

A theological critique of the models of ecclesiology
and missiology of St Thomas' Church, Philadelphia,
Sheffield.

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I certify that this dissertation is based on my own original research
and contains no material from any other source which is not
referenced.

(signed)

Contents

Section 1 - Description of the model of St. Thomas' Church Philadelphia	2
<i>Description of St Thomas' Church Philadelphia, Sheffield</i>	2
Description of STP as explained by 'vision, values, vehicles, vocabulary'	4
Principle outworking of this situation at STP	11
Section 2 – Theological & Ecclesiological Analysis	14
<i>Introduction</i>	14
<i>The theology which underlies STP's practice</i>	14
missio Dei	14
Mission imperative determines ecclesial structural response	17
<i>Comparison of STP theology and praxis against that of the historic Western church</i>	19
Defining the "essence" of church	19
Assessing how adequately STP maps to classic descriptions of the essence of church	24
Account of Bevans & Schroder's ecclesiology mapped against 20 th	
Century models of mission in comparison to STP	28
Unity and Diversity in Acts as a model for STP – Comparisons to the work of Loveday Alexander	31
<i>Resulting analysis of STP in comparison to the historic Western church</i>	37
Church or network?	38
Implications of low control/high accountability	41
Incarnation	42
Concluding reflection	48
<i>Summary and concluding reflections to Sections 1 & 2</i>	49
Section 3 – Issues of application and contextualisation	52
<i>Introduction</i>	52
<i>Need for appropriate contextualisation</i>	52
<i>Discussion of 4 Spaces thinking</i>	56
Analysis of 4 spaces in reference to STP	59
Concluding reflections	62
<i>Movement dynamics</i>	63
Adaptive methods	64
<i>Summary and concluding reflections to Section 3</i>	67
Final Conclusion	68
Bibliography	71

Section 1 - Description of the model of St. Thomas' Church Philadelphia

Description of St Thomas' Church Philadelphia, Sheffield

Sheffield is a complex post-industrial city in the heart of England of around 530,000. It is a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-religious city of mixed economic and social opportunity.¹ St Thomas' Church Philadelphia, Sheffield (herein STP) describes itself as 'a multi-denominational church. This means that over the past 25 years a Church of England, a Baptist and a Free/House church joined together (and quickly worked through any challenges!) so that today we represent the heritage of all 3 historic ways of church.'²

It was originally a church "plant" into the city of Sheffield from St Thomas' Crookes, Sheffield structured as an Anglican-Baptist Local Ecumenical Project (LEP),³ of around 800 people which was around 80% of that church's congregation,⁴ predominantly those who did not consider their affiliation to St Thomas' to restrict them to worshipping or ministering in its parish of Crookes, but shared in its focus upon the wider city. In 2003 STP purchased and became established in its present large campus, a former engineering works of 7 interconnected buildings and offices, including a meeting hall with capacity for approximately 800, in the Philadelphia area of Sheffield.

¹ 'National Statistics Annual Population Survey December 2008' in: CreativeSheffield Ltd, *Sheffield, England: Key Location Factors 2009* [<http://www.creativesheffield.co.uk/NR/rdonlyres/091D2EF9-D2F6-41BD-B9CC-D1C766761479/0/KeyLocationFactorsforSheffield.pdf>]. Consulted 20.07.2012

² The campus is today the registered place for 2 distinct churches called St Thomas' Baptist Church, and the Anglican St Thomas Church at Philadelphia, the later which operates as an Extra Parochial Place. Both these churches, and their House Church partner 'The King's Centre' operate under one legal entity The Philadelphia Network Ltd, and an overarching network name of 'Network Church Sheffield'. Source: St. Thomas' Church Philadelphia, Sheffield. 'Our Church' [http://www.stthomaschurch.org.uk/our_church]. Consulted 20.07.2012

³ Itself the result of a merger between neighbouring congregations of Anglican & Baptist churches in Crookes, Sheffield in the mid-1980s. See R. Warren, *In the Crucible* (Crowborough, East Sussex: Highland, 1989) and N.J. Mallon, *Calling a City back to God* (Eastbourne: Kingsway Communications, 2003)

⁴ N. J. Mallon, *Calling a City back to God* (Eastbourne: Kingsway Communications, 2003).

Over the next 5 years it became independent from the sending church in Crookes, and ‘formally established a new church of St Thomas’ Philadelphia, with a distinct vision, staff team and membership.’⁵

Governance and Denominational Affiliation

STP is recognised as a multi-denominational church, and treated by the Church of England and Baptist Union of Great Britain as the equivalent of an LEP. STP has a spiritual “constitution” (not legally enforceable, since its legal entity is as a Limited Company with charitable status) which states that it will usually have a “Stream Minister” to represent each of its 3 component ecclesial heritages (“Streams”) of Anglican, Baptist and Free. These ministers relate to external “Visitors” of each denominational stream. Thus, through these 3 staff posts STP is in full covenantal relationship with the Diocese of Sheffield, whereby an Ordained Anglican Priest is a member of senior staff who relates to the Bishop as their denominational oversight.⁶ The church is also a member of the Yorkshire Baptist Association, relating to its member churches and Regional Ministers not in a formal way, but through relational association via its Baptist Stream Minister. Finally, a Free Church Minister relates to an agreed representative Visitor of this tradition from a different church in the city of Sheffield.

STP amalgamates its legal governance requirements (limited company directors with operational responsibility) with its spiritual direction by combining to form one Board made up of executive church leaders and a majority of lay non-executive church Wardens.⁷ This Board is accountable to a Representative Church Members Council

⁵ St. Thomas’ Church Philadelphia, Sheffield. ‘Our History’ [http://www.stthomaschurch.org.uk/our_history]. Consulted 20.07.2012

⁶ Additionally, in the Church of England, Church Wardens are officers of the Bishop.

⁷ The Anglican name of Warden has been retained. In many respects their role of offering accountability, spiritual oversight and counsel is more akin to the Baptist ‘Elder’ role. In fact, there is a spread of

(which is also legally the Members of the limited company) and is made up of around 30 recognised lay leaders of ministries or groups within the church, voted for by other lay leaders (not the executive) whose role is to offer accountability, communication and counsel to the Board.

Description of STP as explained by ‘vision, values, vehicles, vocabulary’

A description of the structure, operation and intention of STP is best determined by using categories the church itself frequently employs of: vision; values; vehicles; and vocabulary.⁸

Vision

The published vision statement of STP is ‘Calling a City back to God. The revival and transformation of Sheffield’⁹ which they summarise as, ‘Seeing the power of the gospel bring personal and city-wide transformation.’ Thus, the church has a vision grounded in Matt. 28:18-20 to reach the whole city of Sheffield and its surrounding areas (from which a proportion of its congregation is drawn), and its intention, according to recent conversations with former leader Paul Maconochie, is to achieve this is by nurturing multiple ‘mature missionary disciples who reflect and model the life of Jesus Christ.’ The vision for maturity (Eph. 4:12-16; Col. 1:28) and commitment on the part of its congregation is evidenced in their website vision statement:

‘There is both a call and a cost to our vision. The call is to personal revival – it starts with you and me living sold-out lives for, and because of, Jesus’ love - in our everyday contexts. The cost means a life interrupted, as we invest our time,

denominational affiliation among the Wardens so that only 2 are Anglican, a number are ‘Baptist’, and a number are ‘Free Church’.

⁸ M. Breen, *Multiplying Missional Leaders*, (Pawleys Is, NC.: 3 Dimension Ministries, 2012), Ch. 8 pp.111-122

⁹ St. Thomas’ Church Philadelphia, Sheffield. ‘Our Vision’ [http://www.stthomaschurch.org.uk/our_vision]. Consulted 20.07.2012.

money and resources into the ministries of this church and into loving and serving our city.’¹⁰

STP’s methodology towards achieving this vision is by blending a balance of different forms and expressions of the body of Christ in the world. What they describe as ‘the balance of Both/And’¹¹ principally involves harnessing the strengths of large-scale corporate gatherings and geographically dispersed mid-size “Missional Communities,” supported by specific ministries of service to the city. Furthermore, it aims to play a part in the reformation of the Western church towards a culture of discipleship and mission, leading to the re-evangelisation of Western Europe. This is principally achieved through the church’s links and influence in other churches around the world, and its affiliation to a missionary religious order, The Order of Mission.¹² Therefore, as this essay will expand, it appears that the overarching vision and purpose of St Thomas’ Church Philadelphia is to be a catalyst towards a *movement* of mission.

Values

This vision is underpinned by a number of discernible values, which are intended to result in observable behaviour. At root is a theology of the mission of God’s people, to be addressed shortly in this essay. STP views itself and its component parts as fundamentally missional in call and purpose, with an expectation that the Christian faith leads believers beyond their confessing congregations into the world at large. The church’s theology is grounded principally in the interaction of two biblical themes,

¹⁰ St. Thomas’ Church Philadelphia, Sheffield. ‘Our Vision’ [http://www.stthomaschurch.org.uk/our_vision]. Consulted 20.07.2012.

¹¹ St. Thomas’ Church Philadelphia, Sheffield. ‘Our Vision’ [http://www.stthomaschurch.org.uk/our_vision]. Consulted 20.07.2012.

¹² The Order of Mission ‘What is TOM?’ [<http://www.missionorder.org>]. Consulted 20.07.2012. See also Diane Kershaw, ‘The Order of Mission: Being a Sent People’ in: G. Cray, I. Mobsby & A. Kennedy, *New Monasticism as Fresh Expression of Church*, (London: Canterbury Press, 2010), pp.80-91. See also Mission and Public Affairs Council, *Mission-Shaped Church*, (London: Church House Publishing, 2004), pp.74-75.

those being covenant and the kingdom of God.¹³ It has published 5 “Core Values” which it claims are biblically rooted and express what their common life should embody and replicate: Faith; Identity; Community; Discipleship; and Transformation.¹⁴

All the above are to be put into practice over another foundational principle: “Low Control/High Accountability,” which they claim is drawn from the gospel witness of how Jesus interacted with his disciples:

‘The way we put our Core Values into practice should be by this process of low control (leaders don’t tell people what to do, but empower everyone to seek God for their own actions and call) and high accountability (people choose to submit to each other and share the decisions, joys and challenges in honest relationship).’¹⁵

This results in a high value on leadership. The church invests a large degree of trust and authority in its internally appointed Senior Leaders (some of whom are ordained Ministers within either the Anglican or Baptists denominations), as well as holding high value in the encouragement and empowerment of lay, often volunteer leadership at every level within the organisation.¹⁶

These values come together in the church’s most commonly used idiom and guiding principle, which is that the life of Christian discipleship ought to reflect how

¹³ STP appropriation of these biblical themes is expressed succinctly as: “Covenant is the theme in scripture that expresses God’s desire to call us into deep and loving relationship with Him and to partner with Him in transforming our society as we ourselves are transformed. Kingdom is the rule and reign of God in His people, and increasingly in this world. We partner with Him to further His Kingdom in words, works and wonders as we overflow His great “power that is at work within us” (Eph 3:20) into the world around.” St. Thomas’ Church Philadelphia, Sheffield. ‘Our Core Values’ [http://www.stthomaschurch.org.uk/our_core_values]. Consulted 20.07.2012.

¹⁴ St. Thomas’ Church Philadelphia, Sheffield. ‘Our Core Values’ [http://www.stthomaschurch.org.uk/our_core_values]. Consulted 20.07.2012.

¹⁵ St. Thomas’ Church Philadelphia, Sheffield. ‘Our Core Values’ [http://www.stthomaschurch.org.uk/our_core_values]. Consulted 20.07.2012.

¹⁶ For example, the present Senior Leaders are not ordained. Notwithstanding, STP’s constitution requires in the usual course of events one or more ordained senior staff at some level of the organisation.

Jesus lived a “balanced life” in 3 dimensions (Luke 6:12-19) of “UP” (to God), “IN” (to each other) and, “OUT” (mission to the world). This triangle (one of their Lifeshapes – see discussion to follow) forms the basis of measuring the effectiveness of much of the observable life of STP against a balance of these 3 criteria.¹⁷

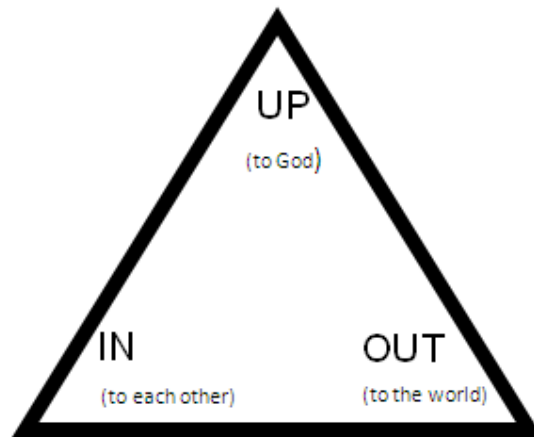


Diagram 1. Lifeshapes Triangle.

Vehicles

STP organises itself to achieve this vision and values along a number of distinct “vehicles” representing a clear methodology. These are partially illustrated by a diagram of triangles,¹⁸ representing the 4 principle types of groups which engender different levels of belonging or association, and different interactions and outcomes in church community, as follows:¹⁹

¹⁷ M. Breen & W. Kallestad, *The Passionate Church*, (Colorado Springs: Cook Communications, 2005)

¹⁸ Previous Team Rector of St Thomas’ Church Mike Breen cites that the inspiration for this model came from Eddie Gibbs in *I believe in Church Growth* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1985). Breen built upon Gibb’s observation that, ‘wherever the church was growing throughout the world, the church appeared to be organized into three levels of church life, representing three different types of groups and three distinct experiences for the members.’ M. Breen & A. Absalom, *Launching Missional Communities: A Field Guide* (Pawleys Is, SC: 3DM, 2010), p.16. To these 3, was added the smallest group of 2-4 people in close “accountability” relationship, sharing the most intimate challenges and joys of their discipleship walk.

The emphasis upon accountability was strong since the mid-1990s, following the collapse, due to lack of ecclesial and moral accountability, of the ‘Nine O’Clock Service’ which was originally birthed out of St. Thomas’ Crookes. See F. Furendi, *Culture of Fear Revisited* (London: Continuum, Revised edition 2006), pp.164-165 for a discussion of the C of E’s response.

¹⁹ B. Hopkins & M. Breen, *Clusters: Creative Mid-sized Missional Communities* (3DM Publishing, UK, 2nd Edition 2008), p.200



Diagram 2. STP Models of Association.
 From Hopkins & Breen, *Clusters*, 2008 (adapted)

The largest scale “vehicle” orbits around the large campus of buildings which facilitate what commentators often describe as the “attractional” or “gathered” church, with paid leadership at the centre, centrally-operated activities, gathered worship and ministries. The campus enables large scale Sunday gatherings where people who affiliate to various smaller-sized groups all come together, as well as members who are in no other group, and occasional visitors. The campus also hosts multiple mid-week meetings of missional communities and ministries like youth work. It houses the central staff team, it hosts the majority of its training events, and occasional public conferences.

The mid-sized triangle represents STP’s 40-plus adult missional communities (MCs).²⁰ These are mid-sized groups of between 15-35 Christians and usually non-Christians, affiliated around a common missional vision.²¹ This is frequently focussed upon Christian witness to a specific geographic area of the city (neighbourhood vision) or a dispersed people-group (network vision) like students or their workplaces. The emphasis is upon a balance of “UP”, “IN”, “OUT” as they share life in community whilst furthering God’s missional purposes for his people. This is reflected by a range of purposes to their meetings such as mission, accountability, worship and fellowship.

²⁰ Previously called “clusters” by STP prior to around 2007.

²¹ This model is rapidly gaining traction in North America and parts of the UK, having been pioneered at STP in the 2000s. See R. McNeal, *Missional Communities: The Rise of the Post-Congregational Church*, (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 2011).

Thus they are described by STP as ‘extended family on mission’²² which some commentators would equate to a model of “engaged”, “scattered” or “house church” – distinct communities within the wider organisation with distinct purposes but not replicating *some* of the functions of ‘gathered’ church.

The third triangle represents “Small Groups” (SGs) of between 4-12 people, which exist within MCs – they can be 2 or 3 SGs within each MC - and are usually more “UP” and “IN” focused, providing Christian nurture and pastoral care to the members. The fourth triangle represents accountability groups of 2-4 people²³ who share and encourage each other in the most intimate challenges and joys of their discipleship walk.

