

University of Cumbria

So Much For The City.

Reflecting on Experiences of 'Small Town' Church-Planting in a UK
context, in dialogue with Tim Keller's 'Center Church'
Planting Model for Cities.

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Soli Deo Gloria

Robin Ham

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Abstract

So Much For The City. Reflecting on Experiences of 'Small Town' Church-Planting in a UK context, in dialogue with Tim Keller's 'Center Church' Planting Model for Cities

This work seeks to use a form of the Pastoral Cycle to contribute to a theological vision for church planting in 'small towns'. It begins by reflecting upon my own current experiences of church planting in Barrow-in-Furness, Cumbria, as well as drawing upon the experiences of others, before engaging with one of the most popular praxis texts for Western church planting, Tim Keller's *Center Church*.

The dominance of urban or city-based approaches to church planting within British evangelicalism can mean that practitioners unthinkingly adopt city-focused models, without thinking through their own context, or perhaps not even considering smaller places as a potential place to serve. The goal of this Practical Theology project is to begin to articulate a theologically reflective approach to church planting in a 'small town' environment, acknowledging, appreciating and understanding how such a context might shape our approach and what theological resources can help this end.

Chapter One: Introduction & Methodology

For many it was 2004's *Mission-Shaped Church (MSC)* report that catapulted the vocabulary of church planting into common parlance within the Church of England and the wider ecumenical ministry landscape of the UK.¹ This challenged a report from 1994 that had proposed church planting as a 'supplementary strategy that enhances the essential thrust of the parish principle' (1994, v).² Instead, *MSC* definitively argued that 'a variety of missionary approaches is required' (2004, xi). Specifically, it spoke of church planting as the practice of 'creating new communities of Christian faith as part of the mission of God to express God's kingdom in every geographic and cultural context', a definition coined by Bob Hopkins as early as 1991 (2004, xii).³ As has been noted, there is no shortage of criticism for church planting and fresh expressions, not least within the Church of England. (Mackrell-Hey, 6).

As we come towards the fifteenth anniversary of the publication of *Mission-Shaped Church*, I've often heard people comment how church planting is now considered the

¹ See Cray, G. (ed) (2004) *Mission-Shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of Church in a Changing Context*. London: Church House Publishing.

² See House of Bishops (1994) *Breaking New Ground: Church Planting in the Church of England*. London: Church House Publishing.

³ See also Hopkins, B (1998). *Church Planting: Models for Mission in the Church of England*. Cambridge: Grove Books (Grove Evangelism 4) and Hopkins, B. (1998) *Church Planting: some Experiences and Challenges*. Cambridge: Grove Books (Grove Evangelism 8).

'sexy' ministry option.⁴ Within the Church of England we now have the existence of national and regional resource churches to 'pump-prime' church planting (Diocese of London, 2018), as well as a 'church planting bishop', and numerous 'success stories' (The Church of England, 2018). To put it simply, church planting has become normative.

One of the leading influences on church planting within Western evangelicalism is pastor and author Tim Keller (Shellnut, 2017). Keller co-founded the *City to City Movement*, which advocates for church planting within urban centres, modelled on his endeavours as part of Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York and as articulated in his planting 'textbook', *Center Church*.⁵

Yet amidst the surge of attention given to church planting, it is my sense that the major emphasis and 'front stage' focus has been on church planting within *cities* or urban centres. I have become particularly alert to this as I have sought to plant a new church within my own context of Barrow-in-Furness, a relatively isolated town of 70,000 in South Cumbria, UK. The process has raised natural questions about how useful Keller's city-based models are in the context of a small town. There are also bigger questions

⁴ For example, I've heard this said on numerous occasions in informal conversations at theological college. A quick Google search sees a similar sentiment being engaged with: Welch, E. (2013) *Church Planting is Sexy...Not*. Available at <http://thebridgeilm.com/church-planting-is-sexy-not/> (Accessed 20 August 2019).

⁵ Given this is the published title of the book in the US and the UK, we will herein be following this American spelling of 'centre' when referring to either this publication, or quotations including this word, without using '[sic]'.

about the underlying theological vision behind Keller's emphasis, and whether it may unhelpfully emphasise cities over and above other places.

As a work of Practical Theology, this dissertation aims to reflect upon my experience, but in conversation with Scripture and the experiences of others. It also particularly intends to dialogue with Keller's 'Center Church' and form a working foundation for church planting in my 'small town' context and others like it. Having set out briefly the rationale of this project, we now turn to consider the structure and the methodological process used, as well as significant issues to be aware of throughout.

Introducing Practical Theology

Practical Theology is generally concerned with theologically reflecting on praxis. Ellis has written about the importance of the priest as contextual theologian (2004, 121)⁶.

Similarly, Carr has observed that theological reflection is part of the 'basic activity of everyday ministry' (1997, 120). Whilst it is an academic discipline, it 'seeks to serve both the mission of the Church and the needs of the world; it touches that which is most personal and engages with that which is most public. Perhaps the truth of the matter is

⁶ Ellis argues for concrete examples of theology done in a local context and warns against the tendency to see reflection, storytelling and poetry as the stuff of 'retreats and quiet days', rather than practical theology. There is a need to grow not just theological educators, but those who 'theologically reflect with and for people' in context; for 'the creation of hope is the job of the priest who is a theologian' (Ellis, 129, 131).

that practical theology cannot be defined too precisely – nor should we try to do so’ (Lyall, 2009, 158-159). This tension will be evident throughout this piece of work.

Practical Theology & the Pastoral Cycle

As Ward observes, the Pastoral Cycle (PC) has come to define Practical Theology.

Although it can take various forms, the PC describes a series of intentional stages that shape the reflective process (2017, 96). Being cyclical, the aim is that the process itself will transform the response and lead to further reflection. One of the pioneers of the PC, Joseph Cardijn, defined three stages: see, judge, act. (1965, 2) In a sense every iteration is some version of this framework, with Kolb significantly underlining the importance not just of experience, but of *reflecting* upon experience. (Ward, 2017, 96-97). This then creates four stages: experience; theological reflection; learning; action. Sometimes this is adapted and articulated as: experience; analysis; theological reflection; action.

Ward has noted some limitations of the PC: firstly, that it is often used in situations of conflict, and thus does not model a ‘normal’ theological reflection; secondly, that the PC is too rooted in Marxist thought; thirdly, that the PC limits the place of theology to one stage in the process (2017, 100-102). Indeed, as Catalan and Nieman have argued, practical theology must surely be theological ‘all the way down’. (2008, 84-85).

Thankfully, most writers on the discipline of theological reflection include some admission that it is not 'straightforward' and 'some ambiguity is to be expected' (Ward, 2017, 114). Thus, though widely received, it is unsurprising we have variant models of PC.⁷ Pattison's insight is particularly helpful, re-presenting the process as a three-way conversation involving 'the researcher's own beliefs, perceptions and assumptions; those of the Christian tradition; and the contemporary situation' (2000, 137). For me, the Christian tradition will specifically include the insights and perspectives of Scripture, as understood in the evangelical tradition.

Theological & Ethical Considerations & Self-awareness

To be truly theological, I am aware that I must consider *myself* and my own process of reflection through theological lenses. Ward describes this need for self-reflection, to 'think through how you have been shaped as part of the Christian church' (2017, 116). I am conscious that I come with my own theological assumptions and my own experiences of ministry and church planting, which are inseparable from the act of theological reflection and contribute to a 'tissue of events' (Goffman, 1989, 130).⁸

⁷ For a wider discussion of these issues, see Ward, P. (2008) *Participation and Mediation: A Practical Theology for the Liquid Church*. London: SCM, pp. 33-50; Lartey, E. (2000) 'Practical Theology as a Theological Form', in Woodward, W. and Pattinson, S. *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 128 – 135; Green, L. (2002) *Let's do Theology*. London: Continuum, pp.128-134.

⁸ I am indebted to Allison Fenton for drawing my attention to this delightful phrase.

As a confessional Anglican, I am also aware that inevitably I observe with an *imperfect* love. I am aware of my own limitations and short-sightedness in seeing, listening and understanding. Here Poythress is helpful (2011, 161):

Human beings do not perfectly master their culture or the cultural meanings that they observe; they do not know their own thoughts perfectly as they go through the experience of interpreting the meanings of human actions in a culture; they do not remain completely the same as they go through the process of interpreting; they do not plumb all the implications of what they interpret.

In other words, as I reflect on the experience of four years of living and ministering in Barrow, I will need to account for - and guard against - assumptions, bias and superficial conclusions. This is the nature of observation 'in the field' as a Christian, especially it being a familiar field that I have been a 'live' participant in (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, 209). Rooms frames this focus on manner as akin to the apostle Paul's 'phronesis' (Philippians 1:27), grounded in the habitus of the Christian community and missional context (2012, 86; Fowl, 2005, 26).⁹

It is also important to note, with Hammersley & Atkinson, that the goal of research is not the production of knowledge *at all costs* (2007, 209). Indeed, ensuring research is ethically appropriate is 'a significant aspect of the conduct of sound research' (Blaxter, 2010, 161). If anything, the maxim of 'not forgetting one's humanity' (Hammersley &

⁹ To expand on this, Fowl describes how for the apostle Paul in Philippians there is a real connection 'between love, prayer, knowledge and judgment in a moment' (Fowl, 2005, 26).

Atkinson, 2007, 219-20) is extended by my theological presuppositions, for ultimately I am a disciple of Jesus Christ, seeking to love God and love my neighbour. Of Hammersley and Atkinson's four models of ethics, I believe the one most appropriate to my theology is ethical situationism. Unlike, ethical relativism or Machiavellianism, this is still ethically rigorous, and yet it allows for a flexibility of judgment based on the context specifics, unlike ethical absolutism (2007, 229).

The Structure of this Work

This project will generally follow a PC comprised of four stages: experience; analysis; theological reflection; action. It is intended to mirror a spiral model of research, where each stage informs later stages and fuels further reflection or research, rather than expecting a 'fixed, linear series of stages' (Blaxter, 2010, 9-10).

After this first chapter setting out some of the theological methodology, *Chapter 2* will pay attention to the context in which this work is set, namely Barrow-in-Furness and my remit to plant a church. Here I will draw on the insights of sociological reflection.

Giddens wrote that 'the practice of sociology involves gaining knowledge about ourselves, the societies in which we live ... [and] sociological findings both disturb and contribute to our common-sense beliefs about ourselves and others' (2009, 12, 14). In

this case, my experience over the last four years has given me knowledge about life and ministry in the town of Barrow, and whilst this is now familiar, the sociological imagination helps one to 'think ourselves away' from the familiar and look at them afresh. (Giddens, 2009, 20).

In social science, epistemologies of social reality are often grouped into either quantitative or qualitative, the former being often considered as the more objective traditional approach and the latter considered more naturalistic and subjective (Blaxter, 2010, 60-64). The latter has been described as 'watching people in their own territory and interacting with them in their own language, on their own terms' (Kirk & Miller, 1986, 9). However the distinction can be exaggerated and it is difficult to imagine research that is wholly one or the other (Blaxter, 2010, 59). Given the nature of this project, reflecting on ministry and church-planting in a particular place, I was led to focus on qualitative research and reflection *over* quantitative. We want to allow for person-variable responses.¹⁰

Blaxter lists four common research techniques: documents, interviews, observations, and questionnaires or surveys. Observational reflections should not be under-valued.

