

Does “I do” include God?

By

Phillip Wilson

A Graduate Project Final Paper

Submitted to

Atlantic School of Theology

Halifax, Nova Scotia

in partial fulfillment of the

requirement for the

Master of Divinity Degree

December, 2017. Halifax, Nova Scotia

© 2017

Phillip Wilson

December 9th, 2017

Approved by: Dr. Susan Willhauck

Associate Professor of Pastoral Theology

Date: December 9th, 2017

Table of Contents

Research Ethics Board Certificate	3
Introduction	4
Research Question, Phases, Methodology and Questions	5
Review of Literature	7
Historical context of marriage	7
The United Church of Canada views of marriage	9
Spiritual versus Religious	10
Method	12
Data Collection	13
Data Analysis	14
Relationship Theme	14
Authority and Identity Theme	16
Content or Minimum Requirement Theme	17
Advice	19
Evaluation and Implications	19
Bibliography	22
Appendix 1 – REB Proposal	23

Certificate of Ethical Acceptability for Research Involving Humans

This is to certify that the Research Ethics Board has examined the research proposal:

AST REB File number:	0032017
Title of Research Project:	Does "I do" include God?
Faculty Supervisor:	Dr. Susan Willhauck
Student Investigator	Phillip Wilson

and concludes that in all respects the proposed project meets appropriate standards of ethical acceptability and is in accordance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans (TCPS 2) and Atlantic School of Theology's relevant policies.

Approval Period: 8 September 2017 to 16 April 2018
--

Dated this 12th day of October, 2017 at Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Dr. Alyda Faber
Chair, Research Ethics Board
Atlantic School of Theology
660 Francklyn Street
Halifax, Nova Scotia
B3H 3B5

Does “I do” include God?

By Phillip Wilson

Abstract

“Does ‘I do’ include God?” is a research project by Phillip Wilson, submitted December 9, 2017, in partial fulfillment of the Master of Divinity at the Atlantic School of Theology in Halifax, Nova Scotia. This qualitative study seeks to explore the experiences of United Church of Canada clergy officiating weddings that are not explicitly Christian. Included is a review of relevant literature, a general theological framework, and data provided by an online survey and by the research partners. The benefits of this research will be to inform the United Church of Canada, current clergy and theological students as to the practice among the church. The data may allow the church to identify and respond to the phenomenon of the population segment who identify as *spiritual but not religious*.

Introduction

My interest in this research topic arose when I was asked to officiate two weddings that were of personal significance. One wedding is for a Deaf couple; this is important because of my being both the son of Deaf parents and a Sign Language Interpreter. The second wedding is for my god-daughter, who had originally asked if I would interpret her wedding before asking if I would officiate. These two requests wanted me to officiate, but specifically did not want an overly Christian wedding ceremony. I had previous discussions with my Education Supervisor who influenced my position when officiating weddings. He shared a personal experience with an interfaith wedding for his daughter’s friend. The learning was the use of *God language* and prayer in any future weddings. My stance became, “I am a minister and the ceremony will be explicitly Christian.” My stance had a broad scope, and my minimum requirement was a form of Christian prayer and a scriptural passage. Before these two requests, couples were agreeable to my requirements and selected prayers and a scripture reading. My presence,

the prayer and scripture reading fulfilled my need for explicit Christianity in the ceremony. My practice was to offer a brief reflection, speaking of love and partnership that was not explicitly focused on God. My conflict arose because of my desire to officiate at these two weddings, giving rise to my interest in the topic of my research. I wanted to investigate what the experiences of other clergy were when in a similar position.

Purpose and Research Questions

The question I have elected to study is “What are the experiences of The United Church of Canada clergy officiating weddings that are not explicitly Christian?” The scope of this study will be confined to United Church of Canada clergy who are licensed in their respective provinces to officiate weddings.

The first phase of the research was conducted utilizing Survey Monkey, an online survey tool. The survey gathered demographic information of respondents, whether they have experienced being asked to officiate weddings without explicit Christianity included in the ceremony, and a section to offer a brief comment. The online survey questions included the following:

- Male or Female (it is worth noting this question was removed from the original survey as it was determined not to be significant data)
- Province you reside in:
- Are you:
 - Ordained, Diaconal, Designed Lay, Other
- Years in Ministry:
 - 0-5, 6-10, 11-20, 20 over
- Approximately how many weddings have you officiated?

- 0-20, 20-50, 50 or more
- Have you ever been asked to officiate a wedding without Christian language and/or symbols?
 - Yes/No
- If yes, did you officiate the wedding?
 - Yes/No ...Please comment as to why? (a one-hundred-word comment box was offered to respondents)

As a part of the survey, participants were invited to be interviewed by the researcher and were given an email address to express their willingness to participate.

The survey was designed to offer anonymity as much as possible and asked no identifying information of respondents.

During the second phase of the research, interviews were conducted with respondents through their choice of Skype or Facetime, telephone, or a face-to-face interview, if geographically close. Once interviewees were identified, consent forms were sent electronically to all partners and returned to the researcher. Interview questions included the following:

- Describe an experience where you were asked to officiate at a wedding that was not Christian?
- Did this experience change or influence your position on weddings?
 - If so, how?
- What do you feel are the key elements required for a Christian wedding?
- Have your thoughts on this changed over the course of your ministry?
- Does your current pastoral charge have a wedding policy that reflects your position on weddings?
- Do you accept to officiate weddings outside of the church building/sanctuary?
- What advice do you have for people who are going to be faced with a similar request?

