

Beyond Synodal Listening: Theological Action Research and Cultures of Conversation

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Abstract: In the contemporary Catholic Church’s engagement with synodality *listening* has become the dominant emphasis; methods for “spiritual conversation” are designed to give priority to listening—to one another and, fundamentally, the Holy Spirit. This paper offers some critiques of this emphasis and seeks to explore *conversation* as the synodal fundamental. Conversation overly controlled by listening is, I argue, susceptible to subtle and unhelpful power dynamics. “Ordinary conversation”—interruptive, informal, spontaneous, and not always polite—has its own theological significance and must also find its place in a truly synodal church. Drawing on extensive experience of theological action research and insights from systems theory, the paper sets out why such “ordinary conversation,” distinct from what might be seen as “formal listening,” is ecclesologically essential for a full realisation of church. By way of conclusion, key themes are identified whose development is needed for the further enrichment of synodal processes through attention to ordinary conversation.

SINCE 2021, CATHOLIC COMMUNITIES ACROSS THE GLOBE have been invited in a formal way,¹ at Pope Francis’s behest, to become increasingly involved in processes of “synodality.”² These processes have culminated in two international synodal assemblies in Rome, in October 2023 and 2024, where bishops and other clerics are joined by lay women and men, all with equal voting and speaking rights. These assemblies have been organised to be deeply conversational and shaped around prayer and refectio, as

¹ The language and theology of synodality as a “walking together” was a growing theme in Pope Francis’s teaching from earlier in his pontificate, as he found expression for a vision of a less bureaucratic, discerning, and communal church. Much of this is reflected in the 2018 document of the International Theological Commission (ITC) *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, work for which began as early as 2014, just the year after Pope Francis’s election: www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_synodalita_en.html.

² For the Vatican’s own website supporting synodality see www.synod.va/en.html.

delegates work together on submissions sent to Rome by every region of the world, drawn from local submissions based on the reflections and concerns of Catholic laity and, in the best cases, those to whom they relate in the wider world.³ As the working document (*Instrumentum Laboris*) for the second of these synodal sessions is published, with its focus on “How to be a missionary synodal Church,”⁴ we are already seeing a wide range of organisational, educational, and pastoral practices for renewal being contemplated.

However, whatever decisions and further work may arise from this Roman Synod, the effectiveness of those synods depends on a necessary consideration and practice of “synodality” on the ground which the renewal of the Catholic Church in mission and life in the Spirit requires going forward. Synodality is not a short-term, consultative process. Rather, it is “the specific *modus vivendi et operandi* of the Church, the People of God.”⁵ This wider living and practice of synodality is the particular concern of this article.

Many pages have been written on what is meant by “synodality,”⁶ and there is too much to be said on the subject to include in this article.⁷ For the reader for whom this may be a new or less clear idea, I begin with a brief outline of the most salient characteristics of synodality. The most recent document, the 2024 *Instrumentum Laboris*, partly in

³ Processes developed varied not only from nation to nation, but also from diocese to diocese. In my own context—England and Wales—parish listening groups, with open agendas, were encouraged, and written submissions then made, often in response to some preset themes, then sent to Diocesan Synodal Teams. These teams then synthesized these submissions so as to contribute to a document drawn together by the Bishops’ Conference’s Synod team, which then was incorporated into the European Continental Level Document for the Synod in Rome 2024.

⁴ *How To Be a Synodal Church On Mission? Five Perspectives for Theological Exploration in View of the Second Session of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops*, www.synod.va/en/resources/documents/documents-for-the-second-phase/towards-the-2024-assembly/how-to-be-a-synodal-Church-on-mission.html.

⁵ ITC, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, no. 6, quoted in the *Preparatory Document*, no. 10. *Preparatory Document*, 2021: www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/preparatory-document/pdf-desktop/en_prepa_desktop.pdf.

⁶ The complex and sometimes disputed nature of the term is reflected in the way in which, following the 2023 Synod assembly in Rome, calls have been made for greater attention to be given the term, and its theological as well as practical meaning. This has been picked up in the 2024 Synod’s *Instrumentum Laboris*, nos. 5–9.

⁷ As well as the excellent materials on the School for Synodality website (www.schoolforsynodality.org.uk) and the Vatican’s synod site, I would draw attention to: Jos Moons, “A Comprehensive Introduction to Synodality: Reconfiguring Ecclesiology and Ecclesial Practice,” *Roczniki Teologiczne* 69, no. 2 (2022): 73–93; Massimo Faggioli, “From Collegiality to Synodality: Promise and Limits of Francis’s ‘Listening Primacy,’” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 85, no. 4 (2020): 352–369; Rafael Luciani, *Synodality: A New Way of Proceeding in the Church* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2022); Stephen McKinney, Thomas O’Loughlin, and Beata Toth, eds., *Synodality and the Recovery of Vatican II: A New Way for Catholics* (Dublin: Messenger, 2024).

recognition of a perceived lack of clarity concerning the term, helpfully cites the *Synthesis Report* from the 2023 Synod assembly thus:

Synodality can be understood as Christians walking together in communion with Christ toward the Kingdom along with the whole of humanity. Its orientation is towards mission, and its practice involves gathering in assembly at each level of ecclesial life. It involves a reciprocal listening dialogue, community discernment, and creation of consensus as an expression that renders Christ present in the Holy Spirit, each taking decisions in accordance with their responsibilities.⁸

The vision here is one of the church, *at every level*, becoming a participating and discerning communion, and so being able to follow in the ways the Spirit is calling us to be in and for God's world. More than this, as frequently emphasised in official documents throughout the synodal process, this participation and discerning together is not just for those actively and visibly "in" the church, but needs to include *all*—with a special place for the voices of those marginalised or living with poverty of one kind or another. Informed by such a spirit of total inclusion, church communities are called to practise and learn what it is to walk and discern together through patterning our lives by attentive listening, shared celebration, speaking out in courage, with honesty and love whatever is in our hearts (*parrhesia*), and sensitivity and obedience to the Spirit's promptings. All this requires a profound personal and communal formation, and outward-looking engagement with all in society, especially the poor and marginalised.⁹

As with all great theological and especially ecclesiological visions, the challenge that meets us head on is that of *how* such discernment, attentiveness, and obedience to the Spirit is to be practised. I write this article from a position of theological and vocational commitment to and enthusiasm for synodality, as described in these texts, whilst reflecting more critically on my own, albeit limited, experience of what this has meant in practice for what I would argue is the majority of Catholic lay people.

