

Action Research for Doctor of Ministry Project: A Practical Definition¹

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Abstract:

In this article we outline an extended and practical definition of Action Research as a means of developing a paradigm that can help Doctor of Ministry candidates research in contexts where they are change agents. This paper gives a brief history of Action Research, discusses using this methodology in a DMin project, cross-references values and activities with ATS DMin Standards, and reflects on the compatibility of Action Research with theological ideals.

To think and act practically in fresh and innovative ways may be the most complex thing that humans ever attempt,

–Don S. Browning (Browning 1991, 7)

The Standards of the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) for Doctor of Ministry (DMin) programs requires programs to provide for “the development and acquisition of skills and competencies, including methods of research...that are required for ministerial leadership at its most mature and effective level” (Association of Theological Schools 2012, E.2.1.3). The standards also prescribe a terminal research project related to the nature and practice of ministry (Association of Theological Schools 2012, E1.4, E2). While the standards do not specify any particular or preferred research methodology, the values and outcomes espoused in the standards are better fulfilled by some approaches than others. A number of questions arise when evaluating the most appropriate kinds of research for a DMin project²: What do leaders already do that looks like research? What

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² By *project* we mean that which the candidate does by design to facilitate constructive development in themselves and their ministry, the research and assessment that entails, and the written report or thesis that issues from it. The DMin Standards of the Association of Theological Schools state that, “The program shall include the design and completion of a written doctoral

are other professional fields using to improve practice? What approach would be consonant with the dual roles of ministry leader and researcher? and What set of skills and perspectives that would be useful to leaders and pastors for the rest of their ministry? As we reviewed a variety of research methods that could be used in conjunction with ministry projects, Action Research seemed to satisfy and even best address these concerns. Tim Sensing in *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* concurs that participatory action research is the most appropriate approach for Doctor of Ministry projects (Sensing 2011, 55 fn16).

Action Research seems obvious and simple at first glance, but as one enters more deeply into the approach both conceptually and practically, it turns out to be profound and challenging. In this paper we explore the nature of Action Research; in a subsequent article, we discuss further some of the ethical, theological, and practical issues that arise in the use of Action Research in the context of a Doctor of Ministry project.

Streams of Action Research

Action Research is not unique to ministry or doctoral research. It is increasingly used in business, industry, athletics, and the arts, in professions such as education, health care, and social services, and in academia where it has given rise to a number of scholarly journals: the Center for Collaborative Action Research lists over 40 journals on or open to publishing action research (Center for Collaborative Action Research 2016). The term itself is often nuanced and referred to variously as participatory action research (PAR), contextual action research, collaborative action research, praxis, emancipatory research, collaborative inquiry, experiential learning, community-based research, reflective practice, continuous improvement, etc. Throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, Action Research (as a method, though not always as a term) has been employed in different movements including social action as pioneered by Kurt Lewin in the 1940's (Lewin 1946), continuous improvement cycle championed by W. Edwards Deming (Deming 1986) in Japan in the 1950s, liberationist movements with Paulo Freire (Freire 2005) as a leading advocate in Latin America in the '60's, experiential learning inspired by John Dewey and articulated by David Kolb (Kolb 1984) in the 70's, living educational theory or practitioner research by the British-based Jean McNiff (McNiff 2010) and her collaborator Jack Whitehead, appreciative inquiry developed by David Cooperrider and colleagues at Case Western Reserve University (Cooperrider and Whitney 2005) in the 1980s, and adaptive leadership articulated by Ronald Heifetz (Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky 2009) in the past two decades.

level project...[that will] demonstrate the candidate's ability to identify a specific theological topic in ministry, organize an effective research model, use appropriate resources, and evaluate the results. It should also reflect the candidate's depth of theological insight in relation to ministry...[and] that contributes new knowledge and understanding of the practice of ministry...[with] upon completion...an oral presentation and evaluation" (Association of Theological Schools 2012, 2012, E.2.4, E2.4.1-2). In some cases, we may refer to the project in the traditional business or science sense of the research and action involved, with the report or thesis distinguished from it.

Action Research takes a different tack from orthodox positivism, which still informs much of academic research. Many gains in knowledge have been made through the “objective” method of study, and occasions of detachment continue to be an important discipline in all research. However, traditional academic research usually stops short of constructive involvement in the group being studied and does not necessarily extend to enhancing the professional practices of the agent – two of the primary goals of the DMin – while “Action Research is more appropriate than traditional research for developing professional competencies and organizational learning” (Zuber-Skerritt and Perry 2002, 171).

