A theological and ethnographic exploration of three pioneering contexts in Gloucestershire through the lens of "earthed spirituality."

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Contents

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Abstract

This research explores the missiological outworking of pioneer ministry rooted in an 'earthed spirituality' which engages deeply with practical societal and environmental concerns and can be described in the phrases: 'down to earth' and 'of the earth'. At the centre of the study is ethnographic research in three pioneering contexts in Gloucestershire which live out an 'earthed spirituality.' An ethnographic description from each context has been produced, as well as an extended theological reflection from each on a theme which was both prominent in the research and has not received significant attention within missiology.

Significant themes explored are first the outworking of the kenotic dynamic in missional practice that draws on insight from Asset Based Community Development. A second reflection advocates for the use of 'liberation' as a framing of the core gospel in a context where individuals have been sinned against, both structurally and in terms of challenging life histories. The final reflection explores the spirituality of activism in a context where Extinction Rebellion have prominence, with a particular focus on the importance of 'hope' to counter eco-anxiety and enable activists to continue their work. Overall is an exploration of the nature of the core gospel for pioneers rooted in an earthed spirituality.

In additional, two portfolio articles are included, the first exploring a holistic approach to evangelism, and the second, rooted in fieldwork, the insight embedded within Forest Church.

The strands are drawn together in the final chapter which explores the society's need for a new story to live by that enables both human and environmental thriving. The insights from each context offer Christian perspectives to the movement to address the human and environmental challenges within contemporary society.

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PORTFOLIO

A: Literature Review: finding a language

1. Introduction

Literature reviews serve different purposes depending on the nature of the project. Creswell writes: 'The literature may be fully reviewed and used to inform the questions actually asked, it may be reviewed late in the process of research, or it may be used solely to help to document the importance of the research problem.'[1] In this project, engagement with the literature is needed both at the beginning and end of the research process, the first to orientate within the field and provide a context for the core research question, and the second in dialogue with fieldwork data. This literature review comprises the initial part of the process. It is therefore bounded by a publication date prior to the Spring of 2015, with the breadth of this multi-disciplinary project necessitating an indicative rather than exhaustive review. Gaps in the literature within which this project sits will also be highlighted.

The review finds limited writing concerning theological insight emerging through the deep contextual engagement of pioneer ministry, despite the significant informal conversation. My professional practice, which in my regional role brings me into contact with multiple missional practitioners and national networks, has identified 'earthed spirituality' as a focus that has potential to draw together the insight developed informally towards solid contextual theology. The hope is that this study will bring this conversation into a more formal discussion in the academy and be of value in consolidating the thinking for practitioners, both 'pioneers' and those working in traditional models of church.[2]

'Earthed Spirituality' connects spirituality with environmental perspectives, social action, and faith sharing. This thesis proposes that holistic ways of thinking are both culturally attractive and theologically rooted in Christian orthodoxy, and therefore contain significant promise for mission and ministry. There is an insistence throughout that spirituality, theology and practice are inseparable.

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[1] John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design* (Los Angeles: Sage 2013) p.51.

[2] https://www.churchofengland.org/pioneering accessed 11 September 2020

The practical research which forms the core of this study will explore missional projects working contextually and rooted in an 'earthed spirituality', in order to uncover insight about the ways that they are expressing the Gospel in word and practice. The theology underpinning these will be examined, in the expectation that there might be insight discovered that can be shared with the wider church. This means that this discussion in this literature review can only be provisional, with the bulk of the theological work occurring after fieldwork. Focus here will be on theologies which my own professional practice indicates likely to be fruitful in the development of missionally effective contextual theologies.

This review opens by exploring pioneer ministry against the background of contextual mission and the contemporary spiritual landscape. 'Earthed spirituality' is then examined, as the primary lens through which this research is focussed; then theological strands which show promise as useful sources of engagement are considered. Finally, pioneer ministry is proposed as a vehicle to explore contextual mission and ministry which engages through an 'earthed spirituality'.

2. Pioneering, mission and contextualisation

Doug Gay, reflecting on the ecclesiology of the emerging church writes: 'Missiology, in particular post-colonial missiology, insists that questions of culture be given a greater prominence within theological reflection and that incongruities between church practice and contemporary culture be critically examined and assessed.'[3] Healy, in discussing ecclesiological ethnography advocates for the exploration of local experiments in order to discover productive ways forward in a fast changing context. He writes that: 'Developing broader analyses may help to promote such a common Christian culture, while also bringing to light significant experiments at the more local level, and assessing them before proposing them for more general adoption.'[4] This chapter explores pioneer ministry as a significant form of local experiment, proposed as the heart of this study due to the depth of their contextual and cultural engagement.

As the wider church explores ministry in this changing context, challenges around language and communication are evident. Helen Cameron describes how society has changed in such a way that the worldview of the church is incomprehensible to many around us. This has

[3] Doug Gay, *Remixing the Church* (London: SCM 2011)
[4] Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life* (Cambridge: CUP 2000) p.183.

profound implications for mission: 'when our talk about God - our theology - loses social traction, mission falls into crisis.'[5]

Pioneer ministry is a form of missional practice which seeks to engage with this reality, forming new forms of Christian community, or Fresh Expressions of church. The latter are defined ecumenically in this way: 'Fresh Expressions are new forms of church that emerge within contemporary culture and engage primarily with those who don't 'go to church''[6] This form of ministry has been chosen as an appropriate vehicle as it is at the forefront of exploring the new forms which church could take within a rapidly changing culture. A baseline of such ministry is that it is contextual in its approach, responding to local situation and culture. As Sutcliffe puts it: 'context is at the heart, the centre, of any pioneering venture.'[7] This makes pioneering invaluable as a resource for researching culturally engaged contextual mission.

The need for contextual theology is noted by theologians of a variety of theological backgrounds. Bosch says: 'The Christian faith never exists except as "translated" into a culture.'[8] And McGrath writing from an evangelical perspective: 'To be a 'theologian of the cross' is to recognise the resistance of the cross to interpretation, and to concede that we will never plumb the full depth of its meaning... Each and every generation... must learn to return to the cross itself.'[9]

Bosch in his major work, *Transforming Mission* looks at the changes within late twentieth century society against the background of previous paradigm shifts in the mission of the church. In his understanding, we should expect contemporary changes to be both evolutionary and revolutionary, as have been previous paradigm shifts in the church's history: 'The thesis of this study is that, in the field of religion, a paradigm shift always means both continuity and change, both faithfulness to the past and boldness to engage the future, both constancy and contingency, both tradition and transformation.'[10]

[5] Helen Cameron et al, *Talking about God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology* (London: SCM 2010) p.12.
[6] https://freshexpressions.org.uk/about/what-is-a-fresh-expression/ accessed 16 March 2020
[7] Simon Sutcliffe, 'Located and Rooted', in Jonny Baker and Cathy Ross (eds) *The Pioneer Gift* (Norwich: Canterbury Press 2014) p.163.
[8] David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis 1991) p.447.
[9] A. McGrath, *The Enigma of the Cross* (London: Hodder and Stoughton 1987) p.79-80.
[10] Bosch, *Transforming,* p.366.

He goes on to describe how during previous paradigm shifts there has been the tendency for two opposite reactions, a clinging to the past or an over-reaction, rejecting roots in the past.[11] The task of contextual theology and missiology therefore is to find a path that holds balance, both respecting and valuing the past while moving towards the future. Within an age characterised by the 'spiritual but not religious' identity, highlighted by Grace Davie, this involves finding a meeting point between the streams that reject Christian tradition with those rooted in the traditions of Christ.[12] He goes on:

> Neither extreme reactionary nor excessively revolutionary approaches, so it seems to me, will help the Christian church and mission to arrive at greater clarity... In the case of each paradigm shift reviewed so far, there remained a creative tension between the new and the old.[13]

While having much to say that is positive about contextualization, and understanding that the mission of the church has always been contextual, he points out that there are pitfalls to navigate in order to maintain faithfulness, both to tradition and culture.[14] This latter theme is taken up by Bevans as he explores the strengths and weaknesses of different models of contextual theology.[15]

One of these models, the 'transcendent', is a good reflection of how pioneers work. It is an approach that is intuitive rather than cognitive, as theology is explored prayerfully, deeply influenced by personal experience. Good practice, as pioneering projects are brought to birth, involves a considerable listening process, listening both to the community and to the Spirit of God, in order to discern what might be appropriate for that community. The national Fresh Expressions team, writing here on their website, consider that: 'Any Fresh Expressions journey begins with listening... This prayerful listening is vital.'[16] It is rooted in Bosch's concept of *Missio Dei*: mission is God's and the church's role is to discern God's purposes and play a part in what God is doing.[17] This process of listening to community and to God means that theology, spirituality and practice are approached intuitively and instinctively.

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[11] Ibid. p.366.
[12] Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945: believing without belonging* (Oxford: Blackwell 1994)
[13] Bosch, *Transforming*, p.366-7.
[14] Ibid. p.425f.
[15] Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology 2nd edition* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis 2002)
[16] https://freshexpressions.org.uk/find-out-more/practicalities-the-fresh-expressions-journey/ accessed 16 March 2020
[17] David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis 1991) p.389.

Bevans writes that within the transcendental approach: 'Theology is conceived as the process of "bringing to speech" who I am or who we are - as a person or persons of faith who are in every possible respect a product of historical, geographical, social and cultural environment.'[18] In my professional practice I have observed pioneers make instinctive leaps in their ministry, needing later to return to examine why that leap made theological sense. Bosch considers this as the theological method of biblical writers, who were not scholars starting from text, but began with missionary encounter and from there were forced to theologise.[19] In order to ensure its integrity within Christian orthodoxy, this intuitive approach needs to be rigorously explored in dialogue with scripture, tradition and the academy, as well as context. This process is at the core of this study.

The contention of this research is that pioneering results in a uniquely earthed approach as word and action are combined in new creative ways. There is an instinctive contextualisation of practice and language which offers potential for both traditional and pioneering ministry in the emerging context. This is worthy of exploration and wider dissemination.

3. Contemporary UK spiritual themes

This section of the literature review explores contemporary spiritual trends as the backdrop for effective mission. Post-Christendom dynamics are present, within a spiritual, cultural and socio-economic landscape which is a complex, with intersecting streams and counter-streams, elusive and not easily classified.[20]

Believing without belonging

A significant strand is the 'believing without belonging' dynamic, identified by Grace Davie.[21] The theme, used as a subtitle for her 1994 work, raises questions about why belonging isn't valued: 'Why is it, for example, that the majority of British people - in common with many other Europeans - persist in believing (if only in an ordinary God), but see no need to participate with even minimal regularity in their religious institutions?'[22]

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[18] Bevans, *Contextual Theology,* p.104.
[19] Bosch, *Transforming,* p.16.
[20] Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster 2004); Mike Storry and Peter Childs (eds) *British Cultural Identities 2nd edition* (London: Routledge 2002)
[21] Davie, *Since 1945* and Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain: a persistent paradox* (Oxford: Blackwell 2015)
[22] Davie, *Since 1945,* p.2.

Subsequent research has explored this question further, as well as examining the nature of belief that chooses not to belong. Woodhead clearly agrees with Davie's assessment of the abundance of belief outside institutional religious settings: 'But the evidence gathered here also shows that religion never really went away, so that talk of its 're-emergence' or 'return', or of 'post-secularity' is misleading.'[23] She believes secularisation and post-secularisation theory to be founded on false premises, measuring religion only by churchgoing and institutional allegiance.[24] Her insight has roots in her and Heelas' 2000-2003 field study in Kendal, comparing traditional churchgoing, in decline, with the rise of the 'holistic milieu.'[25]

Goodhew critiques secularisation theory from a different angle, reminding us that while there is decline in church attendance in traditional denominations and the ethnically white British population, this is balanced by growth elsewhere.[26] So, while there is no doubt that atheism and secularisation have risen, belief has not diminished to the extent that it might seem if we base our understanding purely on attendance at religious services, especially when focussing on traditional denominations.

That said, belief itself has changed and is not uniform: we cannot assume that all those believing without belonging subscribe to orthodox Christian beliefs, or that they are a uniform group. David Voas describes these as those with 'fuzzy fidelity',[27] noting that only a fraction of the population adhere to basic church doctrine but a significant proportion believe 'the existence of a higher power.'[28]

Voas sees two broad streams within this 'fuzzy fidelity'. The first and largest he refers to as popular heterodoxy, combining: 'elements of astrology, reincarnation, divination, magic, folk religion, and conventional Christianity.'[29] The smaller stream is those who are conscious 'spiritual seekers'. Less than two percent are involved in the 'holistic mileu' and of these, half don't identify it as spirituality or spiritual seeking, rather as tools for psychological wellbeing.[30]

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[23] Linda Woodhead, 'Introduction', in Woodhead and Catto (eds) *Religion and Change in Modern Britain* (Abingdon: Routledge 2012) p.7.
[24] Woodhead, 'Introduction', p.24.
[25] Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution* (Oxford: Blackwell 2005)
[26] David Goodhew, 'Church Growth in Britain: A Response to Steve Bruce' *Journal of Religion in Europe* 6 (2013) p.297-315.
[27] David Voas, 'The Rise and Fall of Fuzzy Fidelity in Europe', *European Sociological Review* 25(2) 2009 p.155-168.
[28] Voas, 'Fuzzy', p.161.
[29] Ibid. p.162.
[30] Ibid. p.162.

Voas' estimate is that 'fuzzies' comprise fifty percent of the British population. This figure is confirmed by other studies. For example, Vincett and Woodhead estimate 2-5% as highly committed participants in religious practice; 10-20% spiritual but not religious; and 20-40% believing in some kind of life-force or God.[31]

Storm, working with the 50% identified by Voas in the broad 'fuzzy fidelity' category has found four general streams.[32] She finds 31% of the 'fuzzies' to be 'moderates', with a strong sense of belonging to a religious community and relatively high levels of belief and practice, but not high enough to qualify as highly religious. Another 22% she defines as 'passively religious'. These speak about themselves as spiritual but not religious, having some kind of belief in the Divine but little or no formal practice. She defines 'believing without belonging' rather more narrowly than Davie so has a smaller proportion in this group: 22%.[33] The final 25% belong without believing, holding to a nominal belief which is valued most strongly at rites of passage.[34]

Chapman, Naguih and Woodhead chart significant elements that have changed in the popular understanding of God in the post-war years under the heading 'God-change': 'Belief in paranormal experience, answer to prayer and an afterlife have remained fairly steady in the post-war period... Nevertheless, surveys suggest that there has been a change in the *kind* of God most people believe in.'[35]

In wider streams of belief outside the church, the starting point is the decline in belief in the personal Christian God, alongside an increase in belief in 'God-within' or 'Spirit' or 'life-force'.[36] Within churched Christianity belief has moved away from a stern, distant judge or monarch to belief in a loving personal God, especially in evangelical faith, and towards a different kind of love expressed in responsibility towards society, in more liberal strands of faith.[37]

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[31] Giselle Vincett and Linda Woodhead, 'Spirituality', in Woodhead, Kawanami and Partridge (eds) *Religions in the Modern World: Traditions and Transformations* (New York NY: Routledge 2009) pp.319-338.
[32] Ingrid Storm, 'Halfway to Heaven: Four Types of Fuzzy Fidelity in Europe' *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* Vol.48:4 (2009) p.702.
[33] Storm, 'Halfway', p.708.
[34] Ibid. p.708.
[35] Mark Chapman, Sharuq Naguih and Linda Woodhead, 'God-change', in Woodhead and Catto (eds) *Religion and Change in Modern Britain* (Abingdon: Routledge 2012) p.173-4.
[36] Chapman, Naguih and Woodhead, 'God-change', p.179.
[37] Ibid. p.179.

Eco-spirituality

Overlapping as a group with the 'fuzzies' are those for whom an environmental concern has given rise to a spirituality rooted in appreciation of nature, with or without associated deism. Louv is one who references this move: 'Just as many places of worship are going green, environmental organisations are increasingly likely to evoke the spiritual.'[38] Eco-spirituality contains a wide breadth, from the atheist through to the explicitly Christian.

In the background are theories of the interconnectedness of all life, notably Gaia. The Gaia hypothesis, formulated by the scientist James Lovelock, promotes the idea that all life on earth is interconnected as part of a living planet, with the connection going deeper than relationships between separate external organisms.[39] This controversial but influential hypothesis is complemented by writings from both Christian and alternative spiritual streams. Rosemary Radford Ruether's *GAIA and God* explicitly explores Christian theology in dialogue with the GAIA hypothesis;[40] Ilia Delio explores the theme of interconnectedness under the term 'catholicity' without directly referencing GAIA;[41] and an example from the 'holistic milieu' is Seed, Macy, Fleming and Naess' *Thinking Like a Mountain*, with its invocation: '*We ask for the presence of the spirit of Gaia*, and pray that the breath of life continues to caress this planet home.'[42]

Ghee explores eco-spirituality as an atheist. He considers the imperative within humanism to moral development, speaking of the gap so often felt between moral ideal and the reality of life as it is actually lived. There needs to be a choice to live differently for the sake of what is endangered: '*metanoia* takes the form of a commitment to the processes of self-overcoming or inner *jihad* – commitment, in other words, to the disciplines of a spiritual life.'[43] As he continues, he explores the experience of 'wonder' as an experience that can underpin this change: 'Thus we might have a sense of wonder at the immensity of the starry heavens or at the loveliness of a meadow in early May, or at the charm of a young child. And the point about the wonder is that it is an experience associated with rejoicing and care.'[44]

[38] Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: Algonquin 2005) p.295.
[39] James Lovelock, *What is Gaia?* http://ecolo.org/lovelock/what_is_Gaia.html accessed 19 June 2015.
[40] Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God* (New York: HarperCollins 1992)
[41] Ilia Delio, *Making All Things New: Catholicity, cosmology, consciousness* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis 2015)
[42] Seed, J. 'Invocation' in Seed, Macy, Fleming, Naess (eds) *Thinking like a Mountain: towards a Council of all beings.* (Gabriola Island BC: New Society Publishers 1988)
[43] Michael McGhee, 'Spirituality for the Godless', *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement*, Vol.68 (2011) p.230.
[44] McGhee, 'Godless', p.240.

This sense of spirituality associated with wonder, care and commitment to a positive future is found within the writings of both George Monbiot and Roger Deakin. Throughout Monbiot's work is a recurring theme of the relationship between humanity and the natural world, a return to a more wholesome relationship, reversing some of the effects of human destructiveness in order to find new balance, and the sense of wonder described by McGhee.

Monbiot advocates a 'rewilding', reintroduction of species in order to restore balance. There is something of a 'return to Eden' flavour in his thinking, though not made explicit: 'I see rewilding as an enhanced opportunity for people to engage with and delight in the natural world.'[45] This comes against the background of the selective memory loss termed 'Shifting Baseline Syndrome' a term that Monbiot borrows from the fisheries scientist Daniel Pauly.[46] The baseline we use to measure how the natural world should be, for most of us goes back to our childhood. We are aware of loss of diversity and change in environment over a few decades but fail to notice how much is lost when considering time periods beyond living memory.

Monbiot also speaks of hope. Environmentalism needs to step back from the negative prophecies and remind us of the value in what we seek to protect: 'I hope to encourage a positive environmentalism... We know what we are against; now we must explain what we are for.'[47]

Roger Deakin's writing is an example of the growing body of popular writing with an eco-spiritual approach. Wonder and connectedness to the natural world are explored in narrative style as he describes his relationship with the trees of the British Isles: 'To enter a wood is to pass into a different world in which we ourselves are transformed… It is where you travel to find yourself.'[48] Writing on sacred groves in Devon, Deakin draws together Churches, Green Men, Henges and trees, with a sense of awe and poetry as the connecting strand: 'The Green Man is clearly uttering something... Since he is life itself, the thing he utters, or 'outers', is the living green of the woods in spring.[49]

[45] George Monbiot, *Feral: Rewilding the land, sea and human life* (London: Penguin 2014) p.11.
[46] Monbiot, *Feral,* p.69.
[47] Ibid. p.12.
[48] Roger Deakin, *Wildwood: a journey through trees* (London: Penguin 2007) p.x.
[49] Deakin, *Wildwood,* p.114.

Nature deficit disorder is another important strand to note. The phrase was coined by Richard Louv as he writes on the value of the natural world for our emotional and spiritual health.[50] Louv explores scientific studies about children's engagement with nature before concluding that contemporary disconnect from nature has an adverse effect on health: 'But based on accumulating scientific evidence, I believe the concept - or hypothesis - of nature-deficit disorder is appropriate and useful as a layperson's description of one factor that may aggravate attentional difficulties for many children.'[51]

His hypothesis has been widely picked up and is associated with the rapid growth of contemporary movements to get children outdoors, such as Forest Schools and the National Trust's '50 things' campaign.[52] Monbiot refers to it in his writing: 'Of all the world's creatures, perhaps those in the greatest need of rewilding are our children. The collapse of children's engagement with nature has been even faster than the collapse of the natural world.'[53]

Eco-spirituality overlaps with churched Christianity as well as with the 'fuzzies'. Wendel Berry and John Muir are others among those with explicitly Christian eco-spirituality, although in both cases an ambivalence in their relationship with the institutional church.

John Muir is hailed as the 'Father of our National Parks System' in the US.[54] His writings have a decidedly spiritual quality, full of biblical quotes and echoes of his Christian heritage. Living from 1838-1914, he was several steps ahead of his own society, with thoughts and meditations very pertinent to our own time. It was in nature rather than in church that he found spiritual connection and communion with God:

> I have not been in church a single time since leaving home. Yet this glorious valley might well be called a church, for every lover of the great Creator who comes within the broad overwhelming influences of the place fails not to worship as they never did before.[55]

Wendel Berry, a contemporary writer shares much of the same ethic and insight. He finds himself frustrated by the lack of interest in ecological issues from the churches, while at the

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[50] Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: Algonquin 2005)
[51] Louv, *Last Child*, p.99.
[52] https://www.forestschools.com/ and https://www.50things.org.uk/ accessed 19 June 2015.
[53] Monbiot, *Feral,* p.167.
[54] http://www.johnmuir.co.uk/johnmuir/ accessed 22 May 2015.
[55] Highland, *Muir,* p.119.

same time finding for himself a Christian spirituality deeply rooted in the natural world. He expresses his frustration: 'for the fact simply is that the churches, which claim to honor God as the "maker of heaven and earth" have lately shown little inclination to honor the earth or to protect it from those who would dishonor it.'[56] For this reason, despite his Christian faith he feels estranged from the mainstream church.[57]

This divorce between Christian environmentalists and Churches who seem little interested in the things of the earth is a part of the background to our discussion, and to the exodus of people from churches who seem not to speak of the issues they care about.

Wicca, Neo-Pagans and 'Mind/Body/Spirit'

Some strands of eco-spirituality formed into more explicit spiritual expressions, such as Wicca and Neo-Paganism. Chapman, Naguih and Woodhead reflect on how, despite the inhospitality of the immediate post-war period to alternative spiritual streams, foundations were being laid by Gerald Gardner and others in the reconstruction of Wicca for the neo-Pagan revival.[58] Key characteristics include the divine feminine, the sacralisation of the natural world and a variety of understandings of polytheism.[59]

From the late 1960's onwards, three main strands of alternative spirituality began to develop: the mystical ineffable 'one'; the divine feminine and the divine in nature. Between them these appealed to: 'a wide range of the majority British population, particularly those who felt no reverence for the God of either evangelical or mainstream Christianity.'[60]

These spiritual streams were complemented by the developing Mind-Body-Spirit movement. The focus on how to improve your life and your relationships, and to manage your emotions, appealed more to those with less leisure for pursuing a quest for meaning, and with more focus on the practical issues of life.[61] Harvey and Vincett see a similar broad division when they write of two broad trends, the therapeutic and the move towards re-enchantment.[62]

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[56] Wendell Berry, *What are People For?* (Berkeley CA: Counterpoint 1990, 2010) p.95.

[57] Berry, *People,* p.101.

[58] Chapman, Naguih and Woodhead, 'God-change', p.180.

[59] Ibid. p.180.

[60] Ibid. p.182.

[61] Ibid. p.183.

[62] Graham Harvey and Giselle Vincett, 'Alternative spiritualities: marginal and mainstream', in Woodhead and Cato (eds) *Religion and Change in Modern Britain* (Abingdon: Routledge 2012) p.160.

Glendinning and Bruce's survey in Scotland based on 2001 Scottish Social Attitudes Survey made a division between practices associated with divination and those relating to wellbeing, with the former more important among those with little educational qualifications, and the latter to those with higher qualifications.[63] In the total population, 30% had tried fortune telling, tarot or astrology, other than magazine or newspaper astrology; 44% had tried alternative/complementary medicine, herbal remedies, homeopathy, aromatherapy; and 22% had tried yoga or meditation.[64]

Within this overall mix, Mindfulness is a particularly popular expression of the therapeutic, drawing on Eastern wisdom but expressed in the West as a practice to combat anxiety.[65] Yoga also has eastern origins, expressed variously in the West, sometimes simply as a physical practice and sometimes with a more explicit spiritual core.[66] Healing is significant, with Asian healing systems such as Reiki noteworthy.[67] Other practices include card reading and tarot; crystals; fortune telling; and a whole variety of esoteric expressions.[68]

These spiritual streams have a wider influence in society than just adherents. Harvey and Vincett write that while practitioners are a minority, their ideas, practices and products are more significant: 'There are alternative ways of being religious or spiritual that are increasingly familiar.'[69] This resonates with Voas' distinction between the larger group of 'popular heterodoxy' and the smaller stream of 'spiritual seekers'[70] An example is the Druidic ritual used in the Paralympic closing ceremony.[71] At a moment of national pride, broadcast globally, a choice was made to reflect our current reality in the use of words from an alternative spiritual stream.

Harvey and Vincett reflect on the ethics of alternative spiritualities: 'its members may also more consciously attempt to influence policy by involvement in various 'progressive' causes such as feminism, environmentalism, the peace movement or social justice campaigns.'[72]

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[63] Tony Glendinning and Steve Bruce 'New ways of believing or belonging: is religion giving way to spirituality?' *British Journal of Sociology* Vol.57:3 (2006) p.404.
[64] Glendinning and Bruce, 'New Ways', p.404.
[65] https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/mindfulness accessed 22 May 2020.
[66] Harvey and Vincett, 'Alternative', p.166.
[67] Harvey and Vincett, 'Alternative', p.166.
[68] Chapman, Naguih and Woodhead, 'God-change', p.183.
[69] Harvey and Vincett, 'Alternative', p.168.
[70] Voas, 'Fuzzy', p.162.
[71] Jason Pitzl-Waters, *Paralympics,* http://www.patheos.com/blogs/wildhunt/2012/09/druid-liturgy-in-paralympics-closing-ceremony.html accessed 8 May 2015.
[72] Harvey and Vincett, 'Alternative', p.159.

Adrian Harris argues that in putting us back in touch with our bodies, Paganism reconnects us to the earth and transforms our ethics. He considers that the theology and practice of Paganism: 'not only holds a solution to our environmental crisis, but can bring about a revolution in the way our culture makes sense of reality.'[73]

The intersection between these spiritual streams and wider culture is complex, often with lack of clarity concerning whether it is the spirituality or the wider culture that is taking the lead. The concerns of these streams however undoubtedly reflect profound changes in society over the last sixty-five years:

> Secularization and resacralization… individualization versus the communal, changing gender relations, challenges to ideas about the body and science, and the various movements which have motivated different generations (Peace/anti-war, environmentalism, anti-capitalism).[74]

There is openness from within these streams to dialogue with Christianity when it is speaking of shared concerns. Liz Williams describes the five areas she sees as intersection and agreement between the faith streams. She lists these as the shared sacred spaces within the British Isles; a belief in the principle of deity; a social conscience; a concern for the environment; and a seasonal pattern of worship.[75] Philip Carr-Gomm, former leader of the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids reminds us of the Christian roots of Druidry.[76] He goes on to explore the shared spirituality between Christian nature spirituality and Druidry.

For many practitioners, prophetic presence within society is key to the attractiveness of alternative spiritual streams. Harvey and Vincett write: 'At the same time, the perception of alterity is what makes alternative spiritualities attractive to some people, and these religions retrain strong tendencies to speak from the margins and empower more marginalized identities and causes.'[77] However this results in a tension between the hope of holding an increasingly mainstream position within society and the desire to remain at the ethical and

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[73] Adrian Harris, 'Sacred Ecology', in Graham Harvey and Charlotte Hardman *Pagan Pathways: a guide to the Ancient Earth Traditions* (London: Thorsons 1996) p.149.

[74] Harvey and Vincett, 'Alternative', p.161.

[75] Liz Williams, 'Building on ancient roots: Paganism and Christian paths', in Denise Cush (ed) *Celebrating Planet Earth: a Pagan/Christian conversation* (Alfreston: Moon Books 2015) p.63-65.

[76] Philip Carr-Gomm, 'Druidry and Christianity', in Denise Cush (ed) *Celebrating Planet Earth: a Pagan/Christian conversation* (Alfreston: Moon Books 2015)

[77] Harvey and Vincett, 'Alternative', p.169.

societal cutting edge. The wider influence is balanced by a need to refrain from becoming so integrated into the mainstream that the unique voice can no longer be heard.

Christian prophetic streams

Christianity also lives with the tension between the prophetic margin and the mainstream. Prophetic here is being used in the sense Brueggemann outlines in *The Prophetic Imagination*: rather than future telling, a prophet shares God's vision for the renewing of society.[78] Cole Moreton, in exploring the spirituality of our nation, notes the strength of the prophetic voice within the Christian faith, though at the same time the struggle for that voice to be heard within a faith that has become central and mainstream within our society.

> There has always been a strong tradition of dissident faith in England, proposing a God whose bounty is for all the people, not just the people in power. That is very important to our story, but it has usually been pushed to the fringes of society and not allowed near 'the English God'.[79]

This dissident faith in England, the prophetic stream, is the area where there is significant potential for exploring contextual theology in dialogue with alternate spiritual streams. The themes, passions and priorities are broadly similar across the spiritual streams, there is potential for a language in common and a Christian voice in the conversation.

Moreton's explorations of the spiritual landscape lead him to conclude that it is not so much that people no longer have an interest in spirituality, more that there is no longer a match between the God of the Church and the emerging God of the people. Here he describes the latter:

> He looks both male and female now... he doesn't care whether you are straight or gay, married or cohabiting because there are much bigger things to worry about, like the sins or mistakes that are causing the seas to warm, the ice caps to melt and the crops to burn.[80]

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[78] Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis MN: Fortress 1978, 2001)
[79] Cole Morton, *Is God still an Englishman?* (London: Little Brown 2010) p.23.
[80] Moreton, *Englishman,* p.345.

The lack of the prophetic within the church is one of the reasons that activists have felt the need to find a different spiritual home: 'For many activists, the pagan idea of an ancient and universal spirit that animates the earth gives their actions a personal, spiritual framework.'[81] This is against the background of the tendency of the mainstream church to sacralize the status quo rather than following a prophetic calling.[82]

The biblical scholar, Tom Wright, reflects that it suits vested interests for churches to retain poor theology and remain unworldly: 'They will tell the church, again and again, to get back to its proper business of 'saving souls'.'[83] He is clear in advocating for a different approach: 'to be truly effective in this kind of mission, one must be genuinely and cheerfully rooted in God's renewal of space, time and matter within the life of the church.'[84] The renewal of all creation is both the goal in Christ and the achievement through resurrection.[85]

Leonardo Boff, a Brazilian liberation theologian, argues similarly that if churches keep their distance from societal concern and remain preoccupied with internal order: 'they run the risk of traducing the nature of religious experience, which is always orientated to solidarity and justice, and of losing credibility as well as the respect they have always enjoyed in history.'[86] The challenge to churches is to resist the pressure from the status quo and re-engage with the drama that God is working out in the world.

Spiritual themes: conclusions

Overall we find a broad section of society who at least in a 'fuzzy' way, have some connection with a spiritual language. Eco-spirituality is significant, taking a variety of forms including Pagan; broadly deist; and atheist, as well as finding expression within Christianity and other established faiths. Also significant is the Mind/Body/Spirit movement with its focus on self-help and healing.

These spiritual streams have a wider influence on culture, and are influential on people's worldview, therefore needing to be taken seriously by any Christian seeking to communicate Christian faith. While it might be only a minority who are spiritual seekers or subscribing to

[81] Moreton, *Englishman,* p.338.
[82] Bosch, *Transforming,* p.429.
[83] *Tom Wright Surprised by Hope (London: SPCK 2007)* p.281.
[84] Ibid p.282
[85] Ibid p.282.
[86] Boff, *Ecology and Liberation,* p.69.

alternative spiritual paths, the influence is such that the language that speaks to the minority will also have resonance in the wider sphere of influence.

There is a significant divergence between the beliefs outside the church and Christian orthodoxy. Within Bosch's understanding, spirituality outside the church represents the stream within the paradigm shift that is rejecting the past, contrasting with those clinging unhealthily to the past.[87] The latter is found in rigidly traditional expressions of church and theology. The task of this work is to explore the balanced path in between.

While there is much work within the sociology of religion in describing our new way of believing there is very little in the academy that explores how Christianity speaks of God within this new faith-world. The review seems to be indicating a gap in the literature, with a need for exploration of language which expresses Christian faith authentically within this stream and the broader context that surrounds it.

4. Earthed spirituality

So far, in mapping out the landscape within which this research project sits, the focus has been on contextualisation of mission and theology, as the core methodology of pioneer ministry; and on some broad themes within the literature on UK spirituality. This next section examines what is meant by the term 'earthed spirituality' chosen for this project as the lens through which to examine contextualisation against the background of these themes.

The term 'earthed' is used for its potential to express both everyday life and environmental concerns. It draws on the phrase 'down-to-earth' alongside the 'earth' of environmentalism, thus including the realities of daily life alongside creation care. A holistic understanding of mission necessitates inclusion of an environmental understanding; the term 'earthed spirituality' is intended to include people as well as nature and to reflect a spirituality that is grounded in the everyday matters of life, both human and non-human. This holistic understanding underpins 'the five marks of mission' which are in wide usage in several historic denominations including my own Anglican tradition and hold together Christian lifestyle, environmental concern with growing discipleship and our speech and language about God.[88]

[87] Bosch, *Transforming*, p.366.

[88] http://www.anglicancommunion.org/identity/marks-of-mission.aspx and http://www.archbishopofyork.org/pages/five-marks-of-mission.html and http://www.methodist.org.uk/who-we-are/relationships-with-other-denominations/ecumenism-in-britain-and-ireland/england/resources/ecumenical-basics/guidance-notes/the-five-marks-of-mission accessed 22 May 2015.

Richard Rohr is among those who consider that this understanding of spirituality is core to a Christian understanding. 'God offers us quiet, contemplative eyes, but God also calls us to prophetic and critical involvement in the pain and sufferings of our world - both at the same time. This is so obvious in the life and ministry of Jesus that I wonder why it has not been taught as an essential part of Christianity.'[89] Ian Adams writes similarly about spiritual practices, which he considers to embrace the whole of life: 'They are about a daily choice to move in the directions that are good for us, good for the people around us, and good for the earth.'[90]

This way of understanding spirituality as active, connected and down-to-earth, has been a thread running through Christian history. However it has tended to be a voice on the margins while the mainstream takes a less radical approach. Rohr writes: 'For much of its history following AD313, the church's job or concern was not healing, but rather maintaining the social and church order.'[91] There is however another way which is truer to Jesus' intent: 'To begin with a mystical moment and to end in what looks like politics is the norm, as far as I can see. This is the great dance that we work towards in Christian spirituality.'[92]

Rohr is among a cohort of theologians and practitioners who reject the institutional approach in order to recover the heart of Jesus' mission. This cohort is significantly influenced by liberation theologians, leaders in this approach. Anna Ruddick cites liberation theology as foundational for the understanding of mission developed by the Eden network, a network of small missional communities living in various locations in the UK: 'Arguably the most significant influence has come from liberation theology. I suggest that movements such as Eden are part of a worldwide legacy of liberation theologians who put God's concern for the poor front and centre.'[93] This from Eden teams is representative of a direction of movement taken by Christians passionate about mission who in their work with the poor have found liberation theology to be an inspiration and a guide.

[89] Richard Rohr, *Dancing Standing Still* (Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press 2014) p.7.
[90] Ian Adams, *Running over Rocks* (Norwich: Canterbury Press 2013) p.xvii.
[91] Rohr, *Dancing,* p.53.
[92] Rohr, *Dancing,* p.11
[93] Anna Ruddick, 'Transformation: A 'How To' Guide', in Jonny Baker and Cathy Ross (eds) *The Pioneer Gift* (Norwich: Canterbury Press 2014) p.60.

Liberation theology

Since the work of liberation theologians is so frequently cited as an influence within this growing stream of thought, it is important to examine their thinking on spirituality.

Liberation theology is a significant theological stream born out of reflection on poverty in South America. Spirituality and theology are held closely together for liberation theologians. Thinking about faith should be integrally linked with lived experience of Christian discipleship, in both practical and contemplative expression. Gutierrez writes that 'efforts to understand faith, which we call theologies, are closely linked to questions which come from life and from the challenges which the Christian community faces in bearing witness to the reign of God.'[94]

He discusses the primacy of prayer and of commitment to participation within history as living out that which Matthew's gospel names as 'doing the Father's will'. Within this understanding: '"Spirituality" is the word we use today to designate what is known in the Gospels as "following Jesus." This is what forms the backbone of faith discourse. This is what gives theology its deepest meaning and its breadth.'[95]

Thus spirituality, lived experience and the reflection on experience in God that we call theology are intertwined and inseparable. In response to those who consider spirituality as a withdrawal from present world commitment, he both restates his understanding of the depth of integration between prayerfulness and active commitment, and underlines the necessity of spirituality to enable an activist to continue steadfastly on the path they have chosen. For Gutierrez, spirituality is not about withdrawal, but rather radical engagement at the place where love for God and neighbour meet: 'Spirituality is located at this depth. Far from being an evasion of the challenges of the present, it provides steadfastness and durability to the commitments to which I just alluded.'[96]

Sobrino also underlines the need of a spirituality for those who are working for liberation. 'The poor and impoverished of this world bring the human being face to face either with hope, or with despair, resignation or cynicism.'[97] Without a spirituality, it is all too easy for despair,

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[94] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Situation and Tasks of Liberation Theology Today,* transl. James B Nickoloff, in Joerg Rieger (ed) *Opting for the Margins: Postmodernity and Liberation in Christian Theology* (Oxford: OUP 2003) p.89.
[95] Gutierrez, *Tasks,* p.101.
[96] Gutierrez, *Tasks,* p.102.
[97] Jon Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation: towards political holiness,* transl. Robert R. Barr, (Maryknoll NY: Orbis 1988) p.33.

resignation or cynicism to prevail over hope. Spirituality keeps us focussed on and open to hope, no matter what realities may face us. He writes of the spiritual discipline of keeping an openness to a utopia. This is not easy because utopia brings judgement to current realities: 'It is not easy to consistently choose one's position in the concrete reality of history *in the light of utopia*, that that utopia may judge us and animate us. And this is something we must do consciously, with great disinterestedness, and great hope.'[98]

Sobrino roots his understanding of earthed spirituality within biblical revelation which is itself a story of a people throughout their history in God. Because this is our starting point, then all spirituality must be founded on the realities of life. He writes: 'Accordingly, honesty with and fidelity towards the real are not only prerequisites for a spirituality, they are the very foundations of that spirituality, and this is what is most basic about spirituality.[99] This enables us to keep on hearing God in history, and to respond appropriately in our Christian discipleship.

All-creation

Leonardo Boff is a liberation theologian who while sharing the commitments expressed above, also widens the conversation to include non-human creation. It is not just the wellbeing of rich and poor that are interconnected but also that of humanity and wider creation: he reminds us to hold together a concern for the poor with environmental concerns rather than regarding them as separate issues. Considering the current ecological crisis, and the plight of the poor he encourages us to address the issues holistically. 'The ecological question leads to a new level of global awareness: the importance of the earth as a whole, the common good of nature and humankind, the interdependence of all, and the apocalyptic dangers that threaten the creation.'[100]

Boff writes with a strong critique of Western environmentalism that tends to stand apart from human issues within society. If humankind are ourselves a part of the wider ecology that includes all of creation, then it is impossible to separate out issues of ecology from those of human society. In particular it is not acceptable for Western nations to push solutions to the environmental crisis onto poorer nations, while not setting limits to their own desires: 'The

[98] Sobrino, *Spirituality,* p.28-9.
[99] Sobrino, *Spirituality,* p.21.
[100] Leonardo Boff, *Ecology and Liberation* transl. John Cumming (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis 1995) p.15.

rich waste resources that the poor are without today and that generations of humans will be without tomorrow.'[101]

Boff's work therefore encourages us to keep conversations about the environment and poverty together rather than treating them as separate issues. This study is attempting to do just this, in considering the wider prophetic stream within society as well as the narrower one of environmentalism, rather than taking the easier path of focussing purely on a dialogue between Christianity and eco-spirituality. It is this holistic approach that makes 'earthed spirituality' such a suitable term. It allows us to describe a spirituality that is 'down-to-earth', rooted in the realities of life in the dynamic described by liberation theologians, and which is also connected with the earth in the sense of non-human creation.

Western context

The following discussion returns to western theologians and practitioners who have been influenced and inspired by liberation theology. Themes include transformation and reconciliation, and a movement away from a paternalistic understanding of Christian help for those in difficulty towards a mutual sharing as those with different lived experiences live out our liberation together, within the context of reconciliation.

Ruddick, quoted earlier, writes on the increasing importance of transformation as a theme within Eden's understanding of Christian mission. The focus for them has shifted from personal salvation, with language of personal and community transformation coming increasingly to the fore and currently expressed in the network's strapline 'Transforming communities from the inside out'.[102]

The theme of reconciliation is worked out in an understanding that we should 'be with' others in our community rather than 'do for'.[103] The latter understanding can quickly slip into unequal relationships, with true Christian reconciliation demanding an understanding that there are mutual gifts to be received in both directions.[104] Ruddick writes that this is 'expressed in the language of Eden teams as to/for/with, meaning that the teams learn to

[101] Boff, *Ecology and Liberation,* p.21.
[102] Ruddick, *Transformation,* p.59.
[103] Sam Wells, *A Nazareth Manifesto* (Chichester: Wiley 2015) p.86.
[104] Wells, *Nazareth,* p.96.

avoid doing things *to* people, even to avoid the temptation of doing things *for* people, but to do things *with* people in their communities.'[105]

Sam Wells links our salvation with that of others, with reconciliation being core to the working out of our salvation in our Christian discipleship. As we go out in mission, we both transform others, in the gifts we have to share, but also are transformed ourselves as our salvation reaches us at increasingly deeper levels: 'Go, and continue to see the face of Jesus in the despised and rejected of the world. You are not their benefactor. You are not the answer to their prayer. They are the answer to yours.'[106] Richard Rohr says similar: 'We do not go to the edge just to help others, but only after the fact do we realize that it was really to let them help us in ways we never knew we needed.'[107]

This equality where both sides of the relationship have a need takes us from servanthood to reconciliation, where there is healing for all involved as rich and poor, male and female, humanity and the natural world meet one another: 'The ones we think we are saving end up saving us and, in the process, redefine the very meaning of salvation.'[108]

What we are finding here is the dynamic that occurs when liberation theology, with its 'option for the poor', is explored by western writers living in a place of privilege. Liberation theologians write of the liberation of the rich being intertwined with the liberation of the poor. Western writers are here reflecting on how the 'option for the poor' enables both rich and poor to find liberation.

Earthed spirituality: conclusions

In conclusion, the 'earthed spirituality' that is being explored in this study is a spirituality rooted in everyday realities and the struggle for liberation and reconciliation. It is in many ways an equivalent for the phrase 'concrete spirituality' that recurs, at least in translation, in the writing of liberation theologians. However, 'earthed spirituality' is preferred in this study since it is linked to nature rather than linked to human activity. Given the frequently destructive nature of human interaction with the world, it seems more appropriate to use a phrase that expresses the hope that spirituality will be a part of healing rather than of

[105] Ruddick, *Transformation*, p.60.
[106] Wells, *Nazareth,* p.96.
[107] Richard Rohr, *Dancing Standing Still* (Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press 2014) p.52.
[108] Rohr, *Dancing,* p.52.

destruction. It also ensures that concern for reconciliation with the non-human created order is kept within the same conversation as reconciliation within humanity.

If the arguments of liberation theologians are accepted, then it is in fact appropriate for all Christian spirituality to be understood in these terms. However, given the ambiguous nature of the term and the way that it is sometimes used in an ethereal and other-worldly sense, the term 'earthed spirituality' is being used to bring clarity to how spirituality is being understood in this research.

5. Theological threads

To communicate well within this new reality, clarity is needed about what it is within the Christian tradition that engages with the concerns of the wider population. Perspectives within theology are being sought here that resonate with contemporary questions. The majority of the theological work will be in dialogue with the fieldwork, later in this project: this section outlines some provisional possibilities.

Eschatology is key given its significance in determining the missional priorities for Christians. Also significant are questions around community, redemption and immanence. Liberation and feminist theologies will have particular prominence as the discussion unfolds as themes of embodiment and physicality within feminism connect with the discussion, as do the prophetic and practical concerns of liberation theologians and insights from pioneer theologian-practitioners.

Eschatology

Eschatology is critical to this research question. If the world is considered as a fleeting thing which will be replaced in the last times, many of these questions become insignificant. 'Earthed spirituality' is rooted in a different eschatological perspective. Moltmann is clear that rather than concerning questions of the last times, eschatology is about the present moment, Christian hope for contemporary concerns: 'From first to last, and not merely in the epilogue, Christianity is eschatology, is hope, forward looking and forward moving, and therefore also revolutionizing and transforming the present.'[109] This means that: 'the eschatological outlook is characteristic of all Christian proclamation, of every Christian existence and of the whole

[109] Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope,* transl. James Leitch (London: SCM 1967) p.16.

Church.'[110] Hope offered through Christian eschatology runs through all of Christian life and action.

The Church should always unsettle human society as the values that we hope for in God are promoted: 'It makes the Church the source of continual new impulses towards the realization of righteousness, freedom and humanity here in the light of the promised future that is to come.'[111] This applies to all-creation, not just humanity. Boff writes: 'Redemption implies not a replacement but a recovery... Otherwise we could not speak of redemption but only of substitution, of the creation of another nature. Redemption as it were picks up creation, resets the hands, and staunches the bleeding wounds.'[112]

Wright considers the gap between the understanding of hope within the theology of the academy and that of the mainstream church: 'I find that to many - not least to Christians - all this comes as a surprise: both that the Christian hope is surprisingly different from what they had assumed, and that this same hope offers a coherent and energizing basis for work in today's world.'[113] He explores the assumption within our churches that heaven is primarily a place away from the created order to which we go when we die. In exploring the biblical basis of his theology, he notes how easily we misread the bible, with the influence of Platonic thought on Christianity over the centuries distorting our understanding.[114] Most importantly for the sake of this study, he explores the interaction between theology and practice, pointing out the influence that poor theology has on the mission of the church.

> It is telling that English evangelicals gave up believing in the urgent imperative to improve society (such as we find with Wilberforce in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) about the same time that they gave up believing robustly in resurrection and settled for a disembodied heaven instead.[115]

A related consideration is whether we can widen our horizons to include the whole created order. Moltmann is among those authors who, drawing on the New Testament and patristic theologies, conclude that the binding of God to the created order in the incarnation was not

[110] Moltmann, *Hope,* p.16.
[111] Moltmann, *Hope,* p.22.
[112] Boff, *Ecology and Liberation,* p.47.
[113] Tom Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (London: SPCK 2007) p.6.
[114] Wright, *Hope, p.264.*
[115] Wright, *Hope,* p.38.

limited to humanity but concerned all of creation. Modern Christologies, as Moltmann expresses it: 'have confined themselves to the anthropological significance of God's becoming human, and have neglected its meaning for the interpretation of the cosmos.'[116] He continues to explore:

> In the movement of God, his becoming human and his self-surrender on the cross, heaven too opens itself for the earth, and earth for heaven. Heaven and earth are clasped and gathered into a whole, and in the all-embracing peace of Christ arrive at their open communication with one another.[117]

Critically, this understanding has been lost in the modern era with the salvation of creation lost alongside other earthed perspectives as 'heaven was reduced to the salvation of the soul.'[118] Moltmann continues: 'This religious reduction led to the heedless neglect of the earth and to the surrender of the future. Anyone who confuses the kingdom of God with heaven transforms his hope into resignation.'[119]

When set alongside the literature on the contemporary spiritual landscape, this appears to indicate that an 'earthed' approach is likely to be more, rather than less, attractive to those outside the church. A faith that equips us to deal with the issues around us is attractive and makes not only theological sense, but also missiological sense.

Community and Trinity

The relational nature of God is picked up by many contemporary writers on missiology as they see the pattern of the perichoretic relationships outplaying within their ministries. An example is Goodhew, Roberts and Volland, writing in '*Fresh!*' their introduction to Fresh Expressions. They consider that: 'the interplay of the three persons of the Trinity is for the purpose of mission.'[120] As they continue, they discuss Rublev's icon, and the way in which 'the observer is being invited into the picture.'[121] In this way, the model of the Trinity is worked out in human community, underlining the importance of relationship, in all aspects of life but particularly in Christian mission.

