

Oral history interviewing and its value in practical theological hermeneutics: an example from a study about a Pentecostal congregation

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Abstract

Prior experience has been recognised as an important element of hermeneutics in both secular and theological studies. A problem for practical theologians who are investigating Pentecostal situations is the quality of the historical record that is available for analysis. This is an issue that is also relevant to this research and it was therefore decided to use the social scientific approach of oral history interviewing to provide a more detailed documentary record. The resulting interaction between contextual perception and the historical record revealed three central themes for further analysis: (1) autonomy, (2) authority and (3) the role of the Spirit. The lack of community was identified as a key issue in these areas, especially concerning participation. The importance of participation through ministry in the Spirit was identified as a possible means whereby an attractive community with a strong identity in Christ can be developed in the future.

Introduction

Acknowledgement of the importance of prejudices and pre-understanding has been a significant feature of hermeneutical studies since the work of Gadamer in the 1960s (cf. Village 2007:77-79), but it is only in recent times that it has become a feature of practical theological investigations. These studies have progressed beyond what Van der Ven (1993:34-41) identifies as the first “orientation” where practical theology was seen as the application of the fruits of the other theological disciplines for the improvement of the praxis of the pastor. Practical theology has become more aware of the impact that contextual factors can have on praxis. Browning (1991:55-74) identifies the need to develop an in-depth understanding of the concrete situation in which one is acting as foundational to his or her “strategic practical theology”. Farley (2000:120) sees the interpretation of these situations as central to the nature of practical theology. A key aspect of his hermeneutical approach involves “probing the past” for “disguised repressions”. These are seen as events that were important in the formation of tradition and structure, but have been forgotten over time. Farley (2000:121) continues:

To grasp the present situation of men and women in the churches calls for more than simply describing present policy. For the present is comprised of and structured by these disguised repressions of the past. And only a certain way of studying the past will uncover these repressions and in so doing will thus uncover something at work in the present.

One is therefore left asking the question: What is the “certain way of studying the past” that Farley is referring to?

I believe that depends on the situation one is studying. Many Anglican parish churches in the United Kingdom have detailed records which stretch back to the medieval period that offer a great deal of information to the researcher who is interpreting the current situation.¹ But what if one wishes to study a modern South African Pentecostal congregation?ⁱⁱ Academic Pentecostal studies have developed markedly in recent years and examples of research into the history of the movement have featured in this journal (Kalu 1998; Nel 2001). At grassroots level, the original anti-intellectual stance of Pentecostalism (cf. Theron 1999:50) is still evident – a point that is reinforced, albeit only in a single case, in this current research project which focuses on the Assemblies of God in KwaZulu-Natal. In

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this particular study, I decided to use the case study approach of Eisenhardt (2006) as the inductive phase in my use of the empirical approach of Van der Ven (1993). The case study focussed on a single congregation that is called Ablewell Christian Fellowship for the purposes of the study.ⁱⁱⁱ On initial enquiry, I was informed that the church kept a record of meeting minutes that stretched back to its planting in 1982. These records contained some useful information, especially regarding the ministry period of the current leader (from 1992). Information on the period from July 1982 to June 1992 was, however, extremely sparse. There were only 10 recorded entries and significant gaps existed between these entries. There was nothing for the periods 12 April 1983 to 12 August 1985 and 26 April 1986 to 30 June 1992. The minutes were rather brief and bluntly factual; they lacked a personal element that could have offered more to the interpretive process. It was apparent that these records alone would not be sufficient to assist me in developing an understanding of the historical background that would enable me to identify the “disguised repressions” in the current situation. Another approach was therefore required to supplement the documentary analysis of the meeting minutes.

One such approach was suggested in the work of Ackermann (1996:32 & 33) who sees “historically and contextually rooted stories” as an integral part of her feminist approach to studying praxis. These individual stories can be obtained through “life history” or “oral history” interviewing (Bryman 2001:316). Life history interviews encourage interviewees to look back on their entire lives and are usually combined with the study of personal documents like diaries; oral history interviews are more specific because they use questions that focus on particular events or periods in the past. Bearing in mind the specific time span of the meeting records, it was decided that the oral history approach (with its focus on particular time periods and events) would be more suitable for this research. One should note that this study used a “conventional approach” to oral history interviewing where the aim is the improvement of academic knowledge (Ntsimane 2006:7 & 8). This is in contrast to the Sinomland Centre’s^{iv} creative use of oral history methodology to preserve family voices to aid the resilience of individuals who are involved in the Memory Box Programme (see Denis 2001 and Ntsimane 2006 for examples of this approach).