A further integral vehicle within STP are its various ministries. These are groups or activities providing a free service targeting specific recipient groups, located both at the central campus and geographically spread. Ministries tend to have a principle aim of either evangelism and Christian discipleship (such as youth and childrens provision) or social improvement (such as care and recovery programs to some of the city’s vulnerable and/or homeless people), while aiming to integrate both with integrity. The human resource for these ministries comes from the church congregation, and is occasionally linked to a specific MC. Other ministries of STP include the provision of discipleship initiation (such as The Alpha Course) and training to existing STP members (such as prayer or leadership courses), and are delivered across both centrally gathered and geographically dispersed church contexts.

²² St. Thomas’ Church Philadelphia, Sheffield. ‘What Are Communities?’ [http://www.stthomaschurch.org.uk/what_are_communities]. Consulted 20.07.2012.

²³ STP encourages its members to choose “accountability partners” from anyone suitable within the church. Therefore they sometimes are in the same MC or Small Group, but are frequently made up from individuals who connect into a range of groups. See also St Thomas Church Philadelphia, Young Adults. ‘2 to 4 group’ [http://www.sttomasyoungadults.com/?page_id=177]. Consulted 20.07.2012.

Finally, a central staff team offers a resource of spiritual leadership and oversight, some rites of passage, training, coaching, and specific pastoral care expertise when necessary. The structure may be illustrated thus:

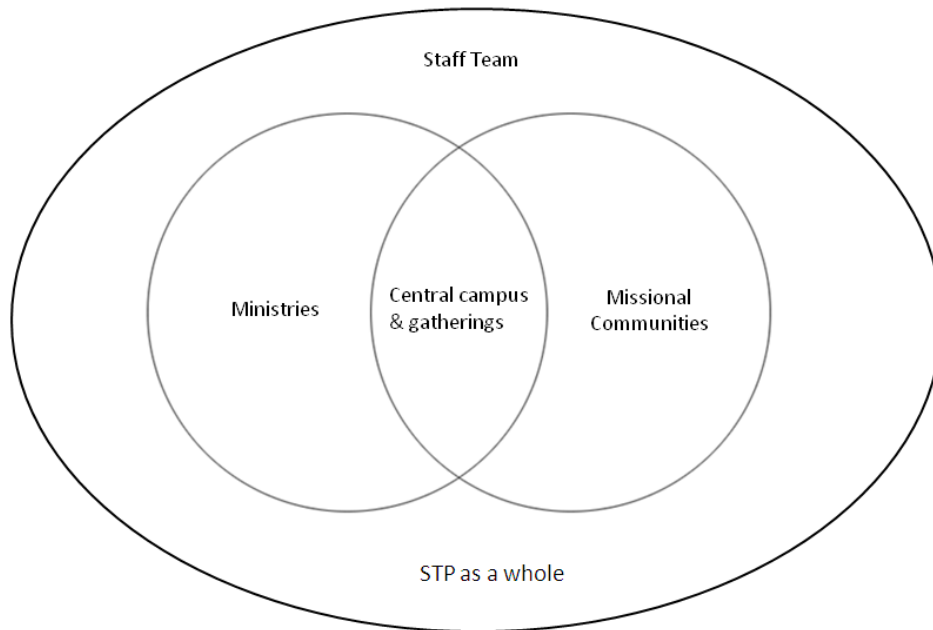


Diagram 3. Structure of STP.

Vocabulary

STP uses the phrase “vocabulary” in reference primarily to its system of discipleship tools based upon the gospel accounts of Jesus’ life, leadership and ministry called Lifeshapes.²⁴ These memorable shapes carry an embedded philosophy of Christian life and leadership aimed at nurturing disciples of Jesus. Their genuine application would span both values and vehicles, so they are frequently described within STP as acting like an “operating system” under the surface of the organisation. Thus, STP’s principles are also its vocabulary. The most common reference members make within this vocabulary is to the Triangle Lifeshape (Diagram 1), and the Circle (Diagram 4 below),

²⁴ Developed by former St Thomas’ Team Rector Mike Breen, Lifeshapes are now copyrighted and used internationally by a wide range of church from various denomination and heritage. Breen & Kallestad, *The Passionate Church*, 2005.

which is a reflective cycle.²⁵ Lifeshapes also form the rule of life for the Order of Mission,²⁶ which was instituted from St Thomas' church in 2003 and includes in its members many leaders from STP.

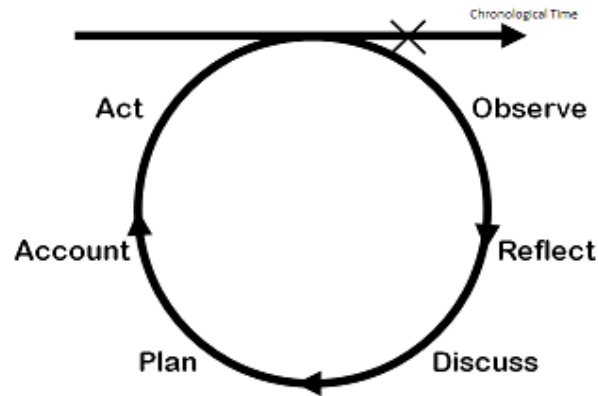


Diagram 4. Lifeshapes 'Learning Circle'.

Principle outworking of this situation at STP

There are a number of significant consequences arising from this model of church, which contribute to a fuller description before this essay begins its analysis. Firstly, STP does not operate like a “communal” local parish church, it is “associational” because it gathers people for worship and belonging from all over city.²⁷ The church encourages members to relate within a ‘Both/And’ continuum,²⁸ so that the majority of members see their location of belonging and association in two or three of the Diagram 2 “Models of Association” triangles. Thus, their sense of identity as church through STP relates both to centralised gathered worship, and dispersed smaller

²⁵ D.A. Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner – How Professionals Think in Action*, (Basic Books, 1983). Also: J.D. Whitehead & E.E. Whitehead, *Method in Ministry – Theological Reflection and Christian Ministry*, (Wisconsin: Sheed & Ward, Revised edition, 1995).

²⁶ The Order of Mission ‘Rule and Pattern of Life’ [<http://www.missionorder.org/show/98>]. Consulted 20.07.2012.

²⁷ For a full treatment of Associational and Communal church models see: Geoffrey K. Nelson ‘Communal and Associational Churches’, *Review of Religious Research*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (Winter, 1971), pp. 102-110

²⁸ St. Thomas’ Church Philadelphia, Sheffield. ‘Our Vision’ [http://www.stthomaschurch.org.uk/our_vision]. Consulted 20.07.2012.

communities. This is a continuum in the sense that the expression of church for an individual can be both gathered and dispersed over any given month.

Secondly, STP operates no formal membership requirements or records.²⁹ It operates as a “centred set” by offering multiple invitations and paths for people to belong and participate in its sacraments and the church body at all levels, on the understanding that membership of this set is understood as people oriented and being led towards a centre, in this case discipleship to Jesus Christ. This is in contrast to traditional denominational “bounded set” membership which stipulates clear boundaries of who may/may not be considered a church member.³⁰ Thus, people in Sheffield may consider themselves members of STP prior to becoming Christians or baptism, and the church leadership considers and counts its large fringe³¹ as much as long-term members.

This has a secondary impact that the majority of attendees would rarely or never affiliate themselves to a specific denomination, rather seeing their identity as “Christians” within this church, while understanding that STP itself remains multi-denominational. The exception comes during occasional offices such as baptism, when STP requires candidates to select a denominational affiliation and associated liturgy.³²

²⁹ Although STP operates in as a multi-denomination church it has ceased to maintain formal records of denominational membership such as a Parish Roll (Church of England) or Baptist Members Roll. Nevertheless, membership of the Church Representative Members’ Council requires a proven commitment to Christ, maturity and leadership experience, albeit applied informally.

³⁰ The appropriation of mathematical set theory within church membership and contexts has largely been championed by missional anthropologist Paul Hiebert. P. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994). See also M. Frost & A. Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st Century Church*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003).

³¹ For a fuller treatment see N. Spencer & Y. Richmond, *Beyond the Fringe: Researching the Spiritual Age: The Report of Revd Yvonne Richmond’s Research in the Diocese of Coventry Into the Spirituality of People Outside the Church* (Calver: Cliff College Publishing, 2005)

³² Paddy Mallon a previous St Thomas’ Baptist Minister wryly explained this situation a decade earlier: ‘When we explain that there is a theological difference between the acts of confirmation and believer’s baptism, they struggle with the choice, because they do not have a grid of reference that resonates with the world-view of denominationalism. It is not that they do not want to make a public confession of their faith, but rather that they have difficulty with the concept of deciding whether to take on the label of

A third implication of STP's ecclesial structure is that a variety of ecclesial practice occurs across the different "vehicles", with some designed to offer certain elements, but not be strong in other respects. For example, the majority of pastoral care and spiritual formation/discipleship occurs through personal contact at MC or Small Group level, not during Sunday gathered church. MCs are designed to act like 'extended family on mission'³³ whereby group members commit to invest in each others' lives and in Christian maturity (such as bible studies or occasionally sharing in Eucharist in their homes/meeting places), while ministering to their missional contexts as a group. By contrast, gathered Sunday church is designed as a place for leadership to espouse vision, biblical and theological teaching, public testimony, shared liturgical worship, sacraments and occasional offices, but not a strong sense of communal family or belonging.

either 'Anglican' or 'Baptist'. The postmodern generation has a natural suspicion of institutions, of which the church is just one among many.' Mallon, *Calling a City*, p.61

³³ St. Thomas' Church Philadelphia, Sheffield. 'Our History'
[http://www.stthomaschurch.org.uk/our_history]. Consulted 20.07.2012.

Section 2 – Theological & Ecclesiological Analysis

Introduction

This section provides an analysis of the foundational theology underpinning STP's approach, and compares its ecclesiological outworking against some historic western protestant church practices. In particular, it applies two major thesis of ecclesiology: Alexander's biblical exposition of the early church in Acts, and Bevans and Schroeder's mapping of Christianity's "constants in context" to late 20th century ecclesiology, and asks how adequately STP maps to these classic descriptions of the essence of church. It then critiques a number of significant ecclesiological features unique to STP in the light of the above.

The theology which underlies STP's practice

The theological analysis which now follows is an attempt to outline those premises of theology closest to STP's position, so as to allow for further analysis and critique. It is not written simply in support of STP's position, and it acknowledges there are counter arguments to most theology.

missio Dei

This exploration centres upon the nature of church, what constitutes "church" and how this may be constructed. For the past 50 years, theologians across all spectrums have reached agreement that questions of ecclesiology must take their foundation and principles from the scriptural witness to the God they represent. The nature of the church is to be derived from the nature of the Trinitarian Godhead.³⁴ Karl Barth laid the doctrinal foundations for the mission and very essence of the church being thus rooted,

³⁴ One of the first to articulate mission as an activity of God himself was Karl Barth at the Brandenburg Missionary Conference in 1932. This concept was most widely embraced in the aftermath of the International Missionary Council in Willingen, Germany, in 1952. World Council of Churches. 'History'. [<http://www.oikoumene.org/en/who-are-we/organization-structure/consultative-bodies/world-mission-and-evangelism/history.html>]. Consulted 01.08.2012.

since ‘the church exists in being sent and in building itself up for the sake of its mission.’³⁵ His recovery of *missio Dei*, the doctrine that mission is an activity and characteristic of God’s nature, places missiology within the doctrine of the Trinity, rather than a subset of ecclesiology or even soteriology.³⁶ Seminal contributions from Newbigin³⁷ and Bosch³⁸ have since built upon Barth, emphasising three particular aspects of the doctrine of God relating to mission: God’s Trinitarian nature; incarnation; and, sending nature.

The triune God lives within itself as a community, but one which is, by nature, focussed beyond itself by the motivation of love,³⁹ a love which participates fully with the created order to the point of *kenosis* and self-sacrifice.⁴⁰ Thus, Bosch states God is a “sending” God, and human mission participates from this basis.

‘Mission is, primarily and ultimately, the work of the Triune God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, for the sake of the world, a ministry in which the church is privileged to participate. Mission has its origin in the heart of God. God is a fountain of sending love. This is the deepest source of mission. It is impossible to penetrate deeper still; there is mission because God loves people.’⁴¹

³⁵ Karl Barth ‘Church Dogmatics IV/1’ (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), p.725 in: D.J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in the Theology of Mission*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), p.372

³⁶ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, pp.389-400

³⁷ Notably L. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, (London: SPCK, 1989)

³⁸ Notably D.J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*. Also: Bosch, *Believing in the future : toward a missiology of Western culture* (Leominster, Herefordshire: Trinity Press International, 1995)

³⁹ Gerald O’Collins, *Christology A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2nd edition, 2009), p.300

⁴⁰ Paul S. Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation – The Christian Idea of Atonement*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989)

⁴¹ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p.392

This point is underlined by the scriptural witness. In the Old Testament the motif of covenant creates a people with the purpose of being not just a centripetal community set aside for the worship of Yahweh but also and always a blessing to all nations (Gen. 12:3).⁴² In the New Testament we may describe Christ's followers as "sent people" as in the words of Jesus 'As the Father sent me, so I am sending you' (John 20:21),⁴³ likewise His Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20), and call for his followers to be His "witnesses" (Luke 24:46-48; John 15:26-27) and the overwhelming emphasis in Acts of a call to witness to the gospel beyond existing boundaries (Acts 1:8; 13:2; 14:21;16:9,13,32 and more). Indeed Bosch argues the whole of the New Testament has to be understood as a missionary document. 'Mission was, in the early stages, more than a mere function; it was a fundamental expression of the life of the church. The beginnings of a missionary theology are therefore also the beginnings of Christian theology as such.'⁴⁴

Therefore, in the scriptural model for Christian discipleship, just as God sent his Son and Spirit into the world, so God's people are, at root, a sent or missionary people, and God's church is to mirror this biblical witness.⁴⁵ The Trinity, then, may be likened to 'community-in-mission', which Lings argues 'enables better understanding of [the] corporate Church identity and its mission, notably closing the gap between ecclesiology and missiology.'⁴⁶

Furthermore, the scripture witness to the *method* of Christian witness is also deeply significant. The doctrine of incarnation (John 1:1-18), the sense of God's deep

⁴² See C.J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative*, (Nottingham: IVP Academic, 2006) & *The Mission of God's People – A Biblical Theology of God's People*, (Grand Rapids, IL.: Zondervan, 2010).

⁴³ Also John 5:36-37; 8:16-18; 17:18

⁴⁴ H. Kasting, 'Die Anfänge der urchristlichen Mission' (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1969), p.127 in: Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p.16 (his translation).

⁴⁵ 'In giving ourselves away to others, we find ourselves leaning upon a movement of self-giving and mission that is far deeper than our own, as we share in the 'sending' of the Son *by* the Father'. P.S. Fiddes, *Past Event*, 1989, p.166

⁴⁶ G.W. Lings, *The Church's Calling and Capacity to Reproduce*, PhD Thesis, University of Manchester, 2008, p7. Available online: [http://www.churcharmy.org.uk/ms/sc/SCOLER/sfc_27197.aspx].

participation and identification with humanity, forms another foundation for the *missio Dei*. It follows that as Christians and the church seek to join in with God's mission in and to the world, they must do so in the way the Trinity always did, by incarnation, by being sent. Mission is therefore seen as a movement of God to the world, and the church is the instrument for that mission.⁴⁷

Mission imperative determines ecclesial structural response

The implication of this argument is that since the nature of church must be derived from the doctrine of God, the modern acceptance of the centrality of God's missionary nature means that 'The mission Dei institutes the *missiones ecclesiae*'⁴⁸ (1 Peter 2:9). 'The Christian faith, I submit, is intrinsically missionary.'⁴⁹ Atkins summarises the implication for ecclesiology succinctly. 'To use theological shorthand, theology – read mainly through the lens of missiology – produces ecclesiology, rather than vice versa.'⁵⁰ Bosch adds a corrective that the definition of mission goes well beyond the church, since it proceeds from God. He warns 'to say that the church is essentially missionary does not mean that mission is church-centred.'⁵¹ Nevertheless, Newbigin was clear half a century ago that reimagining church to be missionary in its contemporary context must not result in diluting or downplaying its function, 'An unchurchly mission is as much a monstrosity as an unmissionary church.'⁵²

Contemporary missiologist Alan Hirsch takes the implication of Trinitarian doctrine further, arguing that the church must display not only this missional

⁴⁷ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, pp.368-374

⁴⁸ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p.370

⁴⁹ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p.8.