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[116] Moltmann, *Creation,* p.170.
[117] Ibid. p.171.
[118] Ibid. p.181.
[119] Ibid. p.181.
[120] David Goodhew, Andrew Roberts and Michael Volland, *Fresh!* (London: SCM 2012) p.34.
[121] Ibid. p.35.

These missiological reflections have solid theological underpinning. Leonardo Boff is among many who explicitly connect Trinitarian theology with human society, considering both wider society and church. He notes how our contemporary society prioritises the individual over the communal: 'our dominant culture stresses the predominance of the individual… divorced from any consideration of their relation to society.'[122] Consideration of God without the Trinitarian dynamic tends to reinforce this distortion, whereas 'seeing people as image and likeness of the Trinity implies always setting them in open relationship with others; it is only through being with others… that they can build their own identities.'[123] He emphasises the importance of playing a part within trans-personal dynamics of society, the community must place itself within a greater whole.[124]

This also illuminates our understanding of church. Boff considers the perichoretic relationship: 'as a model for the community of those who follow Christ… more communion than hierarchy, more service than power, more circular than pyramidal, more loving embrace than bending the knee before authority.'[125]

Moltmann shares perspectives with Boff. He too sees the Trinity as the model for human relationships and society, with community life a participation in the life of the Trinity. A particular distinctive of his writing is the challenge to philosophical assumptions about the unchanging nature of God. He considers that as relationships require vulnerability, then discussion about Trinity and relationship necessitates that God is vulnerable: 'We must drop the philosophical axioms about the nature of God. God is not unchangeable, if to be unchangeable means that he could not in the freedom of his love open himself to the changeable history of his creation.'[126] So too, in contrast with the traditional assertion of impassibility, he considers God to have a capability to suffer in love for creation; to be vulnerable in the pain of the cross; or to be perfect 'if this means that he did not in the craving of his love want his creation to be necessary to his perfection.'[127] This means that for Moltmann, human experiences of vulnerability and suffering, have a model in God's being.

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[122] Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society,* transl. Paul Burns (London: Burns and Oates 1986) p.148.
[123] Boff, *Society,* p.149.
[124] Ibid. p149.
[125] Ibid. p.154.
[126] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit,* transl. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM 1977)
[127] Moltmann, *Spirit,* p.62.

This perspective is not universally shared. Castelo, for example, questions some of the ways in which Moltmann reaches his conclusions, in particular the way in which he sets up traditional theology as a foil to his perspective. Castelo argues that 'terminological clarity is largely absent from (im)passibility discussions.'[128] This lack of clarity obscures the fact that the church fathers 'negotiated (rather than capitulated to) the prevalent metaphysical tendencies of their times.'[129] Therefore, he considers the theory that Patristic theology took up Hellenistic patterns of thought wholesale to be simplistic and lacking in nuance.[130] This means that traditional qualities such as impassability don't need to be rejected in the way that Moltmann does, rather the nuance explored to mine its depth.

That said, Castelo reflects on how in post-Holocaust society it is unsurprising that suffering should have priority in theological reflection and sees Moltmann's theology against this backdrop.[131] Mostert notes how this reflection is confirmed in Moltmann's autobiographical reflections, continuing: 'The problem of suffering is the driving force of this theology of the crucified Christ.'[132] This positions Moltmann's work as a contextual theology responding to contemporary questions, with deep resonance and wisdom. Once again, Bosch's reminder to take care to hold balance is pertinent, with new wisdom held alongside traditional concepts, and care needed to maintain transcendence and to not over anthropomorphize God's being.[133]

Overall, these theologians share insight around community and relationship, and the relationship between love and suffering. A question that goes into this research is therefore how these insights can be expressed in ways which are life giving good news within a society that tends towards individualism yet craves relationship and community.

Creation, immanence and panentheism

As Christians dialogue with eco-spirituality questions are raised about God's presence within all creation. Within the Christian traditions, this question can be held within a Trinitarian understanding: God is both radically present within all creation and wholly other; in addition, God became a part of the physical world when born as the human child Jesus. Alongside

[128] Daniel Castelo, 'Moltmann's dismissal of divine impassibility: Warranted?' *Scottish Journal of Theology* Vol.61:4 (2008) p.400.
[129] Castelo, 'Warranted?', p.399.
[130] Ibid. p.399.
[131] Ibid. p.397.
[132] Christiaan Mostert, 'Moltmann's Crucified God', *Journal of Reformed Theology* Vol.7 (2013) p.165.
[133] Mostert, 'Crucified', p.176, 178.

Incarnation, Christian resources for the conversation are found within the discussion of pneumatology, the way in which God is present within all creation through the Holy Spirit.

For many, this understanding of God's immanence takes the particular form of 'panentheism', the idea that God is present within all that is. Panentheism is a slippery term which makes it highly controversial in theology: it is not always clear whether what one theologian rejects is the same concept that another one celebrates. Moltmann and Boff are both advocates whereas Wright rejects the term.[134]

Theological concerns are first that the transcendence of God has potential to be overly downplayed if not lost, and second that the term implies too fully realised an eschatology to be appropriate this side of the eschaton. In addition, for some it has become associated with 'process theology', rather than open to expression within various theological stances.[135] Nevertheless, exploration is important given its popularity with environmentally rooted practitioners.[136]

Once again, Boff and Moltmann are key voices. As Boff discusses panentheism he stays thoroughly within an orthodox framework. He writes that: 'A particularly appropriate idea for the cosmic ubiquity of the Spirit is panentheism. This is a very old and noble Christian concept that can strengthen our spirituality and enrich our theological understanding of ecology.'[137] He understands panentheism to be held within the dynamic of the Trinity, meaning separation between Creation and Creator is held but also affirming an intimate connection and presence of God within all that is made. This approach allows him to hold the ecology of all of creation within an understanding of the interconnectedness of all life within God: 'This experience gives rise to a new integrative and holistic spirituality that can unite heaven and earth.'[138]

Moltmann is another who explores immanence and panentheism within an orthodox Trinitarian framework. He writes: 'Our starting point here is that all relationships which are

[134] Moltmann has used the term panentheism: Moltmann, *Creation*, p.98. He has published since the publication date boundary of this review expressing his current preference for Shekhinah over panentheism for God's indwelling in all creation: Jurgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Hope*, transl. Margaret Kohl and Brian McNeil, (Louisville KT: Westminster John Knox Press 2019) p.115.
[135] John Polkinghorne, *Kenotic Creation and Divine Action* in Polkinghorne (ed) *The work of love: creation as kenosis* (London: SPCK 2001) p.91-2.
[136] http://www.mysticchrist.co.uk/forest_church/press accessed 11 September 2020.
[137] Boff, *Ecology and Liberation,* p.50.
[138] Boff, *Ecology and Liberation,* p.51.

analogous to God reflect the primal, reciprocal indwelling and mutual interpenetration of the trinitarian perichoresis: God *in* the world and the world *in* God.'[139]

Deane-Drummond, known for her work on eco-theology, is a further voice in the debate about panentheism. She considers it as a useful meeting point for dialogue with spiritual seekers:

> A modified form of pantheism known as *panentheism*, still allows for a distinction between God and the world. It seems to me to offer the most fruitful alternative available. It allows for a sense of the traditional understanding of the Lordship of God, yet is a Lordship based on the love of God, rather than the will to power.[140]

Sallie McFague's metaphor of the earth as the Body of God takes panentheism to an extreme as she asks her readers to consider: 'What if we dared to think of our planet and indeed the entire universe as the body of God?'[141] She is clear that she is playing with a metaphor and acknowledges that it cannot be taken too far, but offers the idea as a balance to the over-spiritualisation prevalent in much theology, both in the academy and in churches: 'There is one obvious advantage to this model: it allows us to think of God as immanent in our world while retaining, indeed magnifying God's transcendence.'[142]

Moltmann spends some time exploring the accusation that Christianity is responsible for the ecological crisis, noting that the argument doesn't hold up given that the creation account has been around for three thousand years but abuse of creation for only four hundred: 'There must have been other, more important factors in its development... This was the new picture of God offered by the Renaissance and by nominalism: God is almighty, and *potentia absoluta* in the pre-eminent attribute of his divinity.'[143]

Radford-Ruether helpfully explores the intersection between Christian theology and the Gaia hypothesis: 'Are Gaia, the living and sacred earth, and God, the monotheistic deity of the biblical traditions, on speaking terms with each other?'[144] She reminds us that while Gaia forms a helpful critique to the traditional (male) theology of the church, the answer is not to

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[139] Moltmann, *Creation*, p.17.
[140] Celia Deane-Drummond*, A handbook in Theology and Ecology* (London: SCM 1996) p.139.
[141] Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis MN: Fortress 1993) p.19.
[142] McFague, *Body,* p.20.
[143] Moltmann, *Creation,* p.26.
[144] Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God* (New York: HarperCollins 1992) p.1.

discard transcendence entirely: 'I agree with much of this critique [of male monotheistic God], yet I believe that merely replacing a male transcendent deity with an immanent female one is an insufficient answer to the "god-problem."'[145] There is insight here connecting with Bosch's observation that one possible reaction to paradigm shift is to reject the past and go in a totally new direction. Radford-Ruether's comments here remind us to keep balance as we dialogue between the new and the old.

Santmire draws on Luther's theology, particularly his refusal to be tied down to prepositions concerning God's presence and action, rather to insist in a mystical understanding that in, with, under, above and below are all containers of truth. The passage below sets this against the concept of panentheism:

> According to Luther, we do not know God's spatiality in any respect, as the protagonists of panentheism seem to think we do. For them, God's place is around the universe, like a womb; the universe is *in* God. For Luther, we only know God's presence in, with, and under, above and below, beyond and around and within our world... That leaves us, in faith, with a world that is overflowing with the presence of God, a sacramental world of enchantment, mystery and wonder.[146]

That he rejects the term panentheism illustrates the elusive nature of the term, as advocates of the term would consider his approach as panentheistic. Terminology aside, there is much in these strands of theological investigation that have potential to be received warmly in conversations in wider society, particularly those drawn to eco-spirituality.

Insight from practitioners

Finally, we turn to some consideration of theological work published by those who are partners in the dialogue as reflective practitioners rather than as academy. There is extensive literature providing a foundation for those taking their first steps in pioneer ministry, and concerning practicalities, ecclesiology and principles for relating Gospel and culture.[147] This section, rather than focussing here, concerns those writing on what is being discovered theologically through pioneering.

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[145] Radford Ruether, *Gaia,* p.4.
[146] Saltmire, *Nature,* p.142.
[147] For example Michael Moynagh, *Church for Every Context* (London: SCM 2012) and Dave Male, *How to Pioneer* (London: CHP 2016)

Simon Sutcliffe laments the lack of theological writing from pioneering practitioners: 'Rarely, if at all, have there been books that have asked pioneers to write about the theological themes from their context. What does *salvation* look like in your context? In your community, what is an appropriate understanding of *sin*? What is the relationship between local people and *creation*?'[148] He asks us to wrestle with these questions as well as the practical 'what' and 'how' of mission and pioneering, so that 'the new vocabulary and narratives we have discovered… might inform new ways of thinking theologically.'[149]

Some beginnings are being made, notably Tomlinson who describes an expression of faith he calls 'progressive orthodoxy'.[150] He defines this as a faith that has deep rootedness in past expressions of faith but which is engaged in dialogue and dynamic interaction with the present world.[151] He explores what this might mean on a variety of theological issues, the following example being an exploration of atonement:

> First, I do not believe that Jesus died in order that God would forgive our sins. Jesus forgave people's sins constantly in the Gospels, long before he died on the cross, and he taught his disciples to pray for forgiveness with every expectation that it would be granted... The God of Jesus Christ is characterized by grace and love, not wrath, anger or retribution.[152]

Andrea Campanale, also reflecting on the theme of sin and forgiveness considers the language of sin in a culture which experiences shame. 'In our sacred text and faith tradition we have a wealth of stories that can help the shamed begin to integrate their real and ideal selves.'[153] But instead of expressing this tradition: 'currently much of what we say in church reinforces shame.'[154]

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[148] Simon Sutcliffe, 'Located and Rooted: Contextual theology and pioneer ministry', in Jonny Baker and Cathy Ross (eds) *The Pioneer Gift* (Norwich: Canterbury Press 2014) p.169.
[149] Sutcliffe, *Rooted,* p.170.
[150] Dave Tomlinson, *Re-enchanting Christianity*: faith in an emerging culture (Norwich: Canterbury Press 2008)
[151] Tomlinson, *Re-enchanting*, p.32.
[152] Tomlinson, *Re-enchanting,* p.60.
[153] Andrea Campanale, 'A Gospel that overcomes shame', in Jonny Baker and Cathy Ross (eds) *The Pioneer Gift* (Norwich: Canterbury Press 2014) p.189.
[154] Campanale, *Shame,* p.191.

Finally, Annie Heppenstall is a liturgist whose theology is expressed in poetic prayers rather than prose. Here she introduces her work, writing about the way she uses fresh language to enable her work to connect with those unused to the church's language, yet remaining faithful to the tradition.

> I have unpacked some words that have a multiplicity of meanings and have offered 'fresh expressions' of concepts for people who do not want to use, or are not familiar with, standard Christian vocabulary. In so doing, I have inevitably expressed my own interpretation, but hope that I have done so in a way that is respectful of and resonant with the root tradition.[155]

These are examples of authors beginning to explore a new expression of theology for our contemporary culture. But as Sutcliffe laments, there is only a scarce beginning. It is hoped that this project will provide an addition to the debate. Wrestling with theology in the company of reflective pioneers is a primary task of this research project.

6. Conclusion: Towards a language about God

What is emerging is some ground for fruitful discussion between the theology of the church and the concerns of contemporary UK culture. These engage with questions around the nature of Christian hope; an understanding of salvation that goes beyond the eternal destination of each human soul; and God's presence in and through all creation. Out of this dialogue it is hoped will come a language which both enables the church to express matters of faith better in conversation with wider society, and which encourages deeper engagement in the practical matters of our society.

In a society that is more aware than ever of the suffering around us, confining faith to an other-worldly realm is not ethical for a faith community and is increasingly detrimental to the church's mission. Authentic witness in right action is expected, and words without action are not respected. More attractive than other-worldly approaches is a gospel which resonates with the brokenness of today's society and takes seriously environmental concerns. The liberative praxis of Christ's teaching and example has much to say within contemporary society and is a theme with the potential to bear much fruit in dialogue with partners from other spiritual traditions who offer a similar critique of society.

[155] Annie Heppenstall, *The Book of Uncommon Prayer* (Buxhall: Kevin Mayhew 2015) p.57-8.

These practical out-workings of faith are intimately connected with the theological discussion. Moltmann, Wright and others offer a perspective that enables us to root practical action in Christian hope. Thus the more theoretical discussion on theology and the practical and prophetic are in many ways a part of the same theological movement. We need to examine the stories we tell about our faith, particularly as relating to Christian and Hebrew insights, shining light on the contemporary issues of our day. We need to move away from the sacralising of the status quo and towards a genuine prophetic voice within society.[156]

What is emerging therefore is a search within society for a spirituality that relates to questions concerning this life, both in the everyday sense and in terms of wider socio-political and environmental concerns. There is also a body of work that explores theology in dialogue with the environmental movement; there are writers concerning themselves with spirituality of the natural world; others on Christian ethics in the context of poverty and marginalisation. However, the connection between the spiritual movements and the Christian theological work, for the sake of mission, is rarely made.

The body of work that comes closest to achieving the desired integration of theology and practice is that of reflective practitioners, and rarely found elsewhere. Good examples have been quoted above from *The Pioneer Gift* compiled by Baker and Ross.[157] The fact that this body of writing is where the contextual theology is beginning to take place supports the core assumption that there is something unique in the thinking of pioneering practitioners that is worth exploring.

A combination of language and praxis is being sought in this study that communicates to wider society, that encourages those already in the churches to deeper engagement in contemporary issues, and that offers to those already engaging in society a language for speaking of God. The hope is that in exploring the theology and practice of Pioneer Ministers, a language will emerge which is working and which can be adopted more widely. Once discovered, insight needs to be communicated back to the mainstream church in order both to enable good communication with partners, and to take the earthing of faith in social and political realities more seriously.

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[156] Bosch, *Transforming,* p.439.
[157] Baker and Ross, *The Pioneer Gift.*

B: Methodology

1. Introduction

The intention of this project is to explore the possibilities inherent in 'earthed spirituality' within pioneer ministry, focussing on three contexts in Gloucestershire, one each in Tewkesbury, Gloucester and Stroud. The hope is that in exploring these, insight will be developed about 'earthed spirituality' that will be of value to the mission of both pioneering and traditional models of church.

A preliminary review explored key areas within the literature which form the backdrop to this study. This provided clarity for the core question and will continue to undergird the study, informing the questions that are asked in the field. Engagement with the literature will return to prominence in a late stage of the process after data has been collected as the theology found in the field is put into dialogue with theological sources.

The Literature Review explored the term 'earthed spirituality' which is being used as a focus for this study, a spirituality which is rooted in everyday realities and the struggle for liberation and reconciliation. The twin phrases 'down to earth' and 'of the earth' remind us of both the human and wider creation elements involved in earthing our spirituality.

The study is primarily a work of missiology, therefore an exploration of the relationship between mission and context needs to remain central. In exploring contextual theology there needs to be both a grounding in the cultural realities in which mission is taking place, and in theological themes that intersect with the preoccupations of that culture. Given the focus on earthed spirituality, the theological review focussed in areas that are most pertinent to the 'of the earth' and 'down to earth' themes being explored. All of this provides both valuable background in deciding how to approach the questions with the cases being studied, and voices from the tradition to bring into dialogue with insight from the cases once data has been collected.

Spirituality, theology and practice are here held tightly together, and considered inseparable, following insight that is commonly found in the writings of Liberation Theologians. Gutierrez, for example, having outlined a theology that is earthed in real life experiences, Christian discipleship and a preferential option for the poor writes that: ‘Not only is spirituality a matter

of consequence to every Christian; the very fate of the kind of theology I have been proposing depends on it.'[1] Spirituality and theology are seen here as inseparable partners in the work of living out the Christian faith in a way that is transformative within our communities and our world.

Personal statement

Creswell writes: 'Researchers have a personal history that situates them as inquirers. They also have an orientation to research and a sense of personal ethics and political stances that inform their research.'[2]

I come to this study with twenty-five years' experience as a practitioner. This began through employment with USPG, a historic Anglican Mission society where I was introduced to both contextual theologies and small missional communities. Through USPG, small missional communities were explored as '*New Ways of Being Church'*, bringing the thinking of Liberation Theologians around Base Ecclesial Communities to the UK situation. I was also introduced to the 'five marks of mission', a holistic approach that has stayed with me in subsequent ministry.[3] Professional travel for USPG took me to South Africa in the early years following their first democratic elections: the 'incarnational mission' spoken of frequently, rooted in practical, political and social realities was refreshing and inspiring. The study that preceded this employment was a degree in geography and MSc in environmental science, together giving a grounding in social science methods and in practical issues around both 'human geography' and environmentalism.

Following theological training in Cambridge, local church ministry followed for fourteen years, in Middlesbrough and Milton Keynes. Issues surrounding poverty and the church's response to the challenges of everyday life have always been in the background of my ministry, and mission has always been a priority. Creative approaches to engage the local community have included participation in NE1 and Hope08;[4] the employment of a detached youthworker; and various experiments in cafe church, pub church and community engagement. A return to formal study during the latter years of this ministry resulted in an MA in Mission (Emerging

[1] Gustavo Gutiérrez, 'The Situation and Tasks of Liberation Theology Today', transl. James B Nickoloff, in Joerg Rieger (ed) *Opting for the Margins: Postmodernity and Liberation in Christian Theology* (Oxford : OUP 2003) p.101.
[2] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry,* p.51.
[3] http://www.anglicancommunion.org/identity/marks-of-mission.aspx accessed 15 July 2016.
[4] NE1 was a regional mission event in the North East, part of the movement that resulted in the national Hope08 and then ongoing mission under the HOPE banner.
https://www.hopetogether.org.uk/Groups/302985/Web_2019.aspx accessed 7 September 2020.

Church) through the University of Manchester (Cliff College).

My current studies are part-time, alongside full-time work for Gloucester Diocese, from 2014-2020 as Mission and Evangelism Officer, and currently as Environmental Engagement Officer. I am very conscious of the overlap between my studies and my professional practice. In particular, until December 2020 I facilitated the network of local pioneer ministers and participated in the national conversation about embedding pioneering practice within church life. I advocated for Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) as a model for healthy engagement with the community for the inherited church. I have been involved in the national 'Forest Church' conversation since 2013, am co-facilitator of the local Forest Church, and offer Forest Church training to local churches and church schools. I have had involvement in the past with other Fresh Expressions, most significantly Visions in York and FEIG in Gloucester. At times, the line between my studies and my professional practice is thin.

With this background I need to be aware that I have a personal commitment towards the work of pioneers, which brings both benefits and potential difficulties. It makes relating to the priorities and ethos of the practitioners straightforward as we speak the same language and have shared history, but I potentially share the same blind spots as those I am researching. I am not attempting to bring objectivity to this research, rather I am using the warmth and understanding that I have in the hope that it will allow me to uncover things that I am uniquely able to see as someone deeply engaged as a professional. I will undoubtedly miss things which someone with an 'outsider' perspective might have picked up.

2. Methodology

A discussion of the overall approach is outlined first, followed by details of the methods proposed.

Ecclesiological ethnography

The methodological framework proposed for this study falls within the school of ecclesiological ethnography.[5] Insights and methods from both ethnography and case study research will be of value, though with neither methodology being a true fit on its own without the addition of the theological dimension.

[5] http://www.ecclesiologyandethnography.com/about/ accessed 23 April 2016.

Ethnography in its purest form produces, as the end result, a descriptive report aiming to draw to a wider audience the culture of a particular community. Wolcott, writing as an anthropologist, encourages us to be clear about making a distinction between producing an ethnography, and borrowing from ethnographic methods for research projects that have a different underlying intent. He notes how: 'for many of today's qualitatively orientated researchers, to be "doing ethnography" has become a shorthand expression for describing how they intend to gather data, without necessarily suggesting or implying, and certainly without promising, that the outcome of their efforts will be framed as ethnography.'[6]

He is clear that without an ethnographic report at the end, research isn't ethnography. Though he acknowledges that as the methods are used increasingly within a broad range of disciplines in the social sciences, boundaries are becoming blurred:

> A critical distinction will be observed between employing a set of research procedures… and employing those approaches with the intent of producing a full-blown ethnography. In practice, however, such a distinction is a matter of degree; the boundaries are not well defined.[7]

By Wolcott's definition at least, the proposed research is one that uses ethnographic methods but with a different report proposed from one which is strictly an ethnography.

Creswell agrees that the intent of ethnography is to describe a culture and suggests case study research for any project intending to explore a wider issue through qualitative research. He writes: 'the intent in ethnography is to determine how the culture works rather than to either develop an in-depth understanding of a single case or explore an issue or problem using the case as a specific illustration.'[8] The research proposed has the latter aim, of using the cases to explore and illustrate a particular issue. As a project exploring more than one case, there are elements of multi-site case study in the approach. It is however a project that relies primarily on ethnographic techniques whereas case study research, while often using qualitative field research isn't as dependent on this form of data collection and often involves mixed methods. Yin, in his exposition of case study research writes that:

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[6] Harry F. Wolcott, *Ethnography: a way of seeing* (London: SAGE 1999) p.41.
[7] Wolcott, *Ethnography,* p.13.
[8] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry,* p.97.

> Ethnographies usually require long periods of time in the "field" and emphasize detailed, observational evidence. Participant-observation may not require the same length of time but still assumes a hefty investment of field efforts. In contrast, case studies are a form of inquiry that does not depend solely on ethnographic or participant-observer data.[9]

Definitions for both case study work and ethnography are hard to pin down, with a variety of approaches under each broad definition, and an area of overlap. Yin writes: 'Remember, too, the large areas of overlap among the methods.'[10] At the most basic level, a case study is the exploration of a specific example or examples in order to examine the posed question. A baseline for case study work appears to be the use of the example to answer a broader question, rather than just to describe the case as it is in itself. Thus the proposed study includes elements of both case study research and ethnography, with the tools of ethnography proposed for data collection but the intent of exploring a wider research question.

As the project doesn't quite fit either classic ethnography or case study research, it is helpful to explore the ways in which ethnography is being used within missiology as an exploratory tool. The network for *Ecclesiology and Ethnography* describes itself as 'a growing international group of scholars committed to the empirical and theological study of the Christian church.'[11] That the words used are 'empirical' and 'theological' expresses that the tools of ethnography are being used in work which is at heart theological. Here, the word ethnography is used loosely, 'understood more generally as qualitative research.'[12] Thus there is no attempt to maintain a purity within the anthropological roots of ethnography, rather to use the tools of ethnography as they fit each research project. Geiger outlines how the approach is understood: 'Ethnography—writing about people and their culture with and among those people and culture—in a theological mode is about learning the truth about people and their experience in order that truth may emerge in theological discourse.'[13]

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[9] Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research 4th edition* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE 2009) p.15.

[10] Yin, *Case Study,* p.11.

[11] http://www.ecclesiologyandethnography.com/ accessed 23 April 2016.

[12] Christian B. Scharen, 'Introduction', in Scharen (ed) *Explorations in Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans 2012) p.3.

[13] Matthew W. Geiger (2014) 'A Review of "Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics"', *Religious Education,* Vol.109:1 (2014) p.103.

Scharen introduces the series of books in the discipline by advocating for an approach that is deeply rooted in lived practice, reflecting theologically on what is found: 'rapprochement between empirical and theological understandings of the church ought to be encouraged in such a way that the actual life of the church is attended to, thought through theologically, and thereby strengthened (one hopes) for more faithful witness.'[14]

That a dedicated conference, network and journal exists is another indication that a theological approach to ethnography is developing as a distinct methodology.[15] Healy writes about its outworkings:

> Ecclesiological ethnography shares with the postmodern theorists the concern to describe cultural patterns "thickly," with rigorous attention to detail, nuance, process and relationship. But it cannot adopt a "thin" agnostic theory for doing so... Instead, it adopts the "thick" theory that is the ongoing, self-critical Christian tradition of inquiry.[16]

The work emerging from this school can be illustrated by an example such as Sarah Dunlop and Pete Ward's study of the meaning of the sacred for young Polish migrants.[17] A large proportion of the report is ethnographic description, but the study goes beyond the purely descriptive as it begins to draw provisional conclusions about the meaning of what has been observed. The study self-identifies as ethnography, but there is a recognition that it is working in a grey area between case study and ethnography, identifying as: 'visual ethnographic case study.'[18]

This study therefore locates itself within the understanding of ethnography practiced within practical theology, with theological concerns and the practices of the church at the heart. The proposal is to use ethnographic research, aiming to take the data collected into exploration of wider questions. The intent is not to produce an ethnography, a detailed report of the interactions of various phenomena within the projects, rather to seek ways forward around issues pertinent to the health of the wider church, in both inherited and fresh expressions

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[14] Scharen, 'Introduction', p.2.
[15] http://www.ecclesiologyandethnography.com/about/ and http://booksandjournals.brillonline.com/content/journals/22144471 accessed 27 April 2016.
[16] Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life* (Cambridge: CUP 2000) p.180.
[17] Sarah Dunlop & Pete Ward 'From Obligation to Consumption in Two and-a-half Hours: A Visual Exploration of the Sacred with Young Polish Migrants', *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, Vol.27:3 (2012) p.446.
[18] Dunlop and Ward, 'Obligation to Consumption', p.432.

forms. This involves drawing on the wisdom within the social sciences located within both ethnographic and case study research, without being a pure form of either methodology, in keeping with the developing school of ecclesiological ethnography.

Epistemology

Various epistemological frameworks are suggested by those who write on research methodology within the social sciences. For example Creswell outlines frameworks that he names as post-positivism; social constructivism; transformative/postmodern; pragmatism; and critical/race/feminist/queer/disabilities.[19] Cameron and Duce, writing as theologians, find four main epistemological frameworks within social science texts on methodology: positivist, social constructivism, pragmatic and critical realist.[20]

None of these frameworks however describe an epistemology that is fully compatible with a Christian worldview, that incorporates the Christian metanarrative and an understanding of transcendent as well as earthed realities. Important elements are shared in such a way that enables the methods to be valuable tools to theological study. The priority given to justice within the critical approach, prioritising the outsider viewpoint, has significant biblical support.[21] Likewise the understanding within social constructivism, that reality is explored in dialogue with others, mirrors Christian understandings of relationship and community, and the postmodern insight that cultural and personal background has a fundamental effect on how different individuals perceive the same realities is invaluable. [22]

However the Christian tradition doesn't sit comfortably alongside all elements. For example, while recognising the insight within the postmodern approach, Christianity holds to one ultimate reality, despite the multitude of different ways that it is perceived. Cameron and Duce discuss the areas of conflict between Christianity and each of the epistemological approaches they have identified. In discussing social constructivism they note that within the assumed relativism, 'the Christian tradition will be seen as offering insights rather than a normative basis for discerning right action.'[23] Likewise in a pragmatic epistemology: 'there is a

[19] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry,* p.36-7.

[20] Helen Cameron and Catherine Duce, *Researching Practice in Ministry and Mission* (London: SCM 2013) p.30.

[21] For example, Gutierrez, 'Option for the Poor', in Sobrino and Ellacuria (eds) *Systematic Theology, perspectives from Liberation Theology* (London: SCM 1996)

[22] For example, Leonardo Boff, *Ecclesiogenesis* transl. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll NY: Orbis 1986) p.23f.

[23] Cameron and Duce, *Researching Practice,* p.32.

danger of bypassing the Christian tradition in a search for 'what works'.'[24] There is therefore a particular approach to epistemology that is inherent to those engaging from a faith perspective: distinctive but incorporating insight from other epistemological frameworks.

Healy describes the difference the Christian understanding and praxis makes as a theologian undertakes qualitative research. He writes that: 'the theologian therefore undertakes her work in an engaged, even prayerful manner, rather than with the disinterested objectivity or humanist agenda of the academic agnostic sociologist.'[25] The prayerful engagement adds a new dimension, with the earthed and transcendent realities held as one in the researcher's praxis.

That said, practical theology and missiology require an engagement with a breadth of disciplines included in the social sciences, in order to ensure that we root our theology in lived experience rather than allowing it to become disconnected from life's realities. The priority given to experience is encouraged particularly strongly by liberation theologians who always have the experience of the poor, redemptive praxis and community-based approaches at the heart of any theological discussion. For example, Chung Hyun Kyung writes: 'Asian women's approach to the creation of theology, like all other forms of liberation theology in the Third World, is *inductive*, drawn from experience and commitment. It is also *collective* in its approach and *inclusive* in its perspective and goal.'[26]

Similarly, Kwok Pui-Lan outlines how theology cannot be a discipline separated or apart from Christian discipleship:

> *Theologians cannot afford to* engage in the academic exercise of mental gymnastics when so many people are daily dehumanized or die of malnutrition and unsafe drinking water. Theology must be embodied; and reflection and action must be integrally linked together.[27]

Holding experience at the heart of the discussion is not without controversy. Scharen and Vigen describe the various different ways in which scripture, reason, tradition and experience

[24] Cameron and Duce, *Researching Practice,* p.32.
[25] Healy, *Christian Life,* p.166.
[26] Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to the be Sun Again* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis 1990) p.103-4.
[27] Kwok Pui-lan, *Introducing Asian Feminist* Theology (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 2000) p.32.

are held in different relative importance by different approaches.[28] They go on to outline the critique of approaches that bring experience into a central position: 'experience cannot be given too much authority' as 'it is too vulnerable to individual dispositions, filters, interpretations, and blind spots.'[29]

This critique needs to be heard as there are vulnerabilities associated with this approach. There are also ways of minimising the vulnerabilities in order to benefit from the approach without the individual theologian's perspective overriding all else. In particular, the strengths of this approach are maximised when paying attention to a variety of experiences alongside the 'critical use and interpretation of multiple and mutually corrective sources.'[30]

Moschella too advocates for the involvement of others in research as a way of illuminating the blind spots and engaging other perspectives: 'Because ethnographic research and writing is highly subjective, we need input from others who can help us think through the process and help prod our self-awareness along the way.'[31] Scharen and Vigen note that many Christians scholars are more comfortable with this as it 'puts individual experience into a larger context.'[32] This approach, as Healy expresses it, is one in which 'truth is discerned through engagement with those who are other than "we" are: with the Spirit, with those Christians with whom we disagree; and with those outside the church.'[33] When held in right balance, they consider that: 'giving the category of experience priority can create a lively space for interaction and reflection among all of the sources - traditions, sacred scriptures, doctrines, the sciences etc.'[34]

This study takes the approach outlined above. While insight is gained from the epistemological approaches of the social sciences, the approach is at heart theological, using a theological method that puts experience at the centre of the discussion. Experience is given priority, being careful to listen to multiple voices, and with appropriate dialogue with the other key voices that need to be heard within theological exploration.

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[28] Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen (eds) *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics* (London: Continuum 2011) p.61.
[29] Scharen and Vigen, *Ethnography,* p.61.
[30] Ibid. p.62.
[31] Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral* Practice (Cleveland OH: Pilgrim Press 2008) p.20
[32] Scharen and Vigen, *Ethnography,* p.62.
[33] Healy, *Christian* Life, p.170.
[34] Scharen and Vigen, *Ethnography*, p.63.

3. Sampling

In many projects, randomising a sample is a key priority but when seeking to explore a particular aspect of mission and ministry, in this case 'earthed spirituality', then it is essential to ensure that the aspect being studied is sufficiently present in the cases being studied to be sure that it will be a rich source of data. Creswell writes that he recommends: 'that investigators first consider what type of case study is more promising and useful.'[35]

The purpose of this project is to find and explore some good practice in mission and ministry that is rooted in an 'earthed spirituality'. Projects therefore need to be chosen in a targeted way rather than randomly, ideally with contrast between the different cases so that they offer different perspectives on 'earthed spirituality'. Pragmatism about practicalities will be necessary, in particular in terms of travel and distance from home.

This is an approach that is known as purposeful sampling. It further subdivides by the method used to narrow down the potential cases to the chosen few. Creswell calls his preferred method 'purposeful maximal sampling', writing that 'I prefer to select cases that show different perspectives on the problem, process or event I want to portray.'[36] This approach, using purposeful maximal sampling should provide valuable data for this study. The different perspectives, united in a rootedness in 'earthed spirituality' should enable conclusions to be drawn that have wider applicability than would be the case if all the cases were very similar.

Pioneer ministry has been chosen as the focus, as this approach is frequently characterised by particularly good practice of 'earthed spirituality'. This conclusion has been reached both through professional practice and the evidence from the writings of reflective practitioners encountered during the literature review. A Pioneer Minister is defined by the ecumenical 'Fresh Expressions' organisation as someone: 'able to enable new missional forms of church for a changing culture.'[37] The same page quotes Dave Male who considers pioneers as 'people called by God who are the first to see and creatively respond to the Holy Spirit's initiatives with those outside the church; gathering others around them as they seek to establish new contextual Christian community.'[38] The commitment, inherent in the definition, to be contextually rooted in their practice makes the practice of pioneers a fruitful place for the

[35] Creswell *Qualitative Inquiry,* p.100.
[36] Ibid. p.50.
[37] https://freshexpressions.org.uk/get-started/pioneer-ministry/ accessed 4 May 2020
[38] Ibid.

exploration of 'earthed spirituality' to take place.

Triangulation and data saturation are key concepts in deciding the number of projects that it is appropriate to include. Alongside this must go some pragmatism as decisions are made about the time available for the study: the more cases included, the less time is available to each one. Moschella writes: 'As a religious leader-ethnographer, you probably won't be doing research full time, so it becomes especially critical to take practical limitations into account.'[39] This is a part time study undertaken by a missional practitioner, thus pragmatism is an unavoidable part of the overall equation.

Creswell writes that: 'in triangulation, researchers make use of multiple and different sources, methods, investigators, and theories to provide corroborating evidence… Typically, this process involves corroborating evidence from different sources to shed light on a theme or perspective.'[40] In this project, cases are largely being treated independently meaning triangulation between the projects isn't a primary consideration. Consequentially, a small number researched thoroughly, with enough corroborating evidence for internal triangulation is of greater benefit than a large number of cases. Triangulation also comes into play at a late stage when reflecting theologically and seeking corroboration of insight found in the field with broader theological sources.

With these considerations in mind, an initial choice was made to include four projects. This aimed to balance the need for ethnographic research to maximise time spent in each context with exploring a variety of different expressions of 'earthed spirituality.' In the event, one project had to withdraw due to changing circumstances: the research continued with the three that remained.

Given the amount of time in situ required by an ethnographic approach, geography is a key concern. Yin references the need to consider 'convenience, access, and geographic proximity' when choosing cases.[41] For this reason, the boundaries of Gloucester Diocese have been chosen as the defining geographical area. This introduces a potential element of bias as there is a prior relationship between the potential cases and the researcher through her employment. This is unavoidable given that the alternative would be to travel significantly

[39] Moschella, *Ethnography,* p.70.
[40] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry,* p.251.
[41] Yin, *Case Study,* p.93.

further, making ethnographic study untenable. In addition, the national network of pioneers is relatively small and the researcher is in contact with a variety of practitioners, through professional networks and social media. Local contacts ensure a clarity of relationship that can be anticipated better than can a more nebulous social media relationship. It is also significant to note that while the researcher's work involves enabling peer support between the pioneers, it is not a line management role so potential concerns around whether the working relationship allows for honesty and vulnerability do not apply in this case. In fact, the facilitation of peer support is about enabling safe space where vulnerability is possible and questions can be asked. This means that existing relationships may bring positive benefits, allowing depth of conversation.

A further boundary to potential cases is longevity of the project. For the purposes of this study it is preferable to be working with projects that are beyond the initial stages of establishing roots. For a study exploring 'earthed spirituality', such rootedness is essential. For this reason, the short-list of potential projects is those with a five-year history prior to the field research phase of the doctoral project. One of the projects has had a change of leader during this time but with four years history under the new leadership before the fieldwork phase.

With these considerations in place, what is sought are pioneering projects within Gloucester Diocese, with an existing relationship with the researcher, approaching 5 years longevity and demonstrating good practice in 'earthed spirituality'.

The three projects that remained after one withdrew were Kingsholm in Gloucester; *Celebrate* in Tewkesbury; and the various strands initiated by the pioneering work in Stroud. The work in Kingsholm is local and neighbourhood based, focussed on building community, and including a neighbourhood coffee shop, *Roots*, run as a social enterprise. *Celebrate* is a project focussed on a working-class estate. There is a depth of pastoral care and a very practical approach to meeting the needs of local people. The work in Stroud includes a sacred music festival, involvement in town wide initiatives on social and environmental issues, and a new monastic community, all deeply rooted in the very particular bohemian culture in Stroud. These should provide an interesting contrast with appropriately different perspectives, and 'earthed spirituality' in common at the heart of their pioneering.

4. Theological method: théologie totale and the four voices approach

In order to ensure that the data is collected that is of most value to the overall design of the project, some conclusions need to be reached about the data analysis phase, before data collection can be considered. Core to this is the theological reflection method. Yin clearly recommends holding the desired report in mind from the start: 'This will facilitate the collection of relevant data, in the appropriate format, and will reduce the possibility that a return visit will be necessary.'[42]

The overall aim of this research is to describe the missional project, listen for the theology that is being expressed by pioneers, in word and action, and to seek theological resources that resonate as theological underpinning for the ministry, bringing field data into conversation with wider sources. The intent is to amplify the insight found at the margins of church life and to assess its theological integrity in order to bring it to a wider audience.

The framework for analysis will combine elements from Sarah Coakley's 'théologie totale' and the 'four voices' approach developed by Helen Cameron and colleagues.[43] Both approaches in slightly different configurations seek to integrate theology with practice.

The four voices approach was initially considered as the primary framework for analysis. Within this framework, four voices of theology are brought into dialogue with one another. The contextual theologies of a project emerge through fieldwork: the 'espoused theology', that which is consciously articulated; and the 'operant theology, that which is embedded in practice. On the latter, Cameron writes that: 'the faith-carrying words and actions of believers embody an 'operant' theology.'[44] Cameron names the other two voices as 'normative theology', the scriptures, creeds, liturgies and official church teaching, and 'formal theology', that of the academy.

The focus on the difference between 'operant' and 'espoused' theology is critical for the Action Research used by the authors, allowing them to help their practitioner co-researchers to consider areas where either practice or theology needs to be challenged in order to encourage deeper integration between the two. This research, rather than seeking to improve

[42] Yin, *Case Study*, p.90.
[43] Helen Cameron et al, *Talking about God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology* (London: SCM 2010) p.53ff. and Sarah Coakley, *God, sexuality and the Self* (Cambridge: CUP 2013) p.xvii.
[44] Ibid. p.14.

the practice of the participating projects is seeking to learn from them and discover insights that deserves wider acknowledgement. Research into the gap between 'operant' and 'espoused' theology is therefore of limited value. Insight from Helen Cameron and her colleagues remain invaluable particularly in the prompt to seek out both espoused and operant theology within the fieldwork, but a wholesale use of the framework is not appropriate.

Sarah Coakley's théologie totale comes from a different angle as its purpose is to ensure her work of systematic theology remains grounded in the realities of mission and ministry. She writes: 'The method I here call *théologie totale* involves a complex range of interdisciplinary skills; and to link the theoretical to the pastoral in this way is a task of some considerable spiritual and intellectual delicacy.'[45] Her method involves two broad sources: fieldwork using the tools of social science, and the academy, with a significant focus within the methodology on prayer as part of the reflective process. Stephenson writes of her theological method that:

> Part of the fundamental logic of *théologie totale* is theology's critical appropriation of the social sciences, especially pertaining to feminism... she will intentionally turn to sociology of religion and inform *théologie totale* with field work that draws on the concrete behaviors of religious practitioners.[46]

There is more to the method than an integration of fieldwork with academy. Coakley writes:

> The vertiginous free-fall of contemplation, then is not only the means by which a disciplined form of unknowing makes way for a new and deeper knowledge-beyond-knowledge; it is also – as I have already argued – the necessary accompanying practice of a theology committed to ascetic transformation.[47]

There is here an expectation both of the self-emptying in contemplative prayer to allow space for God to speak wisdom, an 'attentive openness',[48] and an expectation that the theologian is open to being transformed by God for the sake of the world.

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[45] Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self* (Cambridge: CUP 2013) p.xvii.

[46] Christopher A. Stephenson, 'Sarah Coakley's Théologie Totale: Starting with the Holy Spirit and/or Starting with Pneumatology?' *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* Vol.26:1 (2017) p.4.

[47] Coakley, S*exuality,* p.43.

[48] Ibid. p.88.

Coakley describes orthodoxy as a project rather than a static mark of credal correctness: 'At the horizon of true orthodoxy, theology, 'spirituality', and ethics are fully united.'[49] There are resonances here with the insistence of liberation theologians on holding together theology, spirituality and praxis, rendering this particularly suitable as a method for this project. Resonance too is in the resistance to binaries:

> It resists the divides between belief and practice, between thought and affect, between academic and accessible writing... and it resists these divides not because it aims to forge a compromise between them, but because its contemplative method claims to cut across them and to redirect creative energy beyond them.[50]

Both the four voices approach and théologie totale agree that experience and practice is primary, held in appropriate balance within the breadth of Christian tradition. Theology and tradition are seen as animated rather than fixed, with practice and experience fundamental to discerning developments in and with God. Cameron writes: 'This idea of 'living Christian tradition' as a way of understanding Christian practice is key to the methodology set out here.'[51] Similarly Coakley: 'theology in its proper sense is always implicitly *in via* as practitional.'[52] This study needs a framework that holds spirituality, theology and practice tightly together, as is the imperative for 'earthed spirituality'. This is found within these analytical frameworks, with the priority given to prayer by Coakley a particularly welcome addition.

The theological method used in this project, drawing on these, will be to gather data using the tools of social science, in both espoused and operant forms, and then to engage with other sources, prayerfully and reflectively in order to seek the wisdom from each project that deserves broader acknowledgement. This framework allows the theology, developed intuitively by reflective practitioners, according to the 'transcendental' model of contextual theology described by Bevans,[53] to be considered alongside the breadth of the Christian tradition. Pears describes the importance of this process when she asks of contextual theologies:

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[49] Ibid. p.90.
[50] Ibid. p.91.
[51] Cameron, *Talking,* p.51.
[52] Coakley, S*exuality,* p.45.
[53] Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology 2nd edition* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis 2002) p.104.

> Where is the Christian tradition in these theologies which are so radically different from each other? Given their radicalism in relation to elements of Christianity, what is discernibly Christian about these theologies so that we might even speak of them as Christian?[54]

Theologies that are pushing boundaries need to be explored in the light of traditional sources and prayerfully. This will enable conclusions to be drawn about the transferability of the contextual theologies expressed by the pioneers and therefore whether their insight and practice around 'earthed spirituality' holds possibilities for mission and ministry elsewhere.

While drawing on Coakley's 'théologie totale', the focus on mission means that the critical engagement is lighter than in Coakley's own work where systematic theology is the primary goal. This project is not aiming to argue correctness, over and against other positions, but rather the presence of certain positions within the range of theologies expressed within the academy, meaning they can appropriately be drawn on by missional practitioners. The intention is to find resonance within academic writing with what was found, both in operant and espoused forms, in the field. These resonances will be explored in gentle critical engagement but without confronting those in the academy that hold a radically different position. This is consistent with the overall epistemological approach that, while not relativist, draws on postmodern insight.

All of this means that the data collected needs to be of an appropriate form to be useful to this analytical framework. Most importantly, data needs to be theological, so that it is of a kind that can be brought into dialogue with scripture, tradition and the academy. The four voices approach identifies two broad forms of field data: the theology articulated by the practitioners and core leadership teams, their 'espoused theology' and the theology embedded within practices, their 'operant theology'. Although not analysed separately for this project, data will be collected in these two forms. Qualitative methods are those best suited to generating data in this form, with interviews and focus group the primary source for the espoused theology, and participant observation alongside written evidence for the operant. Following fieldwork,

[54] Angie Pears, *Doing Contextual Theology* (Abingdon: Routledge 2010) p.174.

themes found during the process of coding will be taken into dialogue with external theological sources.

When writing each chapter, ethnographic description is followed by theological reflection on an aspect of each case. The choice for the latter is on the basis of it being both significant within the data and saying something new which relates to the core focus on earthed spirituality. The latter excluded issues within the data which have been written on by others or which don't relate directly to earthed spirituality. These are simply noted in the ethnographic description without further discussion.

5. Data collection methods

In order to generate theological data, in both espoused and operant forms, ethnographic methods were used. This means engagement with a variety of different methods to ensure there is sufficient evidence to draw conclusions that are convincing.

Yin writes that: 'Any case study finding or conclusion is likely to be more convincing and accurate if it is based on several different sources of information, following a corroboratory mode.'[55] Here, the triangulation that was discussed earlier comes into play. The data collection process will therefore include a semi-structured interview with the key pioneer; where possible, a focus group with the core leadership team; attendance at a variety of different types of event; and where available, examination of online presence and paper records such as publicity and leaflets.

Flexibility will be built into the process in order to be able to respond to promising lines of enquiry as appropriate. Creswell writes that: 'The research process for qualitative researchers is emergent. This means that the initial plan for research cannot be tightly prescribed, and that all phases of the process may change or shift after the researchers enter the field and begin to collect data.'[56]

The details will vary between the projects in order to be a best fit for each situation. Planning will take place in discussion with the lead pioneer during the three months prior to the research phase beginning, at a point where appropriate dates are in the diary of the project

[55] Yin, *Case Study,* p.115-6.
[56] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry,* p.47.

and appropriateness to research can be discussed, with contact being made significantly in advance in order to ensure that key dates don't clash with other diary commitments. Six visits will be regarded as a minimum with the hope for eight to ten over a period of two to three months. A programme is likely to include at least two main events or services, at least one of any other significant type of event, and leadership team planning and prayer meetings.

The interview and focus group will follow rather than precede attendance at events in order to ensure that observations aren't prejudiced by the conversation, and to enable reflection on what has been observed with the lead pioneer and leadership team.

Wolcott suggests considering the personality and skill set of the researcher: 'You also need to recognise personal strengths and preferences in conducting fieldwork, so that in whatever ways you execute the research role you make the fullest use of what you do best.'[57] My professional skills and training in listening, interviewing and groupwork, as well as background in both theology and ministry are all helpful for the work proposed and in keeping with the skills Yin suggests as essential.[58]

In terms of the observational element, as someone with a preference for the big picture rather than details, I am in a good position to be able to portray an intuitive and impressionistic account of events and to note connections and themes. Care will need to be taken to pay more attention to detail than might come entirely naturally, as there may be instances where details of practice contain important data about the operant theology.