¹⁰ The phrase "person-variable" is taken from George Mavrodes, *Belief in God* (New York: Random House, 1970), 7-8, 31-41, 80-89, 101-111. Cited in John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987). 119.

(Blaxter, 2010, 64). Osmer describes this as the 'descriptive-empirical task,' formed from informal observations and subjective experiences, but also more formal data (2008, 11). I will be seeking to capture this mix.

Moschella's work on ethnography as part of pastoral practice is helpful to incorporate into this reflective process. Ethnography helps one to be immersed in the life of a people to learn about them and from them. Understanding the stories that people tell about themselves is crucial to understanding people: 'we shape our lives and give meaning and coherence to them through telling personal stories'. Not only that, but we are shaped by the stories that we *hear* (2008, 5). Ward develops this (2017, 122):

Paying attention to the sights, smells, and tastes of communal life will lead the pastor into a much richer and more complex understanding of the cultural narratives of the community in which he or she serves.

Here, ethnographic research is effectively 'a form of holistic pastoral listening' (Moschella, 2008, 10). This takes us back to our theological presuppositions, for listening well is a *spiritual discipline*, not simply a sociological necessity. Giving 'holy attention' to people, place and a situation is an act of loving one's neighbour and the God who made this people, place and moment.

In ***Chapter 3***, I will consider more generally church planting in small towns and rural areas, specifically through interviewing three individuals involved in such ministry. In

seeking to hear from practitioners who have reflected theologically on their experience and praxis, I used Mason's five questions to formulate an appropriate form of enquiry (2002, 13-22).¹¹ My interview questions can be found in the Appendix.

For these 'conversations' I received consent from my interlocutors, and sought to give clarity about how the information they provided would be used (Blaxter, 2010, 164). It would be anonymous, with no record of names kept. Whilst I had a set of simple questions, it was my intention (which I explained) to cultivate a more unstructured, naturalistic approach, seeking to be more reflexive to what they had to say (Blaxter, 2010, 193). My hope was that the set questions allowed the conversation to 'spill over' and take different directions and I wanted to have a conversational posture that allowed this. Of course, I was aware that one's method can affect the data given, and so sought to use questions that didn't encourage interlocutors down a particular road (Blaxter, 2010, 83). That said, of course I bring my own agenda in the very nature of the project. It is also important to note that each of my interlocutors face the same limitations I expressed about myself; we are all 'subjects' with consciousness and agency, producing accounts of ourselves and our worlds (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, 97).

¹¹ Mason's questions are as follows: 1) What is the nature of the phenomena you wish to investigate?; 2) What might represent knowledge or evidence of the entities you wish to investigate?; 3) What topic is the research concerned with?; 4) What is the intellectual puzzle you are seeking to explain or explore?; 5) What is the purpose for your research? (Mason, 2002, 13-22).

In *Chapter 4*, I will turn to engage with Tim Keller's popular 'Center Church' model for church planting in urban contexts. To use Ballard and Pritchard's language, the 'interruption' or 'tension' (2006, 77-78) from which I start this project is the experientially-based observation that much church-planting methodology assumes the context of a city. Whilst I have deep respect for Keller's ministry and writing, and have personally benefited from his insights, I will seek to engage in fair and constructive critique.

Chapter 5 will then seek to begin to formulate a theological vision of church planting in small towns. Whilst heeding Ward's aforementioned point about theology occurring all the way through, this section is what he calls the 'normative task,' where theological concepts are introduced to help interpret the situation. For me, this is where I will particularly reflect upon Scripture and the resources it provides and 'where the rubber hits the road'. It is 'where we move from reading what others have said to doing this thing called practical theology'. That said, it is likely to still represent a 'methodological challenge' (2007, 95).

Finally, *Chapter 6* will seek to offer some action and ministerial outcomes as 'guideposts' for future ministry in small towns or rural locations in a UK context. This is about formulating an initial response, 'specific pastoral strategies that grow out of the

preceding stages and seek to make a difference in the original pastoral situation' (Ward, 2007, 99). As Ward warns, I certainly do not want to fail to make specific connections to practice. Ultimately, the goal is to serve the church (2007, 116-117).

Chapter 2: Loving the Longest Cul-de-Sac

My family & I moved to the town of Barrow-in-Furness, Cumbria, in the summer of 2015, where I was to be licensed as a Pioneer Curate within the Church of England. The specific remit of the curacy role was to work towards planting a new church within a part of the town without any church presence. I soon became fascinated with the town's powerful sense of 'place' and became increasingly convinced of the need for this to influence and shape the ministry I would be involved in.

This project is born out of the lived experience of ministering, and particularly church planting, in my own 'small place' context. In UK settlement hierarchy, a place is technically labelled a 'small town' if it has a population of 1000 to 10,000, and a 'large town' if it is between 10,000 and 100,000 (Wikipedia, 2019). At approximately 70,000, this makes Barrow-in-Furness a 'large town' (City Population, 2019). However when compared to other cities in the north of England, the size contrast is striking.¹²

Furthermore, whilst population is obviously one measure of 'size', it would be prudent to consider a place's economic power, national cultural influence, and geographic location in determining its comparative 'size'. As such Witmer uses the term 'small places' in a

¹² Cities are notoriously difficult to define, but one nuanced assessment deduced the following figures for northern cities: Manchester, 1,903,100; Newcastle, 837,500; Sheffield, 818,800; Liverpool, 793,100; Leeds, 761,500. Obviously these dwarf Barrow-in-Furness! Though obviously not in the north of England, London's comparative figure would be 9,750,500 (City Metric, 2015).

non-technical sense to capture areas of countryside and communities that are relatively small in population, influence, and economic power (2019, 15). In this regard, and whilst using admittedly subjective indices, I am content to describe Barrow as a 'small place' and will use this phrase herein to capture both rural areas and smaller towns (even if those towns are technically 'large' at <10,000).

Introducing Barrow Objectively

In 1780, *Barrowhead* was recorded as being a simple hamlet, consisting of just five farmhouses at the end of the Furness peninsula, the most south-westerly point of what is now Cumbria (Mansergh, 2005, 9). However by 1886, little over a century later, the population had rocketed to a remarkable 47,259 (Bainbridge, 1939). The development of the Furness Railway in 1841 had meant the area's propensity for iron-ore mining (and thus smelting and steel production) saw Barrow undergo 'dramatic growth from unremarkable village to Victorian boomtown' (Trescaheric, 1). Apparently the town's grand neo-gothic, red-brick town hall was constructed in the belief that, according to Prime Minister William Gladstone, Barrow would become 'another Liverpool'.¹³ It was also infamously dubbed 'the next Chicago', and was thought to 'boast more wealthy

¹³ This piece of folk-lore was shared with me at a tour of the town hall by one of the staff.

aristocracy than most places' (Hatherley, 2011). By 1876, the town was thought to have the largest steelworks in the world (Henderson & Royall, 2015).

However, as the nineteenth-century drew to a close, new steel-production methods meant Barrow's steel and ironworks faced stiff competition and eventual decline. Sheffield-based steel firm Vickers took over Barrow's Shipbuilding Company and so began the rise of Barrow's next defining industry, leading to the construction of numerous merchant ships, naval surface ships, airships and later submarines. One local writer describes how the town's economic fortunes have always been physically symbolised in Barrow's landscape: firstly, in its 'Victorian heyday, it was the belching chimney and red-hot furnaces of the Iron and Steelworks...'; then for much of the twentieth century it was 'the line of Vickers' [shipyard] cranes silhouetted against the setting sun'. But since the 1980s it has been the looming hulk of the Devonshire Dock Hall (DDH) that has defined the Barrow skyline. This facility, the tallest building in Cumbria and one of the largest shipbuilding complexes of its kind in Europe, is sometimes known as 'Maggie's [Thatcher] Farm' or the 'Trident Sheds'. It was the construction site for the *Vanguard* class of nuclear-powered Royal Navy submarines, carrying the US-made *Trident II* nuclear missiles, i.e. Britain's 'continuous-at-sea [nuclear] deterrent' (Chakelian, 2016).

As such, peak employment for the *Vickers* shipyard in 1990 reached 14,500, nearly half the town's workforce (Trescaheric, 1992, 75). However, inevitably the town was hugely reliant on the Ministry of Defence's (MOD) submarine order book. As the Cold War receded and defence spending came under review, thousands of jobs were cut. By 1995 the workforce had shrunk to 5,800, with unemployment in the town rising to 10% (compared to 4.6% in 1990). One letter in a local newspaper described how Barrow had been manoeuvred into being 'a one-horse town handcuffed to Trident'. Such was unemployment that apparently 210 applicants sought a library assistant's post in 1992 (Jepson, 2017, 45). As the current MP, John Woodcock, describes it, 'Once-proud working people, who were trained to do the most advanced manufacturing on the planet, lost that dignity of being able to get to work, and ended up languishing on benefit' (Chakelian, 2016).

However, over the last few years, due to the MOD's order of the new *Astute* class of nuclear-powered hunter submarines and more recently the overlapping orders for the nuclear-deterrent *Dreadnought* class (replacing *Vanguard*), employment at the shipyard, now run by BAE Systems, has picked up and is set to increase. That said, much has been made of the 'gaping skills gap' that came with the unemployment of the 1990's (Chakelian, 2016). When the MOD decided it did want new submarines, they had to go about training up a whole new generation of workers.

It's hard to over-estimate the role of shipyard in Barrow life and how intertwined it is to the town's identity (Kennard, 2017). Most families will have or have had at least one adult who worked on these highly-advanced nuclear-powered 'boats'. It's normal to see a submarine poking its upper-body out of the water in the Barrow dock as it undergoes the final stages of testing. It also brings an interesting edge to politics in the town, with the Labour Party's variant nuclear disarmament policies meaning that a typically Labour-voting town is often 'up for grabs' by pro-Nuclear deterrent Conservative Party candidates. Politics becomes a single-issue vote in the town (Kennard, 2017).

In the 2011 UK census, Barrow recorded a population of 69,199, making it the second largest urban centre in Cumbria (although the population has declined since 2001; Nugent, 2012).¹⁴ Culturally, the town's background in industry and now manufacture means it's often considered a 'working class town'. Indeed, a recent survey labelled it the 'most working class town in Britain' (Davies, 2008). 96.9% of the population in 2011 were White British and 70.7% identified as Christian. Whilst the shipyard naturally dominates, there are associated maritime industries, a Kimberley Clark plant, a large hospital and a growing energy generation hub (including one of the world's largest offshore wind

¹⁴ The 2011 figure actually meant a 4% decline from the 2001 population of 71,900, which equated to the highest percentage population loss in the whole country between those dates. Due to net migration, it is projected that Barrow's population will decline to 65,000 by 2037 (Nugent, 2012).

farms), which all mean the local economy is healthy, even though there remain areas of significant deprivation. The town as a whole was ranked as the 44th most deprived area (out of 326) in England in 2015, but a number of town-centre wards were amongst the 3rd most deprived areas in the country.¹⁵

An Impression of Barrow

At a more subjective level, it may help to begin with my own 'first impressions'. My wife & I first visited Barrow back in November 2014, after a long drive from London where I was undergoing residential ordination training. We had been put in touch with other clergy in Barrow, and an opportunity had arisen to explore planting a new church in an unchurched part of the town, as part of a Pioneer Curacy with the Church of England. Even in the space of a weekend the town made an impression on us: the strong sense of Barrovian identity in those we met, the stunning beach vistas looking north up the west Cumbrian coastline, not to mention the aforementioned DDH building dominating the skyline. Seven months later I had finished my training and we had moved our young family to Barrow.