⁵⁰ Martyn Atkins 'What is the essence of church?' in: S. Croft (Ed.), *Mission-shaped Questions - Defining issues for today's Church*, (London: Church House Publishing, 2008), p.17.

⁵¹ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p.493. For a fuller critique of the danger of church "in our likeness" see John M. Hull, *Mission-shaped Church: A Theological Response*, (London: SCM Press, 2006).

⁵² L. Newbigin, *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of Church* (New York: Friendship Press, 1954), p.269

imperative, but what he calls “a missional-incarnational imperative,” in contrast to the come-to-us mode prevalent in Christendom which he calls the “evangelistic-attractational model.” By arguing such, he begins to define the method, as well as the motive for ecclesiology. He contends that operating incarnationally inspires innovation in ecclesial practice and resultant ecclesiology.⁵³ Innovation is therefore crucial to appropriate contextualisation and enculturation of the gospel ‘which faith the Church is called upon to proclaim afresh in each generation,’⁵⁴ and which goes beyond evangelism in addressing the whole person and the whole of society, including the likes of economy, environment, politics, and culture,

This issue of contextualisation is central since it ought to help shape the resulting ecclesiology and must be married with the foundations of the Christian faith which remain constant above and despite immediate circumstances: the balance which Bevans and Schroeder call ‘Constants in Context’,⁵⁵ and what Jesus commissioned in Matt. 28:19-20. For Brueggemann this requires a call for the church to engage in inculturation while maintaining integrity to its other-worldly calling. ‘The persons and communities called by this God for praise and obedience and sent by this God for justice, mercy, and faith also live among and in contestation with other gods, other loyalties, other authorities.’⁵⁶ Such an engagement with the world begins to blur the convenient theological boundaries of the academy, so that as Bosch finds, ‘In fact, our

⁵³ A. Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways + reactivating the missional church*, (Grand Rapids, MI.: Brazos Press, 2006), Chapter 5 pp.127-148

⁵⁴ The Declaration of Assent is made by deacons, priests and bishops of the Church of England when they are ordained and on each occasion when they take up a new appointment. The Church of England ‘Common Worship: Main Volume: Authorization, Preface, and Declaration of Assent’ [<http://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-worship/worship/texts/mvcontents/preface.aspx>]. Consulted 20.07.2012.

⁵⁵ S.B. Bevans & R.P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004)

⁵⁶ Walter Brueggemann ‘Evangelism and Discipleship: The God Who Calls, the God Who Sends’ in: P.W.Chilcote & L.C. Warner (Eds.), *The Study of Evangelism: Exploring a Missional Practice of Church*, (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 2008), p.219

missionary practice happens in the tension between divine providence and human confusion.’⁵⁷

Thus St Thomas’ Philadelphia faces the same challenge of finding the balance between incarnational mission resulting in innovation in the presentation and proclamation of the gospel, amidst maintaining the integrity of the constant elements of gospel life and witness, which STP have identified as found partly within the intersection of Kingdom and Covenant theology.⁵⁸ Bosch contends that the focus of the church within its participation in the *missio Dei* ought to be its function as a seed, sign or instrument of the Kingdom of God coming, not only through the church but in the world at large. This is why understanding context is vital, and a subject which this essay will examine in greater detail in considering STP’s ecclesiology, derived from its theology.

Comparison of STP theology and praxis against that of the historic Western church

Defining the “essence” of church

Having outlined STP’s doctrinal foundations as God’s people, it is now appropriate to consider in more detail the question of what constitutes church. This aids the task of assessing the theology and ecclesiology of STP against the historic thought and practice of the Western church, particularly in the past century. STP is a very young church founded in 2003, and despite its mother church’s long ecclesial heritage⁵⁹ it has operated in relative freedom to establish its own distinct expression of the body of Christ, because of the flexibility of expression afforded within an LEP not formally required to mirror one denominational pattern or another. The building blocks of

⁵⁷ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p.9

⁵⁸ St. Thomas’ Church Philadelphia, Sheffield. ‘Our Core Values’ [http://www.stthomaschurch.org.uk/our_core_values]. Consulted 20.07.2012.

⁵⁹ St Thomas’ Crookes was founded in 1840, Crookes Baptist Church around 1909.

ecclesiology discussed here are drawn from a continuation of the thought of Newbigin and Bosch, as well as contributions from Volf and Croft, who are both influential in their respective fields of non-conformist and Episcopalian ecclesiology, all of whom as evangelical protestant thinkers are appropriate in assessing STP and forthright enough to offer important potential critiques.

Beginning with the seminal work of Miroslav Volf in *After our Likeness*, his premise for ‘exploring what makes the church the church’ is grounded in the same primacy of the Trinitarian *missio Dei* as discussed above, the consideration of which he overlays with soteriological, anthropological and Trinitarian issues.⁶⁰ Volf makes three primary points, that the church in essence is: an assembly; the confession of faith in Jesus Christ; with a commitment to discipleship. An “assembly” means upwards of 2 or 3 people meeting in a definite place, which Volf contends is the New Testament and particularly Pauline use of the word *ecclesia*, referring to specific individual churches, not “the church universal.”⁶¹

His second marker leads on from the first, because an assembly is not a church until it gathers in the name of Christ. This is a potential challenge to many “fresh expressions of church”, including some of STP’s groups like football teams which aim to engage at the church’s fringe. Not everyone present must believe, ‘The church exists even if I do not believe; yet without at least someone believing, there can be no church, and in this sense the existence of the church is bound to the faith of its members in

⁶⁰ M. Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 1998), p.127

⁶¹ Volf makes the point that the Greek word *ecclesia* refers to the assembly of free citizens of a city, so that when Paul speaks of “the church” it is in plural form, ie. a group of individual churches. He does recognise a “universal church” for Paul, but not as the totality of local churches, but rather carrying the Jewish apocalyptic understanding of ‘the universal church as a heavenly and simultaneously eschatological entity.’ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, p.139

Christ as their Saviour and Lord.’⁶² Upon these 2 principles sits the third, that those people who gather in faith will allow their lives to be determined by discipleship of Jesus. Volf thus formulates a tight definition of the nature of church⁶³ because his principle concern is the “transmission of the faith.” ‘The ecclesiological dispute concerning the church as community is therefore simultaneously a missiological dispute concerning the correct way in which the communal form of Christian faith today is to be lived authentically and transmitted effectively.’⁶⁴

Volf acknowledges that the “transmission of faith” will not necessarily result in creating disciples of Jesus Christ, neither does his favoured emphasis upon participative church structures not overly reliant upon clergy. He points to the need for a deep spirituality and being led by the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:16-18, 25) in community. Bosch complements this insight, noting that ‘the intimate linking of pneumatology and mission is Luke’s distinctive contribution to the early church’s missionary paradigm,’⁶⁵ so that “witness,” one of the key phrases in Acts, is to be about the personal and lived-out effect of God in believers’ lives, leading to repentance, forgiveness of sins and salvation (Acts 26:17). Thus the understanding of the essence of “church” must include for Bosch being led by the Spirit in witness. This points to the significance of STP’s five Core Values and its “rule of life” governed by Lifeshapes, which offer a pattern and framework within which to live as disciples in community, and a reflective cycle (the “Learning Circle” see Diagram 4) which embodies Jesus’ two crucial discipleship processes of “repent” and “believe” (Mark 1:15).

⁶² Volf, *After Our Likeness*, p.147

⁶³ ‘The church is wherever those who are assembled, and be they only two or three, within the framework of their pluriform confession of faith profess faith in Christ as their Savior and Lord through baptism and the Lord’s supper.’ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, p.154

⁶⁴ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, p.11

⁶⁵ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p.114

Volf's definition of church lacks an explicit focus upon mission. For this, one can draw upon Steven Croft's mapping of ecclesiology for a mixed economy.⁶⁶ He observes that 'the Church is initiated by Jesus as we respond to an encounter with the risen Lord and to his call,' since the word *ecclesia* for Croft is translated as "those who are called out." The basic pattern for church is the call to be with Jesus in community and to be sent out. 'Worship, fellowship and mission are the essence of the life of the Church. The DNA – the life – of every Christian community is contained in this simple rhythm.'⁶⁷ Here we see reflected STP's foundational principles of a balanced personal and corporate Christian life - "UP" (worship), "IN" (fellowship) and "OUT" (mission).

To these definitions of the essence of church Newbigin contributes the metaphor of being a pilgrim people, just as the people of God have always been - on a journey, holding its missionary call and the eschaton before it. *Ecclesia* for Newbigin thus embodies being called out of the world and sent back into the world.⁶⁸ Here we find a link for the local church to the "church universal" which is such an important theme in Acts, as this essay will later assess.

Scholars have presented numerous other models and marks of church contributing to this body of knowledge, which while significant, are too numerous to detail.⁶⁹ Newbigin helps to bring these various marks of church together by arguing that they must be integrated into an holistic life for individuals and the church community,

⁶⁶ 'The term was first used by Archbishop Rowan Williams to refer to fresh expressions and 'inherited' forms of church existing alongside each other, within the same denomination, in relationships of mutual respect and support.' Fresh Expressions 'What is the mixed economy?' [<http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/guide/about/mixedeconomy/>]. Accessed. 03.08.2012.

⁶⁷ Steven Croft 'Mapping ecclesiology for a mixed economy' in: S. Croft (Ed.), *Mission-shaped Questions - Defining issues for today's Church*, (London: Church House Publishing, 2008), p.189

⁶⁸ 'The Church is the pilgrim people of God. It is on the move—hastening to the ends of the earth to beseech all men to be reconciled to God, and hastening to the end of time to meet its Lord, who will gather all into one.' L. Newbigin, *The Household of God*, London, New York: Friendship Press, 1954), p. 18

⁶⁹ Famously from the Catholic academy, A. Dulles, *Models of the Church* (London: Image Books, 2nd edition, 2002). An author David Bosch drew from was R. Michiels 'The Self Understanding of the Church after Vatican II' Louvain Studies, Vol 14, 1989 in: Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p.372

living the gospel faith out for all to see. By integrating word and deed, preaching and action, the church congregation thus effectively communicates and transmits the faith. ‘I am suggesting that the only answer, the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it.’⁷⁰

Summarising the essence of church at STP

The portrait of the essence of church which emerges from these scholars suggests a sent pilgrim people, proclaiming and demonstrating their faith in words, deeds and presence, who also gather in Christ’s name as his disciples. This may be reflected in STP’s “Both/And” approach of gathered and dispersed church.⁷¹ To summarise this emerging picture of the essence of church we return to the New Testament portrayal of a balanced Christian life. A number of scholars in recent years, including Bosch,⁷² have identified a three-fold integration of “UP”, “IN”, and “OUT” (Diagram 1) to which the influential Mission Shaped Church report of 2004 added a fourth dimension “OF.”⁷³ Croft summarises what he calls these ‘four spatial relationships’ and links them to the four classic marks of the church, themselves a product of hundreds of years of debate, found in the Nicene Creed as one (IN), holy (UP), catholic (OF) and apostolic (OUT) church. It is helpful to reproduce his entire description:

UP – ‘All expressions of church are drawn into a journey with an UP dimension – the journey towards God in worship, which must equally be about seeking God and becoming like God in holiness.’

⁷⁰ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, p.227

⁷¹ ‘One of our church’s greatest strengths is that we deliberately find the balance of both/and. We both ‘gather’ together as family for worship and encouragement and we ‘go’ to love and serve our city in Missional Communities (MCs) and the places we live or work’. St. Thomas’ Church Philadelphia, Sheffield. ‘Our History’ [http://www.stthomaschurch.org.uk/our_history]. Consulted 20.07.2012.

⁷² ‘...mission is quite simply, the participation of Christians in the liberating mission of Jesus, wagering on a future that verifiable experience seems to belie. It is the good news of God’s love, incarnated in the witness of a community, for the sake of the world.’ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p.519

⁷³ Mission and Public Affairs Council, *Mission-Shaped Church*, (London: Church House Publishing, 2004), p.99

IN – ‘The Church is led into a journey containing an IN dimension. It is a dimension of relationships, in order to express in practice the oneness of the Trinity and of the Body of Christ.’

OUT – ‘The nature of the Church includes being sent onto the journey OUT. The sending in mission embraces the breadth of the five marks of mission. This journey on and out is fulfilment of our apostolic call.’

OF – ‘To be church we are called to walk on a journey which has an OF dimension. No one exists of themselves or by themselves.... Both the Church militant and the Church triumphant are expressions of interdependence in the OF dimension as the Church seeks signs of being catholic.’⁷⁴

Any application of the essence of church to the reality of *a* single church ought to engage with the formulary of these classic creeds, which although differing in their application over the ages and holding some questions about their present all encompassing suitability, remain the faith-foundation of the church universal.

Assessing how adequately STP maps to classic descriptions of the essence of church

This essay now considers how St Thomas’ Philadelphia is structured. Drawing on the earlier description and its Trinitarian theology following *missio Dei*, it considers how comprehensively it matches these kinds of ecclesiological criteria mentioned above.

Former STP senior staff members Bob Hopkins and Mike Breen have argued that STP is structured to allow for the balance of all 4 ”spatial relationships” of Mission Shaped Church Report to occur across its different gathered group sizes, each of which

⁷⁴ Steven Croft ‘Mapping ecclesiology for a mixed economy’ in: S. Croft (Ed.), *Mission-shaped Questions - Defining issues for today’s Church*, (London: Church House Publishing, 2008), p.190

have specific strengths and purposes and are mutually complementary.⁷⁵ STP appears to be structured around its missional-imperative, rather than a pastoral emphasis. Hopkins identifies three missional methodologies which he maps to particular types of church gathering, and explains their value against the Report's terminology and its observation of categories of unbelievers in modern Britain.⁷⁶ This essay now applies this methodology to the current circumstances of STP.

Hopkins' first category is "come to us", representing the mode of church often called "attractional"⁷⁷ or "inherited" amongst those engaging with fresh expressions of church. Here the expression of the communal body of Christ occurs in centrally gathered congregations, with corporate worship, teaching and ministry provided usually by a central team of clergy and/or specialists, like worship and childrens' leaders. It is "attractional" in the sense that it requires sympathetic non-believers to leave their usual context to attend, for example, a STP Sunday morning church service. Hopkins maintains this mode is most effective at "UP" and "OUT" expressions, which at STP involve campus gatherings of several hundred to each Sunday service (hence meaningful "IN" personal interaction is more difficult to attain in an impersonal environment), large-scale contemporary musical worship, professional-quality, well presented preaching and quality additional provision for youth/children and the city's vulnerable.⁷⁸ STP welcomes non-believers and often the non-churched attending services weekly, many of whom soon convert to Christianity as a result of experiencing

⁷⁵ Hopkins & Breen, *Clusters*, 2008

⁷⁶ Mission and Public Affairs Council, *Mission-Shaped Church*, (London: Church House Publishing, 2004), p.37

⁷⁷ Although the tag "attractional" is increasingly recognised in contemporary debate around the "emerging church", it is arguably an unhelpful descriptor since it suggests that traditional gathered church cannot also be missional. For more see: 3D Ministries 'Mike Breen: Can a Church be Missional AND Attractional?' [<http://mikebreen.wordpress.com/2010/12/09/can-a-church-be-missional-and-attractional/>]. Accessed 03.08.2012.

⁷⁸ STP's various ministries to the vulnerable, such as homeless or addicts in Sheffield, all sit under the corporate name of "Restore".

these gatherings and their spirituality. This illustrates Mortimer Arias' observation that authentic incarnation may also occur in the centrally gathered church since

‘Jesus himself called his disciples to be the... light of the world, the city upon a hill, the leaven in the dough – all images of incarnational Christian witness...In this perception centripetal mission is a permanent and essential dimension of mission; it has to do with quality, with authenticity, with being.’⁷⁹

The second method is “go to them, then come to us” representing the “engaged” or “scattered” mode whereby believers target their activities to mission on the fringes and into specific sub-cultures, for example, students or young families. Once individuals are brought into relationship and possibly faith they are expected to journey into attending the “inherited” mode of church, i.e. “once you’ve come to faith, come to Sunday church.” This occurs at STP principally through its Small Groups and Missional Communities, and some ministries like children/youth clubs. New converts are usually encouraged both to enter mainstream church life, therefore including “attractional” church, and, in addition, to see their primary place of belonging as their MC (see Section 3 discussion of “social spaces”).