Wolcott, discussing participant observation, contrasts two basic personality styles among researchers: 'Among fieldworker types, we can distinguish between the passively inclined observer who seldom or never asks a question and the aggressive researcher who does little else. Both culture and personality enter into the equation of how each of us goes about fieldwork, influencing even the way we pose our problems or devise strategies for investigating them.'[59]

As someone of the former type, participant observation will be conducted separately from interviewing. There will be gentle participation in order to blend into the event and minimise

[57] Wolcott, *Ethnography*, p.74.
[58] Yin, *Case Study*, p.69.
[59] Wolcott, *Ethnography*, p.47.

any awkwardness that may arise from the presence of a silent observer, but without any active interviewing. In order to ensure that data of the type best drawn out in different ways is included, separate occasions will be put into the research timetable, both to interview the lead pioneer and to enable a conversation within a focus group comprising the core leadership team.

Humphrey's exploration of the 'insider-outsider hyphen' is also of relevance to this project. She describes a dynamic in her research whereby she moved at various points between insider and outsider, seeing herself as a bridge between worlds which, while complex to inhabit, brings unique insight. She writes: 'An insider-outsider who cross-fertilizes the values and views spawned from different life-worlds gives birth to a new world whose contours cannot be known in advance.'[60] A similar dynamic is at play in this project. The researcher is an outsider in the community dynamics of each individual project, but an insider in broad discussions around pioneering, and in the local pioneer network.

Exploratory approach

In some projects, a tight focus is appropriate in order to ensure that data observed corresponds to a particular question. Cameron and Duce write that: 'Predefining your categories will involve a degree of researcher bias, but this is necessary to keep your research focussed.'[61] This project however, being more exploratory in style had considerable openness to observe widely and include breadth. While predefinition is helpful for a more focussed research question, for an exploratory project the researcher bias was considered too high a price to pay. Categories were not predetermined, either at data collection or coding stage, in order to allow insight to emerge from the data itself. In this sense, the project was drawing on the approach of grounded theory, which, as Denscombe puts it, aims to 'build up general theories that emerge from the data.'[62]

Denscombe, goes on to outline how the point in grounded theory is to generate theories rather than to test them. This approach has implications for choices in data collection such as how to go about observation and interview style. He writes: 'there is a preference for unstructured interviews rather than structured interviews, for the use of open-ended questions in a questionnaire rather than fixed-choice answers, and the use of fieldnotes rather

[60] Caroline Humphrey 'Insider-outsider - activating the hyphen', *Action Research* Vol.5:1 (2007) 11-26.
[61] Cameron and Duce, *Researching Practice,* p.54.
[62] Martyn Denscombe, *The Good Research Guide 4th edition* (Maidenhead, OUP 2010) p.107.

than observations based on a tick-box schedule.'[63] The preference is for open methods that produce relatively unstructured data. The following sections outline how this exploratory approach is worked out in practice within the different data gathering techniques used.

Participant observation

Observation needs to be a key method for the gathering of data, but there are still choices to be made about how much to participate as a researcher; frequency and mix of types of occasion included within the research timetable; and method for recording the data generated by observation.

Methodology authors are divided in their opinion about how systematic the method of recording information should be. For example, Simpson and Tuson advocate a pre-planned systematic approach. They write: 'The personal experience of just looking must be transformed into a public event by the systematic recording of what we see and by subsequent analysis and interpretation.'[64] Later they claim that: 'No research claims will stand up if they are based simply on impressionistic accounts of what someone saw.'[65]

In direct contrast is Wolcott who finds this a rather narrow approach that is likely to miss important data that doesn't fit into such a systematic framework. He writes that: 'Neophyte researchers indoctrinated so rigorously in rigor that they no longer appreciate or trust what each of us accomplishes through personal experience may need to be reminded of the human capacity for observation and to recognize that ultimately everything we know comes to us that way.'[66]

It seems likely that the difference between approach depends to a large extent on what questions are being asked and what kind of insight is being sought through the fieldwork. While it would be possible in theory to generate a rigorous schedule of observing certain phenomena at fixed time intervals, it is unlikely that this would produce the most useful data for the question in hand. It is further true that in attending to the schedule, other data is likely to be missed that could prove more important to the research question, and also that a

[63] Denscombe, *Research,* p.111.
[64] Mary Simpson and Jennifer Tuson, *Using Observations in Small-Scale Research revised edition* (Glasgow: SCRE 2003) p.2.
[65] Simpson and Tuson, *Observations,* p.65.
[66] Wolcott, *Ethnography*, p.46.

significant amount of work could be generated for minimal results. Wolcott in a discussion of the change in attitude towards systematic practice over time notes that systematic data collection: 'ran its course as even fervent advocates came to realize the rather low yield of insight for the effort involved.'[67] All of this together seems to suggest the appropriateness of an impressionistic rather than systematic approach.

A further challenge to a rigorous approach is the suspicion within post-modernity of any claim to objectivity. Wolcott writes that: 'Today, we no longer have to pretend to a level of objectivity that was once fashionable; it is sufficient to recognize and reveal our subjectivity as best we can, thus to maximize the potential of fieldwork as personal experience rather than to deny it.'[68] Moschella makes a similar point when she states that: 'Ethnography was once considered an objective social science... but it is now widely recognized that human social life cannot really be studied in its natural state, undisturbed by the researcher.'[69] In this way of thinking, there is a recognition that there is always bias, that it is as likely to occur in the choices made about so-called objective systems as in less structured approaches, and that it is better to acknowledge it honestly and work with it than to make pretence of objectivity. Cameron and Duce share this perspective, significantly so since the four voice analysis tool which is proposed is one associated with their work. They write: 'A more open-ended observation draws upon an ethnographic approach... The researcher's goal is to experience events in the way in which people in the study experience them, recording not just what people say but what people do... It does not aim to be replicable.'[70]

Level of participation is another factor that needs to be considered. Care needs to be taken not to allow participation to influence the proceedings to take a different outcome than would have been the case if not present. However, there are times when non-participation results in awkwardness as the group feel observed by a researcher. Dewalt and Dewalt write on the sliding scale between participant and observer, with challenges and advantages associated with each choice. They write: 'The key point is that researchers should be aware of the compromises in access, objectivity, and community expectations that are being made in any particular place along the continuum.'[71]

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[67] Ibid. p.36.
[68] Ibid, p.46.
[69] Moschella, *Ethnography*, p.26.
[70] Cameron and Duce, *Researching Practice,* p.51.
[71] Kathleen M. Dewalt and Billie R. Dewalt, *Participant Observation* (Walnut Creek CA: Altamira 2002) p.23.

Gentle participation on the whole seems advisable as it enables the researcher to blend into the background rather than adding an artificial element into the situation and thus changing behaviours significantly. In situations with larger groups, participation was more passive as the group dynamic didn't necessitate more. Other situations required much more active participation for the researcher's presence to feel comfortable for the group.

Observations will be recorded in a field journal. Brief notes or phrases will be made in the field. These will be typed into fuller notes the same day, or the following day for an evening event, when memory is still fresh.

Interviews

A semi-structured interview style will be used as this will allow plenty of opportunity to explore the interviewees' practice, theology and spirituality without prejudicing the process through too tight a schedule. This will be audio recorded. Kvale and Brinkmann say of a semi-structured interview that: 'It is defined as an interview with the purpose of obtaining descriptions of the life world of the interviewee in order to interpret the meaning of the described phenomena.'[72] This is the kind of data that is helpful to an ethnographic project.

For an exploratory project, openness is preferable to answers that are tightly structured. Again, this indicates that semi-structured interview style is the most appropriate. Kvale and Brinkmann describe the value in different kinds of interviews:

> An *exploratory* interview is usually open, with little pre-planned structure. In this case the interviewer introduces an issue… then follows up on the subject's answers and seeks new information about and new angles on the topic. Interviews that *test hypotheses* of group differences tend to be more structured.[73]

Questioning is under three broad headings, starting by inviting the interviewee to tell the story of how the work came about, leading into conversation about the practical and day-to-day life of the ministry. The second section explores with the interviewee the rootedness of the vision within Christian faith and theology; and the third explores the language used in faith

[72] Steinar Kvale and Svend Brinkmann, *Interviews* (London: Sage 2nd edition 2009) p.3.
[73] Kvale and Brinkmann, *Interviews*, p.106.

conversations. An invitation is given at the end to the interviewee to add anything they consider important that has been missed within the flow of conversation. Sub-questions are minimal, with the interview mostly following the flow of conversation. However, opportunity is taken to explore queries generated during the fieldwork, specific to each case.

An engaged approach is unavoidable as all of the lead pioneers are already known to the researcher. This should prove to be an advantage rather than a disadvantage as the move into open and honest conversation should proceed faster than would be the case when approaching a project as a stranger. Kvale and Brinkmann here speak of the process of warming up an interview to the point where it flows freely: 'The interviewees will want to have a grasp of the interviewer before they allow themselves to talk freely and expose their experiences and feelings to a stranger.'[74]

Some of this work will still be necessary as there may be a felt vulnerability as something as personal as pioneering is discussed, but the existing relationship should aid rather than hinder the process. This vulnerability is key to generating valuable insight through the interview, it can't be considered as a scientific process. Kvale and Brinkmann again: 'In the interview, knowledge is created "inter" the points of view of the interviewer and the interviewee.'[75] Denscombe also discussed personal involvement in an interview, advocating it particularly when the interviewer seeks to empower the interviewee:

> Under these circumstances, the researcher will be inclined to show emotion, to respond with feeling and to engage in a true dialogue with the interviewee. The researcher will become fully involved as a person with feelings, with experiences and with knowledge that can be shared with the interviewee.[76]

He goes on to warn that this interview style is considered unconventional.[77] Nevertheless it is considered the right approach for this project, partly due to the existing relationships with the interviewees, and partly having already drawn the conclusion that scientific objectivity is an unrealistic goal. It seems that it is a style within keeping of the overall style of this project.

[74] Ibid. p.128.
[75] Ibid. p.123.
[76] Denscombe, *Research,* p.180.
[77] Ibid. p.180.

When it comes to transcription, there is no need within this project to include details of hesitations and repetitions. The purpose of the transcript is to record the conversation so that data is preserved that can be explored in dialogue with voices from the academy and tradition. The researcher will do her own transcription. This is considered time well spent as though time consuming, the process allows the interview to be heard again and enables reflection on what has been discussed. Kvale and Brinkmann discuss transcription choices, stating that: 'the answer will depend on the intended use of the transcript, for example whether for a detailed linguistic or conversational analysis or for reporting the subject's accounts in a readable public story.'[78] This project is not proposing any detailed linguistic analysis but simply needs a readable account.

Focus groups

Focus groups, which like the interview will be audio recorded, offer the opportunity to explore the research themes with the wider leadership team as well as the lead pioneer. It also allows for the perspectives of a variety of individuals to interact in creative ways, thus generating new insight. Cameron and Duce write that: 'Focus groups can access information that is not easily shared in one-to-one interviews through people bouncing ideas off each other and sharpening and refining their views in response to others.'[79] The intent is not to control the conversation but rather: 'to create an environment in which people feel relaxed enough to share spontaneously their attitudes, experiences and values relating to a given topic.'[80]

The discussion will not be tightly controlled. Core questions will be asked in order to keep the discussion focused on the research question, and some gentle facilitating to prevent the discussion going too far off topic, but with enough time and space allowed for discussion around the issue, which has the potential to reveal greater insight than would be the case if a tighter focus was attempted. Cameron and Duce write that: 'the facilitator of a focus group has less control beyond asking open, probing questions to keep the discussion on track.'[81]

Focus groups opened by inviting each participant to introduce themselves by name and to say something about their involvement with the project. Questions to keep the conversation on track had the same broad categories for discussion in mind as the interview schedule, though

[78] Kvale and Brinkmann, *Interviews*, p.181.
[79] Cameron and Duce, *Researching Practice,* p.110.
[80] Ibid. p.109.
[81] Ibid. p.110.

with considerable flexibility to adjust to both the flow of conversation and the culture of the group.

Participation will be determined by membership of the core leadership team, meaning that the lead pioneer is inevitably the gate-keeper. This shouldn't be problematic as the leadership team should be a discrete and identifiable group with a clear boundary, meaning that gate-keeper influence on the focus group membership is negligible. As with the interviews, transcription will be to a readable account, with transcription choices being made accordingly.

In the event, a combination of ethical and practical concerns made a focus group in Stroud unworkable: it proved impossible to find a date outside the regular pattern of meetings and the group was unwilling to sacrifice the content of a regular meetings to give it to the focus group. It wasn't considered ethically appropriate to push them on this latter reluctance.

Documentary data

Documentary data has potential to be a useful additional source of data. Moschella writes that: 'Ethnographers also read a great deal. Historical records, worship bulletins, newsletters, and by-laws are raw materials to examine.'[82] In this study, since none of the projects are prolific producers of documentary evidence, documentary data is being considered as a supplementary source that will increase the strength of the evidence through additional triangulation. Potential lines of enquiry include modest websites or webpages and social media presence.

6. Coding and Data analysis

Coding will use an open style, as appropriate for an exploratory project, with the intent to minimise researcher led predetermination of categories. Marshall and Rossman, drawing on Crabtree and Miller, name the style as 'emergent intuitive', contrasting it with a 'prefigured technical' style which organises and predetermines in advance.[83] In 'immersion strategies', categories are not prefigured, and 'rely heavily on the researcher's intuitive and interpretive capacities.'[84]

[82] Moschella, *Ethnography,* p.26.
[83] Catherine Marshall and Gretchen Rossman, *Designing Qualitative Research* (London: Sage 2011) p.209.
[84] Marshall and Rossman, *Qualitative,* p.208.

This is appropriate for the overall style of the project. In the case study by Cory Labanow included by Swinton and Mowat, the intuitive engagement of the researcher, brings existing experience to the question, and is celebrated, following Gadamer's hermeneutic: 'the interpreter is an inevitable part of the interpretive process… this dynamic is a prerequisite to understanding, not an obstacle to it.'[85]

This open approach to coding will mean a two-stage process. Initially, within each file of field data a code is assigned for themes within each paragraph. The same code is used when the theme recurred in other places, in order to minimise code proliferation.[86] However, no limit is made to the number of codes, with new ones added as frequently as needed, led by the data. The first cycle process is relatively systematic within an emergent intuitive system.

Where possible, *In Vivo* codes are used: a word from interview or field notes used directly as a code. Saldana, in his manual on coding, recommends this approach particularly for interview transcripts.[87] Descriptive coding is also used, particularly when wanting a code to cover a phrase or theme when no single word is available in the data itself. Saldana considers this an approach particularly well suited to ethnographic data.[88] This combination of more than one approach means coding is best described as eclectic. Saldana considers this an appropriate approach for a project with multiple different types of source, including field notes, interview and documentary data.[89]

This second cycle of the process involves giving particular attention to codes that recurred in order to identify recurrent themes and patterns. This is a form of Pattern coding, which Saldana describes as: 'a way of grouping those summaries into a smaller number of categories, themes or concepts.'[90] The second cycle is less systematic, identifying broader themes through a process of reading and rereading the coded data, and involving both prayer and the subconscious. Saldana, in outlining the variety of approaches to coding refers to DeWalt & DeWalt's assessment that: 'your subconscious, not just your coding system, develops connections that lead to flashes of insight.' Within the epistemological approach of this project, and drawing on Sarah Coakley's 'théologie totale', the subconscious is also opened up

[85] Cory Labanow, 'Researching a Local Church: Exploring an 'Emergent Church'', in Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM 2006) p.136.
[86] Johnny Saldana*, The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers,* 4th edition (London: SAGE 2016) p.78.
[87] Saldana, *Coding,* p106-7.
[88] Ibid. p.102.
[89] Ibid. p.213.
[90] Ibid. p.236.

in prayer to deeper wisdom.[91]

Once themes have been determined, they are taken into dialogue with various conversation partners, through both physical conversation and interaction with written sources, the latter both theological and sociological. Engagement with written sources uses the theological method described above.

Conversation partners

In addition to the written sources brought into conversation with field data are the people with whom personal dialogue is possible. Scharen and Vigen write that: 'At its best, ethnographic work embodies a conversation among numerous and varied voices. Rather than simply presenting an individual's scholarly reflection or observations, it reflects an engaged dialogue with others.'[92]

Core to this aspect of the research is the overlap between the research project and professional practice: as is appropriate for a professional doctorate, there has been a natural cross-fertilisation between insights learned through the research and day to day interactions. While there isn't formal dialogue as part of the research structure, informal dialogue is considerable as questions arising out of the research are articulated in various professional groups. Significant within this is the network of local pioneers that I facilitate; in addition are clergy and church members who I engage with in both informal conversation and training events. Also significant as informal conversation partners are colleagues in my team. I am grateful to all these for their conversation, which has been lifegiving for all involved.

Moschella, in her discussion of the importance of involving the perspectives of others in the research offers suggestions about how this might be done. She explores various options including the suggestion that: 'ethnographic studies could also be used as case studies for peer groups.'[93] This is not a formal part of the research design, but is happening naturally as research and professional role overlap. To date, this has been most significant in the area of Forest Church, partly due to the chronological precedent in the research process. Considerable training has been offered that draws on the research. In addition, other professional areas of work where I am drawing on my research include the toolkit I am

[91] Coakley, *Sexuality,* p.xvii.
[92] Scharen and Vigen, *Ethnography,* p.21-22.
[93] Moschella, *Ethnography*, p.20.

developing for churches wanting to explore 'Asset Based Community Development'; various aspects of environmental activism; and my engagement with the national 'estate churches' network for conversation about evangelism in financially disadvantaged communities.

7. Ethical issues

The ethical stance of this project needs to begin with a respect for all who are encountered during the fieldwork process, whether in leadership or in attendance at events. This includes taking their opinion seriously, being aware of power dynamics, and ensuring that the process overall gives back as well as receiving from the cases. Creswell writes that:

> During data collection, the researcher does not further marginalize the participants, but respects the participants and the sites for research. Further, researchers provide reciprocity by giving or paying back those who participate in research... Researchers are sensitive to power imbalances during all facets of the research process.[94]

Self-awareness will need to be a part of the process. Scharen and Vigen consider that: 'Reflexivity is of paramount importance as a way to guard against violating those from whom we seek to learn.'[95] Journaling and conversation partners are proposed as key techniques that will be used to support such reflexivity. Physical conversation partners have already been discussed but it should be noted that published writing can also be an aid to reflexivity.

Information will be shared with the projects at appropriate points to ensure that they are fully informed, and they will have explicit permission to withdraw from the process should it prove necessary. Moschella writes of information sharing that: 'It involves conveying three basic kinds of information to participants: information about you and your study, information about the research process itself and any known risks or benefits to the participants, and information about what you intend do with the data you collect and the narrative you construct.'[96] Primary to this is the information that will be shared in advance of the start of fieldwork with the decision makers.

Whether or not the researcher will be advertised as such on attendance at events will depend on the size and nature of each event. In smaller groups, she will be introduced at the start,

[94] Cresswell, *Qualitative Inquiry*, p.34.
[95] Scharen and Vigen, *Ethnography,* p.20.
[96] Moschella, *Ethnography,* p.92.

with appropriate information shared about the nature of the project. In larger and more public events there appears to be no ethical reason why it is necessary to publicise the fact that there is a researcher present, particularly as the research is into the theology, priorities and practice of the leadership team rather than into the participants themselves. The gentle participation proposed has been chosen to ensure that the researcher's presence doesn't upset the dynamics in a way that has a negative effect on the project.

There are some vulnerable adults involved with the cases, with a particular focus in one, and children present at times in all of them. In order to empower the community members, vulnerable adults are included within the leadership of one project. This means that the focus groups with the core leadership team in this project is likely to include individuals whose mental health is fragile and/or who have a difficult personal history.

It is appropriate to include those individuals in any activity that involves the full leadership team. In fact to exclude them would be to disempower them and to send a message to them that undermines the positive work of the projects. Care will be taken through the facilitation role to ensure that the conversation doesn't stray into areas that would be inappropriate for vulnerable people. The researcher has DBS clearance. Other than those involved in leadership, there are no other plans to interview vulnerable adults or children.

Discussing the research findings with each project is considered of ethical importance. Scharen and Vigen write that: 'In all, authentic collaboration means that ethnographers are accountable to those from whom they learn and that they ought to show them what they write, or discuss their writing and conclusions with them.'[97] Best practice will be followed in giving feedback, to ensure that it is a positive experience for the projects. This will be primarily in order to support their work rather than as a subsequent level to the fieldwork. Yin writes: 'the main informants usually expect to receive some feedback from you about their case. Your value to them is as an external observer, and you should be prepared to provide such feedback.'[98]

The finished report will be shared with the project before submission, and in the event of publication they will be contacted and given the opportunity to edit, thus ensuring that

[97] Scharen and Vigen, *Ethnography,* p.24.
[98] Yin, *Case Study*, p.93.

sensitivities are dealt with appropriately. Anonymity cannot be guaranteed to the lead pioneer as they will be identifiable from the project description, but they will have the right to veto quotations that have been included. Focus group participants can be offered more anonymity although quotations will be identifiable to a known small group. A draft will be shared before it is finalised to ensure that any particular sensitivities are dealt with appropriately.

A final potential concern is that the focus on three pioneers from a network would result in an uneven distribution of the researcher's professional responsibilities towards the wider network of pioneers. In the event, this has not been problematic, with other pioneers continuing to engage comfortably in the usual way. The only change from prior to the research has been occasional sharing of insight from research, informally as part of the conversation in network gatherings. This has been received as a positive contribution to the discussion rather than as distraction.

8. Final words

Creswell writes of qualitative research's 'ability to transform the world.'[99] While no project can do so on its own, the hope is that this project may play a small part, alongside others, in bringing to wider attention some significant work undertaken by pioneers that is transformative, in small ways, in their locations and contexts. Small things, when multiplied become a movement, and movements are transformative. If this research encourages, supports and enables the church to play a more significant part in transforming our world, underpinned by a theological understanding, then it will have achieved its purpose.

'Earthed spirituality' appears to be well placed to enable such transformation, rooted as it is in key contemporary issues around environmentalism and the thriving of both individuals and communities. In exploring the language and practices of pioneers and examining their theological basis, the hope is that this research will strengthen the foundation of this approach, thus enabling advocacy for a wider adoption within churches.

[99] Cresswell, *Qualitative Inquiry,* p.44.

C1: Pioneering evangelism: seeing the whole picture.[1]

Introduction

What is the point of evangelism? What are we hoping to achieve? So often, the way evangelism is spoken about gives the impression that the ultimate point is to grow the church. We are concerned about the statistics about church attendance, so in order to reverse the trend we need to prioritise evangelism. Or perhaps we are concerned about the eternal destination of individual souls? But with conversations about the latter complicated against the backdrop of religious pluralism, we might need an alternative perspective.

In my work for Gloucester Diocese, I am concerned with the breadth of mission, from social responsibility through to evangelism. I am conscious that while I, alongside the pioneer ministers in the Diocese, integrate these things and understand mission holistically, across the church in general, social responsibility and evangelism often seem to pull in different directions. My concern in this article therefore is to explore why this might be and to suggest some ways that the Good News might be expressed that keeps social responsibility front and centre in the message that is being proclaimed.

This is less of a new project than I realised when I started. One hundred years ago, Walter Rauschenbusch wrote this: 'But even today many ministers have a kind of dumb-bell system of thought, with the social gospel at one end and individual salvation at the other end, and an attenuated connection between them.'[2] He advocated for a rounded system of doctrine able to hold the two together, but the problem persists. There have indeed been developments in theology, notably Liberation Theology, that take this forward, however, the division remains pervasive and the project needs further work. Perhaps the distinctive theology arising out of the work of pioneering will help us take significant steps forward with the work of integration.

This article begins by outlining the nature of the problem of evangelism in our contemporary context. It explores the distinctive approach of pioneer ministry as an avenue for widening our evangelistic message and some suggestions are made about theological themes to explore. This forms a part of a longer research project that is exploring 'earthed spirituality' within the practice of pioneer ministers and will take this question into ethnographic fieldwork.

[1] An earlier version of this article was published in the practitioner/pioneer facing journal, *ANVIL*, in 2017.

[2] Walter Rauschenbusch, *A theology for the social gospel* (reprint by Martino 2011. New York: Macmillan 1918) p.9.

Before I proceed, I should state that evangelism is being defined here as any verbal communication of an aspect of the Good News of Christ. This sits roughly in the middle of the range of definitions, which range from the broadest which claim all proclamation of the Gospel as evangelism, whether spoken or rooted in action, through to the narrowest which only uses the term when there is a specific challenge to commitment.[3] I will also assume an approach which takes seriously the ethical questions associated with evangelism and is founded in positive principles of reciprocity, honesty, humility and respect.[4]

Changing context, changing language

The language that is frequently the norm for evangelism is one inherited from a very different culture and context, in particular the Christendom context of the eighteenth century: the era of influential evangelicals such as George Whitefield and the Wesleys. Their use of language and turn of phrase were contextually appropriate, but when we use the same inherited language without regard for our changed context, we run into difficulties. In particular, the way in which our cultural realities of individualism, consumerism and post-Christendom change the way in which the same words are heard.

This is particularly so in recent decades. Derek Tidball, in his interview for Maxwell Wood's 2011 PhD, reflects on how the cultural change of the 1960's has necessitated a change in how we speak of the cross. Guilt and punishment have receded in cultural importance, whereas restoration is very current. He says: 'So actually the world does become very different and still talking about the Cross in those terms seems to relate to a past decade at least, if not a past generation.'[5]

Within Christendom, to invite an individual to take Christian discipleship seriously was also to invite them to participate in a more fully Christian way within Christendom society. The message we have inherited which has individual conversion at its heart was born within this context and had a deep sense of the societal implications of the Gospel. However, in our current post-Christendom context we cannot assume that the societal implications will

[3] For examples of the range see Bryan Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom* (Grand Rapids MI: Brazos 2007) p.21. and Philip R. Meadows, *Entering the divine embrace: towards an ancient-future Wesleyan theology of evangelism,* Wesley and Methodist Studies Vol.3 (2011) p.7.

[4] Roger Greenway, 'The Ethics of Evangelism' *Calvin Theological Journal* 28:1 (1993) 147-54.

[5] Maxwell Wood, "Penal Substitution in the Construction of British Evangelical Identity: Controversies in the Doctrine of the Atonement in the Mid-2000s," (PhD diss. University of Durham, 2011)

automatically be understood, particularly against the background of an individualistic worldview.

Referring to 'Enlightenment ideals of individual autonomy,' Suderman notes the roots of individualism within modernity: 'individual freedom in the modern liberalist sense… means being free from others, and individual means being separate and apart from others.'[6] He concludes that this individual freedom does not allow a community to come together and embody peace, and is therefore not compatible with the Christian calling. He writes: 'The whole Christian imagination, therefore, becomes shaped by these modern notions which have infiltrated and corrupted the church and its witness, the most extreme being the relegating of the religious to the private realm.'[7]

The early evangelicals were working in the era referred to by Suderman, containing the early seeds of what became the individualism and consumerism that we know today. They contextualised the gospel successfully, in a way that was appropriate for their time. However, when we use the same language within our different context where the early seeds of individualism have become fully grown, we find that we are inadvertently proclaiming the 'gospel' of the individual.

Meadows as he discusses the early evangelical paradigm writes: 'There lies within the paradigm itself the seeds of its own undoing, especially in its captivity to the individualistic bent of modernity.'[8] He discusses how easily within our own context, the invitation to personal salvation can become distorted into private spirituality, and how conversion can come to mean merely an inward journey rather than a visibly transformed life. He continues: 'The danger here is that such anthropocentric goals can be attained with or without the activity of God, and made available for individual consumption with or without the summons to costly discipleship.'[9] The final danger, he writes, is the temptation for churches to downplay the cost of discipleship and think merely of the effectiveness of evangelistic practices in terms of making the kind of shallow convert that might most quickly fill our churches.

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[6] Andrew Suderman, 'Overcoming modernity's individualism: Becoming a community of peace in the face of violence', *Verbum et Ecclesia* Vol.32:2 (2011)
[7] Suderman, Overcoming, p.2.
[8] Meadows *Ancient-future,* p.5-6.
[9] Ibid. p.5-6.

Societal transformation was in fact the aim of the early evangelicals. Their evangelism was deeply connected with a desire to see society transformed in the light of the Gospel. However, as Methodist theologian, Abraham explores, the language they used laid the foundations for a disconnect between individual salvation and societal transformation. He charts how transformation dropped from the priorities towards the end of the 19th century. The result is that: 'there is little left but a message of sin and salvation that has relegated eschatology to the last days of history, as we can see happening in the fragile theology of D. L. Moody. Modern evangelists for the most part inherit this anthropocentric emphasis.'[10]

A solution to this problem, is to be explicit about the fact that it is the kingdom of God rather than personal conversion, that is the *telos* or end goal of evangelism.[11] The Kingdom of God is described by Newbigin as 'the reign of God, his justice and peace.' Abraham was the first to suggest this shift of focus. In his classic 1989 text *'The Logic of Evangelism'*, he wrote: 'Over against those who construe evangelism as the proclamation of the gospel and against those who construe it as church growth, the thesis presented and argued here is that we should construe evangelism as primary initiation into the kingdom of God.'[12] This is critical to this discussion, as the focus on kingdom automatically ensures that the gospel is communicated and received as something that is more than just about *me*. When received this way, as initiation into the kingdom rather than a gift for an individual to receive, then the dumb-bells referred to by Rauschenbusch are connected from the start. The societal outworking of discipleship isn't a difficult add-on but rather a part of the Good News itself.

If we are serious about having kingdom at the heart of our evangelism, then our language as we speak of the Good News of Christ needs to change. We need to be careful not to be subtly reinforcing the worst habits of our society as we speak about what God can do for an individual. Sadly, too much of the evangelistic literature available falls into this trap.

An example is the 2016 publication from Scripture Union, a mission organisation well respected by the mainstream denominations. The tract states that:

> Being a Christian is knowing and believing in the… God who loves us… God gave us the freedom to choose and the freedom to love. But instead of loving God we chose to

[10] William J. Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans 1989) *p*.59.
[11] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (London: SPCK 1989) p.134.
[12] Abraham, *Logic,* p.13.

> ignore him… So that's what being a Christian is really about. Knowing and loving a God who loves and cares for us so much that, even though it cost him everything, he made a way for us to be with him forever.[13]

The focus is on how knowing God in *my* life is liberating for *me,* but lacks a community element, without mention of what sin might mean other than not loving God. This is despite the fact that the different life stance involved with Christian commitment is frequently life giving, and Good News in itself.

Stone, writing on this approach to evangelism considers that: 'One of the enormous challenges of Christian evangelism today is that in order to learn once again to bear the faithful and embodied witness to the Spirit's creative "social work," it may have to reject as heretical the pervasive characterization of salvation as "a personal relationship with Jesus."'[14] This isn't to say that our relationship with God isn't personal, but rather that the invitation is not into a one-to-one relationship but instead into communion with all creation in God. Our language needs to reflect this: the short-hand of "a personal relationship with Jesus" is all too easily co-opted into an individualistic agenda. In addition, the fact that I am not really liberated until I have allowed my relationship with God to free me in my relationships with others, and my relationship to wealth and consumerism is rarely included within the core evangel.

A part of the difficulty we are facing is how little is known of Christianity by the people around us. When Wesley and his contemporaries were preaching, there was better knowledge about what it meant to commit to Christ. Murray Williams has reflected extensively on the implications of post-Christendom for Christian mission. In his words: 'In Western culture, until recently, the story was known and church was a familiar institution. Evangelism meant encouraging those who already knew the story to live by it and inviting those already familiar with church to participate actively.'[15]

When the story isn't known, our short-hand presentations can be heard in very different ways to what is intended. Whereas a call to repentance and to return to Christ is heard positively by someone who has a background understanding of core Christian values and is being called back to taking them seriously, it is heard very differently without that understanding and against the background of the individualism and consumerism proclaimed by our society.

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[13] Catalina Echeverri, *What is being a Christian all about?* (Bletchley: Scripture Union 2016)
[14] Stone, *Evangelism,* p.17.
[15] Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom* (Bletchley: Paternoster 2004) p.2.

Likewise, the unconditional love of God needs to be known before repentance and forgiveness can be received as Good News. Heard without this it feels like judgement and is frequently rejected as such. On the other hand, a message that speaks about the value in an individual's life of personal relationship with Jesus, heard against the background of consumerism and individualism, easily becomes spirituality to aid personal wellbeing rather than a call to discipleship. All of this means that in our post-Christendom context, the evangelism that is needed to communicate effectively is very different from that which was appropriate within Christendom.

Finney, in exploring this question, writes: 'The question many modern Christians need to face is, 'Have we assumed that the good news which is rightly given to Antioch is also appropriate for Athens?' Have we taken it for granted that a gospel whose content was suitable for the church is satisfactory when the message is taken out of the church?'[16] He writes here of church, but might just as easily have written of Christendom. Assertions of faith are heard differently from a post-Christendom perspective. He continues:

> Our 'church' gospel has focused on the great truths of incarnation and atonement, of human sin and salvation. Indeed... in some evangelical circles it has almost been reduced to a formula. Church people and those who were brought up in the life of the church are familiar with the words preachers use and the worldview from which they speak... But that seems to cut little ice with those not brought up in Christian surroundings.[17]

The full implications of our post-Christendom context are drawn out by Murray Williams. He considers that for evangelism to be appropriate within post-Christendom society, we much discard some previous practices. He continues: 'Disavowal involves recognising that once effective strategies are no longer appropriate, repentance for attitudes and methods that were inconsistent with the gospel and rooting out vestiges that distort evangelism today.'[18] This means we face the complex task of disavowing much that is widely assumed and accepted within the practice of evangelism.

[16] John Finney, *Emerging Evangelism* (London: DLT 2004) p.98.
[17] Finney, *Emerging,* p.98-99.
[18] Murray, *Post-Christendom,* p.227.

This change of approach is likely to be uncomfortable as, on the surface at least, it appears to challenge core beliefs. Many Christians have been exposed to the idea that faith should be expressed in particular ways, the formula referred to by Finney, indeed the same one that was quoted in the Scripture Union tract.[19] It takes courage to face the question.

Towards a holistic evangel

Having outlined the nature of the difficulty we face, the remainder of this article suggests some potential ways forwards, new ways of speaking about the Good News in Christ which are more deeply lifegiving, having avoided the traps of over-contextualisation. Pioneers have been significant in beginning to develop this new faith language. The contextual approach that is at the core of this approach to ministry means that pioneers are always engaged in a dialogue between the tradition as they have received it and the concerns, questions and thought patterns of those they encounter. This means that they are facing the difficult questions expressed above and seeking a way forwards. Some themes are beginning to emerge, which, though space doesn't allow for full theological discussion, are briefly signposted here: in depth discussion will follow fieldwork.

Holistic

Post-Christendom evangelism is not about seeking one new theme to replace one old one. Rather, as Murray puts it, we are: 'searching for multiple contact points with the gospel in a culture no longer dominated (as Christendom was) by guilt, employing the full range of New Testament imagery and learning to relate the story to contemporary angst and yearnings.'[20] That means flexible conversations with an awareness of the fullness of the evangel so that gospel connections can be made with the life stories people are sharing.

Bosch shares this perspective, writing that: 'We cannot capture the evangel and package it in four or five "principles". There is no universally applicable master plan for evangelism, no definitive list of truths people only have to embrace in order to be saved.'[21] Rather, he considers that: 'We can only witness in humble boldness and bold humility to our understanding of that gospel.'[22] Post-Christendom evangelism therefore is often about

[19] Finney, *Emerging,* p.98.
[20] Murray, *Post-Christendom,* p.229-30.
[21] Bosch, *Transforming,* p.420.
[22] Bosch, *Transforming,* p.420.

responsive conversation rather than a fixed message. Conversation flows and connection points are sought between life experience and the gospel.

This study has a particular focus, which is to seek those strands that keep kingdom as the end-goal, supporting the partnership of evangelism and social responsibility and avoiding association with the anti-gospel messages inherent in individualism and consumerism. The broadening of connection points advocated above can fall into the trap of offering each individual what they need in a way which is once again held captive to individualism. There are, however, multiple themes that avoid this divergence. Murray considers that:

> Reconfiguring evangelism will also mean rediscovering the gospel of the kingdom: liberation rather than personal fulfilment, reconciliation rather than justification, transformation rather than stability; focussing on hope rather than faith... Who knows what good news a church on the margins might rediscover.[23]

All these are key gospel themes, not new, but a rebalancing to avoid the traps set by our cultural context and to keep a broad vision of God's kingdom. The first part of this article explored the importance of clarity about the *telos*, the end goal of evangelism. The broader vision reminds us to see beyond church growth or the salvation of individuals, and enables a holistic integration of lives lived in radical discipleship with what we articulate concerning our faith.

Liberative

We are offered freedom in Christ: it is beneficial to stop and consider what this means and whether there are more freedoms offered than freedom from guilt, for all that the latter is part of the liberation. Freedom is also offered in all aspects of life which bind us, whether physical, emotional or spiritual.

Liberation theology is in the background of this discussion and informs the work of many who are working with those for whom economic poverty is a reality. Andy Freeman expresses how it resonates within society: 'This commitment to the least in society is particularly resonant for

[23] Murray, *Post-Christendom,* p.232.

a generation growing with an increased sense of commitment to justice.'[24] This means that there is a readiness to receive as good news insight that speaks liberation into these situations.

Boff, as a liberation theologian writes of how the gospel rightly prioritises the poor: 'This comes from the essence of God who, being life, feels attracted to those who have least life, because they are denied life by oppression… they are the first beneficiaries of the new order that is the reign of God.'[25] Counter to the untruths of our society, this prioritisation of the poor is also liberative for those in better economic situations as we learn to set aside society's barriers between people. Boff continues: 'To live this dimension of love is to be free. Offense, humiliation, and violence keep us imprisoned in bitterness, and often with a spirit of revenge. Forgiveness frees us from these bonds, makes us fully free. Free to love.'[26]

Rohr shares this perspective from the North American context, understanding that: 'Any overly protected life does not know deeply or broadly. So Jesus did not call us to the poor and to the pain just to be helpful to them, although that is wonderful too. He called us there for fundamental solidarity with the real and for the transformation of ourselves.'[27] He continues: 'The ones we think we are saving end up saving us and, in the process, redefine the very meaning of salvation.'[28]

Williams also considers personal transformation, arguing that the gospel: 'cannot aim at *satisfying* rather than *transforming* people.'[29] He discusses how peace and comfort in tragedy is a part of God's grace, but only within the context of its being a word about the Lordship of Christ in all realms of life, then continues: 'This personal response that is called for is a call to service. Jesus' invitation to follow him is asking people whom they want to serve. Evangelism is therefore call to service – to win people to Jesus is to win their allegiance to God's priorities.'[30]

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[24] Andy Freeman, 'Francis of Assisi', in Cathy Ross and Jonny Baker (eds) *Pioneering spirituality* (Norwich: Canterbury Press 2015) p.86.

[25] Leonardo Boff, *Christianity in a nutshell,* transl. Phillip Berryman, (Maryknoll NY: Orbis 2013) p.57.

[26] Boff, N*utshell,* p.58.

[27] Richard Rohr, *Dancing Standing Still* (Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press 2014)

[28] Rohr, *Dancing,* p.52.

[29] Andrew Williams, 'Re-experiencing Evangelism in the City'*, International Review of Mission* 105:1 (2016) p.28.

[30] Williams, 'Re-experiencing'*,* p.28.

The process is not fast or easy as we are held tightly by the bindings of our cultural norms. Stone describes the process of moving into freedom in Christ as detoxification: 'Given the intense and ongoing culture of conversion within which we live today, there is no reason to believe that conversion to Christianity will take place any faster. Indeed, there is every reason to believe that the process will resemble an intensive and sustained process of detoxification.'[31]

The metaphor that Brueggemann employs is helpful here. He contrasts the liberative story of Christ with the unhealthy stories that can bind our freedom. He considers that evangelism is: 'to tell "the old, old story," but to do so in ways that impact every aspect of our contemporary life, public and personal. The stories themselves are vehicles whereby all things are made new.'[32]

He writes that: 'we come with our imagination already saturated with other stories to which we have already made trusting (even if unwitting) commitment.'[33] These stories: 'lack the life-giving power of holiness out beyond ourselves to which we must have access if we are to live fully human lives.'[34] Evangelism then is to notice that these stories are not adequate and to offer an alternative.

This detoxification as we re-orient around a different story is both hard work and immensely worthwhile and liberating. The service of Christ can sometimes be expressed as if service was a burden, another thing on the to-do list for busy people, and therefore not something that can be received as Good News. However, when framed differently as orientation around a life-giving story, then there is freedom to be found. This is truly Good News and therefore helpful content for evangelism.

Hope-filled

Hope is a much needed and rarely seen commodity. Prominent in the UK as I write are the environmental crisis; Brexit discussions and covid-19, against the backdrop of austerity cuts to essential services. Christianity speaks hope beyond what can be seen, rooted in the eternal purpose of God for the created order. Yet often we speak as if hope was merely about our

[31] Stone, *Evangelism,* p.259.
[32] Walter Bruggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism* (Nashville TN: Abingdon Press 1993) p.11.
[33] Bruggemann, *Evangelism,* p.11.
[34] Ibid. p.11.

eternal destination. Hope is essential Good News for all, whether for a community worker dealing with the aftermath of cuts to services; someone struggling to make life work; or someone for whom life is comfortable but who is troubled by items in the news.

Stone links hope back, once again, to the debate about the end goal of evangelism. He considers that evangelism lives by hope as we are called into a journey whereby both church and world together find ultimate fulfilment. He writes: 'Hope punctuates the practice of evangelism in much the same way that a final punctuation mark gives meaning to an entire sentence.'[35] Hope runs so prominently through the gospel that sharing our faith is fundamentally about sharing the hope that is within us, bearing in mind that this hope has holistic consequences and is about so much more than the eternal destination of an individual. Stone continues: 'While evangelism is frequently referred to as "faith sharing," it might just as appropriately be termed "hope sharing."'[36]

Hope is in one sense about the future, but also has implications for the present moment. Stone writes: 'Hope is, of course, oriented towards the future - where things are headed and how they shall turn out, towards God's love as not only the source and ground of our lives but their ultimate aim and end. Yet hope utterly transforms the present and reinterprets the past.'[37] Current struggles look different in the light of hope. Realities may not change in an instant, but work towards change feels worthwhile because we believe that God's future will ultimately prevail over the disconnect we are currently experiencing. So too hope for our own lives as we struggle towards personal liberation in Christ.

The need for a hopeful gospel, connected with life around us, is articulated by Maxwell-Rose, as she wrote, within a week of Trump's election success in the US: 'I am increasingly struggling with songs which seem to focus entirely on a sense of an exclusive, insular relationship with God.'[38] She continues:

> 'As I look back at a year rife with division, hatred and brutal conflict, I'm desperate for something that speaks to these times. Something that reflects the enormity of God and

[35] Stone, *Evangelism,* p.56.
[36] Ibid. p.56.
[37] Ibid. p.56.
[38] Katherine Maxwell-Rose, *Why I've given up singing worship songs,* http://www.christiantoday.com/article/why.ive.given.up.singing.worship.songs/102601.htm accessed 06 January 2017.

how he relates to every part of the world; something that speaks to our call to be part of the bringing of his kingdom of peace, love and hope.'[39]

Her longing for a fuller gospel reminds us that the hope expressed within a holistic evangel is attractive. The worst habits of our society are cords that bind, and evangelism which itself is entangled, fails to set people free. In contrast, evangelism rooted in a different vision for society offers new freedom, and participation in the life in all its fullness that Christ offers.

Earthed

'Earthed' is a word that can be understood in two ways, ideally held holistically. It can mean 'down to earth' rooted in the realities of life, and alternatively can mean 'of the earth' referring to connectedness with non-human creation.

The former is a thread running through all that has been said up to this point: Christian insight about community life is invaluable within a society that promotes the individual over the communal. Sam Wells in his discussion of the difference between 'being with' and 'doing for' as forms of Christian service describes a community where all have something to offer, whether their starting point is that of privilege or that of disadvantage. He writes:

> The abundant community believes that what we have is enough; we have the capacity to provide what we need in the face of sorrow, aging, illness, celebration, fallibility, misfortune, and joy; we organize in a context of cooperation and satisfaction; we are responsible for one another, in that if one is not free, valued, or flourishing, none of us can be.[40]

This sense that all have something to offer in the wider community life extends to all creation. Boff is especially concerned to ensure that those working for the good of humanity and those working on environmental concerns are having joined up conversations. He considers all creation as 'brothers and sisters of God'[41] meaning that: 'there is an earthly and cosmic kinship. Human beings are not shut up in their tiny human world; they live with the great community of life and include in their love all beings of creation.'[42] He is in many ways

[39] Maxwell-Rose, *Worship Songs*
[40] Sam Wells, *A Nazareth Manifesto* (Chichester: Wiley 2015) p.254.
[41] Boff, *Nutshell,* p.40.
[42] Ibid. p.40.

outlining his understanding of the evangel in this text. There is joy in here, there is life, there is good news. Why would we exclude such joys from our evangel except because we have failed to think big enough?

The language of evangelism frequently presumes that humanity is the only part of the created order about which God is significantly concerned. It is however both a fuller expression of Christian tradition and better news when all creation is held together in our understanding. Meadows considers the implications for evangelism: 'The promise of the gospel cannot be reduced to personal salvation, but has the cosmic scope of the Missio Dei to renew the whole of creation.'[43] He is joined by Woods in including all of creation in the gospel vision. Woods writes: 'Similarly, with affirming life we need to take a larger eco-centric perspective to avoid a narrow self-centredness that diminishes our witness.'[44]

Finney puts in like this: 'I believe that in our proclamation of the gospel we have too often made our wondrous God 'too small'. The creator of the universe is more than just a Saviour, glorious though that fact is.'[45] The 'earthed' dimension enlarges our vision, offering breadth of Good News, and deep connection with the concerns in our society around both environmental destruction and societal concerns, particularly when hope in God's purposes can be presented.

Conclusion

The intent of this article has been to begin a conversation rather than to produce definitive answers. Threads have been drawn together from theological, missional and spiritual resources which add depth to the gospel and which need to be a part of the evangel if we are serious about renewal of the practice of evangelism. The evangel that we have inherited can too easily find itself in service to our culture's stories of individualism and consumerism, rather than truly in service to the kingdom of God. In order to achieve the latter, the breadth of Good News needs to be taken from the realm of discipleship and church life and put front and centre, within the evangel itself.

While the process involved in changing our thinking is unlikely to be easy, the potential fruit is plentiful. We will aid Christians in finding a language that has integrity within their own

[43] Meadows, *Ancient-future,* p.6.
[44] Philip Woods, 'Reclaiming Evangelism'*, International review of mission* Vol.105:1 (2016) p.48.
[45] Finney, *Emerging,* p.91.

experience of faith; we will make stronger connections between the work of evangelism and that of social responsibility; we will be better placed to build a church which demonstrates the gospel in lived example; and we will be communicating an evangel that can be joyfully received as Good News.

The prevalence of language about evangelism that is profoundly caught up in modernist assumptions indicates that this is an area of church life which needs significantly more attention. The questions raised here will be taken into ethnographic research into 'earthed spirituality' as expressed by pioneer ministry as part of my ongoing work.

C2: Brueggemann, the Land and the Forest[1]

A Forest Church perspective on theology of the land

Introduction

Forest Churches are Christian communities that meet outdoors, engaging with the natural world. This article explores the insights of Forest Church practitioners in dialogue with Old Testament theology of the land, with a particular focus on Brueggemann's *'The Land'*.[2] As a Forest Church practitioner myself, and engaged with the wider Forest Church network, I am conscious that a depth of understanding of the relationship of humanity with non-human creation, held in God, is a core insight offered within the Forest Church movement.[3] 'Nature connection', that is, seeking a relational connection with non-human creation, is a fundamental practice for Forest Churches, as is an understanding that meeting with God can be facilitated in such a way. Themes emerging have a resonance with the Hebrew understanding of the connection between the wellbeing of the people and the wellbeing of the land: it seems that theologies of the land offer insight into what practitioners are experiencing.

What follows explores these resonances, rooted in fieldwork with five UK Forest Churches: participant observation of each gathering and a semi-structured interview. Both Forest Church and Brueggemann are introduced in order to give a baseline for the discussion. Then key themes from the fieldwork are explored, examining the various ways in which theology of the land forms a theological underpinning to the contemporary work of Forest Churches. A priority throughout is to consider the practical outworking of this theology in the mission of the church. This is drawn together in a missiological reflection towards the end.

Within an article of this length it isn't possible to engage with theological voices that might offer a critique: the focus here is on showing the resonance between the practices of Forest Church and theology of the land. The ecclesiological questions asking to what extent this is truly church have also been set aside in this article in order to maintain focus on the main theme of missiological engagement with theology of the land.

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[1] This article was published in the peer reviewed journal, Practical Theology, in 2018. It is included in published form with minor editorial corrections.

[2] Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: place as gift, promise and challenge in biblical* faith (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress 1978, 2002)

[3] Bruce Stanley, *Forest Church* (Llangurig: Mystic Christ Press 2013) p.12.