¹⁵ "Indices of Deprivation 2010". Office for National Statistics. Archived from the original on 11 September 2014. Retrieved 11 September 2014.

Although subjective observations will vary for different people, over the last four years there has definitely been a cumulative and settled sense of 'life in Barrow'. For a start, its remote location - an 'exposed hook of north-west England, surrounded on three sides by sea' (Chakelian, 2016) means Barrow does embody many of the characteristics associated with a smaller population. For example, people often comment on its strong sense of 'Barrovian' identity: people have learnt to be independent, to 'not expect much', and are loyal to their town. Locals will describe it as 'like a big village', and people who move to the town are known as 'off-comers', an apparently uniquely Cumbrian phrase. I have heard residents who arrived in the town as much as forty years ago say they still feel slightly on the edge. That said, I've also been surprised to hear many stories of people who moved to Barrow thinking they'd stay for a few years, but have found themselves still here decades later.

Undoubtedly, Barrow is a place with a reputation. In my experience those who have never been to Barrow are likely to associate it with one of the following sentiments: 'cut off from civilisation', significant levels of deprivation, and embodying the idiom that 'it's grim up north'. In part this has been affirmed by recent national news stories: the BBC reported on a notable spike of drug-related deaths in the town in April 2018 (Buchanan & Horrox, 2018), then there was a story in November 2018 about a Barrow library having no books taken out for a whole year (BBC News, 2018). Prior to that, a 2014 Office for

National Statistics 'Personal Wellbeing Survey' judged Barrow to be 'the least happiest place in the UK' (AOL Travel, 2014). This led to a fascinating response piece by a Barrow-born editor of a national newspaper, which resonated with much of my experiences. He commented on the beauty of the place: surrounded by sea on three sides and Lake District fells to the north; proud Victorian buildings and squares; the dramatic and enchanting ruins of Furness Abbey. But he also captured something of the sense of *place*, as found in its people (Blackhurst, 2014):

Barrow is a glass half-empty place. Its locals love a good moan ... They do not suffer fools, and can smell insincerity and someone hamming up a mile away. They can be direct, they will call a spade a spade ... But it would be wrong to equate their forthrightness with rudeness. Usually there is no malice, no hurt intended... Neither should their grumpiness, frequently aided and abetted by a growling, monosyllabic delivery, be mistaken for misery. They're never happier than when staring into the bottom of a pint glass putting the world to rights. And they don't take easily to strangers. That detachment from the rest of Britain, stuck on the end of a peninsular, makes them wary.'

I would echo much of this description. Phrases like 'salt of the earth' can be over-used, but the sense of the idiom does capture something of the 'say it as it is', 'take no pretence' mentality I have found in Barrow. Similarly, the town is frequently referenced as being 'at the end of the longest cul-de-sac in the country'. Though this is told as a joke (and can be heard on an informational video at Barrow's Dock Museum), the implication is that it is a negative attribute, as if this distance somehow made Barrow's inhabitants innately backward or disconnected.

Of course, it would be naive to think that Barrow's location *hasn't* effected its culture.

It is surprising how normal driving forty minutes to the nearest motorway becomes, but Barrow's location has surely helped cultivate some of its greatest strengths too, not least local pride, communal spirit, and self-sufficiency. Sometimes this pride is articulated in a fairly self-deprecating way and I have heard various visitors to the town comment on Barrow's 'low self-esteem'.¹⁶ But equally I have found people are very interested in what I, as someone recently moved to the area, make of their town. One writer noted a pervading 'quiet optimism' that recognises how the town has already come through some significantly challenging periods, not least in the post-World War 2 and post-Cold War periods (Nugent, 2012). One of my favourite anecdotes is witnessing an online exchange on a Barrow-based photography Facebook group. One Barrow resident had commented on how Barrow was a 'black hole', to which the national political journalist Isabel Hardman responded:

I moved to Barrow nearly two years ago and can honestly say that it is the place I've been happiest in my whole life... it's not just the abundant natural beauty - which isn't just around the town but also in the town - or the lovely buildings, or the extraordinary light that Morecambe and the Irish Sea offer, or the nature reserves. It's actually Barrow itself, the friendliest, most unassuming place I've ever visited, let alone lived in. I never go anywhere without someone wanting a brief chinwag. I'm born and bred south east England but I would rather be sucked into a 'black hole' at the southerly tip of Cumbria than anywhere else on this planet.¹⁷

¹⁶ This was partly the reason why a recent Barrow churches' mission initiative was given the double-meaning name, 'Believe in Barrow'.

¹⁷ Taken from a post in a private Facebook group.

Fittingly, another recent national survey, this one commissioned by Royal Mail and the Centre for Economic and Business Research, calculated that Barrow was one of the most *desirable* postcodes to live in the country, based on access to good schools, green spaces, employment prospects, affordable housing and average commuting times (The Mail, 2016).

What does Church look like in Barrow today?

Here again we can divide between objective data and subjective observation. Beginning with the former, in the 2011 census 70.7% of Barrow's population identified as Christian, a much higher figure than the national average (59%).¹⁸ However, the percentage of Barrow's population in 2012 who regularly attended church was strikingly low (> 4%), notable because this is both lower than Cumbria's average (6.4%) *and* lower than the national average (~5%). Peter Brierley predicted that Barrow could have less than 2,000 people in church on a Sunday by 2020. The latest figures for the number of churches per local authority indicated there were 50 churches in Barrow-in-Furness in 2005, equating to 1 church per 1,400 people. This ratio indicates a paucity of churches per person, compared to elsewhere in Cumbria: for example, Carlisle had 1 church per 900 people and South Lakeland had 1 church per 600 people. Of course, the combination of these

¹⁸ The following data in this paragraph was all shared with me in personal correspondence by statistician Dr Peter Brierley of the Brierley Consultancy on 13th February 2018, for which I'm very grateful.

statistics does mean the average church attendance (in 2005) tended to be much higher in Barrow (62 people) than most other parts of Cumbria, although not Carlisle (86 people). The average age of churchgoers in Cumbria in 2012 is notoriously higher (56 years) than the national average (48 years) and was predicted to be 58 in 2018. I read of one church leader remarking that the Church of England had fifteen years left in Cumbria (Mackrell-Hey, 2019, 22).

Subjectively, personal observation would appear to affirm much of this data. Through the ministry of occasional offices I meet many people who would identify as 'Christian' and who would associate themselves with a particular church (unsurprisingly in my case, this tends to be the local Church of England parish church). But few would attend apart from these offices and perhaps Christmas. As a clergy person my general sense is that people in Barrow feel the Church has an important place in local life, bound up with family history, tradition and even civic life, but simultaneously they would imply it is fairly irrelevant to everyday existence. I would guess there would be only two churches in Barrow with a regular Sunday service attendance over 100 people: a independent charismatic church and a combined Roman Catholic service. Most church congregations appear to be mainly aged over 60 years old.

Our situation: Church Planting in Barrow

Since the very first discussions prior to my appointment, part of the remit of my role has been to explore planting a church in the Holbeck & Roose neighbourhoods of St George's parish in South Barrow. These form a mainly residential area on the south-easterly edge of the town, separated from the rest of the parish by the Barrow to Lancaster railway line. The area is over 1.3 miles from St George's church (which is located in the town centre), leading a small group of residents to identify the need for a local congregation in their vicinity.. There had been three churches in the vicinity, but all had been closed over a number of years.

In my experience, most self-identifying 'church plants' in the UK tends to follow the model of a mother-church sending out a group to form the core of a new congregation. This had been the nature of the two church plants I had previously been involved with in London and Cheltenham. There are obviously other models, as well as the wider phenomenon of 'fresh expressions'. As has been noted, within the Church of England both of these have been promulgated by 2004's MSC report.

Within Barrow we quickly found ourselves asking how we might seek to plant a new missional congregation when there weren't any churches in the vicinity who would be able to send a ready-made 'core team'. Given the size and age profile of most churches

in the town, we realised any new church would likely be planted with much more of a 'pioneer plant' model. In the first couple of years we found it helpful to think of our aims as simply being to 'bed in' to community life and to gently 'plant the gospel' and see what happened. In practice, I was serving part of my curacy with two existing parish churches and so my time was initially split between duties connected to these churches and exploring something new.

The birth of Grace Church Barrow

Initially we focused on simply getting to know people, including gathering some local Christian residents to pray for each other and our area. After a year we started running a family-friendly Sunday afternoon gathering in a local primary school every few weeks, as well as a midweek gathering in our home where a few of the more committed Christians would meet to pray and read the Bible. Another year on and we transitioned this gathering into a weekly meeting under the name of Grace Church Barrow, thus now identifying as a church.

For a combination of reasons, after another year we moved Grace Church to a Sunday morning slot and moved venue to a local working men's club. These two changes felt risky, because most of our regular attendees were Christians already in attendance at

other churches on a Sunday morning. We knew most would remain at those churches. However, we hoped changing the time would prove to be better for those we were getting to know who didn't currently attend church and that it would help us feel more like a distinct church community rather than a meeting of Christians from different churches. On that first Sunday morning in October 2018, we expected to be 6 adults and 3 children, but we were actually 10 adults and 5 children. Since then our average has been 18 people per week, although we have seen 72 different people attend from Barrow over the past ten months. In Spring 2019 we saw one baby and two adults baptised, and two adults re-affirm their baptismal vows. It has been a joy to play a part in some people coming to a living faith in Jesus Christ and others becoming more established in their faith.

That said, it has also felt incredibly fragile and weak. There have been some weeks where Sunday attendance has been my family and just two or three other adults. We have identified with the Church Army Research Unit's observation about church plants that 'a child is a human, even though it is not an adult' (2011, 12-13). Though a ministry cliché, ultimately, we remember that it is not *all* about numbers. Mackrell-Hey rightly notes that a healthy church 'will not only question the quality of its worship, the depth of its teaching, and the strength of its fellowship... [but it will also] question how it is part of God's plan to bring salvation to the communities in which its members live...'. (2016, 6).