The third method is “go to them, stay with them” which Hopkins calls the “incarnational” or “emerging” mode. This requires incarnational contextualization of the gospel and Christian community for the purpose of responding to local or cultural needs or aspirations. When sub-cultures are reached they are not required to journey to the central “inherited” mode of church (although they are welcome to), instead the most likely result is the emergence of appropriate new forms of indigenous church. This mode is less widespread at STP, a somewhat surprising observation considering the

⁷⁹ Mortimer Arias ‘Centripetal Mission, or Evangelization by Hospitality’ in: Chilcote & Warner (Eds.), *The Study of Evangelism*, p.429

church is often known for its innovative approaches to mission and ecclesiology. It occurs primarily through a small number of Missional Communities whose members have moved to live, work and minister in usually deprived geographic areas of the city, with a vision towards indigenous unreached people groups. Another expression is in ministries like youth provision which occur in a number of venues around the city, whereby local youths are formed into groups for relationship and discipleship with little reference back to the central STP church body or campus.⁸⁰

In this third mode, once new members belong to a community they have no natural connection to the central gathered church at Philadelphia, thus their primary place of identity as “church” is located within their community in Sheffield. Their connection to the wider STP is therefore second-hand, through their group leaders, who, because at present they are not second-generation indigenous leaders, are still relationally well connected, coached and accountable to STP’s central leadership team. This bears some similarities to the model recounted in the book of Acts of trans-local accountability and apostolic oversight, as discussed shortly. However, it does raise a question of catholicity for these fringe groups, in the sense that if their members do not recognise that they are a part of STP as a whole, even while their leaders do, then it is questionable as to whether their “OF” is found anywhere other than in the “church universal” rather than STP itself. Since they operate as virtually self-contained church communities in their own right they aim for a balance of “UP”, “IN” and “OUT”, although because they are led by lay volunteers their “Upward” dimension is often smaller-scale and less polished than the campus services, and certain pastoral care needs

⁸⁰ For example, STP’s Youth network called FORGE YOUTH has an established group in Norton, a suburb of Sheffield about 6 miles from the Philadelphia Campus, led by a member of STP staff. However, the children who attend rarely, if ever, actually attend gatherings at Philadelphia, and relate principally to their leader in their locale.

(“IN”, like specialist counselling) are still met by the central STP team. This explanation may be illustrated thus:

Methodology	Missiological category	Mode of gathered church within STP	Most effective spatial relationship	MSC⁸¹ categories of mission effectiveness to unbelievers	Structural prerequisites
come to us	gathered or inherited or attractional mode of church	gathered campus Sunday church	UP & OUT	fringe & some open de-churched	priest + building + stipend
go to them, then come to us	scattered or engaged mode	MCs & SGs	IN & OUT	fringe & some open de-churched & potential among closed dechurched & non-churched	both/and central & scattered structures
go to them, stay with them	incarnational or emerging mode	some MCs & ministries	OUT with some UP & IN	open de-churched, closed de-churched, non-churched (not fringe)	community + faith + action

Adapted from Bob Hopkins & Mike Breen *Clusters: Creative Mid-sized Missional Communities*⁸²

This illustrates well STP’s “Both/And” continuum whereby the essence of church is represented sometimes at gathered Sunday services, and at other times through MCs or ministries (see Diagram 3). This is an apparent strength of STP, as this methodology offers a number of effective outlets for “church” to occur with variety according to different contexts.

Account of Bevans & Schroder’s ecclesiology mapped against 20th Century models of mission in comparison to STP

Now follows an application of a scholarly analysis of mission and ecclesiology which offers the scope for comparison against the practice of STP. In *Constants in Context*

⁸¹ Mission and Public Affairs Council, *Mission-Shaped Church*, (London: Church House Publishing, 2004)
⁸² Hopkins & Breen, *Clusters*, 2008, chs.7&8 pp.112-139

Bevans and Schroeder treat the essential differences in ecclesiological understanding underlying a number of paradigmatic approaches to mission, particularly within the past century. These offer a grid on which to map the ecclesiology of STP. They conduct their analysis from the same premise of theology outlined in this essay, that the mission of the people of God, and its resultant witness to the gospel, should be the driving-force of ecclesiology and Christian practice. These form the foundation of “constants” against which they consider the church’s various responses to its particular “contexts” over time.

The work cites Bevans’ six ‘Models of Contextual Theology’⁸³ in the encounter of Christian faith and human culture (the most closely allied to STP’s apparent world view being the translation, transcendental and counter-cultural models) and the different approaches of two historic perspectives on culture: Classicist or Empiricist. Then they map against three historic “types” of theology tolerated or approved of within the church in the West, “Type A - Orthodox/Conservative”, “Type B – Liberal” and “Type C - commitment to liberation and transformation.” The latter is broadly the closest to STP’s stated positions. They then offer a conclusion that a preferred fourth type of theology of mission for the 21st Century, consisting of a synthesis of the best of these three, ought to be “Prophetic Dialogue.” Over all this, they overlay their six “constants” of mission. In this essay a consideration of one category, ecclesiology, is sufficient.⁸⁴ Finally they map them against three strains or models of mission of the 20th century, which run through all the three Types: ‘Mission as Proclamation of Jesus Christ as Universal Saviour’; ‘Mission as Participation in the Mission of the Triune God’; and,

⁸³ Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002)

⁸⁴ Ecclesiology is for the authors a “constant,” although its expression differs in response to context, because the ecclesial nature of any missionary activity contains a synergy ‘expressed by fidelity to a common book, a common heritage and a common ritual,’ those of the bible, the Judeo-Christianity, and the sacraments. Bevans & Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 2004, p.34

‘Mission as Liberating Service of the Reign of God’. Their mapping may be represented thus:

“Constant”	Theology of mission				
	Mission as Participation in the Mission of the Triune God	Mission as Liberating Service of the Reign of God	Mission as Proclamation of Jesus Christ as Universal Saviour		Mission as Prophetic Dialogue
			Roman Catholic	Evangelical & Protestant	
Ecclesiology	Servant, People of God, Pilgrim People, Body of Christ, Missional, Mystical, Communion, Sacrament, Communion-in-mission	Herald, Servant, People of God, Pilgrim People, Body of Christ, Missional, Sacrament of salvation, Creation of Spirit	Hierarchical communion Missional	Free association of members Missional	Herald, Servant, Pilgrim people of God Missional Sacrament, Communion-in-mission
Bevans & Schroeder (adapted) Ecclesiology mapped to theologies of mission ⁸⁵					

As with any type theory, the organic reality of STP does not simply match any one of these categories. The closest match for STP’s ecclesiology is to Bevans and Schroeder’s own category of the Prophetic Dialogue theology of mission.⁸⁶ The sense of “Herald” is prevalent and integral in two of the four “Models of Association” triangles, excluding Small Groups & personal accountability (see Diagram 2), as well as STP’s ministries. The element of “Servant” is evident in some MCs, particularly those with an incarnational approach to their local communities, and within all ministries offering the provision of free service to Sheffield communities, like the vulnerable people’s ministry

⁸⁵ Bevans & Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 2004

⁸⁶ Their definition is: ‘Prophetic dialogue – prophetic – share gospel in season & out of season (2 Tim 4:2) – the fullness of the gospel. Dialogue – because the imperative – rooted in the gospel itself – to preach the one faith in a particular context. Without dialogue, without a willingness to “let go” before one “speaks out” mission is simply not possible.’ Bevans & Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 2004, p.350

Restore. “Communion-in-mission” is a pertinent image for STP, whereby the communion is held together as a synthesis of all 4 “Models of Association” triangles, as this essay will shortly discuss. “Mission” is the driving imperative of the church and its vision which is incarnational-mission. “Pilgrim people of God” is another strong theme within STP’s communication of vision and testimony, as evidenced by its incarnational methodology, and the internal emphasis upon individuals gleaning a personal vision and sense of calling, which in Martyn Atkin’s phrase, heightens their sense of ‘significance.’⁸⁷

There are, as to be expected with any model, a number of crossovers to other categories, notably “Mission as Participation in the mission of the Triune God.” However, STP does not have a particular emphasis upon either “Mystical communion” or “Sacrament” which is a fair critique of its ecclesiology, although not surprising given that it sits at the charismatic evangelical protestant end of the spectrum, and thus holds a low sacramental theology. What this analysis shows is that STP has a coherent theological understanding of the essence of “church”, which is systematically represented in a coherent ecclesiology and manifested practically in methodologies which concur to Bevan and Schroeder’s recommendation for 21st Century church. This suggests that STP is potentially well placed to match the church’s historic “constants” to present “contexts” over time.

Unity and Diversity in Acts as a model for STP – Comparisons to the work of

Loveday Alexander

The description and analysis thus far makes it clear that St Thomas’ Philadelphia does not easily fit into classic ecclesial models and in some ways defies simple

⁸⁷ Martyn Atkins ‘What is the essence of church?’ in: S. Croft (Ed.), *Mission-shaped Questions - Defining issues for today’s Church*, (London: Church House Publishing, 2008), p.20

categorisation, yet its own application of its theology into ecclesiology and missiology is internally coherent. Since its structure is one which encourages variety, assessing STP as a whole shows that it consists as a synergy of multiple aspects of church occurring in different forums. To reference a phrase STP uses of itself and its vision, this frequently results in a situation of ‘Both/And.’⁸⁸ This leaves STP open to the critique that it is neither one nor another very effectively. Neither an associational gathered church, nor a network of dispersed interrelated house-churches, thereby potentially missing some key ingredients of the essence of church, if not in a theological sense, then due to a clumsy or pragmatic approach to its ecclesiology. For example, we later assess the critique that the role of the sacraments and priesthood may be significantly underplayed.

However, there is a further ecclesial pattern to consider as a comparison model, portraying both a unity and diversity in the early church of Acts based on the scholarship of Loveday Alexander.⁸⁹ Since STP gives a high value to scripture and narrative theology, and draws much of its missiology from the missionary exploits of the New Testament, this seems an appropriate comparison to make. Her hermeneutical approach is to draw a ‘narrative picture of the apostolic age’⁹⁰ without placing an over-emphasis on Acts as purely descriptive or normative for ecclesiology or missiology.

Alexander contends that there is to be discerned through the narrative of Acts a unity of origin “one Lord, one Spirit”, place “all together in one place,” and practice “with one heart and one soul” for the early church, and simultaneously a diversity of

⁸⁸ St. Thomas’ Church Philadelphia, Sheffield. ‘Our Vision’ [http://www.stthomaschurch.org.uk/our_vision]. Consulted 20.07.2012.

⁸⁹ Loveday Alexander, ‘Community and Canon: Reflections on the Ecclesiology of Acts’ in: A.A. Alexeev, C. Karakolis, U. Luz, K. Niebuhr (Eds.), *Einheit der Kirche im Neuen Testament*, (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), pp. 45-78

⁹⁰ Loveday Alexander ‘Community and Canon’ in: *Einheit der Kirche*, 2008, p. 50. She comments: ‘what I am offering here is a critically-informed reading of the biblical narrative which takes it seriously as a rhetorically-constructed narrative but is also aware of the potential critical distance between this narrative (any narrative) and the muddle of real world events it is attempting to reduce to order.’ p.51

leadership, practice, place and mission, all held together in communion/*koinonia*⁹¹ (Acts 2:42-47). She points to a unity of origin in Jerusalem as a spiritual and leadership rallying point, rather than a headquarters, since the mission of the church mirrored the Acts 1:8 commission to go from Jerusalem outward in “concentric circles.” This can be seen beginning from chapter 8. Jerusalem acted as a model for what it meant to be church, a place from which the emerging church drew its sense of purpose, its narrative and spiritual connection to Judaism through the Christ event, and its initial leadership from the apostles (Acts 8:1,14; 15:2). A parallel for STP could be the central campus, which houses the staff team and functions as the place from which shared vision, values and vocabulary emanate.

Unity of place in Acts means the,

““Church” is something that happens when a body of people in a given place start to get together and act together as God’s people, under the guidance of God’s Spirit. Church is grounded in the being of God *in a particular place*: we might almost say, *the church* is a form of local incarnation of what it means (ontologically, historically, and universally) to be God’s people.”⁹²

This mirrors STP’s approach of polycentric expressions of local church in the same city (Missional Communities), held within one unifying identity. As Alexander notes, ‘What Luke’s narrative does *not* give us is a managerial blueprint for precisely how these local instantiations of church relate to each other: if you like, what is the

⁹¹ The Greek word has around 19 usages in the New Testament, meaning ‘(a) contributory help, participation, (b) sharing in, communion, (c) spiritual fellowship, a fellowship in the spirit. Strong’s Concordance. ‘2842. Koinonia’ [<http://concordances.org/greek/2842.htm>]. Site: Biblos.com, Copyright 2004 – 2011, consulted on 03.08.2012

⁹² Loveday Alexander ‘Community and Canon’ in: *Einheit der Kirche*, 2008, p.53

overarching managerial structure of the global or meta-church.’⁹³ This suggests that even if STP’s methodology may appear pragmatic, or simply as a result of the sheer size of its membership demanding particular organisational dynamics, this may be perfectly justifiable, since there are no hard and fast New Testament structural models anyway.

Unity of practice in Acts revolves around the apostolic template in 2:37-46 whereby ‘the believers are unified by disciplined attentiveness to “the teaching of the apostles, the fellowship, the breaking of bread, and the prayers,”’⁹⁴ yet a diversity of practice within these boundaries occurs because Luke does not then bother to explain these famous “four marks” in any detail. This is a helpful parallel in justifying the multiplicity of ways which these four marks occur within the body of STP. As Alexander points out, the breaking of bread is never explained in Acts, much less regulated, while prayer is a constant feature but in a variety of settings like the temple, house rooftops, in hymns and ritual. The teaching of the Apostles plays a vital role in the Acts narrative, but occurs in a variety of contexts and to different audiences from Jews (Acts 2) to Gentile women (Acts 16). Finally, alongside a sharing of goods and eliminating material need (chapters 4-6) the rite of baptism is a unifying route of entry to the Christian community, although once again the specifics of how, or where, or by whom it was administered are rarely recounted. These are significant comparisons for STP with its diversity of practice, alongside its aim to retain the unity found in the fundamentals marks of church, and adherence to its own clearly stated “4 V’s.”⁹⁵

Alexander outlines how diversity of expression in the church of Acts occurs in its leadership patterns, whereby Luke’s theological picture is of the church led, not

⁹³ Loveday Alexander ‘Community and Canon’ in: *Einheit der Kirche*, 2008, p.53

⁹⁴ Loveday Alexander ‘Community and Canon’ in: *Einheit der Kirche*, 2008, p.46

⁹⁵ As previously described, the “4 Vs” refers to how STP’s ecclesial structure is determined by its vision, values, vehicles and vocabulary.

principally by the Apostles, but by the Holy Spirit ‘who overrides the most careful attempts at regulation and control,’⁹⁶ as the church is directed by its apostolic witness to Christ. Even the apostolic group which began in Jerusalem and is later extended to include Paul held to a unity which embodied diversity, in a pattern of relations which ‘embodies a pluralist model of witness and authority rather than a single, monolithic succession.’⁹⁷ This seems pertinent for STP whose leadership model allows for great diversity, is almost entirely lay-led, and reveals a multiplicity of local visions which are all required to sit within the framework of the central shared vision and values as previously outlined.