The rest of this article focuses on how this conventional oral history approach, allied to documentary analysis, helped the researcher to develop an understanding of the past that improved the interpretation of the current situation. This is done by briefly outlining a number of background features, such as the position of the researcher in relation to the interviewees, the present context of Ablewell Christian Fellowship and some information on the structures of the Assemblies of God. This is followed by an overview of the more important features of the documentary analysis of the meeting minutes. The oral history approach that was used is then described and the responses from the various informants are used to develop a historical understanding of Ablewell Christian Fellowship. The past is then contrasted with the present to uncover issues that might be underlying current problems. The article ends by offering a practical theological suggestion to the church as to how it can tackle current problems.

Background to the case study on Ablewell Christian Fellowship

Position of the researcher

A point that should be emphasised at the outset is the relationship of the researcher to the congregation at Ablewell. The research at Ablewell was undertaken as overt participation – an approach that, according to historical studies, would see me as an “insider” (Carton & Vis 2008:53-56). This occurred between April 2007 and May 2009. The overt approach was suitable because my initial experiences at Ablewell demonstrated how guarded many people in this rural congregation were when they were engaged in conversation. This attitude changed over time and the congregation gradually became more open as I was accepted in the local community. I am aware that my interpretation of the situation at Ablewell could have been affected by this interaction, but I felt that this was a necessary requirement to obtain some useful insights into how this tightly bonded rural community (see the following section of this article for further details) functioned. The researcher can be religiously classified as a charismatic evangelical who did not feel out of place in Ablewell’s Pentecostal context.

The context

Ablewell Christian Fellowship is situated in a small farming town in inland KwaZulu-Natal. The original town has been in existence for just over a century, but many of the farming families (both British and Afrikaans) have been in the area since the mid-nineteenth century. These families know each other well and there is a strong sense of community. The people are generally conservative and

have modernist life views:^v the man goes to work and is the prominent figure, while the woman looks after the children and maintains the home.

In many ways Ablewell Christian Fellowship mirrors its conservative context. The Sunday worship was only mildly charismatic, with infrequent use of speaking in tongues and prophecy. The service was very structured and preaching was restricted to leadership or speakers from elsewhere who were invited. The congregation averaged around 50 to 60 in number and was mixed, with Black Africans and Indians making up at least a quarter of the numbers at Sunday services.

An evident feature of the congregation was that they were not “mobilised”: few were involved in the ministry of the church. Most of those who were mobilised were involved in the children’s ministry on Sundays, but only certain individuals did other work besides this. The pastor did outreach in the township with his wife and two other members. This involved some preaching of the gospel and a soup kitchen.

Several topics came to the fore in the pastor’s preaching during the period of observation. A series of sermons was delivered on “The Feasts of the Lord” and how important they are for the modern church. This was supplemented by an Easter or “First Fruits” sermon which highlighted the pagan Babylonian roots of Easter. Another series centred on the need to be “waiting and watching” for the return of Jesus. An important message was the Pentecost sermon which focussed on the revival promise (*El Shammah*) that the pastor believed had been given to the church. The pastor believed that the Lord would, through the Spirit, make the local region a “fruitful field” (Isa. 29:17). He noted that a trusted prophetic source had told him that this would be fulfilled by Pentecost 2009 but that it had not materialised. He then went into a range of reasons why he believed the vision had not come to pass. These mainly related to the area being in bondage to a range of spirits that he identified as Witchcraft, Intimidation, Independence, Black Crow and Jezebel. He did not reveal how they had been identified. He believed that the revival promise would still be realised in the future.

A notable event during the research was the restructuring of the children’s ministry. A number of the people who were involved with the work were unhappy with how this was done and it resulted in around 15 people leaving the church, several of whom had held leadership positions in the past. It was noted that some of their problems stemmed from how the church was working within the “Group” structure of the Assemblies of God. Though stable, the church was not growing and all was not well. It was obvious that there were a number of issues that needed careful consideration.

