

# ARCS

## Action Research - Church & Society



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### Housing Justice Remit Document

The following project remit describes a phase of Action research with Housing Justice. It falls into three sections:

1. How this project remit fits in with the work of ARCS
2. An overview of the proposed research work on behalf of Housing Justice
3. A sequence of events in terms of action research

#### 1. ARCS project & Housing Justice

It has been decided that a viable form of action research leading to theological reflection will focus upon the UNLEASH aspect of Housing Justice's work. UNLEASH is a membership forum and network for churches, agencies and individuals concerned with housing and homelessness in London, coordinated by Alastair Murray. Specifically this will include in-depth research in two parishes (one Anglican and one Catholic) operating within the Islington Winter Shelter Network.

Housing Justice approached ARCS with a view to ARCS helping facilitate some theological reflection on their work. The ARCS team are keen to be working with a group engaged in social justice issues in London.

The ARCS project is located at Heythrop College, and also has developed a research partnership with OxCEPT (Oxford Centre for Ecclesiology and Practical Theology) at Ripon College Cuddesdon. ARCS involves Action research which aims to be collaborative, participatory and democratic, and through a shared research process aims to effect change within an organisation. Research takes place in iterative cycles following a pattern of data collection, analysis, and reflection and moving back into the field to facilitate change.

Overarching questions to be explored include: How does the practice (of being involved in a Winter Shelter Network) influence the theological outlook of the Churches and the faith practice of individuals involved? Following on from this, how can UNLEASH develop ways of enabling Churches to reflect theologically upon the impact of their involvement with the Winter Shelters Network? The aim of the research can be summarised as:

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*ARCS engages with church agencies and church community groups in the course of the renewal of their own life, their religious evangelising mission and their outreach to society. ARCS seeks to enable them through deepened theological awareness to improve their effectiveness, develop relationships with other traditions and bring faith and faith-based values to the wider society.*

*To reflect theologically on the impact of one Winter Shelter Network on parish life, focusing on an Anglican and Catholic parish.*

The research is to be undertaken in the form of a 'co-researcher' model. This involves the coordinator of UNLEASH, Alistair Murray, becoming an active researcher in the project and taking shared ownership of the project and the ARCS team providing ongoing support. This model will lead to enhanced analytical focus for the recipients and strong participation in the direction of the research. It is much like Housing Justice developing its own research department.

#### *Theological research*

The ARCS project whilst offering an exercise in action research to participating groups is keen to stress that this is specifically theological research. It is especially concerned with the work of renewal and evangelisation and outreach to society.

There are several guiding theological themes arising out of the preliminary research: the theology of grace, Christology, sacraments and sacramentality, church in the world. It is envisaged that the research will involve two way dialogue between the practices conversing with these theological themes; and the theology informing the practices.

The overall results of this research will be analysed using grounded theory techniques, and will feed into a larger framework of analysis of other projects involved with Action research and ARCS.

#### *An action research cycle and the work of Housing Justice UNLEASH*

A cycle of action research looking at two parishes engaged in the Islington Winter Shelter Network will involve theological reflection on the relation between faith and social justice praxis. This will involve specific groups in the research: shelter guests, volunteers, local parishioners, and church leaders.

As stated above one aim is to help the parishes involved to theologically reflect on the impact of their work. It is hoped the results of the research will begin to be fed into future practice across other projects and networks in the London area and possibly nationwide.

Seeing as the research is a shared venture concerning evangelisation and renewal, some initial questions of interest to ARCS and Housing Justice concern:

- What motivates parishes and parishioners to get involved in faith-based homelessness action in London?
- How does faith influence practice and practice influence faith?
- Has the theological outlook of the parish as a whole been affected by their involvement in this type of work?

- What might be the differences and similarities between the involvement of Anglican and Catholic parishes in the Winter Shelters project?
  - What have they learnt from one another?
  - How has this work affected their ecumenical orientation and willingness to engage in wider community initiatives?
  - What can other Churches learn from this?

## 2. An overview of the proposed research work on behalf of Housing Justice

Housing Justice is pleased to be an active partner in this action research. Many of our members are churches involved in providing services to homeless and excluded people and our hope is that this research will help us to develop appropriate resources to support them in this work.

Winter shelters are one kind of project that Churches set up in response to the perceived needs of homeless and excluded people and groups. We are not aware of any research examining the theological impetus and results from the relationship between the starting up of such projects and the churches with which they are linked. There are different ways that such projects can impact upon their churches e.g. on the giving of time or money; on wider community involvement; and on the people who volunteer to take on roles within the project.

