

Why are people choosing to join Emmanuel Methodist Church, Barnsley?

Leslie Newton

This dissertation is my own work and has not been
submitted previously in support of any qualification or course.

A Dissertation Submitted in part-fulfilment of the requirements for the
Master of Arts in Evangelism Studies,
University of Sheffield at Cliff College

Abstract

Emmanuel Methodist Church, Barnsley began its life in a new building in March 2002, as the merger of three separate congregations. Since that time there has been significant growth both in numbers attending worship and in formal church membership.

This dissertation aimed to examine the reason for that growth, particularly since the three churches that came together had not been growing for many years. Furthermore it sought to dig below the surface comment often given that Emmanuel is growing ~~because it is new.~~ A key aim was to discover the underlying reasons drawing people to Emmanuel and encouraging them to join. It then drew out conclusions as to how the growth of Emmanuel can be sustained into the future, and what implications there are for the Barnsley Circuit, of which it is part, which comprises 30 churches, many of which are not growing.

Research was undertaken in two ways. Firstly, recent relevant research into merging churches, church plants and the area of church growth generally was examined. Secondly a sample of 20 Emmanuel joiners were interviewed to discern their reasons for being drawn to Emmanuel and then deciding to join.

The key findings of this research were that there are relatively few but very important elements to why Emmanuel is growing: the fact that the church has a reasonable ~~public profile~~ the atmosphere of welcome and acceptance, the ease with which people have been able to begin to contribute and develop their sense of belonging, and the quality of preaching and worship.

These findings give some comfort that it is possible for Emmanuel to ensure that growth continues into the future, beyond when it will no longer be considered ~~an~~

It also offers both encouragement and challenge to other churches in the Circuit: encouragement that they do not all need a new building to grow, but challenge that perhaps their ways of being church needs to change in order to facilitate growth.

Acknowledgements

The writer would like to thank the following for their help and assistance in enabling this dissertation to be completed:

- the Barnsley Circuit, Sheffield District and Methodist Connexion for financial support towards this MA course;
- the joiners of Emmanuel for so willingly agreeing to be interviewed and for so carefully thinking about their experiences at Emmanuel and before;
- the Barnsley Circuit for allowing me the time away from other work to concentrate on completing this piece of work;
- the tutorial staff at Cliff College for their inspiring leadership, wise insights and advice;
- Jayne Wragg for typing up interview material and Jan Eldred for proof-reading, and finally,
- Gill and Laura for sacrificing time together to enable me to complete this work.

Contents

Chapter One:	Setting the Scene	6
Chapter Two:	Surveying Techniques	14
Chapter Three:	Exploring Emmanuel's Grounds	20
Chapter Four:	Exploring Emmanuel's Growth	31
Chapter Five:	Taking the Soundings	41
Chapter Six:	Drawing the Threads Together	61
Chapter Seven:	Feeding Back to Emmanuel and the Circuit	74
Endnotes		80
Appendix:	The Interview Pro-forma	83
Bibliography		85

Chapter One: Setting the scene

Emmanuel Methodist Church, Barnsley opened its doors on March 23rd 2002. The President of the Methodist Conference, Revd Dr Christina Le Moignan, attended and spoke of the need to have our foundations right if the church was to grow. For a church built on the site of previous coal mining subsidence the message had added significance. The members prayed that the foundations, both spiritually and physically, were now firmly in place. But would the church grow? The past did not provide, in itself, much in the way of assurance of future success.

1.1 The origins of Emmanuel Methodist Church

The core congregation came from two merging churches, Zion United Methodist Church and Pitt Street Methodist Church. Zion United Methodist Church was itself the result of a merger in 1996 of two other Methodist churches located less than a mile apart and serving the same community (Old Town and Huddersfield Road.) That merger was the fruit of over 25 years of discussion between them, and was achieved on the basis that full consideration would be given to where the merged church should meet in the long-term future - in one of the existing buildings or in a new building. The Church Council eventually resolved that a new church should be built on the main road site of one of the former churches (Huddersfield Road), and ambitious plans were developed for a large-scale church and community centre.

It was in the midst of this process an invitation was extended to two neighbouring Methodist churches to join the project. One of these, Pitt Street, responded positively and a process of courtship preceded a formal merger in 2000. For most of the period from merger to occupation of the new church the two congregations

continued to operate separately, uniting for worship monthly and sharing business in a single Church Council. The combined membership of the two congregations was 135 at the point of becoming Emmanuel Methodist Church.

1.2 A context of consistent decline

The history of all three constituent churches tells a common story of consistent numerical decline. In days gone by, Pitt Street (almost in the town centre) had been very much the 'Circuit Church' - a thriving society of over 300 members. The original Preaching House building had to be demolished in the 1980s only shortly after a considerable scheme of modernisation had been completed. After a nomadic period the congregation returned in 1987 to what had been an adjacent Church Hall, now a multi-purpose space, used for worship and other activities, with various ancillary rooms attached.

Sadly this new start did not provide the growth that might have been hoped for. As was reported in the brochure to mark the Closing of Pitt Street in 2002, 'the membership of the church in 1996 was 78 and had been decreasing steadily since 1982 when there had been 223 members. Various initiatives had been attempted over the years to revive the mission of the church.'¹

The decline in membership continued unabated from 1996 to 2002, reducing from 78 to 51 at the point of merger. All this was despite the core congregation having some significant creative flair and lively commitment, particularly in the area of imaginative and all-age worship.

Huddersfield Road had opened in 1928, and enjoyed a thriving early period in its history with a very busy social scene, but also a significant spiritual strength based around prayer and Bible study.² By the time of their merger with Old Town in 1996, however, the age of the congregation and structural problems with the building rendered long-term survival apparently impossible.

Old Town, with a history of over 150 years, had not suffered quite so dramatically, and yet the decline was evident all the same. Whilst youth work was still thriving and the membership had a slightly more balanced age spread as compared to Huddersfield Road, the comment minuted in the discussions leading up to the 1996 merger is revealing: %t has been difficult to fill offices at Huddersfield Road for some years, it is becoming more difficult to do it at Old Town.³

All of this led to the view, expressed in the same meeting, that %Huddersfield Road will close within five years with present trends, Old Town may last ten years.⁴

A review of membership records and other indicators demonstrate the decline all too clearly. During merger discussions originally held in the early 1970s, and then revived in the mid-90s, the following statistics were noted:

	Huddersfield Road		Old Town		Combined	
	1970	1995	1970	1995	1970	1995
Membership	66	21	104	74	170	95
Number in worship	95	12	120	75	215	82
Sunday School	50	0	60	30	110	30
Nos at Midweek groups	105	10	140	105	245	115

Figure 1 – extracted from Circuit Records

Furthermore the years that followed the merger of Huddersfield Road and Old Town did little to suggest that merging was a principle that in itself encouraged growth.

The performance of the Circuit at large did not provide great hope either.

Year	Zion United Membership	Circuit Membership
1995	95	1404
1996	90	1411
1997	88	1406
1998	84	1367
1999	77	1302
2000	84	1268
2001	84	1241

Figure 2 – extracted from Circuit Records

1.3 A context of widespread lack of new members

Figure 3 below illustrates clearly the consistent lack of new members being received into both the Circuit and the relevant churches. No more than 1-2 members per church in the Circuit were being received each year on average, and in the merging churches only 14 new members (including reinstatements) had been received in 7 years.

Year	No of new members inc reinstatements			
	Circuit	Old Town/ Zion Utd	Huddersfld Road	Pitt Street
1995	64	4	1	0
1996	40	0	-	2
1997	58	0	-	0
1998	42	2	-	0
1999	25	0	-	0
2000	25	3	-	0
2001	38	2	-	0

Figure 3 – extracted from Circuit Records

Of course, this predicament was not peculiar to the Barnsley Circuit. The Sheffield District and indeed the whole of the Connexion has been in consistent decline for

many years. As Frost summarises⁵, figures of Free Church membership in England demonstrate a decline of about 3 per cent per year a rate from 1937 to 1947 before stabilising in 1950. However, decline continued at the end of the 1950s, accelerating in the 1960s. In the 1970s the Methodist Church lost 20 per cent of its membership, and in 1996 Methodist membership statistics revealed a continuing 2.5 per cent annual decline. The %Statistics for Mission+ released by the Connexion for the year ended 31st October 2002 revealed that the decline is continuing. The membership of the Methodist Church connexionally had reduced in the year by a further 2.1%, with the Sheffield District faring slightly worse than that, reporting a net loss of 2.7% for the year.

1.4 The design of the new building

Against this backcloth of relentless decline, it is understandable that one of the most contentious elements of the new Emmanuel building was that it was clearly designed to accommodate growth. The worship area contains seating for 220, and a screen at the back can be withdrawn to open up the Upper Hall to accommodate a total of 450 for a large occasion. Beneath that level is another large hall, and then there are also a variety of different smaller rooms.

Some unease about the scale of the building was expressed by a limited minority within the Zion United congregation, particularly in the early stages, and this was added to subsequently by some of the Pitt Street members.

This concern was summarised effectively by a member of the Pitt Street congregation in a letter to the leaders of the church in March 2000. In a wide-

ranging critique of the proposals, he commented that % we only do slightly better than the recent performance levels of either uniting church, our congregation in about 20 years time will be about 50 (or less!)+⁶

Some members of the Circuit Property Executive, with their brief to recommend a grant from the Circuit Advance Fund, also displayed some hesitations about the boldness of the scheme.⁷

So from where did the inspiration for a building of this size emerge? The answer to this question is found in the original specifications that were put to the architects right at the start of the project.⁸ This wish list was the fruit of conversations within Zion United but also with the existing user groups on both sites. These included two playgroups and a dance school, together with many other choirs and groups.

The vision expressed around that time was to develop a future role not just as a church but as a servant of the West Barnsley community. The worship area was to be capable of enlargement for combined services. It was also to be available for use by choirs, brass bands and musical groups. With this in mind, acoustic design was important.

At that stage a formal Mission Statement had not been developed, and this was only created in the period of merger discussion with Pitt Street. Having said that, the leaders of that time considered that the architects brief provided an effective implied statement of missionary intent.

All of this shows a worthy pragmatic approach to accommodating the needs of many folk, but perhaps looking back there was a slightly less comprehensive consideration of the likely future strength of the worshipping congregation. Nevertheless, all the way through the process of finalising the plans, there was an inherent confidence from the church leaders that growth would be a fruit of the new building.

In addition, undoubtedly many people offered much prayer that the new Emmanuel Methodist Church would be able to attract new people to join.

As the opening approached, however, the effort of keeping the builders and architects on track tended to dominate, and attempts to market and advertise the new church, therefore, were minimal. It would not be possible, therefore, to claim that new joiners, initially at least, were attributable to the fulsome, evangelistic efforts on the part of the church.

1.5 The Opening Period

In the event, prayers were answered beyond many people's expectations. New people came right from the start. At least one couple came to the Dedication Service with the express intention of joining the church.

By May 2002 the church leadership agreed to organise a Newcomers Tea to which 19 people were invited and 18 newcomers attended. In October 2002 25 people were received into membership, and in February 2003 another 15 people were received and in May 2003 a further 8. As this paper is prepared a further 23 people are in the process of considering membership.

These figures add up to a total representing just over 50% of the original membership of 135 in a little less than an eighteen-month period. The architects were keen to tell us, in the planning stages, that a new build would lead to growth in the congregation, but the Emmanuel experience goes well beyond the kind of 10% per annum figures that was suggested by them.

My own involvement with the Emmanuel project began in September 1999 when I became minister of Zion United. By then the plans were drawn, and the invitation to Pitt Street to come on board had been issued. The lead up to the new building was hectic. The time since the opening has been equally busy and challenging. But it has also been, without doubt, the most fulfilling period of my Methodist Circuit Ministry so far. I have had so much opportunity to spend time visiting, nurturing and guiding a large number of new members. I very much hope that these opportunities will continue, that Emmanuel will continue to grow, and that therefore, this research will help that to happen.