Furthermore, Acts clearly illustrates a diversity of mission to multiple *ethnos*/people groups and “place” whereby the historic vision-centre of Jerusalem is retained while the mission to the Jews and Gentiles is dispersed. In addition to Jerusalem, centres become located around mission emanating from several cities including Antioch (Acts 12-13) and later Ephesus (Acts 19). Alexander notes that the ‘polyglot diversity of this spatial centre’ is depicted as several pilgrim centres which act as ‘a symbolic anchor-point for multiple networks across time and space.’⁹⁸ This depiction is similar to STP’s central campus, which operates in many ways like an historic minster church by offering a centralised “home base” of worship, hospitality, resources, leadership, and connection points, while simultaneously acting as a place of

⁹⁶ Loveday Alexander ‘Community and Canon’ in: *Einheit der Kirche*, 2008, p.60

⁹⁷ Loveday Alexander ‘Community and Canon’ in: *Einheit der Kirche*, 2008, p.59

⁹⁸ Loveday Alexander ‘Community and Canon’ in: *Einheit der Kirche*, 2008, pp.64-65. Others have expanded upon the pattern of “concentration” and “spread” in Acts, including Bob Hopkins, *Enabling Church Planting*, (Warwick: CPAS, 1995) p.5

sending-out people into missionary life around the city. This means the gathered Sunday congregation is never made of up of the same group of people two weeks running.⁹⁹

Where STP differs from the early church pattern is how in Acts the geographical centre does not equate to a centre of authority, since the church kept dispersing and, in Bauckham's observation, there was no centripetal movement back to Jerusalem.¹⁰⁰ Alexander reflects that this was a polycentric model, whereby in an increasingly diverse centrifugal expansion and plurality of "churches," authority and accountability are held together not by central imposition but by 'a radical commitment to *koinwni/a*, to keeping the channels of communication open at all costs.'¹⁰¹ By contrast, STP is effectively just *one* centre/campus with a lot of satellite semi-autonomous MCs. Under the value of "low control/high accountability" they are encouraged to express their vision and self-select their leadership, but remain accountable, not mutually to the rest of their congregation, but to STP's staff leadership team. This team acts with delegated authority from the wider body of STP and its Board/Council so that the STP Senior Leader acts arguably in a form of episcopal oversight, but with tighter authority than is evident from the Apostles in Acts. Therefore, authority and accountability are arguably not polycentric in STP.

Even beyond the issue of unity it is the issue of catholicity as a most significant consideration for STP. This is due to the potential critique that it is fragmented because of its multiple MCs, dispersed across the city by neighbourhood or network, and further detached from the church universal because of its multi-denominational status whereby

⁹⁹ See J. Finney, *Recovering the Past – Celtic and Roman Mission*, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1996). Also: N. Spencer, *Parochial Vision: The Future of the English Parish*, (Carlisle, Paternoster Press, 2004).

¹⁰⁰ Richard Bauckham, "James and the Jerusalem Church", in: R.J. Bauckham (Ed.), *The Book of Acts in its First Century Setting 4: Palestinian Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), pp.415-480.

¹⁰¹ Loveday Alexander 'Community and Canon' in: *Einheit der Kirche*, 2008, p.67. Author's italics and rendering of the Greek.

no single denominational leader has overall authority over the church or leadership. Indeed, it may be correct and helpful to view STP as a network of local missionary congregations who periodically gather together and consider themselves one whole.¹⁰² Alexander finds that the early church's nature of unity comes from the principle of radical communion, and in a narrative sense from the canonical example of unity and diversity.¹⁰³ Arguably, this is just how STP operates, encouraging diversity of ecclesial expression while firmly retaining a shared identity as "one church" together in community and mission to the city. Its catholicity comes less from its denominational links than from its similarity to the picture in Acts of diverse churches which simultaneously retain an overarching sense of unity of faith in Christ and of the catholicity of the church.

'The fact is that Acts resists all attempts to force the practice of the early church into the neat ecclesial patterns we try to impose on it: rather, we need to admit that Luke's picture of the early church shows an irreducible pluralism mutating around a central core of practices and beliefs expressing faith in Christ.'¹⁰⁴

Resulting analysis of STP in comparison to the historic Western church

This section draws upon previous descriptions, models and theological assessment to analyse the extent to which the theology and ecclesiology of STP is coherent and in

¹⁰² This structure is gaining traction in some North America. In commentating on the contemporary North American evangelical missional church, Halter & Smay write about their emerging experience of 'Both/And' church, describing their ecclesial structure as 'a congregational network of incarnational communities' H. Halter & M. Smay, *AND: The Gathered and Scattered Church*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), p.25.

This type of Both/And church is sometimes known as Hybrid Church - see: D. Browning *Hybrid Church: The Fusion of Intimacy and Impact* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010).

¹⁰³ Alexander refers to 'the canonic principle whereby Scripture itself encompasses and celebrates the diversity of the apostolic witness to the one Lord' and cites the supporting view of James Dunn and L.T. Johnson. Loveday Alexander 'Community and Canon' in: *Einheit der Kirche*, 2008, p.49

¹⁰⁴ Loveday Alexander 'Community and Canon' in: *Einheit der Kirche*, 2008, p.64

keeping with that of the historic western church. It asks the question “is this “church?” and addresses some of STP’s arguable weaknesses as well as strengths.

Church or network?

The first issue to settle is whether STP ought to be considered a “church” or a network. It is evident that STP can be considered a church, because its multiple expressions all refer into one centrality of identity, with formal legal and ecclesial bodies beneath it and a physical campus to represent it, so that across the sum of all 4 “Models of Association” triangles (Diagram 2) the whole breadth and essence of church occurs. STP’s structure and philosophy appears to be that, as long as all the marks of church happen *somewhere, sometime* amongst the various expressions, that is legitimate. Its clear vision of ‘Calling our City back to God: The Revival and Transformation of Sheffield’¹⁰⁵ defines its identity around a sense of missionary calling to the city at large.¹⁰⁶ In assessing missional church, Martyn Atkins argues that this strength of purpose is a typical facet of ecclesiology for any church which prioritises *missio Dei*. This he calls “significance”, alongside listing several other consequences which strongly resonate with STP, including their essence being defined by being “Spirit-filled,” living as an organic body of Christ in “Human Community,” having “A Big Map” of extensive outward vision (not just internal jobs to be done), and an “Early Warning System” which ensures the focus of church activity remains firmly defined by *missio Dei*. His observation of this kind of church fits well with the character of STP

¹⁰⁵ St. Thomas’ Church Philadelphia, Sheffield. ‘Our Vision’ [http://www.stthomaschurch.org.uk/our_vision]. Consulted 20.07.2012.

¹⁰⁶ It is worth noting that STP views “mission” holistically, not just as evangelism which is an important component part, but including other wider aspects like justice and fullness of life. This sounds obvious but it is worth stating, particularly for an Evangelical church. See Gruder who argues against the dichotomy of separating the means from the end in gospel proclamation: Darrel L. Gruder, ‘Incarnation and the Church’s Evangelistic Mission’, in: Chilcote & Warner (Eds.), *The Study of Evangelism*, pp. 171-184.

leaders and their practice of church, since ‘church understood to be essentially the chosen partner of God in the mission of the kingdom therefore implicitly critiques all other understandings of church.’¹⁰⁷

While the expressions and essence of church manifest in a variety of ways allowing for creativity and the expression of God-given vision to flourish, they still all come under one banner and common identity of the wider body called St Thomas’ Philadelphia. All group or ministry leaders are accountable to the central church leadership. This helps to address some ecclesial questions about adequately covering all marks of church, such as the sacraments. In STP, Anglican liturgical Eucharist occurs in central gathered Sunday church presided over by their Mission Priest, and it occurs occasionally in the dispersed MCs or SGs when it is lay-led and considered either a Baptist communion, or an Anglican Agape Meal. STP connects to the wider UK church, rather than being an independent congregational church, because it is officially an Anglican/Baptist/Free Church partnership in communion with those denominations. This helps answer the question of what STP is part “OF” in the sense of catholicity. It also avoids one of the frequent accusations against fresh expressions of church (which some MCs arguably are) that they don’t adequately link their people back into their denominations or foster an appreciation of the wider local church.

Volf determines that the church, not individuals, is the image of the triune God, and is vital for the faith to be both lived authentically and transmitted effectively.¹⁰⁸ ‘The consequences of the dual emphasis on person and community for the construction of the ecclesial self are significant: it is a self that is always “inhabited” or “indwelled”

¹⁰⁷ Martyn Atkins ‘What is the essence of church?’ in: S. Croft (Ed.), *Mission-shaped Questions - Defining issues for today’s Church*, (London: Church House Publishing, 2008), p.22

¹⁰⁸ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, p.7

by others.’¹⁰⁹ Therefore, the issue of commonality and community is key to what makes a church, within which all sorts of unity and diversity may co-exist. In drawing upon the narrative of Acts, Volf observes that, ‘The church nowhere exists “above the locally assembled congregation, but rather, “in, with, and beneath it”. A congregation *is* the body of Christ in the particular locale in which it gathers together (see Rom., 12:5; 1 Cor. 12:12-13).’¹¹⁰

This definition allows STP to locate its MCs and SGs – groups which might otherwise be accused of being independent house-churches, or at times lacking sufficient “marks” to be called “church” at all – within an integrated whole.¹¹¹ Each dispersed expression of ecclesial community sits “in, with, and beneath” the single identity of STP.

STP operates along a continuum between gathered and dispersed expressions of church which is somewhat contradictory to the more Catholic/Orthodox understanding of church wherein coming together in Eucharistic worship is essential, the model of. Former STP leader Mike Breen argues that this is partly in reflection of the New Testament pattern he observes of the apostles and early church living in a balance or “continuum” between worship and mission in both the temple (Acts 2:46) and households (*oikos* – Acts 16:15, Rom. 16:3-5) and the marketplace. He argues that a missionary church requires elements of both appropriate “organisation”, and “organism”

¹⁰⁹ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, p.3

¹¹⁰ Otto Weber, ‘Versammelte Gemeinde: Beiträge zum Gespräch über die Kirche und Gottesdienst’, (Neukirchen: Buchhandlung des Erziehungsvereins, 1949), p.33. In: Volf, *After Our Likeness*, p.138

¹¹¹ As previously outlined, Volf (*After our Likeness*, Chapter 3) says the church exists in small local units, confessing faith publically and celebrating Eucharist & baptism. Since the sacraments are often absent from MCs, they are arguably not local churches, at least not of the type Alexander uses as examples of catholicity amongst multiple “churches” rather than “the church” in Acts.

to function, thus a continuum of gathered (organisation) and dispersed (organism) is the consequence.¹¹²

Implications of low control/high accountability

A second potential critique and potential for imbalance lies in the application of STP's value "low control/high accountability." In its support, this is a leadership model discernible in the New Testament, for example how Jesus led and closely instructed his disciples in "high accountability" while teaching them how to minister themselves in the power of the Spirit - "low control" (Matt. 28:18-20; Luke 10:1-20). Volf is theologically content to allow freedom and exploration of charismata in a congregation in order to release the fullest expression of Christ's body on earth. '*That all Christians have a task in church and world is grounded in Christian calling; which concrete ministry (or ministries) they have is determined by the gifts of the Spirit given to them at the moment.*'¹¹³ Similarly, Hirsch argues that enabling a local congregation to break out of stagnancy and fully express itself requires creating contexts in which to foster risk and "liminality."¹¹⁴ Arguably, says Volf, 'the more a church is characterized by symmetrical and decentralized distribution of power and freely affirmed interaction, the more will it correspond to the Trinitarian communion.'¹¹⁵

The primacy given to the value of "low control/high accountability" and relational, rather than hierarchical, leadership is instrumental in facilitating what Hopkins and Breen have identified as the two fundamental theological precepts which

¹¹² Breen, *Multiplying Missional Leaders*, 2012

¹¹³ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, p.226

¹¹⁴ Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, p.231. Elsewhere he describes a congregation living in 'dangerous faith' and close connections as the goal of 'communitas' pp.222-223.

¹¹⁵ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, p.236

underpin STP's understanding and practice of ecclesiology: incarnation and multiplication.¹¹⁶

Incarnation

It is first necessary to give some explanation of incarnation in relation to ecclesiology. As John Mackay puts it, incarnation 'provides the image of what men and women should be who take seriously Jesus Christ and His mission to the world.'¹¹⁷ Because it is based on Jesus' lived example and God's Trinitarian nature, Gruder argues that an incarnational approach provides an integrative function for a theology of mission, holding together dichotomies which are otherwise harmful to carrying out mission obediently. These include the dichotomy often made between Christian faith and culture, into which an incarnational approach takes the intricacies of context with total seriousness, validating the significance of contextualization and indigenization, just as Jesus did.¹¹⁸ STP seems to mirror this significance in its multiple Missional Communities, each of which are different in vision, scope, missional context and format, while retaining a number of "constants" set by the STP leadership.

Missional Communities seem to be particularly strong in addressing Gruder's other noted dichotomies: the separation of the means from the end of gospel proclamation; and the false distinction between 'doing evangelism and doing justice.' MCs integrate Christian worship ("UP"), community ("IN"), and mission ("OUT") in the same body of people, pooling their gifts and accepting their weaknesses on a journey of life together. As Gruder finds: 'To use contemporary language, the

¹¹⁶ Hopkins & Breen, *Clusters*, 2008

¹¹⁷ John Alexander Mackay, 'Ecumenics: The Science of the Church Universal' (Englewood Cliffs, NJ.: Prentice-Hall, 1964) in: Darrel L. Gruder 'Incarnation and the Church's Evangelistic Mission' in: Chilcote & Warner (Eds.), *The Study of Evangelism*, p.177

¹¹⁸ Darrel L. Gruder 'Incarnation and the Church's Evangelistic Mission' in: Chilcote & Warner (Eds.), *The Study of Evangelism*, p. 179

incarnational principle cannot tolerate a separation between “our walk” and “our talk.”

119

Notwithstanding this pragmatic sense of utilising the different size expressions of church to act like “horses for courses,” it is legitimate to critique the balance which the members of STP regularly manage along this continuum, and their motives for doing so. For example, how much are the people there for; the sake of God (“UP”); for the sake of mission and to create missionaries (“OUT”); or for the sake of each other (“IN”)? In a church with such a strong missional-incarnational emphasis, the danger is that legitimate pastoral concerns – the issues of loving the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:12-27) - are undermined or overlooked. It is worth noting that Catholic and Orthodox theology typically focuses on incarnation in Christ, rather than in humanity, which raises fair questions as to whether STP’s approach is insufficiently sacramental, and whether the high value on lay leadership devalues the role of the priest.

Building upon the theology of incarnation, Hopkins and Breen contend that STP’s methodology of framing *how* the church expresses itself in the various contexts of Sheffield sit upon three principle steps: the first is identification with each culture and context; the second is articulating the gospel in their language and addressing their world view; the third is allowing the gospel community that arises to be embedded in their inherent social forms but transformed by the values of the Kingdom of God.¹²⁰ This approach gives rise to framing church broadly in four different ways to suit different contexts (4 “social spaces”) as this essay outlines in Section 3. Certainly, this theology has two more practical outworkings in STP which reflect a particular type of ecclesiology: those of multiplication and the emphasis upon lay leadership.

¹¹⁹ Darrel L. Gruder ‘Incarnation and the Church’s Evangelistic Mission’ in: Chilcote & Warner (Eds.), *The Study of Evangelism*, p.182

¹²⁰ Hopkins & Breen, *Clusters*, 2008, ch.7 pp.112-124

Multiplication

Hopkins and Breen outline how STP has an expectation of multiplication and growth for the kingdom of God in and through its own ministries and community. This may be drawn biblically from the Genesis mandate to God's people to fill the earth and bless all nations (Gen. 1:28; 15:3), to various teachings of Jesus (Matt. 13:1–9, 18–23; John 15:1-8), and to the movement of mission which grew through the early church (Acts 2:41, 14:21; Col. 1:9-12).¹²¹ In addition to theological reasons, the practical driver for this focus on multiplication is, as Bob Jackson has demonstrated statistically,¹²² the fact that church attendance is very effectively increased by multiplying congregations through various forms of church planting. This is manifested in a vision to multiply missional communities into the almost infinite available people-groups and interests in Sheffield, and in multiplying believers within the church and city in general through evangelism. STP is clearly an evangelical church in this respect.

Intriguingly, in answering the challenge of how to guarantee the health and orthodoxy of the multiplying communities of faith, Hopkins says this is impossible. 'When a desire to protect orthodoxy and achieve risk minimisation are the dominant concerns, then mission and movement are discouraged or even stifled.'¹²³ Hence STP's dominant value of low control/high accountability appears to be a vital pressure-valve which, at least in theory, allows for both incarnational innovation in church practice alongside the accountability and direction of the wider church body through its leaders. This is enabled further by the fact that STP does not seek to "plant" its MCs as

¹²¹ George Lings expands the theme of reproduction in churches with helpful correctives to getting carried away and thinking its all the task of the church to reproduce God's kingdom. G.W. Lings, *The Church's Calling and Capacity to Reproduce*, PhD Thesis, University of Manchester, 2008, p7. Available online: [http://www.churcharmy.org.uk/ms/sc/SCOLER/sfc_27197.aspx].

¹²² B. Jackson *The Road to Growth*, (London: Church House Publishing, 2005)

¹²³ Hopkins & Breen, *Clusters*, p.77

independent congregations in the city, but rather to retain them as part of the single network church, under one identity and leadership.