As clergy, we can instinctively tend to measure fruitfulness by counting, as the phrase goes, 'bums on seats'. But in recent months I have been encouraged to consider instead the way the 'few' are wafting the 'aroma of Christ' (2 Cor. 2:15) in the networks, friendships and general community presence that they inhabit.¹⁹

Going Nowhere Slowly

In January 2019 I formally ended my curacy and was licensed as 'Pioneer Minister with responsibility for Grace Church Barrow'. The Barrow Deanery now contains eight Anglican parishes, with five stipendiary clergy positions including mine, which means there is an inevitable pull of energy and time for all clergy towards inherited church, not to mention the evident need for clergy to work collegially. Whilst it can be a struggle to guard time and energy for Grace Church, the reality is that occasional offices and other events/contacts through inherited church systems and practices still provide fruitful opportunities that often seem to knit together with what we're looking to be involved with through Grace Church.

¹⁹ In some ways you could say this has been modelled by the Church of England nationally, after General Synod welcomed a campaign entitled *Motivating the Million*, to help the one million regular worshippers speak about and live out their faith (Church of England, 2019).

The Diocese of Carlisle (Church of England) and the parallel regional groupings of three other partner denominations have also committed to working together, declaring Cumbria to be England's first ecumenical county under the banner of the 'God for All' initiative. This has been labelled as a 'new paradigm for ecumenism'.²⁰ On the ground, this means the implementation of Mission Communities, clusters of ecumenical churches committed to working together for mission and outreach, including thinking strategically about using buildings, people and connections (God for All, 2018). In Barrow we have the Barrow Mission Community, and in April 2019 I was appointed as the joint leader of this network. Of course, on one level this could be seen as a threat to investing time and energy in Grace Church.

However, my concern for the growth of God's kingdom in Barrow means that I have to be concerned with more than just Grace Church. I want to see other churches planted and existing churches renewed and flourishing. Maybe this is what one God for All observer labelled 'Kingdom ecumenism' (Mackrell-Hey, 2019, 42). I wouldn't necessarily agree with the verdict that 'kingdom ecumenism adopts a low and unsophisticated view of the wider and local Church', nor that being kingdom-centred or ecclesiocentric have

²⁰ For an insightful outsider's perspective on *God for All*, see, Mackrell-Hey, L. (2019) *God For All: A New Paradigm for Ecumenical Working?* (Unpublished). The quotation is taken from p. 47.

to *necessarily* be alternative options.²¹ (Mackrell-Hey, 2019, 43-44). However in some ways we have modelled this at Grace Church: of those who are part of Grace Church *and* have been part of other churches previously (perhaps nine adults), only one adult (excluding my wife & I) would identify as Anglican. This raises obvious questions when it comes to developing Grace Church's polity, e.g. on the sacraments, leadership structure, and even financial framework. Whilst some may label this as 'ecumenical gymnastics', it seems to me to model the necessary 'creative' posture for a cultural climate where the Church can't afford to be side-tracked or distracted from its task of reaching the lost (Mackrell-Hey, 2019, 46).

²¹ I do find this perspective helpful, however: 'What, if, as was the case in Cumbria, we gathered together as fellow Christians first, and church leaders second, and asked ourselves the question, 'What is the work of the Kingdom to be in this place? One of the tenets of our pioneering hub in Peterborough is that if you focus on making and supporting disciples you will generate 'church', whereas if you try to focus on sustaining the church, you will get nothing' (Mackrell-Hey, 2019, 44).

Chapter 3: Small Town Conversations

As outlined in the Introduction, in this chapter I share the observations and experiences from interviewing three individuals, *A*, *B* and *C*, who are engaged in church planting in 'small places'. My interview questions and ethical consent forms can be found in the Appendix.

The Participants

A is living in rural Ireland as a Church of Ireland ordained minister. He was responsible for four churches, three in different villages (population of each around 200-300) and one in a small town (population: 1500), all largely dependent on the farming industry. He had been there for two years. Amidst this ministry he was seeking to establish a new congregation, akin to a 'fresh expression' of church.

The second individual, *B*, was living in a rural area of East Anglia, England, where he had been for nine years. He had helped plant an independent evangelical church that sought to engage with a number of villages of less than 1000.

The third individual, *C*, was living in Carmarthenshire, South Wales and serving as a Rural Chaplain and Pioneer Minister, having moved back to Wales in 2004 after some time ministering in urban areas in England. He lives with his family on his own land, with his own cattle.

My conversations with *A* and *C* were conducted over the phone. I exchanged emails with *B* but unfortunately we weren't able to schedule a conversation. Instead he was kindly able to point me to an online interview with him that covered similar ground.²²

I have organised this chapter according to common areas of conversation between the three interviews, pertaining to ministry and church planting in small places.

The Call to Small Places

A spoke of first personally seeing the clear need to share the gospel in his area, with few young people or families in church, nor many evangelical churches. He also observed, 'there weren't exactly people queueing up to serve'.

²² <https://www.acts29.com/the-rural-reality-an-interview-with-john-hindley/>

B described how his parents-in-law moving to the area had established an initial connection and familiarity with the place. A friend also commented that it would be easier to find a replacement for *B* in his role at his current city-based church than it would be to find someone to come and plant in the area they were considering. Consequently, through prayer and research his love for the area and its people grew. There was also a clear sense of need and an opportunity to partner with a nearby church.

C had Welsh roots and felt moved to return to rural areas of Wales after working in a farm shop in Kent. He saw that large areas were 'unreached', with most people having no realistic likelihood of coming into contact with 'biblical Christianity'. As a result he moved to lead a church 're-plant' in a market town in South Wales, before then being convinced of the need to grow churches in rural villages six years later.

Understanding Small Places

A spoke of how, even though moving back to Ireland from England was 'coming home', moving to a rural area was the 'biggest cultural change' he had ever made. This was a place where many people could trace fifty generations of descendants in that same place. Getting to know people well took time, and it felt like there was a suspicion of

outsiders, especially people 'from the city'. That said, you could get a relatively quick sense of 'who's who'. There was a strong culture of looking after each other, e.g. seen in sharing farming equipment. Most people lived and worked on their own land, which made moving into the area difficult as there was little other work. Fewer social meeting spots, e.g. cafes, meant building relationships needed a different approach. Pubs were also politically charged places in Ireland. Evidently it was important to understand the local way of life and traditions, in this case especially farming. Life was also less diary-based, so establishing memorable rhythms of life - such as weekly events - was important.

B identified the following distinctives: low population density and geographical dispersement, meaning that building relationships required more planning; villages tended to be more socially mixed, meaning that a church needed to be able to engage with a range of people and demonstrate a tangible and surprising unity; low mobility, meaning both that you couldn't rely on Christians moving into the area and that relationships took longer to form, though people did often stay for longer too.

C observed how life in his area revolved around 'rugby, ruminants, and religion', but that the latter was 'toxic' for many people because they saw themselves as having 'done chapel'. Hence, *C* bought some land, converted an old barn, bought some livestock and

enrolled in a Masters in Agricultural Environment studies. He wanted to be 'part of things'. The culture often embodied a 'cherished eccentricity'. If someone didn't have an eccentric side to them, it may be that they were hiding something.

Bias to the City?

A and *B* articulated that population density in urban areas meant that there *was* a legitimate need for more churches in urban areas.

A felt that when he had been in England, smaller towns, working class areas, and villages often seemed forgotten by Christians in cities, even if it was articulated that planting in cities was a means of reaching the wider region. However, in Ireland class distinctions were less obvious and a larger percentage of the country was rural, so it was harder to ignore 'small places'. That said, amongst ministers in Ireland there was still an in-joke that 'everyone wants to church plant in Dublin, but no one wants to go anywhere else'.

B said he sometimes felt 'there is a bias to the city that is presented overly strongly' within Western evangelicalism. He acknowledged that serving in rural areas might seem 'indulgent' to some, or not a 'gritty calling' or 'very edgy'. However, 'the heart of the issue is that people need the gospel'.

C spoke strongly of 'urban imperialism' within British evangelicalism, which valued numbers and placed importance on cities with a large student population or suburban middle-class churches. He specifically felt Tim Keller was close to the root cause of this, believing that Keller, if pushed, *would* argue that urban areas are more important, because of their population density.

Christianity in the Small Places

A noted that, in his experience, new ministry initiatives that weren't clearly connected to the established church were often seen by locals as being 'cults'. Being ordained into the national church created more 'open doors' in his situation because of a respect for the historical denomination. He'd sensed a trend of people articulating their faith as 'I did my best, now I hope for the best'. People would often identify as Roman Catholic *or* Protestant, and it was hard for people to think of themselves beyond those categories. Personal identity was connected to family history.

A & B both commented on how Christianity seemed to more respected, compared to their previous experience in cities, even if that was slowly changing. B described how in

schools there was 'a greater respect for the Bible and the assumption that [the Bible] is good'.

C spoke of how many farmers knew him as 'The Rev', which was 'a box' that helped people know he was 'there for us'. That said, he didn't associate much with existing chapels or churches because they were seen as 'toxic'.

A Church Shaped for Small Places

A shared how part of their plans for church planting were engaging with people's 'frustration with religiosity'. Where new people had moved into the area, especially those of Eastern European descent, some would speak of finding 'traditional' churches 'insular'. Therefore creating welcoming spaces to explore the Christian faith was important.

B explained that 'contextualisation is never changing the gospel, but changing our presentation to fit the local circumstances. In the deepest sense, it is simply love. ... For us, contextualisation has looked like working hard at welcoming all ages, presenting the gospel in a way that is simple but deep. It has also meant learning that being externally good and visibly coping are important values for a lot of people, and that the gospel

offers the freedom to be honest about your carefully buried guilt, shame and terror that you are not coping at all.'

C described three aspects of his ministry: 'Rural Outreach Teams', which were a visible 'chaplaincy' presence at town markets; on-farm Micro Church Communities, which enabled strong relationships to be built at a 'grassroots' level; and a Sunday afternoon 'hub', which included 'prayer, worship and Bible time' at the chaplaincy cafe, a rented premises at one of the bigger town's markets. He also sustained a fairly large online presence, important given that 75% of farmers regularly used Twitter. These aspects all existed under the banner of a Christian charity. Ultimately, ministry here looked like 'learning to be a missionary'.

A Theology of Small Places

In terms of key theological themes or Bible passages, A spoke of the importance of remembering that 'every person is made in the image of God', even those that the wider culture might see as insignificant. Here he also cited 1 Corinthians 1:26-31 to underline that God doesn't view and categorise people the way we might be tempted to.

B noted that it was important to see that 'people are people, sin is sin and Jesus is a generous Lord... we want to see churches planted in the isolated, forgotten and small places. We want to see Christ worshipped by all – small and great, in village and town as well as city and suburb.'

C spoke passionately about how Jesus left Capernaum to go to 'nearby villages', so that he could preach there also (Mark 1:38). He noted that we highlight Jesus' mission to preach the gospel, but we forget where he was intending to do this. This rural calling of Christ fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy of a light dawning on 'Galilee of the Gentiles' (Isaiah 9:1-2). *C* said that to follow Jesus was not to 'count heads' but to 'care for warm hearts and changed lives'. As such, there was a need to renounce our understanding of what kind of ministry is 'significant'.

Encouraging Ministry in Small Places

We also discussed how to encourage others to consider 'small places'. *A* spoke of how grasping that people were 'still people facing an eternity without Christ' would be the ultimate motivation. More clearly defined partnerships with nearby city churches could be a way forward for providing much-needed people and financial resources.