Forest Church

Forest Churches are Christian communities that normally meet outside in the natural world. The venue for a gathering is not necessarily a forest, it may equally be moorland, coast, meadow or any other natural environment. It is a recent movement that has gained momentum rapidly over the past five years, originating in the UK, with similar expressions emerging internationally. They are new in their current form, but with resonances and practices that have a long Christian history, notably the Franciscan and 'Celtic'[4] traditions. Forest Churches are as varied in style as churches that meet indoors, ranging from liturgical through to informal and with a spectrum in between. What they have in common is that engagement with the natural world is core to their spiritual practice, they are not doing outdoors what could equally be done inside.[5]

My own Forest Church tends to begin and end with prayers, using Trinitarian language, sometimes liturgical and sometimes extemporised. Wider creation is referenced much more frequently than is the norm for churches, noting especially what lives and grows in the place of gathering, acknowledging that we are visitors and for them it is home, acknowledging too our shared creator. We reference the changing seasons, noting how the death and resurrection that is so central to Christianity is lived out by the natural world on an annual cycle. We allow nature to teach us how to hold onto hope in that which is unseen, as we watch the dying back in autumn and wait in confidence for the spring. Within the prayerful framework, as an all-age gathering we often spend significant time in an exercise such as bud identification, prompting us to look carefully, encouraging appreciation and thankfulness. Forest Churches with fewer children present often spend time in silence and prayerful meditation as they sit or walk in their gathering space.

It is hard to be sure how many Forest Churches exist as many are only promoted locally. An indicative figure is membership of the Forest Church Facebook group: 1191 on 28th Sept 2018, and the closed group for those in active leadership of a Forest Church which numbered 43 on the same date.

[4] Celtic is a disputed term, here in popular usage.
[5] Stanley, *Forest,* p.13.

Forest Churches fall within the larger family of Fresh Expressions, a contemporary ecumenical movement that gained profile and energy following the 2004 publication of the Church of England report, 'Mission Shaped Church'. They vary widely, generally incorporating some of these characteristics: deeply engaged with a local neighbourhood or network; highly creative; gathering in a school, community building or outdoors rather than a church; choosing a day other than Sunday to meet. They explore contemporary contextual resources for worship and discipleship and are defined as churches whose primary focus is to engage missionally with those who are not already members of the church.[6] Fresh Expressions are rooted missiologically in the Missio Dei, the understanding that mission is primarily God's, and the role of the church is to discern what God is doing and join in.[7] This results in a dynamic which is based in the wider community, seeking to join in God's work and to build Christian community in new places, rather than focussing missionally on invitation to an existing congregation.

The five Forest Churches that form the basis for this article illustrate the variety of practice. Fieldwork took place in the early months of 2017, listed in chronological order.[8]

Wychwood: The visit took place in January on a day of steady rain and mist. This was the only visit that included time spent indoors. We gathered materials from the garden to use for art, finding fronds that could be used as paintbrushes, as well as mosses, ferns and leaves that made interesting designs and prints, taking them indoors to art tables. This art, using natural materials was made into covers for the eco-journals that would be an important task for members during 2017. Prayers including nature poetry ended the gathering.[9]

West Midlands: Gathering in a garden, people mingled around refreshments and crafts: honeycakes and mulled honeywine or apple juice; weaving 'Brigit crosses' from reeds; and candle making. As dusk approached, we gathered in a circle around a fire, for a liturgy drawing on ancient traditions, opening and closing with prayers facing the four compass points and acknowledging wider creation in that space. Christmas tree branches were burned on the fire

[6] https://freshexpressions.org.uk/about/what-is-a-fresh-expression/ accessed 20 May 2020.
[7] David, Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis 1991) p.389.
[8] Permission has been given by these Forest Churches to describe a gathering and include interview quotes without anonymising.
[9] Wychwood, 29 January 2017.

with candles then lit from this fire to take the Christ light into the year ahead. The Brigit crosses made earlier were used for the final blessing.[10]

Oxford offshoot: Light snow was falling as this group gathered in a country park. Following opening prayer, the group scattered to find individual space in nature with God. The community re-gathered after ten minutes to share reflections on what God had inspired us in and through the nature in that place. A series of short readings were read, and then we were then set the task of making mandalas from natural materials. Candles were lit in the mandalas and final prayers shared together, focussing on the theme of light, and taking the Christ light into our daily lives.[11]

Hanslope: We gathered beside a farmed field on the edge of the village, young families were a significant proportion of those present. Following an interactive reading of the parable of the sower and the seed, we walked towards a nearby bluebell wood, collecting bird feathers along the way. We shared our appreciation of what we could see in the hedgerows and talked about the different feathers we had found, in particular the way in which the downy, flight and semi-plume feathers fulfil different purposes for the bird. On reaching the wood, we gathered to pray, shared a snack and then walked back to the village.[12]

Ancient Arden: The gathering began with a bring and share lunch on the patio of a sizeable garden. Following lunch, we moved to the circle on the lawn, opening with prayers and a chant as the leader walked around the circle with incense. We then scattered prayerfully to explore the garden, which is managed with an ethos to encourage what is thriving naturally. Notes accompanying the space effectively made the garden into prayer stations. When we regrouped, we shared our experiences of God in nature, a poem was recited, and we sang, accompanied by harp and percussion. We returned to the circle to finish our time together liturgically.[13]

<u>Brueggemann's 'the Land'</u>

Brueggemann considers that land is a central, if not the central theme of biblical faith. While not excluding the political dimension, the focus is on the neglected ecological implications. He

[10] West Midlands, 4 February 2017.
[11] Oxford offshoot, 11 February 2017.
[12] Hanslope, 22 April 2017.
[13] Ancient Arden, 6 May 2017.

writes: 'It will no longer do to talk about Yahweh and his people but we must speak about Yahweh and his people *and his land*.'[14] 'Land' here is the Hebrew term '*eres* referring both to earth and land, made explicit in the preface to the second edition: 'In its usage as "earth", the term clearly refers to the created earth with reference to the creator God who governs "heaven and earth." The same term, however, refers to land, most specifically Israel's "land of promise" that Israel hopes for and holds from Yahweh.'[15] Perhaps it is a symptom of the urban disconnection from the land that in the modern era we have attempted to consider the one without the other, forgetting how dependent we are for life on the fertility of the land.

In Brueggemann's understanding, the texts point to a three-way relationship between God, people and the land rather than a two-way relationship, with non-human creation being an optional add-on. Land is not something to be owned and used or abused, but rather something held within covenant gift from God, to be nurtured and appreciated. The people cannot survive without the land: it is needed and is gifted by God. Conversely, the land may either thrive or wither, depending largely on how it is treated by the people. There is a symbiotic relationship between land and people, held in God.

Brueggemann sees Yahweh as granting his people 'enduring and wholesome continuities, enjoying the span of planting and harvest, participating in the full cycle of life with the earth - and all under Yahweh's attentive, protective eye.'[16] Within this understanding of a wholesome interrelationship between God, the people and the land come aspects of justice both for people and wider creation, held within the Levitical laws and the sabbath principle.
The balance goes wrong when people look in the wrong direction. This Brueggemann explores using the language of idolatry: 'There are other gods who make themselves available. They present as practical choices, usable loyalties put at the disposal of Israel... That is the central temptation of the land, that it seems to contain its own gifts adequate to secure existence. The sources of fertility are in the land itself.'[17] The question here is whether we leave God out of questions of fertility, trusting simply to the land itself without acknowledging the hand of the creator in life and growth.

Considering this against the background of contemporary society, Brueggemann writes that:

[14] Brueggemann, *Land*, p.3.
[15] Ibid. p.iii.
[16] Ibid. p.49.
[17] Ibid. p.54.

'It is likely that conventional Christianity has wanted always to talk about Yahweh and neglect land. And conversely, secular humanism wants always to talk only of land and never of Yahweh. And most of us live in both worlds and settle for an uneasy schizophrenia.'[18] Christopher Wright and Norman Habel are two authors who in significant ways have drawn on Brueggemann's work. The ethical element is the focus for Christopher Wright as he, using Brueggemann's framework of a threefold relationship, explores the people's relationship with the land in the context of an examination of the social ethics expressed in the Old Testament texts. Wright explores how easily economic growth becomes obsessive and idolatrous, and how the concept of gift is key to living well with respect to the land and others within society, and preventing the idolatry of growth from taking hold.

He writes: 'For those who live in obedient relationship with God, increase in material goods is... to be received as a gift and enjoyed responsibly... For those who live in alienation from God, however, growth in prosperity becomes an end in itself.'[19] This has repercussions not only for the relationship with the land but also for the relationship with others within society: 'The answer to poverty was not the reduction of all to equivalent frugality, but rather, a return to repentant obedience to God that would raise all to renewed blessing and bounty.'[20]

Norman Habel's approach offers a gentle critique to Brueggemann as rather than seeking an overview of the biblical understanding of land he seeks to disentangle the various voices present, each with a distinctive approach. He writes: 'It is no longer possible to cite the position of the Bible on land as if that position were singular and obvious. There are many competing positions from which to choose.'[21] He identifies six different voices, choosing particular biblical foci to illustrate the themes: Royal (Kings, Psalms); Theocratic (Deuteronomy); Ancestral household (Joshua); Prophetic (Jeremiah); Agrarian (Leviticus 25-27); and Immigrant ideology (Abrahamic narratives).[22]

As he unpacks the six voices, it becomes evident that some resonate with the concerns of Forest Church practitioners more than others. In particular, those voices that are expressing views formed close to the land resonate more than the Royal voices. The prophetic is one of those strands that connects well with Forest Church thinking. Habel writes: 'It is my

[18] Ibid. p.49.
[19] Christopher J.H. Wright, *Living as the People of God* (Leicester: IVP 1983) p.72.
[20] Ibid. p.54.
[21] Norman C. Habel, *The Land is mine* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress 1995) p.xii.
[22] Habel, *Land,* p.149-158.

contention in this study that the ideology of the book of Jeremiah promotes what might best be described as a symbiotic relationship among YHWH, the land and the people of Israel.'[23] That sense of symbiotic relationship, the interconnectedness of all creation in God is very much evident in the Forest Church practices and interviews. So too the agrarian: Habel explores concepts of sabbath and jubilee in this discussion, noting that whether or not it was actually lived out: 'the jubilee legislation is promoting a radical social order designed to preserve the economic integrity of the landed peasant farmer.'[24]

Habel's analysis reminds us that there have always been a variety of ways of expressing faith. As we explore the different voices, it is good to consider which of the six are missing or neglected in the contemporary church, and to explore the ways in which Forest Church practices might help us to re-engage with neglected voices.

Forest Churches in dialogue with Brueggemann

The following discussion is led by the fieldwork and explores the most significant themes that emerged in the interviews and practice of the five Forest Churches. Four themes are discussed, exploring the resonances with Brueggemann's insight. A fifth theme, the divine feminine, is excluded, as the issues around the divine feminine and contemporary dialogue with Neo-Paganism, held alongside the Old Testament attitudes towards Canaanite practices and 'other gods' is too complex to be summarised in the space available here and is worthy of an article of its own.

Earthed and embodied

There is something very down to earth, ordinary and physical in the language and practices of Forest Church, which is refreshingly different from that of the inherited church.[25] Ancient Arden spoke of the difference between the 'language of the royal court' used in most churches and the everyday language of Forest Churches: 'the language of the wood, as in the Forest, and the kitchen.'[26] They spoke of how the latter connects faith better to daily life, using language relating to 'things I was seeing every day, to do with the cycle of the seasons, and where food

[23] Ibid. p.75.
[24] Ibid. p.97.
[25] 'Inherited Church' is a term used within the Fresh Expressions movement for established church congregations, church as we have inherited it from previous generations of Christians.
[26] Ancient Arden, 6 May 2017.

comes from, and what things were made from, and what creatures are around, and what their names are.'[27]

As well as words referencing the ordinary, Forest Church celebrates physicality, as discussed in this reflection from Ancient Arden:

> 'The Christian faith that I think I had inherited was very much that the body wasn't very much a part of the faith. Yes, certainly the mind, actually, would be the strongest one. Yes, the spirit also. And then the body was a complete afterthought. And I was trying to look for - is there a spirituality that tries to bring all these things together?'[28]

Several of the churches explored how tactile and physical their Forest Church practices are, and alongside this, the physicality of worship that is outdoors, exploring, touching, interacting with the natural world, for example Oxford: 'And yeah, we often do quite tactile worship in Forest Church, and I find that really earthing.'[29]

Within Forest Church, the spiritual and physical are seen as interconnected as a whole. From Ancient Arden, spending time with God in nature has led to reflection on the interaction between spirituality and the physical:

> 'You can't have the spirit without the earth, you know, the fact that we are flesh and blood, but we're also spiritual beings, we're not just separate. And Jesus, you know he's got - there's the divine and human, he was an earthly being as well.'[30]

This theological rooting in the dual nature of Christ is important, not least as a reminder that immanence, God's presence within physical creation is at the heart of our faith.
When we set this alongside Brueggemann, we find an earthiness in God's interaction with the fertility of the land, bringing life, growth and necessary food, whether manna in the desert or food grown in the land.[31] God's concern is not other-worldly but rooted in the stuff of life, the soil and the fertility of the land. Brueggemann reminds us that 'Yahweh is a fertility God.'[32]

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[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Oxford offshoot, 11 February 2017.
[30] Ancient Arden, 6 May 2017.
[31] Brueggemann, *Land,* p.30; p.46.
[32] Brueggemann, *Land,* p.99.

That said, while God is radically present within creation, the two should not be conflated. Finding the gifts of life solely within creation without a transcendent deity quickly leads to idolatry and ends in injustice. It pushes the agency onto the people who will then be tempted to overwork the land, the poor and themselves. In contrast is a life of trust in the gift and the giver, rooted in the earthiness of God's relationship with the people, trust in the gift of land and fertility, and in the giver, all held within covenant relationship.

Outdoors spirituality

All five interviews referenced the outdoors as a place where many locate their most profound spiritual encounters. This example is taken from the Wychwood interview: 'ask them where do they find God, very most of them will say outside. They'll talk about on a beach, or they'll talk about on a mountain, or they'll talk about in a forest.'[33] They all also referred to the fact that the practitioner's own spirituality is very much drawn from the outdoors. From the Hanslope interview: 'So I would say, for me, as a young child, my first experience of encountering God is outside. Before I could even voice that, or articulate it in any way. So that's always been, since the earliest point of my life, that's something I've felt there.'[34]

Ancient Arden wondered aloud: 'And I just got thinking, if that's where we feel closest to God, why do we keep building buildings?'[35] and the West Midlands interview explicitly connected this sense of outdoors spirituality with Christian mission: 'So the whole idea is it reconnects with nature, reconnects with Christian tradition, but I think also creates a space in which many people who find spirituality in nature, as a natural thing, can connect with the Christian story.'[36]

The reflections of Forest Church practitioners seem to indicate that spirituality rooted in experience of non-human creation is natural to humanity. It connects well, it helps us to connect with God, and in fact our wellbeing is tied in with our relationship with the natural world. All of this makes sense within the framework that Brueggemann expounds. If there is a three-way relationship between God, humanity and the natural world then we shouldn't be

[33] Wychwood, 29 January 2017.
[34] Hanslope, 22 April 2017.
[35] Ancient Arden, 6 May 2017.
[36] West Midlands, 4 February 2017.

surprised when the natural world is a place where people find their deepest connection with God and a sense of profound wellbeing.

It is generally implicit rather than explicit within Brueggemann, his primary focus being more about the ethical outworking of this understanding, than the spirituality in itself. There are however hints, notably when he writes of sabbath. Sabbath requires us to slow down and to remember God, practices which are central to Forest Church as we slow down, notice and give thanks. Brueggemann considers that: 'Sabbath is a voice of gift in a frantic coercive self-securing world... Sabbath is for honoring land.'[37]

The awakening to spirituality within the natural world expressed by Forest Church participants isn't found so directly within the Hebrew bible, perhaps because it is assumed in the pre-modern world. The concern is more 'which god?' than whether there is a God at all. Should the people look to Yahweh and the covenant relationship between God, people and the land, or are gods found in the fertility of the land itself?

Nature speaks of God

There is an expectation within the practice of Forest Church that God will speak through our encounter with non-human creation, seen as the second book of God.[38] Wychwood said: 'Creation speaks of God's provision in many ways.'[39] The practice of 'terra divina'[40] or 'sensio divina'[41] was brought up in the Oxford interview, and the third testament concept was mentioned by Ancient Arden: ' it's not just the Old Testament and the New Testament, the other book is nature.'[42]

Forest Church participants see the big Christian and biblical themes lived out by the natural world, offering us another way of learning about the things of God: 'I think what I really appreciate is the rooting of things such as the Easter story in the wider universal context, you know, the regeneration of the earth.'[43] The Wychwood interview described the way that they had explored sacrifice and resurrection themes in the role of the birch tree in regeneration and

[37] Brueggemann, *Land,* p.59.
[38] Bruce Stanley, *Sensio Divina,* 18 March 2014 http://www.mysticchrist.co.uk/blog/post/sensio_divina accessed 22 May 2018.
[39] Wychwood, 29 January 2017.
[40] Ian Adams 2013 http://www.belovedlife.org/beloved-life-practices-week-3-close-up-terra-divina/ accessed 9 June 2017.
[41] Stanley, *Sensio,* accessed 22 May 2018.
[42] Ancient Arden, 6 May 2017.
[43] Ibid.

re-forestation: 'the birch tree is a good symbol of the resurrection. It breaks the ground so that everything else can grow but then it itself then dies because it's overcome by all the stuff that now grows where it's broken the ground.'[44]

In these ways, the practices of Forest Churches identify with significant streams of Christianity that tend not to be prioritised in the contemporary church and yet which connect well with society around us. As with spirituality, this is implicit rather than explicit in Brueggemann but underpinned by the three-way relationship between God, people and the land. The critical perspective is Yahweh's dwelling within the land itself. Many within the Forest Church movement are drawn to the concept of 'panentheism', that God is profoundly present within all creation. For Forest Church participants it is a Trinitarian panentheism, that understands God as both radically immanent within creation and wholly other, thus avoiding the conflation of God and creation that Brueggemann warns against.

This is the root of a spirituality which is nature focussed but with Yahweh at the heart and which allows creation to speak of God. It is implicit when Brueggemann opens out possibilities around Yahweh's role within creation, bringing life to the land and food to the people. It is God who works from within to bring the growth and life, thus to engage with creation is to see God at work.

The intriguing question raised by Brueggemann comes in the discussion of exile when 'Yahweh himself departs from the land and the city.'[45] Brueggemann makes a subtle distinction as we can't speak of God withdrawing completely from creation, but 'at least, we might say that the 'power of life' may be withdrawn.'[46] The implication is that the possibility for both connection with God in the natural world and nature speaking of God is dependant to an extent on whether people in that place are expressing the threefold relationship in healthy ways. The crisis for the land in exile teaches us that: 'He is at the disposal of his people and is forced out of his land by the work of his people.'[47] We are left then with questions around whether God is more deeply present in some places than others. Concerning places from which God has been 'exiled', we might wonder what calling there is on his people to enable the return from exile.

[44] Wychwood, 29 January 2017.
[45] Brueggemann, *Land,* p.130.
[46] Ibid. p.190-91.
[47] Ibid. p.130.

Environmental ethics

There are two interconnected strands here in the practice of Forest Churches, first the ethics around environmentalism, rooted in an understanding of God in all things, and secondly the possibility of missional connection with wider society. On the former, Ancient Arden begins to unfold this in the question: 'If God is present in all things, in what ways are we abusing God by what we do with the creation?'[48] Wychwood has explicitly brought an environmental focus into the centre of their priorities for Forest Church: 'We need to be not just helping people with a personal spirituality but considering ... how are we using the earth's resources?'[49] The West Midland interview considered the link between the ethics and the calling of Christians:

> 'We live in an age where we are aware of how badly we have often lived with the planet, and issues with climate change, and deforestation, and species extinction, and all of these kinds of things, so this is partly a way of reconnecting with that and thinking, how do we live well with the world around us? And what is our calling, as people made in God's image to the world around us?'[50]

Within the practice of Forest Church it is almost impossible to untangle the practices of reconnection with the natural world from commitment to a lifestyle lived with environmental awareness. A positive feedback is generated between these two aspects. For Forest Churches, environmental ethics are rooted in connection with and love for wider creation. For Oxford:

> I think as Christians, there's a very obvious reason why we should care for nature, but for all of us, I think, it comes down to falling in love with it, because if we don't, we won't really care. And we won't really care enough to do the stuff that is quite difficult to do.[51]

Nurturing the love for nature then becomes a significant part of the reason for Forest Church with the expectation that the love will result in 'green' lifestyle choices. This was discussed too in Ancient Arden: 'for me, what it has done, in falling in love with the natural world has made me realise how important it is to have an eco focus to how I live.'[52]

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[48] Ancient Arden, 6 May 2017.
[49] Wychwood, 29 January 2017.
[50] West Midlands, 4 February 2017.
[51] Oxford, 11 February 2017.
[52] Ancient Arden, 6 May 2017.

On ethics, Brueggemann contrasts the management of the land according to the Hebrew vision with how the land is managed in the surrounding nations, in more destructive ways. Reflecting on the move from prophets to kings in 1 Samuel he writes: 'Israel tried to solve (the question of land management) too easily. It proposed to manage land like all others around it.'[53] Brueggemann holds this in comparison to the speeches at the boundary in Deuteronomy that insist on the opposite: 'Israel is to be in the land differently. And if it is to be in the land differently, it will have to manage it differently.'[54]

The different vision is rooted in gift and covenant and relationship, allowing land sabbath, not overworking the land but trusting that fertility and life are rooted in Yahweh. We choose life in all fullness when we relax into the gift: '*Gifted land* gives life and *managed land* does not.'[55] There are implications for long-term fertility of the land when we make the wrong choice: 'Land that is handled unjustly will finally not be productive.'[56] The outcome for both land and people are better when our ethics are rooted in the threefold relationship of God, people and land. It does however require a letting go of power and control into God's hands, which isn't an easy transition to make, as evident both in the biblical record and in contemporary society. This vision resonates with the experience of Forest Churches where focussing together on restored relationship with the earth and with God is inspiring participants to take seriously their practical responsibilities towards the natural world.

<u>New Testament</u>

With the New Testament's focus on the person of Jesus, an earthing of spirituality is evident in the fact of the incarnation itself, the drawing together of heaven and earth in the person of Jesus. It is however frequently implicit rather than explicit. James Jones writes:
'I was recently asked to write the preface to a booklet on sustainable development by a leading evangelical charity. All the biblical references in this pamphlet came from the Old Testament; there were none from the Gospels... I wanted to see what the Gospels revealed of Jesus' attitude to the earth.'[57]

Brueggemann himself takes a chapter to consider how his themes are taken into the New Testament. He considers that: 'The movement clustering around Jesus, enigmatic as it is,

[53] Brueggemann, *Land,* p.70.
[54] Ibid. p.70.
[55] Ibid. p.33.
[56] Ibid. p.186.
[57] James Jones, *Jesus and the Earth* (London: SPCK 2003) p.5.

appears to be a restatement of the theme of waiting in confidence for the gift.'[58] Santmire echoes this, emphasising the eschatological perspective. There is a focus on calling people to decision, including the neglected all-creation perspective which is essential since humanity has such power to build or to destroy. He writes: ' Jesus also took for granted, as the parables of growth show, that there would be a final transformation of heaven and earth, in keeping with the prophetic apocalyptic expectations he inherited.'[59]

For Brueggemann, land remains central: 'It is sobering for New Testament exegesis to recognize that the single central symbol for the promise of the gospel is land.'[60] This central symbol has been spiritualized and taken in less earthed directions over the centuries but we can't get away from the fact that it is: 'a *country* that is sought. Our interpretation, no matter how we may wish for something less specific and concrete, will have to face that term.'[61]

The New Testament draws on the history of the people's relationship with the land, taking this into core themes: 'Jesus embodies precisely what Israel has learned about land: being without land makes it possible to trust the promise of it, while grasping land is the sure way to lose it.'[62] He continues: 'This central insight and mystery of the gospel - that letting go is to have and keeping is the way to lose.'[63]

Jesus' own connection with nature is evident in the frequency with which he turned to nature for parables and illustrations of the kingdom of God. To take an example, Fisher explores the deeply ecological understanding that underpins Jesus' parable of the sower:
'A farmer has gone out to sow, and some seed falls on the path, packed too hard for it to germinate (Mark 4:3–4). The seed produces no grain, but birds eat it up, and replant some where it can germinate. Animals graze the brush, and leave manure that can fertilize worn-out fields. Even in this seemingly worthless habitat we find hints of the mutualism that is at the heart of ecological dynamics.'[64]

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[58] Brueggemann, *Land,* p.157.
[59] H. Paul, Santmire, *The Travail of Nature* (Minneapolis MN: Fortress 1985) p.200.
[60] Brueggemann, *Land,* p.168.
[61] Ibid. p.169.
[62] Ibid. p.169.
[63] Ibid. p.171.
[64] George W. Fisher, 'Symbiosis, partnership, and restoration in Mark's parable of the sower', *Theology Today* Vol.73:4 (2017) p.381.

The deeply ecological understanding that Fisher sees here is rarely made explicit by commentators: he brings his expertise as a Professor of geology to his reading of scripture. What he begins to draw out for us in this parable can be seen frequently elsewhere in the New Testament: the seed that dies and is buried in order to rise to new life; the weeds and the wheat growing together; the relationship of a shepherd to his sheep. Jesus was clearly deeply connected with the land, and his teaching with the Old Testament wisdom embedded in the relationship of the people to the land, in God.

Missiological reflection

This all now needs drawing together into the practical implications for the mission of the contemporary church. There are two elements to consider: the first is the opportunity offered by Forest Church for people to connect with the Christian tradition who are drawn to an outdoor spirituality; and the second is the encouragement of environmental ethics, a right relationship between humanity and the natural world.

Forest Churches aim to do both these things, the emphasis varying a little from one to another but the two being so radically intertwined that they very much belong together. In fact, Brueggemann's challenge is to call us to consider how, or indeed whether, it is possible to live out environmental ethics without spirituality coming first. It is only when we realise that all is gift from Yahweh that we are protected from the temptation to idolatry and all the human and environmental injustice that follows.

On the first, the contemporary church struggles in many ways to offer Christian spirituality to those who consider themselves to be 'spiritual but not religious'. Spirituality outside the church has been well documented, with authors such as Voas and Vincett & Woodhead[65] estimating that fifty percent of the population have some kind of belief in a higher power. Moreton, in his journalistic survey of contemporary spirituality sees a significant strand of this unchurched spirituality as seeking connection with the natural world. He writes: 'It is not quantifiable, in a census or a survey, because our new way of believing does not want to sign up or be pinned down, it is elusive and private, but it is also obvious and all around us. We want a spirituality that relates to the earth.'[66]

[65] David Voas, 'The Rise and Fall of Fuzzy Fidelity in Europe' *European Sociological Review* Vol.25:2 (2009) pp.155-168; Giselle Vincett and Linda Woodhead, 'Spirituality', in Woodhead, Kawanami and Partridge (eds) *Religions in the Modern World: Traditions and Transformations* (New York NY: Routledge 2009) pp.319-338.
[66] Cole Moreton, *Is God still an Englishman?* (London: Little Brown 2010) p.340.

There is nothing in the Christian tradition that opposes such an earthed spirituality, in fact Christianity as a faith rooted in incarnation is profoundly earthed, and as we have seen from Brueggemann, is also rooted in the land. We have however drifted over the centuries into less holistic expressions.

Many authors have traced the history of the drift of Christianity from its original earthiness. Elizabeth Johnson is one such, engaging here with Aquinas she explores how he: 'understands divine indwelling 'in all things' and 'everywhere' to entail an interesting mutuality.'[67] She notes also how contemporary theology uses the word panentheism to describe this model of the God-world relationship.[68] Similarly, Delio writes about the way contemporary science speaks of relationship and integration between aspects of the created order: 'We are to awaken to the whole we already are and deepen it by becoming more whole and unified through creativity, convergence and consciousness.'[69] It is intriguing to note that the culture we currently inhabit is in a variety of ways drawing us back to integration and offering space to Christianity to rediscover that which has been lost.

All of this is understood by Forest Churches, many of whom are intentionally expressing worship in a way that enables such people who relate to an earthed spirituality to find a spiritual home. This is from the interview with the Ancient Arden team:

> 'There's a huge number of people out there who left the church because the church doesn't worship outside… So there was this sense in which, if actually we had a Christ centred spirituality with an outdoor earthy focus, then maybe people who wanted to engage spiritually with the outside world may find the presence of Christ there in the way that *we* have. And find that a wholly sufficient spirituality.'[70]

We find therefore as we explore Brueggemann that the impulse to worship outside is both biblically rooted, and profoundly helpful within the contemporary spiritual scene. It enables churches to offer something which is deeply rooted in our tradition and has integrity within Christianity, that also connects profoundly with the zeitgeist of our times.

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[67] Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts* (London: Bloomsbury 2015) p.147.
[68] Ibid. p.147.
[69] Ilia, Delio, *Making All Things New: Catholicity, cosmology, consciousness* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis 2015) p.xi.
[70] Ancient Arden, 6 May 2017.

As for the ethics, again contemporary streams within society are encouraging churches to re-examine our traditions, discovering that we have forgotten resources to offer to contemporary conversations. Forest Church has emerged against the background of contemporary environmentalism which has over recent years moved away from attempting to 'guilt trip' people into living differently with respect to the natural world. Instead it is speaking of 'falling in love with nature' as a route into activism.[71] Significant initiatives seek to help us to get outside and to reconnect with the natural world, including well known examples such as Forest School, and the National Trust's '50 things to do before you are 11 ¾'.[72] There is a growing awareness of the value of connectedness to the natural world for human wellbeing, for mental health and invisible disability in particular.[73] Within the secular streams, the emphasis is on restoring the two-way relationship between humanity and the rest of the natural world, both for our wellbeing and to inspire environmentally sustainable lifestyles.

Forest Church, against this background, seeks to add in the third element, considering how relationship with God inspires and enables ethical living. This means firstly that Forest Church encourages participants, as they connect with the natural world, to consider how their growing love for nature might be worked out in lifestyle choices and ethical decision making. It also leads us to consider, as we engage in wider societal conversations about the environment, to discover the insight buried within the Christian tradition that has potential wisdom to offer. Key to that wisdom is the insight that Brueggemann expounds, that relationship with God is the only way we can avoid slipping into unjust practices. Environmentalism is beginning to discern that there is a spiritual problem that needs to be addressed, it seems that there is wisdom here for the conversation.

Conclusion

We have seen the ways in which the different themes picked up by the Forest Church practitioners interweave with the biblical record. At the core is the vision of reconnection between God, humanity and non-human creation, explored practically in the gatherings of Forest Churches and resonating strongly with the agrarian and prophetic vision of the Old Testament and taken into eschatological vision through Jesus' ministry and the New Testament

[71] George Monbiot, *Promise not* fear, 16 June 2014. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jun/16/saving-the-world-promise-not-fear-nature-environmentalism accessed 13 September 2017.
[72] National Trust, *50 things to do before you are 11 3/4* (London: National Trust 2015)
[73] Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: Algonquin 2005)

record. Forest Churches are exploring theologically in areas which are unfamiliar to many in contemporary churches. However, when set alongside theological and biblical sources it becomes clear that these areas connect with aspects of mainstream theology that, while neglected in recent years, have been expressed within older Christian sources and significant biblical voices.

Connecting with these forgotten streams within orthodoxy offers opportunities for missional engagement in contemporary society. This is particularly so when engaging those rooted in earthed alternative spiritualities or environmentalism. The language and thought patterns expressed in the streams that Forest Churches are rediscovering resonate well with their existing worldview. If Christianity is to engage with those in our society who are taking environmentalism seriously or finding their spiritual space outdoors, then rediscovering the forgotten ecological language within the tradition is essential.

This also enables Christianity to add to the 'green' conversation in a positive way, as the two-way reconnection between humanity and the natural world is opened out into a three-way reconnection, with the addition of the spiritual dimension. Nurturing this spirituality in the way that Forest Churches do offers a contribution to human and environmental wellbeing which is a much needed balance as society at large drifts towards disconnection from both God and nature. The spirituality, as Brueggemann so clearly demonstrates, is the means for us to be free from the anxiety that leads us in destructive directions and allows us to rest in the gift and the giver.

I end with liturgy, rooted biblically in Jeremiah 23.24, from *'The Book of Uncommon Prayer'* loved by Forest Church practitioners and used frequently in my own Forest Church.[74] This beautifully expresses the connection that Forest Churches are exploring: as we grow in love for creation so we discover love of God, and as we grow in love for God so we grow in love for the earth. Love of course is a practical thing, so is followed by ethics, right action and lifestyle choices that care for God's creation.

[74] Annie Heppenstall, *The Book of Uncommon Prayer* (Buxhall: Kevin Mayhew 2015)

Do I not fill heaven and earth, says God?
So may we search and find
the sacredness of the earth.

Do I not fill heaven and earth, says God?
So help us to love God
through loving the earth.

Do I not fill heaven and earth, says God?
So may we take no more than we need,
and return what we can;
may we work for healing, not harm,
for regeneration, for re-greening;
may we cherish the earth
and all creation,
now and in the time to come.
Amen.

THESIS

A theological and ethnographic exploration of three pioneering contexts in Gloucestershire through the lens of 'Earthed Spirituality'.

Chapter 1: Thesis introduction

This main thesis builds on the foundations developed within the portfolio chapters. Rooted in ethnographic research in three pioneering contexts that inhabit an 'Earthed Spirituality', the thesis explores contemporary mission against the backdrop of the contemporary spirituality described in the literature review. In doing so it seeks out contextual theologies developed through the missional practice of pioneer ministry. The deep listening process that is fundamental to pioneering, listening to both local community, wider cultural currents and God, results in a contextual theology that has potential to offer insight to the wider church in its missional engagement.

This thesis particularly explores the questions around the core gospel content for pioneers who are working from an earthed spirituality. A question running throughout concerns the content of the Gospel, against the background of a tendency to over formularise expressions of Christian faith, discussed more fully in the evangelism article. The thesis posits that expressions of Good News, rooted in an earthed spirituality, have significant potential, both for evangelism, and for ensuring that the church retains focus on a vision of God's kingdom for all society and creation.

Anglican context

While only two of the three fieldwork situations are Anglican, the location of the researcher as a Diocesan Officer means that current Anglican concerns are in the background. The tension particularly within view is that found between earthed missional approaches such as pioneer ministry and more heavily resourced, top-down approaches.

It is an emotive debate, Giles Fraser recently wrote: 'There are some forms of Christianity that exist only in order to reproduce. Christians are here to make new Christians who, in turn, are called to go out there and make even more new ones. The purpose of church life is to beget

more church life.'[1] While arguably an unfair caricature, there is a question underneath about the core purpose of our mission as Christians. From within pioneering, Paul Bradbury writes: 'Growth, rapid and unchecked, where it is not wanted, or where it is imposed on a context, is what we might call a cancer.'[2]

The debate is not new, with the late twentieth century forming the backdrop. Here was found on the one hand the earthed ministries spearheaded by David Sheppard in his ministry in Liverpool, and explored in the Faith in the City report, and on the other, the Decade of Evangelism in the 1990's.

On the latter, the Decade of Evangelism failed to halt the downward trend of church attendance. The concern is that current new initiatives are not approaching the challenges differently enough to expect different results.[3] The premise of this research is that an earthed approach shows more promise.

The former is more akin to the earthed approach taken in this thesis. The Faith in the City report, while holding a careful balance between the societal and individual dimensions of the Gospel, reminded us in 1985 that: 'the evidence of the gospels makes it clear that Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God had from the start profound social and political implications.'[4] In common with the approach of this thesis, the wisdom found within Liberation theology is in view. The interaction between practical and spiritual realities are taken seriously: 'In Britain today, it forces us to ask what it is (in the way of inherited attitudes and priorities) that may be preventing people from responding freely to that power which (we believe) is capable of transforming both their lives and the society in which they live.'[5]

David Sheppard should be noted as a foundational thinker. In 1974 he wrote that integration within society isn't about bringing the other up to 'our' standards. Rather: 'true integration asserts that there is solidarity in one human race… we are poorer if we do not enable other groups to be strong.'[6] He advocates for looking for the flickers of fire that can be built into

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[1] Giles Fraser, *The Church is abandoning its flock* https://unherd.com/2021/07/the-church-is-abandoning-its-flock/?=frlh&fbclid=IwAR17VtZKGJRKFOMgCFU_jCoUGikBELou4l9i5XJVt3OWV95VOeAf6a57Gfo accessed 9 July 2021

[2] Paul Bradbury, *Off target? Can we aim to plant 10,000 churches in 10 years?* https://pioneer.churchmissionsociety.org/2021/07/off-target-can-we-aim-to-plant-10000-churches-in-10-years/?fbclid=IwAR27YByiHDIer4Pk9FM3MjIJAkEXT6ZMFh1ZLKmq2KuPlxKF4BsFPUe6HAU accessed 23 July 2021

[3] Clive D. Field, *Assessing the Decade of Evangelism,* http://www.brin.ac.uk/assessing-the-decade-of-evangelism/ accessed 23 July 2021

[4] Archbishop's Commission, *Faith in the City* (London: CHP 1985) p.48.

[5] Ibid p.64.

[6] David Sheppard, *Built as a City* (London: Hodder and Stoughton 1974) p.40.

community warmth, a dynamic akin to the ABCD community development explored here in chapter 2. He writes: 'The philosophy of community development, encouraging the community to discover and develop its own resources rather than be dependent on outside leadership is very close to Christian understandings of God given potential in all human beings.'[7] He speaks too of working with others from the wider community on shared concerns, as a meeting of equals, and from that place of mutual support, sharing Christian insight, for example about: 'why they value youngsters whom others call 'yobs' or 'hooligans'.'[8]

Reference should also be made to the legacy of Anglican Social Theology, within which Sheppard and Faith in the City stand. Foundations were laid by William Temple in his ministry between the first and second world wars.[9] Brown notes how a surge of energy towards social engagement, in this tradition, has arisen at times of economic downturn: 'only to prove ephemeral and often defensive when critics become vocal.'[10] The challenge for the Anglican church is the centre of gravity towards the middle class, discussed here particularly in chapter 3. Brown also notes the need for a more robust theological foundation is order to resist the ephemeral tendency in order to make greater inroads and prevent other priorities eclipsing the societal.[11] He writes: 'Not surprisingly the years around the turn of the millennium saw the Church focusing on its own growth, indeed on its survival, with less to say about its relationship to the society it is set within.'[12]

In discussing recent developments in Anglican social theology, Hughes notes an increased turn to theological resources when seeking insight concerning societal challenges. He writes of: 'a greater doctrinal confidence, in the sense of expecting the Christian tradition to have its own resources to engage with social and political problems' rather than deferring to social sciences and political ideologies on societal questions.[13] Hughes credits Rowan Williams as key in this renewed confidence, noting how, as Archbishop of Canterbury, he was able to speak theologically on societal issues to a wide range of secular audiences. He writes: 'Williams shows us that it is possible to have a theological integralism and open engagement with a pluralist society.'[14]

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[7] Sheppard, *City*, p.322.
[8] Sheppard, *City*, p.318.
[9] Malcolm Brown, 'The case for Anglican Social Theology today', in Brown, Suggate, Chaplin, Rowlands, and Hughes, *Anglican Social Theology* (London: CHP 2014) p.12.
[10] Brown, *Today,* p.12.
[11] Ibid. p.12.
[12] Ibid. p14.
[13] John Hughes, 'After Temple? The Recent Renewal of Anglican Social Thought', in Brown, Suggate, Chaplin, Rowlands, and Hughes, *Anglican Social Theology* (London: CHP 2014) p.64.
[14] Hughes, 'After Temple?' p.73.

The contention of this study is that such theological work, focussed through the lens of an earthed spirituality, will enable both better social engagement and evangelism, rather than perpetuating the pendulum between the two. This results when insight from the Christian tradition earthed in the realities of society and creation is expressed as Good News to a society in need of new vision.

Spiritual landscape

The focus on numerical growth is in the background of both the Decade of Evangelism and the current focus on church growth. Statistics tell a story of decreasing engagement with formal church structures. When judging purely on statistics concerning church attendance, it seems our society is increasingly secular. However Voas' research outlined in the literature review shows significant numbers, perhaps as many as 50% of the UK population have some spiritual beliefs, though often vague and unformed.[15] Eco-spirituality is significant, with a concern for the interconnectedness of all life; as are various forms of neo-Paganism, and the practical tools of the Mind/Body/Spirit scene. Concerns around how spirituality connects with contemporary life are significant, with 'earthed spirituality' identified as a place where Christianity connects with these worldviews. This earthed spirituality is one which resists other worldliness and is deeply concerned with contemporary human and environmental concerns, both 'down to earth' and 'of the earth'.

Missiologists and sociologists of religion have offered significant insight to questions around the disengagement with institutional church structures, often commenting on failure to engage with the reality of contemporary questions. John Drane, writing against the background of the rise of new spiritualities since the 1990s critiques Christianity: 'There is a tendency to reduce Christian spirituality – including Christian mission – to the application of a formula which will deliver more or less immediate dividends, preferably in large quantities.'[16] He considers the popularity of the phrase 'lifestyle spirituality' found in the societal search, generally outside the church, for spiritual meaning in everyday life.[17] He finds this instinct to integrate, healthier than the formulaic approach, noting as a biblical scholar how biblical writers would find it incomprehensible to divide spirituality from the rest of life. He writes: 'From a Christian perspective…it was natural to regard all the activities of everyday life as

[15] David Voas, 'The Rise and Fall of Fuzzy Fidelity in Europe' *European Sociological Review* Vol.25:2 (2009) 155-168.
[16] John Drane, *Do Christians know how to be Spiritual?* (London: DLT 2005) p.119.
[17] Ibid. p.65.

being spiritual.'[18] 'Earthed spirituality' thus finds itself both supported biblically and in keeping with contemporary spiritual approaches.

The community theologian, Ann Morisy agrees, critiquing: 'the current emphasis on reciting and preaching the formulas of our faith'[19] as it renders the offer of salvation as: 'neither earthed nor convincing.'[20] Against the background of an increasing lack of hope within wider society, she encourages Christians not just to speak, but to live out and 'perform or enact hope, here and now.'[21] She continues: 'The Good News is not just communication, it also makes things happen.[22]

She sees any form of Christianity that isn't engaged in present realities as a form of Gnosticism, writing: 'In the history of the church, gnosticism was judged a heresy because gnostics were preoccupied with gaining personal insights which brought personal salvation at the expense of a commitment to a world made new.'[23] She sees a corrective in the Celtic style of Christianity, which: 'continually celebrated the interwoven relationship between earth and heaven.'[24] The result of this perspective is that: 'When the Godly eternal gets so interwoven with everyday life it is impossible to smother hope.' [25] This is the hope that is needed and sought by a society that is 'bothered and bewildered.'[26]

Against this background, Andrew Brown and Linda Woodhead consider the failings of the Church of England noting that despite declining church attendance: 'People still seek healing, ritual, connection with their ancestors, and links with their descendants. They need community and some need explanations of their purpose in life.'[27] They consider the public nature of faith, that it can't be just about individual salvation, yet broader, more liberal approaches have been sidelined:

> The idea that liberalism was a 'wishy washy' version of the true gospel was revealing; it conveniently forgot about the harsh political struggles by which first the unpropertied

[18] Ibid. p.64.
[19] Ann Morisy, *Bothered and Bewildered* (London: Continuum 2009) p.27-8.
[20] Morisy, *Bothered*, p.27-8.
[21] Ibid. p.18.
[22] Ibid. p.18.
[23] Ibid. p.19.
[24] Ibid. p.21.
[25] Ibid. p.21.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Andrew Brown and Linda Woodhead, *That was the Church that Was* (London: Bloomsbury 2016) p.215.

> classes, then 'blacks', then women, children and gay people gradually won the same rights as gentlemen, and the role that Christians had played in these struggles.[28]

They advocate for a church which has wider purpose for the sake of the whole of society: 'If what survives is to be the church of a new England (the old one having disappeared) it has to be a church for England, and not for the Church.'[29]

Cole Moreton considers eco-spirituality, considering an approach that is grounded in land and nature to be rising in significance.[30] He writes: 'If we could… ask everyone in England to put up their hands if they believed in live-and-let-live, looking after the planet and the existence of some kind of God, millions of hands would be raised. Most of the 26 million people who believe in a higher power but don't belong to an organised religion would probably raise their hands.'[31]

Elaine Graham and Stephen Lowe remind us of the importance of place against the background of globalisation's tendency toward the 'gradual dissolution of the local as a discrete, unadulterated space.'[32] They argue that Christians need to hold a creative tension, at one level affirming the flows of capital, labour and commodities, including the hybridisation of cultural identities.[33] Yet the importance of the local and of the particularity of place still needs to be affirmed and celebrated. They note the 'spatial-turn' in urban theory, with its focus on the way particular places are inhabited.[34] The call for Christians is to give: 'attention to the ways in which we inhabit urban space and place as embodied beings.'[35] This resonates with the instinct of pioneers to listen well to their local communities as they seek an appropriate missional response.

It is appropriate to set this affirmation of place alongside Brueggemann's threefold relationship between God, the people and the land, explored more fully in the article on Forest Church.[36] While the Old Testament focus is by nature more environmental and agricultural than urban, the affirmation of the particularity of place is clearly affirmed, with many contemporary resonances. He considers the unjust outworking of the loss of land and place in

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[28] Ibid. p.215.
[29] Ibid. p.220.
[30] Cole Moreton, *Is God still an Englishman?* (London: Little Brown 2010) p.332.
[31] Moreton, *Englishman*, p.340.
[32] Elaine Graham and Stephen Lowe, *What makes a good city?* (London: DLT 2009) p.98.
[33] Graham and Lowe, *City*, p.98.
[34] Ibid. p.50.
[35] Ibid. p.50.
[36] Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: place as gift, promise and challenge in biblical faith* (2nd edn) (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress 2002)

theological discourse: 'Spiritual Christianity, by refusing to face the land question, has served to sanction existing inequalities.'[37] He advocates for a return to a focus on place and land, as a right rediscovery of its central position within God's relationship with all creation.

Portfolio themes

Examining contextual theology within pioneer ministries expressing an 'earthed spirituality' has been identified as a way to explore contextual theologies developed against this societal and spiritual backdrop. While there is an abundance of literature on the practical or ecclesiological outworking of pioneer ministry, it is rare to see a theological assessment of insights arising out of this approach to church. This thesis focuses on this theological work, rooted in ethnographic fieldwork and both describing what was encountered and exploring insight theologically against external sources. The theological work is important both to assess local theologies against the wider tradition, and to develop new possibilities for evangelism that inhabit a wider theological landscape.

The evangelism article explored how healthy evangelism in this spiritual climate holds together social responsibility with verbal expression of the gospel. It outlines how the dominant summary of the gospel in the contemporary church is inherited from the very different Christendom cultural reality and plays out badly against the backdrop of post-Christendom society. In particular, there is a danger of expressing faith in ways which are imprisoned by individualism and consumerism. Renewing our understanding of the 'telos' of evangelism from individual salvation to kingdom helpfully shifts our focus and opens avenues to explore faith conversations that are free in new ways, rooted in the earthed realities of human society and wider creation, and exploring themes such as hope, community and freedom.

The Forest Church article explores one particular new expression of mission and evangelism. Themes that are commonly expressed with Forest Church gatherings are explored in dialogue with Brueggemann's *The Land,* finding significant resonance around the importance of reconnection between humanity, wider creation and the divine.[38] The areas explored by Forest Churches are unfamiliar for many contemporary churches but are in keeping with the biblical record and offer new points of connection for those not drawn to more traditional expressions.

[37] Brueggemann, *Land,* p.205.
[38] Ibid.

Gloucestershire context

This main thesis takes these initial explorations into more depth in fieldwork with three pioneering initiatives in Gloucestershire. While this study doesn't prioritise developing a regional contextual theology, the location undoubtedly impacts in subtle ways. Much of the county is rural, with Gloucester and Cheltenham the most significant centres of population, and Stroud and Tewkesbury, each a location studied, among the region's market towns. The Severn and the Cotswolds dominate the landscape, with the region perhaps best known for pretty Cotswold villages, but also with a post-industrial element from the shipping that used to come into Gloucester docks. The Stroud valleys are full of former mill, manufacturing and warehouse buildings, mostly now converted to other uses, along the length of the canal that connects with the Severn. In contemporary times, alongside common employment opportunities in the region, GCHQ is a significant employer, particularly in Cheltenham.

There is some ethnic diversity but the county as a whole has only 4.4% registered as UKME in the 2011 census.[39] This is higher, though still under the national average, in urban areas with 11% in Gloucester.[40] The other two locations of fieldwork are market towns: 6% UKME in Tewkesbury[41] and only 2.1% in Stroud.[42] This last is remarkable given the considerably higher participation from ethnic minorities observed during fieldwork, perhaps due to the focus on partnership work with those of other faiths.

Each context expresses an 'earthed spirituality', though with different emphases. Following field research each context is given a brief ethnographic description, then a theological assessment is made of one significant issue. The focus here is on what can be learned from each context, so rather than a critique which draws out both positive and negative aspects it seeks to listen to the insight emerging from pioneers, engaging theologically with what was encountered in the field.