It is helpful to acknowledge my own position in relation to these practices of synodality. My interest in and experience of synodal practices is rooted not only in a longstanding theological concern for Catholic ecclesiology and, especially, the theology of lay living, but also in participating at parish level in such practices. As an academic theologian, I have reflected on both the practice and underpinning

⁸ *Synthesis Report* 1h, www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly/synthesis/english/2023.10.28-ENG-Synthesis-Report.pdf.

⁹ See the "Ten Thematic Nuclei" presented in the *Preparatory Document*, no. 30.

understandings of synodality, which has also led to my being involved in national and European-wide gatherings; as a parishioner of a small, rural parish in the East of England, I have had a small leadership role in instigating and helping resource a variety of synodal practices in response to the requests from Rome and the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales. As a member of the theological advisory group for the UK-based School for Synodality,¹⁰ I have also been glad to hear firsthand of the great promise of synodal practices for parish and diocesan renewal, whilst also being able to develop some critical responses to how the practices are, and are not, effective, helpful, and truly transformative. Significantly, for what is to follow, I have also become increasingly aware of the ways in which my academic research, using theological action research methods and methodology, shines a light on synodal experiences, which both illuminates more sharply, and casts shadows.¹¹ I begin, then, with some reflections on particular dominant practices of synodality, that valorise *listening*, before going on to reflect on how this might be more properly and helpfully complexified by, first, theological action research methods and experience and, secondly, the insights of complexity theories of organisation. To conclude, I argue for a greater emphasis on speech and conversation, identified as “ordinary conversation,” and a greater reserve in the prominence of “formal listening” practices in synodal processes. I suggest that it is ordinary conversation, rather than formal listening and the “spiritual conversations” it often advocates, which better embodies the vision of synodality with which the contemporary Catholic Church is working and reflects our longer traditions around discernment, the search for what is true, and following the Spirit.

SYNODAL PRACTICES AND THE (OVER)VALORISATION OF “LISTENING”

In the previous paragraph, I differentiated between “ordinary conversation,” for which I want to argue, and “formal listening,” which I associated with “spiritual conversation” or, as this practice is also known, “conversations in the spirit.” Whilst there are various accounts of what these spiritual conversations involve, a clear and highly influential one is helpfully and accessibly described on the

¹⁰ See footnote 7 above.

¹¹ As a co-originator of theological action research, I have been part of its development since the beginning. See, in particular, Helen Cameron, Deborah Bhatti, Catherine Duce, James Sweeney, and Clare Watkins, *Talking about God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology* (London: SCM, 2010); and Clare Watkins, *Disclosing Church: Generating Ecclesiology through Conversations in Practice* (London: Routledge, 2020).

School of Synodality website.¹² Here, as the Vatican Synodality website describes,¹³ a method of spiritual conversation in three “rounds,” each followed by a time of silent contemplation and prayer is employed. A first round allows each member of the group to say, in turn, what is in their heart and has come to them in the recommended time of prayerful preparation for the spiritual conversation. In the second round, following the time of silence, each is called upon to respond to what they have heard in the first round, identifying what seems to them an important insight for the group. This is where discernment of the Spirit’s guiding of the group begins to take place. Following a second time of silence, the third round follows a similar pattern of turn-taking in sharing insights and reflections, and the group moves towards noting what is surfacing in their time together. These surfaced themes inform a final review of the spiritual conversation, in which significant themes or directions are identified upon which they want to report more widely. Throughout this process which lasts about two hours, the emphasis is on *listening*—to each other and the Spirit—and responding. There is no direct engagement in discussion, debate, or questioning between group members, as discernment is seen to be primarily taking place in listening. This is not, in my experience, “conversation” in any ordinary sense.

There is a great deal to be said for this practice of spiritual conversation and its formal listening emphasis, and I have no doubt of its value in particular circumstances and groups. However, both my experiences of it at a variety of ecclesial levels, and deepening theological enquiry of it, have left me with the rather provocative question: Is it possible that there has just been too much emphasis on “listening” in this synodal process? To be clear, I, along with the majority of those committed to synodality as a way of being church, would instinctively answer: “Of course not!” The careful, loving work of attending to the voices of all, and especially of those less heard, often silenced in and by church and society, is a central call to which we must respond. It is one of the great tragedies of church life that this listening has been so rare a practice among us.¹⁴ In my questioning of the formal listening advocated by spiritual conversation, I am not in

¹² See www.schoolforsynodality.org.uk/our-resources/conversations-in-the-spirit-a-how-to-guide.

¹³ There is recommendation for this way of working also given on the Vatican’s own synodality site: www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/en/EN_Step_6_Spiritual-Conversation.pdf. This is slightly less accessible, and also—interestingly—leads with a stronger emphasis on the dispositions required for discerning conversation, before offering a form of spiritual conversation method as a *possible* way to proceed.

¹⁴ This lack of listening is amply illustrated by *The Cross of the Moment* report into clergy sexual abuse in the Catholic Church of England and Wales: www.durham.ac.uk/research/institutes-and-centres/catholic-studies/research/boundary-breaking-/.

any way trying to undermine this essential call to listening—especially listening to those less-heard, marginalised voices, among whom, I suggest, the Holy Spirit speaks in especially powerful and necessary ways.

