

Helen Cameron and Catherine Duce, *Researching Practice in Ministry and Mission* (London: SCM Press, 2013) ISBN 978-0-334-04624-0 Paperback, xxxii, 165 pages

Reviewed by Darren Cronshaw

Potential researchers of ministry and mission face a host of research processes to navigate and multiple methods from which to choose. It is one thing to select a discipline and identify an area of inquiry, but it is a whole lot more complex and involved to focus down to a research question and develop a strategy to answer it. There are dozens of guides on general research methods, but few address the specifics and overview of practical theology questions, which is why this book is so welcome.

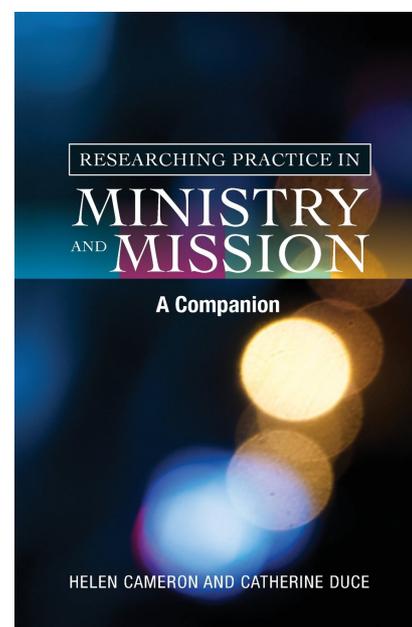
Helen Cameron is the founder and a Research Fellow at the Oxford Centre for Ecclesiology and Practical Theology (OxCEPT), and now focuses her research-based advocacy as Head of Public Affairs for the Salvation Army. Catherine Duce was a fieldworker with the OxCEPT 'Action Research; Church and Society' (ARCS) project, and is now training for Church of England ordained ministry. As seasoned researchers, they are careful to explain they are not offering a 'cook book' approach of research ideals. It is instead a realistic portrayal of the challenges and opportunities of research, convinced as they are that good research can enhance missional effectiveness.

Researching Practice in Ministry and Mission offers a step-by-step guide on the research process, the skills and methodological choices of theological research, and advice on how to manage the demands of a research project. It offers examples of actual projects and annotated descriptions of perhaps a hundred further books on different aspects of research.

In five chapters, Cameron outlines what is involved in designing, doing and writing research. She counsels laying the foundations with a good research question, literature review and methodology section (always asking 'what am I really trying to do here?'), and then (and only then) moving on to data collection, analysis, writing and editing (always asking 'So what? What am I making of this?').

I have used the chapter on 'Asking Questions that Matter' to help students develop their research proposal and understand the difference between methodologies (as the philosophical approaches to research) and methods (as the techniques used to gather data). The chapter on writing and editing is a good help for anyone trudging through this pre-final stage of research, both to get past any writer's block and to consider what examiners look for.

The advice I most valued is for researchers to reflect on what they enjoy and avoid. Cameron likened researchers to Stradivarius violin players who need to learn the unique qualities of the instrument to produce its most beautiful sound:



'You are unique, and what you are doing is valuable, and so you have to learn how to get the best out of yourself. I would understand this as part of the co-creative process of being a Christian. You are learning how to draw the best note out and listening to the undertones' (p.80).

Research is an art and craft, and it is helpful for researchers to understand themselves as instruments of research with unique contributions to make.

In alternate chapters, Duce introduces the most common practical theology research methods: questionnaires, participation observation, interviews, focus groups and documentary analysis. Among the introductions to each method and its strengths and limitations is advice on piloting surveys and questions, preparing well for sessions, being sensitive to interviewees and research sites, and selecting an appropriate sample size. Each chapter is a useful introduction to that method for researchers considering using it. I have used the chapter on participant-observation for my students doing a case study site visit this semester. That is a beauty of the book – each chapter is useful in its own right for researchers at different stages, and overall it is a comprehensive introduction to processes and methods.

I appreciated the dozens of practical suggestions and wealth of research advice throughout the book. For example, some that I wanted to remember included:

- The value of a research journal to note provisional thoughts and responses
- A supervisor can ask a potential supervisee what they envisage where a doctorate will lead to check their commitment to finishing
- The wisdom of sometimes saying 'Good project, but I don't think I'm the person to supervise it'
- Encourage beginning researchers to read a piece of research, consider how it relates practice and theology and whether it meets criteria for good research as relevant, feasible, credible, reflexive, ethical, original and well-managed (perhaps a good Research Methodology course assignment)
- Identify the conference where you will meet people in your field and attend and then present a paper
- Identify the most relevant journal and read every recent issue
- To learn more about any research method, start with the thin introductory book and only if you need to know more get the thick book!
- Collate the list of reading to start on and sort it, rather than just reading whatever you find first
- Expect about 50 citations for Masters and 250 for a doctorate
- Always ask what is the real world relevance, and in what way is the project theological
- See epistemological crises as opportunities for more reflective learning (so journal everything).

My only critique of the book is that there is no attention to the challenges of international students or treatment of intercultural issues in research. Sensitivity is often needed in recruiting and interviewing people from other cultures. For an otherwise comprehensive volume, this is a crucial area that is unfortunately lacking.

According to the Cameron and Duce, research projects come in two types – perfect projects and finished projects. *Researching Practice in Ministry and Mission* is written to help research candidates plot a path to finish. It is an excellent companion guide for beginning or experienced practical theology researchers, those responsible for training and supervising them, and church leaders who read or consider the lessons learned from their research.

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<<http://www.ea.org.au/crucible.aspx>>.