Structures of the Assemblies of God in Southern Africa

The structure of the Assemblies of God in Southern Africa requires some explanation at this stage of the study. The work of the Assemblies of God is overseen by a General Executive that consists of 23 individuals from the denomination who are elected to their positions by the General Conference biannually (Watt 1992:135-137). The Assemblies of God is split into various sections and two historically active sections are of interest to this study: (1) “the Group” and (2) the Fellowship of Independent Assemblies and Ministers (FIAM). “The Group” section of the Assemblies of God originally came about through the work of James Mullen (1992:141). A key feature of “the Group” is the lack of any election to office – leaders are appointed by a senior “apostolic” figure. This “apostolic” position is based on an interpretation of the gift ministries in Ephesians 4:11. The leaders have authority over local assemblies (Mullen 1992:142-144). For many years, the main apostolic figure was John Bond; currently, it is Donovan Coetzee. FIAM was a looser collection of independent assemblies that rejected the “apostolic” interpretation of “the Group”. They were run locally under ministers and elders, but came under the authority of the General Executive (1992:146, 147). This body folded in the late 1980s in KwaZulu-Natal and no longer forms part of the Assemblies of God structure.

Meeting minutes

Both these structures feature in the meeting minutes. The first minuted meeting was held on 25 July 1982 and a constitution was drawn up and signed the following day. The overall theme of the constitution was linked to the Statement of Faith of the Assemblies of God under the heading “Things commonly believed among us”^{vi}. It was interesting to note the inclusion of a statement regarding the “sovereignty” of the Assembly, where it stated that the General Executive may assist the Assembly but should not exercise control over it. This was further explicated with a concise definition of “sovereignty”. The first pastor, Nick Simms, was present at these meetings. These early meetings were held at a place called Cottage Chapel.

The original pastor left after only a few months and was replaced by a new pastor, Rick Hally, at the end of 1982. His time at the church seems to have been turbulent, with attendance and finances dropping sharply by 1983. An original member noted the need for “an alive church that reflected the glory of God” – the lack of “life” being duly noted.

By the time of the next meeting in August 1985, a new pastor (Tim Lewis) had been appointed. His time in ministry was characterised by tension between his “mission” and his work at the church. The mission work stretched from Newcastle down to the South Coast and meant that he was away from the church a lot. The tension developed to such an extent that, by early 1986, one leader wrote the pastor a detailed letter to express his concerns.

There was a period of silence until 1992 when the current pastor, Edward Hicks, arrived. One of the first things that was minuted was his desire to take the church into “the Group” section of the Assemblies of God (they were initially in the FIAM). This issue was not resolved by September 1994 and one leader made it clear that they should not enter “the Group” unless they received direct confirmation from God. He believed that they should remain independent and cited Isa. 54:1b and Gal.4:21-31 to support his position.

The meeting on 2 December 1996 focussed on the problem of balance between Edward’s ministry outside of the church and his pastoral care of the congregation. It appears that Edward responded to this by noting that Ablewell was a conservative church which needed to grow in a Pentecostal understanding of the Holy Spirit. This tension continued into May 1997 when he accused the church of being in bondage to an “independent spirit” – a comment that relates to their continued refusal to enter “the Group”.

Confrontational exchanges are again evident at a meeting in May 1998. Here Edward responded to claims that he was leading the church “autocratically” as opposed to “democratically”. He stated that the church was run “theocratically” and based this on Isa.33:22, 23.

It appears the church finally entered “the Group” in April 1999. A definition of “control” had now been added to the original constitution alongside that of “sovereignty”. A revised vision was in place by February 2000, with Rev.21:1-7 and Rev.22:17 being presented as Jesus’, and therefore Ablewell’s, goals.

March 2002 saw a Passover celebration with a Pentecost celebration scheduled for May. A leader noted that relationships had deteriorated over time and that much love and caring had been lost in the church. In December 2004 a definition for “assist” was added to the constitution to go with the earlier ones on “sovereignty” and “control” that are noted above.

The construction of a new church facility was started in 2006 and was completed in July 2007. The old church building became the location for all the activities of the children’s ministry.

The current constitution, which was amended in 2009, identifies five main objectives for the church: (1) effective pastoral care; (2) discipleship; (3) effective communication of the gospel; (4) care for the poor and needy; and (5) networking. The church clearly identifies itself under the authority and apostolic direction of “the Group’s” national and regional leadership.

Oral history

Although the meeting minutes offered some detail, there were gaps in the record and more personal assessments were required to “flesh out” the bare structure. In an attempt to obtain a richer historical account, the researcher used oral history interviews. Each interviewee was asked four questions.^{vii} These were:

- (1) How did the church come into existence?
- (2) What was it like in the early years?
- (3) What events in those early years really stand out for you?
- (4) Do you think things have changed over the years? If so, how?