Yet I am raising questions about the dominance of listening and its character in our practices for a synodal church. One way of construing what follows is as a critique of what seem to be growing assumptions about “methods” for listening epitomised by the spiritual conversation model just described. My critique reflects a desire to reset our accounts and practices of synodality in the more complex and varied practices of “journeying together”¹⁵—practices which need to involve the open and courageous speech of *parrhesia*¹⁶ every bit as much as listening, and to remember consistently the practical toil of accompanying each other in the mundane sufferings and joys of living life. We need to recall that in the *Preparatory Document* for the synodal process of 2021–2024, “listening” is listed as the second of *ten* “thematic nuclei” for the process, and described as “a first step.” First steps are foundational. But I would argue that we run the risk of making the foundation of listening so valorised that we rob it of its full, complex, and somewhat messy context of that journeying together also characterised by speech, disagreement, practice, relationship, spiritual discipline, shared worship, outreach, work for social justice, ecumenism, and the quotidian practices of household living.¹⁷ In this, I am suggesting a shift of emphasis from listening and spiritual conversation towards ordinary conversation, which has its own culture of listening and attention (and their lack). Any reification of listening, with its accompanying establishing of “methods” and formats, risks specialising “listening” in ways which, paradoxically, disempower the ordinary conversations, shared lives, and journeying together, which are the true matter and properly messy context for God’s conversing with women and men.

The theological importance of such human and often stumbling ordinary conversation pre-dates the current call to synodality and, I would argue, finds particular place in the Second Vatican Council’s

¹⁵ *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission. Preparatory Document for Synod 2021–2023*, Synod of Bishops 2021, 1, www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/preparatory-document/pdf-desktop/en_prepa_desktop.pdf.

¹⁶ “Speaking of all things,” with courage, “integrating freedom, truth and charity” (*Preparatory Document*, no. 30). This multifaceted complexity is also reflected in the “ingredients for synodal process” set out in section 4.5 of the *Vademecum for the Synod on Synodality*, Synod of Bishops 2021, www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/vademecum/en_vade.pdf. I note especially here the ingredients of informal conversation, shared activity, and non-verbal expressions. The 2014 ITC document on synodality concludes with a rallying call not around listening, but *parrhesia*.

¹⁷ See *Preparatory Document*, no. 30.

account of church. Beyond the specifically ecclesial, there is a fundamental sense that through such conversation human beings work together to discern truth, in matters of faith, but also in all matters of authentic discovery. As the Declaration on Religious Liberty, *Dignitatis Humanae*, describes it:

Truth, however, is to be sought after in a manner proper to the dignity of the human person and his social nature. The inquiry is to be free, carried on with the aid of teaching or instruction, communication, and dialogue, in the course of which men [sic] explain to one another the truth they have discovered, or think they have discovered, in order thus to assist one another in the quest for truth.¹⁸

The discerning of truth through ordinary conversation where both true and less than true understandings are shared is a human call rooted in the heart of what it is to be a person, based in the human dignity of all women, men, and children. This commitment to multifaceted conversation, with all the implied and inevitable tensions and misunderstanding typical of its ordinariness is, further, given a prominent place in Catholic fundamental theology, as the “development” or “progress” (*processio*) of revelation more specifically in the life of the church is described at the Second Vatican Council:

This tradition which comes from the Apostles develops in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit. For there is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down. This happens through the contemplation and study made by believers, who treasure these things in their hearts (see Luke, 2:19, 51) through a penetrating understanding of the spiritual realities which they experience, and through the preaching of those who have received through Episcopal succession the sure gift of truth.¹⁹

This dynamic sense of the “development” or “progress” (*processio*) of revelation taken together with the accounts of church and mission in *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes* have suggested to me an understanding of Vatican II ecclesiology in which contro-versing, conversation, and communication are essential.²⁰ Conversing, discussing together, sharing our diversity of insights is fundamental to the church being what she is truly called to be, in and for the world: a

¹⁸ Vatican II, “Declaration on Religious Liberty” (*Dignitatis Humanae*), no. 3.

¹⁹ Vatican II, “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation” (*Dei Verbum*), no. 8.

²⁰ This is argued in Clare Watkins, *Laity and Communication: Some Implications of Organization Theory for the Ecclesiology of Vatican II* (PhD diss., Cambridge University, 1990), www.repository.cam.ac.uk/handle/1810/250979.

witness to “the living tradition” of God’s loving of and reaching out to all in our world.

This desire to rediscover ordinary conversation as the beating heart of Christian life and mission is not, however, merely an “academic,” or abstracted concern. Rather, the argument set out in this article is motivated by my growing concern for the very practical need to make listening, discernment, conversation-in-the-Spirit, *parrhesia*, participation, and so forth more mundane, quotidian, and ordinary. We know that the current systems, methods, and roadmaps for these synodal gifts have been of extremely limited impact in terms of numbers of church people involved; if we take seriously that central call to include those “protagonists of the church”²¹ marginalised and variously impoverished in our societies, then these limitations are thrown into even sharper relief. Our well-intentioned ordering, systematising, and quasi-professionalising of formal listening through spiritual conversation models may well be part of the problem here.

Let me illustrate something of my problem with formal listening and the method for spiritual conversation described earlier, through two experiences of my own. These practical experiences, and others like them, have often felt, to me, as a disappointing mismatch for the deeper theological account of conversation implied in Vatican II’s ecclesiology and missiology. One experience concerned a continental level event which employed the method of spiritual conversation in small groups described above: following prayer, each of us spoke in turn what was in our heart; a time of quiet followed, after which each could comment on what they had heard, and so on. Insights were then gathered from this careful and prayerful process. Careful, prayerful—and, in my experience, strangely and adversely *controlled*. So, when—on occasion—conversation became fuelled with flashes of excitement, when words from different contributors began to fuel each other to new ideas, challenging, developing, confusing, misinterpreting, realising, laughing . . . all this was quickly closed down with the reminder that our time together was not about discussion. It was not, in fact, about anything I much recognised as natural, human meaning-making through the clumsy and joyful adventure of open and trusting ordinary conversation. Given the inclusive intention of synodality, a question arose for me: Is this carefully curated spiritual conversation the kind of conversation I would want to invite my less church-y friends, family, and colleagues, into? This is an important question, as it seems to me that the authentic vision of synodality and its discerning processes depends on including just such people.