Unconstrained lay involvement and its implication for ordained ministers

The ecclesiology of STP lays a strong emphasis upon lay leadership of ministries and mission, allowing for laity to hold leadership positions at all levels, including at Senior Leader position.¹²⁴ This reflects a meritocratic approach to selecting leadership, based on proven ability and suitable character to carry out the roles, as determined from within the organisation, rather than restricting certain roles to ordained clergy or denominationally licensed people. This works towards the aim of placing confessing members into the roles appropriate to their context, gifting and calling within the community.¹²⁵

STP recognises the office of priest or congregational minister, but lays a non-traditional emphasis upon their function, to be predominantly equippers empowers of the whole congregation into works of service (Eph. 4:12-17). It stems from the theological principle of the “priesthood of all believers” (1 Peter 2:5-9), since there is now no need for the mediatory role of priests, because Christ took on such a role in the spiritual realm through his death (Hebrews 4:14; 7:23-25; 10:18). Since this a doctrine which the Anglican and Baptist denominations do not agree upon, STP prefers to base its position upon Jesus’ edict that his followers are to eschew operating principles based on relationships of power. This is evidenced by the kenosis and crucifixion of the Triune God (John 3:16) and the instruction that leadership must not “lord it over” people and act as “benefactor” (Luke 22:24-27; John 15:13) in the sense of what is

¹²⁴ It is presently the case that the 2 joint-Senior Leaders of St Thomas’ Philadelphia are not ordained. However, it has usually been the practice that the Senior Leader be previously ordained by either the Anglican or Baptist Denomination, reflecting the heritage of the church, before taking post.

¹²⁵ The Baptist heritage is particularly strong on recognising the call of a Christian community upon a member as the principle gauge of their suitability for community leadership, which it tends to call “ministry”.

today called a “provider-client” relationship. STP’s stated aim¹²⁶ in seeking to empower all competent members into various leadership roles is to counter this tendency to consumerist passive receptivity within the 21st century church and British society,¹²⁷ and to promote taking personal responsibility within the communal body of Christ. Although they don’t highlight it, this approach also helps counter the natural tendency of church groups away from organism into hierarchy and institutionalism and, in Viola’s phrase, ‘entropy.’¹²⁸

STP does recognise denominational ordination, and actively encourages its senior leaders and some ministry leaders into that path of vocational discernment. The roles of ordained clergy do not emanate from the typical Episcopalian theological and ontological assumptions, for example, that only clergy may administer the Eucharistic sacrament.¹²⁹ Furthermore, it recognises a role of Episcopal oversight from its local Diocese, and yet, because STP is multi-denominational, it does not see the classic Anglican three-fold ordering¹³⁰ as the *only* model either for clergy or internal ecclesial organisation. All Missional Community leaders (group sizes from 15 sometimes up to 50 or 60 – mirroring the average sized church congregation in the UK)¹³¹ are lay

¹²⁶ M. Breen & W. Kallestad, *A Passionate Life*, (Colorado Springs: Cook Communications, 2005), p.99. Also Hopkins and Breen, *Clusters*, ch 6 pp.101-111.

¹²⁷ Craig Bartholomew argues that by the end of the 20th consumerism was the overarching narrative directing life in the West. C. Bartholomew & T. Moritz (Eds.), *Christ and Consumerism – Critical Reflections on the Spirit of our Age* (Carlisle, Paternoster Press, 2000)

¹²⁸ F. Viola *Finding Organic Church* (Colorado Springs: David C Cook, 2009), argues the church ought to be characterised by community and assembly, not building and denomination.

¹²⁹ As previously mentioned, it is important to note that if the church is performing a specifically Anglican rite, such as an Anglican Baptism, Confirmation or Anglican Holy Communion, then this will always and only be performed by an ordained Anglican Priest.

¹³⁰ S. Croft, *Ministry in Three Dimensions*, (London: Darton Longman & Todd, revised edition 2008)

¹³¹ In 2005 the English Church Census was carried out by Christian Research with the participation of 18,720 churches, about half of the total known churches in England. It found that the average size of the congregation in evangelical churches (those broadly akin to St Thomas’ Philadelphia) is as follows: “charismatic evangelical” average 104; “broad evangelical” – 77; “anglo-catholic & broad” – 54; “liberal” – 46; “low church other categories” – 36. The Evangelical Alliance ‘English Church Census 2005’ [<http://www.eauk.org/church/research-and-statistics/english-church-census.cfm>]. Consulted 03.08.2012

volunteers.¹³² The principle tasks of STP clergy are setting the vision and preaching (Acts 6:4), leading a staff team who themselves lead ministry departments, and specialist coaching input both to the staff team and other leaders within the organisation. Doornenbal notes this philosophy of leadership is common in his observations of Western “Emerging Church” models.¹³³ From a theological perspective, he cites Cladis’ observation that the perichoretic nature of God as Trinity illustrates key aspects which leadership teams ought to reflect, such as collaboration, non-competition and empowerment, because ‘God in perichoretic fellowship is constantly giving.’¹³⁴

Miroslav Volf supports this approach from his reading of the New Testament, arguing that since Pentecost *all* Christians have charismata, and Christ is acting through *all* members of his body the church – not merely the officeholders. “Offices” are a particular type of *charism* gifted in the present, not a reflection of ontological categories, and those who hold them do not necessarily need to be ordained since selection to an “office” in the New Testament witness is grounded in the local church congregation.¹³⁵ Clearly, he holds an extreme congregationalist view, yet this appears to mirror STP’s broadly meritocratic approach to selecting leadership roles. Volf further observes that our contemporary cultural context is helping to create this shift to increasingly participatory models of church, rather than top-down priest-led.¹³⁶

¹³² As Hanson finds, “To put the matter another way, when Christ founded the church he made no distinction between clergy and laity in it. This is not to say that the distinction is necessarily wrong, but only that it is not of dominical nor apostolic institution.” R. Hanson, *Christian Priesthood Examined*, (Guilford: Lutterworth Press, 1979), p.27

¹³³ Doornenbal, *Crossroads*, pp.190-197. A separate definition of emerging church is too complex for the scope of this essay.

¹³⁴ George Cladis ‘Leading the Team-based Church: How Pastors and Church Staffs Can Grow Together into a Powerful Fellowship of Leaders’, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999), p.15. In: Doornenbal, *Crossroads*, p.183.

¹³⁵ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, p.236. Volf here is drawing upon the work of Jürgen Moltmann.

¹³⁶ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, pp.12-13. For all his support for anti-clericalism, diversity and free-church ecclesiology, Volf is not totally in support of the Free Churches. He later says they often are too homogenous and conform too much to the values of society around them.

Nevertheless, STP's position allows for obvious and legitimate critique, principally from the Episcopalian tradition who order the church by the three-fold offices of the early church of *Diakonos*, *Presbyter* and *Episcopos*, a pattern which scholars like Croft argue allows both for a priesthood and significant lay empowerment.¹³⁷ Since STP is partly an Anglican church, this must be taken into consideration.

Concluding reflection

To conclude this section about the significance of laity and clergy in STP, it could be argued on the face of things that this relationship is an area in which STP is theologically and ecclesiological incoherent. Clearly its ecclesiology is driven by its missiology, but this is arguably at the expense of remaining true to the historic practice of the Western church. It appears theologically incoherent since, at local church level, it reflects neither the New Testament example of lay-led congregational governance with apostolic oversight, nor purely the Patristic model of Episcopal oversight, yet neither does it operate solely as a meritocratic "priesthood of all believers" (1 Peter 2:5-9), since it retains ordained clergy in "offices". Ecclesologically, it appears to negate its Anglican heritage by forming itself primarily on a free-church structure. As Atkins observes, 'a preference for "bottom-up church of the people" rather than a top down church of ecclesiastical hierarchy is almost instinctive to those who embrace a missiological essence of church.'¹³⁸ It could be argued that STP adopts an overly pragmatic approach, simply doing "whatever works" in service of its vision to best

¹³⁷ Croft, *Ministry in Three Dimensions*, 2008

¹³⁸ Martyn Atkins 'What is the essence of church?' in: S. Croft (Ed.), *Mission-shaped Questions - Defining issues for today's Church*, (London: Church House Publishing, 2008), p.24, who cites Leonard Boff's work as an further example. One could add that the ecclesiology of Miraslav Volf shares this perspective.

enable the effective transmission of the faith and discipleship in all members, and to propagate the faith in its city.

However, as this essay goes on to explore in Section 3, a broader appreciation of the international network of relationships and influences in which STP operates may in fact reveal that STP is arguably participating in establishing a new ecclesial paradigm appropriate for the context of mission in the 21st century. As a “Both/And” church of both gathered and dispersed congregations in Sheffield, it operates like a network. Its multiple expressions of church around the city are overseen by the equivalent of a New Testament apostolic office - the Senior Leader – but with direct leadership lines of authority and accountability to the various lay-leaders, rather than the polycentric authority depicted by Alexander in Acts.¹³⁹ It therefore appears incoherent to the historic paradigms because it is structured and operating from a movemental paradigm, rather than as a traditional local church.

Summary and concluding reflections to Sections 1 & 2

This essay now considers concluding reflections to the descriptions and analysis offered in Sections 1 and 2. A supportive argument for STP’s particular ecclesiology follows the theological argument firstly that ‘God is a missionary God who sends the church into the world and that this “sentness” has all kinds of practical implications for church life.’¹⁴⁰ In common with contemporary British Anglicanism, STP aims for a balance of the Christian life in the four “spatial relationships” of “UP”, “IN”, “OUT” and “OF”. In its structure it seeks the recovery of different shapes and sizes of church, evidenced not least in the example of Acts, drawing upon the strengths of each. Aiming to operate on a

¹³⁹ Loveday Alexander ‘Community and Canon’ in: *Einheit der Kirche*, 2008, pp. 45-78.

¹⁴⁰ R. Doornenbal, *Crossroads - An Exploration of the Emerging-Missional Conversation with a Special Focus on ‘Missional Leadership’ and its Challenges for Theological Education*, PhD Thesis, UV University Amsterdam, 2012 (Delft, The Netherlands: Eburon Academic Publisher, 2012), p.199. Available online: [http://www.churcharmy.org.uk/ms/sc/SCOLER/sfc_27216.aspx].

two-dimensional rhythm or continuum between the biblical precedent of “Temple” and “Household,”¹⁴¹ STP therefore holds to a “Both/And” pattern of both corporate gathered and dispersed church. It sees this as an effective spread of resources and leadership and complementary to its theology rather than in contradiction as some would argue.¹⁴² This approach ought to be viewed as fairly unique, and a strength of its ecclesiology, offering it the capability of avoiding some potential blind-spots inherent in employing only one mode.

In many respects this approach is theologically coherent while essentially pragmatically directed. It helps the practicalities of being church, what Croft calls ‘derived ecclesiology.’¹⁴³ However, ordering a church around what Hirsch calls the ‘missional-incarnational imperative’¹⁴⁴ also leaves potential for STP’s own blind spots. For example, there is a danger that its focus is too weighted to “OUT” at expense of “IN” and “OF”. This essay has noted some weaknesses in STP’s catholicity because of its large fringe and multiple dispersed MCs, and its slightly diluted relationship to its founding denominations, due to it being an LEP. The essential question is whether the “constants” of Christianity are being applied sufficiently, as well as STP’s obvious commitment to “context”. This prevents pragmatism above coherent Christianity. In its defence, STP’s approach is broadly consistent with Bevans and Schroder’s thesis that “Prophetic Dialogue” must be the most fruitful theology of mission for the 21st century:

‘..the various elements involved in an understanding of mission today – witness and proclamation, liturgical action and contemplation, inculturation, inter-religious dialogue, working for justice and commitment to reconciliation – all

¹⁴¹ Hopkins & Breen, *Clusters*, 2008

¹⁴² Breen & Absalom, *Launching Missional Communities*, pp.50-53

¹⁴³ Steven Croft ‘Mapping ecclesiology for a mixed economy’ in: S. Croft (Ed.), *Mission-shaped Questions - Defining issues for today’s Church*, (London: Church House Publishing, 2008), p.196

¹⁴⁴ Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, Chapter 5 pp.127-148

contribute to a missionary practice that is both dialogical and prophetic, faithful to contemporary context as well as to the constants of Christian faith.’¹⁴⁵

Yet, since STP is so diverse in practice and leadership, it must strive to ensure that *all* of the essence of church remain covered *somewhere* in its practices. Otherwise it may miss some vital elements, not deliberately, but as a consequence of its decentralised methodologies. This is a common critique of fresh expressions of church, which some commentator like Hull¹⁴⁶ accuse of selling-out to contemporary post-institutional consumerist culture by making church “in our likeness,” or of dropping historic practices like frequent Eucharist celebration.¹⁴⁷ A danger lies in STP’s Missional Communities becoming too homogenous,¹⁴⁸ or focussing on certain aspects of the Christian faith and neglecting others, since they are encouraged to foster their own distinct visions and outward actions within what is a very broad vision-framework set by the STP leadership team. As Doornenbal notes, ‘*koinonia* in the New Testament is *not* to be equated with a community of the likeminded, because its collective identity is constituted by another reality.’¹⁴⁹ However, it appears that STP’s “Both/And” mixed economy structure, reflecting biblical unity with diversity both in practice and leadership, actually helps counteract the worst criticisms of fresh expressions.

¹⁴⁵ Bevans & Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 2004, p.284

¹⁴⁶ John M. Hull *Mission-shaped Church: A Theological Response* (London: SCM Press, 2006)

¹⁴⁷ See Martyn Percy ‘Old tricks for new dogs? A critique of fresh expressions’ and Michael Moynagh ‘Do we need a mixed economy?’ in: L. Nelstrop & M. Percy, *Evaluating Fresh Expressions: explorations in emerging church*, (London: Canterbury Press, 2008), pp.27-39 and pp.177-186 respectively.

¹⁴⁸ Fresh expressions, says Martyn Percy, may simply be an updated version of the “homogenous unit principle” which is today broadly discredited by theologians and missiologists. Martyn Percy ‘Old tricks for new dogs? A critique of fresh expressions’ in: Nelstrop & Percy, *Evaluating Fresh Expressions*, p.38.

¹⁴⁹ Doornenbal, *Crossroads*, p.64. Author’s italics.

Section 3 – Issues of application and contextualisation

Introduction

Having defined and analysed the principle theology of STP and its resultant ecclesiology, section 3 explores a number of issues in its practical application and contextualization. It explores the balance for STP to find in its ecclesial structures and missional strategies between pragmatism and robust faithfulness to the biblical mandate of the Christian people of God. It argues that there is a middle ground which STP is finding because its defining practices reflect movemental and network dynamics, rather than historic denominational ways of being church.