B spoke of praying for 'more gospel harvesters in the countryside', but he was also eager to note that 'the call is not to leave urban ministry and come to the country. The call is "Follow me" and joy, hope, peace and love lie in picking up our cross and following after our Lord wherever he leads'.

Similarly, *C* felt that many considering ministry or at theological colleges had lost sight that to follow Christ meant 'come, live, die'. People were choosing comfort, the familiar and 'significance'. He offered anyone considering this kind of ministry the opportunity to come and live for free at his family's property and learn how to care for cattle, with that itself providing powerful parallels with pastoring.

Continuing the Conversation

I was struck that each of these interviews represented a story of personal commitment, sacrificial adjustment, and patient love. I found myself often affirming comments made, and identifying with the experiences recounted. I was also grateful for the wisdom of those who had been where they were for much longer periods than my own time in Barrow. Overall, I found it to be a fruitful and inspiring exercise, giving me a renewed sense of the importance of articulating and communicating a theology of 'small places'.

Chapter 4: Center Church in the Spotlight

Tim Keller's *Center Church* is widely considered a seminal work in the field of church planting and evangelical ministry in a late-modern context. It puts into writing the training and coaching that has inspired and shaped hundreds, if not thousands, of church plants in major cities across the world through Keller's own example and subsequently through the city-based church planting organisation he helped set-up, *Redeemer City to City*. As one reviewer put it, *Center Church* is 'a textbook summary of this amazingly gifted pastor's philosophy of ministry' (Leeman, 2013).

Keller himself spent twenty-eight years ministering in New York City and is generally seen by many as an exemplar of a generous but reformed evangelicalism. As an individual, he is often described in terms of his humility, wisdom and experience.²³ One article in *Newsweek* described him as a 'C.S. Lewis for the 21st Century' (Miller, 2008). Another reviewer described him as a 'Protestant with *ex cathedra* potentiality' (Leeman, 2013).

Keller's aim in *Center Church* is to lay out 'a particular theological vision for ministry that ... will enable many churches to reach people in our day and time, particularly where

²³ See for example the published endorsements of *Center Church*. <https://www.redeemercitycity.com/centerchurch>

late-modern Western globalisation is influencing culture' (2012, 25). Keller is confessionally reformed in his approach, and yet seeks to help readers rethink their assumptions about church through careful and appropriate contextualisation, not just of the gospel message, but of ministry practice, for a contemporary urban culture.

Described as representing the best of 'missional thinking' (Leeman, 2013), *Center Church* is organised around three core commitments (Keller, 2012, 21-22):

- *Gospel-centered*: "The gospel of grace in Jesus Christ changes everything, from our hearts to our community to the world. It completely reshapes the content, tone, and strategy of all that we do."

- *City-centered*: Cities increasingly influence our global culture and affect the way we do ministry. With a positive approach toward our culture, we learn to affirm that cities are wonderful, strategic, and underserved places for gospel ministry.

- *Movement-centered*: Instead of building our own tribe, we seek the prosperity and peace of our community as we are led by the Holy Spirit.

Center Church under the Spotlight

Unsurprisingly, as a leading thinker and very popular text, Keller and *Center Church* respectively have both received their fair share of critique.²⁴ Some of the most recurring of these include the argument that Keller over-emphasises 'the boardroom table of pragmatism',²⁵ as well as questions over the way he portrays the relationship between ministry success, faithfulness, and fruitfulness. In fact, both of these areas are related, for they reveal Keller's focus on contextualisation, which will be controversial to some: 'Skill in contextualization is one of the keys to effective ministry today' (90). Or again: 'To the degree a ministry is over-adapted or under-adapted to a culture, it loses life-changing power' (24). Or later: 'Only this kind of [missional] church has any chance in the non-Christian West' (273).²⁶

City-Centred

For all that we could spend time engaging with these discussions, the particular focus of our study here is on *Center Church's* second major section: 'City-centered'. As Keller writes, 'cities are wonderful, strategic, and undeserved places for gospel ministry and...

²⁴ For example, see Campbell, I. and Schweitzer, M. (eds) (2013) *Engaging with Keller: Thinking Through The Theology of an Influential Evangelical*. Darlington: EP Books, 2013.

²⁵ <https://www.9marks.org/review/center-church-doing-balanced-gospel-centered-ministry-your-city/>

²⁶ The concern sometimes here is that Keller places too much emphasis on making the gospel more palatable, and there is a lack of emphasis on trust in the supernatural power of God: 'A ministry that never leads with sin or judgment, or a ministry that seldom, if ever, mentions cultural bugbears, is a ministry that has succumbed to a limited, reductionistic gospel more than it realizes.'²⁶ (<https://www.9marks.org/review/center-church-doing-balanced-gospel-centered-ministry-your-city/>)

that virtually all ministry contexts are increasingly shaped by urban and global forces' (2012, 88).

In tracing Keller's emphasis on cities, we need to go back much further than the publication of *Center Church*, or even Keller's ministry in New York City. Whilst serving as a pastor in the town of Hopewell, Virginia (2010 population: 22,591), Keller was the director of church planting for the Presbyterian Church of America. He then moved to be part of the faculty at Westminster Theological Seminary where he was mentored by Harvie Conn, professor of Missions and an early advocate of ministry in urban centres. It's sometimes said that there would be no ministry of Tim Keller without Harvie Conn (Stiff, 2009). Around 1989 Keller was approached by his denomination to explore planting in the city-centre of Manhattan. It was acknowledged that there were few evangelical churches in the city-centre of Manhattan that were suited to sceptics and seekers; 'those who felt called to Sodom and Gomorrah, or New York City, were scarce'. When Keller was initially asked to consider ministering in Manhattan, he himself wasn't keen (Stafford, 2009):

Keller found some signs of life in the churches of the outer boroughs. Manhattan itself, however, with its artists and musicians and 80-hours-a-week doctors and financial service personnel, had mostly gloomy, half-empty church buildings.

He was tasked with doing research on the potential for the denomination to plant in inner-city Manhattan, being told that he could then pave the way for someone else.

However, the two pastors he identified both turned the 'opportunity' down and it was put to Keller that it was him or nothing (Stafford, 2009). He accepted, becoming increasingly convinced of the need for urban ministry, and Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York was launched. He led the church for 28 years, growing it to a weekly congregation of over 5000.

Recovering God's Heart for the City

Moore believes the church in the US had become 'suspicious of urban values' over the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as if rural life was 'more wholesome' than urban life (2000, 194). In the post-World War II period, there was an explosion of movement to the suburbs. Noting these are 'sweeping generalisations', Moore suggests the Protestant tradition of individual responsibility encouraged Christians to lean towards the country, whereas a Roman Catholic emphasis on the corporate nature of life perhaps saw those used to more liturgical forms of worship valuing the city (2000, 194).

The Church of England's *Faith in the City* report of 1985 noted that the C of E was adapted to an agrarian society and that it was no surprise 'to find the Church as a bearer of rural nostalgia' (1985, 5). One book, published in 1884, identified cities as 'debased or

spirit-broken, hapless victims of an un-Christian civilisation'.²⁷ Moore argues the Bible is 'ambivalent' about the city, speaking both of the heavenly Jerusalem, but also 'of the wickedness of Sodom, Gomorrah, and Babylon' (Moore, 194).

It is this context that is important to keep in mind when understanding Keller's focus on the city. He has written that 'the cities of the world are grievously underserved by the church' (2012, 166) and that many Christians 'especially in the United States, are indifferent or even hostile toward cities' (2012, 135). For the American context, this has been well noted by Keller's mentor, Harvie Conn. He sought to reverse a trend and correct a faulty theology that he had observed over decades within American evangelicalism. Any critique of Keller's emphasis need to be seen in this light and thus with understanding.

So Why the City?

Centre Church begins with the unashamed statement that the *City to City* initiative (for which *Centre Church* is essentially a rationale and textbook) believes 'ministry in the center of global cities is the highest priority for the church in the twenty-first century' (2012, 21). Despite this bold statement, Keller appears to hold a nuanced approach to

²⁷ As cited in *FITC*, 1985, 5. The quotation comes from Rev Henry Solly's book, *Rehousing of the Industrial Classes: or Village Communities versus Town Rookeries*, published in 1884.

cities: 'the biblical view of cities is neither hostile nor romantic ... the city is humanity intensified - a magnifying glass that brings out the very best and worst of human nature... the Bible depicts cities as places of perversion and violence and also as places of refuge and peace' (2012, 135). Indeed, Keller recognises that the most common Hebrew word for city, *ir*, meant 'any human settlement surrounded by some fortification or wall' and that most ancient cities numbered about 1000 to 3000 people. In this sense, cities in the Bible are to be understood not by their size as much as their *density* (2012, 135). Keller highlights three 'signal features' of urban life that flow out of this density: safety and stability; diversity; and productivity and creativity (2012, 136-137). He also spends two chapters outlining a redemptive-historical overview of the role of *cities* in the Bible (2012, 135-152).

The reasons Keller cites for prioritising city-based ministry have been helpfully grouped into three general categories: historical reasons, strategic reasons, and eschatological reasons (Witmer, 2019, 102-111) We will *respond* to these briefly, before engaging further in the following chapter.

Historical reasons

On the first category, Keller has argued that the first Christian missionaries in the Roman Empire focused on cities over and above small towns or the countryside (2013, 27). He argues that in the years after Christ, Christianity grew *through* the cities: 'the early church was largely an *urban* movement that won the people of the Roman cities to Christ, while most of the rural countryside remained pagan' (2012, 149). Keller affirms sociologist Rodney Stark's conclusion that the sense of movement in cities in the times of the early church meant that Christianity's 'superior capacity' for meeting social problems (widowhood, orphans, aftermath of war, homelessness, poverty, loneliness) meant it played a 'major role in its ultimate triumph', creating 'not simply an urban movement, but a new culture'. (Keller, 2012, 149; Stark, 1997, 161-162). With historian Richard Fletcher, Keller believes this occurred again during the Christian mission to Europe in AD 500-1500 (Keller, 2012, 150; Fletcher, 1999).

Strategic reasons

A 2010 Special Report by *The Financial Times* stated that whereas once only 3% of the world's population lived in cities, soon, 80% would soon be living in urban areas (Financial Times). Citing Mohler's conclusions about this report, Keller says 'there really is no choice'; the sheer population data means the cities must be prioritised (Keller, 2012, 157; Mohler, 2010). For this reason, Keller can say 'cities have more of the image of God

per square inch than any other place on earth' (2012, 141). Cities are 'like a giant heart, drawing people in and then sending them out', often with a phenomenal centre-outwards movement (2012, 159). In particular, the particular demographics that make up city populations make cities the 'best' places to reach the younger generation, the 'cultural elites', accessible 'unreached' people groups, and the poor (2012, 160-162). Keller has argued that 'the cities of the world are grievously underserved by the church' (2012, 166).