These questions were open-ended and other questions were used to follow up on interesting topics that arose in the course of the interviews (cf. Carton & Vis 2008:44). They were designed to produce material that covered two areas of concern in the meeting minutes: (1) the gaps in the early record up to 1992 and (2) general detail concerning “ordinary” life and experiences in the church over the years of its existence.

Eight people were interviewed in six interviews from January to July 2009. The interviews were arranged and conducted with sensitivity to social location (Ntsimane 2008:110, 111). For some interviewees like Chris and Isla this meant chatting to both of them over morning tea at their home, while others like Linda preferred to be interviewed individually in a public cafe. Due to the limitations of an article of this nature, only the answers that are considered significant for this study are included below.

- The Foundation of Ablewell Christian Fellowship

Nick was the first person who was interviewed. He had been the first pastor of the church from July 1982 to September 1982. He then later returned to minister for about three years from June 1987 through to February 1990. He recalled that the church had been the result of Bible study that had been conducted by a local Assemblies of God minister. He remembered how he had come to Ablewell.

Nick: ... I was just a young Assemblies of God minister at the time. John Bond called me to say that there was a new Assembly that needed a minister and he wanted to send me there. I thought it was a bit strange because it was not a “Group” ministry but belonged to the Independents [FIAM] but ... we were sent under orders you could say. Ministers were moved around a lot back then; you stayed in one place for about two years until they [John Bond] moved you on elsewhere. Anyway, I arrived and we constituted the church with around 20 to 25 [23] people present.

Mark and Sara were interviewed together. Mark is an elder in the church and was present at its inception. He recalled that the Bible studies which the Assemblies minister had given them were important but noted that the work of a charismatic evangelistic ministry team had also been significant in their conversion to Christianity at the time. Chris and Isla had not been part of the church at its inception but had joined it soon after; they had originally worshipped at the local Methodist church. Chris had been an elder at Ablewell. They both remembered the ministry of a charismatic evangelistic team as playing an influential part in how the church came into existence and they pointed out other things of interest regarding the founding of the church.

Chris: ... Larry [Assemblies of God minister] did come a lot to teach both the men and the women, but there were other things happening at the time. A couple of Baptist guys ... Den Stokes and Ed Payne were also doing good Bible studies in the area. We were also doing lots of things by ourselves. There were “Hotline Tuesday nights”, which were lively charismatic prayer meetings where the gifts really operated [people spoke in tongues, healings occurred, prophecy was spoken]. People came from all over for those ... and ...

Isla: This was all tied up with what had started in the charismatic renewal of course.

AJT: When had all these activities started to take place?

Isla: The charismatic renewal was back in the mid-1970s. A group of us travelled all over South Africa for events and outreaches. The Tuesday night prayer meeting was just an extension of that. It started around 1980. No ministers; just people from many churches joined in the Spirit. Many of these people ended up at the church [Ablewell].

Linda is the widow of a former church elder and had helped in the development of the church until she and her husband had moved on in 1995. They had come into the church at an early stage from an Anglican background. She had not been present when the church was formed but had been part of the charismatic activity which Chris and Isla mentioned. She had joined the church in late 1982. Ruth had not been part of the church at its inception back in 1982 but did add that the early services were held in a converted chicken coup on her aunt’s farm. This became known as “Cottage Chapel”. Ruth had become involved in the church when she had moved to the area in 1990. Edward is the current pastor and was not present at Ablewell’s inception. He had, however, been close to Larry (an Assemblies

minister who had been involved in the local area) and he remembered him having been extensively involved in Ablewell in its formative period. He considered Ablewell to be an Assemblies of God plant that was attached to Larry's church.

- The early years

Accounts of the early period were varied. Nick recalled that about 25 to 30 people had gathered together with a strong sense of community being evident. Sara remembered the early meetings as times with real anointing when many people had sung and prayed in tongues. She remembered "Cottage Chapel" as being full with around 35 people who had worshipped there on Sundays. Special memories for Mark were the occasions in 1982 when they had met at the first pastor's (Nick's) home and had blessed times of praise and worship as fellowship. This seemed to have changed with the arrival of the second pastor, Rick Hally, in November 1982. Mark and Sara explained:

Mark: Ja ... you don't want to be nasty, but he was sent up from Cape Town and we all felt he was a bit immature in the Lord. He had problems with his marriage ...