Action Research fits well with recent perspectives in practical theology. In the latter part of the 20th century, most practical theologians moved from a deductive approach, in which there was an attempt to apply directly to real life the axioms and findings from other branches of theology, to an inductive, praxic, contextual theology with personal experience and cultural realities being full dialog partners (Fleischer 2000, 23-25). The rich history of writers in this vein includes Bernard Lonergan (Lonergan 1968), James and Evelyn Whitehead (Whitehead and Whitehead 1995), Thomas Groome (Groome 1991), and Richard Osmer (Osmer 2008). A major contributor to Action Research theory and practice, David Coghlan (Coghlan and Brannick 2010), has written on Action Research from an Ignatian point of view (Coghlan 2004). Their approach is “at once personal, communal, and historical” (Lonergan 1968, 12) stressing community involvement in interpretation of the context, clarification of the informing values, and development of responses for transformation. Action Research adds to this conversation in its insistence that we go beyond *thinking* practically and *planning* for action to actually acting as an essential element in the cycle, generating data for better understanding as well as constructive change.

Moreover, Action Research is the way reflective ministers and Christian leaders do part of their work. Leaders initiate or facilitate a common-sense way of moving into the future: problems and issues are identified and explored, preferred conditions and practices are articulated, initial steps to altering the situation are imagined and implemented, the effects on self, others, and the organization are assessed (and sometimes made public), and the cycle is repeated. As a database search of the Theological Research Exchange Network reveals, numerous DMin theses have now been published that demonstrate the value of Action Research in ministry (Theological Research Exchange Network, 2016).

A Definition

We define Action Research as *an iterative project cycle with action, research, and reflection guided by a leader with the participation of others in the situation and consonant with the ideals of the group to effect positive individual and social change and to develop transferable and theoretical knowledge.*

There are two principle dynamics, the cycle and the spiral which occurs when there are further iterations with added learnings; there are two principle activities, action and research, with a number of attendant activities including discerning, planning and reflection; there are two principle parties, the leader-researcher and the participants; and

there are two principle purposes, constructive change in the person or organization and generating new knowledge.

Iterative Project Cycle

Action Research involves a cycle with phases typical to projects: comprehending the situation, focusing on something that needs attention, imagining a constructive response, implementing the plan, and assessing the outcomes. Action Research theorists Kemmis and McTaggart describe it as “plan, act and observe, and reflect” (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988, 5). Coghlan and Brannick’s model includes a pre-step of context and purpose, and four basic steps: constructing, planning action, taking action, and evaluating action (Coghlan and Brannick 2010, 10).

However, Action Research usually involves and even requires multiple cycles. Lewin’s original conception for Action Research was “a spiral of steps, each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action, and fact-finding about the result of the action” (Lewin 1946, 34-35). Edward Deming’s “Wheel of Continuous Improvement” (L2Manage 2008) emphasizes this aspect of Action Research. So Action Research presupposes multiple iterations, each one arising from reflection on and assessment of the previous cycles, narrowing or extending the scope and refining or transferring the innovation. So Action Research is more than a planning model; it is a process, an approach to understanding and improvement that requires real-life engagement (action) with observation and feedback loops at each stage of the process (research).

Action

Action – initiating, guiding, implementing, performing, executing – is intrinsic to leadership and to ministry; it is part of the job. The standards of ATS requires that the DMin program provide for “the formulation of a comprehensive and critical understanding of ministry in which theory and practice interactively inform and enhance each other” (Association of Theological Schools 2012, F.2.1.2). Consequential action embedded in and issuing in research is the critical feature that distinguishes Action Research (and raises many of the philosophical and practical issues associated with it). As Edgar Schein notes, “In actual practice what most change agents have learned from their own experience is that “diagnostic” activities such as observations, interviews, and questionnaires are already powerful interventions and that the processes of learning about a system and changing that system are, in fact, one and the same” (Schein 1996, 65).