Methodological summary

Fieldwork is rooted in ethnographic methods, with time spent attending various gatherings in each location in order to participate and observe. Semi-structured interviews with the pioneer followed, and a focus group was carried out in two of the three locations. Field data was then

[39] https://www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/media/2105749/2020-21-service-user-diversity-report.pdf accessed 23 July 2021.
[40] https://www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/media/1521546/understanding_gloucester-10.pdf accessed 23 July 2021.
[41] https://www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/media/2106420/tewkesbury.pdf accessed 23 July 2021.
[42] https://www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/media/1521547/understanding_stroud-8.pdf accessed 23 July 2021.

coded, and significant themes, one for each case, taken into dialogue with academic theological resources. This results in a two-part report for each case: ethnographic description and a brief outline of some key themes, followed by in depth discussion of one significant theme. Insight about the understanding of Good News has been explored by looking at both the 'espoused theology', that which is consciously articulated; and the 'operant theology, that which is embedded in practice.

Details of fieldwork are in appendices. Appendix A lists field visits by date and appendix B is extracts from the three primary forms of field data: extracts from a focus group from Kingsholm; field journal from Tewkesbury and interview from Stroud.

This is not a project that seeks new theological insight, rather it is one that explores that gap between thinking which has a significant presence within the academy and the narrower vision found within practice. The pioneers have a wider vision that is supported within the academy, the project intends to highlight this wisdom and illustrate the ways in which the academy supports their practice. The hope is that in illustrating the outworking of such theological vision, broader traction in the field will be enabled.

Thesis chapters

Chapter 2 explores a missional community in Kingsholm, Gloucester, which engages deeply within the local community through neighbourhood hospitality and a community coffee shop. The kenotic dynamic is explored as it connects with questions of power and community engagement, bringing together insight from kenotic strands of theology, from Asset Based Community Development, and the opposed narratives of abundance and scarcity. Conclusions are drawn about how the kenotic approach can form good news for a wider society that needs freeing from narratives about power and control that ultimately bind those on both sides of the power dynamic.

Chapter 3 explores a Fresh Expression located on an outer estate in Tewkesbury, socio-economically very different from the town centre and the Abbey congregation. Here, the theme of liberation is explored as an alternative framing of the core Gospel. This takes seriously both structural and personal sin and offers a narrative that brings hope for those who are sinned against as much as sinners. Liberation is in multiple forms, with the spiritual, interpersonal and practical deeply intertwined. Good news in Christ therefore concerns the possibility of living life with more freedom in both spiritual and practical aspects of life.

Chapter 4 explores the various expressions associated with pioneer ministry in Stroud. The theme of hope is prominent, as spiritual underpinning is offered to political activists working for change and needing refreshment in hope in order to counter burnout. These activists are themselves rooted in a variety of different spiritual traditions, therefore a key question is how insight from within Christianity can support hope within ministry that is plural in its spiritual makeup. Good news is found in God who continues to hold creation and draw us towards a positive future. Despite the crises in which we now find ourselves, God brings hope.

Chapter 5 draws threads together towards a conclusion, seeking ways in which an 'earthed spirituality' as expressed in these three contexts offers insight that resonates beyond the localities themselves. It is suggested that gospel themes that are earthed in this way offer potential for mission which avoids the traditional separation of evangelism from social responsibility. Instead, the Good News is lived and expressed in ways that offer resources to wider society as we seek new vision for our society and planet.

Chapter 2a: Kingsholm ethnographic description

'Roots' is a community coffee shop which emerged out of the vision of a Christian community rooted in pioneering mission in Gloucester. At the time of the fieldwork, Roots had been open for a little over three years, running with involvement from the Christian community but as a separate entity, constituted as a Community Interest Company (CIC). The fieldwork included aspects of both Roots itself and the church, noting both the interactions and separation between the two.

Roots is located in Kingsholm, a residential area to the north of the city, separated from the centre by the inner ring-road. It is socio-economically mixed, housing including owner occupied, private rentals, and social housing, the latter including a single ten-storey block of flats. Properties are primarily semis, terraces and town houses, with minimal new development since the 1960s. The rugby stadium is to the west, and the hospital to the east. The coffee shop is situated in a small row including a butcher, hairdresser and garden machinery shop towards the end of a row of terraced housing and across the road from the block of flats, GP surgery and a pharmacy.

The lead pioneer, Ian, has a Vineyard background having worked as a youth pastor. While now ministering independently of any denominational network, he has strong relational links locally, significant partnership working with the Anglican Diocese and is an active member of the local network of pioneer ministers and a Fresh Expressions Associate. Ian runs, on fair trade principles, a direct trade coffee import business called Ethical Addictions, which is his paid employment.

The pioneering has a history going back over ten years with a focus on neighbourhood hospitality, open house and community breakfasts at Ian's family home. Ian also gathers the men to play football and for an annual weekend away. Here, Ian describes the early phase:

> About seven or eight years ago, two couples sat in a room in Gloucester together, praying, trying to figure out what we were meant to do for church. We were part of… more traditional churches, but already very involved with our neighbours. We were doing Mums groups, and community meals, and different events, and connecting with neighbours, and the more we got involved in, if you like, traditional church, the less time

> we had for unchurched. Just the reality of church life. So praying to try to figure out what we'd do... So we committed to praying for three months and not doing anything and then we left what we were doing as church and started, effectively I guess a house church.[1]

A similar process of prayerful discernment preceded the development of the coffee shop. Ian had been chatting with his wife, who had felt prompted to enquire about a derelict shop in the community. The enquiry revealed that there had been another recent enquiry. Ian describes what followed:

> So we went to dinner with friends the following week, and they said "oh we've got this thing we want to talk to you about" and they leaned over and picked up this brochure of this building, and it was the same building, and they'd been the other ones that had enquired. We all got goose bumps and went ok, what's God doing, met and talked about it... So long story short, we bought it, renovated it and opened Roots as a coffee shop, community centre and so forth.[2]

What was a derelict shop has now been developed into a coffee shop and community hall. The building is relatively narrow but extending backwards.[3] Downstairs, seating for the coffee shop takes up the front third of the space. The central third on the right hand side is the serving area with the kitchen behind, and to the left is a corridor through to the back of the building where the toilets and lift are located. There is a back door through to a back yard with recycling, bins, cycle parking and access to Ethical Addiction's warehouse and business space. A gate allows cyclists into the back yard from a driveway along the side of the building.

Stairs from the coffee shop go up into a small area of additional seating. The majority of the upstairs space is taken up by the community hall, which can also be accessed by a lift, and by a staircase at the back of the building.

Details of the building indicate the community and environmental values held by the church. The shelving units are made from repurposed crates and pallets. Plastic is avoided, with baskets and hessian used for stock such as crisps packets, and prices for drinks in the fridge on

[1] Ian Meredith interview, 26 January 2018.
[2] IM interview.
[3] Description here and following is drawn from field journal.

brown luggage labels. It is significant to note that the fieldwork predated the increased profile given to the problem of single use plastic in BBC's Blue Planet series. Ethical Addictions coffee is for sale, as are reusable coffee cups. The label on the coffee says: 'We work with and buy directly from farms and villages, caring for workers and the environment.' The back yard includes a single bin for landfill waste and a range of different recycling bins; the monthly 'fix-it café' offers an alternative to our throw away society. Ian says of their environmental choices:

> When we renovated Roots we spent money on a 130 year old building, you know. It's a beautiful old building, and there's something about culture that means you keep it, don't knock it down, but how d'you make that as efficient as you can? And there's an efficiency interest for us in saving, we don't want to spend masses on bills, so it's not solely environmentally motivated, there's a financial motivation, but we put insulation in everywhere, we have LED lighting throughout the entire building which obviously cost us way more than standard lighting, we have solar panels on the roof, we have thermodynamic water heating, we have infrared heating of the building.[4]

Similar attention goes into ensuring that all are welcome. A lift enables access to the upstairs space for those who cannot use stairs and one of the toilets is accessible. Financial inclusion is enabled by careful balancing of the needs of a business to be sustainable with a desire to include, and is managed through the range on the menu. Drinks start at £1.25 for a cuppa and extend to pricier speciality coffees such as gingerbread latte or 'bonfire coffee'. The food menu has a similar range, starting with 'three for £1' traybakes. A couple sat for several hours with a single drink during the daytime, with no sense of being rushed on. By contrast, parents of children coming in for activities upstairs spent significantly on coffees and cake, as well as snacks for the children afterwards when they had finished. Gluten free and vegan options are available on the main menu without need for special request.

Community use is encouraged by aspects such as the table which holds colouring pencils and paper for children as well as water jugs and glasses for people to help themselves. The area under the stairs is set up as a children's play area with various toys and activities available. The upstairs seating area includes a shelf unit containing books and board games which customers are welcome to borrow. A domestic radio sits on the top of the shelving, playing radio 2 at a level which is barely noticeable when there are lots of people present but which prevents the

[4] IM interview.

cafe feeling lonely and silent when it is quiet. A stuffed rabbit sits on the top shelf, lost property, waiting to be reunited with its owner.

Leaflet holders contain information about a range of community activities and support for issues such as debt and mental ill-health. A desire to support wellbeing from all possible perspectives is in evidence. There are two notice boards, one which is specific to Roots and contains information about events and activities happening on the premises, and the other more general community information.

The community hall functions separately, with four kinds of users: those hiring the hall for private parties; those hiring for public events; those run by Roots; and those run by the church. The church, while supporting Roots in a variety of ways, does not own the building and so pay rental for their use. The dynamic between Roots and the church is intriguing and discussed at length later. The Christian inspiration behind the values of Roots is indicated by postcards that are placed in holders on each table:

> We are inspired by the example and message of Jesus. We welcome and work with any individuals and organisations for the good of the community, whatever their beliefs. Roots belongs to all of us to help Kingsholm flourish – enjoy it, use it, bring your ideas and make them happen.

That Roots belongs to all is a core value. The hope is that its presence will enable the thriving of the community in the neighbourhood, but that will only happen if people participate. Posters in the toilets both advertise regular events and encourage volunteers to help with various activities. The café is used by a wide variety of people, with different groups dominating at different times of day. Groups of Mums with toddlers use the downstairs space near the play area, professionals use the café for meetings with clients or with other professionals, adults meet friends, parents drank coffee while children attended an activity in the community hall. A few gatherings are in the diary explicitly to enable people to meet new people. 'Coffee, chill and connect' is for those who work from home to connect with others doing the same; 'Knit and natter' is pretty much what the name suggests. A Big Issue seller popped in from time to time and was obviously well known by the staff.

The Christian community now meets on a monthly basis in Roots cafe on a Wednesday evening and in small groups in homes on the other weeks.[5] I was welcomed at 'monthly church' but asked not to attend weekly church due to the depth of sharing of personal matters that happens. For similar reasons I was also not able to attend any staff management meetings.

Church gatherings vary from month to month with a wide variety of different people leading, each free to choose their own style. Sung worship was a part of every gathering I attended though did not dominate. A common thread, also expressed in the Christmas carols which had a wider public attendance, is a relaxed informality including gentle humour, an expectation that God will be present and at work, and significant theological content expressed within everyday language, with no assumption of prior knowledge. A depth of relationship between the members was evident. Communion was celebrated at both Wednesday evenings, with 'low-church' liturgical style but a deep sense of sacramentality, expecting God to be mediated through bread and wine.

The one gathering I attended that wasn't hosted at Roots was the chocolate party. A monthly community breakfast is hosted in the home of one of the church members, in December this is replaced by a 'chocolate party'. Both breakfast and chocolate party are an open house, people popping in when they can, with an openness to meet new people that is facilitated by church members. This community hospitality is a continuation of the church's ministry from before Roots was available as a venue.

Practice is ahead of theology at some moments. A phrase was repeated a couple of times in interview: "my theology won't let me go there". I wonder what would happen if theology was in fact allowed to go there, what additional depth might be found? An example is the discussion of what difference it made to be praying while renovating the building, whether that resulted in sacred space. Ian continued: "theologically you get in danger of going back to the Holy of Holies, back to the Arc, and all that kind of thing, and yet the reality of my experience of God is that there are places where I feel His presence more. I'm not sure I can articulate that fully in my own theology."[6] Another moment came, described below, when wondering about those who feel part of the church but only attend social elements. These are

[5] At the time of fieldwork the church didn't have a name so throughout is just 'the church.'
[6] IM interview.

not questions that have current urgency for Ian, yet my suspicion is that there is theologically depth to be found, were they to be explored.

Kingsholm: thematic summary

A significant theme is the way in which kenotic theology plays out in the practice of this project, in particular in the relationships between the church and Roots café, and between café/church and wider community. This theme will be given significant space in the next chapter. The following section outlines other themes which are worth noting.

Missio Dei

The first thing to note is a simple reliance on God, framed by the *missio Dei*. There is a lack of anxiety about outcomes and conversion which is significant in setting the ethos: "our responsibility is the easy bit, it's the relationship, it is the connection, it is telling the story. The conversion bit is the Holy Spirit's responsibility, it's not mine anyway. And so we're just there to create an environment where that can happen."[7] Similarly, although there is desire to see people come to faith, church numerical growth is not prioritised: "From my perspective, if our group, if our church stayed at thirty, but Kingsholm became an epicentre of the kingdom of God, and lots of people turned to Christian faith, and lived for community, I'd be happy with thirty."[8] There is a patience, allowing things to take time and to work at the speed of relationship: "And I think what I've learned more than anything is that living alongside people, and giving it time, and being patient, and letting God be God, and let people see."[9] This freedom from anxiety makes the community far more attractive than one where concern about numbers and budget was more primary.

Kingdom focus

Associated with this is a focus on kingdom rather than church: "the vision is to see the kingdom of God come in the area that God's placed us in, in our community."[10] Ian continued, saying that there is a hope that people will come to faith, but it goes beyond the individual: "it's also about seeing transformation in your community. People's lives getting better. Surely if the gospel is good news, always that's what it should mean."[11] This means that community,

[7] IM Interview.
[8] Focus group participant, 5 February 2018.
[9] IM Interview.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Focus group.

both in terms of relationships within the church, and in the wider community are of far more importance than the worship when the church gathers:

> Compared to most other churches we have a very low priority for corporate worship, because we see, I think genuinely we see worship as everything that we do… In the Old Testament, you know, there's verses, bible verses, you know, God doesn't want all the singing and the celebrations and stuff, he wants justice and caring for the poor and that.[12]

This lack of focus on corporate worship frees the church to put their energy into relationships and neighbourhood.

This is founded on an uncomplicated gospel: "Jesus simplified God's message to be 'love God and love our neighbour'... You know, we add an awful lot to that. But we're told to love God and to love our neighbour. And this is our expression of doing that."[13]

While uncertain in interview whether love of neighbour could include the natural world, in practice this includes an environmental ethic as well as human society. Theologically this is rooted in Ian's eschatological understanding: "My theology isn't that this is being destroyed. Heaven is coming here on earth."[14] Several environmental choices have already been highlighted in the description that began this chapter; reuse and recycle is in evidence all round the building; and local suppliers were used where possible and observed dropping around supplies during fieldwork.[15]

Community, relationship and inclusion

The outworking of this simple gospel is about living within the community, "being incarnational". The descriptive passages above note the commitment to inclusion, to participation and to an environmental ethic. The ministry has a holistic vision which is earthed in lived realities, both human and those of wider creation, with spiritual realities integrated and running throughout: "what we focus on is the real core of that relational church, the

[12] Focus group.
[13] IM Interview.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Field journal, 24 November 2017.

relationship with God, and the relationship with each other in pursuit of being closer to God and bringing the kingdom to the community around us."[16]

Ian says:

> I think that, even though outside of church people recognise that we are built as relational beings, whether there is any concept of God in that or not, I think most people recognise that we are built to do life together. So how do we do that? Community is a really buzz word for us. It probably goes deeper than for others as for what we mean by shared life, shared possessions, shared... and we can break out what that means practically.[17]

In practice, this results in a core of those Christians who are part of the Fresh Expression and a wider group who are part of the community but not self-identifying as Christian, with blurred and fluid boundaries. "And so I think there's people who very much identify with the community that's being built, and they recognise that the core of that community is Christian."[18] This community is inclusive, participatory and outward facing. Something of the dynamic is described here, Wednesday being the night that the church gathers: "There is a fairly hard edge between Wednesday night and not Wednesday, but the non Wednesday night stuff has a real breadth to it, a real inclusion and that's coming from… not from the core Wednesday night goers, but from people who are involved in some way."[19] The broader community is understood by some to be church: "And **they** would consider it part of the church as well, that I think is interesting."[20] Ian said similarly in interview: "We've had times when… we've had conversations, just as a snap-shot conversation - we've had conversations where friends of ours - 'we **are** part of your church, aren't we? Even though we don't do the God stuff?' Unpack **that** theologically!"[21]

Another intriguing question held by Ian is around those who take on board the values and ethos but without connecting with the spiritual core: "And there's been spin-offs off it, where

[16] Focus group.
[17] IM Interview.
[18] Focus group.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid.
[21] IM interview.

others, not believers, have learned to do community... I don't know if that's good, bad, indifferent? I don't know. I think I hold that quite lightly and don't over analyse it."

Sacred space

Yet another unanswered question concerns the nature of sacred space for a building which is primarily a coffee shop and where community and relationships are of primary importance. There are anecdotal comments about the 'feel' of the place, with it hard to untangle the spiritual from the welcome. Ian said: "I don't know about the theology of this, I talk about the fact that as we renovated it, with our own hands, most of us, we literally prayed God into the fabric of the building - I'm not sure that happens! Certainly God's presence dwelling there, there's something."[22] Feedback affirms this: "We've had dozens of stories of people saying 'there's something about this place, that I feel safe, I feel welcome, I feel...' you know, even language of 'there's some spirit here' or something. You get really fascinating comments from people, going 'I never get this anywhere else.'"[23] The sacred space is protected carefully, with some boundaries in place around who is allowed to hire the community space.

Living differently

Living differently is foundational for evangelism: "Everything we did raised a question. What we do is **very** counter-cultural. And so the questions start to come, why do you do this."[24] This invites a response that references Christian faith and Jesus' teaching and example. "I think the fact that we do Roots for no profit whatsover is a massive challenge in our culture, people don't get it. To the point where I've had the same friends ask me three, four times, 'so you don't get paid for that? So **why** d'you do it?' That's a really big one, because we're so driven by money in our culture."[25] Living differently extends to the business itself. The management group are voluntary; ethical issues are taken seriously, particularly around the environment and supporting local; and the staff are treated like whole people rather than as commodities. This difference in approach again raises questions: "But what we've seen through our staff is, well one of the ladies there, over the space of a year, eighteen months, met God, just by the way we treated her as an employee... well all we did was the right thing. We just cared about her, you know?"[26]

[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid.

Evangelism

While much energy goes on the practical and relational, there is a concern to ensure that the spiritual dimension is not sidelined, and is openly expressed: "The biggest danger, the drum I beat in Roots and in church, the biggest danger of the way we do church and the community we belong to is that if we drift from Jesus being at the centre, we become the best social club in town. And nobody knows why we do it... And so, my litmus test, if you like, is always, do those outside of our church know why we do what we do? If they do, then we know that the conversation's always open, and we know that they know why, and if they choose not to engage or ask about that, that's not my responsibility." This leaves an opening for those in the wider Roots community to be able to ask questions when the moment is right for them: "every now and again something will crop up that they want to ask someone about. Something happens in life and either they want, ah someone needs to help out with that, I'll ask the church lot, or something's thrown this spiritual question my way, who can I ask about? I know who I'll ask about that, these guys I've been having breakfast with for the past three years."[27]

When those questions do arise, it is an open and unprotected conversation: "I tend to be really honest and say that I don't get it all." It starts with listening rather than talking: "on a personal level I just tend to chat to people, and find out where they're at, and respond to that."[28]

Evangelism therefore is rooted in living differently and waiting for questions: "I firmly believe in being ... incarnational, living alongside people, being Jesus in the midst of that community of neighbourhood, and inviting question, and letting people see Jesus amongst us, and inviting those questions, and inviting them to see him, before we tell them about him." On occasion the beginning of the response comes from the wider community rather than the church: "And one of the other guys said 'well it's Ian, and his Christian friends, they've build this community around, which we're all invited to.' And he went 'no it can't be that.' And they all rounded on him, and went 'yeah yeah yeah, that's exactly what it is!' I didn't even have to say anything. It was amazing!"[29]

Language is kept simple but without compromising on content: "probably the key difference is that we tend to keep the language as simple as possible. We really try not to assume too – it depends on the group, because every group is different, but we try not to assume too much

[27] Focus group.
[28] IM Interview.
[29] Ibid.

prior knowledge of the bible, or even big words sometimes. And we try not to use too much Christianese." [30] This, for example, is from the Christmas carols at Roots: "Christmas is the story of how to love God, how to love one another". "The reading we heard was from a guy called Isaiah, long before Jesus was born talking about his birth. He used the word Emmanuel, which is a word we see a lot at Christmas, it basically means that God is with us."[31]

A newer member of the church said in focus group: "I think our church is very good at giving us the confidence in understanding our own sense of God in our lives and our relationship with God, that really empowers us to be able to share that with others where it feels right to.[32]

Gospel content

This ability to locate evangelism in living differently and waiting for questions is rooted in an understanding of God present and at work in and through all of life. In a December church gathering, the leader said: "God isn't aloof or distant, God came down to be with us, to get involved in our situations and in our lives."[33] In the same gathering, those present were asked to **"**write down words that are about the gift - or what it means to you to be a Christian."[34] Responses included hope/Jesus gives HOPE (several times); Life in all its fullness/new life; Meaning and purpose (several times); faithful; Freedom and peace; Adventure and full of surprise; God's love for me and the world (several times); forgiveness and grace; family and support (several times); help with practical concerns (several times).

Sin is spoken of but without the word itself, at least not initially: "I think I change the language, and I'll later on in that conversation say 'ultimately that's what the bible calls sin'" On being asked what language he uses instead, Ian responded: "We've all done bad stuff, we've all done stuff we regret, we've all done stuff that makes us not perfect. So just, stuff that people can nod along to. Going 'yeah'. And actually when you look, the feeling of unworthiness is very very prevalent in our culture."[35] Belonging and purpose are also significant: "And if you engage, and you know, perhaps so much of the church doesn't engage, but if you do engage with those outside the church... you do hear that, in their conversation, of lacking purpose."

[30] Focus group.
[31] Field journal, 16 December 2017.
[32] Focus group.
[33] Field journal, 6 December 2017.
[34] Ibid.
[35] IM Interview.

The interview with Ian was notable for the constant return to story based accounts. He strongly resisted being pinned down theologically, and frequently responded to theological questions with a story. He knows this of himself, and when asked what he talks about when engaged in evangelistic conversations, answered that "my default is narrative."[36] When we were talking about what Ian considers to be core to the Good News he was straight into narrative mode: "And then we tell the Good News, as far as what is the story of Jesus, and why he did what he did, and why was that necessary. And that just needs some - we tend to use as much basic language as we can. My starting point tends to be '2000 years ago there's a guy called Jesus, this is a fact. He did some stuff and he said some stuff. What are you going to do about it? Let's look at what he said, let's look at what he did.'"[37]

[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid.

Chapter 2b: Kenosis in practice (Kingsholm)

This chapter will explore the kenotic dynamic within the practice in Kingsholm, with evidence of this dynamic from the fieldwork presented throughout the chapter. The kenotic movement, as applied to Christian discipleship and mission, will be explored in a dialogue between the fieldwork and the academy. Kenotic theology is that which explores the self-emptying of Christ, whether in terms of Jesus' ethic as illustrated in the gospel narratives or in Christological understanding, the nature of the incarnation. In keeping with the 'earthed spirituality' that is the focus of this study, this chapter explores the outworking in a local community of the kenotic dynamic, for individuals, community and church, in order to discover embedded aspects of the gospel.

Within the fieldwork, the theme of kenosis was most sharply raised by the reluctance within the focus group to identify Roots café as in any sense part of the church. Until the focus group, blurred lines had been observed between Roots café and the church which created the café, and yet there was an unwillingness among the people gathered in the focus group to talk about Roots. In fact, they refused to have the conversation beyond dialogue around why they didn't want to talk about Roots. A participant stated that "they're quite different";[1] another used the analogy of overlapping circles in Venn Diagrams;[2] a third said that "Roots is a completely separate organisational structure to anything that's within our church."[3] There was a general reluctance to confuse the two. This was despite the fact that in the initial introductions, every participant had something to say about their role within Roots as well as within the church. Some focus group participants were members of the management structure with one chairing the board, and other board members and the employed café manager also present. Others volunteer at Roots, either for church hosted events that hire the hall or Roots hosted events such as Roots runners. Roots only exists due to the vision and hard work of church members.

Church members are clearly very involved in the community life that happens at Roots but draw this boundary through a desire for Roots to be a community space, owned and used by the community as a whole, not just the church. It became apparent that there is a profound sense of having given the facility away to the community, while at the same time retaining a

[1] Focus Group participant, 5 February 2018.
[2] Focus Group.
[3] Ibid.

hold over core ethos and spiritual values. A focus group participant said: "to say that they are the same just negates the open doors that we're trying to do."[4] Another elaborated:

> I always think that, a part of Roots as well is that we're trying to create a genuine shared space. So it's not that we've built a church building and then tried to invite people to our cafe in the front, but it's still ours. We're genuinely trying to make it something that belongs to the community. If we're serving the community then we're serving the community, but we're inviting everyone to come in and invest in it, and be a part of it, genuinely, trying to not have too tight a hold on it.[5]

Another participant said: "So a lot of our church outworking of mission is through Roots, but that's not part of our church's building itself up."[6] There is a subtle difference being expressed here. The church does in fact hope that people will come to faith but is not that interested in growth as a church, in being built up themselves. There is a very relaxed attitude towards church growth. Ian said in interview: "And I've seen friends come to faith and go to other churches."[7] He had no sense that it would have been better if they had joined their church, all was well as long as they had found a spiritual home.

Other comments from the focus group reinforce this sense of kenotic outpouring, with priority given to their gift to the community rather than the building up of the church: "We never wanted it to be a church project as such, or a Christian coffee shop or anything like that,"[8] and "we want to build the kingdom of God, not build our own egos."[9] The overall focus is far wider and deeper than the church itself: "the vision is to see the kingdom of God come in the area that God's placed us in, in our community. So that's not just about - it **is** about I hope people coming to know Jesus, and coming to faith, but it's also about seeing transformation in your community."[10]

In all of this, the sense of letting go of power and control over Roots café is profound. Roots is what the whole community makes it, not what the church makes it. That said, the fact that the ethos is rooted in Christ is not hidden and various protections are in place to ensure that

[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.
[7] IM interview, 26 January 2018.
[8] Focus Group.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid.

this remains central and visible. The dynamic allows them to both be fully inclusive without losing identity.

The practice reflects the kenotic dynamic: the exploration that follows explores how, within this dynamic, a genuine giving away of power can be lived out alongside a right retaining of core identity for the sake of others and community. The opening section explores the widespread Western cultural assumption of a 'scarcity narrative' that is in the background of the discussion, and the practice of ABCD that informs the work in Kingsholm. In the second section, through examining various kenotic theologies in dialogue with the practice at Roots, it will be demonstrated how kenosis is Good News in both word and practice. The conclusion considers the missional implications of the discussion.

Part 1: Gospel, abundance and assets

The practices in Kingsholm are influenced by Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) and during the period of the fieldwork, they were advertising for an ABCD based community enabler to join their staff.[11] For a church with a focus on kingdom rather than church, highly relational and rooted in neighbourhood, this is a tool and a mindset that is in keeping with their vision.

ABCD is an approach to community engagement that resonates with a kenotic approach, particularly in the dynamic whereby power and control is given away by external agencies to community members. The focus is on facilitating, enabling, and getting out of the way. Al Barrett is a UK based practitioner-theologian known for his work in this area. He writes that:

> ABCD is founded on the idea that change will only happen if we identify and mobilise the gifts and capacities of local people and the social, physical and economic resources of a local place. It is an approach that seeks to build strong, sustainable communities from the 'inside out', through forging and nurturing relationships of care and creativity.[12]

Similarly, Mather writes that: 'John McKnight and Jody Kretzmann, cofounders of ABCD, proposed that when working with low-income citizens, you ought to begin by focusing on the

[11] Facebook post, 3 January 2018.
[12] Al Barrett, *Asset Based Community Development: a theological reflection* https://resources.depaul.edu/abcd-institute/publications/publications-by-topic/Documents/ABCD_Theological_Reflection_2013.pdf accessed 5 November 2019.

gifts of the community rather than starting with what the community lacks.'[13] This contrasts with an approach to community building whereby external experts come into a community to do things for them. Sam Wells has written on this, advocating for an approach of 'being with' or 'doing with' a community rather than the default of 'doing for.'[14] Barrett continues, reflecting on the relationship between ABCD and Christianity: 'Although not an explicitly Christian methodology, ABCD's core values and methods resonate deeply with Christian theology and practice.'[15]

In order to work in such a way, there needs to be confidence that there is enough to go around. Conversely, belief that resources are scarce is a blockage to generous living, and therefore to the dynamic being explored here. Brueggemann has written extensively on the contrast between the 'scarcity narrative' and the biblical theme of abundant gift from God.[16] The resonance between this insight and ABCD is so profound that Brueggemann has co-written a book with two authors, Block and McKnight, known for their work on ABCD. The theology shows that it is truly good news in the power that it has to transform lives and communities: 'It isn't just that there is enough, but the practice of a belief in abundance makes more available.'[17] This is Good News that runs counter to core beliefs within our society. They write:

> 'If we want to follow the signs of the times, we have to look at how our core economic beliefs have produced a culture that makes poverty, violence, ill health, and fragile economic systems seem inevitable. Economic systems based on competition, scarcity, and acquisitiveness have become more than a question of economics; they have become the kingdom within which we dwell.'[18]

The proposal is '*An Other Kingdom'* a different way of living rooted on abundance rather than scarcity. Barrett notes how: 'Christians are well-practised at rehearsing what Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann calls the 'liturgy of abundance', a song of praise for God's creative

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[13] Michael Mather, *Having nothing, possessing everything: finding abundant communities in unexpected places* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans 2018) p.15.

[14] Sam Wells, *Being with those of other faiths,* https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2019-05/Sam%20Wells%20on%20Being%20With%20Other%20Faiths.pdf accessed 11 March 2020.

[15] Barrett, *Reflection*.

[16] Walter Brueggemann, *The liturgy of Abundance, the myth of scarcity* https://www.religion-online.org/article/the-liturgy-of-abundance-the-myth-of-scarcity/ accessed 5 November 2019.

[17] Peter Block, Water Brueggemann, John McKnight, *An Other Kingdom: departing the consumer culture* (Hoboken NJ: Wiley 2016) p.3.

[18] Ibid. p.xiii.

generosity.'[19] We do this whenever we give thanks. He invites us to take this liturgy of abundance into our practice in our wider communities: 'ABCD invites us to practise the same liturgy of abundance in our own neighbourhoods: to open our eyes to the ways God has blessed this place and this people with goodness, vitality and fruitfulness.'[20]
Brueggemann has written extensively on the contrast between the abundance narrative of the gospel and the scarcity narrative of our culture. We are conditioned by our culture to a way of thinking in which everything is finite, in which giving away, whether of power or material wealth is from a finite resource so that in giving, we have less.

However the gospel tells it differently. Any kind of giving increases the abundance of life that is available, whether considering power or material resources. He considers Christians, whether liberal or conservative, to be: 'torn apart by the conflict between our attraction to the good news of God's abundance and the power of our belief in scarcity - a belief that makes us greedy, mean and unneighborly. We spend our lives trying to sort out that ambiguity.[21]

Brene Brown names the scarcity narrative as the 'culture of "never enough."'[22] She writes: 'Scarcity thrives in a culture where everyone is hyperaware of lack.'[23] She links this to both trauma and shame, underlining how important it is to unpick this false narrative in contemporary society: 'Worrying about scarcity is our culture's version of post-traumatic stress. It happens when we've been through too much, and rather than coming together to heal (which requires vulnerability) we're angry and scared and at each other's throats.'[24] She prefers to speak of wholeheartedness rather than abundance, her preference arising out of her different focus. She is speaking of an aspiration for life which rightly should be for wholeheartedness rather than abundance, whereas Brueggemann is speaking theologically of abundance in God.[25]

Brueggemann traces the theme through the Bible, seeing the scarcity narrative beginning to creep in during the Egyptian famine. Until that point: 'Blessing is the force of well-being active in the world, and faith is the awareness that creation is the gift that keeps on giving.'[26] But

[19] Barrett, *Reflection.*
[20] Ibid.
[21] Brueggemann, *Abundance.*
[22] Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly* (London: Penguin Life 2015) p.18.
[23] Ibid p.26.
[24] Ibid. p.27.
[25] Ibid. p29.
[26] Brueggemann, *Abundance.*

following Pharaoh's dream and Joseph's interpretation: 'Pharaoh gets organized to administer, control and monopolize the food supply. Pharaoh introduces the principle of scarcity into the world economy. For the first time in the Bible, someone says, "There's not enough. Let's get everything."'[27]

Our culture has inherited the struggle and although the church has habits that practice the 'liturgy of abundance' it is evident in our activities that we struggle to quite believe it. Whether considering practical assets such as material goods, or intangibles such as power, we are dealing with a balance sheet whereby giving away means that less is left. We need to take courage and explore a belief in abundance, in both theology and practice, if we are to express the gospel message fully. We have here an aspect of Good News that is rarely explicitly shared, particularly in a way in which word and lifestyle are in resonance. Within the gospel perspective of abundance, the more that is given away, the more is available to be shared.

This can be lived out with respect to various different scarce resources. Mather directly relates it to the 'asset based'[28] approach of his church:

> We were practicing the theology of abundance by looking for and naming the gifts of people who are thought of as poor and needy. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus proclaims Good News to the poor. Likewise, our telling people who thought they had nothing to offer that they had gifts was indeed good news. And very effective.[29]

Considerations around power are important here. Mather writes: 'When people believe they're powerless, efforts to help them often make matters worse.'[30] He continues: 'People who don't have much can do a lot. They have power and agency to act.'[31] They will only be able to act though when allowed to do so. For this to happen, those with power or privilege need to live out the kenotic dynamic, making space for the other, for life and growth in those who may not believe they have anything to offer.

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[27] Ibid.

[28] Used here in the technical sense as used within ABCD – practice based on 'assets', both people and material, rather than on fixing problems.

[29] Mather, *Possessing Everything* p.17.

[30] Ibid. p.56.

[31] Ibid. p.56.

The church's decision to share Roots with the community is working within this ethos. At the time of fieldwork this was based in the invitation to 'bring your ideas and make them happen' on the information postcard and the call for volunteers such as the poster in the toilets observed during fieldwork.[32] The decision to employ an ABCD based community enabler is one which takes this deeper into the community, beyond those who would naturally volunteer.

Part 2: Kenotic theology and Kingsholm

The 'asset based' approach, working with the positives rather than problems in a community, and the 'liturgy of abundance,' need to be kept within view as this next section explores how they, embedded within the work in Kingsholm, resonate with kenotic theologies. The themes are connected as both are concerned with dynamics of giving away or letting go in order to further God's purposes.

Kenotic theology is not a uniform school, it has had a variety of different iterations. The next sections outline important elements of the debates, acknowledging the field rather than going into depth on every issue, with a focus on where the debates engage with perspectives discovered through the fieldwork.

Philippians 2

The starting point is the Christological hymn that Paul embeds in his letter to the Philippians. This passage begins exploring the self-giving of Christ. As it continues, it becomes clear that the result of such self-giving is not disempowerment, rather the opposite: 'Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name.[33]

Roger Latham sees this dynamic also told in the story in John 13 of Jesus washing his disciples' feet.[34] Significant to this debate is that Jesus took on servanthood but wasn't in any sense diminished by it. He took on a menial task that outraged Peter, yet afterwards, 'Lord and master' remains appropriate language to use.[35] Jesus has modelled a different kind of servanthood, which gives away to others without loss of self.

[32] Field journal, 24 Nov 2017 and 13 Nov 2017.
[33] Philippians 2.9.
[34] Revd Dr Roger Latham, presenting at Gloucester Diocese clergy conference, September 2019.
[35] John 13.13.

Returning to Philippians, contemporary biblical scholars agree that Paul's incarnational Christology was not developed enough at the time of writing for it to be appropriate to read an incarnational understanding as his original intention. Sarah Coakley writes: 'One striking point of unanimity in the modern New Testament discussion... has been the virtual ruling out of a 'dogmatic' or 'metaphysical' reading of Paul's interests in this passage. It is not, in other words, a prefigurement of second-century Logos speculation... let alone a preview of fourth-century Nicaean orthodoxy.'[36]

It is therefore the demeanour with which Jesus conducted himself, rather than incarnational Christology, that was Paul's primary purpose in writing. As Coakley puts it: 'on this 'ethical' reading, the 'emptying' of v. 7 is *parallel* to the 'humbling' of v. 8; both take place within Jesus' earthly existence, rather than the 'emptying' being a precondition of the earthly life (as on the 'pre-existence' reading).'[37] Thus, a self-emptying kenotic dynamic is seen lived out within Jesus' life and example, and expected of his followers within Christian discipleship.

That said, while it is not appropriate to claim that Paul himself was considering incarnational Christology here, the passage has been used in this way in later interpretation. Here for example, Migliore takes an incarnational approach:

> The idea of *kenosis* comes from the Christological hymn of Philippians 2:5ff… In Jesus Christ, God and humanity are united in mutual self-giving love. It is a union of the Spirit in which there is a reciprocal self-limitation and total openness of each to the other.[38]

As he continues, he discusses the holding together of humanity and divinity within the person of Christ and so is clearly considering incarnation rather than ethics. In doing so he stands on a solid foundation of systematic theology dating back at least to the debates in Nicaea and Chalcedon if not further into second century logos theology.

Kenotic approaches in theory

The practices of Kingsholm church reveal a sophisticated approach whereby there is both a profound giving away of power and control to the wider community, alongside a retained

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[36] Sarah Coakley, 'Kenosis and subversion: on the repression of 'vulnerability' in Christian feminist writing', in Daphne Hampson *Swallowing a Fishbone?* (London: SPCK 1996) p.86.

[37] Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell 2002) p.8.

[38] Daniel L Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans 1991) p.150.

identity rooted in Christian values that are non-negotiable and closely guarded. Power is shared but core identity and values remain stable. Through this movement, Roots has become well respected within the community, and trusted in a way that churches which keep a closer hold on boundaries and power often struggle to achieve. They have also avoided the dynamic of the late 20th century whereby good social projects with Christian foundation give away their Christian identity along with power and therefore become increasingly distanced from their Christian foundation.[39] When set alongside the kenotic school of Christology, this illustrates how a healthy approach to kenoticism gives freely but retains identity.

Kenotic approaches following Luther have been helpful in beginning to open theology up to a less static way of conceiving of the nature of God. Later approaches, incorporating feminist insight and discussed below, have moulded the debate in ways which have deep resonance with the missional practice in Kingsholm. These later iterations hold to the narrative of abundance, whereby giving away adds to what is available rather than resulting in depletion, as assumed by the scarcity narrative. This fundamentally changes how the kenotic dynamic functions because giving away becomes gain rather than loss.

Senor describes kenoticism as 'something of a newcomer in Christological theory.'[40] It is a relative newcomer as a distinct school but, as Senor puts it: 'The fundamental biblical impetus for the kenotic perspective comes from an early hymn that Paul quotes in the second chapter in his letter to the Philippians.'[41] The approach goes back to Lutheranism but with renewed interest in nineteenth century debates in Germany: 'the goal was to incorporate the then-current research into the 'historical Jesus' into the life of faith, not in a way that would reduce the bold metaphysical claims of Chalcedon but instead as a means of using what was being newly learned about the life and times of Christ as a way to better understand his humanity.'[42]

The result was a debate concerning what divine qualities needed to be renounced in the incarnation. Law describes kenotic Christology as: 'a type of theology that holds that in order to become a human being the Logos or Son of God renounced the attributes or prerogatives belonging to his divine nature in order to assume human nature and live a genuinely human

[39] For example: https://emmaus.org.uk/about-us/ accessed 14 May 2020.
[40] Thomas Senor, 'Drawing on many traditions: an ecumenical kenotic Christology', in Anna Marmodoro and Jonathan Hill, *The Metaphysics of the Incarnation (*NY: OUP 2011) p.102.
[41] Ibid. p.103.
[42] Ibid. p.103-4.

existence.'[43] Senor, in his search for 'an ecumenical kenotic Christology', notes divine attributes considered essential to divinity but incompatible with living a humanity that experienced life in any way similar to others. He writes: 'Such properties include omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence'[44] but no human can have these properties since 'humans are limited in power, knowledge, and spatial location. So if he is both divine and human, then Jesus has a long string of pairs of incompatible properties.'[45]

There are two ways of approaching the list of incompatible properties. The approach of classical theology, from the ecumenical councils to Aquinas, is to explore how they can be held together in one person.[46] By contrast, though building on the classical understandings, the focus in earlier kenotic approaches is to explore what was given up. Some of these properties must have been given up, or put aside, for the duration of the incarnation in order to live a full humanity.

Both approaches struggle for coherence. Senor's discussion illustrates the problem as he unpicks various attempts to reconcile the difficulties. He himself says in his conclusion:

> Admittedly, the position I'm advocating is something of a hodge-podge. But it might be that the best we can do… is to shoot for accounts that meet our desiderata, are apparently logically consistent (or at least are not apparently logically inconsistent!) and explain the relevant data as well as or better than their competitors.[47]

An additional problem with this approach is that if all the divine attributes that Christ gave up are so important, then we are no longer able to learn about the character of God from Christ. If we are serious about the character of God being revealed in Jesus, then we have a real difficulty. Nevertheless, the understanding within this form of kenoticism that power was given up by the person of Christ at the moment of incarnation has continued into various debates.

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[43] David R. Law, 'Luther's Legacy and the Origins of Kenotic Christology', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, Vol.93:2 (2017) p.41.
[44] Senor, 'Ecumenical', p.91.
[45] Ibid. p.91.
[46] John Polkinghorne, 'Kenotic Creation and Divine Action', in Polkinghorne (ed) *The work of love, creation as kenosis* (London: SPCK 2001) p.94.
[47] Senor, *Ecumenical*, p.112.

Kenotic approaches in practice

The outworking of kenotic theology, often operant rather than openly acknowledged, has a profound influence on missional choices. The presence within our society of charities with Christian foundation but no current Christian expression have perspectives in common with earlier kenotic approaches whereby both power and identity are given away. The giving up has been so profound that the original identity is no longer there to be seen. Other contemporary churches hold tightly to power and boundaries with kenoticism only minimally expressed.

The approach in Kingsholm differs in significant ways from the kenotic dynamic outlined above. While the giving away of power to the community is profound, there is no sense of giving up aspects of their identity in Christ. In fact, their Christian identity, rather than concealed, is revealed through the kenotic choice to sit lightly to power. This last gives us insight into a more helpful approach, whereby the choice to sit lightly to power in itself reveals the nature of both God, and God's church.

It is important to the church that Roots, alongside the church's wider hospitality work is not just another community social project. The ethnographic description quoted Ian as he spoke about his determination that Roots is not just a good social project but that Jesus is kept at the centre.[48] While participation has been given away, and the invitation is open to all community members to use the building and to run community events in the space, there are core values underpinning Roots which are non-negotiable. The postcards on the table are a constant reminder that inspiration comes from the life and person of Jesus.[49] The outworking of this inspiration is expressed in values that can be shared by people of other or no faith: everybody matters; family friendly; fair wages and well treated staff; locally sourced ingredients; fostering community, fair trade; protecting the environment; having fun. But that the inspiration comes from Jesus is made clear.[50]

Also significant are the boundaries put on the use of the upstairs space – broadly open but in terms of explicit spirituality, limited to spiritual practice which points towards Jesus. Ian said in interview that: "the board took a decision to lay down some criteria of what can and can't

[48] IM interview.
[49] Field journal, 13 November 2017.
[50] Ibid.

happen and anything outside of that criteria goes to the board."[51] He elaborated about why this is considered important, and how this is expressed to people enquiring about hiring the space: "I just talk about the reality, well we believe in a spiritual world, and therefore what we invite into this building really matters to us."[52] Roots hold a clear line that spirituality expressed in Roots must be Christian: "Quite often you also get "well it's good spirits and good stuff." And you go, you know, in our minds there's not. It is either going towards Jesus, and if it's not going towards Jesus, then that's a problem."[53]

In addition to boundaries around hall rental, staff members are asked whether they are comfortably working within a broadly Christian ethos. They are told "that Roots is set up by a bunch of local Christians, with an idea of how to love God and love this neighbourhood, and so it has a Christian ethos, something like that, as its foundation."[54] They are asked whether they are comfortable working in that environment. They are also expected to be able to answer members of the public who ask what is different about Roots: "the staff are all briefed, not a verbatim answer, but this is the kind of response that we'd expect you to give, and if you're uncomfortable in any way, you just offer to get one of the managers to be in touch, to talk about it more."[55]

Overall there is a clear contrast between kenotic approaches that claim Jesus had to give up significant divine attributes at the incarnation, and the practice in Kingsholm, a profound self-giving dynamic but without loss of identity. Reconciliation of the difference can be found within feminist approaches to kenoticism.

Feminist perspectives

Some feminist authors reject the kenotic ethic entirely, on the basis that it encourages a giving away of power by those who already have limited power. It is one thing for a white, heterosexual male to give away power, another for a woman. Hampson writes: 'Women have had to struggle to achieve what measure of autonomy they have attained to within a male world... They will not easily be persuaded to let go of it in the sphere of their religion.'[56] The same argument would apply in any unequal power relationship, concerning other protected

[51] IM interview.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Daphne Hampson, 'On autonomy and heteronomy', in Daphne Hampson *Swallowing a Fishbone?* (London: SPCK 1996) p.3.

characteristics.[57] This perspective works with an assumption that power is something of limited quantity, that if given away then the giver is lessened. Hampson suggests that 'the female paradigm is not powerfulness, nor that of the self-divestment of power which is *kenosis*, but rather (what is not envisaged within the masculinist dichotomy), the mutual empowerment of persons.'[58]

Her vision of mutual empowerment is admirable, and her word of caution against advocating the giving away of power by someone on the underside of a power dynamic needs to be taken seriously. However, it is hard to conceive how such mutual empowerment is possible without a mutual kenosis as core to the relational dynamic, a giving away and making space for the other. It is this giving away which allows the mutual empowerment. Her advocacy for mutual empowerment therefore does not equate, as she seems to think, with a need to reject kenosis. Going forwards therefore we need to both heed her warning but with an understanding that kenosis is a necessary part of the mutual empowerment she advocates.

Two developments in feminist thought are helpful at this point; the first explores the relationship between kenosis and empowerment, and the second challenges patriarchal assumptions about the nature of God and the meaning of power. Sarah Coakley has written extensively on the first. Her insight is rooted in an exploration of the dynamic of kenosis as it plays out within contemplative prayer. This gives her insight which she brings to her work as a systematic theologian. She writes:

> My aim here is to show how wordless prayer can enable one, paradoxically, to hold vulnerability and personal empowerment *together*, precisely by creating the 'space' in which non-coercive divine power manifests itself, and I take this to be crucial for my understanding of a specifically Christian form of feminism.[59]

Elsewhere she connects this to Jesus' teaching, arguing that the kenotic vision and personal empowerment are not mutually exclusive, but rather, intimately related: 'Only, I suggest, by facing - and giving new expression to - the paradoxes of 'losing one's life in order to save it',

[57] https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/equality-act/protected-characteristics accessed 1 February 2019.
[58] Daphne Hampson, 'Response: Daphne Hampson', in Daphne Hampson *Swallowing a Fishbone?* (London: SPCK 1996) p.122.
[59] Coakley, 'Kenosis and Subversion', p.15-16.

can feminists hope to construct a vision of the Christic 'self' that transcends the gender stereotypes we are seeking to up-end.'[60]

The second strand of feminist thought is that concerned with the meaning of divine power, in awareness that a false understanding can support a problematic ethic. Coakley writes that we should be concerned by concepts of: 'a divine force that takes on humanity by controlling and partly *obliterating* it' especially when this is done in the name of kenosis.[61] She continues: 'it is a matter of how divine 'power' is construed in relation to the human, and how this could insidiously fuel masculinist purposes, masculinist visions of the subduing of the weaker by the stronger.'[62]

Qualities traditionally considered essential for divinity are those associated with power and control: omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence. Senor has argued that these are incompatible with humanity, or at least with any kind of humanity which means Jesus truly lived as one of us.[63] Therefore, if held they must necessarily have been given up by Christ at the incarnation. These however are qualities that feminist theologians challenge, asking whether attributing them to God is a patriarchal assumption rather than rooted in biblical narrative. If this is correct, then divine attributes have not been given up in the way traditionally assumed as they were not core to God's character in the first place.

Elizabeth Johnson alludes to this when discussing kenosis in the context of the passion narrative and the kenotic hymn in Philippians 2. She writes:

> This tremendous swoop from divine form to crucified human form traces an arc of divine humility. It credits the incomprehensible God with having a seemingly non-godly characteristic, especially when seen against the model of an omnipotent monarch, namely, the ability to be self-emptying, self-limiting, self-offering, vulnerable, self-giving, in a word, creative Love in action.[64]

She talks here about 'seemingly' non-godly characteristics, when 'the model of an omnipotent monarch' is assumed. But we don't need to take that assumption. If the model of an

[60] Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell 2002) p.33.
[61] Coakley, *Powers*, p.15.
[62] Coakley, *Powers,* p.15-16.
[63] Senor, 'Ecumenical', p.104.
[64] Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (London: Bloomsbury 2015) p.202.

omnipotent monarch is not essentially Christian, then godly characteristics haven't been given up at all, with the nature of God shown to us more clearly in the biblical model of Philippians 2 and John 13.