Sara: His wife was a lovely lady who really carried the work but she was ill with breast cancer. This was affecting them both and it was not a good time for everyone concerned. A lot of our people left the church because of the problems at this time. We did [leave] for a time.

AJT: Could you be more specific as to these problems?

Mark: As I said, he was immature in the Lord and many of the people had less respect for him than they did for his wife.

Chris and Isla agreed that Rick Hally's time in the ministry had not been a success and they seemed evasive as to the reasons why. Linda was more open about why Rick Hally had not been respected. She suggested that the move into the rural, insular community and his wife's health problems had put him under pressure and he had sought comfort in an extra-marital affair. This had probably been why some people had thought he was "immature in the Lord".

- Key events at Ablewell Christian Fellowship

Linda was also open about other problems with later pastors which she felt had affected the church. Tim Lewis, who arrived in March 1985, had caused a problem because many people had felt that he was never really around and was using the limited funds of the church for his "mission". He was replaced by the fourth pastor to lead the church, a Roy Line who had ministered at Ablewell from July 1986 to February 1987. He was an ex-headmaster who was very authoritarian and had a wife with a dominant personality. They, unfortunately, had caused a great deal of hurt amongst the congregation with their overbearing approach. Linda gave some examples and described the outcome:

Linda: They just did not understand how to handle things. One couple had been having a difficult time and they [Roy and his wife] went over to see them. I am not sure exactly what was said but we [Linda and her husband] spent weeks trying to pick up the pieces. That couple would not return to the church because of what had been said. This type of thing involving, how would you say ... overbearing comments happened a few times and many were hurt by it. We decided something had to be done and we sacked him.

AJT: How did the church do that?

Linda: We had a meeting and asked him to leave. I still feel it was rather naughty but ... but the situation was not good and something had to happen.

AJT: Did his departure improve things?

Linda: Yes, it did. Nick agreed to come back to help sort out the problems that had been caused. His time with us [1987—1990] was a time of great healing and the atmosphere was happy again.

Chris and Isla also remembered Nick's second phase of ministry with fondness. Chris emphasised the tremendous love and unity that was present at the time. Another important time that stood out for Chris was when the church had no pastor from 1990 to 1992 – a period he called a "golden era". Isla remembered a vision she had had for a new church building in 2003 that included an upper level for a pastor training facility. She added that a church leader at the time had seen exactly the same vision. She

regretted that they had not been listened to when the new church building had been designed in 2006. For Edward, the main events had centred around the “*El Shammah*” revival promise and “*El Shammah* ministries”. He explained:

Edward: “*El Shammah*” means the Lord is here – in our midst. Back in 1993, a prophet called Barry Hines spoke a word [prophetic utterance] over us [Peter and his wife] concerning the local area becoming a “fruitful field”. This was tied to the “fruitful field” text of Isaiah 29:17. There have been many repeats of this word over my time here – Lorraine has a whole folder of texts and words that have been given to us. It [revival] will come.

Edward: The ministry [*El Shammah*] started around the end of 1999. Dirk Steyn ran the tent ministry for around three years [2003] and they visited about 25 locations in our area. The Lord worked through him [Dirk] and his team in supernatural ways; the Spirit moved in amazing ways [healings, deliverance from evil spirits].

AJT: Why did the ministry stop?

Edward: *El Shammah* ministries didn’t stop really. We [Edward and Dirk’s brother Piet] still take trips to Israel each September and the tent work continues, but on a smaller scale and it’s not attached to our body [Ablewell]. Dirk stopped his ministry because of allegations made by some in the Ladies Bible Study. Dirk was a good-looking guy and some women were attracted to him. This became “overspiritualised” as some ladies saw this attraction as a demonic problem for Dirk. They told him and he just left the church and gave everything up to go back to farming. The other side [Piet’s Israel tours] is still active, but it is nothing like it was; it was something special.