- The follow up question: Are you aware that the United Church has a document "Marriage: A United Church Understanding" that notes "In United Church celebrations of marriage, several elements characterize the service of worship"?

Review of Literature

For the purposes of this literature review, an examination of literature will not include the area of the sacramentality of marriage, but marriage within the Reformed Protestant tradition. The main goal of this review will be to explore the following:

- Historical context of marriage
- The United Church of Canada's views on marriage
- Spiritual versus Religious

There have been many mainstream media articles in newspapers and magazines that discuss the decreasing use of clergy and/or the church for weddings or the popularity of non-clergy officiants.¹ Given this mainstream identification of a 'trend', there has been an increase in scholarly work on the issue but none with the context of The United Church of Canada.

Historical context of marriage

The early history of marriage places the church at the fringe regarding the marriage ceremony, "marriage was not a Christian institution"² In the late tenth or early

¹ [http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=126426016;](http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=126426016)
<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/11/fashion/more-couples-ask-friends-or-family-members-to-marry-them.html>. Accessed July 24, 2017.

² Charlotte Methuen. "Thinking About Marriage: An Excursion Through Christian History." *Modern Believing* 55, no. 2 (2014). 153.

eleventh centuries, marriages “were generally entered into not in the church, but outside the church door.”³ Charlotte Methuen suggests 1 Corinthians 7:14 speaks of Paul’s belief “a Christian partner could make a marriage holy.”⁴ The eleventh century saw a shift toward the ‘solemnization’ of marriages, recognizing that “it was the couple who actually made the marriage.”⁵ Couples legally did not need the formal “involvement of a priest, so that would be recognized by the church.” The Protestant Reformation brought marriage to a new level of importance, and by the eighteenth century could only be conducted by an “episcopally ordained minister”.⁶ Martin Luther stated that marriages were “blessed by God...[he] maintained that it is a secular association”⁷ The Lutheran tradition developed a belief that marriages were “governed by the state, not the church”⁸ Marriage: A United Church of Canada Understanding, states “the religious ceremony was meant to be public granting statues to the married couple in the community.”⁹ During the

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ R. Probert., “Examining Law Through the Lens of Literature: The Formation of Marriage in Eighteenth-Century England”. *Law and Humanities*, 2. (2008). 35.

⁷ Kimberly Bracken Long. *From This Day Forward-Rethinking The Christian Wedding*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 68.

⁸ Ibid., 69.

⁹ The United Church of Canada., *Marriage: A United Church of Canada Understanding*. (Toronto, The United Church of Canada, 2005), 8. Accessed July 24, 2017. (<https://commons.united-church.ca/Documents/What%20We%20Believe%20and%20Why/Gender%20and%20Sexuality/Marriage,%20A%20United%20Church%20of%20Canada%20Understanding.pdf>)

period of reformation, a clergy's role was to officiate "on the authority of the state."¹⁰

Calvin began with similar thoughts of marriage to that of Luther, later believing that "God draws to people into a covenant relationship."¹¹ Calvin is acknowledged to have officiated at over 250 weddings, and stressed the importance of the marriages taking place "in the midst of community."¹² Within a Canadian context, "all ordained ministers" were finally given the authority to officiate marriages in 1857.¹³ This historical review has highlighted the possible return of clergy acting on behalf of the state and removing marriages from the Christian church.

The United Church of Canada views on marriage

Although there have been times in the history of the United Church of Canada where the denomination has examined its stance on marriages, little work has been done on the topic of marriages as it pertains to individuals who may identify themselves as *spiritual but not religious*.

- 1960s – marriage breakdown, divorce and remarriage.
- 1988 – relationship and human sexuality.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Kimberly Bracken Long. *From This Day Forward-Rethinking The Christian Wedding*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 70.

¹² Ibid., 74

¹³ The United Church of Canada., *Marriage: A United Church of Canada Understanding*. (Toronto, The United Church of Canada, 2005), 8. Accessed July 24, 2017. <https://commons.united-church.ca/Documents/What%20We%20Believe%20and%20Why/Gender%20and%20Sexuality/Marriage,%20A%20United%20Church%20of%20Canada%20Understanding.pdf>

- 2003 – lobbying the Federal Government to support same-sex marriages.

Although The United Church is of the reform tradition and does not deem marriages as a sacrament, it does “believe marriage to be profoundly sacramental”.¹⁴ Marriage: A United Church Understanding does clearly identify characterize celebrations of marriages and worship:¹⁵

- God is praised as the source of love and the initiator of covenant.
- Gospel values (love, justice, compassion) made known to us in Jesus are expressed
- Scripture is read and proclaimed in some form.
- Witness in the legal sense are acknowledged, as well as the presence and support of family, guests, and congregation.
- Promises are made between the couple and before God.

The United Church of Canada’s “What We Believe” page of its website states the General Council may set a “norm”, but local congregations “develop their own policy and practices.”¹⁶ This highlights a gap in identifying what the practice is for the local congregations and the clergy who serve them.

Spiritual versus Religious

¹⁴ Ibid., 9.

