

## CHAPTER 8

# Case Study Method

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The case study method is one of the most widely used and valued ways of doing practical theology even though, strictly speaking, it was not originally devised and developed by practical theologians and is not unique to practical theology. This chapter discusses the nature and purposes of the case study method and its development, offers an illustration from the field of interfaith spiritual care, and considers the method's use in research and theory building as well as in theological education and ministerial formation. It concludes with a brief appraisal.

### Description

The case study method is a special way to learn from a concrete slice of reality and human experience, whether in research, teaching ministry arts, or supervision. It can be defined as an organized and systematic way of studying and reporting various aspects of a person, family, group, or situation utilizing a structured outline of subjects and questions (Asquith 1990: 123–126). In practical theology the case study method can serve a number of purposes on different levels of abstraction, such as: critical and constructive reflection on ecclesial and ministry practice; study, analysis, and evaluation of different forms of faith experience, formation, and transformation; and theory building as well as application or demonstration of theory. In each of those instances, the goal is fundamentally the same, namely, to provide further insight by focusing intensely on a particular case that is approachable from diverse perspectives.

Case studies are a special form of narrative. Procedurally, they are normally created in written form, and then presented and discussed with peers and colleagues in appropriate settings. In practical theology and theological education and ministry formation, the written structure usually includes background and description, analysis, evaluation, and theological reflection. “Good” cases tell a story and are normally brief; they

are relevant to the reader and focus on an interest-arousing issue or critical event; they have pedagogical or heuristic value by eliciting optimal expectation or tension and calling for discernment and some kind of resolution or decision. Cases can of course be further developed and published as scholarly contributions and are commonly found in specialized journals and publications in practical theology.

As a form of collaborative learning, the case study method normally includes a seminar setting in which somebody presents a case, another person moderates the discussion, and all participants share and discover wisdom in the ensuing process of theological reflection. A recommended seven-step process includes: presenting the case, clarifying information, sharing personal wisdom, pooling professional and educational wisdom, claiming the wisdom of the people of God, reflecting on the presenter's ministry, and evaluating the process (Mahan et al. 1993: 28–47). Possible benefits of the case study seminar include opportunities to unveil presuppositions and assumptions regarding ministry practices and methodologies, to engage in interdisciplinary and integrating work, and to test and develop one's operative theology (Northcott 2000: 59–65).

## Early Developments

The case study approach has been used widely and for a long time in areas outside of practical theology, such as medical studies, psychiatry, and psychotherapy in particular. In fact, next to introspection, case study is the oldest research technique in psychology. Nevertheless, there are notable traces of practical and pastoral theological reflection pointing in the direction of case study methodology at least 20 years before the formal introduction of the latter at Harvard Law School. Documented testimony for such a claim is offered by Seward Hiltner, who described and analyzed in some detail the careful recording of cases – or “pastoral sketches” – by Ichabod S. Spencer, a mid-nineteenth-century Presbyterian pastor. Spencer's practice can indeed be considered an early exercise in pastoral theology (Hiltner 1958: 69–85).

Christopher Langdell, the first dean of Harvard Law School, introduced the case study method as an educational approach in 1870. He realized that students could learn principles of law better by carefully studying actual court cases dealing with particular situations. In other words, cases could be seen as a way to learn the application of principles and doctrines of law. And law students could also learn the process of making legal decisions by understanding the relevance of concrete, specific cases to general situations instead of applying general rules to a specific case. Other innovative graduate schools of medicine and social work then followed Harvard's lead and began systematically to employ the method for teaching diagnostic skills to students and for supervising their practical work.

The Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration for its part adopted the methodology for its curriculum in 1908 and eventually became a model for its wide use in education. This school in turn cooperated with the Association of Theological Schools in the creation of the Case Study Institute, which for several years provided cases on a variety of subjects and situations for use in churches and theological schools.

The cases presented particular situations that need to be addressed from the perspectives of theology, ethics, pastoral care and counseling, church leadership and administration, and other disciplines.

In the 1970s James D. Glasse first systematically discussed the case study method for theological students and for pastors as well (1972: 84–105). His book includes guidelines on writing cases and case conferences in seminar groups. Almost two decades later, Jeffrey Mahan, Barbara Troxell, and Caron Allen published another such guide (1993). In addition to practical information about case writing, presenting, facilitating discussion, interpretation, and reflection, the authors briefly discuss the dynamics and the value of “sharing wisdom” in the context of group case study.

## Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE)

The earliest systematic use of case study methodology for ministry formation and theological education is found in the pioneering work of Anton Boisen, one of the founders of CPE.<sup>1</sup> Historically, CPE was created in response to dissatisfaction with the reigning, classic academic model of theological education. Boisen was influenced by prominent Boston physician and churchman Richard Cabot (1936), with whom he studied at Harvard Divinity School and who had advocated for a clinical year in the course of theological study, convinced of its value for future competent ministry. Supported by Cabot and others primarily in theological education, Boisen became chaplain of Worcester State Hospital in Massachusetts and, starting in 1925, he gathered a small group of theological students in the hospital to study with him. Thus he launched a training program designed to supplement theological studies in the classroom and the textual documents of scripture and church tradition. In that position he developed the case study method for research and teaching. The careful reading of “living human documents” (Boisen 1936; see also Gerkin 1984) of patients struggling with illness became an essential component of the theological curriculum. His main concern and purpose were not primarily that students learn appropriate intervention skills; rather, they were to help them form their own theology from an empirical base, especially by careful study of care-receivers’ religious experiences and beliefs.

Russell L. Dicks is another important figure in the CPE movement and the development of case study methodology in particular. As a hospital chaplain he developed the verbatim format as a special form of the method, different from Boisen’s life history and particularly, though not exclusively, suited for short-term pastoral care in health care centers (Cabot and Dicks 1936: 24–61). The verbatim is a document written from memory that records an interaction in approximately the dialogical form in which it happened. Typically it includes description of the setting, the people involved, and the expectations for that particular interaction; a segment of the dialogue that took place; and reflection on the relationship between care-receiver and caregiver. Among other

<sup>1</sup>In this section I follow closely Glenn Asquith who studied Anton Boisen in depth, especially his method. See Asquith 1976, 1980. For a history of CPE, see Edward E. Thornton 1990.

valuable features, it usually offers a clear window into the caregiver as much as into the care-receiver. The focus on actual interactions between chaplains and patients soon became the cornerstone for supervision and evaluation in CPE programs.

The method continues to be a key element of CPE, which involves clinical experience, study, and teaching and learning in supervised settings. The pastoral theological formation of the students, including but not reduced to their personal and ministerial or professional formation, has continued to be a key concern. More recently, other voices have argued that learning pastoral care in the congregational setting today requires a far more intentional focus on the faith community. They propose using case study to consider various dimensions of the church's life and ministry, including worship, preaching, and Christian education (Capps and Fowler 2001).

## Illustration of Case Method in Scripture

The use of story and parable for the purposes of teaching and reflection on faith and life is of course an ancient precursor of the contemporary case study method, and it can be viewed as a way of theologizing at the grassroots level as well. For its part, the church has engaged in doing theology since the beginning, not only as a way of training believers in the ways of faithful living but also and especially in response to its encounter with peoples of other religions and cultures. In fact, it can be argued that, as a way of doing practical theology, the church continued the rabbinic practice of understanding human experience and interpreting it in context and in light of the tradition.

One of the earliest and clearest testimonies of such practice can be found in the account of the Jerusalem council (Acts 15:1–35). The initial success of the Gentile mission generates new questions pertaining to requisites for belonging to the church as people of God, and thus for salvation itself. Conflict, debate, and dissension take place: a genuine threat within the life of the church is felt and a meeting is called in which Paul, Barnabas, and others have the opportunity to tell their story, while some Pharisees insist on the need for converted male Gentiles to be circumcised and to keep the law of Moses (5). We are told that this is the concern and business of the whole church (4, 12, 22) even though the leaders have a special role to play: Peter and James speak persuasively, and the apostles and the elders make significant choices with the consent of the whole church (6, 22). In addition to the role of experience and the church's own practices within the Judean context, a reinterpretation of scripture provides key foundational input and orientation; in fact, a connection is explicitly made between the perceived work of the Holy Spirit, personal testimony, and the message received in the words from three prophets (15–18). The discernment process is somehow experienced as Spirit-led and culminates in a unanimous decision (25) to send two leaders – Judas and Silas – as special representatives to the believers of Gentile origin in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia (23) with a letter of accord. The letter clarifies the scope of key expectations concerning Gentiles in keeping with Mosaic law (20, 29) and reaffirms the work of Paul and Barnabas. Luke's narrative also tells us that the Antioch believers rejoiced at the exhortation and were encouraged and strengthened by Judas and Silas (31–32). The

very presence of converted Gentiles became a gift to the early church as an opportunity to challenge and to enrich its practical theological imagination.