- How things have changed

Negative change seems to be a common theme in the church’s history. Mark thought that the church had become more conservative over the years, stating the reduction in the use of spiritual gifts (like speaking in tongues) as a key part in this process. Sara believed that there had been a real lack of teaching Christian basics and this had hindered discipleship and growth in the church. Chris seemed to think that the church had become more controlled over time, with what he saw as a “Clerical George” attitude dominating: an approach which favoured that all ministry should be delivered by a trained minister over one that encouraged lay ministry. Ruth perceived the church to have become more conservative and restrained over the years. Linda remembered doing deliverance work (exorcism of evil spirits) with her husband and Edward and was surprised that this particular ministry was no longer functioning. Nick noted that the church had definitely changed over the years but that it still struggled for a sense of purpose beyond ministering to the pastoral needs of its people. Evangelism had always been a struggle and spiritual warfare (engaging evil spiritual forces in prayer) had been a common emphasis. The visiting aspect was something that struck Edward:

Edward: I found it a strange little group when I arrived. All I seemed to do was to go around and take tea with them. It was nice and friendly, but there was little time for ministry. Everything was ... well, it was not Pentecostal; it was restrained, conservative ... very different from other Assemblies.

AJT: Does that visiting still continue?

Edward: Not as much as people would like; there are other things to do and I can’t do it all.

Letting the past speak to the present

After having viewed the historical sources (both documentary and oral), we can now look at how they inform us about the present situation at Ablewell. Because an article of this nature cannot cover all the aspects involved, I have selected what I perceive to be three important areas.

Autonomy

The first is the issue of autonomy. The pastor’s reference to “being in bondage to a spirit of independence” in the sermon I observed was not new. According to the meeting minutes, he made the same remark in 1997 – probably in relation to Ablewell’s continued refusal to become part of “the Group”. One wonders whether this spiritualisation of the issue is in fact valid when other evidence is

considered. Although the pastor considered the area to be in bondage to a “spirit of independence”, one cannot discount the naturally independent nature of this rural community. As a group, they stick together and defend their identity. Many of the families have been connected for at least a century and much good has come from it. The community spirit that is evident does not appear to be evil in origin.

It should further be noted that the church did not emerge from pure Assemblies of God roots. Chris and Isla spoke of the importance of the charismatic renewal and the prayer meeting on Tuesday nights. This was interdenominational: Chris and Isla were originally Methodists, while Linda has Anglican roots. Chris mentioned the impact of Baptist Bible ministry in the area. Mark and Sara were converted through the ministry of a charismatic evangelical outreach in the area. One should remember that although the church was constituted as an Assemblies of God church, it was originally in the FIAM which – as the name suggests – was a freer collection of Assemblies than those in “the Group” under the authoritarian leadership of John Bond.

One can see this independent nature coming through in Ablewell’s struggles over entry to “the Group”. Edward’s desire to bring the church under “the Group” umbrella is evident in the minutes, but the ongoing seven year saga about entry demonstrates the church’s reluctance to accept his plans.

A more subtle, yet important, part of this issue can be picked up from the evolving constitution. The constitution always included items on “sovereignty”, outside assistance and general committee control. What is interesting is that under Edward’s leadership, definitions for “assist” and “control” were added which diluted the independent control that these originally gave to Ablewell – thereby giving outside directives more power without visibly infringing the constitutional rights of the church.

Authority

The second important area is that of authority. Problems arose due to what were perceived to be an authoritarian style of leadership. Linda recalled how the fourth pastor, Roy Line (1986, 1987) had been rapidly removed after a few months at Ablewell because of the problems his dominant style had caused and Edward also had trouble with regard to this issue. His desire to lead the church “theoretically” was clearly in response to a general belief that he was being autocratic. There is evidence that suggests this was an accurate observation by the church. The move towards “the Group” was certainly not desired by Ablewell; the desire was Edward’s. It would appear that the issues Isla mentioned regarding construction work at the church had arisen because the views of the congregation had not been given sufficient consideration. The restructuring of the children’s ministry was done without consulting a number of key participants in that ministry – a decision that led to much hurt.

The role of the pastor had also been a cause of friction for Ablewell. Edward was not the only minister who had been challenged over “mission” and “pastoral duties”; Tim Lewis, the third pastor (1985 and 1986), was heavily criticised for the same problem. This does raise questions about the pastor’s role. Edward commented on the strong emphasis that had been placed on pastoral visitation when he had arrived at Ablewell. The pastor has to travel a great deal and visiting takes up much time in a rural community, so it is understandable that Edward had struggled to fit this element into a busy schedule of teaching and evangelism. Pastoral work with the body does not appear to have ranked high on his list of ministerial priorities. It does appear, however, to have been an important issue for others (like Chris and Mark) at Ablewell.