¹⁵ Ibid., 10.

¹⁶ <http://www.united-church.ca/community-faith/welcome-united-church-canada/what-we-believe>, accessed July 23, 2017

Statistics Canada General Social Survey notes “Between 1985 and 2004, the share of Canadians aged 15 and older reporting no religious affiliation increased by seven percentage points from 12% to 19%”¹⁷ In the United Church Observer magazine, an article entitled “I’m not religious. I’m spiritual.” delves into the popularity of spiritual but not religious movement. Even though there is an increase in this group of Canadians, the Observer article cites Reginald Bibby believing these non-religious people “will return to the fold later in life.”¹⁸ Boaz Huss believes that the spiritual movement “challenges the division created in the modern era between the religious and secular realms.”¹⁹ Huss believes that the spirituality movement is a new “cultural dominant category” that are “neither religious or secular” and is not easily defined.²⁰ Though there has been some research on this movement, there seems little research as to how it impacts weddings.

In a 2015 research article, Dusty Hoesly examines the increase in the use of “friends or relatives who have become ordained online” to officiate at weddings.²¹ Though his research examines couples who used Universal Life Church ordained persons, he substantiates the increasing ‘secularization’ of weddings.²² Hoesly identifies couples’

¹⁷ Warren Clark and Grant Schellenberg. “Who is Religious”, (Statistics Canada, 2008), 2. accessed July 24, 2017, <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11-008-x/2006001/9181-eng.htm>

¹⁸ http://www.ucobserver.org/faith/2009/06/not_religious/, accessed July 24, 2017

¹⁹ Boaz Huss., “Spirituality: The Emergence of a New Cultural Category and Its Challenge to the Religious and the Secular”, *Journal of Contemporary Religion* (2014), DOI: 10.1080113537903.2014.864803. 47.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 53, 54.

²¹ Dusty Hoesly. “‘Need a Minister? How About Your Brother?’: The Universal Church Life Church between Religion and Non-Religion”, *Secularism and Nonreligion*, 4:12 (2015): 1.

²² *Ibid.*

desire to have their weddings reflect their own “conscious exclusion of most ‘religious’ language” and the increased “personalized” nature of weddings.²³ He cites research conducted by Pew Research Center, suggesting that “younger generations are more secular” as compared to older generations.²⁴ Three other references are given suggesting a decline in “weddings officiated by traditional clergy” (Werner,2010; Boorstiend, 2011; Gootman, 2012).²⁵ A Statistics Canada survey shows that in 2000, 157,395 marriages were registered, and 119,870 were officiated by clergy. In contrast, in 2004, 146, 242 marriages were officiated by 108,563 clergy.²⁶ Although there is a decrease in clergy officiating in weddings, there are some clergy who are continuing to officiate weddings for those couples who may not be religious. Hosely’s research only addresses a particular view and within the context of his denomination of the Universal Life Church, not the United Church.

Method

The method of research was a grounded theory approach with a personal narrative tool for gathering clergy experiences. Merriam quotes J. Corbin and A. Strauss, “The end result of this type of qualitative study is a theory that emerges from...the data.”²⁷ which

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.,3.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ “Marriages, by type of marriage and type of officiant, Canada, provinces and territories” (Statistics Canada, 2009) accessed July 24, 2017, <http://www5.statcan.gc.ca/cansim/a26?lang=eng&id=1011013>

²⁷ Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research: Guide to Design and Implementation*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 29.

is why I have selected grounded theory as my methodology. Grounded theory is suited for a study where there is a need for “building theory”²⁸. This study will have a focus on “specificity” on the current practice of clergy and may inform the future ‘practice’ of clergy and the church.²⁹ Another quality of grounded theory, is that the research may be used to frame future research on a related topic, such as why couples choose clergy to officiate when they identify as ‘Spiritual but Not Religious’.

The survey and semi-structured interview questions are, as Creswell explains, the “focus” to develop an “understanding how individuals experience the process [practice] and identifying the steps in the process.”³⁰ The survey was launched in early September after receiving my Ethics Board Approval. It was my intent to have thirty survey respondents and six to eight interview participants. Interviews were conducted and transcribed in early October. Data analysis included open coding with a provision to ask further clarifying or “detailed questions that help to shape the axial coding phase” to further develop the core phenomenon and “what strategies were employed during the process.”³¹ It is worth noting that I did ask a follow up question after the axial coding was concluded.

An invitation was circulated through social media networking. Original plans allowed for an electronic invitation to be circulated via email to the various conferences

²⁸ Ibid, 30.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ John W. Creswell, *Second Edition – Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2007), 66.

³¹ Ibid.

in the United Church of Canada and ministerial colleagues. Social media response was overwhelming, and only a few electronic invitations were distributed. The distance and variety of people who expressed interest determined the scope. Once interviewees had been identified, consent forms were sent electronically to all partners and returned to the researcher. Prior to the interview commencing, partners were informed that all interviews were to be recorded and destroyed at the completion of the project; the interviews may be stopped at any time; and at their request, pastoral care would be provided by a neutral party.

Data Collection

A total of one hundred responses were collected and seven interviews were conducted. Of the seven research partners, four were women and three were men. Experience in ministry ranged from five to over twenty years. Province of Residency included Manitoba, Ontario, Saskatchewan and Prince Edward Island. Partners were given the opportunity to select a pseudonym for the purposes of the research: Puddle, Kitten, Minerva, Gordie Boy, William, Sunshine and Peppie.