²¹ *Synthesis Report, XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, First Session*, Synod of Bishops 2023, no. 4, www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly/synthesis/english/2023.10.28-ENG-Synthesis-Report_IMP.pdf.

My sense that the carefully curated nature of the spiritual conversation in this first example might also—somewhat paradoxically—result in some subtle but significantly problematic power dynamics was further suggested by a second experience. This time I was taking on the role of facilitating a reflective conversation as an intentional response to the early stages of the synodal process. The participants in the conversation were all experienced and qualified counsellors, working in a Catholic charity. As such, attentive listening in a context of pastoral care and discernment was, at least potentially, something in which they were especially experienced. They did, of course, know, in both theory and practice, a great deal about listening and felt assured they thereby not only were well-equipped for the synodal process, but also had a good deal of wisdom to offer that process—and they were right. However, as our work together developed, I had to reflect on my own growing unease around how listening was being understood in our conversations. As counsellors the participants were experienced in a very particular therapeutic form of listening, characterised by a clear asymmetry of client and counsellor. The listening in which they were expert is not part of a conversation in any ordinary sense, but is, rather, the caring and expert exercise of a professional skill set, so as to enable the thinking-through of the speaker. Vulnerabilities are not equal; and whilst love, care, and attentiveness were quite rightly recognised as part of this work, shaping a true Christian vocation, this seemed to me a different kind of listening from that which—*ordinarily*—we would want to characterise our church relationships or, indeed, any of our close relationships. Listening—like loving—necessarily takes different forms in different contexts, of course; and I question whether the complexity of the variety of listening, speaking, conversation, and journeying has yet been even partially understood in our synodal processes. However, what the experience working with Catholic counsellors led me to think about more deeply was whether, in formalising our ecclesial practices of listening, we were more indebted to the professional models of listening, such as found in counselling, or spiritual direction—with all their asymmetries and complexities of power and projection—than to a theological and humanly embodied experience of ordinary, loving conversation in which listening is practised, largely imperfectly, in more contextual, intuitive, and so, potentially, symmetrical ways.

I have spent considerable time describing the emphasis on formal listening and spiritual conversation methods in the current practices of synodality and raising critical questions about them. I suggest that these are, on their own, inadequate for embodying the rich theological insights of both Pope Francis's vision for a synodal church, and the fundamental theology and epistemology of the second Vatican

Council upon which it is built. In particular, as these methods of formal listening and spiritual conversation gain currency, there remain un-examined questions as to whose articulation they enable, and whose they might disable, as specific cultures of speech and silence mix with subtle and pervasive asymmetries of power in the relation between those who are listened *to*, those who listen, and those who choreograph the listening and its articulated outcomes. There is another essay to be written specifically about these questions of power and the need to recognise them in synodal processes. In this article, I want to keep the focus on de-emphasising the formal listening of spiritual conversation, and centering, instead, ordinary conversation for our journeying together. With this purpose in mind, in the next two sections, I turn to explore how synodality might be alternatively informed and enriched by insights from the two areas of thought and practice named at the start: theological action research and organisational studies.

CONVERSATION AND/AS LEARNING: INSIGHTS FROM THEOLOGICAL ACTION RESEARCH WORK

In wishing to highlight the importance of *ordinary conversation*, I am informed by my own research practices, both in terms of methods and content. The last two decades have seen the development of a participative qualitative practical research methodology—theological action research—of which I am a co-originator.²² This methodology

²² For an early overview see Cameron, Bhatti, Duce, Sweeney, and Watkins, *Talking about God in Practice*. This work has been developed further in a range of papers, and most notably in Watkins, *Disclosing Church*. For additional perspectives on theological action research see Clare Watkins, “Practising Ecclesiology: From Product to Process: Developing Ecclesiology as a Non-Correlative Process and Practice through the Theological Action Research Framework of Theology in Four Voices,” *Ecclesial Practices* 2, no. 1 (2015): 23–39; Tone Stangeland Kaufman and Jonas Idestrom, “Why Matter Matters in Theological Action Research: Attending to the Voices of Tradition,” *International Journal of Practical Theology* 22, no. 1 (2018): 84–102; James Butler, “Prayer as a Research Practice? What Corporate Practices of Prayer Disclose about Theological Action Research,” *Ecclesial Practices* 7, no. 2 (2020): 241–257; James Butler, “‘Denomination Doesn’t Matter’? A Proposal for a Receptive Ecumenical Missiology from a Theological Action Research Project on Methodists and Catholics Engaging Together in Social Action,” *Ecclesial Practices* 10, no. 2 (2023): 165–181; Helen Cameron and Andrew Rogers, “Theological Action Research in Conversation with Contextual Biblical Interpretation,” in *Challenging Contextuality: Bibles and Biblical Scholarship in Context*, ed. Louise J. Lawrence, Peter-Ben Smit, Hannah M. Strømmen, and Charlene van der Walt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), 129–146, doi.org/10.1093/9780191982415.003.0008; and Daniel P. Rhodes, “Theology as Social Activity: Theological Action Research and Teaching the Knowledge of

draws on participative action research,²³ both in terms of methods and epistemology, but reshapes this in terms of a “whole theology” approach,²⁴ which names, surfaces, and integrates the proper variety of specifically theological sources and authorities (loci of revelation), as understood in, for example, Catholic fundamental theology, and—differently—the Wesleyan Quadrilateral.²⁵ For theological action research, the practices of quotidian faith life and language are recognised as properly and fundamentally theological—as “bearers of theology” in their own right. As such, they are held in ongoing, mutually critical conversation with the more established and already discerned theological voices of normative Christian teaching and formal, academic theological accounts.²⁶ The methods for such a whole theology include a variety of qualitative research methods which enable thick description of and practitioner testimonies to practices to be expressed in forms which enable wider reflection. This data is, significantly, *discerned* (as distinct from “analysed”) not only through attentive reading and thematic surfacing but, most crucially, through reflective but free-flowing—so in that sense “ordinary”—conversation between academics and practitioners.²⁷

Whilst this is not the place to explore this methodology and its concomitant epistemology in any further detail, for the purposes of this paper I would draw attention to two significant points regarding listening, conversation, and discernment which arise in its practice. The first of these concerns the ways in which theological action research both roots its theological claims in a vision of whole theology, itself built on a “conversation” between different “voices” or authorities within theology, and resolutely refuses to allow such conversation to be simply abstracted. Thus, the authoritative sources for theological action research are understood as “four voices of theology”—the operant (embodied in practices), espoused (articulated by practitioners), normative (received and established traditions), and formal (academic)—drawn into an interpenetrating and mutually (in)forming conversation. The image of “conversation” is, of course, not strange to interdisciplinary theology and especially current within practical theology. In the same way, the influential British practical theologian Stephen Pattison famously described the discipline of

Christian Ethics and Practical Ministry,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 73, no. 4 (2020): 340–357.