However, Keller would say the strategic value of cities is not simply that they have more people in, but the role they play in the wider culture. He believes this was the logic behind the aforementioned historical reasons, with cities being significant for disseminating information and culture. (2013, 27). This position seems to have been first articulated by Roland Allen (1912), and since echoed by Allan Barth: 'Whatever develops in the city tends to have a profound effect throughout the nation and often the world. Influence tends to move from the city outward, not inward' (2009), as well as Keller (2012, 148, 161). This line of argument tends to have two elements: firstly, influence flows as people move from the city to small places; secondly, influence flows as the broader culture is shaped in the city, and thus effects smaller places. Thus Keller can conclude: 'As the city goes, that's how the society goes. If you win the countryside and

you ignore the cities, you've lost the culture. But if you win the city and you ignore the countryside, you've won the culture' (2013, 34).

Eschatological reasons

Keller argues that the Bible moves from a largely negative view of the city to a more positive one' (2012, 138). The city is thus a 'positive social form' whose capacities can be 'realized for God's glory', even though it can also be a 'vehicle for enhancing human rebellion against God' (2012, 135). It is also important for Keller that the Bible depicts the eschatological hope as a city (Revelation 21-22). This is a 'garden-city', 'the garden of Eden, yet faithfully cultivated', with gardening a 'paradigm for cultural development'. If humans are called to imitate Adam and Eve's 'cultural mandate', and if cities are the 'places of greatest cultural production', Keller concludes that 'city building is a crucial part of fulfilling that mandate' (Keller, 150). Interestingly Keller believes that the assumption of a rural, Edenic eschatology leads to an emphasis on evangelism and discipleship, whereas a city-based eschatology will lead us to 'steward the endless wonders and riches that God put into the created world' (2012, 151).

Championing the City vs 'Small Places'

In my reading of Keller, he would be critical of anyone using his work to argue that small town or rural ministry is insignificant. Similarly, I sense that he would be grieved at the thought of people importing his model of planting into a 'small town' location. He explicitly expresses concern that his vision is not taken and applied uncritically into different contexts. This would be to fail to do 'the hard work of contextualisation, reflecting on [ones] own cultural situation ... to seek to better communicate the gospel to their own context' (2012, 25).

In the process of this project, I came across Stephen Witmer, a pastor based in New England in the USA. Witmer is behind an initiative called *Small Town Summits*, which seeks to embody 'small conferences in small places for small-town Christian workers' that consider 'how God means for the gospel to form our ministry in small places' (Small Town Summits). He is also the author of a forthcoming book, *A Big Gospel in Small Places*, due to be published after the completion of this project, though I was grateful to receive an advance manuscript from the author (2019).

As well as observing the need to encourage people to pursue ministry and mission in 'small places', Witmer has also reflected on the role Keller has played in shaping the current ministry landscape. He notes a 'growing stream' of 'urban apologetic literature'

with a 'dynamic movement towards city ministry'. On this influence of Keller, he writes (2019, 101):

The hearts of a generation of young church planters and church revitalizers have been fired for reaching the city. City churches have been planted, city souls have been won, cultures have been influenced, and the gospel has spread. Though much gospel work remains to be done in the great cities, the gains are indisputable.'

This has been important for me to hear, for it affirms my own observations about Keller's influence and it seems to underline the concern I have about the city-centred atmosphere that has abounded in reformed evangelicalism in the West over the last few years.

Engaging with Keller

We have seen that Keller typically articulates historical, strategic and eschatological reasons for valuing or even *prioritising* 'city-centered' ministry. I will briefly outline some introductory responses to these reasons now.

Firstly, the *historical* reading of the early church as prioritising cities is often known as the 'Urban Thesis' of Christian origins, as championed by Stark: 'Any study of how Christians converted the empire is really a study of how they Christianized the cities.' (2006, 26). However this has been notably critiqued by Robinson (2017, 146-175). Even

if, for example, the apostle Paul prioritised cities as he knew them, it is harder to prove his reasons. There are also significant gaps in Paul's ministry that we do not know about (Witmer, 2019, 102-103, 105). Schnabel has concluded it is 'a significant overstatement to say that Paul's passion was the planting of churches in 'metropolitan centers' or in the 'strategic cities' of the Roman Empire' (2008, 281). It can also be argued that Jesus' ministry in the gospels, and that of his twelve original disciples, is explicitly not city-centered.²⁸

Secondly, it is often stated or implied that cities are more *strategic*. Sometime this is articulated in terms of population density, and other times in terms of influence on culture and the wider geographic landscape, i.e. 'reach the city, reach the region [or even nation]'. As Witmer acknowledges, cities do exert 'massive outsized influence... they disseminate values that shape people in small places - and that culture-shaping influence is usually unilateral' (2019, 49). However, he also asks if this should be the way we discern priorities. He gives the example that, in the UK, 20% of the population live in rural areas, but *half* of UK's post offices are in these areas. Is that a mistaken sense of

²⁸ Witmer makes the following observation: 'Jesus regularly ministered in cities and towns, villages and hamlets, the countryside and farms (Mark 6.56; Luke 8.1; 13.22).⁷ In fact, we're told that Jesus visited all the towns and villages of Galilee (Matthew 9.35). He could easily have visited the 175 towns and villages of Lower and Upper Galilee during his ministry travels, and it's likely that a major proportion of the 200,000 people living in Galilee personally saw him during his public ministry...When Jesus sent out his twelve disciples, he anticipated that they would go to the towns and villages of Israel (Matthew 10.11), which is in fact where they went (Luke 9.6)'. (2019, 102-103).

priorities? Perhaps it reflects 'an understanding that such communities have their own identity and needs' (2019, 98).

Donnie Griggs traces this idea to 'Trickle-down economics', where the prosperity of business and the wealthy (often through tax relief) will in turn stimulate the society at large (2016, 28). Accordingly, if the cities are spiritually fruitful, then this will 'trickle-down' to the 'small places', apparently through people movement and general cultural influence. However, I find it hard to read this assumption without sensing that 'small places' are akin to an 'added bonus'. Chester has pointed out that we need to be 'intentional' in planting in rural areas, not relying on cities as centres of influence as if the gospel message will automatically be encountered by all in surrounding areas as a result of churches in the city (2018). Indeed, it has been observed that even as people move out of city centres as they seek to settle down, they tend to exchange cities for *suburbs*, rather than smaller towns and rural locations (Kotkin, 2011).

Thirdly, whilst prioritising cities now *because* of the biblical vision of an eschatological city, the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21-22) is a common connection, Witmer helpfully critiques this reading of Revelation, noting what kind of city it is.²⁹ Hooker has observed

29 Witmer: 'Some writers simply state that all God's people will live in a city, without qualifying or nuancing that claim; it's also sometimes said that mankind began in a garden but will end in a city. Other writers describe a mainly-urban future for God's people while allowing the possibility that the future may not be exclusively urban. Still others

how it seems more that the city of God and the Garden of Eden have 'coalesced' (2010, 21, 24). It could also be noted that just because the eschatological vision is described as a wedding, this does not mean we denigrate singleness now.

God of the City?

Undoubtedly Keller's work must be commended for its important emphasis on contextualisation, which theoretically is as valuable for those of us ministering in small towns as in cities. Yet there is a lingering concern about what his focus on cities *implies*, or at least in the silence of what is not said or stated explicitly. This is not just directed at Keller and the ministries associated with him, but by a wider reformed evangelical constituency that appears heavily influenced or by, or drawn to, Keller. Generally the concern is that by linking church-planting so tightly to urban or city-based ministry, ministry amongst 'small places' is implicitly neglected or even discouraged.

Critically, it seems the language of 'prioritizing' is sometimes used without clear statement of what is meant. As Witmer notes, it could conceivably refer to the need to consider city ministry 'more important than we have in the past' or that we ought to 'invest more resources and people in city ministry than we are at present' (2019, 101). As

recognise that the New Jerusalem isn't only urban but rather a kind of 'garden city,' the garden of Eden finally cultivated and brought to fulfilment.' (Witmer, 2019, 110).

we have noted, Keller is reacting to what he perceives to be a long-standing wariness amongst Christian organisations and denominations to cities. He has spent nearly thirty years serving in New York City and evidently understands this historical propensity much better than I. In that respect, perhaps Keller would not be too concerned with the charge that he has over-emphasised the city, given the need to 'over-steer' to recover what he perceives to be a healthy Christian approach to cities. But it is not surprising that some infer from this that cities should be prioritised over and above ministry in 'small places'. (Witmer, 2019, 101). There are also questions over Keller's definition of cities as simply being an area of dense population, which we haven't the space to go into now. This seems to minimise the notion of cities as essentially humanly-created artefacts, with their own sociological symbols, which can in turn *enable* dense population (Pickett, 2013).

That being said, it is my perception that Keller has been successful in 'redeeming cities' in the eyes of those considering Christian ministry. Given my own limited age and experience, it is perhaps difficult to fully evaluate the legitimacy of his emphasis, as I have not experienced what he faced. Indeed, as I have more actively considered Christian ministry and church planting over the last twelve years or so, I have done so in an atmosphere that has been increasingly impacted by the likes of Keller. As such, it now

seems that cities are generally well served when it comes to considering church planting.

But the question remains as to how much Keller's ministry and the subsequent wider emphasis on urban church planting is driven by a theological framework that faithfully captures all that could be said theologically regarding 'small places'. In other words, we need to reconsider a 'theological vision' for such places that appropriately deploys the theological resources available.

Chapter 5: God of the Small Places *and* the City?

In this chapter I seek to articulate a 'theology of small town church planting', having reflected on my own context, listened to the experiences of others, and engaged with Tim Keller's work on church planting in cities.

Theological Vision

One of the striking aspects of Keller's writing in this area has been his emphasis on 'theological vision'. Here he borrows from theologian Richard Lints (1993, 316), who defines theological vision as that which:

...allows [people] to see their culture in a way different than they had ever been able to see it before. The vision gives them new eyes on the world and forces them to take a prophetic stance in each of the pieces of culture that are addressed. Those who are empowered by the theological vision do not simply stand against the mainstream impulses of the culture but take the initiative both to understand and speak to that culture from the framework of the Scriptures.

As Witmer notes (2019, 41), Keller builds on this concept and describes how a church may be sure of its theological foundations (its 'hardware' - what to believe) and will have particular ministry practices (its 'software' - what to do), but what it really needs to

consider is how these are connected.³⁰ This is through 'middleware' (how to see), a theological vision that restates beliefs but *with* their 'rich implications for life, ministry and mission in a type of culture at a moment in history'. Keller credits this with being key to the fruitfulness of Redeemer Presbyterian Church (2012, 17). Elsewhere, he describes it a church's 'DNA', a 'set of instructions deep within the cells of an organism that directs how it develops, grows, and self-replicates (2012, 22). Unsurprisingly, Keller has expressed frustration with churches that have imitated RPC's 'programs - even our bulletins - and haven't grasped the underlying theological principles that animate us' (97). For Keller, this is indicative of a *missing* theological vision.