Six interviews were conducted using an internet-based video platform such as Skype or Facetime, and one interview was conducted by phone. All interviews were recorded using a hand-held digital recorder and a back-up recording on a laptop. The interviews were conducted in a closed office space assuring privacy for all partners.

Data Analysis

As previously mentioned, the online survey had one hundred responses. Classifications of clergy were as follows: ordained (87%), diaconal (4%), designated lay

minister (7%) and student minister (2%). Most respondents, 71% had over 11 years of ministry and 38% with 10 or fewer years. Forty-two percent of respondents officiated 20 or fewer weddings, 22% between 20 to 50 and 36% 50 or more. Almost three-quarters of respondents had been asked to officiate a wedding without Christian language (73%). When asked if they officiated the wedding, only 88 respondents answered the question: 61.5% said yes (59 respondents) and 30% said no (29 respondents), and a total of 85 or 88.5% offered comments. Many of these comments supported the identified themes that emerged from the interviews. There were three main themes that emerged from the data: relationship, authority and identity, and content or minimum requirements. A fourth category, advice, will be discussed that emerged from the data of the research partners' interviews. Because of an additional question asked to each of the research partners, a fourth set of responses was analyzed and identified as advice. Relationship between clergy and couples emerged as the basis for 61.5% of clergy who continued and officiated the wedding. This statistic, coupled with the comments of survey respondents and research partners, indicates that developing a connection or relationship with open communication and dialogue to build a sense of trust was the contributing factor in officiating the wedding. Online comments included the following:

- Engage in further conversation by building trust
- Their reasoning feels authentic to me
- Talking about what they do want, and what may have meaning for them
- Talked about what language might sound like
- Plan a ceremony that has meaning to them
- An invitation to experience the church
- Create something that embraced the couple's feelings of Spirit
- God language they ended up liking
- Work without pushing religion into them
- Honour and respect having conversation
- Use of language "Higher Power" however you understand it

Axial coding of interview transcripts offers these thoughts:

Gordieboy...said that he worked collaboratively with the couple and they appreciated his level of integrity that they wanted as a part of their wedding. "To me it's about relationship and authenticity."

For Sunshine, trust was important to develop in her relationship with the couple over several meetings. Relationship is a key thing in all that I do. A sense of honour for Sunshine that she was not serving as a simple functionary.

Peppie believes the couple ought to be happy "after all it's their day" but for Peppie, one needs to be authentic to their own beliefs and role in the church.

Puddle believes it is important to share your views of a sacred wedding with the couple as you begin that conversation – the first meeting or two is about establishing a relationship.

This primary theme provided the greatest insight. The majority of clergy did not respond with a 'flat-out no' but saw an opportunity to engage in relationship building with the requesting couples.

Authority and identity emerged as a secondary theme. Clergy acknowledged their license to marry because of our role within the church. One survey comment offers this insight: "my authority to perform the ceremony is as a Christian minister." Other comments acknowledge our "covenanted relationship with our pastoral charge", "a function of our office", and is a "part of our Call to ministry." Other comments that stood out were, "I am a Minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, we are a package deal" and "I am neither competent nor called to lead non-Christian ceremonies." I believe it is noteworthy to acknowledge two opposing comments to the online survey as reasoning for officiating the wedding(s). The comments included, "Marrying in Ontario doesn't require specific language" and "I am acting as a civil servant". None of the seven research partners identified directly with this sentiment offering:

William believes “I am a Christian Minister licensed to perform marriages through my denomination authorizing me to do these weddings.” William shared that as the pronouncement was made “I pronounce you by the authority granted to me through Jesus Christ in the United Church of Canada by the laws of the Marriage Act...”

Puddle and others acknowledged the legal requirements of officiating at weddings in the respective provinces, saying “I do wedding ceremonies on behalf of the province.” Puddle also recognizes “your marriage license is connected to your call or appointment.”

Peppie shared these thoughts “I bring God, I am the God bringer and God is my job...the hope that is attached to that is part of what I do.”

Minerva shared that doing a non-Christian wedding “wouldn’t have been authentic for me, it would have been in the style of a wedding commissioner...especially when I was licensed as clergy.”

Sunshine offers this “I’m there and God is with me whether I use a lot or a little bit of language, so God is coming with me”. Sunshine shared that a couple ought not “ask a minister of the United Church, or any other denomination to deny who they are just so you can get married.”