Need for appropriate contextualisation

One of the foundational arguments emerging in this essay is that the way a church operates and shapes its ecclesiology and organisation ought to be as a theological derivative of all Christians' participation in the triune *missio Dei* and their call into a lifestyle of worship and community through incarnational mission. Church history shows that one of the most effective considerations in the transmission of the faith is a sensitive appreciation of societal contexts, leading to a witness and proclamation of the gospel appropriate to that context, and a call into Christian community, the church, which is likewise appropriate to the people.¹⁵⁰ Hirsch defines contextualization as the

‘dynamic process whereby the constant message of the gospel interacts with specific, human situations. It involves an examination of the gospel in the light of the respondent’s worldview and then adapting the message, encoding it in such a way that it can become meaningful to the respondent.’¹⁵¹

¹⁵⁰ Two seminal 20th Century examples exist in B.E. Olsen *Bruchko*, (Altamonte Springs, Florida: Creation House, 1979), and V.J. Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered: An Epistle from the Masai*, (Mayknoll, NY.: Orbis Books, 2nd edition 1982)

¹⁵¹ Frost & Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, pp.80-81

Similarly, scholarship and 20th century missiology has decried the failure of appropriate contextualisation and indigenization of local church, and the potentially damaging affects this can have on the nature and replication of church in recipient cultures.¹⁵²

An appreciation of the 21st century British context is therefore key to gaining understanding for how any church, and in this case study St Thomas' Philadelphia, ought to shape its balanced life of "UP", "IN", "OUT" and "OF" dimensions. Recently published works by former STP leaders indicate that the church is strongly of the opinion that it (and all UK churches) need to adapt their church practice from 20th century "inherited" modes, and be willing to keep adapting it, in order to meet the missionary task into the future. They do not suggest that the inherited church structures are wrong or bad, just that because the context of British society has moved on so significantly in the past 50 years, so must the church's enculturated response.¹⁵³ This challenge to adaptive change is also the premise behind most thinking around "Mission Shaped Church" and "fresh expressions" within the Anglican and Methodist churches in Britain.¹⁵⁴

Contemporary missiologists, drawing upon sociological and anthropological observations, point to the present condition of postmodernity and post-Christendom as principle factors of consideration towards appropriate contextualisation. Ian Mobsby observes that contemporary society actually reflects a mix of pre-modern, modern and

¹⁵² R. Allen *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church and causes which hinder it*, (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1962). Also: S. Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, (London: Penguin, 2nd edition reprint, 1990)

¹⁵³ Breen & Absalom, *Launching Missional Communities*, 2010. Furthermore, Martyn Atkins says the beef some fresh expressions have is not with the traditional denominations *per se* but with how useful/missional their structures are. There is plenty of room for "the mixed economy of practices" as long as they serve the ultimate essence of the church. M. Atkins 'What is the essence of church?' in: S. Croft (Ed.), *Mission-shaped Questions - Defining issues for today's Church*, (London: Church House Publishing, 2008), p.28

¹⁵⁴ Mission and Public Affairs Council, *Mission-Shaped Church*, (London: Church House Publishing, 2004). See also Doornenbal, *Crossroads*, 2012.

post-modern thought held together at times coherently, at others in tension.¹⁵⁵ Robert Doornenbal finds the term “postmodernism” problematic and ideologically laden, preferring to use “Postmodernity”. He comments that

‘Postmodernity can be understood as a dynamic socio-cultural configuration in highly modern societies in which, among other aspects, consumerism, information technology, fast paced change, and some form of relativist or pluralist thinking (prompted by the consciousness of one’s situatedness) have deep repercussions.’¹⁵⁶

This context has partially contributed to the post-war decline of traditional Christian values and connectedness between church and state in the UK, so that some of the assumptions of the Christendom era are rapidly dissolving. Doornenbal finds that

‘The term ‘post-Christendom’ focuses more specifically on religious developments...It refers to both a socio-political reality and an accompanying mindset. We have found different scholars who affirm that generally in Western Europe, the tight conglomerate of civilization, territory and ideology called Christendom is, indeed, crumbling. The language of Christianity has gradually lost its status as the lingua franca, particularly among the younger generations. In Europe the churches presently holds the loyalty of only a small minority of the inhabitants.’¹⁵⁷

Thus commentators like John Drane¹⁵⁸ and Alan Roxburgh sound the alarm that the ecclesiology and missiology of the church must no longer operate from a

¹⁵⁵ Louise Nelstrop ‘Mixed economy or ecclesial reciprocity: which does the Church of England really want to promote?’ in: Nelstrop & Percy, *Evaluating Fresh Expressions*, pp.192-193

¹⁵⁶ Doornenbal, *Crossroads*, p.116

¹⁵⁷ Doornenbal, *Crossroads*, p.118. Also see S. Murray, *Church After Christendom*, (Milton Keynes, Paternoster Press, 2004)

¹⁵⁸ ‘When the emerging church prioritizes Christology over against ecclesiology, it is being far more subversive of the status quo than most church leaders would like to admit.’ J. Drane, *After*

Christendom paradigm, otherwise ‘we will try to navigate our way forward on the basis of our existing maps,’¹⁵⁹ when the contextual territory has actually shifted dramatically. Nevertheless, Hopkins and Breen contend that because of the present mixture of philosophies, the understanding of post-Christendom must be applied heuristically. This means designing a church response both for times when the culture has moved beyond the paradigm of “inherited” church, but also that missional expressions of church must still ‘take account of where expectations are still based on residual forms and meanings from Christendom.’¹⁶⁰ In this sense, Doornenbal’s observation is instructive that ‘postmodernism thus understood, should not be denied, defied, or deified, but should continue to be discussed and thereby engaged.’¹⁶¹ Thus Mobsby, despite his support for radical “organic church,” is in agreement with this approach, recommending the adoption of a mixed economy in this present era, until the completion of the paradigm shift¹⁶² which he assumes will eventually take place in full.¹⁶³ It appears that STP has done just this, offering both centralised gathered “come to us” expressions of church, alongside Missional Communities across the city reaching both neighbourhoods and

MCDONALDIZATION: Mission, Ministry and Christian Discipleship in an Age of Uncertainty, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2008), p.51

¹⁵⁹ Alan J. Roxburgh, *Missional Map-Making: Skills for Leading in Times of Transition* (San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons, 2010), p.83

¹⁶⁰ Hopkins & Breen, *Clusters*, p.134

¹⁶¹ Doornenbal, *Crossroads*, p.103. For a fuller discussion of postmodernity and post-Christendom in “Emerging Church” context see Doornenbal Chapter 4, pp.89-119

¹⁶² Leith Anderson is recognised as one of the first Christian authors to claim that the sociological and scientific category of a paradigm shift – a fundamental change in basic assumptions – was needed for the church in the 21st century. Leith Anderson ‘A Church for the 21st Century’ (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1992), in: Doornenbal, *Crossroads*, p.69.

This idea was developed in “Emerging Church” conversations, not least in response to Bosch’s 1991 observations of paradigm shifts in the theology of mission, which naturally precede any ecclesiological response. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 1991. See also Christian R. Schwartz *Paradigm Shift in the Church: How Natural Church Development Can Transform Theological Thinking* (St. Charles, IL.: Churchsmart Resources: , 1999).

¹⁶³ Louise Nelstrop ‘Mixed economy or ecclesial reciprocity: which does the Church of England really want to promote?’ in: Nelstrop & Percy, *Evaluating Fresh Expressions*, p.193

networks, each offering a range of styles and expressions of Christian community.¹⁶⁴ This facilitates both “go to them, then come to us” and “go to them, stay with them” models of church, as previously described.

In summary, in his 2012 consideration of the Emerging Church approach worldwide Doornenbal locates two arguments, which are illustrative in this situation, as to why, when contextualization is attempted within a framework of missional-incarnational ecclesiology, it can give rise to no standardized policy or congregational model. Firstly, because the essence of a church ought to precede its form, and secondly, because ‘the church is responsible to translate the good news of the gospel along with its organizational reality into every cultural context that it encounters.’¹⁶⁵

Discussion of 4 Spaces thinking

At this stage it is instructive to introduce the work of anthropologist Edward Hall, whose classic 1966 observations in *The Hidden Dimension* analyses both what appears to be the problem behind this kind of behaviour in “inherited” church, and simultaneously offers a potential solution. The problem may be defined through his observation that ‘no matter how hard man tries it is impossible for him to divest himself of his own culture, for it has penetrated to the roots of his nervous system and determines how he perceives the world.’ Thus the “inherited” church may arguably be blind to its own present deficiencies in the context of emerging postmodernity and post-

¹⁶⁴ The importance of the theological theme of contextualization in the planting of network churches is immense. As Haigh, drawing on the analysis of Graham Cray, observes ‘embodying the gospel in the Network Society is about a re-emergence of how to be church *how* people are, and a divergence from just how to be church *where* people are.’ N. J Haigh, *Reconfiguring the System: A Sociological and Theological Enquiry into the Emergence of Network Church within the Church of England*, Dissertation towards M.A. Theology and Ministry, St John’s College, University of Durham, 2004. Available online: [http://www.churcharmy.org.uk/ms/sc/SCOLER/sfc_26186.aspx]. Accessed 03.08.2012.

¹⁶⁵ Craig van Gelder, ‘The Ministry of the Missional Church: A Community Led by the Spirit’, (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Books, 2007), p.61. In: Doornenbal, *Crossroads*, p.55

Christendom. In the same passage he goes on to offer what contemporary sociologists and missiologists have come to view as the potential solution. Observing that

‘..people cannot act or interact at all in any meaningful way except through the medium of culture...Because of the interrelationship between man and his extensions it behoves us to pay much more attention to what kinds of extensions we create, not only for ourselves but for others for whom they may be ill suited.’¹⁶⁶

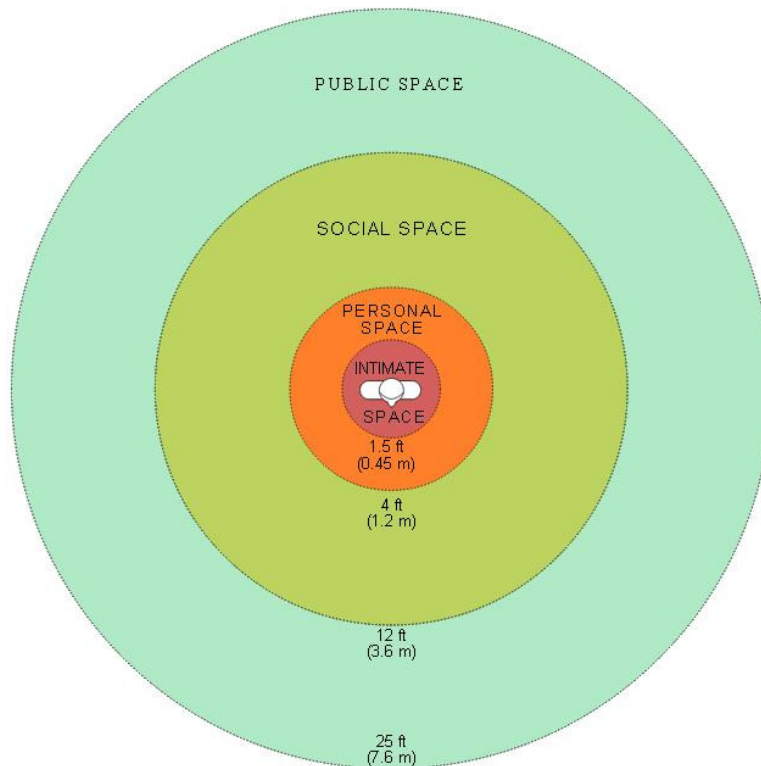
The conclusion this draws for the church is that it ought also to create expressions of church encompassing worship, community and witness, which are appropriate both for its present members, and its task of mission.

Hall’s observations were taken up in 2003 by Joseph Myers in *The Search to Belong* who applied Hall’s proxemics theory to congregational and church contexts. Working from the principle that people have a controlling desire to belong in groups and find multiple points of connection to others, Myers claims that this connection will not necessarily result from “inherited” models of church which call for more time, more commitment, closer proximity, unified beliefs, or unified team goals.¹⁶⁷ Instead he applies Hall’s proxemics theory which proposes that there are four principle “spaces” in which people belong and interact in life, and each holds a natural level of comfort for physical proximity to others: “Public” spaces of 12+ feet; “Social” of 4 to 12 feet; “Personal” of 18 to 48 inches; and “Intimate” of 0 to 18 inches. He gives examples of “public space” as party political rallies or sharing the experience of sports games with strangers. A “social space” such as Sunday church allows people to present “snapshots”

¹⁶⁶ By “extensions” he refers to means of living such as houses, cities, technologies. E.T. Hall, *The Hidden Dimension: Man’s Use of Space in Public and Private*, (London: Bodley Head, 1969), pp.177-178

¹⁶⁷ Meyers, *The Search to Belong*, pp.9-18

of who they are and help them to select who they wish to go deeper in relationship with. “Personal Space” is the place of close friendship and seeing the same group of people regularly. Finally, “Intimate Space” is where people share “naked” thoughts, feelings, or experiences in groups of between 2 and 3. This may be illustrated thus:



4 Social Spaces adapted from Edward T. Hall, *The Hidden Dimension*, 1969.¹⁶⁸

Myers’ crucial point is that people connect in all four spaces, and each space performs a different and distinct function. Therefore, it is unwise to expect or aim to manufacture certain kinds of experiences from the incorrect “space.” For the church to be a healthy form of community it must likewise provide outlets for connection in each space, and avoid creating discomfort by requiring, for example, everybody to be intimate with everybody else.

¹⁶⁸ Wikipedia. ‘File: Personal Space.svg’. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Personal_Space.svg]. Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license. 17.03.2011.

Analysis of 4 spaces in reference to STP

This theory is highly significant in assessing the ecclesiology and practice of STP, because it has deliberately applied the “four spaces” principles to its structures. Former leaders Alex Absalom and Mike Breen explain this approach in *Launching Missional Communities*. They argue from a biblical perspective that these four spaces have long been utilised by worshipping communities, and that part of the reason the early New Testament church spread so rapidly was due to its clever utilisation of both the public and social space, whereby teaching and worship occurred in temples and synagogues (“public”) and discipleship, fellowship and mission was fostered amongst church occurring in *oikos*/households, operating much like an extended family (“social”).¹⁶⁹ From this premise they maintain it is valuable that churches also employ the smaller group sizes for their own distinct contribution, so that Small Groups (SGs) of around 3-12 people create safe communities of “personal” belonging and spiritual growth, and Accountability Groups of 2-4 people offer the “intimate” space in which to be as honest and supportive as necessary. It may be summarised as follows:

Space	Old Testament	Gospels	Early Church	Modern church parallel
Public	Temple Festivals	Jesus proclaiming gospel to the multitudes	Temple or lecture hall	Celebration (large gathered Sunday services over 100 people)
Social	Synagogue	Jesus and the 72. Parties, weddings	Oikos/households	Missional Community (ideally 20-50 people)
Personal	Family devotional life	Jesus and the 12	Family, missionary team	Small Group (3-12 people)
Intimate	Husband & Wife	Jesus and the 3 (Peter, James, John)	Spouse or mission partner	Accountability Partner(s) (2-4 people)

The Four Spaces in Church Life. Adapted from Breen & Absalom, *Launching Missional Communities*, 2010.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁹ Breen & Absalom, *Launching Missional Communities*, pp.42-46

¹⁷⁰ Breen & Absalom, *Launching Missional Communities*, 2010

In a separate work, Hopkins and Breen draw similar conclusions and contend that the church must recover the correct application of worship and community to the spaces available. For example, Hopkins argues that many church services have fewer than 100 attendees, yet their model is to reproduce the temple or cathedral experience of bygone years with its attendant high production values like choirs, organs, and formal public speaking. Yet, they argue, considering the size of the average congregation in the UK is well below 100 they can't reproduce this kind of experience authentically, and would be better designing their gatherings to suit the "social" space of extended family, food, fellowship and informality which this entails, the further implication being that this may not result in a Sunday service, as such, at all.¹⁷¹ Absalom adds to this the observation from experience that requiring a Small Group to become deliberately missional tends to be problematic due to the type of dynamics the "personal" space naturally engenders, which is more "IN" focussed than "OUT." He recounts that the typical response was that either the group refused the call to mission, or there was never enough momentum to sustain it and the group soon burnt out and returned to its previous dynamics.

‘..small groups of six to twelve are important, but they aren't the best size for doing mission and growing a group on their own. There is something almost magical about the extended family size, something that just *clicks* with groups growing to twenty to fifty.’¹⁷²

The work of a number of scholars supports the approach STP takes of encouraging multiple "spaces" to foster different outcomes in response to its present context. The apostle Paul, argues Malherbe, 'did not primarily deliver an individualistic

¹⁷¹ Hopkins & Breen, *Clusters*, pp.96-99

¹⁷² Breen & Absalom, *Launching Missional Communities*, p.42

challenge to give up vice but aimed at forming a community with those who responded to his proclamation.’¹⁷³ Miroslav Volf proposes that the zeitgeist towards models of participation in contemporary society requires the church to mirror this approach. This is because ‘the appropriation of values indeed can take place only in sympathetically structured circumstances, then in addition to the family, one will be able to transmit faith effectively today only in social groups with a participative structure.’¹⁷⁴ Since *koinonia* and participation seems central to an authentic expression of church, Volf calls for structures which foster this rather than potentially hinder it. Missional Communities in particular require the whole body of Christ to participate fully since they are entirely lay-led and responsible for coming up with their own vision statements, while providing appropriately comfortable “space” and dynamics in which to do so.