Theological Vision and the City

We have noted that *Center Church* has three sections: Gospel, City, and Movement; but here we draw attention to their role as the three 'basic commitments' of the work's 'theological vision' (2012, 21). Keller frames each of them on an axis, explaining that 'the more that ministry comes "from the center" of all the axes, the more dynamism and

³⁰ In this section I am especially indebted to Witmer (2019) for his own work, both highlighting the significance of 'theological vision' in Keller and in leading the way in seeking to engage with Keller at this level. As I read a pre-release copy of Witmer's work it often felt that all I could do was 'think his thoughts after him'. He has been living, thinking and writing about these issues for much longer than I. Again, I note my gratefulness for being able to see an early version of his work and for his humility in urging me to 'carry on the conversation'.

fruitfulness it will have' (2012, 24).³¹ He introduces the 'City' aspect of the theological vision as 'to do with our cultural context' and labels the axis with 'underadapted / only challenge [culture]' at one end, and 'overadapted / only appreciate [culture] at the other end'.

The significance of this as we consider a theological vision for 'small places' is that the way Keller introduces the 'City' commitment *isn't* actually specific to ministry in cities, apart from in its title. He's actually advocating a principle about a church's relationship to its wider culture(s), i.e. whether it over- or under-adapts to it. One could say that entitling this commitment, 'Culture', would more clearly communicate the point Keller is making. Obviously for Keller the fact is that his 'cultural context' *is* the 'city', however by giving it this title, it seems to elevate the city as the preferred location for ministry. One could understand how for Keller's own church in Manhattan, identifying that second commitment as 'City' could be an important step in communicating to the congregation and community that they were not ashamed or unwilling to engage with their city context. However, for *Center Church*, effectively a church planting manual, one could argue that using the title 'City' makes the context of the city less negotiable.

³¹ In other words, there is a spectrum of ways in which you could approach each of the three 'basic commitments' and Keller is advocating that being at the centre of the spectrum for all three is the healthiest, more faithful and fruitful position to be.

A Theological Vision for Small Places

Therefore in seeking to craft a theological vision of ministry in 'small places', the natural assumption would be to review Keller's second 'basic commitment', 'City'. As I indicated, perhaps one approach would be to take this back a level and instead frame this commitment as 'Culture', affirming Keller's point about a church needing to understand and know its cultural context, and not over- or under-adapt to its culture. This could then be applied to a 'small places' context. Alternatively one could even articulate it as 'Local', in contrast with 'City'. However it is also helpful to think of how *Center Church's* other two 'commitments', 'Gospel' and 'Movement' interplay here, which is what we will do now.

A Gospel for All

Firstly, our understanding of the gospel itself must be bound up with how we think about 'small places', rather than being something we consider in a vacuum or as *separate* to our context. Witmer notes that the 'source' of a theological vision for small places has to be the gospel (2019, 43).

For example, whilst it is common to speak of Christians 'taking the gospel' to particular places, it's perhaps better to see that 'the gospel takes us to places (including small ones)' (2019, 44). In other words, it's because of the *nature* of the gospel that we have a heart for 'small places' at all. This connection was made repeatedly in the interviews. We could look at two of the most well known passages in the New Testament, John 3:16 and Matthew 28:18-20. Whilst the gospel of God's love for the 'world' and the call to disciple all 'nations' can often be articulated in terms of a *universal* scope and mission-field, it also means that God's love and Jesus' mission are *particular*. We might say they have an 'omni-focus'. The gospel is for *every* people and place (Shellnut, 2019):

We as the people of God have been sent to the ends of the earth and sometimes rural is one of those ends ... every place is still beloved by God and worthy of our best and most thoughtful ministry as the church.

Thus, through just having the gospel as a 'basic commitment', we are starting to see that our horizons *must* go beyond the bright lights of the city and include every place.

A Subversive Gospel

But secondly, our task of crafting a theological vision needs to not only consider that the gospel has an 'omni-focus', but that the gospel is definitively *subversive* in nature. As a result it begins to turn our values upside-down. Brad Roth uses the phrase 'subversive geography' to describe how, theologically, a place's value lies in it 'being cherished by the God who created and sustains it' and 'its nearness to God', rather than how big or popular it is. (2017, 54). Here our human geographical values - or at least how we consider the significance of a place - are being subverted by what I describe as God's economy.

But the gospel does not just subvert our view of which locations are important. It has a wider impact too. Witmer describes four aspects: how we value strategic significance; how we value size; how we value strength; how we value use of time (2019, 48-70).

Subverting Strategic

The parable of the lost sheep (Luke 15) perhaps best exemplifies this. It demonstrates behaviour that is 'inordinate' and 'unstrategic', yet reveals that this is what God's love looks like. The gospel is an extravagant love that doesn't come to people 'because of what they can contribute'. This 'can subvert our very conceptions of what is strategic'. Again, 'the lavishness of the gospel gives God's people permission and encouragement

to love and serve uninfluential, unstrategic people in forgotten places'. In fact, arguably the more 'unstrategic' or 'insignificant' a place in the culture's eyes, the more that having a Christian presence there will reveal the lavish grace of God. Rather than grounding our ministry in how much these particular people 'deserve' it, instead our ministry is grounded in 'God's character embodied and expressed in the gospel' (Witmer, 2019, 49-53).

Subverting Size

Hindley notes how 'Christ chose the small places, born in neither Rome nor Jerusalem but Bethlehem. He was worshipped and welcomed by shepherds, the same sorts of men he chose to father nations, defy Pharaoh and slay Goliath' (2018). This was picked up in some of the interviews and by Griggs. Jesus had just three years of ministry, yet he spent most of them in the villages and small towns of Galilee (2016, 48).

Although sometimes Acts is used as a rationale for the strategic significance of cities, Hindley (2018) notes how Luke records Paul going 'through the whole island [of Cyprus]' (Acts 13:6). The two port cities of Salamis and Paphos are mentioned, but the whole island is visited. This is echoed throughout Acts. Whilst cities might be named to orientate the reader, the work is not confined to the centres. As well as Lystra and

Derbe, the 'surrounding country' is mentioned as an area where the gospel was preached (Acts 14:6-7). Similarly, Paul seems to invest more in the small town of Berea because of its positive response to the gospel, rather than the larger and more significant Thessalonica (Acts 17:10-15). Hindley describes the apostle Paul's approach as 'more opportunistic than strategic, trusting the Lord for the strategy' (2018).

As Witmer concludes, 'Small is not always, inevitably worse than big (contrary to the prevailing view of our culture' (Witmer, 2019, 58). It is the nature of places that 'not every place is going to have the same potential for that growth metric' (Shellnut, 2019), but this does not mean we should think of such places differently.

Subverting Strength and Wisdom

A key text here that came out in the interviews here is 1 Corinthians 1:25-31. The apostle Paul tells his readers:

'not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.'

Hindley puts it simply: 'There is no need to seek a significant or strategic place to plant a church when God's strategy is to reach foolish, weak, low and despised nobodies. You can plant a church anywhere to reach nobodies, as long as you know you are a nobody yourself' (2018).

Ministry Shaped by the Cross

We could encapsulate these subversive themes by referring to Martin Luther's argument that by nature we are 'theologians of glory', longing for what is rich, powerful and impressive. Instead we need to be 'theologians of the cross', prepared to be weak for the sake of glorifying Christ (Lull, 2005, 50).

As mentioned, I have chosen to frame this in terms of the difference of God's economy.

Witmer summarises this well (2019, 27):

Our God often chooses things that are weak and unimpressive in order to make known his own great power. The gospel itself proclaims God's prizing of what is weak, God's penchant for showing love to those who seem least worthy of it and least likely to influence others with it. God thinks more highly of small places than we do.

Hopeful and Realistic

Framing this in terms of theological vision liberates us from having to persuade someone that a small town is a more attractive or satisfying place to live. Whilst one can list and recount the 'virtues' of small places, there is no need to exaggerate or romanticise such places. As we have seen, there is certainly much to celebrate, but this is neither about denigrating the city or overstating life in the small places. It is the gospel of God's grace that 'prevents us from both despair and naiveté, as well as teaching us to be both hopeful and realistic' (Witmer, 2019, 37-38):

Yes, the Creator God has blessed them and made them beautiful. But more than that, the gospel shows that he treasures them even in their smallness, slowness, anonymity, and lack of high culture. At the same time, they exist in a fallen world, and fallen people live in them. We need to see rural areas and small towns as simultaneously dark and bright places. We'll see them that way only if we allow our thinking to be reframed around the gospel.

Not Transcending the Small Place

Witmer perceptively writes of the temptation to 'transcend' a place. (2019, 113). This is seen in someone approaching ministry in a 'small place' as a stepping-stone to a larger town or city. He draws attention to a comment in *Jayber Crow*, a Wendell Berry novel about the life of a small town barber. The main character observes the frequently short pastorates of the town's ministers: 'Some were wise and some were foolish, but none, so far as Port William knew, was ever old' (2000, 160).

But one may also seek to 'transcend' a place in being loath to really consider the nature of the place, adopting practices from the city, rather than adapting to *this* place.

Facing Up to the Bright Lights

This is why, in stating a theological vision for small places, it may be helpful to explicitly counter the cultural emphasis on cities. Part of this may be simply acknowledging their allure. One reviewer made the perceptive observation that whilst Keller may wish to encourage situation-specific contextualisation, perhaps the 'jaw-dropping skyscrapers and incredible wealth and power' of Manhattan can overawe those visiting the *City to City* programme, leading to *imitation* rather than prayerful *contextualisation* (Pickett, 2013).

Indeed Moore notes how even the word 'city' carries a resonance that 'radiates the mystical aura of thousands of cities throughout thousands of years' (2000, 194). White wrote about the 'the excitement of participation'; cities are lively, growing places and so to exist amongst them brings an infectious buzz (1949). Belonging to a church in a city can mean absorbing some of those feelings, perhaps attendees feel like White, 'unique, cosmopolitan, mighty, and unparalleled' (1949).

Naturally, we do not want the pendulum to swing to the other extreme, which is where

Witmer again puts it so well (2011, 111):

I'd prefer to speak about the crucial importance of big-place ministry and the crucial importance of small-place ministry (and all the places in between), without prioritizing either one. It's best to leave it to God to prioritize the city, suburbs, or countryside in each individual life. If God calls you to the city, throw yourself fully into ministry there. If he calls you to a suburb, don't flee to a city or small town. If he calls you to the countryside, make it your priority to gladly serve him there.

Bringing It Together

The subversive nature of the gospel is critical for a theology of 'small places'. A church that is confident in this gospel, despite it not following the values of the culture, will powerfully 'represent God's commitment to be with all people, everywhere' (Roth, 2017, 34.)

Chapter 6: Reaching Out Whilst Going Nowhere Slowly

The main 'outbox' of this project has been to highlight key themes for a 'theological vision' for church planting in small places, as in the previous chapter. Now I wish to articulate some initial action points and ministerial outcomes as 'guideposts' for future planting in 'small places'. The idea here is that these represent a more 'earthed' and tangible expression of the underlying theological vision, an 'inhabited' and aspirational praxis.

- Growing a Contentment with being on the Outside (with Christ)

Moving to a small town has been a very different experience to moving to a city. As a family we've needed to 'bed in'. However, in places where many families have been settled for generations, it is likely that one will continue to feel like - and be identified as - an 'outsider', even for decades. Being a 'newcomer' (or 'off-comer' in Cumbria) can be exhausting and discouraging. It isn't just about not *knowing* things, or people, or happenings. It is about being treated differently, being located on the edge rather than in the centre. Partly this is because 'lots of people in small towns aren't looking for more

friends' (Heikkinen, 2016). One needs to accept this is how things will be, rather than be surprised or disheartened by it.