A third and final theme that emerged from the data was content or minimum requirements. An interview question addressed each partner’s minimum requirement for officiating the wedding. Noteworthy is that some survey respondents offered comments related to this theme:

- Prayer and God-like language – Creator, Wholly Love were acceptable
- They were open to a sense of sacredness and spiritual language
- Being open to spiritual content
- Articulate a language of diversity, inclusivity, welcome and of course LOVE
- Sacredness of the union, using other language to talk about God’s presence – not churchy but was still Spirit filled
- The use of rituals and language that embraced the couple’s feelings of Spirit
- The service was spiritual and rooted in deep love
- Use of “Creator” language
- The ceremony wasn’t devoid of meaning, spirituality and love
- A mention of “A Song of Faith” as a basis for the use of language from
- Not explicitly Christian was implicitly spiritual

- Finally, the couple hungered for a spiritual experience that a marriage commissioner could not provide

Comments from the interviews:

Kitty:

- Anything that is representative of your relationship that makes it good, healthy and life-giving
- Couples tend to choose a prayer that shows the love the couple has for the people in attendance and the world
- They want to show that they care for something beyond just the two of them – their love is bigger than just the two of them

William:

- Not going to be bible-thumping or me preaching at you
- I often introduce myself and affiliate myself with my pastoral charge

Minerva:

- Couples come having a strong sense of spiritual connection
- Couples are open to having a wedding that honours the fact that it's not just about them
- Minerva recognizes that praising God as the source of love is a part of a wedding ceremony – which is a worship service

Peppie:

- If we don't do it, who is? (Using God-talk)
- Take every opportunity to plant little seeds
- However you want to say God, God has lots of names and faces

The final question asked only to the research partners, were what advice would they offer to future clergy who will be faced with these types of wedding requests?

Respondents made it clear that clergy will encounter this type of request during their ministry...”so be prepared and give it some thought.” A clear theme that appeared from the coding of responses was to check with the pastoral charge and their wedding policy – this will determine how to approach these requests. William summarized this very well, saying, “You’re not the Lone Ranger doing it yourself; there is a governing body that has said what they expect ministers will do at a bare minimum in a service.” He continues

with “Show couples love and show them Christ and when you do that, very rarely will they balk at the God stuff because they see love and Christ.” Other such comments:

Kitty: “I am loyal to the United Church and policies, I believe that God works through me and allows me to discern those boundaries showing God’s love – that’s my approach.” She continued, “the minimum is in my head and in my heart – listen for where it speaks to you and the to community gathered about love. Never loose sight that people can come into the church and come in contact with the church in a way that is life-giving.” “All people are a beloved child of God.”

Puddle: “Talk this over with others, mentors in ministry but also check against your own ego. God is present in the way we are trying to be with people. Seeks ways your Church and ministry can be a blessing in the community and around it, listen to the spirit within...if you can say it with integrity and feel really positive about it...do it.” Finally... “we no longer can expect people to conform to who we are”.

A trained Educational Supervisor, Gordieboy, offers this advice... “know and be ok with the fact that you can say no.”

Sunshine: “Honour what you do and who are on your faith journey” “temper what you do with the idea that its not ‘my way’” “This is about being one-to-one with people”

Evaluation and Implications

As I conclude my Master of Divinity Degree, I realize the limitations that the theological training students undergo. Students are required to complete university and denominational required courses – admittedly these do not equip students with every facet of ministry. This research may provide students and theological schools a glimpse into the current practice of those already in ministry. The reality for students is that we need formation resources, academic resources, supervised ministry resources and educational supervisors. This research can assist students with their formation for ministry. A unique quality of the United Church of Canada is that its clergy can fit into a wide continuum—those who may identify as either conservative to liberal.

Consulting with an advisor, Reverend Dr. Andrew O’Neil, he offers this recollection of a former professor who saw the need for *entry points* for people to experience church. Dr. O’Neil states that the United Church has tackled marriage as an “issue” but perhaps as a denomination we have yet to see it as an entry point for those who may identify as ‘Spiritual but Not Religious’.

The data provided some addition evidence of what I believe were two misconceptions held by couples and clergy. The first, as couples meet the minister, they do so with an image of what their wedding will look like and what a Christian ceremony is. These two images do not match, leading to the request for a non-Christian ceremony. I believe many of these couples are among the population who identify as Spiritual but Not Religious. Once the relationship is established and parameters established on expectations of couples and clergy, couples related to Christian components of the ceremony. I have concluded a need for further research to understand why couples who request a wedding without explicit Christianity proceed with clergy officiating. Sunshine does offer this insight, “Until you break through the stereotypes, or the preconceptions to show folks the minister isn’t the minister you thought you heard ten years ago.”

The second misconception has potential for additional graduate research projects: “What does Spiritual but Not Religious mean to Clergy?” Examining the concept are clergy quick to decline requests based on our preconceived understanding of what *Spiritual but Not Religious* means. Are we preventing an “entry point” when we encounter those who may identify as spiritual? In the end, the data shows that the clergy who agreed to officiate, experienced God was present and acknowledged, meeting the needs of both the clergy and the couples.

In conclusion, the data has identified the importance of establishing a relationship, dialogue and trust with couples seeking a minister to officiate a wedding without explicit Christianity. It acknowledges both the authority given to clergy to officiate and the content requirements. I believe these three themes can allow for clergy to seek ways to engage couples where they are, just as Jesus did with those on the fringes of society or our church world, and seek ways to be an *entry point* to the church.