This text provides a richly textured, prototypical illustration of the early church doing practical theology on the way, as it were. Indeed it can be considered as a multi-way hermeneutical process for the sake of relevant and truthful discernment and faithful action. Luke's narrative therefore also lends itself to presentation as a scriptural case that addresses the key dimensions and dynamics of *mid-level practical theology*. By *mid-level* I mean what Leonardo and Clodovis Boff refer to as the "pastoral" level of doing liberation theology, which functions as a kind of bridge between professional (or academic, systematic) and popular (or grassroots) levels (1987: 11–21). All three levels are closely interrelated and potentially enrich each other. In this framework, most scholarly presentations of case studies are "high-level" theologizing.

Many other Bible materials can of course be adopted and adapted in terms of the case study method at different levels of doing practical theology and in theological education and ministerial formation in particular. For example, the postresurrection narrative of the walk to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–35) has inspired, as well as illustrated, the work of several practical theologians (e.g., Groome 1981: 136–137, 207–223; Loder 1989: ch. 4; and Schipani 1994: 59–65). Most recently I have worked with the story of Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman (Matt. 15:21–28; Mark 7:24–30), both systematically (Schipani 2009: 51–68) and also in a number of health care and congregational settings. Scriptural case material can also be used as a teaching method that enhances learning and fosters theoretical and practical integration in seminars and classes within the curriculum of theological education.

## Another Illustration

It was Saturday evening when Chaplain Bill's pager contact informed him of a need at a palliative care unit.<sup>2</sup> When he heard the name, Bill immediately suspected that the patient might be Jewish. When he arrived, he found the patient's room filled with family members. The young men were wearing yarmulkes (skullcaps). A woman with grey hair who was standing by the bed looked at Bill as he entered the room; Will realized that she was the wife of the dying man. He introduced himself and she said, "Pastor, thank you for coming. Jacob is not going to make it, and we appreciate that you are here."

Not that there was much doubt, but the chaplain confirmed with the family that they were Jewish and then asked them if it would be helpful if he contacted a rabbi. Jacob's wife smiled and said, "No, our God is your God, and he hears our prayers."

<sup>2</sup>Adapted from a case study originally presented by chaplain William H. Griffith in a year-long CPE seminar co-led by Leah Dawn Bueckert and myself at the Lutheran Hospital of Indiana and later included as one among dozens of cases involving interfaith spiritual care, in Schipani and Bueckert (2009: 81–88) and Bueckert and Schipani (2010).

Bill affirmed her statement and, since Jacob was not responding, he asked the woman if Jacob had the assurance of God's love and care in those dying days. She smiled again and said, "Oh, yes, he knew . . ."

Bill was then introduced to every person in the room, and Jacob's wife directed a grandson to get him a chair so that he could sit with her by the bed. Bill sat down and invited the people in the room to tell him about Jacob. Different ones spoke up, telling him about their relationship and sharing something about how special he was to them. There was laughter as family members remembered things that had happened or lessons they had learned.

An hour passed quickly, and when the time was appropriate, Chaplain Bill stood and told them how special it was for Jacob and his wife to have such a loving family present at such time. He encouraged them to keep telling their stories and to tell Jacob how much he meant to them.

Bill usually concluded his visits with a prayer. He wanted to be sensitive to how he, a Baptist chaplain, could best minister to a Jewish family, so he asked them if he could leave them with a prayer and a blessing from the Bible. They agreed that would be good, so he read Psalm 23, offered a prayer, and then blessed them with the benediction from Deuteronomy 31:8: "It is the LORD who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not fail you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed."