²³ For a helpful introduction see Alice McIntyre, *Participatory Action Research: Qualitative Research Methods* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2008).

²⁴ Watkins, *Disclosing Church*, 239–249.

²⁵ Watkins, *Disclosing Church*, 39–53.

²⁶ This is referred to as the “Four Voices of Theology.” See Watkins, *Disclosing Church*, chapter 4.

²⁷ An account of this process can be found in Watkins, *Disclosing Church*, 17–23.

practical theology in terms of a conversation between theology, practice, and experience.²⁸ Superficially, this seems to accord with theological action research's commitment to understanding and listening to theology in the "four voices" just outlined.

However, as Pattison himself observes in a later article,²⁹ in framing theological conversation in this way we run the risk of formalising and abstracting what are, in every case, practically, contextually, and personally embedded accounts of theological realities. These "voices of theology" named in theological action research form merely a shorthand for the deeply human and embodied accounts of how God is at work in the world, and how we try to make sense of our encounters with God's presence in Spirit and Word. Fundamentally, the conversations which form the dynamics of divine revelation, and must thus shape our best attempts at any whole theology, are not conversations between abstract ideas or codified traditions, but rather between real, imperfect, and not entirely articulate human beings.³⁰

This brings us to a second learning point from theological action research concerning conversation: the way in which the embodied theologies of practice (the operant and espoused voices) are gathered and discerned through multilayered conversational practices. In order to give form and expression to the operant theology (embodied in practices and daily life), theological action research employs a range of qualitative data gathering. Commonly this will involve open or semi-structured interviews and focus groups, but will also draw on more image-led, or creative expressions, as well as the attention to practice of participant observation and other ethnographic methods. The core practice which informs all these methods, although in different ways, is that of conversation: between participants in focus groups and participatory events and, in a particular way, in the form of interview we employ which emphasises the interviewer following the energy of the (asymmetrical) conversation, rather than imposing a predetermined structure of questions, and so aiming to keep it as close to ordinary conversation as possible.

Whilst such an approach to qualitative data gathering is not unique, its conversational emphasis is taken further in the way in which all resulting data—whether in the form of transcripts or non-verbal

²⁸ James Woodward and Stephen Pattison, *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).

²⁹ Stephen Pattison, "Conversations in Practical Theology," *Practical Theology* 13, nos. 1–2 (2020): 87–94.

³⁰ This is emphasised in Watkins, *Disclosing Church*, 29 as something of critical reflection on the variety of ways in which the four voices of theology have been employed since they were introduced in the 2010 volume, *Talking about God in Practice*.

expression—is read and discerned by reflector groups, both from the more academic research perspective, and that of the practitioner participants themselves. Here it is the conversation among the reflectors, framed by prayer and personal reading of the data and enabled by the building up of a trusting relationship through the research process, that are crucial. Data is not thematised by the attentive coding work of any individual, but rather read, prayed over, and reflected on in conversations between diverse individuals. The thematic emphases of any one person are thus affirmed, re-shaped, and challenged by the reading and perceptions of others in the reflector team, and slowly a shared reading emerges of what we are seeing *together* in the practices and accounts explored. In our writing up of these conversations, it is important that the differences in view, the disagreements and tensions, are clearly expressed, resisting the research temptation to smooth over such matters, so as to arrive to clear results or recommendations.

In all these processes, attentiveness to what is heard and observed, and deep and prayerful listening, are fundamental. In training theological action research reflectors and participants, this listening is emphasised, both as a practice of care for the other person and, most crucially, a call to attentiveness to the Holy Spirit. Listening is crucial. However, this pneumatological imperative necessarily complexifies listening, and our methods contextualise it in messy, erring, humanly ordinary conversation. For, as we know, the Holy Spirit is not simply to be perceived through majority views and themes; nor, in general, does the Spirit speak through the most practised, articulate, or eager to share. We may even ask whether we can assume that the Spirit always works through the most “prayerful” or “virtuous”—even if we were able to identify such people. Here, in our characterful and open conversations, listening is practised, but in more mundane and obviously fallible ways than those suggested in the methods of spiritual conversation.

However, the methodology of theological action research is pertinent to this article’s argument. Over the past six years, I have overseen an extensive theological action research project exploring faith learning, focussing (as guided by the funders) on Methodist sites of learning in the UK.³¹ This work is currently being extended into a

³¹ This research was funded by the Susanna Wesley Foundation, and carried out by Clare Watkins (Principal Investigator) and James Butler (Post-Doctoral Researcher). For an overview of this project see www.susannawesleyfoundation.org/faith-learning-and-churches/. Some of the learning from the project has been made available for a practitioner and ministry audience through the online journal of Church Mission Society, *Anvil*: www.churchmissionsociety.org/anvil-journal-theology-and-mission/learning-faith-anvil-vol-39-issue-2/.

new project, more ecumenical in scope, working with Christian groups “on the margins” of both church and/or society, so as to deepen understanding of how faith is handed on, learned, and grown in such “edgy” places.³² In both projects, we have been repeatedly struck by the central place conversation holds in the faith life and learning of so-called “ordinary” Christians, and those coming to faith in the more fragmented realities of social and ecclesial margins. If there is one, simple conclusion I would draw from this work, it is that *conversation-in-ordinary* is the single most important way in which people learn, grow in, and come to faith. Such an apparently simple finding does, however, carry with it some complicating factors, both for conversation as an ecclesial practice and so, necessarily, for understanding listening practices as a Christian calling.