These paradoxes face us with the assumptions that have plagued previous iterations of the debate, first that the kenotic dynamic is disempowering, and the second that powerful qualities such as omnipotence and omniscience are core divine characteristics. Reconciling Jesus' divinity and humanity within the one person becomes problematic when attempting to work with these assumptions: all of the theories Senor posits struggle with the same dilemma, hence his ambivalent conclusion. By contrast, the model of Jesus, both in incarnation and in the journey to resurrection and ascension through the cross live out a dynamic by which empowerment comes through letting go.

This approach to kenosis is closer to the understanding that is being lived out in Kingsholm. While giving away power to the community within a profoundly kenotic dynamic, doing so results in mutual empowerment rather than depletion of either party, and with identity retained by all concerned. The church is stronger for having lived out this dynamic than they would have been had they held onto power. To quote Ian from his interview: "And so the favour that Roots has - even within six months Roots had a humbling and ridiculous reputation in the city - and people say how did that happen so quickly?"[65] At the same time they are enabling others to discover the power and identity within themselves and to offer it to the community.

Christian identity is not at the forefront, yet in terms of prayerfulness and relationship with the divine is significant. In Ian's words: "we don't have a cross on the front of the building, it doesn't say 'Roots the Jesus cafe' or anything like that, because actually our experience tells us that's more of a barrier than anything else."[66] However when considered relationally, it is of great significance and as such valued, protected, and when appropriate, shared.

Reflective practitioners

Roots is not alone in this approach, they are in the company of others who chose to prioritise a depth of community engagement over the growth of their church, and find that letting go

[65] IM interview.
[66] Ibid.

power and control in fact results in church growth.[67] This perhaps shouldn't be a surprise: it is when the church is living in a radically different way that we become a movement that people may want to explore and ultimately join. This section explores reflections from the wider movement of which Roots is a part.

One practitioner whose theological reflection is available in written form is Letty Russell. Her substantial life combined local church ministry with theological education. In her local church practice, she ministered as a white woman in the early days of women's ministry, in black and ethnically mixed neighbourhoods. As a theologian, she facilitated an international women's network including theologians from less powerful nations than her own US. Both of these experiences gifted her with a deep sense of the power dynamics associated with gender, ethnicity, class and economic situation and as a result, her theological reflection on the dynamics of the church's relationship with community is profound. In *Just Hospitality,* published posthumously, she explores the theme of hospitality, advocating for a model that moves beyond an invitational 'them and us' dynamic to one that is much more mutual and relational.[68] She writes that: 'In the practice of hospitality, partnership and power go together, and we need to be constantly aware of the possibility/potential of misusing hospitality to demean those with less power and wealth and to make ourselves feel more superior.'[69]

In a similar vein, David Boshart in describing the ministry of Mark and Amy Van Steenwyk in Minneapolis explores how their first, more traditional approach failed to engage with people local to the church's community gathering. They went back to the drawing board, more interested in engaging locally than attracting incomers from the suburbs. This resulted in: 'the church's decision to dovetail with existing initiatives in the community. Church leaders spoke of trying to learn from the neighborhood and then asking God to show them where He is working and where He wants them to get involved.'[70] Power dynamics had changed. No longer were they the church doing things for the neighbourhood but they were genuinely alongside: 'Hospitality for this church is not only something offered, but also something received.'[71]

[67] For example, Mather, *Possessing Everything*, p.139.
[68] Letty Russell, *Just Hospitality* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox 2009)
[69] Ibid. p.121.
[70] David W. Boshart, 'Revisioning Mission in Post-Christendom: story, hospitality and new humanity' *The Journal of Applied Christian Leadership* vol.4:2 (2010) p.17.
[71] Ibid. p.17.

Zscheile explores the same within a US Episcopal Diocese.[72] His revisioning: 'invites us to re-examine some of the aristocratic/benefactor patterns deeply ingrained within Episcopal approaches to mission.'[73] As he reflects on the power dynamic, he considers that: 'Mission in this frame does not involve a decentering of those holding power, but rather an absorption of others into the present community on its terms.'[74] He considers a Trinitarian imagination to result in a new level of mission, rooted in: 'mutuality, interdependence, and reciprocity.'[75] He continues: 'If mission is an embodiment of God's own communal life of reciprocity, sharing, and exchange (perichoresis) through the power of the Spirit, the missionary encounter involves mutual companionship and conversation.'[76]

Contemporary approaches

Contemporary kenotic theologies incorporate feminist insight in their approach. Migliore, for example, writes : 'It must be emphasized that the act of *kenosis* as described above does not entail a negation or diminution of God's nature (as earlier kenotic Christologies mistakenly taught).'[77] He continues: 'As I stressed in my discussion of the doctrine of the Trinity, it is in the very nature of God to be self-giving, other-affirming, and community-creating.'[78] This means that the gospel presents a profound challenge to our notions of power, and therefore to how we live out power dynamics. Migliore writes:

> Just as the gospel story surprisingly redefines the meaning of true humanity by describing Jesus' intimate relation with God and his shocking fellowship with sinners and the poor, so this story unexpectedly redefines the meaning of true divinity and genuine lordship by depicting the actions and suffering of a humble servant who gives his life unconditionally for the renewal of the world.[79]

A focus on characteristics such as omnipresence and omniscience fails to engage with the profound revisioning of power that the gospel invites us into. Attempts to hold to human notions of power alongside the gospel will become stuck in the ways Senor described above.[80]

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[72] Dwight J. Zscheile, 'Beyond Benevolence: Toward a Reframing of Mission in the Episcopal Church' *Journal of Anglican Studies* Vol.8:1 (2010)
[73] Ibid. p.84.
[74] Ibid. p.93.
[75] Ibid. p.97.
[76] Ibid. p.97.
[77] Migliore, *Faith,* p.151.
[78] Ibid. p.151.
[79] Ibid. p.149.
[80] Senor, 'Ecumenical', p.112.

This revisioning sets us free, both theologically and in our relationships in daily life, as the gospel always should if it is truly good news.

This means that the outworking in Kingsholm is on a firm theological foundation and raises important questions around the conception of kenosis held within more traditional models of church. An institutional model runs closer to the traditional understanding of power, even when contemporary kenotic theology is taught, leaving the observer wondering whether there is a gap in praxis between their theology and practice, with contemporary approaches understood but not lived out. The structures of institutional life perhaps solidify perspectives on power that are not aligned with contemporary iterations of kenotic theology. The open structure of pioneering allows practitioners to respond more quickly so that their theology and practice can be closely aligned. In fact, given the tendency of pioneers to respond through prayerful instinct at a grassroots level rather than to start from the academy and live it out, it is intriguing to note that their instincts and developments within the academy are drawing similar conclusions.

Hope

A difficulty that remains unreconciled at this point is that it is not helpful to entirely jettison attributes such as omnipresence, omniscience and omnipotence from God's being. They were given undue weighting in engagement with Greek thought but some sense of these attributes is assumed simply by the ordinary Christian practice of expecting God to be present in prayer to different people at different places at the same time; also in the Missio Dei and an expectation that God is actively at work within the created order. All this is in evidence in various ways in Kingsholm, for example the story about God's direction of two couples, independently of one another, to the vacant building that was to become Roots café,[81] and the perspective on evangelism that conversion is God's work not theirs.[82] Insight here comes from perspectives that hold together the kenotic dynamic with an expectation that we can hope in God who is actively at work in the world.

Polkinghorne brings insight as a scientist with a focus on the wider created order. He takes seriously the presence of the traditional attributes of omniscience and omnipotence within the being of God, and in fact considers them essential for the maintenance of hope. He writes, in a

[81] IM interview.
[82] Ibid.

critique of process theology: 'it is open to question whether deity has not been so evacuated of power that hope in God as the ground of ultimate fulfilment has been subverted.'[83] Some sense of divine power is necessary for us to be able to hope beyond ourselves. Polkinghorne considers that: 'Only a God who is distinct from creation can be that creation's ground of hope beyond its eventual natural decay.'[84]

Hope is held in the inter-relation between power and love. He writes: 'Love without power would correspond to a God who was a compassionate but impotent spectator of the history of the world. Power without love would correspond to a God who was the Cosmic Tyrant.'[85] Kenosis is the mechanism by which the two hold together, with love guiding how power is used into a kenotic dynamic. He writes: 'The classical confrontation between the claims of divine love and the claims of divine power is resolved by maintaining God's total benevolence but qualifying, in a kenotic way, the operation of God's power.'[86] God is at work in the world thus hope is maintained but the kenotic dynamic is the necessary outworking of power motivated by love.

This resonates with Moltmann, known for the depth of his writing on hope, and writing here on the relational nature of power: power needs an object, it is a relational term.[87] Drawing on Hans Jonas, he writes that for Jonas: ''omnipotence' is a meaningless concept, because almighty power is power without an object and would therefore be powerless power. "Power is a relational term," and links a dominating subject with a dominated object. God's creative power therefore includes a "self-renunciation of unlimited power" for the sake of created beings.'[88]

Polkinghorne considers the kenosis of power to be located not at the incarnation but at Creation. As he engages with the science of evolution, he writes that 'an evolutionary world is theologically to be understood as a creation allowed by its Creator "to make itself."'[89] God's power as Creator is played out though a kenotic dynamic whereby space is made for the unfolding of creation. He continues: 'Although kenotic language was not explicitly used, this is

[83] Polkinghorne, 'Kenotic', p.92.
[84] Ibid. p.95.
[85] Ibid. p.91.
[86] Ibid p.96.
[87] Jürgen Moltmann, 'God's Kenosis in the Creation and Consummation of the World', in John Polkinghorne (ed)*The work of love, creation as kenosis* (London: SPCK 2001) p.147.
[88] Ibid. p.147.
[89] Polkinghorne, 'Kenotic', p.94.

a manifestly kenotic conception. God shares the unfolding course of creation with creatures, who have their divinely allowed, but not divinely dictated, roles to play in its fruitful becoming.'[90]

In this way, kenosis is rooted not in incarnation but in creation. The kenotic dynamic was always at the heart of God's being, preceding the incarnation. It is not expressed in Jesus in a way that has not already been expressed in the act of creation. It also has a clear relational element: it is in interaction with creation that kenosis comes into play. This perspective brings kenosis to the core of God's being, though without denying characteristics such as omniscience and ominipotence which Polkinghorne considers to be secondary to the kenotic movement.

Trinitarian perspectives are important in order to hold the apparent paradoxes. Habets' insight is focussed around the place of the Spirit in incarnational Christology. For him, the Spirit is key in these questions, enabling Jesus' connection with his Father and with those aspects of divinity that cannot be held in human form. He argues that in Christ there is both continuity and discontinuity: 'As the eternal Word, he was privy to the entire council and wisdom of the Father from all ages. However, in the incarnation he restricted himself to the mediation of that knowledge and wisdom through the spirit.'[91]

Thus, in one sense there is resonance with older kenotic approaches in that aspects of divinity are set aside, but the broader Trinitarian framework enables characteristics incompatible with full humanity to be retained through the Spirit within the community of the Trinity. The core divine quality of kenosis that enabled creation was profoundly revealed at the incarnation, with other characteristics that are essential for the maintenance of hope held within the Trinity. Relational connection is enabled by the Holy Spirit, both with Jesus at the time of the incarnation, and subsequently with the Church.

These final insights allow a retention of hope in God. Attributes such as omnipresence and omniscience are held within the Trinity, within relationship, but subordinate to the core kenotic dynamic that is necessary for power to operate in a way that is rooted in loving relationship. These insights also underline the relational heart of kenosis which has been core to God's interaction with creation from the start.

[90] Ibid p.94.
[91] Myk Habets, 'Spirit Christology: Seeing in Stereo', *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 11(2) (2003) p.218-9.

Conclusions

The question that this fieldwork has invited us to engage with is to ask what it means to live in the model of the God who lived as one of us and about whom Paul recited: 'though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.'[92] In particular, how can the idea of following Jesus' example in this way be received as Good News?

The exploration of kenotic theology revealed some significant insights. In terms of the question about Good News, it is important to note that when held against the background of the liturgy of abundance, kenosis is not the negative that it may first seem, and in fact is empowering, both for the one who holds back in order to make space for another, and the one for whom space is made. Letting go in such a way is liberating, and counter-intuitively, is empowering as it makes space not just for others but also for God, who remains at work in and through all of life and in whom rests our hope. The model Jesus gave us is not that we should lose our core identity as we give space to others, more that in the process of giving away we discover our true selves, at the same time as allowing others to do the same. This is an insight that is quite counter to the dynamics of modern Western culture, based as it is on a scarcity narrative. Against that background it is remarkably good news. The false narrative in our society tells us that we cannot give generously as the result is to have less, too little. Within God and lived out within Kingsholm the opposite is true – the more we give away, the more we have.

The exploration of kenotic theology revealed that an understanding of power dynamics based on an all-powerful God for whom omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent are primary characteristics is rooted in a false model of God. Churches that are based in this kind of theology are likely to find their modelling of Christ resulting in more power hungry approaches, whereas those living out life with an understanding of the God whose very nature is to give and to make space for the other, will find this echoed in their practices. They need not fear that such an approach will be diminishing since the giving away is empowering. The way of the cross is the route to resurrection: any attempt to sidestep the cross will be an unhealthy church.

[92] Philippians 2.6-7 NRSV

The question that asks what Christ had to give up in order to become human is a question that is missing the point if there is gospel truth that in giving up we become more, not less. This is a key gospel perspective, that we need to die in order to live; that those who are last are in fact first in the kingdom of God.[93] While schooled by society to see giving away as a negative, the gospel invites us into a different dynamic whereby the letting go is life-giving both for ourselves and for others around us. The ministry in Kingsholm lives this out as they hold lightly to power, make space for the whole community and find that through this, rather than losing themselves they are celebrated, with their Christian inspiration known and provoking enquiry.

[93] Matthew 20.16.

Chapter 3a: Tewkesbury ethnographic description

Celebrate had been established eight years at the time of the fieldwork. The pioneering is rooted in the ministry of Tewkesbury Abbey, focussing on an area of the parish, Priors Park, that is socio-economically very different from the town centre and usual Abbey congregation. The lead pioneer, Wendy Ruffle, said in interview:

> It began really from Paul's vision really, Paul Williams' vision… it's a big part of the Abbey's parish, with 4000 people living here, and… Paul was very aware, although they'd had curates living in Priors Park in the past, they hadn't really connected with the people in Priors Park.[1]

The community is about a mile to the south of the town centre, predominantly built in the twentieth century and consisting of a mixture of terraces, semi-detached properties, low-rise blocks of flats and a few detached houses. The estate is bounded to the west by a main route into Tewkesbury and to the east by a local nature reserve that follows the river Swilgate, and a small newer development with separate access is to the south. Amenities within the community itself are limited but include a primary school; Children's Centre; Costcutter general shop; a community church; and Priors Park Neighbourhood Project (PPNP). Wendy describes it as: "the seventh most deprived ward in the whole county."[2]

Celebrate was born during Wendy's curacy, and she stayed on post curacy as a member of the Abbey team. Ed Sauven joined the team as curate in 2016. Here Wendy describes the beginning of her ministry:

> "So I was itinerant and as pioneers do, I was praying, prayer walking and just looking to see where the community met, to have an eye on building community here, and all of the textbook stuff. And then I realised, quite quickly actually, that there was already

[1] Wendy Ruffle Interview, 15 June 2018.
[2] WR interview. The basis of this statistic is not clear as Priors Park is part of a larger ward, Tewkesbury South, that is not socio-economically uniform. The ward as a whole doesn't feature in the list of ten most deprived in the county though it is likely that Priors Park would feature, if considered apart from the rest of the ward. See https://www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/media/2091308/tewkesbury.pdf and https://www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/media/2094524/gloucestershire_deprivation_2019_v13.pdf accessed 4 August 2021.

> community built here, not necessarily godly community, but already community, because of the adversity that exists in Priors Park. It brought people together."[3]

Wendy began by going to places where people gather in the community, joining in and beginning to develop relationships and seeking to understand the community and discern God's call. She expected this stage of the pioneering to take months or years, a frequent pattern for pioneer ministry, but was surprised to feel God calling her to move far more quickly from initial engagement to forming Christian community: "I just felt the Lord say 'I want you to start something, I want you to trial something at Christmas.' I was like 'really'?"[4] She tested the idea out: everything fell into place, and so Celebrate was born.

Members of the focus group were among those who came in the early days. One said: "My children went to the school where Celebrate meets. I found a leaflet in their bookbag and that's how I came to Celebrate"[5] and another similar: "there was a leaflet in the kids bookbags because they go to Queen Margaret's. And my friend brought me along."[6] By the time of the fieldwork, Celebrate had become an established Fresh Expression, meeting fortnightly in the school, once a month on a Saturday morning and once on a Saturday afternoon, and on the other Saturdays gathering more informally in the residential property owned by the church.

Wendy does not live in the community for family reasons so the house is mostly used as a gathering point for the church community. The community also gathers on a Thursday morning for prayer and discussion group called 'Going Deeper'. The house is a generously sized detached property with a garden.[7] The community tends to gather in the dining area next to the kitchen, then move into the living room for services and meetings. Sofas and chairs are around three sides of the room, with the window to the back garden dominating the fourth wall when not covered by a screen in use for multimedia resources. Furniture is homely, not all matching, comfortable rather than imposing or 'posh'. There are reminders on the wall of the Christian ethos, in Christian imagery and inspirational quotes.

A conservatory at the back of the house has doors into both dining room and living room and is the place where children congregate when they are not with their families in the other spaces.

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[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Focus group participant, 21 June 2018.
[6] Focus group.
[7] Field journal, 17 March 2018.

Upstairs space is used occasionally by Wendy when she sleeps over but more often as somewhere for quiet pastoral conversations, away from the main group. The garden is well tended, this and the summer house being pleasant additional space for the community to use.

The church itself is evangelical charismatic in ethos which particularly expresses itself in their expectation that God will speak to the community in words and pictures; their language about spiritual warfare; and their choice of resources for the 'Going Deeper' gatherings. There were frequent reminders of various words and pictures that had been important and remained important in the life of the church, particularly in the 'Going Deeper' gatherings but also given prominence in the Saturday service that fell around the time of Celebrate's birthday.[8]

They use a variety of media for their worship, using video of worship songs on Youtube when their guitarist is not available, as well as videos of Christian themes or bible stories. They use arts, creativity and symbolic actions very frequently, and sometimes worship outdoors in the garden or nature reserve when the weather is good.[9] A Saturday gathering at the house used stones and glass butterflies for the confession.[10] At the same service, prayers stations were set up and we were invited to make paper boats to speak life to the community; to draw eyes as we pray that God will give us eyes to see as God sees; to write specific intercessions on heart shapes which were pinned up together; and to write thanksgiving on balloons. Throughout, the children danced, led particular parts of the worship, and made Lego models that found their way to the low table that was serving as a communion table, alongside bread and wine. An Anglican pattern is used, in keeping with Common Worship but taking every opportunity for creativity and so feeling vastly different from a default liturgical service.

On another occasion, a gathering using the main school hall was set up with craft tables in the front half of the hall, and tables laden with food of various kinds at the back. To the left was an area set up for the guitarist to lead worship and at the front, screen and projector with the words 'Mothering ~~Sunday~~ Saturday' [sic] on screen.[11]

Children are included at the heart of all their gatherings and are full members of the community, with a sense of family, of inclusion and frequent gathering around food and meals.

[8] Field journal, 15 March, 17 March, 10 May, 21 June 2018.
[9] Field journal, 10 March, 17 March, 1 Apr, 14 Apr 2018.
[10] Field journal, 17 March 2018.
[11] Field journal, 10 March 2018.

There is a preference within Celebrate to worship together rather than separating into adult worship and children's work. Wendy said:

> We are conscious that within Celebrate our families do not want their children out of our worship. They don't want them separated off. They never have done. I thought we would do. I thought we'd naturally, that was just in my head when we started. But it became very apparent that it isn't what our parents want.[12]

This has come initially from Wendy making an appropriate decision to follow the lead of her context, but has become a deep part of the way the community operates. There is a theological understanding that all ages are equally part of the church: "we don't tend to differentiate between our adults and our children, because they're all God's people."[13] Children are often invited to lead aspects of the worship; discussions and prayer stations at the Saturday café services are pitched at a level that can engage adults and children together; and children are prayed for and offered prayer ministry in the same ways as the adults.[14]

American resources were used at times, particularly at the Going Deeper gatherings. During the time of my fieldwork they came to the end of a series on Bill Johnson's 'The Supernatural Power of a Transformed Mind'[15], and moved onto the film 'The War Room'.[16] This felt like a lack of contextualisation, though arguably the culture of Priors Park is more than used to watching American films so it may be more contextually appropriate than appears on the surface.

<u>Thematic summary</u>

The theme that will be explored in depth is around the meaning of liberation and healing within the Good News of Christ, in particular the way in which practical and emotional liberation from various life issues were intertwined with the liberation offered in Christ. This will be discussed in the next chapter. The following are other important issues that emerged during fieldwork.

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[12] WR Interview.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Field journal, 17 March, 10 March, 15 March 2018.
[15] Bill Johnson, *The Supernatural Power of a Transformed Mind* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image, 2005)
[16] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/War_Room_%28film%29 accessed 6 December 2018.

Prayerful listening

When Wendy tells the story of Celebrate, the way that she and the community are guided by their listening to God in prayer is notable. Listening runs as a thread throughout much of their ministry, sometimes obvious such as the pictures received in prayer, others more subtle. At a Saturday gathering, Wendy shared a picture she had been given by God: "Wendy has drawn rough picture - sheep in the middle free and eating grass in the field. Sheep around the edges packed tightly, not free. Vision of the sheep becoming free and joining the sheep in the central open space."[17] On the same occasion she reminded the community of various other words and pictures given to the community over the years, that remain significant to their ongoing vision.

God's voice is heard in other ways too, seeing God at work within synchronicities. One such was when the school mentioned that they would love someone to do table tennis with the kids, not knowing that this is a significant skill for Wendy. As she recounted the story she said: "that was very, very obviously God."[18] Similarly, when Wendy felt God calling her to start a church gathering, before she had expected to, she tested this out by seeking confirmation in the form of God's provision of the necessary practical resources. One thing needed was a venue. Wendy says: "Well we'll put some fleeces out. So I went to school, and met the head and said to him, well this is what we're thinking of doing, how would you feel about us hiring the school hall on a Saturday from you, once a month? And not only did he say 'absolutely yes!', he said 'would you like our kitchen?'"[19]

The other aspect to prayerful listening is the everyday pastoral interactions in the community. Ed describes the process of looking out for the right moment for spiritual conversations with a particular individual: "Just being patient, but not too patient, not letting moments go past. So, that's what I'm trying to discern."[20] Wendy describes another occasion when a lad was walking past the house when Wendy and Ed were both there: "he'd got a can of beer in his hand… And he recognised Ed and was "oh hi Ed!" He was waving at Ed. And I could see Jesus' hand over him." It is that last statement that is particularly distinctive of how the community operates, recognising when God at work and responding with hospitality and welcome. He was invited in with his family and is beginning to attend regularly. Thus the listening runs through

[17] Field journal, 17 March 2018.
[18] WR interview.
[19] WR interview.
[20] Ed Sauvan interview, 20 June 2018.

everything, from the day to day interactions through to listening for God's guidance for bigger, long term decisions for the community.

Community partnerships

Partnership working has been significant to Celebrate from the beginning. The first relationship was with the school. As Wendy described the early days, she said:

> "So the school, and the children's centre, tended to be the core, they're next door to each other, they tended to be the core of what was going on here. There was a neighbourhood project, but again, it wasn't a central meeting point. So I joined all these other things and partnered with these other things, but it was the school I particularly targeted."[21]

By the time of the research they were in active partnership with various community organisations, notably Priors Park Neighbourhood Partnership (PPNP), the Children's Centre, social services and the food bank. There was a new and developing relationship with the local nature reserve; with a community builder working for the NHS; and they are engaged in conversation to bring a Credit Union access point into the community.

As Ed talks about the NHS community builder he illustrates the way they seek a genuine partnership: "So we need to work closely with <N>… we don't want to barge in on anyone else's good works, we just want to encourage it, and see where we fit in really, with helping to foster community."[22] As such, they are delighted when invited to become a part of something another community partner is organising. Wendy described an approach from the Children's Centre: "I had a lovely approach from them... from one of the girls there that said 'we're having a family day, in July, we'd love you to come and do something.'"[23]

While working with many partners who have in common a desire for the wellbeing of the community, there is a sense that there is an extra dimension that Celebrate brings to the conversation. Ed explored in interview how many agencies are focussing on one aspect of humanity such as the mind or the body, whereas the church is: "not an expert in anything,

[21] WR interview.
[22] ES interview.
[23] WR interview.

we're just trying to hold the mind, body and spirit as one, and not trying to split it off."[24] He continued: "We're not trying to look at the spirit in isolation… neither do we think you can look at the body in isolation. So I think that's, people get that, and sort of, when you talk about 'we want a holistic self', they are more open to a spiritual dimension... trying to be a key advocate that spirit is vital, spirit's got to be thought of and wrestled with."[25]

Food and hospitality

There is food at every gathering: lunch after the morning gatherings and a teatime meal following the afternoons. Food poverty is a real issue in Priors Park so this meets a practical need as well as providing a medium for community. Beneath this is a desire to demonstrate the abundance of God's gift and grace, challenging the scarcity narrative that underpins our society, speaking instead of abundance. Wendy wants to demonstrate that Priors Park people shouldn't be making do with leftovers and are worthy of all the abundance of what God can offer.[26]

Food also plays a significant part in the wider ministry in the community. Distributing food donated through Fare Share is a weekly task. Celebrate go around 4-12 families, depending on what they are given. On the occasion I observed, Ed was disappointed with what was available and it was just four.[27]

This is beginning to widen out into community meals as the church works in partnership with PPNP: "The key thing there is we've had a heart to grow it into hospitality, but we just haven't had the capacity to get there. Or not at this stage."[28] PPNP are beginning to explore community meals as a way of making their premises into community space rather than just an agency space, and Celebrate are offering support: "We want to be a part of that, and support it. So two guys… have already started using Fare Share food and other food they've found to cook for groups there. Which is amazing! So we just want to kind of fan the flames of what they're doing."[29]

[24] ES interview.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Wendy Ruffle in work related conversation prior to engaging in fieldwork.
[27] Field journal, 20 June 2018.
[28] ES interview.
[29] Ibid.

Practical good news

For Celebrate, good news is very practical. They spend considerable time and energy on very ordinary concerns. For example, Wendy said in interview: "a Child Support Worker would ring me up and say, 'we've got a Mum that's got no electricity at the moment and we're not allowed to give her money, do you have any?'"[30] Similarly: "a social worker rang me and asked if we had a team of people that could go in and help clear out a Mum's home, when they'd just come under child protection... we have done gardening, and different jobs, helping people, and we definitely want to grow that."[31]

The down to earth is expressed in worship too. Field notes describe Ed talking about "a 'down to earth' candle bought on Ed's recent trip to Tanzania, made from a recycled can. Lighting the Paschal candle from this candle.[32]

There is a very real sense of God being present in and through the ordinary things of life. In interview Wendy said:

> "whilst Christ came to preach, and to heal, there was never a time when Christ left people hungry, or thirsty, or without, when they were in need. So for us, that's a real demonstration of Christ's love, a real outward sign of Christ's presence, we hope from our hearts, so we serve from our hearts, as Jesus would. So if someone is hungry, are we not doing that for Jesus? If someone is in prison, are we not visiting them for Jesus?"[33]

Starting with the practical extends to opportunities to address spiritual needs. Wendy continued: "they say to us, 'why are you doing this?'"[34] to which the answer is: "Do you think Jesus would want to leave you hungry? Do you think Jesus would want to leave you struggling, not able to get this stuff shifted?"[35]

[30] WR interview.
[31] ES interview.
[32] Field journal, 1 April 2018.
[33] WR interview.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid.

Belonging and inclusion

The core of Celebrate is a close-knit group that are committed to one another as well as to the wider community. They have seen each other through various challenges and stand alongside one another: "It's that family atmosphere that is central, is so core to everything really... there's something about eating together that makes it feel special. It's like when you sit down for an evening meal with your family, it's special, isn't it?"[36] Within this is an awareness that all have their various needs, no-one is better than anyone else: "I think that's another thing about Celebrate is every single one of us is broken. And we still stand together. No matter how much one of us is hurting, we're always there for the next person."[37] An important value within the church is that it is ok to come as you are: "People just come as they are... it's the reality, that people are real. If they are up they are up, and if they are down they are down. It is really is it should be, just as they are."[38]

Some of the children have disabilities: a real effort has gone into understanding their needs and ensuring that they can feel part of the church. One focus group participant commented that: "Some of us have also done some training for children with additional needs, within the church context, in the worship as well." A Dad said: "my daughter has disabilities and has struggled to mix at her school, it gives her an environment beyond the realm of disabilities."[39]

Surrounding this core is a wider fringe who are welcomed into the community at various stages of faith exploration, or indeed before faith is a real question: "they can feel relaxed and at home as Jesus made people feel, that they never felt uncomfortable around him. It was amazing really, so... that's what we want to do, to make people feel comfortable really so that they feel part, they belong, before they believe, as we say."[40] Wendy and Ed both told several stories about families where Celebrate members offer a degree of pastoral support with no expectation that church attendance is a necessary part of the bargain. When I accompanied Ed to make Fare Share deliveries, he spent significant time in conversation with people as well as offering the practical resource. As we talked it became clear that these were, in the main, people who wouldn't consider themselves a part of the church.[41] This is rooted in Jesus'

[36] Focus group.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Field journal, 20 June 2018.

example: “Yeah, it's that Jesus was meeting with all sorts, and he was with the tax collectors and those on the outside, and that's why we want to feel really inclusive.”[42]

Community, evangelism and discipleship

While evangelism is important to the community, faith sharing is handled sensitively with a commitment to ensure that any practical support given by the church doesn’t come with strings attached: “It's unconditional, and the unconditional bit is really important. So we are saying to folk, you **do not** have to come to church because we're doing this. We would love to see you, but you do not have to come, you do not have to believe in Jesus for us to do this for you.”[43] This approach does not result in ‘mere’ social action but faith exploration follows: “But God just does it anyway… So we don't have to strive for that. We just have to be open. We just have to witness God's hand on people, and give the invitation, and God does the rest. It's awesome.”[44]

Because of the way in which ‘belonging before believing’[45] is encouraged, the line between discipleship and evangelism is a thin one. When asked about evangelism, Wendy’s response was to say that: “Usually that comes after the belonging bit here.”[46] After talking about the importance within the community of a genuine loving welcome, Wendy continued: “And then, and you can see folk watching from the sidelines... I feel safe here, I feel comfortable here. And so they hear about, they hear about Jesus just in the way that we are, the way that we talk.”[47]

Prayer is offered to the explorers in the community just as it is to those who are committed. Sometimes this turns out to be significant in their journey of faith. Wendy tells the story of a couple who joined the church weekend away, at that time a regular part of the community but not considering themselves as Christians. She says: “they both had physical ailments, and we prayed for them, and they both received healing, and met with Jesus. Just awesome!”

Likewise, bibles are given to people as they begin to belong to the community, without waiting for a profession of faith. Wendy says: “When people have been with us a while, we always buy

[42] Focus group.
[43] WR interview.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945* (Oxford: Blackwell 1994)
[46] WR interview.
[47] Ibid.

them a bible… So we gift that to them, from Celebrate, and we make a big thing of that, of they're being part of our family."[48]

Thus evangelism is something that happens within the Celebrate community itself, rather than external to it. Aspects of good news are shared, in conversation, study and prayer, which enable movement in a Godward direction both for those that already know God and those that still exploring. Evangelism and discipleship happen in tandem.

The Gift of the Outsider

There is a mutual relationship between the Abbey congregation and Celebrate, with an awareness that each has something to contribute to the other. The Abbey are outwardly in the stronger, more powerful position, but the flow between the two goes two ways. This dates back to something Wendy discerned in prayer, early in her ministry: "The Lord showed me a bridge going from the Abbey into Priors Park, but there was two way traffic on this bridge."[49] Abbey congregation members support Celebrate in various ways, but have found themselves learning and growing through contact with people who approach faith differently.

Within this, there is a strong sense of the unique gifts offered by those that society marginalises. Here, Wendy speaks about an occasion when a Celebrate member was giving her testimony in the Abbey:

> "That was just the reality of her life, and that's what folk in Priors Park are like, but they're really happy to share all of that stuff, and so to share the Good News in her life you could see was cracking open hearts and minds of those in the Abbey, and bringing a freshness in their lives. Not that the Abbey's not fresh, in different ways actually, but a different type of depth of freshness in spirituality that was really beautiful, really beautiful for folk."[50]

This works itself out in other ways too. In the focus group, a participant commented about a profoundly disabled child, part of the church community, who enjoys dancing during the worship: "She just fills our hearts with joy, it's just beautiful to watch her. Sometimes she

[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid.
[50] WR Interview.

makes me cry, 'cos it really is beautiful to watch. She does really lift me, and fills me with joy."[51]

There is a sense that the gift of the outsider is rooted in Jesus own person: "Can any good come Nazareth? You know? So Nazareth was not the place you wanted to be, because it didn't have a good reputation, and it's about being able to change perceptions."[52] Priors Park similarly does not have a great reputation, neither do people naturally expect to be blessed through the ministry of a disabled child, yet this is both expressed in the reality of Celebrate's ministry and Jesus' own story.

[51] Focus group.
[52] Ibid.

Chapter 3b: Freedom as Gospel (Tewkesbury)

Introduction

Popular summaries of the core of Christian gospel tend to focus around sin and repentance.[1] In Tewkesbury, while the concept of letting go of old bad habits in order to inhabit newness in Christ was indeed present, language around the concept was quite different. Particularly notable was language around freedom, liberation and healing, the latter having a focus on emotional and spiritual healing in order to live in wholeness with Christ. Wholeness includes physical wellbeing which is itself broad, including aspects relating to financial stability; a suitable home for a family; availability of enough healthy food; and neighbourhood wellbeing; as well as physical healing from ailments. There was a profound sense of the offer, in Christ and in Christian community, of freedom from all that holds people back from living in fullness of life. In this way, the 'earthed spirituality' that is at the heart of this research is lived out in newfound freedom, as Christian spirituality intersects with the realities of daily life in a challenging context. This is in keeping with the emphasis found in the literature review on self-help and healing among those sections of society without leisure to consider a quest for meaning and more concerned about the practicalities of life.

Freedom features significantly in the 'words' and 'pictures', which are important in their shared life as directly God-given insight. As Celebrate approached their birthday, they reflected together on two that have spoken to them over time. Freedom is key to the image of sheep described in the previous chapter: 'Vision of the sheep becoming free and joining the sheep in the central open space.'[2] The biblical image of dry bones coming to life, from the prophet Ezekiel, is also important to them.[3] Two months later, a 'Going Deeper' returned to the two images of freedom and life, and prayer echoed the theme: 'Themes of life and freedom coming to the fore again as praying for the community. Liberation from the sheep pens into the open field. Life in all fullness.'[4] Notes continue: 'Notable for prayer for people to come know Christ linked clearly with prayer for freedom from addictions, from debt, from mental illness, from tobacco.'[5]

[1] For example: https://scriptureunion.global/who-we-are/aims-belief-and-working-principles/ accessed 24 March 2020.
[2] Field journal 15 March 2018.
[3] Ezekiel 37.
[4] Field journal, 10 May 2018.
[5] Field journal, 15 March 2018.

For the Celebrate community, healing, liberation and salvation are intertwined, with both spiritual and practical elements significant. On the latter, the previous chapter described the significant commitment Celebrate makes to work that offers freedom in terms of the practical things of life. Wendy spoke at length about the former in interview: "I see lots of scars in our community, in people's hearts, you know, that God wants to fix. We can't, but God wants to fix, and bless people with that healing."[6] She continues: "folk come to us with such, such brokenness, that you can just see God's love over them... in many instances folk wouldn't know any different, and they think that's just their lot, but we know actually the reality, that Christ can release."[7]

Sometimes healing happens in a moment; often over time; frequently there is a significant moment and then a journey from that point. Wendy says: "So liberation is just like one big pow, yes! But actually it's a continual journey of liberation."[8] She uses the imagery of chains that bind people's freedom: "And then I see God wanting to break another one of those chains off actually, and so, and then we pick them up again sometimes, sadly, or we gain new ones from another pain somewhere else… The others are just going to drop when they're ready to give the rest of that up to God."[9] Emotional healing cannot be separated from the spiritual, with Wendy switching between language about the emotional and the spiritual: "we see a lot of emotional healings, people being freed from bondage. It can be either spiritual, we see a lot of spiritual bondage, and we have a lot of principalities and powers stuff going on here, so our guys are really aware."[10]

Within the overall mix is a sense that all aspects of freedom should be expected to be a part of life in Christ: freedom from hunger; freedom from fear of social services; freedom from becoming overwhelmed when the housework is out of control; freedom from anything which is a form of bondage. The discussion that follows will explore freedom and liberation within the core Christian gospel.

Following an examination of background concerns, the discussion begins by exploring the intersection between language of sin and that of liberation. A discussion of guilt and shame follows, examining how language in church about sin can be problematic in reinforcing feelings

[6] WR interview, 15 June 2018.
[7] WR interview.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid.

of shame, particularly when working with individuals and communities that are 'sinned against'. Then liberation is considered against the background of question of what it means to be saved, concluding that it is positive language that connects with core elements of the gospel in ways which are positive and freeing. Overall the intention is to explore why the instinctive turn to language of liberation and freedom within the Celebrate community is so healthy and life-giving.

Background concerns

Cultural issues are in the background to this whole discussion, given the default in the Church of England to language and values that are more at home in the middle and upper classes. In 1988 Kenneth Leech wrote:

> The underlying problem was, and is, that the Church does not relate in any fundamental way to the needs of working-class people. It was, and for the most part remains, an alien institution, which seeks to minister to a community which it does not understand and with which it has never really identified.[11]

He writes of privilege in ways which have contemporary resonance, noting how the lack of awareness is evident in the Church's approach. He references church documents filled with radical calls for equality 'but seem strangely blind to the structural reality of the position from which they themselves speak.'[12] In the time since writing there have been various attempts to rectify this. There is good practice to note at local level, though progress remains patchy, and Leech's comments on the institutional centre of gravity still stand.

In terms of local good practice, the National Estate Churches Network offers significant support, as does the Anglican Estates Evangelism task group.[13] The contribution from pioneer ministry, the focus for this study, is substantial. Graham and Lowe note the:

> emerging evangelical traditions who have moved into cities in the twenty years since *Faith in the City* and who combine practical projects with distinctive Christian witness:

[11] Kenneth Leech, *Struggle in Babylon* (London: SPCK 1988) p.15.
[12] Leech, *Babylon,* p.20.
[13] https://estatechurches.org/ and https://estatechurches.org/estates-evangelism-task-group/ accessed 2 August 2021.

> groups such as Eden, Faithworks and Urban Presence, as well as the growing prominence of Black-majority churches.[14]

They continue: 'Many of these groups combine a commitment to personal renewal as well as community transformation and have no difficulty in combining personal evangelical commitment with a call to social justice.'[15] They note that these are the fastest growing constituents of the urban church.[16]

Celebrate stands within this new expression of urban evangelicals, showing a combination of commitments that is unexpected to those used to more gathered charismatic evangelical congregations. Their commitments to wider community engagement and issues of justice are significant.

It is a combination that is at times also expressed within the inherited church. Arani Sen, in his book *Holy Spirit Radicals*, explores how the three strands of personal salvation, baptism in the Holy Spirit and a love of justice intertwine, drawing on both Luke/Acts and his ministry as an Anglican vicar in Leeds.[17] A particular focus for him is the important role of the Holy Spirit in justice ministries, making a charismatic approach highly compatible with this form of ministry. Sen refers us back to the Prophets, noting how, in listening to God's voice, it was radical challenge to society that they heard.[18] Sen writes of the 'politics of Pentecost,' with one of the signs of the Spirit's presence being radical community and the breaking down of barriers.[19] This was seen in the biblical church, but also in the Azusa Street revival in 1906, with mixing of black and white Americans to worship, half a century before the Civil Rights movement.[20]

While Sen doesn't identify as working class, as a British Asian, he brings a different perspective from the white middle class to his vision and ministry. This is valuable illumination in exploring the vision of Celebrate and putting some context to their approach.

This vision, shared by Celebrate, Sen, and the urban evangelical pioneers referenced by Graham and Lowe, is in keeping with Chaplin's, as he explores the evangelical contribution to Anglican social theology. In his assessment, Evangelicals withdrew from social concern at the

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[14] Elaine Graham and Stephen Lowe, *What makes a good city?* (London: DLT 2009) p.45.
[15] Graham and Lowe, *City,* p.45.
[16] Ibid. p.45.
[17] Arani Sen, *Holy Spirit Radicals* (Malcolm Down 2018) p.5.
[18] Sen, *Radicals* p105.
[19] Ibid. p.31.
[20] Ibid. p29.

time of William Temple, not liking the liberalism that was associated with it.[21] This resulted in: 'a lopsided preoccupation with individual conversion and discipling.'[22] Lately however he sees this beginning to be balanced: 'by a renewed commitment to social and political engagement.'[23] This engagement builds on a historical commitment to the marginalised that arises out of small groups of committed disciples. He writes of a history, the legacy in which Celebrate and others stand:

> The conclusion may surprise those outside, and some inside, the movement: the originating experience of a tight-knit fellowship of converted believers becomes the mainspring for the cultivation of civically engaged, critical citizens. Moreover evangelical associational activity, past and present, has also at times offered the prospect of social standing and political influence to those on the margins of society.[24]

A particular concern for Chaplin as an evangelical is the biblical and theological rooting of such engagement.[25] While offering some brief reflections on biblical resources, he calls for more work to be done in order to solidify the foundations.[26] The hope is that this study stands alongside others as a part of this work.

Community theologians Barrett and Harley, in reflections arising out of Anglican community ministry in Birmingham, write of three 'economies', three ways of examining and interpreting our neighbourhoods.[27] In the first, what can be counted is what matters. It is familiar to us in the functioning of society's wider economic systems, in the church it warps our imaginations: 'Our non-Christian neighbours are valued as 'potential Christians' – even, more crudely, as potential sources of income.'[28] They note how this can come to dominate Church strategic thinking, particularly in times of institutional insecurity, even when we are claiming to be driven by different priorities.[29] This tendency is one that is a backdrop for this study.

In contrast is a second economy, characterised by giving out, with a focus on: 'the growth of God's kingdom.'[30] On the surface this seems more promising, however, the second economy

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[21] Jonathan Chaplin, 'Evangelical contributions to the future of Anglican social thought', in Brown, Suggate, Chaplin, Rowlands, and Hughes, *Anglican Social Theology* (London: CHP 2014) p.89.
[22] Chaplin, 'Evangelical', p.89.
[23] Ibid. p.89.
[24] Ibid. p.98.
[25] Ibid. p92.
[26] Ibid. p.98.
[27] Al Barrett and Ruth Harley, *Being Interrupted* (London: SCM 2020) p.64.
[28] Barrett and Harley, *Interrupted,* p.64.
[29] Ibid. p.67.
[30] Ibid. p67.

also distorts: 'there is huge power in 'self-giving'.'[31] The change of focus to beyond the walls of the church is to be celebrated, but the clear division between giver and receiver maintains power imbalance and fails to empower wider community members. This dynamic is the one Leech refers to which calls for equality but is blind to how practices maintain unjust structures.

The third economy, the one that they advocate is one where wider community is encouraged to 'interrupt' the business of the church, enabling a genuine co-creation. They write:

> In the third economy, the Church is neither anxious about its survival and its scarce resources, not overflowing in its own God-given (and often, let's face it, rather self-satisfied) abundance. Instead it rejoices in its radical insufficiency... but more like an ultra-violet torch that seeks and reveals what would otherwise go unnoticed.'[32]

This approach was explored in some detail in the previous chapter.

Black British theologian, Anthony Reddie, reminds us to consider the effect our theology has on those receiving it on the margins of society: 'Black theologians have challenged some of the so-called fundamentals of the Christian faith, arguing that these were either misunderstood or that our adherence to them had negative consequences for oppressed Black people.'[33] While exploring the concept of original sin, he wonders how it can be that the marginalised can be considered equally sinful when compared to those with privilege. This plays itself out in everyday situations and is lived experience: 'When Black Caribbean people came to Britain and were confronted with wholesale racism and rejection from good White Christian folk, I am sure it was very, very cold comfort to be told that they were as sinful as the people who were despising and rejecting them.'[34]

As a result, while not rejecting the concept of sin he refuses to affirm that all equally fall short, the privileged and marginalised alike: 'Sin is now no longer abstract and universal, but concrete and specific to all times and spaces.'[35] In considering a working-class community, this perspective is a significant consideration in the discussion that follows as we explore the way in which language about sin is used and reframed in the Celebrate community.

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[31] Ibid. p.68.
[32] Ibid. p.130.
[33] Anthony Reddie, *Is God Colour Blind?* (London: SPCK 2009, 2020) p.93.
[34] Reddie, *Colour Blind*, p.99.
[35] Ibid. p.104.

The language of sin

In interview, when Wendy was asked about liberation she connected it closely to the concept of sin: "You know, you cannot separate liberation and the gospel, can you? Cos the gospel is all about liberation. Liberation from sin, originally, that kind of binds us, and… that's a gateway isn't it?"[36] She sees an initial moment of liberation in turning to Christ, followed by ongoing liberation as God slowly chips away at the various things which bind us:

> "As soon as you recognise that and you've given that up to Christ and you get to know who Jesus is, isn't that then, the complete liberation, the beginning of… And then comes the rest of God's blessing and liberation in being freed from all the **stuff** that's, the scars, the wounds that we carry."[37]

Wendy turned to the traditional language of sin in interview, but it was not in wide usage in community life. It is a concept that is useful, but different language communicates it better. In Going Deeper gatherings, when the language of sin was used it was predominantly from the American resources rather than from Celebrate members themselves. When these resources were used, the subsequent discussion by members of the Celebrate community took a different direction. Field notes record: 'Discussion feeling much more earthed and real than the video, though the disciplines mentioned in the video are genuinely helpful. But as the conversation went on, they become rooted in real stuff.'[38] The real stuff referenced here is the difficult life experiences of members of the community. Conversation continued, discussing 'the negative mind commentary' as a member described how 'she tells her mind to shut up, doesn't listen to it.'[39]

A communion service expressed the confession and absolution using stones and butterfly shaped glass. Notes record: 'Confession - basket handed round. Take a stone, reflect on the shape of it, hold it in your hand. The roughness of the surface, the shape, the colours. Think about the week gone by and anything that wasn't as ideal as it could have been.[40] The butterflies followed, illustrating freedom and new life, with the leader talking about: 'how God changes us, transformation, like the chrysalis transforming into a butterfly, coming out of the

[36] WR interview.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Field journal, 15 March 2018.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Field journal, 17 March 2018.

chrysalis, being made new, spreading their wings. Holding the butterfly and reflection on this transformation God offers us.'[41]

The Easter service, despite the obvious focus on cross and resurrection, only once, in a passing reference, used the word 'sin'. A creative prayer activity began with an invitation to write: 'the rubbish things in life that we have to deal with and others have to deal with, the things that make us shrink. The opposite of life. Some suggestions on a sheet but feel free to write your own.'[42] 'Things that make us thrive'[43] were then pinned to a separate line. The leader spoke saying: 'Both are powerful. Sometimes these ones (pointing to the negatives) can have a real hold on us. Lies, shame, all these negatives hold a deep power over us.'[44] The negatives, which were written on flash paper, were then lit, disappearing with the words: 'This is the difference that Easter makes.'[45] In traditional language, sin is dealt with by the cross, we are set free and enabled to thrive. All this seems to indicate that while the concept is valuable and indeed core to Christianity and may be expressed in traditional language in conversation with another mature Christian, it is not language that is significant in use with the new Christians and explorers of the Celebrate community.

In the extract from interview quoted above, Wendy expressed her understanding that liberation from sin comes first, then the journey. This raises a question about what she means when she uses the word sin. Paul Fiddes' work on atonement is helpful at this point. He writes:

> As the expression of the human predicament alters, so there will likewise be a shift in the way that salvation is expressed. Thus as time passes there develops a whole kaleidoscope of images of atonement, none of which can be complete in itself, each of which remains to overlap with the next, and all of which contribute to the pattern of God's act of reconciliation.[46]

As he continues, he examines the concept of atonement in different periods of history against the background of the understanding of the human predicament that existed at the time. The

[41] Ibid.
[42] Field journal, 1 April 2018.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Field journal, 1 April 2018.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Paul S. Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation: the Christian idea of atonement* (London: DLT 1989)

question he is exploring is how the preferred model at that time functioned as good news against the background of each historical period's deep questions.