Chapter Two: Surveying Techniques

There is no doubt that Emmanuel has caused something of a stir within Barnsley. People frequently relay conversations to me about the growth. Some of this, sadly, is very occasionally with a somewhat sour edge, such as the reported comment from a former Circuit Steward from another church within the Circuit, %hese figures about growth, theyqe not true. Everyone was there all the time!+ Unfortunately, but perhaps because of some of the reasons that the examination of literature will reveal, the good news of Emmanuel's growth is also being seen by some as something of a threat.

However, one of the most consistent comments made relating to Emmanuel's growth is, %ts growing because its new.+ If this really is the only, or even primary, reason, then Emmanuel's future is in peril, and Emmanuel's experience has little to teach other non-new churches. Quite plainly, Emmanuel's newness is diminishing as every day passes.

Whilst the comment is understandable, there simply must be more to it than that. Although there are some people who seem to be almost genetically attracted to anything new, that type of person rarely sticks . there is always something more newqcoming along. The research presented herein is designed to try to probe quite intentionally and consciously beneath any thoughts of %came because it was new.+ A key objective is to uncover the true range of influences and motives that are encouraging people to come to Emmanuel in the first place, and then persuading them to stay.

The aim, then, is to dig beyond the veneer of newness, and to weigh the significance of the range of other factors involved. It is hoped that the result will be a deeper appreciation of the qualities inherent in Emmanuel that can enhance its growth in the future. It is also hoped that there will be a better understanding of how the growth at Emmanuel can be explained in the context of the continuing gradual decline of the Barnsley Circuit. For this reason the concluding chapter will comprise brief statements intended for both Emmanuel Church Council, and for the Barnsley Circuit Meeting.

2.1 Looking at the range of factors

The potential factors leading to growth will be examined and evaluated in different ways. In chapter 3, factors that could be described as focussing on Emmanuel the institution are explored. These factors are those that are in place because of what Emmanuel is . whether or not any new people had ever considered joining Emmanuel. They are:

- the fact that Emmanuel is a merged church;
- the fact that Emmanuel is a (comparatively) large church (and upon creation was immediately the largest church within the Circuit);
- the fact that Emmanuel occupies a new building;
- the fact that Emmanuel is a church building with integrated community use.

Each of these factors is examined in turn by reference to recent research to consider how relevant it is to Emmanuel's situation.

In chapters 4 and 5 factors that are much more related to the choices and preferences of people who might join Emmanuel are explored. This includes examining the research into how people choose which church to join, the important factors common to growing churches, and also the background of those people who are joining Emmanuel.

In particular it includes a specific piece of new research into the people who have joined Emmanuel's congregation since it opened. This research has been undertaken by guided interview of a sample of joiners to cover a range of backgrounds and ages. Further explanation of the methodology of this research is given below.

2.2 The methodology of the interviews

Interviewees were selected so as to try to give as representative a sample as possible of those who have joined Emmanuel. The following tables indicate the background of the joiners (and the terms used are considered more deeply in chapter 4), together with their age and gender. In producing this sample I drew on previous pastoral conversations with the 70 folk to make assessments about the background of each person. Obviously the interviews themselves were able to draw out more accurately and profoundly the background of each participant.

First names are used by permission of those interviewed, and these will be used in later chapters when their comments are considered.

Background	Emmanuel Joiners		Sample size	
	No	%	No	%
Convert	25	36	7	36
Transfers:				
- Local Methodist	8	11	2	11
- Local of Other Denomination	16	23	5	23
- Methodists who have moved area	6	9	2	9
- Other denominations who have moved area	7	10	2	10
Restored	8	11	2	11
Total	70	100	20	100

Age	Emmanuel Joiners		Sample size	
	No	%	No	%
<25	0	0	0	0
25-34	12	17	3	17
35-44	9	13	3	13
45-54	10	14	3	14
55-64	18	26	5	26
65-74	17	24	5	24
>75	4	6	1	6
Total	70	100	20	100

Name	Age						Background						Gender							
	25-34		35-44		45-54		55-64		65-74		>75		Conv.	Loc Meth	Local Other denm	Meth move	Other denm move	Rest.	M	F
	Alison					1									1					
Caron		1												1						1
George R								1					1							1
George E									1											1
John									1									1		1
Hannah	1																1			1
Hazel					1												1			1
Jane		1												1						1
Janet		1												1						1
Anita				1														1		1
Eileen					1									1						1
Karen	1														1					1
Kathleen				1									1							1
Lea							1						1							1
Margaret					1								1							1
Mark	1													1						1
Peter				1										1						1
Ray					1										1					1
Sue					1										1					1
Terry							1							1						1
TOTALS	3	3	3	6	5	0	7	2	5	2	2	2	2	7	13					

Figures 5, 6 and 7 – Extracted from Pastoral Records at Emmanuel

It was a relatively straight-forward process to generate a sample that was representative of background, and also almost representative of age. In the event it was not felt to be pastorally practical to include any of the four over-75 who have joined the church, but this is only a slight distortion.

The sample is also almost representative in terms of gender, with 34% of joiners being male compared to 35% of the sample.

The process of selecting the sample was made all the more straightforward because everyone who was approached accepted my request to be interviewed. A small number were slightly apprehensive initially, but by the end of the process, they were glad to have been given the opportunity to think through the events of this significant period of their lives.

The interviews were conducted in June to early August 2003 and followed the proforma included in Appendix 1. The interview was designed to allow for flexibility of response, and to encourage interviewees to elaborate and deviate as necessary to ensure key elements of their stories were included. Notes were hand-written as each interview took place. I decided at the outset to use this method so as to make a feature of carefully noting of what was being said. This encouraged thoughtful responses with quotes being agreed as were felt worthy. The notes were then typed up by a third party volunteer ready for comparison and consideration.

Clearly the fact of my relationship as Minister to the interviewees cannot be eliminated from this process. At the outset of each interview I stressed that I was wanting to hear their inner reflections, and that they shouldn't feel uncomfortable about saying things I might not wish to hear. Inevitably as the interviews proceeded there was sometimes a mixture between conversation that was directly relevant to this research and some that was more of the nature of pastoral visitation. It is not

possible to measure objectively to what extent this relationship did in fact skew what was said. However, my subjective feeling was that people were being fairly genuine. When comments were made which were complimentary of my ministry, a number of people introduced this by saying %must say this+ or words to that effect. Direct criticisms of my Ministry were not made, perhaps (a) they were beyond the direct scope of this research, and (b) the fact that I was interviewing relatively new joiners meant that they were less likely to have arrived at that stage.

This in itself perhaps highlights an element of the research that needs to be borne in mind throughout what follows. It is not possible to know at this stage how these people will feel in another five years time. Will the church have retained them? Will they successfully make the transition from new people to being simply part and parcel of the Emmanuel membership? This piece of research cannot determine that.

Chapter Three: Exploring Emmanuel's Grounds

3.1 Exploring the effect and impact of merging churches

The merging and consolidation of congregations is nearly always a complicated business. It involves dealing with a whole host of difficult issues: attachment to buildings, emotions, ancestral loyalties, transport, sense of ownership. Nevertheless it has been a common part of Methodist life ever since Union in 1932.

A very relevant piece of research into the effects of merging churches was undertaken by Dunstan who explored in some depth the consequences of what amounted to a church merging policy within the Ilkeston Methodist Circuit in the 1950s and 1960s.⁹ As Dunstan notes¹⁰ a considerable energy towards church merging across the Connexion derived from the effects of Union in 1932. There were simply too many chapels once Union had occurred. Pressure came for pragmatic reasons locally, but also from on high. In 1948, a report to Conference on Ministerial Man-Power proposed, among other things, the fusing of Societies in Circuits already amalgamated and new amalgamations. In some places long overdue.¹¹

This was slowly and often only reluctantly implemented. However, as Dunstan comments, the peak period for chapel closure and amalgamation in the British Methodist Church was 1963-71. This same period also saw a rapid decline in membership, a diminished ability to attract new members and a slight increase in the proportion of members who ceased to meet. Whilst a direct link between these events and these effects must not be automatically assumed, it is nevertheless apparent that amalgamation did not provide a renewing and strengthening influence.

Dunstan's conclusions of the Ilkeston story are stark. It is evident that every chapel amalgamation investigated resulted in a loss of members. None of the amalgamated churches in this study exhibited any growth track at all.¹²

An interesting observation in Dunstan's research is that in most cases in Ilkeston, amalgamation was brought about by necessity, rather than by a decision of strong churches to merge of their own free will. This led Dunstan to comment, 'amalgamation as a result of the weakness of one part or coercion from above is to be avoided if at all possible.'¹³

The position with regard to Emmanuel was that all parties were moving on to new ground. (Although the ex-Huddersfield Road members might think of themselves as going home, the building was so radically different, and their number was so few that this was only mildly symbolic.) There was very little home advantage. Everyone in their turn had to deal with letting go of their building, and then move on. Although the absence of home advantage might be thought of as being an advantage, Dunstan in fact concluded that in Ilkeston it was the attachment to buildings which caused one of the main stumbling blocks for people in transferring to another society and then moving on.¹⁴

Dunstan's research into the merging of Bath Street and Central in Ilkeston is particularly pertinent to Emmanuel's situation and paints a worrying picture. Recommendations from a District Commission in 1967 for both buildings to close and then for a new church to be built on one of the sites were not welcomed, but

eventually accepted. The process of merging and building a new church took a further 8 years, including seven years of worshipping together prior to the opening.

Unfortunately the statistics are not available for much of the crucial period but the statistics that do remain are not encouraging. In December 1967 the membership of Bath Street was 133 and Central was 192. No further figures are available until 1980 when the combined membership was 154 . less than half of that in 1967. Dunstan observed that there were some large drops in Circuit membership in the late 1960s and it is possible that some of this was due to disgruntled members from these two societies leaving. Anecdotal evidence concerning the opening of the new church, St Andrews, in 1975 is mixed. Some of it is similar to anecdotal conversation in Emmanuel: %b was an exciting time. Everything was so new, so modern.+ Other comments were much more worrying: %b wasn't like we expected it to be. We were never together in worship. People used to sit separately. It took a long time to know each other.+¹⁵

Examples of formal mergers within the Barnsley Circuit do not abound. Although there have been many closures, (the Circuit contracting from nearly 50 churches in the early 70s to 30 today) the typical pattern has been the closure, one by one, of the weakest churches. The members have then scattered to churches close to where they were living, or ceased to meet. A merger of ex-Primitive and ex-Wesleyan churches in Ryhill (on the edge of the Barnsley Circuit) in the late 1960s had a similar outcome to those described by Dunstan in Ilkeston. Quite a number of people just would not transfer, choosing instead to cease worshipping altogether, or joining the Anglican church. Growth as a result of merger apparently just did not

happen. As of 2002 the chapel had reduced to only 13 members, considerably less than either one of the pre-merging churches.¹⁶

The one genuine recent merger worthy of note and comparison within the Barnsley Circuit occurred at Staincross. Here two churches, Greenside and Barnsley Road, (again Ex-Primitive and Ex-Wesleyan) and only a 100 yards or so from each other, combined in 1995 around a specific plan to build a new church on neutral ground. Upon the merger the new ~~Staincross~~ church became, at that point, the largest church in the Circuit.

Progress towards the new church was slower than had been anticipated, but nevertheless the new church was completed and opened in December 2001.

Membership statistics relating to Staincross and taken from Circuit records are set out in Figure 4.

	Membership totals			New members
	Greenside	Barnsley Road	Combined	
1994	100	27	127	1
1995	99	28	127	6
1996	126	-	126	2
1997	130	-	130	4
1998	117	-	117	0
1999	114	-	114	0
2000	116	-	116	2
2001	114	-	114	1
2002	112		112	0

Figure 7 – extracted from Circuit Records

Comparison with the Emmanuel story raises an interesting question. With a not dissimilar background, why such a difference in outcome so far? There is perhaps evidence of a small growth dividend around the time of merger but there is no

indication of significant growth in the new premises. This is despite the premises being on a main road position with excellent parking.