An authoritarian stance is evident in how ministry is structured. The “body” ministry of the early years is no longer a prominent feature of worship; as Chris said, a “Clerical George” model now dominates proceedings. This is probably most evident in Edward’s own comment that “I can’t do it all”. In a balanced ministry structure he would not have had to “do it all”; others in the leadership would have taken on responsibilities like pastoral visitations.

As is shown by Chris’s comments above, this approach does not sit well with the “body”. The best evidence of this in the history of Ablewell relates to two “eras”. Firstly, the informal and relaxed approach of Nick in his two periods of ministry (1982 and 1987-1990) saw times of growth and of healing. Today, he is still well respected by all the people in the church who knew him. The other time was when the church had no pastor and was run by the elders: Chris’ “golden era” (1990-1992). These were times when the body had a voice and communication consisted of dialogue between the community rather than authoritarian instruction to it. This is an important issue for many in post-apartheid South Africa who view authoritarian structures with suspicion (Pieterse 1998:186). Another point in the historical evidence is that these were also times that saw the greatest use of spiritual gifts like healing, prophecy and speaking in tongues at Ablewell.

The role of the Spirit

This brings us to a point of disagreement in the records. Edward said that the congregation that he had inherited in 1992 were conservative and not obviously Pentecostal (displaying signs of baptism in the Spirit like speaking in tongues – something which he earnestly desired in the church). The majority of the interviewees would disagree with this and would say that the earlier years of the church, especially the two “era’s” that are identified above, were times of great freedom and spiritual life. The historical record gives a possible reason for the current charismatic apathy at Ablewell. Edward mentioned that the tent mission which had run from 1999 to 2002 had been damaged because some of the women in the ladies’ Bible study group had made “over-spiritualised” comments to Dirk Steyn. One wonders whether these charismatic excesses and the damage they caused to a vibrant ministry have caused people to be more cautious about spiritual gifts (like prophecy) in the present day.

A practical theological suggestion

When one reads Paul’s teaching on spiritual ministries in 1 Cor.12-14, he repeatedly emphasises that they should function to edify the community (cf. Menzies & Menzies 2000:181-183). The problem that is highlighted above points to a recurring theme in the dialogue between the historical record and the present situation: problems arise at Ablewell when little consideration is given to relationships in the community. I would like to expand upon this by drawing on the “Total Church” model of Tim Chester and Steve Timmis (2007).

Chester and Timmis (2007:16-19) see the foundations of a successful church as the gospel and the community. I will expand on the community element here. When one considers the local context of Ablewell, one sees a tight community with a strong identity. There are therefore strong bonds that link together the relationships in the community and individuals have a distinct identity and role. Chester and Timmis (2007:38-45) explain that when one becomes a Christian, one severs the relationship bonds of one’s old life and dispenses with one’s former identity. Their scriptural basis for this is found in Matt.10:34-37; Mark 3:31-35 and Luke 11:27, 28. The new Christian builds new relationships in his or her new community – the church. He or she therefore forms a new identity as part of the community.

In the local context of Ablewell, this is important. People have to let go of the strong identity that they protect so tenaciously to take on a new identity in the church community. The question is: Does the church offer an attractive alternative to what they already have in secular society? Does it offer them the community ethos they hold so dear? I believe that the current answer would be “no”.

My reason for saying this lies in a broad understanding of *koinonia*. This Greek word that is translated as “community” can also be linked with the words “common”, “sharing” and “participation” (Chester & Timmis 2007:41). And it is the final word, “participation”, that I wish to focus on here.

When one looks at both the present and historical situations at Ablewell, lack of “participation” is evident. “Body” ministry does not function like it once did. The leadership have made major construction and children’s ministry decisions without consulting the congregation. The “*El Shammah*” revival promise had been made to Edward and his wife is held out as the central hope for the whole church. Similar revelations to others in the body concerning the need to stay independent or construction plans have been ignored. One can see why accusations of autocratic leadership were levelled at Edward in the past by a congregation that does not feel that it can – and therefore does not – participate.

This style of leadership is the key issue here. Edward said that Ablewell should be run “theocratically”, with God guiding its ministry. Although I do not disagree with his emphasis on divine direction, I do feel a church led “pneumacratically” – by the Holy Spirit through the body – is more in line with a New Testament model of a church. If the body is encouraged to minister through the spiritual gifts^{viii} (like healing), the community will be edified and encouraged. I believe that as the sense of community increases, there will be more freedom for this Spirit ministry: a cyclical pattern of mutual nourishment between Spirit and community.