When he reaches the twentieth century, the background to our deepest questioning becomes sociology and psychology. Against this background: 'The image of healing has become predominant among concepts of atonement, overcoming an alienation which has its base in the fragmenting of the personality and in friction between social groups.'[47] He considers that we are caught between our freedom and our limitations, with the tension causing great anxiety. Limitations include bad housing, broken families, unemployment, advertising, the media, our inner complexes, our genes, with death as the most final limit. He continues: 'In the tension between our freedom and our finiteness, or between the possibilities and actualities of our lives, we become anxious.[48]

The insight has stood the test of time and continues to resonate into the twenty-first century. Anxiety is prevalent in Priors Park. Against this background, it is unsurprising to find healing, freedom and liberation at the forefront of gospel understanding. Fiddes considers sin, within this formulation, as a refusal to trust in the resources beyond. He writes: 'Rather than coping with our anxiety by trusting in God, we thus try to create our own solutions by making some object or person with the world our absolute security.'[49] This resonates with Wendy's imagery of picking the chains off, one by one, following a decision to turn to Christ. The choice to trust in God is a gateway to all other aspects of freedom that can be dealt with a little at a time.

Guilt and shame

In the background of the choice not to lead with the word 'sin' is the complicated relationship between guilt and shame: language of sin cannot be heard positively when feeling a depth of shame. The dynamic takes slightly different forms for different sections of society, with particular care needed around those, such as the community in Priors Park, who are 'sinned against' in significant ways, whether individually or structurally. The way in which communities of this kind are sinned against structurally is discussed further below, with particular reference to Owen Jones book 'Chavs'.[50] The individual sense was referenced by Ed in interview when he noted that around 80% of the Celebrate community experienced abuse

[47] Fiddes, *Salvation,* p.10.
[48] Ibid. p.11.
[49] Ibid. p.12.
[50] Owen Jones, *Chavs: the demonization of the working class* (London: Verso 2011, 2012, 2016)

as children.[51] For the gospel to be heard as Good News, the healing of the shame of the sinned against needs to be prominent within the discussion.

Brené Brown describes the difference between guilt and shame as the difference between what we did and who we are: 'Shame is about who we are, and guilt is about our behaviours.'[52] She sees guilt as a positive feeling promoting change: 'We feel guilty when we hold up something we've done or failed to do against the kind of person we want to be. It's an uncomfortable feeling, but one that's helpful.'[53] Shame on the other hand is less likely to result in positive change: 'much more likely to lead to destructive and hurtful behaviors than it is to be the solution.[54] Shame results in disconnect and feelings of unworthiness: 'Full of shame or the fear of shame, we are more likely to engage in self-destructive behaviors and to attack or shame others.[55]

Shame, understood in this sense as a feeling of unworthiness about 'who I am', can get in the way of the healthy process of confession and repentance. In leading us into self-destructive or other negative behaviours, it blocks our ability to choose to work with God towards positive change, and therefore needs addressing first. Gospel insight concerning the goodness of all creation and our identity as children of God are potential points of healing.

Not all agree with Brown that shame is a negative. Elspeth Probyn writes positively about shame, seeing in it our desire to live well. Shame reflects our failure to live up to the standards we have for ourselves. She connects shame with interest in the sense that we only feel shame when we have an interest in something, when it matters to us that we get it right. She writes: 'Shame illuminates our intense attachment to the world, our desire to be connected with others, and the knowledge that, as merely human, we will sometimes fail in our attempts to maintain those connections.'[56]

Her last phrase touches on guilt and is indicative of the way she holds a more blurred boundary between guilt and shame than does Brown, key to her positivity. In addition, shame itself can have a constructive or destructive role with the two authors prioritising differently.

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[51] ES interview.
[52] Brené Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection* (Centre City, Minnesota: Hazelden 2010) p.41.
[53] Brown, *Gifts,* p.41.
[54] Ibid. p.41.
[55] Ibid. p.41.
[56] Elspeth Probyn, *Blush: faces of shame* (Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press 2005) p.14.

Nash distinguishes between two kinds of shame, noting that in the English language there is no distinction between disgrace shame, the negative that is the focus for Brown, and discretion shame, which is relational and enables us to make appropriate choices and exercise constraint.[57] In this sense, having no shame is a negative, and it is this relational aspect that is the focus of Probyn's work. She writes: 'It's in this sense that shame is positive and productive, even or especially when it feels bad. The feeling of shame teaches us about our relations to others.'[58]

Brown's stories do in fact illustrate this. She writes with an autoethnographic element, reflecting on her own stories. Her experiences of shame and subsequent resolution have strengthened her self-understanding and as a consequence her relationships to others. She tells two stories about public speaking engagements that did not go well because she had been expected to deliver something different from her core work and passion. She felt shame and embarrassment at her poor performance, but reflection with others showed her that the problem was not within herself but in the false expectation, and this strengthened her understanding of her calling.[59] In this sense, shame was helpful and there was something to learn within the feeling, but the only associated guilt is in allowing the expectations to temporarily divert her from her true self in God.

Simon Cozens and Andrea Campanale are both reflective practitioners who write on the connection between shame and gospel. Campanale reflects: 'In Western cultures, the good news has entailed confessing our wrongdoing and having God liberate us from guilt. Yet no such release comes when we reveal our shame.'[60] She considers the implications for her message, wondering how we might reframe the gospel to free those overwhelmed by shame: 'Jesus himself came not just to free us from sin, but to restore honour to the shamed. We see him enacting honour–shame reversals that characterise the coming of the Kingdom of God time and again throughout the Gospels.'[61] She considers that: 'In our sacred text and faith tradition we have a wealth of stories that can help the shamed begin to integrate their real nd ideal selves.'[62] We need to use more of these resources, avoiding those that reinforce shame.

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[57] Sally Nash, *Shame and the Church* (London: SCM 2020) p.9.
[58] Probyn, *Blush* p.35.
[59] Brown, *Imperfection* p.7-12 and p.33-35.
[60] Andrea Campanale, *Mission means healing shame* https://churchmissionsociety.org/resources/mission-means-healing-shame/ accessed 9 March 2020.
[61] Campanale, *Healing.*
[62] Andrea Campanale, 'A Gospel that overcomes shame', in Jonny Baker and Cathy Ross (eds) *The Pioneer Gift: Explorations in Mission* (Norwich: Canterbury Press 2014) p.189.

Cozens, following experience in the shame culture of Japan, also reflects on expressing the gospel primarily in terms of shame. He writes: 'If people no longer feel a sense of guilt, then their sense of identity is derived not from inside them but from how they appear in front of others.'[63] He questions what this means in terms of how we share the good news, given that people in Western culture don't really think of themselves as sinners:

> We might need to explain to someone what it means to be a sinner, but we don't need to tell them what it means to be ashamed. They already know that. Shame is something we can tap into as we share the gospel, a common starting point that we all understand.[64]

There are problems in this approach in that it potentially locates our sense of right and wrong more within what others think of our behaviour than in any sense of ultimate values. However, as a way of connecting with a society that has lost a sense of ultimate values but does feel shame, there is wisdom. There is much to be celebrated too in locating our sense of fallenness in the relational way that is foundational to shame. Cozens considers there to be neglected aspects of the gospel embedded within these insights: 'I don't think it is just about what works in a culture. These themes of identity, acceptance and freedom are in Gen 3 so it makes sense that they should be part of how we share the gospel.'[65] Cultural change is not changing the gospel, but pushing us to look to different resources within the richness of the gospel in order to remain good news.

These reflections carry insight for large sections of society but have an additional dimension for those in socio-economically disadvantaged communities due to the tendency for shame to be put onto them by other sections of society and by the media. Owen Jones explores this in his book 'Chavs' which traces the demonisation of the working class and the use of the disrespectful term 'chav' against the background of political choices in recent decades.[66]

Contrasting with legislation protecting various groups from discrimination and hate speak he writes: 'It seems as though working class people are the one group in society that you can say practically anything about.'[67] Jones continues, outlining the Chav caricature: 'the feckless, the

[63] Simon Cozens, *Looking shame in the eye* (London: IVP 2019) p.7.
[64] Cozens, *Shame,* p.25.
[65] Ibid. p.25.
[66] Jones, *Chavs.*
[67] Ibid. p.2.

non-aspirational, the scrounger, the dysfunctional and the disorderly.[68] This feeds into middle-class prejudice with a resulting conclusion that those at the bottom must be there because they deserve to be, they have made no effort: 'Meritocracy can end up being used to argue that those at the top are there because they deserve to be, while those at the bottom are simply not talented enough and likewise deserve their place.'[69] The tendency within society to advocate for social mobility rather than improving the conditions of the working class as a whole: 'underlines the notion that being working class is something to get away from.'[70]

It takes a remarkably robust attitude to hear this from the media without wondering whether perhaps your situation is your fault after all. All of this means that those in communities such as Priors Park have an additional layer of shame to deal with. Disempowered and laughed at – this is what it means to be the disinherited in contemporary UK society. Communication of the Gospel therefore needs to take a particular approach to ensure that, rather than language of guilt reinforcing the shame, the offer is life and freedom.

Comments on class from Kenneth Leech were referred to at the start of this chapter. Here, what is important to note is the implications of poor engagement with the working-class on expressions of Good News. Leech notes that: 'Nowhere did the Church of England become an indigenous part of working-class culture.'[71] This is significant to the discussion in hand as it underlines how rarely the nature of Good News has been explored from within working-class culture, rather than received with accretions from the middle-classes.

UK based community theologian, Ann Morisy, draws our attention to an approach that takes systems, as well as power dynamics, seriously when considering the marginalised within society. She considers love to be at the heart of a systems perspective, in refusing to isolate any group or individual. A systemic approach: 'appreciates the interconnectedness of life, acknowledging that everything interacts with and impacts on the things around it… Things, events, people cannot be understood in isolation, because things, or parts, function the way they do because of other 'parts'.[72]

She continues: 'When we begin to sense the significance of sinful systems, we get off the back of the poor or marginalised because we see their situation in a new light, and likewise we

[68] Ibid. p.95.
[69] Ibid. p.97.
[70] Ibid. p.97.
[71] Leech, *Babylon*, p.17.
[72] Ann Morisy, *Bothered and Bewildered* (London: Continuum 2009) p.50.

begin to get an insight into our own culpability.'[73] This is critical in the discussion that follows below as it explores the interaction between individual and systematic sin, and the outworking in our understandings of salvation and liberation.

Salvation

The discussion above illustrates the importance of gospel language that enables freedom from shame, whether the shame is rooted in structural concerns or personal life history. The previous section explored how healing and wholeness is a positive route into faith exploration within contemporary society. All of this resonates with the concerns of the Celebrate community.

When set alongside the traditional language of salvation, these perspectives raise questions about what it means to be saved and how personal salvation in Christ intersects with other aspects of our lives. What are we saved from, and for what purpose? How do we use our freedom well? Gutiérrez wrote fifty years ago: 'One of the great deficiencies of contemporary theology is the absence of a profound and lucid reflection on the theme of salvation.'[74]

Ford's and Kuhrt's contributions in Andrew Davey's *Crossover City*[75] discuss this question of the meaning of salvation against the background of economically disadvantaged UK communities, as does Anna Ruddick in Baker and Ross' *The Pioneer Gift*[76] and Tim Chester in *Unreached*.[77] For all, there are both individual and corporate dimensions, though Ford and Chester begin with the individual and work outwards, whereas Kuhrt and Ruddick begin with wider community and work back to the individual.

Mandy Ford, in language which echoes Jones, begins by discussing salvation in broad rather than explicitly Christian terms: 'When people are given the educational or economic means of escape, they grab them with both hands and move out of the city to the suburb. Salvation is presented in terms of suburban life and morality.'[78] The difficulty here is that those with enough strength to move beyond their circumstances do not remain to share their resources

[73] Morisy, *Bothered*, p.52.
[74] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A theology of liberation* transl. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (London: SCM 1974, 2001) p.147.
[75] Andrew Davey (ed) *Crossover City* (London: Mowbray 2010)
[76] Anna Ruddick, 'Transformation: A 'How To' Guide', in Jonny Baker and Cathy Ross (eds) *The Pioneer Gift: Explorations in Mission* (Norwich: Canterbury Press 2014)
[77] Tim Chester, *Unreached: growing churches in working-class and deprived areas* (Nottingham: IVP 2012)
[78] Mandy Ford, 'Sin in the city: Salvation and the City', in Andrew Davey (ed) *Crossover City* (London: Mowbray 2010) p.67.

with others who need it. Salvation does not contain any offer beyond the individual, for the wider community.

Communal elements are critical, Ford considers that salvation should not stop with the individual. However, when churches have engaged with local strategic partnerships, recognising God's work within community transformation, she argues that they have often failed to communicate the spiritual dynamics at play. She writes: 'What seems to be missing from this discourse is the language of spirituality and conversion… It is as though we have forgotten that salvation is part of the divine economy in which the city is already being saved and its citizens have been saved too.'[79]

The question therefore concerns what salvation, in the sense of the work of Christ, has to do with the salvation and regeneration of urban communities. For Ford, the focus needs to be on personal salvation, given the significant liberation seen in the lives of those who turn to Christian faith. She writes:

> Conversations with my own, outer estate congregation reveal stories of release from isolation and desperation, acceptance after years of loneliness or alienation, renewed strength in the face of stressful responsibilities – all of which are understood as outward sign of God's saving grace. Salvation is experienced as reassurance, freedom, forgiveness and hope in the lives of individuals.[80]

Starting with the individual impacts wider society: 'those who know themselves to be loved by God are able to stand where they are, to inhabit their space and offer their gifts without fear of rejection.'[81] She takes the approach that starts at the personal and moves outwards, reminding us of the power that personal liberation has, not only for the individual but also for the communities those individuals inhabit.

Chester shares Ford's focus on starting with the individual. He lists key themes such as purpose in life and the fatherhood of God, which he has found helpful when relating gospel themes to the life questions of people in the Manchester estate where he lives. Particularly pertinent to this discussion is his focus in the chapter on evangelism on 'four liberating truths',

[79] Ibid. p.68.
[80] Ibid. p.69.
[81] Ibid. p.70.

aspects of the gospel that can enable freedom from negative perspectives.[82] Like Celebrate, he finds liberation a helpful lead concept.

Others start from the communal and move inwards, beginning with community transformation but taking care not to fall into the trap that Ford highlights. Ruddick writes out of field research rooted in her experience with Eden teams, small missional communities that commit to live long-term in Britain's most deprived communities.[83] She finds transformation to be helpful language: it resonates for community transformation while also speaking of holistic salvation and personal transformation in Christ. Eden teams reach widely in both directions, with core Christian community expressing discipleship through depth of engagement with community transformation. In their missional practice, they found traditional Christian language insufficient for the challenge that faced them: 'The hope for Christian change held by Eden, salvation and discipleship, was confronted in practice by vast social and systematic problems. Salvation took on a here-and-now urgency and discipleship a new holism.'[84]

Jon Kuhrt's reflections are rooted in his ministry with those who are homeless. He writes: 'Too often our use of the word *salvation* and associated phrases like 'being saved' become religious jargon.'[85] He asks us to consider what we mean when we talk about salvation: 'Are we declaring a whole gospel?'[86] He considers the biblical picture to be multifaceted, encompassing all creation, and he focusses on four dynamics: wholeness, liberation, forgiveness and affirmation. Again there is the sense that salvation touches all of life: to be saved is a dynamic that resonates through relationships and community, going far beyond a one-to-one relationship with God. He writes: 'This is the powerful synthesis that Martin Luther King developed and represented through the civil rights movement in the USA... a declaration of hope in God's salvation in the complexity of the urban context.'[87]

Many contemporary writers who hold a holistic understanding of salvation draw on liberation theology, Ruddick for example discusses their influence on 'Eden Teams'.[88] The liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez explores how traditional accounts of salvation focus on the

[82] Chester, *Unreached,* p.114-5.
[83] Ruddick, 'Transformation', p.56.
[84] Ibid. p.60.
[85] Jon Kuhrt, 'What Does Salvation Man in the Urban Context?' In Andrew Davey (ed) *Crossover City* (London: Mowbray 2010) p.74.
[86] Kuhrt, 'Salvation', p.74.
[87] Ibid. p.82.
[88] Ruddick, 'Transformation', p.60.

question of our eternal destination, being saved from death for life everlasting. Associated with this are questions about what a person needs to do in order to be saved. On the question of 'salvation of the pagans', he writes on how it is traditionally viewed: 'This is... the problem of the number of persons saved, the possibility of being saved, and the role which the Church plays in this process. The terms of the problem are, on the one hand, the universality of salvation, and on the other, the visible Church as the mediator of salvation.'[89]

This backdrop into which liberation theology speaks is a very limited view of salvation, and liberation theologians have led the challenge to the church to consider the meaning of salvation for this life. While there are mixed opinions about the question of the universality of eternal salvation, the meaning of salvation as it begins in the life we know now is increasingly prominent. The Peruvian Liberation theologian, Gustavo Gutiérrez writes: 'From this point of view the notion of salvation appears in a different light. Salvation is not something otherworldly... Salvation – the communion of human beings with God and among themselves – is something which embraces all human reality, transforms it, and leads it to its fullness in Christ.'[90] Gutiérrez himself opens out the possibility of this salvation widely: 'Persons are saved if they open themselves to God and to others, even if they are not clearly aware that they are doing so.'[91] Others heed the call to explore salvation in this life while holding more closely to the role of the church in the process.[92]

Liberation theologians hold a very close relationship between socio-political freedom and personal freedom, at times almost to the point where it seems impossible for an individual to gain a sense of personal freedom when living within unjust structure. Guttierez writes of three levels of liberation: political liberation; human liberation throughout history; liberation from sin and admission to communion with God.[93] He sees the three closely intertwined, with barriers to the latter personal freedom when the former is not free. He writes: 'These three levels mutually affect each other, but they are not the same. One is not present without the other, but they are distinct: they are all part of a single, all-encompassing salvific process.'[94]

[89] Gutiérrez, *Liberation* p.148.
[90] Ibid. p.149.
[91] Ibid. p.149.
[92] Leonardo Boff, *Ecclesiogenesis,* transl. Robert Barr (Maryknoll NY: Orbis 1986)
[93] Guttierez, *Liberation,* p.175.
[94] Ibid. p.175.

Leonardo Boff, a Brazilian liberation theologian, is in broad agreement, but giving a more central place to the church. He writes: 'The kingdom of God, contrary to what many Christians think, does not signify something that is purely spiritual or out of this world. It is the totality of this material world, spiritual and human.'[95] He too takes three categories though with slightly different emphasis. For him, the Kingdom of God: 'embraces all: the world, the human persona, and society; the totality of reality is to be transformed by God.'[96] Liberation is neither limited to political or societal freedom or liberation from sin but encompasses all.

What is clear here is the interconnection between personal liberation, and the socio-political. It is hard for the oppressed to see beyond their oppression and to open up to God and others in fullness of life. As Thurman puts it: 'It is only when people live in an environment in which they are not required to exert supreme effort into just keeping alive that they seem able to select ends beside those of mere physical survival.'[97] Liberation theologians rightly challenge the church to understand this interconnection and not to neglect structural sin.

Individual liberation is not, however, completely dependent on socio-political liberation. Valuable insight comes from Howard Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited.*[98] Thurman, himself an African-American, explores the meaning of the gospel for African-Americans[99] in the 1940's, before the birth of Liberation Theology as a distinct school. Thurman is quoted above indicating his awareness of the interconnection between the personal and socio-political, but his focus concerns how an individual can be free, even when the structures that surround her are oppressive. Writing on the meaning of redemption, he says:

> I do not ignore the theological and metaphysical interpretation of the Christian doctrine of salvation. But the underprivileged everywhere have long since abandoned any hope that this type of salvation deals with the crucial issues by which their days are turned into despair without consolation. The basic fact is that Christianity as it was born in the mind of this Jewish teacher and thinker appears as a technique of survival for the oppressed.[100]

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[95] Leonardo Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator: a critical Christology for our time,* transl. Patrick Hughes (Maryknoll NY: Orbis 1978, 1984) p.56.
[96] Ibid. p.55.
[97] Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon 1949, 1976, 1996). p.58.
[98] Thurman, *Disinherited.*
[99] Thurman uses the term Negro that was contemporary at the time he was writing.
[100] Ibid. p.18.

Significantly in terms of the discussion, he understands Jesus himself as formed in his humanity within the context of an oppressive regime. Thurman argues that as a poor member of an occupied nation, Jesus himself was one of the disinherited. His teaching is therefore rooted in an exploration from the inside of what it means to thrive in such circumstances. The heart of Jesus' answer concerned not allowing anyone else to determine the nature of your inner life: 'He recognized with authentic realism that anyone who permits another to determine the quality of his inner life gives into the hands of the other the keys to his destiny.'[101] Freedom and liberation therefore is in coming close to God, enabling inner freedom, out of which any calling with respect to wider community is lived.

Thurman shares with the liberation theologians the sense of Christian calling to bring political and socio-economic change: the focus on inner life is not to neglect the structural concerns but to ensure that engagement with the latter come from the right spiritual centre. He considers that: 'The urgent question was what must be the attitude towards Rome... This is the position of the disinherited in every age. What must be the attitude towards the rulers, the controllers of political, social, and economic life?'[102] It is significant that he was highly influential within the US Civil Rights movement, including Martin Luther King. Bucko and Fox write: '*Jesus and the Disinherited* was such a gospel to Dr. King that he took it with him each of the thirty-nine times he went to jail while protesting social segregation.'[103]

When these perspectives are put together, there are two broad movements involved in the freedom and liberation that God offers. The first, the focus of Thurman's writing, also expressed by Ford and Chester, is the work of inner freedom as we strengthen our connection with God and our commitment to live by Jesus' teaching, thus being set free even while living within unjust socio-political situations; the second is the outward focus whereby we use this new freedom to loosen the chains of the system. This latter offers hope for those, as Guttierez describes, who are finding it hard to even consider inner freedom while so bound by the system. God's salvation is both individual and communal, and the two are profoundly interrelated, with salvation beginning in the day to day of this earthly life.

[101] Ibid. p.18.
[102] Ibid. p.12.
[103] Adam Bucko and Matthew Fox, *Occupy Spirituality: a radical vision for a new generation* (Berkeley CA: North Atlantic Books 2013) p.xx.

All of this sits within an integrated worldview that holds together earthly and spiritual realities. Walter Wink gives significant attention to this in his writing. Contrasting with the 'materialist' worldview that denies spiritual realities, or the 'theological' that confine God to a privileged realm, he writes on the 'integrated' worldview: 'The spiritual is at the core of everything and is therefore infinitely permeable to prayer. In this view, the whole universe is a spirit-matter event.'[104] Within this worldview, Wink considers the way in which the spiritual permeates structures and institutions, for good and bad. He discusses 'the great socio-spiritual forces that preside over much of reality. I mean the massive institutions, social structures, and systems that dominate our world today, and the spirituality at their center.'[105] Key to addressing unjust world systems is not just the human and relational means, but also prayer which recalls each structure or institution to its right calling in God.[106] This worldview holds the spiritual warfare that is significant with Celebrate's spirituality together with the understanding discussed above that integrates personal and socio-political liberation.

All of this resonates with what was found in Priors Park. There is a dual dynamic to their work with significant energy given both to individual liberation and community wide initiatives, and with the whole underpinned with an integrated spiritual worldview. The next sections focus in on how good news is expressed at the individual level, beginning with insight from Thurman.

Jesus and the disinherited

In 1949, Howard Thurman wrote: 'I can count on the fingers of one hand the number of times that I have heard a sermon on the meaning of religion, of Christianity, to the man who stands with his back against the wall.'[107] At the time he was writing, many of those with their backs against the wall were still found in church; now they are likely to be disinherited from church as well as society as we fail to preach the gospel for the disinherited. Celebrate and other similar initiatives seek to rediscover language and gospel truth that connects with the needs of these sections of our communities.

Thurman outlined the various ways in which the disinherited may hand over the freedom of their inner life to their oppressor, as they allow themselves to be overtaken with fear,

[104] Walter Wink, *The Powers that be* (New York NY: Doubleday 1998) p.184.
[105] Wink, *Powers* p.189.
[106] Wink, Powers p.29f.
[107] Thurman, *Disinherited,* p.3.

deception and hate. These are remarkable when set alongside the negatives on the washing line in the Easter liturgy, which significantly included fear, jealousy, and anger.[108]

Thurman describes deception as a temptation for those who find it the only means for the disinherited to oppose their will on those in stronger positions: 'Through the ages, at all stages of sentient activity, the weak have survived by fooling the strong.'[109]
Hatred, as Thurman sees it, is energising to someone who is disinherited. Born out of bitterness, it is a way to avoid being pushed down by the strong:

> 'Because they are despised, they despise themselves. If they reject the judgement, hatred may serve as a device for rebuilding, step by perilous step, the foundation for individual significance; so that from within the intensity of their necessity they declare their right to exist, despite the judgement of the environment.'[110]

Finally, Thurman considers how: 'Fear, then, becomes the safety device with which the oppressed surround themselves in order to give some measure of protection from complete nervous collapse.'[111] It serves a purpose, as a protection, which is why it is so hard to let go. Extreme care is exercised in order to minimise a threat: 'Fear thus becomes a form of life assurance, making possible the continuation of physical existence with a minimum of active violence.'[112]

Of these three, fear was most significant for Celebrate, expressed during the fieldwork in language around anxiety and mental ill-health, as well as concerns about practical basic needs.[113] Thurman wrote: 'Fear is one of the persistent hounds of hell that dog the footsteps of the poor, the dispossessed, the disinherited.'[114] It is not necessarily related to something in particular: 'The ever-present fear that besets the vast poor, the economically and socially insecure... is like a climate closing in. It is nowhere in particular yet everywhere.'[115] It is rooted in circumstances: 'When the basis of such fear is analysed, it is clear that it arises out of the

[108] Field notes, 1 April.
[109] Ibid. p.48.
[110] Ibid. p.71.
[111] Ibid. p.30.
[112] Ibid. p.30.
[113] Field notes, 1 April, 20 June.
[114] Thurman, *Disinherited,* p.26.
[115] Ibid. p.26-7.

sense of isolation and helplessness in the face of the varied dimensions of violence to which the underprivileged are exposed.'[116]

No wonder then that members of the Priors Park community struggle so hard with various mental health concerns, and at times with addictions which can be argued as an attempt to self-medicate or control an uncontrollable environment. The good news is that Jesus' teaching provides freedom, teaching us not to fear and to trust instead in God's goodness. Thurman writes: 'This idea – that God is mindful of the individual – is of tremendous import in dealing with fear as a disease. In this world the socially disadvantaged man is constantly given a negative answer to the most important personal questions upon which mental health depends: "Who am I? What am I?"'[117] There is resonance here with Fiddes' discussion about the anxiety of being caught between constraints and freedom.[118]

Thurman outlines how, for fear, deception and hate, while there may be some benefit of the habit, ultimately it becomes life denying. The hard discipline of resisting the pull to this habit through following Jesus' teaching is life-giving and the route into freedom. Thurman writes: 'Wherever his spirit appears, the oppressed gather fresh courage; for he announced the good news that fear, hypocrisy, and hatred, the three hounds of hell that track the trail of the disinherited, need have no dominion over them.'[119] For each of these, spiritual discipline which encourages resistance is the route into freedom.

<u>Salvation and personhood</u>

Womanist theologian, Delores Williams explores perspectives on salvation among black women in the US. The community she describes, though different from that of Priors Park, share the dynamic by which they have been oppressed and marginalised by wider society. The language she uses around personhood and 'somebodiness' resonates with that found in Celebrate, practices to enable positive identity, so people can stand tall and live well within difficult circumstances. Field notes record that during the washing line exercise in the Easter liturgy the focus was: 'not on sin and forgiveness but life-giving and life-denying.'[120] On the latter: 'some are our sin but can be done to us, not all our stuff.'[121] Field notes from a different

[116] Ibid. p.27.
[117] Ibid. p.39.
[118] Fiddes, *Salvation,* p.12.
[119] Ibid. p.19.
[120] Field notes, 1 April.
[121] Ibid.

occasion record these themes: 'confidence building, helping people stand tall, letting go of fear, taking on identity which enables confidence.'[122]

Williams finds worthlessness to be a key theme, with freedom rooted in the discovery of personhood in Christ. Her description of the fate of Black women has echoes of Owen Jones' portrayal of 'Chavs'.[123] She writes: 'There are narratives in which the white slaveholding class refer to Black women and their progeny as filthy and dirty and therefore "proper" subjects for their physical violation and destruction.'[124]

Against this background, salvation in Christ involves discovery of a sense of worth and personhood. Faith in Christ: 'healed Black women's consciousness of their "unworthiness" and boosted their self esteem.'[125] Williams uses the term 'somebodiness to describe the movement from low self-esteem towards being worth something in Christ: 'This development often proceeds from feelings of personal unworthiness to a sense of somebodiness bestowed by an encounter with Jesus. Reaching the level of "somebodiness" amounts to what they see as liberation.'[126] It also proved life-giving to understand a feeling of unworthiness as sin.[127] Framing it in such a way gave resources to reject the shameful negative identity and claim positive identity in Christ.

Anthony Reddie has already been noted as a black British theologian. He bridges the gap between the black and womanist theologians explored above and the UK context, finding that their insight is needed just as much in our own context. He notes how: 'Black and Womanist theologians begin with the realities of Black suffering, marginalization and oppression in the world as their basis for talking about God.'[128]

UK based community theologian, Ruddick, uses similar concepts to Williams, using the language of personhood for Williams' somebodiness. She focuses on transformation, with both community and personal transformation interwoven. In order to work towards such transformation, three critical issues need to be addressed: 'overcoming dependence through a focus on significance; overcoming the 'wall in the head' by ushering in the new; and

[122] Field notes, 17 March.
[123] Jones, *Chavs.*
[124] Delores S. Williams, 'A Womanist Perspective on Sin', in Emilie Townes (ed) *A Troubling in my Soul* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis 1993) p.144.
[125] Ibid. p.143.
[126] Ibid. p.140.
[127] Ibid. p.143.
[128] Reddie, Colour Blind, p.94.

overcoming inaction by cultivating personhood.'[129] There is good news for individuals as they discover their significance, and this then is good news for the wider community as this is lived out. She writes: 'Making room for others not simply to receive but to bring their skills and insight cultivates personhood, providing the basis for their future action.'[130]

Freedom for…

Thurman's focus on personal disciplines had a bigger purpose in mind than each individual: the civil liberties movement was in the background to his writing. Part of the key to finding freedom is for a person to take their eye off their own problems and onto a wider horizon. Doing so is not straightforward when problems are as basic as finding food and shelter for the family; at times, physical freedom needs to precede the spiritual. When the basics are secure enough to allow the beginnings of a broader vision then life opens out and a liberation is experienced.

What is described here is the personal dynamic of sin as each individual attempts to stand tall and find liberation within an oppressive socio-political structure, without neglecting the reality of structural sin. Ruddick noted this dynamic, and Williams, in her conclusion, expresses the interaction between the personal and the corporate: 'Individual sin has to do with participating in society's systems that devalue Black women's womanhood (humanity) through a process of invisibilisation... Black women also participate in sin when they do not challenge the patriarchal and demonarchal systems in society.'[131] This latter perspective gives a clue as to the purpose of our liberation: it is not simply so that we as individuals are liberated but so that we can become a part of dismantling oppressive structures, thus setting others free.

For Eden teams and for Celebrate, the practical support of the church community can become the place where those basics are held: their practical ministries therefore have both practical and spiritual significance as they give people capacity to look beyond daily stresses. Someone with deep resilience may be able to begin to work on the spiritual disciplines even when still living under oppression. Participating in the broader vision begins to offer freedom to others who cannot find that strength under the weight of their burdens. In time, the latter begin to participate in the broader work as well as their personal liberation, thus liberation breeds liberation.

[129] Ruddick, 'Transformation', p.71.
[130] Ibid. p.70.
[131] Williams, '*Womanist*', p.146.

For most Celebrate members, participation in the wider concerns are local and either relational or practical. Ed said in interview: "I think that people are seeing that they have a role, that it's not just God who steps in, they're the hands and the feet. So yes, those are sort of exciting moves."[132] A focus group participant talked about food distribution: "those families that need, that may attend food bank, that need food, they're the needs that we can meet, because through Fare Share, that we can distribute food and help them." He continues: "And just going around, just, if we go around with the food then we meet them, and then we can see maybe that they've got other needs as well."[133] Another spoke about the way his cooking skills are beginning to be used in the community café: "I've been involved in the food for a while, and I felt that's really useful because that's a talent that I have been given and it's also been about listening to what people's needs are... we're just all pulling together and it's a wonderful Christian experience, you know?"[134]

Working for political change is not yet significant for most Celebrate members with day-to-day practical support prioritised over institutional politics. The former may come in time as members grow in confidence: Wendy herself is politically engaged in various ways, including community meetings with councillors; functioning as chaplain to the Mayor, and involvement in bringing the Credit Union to Priors Park.[135]

Ed described liberation found in life-giving purpose in terms of adventure and journey: "journeys, it's a very Christian term, and I love it, but adventure kind of fits the bill, very similar in that we're always talking about something that's not easy, that's almost on the point of being, we don't know whether we'll do it. We're stepping out and seeing what happens, and so yes, I think people have grown in their appetite for that."[136]

The healing and liberation offered by God is changing how people react to adverse circumstances, in ways that halt the cycle of negativity. Ed talked in interview about Celebrate members' increasing resilience and maturity, particularly in how they respond to those who: "do all sorts of horrendous things."[137] He observed that: "the battles keep coming and yet

[132] ES interview, 20 June 2018.
[133] Focus group participant, 21 June 2018.
[134] Focus group.
[135] WR interview.
[136] ES interview.
[137] ES interview.

they are learning to ride the waves a bit more, and not just lash back from a place of deep emotion and deep hurt. And growing in restraint there, which is a hard thing."[138] At times they get hit hard, so it is impressive to see people growing in those battles: "they've got new foundations that hold them, rather than just being allowed to be tossed and turned by circumstances."[139] This has an impact not just on the individuals involved but also on the culture of the whole community.

Stories of transformed lives are shared with the wider community, this again is from the focus group: "I don't think anybody can argue against when they come up against a life that's been changed, like *N*'s. You can't say, well, it didn't happen. Because it **has** happened, through God."[140] The participant continued, talking about the 'cauldron of negativity' that at times takes over the community and how powerful changed lives are within that: "that gives us encouragement that we can see others come out of addictions and into that glorious light, and I think that's my great hope is, that can happen, because it's already happening."[141]

In this way, the integration of practical, personal and spiritual liberation is lived out by the Celebrate community in Priors Park. Personal freedom is lived out in a commitment to playing a part in God's purposes. This in itself is lifegiving for the individuals themselves as well as those they serve as they find freedom from the false promises of self-preoccupation and the habits which follow.

Conclusion

The traditional concept of sin is woven throughout the discussion above, but different language preferred in order to ensure that what is expressed is received as good news, avoiding feeding an existing sense of shame and worthlessness. Liberation and freedom are helpful ways of expressing the gospel. This has dual aspect, concerning both personal freedom, and the wider purpose of that freedom, with a depth of interconnection between individual and socio-political freedom, all held in God.

Different authors put different emphasis on spiritual or practical freedom. Some emphasise starting with personal spiritual freedom, others on the way in which practical freedoms are a

[138] Ibid.
[139] Ibid.
[140] Focus group.
[141] Ibid.

necessary prerequisite for considering spiritual purpose. Both have merit and indeed both need consideration within a holism that understands profound interaction between the personal and the communal. The priority for any practitioner is to ensure that whatever the starting point, both personal and communal are taken seriously and held within the same gospel dynamic.

The conclusions reached here have a particular focus on disadvantaged communities, with implications for this sector of society where church has consistently failed to gain traction. The failure of the church to fully explore the nature of the gospel for the 'disinherited' may well be significant in this failure. There are wider implications too in a current political climate where many who are financially better off still feel trapped and powerless. This means that strands explored here have wider resonance than just financially disadvantaged communities.

Chapter 4a: Stroud ethnographic description

Fieldwork in Stroud followed the work of pioneer minister, Simon Howells, who is addressing the gap between the culture of the church and the distinctive bohemian subculture in the town. Stroud is situated within the Cotswolds, in a meeting point of five valleys, just east of the main escarpment and Cotswold Way. It is known for its artistic community, its green ethic, left-of-centre politics[1] and history of protest, all of which have an extended history in the town.[2] Locally, the subculture is known as 'Stroudy' and is notably different from the surrounding area, though with inevitable blurring of boundaries.

The church has, until Simon's appointment, held itself at some distance from Stroud's subculture and as a result had only limited success in terms of missional engagement. Simon was employed as a pioneer to build relationships with this aspect of Stroud's reality. He says:

> My particular task was to engage with the bohemian community, if that is the right word, because that's where it was… If you plonk an evangelical thing, it just doesn't scratch where people are itching. And the idea that things can be exclusive or that there are certain groups of people that you reject for their sexuality or whatever, it's just a non-starter. It's just like, you've got to be joking? What are you playing at? Why on earth would we want that?[3]

Working within this culture of radical inclusion, where lines and boundaries are resisted has put Simon, and his pioneering work in a vulnerable position with much potential for being misunderstood by a church that prefers clear lines.

Simon inherited a Messy Church, founded by a pioneer curate with a missional calling but less radical vision. In the early stages of his pioneering, he changed its name to 'Wide Open Space' and moulded it in a more Stroudy direction: "I put in things like - circus skills was a major theme one time, sculpting was another theme, and actually that worked really well."[4] He found himself overstretched however when the Rector left and he needed to cover the

[1] The constituency currently has a Conservative MP, a change at the 2019 election from previous Labour MP due to split vote between Labour and Green, with Molly Scott Cato standing for the Green Party.
[2] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stroud accessed 6 December 2018.
[3] SH Interview, 3 October 2018.
[4] SH interview.

vacancy: this combined with a desire to go in a more radical direction resulted in letting this project go. He said:

> So I started to particularly mix with the multi-faith or multi-spiritual crowd. And I realised that I needed to not just be a church leader, but a spiritual leader in the centre of town, to whoever needed that. And that meant forming a different set of partnerships from what you might do if you weren't doing that.[5]

These partnerships have resulted in many intersecting circles, with varying degrees of partnership with Simon's ministry, and with a common interest in spirituality and in peace and justice work. They function independently, though with a relationship with one another. The Stroud Sacred Music Festival (SSMF), in its fourth year at the time of the fieldwork, is beginning to become a home for the holding of relationship between the groups, and an overall focus. There is a SMMF festival weekend in July each year, and a regular programme of events throughout the year that are promoted under the SSMF banner. A Hindu, Girish Patel, who is a key partner alongside Simon, considers the coming together of faiths in SSMF as an "act of peace" in and of itself.[6] Simon, while agreeing with this perspective also has a concern to offer spiritual support to the activism that is so much a part of the town's reality.[7]

The 'Night of the thin veil' in late October was one such offering. Field notes describe an old church with strings of fairy lights between pillars, windows lit in purple, orange and pink.[8] Food tables were at the back with curry and samosas for sale, and hot drinks for donations. Indian music was playing and a thin fabric veil had been placed behind the staging area. Seating was set out in the nave area, in a roughly elongated semi-circle.

Simon was visible as a priest wearing clericals, and holding the whole gathering. He introduced the event as a devotional festival, highlighting the different festivals represented, in language which was true to his Christian commitment but respectful and inclusive, seeking that which we can affirm in one another. His introduction made reference to the Celtic New Year, with light emanating from the divine overcoming the darkness around us; Divali; the full moon when Buddha received enlightenment; the thin veil with ancestors and saints, remembered by

[5] Ibid.
[6] Field journal, 18 July 2018.
[7] SH interview.
[8] Field journal, 21 October 2017.

Pagans and Christians; loving kindness. Representatives from different faith traditions were invited to speak a few words from their perspective. There then followed music from a community gospel choir and the Ragababas, a devotional musical collective representing many faith traditions. The music of the Ragababas took us into a meditative space: towards the end, Simon who plays keyboard with them, spoke words of meditation: "In the way of... In the way of Christ... In these schools of wisdom... One last piece, then will go into silence. Please keep the silence... Close your eyes, in fields of wonder, close your eyes and dream."[9] We kept silence together for a while, with the gathering ending with a dance performance and final words from Simon.

In the Stroud Solstice spiral a couple of months later, a labyrinth was set out on the floor of the main nave using evergreen branches and leaves. With live ambient music playing in the background, participants were invited to walk the labyrinth meditatively. Instructions said to: 'take an unlit night light and walk into the spiral. Go at your own pace, passing others carefully if necessary. You may wish to reflect on the last year and give thanks. Light your night light in the centre of the spiral. Walk out of the spiral following the exit path with your lit night light. You may like to dream into the coming year.'[10] On exit, we placed our lights on a table that was set out with peace and justice themed written reflections, next to a lit globe of the world.

In these gatherings, peace and justice is assumed as the point of spirituality, alluded to gently but not pressed because this is a community that is already committed and needs to ground and reconnect, rather than be pressed to do more. This goes for both Christian churches and the wider community in the town. In interview, Simon listed a few church led initiatives: a youth project for children unable to stay in school; a project for semi-homeless people; and work to support refugees and asylum seekers, saying: "there's very strong Christian run justice ministries." In terms of the wider community, there is a deep awareness of structural injustice and the need for activism as well as local compassion based projects. As our conversation moved into the realm of structural sin, Simon responded passionately: "Systemic sin, I mean, blimey, yeah." He followed this with reference to climate activism, significant locally, and discussed more fully in the theological chapter that follows.

[9] Ibid.
[10] Photograph, 21 December 2017.

Christian community is expressed through St Lawrence Church and Stillpoint. St Lawrence is an inherited church with a 700 year history and a location in the town centre. Increasingly, there is a blurring of boundaries between Simon's pioneer ministry and his role as vicar of St Lawrence: the church increasingly hosts events for the wider bohemian community that have developed through the pioneer ministry. Church members are becoming engaged themselves with the pioneering. Simon said: "But if you're in St Lawrence, there's some St Lawrence people, traditional people I mean, who've got **very** excited about the pioneer ministry."[11] Alongside this is Stillpoint, a meditative Fresh Expression, meeting on Tuesday evenings in members' homes. On the occasion I visited, the core of the evening was taken with an Ignatian examen, beginning with shared silence and then a sharing of 'consolation' and 'desolation', which was held by the group.[12] A discussion based on material from Taizé followed.[13]

St Lawrence Church also offers two monthly services which particularly appeal to the Bohemian crowd: the first is Taizé which in Stroud is expressed in a deeply meditative format. The second is the 'Cowshed' service, based on liturgy that shares history with Bede Griffiths' early experiments in Christian community in the area before leaving for India.[14] It is described on the website as: 'A contemplative communion service steeped in the Christian mystical tradition: simplicity, silence, scripture, music, contemplation, and an inclusive Holy Communion. Bringing together the riches of Eastern and Western wisdom traditions.'[15]

In a service booklet which is a photocopy of the original, handwritten in italic ink pen, peace, justice and environment concerns are expressed vividly throughout: 'To the heavens be peace, to the earth and sky be peace.'[16] Field notes explore the difference between how faith is expressed here as compared with standard Anglican liturgy: ""Almighty God to who all hearts are open" becomes "O God of many names, to whom all hearts are open..." "The Lord be with you" "And also be with you" becomes "Peace be with you" "And also with you""[17] The service attracts people who would not attend any other form of Christian worship. Some have Christian background but have been de-churched for decades: "when we set up the Cowshed, and I saw who came, I thought, so this attracts a whole lot of interfaith people. And then I

[11] SH interview.
[12] https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/25557/consolation-and-desolation-2 accessed 6 December 2018.
[13] Field journal, 25 September 2018.
[14] http://www.bedegriffiths.com/bede-griffiths/ accessed 19 July 2019.
[15] https://www.stlaurencefuture.org.uk/events-listing.html accessed 19 July 2019.
[16] Field journal, 1 July 2018.
[17] Ibid.

talked to them, and they said, 'no I'm not interfaith, I'm a Christian, I just don't have a way to express it. I have a residual Christianity which I want to return home to.'"[18]

The Sacred Music Festival itself is a significant undertaking over a 36 hour period, Friday evening and Saturday daytime and evening, and including both local contributions and internationally recognised artists. The headline act was Maya Youssef, a Syrian musician, now resident in the UK.[19] The church hosted a morning and evening programme: in the morning, two offerings in an open spiritual tradition, and the festival's closing concert in the evening. The town hall hosted a programme of meditative chant with spiritual traditions such as Taizé; Native American; Buddhist and Sikh kirtan; and a local musician Matthew Heyes-Moore who draws inspiration from many spiritual traditions.

An upstairs room hosted discussions: I attended one on scriptural chanting hosted by the Rabbi of the local liberal Jewish community alongside other faith leaders. A tepee in Bank Gardens hosted a variety of workshops including arts and crafts, storytelling and dance. At one point, a procession with drummers came through the town's commercial centre, halting at the bottom of the gardens, and: 'chanting and drumming "Peace to you my friend." to those who had gathered to watch.'[20] Overall there was a festival feel, with attendees free to wander across the town between venues, choosing their own mix of music, chant and discussion, or sitting in the sun on the grass with music from the venues in the background.

Thematic summary

The theme that will be the focus of a more in-depth discussion in the next chapter is the way in which this pioneering work offers a spiritual underpinning to the town's activism and peace/justice work. Other themes worth noting are discussed briefly below.

Inculturated Good News

Underpinning the ministry in Stroud is the profound inculturation within Stroud's Bohemian culture. Simon compared how he expresses Christian faith with a classically evangelical speaker he witnessed in the town: "People are literally walking away from this. It's not, it's more than not interesting, it's just the wrong message."[21] Gospel music is appreciated, but

[18] SH interview, 3 October 2018.
[19] http://mayayoussef.com/ accessed 12 May 2020.
[20] Field journal, 7 July 2018.
[21] SH interview.

evangelical Christianity is: “only really acceptable in its artistic form, not in its verbal form, because it’s isolationist, and people don’t really want that.”[22]

Anything which encourages a dualistic mindset, an unengaged or unearthed faith, or exclusion of any other person on any basis is the wrong message for a town for whom those things are core values. A religion which does not share the values will quickly be rejected. There are however approaches to Christianity which avoid such pitfalls. Simon and I discussed the weekend with Br Martin of the Bede Griffiths Sangha (community) that I had attended: “Such a strong sense of non-duality. Such a strong sense of, you know, the conversation we’ve just had about the divine, and the divine’s interconnectedness with everything, including us... So I think he’s a good example of... east meets west, rather than just west, or just east, that makes a lot of sense here.”[23] An important strand here is the resonance within Christianity around interconnectedness, God’s presence by the Holy Spirit in and through all of life; that all is held in God.

He continued, talking more generally about the importance of earthed and embodied faith:

> “so if you take a place like this, the idea that our movement, our fitness, our diet, our prayer life, our scripture absorption, these are all one and the same thing. They are not something subservient to doing quiet times, read the bible of whatever, or reading some scripture every morning. They are – so the wholeness aspect of it… and the message of interconnectedness. Which can be deeply Christian. So it’s very difficult to take both of those out – wholeness and interconnectedness, out of the message here, of what spirituality is, and then still come up with something.”[24]

Here again there is plenty of potential for Christian resonance with the town’s values as we speak of the church’s working with God for a positive future, for a healing of all creation: individual, societal and environmental.

The question then is what is the uniquely Christian contribution to the spiritual conversation in the town? What can we offer that is good news? Within a mindset that values an earthed spirituality then the incarnation is profoundly important: “the idea of the divine deeply rooted

[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid.

in your own humanity, in fact that's where you find the divine, is what I use as my evangelistic focus, rather than the cross... the almost shocking news that he would leave heaven to inhabit our own humanity, is good news. Very good news, to everybody. I'm very happy to go there."[25]

Conversations about sin and about the cross are more problematic, at least initially, as Simon puts it: "because they think what we mean by sin is our version of it wrapped up in a warped vision of sexuality. So they won't go there."[26] When the time is right for the conversation, it is framed differently to the classic evangelical formula. Simon says: "It's a good point a little bit further along when you are talking about the triumph of love, but it's not further back."[27] 'Triumph of love' is a fascinating phrase. It frames the work of the cross in entirely positive terms that roots the hearer in hope. Whatever we might be seeing in our news, however much in our activism we feel we are banging our heads against a brick wall, however we might be feeling about ourselves, there is hope because love has triumphed.

Music and the arts

Evangelism is not confined to what can be expressed in language, in fact there is a profound awareness that the spiritual goes beyond language. The reality of God's presence as a community gathers around music can be profound. Simon tells the story of a particular occasion when Ragababas had been playing a set:

> "We had just been singing the word Hallelujah, and we were ending the whole evening, and I was ending it from the keyboard. And for some reason, the song ended with that, it just so happened, and everyone was singing it, and there was like 400 people there, and I just slowed down, like you would do in a church, just slowed down, and let them carry on singing, told everyone to take their hands off their instruments and just let them – and everyone got on their knees – multifaith setting – got on their knees, and there was a silence that went on for about four or five minutes. Totally unprepared. And so we literally got beyond the veil, at that moment, and it was a stunning moment. And it wasn't a one-off. That's I think our particular contribution on the interfaith front."[28]

[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.