There is the potential for considerable fruit from a separate study into the reasons behind the non-growth of Staincross. Herein all that can be produced is some anecdotal evidence. People who know the Staincross situation speak of some of the tensions found at St Andrews in Ilkeston. There appears to be considerable resistance to trying new initiatives in worship and in other areas of church life. There are also reports of significant property protectionism, with some community groups being refused space in the new building for fear of spoiling the fabric. Others tell of reports of new people trying Staincross and finding the congregation hard to break into.

3.2 Exploring the New Build/Church Plant Dimension

Although Emmanuel is first and foremost a merged church, the fact that it occupies completely new premises has given it the feel of a new church . almost of a church plant. The congregations, it appeared to the writer, in the main gathered with significant anticipation of life in the new building . not just because the building was new, but because there was an awareness that here was beginning a new journey, in a new place with a set of people not all of whom did they know. Therefore some of the research undertaken with regard to the characteristics and effectiveness of church plants must be applicable.

Wakefield, in a very relevant piece of work, undertook a fruitful exploration of the impact of new churches and church plants (albeit primarily from within an Anglican context.) His research of both churches in USA and England supported his conclusion that there seems little doubt that church-planting produces growth in the total number attending the new church and its parent church.¹⁷

American Research of Southern Baptist Churches (SBC) discovered that of all new churches founded before 1927, 25% grew more than 10% between 1981 and 1986, while 68% of those founded between 1972 and 1981 grew more than 10%. There was growth in both groups, but the average growth in the newest churches was 47.1% as compared to 4.1% in the oldest churches. Overall, the 7% of newest churches accounted for 25% of the total SBC growth.

Hunter, through his research,¹⁸ concurs with another finding of the SBC research, in suggesting that groups (including churches) gradually tend to lose their effectiveness in attracting new members as time moves on: new groups are more dynamic and outward-looking, whereas older groups can become insular and consequently more difficult for new people to join. He estimates that new churches average an annual growth rate of 10% for the first fifteen years, beyond which the growth rate declines. Similarly, groups within a church seem to have an eighteen month natural growth track.¹⁹

Limited research within an English context suggests that there might be a tendency to see a considerably shorter period for growth here, something more like 3-5 years. Certainly this is the advice provided by the Resourcing Mission office of the

Methodist Church.²⁰ A positive and indicative piece of research within the English context was conducted in 1980 by Staton. He attempted to see if there was a relationship between the modernisation of Methodist church premises and numerical growth.²¹ Taking a sample of ten recently improved church premises he discovered that nine of them reported a renewal of enthusiasm, (i.e. a raising of morale), five of them reported an increase in membership, three reported a membership decline, while seven reported an increase in attendance at worship.

More recently Gardiner,²² focused on the Methodist Church in Ashford, and his findings are salutary. The society there moved into a new building in 1941 with a membership of 166. The church grew in membership consistently and strongly until 1956 when the membership stood at 281. This then gave way to an equally consistent and strong decline in membership leading to a membership in 1997 of only 43. This is surely a powerful warning note to Emmanuel and churches like it. Early growth appears to be no guarantee of lasting stability. These statistics perhaps underpin the need for this kind of research about Emmanuel at this stage in its life.

3.3 Exploring the factor of being a larger church

As has already been noted, upon its birth Emmanuel immediately became the largest church in the Barnsley Circuit. Plainly larger churches differ significantly from smaller churches in many ways. The decision as to whether these differences are

positive or negative is largely subjective, and the research among Emmanuel joiners will perhaps indicate how important these factors are.

In summary, however, larger churches are more likely to have a greater level of resources within the congregation to add creativity to worship, to provide finances for new projects and to develop and sustain youth work. In addition, the sheer number of people means that there can be a different atmosphere in worship, and that there is more often going to be a broader age spread. A larger church is perhaps more likely to be better known in its community . with a more noticeable building and more people involved in a wider range of activities. A larger church might expect, therefore, to have more people visiting them who want to go to a church.

Robinson²³ helpfully compares the positives and negatives of an imaginary family with a new baby whom they want christened. The choice that is made between a large church and a smaller church can result in a stark difference in experience. This is between being part of a larger congregation where it is relatively easy to hide, and to pick up what is going on, or being, with family and friends, a swamping crowd who reduce the regular congregation to a small minority.

However, small churches do have their own potential and distinctives. They are able to be naturally and easily more caring: absences can be noticed more easily and a sense of unity can perhaps be achieved which is at a deeper level as compared to a larger congregation. (Paradoxically however, disunity can be more obvious in a small church.) Furthermore, in the right context a smaller church can provide intensive

care and oversight to a new disciple in a way that it is much more difficult to guarantee in a larger church without well-established structures in place.

The question remains, however, as to whether a large church is more likely to grow than a small one.

Schwarz, in his research²⁴, found that the larger a church becomes, the more its growth rate decreases. His surprising findings are that growing churches, *regardless of size*, grew by about thirty members over five years. As he notes %So a small church wins just as many people for Christ as a large one, and what's more, two churches with 200 worshippers on Sundays would win twice as many new people as one church with 400 in attendance.²⁵

This in fact confirms earlier research by Beasley-Murray and Wilkinson, among others that churches reach a growth plateau at about 150 members unless other pastoral staff are employed.²⁶

All of this does not tend to predict that growth at Emmanuel was guaranteed. Other things being equal if Schwarz's research is relevant then the constituent churches should surely have been demonstrating growth as well, if the factors leading to growth were going to be evident in Emmanuel.

3.4 Exploring the links with the community

As has already been noted, an important part of the motivation behind the design and development of Emmanuel was that it be a good home for both and new existing community groups.

Methodist language has moved on considerably from that of 50 years ago: from talk of providing ancillary rooms which might be used to house community groups when there was space in the church diary. In more recent times, a theology of the church building as a resource for the community and neighbourhood has come to the fore. This was certainly a primary motivation in the design of Emmanuel. This explicit incarnational initiative is being widely embraced. Warren, for example, claims that, 'the church needs to be part of the life of the community in which it is set.'²⁷ Church buildings with an explicit community dimension also provide an invitation to people to visit on their terms. In a non-verbalised way the church is saying, 'you don't have to be like us to come here.'⁺ Hunter examines the methods of the Celtic missionaries and the Roman Church during the 5th Century in this country. He tells of the Celtic monasteries being places where strangers were welcomed, refuge was given and visitors were treated as guests. As a consequence of such hospitality, many were drawn into the worshipping community and gradually became Christians.²⁸ Finney also draws comparison between Celtic and Roman missionary methods and makes

the following conclusions. %Evangelism is about helping people to belong so that they can believe.²⁹ This idea of belonging being a precursor to believing is reiterated by Gill and others.

This Celtic approach to evangelism can be emulated today by the church which uses its buildings to practice hospitality. Finney's research, whereby he discovered that conversion is more likely to be a gradual process rather than a sudden event, and that 14% of people coming to faith reported that meeting Christians played a significant part of the journey,³⁰ bears testimony to the opportunity that the church building presents as a facilitator for this type of evangelism.

Having said all that, there does not appear to be significant research into the effects of having an integrated community dimension upon church growth. Anecdotally many people in our churches comment about the need to get people into their church, whether that be through a Luncheon Club, a secular choir, a jumble sale or whatever. Many churches within the Circuit provide such opportunities. However, there is little indication of either effort being made by members to build relationships with users, or growth in Christians as a result. The interviews will reveal the extent to which the community aspect is an important aspect in Emmanuel's growth.

Chapter Four: Exploring Emmanuel's Growth

4.1 Exploring where people come from

A key element to be considered in assessing Emmanuel's growth record is the backgrounds and circumstances of those who have joined. As part of this exercise there needs to be some clarification of categories and terms.

Pointer in his book *How do Churches grow?* explores the different backgrounds from which people join growing churches. He helpfully offers the following categories³¹:

Biological Growth - when the children of committed Christian parents come to personal faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord and join the church, usually by a rite or ceremony that recognises their status as responsible members.

Transfer Growth . the recruitment of members who are already committed Christians, by transfer from other churches.

Restoration Growth . describes the recruitment of lapsed Christians (of at least two years duration) to active membership in regular worship and service.

Conversion Growth . takes place when those outside the Church are brought to repentance and faith in Christ and join a local church as responsible members.

Pointer quite rightly points out that an apparently successful growing church might actually only be successful in drawing people from other churches in the area, not by actually making new Christians. In this he draws on a study of a London church, which had been recognised as a centre for Charismatic renewal throughout the 1970s. The study demonstrated that the church had actually only added an average of one member per year by conversion throughout the decade. As Pointer notes,

Obviously many Christians benefited from the ministry offered by this church but its members failed miserably in the task of evangelising their own community and they are now experiencing serious decline.³²

Gill has also been helpful in considering how it is that growth comes about in a church. He produces evidence from the 19th Century that significant growth in one church may often be at the expense of other churches in the locality.³³ For example, complete attendance records which exist from 1837 to 1877 for the 4 parishes clustered near the Minster enable the following conclusion to be reached: It is difficult to escape the conclusion that individual congregations did tend to prosper at the expense of their neighbours.³⁴

Wakefield noted from conversations with Beasley-Murray that a similar problem has been raised about the large Baptist churches at Gold Hill and the Millmead Centre, Guildford which have grown partly by the transfer of Christians from other local churches, to the extent that some other churches have closed.³⁵

So, it is possible that the growth of church plants is mainly at the expense of other churches, which lose disaffected members. They may also be growing by attracting Christians who move into an area, Christians who would have attended a church anyway. This needs to be considered in the Emmanuel context.

With regard to the possibilities of Restoration Growth, Pointer highlights the particular circumstances of the Methodist Church:

Between 1933 and 1969 the Methodist Church lost a total of 1.2 million members of which 39% had died and 43% had voluntarily terminated their membership. Therefore, in one generation 500,000 Methodists left their churches. Some may have joined other denominations but a large number allowed their membership to lapse and ceased to worship.³⁶

Wakefield also provides useful research by analysing a range of statistical records from different denominations, to discover the background of people joining new churches. This leads to his conclusion that:³⁷

- transfer growth was between 30-50% of the growth per year, with typically 7% of the growth being by transfer from another denomination;
- conversion and restoration growth were between 20 and 40% per year;
- biological growth was about 10% per year.

The proportion of people joining was about 7% per annum. This is compared with the findings at Emmanuel in 5.1 below.

4.2 Exploring what makes a church grow

Church Growth has become a much-studied phenomenon over the last 20 . 30 years. Several major studies have come to broadly similar conclusions. A seminal work by leading American researcher, Wagner identified seven vital signs of a growing church and these have been helpfully evaluated within a British context by Beasley-Murray and Wilkinson.³⁸ Their findings have been reflected in virtually every study since and were as follows:

1. Churches are more likely to grow if the minister is a possibility thinker who can stimulate the whole church into action towards growth.³⁹ Also significant are the ability to delegate pastoral work, enable lay people to discover and exercise gifts, and generally to free the ordained minister for visionary leadership.
2. Growing churches have a mobilised laity actively involved in ministry.
3. Wagner's research indicates that a church needs to be big enough to provide a range of services that meets the needs and expectations of its members.⁴⁰
4. Wagner argued that churches should be able to provide members with three levels of group activity: celebration, congregation and cell meetings. Only cell meetings were evaluated by Beasley-Murray and Wilkinson, and it was found that growing churches tended to have them.
5. Wagner also argued (controversially) that growing churches are homogenous units; that is, they tend to be uniform and attract people from similar social backgrounds, or of similar age groups, etc. Beasley-Murray and Wilkinson found this difficult to evaluate from the evidence they collected, but what they did find suggested this is not actually the case.
6. Growing churches tend to have an evangelistic programme based on proven methods of evangelism. Beasley-Murray and Wilkinson concluded, however, that it is the faith, expectancy and commitment to evangelistic programmes and the love and witness with which they are carried out that are the key factors as much as the programmes themselves.⁴¹
7. Wagner stated that it is important for a church to recognise that the most important function the church has in its community is a religious function.⁴² Churches that prioritised nurture were not likely to be growing at more than the average rate. However, those churches that listed outreach as either their first

or second priority had a strong bias towards growth. Meanwhile, those churches who considered that community service was their main task had a definite bias towards non-growth.⁴³

Schwarz in his research lists eight quality characteristics all of which were deemed by him essential for Natural Church Development. His findings closely paralleled those of Beasley-Murray and Wilkinson:

1. He found that the type of ministry exercised by the leader was important: pastors of growing churches see their task being to equip, support, motivate and mentor individuals.⁴⁴
2. The role of lay people was also emphasised, to such an extent that Schwarz concludes that no factor seems to influence the contentedness of Christians more than whether they are utilising their gifts or not.⁴⁵
3. The personal spiritual lives of church members were also an indication of the health of a church. The level of personal prayer and Bible study, were key determinants for the life of the church.
4. The flexibility of a church's structures also played an important role in determining the vitality of the church: churches which adapted their structures to serve their missionary work had a much higher quality index than those bound up in traditionalism and in protecting structures.
5. Schwarz discovered that the style of worship made little difference to a church's potential for growth. More important was whether those attending found the worship inspirational and enjoyed it. So, traditional worship need not be a problem. The problem seems to come when there is an unthinking bondage to tradition.

