton and we’re working closely with Mark Rowlands of the Faith and Order Committee. By working with three sites who are engaged in online communion in different ways we will bring the theology found in the practice of online communion into the wider conversations. The findings for

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the project will help inform the Faith and Order Committee's recommendation to conference about the practice of online communion. We set out to explore the following questions:

- What is the prevalence of online celebrations of Holy Communion in the Methodist Church?
- How do Methodists understand their participation in online celebrations of Holy Communion?
- How is this similar/different to their understanding of participating in in person celebrations?
- How might online celebration of Holy Communion connect to the Justice, Dignity and Solidarity work of the Methodist church?
- What does it mean for God to be present?

We are early on in the project but the developing conversations have already drawn attention to things such as the significance of a connection to place, the variations in practice (e.g. synchronous / asynchronous participation), the need to move beyond Covid and post-Covid concerns to a bigger picture of online communion and the need to engage with 'lay' perspectives and experiences. One of the key insights from the first meeting is the need to move beyond for and against arguments for online communion in order to articulate a lasting position.