As he rode the elevator to the lobby, Bill was aware that he had just experienced a special moment unlike any he had ever experienced. He had been able to contribute to a meaningful grieving process with people whose religious experiences were in some ways similar and yet very different from his own. At the same time, he had been blessed by the Jewish family. It was affirming to know that being sensitive to the belief system that has given people hope through the years makes it possible to connect with them deeply in a significant way.

## Research and Theory Building

The case study method can serve well as a tool for both exploration and theory building and as a way of demonstrating or illustrating a given practical theological theory. In other words, it potentially has epistemic value, that is, the possibility of generating knowledge. What follows is an example of how Bill's case study has actually functioned in both ways regarding the question of *core competencies* that meet established standards of excellence in interfaith spiritual care. It can be read as a threefold response to the identifiable principles or dependable guides for excellence in spiritual care. How does the case illumine professional wisdom in terms of competencies of *being, knowing, and doing*?

- Bill's ministry illustrates core competencies of *being* indispensable to full *presence* with the family:
  - a clear sense of personal and vocational identity;
  - optimal self-awareness, including a realistic view of strengths and limitations;

- a plurality of character strengths such as acceptance, respect, and sensitivity; humility and compassion; freedom to be vulnerable and openness to new experiences; etc.;
- a spirituality that embraces complexity and paradox (e.g., regarding the normativeness of Jesus Christ and the truthfulness of the care-receivers' non-Christian faith).
- As a spiritual caregiver, Bill demonstrates the value of several core competencies of *knowing* that are essential for *understanding* and *discernment*:
  - a philosophy of care-giving primarily grounded in his Christian faith tradition and shaped by professional training and experience;
  - knowledge of the complexities, dynamics, richness, and challenges of inter-faith situations;
  - understanding of at least one other faith tradition different than his own;
  - clinical and theological knowing and assessment.
- Bill's work also illustrates core competencies of *doing* required for the fine art of *companioning* in spiritual care:
  - He relates to the Jewish family in ways that engage their emotions and spirituality.
  - He encourages and guides the family members in a time of storytelling.
  - He is a participant-observer who internally monitors ongoing care-giving activity, thus maximizing effectiveness while avoiding invasive or intrusive interventions.
  - He provides a number of responses in several care-giving modes (e.g., gently probing, supporting, praying, reading, blessing).

## Theological Education and Ministry Formation

Except for clinical pastoral education, the case study method was not formally introduced into theological education until the 1960s. Case studies were first deliberately used for training students for pastoral ministerial practice. But in 1967 Robert Evans introduced case study as an approach for studying the disciplines of Bible, church history, and theology. His book presents case studies as a way of reflecting theologically on doctrinal issues, learning skills of discernment, and bridging the gap between normative belief/theory and faithful practice (Evans and Parker 1976).

The method has become a key curricular component for ministerial formation, especially though not exclusively in master of divinity courses pertaining to practical theology and most Doctor of Ministry programs. Students doing "field education" or internships in congregations or other settings such as health care centers, jails, and community-based agencies, engage in a supervised learning program that provides practical ministry experience and critical theological reflection. Typically, they participate in ministry response groups within their ministry settings and in peer groups at the school. Students receive guidance and supervision individually and in small groups in both places (see Glasse 1972: 84–105; Mahan et al. 1993).

Case studies which register meaningful ministry events are at the heart of ministry reflection reports, prepared as both an exercise in practical theological reflection and as documentable material for supervisory processing and further reflection. The process and the structure of a written case are analogous to the format and structured process of the seminar group where the case is considered, and include the following dimensions:

- 1 *Background and description* of the ministry event: providing information regarding context and settings; relevant facts about the actors; what took place, with whom, when, and where, etc.
- 2 *Analysis*: determining what was involved in the event and why; dynamic of interactions; key issues viewed and interpreted in human science and theological perspectives, etc.
- 3 *Evaluation*: determining whether ministry goals were met as well as those learning objectives articulated in the student's learning covenant; assessment of the quality of the ministry practice as such, etc.
- 4 *Projections*: identifying new learnings and challenges; making decisions and planning for further ministry work; strategizing for next steps of professional formation and growth.