6. Small groups were again found to be crucial. Our research in growing and declining churches all over the world has shown that continuous multiplication of small groups is a universal church growth principle.⁴⁶
7. Evangelism should be directed towards meeting people's needs. Churches need to have a clear idea of who they are trying to attract and focus their efforts on ways of accomplishing that.
8. The nature of relationships within the church also has an impact on the church's potential for growth. Not only is this expressed in loving care and attention among the congregation, but it can be demonstrated that there is a significant connection between laughter in the church and that church's qualitative and numerical growth.⁴⁷

Taken together these studies begin to give some very helpful indications of what might provide the environment for growth.

Augmenting this is work within the Methodist context by Bridge⁴⁸. In his paper he noted the following emphases as giving rise to a growing church. The similarities with the points above are both striking and reassuring.

1. Good quality pastoral care, whether by the Minister or by members to each other.
2. A collaborative approach from the Minister, enabling lay people to discover and exercise their gifts.
3. Many growing churches indicated that in their view a change in worship-style had been significant, though Bridge comments that it was probably more the fact that these churches have taken worship seriously and that the special attention being given to worship has attracted others to share it.⁴⁹
4. A special, even if only occasional, emphasis on evangelism.

5. Needs-based Evangelism is most effective especially to those in their 20-30s and in retirement.

Consolidating all of that is research undertaken by Strafford into the growing churches within Methodism.⁵⁰ He lists five factors which were found to help growth:

- loving relationships
- inspiring worship
- gift-orientated lay ministry
- empowering leadership
- respect for biblical authority, whilst Bridge argues that theological position is less important than the act of taking theology seriously.⁵¹

Research undertaken by Richter and Francis into the causes of people leaving and returning to church offers some further important insights in this area. They conclude that churches are most likely to encourage leavers to return when they:

- avoid pigeon-holing people into tidy membership categories;
- notice and react sensitively when people are leaving;
- meet and respect people where they are culturally;
- meet and respect people where they are spiritually;
- help people grow in their faith;
- offer practical support as people cope with life's changes and chances;
- encourage parents in their upbringing of children;
- offer people a gospel worth investing in;
- authentically embody the gospel;
- offer people a sense of true community.⁵²

The repeating thread of welcome, care and acceptance is supported by Gill, in *A Vision for Growth*,⁵³ where he carefully develops his argument that people seldom become active Christians solely as a result of an isolated conversion experience.⁵³ He continues that changing from unbelief to belief is usually a slow process. Sometimes it can take many years. There may have to be years of belonging before belief feels fully comfortable.⁵⁴

Finney's research, in *Finding Faith Today*,⁵⁵ supports this too. He reveals that many new Christians refer to faith in terms of relationships rather than belief.⁵⁵ This, as Finney notes, is in spite of attendance at membership/confirmation classes, where issues of belief would have been taught. All this emphasises the supreme importance of relationships.

It is interesting to place alongside all this research a recent piece of work undertaken for the Salvation Army Central North Division in the summer of 2002⁵⁶. The questionnaire asked about anything which might have any bearing on church growth, and some of these factors were then tested in depth in Focus Groups. The main findings are summarised in the Table below. People were asked to say what they thought was most important in the growth of their church. Respondents were allowed to tick as many of the items as they wished. These particular factors were listed because they had been the most significant in a study of larger churches. They have much in common with the strands detected above.

	All who ticked (%)	The most important (%)
The warm welcome received	81	28

The ministry of the church	73	27
People moving into the area	57	6
The relevance of the teaching	55	7
Enjoyable Children's / Youth programmes	51	7
A personal liking for the minister	47	4
New people attending through Alpha etc	32	7
Responses to outreach	29	7
Wide range of activities	29	1
Their denomination	23	4
People joining from another local church	16	1
Ex-members returning to church	16	1

Two factors clearly stand out here, as in all the research, the warmth of the welcome and the ministry of the church.

Further light was shed on this in the Focus Groups which were also part of the research. The churches studied in this way had 11 factors in common:

1. A strong leader(s), who is a good communicator, not remote from his people and always thinking ahead to the next challenge or opportunity.
2. A clear vision of what they want to achieve, led by the leader, owned by the congregation and worked out in practice on a daily basis in all they do.
3. Biblical teaching and preaching which is relevant to people's lives.
4. A warm welcome, including from the minister(s), which is more than simply a warm welcome at the door but is a 'way in' to the family of the church.
5. A strong sense of belonging.

6. Programmes which are appropriate for the needs of the local community.
7. Little if any institutionalism.
8. A strong commitment to evangelism, but which is primarily worked out in social action and community involvement rather than overtly evangelistic programmes.
9. A willingness to work with and learn from others.
10. An ethos of prayer, even though not many attend prayer meetings.
11. They were all using the Alpha Course, but usually by invitation to people with whom they have already established contact through some other means rather than by 'cold' invitations.

As has been noted above variations are bound to occur between different pieces of research. However the above elements provide a rich resource for testing against what is happening at Emmanuel.

Allowing for slight difference in emphasis and priority, which could well come from the subjective elements bound to be involved, the above reports and research, when distilled, nevertheless mark out some clear characteristics of churches which might be expected to grow. These could be summarised into the following factors:

- the minister as leader, envisioner and facilitator;
- a mobilised laity where people are encouraged to use their gifts;
- there is a good welcome, sense of unity and plenty of love and care;
- the church is able to offer a broad range of activities and possibilities;
- there are small groups for fellowship and growth;
- there is a priority on the quality of worship;
- there is evidence of an evangelistic outlook.

Chapter Five: Taking the Soundings

5.1 People's previous church attendance

The responses of the joiners regarding previous church attendance happily bore out what had been anticipated in drawing up the sample, (as set out in 2.2.) Furthermore it is evident from the chart below that the proportions attributable to the different categories of growth from Wakefield's research (in 4.1) (conversion, transfer, biological and restoration) are in some ways replicated at Emmanuel. Total transfer growth to Emmanuel is on the high side at 53%, as is conversion and restoration growth at 47%. It is interesting to note that transfers from other denominations is far higher than would Wakefield's figures anticipated. A possible reason for this is the significant number of people who have transferred to Emmanuel because the local Anglican church is very high church, and has recently been becoming higher. This comment is noted below in responses from some of the sample.

However, the scale of these proportions can be explained to some extent by the fact that there has been absolutely no biological growth at Emmanuel so far. This in turn highlights the unusually weak position of the merging churches insofar as families are concerned. Within the original membership there were simply no active children of members in the teenage bracket. On the basis of Wakefield's research Emmanuel could have been expected to have yielded 7 or 8 new members from biological growth by now. This is an important observation to be picked up by Emmanuel as it plans ahead.

Background of joiners:	Emmanuel	Per Wakefield's Research
Transfer growth		
• from another denomination	33%	7%
• within denomination	20%	23-43%
Conversion and restoration	47%	20-40%
Biological growth	0%	10%

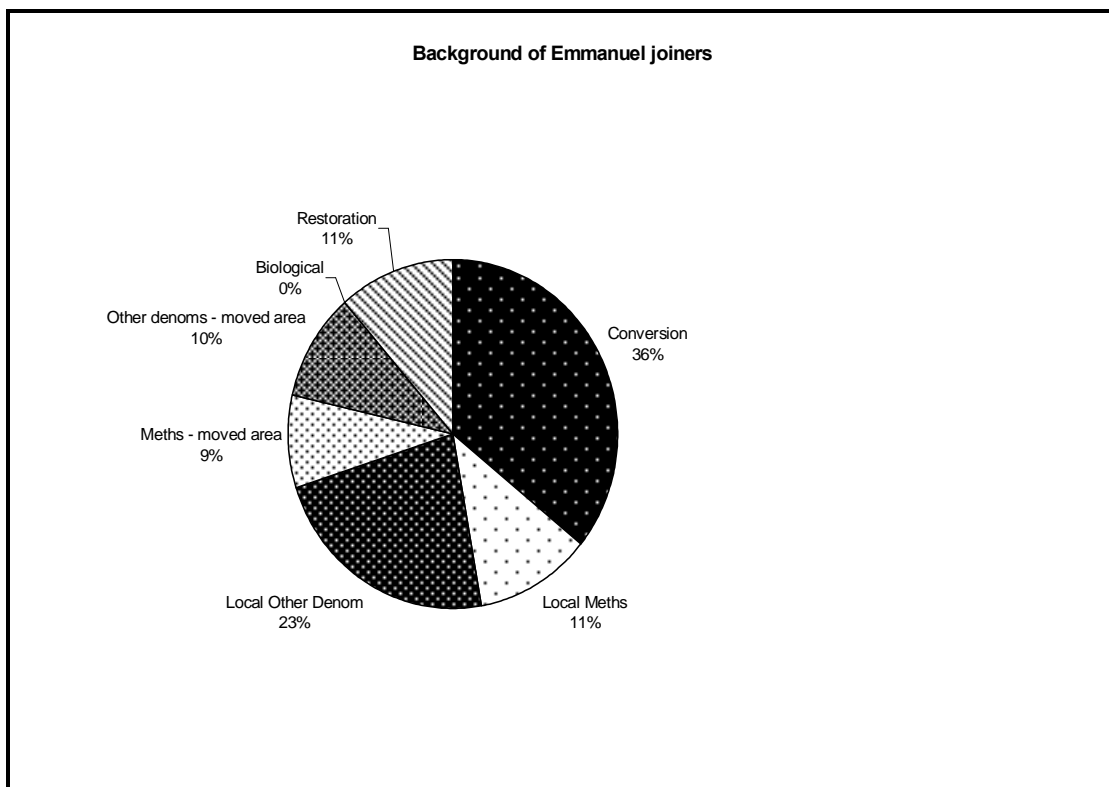


Figure 8 – Results of interviews regarding background

5.2 Church returning – conversion or reinstatement?

One of the hardest judgements to make was in categorising people between conversion and restoration. In a number of cases people had been, at some point in their past, regular adult attenders at church, helped in Sunday School and contributed in other ways. In Richter & Francis phrase, 'changes and chances'⁵⁷

had led to them leaving their previous church in most cases years before. Some cited growing out of Sunday School; others, that their friends moved on; still others, that they moved house and never picked church attendance up again. Now that they have returned, and found a sense of belonging and claimed a faith which they were content to accept, are they converts or restored people? Clearly it depends on (a) how tightly these definitions are drawn, and (b) how deeply the faith was held in their previous experience of church, and (c) how deeply faith continued to be alive in the intervening period.

Both Finney and Gill in discussing their research note a sense of journey about the process of conversion which is relevant here. Conversion is only rarely akin to a sudden thunderbolt experience. It is much more frequently about a number of faith strengthening experiences, leading people gradually as a sense of belonging and a sense of belief go hand in hand. Perhaps in this understanding of conversion, the crucial moment is represented (if not coincidental in timing) by people affirming, through confirmation/reception into membership, that Jesus Christ is their Lord and Saviour.