A particular area of interest is to do with the pastoral needs of the people involved in volunteering. Contact with those who are homeless and excluded can place strains upon volunteers, and also upon the church as a whole in responding appropriately and effectively to the needs of project users. Is the project or church well resourced and good at supporting its volunteers? If not there are likely to be questions about the project's sustainability.

Different projects develop in different ways over time, especially in terms of whether or how they decide to locate themselves within the range of statutory and voluntary agencies involved in action on homelessness. Different church based and church linked projects are at different points in this continuum, and there are may be theological motivations underpinning these decisions.

This research might also help to identify the benefits and risks to churches involved in action on homelessness. Benefits might include

- strengthened church cohesion, faith and community links
- better awareness of the needs of excluded people in the Parish, and a resulting deeper engagement with issues of social justice

Risks can sometimes include inadequate preparation and poor health and safety awareness, and the inability to respond effectively to the needs of people using the project. The individual pastoral needs and motivations of those who volunteer may again merit exploration in relationship to this. Also of interest to us are the strengths and weaknesses, advantages and disadvantages of ecumenical action.

There are a wide range of theological implications to all these issues, and setting aside time to reflect on them will allow lessons to be learned which could have much wider relevance for the church in the world.

### 3. A sequence of events in terms of action research

Methodology: As stated above, the approach being taken to this project comes under the umbrella of Action Research. This includes three distinctive features:

1. The research is a collaboration between an external research agency (in this case the ARCS team from Heythrop) and an internal researcher (Alastair Murray) nominated by the host organisation (Housing Justice). The research agenda, process and methods are jointly designed by external and internal researchers before being presented to the host organisation for approval.
2. The research focuses on the actual practices of the host organisation (the action) but because this is theological research it recognises that those actions are informed by and disclose the theology of the participants.
3. The research is a cyclical process in which the exploration of the action gives rise to analysis and reflection which then influences a further cycle of action which in turn is explored and reflected upon.

The anticipated benefits of action research are that the host organisation has its capacity for research strengthened and experiences developments in its practice as a direct result of the research. The external agency gains the benefit of ideas and data tested in real situations which can be used to address some of the wider academic questions about evangelisation and renewal that underpin the whole ARCS project.

Action Research can involve a wide range of research methods, such as interviews, focus groups, questionnaires. The methods are designed jointly by the research team to ensure they best address the questions being asked at each stage of the research.

The proposed research will involve in-depth data collection from the following groups at parish level: shelter guests; volunteers; parishioners in general; and church leaders. The suggested methods of data collection include: focus groups/interviews and some participant observation.

#### Research Process

Whilst Action Research is a continuous spiral of action and reflection, for the purposes of planning the project has been divided into three phases with suggested timescales.

#### Preparation

January/February 2008

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- Project remit document drawn up by AM, DB
- Project remit document discussed and approved by Alison Gelder at Housing Justice and Jim Sweeney at ARCS
- Project remit revised

## **Phase 1 - Exploring two parishes in the Islington Shelter Network February - June 2008**

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- AM seeks permission from two parishes in the Islington Shelter Network.
- Data collection will involve:
  - Focus groups held with shelter guests; volunteers; parishioners
  - Interviews/focus groups carried out with clergy/ parish co-ordinators
  - Participant observation as appropriate, including observation at the closing session for Islington Shelter Network on April 5<sup>th</sup>.
- CD to help AM with data collection where needed.

## **Phase 2 - Reflection**

**June-July 2008**

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- Joint project team meet and reflect upon data, making links where appropriate to the theological themes in the ARCS project.
- Representatives of the joint team meet with AM and AG to facilitate their theological reflection upon the data. Then they share the joint team's reflections and seek a response to them. AM and AG agree any lessons for their work regarding the Housing Shelter work.
- Joint team prepare an interim report summarising the learning to date.

## **Phase 3 - Reporting**

**July 2008 (TBC)**

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- Joint team summarise project learning and make links to wider ARCS project.
- Feedback of findings to Housing Justice.

It is hoped towards the end of the project to bring together the different participating ARCS research projects for mutual learning.

## **Planning for a second wave of research**

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- Depending on ARCS project funding a second wave of research may be established.

### **Approval:**

This remit document has been approved by:

Dr. Jim Sweeney CP ARCS Project Director  
Ms Alison Gelder Housing Justice