Bibliography

- [http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=126426016;](http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=126426016)
<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/11/fashion/more-couples-ask-friends-or-family-members-to-marry-them.html>. Accessed July 24, 2017.
- Bracken Long, Kimberly. 2016. *From This Day Forward-Rethinking the Christian Wedding*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Clark, Warren and Schellenberg, Grant. 2008. *Who is Religious*. Ottawa: Statistics Canada. Accessed July 24, 2017. <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11-008-x/2006001/9181-eng.htm>.
- Creswell. 2007. *Second Edition - Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Hoesly, Dussty. 2015. "Need a Minister? How About Your Brother?: The Universal Church Life Church between Religion and Non-Religion." *Secularism and Nonreligion* (1): 4-12.
- Huss, Boaz. 2014. "Spirituality: The Emergence of a New Cultural Category and Its Challenges to the Religious and the Secular." *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 29 (1). Accessed July 23, 2017. doi:dx.doi.org.10.1080113537903.2014.864803.
- Merriam, Sharan B. 2009. *Qualitative Research: Guide to Design and Implementation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Methuen, Charlotte. 2014. "Thinking About Marriage: An Excursion Through Christian History."
- Probert, R. 2008. "Examining Law Through the Lens of Literature: The Formation of Marriage in Eighteenth-Century England." *Law and Humanities* (2): 68.
- Statistics Canada. 2009. *Marriages, by type of marriage and type of officiant, Canada, provinces and territories*. Ottawa: Statistics Canada. Accessed July 24, 2017. <http://www5.gc.ca/cansim/a26?lang=eng&id=1011013>.
- The United Church of Canada. 2005. *Marriage: A United Church of Canada Understanding*. Toronto: The United Church of Canada.
- What We Believe*. Accessed July 23, 2017. <http://www.united-church.ca/community-faith/welcome-united-church-canada/what-we-believe> .
- United Church Observer. Accessed July 24, 2017. http://www.ucobserver.org/faith/2009/06/not_religious/ .

Appendix 1: Copy of Research Ethics Board Proposal

Name of Student Investigator: Phillip Wilson

Title of Research Project: Does “I do” include God?

Summary of Proposed Research

Description

The question I have elected to study is, “What are the experiences of The United Church of Canada clergy officiating weddings that are not explicitly Christian?”

My interest in this research topic arose when I was asked to officiate two weddings that were of personal significance. One wedding is for a Deaf couple; this is important because of my being both the son of Deaf parents and a Sign Language Interpreter. The second wedding is for my god-daughter, who had originally asked if I would interpret her wedding before asking if I would officiate. These two requests wanted me to officiate but specifically did not want over Christianity in the wedding ceremony. I had previous discussions with my Education Supervisor who influenced my position when officiating weddings. He shared a personal experience with an interfaith wedding for his daughter’s friend. The learning was the use of ‘God language’ and prayer in any future weddings. My stance became, “I am a minister and the ceremony will be explicitly Christian.” My stance had a broad scope, and my minimum requirement was a form of Christian prayer and a scriptural passage. Before these two requests, couples were agreeable to my requirements and selected prayers and a scripture reading. My presence, the prayer and scripture reading fulfilled my need for explicit Christianity in the ceremony. My practice was to offer a brief reflection, speaking of love and partnership that was not explicitly focused on God. My conflict arose because of my desire to officiate at these two weddings, giving rise to my interest in the topic of my research. I wanted to investigate what were the experiences of other clergy when in a similar position.

Proposed Research Field Sites

This research will be confined to United Church of Canada clergy who are licensed in their respective provinces to officiate weddings.

The first phase of the research will be to conduct an online survey that gathers demographic information of respondents, whether they have experienced being asked to officiate weddings without explicit Christianity included in the ceremony, and a section to offer a brief comment.³² As a part of the survey, participants will be invited to be interviewed by the researcher and given an email address to express their willingness to participate. The survey will

³² See Appendix A.

be designed to offer anonymity as much as is possible, and will ask no identifying information of respondents.

An invitation will be circulated through social media networking, and an electronic invitation will be circulated via email to the various Conferences in the United Church of Canada and ministerial colleagues for distribution electronically. (snowball effect)³³ The distance and variety of the people who express interest will determine the scope.

The second phase of the research will be to conduct interviews with respondents through their choice of Skype, telephone, or a face-to-face interview, if geographically close. Once interviewees have been identified, consent forms will be sent electronically to all partners. At the time of all interviews, partners will be informed; all interviews will be recorded and to be destroyed at the completion of the project and the interviews may be stopped at any time. See appendix B for interview questions.

Principal Research Consultants

At the time of this proposal, invitations have been electronically sent to:

Rev. Dr. Laurence De Wolfe – Presbyterian Church of Canada – Former Faculty of The Atlantic School of Theology.

Rev. Dr. Andrew O'Neill – United Church of Canada – Sessional Instructor The Atlantic School of Theology.

Methodology

The method of research will be a grounded theory approach with a personal narrative tool for gathering clergy experiences. Merriam quotes J. Corbin and A. Strauss, “The end result of this type of qualitative study is a theory that emerges from...the data.”³⁴ which why I have selected Grounded Theory as my methodology. Grounded Theory is suited for a study where there is a need for “building theory”.³⁵ This study will have a particular focus or “specificity”, on the current practice of clergy and may inform the future ‘practice’ of clergy and the church.³⁶ Another quality of grounded theory, is that the research may be used to frame future research on a related topic, such as why couples choose clergy to officiate when they identify as “Spiritual But Not Religious”.

³³ See Appendix C.