In the end subjective judgements are necessary . and this makes direct comparisons between different pieces of research difficult. The deeper conversations with the sample about their past provided a much richer perspective concerning their Christian journey with which to make a judgement. I have come to the conclusion that what we are dealing with here is much more frequently of the nature of conversion rather than reinstatement. Much of what was described in the interviews regarding previous church attendance was about the social side, or

friendships in Sunday School. As Jane said, "There were lots of children the same age and we were pals beyond church."

There was of course a germ of faith in most people in this category. Again Jane is typical in that following a divorce, she continued to pray, but didn't feel she could go back to church. Kathleen, who has suffered significant physical and mental health problems, said "I prayed in my bedroom, I always believed in God, and never blamed God." Lea had always maintained her private faith.

Nevertheless it is in their coming to Emmanuel, that those in this category have begun to talk of their faith coming alive. Terry commented, "At Emmanuel I have discovered something special - the love and kindness of God's presence." Lea observed, "Jesus is so real to me now." Kathleen said, "I know now that Jesus is helping me in my life, and other people can see the difference as well."

5.3 Previous church activity and reasons for leaving

Among those who had transferred from other churches, there was a wide range of backgrounds in terms of previous active involvement in church (in terms of service or leadership.) Pete was a worship leader, Anita involved in Home Missions, John and Eileen had been on the PCC, prayer leaders and involved in Sunday School. Tim and Hannah had been very involved musically. Ray had been an organist, and Janet had helped with youth work. Karen had also been involved in youth work in her previous church. Alison had been involved in prayer leading, and Sunday School teaching. Sue had been heavily involved in the Sunday School.

The most interesting theme arising out of these responses is the feedback from those who have moved church locally: those who have taken a strategic decision to move from another congregation. Within this category there is a repeatedly stated dissatisfaction with the opportunities that existed to contribute their skills and gifts within the church. Both John and Eileen's departure from their previous church was precipitated by a new Vicar who operated, as John put it, ~~an~~ an autocratic priesthood. This, he went on to explain, was evidenced by his lack of appreciation of the gifts and ideas of members of the congregation. This was Sue's story too. There was a mutual lack of trust that made continuing at the previous church untenable.

Ray and Janet had moved to Barnsley four years ago and drifted in to the local Baptist church, because Janet's parents already attended there. As Ray said, however, ~~the~~ Barnsley Baptist was the obvious place to go, although we knew that we didn't particularly want to be there. So for Ray and Janet, the Baptist church was the place to maintain church-attendance. Neither Ray or Janet took up membership, and although Ray helped play the organ and Janet was involved in youth work, the feeling that they needed to move on increased over the four years. There were, for Ray and Janet, particularly significant issues about the style of ministry which was observed by them as not being of the collaborative style which they wanted. The arrival of Emmanuel was for them a potential sign from God of the time to move on.

Both Peter and Anita had been attending their local Methodist Church (about 3 miles away from Emmanuel) since they moved to the area about 10 years ago. The church has around 20 members and most are elderly. Peter and Anita described their experience of the church as ~~hard~~ hard working but insular. Their decision to leave

was very gradual over a period of four years, and involved too their concern for their two children who no longer wanted to attend Sunday School because there were so few of them. Pete noted that he was a worship leader, but added, %but was rarely asked.+

Mark (with wife Dawn) had moved to a village close to Barnsley from Sheffield, but had continued to worship in the Sheffield church for a number of years, due to loyalty and friendships established. Eventually, however, Mark commented that they began to realise that their occasional absences from church just weren't being noticed. On one occasion during their process of wondering about leaving, for a variety of reasons Mark and Dawn had not been to worship for 13 weeks. %No one had phoned up to check after them.+ There was %no interest at all that we had not been for a while.+ This lack of pastoral care was a significant cause of them finally severing their links with their old church and beginning to worship at Emmanuel.

For Tim and Hannah, a change of house and area had become a good excuse to move church. Having come from a vibrant church in Australia, the Worksop church they had settled in %was rather frustrating.+ As Tim commented, %although we had some great friends, there was no one our age, and we did not feel that the preaching was strong enough to challenge us each week.+ Hannah added, %we gave a lot more than we ever received, except for the housegroup.+ So, although their new home was not all that close to Emmanuel, meaning that their journey time was only something like 15 minutes shorter, as Tim said, %when the time came to move, although not outwardly admitting it, we knew that it could be an easy excuse to move on.+

5.4 Factors drawing people to Emmanuel

There is perhaps a surprising range of means by which people actually heard of Emmanuel in the first place. As has already been noted in Chapter 1 the church itself did not find the time to do a significant marketing exercise in terms of flyers and newspaper coverage, although there was limited coverage in the local paper.

Most of the local people who are counted as 'converts' had watched Emmanuel being built and heard about what was happening from conversations. It was therefore the physical presence of the new building which was significant to them. Jane, Terry, Caron, Lea, Kathleen and Margaret all reported that they had watched the new church being built.

For others it was personal recommendation. Tim and Hannah were told about Emmanuel by the organist of their previous church in Worksop who had contacted us for advice about their own building project. Ray and Janet were told about Emmanuel by a couple at the Baptist church who lived near Emmanuel and wondered if it would be suitable for them, knowing they were unsettled where they were. Hazel was told about Emmanuel by one of our members when they met at a computer class and got chatting. In due course, Hazel persuaded George to come along, and he has since become a Christian. Alison was told by a friend about Emmanuel and that it was supposed to be a growing, lively church. John and Eileen became aware of Emmanuel because the choir that Eileen belonged to rehearsed there, and they also contributed to the Carol Service.

Pete and Anita had driven past the new church in 2002. They had known it was being built, but actually seeing it had crystallised the thought of perhaps trying it out. Sue was conscious of Emmanuel's existence by virtue of living locally, but it was the encouragement and prompting of a fellow-joiner Jane that made her first visit come to pass.

Two important points emerge. Firstly, there does seem to be an undeniable linkage between the physical impact of the new building appearing and the conversation that it provoked and new people appearing. Secondly, it is significant to note just how effective personal recommendation is to movers . even when that personal recommendation is based on very scanty and third-hand information.

4.5 First impressions of Emmanuel

The first impressions that people had of Emmanuel are fascinating. George E commented that his first visit to worship %opened his eyes.+ He went on to comment that the people were %so friendly and welcoming+ and that this had blown away his preconceptions of what church would be like. Caron's first worship experience was an all-age communion. She appreciated the laid-back approach.+ %When there was silence you could really pray.+ Caron admitted to crying during the prayers at her first service, because the impact of the worship was so strong. She also enjoyed the fact that %everyone looked like me, and the kids loved it.+ Sue, coming from an Anglican background . and much preferring a low Anglican tradition said that %was very pleasantly surprised . it was very warm and welcoming . and low+. She was also amazed that there were so many people in the congregation who she actually know. For John and Eileen their most significant first impression of Emmanuel was

that ~~it~~ was the only place we've been where everyone can worship in their own way of worship in the middle of everyone else.+ Eileen also valued the warm welcome and the way that the worship and the whole environment ~~wa~~ activated all our senses.+ For both Pete and Anita the most abiding first impression was a sense of ~~am~~ amazement+ at the size of the congregation compared to their previous church. Their experience, and the fact that the children enjoyed the Sunday School groups, led them to say that ~~we~~ we knew straight away that this was the right church for us and we wanted to attend again.+

Mark's first impression was that Emmanuel reminded them of an American church they had attended on holiday . so different from anything they had seen in England. They were impressed that ~~the~~ the church seemed so full+and there was such a friendly welcome. This was also George R's first impression . the welcome and acceptance were something that ~~don't~~ think I could find anywhere else.+ For Lea, too, the fact that a couple of the elderly members had really made an effort to welcome and befriend her was highly significant.

For Jane, in returning to church after a number of years, the main impression was that the service was so different to how she had remembered it. It was ~~an~~ much more friendly and there was *laughter!*+ Jane was struck by the ~~joy~~ joyfulness of it all.+ Margaret's memory of her first attendance was simply the feeling of peace that she had with herself. Kathleen remembers feeling during the sermon that ~~that~~ that was me you were talking about!+

5.6 Factors tending to act as a resistance to returning

By and large there were very few matters raised as factors tending to act as a resistance to returning. This is perhaps to be expected in a sample of people who have all chosen to make Emmanuel their church. However, I was interested to uncover what factors there were which might, for others, be too great an obstacle to overcome.

In the event virtually the only responses to this question were of really independent of anything Emmanuel could influence. So, Tim and Hannah felt the resistance of having to make yet again a new core group of friends.+ Jane had to face telling her husband that her visit to Emmanuel looked like it had not just been a one-off.+ Terry wondered how his son, an Anglican Priest, would react to the news that his father wanted to join a Methodist Church. (In the event he was apparently delighted simply that Terry had made a spiritual breakthrough.) The only word of caution was from Karen who noted that some people were a little bit too friendly and overpowering.+

5.7 Important factors in returning and staying

This was a key part of the research. It allowed people the opportunity to really say what it is about Emmanuel that proved crucial in their deciding to return and then subsequently settle.

The following table incorporates people's responses, indicating those factors that people specifically commented on as being positive.

Key factors in returning	
Welcome at the door	8
Overall congregational welcome and friendliness	12
Quality of music	7
Quality/content of preaching	17
Involvement of lay-people in worship	5
Overall worship quality	7
Attractiveness of building/worship area	10
Amount of youth work	5
The large number in worship	8
Evangelical	1
Local	1
Social aspect	1
Involvement in the community	1
Relatively good spread of ages	1

It can be seen that several areas emerge as being key to many people.

5.7.1 Preaching

The quality of preaching is a key element to many of the sample, and interestingly this is applicable across the board, from those who are converts, to those who are transferring.

Among the converts are the responses of Jane who said the preaching was one of the main reasons for going again. It wasn't stuffy; it had a light-hearted manner, but always something you can take away with you. It relates to everyday life.+ Kathleen compared it with going to a local Anglican church many years ago when she didn't understand the preaching. Margaret commented "At Emmanuel, you read some verses and then talk about them, at other churches I've been to it's just felt like a random talk.+ Terry appreciates "the variety of preaching, and how it shows what a wide church we have.+ George E finds the "preaching helpful to the concerns of my life.+"

Among those transferring from other churches, preaching was certainly given prominence as being an important factor. Alison's key need was that the gospel is preached. Ray and Janet find the quality of preaching to be very positive. Ray commented that this was the fundamental reason for coming back to Emmanuel. It was aimed at a level that was understandable and relevant, and applied to life. This was also key for Tim and Hannah. Hannah noted, this was a big issue for us. We need some solid teaching, because we were not challenged at Worksoop. Hazel likes to be challenged and have the Bible applied to my life. She also commented that there are some people I appreciate more than others because of the content.

It is interesting that the theology underpinning the preaching was not specifically commented upon. Since the preaching is such an important factor in people choosing to return, it must be assumed that the normative style must be hitting the mark. Words used most frequently in appreciation of the preaching was relevant to life, challenging, solid teaching, not stuffy.

5.5.2 Welcome and friendliness

Another very significant factor in people returning to Emmanuel was the welcome offered. This includes both the welcome at the door but, more importantly than that, within the body of the church. People from across the sample found the welcome to be a key element. Caron commented that the welcome steward was offering her far more than the book he was distributing. She felt that he was saying to her that he wants me here. Hazel loved the smiles that she received as she came into church. Hannah recalls that people were interested and friendly. Jane remembers how people introduced themselves to me in the pews, and that in particular, one

lady introduced herself on the very first visit. Terry valued the fact that a lady who he had met at coffee morning came to greet him as he walked into church. She helped him find a seat and made him very welcome. Lots of people made an effort to introduce themselves to me,+he added.

