



Theology and Social Sciences in Ministry Research

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Abstract

There has been considerable debate about how theology should engage with the social sciences, particularly since the 1970s. While some theologians have been suspicious of the sciences, practical theologians have acknowledged the importance of engagement. Van Der Ven for example, has proposed an 'empirical-theological' cycle, which includes phases of empirical research, and theological reflection within the discipline of practical theology. This article examines how theology and the social sciences contributed to a specific project in practical ministry on the youth ministry in Australian churches. In reflecting on the project, it was noted that the project arose out of the theological imperative to pass the Christian faith from one generation to the next, and to reach out to people with no Christian background. The imperative was sharpened by the research, which showed how the theological objectives were not being achieved. The nature of young people's faith, as examined in the project, was grounded in theology, but research contributed to the understanding of what was important to young people in their faith as expressed in the Australian context. The methodology of the research had its roots in the social sciences. The recommendations from the project were primarily theological, but reflected factors identified by the empirical research. It is concluded, in this example, theology primarily, but not exclusively, described what OUGHT to be the case, while the social sciences primarily provided descriptions about what WAS the case. Theological descriptions about what WAS the case, about God's activity in the lives of people, were derived from the

descriptions of sociological analysis, evaluating them from the perspectives of the traditions and sources of faith. In this study, the social sciences, and theology had distinct and different roles in making recommendations for ministry praxis.