The action in Action Research refers to the intentional altering of conditions, effecting real change in the real world. It is a deliberate interposition through starting, stopping, modifying, or continuing (especially in the face of opposition) something in the life of an individual, group, or organization. It involves shaped experience, experimental action. It is not just research for or about action but also research during action and research by way of action. Action is not merely a recommendation from findings or an application of a principle but an intrinsic part of the discovery process. This action is experimental in the sense of “testing-out;” one cannot know for certain how things develop, whether or not it is something one would want to continue, or what the next steps should be. As such,

it requires a posture of openness and flexibility on the part of all, in particular the leader or initiator or researcher.

Research

“If you want truly to understand something, try to change it,” Lewin reportedly said (Cherry 2006). An intrinsic element of Action Research is research, “learning about.” The action in Action Research becomes the occasion for research at a number of levels. Research for the sake of the project occurs at many points along the way including research on the context, the process, the people, the innovation, the issues, and the outcomes. This involves probes such as surveys, focus groups, histories, personal narratives, participant-observation, literature searches and parallel cases. Research as knowledge derived from the project also occurs at many points. Observation and evaluation of the context and action yield data on process, product, effect, people, and system which in turn guides future action. And this data also yields findings relevant to the confirming or building of models and theories, a step in the direction of more generalized knowledge.

Responsible leaders and ministers engage in research prefatory to intentional change, and then generate learning from those projects for the benefit of others. This is congruent with the ATS assumption that DMin project will be “of sufficient quality that it contributes to the practice of ministry as judged by professional standards and has the potential for application in other contexts of ministry” and will make “a contribution to the understanding and practice of ministry” (Association of Theological Schools 2012, F.2.4, F.2.1.4).

Reflection

Reflection is intrinsic to Action Research. It is a pause or deliberation in the flow of engagement to ask questions of the whole project and to gain insight into what is being observed. Dorothy Craig defines reflection “as a mental process during which events, experiences, problems, or situations are revisited and examined in order to promote further understanding that leads to solutions, ideas, improvement and change” (Craig 2009, 145).

In *Doing Action Research in Your Own Organization*, Coghlan and Teresa Brannick call it “the critical link between the concrete experience, the judgment and taking new action...the activity which integrates action and research” (Coghlan and Brannick 2010, 25). Experiential learning theorist David Kolb locates “observation and reflection” between experience and the formation of abstract concepts or theory (Kolb 1984, 21). Craig explains that reflective practice includes critical analysis, problem solving, self-analysis and professional growth and application (Craig 2009, 147).

Critical theological practitioner reflection is rightly emphasized because it is an essential ingredient of effective leadership and ministry (Schön 1983). Christian thinkers like Eugene Peterson (Peterson 1993.), James and Evelyn Whitehead (Whitehead and Whitehead 1995), Sally and Paul Nash (Nash and Nash 2009), Pádraigricia Killen and John De Beer (Killen and de Beer 1995), Henri Nouwen (Nouwen 1971), and Johannes van der Ven (van der Ven 1998) have argued that critical theological reflection is a key

ministry task. However, constant action is often the reality of the contemporary ministry life. An objective of the DMin program is to provide “opportunity for disciplined reflection on one’s experience and needs for educational growth” (Association of Theological Schools 2012, F.3.1.1). Recent presentations to the Association of Doctor of Ministry Education annual conference indicate the ongoing interest in this (e.g., Bell 2011, Jones 2009). This all points to the value of an approach to research that requires critical reflection. It serves both as a vital research skill and as a much needed life practice. To further this, some programs require students to meet with one or more of a counselor, coach, or spiritual director as well as a project/thesis advisor during the course of their DMin program.

Context

Action Research takes place in the social and cultural arena, not in general, but in particular arenas. It is “in situ,” in the situation. Action Research involves exegesis of the context (called an ethnography in other contexts). ATS mandates programs to “make effective educational use of the candidate’s ministerial context” (Association of Theological Schools 2012, F.3.1.2). Carl Savage notes,

Critical pastoral/theological reflection begins with reflection on contemporary *situations* confronted in the storied realities of discipleship and ministry. Such reflection invites the pastoral theologian, the DMin student, to raise questions about what God is doing in the situation, and how the faithful might join God’s transformative action. And, because the situation is always nestled within a *specific contemporary context*, the wisdom as well as the folly of that contemporary society and its dominant discourse must be folded into our reflection. God’s intention can, with the Spirit’s leading, be discovered through reflection on the convergence of forces in contemporary society as well as on, say, the experience of the apostles. (Savage 2009, 16)