One such factor becomes clear when we think further about what ordinary conversation describes. In our research, the term grew in meaning, as we recognised the places of growing in faith in terms of apparently mundane “chats” between people: the brief but regular conversations between dog walkers; the way things might “pop up” unexpectedly over a cup of tea in a neighbour’s kitchen; the occasional word, daily, at the school gate; the comments, banter, and exchanges at the pub. All these appeared throughout our research not only as the necessary precursors to any “deep conversation” when such might be needed, but also as loci where faith itself was nurtured, and stimulated to develop fresh expression. Such conversations-in-ordinary are, by their very nature, unmanaged and unmanageable. It was consistently clear that the group conversations organised in intentional adult faith learning, for example, were—whilst valuable—not only the preserve of a minority but generally less impactful than the day-to-day conversations “in the wild” participants experienced. These unplanned chats are fragmentary, interrupted, and interrupting by nature: they are also significantly free from the shaping, and often unacknowledged, power of those clergy and educational professionals who sought to emphasise courses and preaching as primary places for Christian learning. It was in such unmanaged and unmanageable fragmented places that, again and again, our participants recorded some of their most significant faith learning. As reflectors on the research data, it was here that we felt drawn to understand better how the Holy Spirit leads the vast majority of people more deeply into life in Christ.³³

³² This research is jointly funded by St. Peter’s Saltley Trust and the Susanna Wesley Foundation, and carried out by Clare Watkins (Principal Investigator), James Butler (Post-Doctoral Researcher), and Ian Jones (Director, Saltley Trust).

³³ Some initial insights drawn from this research can be found in “Learning Faith: Reflections from Researching Everyday Faith,” *Anvil: Journal of Theology and Mission* 39, no. 2 (2023), www.churchmissionsociety.org/anvil-journal-theology-

What might this mean for properly complexifying our listening practices? First, it suggests that we need to be listening to what is at work in the ordinary places of the lay living of faith. The identity of the “we” here then becomes important: this is not so much about “expert listeners” gathering up the words and experiences of “ordinary” lay people. It is rather more about we as a whole church developing, recognising, and celebrating, wherever they occur, the quotidian practices of ordinary conversation, and its attendant, ordinary listening and response. These gifts are at work *already* among God’s people; this is not about adding training courses, toolkits, and skill sets. Rather, this is about nurturing what is already at play, as women, men, and children develop their existing gifts of listening and speaking in daily, muddled-up, but graced, conversation.

The emphasis in all I have tried to draw out in talking of theological action research work here has been, quite intentionally, on ordinary conversation among people in quotidian, interrupted contexts of living and loving. It can be seen how very different this is from the disciplined methods of spiritual conversation. This leads me to suggest that—whilst helpful, and perhaps essential, as *part* of church and indeed wider faith practice—these latter intentional practices of formal listening and carefully curated speaking do not, and cannot, reflect the realities of that conversing of the whole People of God where faith, hope, and love are coming alive, albeit in fragmentary, obscured, and seemingly time-inefficient ways. There are, in fact, both practical theological and powerful pneumatological reasons for privileging this chaotic ordinary over the more controlled and disciplined, to which this article can only allude briefly, but in light of my introductory remarks calling for fuller appreciation of a variety and complexity of practice around synodality and its calling to listening *and* speech, to conversation, formal, informal, and non-verbal, it can perhaps already be seen how these research learnings suggest to me a different account of the place of listening in our faith, and more specifically, discernment practices.

CONVERSATION AND HUMAN SOCIALITY: LEARNING FROM SOCIAL SCIENCE ACCOUNTS

A second area of learning and enrichment for synodal processes comes, for me, from the social sciences and, in particular, social science accounts of human organisation, in which the importance of conversation as generator of knowledge (of various kinds), practice,

and-mission/learning-faith-anvil-vol-39-issue-2/. The research and its insights are to be published in Clare Watkins and James Butler, *Christian Faith and Christian Learning: A Theological Action Research Account* (London: Routledge, 2025).

and change is increasingly acknowledged. To some of these I now turn.

I am thinking here of the ways in which complexity theory and related theories of emergence have begun to transform not only theories of human organisation, but practices related to human sociality and organisational change.³⁴ These theories aim to move us away from our embedded thinking around order/stability versus disorder/instability, and focus instead on the ways in which human social reality is constantly emergent, caught up in a dynamic of being and coming to be. As people formed by the dominant epistemologies of modernity, we are used to thinking of process leading to product, activity leading to conclusion or achievement, conversation leading to decision. Indeed, I would suggest that such dominant ways of thinking have tended to shape a more methods-driven account of formal listening practices in our responding to the call to synodality. Within a complexity approach to organisations, and especially to organisational change, it is the less-managed, informal conversation which provides the fundamental locus for insight and authentic culture change. It is in the apparent aimlessness of human activity, relationship, and daily living that authentic forms of human sociality and knowing *emerge*. The undirected, unmanaged processes of human interaction, including conversation, are *self-organising*, and generative of forms of life and more or less explicit epistemologies. Organisations must attend to this embedded human dynamic if authentic change and sustainable organisational life is to be enabled.

An example might helpfully illustrate what I am describing here. Patricia Shaw's admirably readable and practical study of complexity and emergence, offers a number of real-life accounts of how such theories play out in practice.³⁵ In one such account she relates a conversation with a senior leader—"John"—looking for her help with "changing the culture" of his organisation. John is in business mode and looking for a meeting where they can plan a strategy and series of facilitated events that can effect this desired change. Both he and Shaw are only too familiar with these kinds of organisational processes; it is just a matter of tailoring these tried and trusted methods to the current situation. However, Shaw is becoming less sure that these ways of going about things should be so trusted. She writes tellingly of the crucial turn in her conversation with John:

³⁴ I am especially indebted in what follows to the work of Patricia Shaw, *Changing Conversations in Organizations: A Complexity Approach to Change* (London: Routledge, 2002).