Although the welcome was a very significant factor for many people, the research shows that it has not been universally successful. Hazel felt that sometimes she and others were finding it hard to know what to say.+ Nevertheless she took heart from the fact that saw how people who knew each other were greeted, and I wanted it to be like that for me. It is like that now.+ Ray and Janet both felt that the welcome at the door was not as good as it might be, and that it was complicated by the role of handing out books. They also observed, like Hazel, the tendency of people to talk to those who knew each other.+

5.7.3 The attractiveness of the building/worship area

It is fair to say that in comparison to other churches in the Barnsley Circuit and within the area generally, the worship area at Emmanuel breaks the mould. Its scale and height is significantly bolder than most of the more cautious efforts of recent years. The raised area at the front is large enough for choirs and bands, and therefore on a normal Sunday morning provides a large open space at the front of the worship area. The furnishings are of matching wood, the floor is fully carpeted and matches the upholstery of the pews and chairs. There is a large skylight which allows light to enter the worship area over the raised front area. Many of the comments from people for whom this was a positive factor are appreciative of the effect created by this design. Janet's comments are interesting considering Emmanuel's

distinctiveness: %t initially felt so modern to me. I wondered if it was going to work! But it does. The fact that it didn't have a history made me wonder if I'd feel the presence of God, but I do.+

Eileen said that the %open ambience of the building+was very significant to her. She continues, %o feel comfortable at Emmanuel because it reaches all my senses. It feels light, with light coming from all the way around, and there is warmth in the furniture. The almost cavernous space provides a place where I feel happy.+ Mark found the attractiveness of the building %very important+ saying that %just everything about it creates a lovely atmosphere.+ Hazel was unable to quite articulate what she felt inside, but knows that the building %helps me to feel close to God.+ Lea had a similar response. Ray and Janet appreciate the fact that it is %open, light and airy+ and that it therefore did not feel %constraining+ like some churches they have attended. Terry admires the worship area as being %technically fantastic, with brilliant acoustics.+

It is interesting for such a novel design (at least locally) that there was universal praise for it. There were no negative comments whatsoever in the sample.

5.7.4 The number in worship

The responses of people to this factor are interesting. Although it was rated highly overall by people, the actual comments from people suggested that the comparatively large number in worship was perhaps not so much a key factor in them choosing to return as it was impressive.

Mark felt that the number in worship added to the experience that they had. For both Tim and Hannah the number was larger than in their previous church, but compared to the church they had come from in Australia, Emmanuel is still a small church. Ray felt that the larger number in worship changes the atmosphere and brings life. However, Janet said that it would not have made a difference if there had only be 20. We were not looking to be anonymous. Jane found the number in worship exciting, but again it was not really significant to her and it would have been OK if there had been many fewer. Terry felt comforted to come into a large congregation, because it gave him the feeling that he must be on the right track because there are all these folks here. Peter and Anita (having come from a small congregation) felt that the larger number meant that there was not so much pressure upon them. Both Kathleen and Margaret also appreciated the opportunity that a larger congregation gave them to stay anonymous in the first few weeks of their attending. For Sue, too, this was an important factor, especially in her first few visits she was able to remain anonymous, and just quietly come and go.

5.7.5 Music

Music also scored highly as a significant factor encouraging people to return and stay. Emmanuel was fortunate to have a team of organists from the merging churches, but it did not have very many other musicians. Before Emmanuel opened a Worship Consultation agreed that developing the breadth of music was a priority and one of the members began to coordinate the little that there was into a music group to accompany singing on occasion. As the church has grown new musicians have arrived and now the music group is taking an increasingly prominent role in the

leading of worship alongside the organists team. Some of the responses from the interviewees reflect the journey that Emmanuel has been travelling in this regard.

For Caron the music was very significant. %I love it, the hymns and songs. We have a fantastic choice, I love especially the songs off the sheet [*ie modern worship songs, not in the hymn book*], but Charles Wesley hymns are good too.+ Hazel too enjoys the balance and mixture: %I like the organ and the music group+. Janet also feels that the balance of music good %with both traditional and modern.+ For Terry the idea of a music group was a new thing: %I was a bit apprehensive about it, it was something new to me, but it fits in with the whole atmosphere of Emmanuel and I find it to be a very moving experience.+

For Tim and Hannah, again their viewpoint was slightly different. Their church back in Australia had a very well-developed Music Ministry and so Emmanuel did not feel very far down the line for them. Tim commented though that %I would like to get involved in establishing or rather helping in creating good music worship.+ Hannah hoped for more, but again could see the potential. After first attending at Christmas 2002, by Easter 2003 Hannah could detect %that the music was much better, the music group was involved and this gave something to get involved with.+

5.7.6 Other significant factors

Aside from the most significant factors listed above, various people made other comments which perhaps illuminate this enquiry into why people want to come back. For Eileen a significant factor was the %smiley, happy dispositions and the positive attitude of the congregation,+together with the fact that the congregation seemed to have %ownership+ of the worship. Caron particularly appreciates the times when

people give testimony: %They're great. I get a sense of relating comfortably to what people are saying. I know where people are coming from.+ Jane also particularly liked the contribution of others in worship. Her experience of the local Church of England was a %icar spouting on a pedestal.+ She feels that %can be more open with you, and the congregation being involved means it's not just what Leslie says. It leads to a close-knit community. It doesn't feel like being talked to by a headmaster.+ Several others spoke as Lea did of a %remendous sense of God's presence. I felt at home right from the very first visit.+

5.8 Why not another Church?

A key issue to be explored was why they did not choose another Church, particularly in the cases of those for whom Emmanuel is not the local church on their doorstep. In several cases interviewees had visited a range of churches (including a range of denominations) without finding something that had what they were looking for (usually their important priorities from 5.7 above.) For Peter and Anita in the four year process of considering leaving Dodworth they had attended 7 local churches . gradually stretching the net further and further from the community in which they lived (which is the one thing that made them hesitate in coming to Emmanuel.) None of them felt just right as they reported that Emmanuel did. Jane had considered attending the local Parish Church but had been put off by the fact that a friend who was a member had been alienated after her son had %come out+ as being gay. This judgementalism was felt by Jane to be poor treatment by the congregation and not the %ight response.+

Interestingly Ray and Janet were somewhat non-plussed by the question as to why they had never tried the other churches that they knew existed in their village (Methodist, Wesleyan Reform and Anglican). They had never really heard anything about them (good or bad.) Ray concluded that perhaps %subconsciously the buildings didn't attract, or make it look alive.+ Janet felt God's hand more positively in the process. They had talked with friends about the possibility of moving, and they had mentioned Emmanuel to them. Janet feels looking back that their non-attendance at other churches and then their visiting Emmanuel was all part of God's guidance. Mark had a similar story to tell. As he and Dawn were disengaging from their Sheffield church, they wondered about attending some of the other churches more close by (including a Methodist Church in the village where they live.) They didn't try that church because they %just felt it would be the same as Handsworth, an old church with not enough going on.+ When pressed on how they arrived at that impression, they added, %Because the church looks old. For six years we've been driving past and never seen any life!+ More positively, and echoing Ray and Janet's comments, Mark then added, %God was pulling us to Emmanuel. Looking back it just feels that everything was pulling us there. It just felt right.+

John and Eileen visited Emmanuel as the first planned visit of several churches in the area. However it felt so right so quickly that the planned tour evaporated and they quickly made their home at Emmanuel without further investigation.

Typical of those moving area were Tim and Hannah, who had been so wearied by a previous experience of trying to locate a suitable church that they dreaded having to go through the process all over again. This meant that in the end they were content

to settle at Emmanuel having fairly early on discovered it, without going on tour looking for a better match.+ This was supported by Karen and by Alison who said that once she arrived at Emmanuel, there was no need to attend others. I like to stay in one place.+

Hazel had tried a local Anglican church, the local Baptist church and another Methodist church before being told about Emmanuel. She had not even managed to stay in the Anglican church until the start of the service, she could tell it was very high church, and she felt very cold there. Both the Baptist church and the other Methodist church had been better experiences but she still felt that they weren't for her.+ She felt that the preaching had generally been more illustration than content, and that there was a lack of spiritual depth there, despite the people's welcome.

5.9 How things have developed

A common feature of the responses to the interviews is the enthusiasm that people have for Emmanuel, the high sense of belonging that already exists and the deepening of faith that is being sensed.

It is interesting to note how frequently the key issues raised about current feelings towards Emmanuel were related to either belonging and believing . and sometimes these were mentioned almost in the same breath. So, Mark commented that Emmanuel feels just right. Now we know people locally.+ He added, I feel that I'm starting to grow, thanks to the housegroups and getting involved. It's getting us a social life as well as a religious life.+ Caron said, I'm part of it, and it's part of me. I can't ever see me not being a part of it.+ Tim observed that Emmanuel is a great

group of people from all ages with a common goal of spreading the Good News. We feel part of a family.+ Anita emphasised the sense of belonging which has made her family feel at home with a %desire to be involved, because they feel welcome and with friends.+ They added that they enjoy feeling %supported to develop at our own pace . without pressure.+ Kathleen and Margaret both spoke of feeling %really part of it+, and want to get more involved in cleaning, flower arranging, and also in joining a housegroup. Lea simply describes it as %being at home.+

Chapter Six: Taking shape

The combination of the review of literature and research elsewhere together with the research of people who have joined Emmanuel provides a helpful basis on which to explore exactly what is happening at Emmanuel. This chapter seeks to identify some of the key issues, engaging with and balancing different parts of the above research to evaluate the situation.

6.1 What is Emmanuel – merged church or church plant?

The facts appear irrefutable: Emmanuel is a merged church. In 1995 there were three congregations each on different sites and each with their own church council. By March 2002 Emmanuel was born and the three previous societies were no more. Except for only a handful of people, all those still alive who had been part of the three congregations in 1995 were now part of Emmanuel.

However, the research into the respective fortunes of merging churches and church plants raises a very interesting question in the case of Emmanuel. When and why does a merged church behave more like a church plant? Certainly the pattern of growth and development being seen at Emmanuel has much more in common with a church plant as described by Wakefield's research⁵⁸ than the normative pattern of decline that Dunstan found in his research of merged churches.⁵⁹ Dunstan's work, together with limited evidence within the Barnsley Circuit (see 1.2 and 3.1) certainly does not encourage the view that mergers are likely to produce growth *per se*. Dunstan's research suggests that a common reason for this is that the merger is very often the result of a top-down decision, or because of terminal weakness within at least one of the merging parties.⁶⁰ Evidence suggests that it is very difficult to

inspire reluctant mergees with the same level of enthusiasm for their new church as those entering into a new project happily and confidently. Comparing Wakefield and Dunstan's research it seems clear that the attitude of those involved is absolutely crucial. Perhaps it amounts to the question: is this happening because we believe that God wants to build his church here, or is it because we need each other to survive a little longer.+

Certainly insofar as Zion United was concerned there seemed to be the feeling that the merger of 1996 had gone well.⁶¹ Right from the time of merger there was a process in hand of looking to develop one or other site or start again on a neutral site and perhaps this had the effect of developing within people's psyche an expectation of development and renewal . certainly with regard to the property if nothing else. It was not, therefore, a merger with no vision except survival. It was a merger where, although the statistics illustrate it wasn't happening yet,⁶² growth was anticipated. By 1999, when I arrived as Minister, there was fairly clearly a growing sense of anticipation about the prospect of a new church.

However, for a time it was unclear how the relatively late introduction of the Pitt Street Society into the Emmanuel equation would work out. There was, for Pitt Street members, perhaps a greater likelihood of feeling the weight of history bearing down upon them. It is understandable if some of them felt as if they were voting for the final chapter in a story, a descent from being the Circuit Church to the point of closure, rather than voting for a Resurrection process. This possible scenario certainly resonates with some of the situations that Dunstan investigated where

decline occurred upon merger, potentially because a sense of failure in the old church persisted within the new church.⁶³

So, to what extent could Emmanuel be thought of as mirroring a ~~typical~~ church plant? First of all perhaps, in the fact that Emmanuel was being accommodated within a new building that provided a completely new environment. Because it was radically different architecturally⁶⁴ there simply had to be some changes to how things were done. This in itself provided an openness and an opportunity to do things differently.

Furthermore, the fact that Zion United and Pitt Street people were brought together only relatively shortly before Emmanuel opened meant that there was an immediate sense of newness within the congregation . akin perhaps to a new team for a church plant getting to know each other. However, in the interviews Ray and Janet reflected that perhaps this had worked against the church being so friendly to newcomers, because they observed ~~a~~ tendency to talk to those who knew each other.+ For Alison, however, the fact that three congregations had managed to combine, apparently so happily, was one of her positive first impressions.