³⁴ Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research: Guide to Design and Implementation*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 29.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

It is my intention to utilize research tools of an online survey and semi-structured interviews. The survey and interview questions are, as Creswell explains, the “focus” to develop an “understanding how individuals experience the process [practice] and identifying the steps in the process.” I will seek to launch the online survey immediately after receiving my approval. After initially open coding, the researcher may ask further clarifying or “detailed questions that help to shape the axial coding phase” to further develop the core phenomenon and “what strategies were employed during the process.” As this phase of coding occurs, an analysis of data will present a “central phenomenon” and the “casual conditions” and “specific strategies” attempting to identify any “consequences” or “the outcomes of the strategies.”

The recruitment of online survey participants is outlined above and will begin after receiving REB approval (see Appendix D). My goal will be to obtain a minimum of 20-30 online responses, giving me a saturation level to obtain a good sampling. Through the online survey, I will seek 8 participants with the aim of saturating data categories as they emerge. If, after 6 participants, I’m receiving no new data, I will then consider saturation to have been achieved. 8 will be my minimum number of participants.

The purpose of this research is to use a qualitative research approach, which is foundational to developing a deeper understanding of the practice of clergy as influenced by their experiences. Data will allow for categories to emerge that will then inform the practice of clergy within The United Church of Canada. The results of this research may form the foundations of further study, such as why couples choose clergy when seeking non-explicit Christianity.

The results of this research will be presented on November 27, 2017 at a location to be determined. The final results and subsequent paper will be due by December 9, 2017.

Potential Benefits from Study

The benefits of this research will be to inform the United Church of Canada, current clergy and theological students as to the practice among the church. The data may allow the church to identify and respond to the phenomenon of the population segment who are not religious but seek clergy officiated weddings.

Potential Risks from Study

No risks are anticipated arising from this study, and participants can choose to end their participation at any time.

Pastoral Care

All research partners prior to the start of the interview will be informed that pastoral care is available should they request it. Rev. Phil Hobbs has agreed to be available to provide this service.

Process for Obtaining Informed Consent

After I have identified potential participants, I will telephone or email them to ask if they are willing, in principle, to participate. If their answer is affirmative, I will arrange an interview place and time. I will indicate to them that they will be asked to sign an informed consent form, but they are free to decide at that point or at any point to withdraw. At the beginning of the meeting and before the interview begins, I will share the background of my project, answer questions they might have and ask them to sign the consent form (see appendix C). I will inform participants that, should they become distressed in any way during the interview, I can refer them to a helping professional. Participants will have the option to end the interview at any point, and I will delete the recording if they decide to withdraw from the study. See Appendix E.

Process for Protecting Identity of Participants and Confidentiality of Data

Protecting Identity of Participants and Storage and Destruction of Data:

- Upon receiving a signed Informed Consent from research participants, I will:
 - provide one copy for the participants
 - keep one copy for myself, which I will place in an envelope separate from all other materials and store in a locked file cabinet in my home office.
 - provide one copy for my supervisor, Dr. Susan Willhauck, also placed in a separate envelope, who will store it in a locked file cabinet in her office at AST
 - Participants will be given code names. Audio tapes of interviews will be recorded on a digital recording device. These digital recording devices will be kept in locked brief cases or safes and secured at all times during data collection from the time of Informed Consent until deleted permanently from my device at the completion of the research by December 9, 2017.
- Within two weeks of each interview, I will transcribe the interviews onto a Word document. The Word Document transcripts will be kept on a password protected computer from the time of data collection until the final paper is due on December 9, 2017.

- When the final paper is submitted to my supervisor on December 9, 2017 the Word Document transcripts of interviews will also be submitted to her, either as hard copies or disposable CDs and deleted from my computer and trash bin.
- My supervisor, Dr. Susan Willhauck, will store transcripts of interviews in a locked file cabinet in her office at AST for one year and all data materials will be destroyed by shredding or crushing.

Appendix A: Proposed Online Survey Questions

(Demographic based questions)

- Male or Female

- Province you reside in:

- Are you:
Ordained, Diaconal, Designed Lay, Other

- Years in Ministry:
0-5, 6-10, 11-20, 20 over

- Approximately how many weddings have you officiated?
0-20, 20-50, 50 or more

- Have you ever been asked to officiate a wedding without Christian language and/or symbols?
 - Yes/No

 - If yes, did you officiate the wedding?
 - Yes/No OR Yes & No

- Please comment as to why?

- Would you be willing to participate in a brief interview related to this research?
(If you are willing, please contact the research at phi.wilson@astheology.ns.ca)

Appendix B: Proposed Interview Questions

- Describe an experience where you were asked to officiate at a wedding that was not Christian?
- Did this experience change or influence your position on weddings?
 - If so, how? [Comment box]
- What do you feel are the key elements required for a Christian wedding?
- Have your thoughts on this changed over the course of your ministry?
- Does your current pastoral charge have a wedding policy that reflects your position on weddings?
- Do you accept to officiate weddings outside of the church building/sanctuary?

Appendix C: Electronic Invitation to Participate to Online Survey

As a student at The Atlantic School of Theology, students are required to engage in a study of an issue important to the student.

I am inviting United Church of Canada clergy, who are licensed for weddings, to respond to a short online survey. The survey will not take more than 10 minutes with primarily demographic information, yes/no questions and a brief comments section. You will be offered a further opportunity to further participate in interviews about your personal experience on officiating weddings without explicit Christianity. This survey will not require any identifying information, except for gender, years in ministry, number of weddings and province/territory of residency.