That said, it seems one can do something about this. I've sensed that when people see that you are *for* their place and *for* them, rather than just wanting to change their place and them, then trust can begin to be built. Similarly, one can create opportunities to be socially dependent on other people in this place. 'Pitching in for each other' is often one of the frequently-cited marks of a 'small place', and yet if an outsider seeks to essentially operate as an independent unit, then one is cutting against this value.

- Being sensitive to people's reactions to 'newness'

Tied up with this is being aware of how people react to 'newness'. The notion of starting something new can raise real challenges in places with deep roots. New can be seen as threatening and temporary, an unnaturally imposed break with the 'tried and trusted'. It may even be particularly associated with coming 'from the city', and thus being irrelevant and arrogant.

Here even the language of church planting, whilst familiar to those who are in touch with the national conversation on ministry, could be unhelpful to those based in the

locality. We have often preferred to describe ourselves as 'planting the gospel in our lives' or 'continuing the story', rather than planting a church.

- Learning to love by listening and feeling 'the grain' of a place

As mentioned, 'small places' will often contain significant personal/familial history, as well as a strong sense of place. Brad Roth uses the vocabulary of French wine-making, where *terroir* is used to capture the 'sense of a place' (Roth, 2019). Every place has a distinctive *terroir*, be it soil, climate, or vine, which brings a distinctive character to the wine itself. Thus we should consider how the *terroir* of a place should bring out a distinctive *church* for that place. In some ways, this is not particularly cutting-edge ministerial advice. It is the heartbeat of Fresh Expressions methodology. We are called to know our people and culture and shape ministry accordingly, with a range of perspectives on what precisely this looks like, from contextualisation to inculturation.

I have found it helpful to think about the need for church planting here to go 'with the grain' of a place, rather than being invasive. In terms of ministry, we have learnt the importance of getting to know the people who have been serving God in this place for decades. The story of what God has been doing is *their* story, not mine. Certainly, we should be wary of any temptation to think that story begins with our arrival. This means,

though we may arrive with gospel convictions, we are willing to hold any pre-set plans or ideas lightly.

- Adapting to the Pace of a Place and the Pace of Grace

Ministry in cities can seem more effective than in smaller or more rural areas. Churches can grow numerically very quickly and there are often people undergoing significant life changes, which creates natural opportunities to also engage with the Christian faith, perhaps for the first time. Keller has noted these as 'cultural cruciality', 'global cruciality', and 'personal cruciality' (2012, 148). As a result, we can think about what I call the 'pace of grace' as being relatively quick. 'This is how God works,' we might conclude.

But we also need to be alert to the 'pace of a place'. If life in 'small places' typically changes much more slowly than in cities, then this underlines the need for patience. Perhaps God will work here more in line with *this* place's time-scale. It also forces us to confront in our own minds what 'change' we are expecting or looking for. On one level, it can be straight-forward for someone in a position of authority to impose change at some level. Yet this raises the question as to whether such change will actually last.

- Challenging Worldly Definitions of Success

It can often feel like the Western world is fascinated with metrics and growth. In an age of statistical decline in the British Church, more than ever we prize numerical progress. There can be something of a desire for a 'silver bullet' to bring such growth. In church planting, we can therefore measure ministry by numerical 'successfulness'. Typically, we consider those churches that are comparatively large to be those that are successful. When one has lived in a 'small place', the differences with the city become quite striking. It is remarkable that, due to its location, a city-centre church can essentially expect a new influx of people a few times a year.

However, in reality this can be simply 'shuffling the deck', moving the same set of Christians around different churches. Still, having a 'larger hand' makes church life easier, and so it can be something that churches in small places envy. But we have a call to embrace weakness. Whilst the fragility of church life can sometimes be all consuming, it can also become so permanent that it is strangely liberating.

- Repenting of Worldly Desires for Success over Obscurity

Intwined with this is the underlying reason why such definitions can be attractive to us. I find it all too easy to desire 'growth' for the wrong reasons. Some days I do envy the buzz

of the city. Some days I envy the growth stories of city churches. At heart, this can be because I want to be seen as successful or gifted. Witmer honestly comments on how his time in a city-centre church led to him enjoying 'being at the centre of things... I began to take pride in it. The important places where I was living made me feel important' (Witmer, 2019, 7). And yet in God's kindness, I find those days of looking longingly at city churches are coming less often than they used to. Rather than facing toward the wider Church and seeking its approval, I can face God with the people he has placed before me.

- Being Prepared to Embody Longevity and Fidelity

The UK building society *Nationwide* recently ran an advertising campaign built around their promise that every town and city with a *Nationwide* branch would still have one in two years. A Youtube video for the campaign saw poet Matt Abbott proclaim the importance of the local high street, including this poignant line, 'Chain stores and neon will come and go; it's the constants that soothe my brain' (Nationwide, 2019). This touches on the significance of both a local presence *and* a constant presence. This has been called 'stickability' (Heikkinen, 2016).

Longevity is inevitably a searching subject. Stipendiary clergy in the Church of England increasingly seem to be encouraged to keep moving on. On one level, there is a strand of ministerial thinking that says my role is to raise up others to replace me and move on. But whilst of course I do not want to establish a church that is dependent upon me, neither do I want to underestimate the significance of personal relationships built up over time. Isn't part of communicating God's commitment to a place seen through a *Christian's* commitment to a place? In the instance of a stipend, there is also the question of how long a Diocese is prepared to invest in a specific situation, especially if it seems numerically fruitless or financially not sustainable. I also find this raises earnest questions about what I want to accomplish with my life. Would I be content to spend the next 15 years serving in Barrow? Would I be content if Grace Church never grew beyond, say, 25 regular people? Or would I be inclined to think of 'loving a few people for a long time' as a waste, in some way, be it a waste of time or a waste of a life? (Heikkinen, 2016). And yet, 'a whole life lived in, and a whole ministry dedicated to, a small unimportant place embodies precious aspects of the gospel that a highly-successful, 'influencing the influencers' ministry never can' (Witmer, 2019, 53).

Conclusion

Returning to the specifics of my own context, I recall a poem carved in large letters on the flagstones of Barrow's town centre:

Those shipyard men and ships they've built / craftsmen of world renown;
The skills passed down are the skills / that made this little Barrow Town.

It has been strangely fulfilling to reflect upon *this* 'small place'. Unregarded by many, it has its own story, into which are written countless individual stories, and of course into which I now find my own story, and that of my family.

And yet I hope to have done more than to reflect and capture a place - or a *type* of place. For it was not just skills, labour, or the hard-won resources of the earth that '*made* this little Barrow Town'. This project has been about re-discovering that each 'small place' is created, known, and loved by the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. This God subverts the values of our age and lavishly loves beyond metrics, strategies and timelines.

For good reason, many a 'small town' Christian has read Marilynne Robinson's novel, *Gilead*, recounting the life of fictional pastor, John Ames. As he recalls a life spent

ministering in little Gilead, Ames writes these words with which I'll finish my words

(2004, 247):

To me it seems rather Christlike to be as unadorned as this place is, as little regarded . . . I love this town. I think sometimes of going into the ground here as a last wild gesture of love...

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Appendix

Project Information sheet

'Church Planting in Small Places'

I am carrying out a research project with Cumbria Christian Learning through the University of Cumbria as part of a MA in Practical Theology.

This explores what it looks like to plant churches in 'small places' (rural and small town locations, rather than city or suburban locations).

At this phase in my research I would like to interview a number of church planters in such locations about their experiences of church-planting, what has been specifically important because of their 'small town' context, and how they feel about preparation for planting in this context and how much the wider evangelical culture is equipped and mindful of 'small places'.

I will be recording my findings through taking notes of conversations and recording said conversations. Transcriptions of the recordings will be retained. The actual recordings will be destroyed at the end of the project (this is anticipated to occur in September 2019).

The findings of the research will be written up in my thesis which may receive some publication or be rewritten for such purposes.

All information will be handled under the Data Protection Act: electronic data will be stored securely on a password protected computer.

All respondents are guaranteed anonymity unless otherwise agreed – no real names of individuals, locations, church names, organisations or contact addresses will be used in reports or dissemination of research unless you request it. However, there may be identifying features of situations which are recognisable despite name changes.

Robin Ham, postgraduate student,

I can be contacted by email: robin@sbtchurches.co.uk or by phone on 07828 333 106.

Project Information sheet

'Church Planting in Small Places'

The following questions will be used in conducting interviews with 'small town' church-planters:

1. Can you describe the nature of your context and in what sense you would describe it as a 'small town'/'small place'?
2. Can you describe the nature of your church-planting situation - e.g. At what stage of planting are you? Is there an existing relationship with the context, for example, through a pre-existing 'mother church'/'hub church'? Have most people in the church come from other churches or were they previously unengaged with church?
3. In what ways has the 'small town' context impacted upon your approach or method or preparation to church-planting?
4. What have been the particular joys of church planting in a 'small place'?
5. What have been the particular challenges of church planting in a 'small place'?
6. On reflection, what advice or wisdom would you give to someone planting in a 'small place'? (This question seeks to gain the insight of 'hindsight', in contrast to question 3).
7. What have been the key theological ideas or biblical passages that have been formational in your own 'church-planting in small places' journey?
8. Is there any sense in which you have felt discouraged or unequipped for this context by the wider evangelical culture or associated resources (or lack of)?
9. How aware are you of the work of Tim Keller and Center Church? If aware, is there any sense in which this work has positively influenced you in your current situation? Can you say how?
10. If aware, is there any sense in which you have found this work lacking or unhelpful for your context? Can you say how?
11. Given the general brief of this thesis, is there anything you wish to add that may be helpful?

Robin Ham, postgraduate student,

I can be contacted by email: robin@sbchurches.co.uk or by phone on 07828 333 106.

Church Planting in 'Small Places' Ethics Form

Please complete this to show your consent to participate in this study

*Please cross out
as necessary*

Have you read the Participant Information Sheet and understood the nature of this project? YES / NO

Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and to discuss the study? YES / NO

Have you received satisfactory answers to all of your questions? YES / NO

Have you received enough information about the study? YES / NO

Do you consent to participate in the study? YES/NO

Do you understand that you are free to withdraw from the study:

* at any time and
* without having to give a reason for withdrawing YES / NO

I understand that data arising from this project will be handled in accordance with the data protection act and as such will be stored securely with only the researcher, Robin Ham, having access to it.

Do you consent to have your discussion digitally recorded on the understanding that the recording will be destroyed at the completion of this project but that the transcripts will be retained for future use? YES/NO

IF this work eventually goes to publication, would you wish to read and approve/agree it first? YES/NO

Please include your name, address and telephone number if you would like to be contacted in the future should I wish to use excerpts from the transcripts in future publications beyond my thesis.

Signed **Date**

(NAME IN BLOCK LETTERS)

(ADDRESS)

(Phone number)