Typically, Action Research takes place within the organization or group to which the Action Researcher belongs. Nancy Gibson notes that,

This approach increases the validity of research by recognizing contextual factors within the research environment that are often overlooked with more structured approaches. Action Researchers are sensitive to culture, gender, economic status, ability, and other factors that may influence research partners, results, and research communities... The rigor of the research is also enhanced when the methodology and project goals are measured by their relevance to the research context. (Gibson 2003, 4-5)

It is not appropriate to take abstract ideals or a successful model from elsewhere and press them upon a group without taking into account the existing reality. People and groups perceived to be in inferior positions are more vulnerable to this kind of imperialism and it has been the source of much resentment and failed change attempts. Many people have become sensitized to the problem of imposed meanings. David Lyon explains that in postmodernity, “...the very idea of meaning becomes questionable. For meaning to mean anything, some stable boundaries, fixed structures, shared consensus

are assumed (Lyon 2000, 96).” Jean-François Lyotard (Lyotard 1984) argued that such shared meanings could only be established in a local context. While we do not have to fully accept that claim we can conclude that one role religion plays in the contemporary world is to establish these shared meanings but that such shared meanings need to be arrived at through conversation rather than through fiat. All this to say that Action Research as a methodology is particularly suited to the contextual nature of contemporary culture.

A possible response to this need within a DMin program would be to require students to write a paper on their ministry context and a paper describing their leadership narrative early in their program.

Guided by a Leader

Action Research involves the facilitation and guidance of a leader. A popular definition of a leader is someone who has followers. Implicit in this is the assumption that the leader knows and should know the destination and the best way to get there. An Action Research approach to leadership still requires leadership but the approach changes. The leader becomes a change facilitator rather than a change director. While Action Research is a simple strategy, it embraces many complexities. Those engaged in the action project and the research project will benefit from leadership that understands the process. Linda Cannell comments that, “Heifetz and others, when understood rightly, are really getting at the need for leaders to help people develop critical capacities for ‘seeing’ into situations from articulated values, asking the right questions, discerning patterns and trends, synthesizing findings, determining responsible actions, and reflecting on what happens (Cannell 2011).” So the expertise of the leader in process and issues is still needed but more people are brought into the conversation with the result that both direction and destination can change.

Action Research provides an approach to change that helps get people involved in this critical “seeing” and has the reflective component that is necessary for discerning appropriate action. To express this using contemporary popular theology, Action Research provides a model for discerning what God is doing as opposed to an earlier model which valued strategy and action based on established patterns, traditions, or edicts rather than critical reflection. In this respect Action Research takes advantage of reflective skills already developed in other ministry competencies. Most theologically trained ministry leaders have been taught to approach the scriptures reflectively rather than just mechanically. With some adjustment this skill can be applied to the work of Action Research.

Action Research recognizes that researchers are change agents and change agents need to be researchers. But this cannot be an isolated or solo activity.

Participation of Others

Action Research involves the participation of others. It is necessary, of strategic importance for effective action and ethically significant. Action Research takes place in a real-life situation and it affects (and intends to affect) the practices, attitudes, beliefs,

values and understanding of certain people, groups, and organizations. Those in the situation need to be able to participate in the research and action for their own sake as well as for the sake of insight needed for the change. To include people in their own situation as participants is a justice issue, to invite people to become part of the process that will lead to a change in their conditions is intrinsic to their ownership, empowerment, and enlightenment. Such inclusion is a critical factor in what makes Action Research ethical. In addition, an awareness of the social construction of knowledge makes participation critical. From the research perspective, subjects become active participants in the research process.

Lewin, who coined the term “Action Research” was an exile from Nazi Germany and committed to extending democratic values and addressing social conflict. The first two intentional Action Research projects undertaken by Lewin were to investigate and reduce violence between Catholic and Jewish teenage gangs and to integrate African-American and Caucasian sales staff in New York department stores (Marrow 1969) referenced in (Burnes 2004, 984). Obviously, neither social-change goal could be accomplished without the participation and insight of those in the gangs and stores. Freire used a form of Action Research first to advance literacy but ultimately for conscientization and the liberation of the oppressed. He insisted that even with urgency to find solutions to distressing problems, solutions needed “to be solutions with the people and never for them or imposed on them (Freire 2005, 13).” An insight that explains why Action Research can be the most ethically appropriate approach to research when working with oppressed or minority peoples. In Canada the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans advocates a participatory approach when working with aboriginal peoples (Canadian Institutes of Health Research 2014, Article 9.12).