The study of Bill's case illustrates the kind of questions raised and knowledge gained, for example, regarding the evaluative or normative dimension of practical theological reflection. A variety of questions lead to potentially rich exploration: What are the ethical-theological norms that seem to be at work in the situation? To what extent is the caregiver's work effective or functional, from a psychological viewpoint, and faithful or appropriate, from a theological perspective?<sup>3</sup> Are there alternative norms that should be considered in this particular case?

- The spiritual caregiver's ministry to the Jewish family is psychologically effective:
  - Bill prepares himself for the occasion, including alternative plans and careful observation and attention with heightened awareness.
  - Having been welcomed, he sensitively enters into their reality on their terms.
  - He gently invites family members to tell stories that evoke pleasant memories and elicit gratitude and celebration of the dying man's life.
  - He spends an optimal amount of time with the family and leaves with the assurance that his care-giving has been appreciated and that he has contributed to a meaningful grieving process.
- His care-giving is theologically appropriate:
  - He is able to minister with integrity, that is, with due respect for the Jewish faith and tradition of the family and without compromising his own convictions.

<sup>3</sup>Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger (1995: 121–130) discusses systematically psychological functionality and theological adequacy in spiritual care situations.

- His Christological and soteriological beliefs don't prevent him from caring well for the Jewish family.
- He has an adequate understanding (and theology) of scripture, faith, prayer, blessing, and of the continuities and discontinuities between his faith and the care-receivers' faith.
- His actions (praying, blessing, reading scripture, briefly sharing comments on the text, etc.) are also theologically appropriate.

In sum, case study methodology serves very well as an empirically grounded, patterned, disciplined, and praxis-focused way of doing mid-level practical theology for the sake of theological and ministerial formation. This is clearly the case when the focus is on a given ministry art form or specific "ministry practice" such as pastoral care, teaching, preaching, youth ministry, and others. Further, case study is an engaging, helpful method for pastors and other ministerial leaders such as spiritual caregivers, teachers, and others, to grow further professionally as reflective practitioners. There are several excellent case study texts with specialized focus (e.g., Wilson et al. 1986; Evans et al. 1987; Moore 1991; and Capps and Fowler 2001) as well as collections of case studies that can be adapted for education purposes (e.g., Borreson 1998).

## An Appraisal

One obvious disadvantage or limitation of the method is the difficulty of generalizing from one case to another and the amount of time required to experience significant learning through this methodology. Another disadvantage is that the researcher often has no clear limits on data gathering or on writing, so that developing a case can become an aimless or limitless task. Related to this is the risk of distortions introduced into the material through the researcher's selective memory or perception, or through the biased views of the persons or documents from which the case is crafted.

There are, however, a number of benefits of using case method in research, teaching, and supervision of ministry practice. First, cases help to bridge the gap between experience and practice, on the one hand, and reflection and theory, on the other. As illustrated above, case studies can exemplify theoretical constructs, and the latter can also be drawn from particular case descriptions and analysis. In-depth practical theological reflection focused on cases can unveil theory already inherent in practice as well as practice actively shaping theory. Theory building itself can thus be readily viewed as a special form of practice. It is a practice that fosters the development of skills of analysis, discernment, and decision-making, in addition to increased self-knowledge and awareness for the sake of vocational identity and practical theological and ministerial competence.

Second, as demonstrated early in the CPE movement, theological education and ministerial formation benefit immensely by case study methodology as a way of integrating contextualized real life situations into academic settings. Whether focusing on significant events or exploring change dynamics over time, cases present the tension between particular reality and generalization in mutually challenging ways. Cases can

help us see a large and complex picture of reality without artificially extracting particular elements. Further, case methodology can be used to study patterns of interaction and change in order to predict action on the part of the persons or groups.

Finally, there is a fundamental reason for the usefulness of the case study method in practical theology and its subdisciplines, in the theological education curriculum (where practical theology has an essential integrating function in personal, academic, and professional formation), and in the larger arena of action in church and society. The very practices of writing a multiplicity of unique, particular cases on the one hand, and discussing, analyzing, evaluating, and using them for further reflection and action on the other, are inherent ways of doing practical theology. Those practices are empirically grounded and contextually situated; they are hermeneutical in character, fundamentally evaluative and normative, and pragmatically and strategically oriented. In sum, the case study method is inherently analogous to the structure of practical theology with its descriptive, interpretive, normative, and pragmatic-strategic tasks and dimensions.

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