Please take a few minutes, go to (web link – Survey Monkey) and respond to the survey.

If you would like further information, please contact Phillip Wilson at phil.wilson@astheology.ns.ca.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Appendix D: Invitation to Participate via the Online Survey

Thank you for your participation in this online survey. It is greatly appreciated.

If you wish to be interviewed by me, Phillip Wilson, to share your experience of when you have been asked to officiate a wedding without explicit Christianity, please email the researcher at phil.wilson@astheology.ns.ca. Please provide your phone number, province of residency and email address.

Upon receipt of your email, a random selection process of respondents will be conducted and interview candidates will then receive a confirmation email with an Informed Consent. The email will also contain further instructions about returning the Informed Consent to Phillip Wilson and to arrange a suitable date and time for the interview.

Appendix E: Informed Consent

Title of Project: Does “I do” include God?

Name of Principal Investigator [PI]: Phillip Wilson

Atlantic School of Theology

660 Francklyn Street

Halifax, NS B3H 3B5

613.540.0396

phil.wilson@astheolog.ns.ca

I am a student enrolled in the Master of Divinity Program at Atlantic School of Theology. As part of my course work under the supervision of Dr. Susan Willhauck, I am conducting a study on “What are the experiences of United Church of Canada clergy officiating weddings that are not explicitly Christian?”

I will be interviewing people who are or have been licensed to officiate weddings who have been asked to officiate a wedding when asked to be explicitly non-Christian. I am inviting you to participate in my study. The purposes of this work are to examine what ideas and experiences participants may have; to increase the body of knowledge on practice of clergy within a United Church context, and to explore how these themes might filter into the life of the church.

Your participation in this project is appreciated. I will ask you a series of questions on your experience and will record your responses, either by digital recorder or electronic recording device (laptop).

The recordings and transcript will be held in a secure environment throughout this study, and after the final project is completed, they will be held in a locked file in the supervisor’s office for one year, at which time they will be destroyed.

If you are willing to participate in this project, please read the following and indicate your willingness to be involved by giving your signature at the end.

I acknowledge that the research procedures outlined have been explained to me, and that I have been given a copy of this consent. Any questions I had have been answered to my satisfaction. I know that I can contact the researcher at any time should I have further questions. I am aware that my participation in this study is purely voluntary, and I understand that I am free to withdraw from this study at any time. I understand that the personal record relating to this study will be kept confidential. I know that the researcher will make every effort to keep all information obtained in this study as confidential and anonymous as possible. Names and potentially revealing facts will be changed, thus affording me anonymity. To further protect

individual identities, this consent form will be sealed in an envelope and stored separately. Furthermore, the results of this study will be aggregated, and no individual participant will be identified.

The following is a timeline for the storage and destruction of data:

- Upon receiving a signed Informed Consent form from research participants, the researcher will:
 - Provide one copy for the participants.
 - Keep one copy which will be placed in an envelope separate from all other materials and stored in a secure location.
 - Provide one copy for my supervisor Dr. Susan Willhacuk, also placed in a separate envelope. The supervisor will store these in a locked file cabinet.
- Recordings of interviews will be recorded on a digital recording device or password protected computer. These devices will be kept locked and secured at all times during data collection, from the time of Informed Consent, through the public Grad Project presentations and until deleted permanently from the device on December 9, 2017
- Within two weeks of each interview, I will transcribe the interviews onto a Word document or pdf. The Word document transcripts will be kept on a password protected computer from the time of data collection until the final Grad Project paper is due on December 9, 2017.
- The public Grad Project Presentations take place on November 27, 2017 and the final project paper is due December 9, 2017. On that day, I will delete recordings of interviews and forward all transcriptions and copies of Informed Consent to my supervisor by January 1, 2018. The supervisor will store these documents in a locked file cabinet at AST for one year, at which time they will be shredded on December 9, 2018.

If you have questions, please contact me, the principal researcher at....

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Board of the Atlantic School of Theology in keeping with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans. If you have questions or concerns about the study, you may contact Dr. Alyda Faber, chair of the Research Ethics Board, at afaber@astheology.ns.ca.

By signing this consent form, you are indicating that you fully understand the above information and agree to participate in this study.

Participant's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Please keep one copy of this form for your own records.

Appendix F: Thank you letter to Participants

Dear (Partner's name),

I want to express my sincerest appreciation for your time responding to the online survey and further agreeing to participate in the interview.

Your interview and shared experience will provide insight for the United Church of Canada in understanding the practice of clergy when officiating weddings in a society that is increasingly 'non-religious'. It is my hope that this will identify some ways that the church may seek ways to minister to this community of people in Canada.

I also want to extend a personal invitation to join me for my presentation of the results of the study. I will be presenting the results in a public forum on November 27, 2017 (at location, yet to be determined) at 12:00 PM. If you wish to attend the presentation, please RSVP so I can ensure adequate seating. If you live outside of my area, I can provide details on how to join via a streaming service (Skype). This presentation will also be recorded and will be posted on the Atlantic School of Theology's YouTube channel for public viewing.

Once again, thank you for your time and willingness to participate in this study.

Sincerely,

Phillip Wilson

Principal Investigator

Atlantic School of Theology