Staton's research⁶⁵ provides evidence that newness of building in itself can in itself provide an injection of morale and enthusiasm leading to growth in certain circumstances.

All the research seems to point, therefore, to the importance of the fundamental attitudes of those involved in the project. Church planters tend to enter into the new

project with a determination and self-belief that growth will happen. Otherwise they would not bother. Merging congregations, the evidence suggests, often go only reluctantly into mergers to shore up an ever-weakening position, perhaps with only little hope of lasting growth.

In Emmanuel's case, although history must speak of a merger situation, the attitudes and patterns of the new church do accord much more closely to the characteristics of a church plant. With that in mind, Emmanuel needs to be very careful to take full account of the research which speaks of growth tailing off within only a few years unless strategic plans are carefully made.⁶⁶ In particular, Gardiner's study of the Methodist Church in Ashford⁶⁷ provides salutary messages to any new church, including Emmanuel, that early success does not guarantee lasting growth. This highlights the need for further understanding of the causes of Emmanuel's growth.

6.2 What is Emmanuel getting right in terms of drawing people towards it?

The research both of literature and of Emmanuel joiners enables some conclusions to emerge as to what are the key reasons for growth.

From the interview research it is clear that the construction process of the new building was a significant factor for some in developing the idea of attending. Of course that cannot be repeated, and therefore the growth that was encouraged directly by this equally cannot be repeated. However, the feedback from others provides more helpful clues as to how to continue to promote Emmanuel as a church worth trying. It is clear from people like Tim and Hannah, Ray and Janet, Hazel and Alison that when people are looking for a new church, conversations with others can

be very significant.⁶⁸ Emmanuel had managed to create sufficient awareness in the minds of people beyond the congregation itself that it was mentioned when the subject of finding a new church was raised. No doubt this was at least in part linked to the newness of the church as well, as when Tim said "the organist at our old church told us that there was a new church in Barnsley called Emmanuel, that it had a good website, a good group of young people and was very active in the community." However all the indications are that "profile" and "making one's presence known" does have an impact on drawing people towards the church. This is the more positive and potentially helpful lesson to draw for the future.

Some of the research covered regarding the factor of being a larger church⁶⁹ supports this, with the point raised there that a larger church is perhaps more likely to be better known in its community, and that a larger church might expect, therefore to have more people visiting them who want to find a church, or transfer to a new church.

The community and mid-week dimensions of Emmanuel are also significant. John and Eileen's first contact with Emmanuel was through the choir that rehearses there; for Terry the computer suite and a coffee-morning allowed him the opportunity "to see what it was like" without "committing himself" to coming to worship. Terry in fact brought a friend to the computer class, and noted that the friend was "my opportunity to go very innocently to Emmanuel."

The interview research supports the writings of Hunter, Finney and Gill on this matter⁷⁰ in suggesting that it is important that Emmanuel continues to take seriously

its hospitality and its links with the community as a means of enabling people to belong and subsequently to believe. There could well be further initiatives that could be introduced in order to develop further the linkages for people using the building with the worshipping community at Emmanuel.

A further, and somewhat unexpected, response from the interview research, as to why people were drawn to Emmanuel, was quite simply that God had drawn them to the church. This was the conclusion of Mark, Lea, Ray and Janet. It is hard to see how this could be legislated for, but it most certainly should not be ignored. If Emmanuel has the blessing of God we must rejoice and pray that we stay close to Him, that we might continue to work for His Kingdom, and that we might continue to enjoy that blessing.

6.3 What is Emmanuel getting right in terms of keeping people?

The important factors in encouraging people to return and stay at Emmanuel were reviewed in 5.7 above.

It is already clear that many of the factors explored in chapter 4 are replicated to a significant degree in what is happening at Emmanuel. It is important now to consider how it is that those factors are being found at Emmanuel when they were not apparently sufficiently present to lead to growth in the merging churches, and why they are apparently now being found at Emmanuel but apparently less so in other churches in the Circuit.

6.3.1 Welcome

This was one of the two fundamental elements in a growing church as found in the Salvation Army research, and was found to be indicated in much of the other literature reviewed.⁷¹ The welcome featured highly within the feedback from Emmanuel joiners as well.⁷² This is despite the fact that sometimes newcomers did not always feel that they had been welcomed as effectively as they saw other people around them being welcomed.

Nevertheless the feeling of welcome, openness and acceptance is clearly a key to a growing church. Is there anything distinctively different about Emmanuel as compared to the three churches that previously made up Emmanuel that were not growing?

There is no doubt that the regular members of the former congregations would say that the welcome they now give has not deepened or suddenly become more sincere. As noted in 6.1 above it is not clear from the research that the fact that the three congregations had come together did actually provide a completely positive change in openness and welcome.

It would seem likely therefore that the sense of welcome now proving such an important factor must be appearing more subtly. An early initiative at Emmanuel was to have yellow cards in the pews/chairs and entrance lobby for people to complete if they were new and would like us to keep in touch with them. I regularly draw attention to this when I am leading worship. As noted in chapter 1, a newcomers tea was held for those who came to Emmanuel in the early months and since then I

have prioritised writing to, and visiting, those who have completed the yellow cards. The success of that policy is at least to some extent borne out by the high numbers of people who have settled in and joined Emmanuel.

Perhaps too the high level of significance attached to the attractiveness of the building/worship area is relevant to this too.⁷³ Quite a few people commented about the atmosphere, the openness and the fact that it did not feel constraining. This could be all seen as figuring in what helps people to feel welcome.

An overlapping factor to feeling welcome is the way in which new people are incorporated within the life of the church. Although not picked up specifically in the Salvation Army research, the other research⁷⁴ clearly finds that a mobilised laity is a key factor towards a growing church. This is all part of the need to belong within a church that is explored above drawing on Gill and Finney's work.⁷⁵ Perhaps a fundamental difference between Emmanuel and its three previous churches is that there is now much less pressure on new folk to take on jobs that need doing. Pete and Anita drew attention to this in a conversation subsequent to the interview. They have observed that they are now more fully involved in church life than they have ever been, and yet they have felt under less pressure to be involved. They link the two together, concluding that the one is because of the other. People want to be involved, and to use their gifts, but they want to be able to do that in the way that suits them, not feeling like a round peg being bashed into a square peg. There is food for thought here, particularly for smaller churches who are often struggling to fill key positions and feel that any new person might be their salvation.

As summarised in 5.7 there is a deep sense of belonging emerging surprisingly quickly. The using of gifts within the life of the church is something that I have encouraged in all members, including just as surely the newer joiners. Within the sample for research, we have:

- 2 housegroup and prayer meeting leader;
- a Sunday School leader;
- 5 key people within the music group;
- 3 active worship leaders;
- a flower arranger;
- a lady with specific experience in Food Hygiene who has run a course for the church;
- a lady who is helping to start up and coordinate a Baby and Toddler Group;

Additionally, over 75% of the sample are involved in housegroups. Apart from the very slight skewing towards younger people within the sample there is no reason to indicate that the sample is unrepresentative of participation within the church of all the joiners. Perhaps this is the key change from the former churches, which had far fewer activities and therefore far fewer opportunities to get involved.

It would seem, furthermore, that the overall number in worship has had a positive effect on the welcoming effect⁷⁶. There are more people who can make the contact, more people to whom newcomers can be referred when a common link is established. Perhaps it is the case that a poor welcome in a smaller church stands out more clearly than a poor welcome in a larger church.

6.3.2 Preaching and quality of worship

Preaching was singled out by the most people as an important factor in their choosing to return and stay. This is in tune with much of the research quoted in chapter 4 which detailed biblical, relevant preaching together with inspired worship as key elements in growing churches.

One of the fascinating things to consider in this regard is the Methodist context of Emmanuel - a church with preachers organised by means of a Methodist preaching plan to cover the whole 30 churches of the Circuit. This means that the Methodist way is for the preacher each Sunday to not always be the same.

However, it must be noted that compared to other churches in the Barnsley Circuit, Emmanuel does have a higher proportion of my morning preaching ministry than is typical. I normally take about 7 morning services each quarter, whereas most churches would only have 3 or 4 appointments from their minister per quarter.

So, although the theory of the way Methodism has traditionally ordered itself might suggest that the quality of preaching should be pretty even around the 30 churches, this is not in fact the case with regard to Emmanuel. There is a more consistent preaching ministry by myself at Emmanuel, and also, as joint Superintendent, the placing of preachers on the Circuit plan is overseen by myself as well.

In doing this I have been mindful of the fact that there are a lot of people in Emmanuel now who haven't been life-long Methodists, and that most weeks there is someone coming along who has not been before. The preachers have been

planned to Emmanuel, therefore, by and large on the basis of how effective I thought they would be within this context.

It does not seem unreasonable to draw a correlation between the evidence of just how much the preaching matters to joiners, together with the comparative growth of Emmanuel within the Circuit. It appears fair to conclude that the message matters a great deal as to whether people will return and stay, and it is possible to encourage growth in this way.

This surely has significant implications for the future of the Methodist Preaching Plan especially in a Circuit of 30 churches. Is it feasible to hold to a tradition that preachers be fairly randomly appointed to whatever church out of thirty is available, taking little account of normative local style of worship, whether the preacher will be known there, or the average age/type of the congregation? Atkins makes the point very clearly that within our post-modern era, personality in preaching matters a great deal⁷⁷. Only the other week a relatively recent joiner said to me "Oh I thought you'd fallen out with us+ because I hadn't taken a morning service for two weeks. This within the tradition of many Methodist churches, and the normative pattern within the rest of the Circuit, would have been entirely normal and not comment worthy at all.

The fact that the three churches have come together has permitted the concentration of Sunday preaching time for one minister in a way that was impossible when they were three separate congregations. Nevertheless, I have two other churches in my pastoral care and it is only because they only have monthly morning services that I am able to offer as many morning appointments to Emmanuel as I presently do.

The research in chapter 4 also highlights the issue of the quality of worship. It helpfully makes the point that quality is not the same as style. So the crucial element is not the particular approach in worship, but whether that approach is thought about and delivered well. It would be an exaggeration to suggest that Emmanuel is doing anything very ground-breaking in its worship style. There is, though, increasing variety in music, worship leaders are taking more active roles, and drama and testimony are used on occasion as well. John's point about the acceptability of variety of expression and response is perhaps relevant here, however.⁷⁸ There does seem to be a willingness to embrace new ways of worshipping which is adding to the liberty and liveliness of worship.

Another important aspect that was noted in the interview research was with regard to music. Ever since Emmanuel opened this has been an area that it has been seeking to develop. It was in fact highlighted as a priority at a Worship Consultation held as the Pitt St and Zion United churches prepared to come together. The comments received from quite a number of the joiners indicate that the development of the musical ministry has been of considerable importance to them as they considered returning and staying.⁷⁹

6.3.3 The Minister

As has been noted above in 2.2 above, care was taken with the interviews to try to keep the personalisation of issues around the Minister to a minimum. Perhaps further research would need to be undertaken by someone outside the situation coming in to truly analyse my impact at Emmanuel.

However, the research covered in chapter 4 made it plain that the role and style of the Minister is often a crucial factor in determining whether a church grows or not. I hope that my preaching, leadership style and pastoral ministry has encouraged the church to be a more open place than it might otherwise have been. I have made it a priority to constantly focus time and energy on newcomers, in arranging nurture classes, membership training, to develop housegroups and find ways for newcomers to get involved. When new members are received they are given a gifts and skills survey to help them find their place in the ministry of the church.

I have also spent time with a Vision Group trying to develop the way forward for our church. This included Lent Meetings for the whole church in 2003 to consider and comment on the way we are as a church and how we could develop further in the key areas of worship, learning and caring, evangelism and service.

I hope that in these ways my ministry has had some helpful direction and vision about it. Some comments made by newcomers indicate their appreciation of my ministry, but I would aim for such a collaborative ministry within Emmanuel that it does not depend on one person in charge which is a recipe for a fall further down the line.

It is likely too that given the fact of my relative frequency leading morning worship that at least an element of the growth indicates a satisfaction with my preaching and worship ministry generally.