The empowered community will have a strong identity. The Spirit will give it life (John 6:63) and will point to Jesus (1 John 5:6). The attraction of Jesus will be a strong reason to break cherished secular bonds and forge new ones as part of Christ’s community at Ablewell. I saw and experienced glimpses of this during my research and the historical record shows that it was a feature in the past. Whether it will be an option for the future remains to be seen.

Conclusion

Some people might say that it would have been possible to reach the above conclusions from just applying biblical knowledge to the present situation, but I believe that the historical analysis has facilitated the hermeneutical task. There is nothing in the meeting minutes about the ministry of Roy

Line, Nick Simm's second spell at Ablewell or the time when Ablewell was under the authority of the church elders. The oral interviews filled in these gaps. It is significant for this study that the interviewees gave a more detailed and personal account of what had happened than what is available in the meeting minutes. Linda's recollection of Roy Line's ministry is a good example of an interview that offered evidence of historical tension with authoritarian approaches at Ablewell.

While there are many positives, one should note the problems that can be associated with the oral history interview approach which I used. Some interviewees held back information on sensitive topics. Examples of this are when Mark and Sara were questioned about Rick Hally's "immature" faith and the fact that Linda was the only interviewee who mentioned Roy Line's turbulent ministry. Errors of recall were also evident in some interviewees' answers, for example Nick's error about the numbers who had been present at the founding of the church. As a practical theologian who is inexperienced in oral history methodology, I have to take some of the blame for these "mistakes of memory" (Field 2008:146). I am still active at Ablewell and continue to learn about the interviewees and their lifestyles. Backed by this improved understanding, I would like to conduct further interviews with more specific questions targeting set periods. Every interviewee except Linda avoided talking about the ministry of Roy Line and this still seems to influence people who experienced this difficult time. This study did not uncover the full extent of the issues at Ablewell and I believe that further work will produce improved results.

These problems noted, I do feel that oral history interviewing has been shown to be a useful tool for practical theologians who attempt to interpret congregational issues that are often complex. It has shown how patchy Pentecostal historical records can be developed to make them significantly more useful for hermeneutic tasks. What this study has made clear is that we ignore history at our peril. Ablewell's past offers many insights into present issues that, once rectified, should lead to a happier, freer and more effective church community for many years to come.

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Interviews

Nick. Interview 1 with author, 28 January 2009.
Ruth. Interview 2 with author, 20 April 2009.
Mark and Sara. Interview 3 with author, 29 June 2009.
Chris and Isla. Interview 4 with author, 30 June 2009.
Edward. Interview 5 with author, 1 July 2009.
Linda. Interview 6 with author, 10 July 2009.

End Notes

- 1 St Lawrence's in Eyam, Derbyshire, is an excellent example. It is famous for its part in alleviating the plague of 1666, an event that dominates the fundraising capabilities of the church in the present day (see www.eyamchurch.org for details).
- 2 Here "Pentecostal" refers to the "classic" Pentecostal groups of the Apostolic Faith Mission, Full Gospel Church and Assemblies of God.
- 3 A pseudonym is used to maintain confidentiality. Pseudonyms are also used for individuals who participated in the study and for characters from Ablewell's past.
- 4 The Sinomlando Centre for Oral History and Memory Work, University of KwaZulu-Natal. This is a leading centre for oral history work in South Africa. Under the guidance of scholars like Philippe Denis and Radikobo Ntsimane, it has recognised the importance of oral historical methodology in both the academic sphere and at local level. A good example of the standard and type of work produced by the Centre is that of Denis and Ntsimane's *Oral History in a wounded country: interactive interviewing in South Africa* (2008. Scottsville: UKZN Press). Further information is available on the website.
www.sinomlando.ukzn.ac.za .
- 5 I prefer this terminology over the more absolute term "worldview". Modern life-view assumptions dominate but are interspersed with postmodern assumptions that are alien to the modern worldview.
- 6 Available in full in Watt (1992:205–208).
- 7 Five questions were used in the full study but the fifth question related to views that are not strictly relevant for this article.
- 8 I am aware of the work of Berding (2000) and Aker (2002) on "gifts" and "ministries". I choose to use "gifts" here for ease of communication, although I do agree with Berding and Aker's call to use the concept of ministries in relation to the gifts that are listed in 1Cor.12-14, Rom.12 and Eph.4:11.