Absalom’s identification of the inefficiency and even inappropriateness of SGs as primary vehicles for mission suggests that the model which operates in many churches which offer only two primary group sizes of “cell” and “celebration” may be inadequate for the best kind of contextualisation and incarnational mission. What STP seems to have pioneered in the UK is a recovery of this *oikos*/household sized group, which it calls Missional Communities, as being an effective “space” both for its existing congregations to find fellowship and outlets of sustainable shared mission (what Lings calls “community-in-mission” after the image of the *missio Dei*,)¹⁷⁵ as well as places of belonging and connection to non-believers and seekers.¹⁷⁶ Additionally, although this is not unique to STP, it promotes a level of personal accountability in groups of 2-4, which

¹⁷³ Abraham J. Malherbe, ‘Paul and the Thessalonians: the philosophic tradition of pastoral care,’ (Fortress Press, 2nd Enlarged edition 1987), p.11 quoted in: Viola, *Finding Organic Church*, p.134

¹⁷⁴ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, p.17-18

¹⁷⁵ Lings, *The Church’s Calling and Capacity to Reproduce*, p.139

¹⁷⁶ This model was subsequently applied by St Andrew’s Church, Chorleywood, UK with the effect that the church congregation more than doubled in size from around 700 to over 1700 in a few years. The experience is recounted in: M. Stibbe & A. Williams, *Breakout: One Church’s Amazing Story of Growth Through Mission-Shaped Communities*, (Milton Keynes: Authentic Lifestyle, 2008)

offers the fourth “space”/dimension towards creating a culture of discipleship. The four “spaces” have been mapped over the preceding “models of association” (Diagram 2) as follows:

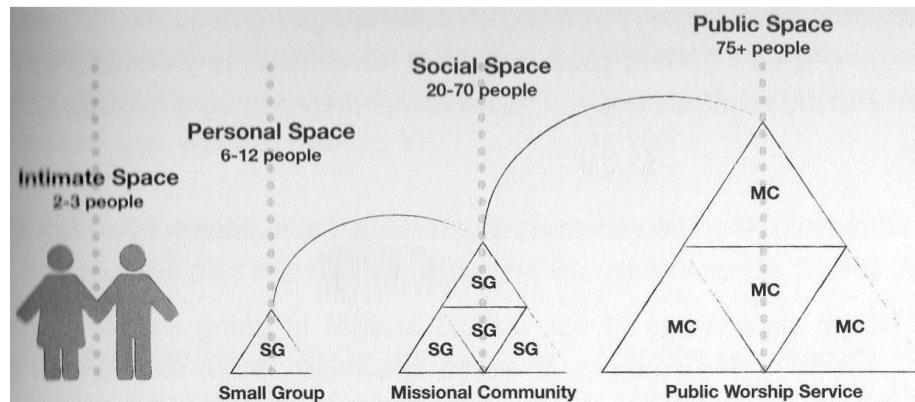


Diagram 5. Four spaces mapped to STP’s Models of Association.¹⁷⁷

Concluding reflections

If we now reconsider Hopkins’ three modes of church; “attractional - come to us”; “engaged - go to them, then come to us”; and, “incarnational - go to them, stay with them” as discussed earlier,¹⁷⁸ then STP arguably achieves an extremely broad coverage of the classic marks of church and the balance of multiple opportunities and “spaces” for the interaction of “UP”, “IN”, “OUT”, and “OF” towards fostering worship, connection and mission. Nevertheless, it ought also to be aware of some of the criticisms of fresh expressions of church, which are similar to MC and SG sized groups. For example, Atkins argues that operating multiple small-scale detached communities runs the risk of losing the ‘community of memory’ which a gathered church brings.¹⁷⁹ By offering a multiple choice of niche types of group to join, it detaches from the

¹⁷⁷ Breen, *Multiplying Missional Leaders*, p.119

¹⁷⁸ Hopkins & Breen, *Clusters*, 2008

¹⁷⁹ Martyn Percy ‘Old tricks for new dogs? A critique of fresh expressions’ in: Nelstrop & Percy, *Evaluating Fresh Expressions*, pp.32-33

catholicity of church, potentially fostering pluralism and individualism.¹⁸⁰ However, it appears that STP's "Both/And" approach offers the chance to counteract this detachment and tendency to individualism by allowing for the "low control" of multiple groups alongside the "high accountability" of regularly calling the body together in Sunday gatherings where identity and worldview may be publicly addressed by the leadership.

A further critique, and one to which STP seems more prone, is Percy's challenge that although many fresh expressions use the rhetoric of 'extensity, outreach & engagement,' many groups are in reality formed through recruiting existing Christians from within the church. While STP may be publicly championing its structure of extensity, in the sense of widely spread groups in outreach to the city, it might actually be operating 'dispersed intensity' – homogenous, mainly Christian, groups recreating their favourite bits of church. 'Dispersed intensity lacks the complex social engagement that can really only come about through dense and reticulate institutional structures that emerge out of churches that are committed to deep local extensity.'¹⁸¹ While this conclusion seems itself rather blind to the benefits of the mixed economy, Percy's challenge remains significant to how STP utilises its various groups in their "social spaces."

Movement dynamics

The argument in section 3 is leading up to a conclusion that, in response to its theological drivers, STP is structured principally along movemental theory and dynamics, far more than traditional denominational ecclesial designs. This stems from the understanding that the missional-incarnational imperative requires contextualization

¹⁸⁰ Martyn Percy 'Old tricks for new dogs? A critique of fresh expressions' in: Nelstrop & Percy, *Evaluating Fresh Expressions*, p.35

¹⁸¹ Martyn Percy 'Old tricks for new dogs? A critique of fresh expressions' in: Nelstrop & Percy, *Evaluating Fresh Expressions*, p.32

of the gospel and a fluidity and variety in church community structures to match, and that Jesus' commission to go into all the world (Matt 28:19) spawned the missionary movement depicted in the book of Acts which today's churches ought to seek to imitate. As a result, the local church continually faces significant adaptive challenge,¹⁸² in maintaining its "constants in context."¹⁸³

There is a body of theory around movements, drawing upon Western societal developments of the past 30 years particularly.¹⁸⁴ This has been applied to ecclesiology by authors like Hirsch,¹⁸⁵ Zscheile who claims 'what is required is a reconceptualization of church organization for a network age,'¹⁸⁶ and famously a century earlier by Roland Allen.¹⁸⁷ Addison recently identified five keys to Christian movements as: 'White-hot faith'; 'Commitment to a cause'; 'Contagious relationships'; 'Rapid mobilization'; and, 'Adaptive methods'.¹⁸⁸ It is the latter which bears some further investigation in this essay.

Adaptive methods

STP appears to be committed in its ecclesiology to pursuing adaptive methods in order to achieve its vision, the implication of which has led to a structure resembling a city-wide network rather than a local church. This, as previously argued, has similarities to the unity and diversity of the early church of Acts, and is in fitting with STP's

¹⁸² Doornenbal, *Crossroads*, pp.1-2

¹⁸³ Bevans & Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 2004

¹⁸⁴ D.A. Snow, S.A. Soule, H.Kriesi (eds.), *The Blackwell companion to social movements* (Oxford : Blackwell, 2004)

¹⁸⁵ Hirsch studied both the early church in Acts and the underground evangelical church in 20th century China to compile his findings in Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 2006.

¹⁸⁶ Dwight Zscheile, 'Social Networking and Church Systems', *Word & World*, 30, no.3 (2010), p.251 in: Doornenbal, *Crossroads*, p.175

¹⁸⁷ R. Allen, *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church and causes which hinder it*, (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1962)

¹⁸⁸ S. Addison, *Movements that Change the World- Five keys to Spreading the Gospel*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011)

“associational” position which potentially has no end to its geographic target area because it is both a gathered and dispersed church.

‘Adaptive methods enable a movement to function in ways that suit its changing environment and its expansion into new fields. A movement’s commitment to both its core ideology *and* to its own expansion provides the catalyst for continual learning, renewal and growth.’ ‘These methods are functional, responsive, simple, sustainable and resilient.’¹⁸⁹

STP’s emphasis upon multiple missional communities reflects the movemental dynamics of flexible, reproducible, scalable, responsive, low cost and lay-led groups in collaborative relationship to each other. It reflects what some argue is the zeitgeist of western 21st century postmodernity, rich in metaphors of movement, change and journey.¹⁹⁰ Another interesting metaphor, argues Doornenbal, is “open-source” in the sense that networks reflect the recent “wiki” phenomena through characteristics like ‘open access, trust, mutual accountability, agility, connectivity, and “a certain messiness”’¹⁹¹ without losing a sense of structure or purpose. This, says Addison, is a key to reproducible movements who ‘democratize their methods’¹⁹² so that every member can participate simply. STP’s lay leadership, vision-led approach to forming MCs, and the way it allows the Eucharist to be shared out in communities are all examples of this philosophy. STP’s “vocabulary” of Lifeshapes and the “value” of low control/high accountability in particular seem to be adaptive methods. They set general boundaries to demarcate behaviour ‘because an excessive control may inhibit progress

¹⁸⁹ Addison, *Movements*, pp.104-5 & p.108. Similar conclusions from the business world are drawn in another recently influential work: J. Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap..and Others Don’t*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2001).

¹⁹⁰ Doornenbal, *Crossroads*, p.129

¹⁹¹ Tony Jones, ‘The New Christians: Dispatches from the Emerging Frontier’, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), p.182 in: Doornenbal, *Crossroads*, p.175. Doornenbal further argues (pp.164-165) that complexity theory offers useful metaphors and systemic responses for churches to consider.

¹⁹² Addison, *Movements*, p.111

possibilities’ and they ‘favour discussion, dissent and diversity to encourage the emergence of patterns and ideas.’¹⁹³

Notwithstanding, STP is deliberately not designed to be fully “organic” such as to encourage flat leadership or decision-making structures. This is partly reflected in movement theory itself, which suggests some organisation and institutionalization is necessary and helpful since, ‘it helps them to maintain identity, regulate processes of change, and reproduce themselves.’ All of these seem vital to this essay’s earlier conclusions regarding how to ‘transmit the faith’ and protect the essence of church.¹⁹⁴ In this way, STP appears to be aiming for what Ori Brafman, influential author of *The Starfish and the Spider*, calls the “sweet spot”. This is the optimal point along a continuum of centralised and decentralised organisation and attributes.¹⁹⁵ STP’s ecclesial structure is based upon a “Both/And” mix which has the potential to achieve such optimisation, although there are no universally appropriate measurements of success in judging this. It encourages dispersed expressions of church and community, but by retaining one central identity, one leadership team and one campus for corporate gatherings it avoids losing connection and cohesion across its network of groups. Thus, STP’s structure utilises a mixed economy both for the purpose of fulfilling its mission, but also to respect the historic modes of church from which it draws its heritage.

¹⁹³ Elena Olmedo, ‘Complexity and Chaos in Organisations: Complex Management’, *International Journal of Complexity in Leadership and Management*, 1, no. 1 (2010), 80-81. In: Doornenbal, *Crossroads*, p.168 addressing the additional academic discipline of complexity theory.

¹⁹⁴ Volf, *In Our Likeness*, 1998

¹⁹⁵ O. Brafman & R.A. Beckstrom, *The Starfish and the Spider: The Unstoppable Power of Leaderless Organizations*, (New York: Portfolio, 2007), ch. 8 pp.181-196.

Summary and concluding reflections to Section 3

This section has investigated the outworking of STP's missional-incarnational theology in the light of its 21st century context, regarding practical issues of church structure, communal association and governance. Observations of other Western churches implementing a similar approach suggest that if contextualisation is the goal of a church then no universal organisational models are identifiable. They must do what is appropriate to their context, while maintaining the historic "constants" of the faith. STP operates a large variety of ministries and groups in all four "social spaces," as well as applying movement and complexity theory to its tactical ecclesiology. Most initiatives orbit around the gathered church and centralised resources, meaning there are few "incarnational" "go to them, stay with them" church plants. In this sense, much of STP's church is not as "fresh" as some contemporary Anglican expressions.

Notwithstanding, this approach fits within STP's commitment to "Both/And" whereby its local authority and accountability are neither fully decentralised nor non-institutional, and its multiple MCs while being lay-led, remain centrally accountable. This arguably reflects a similar pattern to the early church in Acts, and aims towards a "sweet-spot" between centralised and decentralised ecclesiology. Its style of leadership is "Both/And" too, being 'a mixture of the hierarchical and shared-communal' approaches, whereby ordained and lay leadership aims at an empowerment culture, but retain some vertical leadership lines. This, Doornenbal observes, has a parallel in UK "Emerging Church" with those churches sharing an Anglican identity.¹⁹⁶ Nevertheless, STP must be careful to honour its denominational ties through robust accountability, in order to avoid falling into a gap between any formal relationships or catholicity.

¹⁹⁶ Doornenbal, *Crossroads*, p.176

Final Conclusion

St Thomas' Philadelphia is a unique church, not only for its multi-denominational heritage but for its multifaceted expression of church emanating from a coherent theological premise expressing itself in a missional-incarnational imperative. It has clearly defined and strongly held vision and values which delineate its practice. Since they emanate from the Order of Mission, an international missional movement, STP's affiliations stretch beyond its traditional denominations, both in what influences its theology, ecclesiology and missiology, and in where its lines of authority and accountability lie. STP has a commitment to adaptive methods in achieving appropriate contextualisation of the gospel and is unafraid to utilise the insights of anthropology and sociology into its ecclesiological and structural strategies towards its vision to 'call our city back to God.'¹⁹⁷ It structures itself around the principles of local network and movemental dynamics, themselves adaptive methodologies, rather than by traditional ecclesiological patterns.

At first, this situation can look rather complex or confused, and could be accused of prioritising pragmatism over principles. However, this essay has shown that STP does hold a coherent theology behind its practices, and achieves across its range of associational models (Diagram 2) a balance of the four historic marks of the church, of one (IN), holy (UP), catholic (OF) and apostolic (OUT) church. The fact that STP achieves all the essence of church in an innovative structural response designed for mission to its city suggests that it is participating in establishing a new ecclesial paradigm appropriate for the context of mission in the 21st century. The clearest articulation of STP's approach is in their statement that they are a "Both/And"

¹⁹⁷ St. Thomas' Church Philadelphia, Sheffield. 'Our Vision' [http://www.stthomaschurch.org.uk/our_vision]. Consulted 20.07.2012.

church.¹⁹⁸ As studies in ecclesiology by Alexander and Bevans and Schroeder have illustrated, there is biblical and theological precedent for such unity with diversity, which fosters a mixed economy well placed to take its opportunities in various contexts, while retaining the essence of church (“constants”) across the whole organisation. As Volf comments, ‘Trinitarian thinking suggests that in a successful world drama, unity and multiplicity must enjoy a complementary relationship.’¹⁹⁹

Contemporary proponents of fresh expressions might critique STP for not being incarnational and enculturated enough and not listening to its culture enough and responding in the fullest manner. Certainly, STP’s ecclesiology is not as “organic” as practitioners like Neil Cole²⁰⁰ or Frank Viola,²⁰¹ or even Alan Hirsch would advocate. Yet, neither is it aiming to be since it holds together both dispersed and gathered expressions, both empowered localised lay leadership and centralised administrative and episcopal/oversight leadership functions. This structure, as discussed, is driven not by pragmatism but from a number of coherent theological foundations.

The “Both/And” approach seems of clear benefit to STP, and is a unique advantage. Its multi-denominational structure allows for an enculturated response to its contexts. Its adaptive, pragmatic approach and freedom of expression engendered by the value of low control/high accountability is a strength in comparison to some other ecclesial models. Nevertheless, it must also be held in careful balance so as to achieve the bold vision for Sheffield. As Addison comments,

‘Movements that drift away from their core beliefs are always at risk, but so are movements that regard the way they currently function as sacred. Every method

¹⁹⁸ St. Thomas’ Church Philadelphia, Sheffield. ‘Our Vision’ [http://www.stthomaschurch.org.uk/our_vision]. Consulted 20.07.2012.

¹⁹⁹ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, p.193

²⁰⁰ Neil Cole, *Organic Church: Growing Faith Where Life Happens*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005)

²⁰¹ Frank Viola, *Finding Organic Church*, 2009

must be evaluated against the desired outcome. That means we need to be very clear about our unchanging message and mission and clearly distinguish them from our continually changing methods.’²⁰²

This essay has noted some potential areas where STP could slip from covering all of the essences of church, and unless it remains committed to robust external accountability it risks falling between the historic models of association and catholicity, such as the benefits of strong denominational affiliation or the early church pattern which functioned as a network of local congregations help together only by bonds of fellowship.²⁰³ STP is aiming at a “sweet-spot” which “Both/And” can arguably deliver. To achieve this it will need to remain clear in its objectives and its applied theology, as it remains committed both to denominational connections, but principally to being part of a wider missional-incarnational movement.

²⁰² Addison, *Movements that change the world*, pp.108-109

²⁰³ Doornenbal, *Crossroads*, p.175

WORD COUNT: 16473

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