³⁵ See note 22 above.

I say I would be happy to come and talk with him and suggest we include others in the meeting so that we can discuss what people are making of what has happened. At first John hesitates, wouldn't it be better for us to meet first before involving anyone else, so that he can brief me and we can sketch our approach? I ask what makes him hesitate about going straight into a more inclusive conversation that would engage more viewpoints, interests, and ideas about what is going on and what needs to change? There is a pause, and I say that I am increasingly doubtful about "culture change" programmes in situations like this. Yes, says John, we've already had countless change programmes. . . . I can sense a difference in his voice, he sounds less business-like, less rehearsed.³⁶

There are a number of things going on in this account, not least of all issues of power and keeping control that lie just beneath the surface, as John hesitates to let go of the tried and tested (but ineffective), and trust something he will be less able to manage. For our purposes, what is significant is the way in which Shaw's refusal to fold the conversation along the usual crease-lines here, and her questioning of the very premise of what is being asked, relaxes the conversation, albeit through a few moments of discomfort. As the rehearsed expectations and performances give way, a more honest, person-to-person communication is opened up. It is from there that they are able to work with (as it turned out) a rather ad hoc, self-selecting group whose un-choreographed, agenda-free, and largely unmanaged conversation opens up new ways of working and being together. The conversation embodies the self-organising principle of complexity theory, allowing a new culture to emerge from existing realities.

For Shaw, attention to conversation in human sociality becomes crucial. This is not about organising, facilitating, or managing carefully curated conversation, but rather about opening spaces for conversations to find their own participants, dynamics, and topics. Such conversation is expressly not a management issue, although at key points managers and organisational leaders do well to respond to the fruits of such conversation. Rather, it is understood as "an everyday art form by which we make ourselves together."³⁷ Such ordinary talking and listening constitutes social organising, as it tutors people in how we are to live together in the in-between-ness and paradox of ordinary, unplanned conversation so as to let shared meaning and action emerge.

All this discussion is drawn, of course, from social sciences, and so stops short of giving any account of how such processes might inform us of God's action and speaking in our conversing, and how it

³⁶ Shaw, *Changing Conversations*, 23–24.

³⁷ Shaw, *Changing Conversations*, 27.

is to be discerned. Nonetheless, there are well-established theological reasons to suggest that these same patterns and dynamics might characterise the manner in which God makes Godself known in our life in the Spirit together. What Shaw, and the complexity and emergence theories upon which she draws, enable us to articulate more clearly is the deeply human, proper place of paradox and the unresolved in our knowing and acting. As she describes it herself: “I am interested in a logic that is always dissolving categories and staying in the tension of the paradoxes inevitably created by thinking within the movement of sense-making itself.”³⁸

We can read these complexity and emergence theories as one genuine account of how human beings learn and share learning, and how we then grow socially into a body from such conversational learning. In a longer essay, I would want to set out the ways in which different kinds of human and human-divine conversation have held a significant place in the Christian tradition and can be interestingly identified and reflected on in the scriptures. Here I will more simply introduce the idea for which I would argue: these contemporary accounts of human sociality and practical wisdom emerging from unmanaged conversation have significant resonances with the ways in which the longer Christian tradition has understood theology and, indeed, the self-revelation of God in human lives. Theology—the faith practice of seeking deeper understanding of God—is itself a wondering, communal conversing over hundreds of generations, and the theologian is the one who, in a variety of ways, takes part in this unresolved sense-making. Conversation can be presented, then, as the primary way of human learning, social life, and meaning making, and so as one proper and essential locus for encounter with the Spirit and God’s guiding Word. Centering conversation in this way, especially in its more informal, unmanaged, uncurated forms, suggests a context for an ordinary but essential listening practice—in which listening is intractably and precariously caught up in, and interwoven between, the humour, misunderstanding, interruptions, fragmentations, and emerging wisdom of people’s affectively-led talk with one another, their ordinary conversation.

FROM THE FORMAL LISTENING OF SPIRITUAL CONVERSATIONS TO THE SPIRITUALITY OF ORDINARY CONVERSATIONS

In this article, I have made a preliminary case for arguing that there has been an over-valorisation of listening in present Catholic practices of synodality, which has taken an especially unhelpful form through

³⁸ Shaw, *Changing Conversations*, 30.

the dominance of methods for formal listening processes. Spiritual conversation is one such method which I have suggested is inadequate, on its own, for the inclusivity and complexity of that journeying together in all the diversity and unevenness of life synodality calls for. In particular, I have argued that such formalised listening practices run the risk of a paradoxical tendency to limit precisely those ordinary conversations contemporary practical theological research and the human sciences would recognise as essential and normal means by which God's grace is encountered and ways of loving and living discerned. Ordinary, interruptive human conversing, with all its misunderstandings, humour, missteps, and passions—held in trusting and purposeful relationships—is *the* way in which we all learn and grow in faith. Our homes, friendships, work and church lives, and most intimate relationships embody this truth for each of us; and it is perhaps to these slightly messy and difficult-to-control places that we need to look and from which we need to learn, if we are truly to become an attentive, communicative, conversing church in and for the world. What I have presented is as much a provocation to further ordinary conversation on these themes, as an argument in itself. As this provocation comes to its end, and opens a beginning, I hope, to further sharing of perspectives and questioning, I want to suggest that we might helpfully turn, as a synodal church, to what might be learned of conversation and discernment from Christian tradition.