Chapter Seven: Feeding Back to the Church and the Circuit

Chapter 6 formulated some conclusions about the important factors that are encouraging people to choose to join Emmanuel Methodist Church, Barnsley. These conclusions have practical implications both for Emmanuel and the Barnsley Circuit, and therefore form the basis of two summaries presented below which are prepared with the Church Council and Circuit Meeting in mind.

7.1 Paper to Church Council

1. Research indicates that the newness of a church building is in itself often a draw for people to church . both those who have not been attending anywhere, and those who have become disaffected with their original church. Emmanuel has been a beneficiary of this newness dividend. However, this cannot in itself be taken for granted. Many merging churches do not enjoy any significant growth at all. Other factors are very significant.
2. Although a sizeable amount of Emmanuel's growth has been transfer growth (that is those joining Emmanuel directly from another congregation) the proportion is, in fact, fairly typical of what might be expected of a growing, relatively new church.
3. The main area in which Emmanuel shows a distinct weakness is in terms of its biological growth (that is growth by virtue of children from church families becoming church members.) A typical growing church might expect around 10% of its growth to be biological. This, for Emmanuel, would have been 7-8 young people. In fact, Emmanuel has had no biological growth whatsoever. The Church needs to address very seriously how it is to encourage children and

young people within its youth work to deepen their sense of belonging and help them discover their own living faith.

4. There is a widespread pattern of the growth associated with newness tapering off. In Britain that seems to happen after only between three to five years. A key issue for Emmanuel is how to protect the growth pattern that we have been fortunate enough to have, and to find the keys to ensuring growth continues.
5. Despite the fact that Emmanuel can never be new again, it can ensure that it is repeatedly making itself known to people. Emmanuel will have a continuing opportunity to draw people if it retains its public profile. The fact that it is a comparatively large church on a main road, with involvement in a wide range of different concerns means that it is likely that people will continue to drop in at Emmanuel when looking for a church to attend. We need to be constantly prepared to welcome and integrate newcomers.
6. Furthermore, there are other key elements that are contributing to Emmanuel's growth and which can encourage growth to continue into the future. The primary ones are:
 - challenging, relevant preaching and the general quality of worship,
 - a well-rounded welcome and sensitive pastoral care, and
 - creating opportunities that exist for people to become involved quickly in the life and ministry of the church.

Care needs to be taken to ensure that these areas continue to be our hallmarks. In particular, the sense of openness to newcomers and to new ideas must be protected. It is perhaps this sense of openness to the new that has been more instrumental in Emmanuel's growth than the fact that the building is new. Protecting this sense of newness is a vital ingredient to Emmanuel continuing to grow. "Behold I will make all things new!" needs to be a gospel truth that is lived out repeatedly.

7. Consistency of ministry is also an important element within growing churches. Emmanuel needs to consider seriously how it can ensure that such consistency is maintained even within the context of the itinerant ministry pattern of the Methodist Church. There are issues to be thought through in terms of Ministerial length of service and how a broader team of local people can ensure that the direction and consistency of Ministry continues.

7.2 Paper to Circuit Meeting

1. Although Emmanuel's growth has been assisted by the fact that its larger congregation enabled some joiners to remain anonymous in their early visits, it is not true to say that only a larger church can grow, or even that a larger church has a better chance of growth. Research indicates that it is simplistic to presume that big equals growth.⁸⁰ Where the conditions are right, the growth could actually be proportionately much more impressive within smaller churches.⁸¹ Furthermore, many of Emmanuel's joiners indicated that size was not the critical factor.

2. The key elements required to see growth happen are not dependent either on having a new church building. Older churches within the Circuit which cannot enjoy the 'newness dividend' that Emmanuel has, to a certain extent enjoyed, could still see growth if the conditions were right. As significant as Emmanuel's newness in itself, has been the fact that its newness provided it with a chance to have a high public profile. Many circuit churches are in good locations within their community, and the research does indicate that a sense of presence and a public profile really does count. Posters, noticeboards, makeovers can all indicate life and newness of spirit. Signs of life, and tales of activity within the community matters too. It is challenging that although some joiners lived closer to other Methodist Churches, they had not attempted to visit them, because they had not heard anything about them, and assumed that they were dying churches. We need to hear again the Psalmist's encouragement to 'Sing a new song.'
3. An environment of welcome is key. This is not just how well we smile and shake hands at the door, but more significantly how glad and delighted we genuinely are to have new people in our midst; how able we are to find roles for them . not forcing them into jobs we think need doing, but providing them with space to offer the gifts and skills they have and honouring the contributions they can make. All this enables the development of a sense of belonging, in which belief can be deepened. Smaller churches that have not received new members in significant numbers for many years need to be aware of the danger they are in. It is all too easy for the welcome to be offered with such agonising hope that the visitors will join that it actually pushes them away. Smaller churches need to recognise also that new people coming and offering their own contributions will change the way

their church is. It may well be that in order to provide joiners with the range of activities and opportunities that they are looking for, smaller churches will need to work together collaboratively.

4. It is clear that the quality of preaching and worship generally is very important to potential joiners. The Circuit needs to look long and hard at the ways it has inherited of distributing its preaching resources. The research indicates that a degree of consistency is advantageous to growth, and also that lay participation in worship is generally a positive experience. Consideration must be given both to the much more focussed use of preachers, and how to ensure that the gifts of the preacher are matched accurately with the needs of the congregations.

5. The younger generations are generally much more mobile in their lifestyles than some of the core congregations within our village churches. They live in one place, shop in another, work in another, socialise in another, and potentially worship in another. Whether we welcome it or not, younger people are generally more consumerist in their choosing of a church than previous generations. Methodists will no longer necessarily remain Methodist when they move house. They will shop around to find what suits. (The positive other side to that is that Anglicans, Baptists and members of other denominations are similarly fluid, giving an opportunity for Methodists.)

Nevertheless the research shows that people had some sadness when they did not feel that the local church was one that they could either join or remain in. This implies that the problem is not inextricable for village churches. If the profile,

welcome, preaching and embracing of people is right, then there will be a local loyalty that will encourage people from the community to come along and join.

6. The research has shown that allowing the community to use the premises does provide opportunities for people to begin a journey of faith. It enables some to start to feel that they belong. There is a need however to see beyond the financial motivation for letting the premises, and see the work instead as the Christian work of hospitality, care and welcome.

7. In summary, Emmanuel's growth has been largely due to public profile, spirit of openness, welcome and acceptance, and the opportunity it has had to have more focussed preaching ministry. None of these are dependent on new premises. All are attainable by other churches which are willing to undergo a process of reinvention, and embrace the changes that newcomers will bring. This of course is part and parcel of the gospel we proclaim. We can be confident, therefore, that this task is genuinely God's work for us.

Endnotes

Chapter One

- ¹ ðA Service of Thanksgiving published locally upon the closure of Pitt St Methodist Church. Feb 2002.
- ² Anecdotal conversations with elder members of the congregation.
- ³ ðAnother Tryö - Minutes of a Consultation in 1994 to discuss the potential merger of Old Town and Huddersfield Road
- ⁴ *ibid*
- ⁵ Frost R, *Which way for the Church?* (Eastbourne: Kingsway Publications, 1997) p 72ff
- ⁶ Letter from Church Member to Leaders of Zion United and Pitt Street Methodist Church, 5th March 2000.
- ⁷ These reservations are not clearly stated in the action-minutes, but are well-recalled by the writer who was present for some of the conversations.
- ⁸ A copy of this could not be located, but gave a detailed specification of the types of spaces needed in the new building.

Chapter Three

- ⁹ Dunstan P N, *Should churches in close proximity or with small memberships close?* (MA Dissertation, University of Sheffield at Cliff College, 1999)
- ¹⁰ *Ibid*, p 10
- ¹¹ *Methodist Conference 1948 Agenda (Representative Session)*, p 67
- ¹² Dunstan, p 81
- ¹³ *Ibid*, p 82
- ¹⁴ *Ibid*, p 82
- ¹⁵ *Ibid*, p 77-78
- ¹⁶ Extracted from Barnsley Circuit Records held in the Circuit Safe
- ¹⁷ Wakefield G, *Finding a Church: reasons people give for joining and moving from churches.* (PhD thesis, University of Kent at Canterbury, 1988) p 8
- ¹⁸ Hunter GG, *To Spread the Power* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1987), p 114
- ¹⁹ Dunstan, page 23
- ²⁰ Quoted in Staton MW -Property and Progressø *Epworth Review* 7/1 (1980) p 25-6
- ²¹ *Ibid*, pages 25-6
- ²² Gardiner GC, *The Rise and Fall of a Suburban Church* (MA Dissertation, University of Sheffield at Cliff College, 1998)
- ²³ Robinson M & Yarnell D, *Celebrating the Small Church* (Tunbridge Wells: Monarch, 1993), p 55ff
- ²⁴ Schwarz CA, *Natural Church Development* (Moggerhanger: BCGA, 1996) p 46
- ²⁵ *Ibid*, p 47
- ²⁶ Beasley-Murray P & Wilkinson A, *Turning the Tide* (London: Bible Society, 1981)
- ²⁷ Warren R, *Being Human Being Church* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1995) p 57
- ²⁸ Hunter GG, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000) p 52
- ²⁹ Finney J, *Rediscovering the Past: Celtic and Roman Mission* (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 1996) p 47
- ³⁰ Finney J, *Finding Faith Today: How does it happen?* (Swindon: Bible Society, 1992) p 25

Chapter 4

- ³¹ Pointer R, *How do Churches Grow?* (London: Marshall Morgan and Scott, 1984) page 115
- ³² *Ibid*, p 30
- ³³ Gill R, *A Vision for Growth*, (London: SPCK, 1994) Chapter 9 9
- ³⁴ *Ibid*, p 230
- ³⁵ *Ibid*, p 15.
- ³⁶ Wakefield, p 30-1
- ³⁷ Wakefield, p 289-290
- ³⁸ Beasley-Murray P & Wilkinson A, *Turning the Tide* (London: Bible Society, 1981)
- ³⁹ *Ibid*, p 36
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid* quoting Wagner, p 41
- ⁴¹ *Ibid*, p 50
- ⁴² *Ibid*, quoting Wagner, p 50
- ⁴³ *Ibid*, p 51
- ⁴⁴ Schwarz, p 22
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid* p 24

⁴⁶ Ibid p 32

⁴⁷ Ibid p 36

⁴⁸ Bridge D, The Missionary Shape of the Congregation (London: Methodist Church Home Division, circa 1987) p 23-34

⁴⁹ Ibid, p 22

⁵⁰ Stafford M -Church Growth ó the factsø Methodist Recorder 23 October 1997, p 10

⁵¹ Bridge D, p 22

⁵² Richter P and Francis L, Gone but not forgotten (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1998) p 165

⁵³ Gill R, A Vision for Growth, (London: SPCK, 1994) p 31

⁵⁴ Ibid

⁵⁵ Finney, J, Finding Faith Today p 19

⁵⁶ <http://www.christian-research.org.uk/intro.htm> 29/7/03

Chapter 5

⁵⁷ Richter P and Francis L, Gone but not forgotten p 65

Chapter 6

⁵⁸ See 3.2

⁵⁹ See 3.1

⁶⁰ See 3.1

⁶¹ This message was reinforced to the writer time and again in Pastoral Visiting.

⁶² See 1.2

⁶³ See 3.1

⁶⁴ See 1.4

⁶⁵ See 3.2

⁶⁶ See 3.2

⁶⁷ See 3.2

⁶⁸ See 5.4

⁶⁹ See 3.3

⁷⁰ See 3.4

⁷¹ See 4.2

⁷² See 5.5.2

⁷³ See 5.5.3

⁷⁴ See 4.2

⁷⁵ See 4.2

⁷⁶ See 5.5.4

⁷⁷ Atkins MD, Preaching in a Cultural Context (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 2001) p 77

⁷⁸ See 5.3

⁷⁹ See 5.5.5

Chapter 7

⁸⁰ See 4.2

⁸¹ Schwarz CA, Natural Church Development (Moggerhanger: BCGA, 1996) p46