Within the Christian tradition it has long been acknowledged that the actions of the contemporary church rest on understandings and experiences that are a product of communal experience. One often-used application of this idea to theological reflection is the Wesleyan Quadrilateral (i.e., scripture, tradition, reason, experience) (Choun and Lawson 1997). While some might argue over whether or not the use of reason is an individual or communal activity, the other three have a strong communal element. Furthermore John Wesley, as presented by Albert Outler (Outler 1964, iv) was not arguing that we could pick one but rather that all these authorities (with scripture privileged) are necessarily involved in theological reflection. Another example would be the development of doctrinal statements and church policies. While an individual may be an initial author of such documents they do not have any force unless collectively agreed upon. In a ministry context run largely by volunteers, ministry cannot proceed without the participation of those volunteers. Furthermore, recent commentators on cultural change have pointed to a cultural shift towards a “bricolage” or consumerist approach to religion (Lyon 2000). Religious participants with these kinds of expectations will expect to contribute to the development of knowledge.

So while Action Research is usually guided and sometimes initiated by a leader, the action researcher, it is not to be patronizing or manipulative in its process. This is considered by some such a non-negotiable that they prefer the term Participatory Action Research commonly referred to as PAR. Issues around control of the project and ethical

considerations attend to this feature of Action Research. They suggest that stakeholder participation is needed for the success of action and to develop knowledge at the research level.

Consonant with the Ideals of the Group

Action Research incorporates many values, but it does not have within itself the criteria for what is good or most beneficial. Nevertheless, one cannot speak of guiding change without considering the normative aspect of life. One of the distinguishing characteristics of variant forms of Action Research is the *telos* or good that it assumes. Lewin (Lewin 1946) is motivated by ideals of democracy, Deming (Deming 1986) is interested in better quality products, and Freire (Freire 2005) is guided by a Marxian-Christian notion of freedom; Elizabeth Conde-Frazier has social justice in mind (Conde-Frazier 2006); Cooperrider (Cooperrider and Whitney 2005) uses Appreciative Inquiry, an Action Research variant, for self-determined constructive cultural improvement. Each uses Action Research to attempt to achieve their goal.

Ernest Stringer believes that Action Research has an “explicit set of social values” which incorporates the above ideals:

It is *democratic*, enabling the participation of all people; it is *equitable*, acknowledging people’s equality of worth; it is *liberating*, providing freedom from oppressive, debilitating conditions; and it is *life enhancing*, enabling the expression of people’s full human potential (Stringer 2014, italics in original).

Christians value the norms of the Realm of God, the virtues of Christ, and the actions of the Holy Spirit. Missional Christians seek to discern how and where God is already working and become co-labourers with God (I Cor. 3:9). This requires engagement with Scriptures where the characteristic ways and values of God are exhibited, engagement with prayer in which we are sensitized to the movement of the Spirit, engagement with the community of Christ-followers who are called and gifted for the work of ministry, and engagement with the world where the work of God is occurring. Generically, this part of the definition reads, “consonant with the highest ideals of the group;” in a Christian context, the *missio Dei* provides us with an orientation and clues as to what individual and social change should look like and how that might be worked out.

Constructive Social Change

Action Research involves constructive, positive change, or more accurately, the intent to produce positive change. The change is at the individual and social level and includes both function and knowledge. The qualifier positive, while obvious and ethical, still presupposes some criteria. For industry, this means a motivated workforce and a quality product; for liberationists operating with a Marxian backdrop, it means expanding the sphere of freedom and rearranging power relationships; for education, it means increasing student learning and professional satisfaction; for organizations, it means learning a new way to engage problems and move into the future; for professional development, it means discovering and adopting best practices for individuals and groups. For Christian ministers and leaders, the criteria is going to involve an exegesis of the Scriptures, the

church, and the community to understand what is the ‘good.’ Jesus speaks of the kingdom or realm of God as the ideal culture and the apostles speak of Jesus as embodying the virtues of the ideal person. These or some extension of these will form the theological rationale for the project.

Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt and Chad Perry (Zuber-Skerritt and Perry 2002, 178) suggest three types or levels of Action Research that have increasing scope: aims, facilitator’s role, and relationship between facilitator and participants. These three levels help us understand the kinds of roles Action Research can play in constructive social change. The first type is technical resulting in professional proficiency, the second is practical aiming at professional awareness and organizational proficiency, and the third is emancipatory issuing in conscientization and organizational learning and transformation. Some would argue that only the third qualifies as true Action Research, but in any case, Action Research invariably challenges the status quo.

Action Research is a transferable concept. It results in a clearly defined procedure that can be taught to others without being dependent on the details of a specific ministry context. For example, a leader can take the principle of bringing those affected by decisions into the decision making process and teach them to others in the process of refining the small group ministry. One of those leaders could then take those principles and apply it to working with the parents of children in the nursery. Action Research is a transferable concept resulting in organizational learning. Same skill set, entirely different context.

Positive Individual Change

Positive individual change is not limited to the personal and professional development of the Action Researcher, but that is certainly one of the goals for the leader-minister undertaking this work. ATS standards include “the development and acquisition of skills and competencies, including methods of pastoral research, that are required for pastoral leadership at its most mature and effective level” and “opportunities for personal and spiritual growth” (Association of Theological Schools 2012, F.2.1.3, F.2.2.4). We must attend to the whole person of the leader, his or her inner well-being and development, behavior and competencies, discernment of culture, and fulfillment of social roles, thereby promoting the balance needed for sustaining both the person and work of the Christian leader.

With few exceptions individuals in ministry want to improve in their ability to do effective ministry. It is not the desire that is missing but rather that many professionals lack training in a systematic and practical method of action and reflection that allows them to make judgments not just on what is effective about what they are currently doing but also on the underlying values that drive what they are doing and on the possibilities for alternative action, themes explored by Robert Quinn in *Deep Change* (Quinn 1996). The oft-repeated dictum that, “We can’t solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them” is as true in ministry as it is in science. Many ministry professionals are also aware of this truism but the actual practice is often to find a program or approach that has worked elsewhere and apply it directly to their context.

These approaches are insufficient in times of rapid change, fearful groups, and high demands on the leader.

Action Research can provide an approach to ministry improvement that addresses these needs. Action Research is participatory and can be applied to the whole person because it is as applicable to the inner well-being of the individual as it is to the collective ministry of an organization.

Theoretical Knowledge

Action Research includes the development of knowledge expressed in models and theories. A theory promotes understanding by abstracting key elements in a phenomena and describing their function and relationship. Theory related to ministry and leadership cannot be separated from practice; it needs to be derived from practice and to inform of practice. Kurt Lewin captured this relationship when he remarked that, “There is nothing so practical as a good theory” (Lewin 1944, 169). ATS requires that DMin programs provide for “the formulation of a comprehensive and critical understanding of ministry in which theory and practice interactively inform and enhance each other” (Association of Theological Schools 2012, E.2.1.2).

Having a good theory is part of wisdom and leadership and ministry arts are essentially about wisdom. Pentti Routio (Routio 2007) develops a model of how Action Research contributes to theory building. His steps follow that of Kolb’s experiential learning model. When a real-life problem is creatively engaged, evaluation surfaces currently held theory and reflection on the derived data often leads to refining or reformulating a working theory of the situation. The resultant new model is then applied to the context where its efficacy is evaluated. A number of DMin project theses illustrate this (Rempel 2014, Van Ginkel 2012, Leung 2014, Seabrooke 2013, Friesen 2013).

Concluding Discussion

Action Research includes attention to iterations of action, research, and reflection, to context, leadership, and participation, and to social and individual change and the development of theory. These elements make it ideally suited as a research approach in Doctor of Ministry programs. It is an approach to research that takes the collaborative and focused social change elements of contemporary ministry seriously.

Yet an Action Research approach in DMin research does have tension points and challenges. These include the relationship of the project to the thesis, the need for multiple iterations, the difficulty of limiting projects, the incipient nature of proposals, participant and research willingness, ministry stability, risks to participants and leaders, contextual destabilization, and the need to reconceptualize ones’ approach to research ethics. These concerns are discussions to be addressed in a subsequent paper.

Such tensions and challenges do not outweigh the potential of Action Research to promote social and individual change, develop valid and reliable knowledge, and contribute to a missional approach to ministry. It is for these reasons that we think that Action Research is ideally suited to ministry research in Doctor of Ministry programs.

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