Notably, we might do well to consider the ways in which the centering of ordinary conversation, with its “messy” contextualisation of listening, is a feature of both Scripture and the longer, especially premodern, theological tradition. Within patristic and early medieval writing, there is an interweaving of the proper intellectual task of theology, and that particular kind of *conversatio* which is prayer, conversing with God.³⁹ Here many of us would readily bring to mind the writings of Anselm and the *Confessions* of Augustine. The apophatic theological traditions of Eastern Christianity, typified by Denys the Areopagite, also commingle the ecstatic language of prayer and conversing with God, and the work of theology. Indeed, despite the modern reader's tendency to read Thomas Aquinas in a rather analytical mode, it is clear here, too, that the critical to-and-fro of pedagogical *conversation* lies at the heart of his *Summa Theologiae*.⁴⁰

³⁹ See Ashley Cocksworth, *Prayer: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 35–40.

⁴⁰ This is well and extensively discussed by Jennifer Jackson in *Conversation, Friendship, and Transformation: Contemporary and Medieval Voices in a Theology of Discourse* (Abingdon: Taylor & Francis, 2016). I have also been impacted in this account by Victor White's *Holy Teaching: The Idea of Theology According to St. Thomas Aquinas* (London: Blackfriars, 1958).

St. Thomas's own account of learning, whilst emphasising divine agency as the only teacher, places the so-called teacher and the learner in a conversation of shared discernment of the truth of God.⁴¹ Here the *conversatio* of prayer, fundamental to the patristic and medieval accounts of theologising, is understood, further, to be interwoven into that natural and everyday mystery of human conversation, through which we all fundamentally learn and make (or perhaps better, discern) meaning.

Referencing these aspects of our premodern tradition, cannot lead to a simple mapping of what is described there onto our contemporary practices and thinking. The lines of continuity and fruitful recognition of the perdurance of these themes into our own context are there to be drawn, but they must be the subject of a much longer study. For now, I mention these themes simply to underline two things: first, the proper place human conversation has held in the tradition as a key way of faith seeking understanding, theological meaning-making; and, second, the ways in which conversation *with* God, and *inclusive of* God's presence and agency, is recognised as an essential part of such conversation and locus of revelation. The key to unravelling this dynamic further, to aid our own understanding and practice of such conversation today, lies, I believe, in our deepening awareness of the place conversation—of a muddled, misunderstanding, thoroughly human kind—holds within Scripture, and especially in the Gospels. Indeed, we are reminded of just this in the way in which the *Preparatory Document* for the Synods 2021–2023 reflects on two significant biblical narratives: that of the “Council of Jerusalem” (Acts 15), and of the more diffuse Gospel image of “the crowd” that surrounds Jesus.⁴² Especially in the latter (although reading Acts 15 in light of Galatians suggests something similar concerning that story) we see something of the importance of the informal, affectively-driven, impromptu, and often humanly unsatisfactory conversations that form a major part of the fabric of the story of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection. The *Preparatory Document* reminds us of Jesus's uncompromising openness to those in the crowd, as “the widest possible audience” and his acceptance “as interlocutors [of] all who emerge from the crowd.”⁴³ It is especially those cast out from their communities and seemingly separated from God to whom he attends;

⁴¹ See Aquinas, *De Veritate*, q. 11. On the contemporary significance of this see Clare Watkins, “The Faith-Full Intellect: Catholic Traditions and Instincts about the Human Person and Their Significance for Teaching and Learning,” in *Christian Faith, Formation, and Education*, ed. Ros Stuart-Buttle and John Shortt (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 61–78; Vivian Boland, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, Bloomsbury Library of Educational Thought (London: Bloomsbury, 2007).

⁴² *Preparatory Document*, nos. 16–24.

⁴³ *Preparatory Document*, no. 18.

and, thus attending, Jesus specifically calls them into conversation with him, allowing profoundly transformative conversing which is, nonetheless, frequently characterised by misunderstanding and tension. Here the mystery of human-divine conversation as the heart of divine revelation and the person's coming to deeper relationship in God is spelt out in day-to-day narratives, transformed by the presence of the incarnate Word, Jesus.

The truth of this necessary centrality for ordinary conversation in Christian life and learning can be especially felt when we recall that, in the current call to synodality, what is involved is nothing less than a change *in all we do*. The *Vademecum* puts it like this:

This kind of discernment is not only a one-time exercise, but ultimately a way of life, grounded in Christ, following the lead of the Holy Spirit, living for the greater glory of God. Communal discernment helps to build flourishing and resilient communities for the mission of the Church today. Discernment is a grace from God, but it requires our human involvement in simple ways: *praying, reflecting, paying attention to one's inner disposition, listening and talking to one another in an authentic, meaningful, and welcoming way.*⁴⁴

The question as to how our listening practices, and spiritual conversations can really become “a way of life” is so pressing—a question which, I argue, can only be inadequately responded to by formal models of such conversing. Perhaps, in devising our (in many ways excellent) “models” we have failed to see and recognise what has been there—“in the wild”—all along.

In an ecumenical synodal event in which I was privileged to take part, I remember especially one contribution in our group's (formal and disciplined) listening exercise. This is (more or less) what was said in that place of attentiveness: “We should never use the word ‘synodality’ without also referring to the word ‘economics.’” What was being raised was an essential and critical question about whether the synodal practices we are beginning to formalise could really take account of the realities of the lives of the majority for whom the sheer economic pressures of getting on with life were all but overwhelming. For any of our supposed models of listening, the great challenge and, indeed, ultimate test of their spiritual authenticity, must surely be how far they are embodied in the daily lives of *all* the baptised. This cannot, I think, simply be a matter of getting more than the usual ten percent or so of people to sign up to the quasi-professionally designed “models” for listening and conversational practices. Rather, more

⁴⁴ *Vademecum* no. 2.2 [emphases, added].

radically, it requires a recognition of the *already existing*, although often unnamed and unrecognised, realities of faith conversation going on in fragmentary and quotidian ways in the daily lives of millions of “ordinary” people. Here, as my own participative research constantly reminds me (often inconveniently), the Holy Spirit is working and enabling that mysterious and perennial *conversatio* which is the living power of God’s Word among us. If this *conversatio* is to become, through our synodal efforts, a more celebrated and effective authority in the church—as I hope and pray it will—then we will need to attend more to the ordinary conversations than to any of our more particular disciplined and curated models of listening and speech in which it is only ever going to be the minority who are heard. **M**

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