The musicians on this occasion were not all Christian but of mixed spiritual commitment. Simon had been networking and partnering across the faith traditions in the town: "I realised, I'm a musician, I realised that I needed to do something in microcosm that showed what we were doing in macrocosm. And that's why Girish and I set up Ragababas which is a band of 15 people, all of different faiths."[29] In this way, an interfaith collaboration has led to a remarkable sense of the presence of God, raising huge questions about the place of the various different faith traditions in God's purposes.

Simon is conscious of the way in which music allows participants to move beyond the barriers that divide person from person. In this he is not alone: SSMF co-ordinator Sarah Frazer says: "Words and doctrine will often cause divide, sacred music can bridge those divides, and there's a sense of oneness."[30] Simon sees Stroud's experience as insight for the wider interfaith movement: "our particular contribution to this is the beyond words aspect of it. That is deeply held, but wasn't being expressed, and that's where we've been particularly helpful in that context."[31] This is important because traditional channels of conversation and discussion tend to become stuck: "Because, as you know, most interfaith dialogue reaches an inevitable brick wall. But if you do it through the arts, it doesn't. And, we only discovered that by doing that. It reaches a profound place of transcendence, that I didn't know was there before I came here."[32]

Power, kenosis and the interfaith dynamic

The dynamic around power and control is intriguing: power is both held with confidence and given away freely, in fact it seems that the more it is given away, the more powerful the church becomes within the interfaith community. Simon is very aware of the powerful position Christianity so often has and consciously stands back from that, giving space to the other faiths. This dynamic was modelled at the debrief meeting which took place a little after SSMF. The meeting was hosted in his garden, a bring-and-share meal outdoors on a warm evening. Simon was not chairing the evening, that fell to the chair of SSMF. Neither was he called upon to open in prayer, Girish opened with a meditation. Neither did he have any special role within the evening, just as participant. Field notes record that Simon was sitting on the floor inside the circle of chairs: "Two or three others sat on the grass with him. Power

[29] Ibid.
[30] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O0QHlGlQnKE accessed 19 July 2019.
[31] SH interview.
[32] Ibid.

dynamics - Simon not in charge."[33] The way in which he stepped back from holding power both enabled others and allowed him occasions when he could in fact speak with authority to the meeting. A later reflection in the field notes examines the dynamic: "The power in Girish leading the prayers - if Simon had led it would have felt institutional, it wouldn't have worked in the same way even if he had done the same thing. Mistrust due to power dynamics. The power in just sitting on the grass but putting in significant comments - the spiritual core of the festival."[34]

In this way, through the giving away of power, Simon has found himself in the position of spiritual leader for the whole community, within all the faiths, rather than spiritual leader to an isolationist church. In interview he compared the difference between being a church leader and a spiritual leader to the town, as he has become. He said: a "Church leader is the leader of a church of Christians within the town and a spiritual leader is someone who is called upon in all spiritual situations to comment, lead, compere, appear on the radio, whatever it is. And for other people to say no, he speaks for us. Or she speaks for us."[35] He clarified that yes, that meant he can speak for the wider multi-faith community rather than just for the church.

It is an intriguing juxtaposition, that the giving away of power has increased his influence within the community. It is perhaps not unexpected for a faith that teaches that the first will be last and the last first, and which holds the kenotic dynamic at the heart of faith.[36]

The Inter-spiritual dynamic

Simon uses the word inter-spiritual when talking about the relationships between the various faiths in his ministry. The sense here is that spiritual experience of the presence of God is at the heart of what is being sought when gathering, rather than a cognitive understanding. Perhaps even more importantly, it is about working together on the common issues that face our society – focussing on what we can do together, with a spiritual underpinning, rather than getting bogged down in the details of what we do and do not each believe.

Simon talked in interview about the film that had recently been made about the youth night at SSMF. He said: "if you listen to what they say, they're saying, this is great, the church is doing

[33] Field journal, 18 July 2018.
[34] Field journal, 18 July 2018.
[35] SH interview, 3 October 2018.
[36] Matthew 20.16.

something. But they're not saying 'I'm coming back' but what they're saying is 'the church has become a focus where we can talk about how we can work together, spiritually, on the physical problems that we're facing'."[37]

The video features footage of the event itself as well as interviews with leaders and participants. A teenager interviewed said: "People can just come together without having to judge others." Another young participant said: "I think, like, the idea of religions and stuff is like really cool, it brings everybody together, which is pretty, pretty rare."[38] A further contribution celebrated that as a yoga teacher she is not excluded: "It's not like, you're a yoga teacher so you can't be part of the church, it's just like everyone's welcome, let's all come together as a community, let's lift each other up. And I think really, that's what religion should be about, connecting."

Simon is clear that Christian discipleship is aided by interfaith encounter. There is nothing to fear in working together, in fact opening ourselves to one another challenges us in ways that profoundly deepen our faith. "One goes through a steep discipleship learning curve, from whichever faith tradition you come from, when you encounter another, from a different faith, particularly if they challenge you... we have to provide a means to grow deeper into the Christian faith, and one of the ways to do that is by encounter with other faiths."[39]

Pioneering and risk taking

Simon understands risk taking and stepping into the unknown to be core to the calling of a pioneer, and the reason why he finds himself in such uncharted territory in this ministry. He says: "my particular calling demands that I just set off. Literally. Do that. Get in the boat and go. Otherwise I shouldn't have been a pioneer minister in the first place."[40]

Risks are of varying kinds and widely contrasting in that some were very practical and others of a theological and spiritual nature. On the first, SSMF in itself is risky. For a small town to put on a festival and hope that people will come, and will pay appropriately, is risky. In previous years there had been a charge but the year of my fieldwork they had decided to attempt a 'pay

[37] SH interview.
[38] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O0QHlGlQnKE accessed 19 July 2019.
[39] Ibid.
[40] SH interview.

as you feel' approach. A member of the team present at the debrief meeting commented: "I was impressed with the step you took to base it all on donations, so glad that it worked."[41]

Another significant risk was the Sekou Keita concert in September. Simon wondered out loud where else but Stroud you would get 320 people to an African harp concert.[42] He continued: "**I** took the risk. The Hawkwood centre for future thinking, we were doing it in conjunction with, they said they couldn't take the risk. Cos we had to get like, 150 people to break even, at £15 each. And there was 320!"[43] With prayer in the background and prayerful discernment, the risks paid off. But there were no guarantees.

Theological risk is significant too, in that Simon's interfaith work takes him into theological territory where many would feel uncomfortable. He sees this as integral to the calling of a pioneer: "But people find that difficult about true pioneer ministers I think, that we can just step out beyond the Rubicon into dangerous waters and not – so our faith is sending us there, not the answers we have before we set off." Our mainstream culture prefers the route to be clearer in advance, but for pioneering this is often not the case.

Simon is working it out as he goes rather than coming with a preconceived plan: "Contextual Christianity in the centre of Stroud, what does that look like? I still don't know yet. I think we're getting there. But I don't know yet." All he can know is the next step, the direction of travel. "You're often sort of floundering around."[44] What is important is: "the trajectory of where you are going and the belief that, the old adage: don't pull people back to where you are, however beautiful that place may seem to you – have the courage to go with them to a place that neither you nor they have been before."[45] He recognised the last as a quotation from Vincent Donovan, considering it as: "pioneer ministry in a nutshell"[46] continuing: "So I'm, in that context I will undergo conversions along the way, by encounter with the other. Which is a theology that's not acceptable in most evangelical churches."[47]

It was evident in interview that Simon works hard on the theological understanding, to ensure that he remains within his own tradition, and at the same time holds a profound openness.

[41] Field journal, 18 July 2018.
[42] SH interview.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid.

There are questions that are unanswered and remain for the moment as questions: What does it mean that the future is interspiritual? What then is the unique understanding about redemption and the place of Christ? What we have here is perhaps another pioneer with practice preceding theology, going where the Spirit guides, working hard to backfill the theology where possible but also sitting with unanswered questions as God takes him into uncharted territories.

Chapter 4b: A spirituality of activism (Stroud)

Introduction

Activism concerning environmental concerns is at the heart of the 'earthed spirituality' explored in this chapter, with aspects relating to creation at the forefront. There is strong connectivity between this chapter and the eco-spirituality explored in the literature review.

My interview with Simon Howell in October 2018 fell shortly before the first major protest from Extinction Rebellion (XR) in London.[1] He said: "A lot of the guys are going on a march in November, to the climate march, and they'll probably, half of them, they won't be afraid to be arrested – they'll be fearless in all that stuff."[2] Stroud was significant in the creation of XR: an article in the Guardian headlined: 'Stroud, the gentle Cotswold town that spawned a radical protest'[3] goes on to describe territory, both physical and social, very familiar through fieldwork in the town: 'These free-spirited Cotswold streets of vegetarian eateries, quirky shops and yoga retreats have played a pivotal role in the development of Extinction Rebellion… Two of the group's three founders, Gail Bradbrook and her partner Simon Bramwell, live in the town.'[4]

Simon sees the work of Stroud Sacred Music Festival (SSMF) as a contribution to the cause through offering space for the spiritual underpinning of the town's activism, on environmental and other concerns: "I think we do quite well in being a place where people of green spirituality in all its forms feel that it is promoted and can be expressed. So there's lots of activists, and as you know, activists need a meditative side, and I think we can be very helpful there."[5] Likewise there is a role to play in bringing together people in the town with a vision for the common good. In interview, Simon reflected on the justice ministries currently run by the churches in the town which are significant but: "The problem with it is it needs some sort of integration, so they're not – they're a bit isolated, or could be a bit isolated. And so, and I think we can probably play that role."[6]

[1] Matthew Taylor and Damien Gayle, *Climate Protest* https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/nov/17/thousands-gather-to-block-london-bridges-in-climate-rebellion accessed 17 January 2020.
[2] Simon Howell Interview, 3 October 2018.
[3] Tom Wall, *Stroud*, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/apr/20/stroud-cotswold-town-that-spawned-radical-protest accessed 17 January 2020.
[4] Ibid.
[5] SH interview.
[6] Ibid.

Activists and Hope

Activists need a meditative side, they need something that holds them when the going is tough, that protects from burnout, that maintains hope. Simon is picking up here on something that has been noted elsewhere within activist circles, and environmental despair is in the news as I write. Numerous articles are circulating, exploring the concept of environmental despair and eco-anxiety.[7] In one of these, Louise Fitzgerald, environmental campaigner and researcher is quoted saying: '"burnout is a huge problem" among green activists.'[8] In 2017 the American Psychological Association jointly with ecoAmerica produced a seventy page report linking mental health with climate change.[9]

Many of these articles point out how unhelpful despair is, not just to our mental health but also to our ability to act. George Monbiot, unexpectedly for a self-confessed atheist uses the language of sin when talking about ecological despair: 'The Christians are right: despair is a sin.'[10] This comes within an article covering XR's April 2019 rebellion and exploring the necessity of action. Despair is a way of avoiding any kind of change of lifestyle: 'I see despair as another variety of disavowal.'[11] Despair allows us to distance ourselves and to relieve ourselves of responsibility by saying it is already too late: 'But in doing so we condemn others to destitution or death. Catastrophe afflicts people now and, unlike those in the rich world who can still afford to wallow in despair, they are forced to respond in practical ways.'[12] Stobart, writing from within Methodism notes the deep connection between psychology and hope.[13] Hope is however hard to categorise. It is action and object; emotion and cognition; individual and corporate.[14] The narrative of Christianity adds depth to hope as individual and corporate hope is held within the bigger story of God's grace and action.[15]

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[7] For example Kirstie McCrum, *Despair*: https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/environment/2019/07/one-biggest-threats-environment-despair and Fiona Charlson and James Graham Scott, *Eco-anxiety* https://theconversation.com/youre-not-the-only-one-feeling-helpless-eco-anxiety-can-reach-far-beyond-bushfire-communities-129453 both accessed 17 January 2020.

[8] Joe Humphreys, *Active Hope* https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/in-despair-over-climate-change-try-active-hope-1.3738187 accessed 17 January 2020.

[9] American Psychology Association, *Mental Health and our Changing Climate,* https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2017/03/mental-health-climate.pdf accessed 17 January 2020.

[10] George Monbiot, *Rebellion*, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/apr/15/rebellion-prevent-ecological-apocalypse-civil-disobedience?fbclid=IwAR1QsBuqfwtp-qs0qKOzyGxxP6S8UULemjrfQWG4PSF4FZ7BAcwaYmZb0YE accessed 17 January 2020.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

[13]Andrew J. Stobart, 'Towards a Model of Christian Hope: Developing Snyder's Hope Theory for Christian Ministry' *Theology and Ministry* vol.1:7 (2012) 1-17

[14] Stobart, *Hope*, p.1.

[15] Ibid. p.11f.

This all means that countering despair, eco-anxiety and burnout are essential parts of the equation in working for change. This is the contribution that SSMF offers to local activists. The spirituality offered is not individualistic, it is not primarily about a feel-good factor, or indeed about growing a church, but offers something that is essential for the work to continue. So much of what happens in St Lawrence and SSMF takes justice and peace as assumed values and offers reflective space around that, the kind of reflective space that offers refreshment and renewal, ready for the next action. This extract from field notes describes my own experience of walking the Solstice Spiral, and is indicative of what is offered to activists: 'Walking slowly, breathing. Awareness of others walking out with their lights as I walk in... Sign of hope, seeing the lights. Community, others have their lights…'[16] Another visit, this time to Stroud Sacred Music Festival, encouraged participants to keep dreaming of a positive future, to maintain hope. Field notes record: 'Walking meditatively while chanting: "Between darkness and light I will always walk, and wherever I will go, I will open a window of light, and plant the seeds of love."[17] The counter to despair is hope, the belief that it is worth acting because change is possible, and that the small things an individual can do come alongside others' acts, together becoming significant. SSMF in various ways holds people in hope, so that rather than burning out they may continue to act.

Rebecca Solnit in 'Hope in the Dark' reflects on these themes, on how it is possible to maintain hope in dark times, the focus being on political darkness rather than personal challenge. She wants to tell the stories that we forget, about how change has happened, or how negative change has been prevented, in order to bolster hope in those who can tend to be overwhelmed by the times it goes wrong. She also gives hope, through the image of mushrooming, for those who are working away at the foundations of change but not currently seeing any fruit of their labours: 'What we call mushrooms mycologists call the fruiting body of the larger, less visible fungus. Uprisings and revolutions are often considered to be spontaneous, but less visible long-term organizing and groundwork – or underground work – often laid the foundations.' [18]

She talks of the tendency of activists to look so hard at the problems in the world that despair is inevitable. There are two opposite traps that people fall into, one is to avoid looking at the problems, and the other is to spend so long gazing at them that we are paralyzed. She goes

[16] Field journal, 21 December 2017.
[17] Field journal, 7 July 2018.
[18] Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark*, (Edinburgh: Canongate 2005, 2016) p.xiii.

on: 'Authentic hope requires clarity – seeing the troubles in this world – and imagination, seeing what might lie beyond these situations that are perhaps not inevitable and immutable.'[19]

Naomi Klein is another who has written on maintaining the momentum of activism, this quote taken from a book written shortly after Trump was elected in the US:

> 'Saying no to bad ideas and bad actors is simply not enough. The firmest of no's has to be accompanied by a bold and forward-looking yes – a plan for the future that is credible and captivating enough that a great many people will fight to see it realized, not matter the shocks and scare tactics thrown their way.'[20]

The title of the book, 'NO is not enough' refers to the need for activists to begin building the new future no matter what is going on in the political realm. The new future needs to be lived out, because it is in doing so that the vision can be caught and find its way into political conversation.

She finds hope in the fact that even unhealthy dynamics often have some positive at the core, albeit warped into unhealthy directions. Writing here on consumerism, she sees the human longing for community and connection warped into marketing that encourages us to feel part of a tribe: 'That means there is hope: if we rebuild our communities and begin to derive more meaning and a sense of the good life from them, many of us are going to be less susceptible to the siren song of mindless consumerism.'[21]

Macy and Johnstone write about hope against the background of anxiety and paralysis. Macy is rooted in western Buddhism, and Johnstone in the psychology of resilience, happiness and positive change. They consider two common responses, finding it too depressing to talk about and therefore pushing it to the back of our minds, or facing it but finding it overwhelming and wondering what we could possibly do.[22] Against this background they consider two meanings of the word hope. The first is where the desired outcome seems likely but: 'our response gets

[19] Ibid. p.20.
[20] Naomi Klein, *NO is not enough,* (London: Penguin 2018) p.9.
[21] Ibid. p.60.
[22] Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone, *Active Hope: how to face the mess we're in without going crazy* (Novato CA: New World Library 2012) p.2.

blocked in areas where we don't rate our chances too high.'[23] The second meaning they name desire: 'It is this kind of hope that starts our journey – knowing what we hope for and what we'd like, or love, to take place.'[24] They write particularly about what they call Active Hope: 'Passive hope is about waiting for external agencies to bring about what we desire. Active Hope is about becoming active participants in bringing about what we hope for.'[25]

This is an important distinction for Christians who have sometimes tended towards passive hope, praying without also becoming actively involved in creating change. Macy and Johnstone go on to outline a spiralling framework that holds people in active hope, flowing from '*gratitude'*; through an '*honoring our pain for the world'*; then '*seeing with new eyes'*; and '*going forth'* into activism.[26] In reminding of the need to acknowledge the pain before moving onwards, they highlight the element most often missed by Christians, though 'lament' is increasingly gaining attention. Ross for example drawing, on Katongole and Brueggemann, explores lament under the headings complaint; resistance; justice and innovation; and newness and hope.[27]

Christian perspectives on hope

Solnit and Klein are looking for hope within the story of activism over the last few decades. This is significant and their wisdom is invaluable and Christians do well to learn from their contribution. There is however a uniquely Christian perspective on the conversation as the addition of the Christian story puts these valuable insights within a longer timeline, and with God's activity underpinning anything that we might do ourselves. This offers another solid foundation for hope. Unfortunately, Christians do not always make this valuable connection, a loss to wider society that desperately needs hope, as well as a lost opportunity to communicate good news. Macy and Johnstone's distinction between passive and active hope is interesting here as Christians ideally combine the two. There is an element of waiting on an external agency, for God to act, but we do not remain passive while we wait, we actively work with God. Christians do both.

[23] Ibid. p.3.
[24] Ibid. p.3.
[25] Ibid. p.3.
[26] Ibid p.39.
[27] Cathy Ross, 'Lament and Hope' *ANVIL* vol. 34:1 (2018)

Moltmann is a systematic theologian who draws heavily on liberation theology. For him, Christian activism is rooted in eschatology. It is the horizon of God's future that brings hope to the present:

> 'The expectation of the promised future of the kingdom of God which is coming to man and the world to set them right and create life, makes us ready to expend ourselves unrestrainedly and unreservedly in love and in the work of the reconciliation of the world with God and his future.'[28]

He comments on how unhealthy it has been for the church to neglect eschatology: 'Eschatology was long called the 'doctrine of the last things'... But relegating of these events to the 'last day' robbed them of their directive, uplifting and critical significance for all the days which are spent here, this side of the end, in history.'[29] Teaching on the subject therefore became disconnected from incarnation, cross and resurrection: 'a barren existence at the end of Christian dogmatics.'[30] He argues rather that the whole of Christianity is eschatological, with future hope permeating present reality and action.

His discussion of hopelessness contrasts intriguingly with Macy and Johnstone: where they distinguish between passive hope that waits on an external force and Active Hope that takes responsibility, Moltmann discusses 'presumptuousness', the idea that we can act without God, drawing on Joseph Pieper to consider it a form of hopelessness.[31] He is clear that without the action of God, our hope is limited and can only ever be incomplete. An understanding of the action of God is necessary to fully live in hope.

Moltmann ends with a discussion on why the church has been so poor at embracing a depth of hope. He explores the privatisation of faith that has emerged alongside modernity considering how religion has ceased to be a public, social duty: ''Religion' in the course of the nineteenth century becomes the religiosity of the individual, private, inward, edifying... There prevailed within it a pious individualism, which for its own part was romanticist in form and withdrew itself from the material entanglements of society.[32] While there were notable exceptions during this century, there was a clear direction of movement, also noted by Abraham and

[28] Jurgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (London: SCM 1967) p.337.
[29] Ibid. p.15.
[30] Ibid. p.15.
[31] Ibid. p.23.
[32] Ibid. p.310.

discussed in the evangelism article.[33] In this form, religion no longer needs eschatological hope since building the new future is no longer the core purpose, only the edification of the individual and the saving of souls for heaven. The drive for Christian activism became lost and neglected.

More recently, a similar theme was picked up by Tom Wright, in *Surprised by Hope*,[34] who explores how shallow the contemporary Christian understanding is, of this rich resource within our faith. He encourages us towards its rediscovery, reflecting: 'Most people - again, sadly, including many Christians - don't expect Christians to have much to say about hope within the present world. Most people don't imagine that these two could have anything to do with each other.'[35]

Wright first traces historical interactions that have pulled Christianity away from its implications for the whole created order, with reference to the Platonic mindset.[36] The extent to which this is the true cause for this move from materiality is much debated [37] That said, he is sharing insight with many others, notably eco-theologians who write extensively on this, as the impact on our relationship with wider creation is so significant.[38] Regardless of the origin of the problem, that Christians struggle to prioritise God's action within material creation is concerning.

He then notes the popular conception that Christian hope is primarily other-worldly, concerning what happens to the soul at death and without concern for material realities or the future of the created world: 'That remains the popular perception both from inside and outside the church, of what we Christians are supposed to believe when we speak of 'heaven', and when we talk of the hope that is ours in Christ.'[39] He understands the biblical perspective to be very different from this popular conception: 'Over against both these popular and mistaken views, the central Christian affirmation is that what the creator God has done in

[33] William J. Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans 1989)
[34] Tom Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (London: SPCK 2007)
[35] Ibid. p.xi.
[36] Ibid. p.100.
[37] Paul Tyson, *Returning to Reality: Christian Platonism for Our Times* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press 2014)
[38] For example, Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts* (London: Bloomsbury 2015) p.125 and Celia Deane-Drummond, *A handbook in Theology and Ecology* (London: SCM 1996) p.18-20.
[39] Wright, *Hope,* p.103.

Jesus Christ, and supremely in his resurrection, is what he intends to do for the whole world - meaning, by 'world', the entire cosmos with all its history.'[40]

This brings an earthiness to Christian hope, meaning that we have something to say in current socio-political struggles. As well as the perspectives brought by Solnit and Klein we can add that our hope is in God who longs for the wellbeing of all the created order, who promises ultimate fulfilment. But in order to do so, we need to let go of the popular misapprehension, limiting hope to unworldly affairs. We need to learn to understand that incarnation, death and resurrection give hope not for individual human souls but for the earthly future of the whole of God's creation.

Wright is significant in that he brings this perspective into the evangelical mainstream of the contemporary British church. In doing so, he is in the company of significant voices in the academy, particularly those drawing on the wisdom found in liberation theology. Moltmann has already been noted; the discussion that follows briefly examines insight from the perspectives of Brueggemann and Freire, the first as a biblical scholar and the second a Brazilian activist and educator, associated with the liberation theology movement.

Brueggemann is a biblical scholar who brings profound engagement with contemporary concerns to his work, seeking dynamic interaction between "what it meant" and "what it means."'[41] In his work on the Old Testament prophets he examines the role of the prophet and how that might play out in our own times, taking seriously both the contemporary situation and the wisdom in the biblical tradition.

In discussing the prophets, he starts with the human observation that: 'No doubt there were exhausted, despairing people around these three poets who saw nothing new, who hoped nothing new, and who could speak nothing new.'[42] This is certainly familiar in the contemporary situation, among both activists and general population feeling battered and struggling to maintain hope. Moving beyond this he suggests three things, each one learned from a different prophet.

[40] Ibid. p.103.
[41] Walter Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination: prophetic voices in exile* (London: SCM 1992) Preface.
[42] Ibid. p.3.

From Jeremiah he discovers the importance of letting go, in order to discover new hope. It was only letting go of the Davidic-Jerusalem world that creates space to discover the new thing that God is doing.[43] This letting go is not easy, and may involve anguish, pain and mourning. But it must be faced head on, as looking backwards and refusing to let go is the way of hopelessness and despair. It doesn't end with grief, hope follows but only after reality has been faced: 'It makes one wonder how such a one could be hopeful. Eventually we realize that nobody else could hope, except for those who grieve.'[44]

From Ezekiel he discovers the meaning of holiness, a holiness that holds opposites: tough and submissive; concerned and free.[45] Righteous living is important but attaining anything close to God's holiness is so beyond us that there is a freedom in knowing our efforts are impossible. That does not leave us hopeless though, rather it fills us with hope because it is not about us but rather about what God does, the new heart and new spirit that are God given: 'These replace the old hard heart and the old failed breath. God will do for God's people what they could not do for themselves. This is the good news of free gift.'[46]

Brueggemann finds in Second Isaiah the importance of memory and story as a resource to take us into the future. At this time, the worst had happened and exile was the new normal. Using the twin metaphors of exile and homecoming, the prophet weaves a vision of new possibilities that the people were struggling to imagine: 'It was the particular vocation of 2 Isaiah to construct poetic scenarios of alternative reality outside the prosaic control of the empire. These fresh alternatives liberated Jewish exiles to think differently, act differently, speak differently, and sing differently.'[47] This is rooted in well known stories: 'the poet appeals to the old memories and affirmations in an astonishing way... to cause a wholly new discernment of reality.'[48] With imagination set free, and rooted in known stories of God's faithfulness, then hope once again becomes possible.

Concerning the insight from all three for the contemporary church, he suggests the three prophets as a main resource for contemporary hopeful imagination for Christians finding themselves in an alienated cultural situation. He writes: 'If this is a fair statement of the

[43] Ibid. p.12.
[44] Ibid. p.34.
[45] Ibid. p.51.
[46] Ibid. p.68.
[47] Ibid. p.95.
[48] Ibid. p.96.

structure of biblical faith, then serious believers must see that this faith contradicts dominant cultural perspectives that *deny grief, co-opt holiness,* and *nullify memory* in the interest of an absolute present.'[49]

Denial of grief points us towards lament: Brueggemann is one of the authors drawn upon by Ross in her discussion of lament noted earlier.[50] In his writing on prophetic ministry he is clear that lament needs to be a part of the process: 'Hope expressed without knowledge of and participation in grief is likely to be false hope that does not reach despair.'[51] Elsewhere he discusses lament in the context of detailed textual analysis of the psalms, arguing that the loss of lament has been hugely damaging to the church. He considers that lament is significant in the redistribution of power and that when lament is lost, then 'a theological monopoly is re-enforced, docility and submissiveness are engendered, and the outcome in terms of social practice is to re-enforce and consolidate the political economic monopoly of the status quo.'[52] There is clear agreement here with Macy and Johnstone, in fact significantly predating their writing but sadly not extensively picked up within church life.

Paulo Freire's writing helpfully binds together insight from activists and the theologians, the two perspectives considered above. Freire is less explicit than his contemporary Latin American liberation theologians about his rootedness in Christianity. He is primarily an activist and a teacher, and reflection on this practice is at the heart of his work. However, he is frequently considered alongside them. Kirylo and Boyd write of Freire: 'While many have acknowledged his ties to liberation theology, his deep underlying faith out of which that theology arose is often overlooked. In fact for Freire his political radicalism was an expression of and an outgrowth of his deep spiritual connection to God.'[53]

Freire sees activism as necessary for hope, and hope necessary for activism. The one cannot exist without the other. On the one hand: 'Hope, as an ontological need, demands an anchoring in practice. As an ontological need, hope needs practice in order to become historical concreteness. That is why there is no hope in sheer hopefulness.'[54] Sheer hopefulness will eventually fade or turn into despair, without some action that works with the

[49] Ibid. p.132.
[50] Ross, *Lament.*
[51] Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis MN: Fortress 1978, 2001) p.67.
[52] Walter Brueggemann, *The costly loss of lament* JSOT 36 (1986) p.59-60.
[53] James Kirylo and Drick Boyd, *Paulo Freire: his faith, spirituality and theology* (Rotterdam: Sense 2017) p.1.
[54] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope* transl. Robert R Barr (London: Bloomsbury Academic 1994) p.3.

hope in order to shape it into solidity. Freire again: 'I do not mean that, because I am hopeful, I attribute to this hope of mine the power to transform reality all by itself... No, my hope is necessary, but it is not enough. Alone, it does not win. But without it, my struggle will be weak and wobbly. We need critical hope the way a fish needs unpolluted water.'[55] Hope therefore is not enough on its own, but neither can we do without it. The practice of activism is a place where hope is found. At the same time, hope is necessary for any action to happen. In hope's absence: 'it will be hard to struggle on, and when we fight as hopeless or despairing persons, our struggle will be suicidal.'[56] It is into this dynamic that the work of SSMF sits, assuming a commitment to peace and justice work, assuming an activism, and holding in hope.

What these authors share, whether Christian or those of different commitments, is the insight that hope is critical for those engaged in the work of activism. The Christian authors add an extra dimension with the sense of belonging to a story with historical breadth and underpinned by the work of God.

Hope across boundaries

Having explored specifically Christian perspectives on hope, it is necessary to engage with the fact that SSMF and the ministry of St Lawrence work in a broader context. In particular, they are remarkable for their partnership with other faiths in a way which goes beyond where many others are comfortable. This is considered, not as a pragmatic choice, but a necessary part of hope-filled activism.

A field journal entry following the Solstice Spiral reflected on the openness, the way in which they expressed themselves in a way which did not particularly advocate for Christianity and allowed all to take what was offered in whatever made sense to them: 'Openness to all with their own path. Should there be explicit encouragement to a particular path? To Christianity? Start where people are, celebrate what they know already. The message is in the fact that a church is hosting.'[57]

On this occasion, instructions began in this way: 'Take an unlit night light and walk into the spiral. Go at your own pace, passing others carefully if necessary. You may wish to reflect on the last year and give thanks...' As the instructions continue, they retain this openness without

[55] Ibid. p.2.
[56] Ibid. p.3.
[57] Field journal, 21 December 2017.

specific reference either to Christianity or to any other tradition, though hosted in the church which is itself a visual reference. A question might be asked about why a pioneer ministry, with a remit to build new Christian community, is so committed to partnership working with other faiths and to such an open expression of spirituality. An important perspective in answering this question is to explore the purpose of the work. If what is being offered is a spiritual underpinning of activism, then the spirituality on offer must not in any way cut across what the activism seeks to achieve.

In our context of division and disconnection, highlighted in the UK by the EU referendum and subsequent political uncertainty, working for peace and justice without modelling it by working together across boundaries has a critical element missing. Any church which tries to go it alone, without depth of partnership with the rest of the community, of other faiths or no faith, is failing to live out the new reality we are needing to usher in, that of reconnection across the boundaries that divide. Simon's ministry in Stroud is therefore taking a sometimes controversial path in terms of the depth of partnership with other faiths, because it is the only way that truly offers hope. Working together is not a pragmatic choice, but rather a necessity for an activist who seeks to embody what they stand for in all that they do.

Such practice chimes with a view stated by SSMF co-founder, Girish Patel, himself a Hindu, that SSMF is in itself an act of peace. He says this to camera on a video of SSMF: "Through this connection, we find that it is in itself an act of peace."[58] He said similar at the Festival's debrief meeting: "When we gather to celebrate diversity, it is in fact an act of peace."[59]

Rebecca Solnit explores the importance of working across divides in another context, the working together of the political left and right. She describes how 'the countercultural left hijacked progressive politics and made it into something that was almost guaranteed to alienate most working people.'[60] She wonders: 'What could have happened if we could have spoken directly to the people in that wave, if we could have made our position neither right nor left but truly grassroots?' A failure to have a broad base damages the possibilities and potential of a movement, it is important to work together across divides. Solnit is writing here about the political right and left but the same applies in terms of Christian and other or no faith. Crossing the divides is not just a pragmatic necessity for bringing about change, but in

[58] https://www.gloucester.anglican.org/2018/buzzing-at-stroud-sacred-music-festival/ accessed 17 January 2020.
[59] Field journal, 18 July 2018.
[60] Solnit, *Hope,* p.85.

itself it is a part of what brings about the change. She writes: 'Activism, in this model, is not only a toolbox to change things but a home in which to take up residence and live according to your beliefs, even if it's a temporary and local place, this paradise of participating, this vale where souls get made.'[61]

Jim Wallis in his book *'(Un)common Good'*[62] brings a Christian voice to the same insight. In pleading for the Christian left and right to work together, his baseline is a society that includes rather than divides. He writes:

> 'Most of our faith traditions agree that loving our neighbour is required if we say we love God. And making our treatment of the most vulnerable the moral test of any society's "righteousness" or integrity, as the biblical prophets always did, is ultimately the best way to make sure that we are protecting the life and dignity of all God's children.'[63]

He notes that a commitment to the common good is the best way to find common ground with people from other faith traditions, and that: 'People are longing for an inclusive vision of the common good.'[64] What this means in practice is that we must always cross the boundaries that divide us, in order to live the new reality promised in the kingdom of God: 'Fundamentalist religion must be countered by prophetic religion, and a new alliance between prophetic religious leaders across our many faith traditions is the best way to defeat the threats of modern fundamentalism.'[65]

Wallis has learned this perspective through his lifelong activism, rooted in his faith, which at the time of *'(Un)Common Good'* had a particular focus on the Occupy Movement.[66] All of this resonates with the ministry in Stroud. Simon said in interview:

> "What's the point of tribal Christianity? I have no idea what the point of it is, any more. Why? Why would you have it? A Christianity that makes you into a better person, that

[61] Ibid. p.81.
[62] Jim Wallis, *The (Un)Common Good: How the Gospel brings hope to a world divided* (Grand Rapids MI: Brazos 2013, 2014)
[63] Ibid. p.xii.
[64] Ibid. p.xiii.
[65] Ibid p.145.
[66] Ibid p.16, p289-91.

confronts, I don't know - the rise of the far right, the massive inequalities between rich and poor, the environmental catastrophe – yeah, that's good."[67]

In this, Simon finds himself in good company amongst activists, but it leaves unanswered questions about the relationship between the faiths. This question could be put to one side in a pragmatic decision to prioritise activism, and not worry about who is or is not saved, but it is worth examining.

Christianity within interfaith activism

While Stroud is in some ways an atypical context, sociologists of religion such as Linda Woodhead remind us that elements of the 'holistic milieu' are now found across the UK, including in many more ordinary contexts, such as Kendall, the site of Heelas and Woodhead's 2000-2002 research.[68] Woodhead finds traditional forms of Christianity to be diminishing, with new spiritualities: 'more focused on supporting individuals in their everyday lives, fostering new kinds of identity and lifestyle, and linking the like-minded and like-hearted to one another in a vast plurality of different forms of religious alliance.'[69] This means that answers to the questions that are being asked in Stroud are increasingly needed across the UK.

Resources for the conversation also come from writers like John Drane whose missiology is formed against the background of the holistic milieu. He writes about the perceptions on religion and spirituality in contemporary society: 'Where religion is regarded as controlling, prescriptive, narrow-minded, and ultimately damaging, spirituality is life-giving, nurturing and personally empowering.'[70] Nigel Rooms in his discussion of inculturated English faith considers caring for the planet to be a fruitful area of missional engagement.[71] He wonders what faith would look like if we took Englishness seriously highlighting creation care alongside a sense of fairness, and a desire for a better life.[72]

[67] SH interview.
[68] Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution* (Oxford: Blackwell 2005)
[69] Linda Woodhead, 'Introduction', in Woodhead and Cato, *Religion and Change in Modern Britain* (Abingdon: Routledge 2012) p.27.
[70] John Drane, *Do Christians know how to be Spiritual* (London: DLT 2005) p.41.
[71] Nigel Rooms, *The Faith of the English* (London: SPCK 2011) p.121.
[72] Rooms, *English*, p.120-21.

These authors give a wider context for the pioneering in Stroud. It is against these backdrops, both the environmental and the spiritual trends, particularly prevalent in Stroud but present nationally, that it is necessary to consider the place of Christianity within this mixed picture.

Many commentators have outlined the various different options for understanding the relationships between different faiths. For example Migliore, identifies stances from the exclusivist view at the one extreme where only the truth claims of Christianity are correct, to a relativist view that sees a Supreme Being at the core of all faiths and downplays or sees as metaphor the traditional truth claims about Christ.[73] Between the extremes he places nuanced approaches: a developmentalist approach whereby Christianity is seen as the highest member in an ascending series; a transcendental approach particularly expressed by Rahner, understanding God's work within all human society although most explicitly through Christ; and a dialogical approach represented by Tillich, Kung and Moltmann advocating dialogue between faiths in order for each to rediscover latent elements of their own faith. Gaston as a practitioner-theologian references Alan Race's threefold typology of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism.[74]

All these stances have problems for a practitioner seeking to hold their own faith with integrity as well as respecting the position of an adherent of another faith. A position towards the exclusivist end of the spectrum will be inclined to downplay the wisdom held within other traditions; the inclusivist downplays the place of Christ; and those in the middle still need to take a position with respect to their understanding of whether another individual is or is not saved, which effectively allies themselves with one or other extreme.

At this point Newbigin's insight is critical, offering helpful insight for Stroud and other activists whose focus is on what can be done together for the common good. Newbigin considers the question underlying the spectrum of positions identified above as the wrong question. He writes: 'I believe that the debate about this question has been fatally flawed by the fact that it has been conducted around the question, "Who can be saved?"'[75] He considers that: 'as long as it remains the central question we shall never come to the truth.'[76] In fact he finds the

[73] Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith seeking understanding* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans 1991) p.162.
[74] Ray Gaston, *Faith, Hope and Love: Interfaith engagement as practical theology* (London: SCM 2017) p.3.
[75] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a pluralist society* (London: SPCK 1989) p.176.
[76] Ibid. p.177.

impulse to judge whether or not someone is saved as 'astonishing in view of the emphatic warnings of Jesus against these kinds of judgements.'[77]

Instead he advocates for an approach rooted not on an abstraction but grounded in a person's place in the ongoing history of the world.[78] Salvation is not merely about what happens when we die but should be understood in eschatological context: 'Salvation in this sense is the completion of God's whole work in creation and redemption.'[79] Uses of the verb 'to save' therefore, in both past, present and future forms: 'must be understood in the light of the end to which they look.' Rather than starting with questions around the individual, he suggests starting from the historical and eschatological. Instead of starting with questions about individual salvation we should start the other way around. We should begin with the: 'Bible as the unique interpretation of human and cosmic history and move from that starting point to an understanding of what the Bible shows us of the meaning of personal life.'[80]

He concludes:

> Being saved has to do with the part we are playing now in God's story and therefore with the question whether we have understood the story rightly. It follows that our dialogue with people of other faiths must be about what is happening in the world now and about how we understand it and take our part in it. It cannot be only, or even mainly, about our destiny as individual souls after death. Insofar as the debate has concentrated on this latter question, it has been flawed.[81]

The practical implications of such an approach are that we should expect to see signs of the grace of God at work in those who do not know Jesus as Lord; that we cooperate with people of all faiths in projects which are in line with the Christian understanding of God's purpose in history; that a depth of dialogue is possible in the context of this shared commitment, focussed on the meaning and goal of the human story; and that the essential contribution of the Christian will be the telling of the story.[82] If being saved is about the part that we play in God's story, then it is absolutely right to maintain an openness to partners who are working

[77] Ibid. p.177.
[78] Ibid. p.178.
[79] Ibid. p.178.
[80] Ibid. p.128.
[81] Ibid p.179.
[82] Ibid p.182.

with us for positive change on peace and justice concerns, and the setting aside of the question of 'who is saved' is not an avoidance of the question but entirely appropriate.

With this as our baseline, it is now possible to return to the various stances in order to explore what might be helpful in practical day-to-day interaction with those of other faiths. The view that seems closest to what is lived out in Stroud is the dialogical approach. Migliore holds Paul Tillich, Hans Küng and Jürgen Moltmann as representatives of this position, all three with slightly different nuances but sharing the belief that as we dialogue with those from other faiths, we rediscover the depth of our own tradition. Simon expressed this view in interview: "We believe that interfaith encounter is part of discipleship. More than that. An essential part of discipleship. It is the way you go deeper into your own faith. Or a major way you go deeper into your own faith."[83] Gaston also considers that: 'encounter with other faiths and interfaith engagement can be a 'means of grace.'[84] Through encounter: 'the Church can rediscover its vocation in a 'post-Constantinian' context in which Christianity's centuries-long privileged position is thankfully undermined.'[85]

Another approach is the kenotic: having discussed kenosis at length in the previous chapter, it is intriguing to see it emerging as a theme here too in interfaith discussions. Gaston advocates for: 'a practical theology of interfaith engagement that has a spirituality rooted in kenosis at its heart.'[86] As a practitioner-theologian he reflects on his own experience: 'I am still forming answers to the questions I posed myself yesterday: something about crossing boundaries, something about openness, something about the call of Christ to dare to risk disapproval, something powerful too about loving the unloved.'[87]

The kenotic approach was seen in a variety of ways in the work of SSMF. For example at the festival debrief meeting, hosted in the Vicarage garden, Simon sat lightly to power and was content to allow others to lead. He doesn't chair the SSMF meetings, the opening meditation was led by a Hindu, and he sat on the grass without any physical indication of leadership. This approach in fact allowed him to speak powerfully to the group on occasion. Fieldnotes record: 'Simon spoke with some passion, particularly reminding people to keep spirituality at the core. Priestly comments - but not holding power in the sense of chairing, hosting, doing

[83] SH interview.
[84] Gaston, *Faith,* p.ix.
[85] Ibid. p.xi.
[86] Ibid. p.26.
[87] Ibid. p.47.

everything.'[88] A similar dynamic was seen in the Festival itself, for example a Pagan expression leading the procession from outdoors into the church as the daytime activities become focussed into the evening event. Field notes record: 'All gathered in a circle around a tree. Each spoke their name and a word that the tree brings to mind.' Words included endurance, hope, life, love.[89] Other examples include the multifaith spiritual chanting led by Rabbi Anna with Simon as a member of the panel and the spiritual chanting venue with many traditions represented in the programme.

The dialogical and kenotic approaches are a practical outworking of the commitment that Newbigin advocates, paying less attention to the salvation of an individual and more to the broader story of God's purposes: 'There is no salvation except one in which we are saved together through the one whom God sends to be the bearer of his salvation.'[90]

Reflections from practitioner-theologians

Jim Wallis and Matthew Fox are two Christian practitioners, representing opposite poles in the theological spectrum, but both rooted in this approach. Fox is best known for his work on Creation Spirituality;[91] in recent years he has become committed to social and environmental activism, working with and co-authoring books with people from other faith commitments. The Order of the Sacred Earth both describes and initiates a spiritual movement of climate activists, recognising both the need for practical engagement in the issues and spiritual underpinning, with all faith traditions working together. Along with co-authors Wilson and Listug, he writes:

> 'Persons who are religious are welcome into this community along with those who do not identify as religious. Spirituality, however, is required, and that means only a willingness to attempt to live life fully and deeply and not skate along the surface of superficiality, tribalism, or materialism/consumerism.'[92]

The place of spirituality is to ensure a groundedness in love, and to combat any temptation to anger and hatred in the face of adversity in the work: 'The warrior's mysticism allows him or

[88] Field journal, 18 July 2018.
[89] Field journal, 7 July 2018.
[90] Newbigin, *Pluralist,* p.83.
[91] Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing* (Santa Fe NM: Bear 1983); Matthew Fox, *Creation Spirituality* (New York NY: Harper Collins 1991)
[92] Ibid. p.17.

her to work from a place of quiet and stillness and *non-action* therefore. In this way love is returned for hatred and in this way things can change and transform in a deep and lasting way.'[93]

He has also written on the Occupy Movement alongside Adam Bucko. Fox writes about what he called 'deep ecumenism' saying that it: 'is about finding Spirit in all cultures and all religions and finding what the best of spirituality in all have in common and how they complement one another.'[94] His dialogue partner, Bucko, describes the faith of young activists: 'Even young people who are still connected to a specific tradition usually have a different relationship with that tradition than their parents did. They may feel rooted in that tradition but not stuck in it.'[95] He continues: 'This new spirituality is contemplative and experience based. It starts from life rather than concepts. Nonetheless concepts are celebrated as tools to connect the dots and deepen the experience.'[96]

Wallis, an Evangelical practitioner-theologian expresses a strong critique of what he calls the 'private-atonement gospel' the idea that salvation of an individual soul is the primary focus of Christianity, rather than the broader vision of the kingdom of God. He writes: 'While the kingdom of God is central to the New Testament, it was never central in the churches that many of us grew up in. Instead, in our conservative churches, *the gospel of the kingdom* was replaced by a *private-atonement gospel*.'[97] His vision is not of a faith perspective warped by individualism: 'Christianity is not a religion that gives some people a ticket to heaven and makes them judgemental of all others. Rather, it's a call to a relationship that changes all our other relationships.'[98] All this comes from his evangelical faith and biblical vision: 'Private-atonement theology and its disciples are in serious jeopardy of missing the vision of justice at the heart of the kingdom of God. Their gospel is simply too small, too narrow, too bifurcated, and ultimately too private. And in the end it is (as we evangelicals are prone to say) not *biblical*.'[99]

[93] Ibid. p.9-10.
[94] Adam Bucko and Matthew Fox, *Occupy Spirituality: a radical vision for a new generation* (Berkeley CA: North Atlantic Books 2013) p.63.
[95] Ibid. p.22.
[96] Ibid. p.23.
[97] Wallis, (Un)Common, p.53.
[98] Ibid. p.3-4.
[99] Ibid. p.59.

John Drane also reflects on the private atonement gospel, noting roots in the reformation emphasis on each individual having a personal relationship with God.[100] He outlines the limitations:

> Paradoxically, when this insistence was translated into the political and intellectual arena, it not only had the effect of marginalizing the Church as a meaningful spiritual community, but also created the conditions out of which faith could be banished from public life and redefined as a private and personal matter for individuals.[101]

He critiques the tendency in some contemporary spiritualities to echo this focus on the individual: 'Such capitalist spiritualities thereby end up reinforcing the very problems that many of their advocates seek to overcome.'[102] Disengagement from communities of faith, even while pursuing alternative spiritual paths leaves individuals vulnerable to other prevailing thought structures, in particular individualism and capitalism.[103] This is an important insight as it highlights that the private approach to spiritual matters is not a problem unique to Christianity but one found in multiple spiritual approaches in contemporary society.

By contrast is the biblical vision, regarding all the activities of everyday life as spiritual.[104] Therefore, except as a counter to contemporary imbalance, there is no need for a phrase such as Drane's 'lifestyle spirituality', [105] or my 'earthed spirituality.' 'Earthed spirituality' is not introducing something new, rather it is a necessary emphasis in order to return to something that would have been natural and familiar to previous Christian generations.

It is private-atonement gospel that is rejected by Stroud, whereas a gospel focussed on the common good and rooted in an earthed spirituality is appreciated. Wallis takes a kenotic approach to those of other faiths, not wanting to blur the boundaries between faiths but believing that Christianity calls us to be peacemakers.[106] Doing so does not betray or challenge our faith, if anything it throws us back onto God as we discover the depth of our need for spiritual resources in the work: 'Our relationship with the Living Teacher is also absolutely

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[100] Drane, *Spiritual,* p.26.
[101] *Ibid. p.26.*
[102] Ibid. p.37.
[103] Ibid. p.37.
[104] Ibid. p.64.
[105] John Drane, *After McDonaldization* (London: DLT 2008) p.78.
[106] Wallis, *(Un)common.* p.142-3.

essential in keeping our hope alive against all the odds that regularly challenge it. The greatest challenge to us in a world of injustice and a culture of cynicism is how to hang on to a belief in a better world that would change this one.'[107]

In Stroud, this openness is, perhaps counter-intuitively, resulting in people exploring Christianity who would otherwise not be interested. For someone who holds openness and inclusion as a core value, any exclusivist approach is an immediate barrier. The church's values are not in line with an existing deeply held personal ethic and the activism call to live the future. Those churches that might critique the approach taken by the pioneering in Stroud, advocating for a more Christian-centric approach as better missional practice are making a stance that is incompatible with the personal ethics of activists. The inter-spiritual inclusive approach is a more attractive expression of Christianity in this context.

Christianity within inclusive activism

The final question to explore is how the Christian story is held within this radically inclusive activism. Newbigin's focus on eschatological movement rather than individual salvation does not mean that the Christian story should be lost or absorbed into an amorphous spiritual mix. He advocates for the holding of a radical tension, a depth of engagement with all like-minded partners for the sake of the future, but with a confidence in the unique contribution from Christianity, indeed an understanding that the story of God in Christ has implications for the whole of created order, whether Christian or not. A clear confidence in this story allows for boldness as we work with others for God's future:

> If the Church is clear and bold in its affirmation of the truth of the gospel as the reality by which all human enterprises are to be tested and in its unmasking and rejection of the idols whose worshippers fill so much of the not-so-naked public square, then there is room for a great deal of pragmatism, of experiment, of venturing in relation to specific issues.[108]

In terms of the working out of this calling, he cautions that any political movement can become an idol and cautions Christians not to ally ourselves completely, always seeking the Christian distinctive that might be important to influence and shape the movement from

[107] Ibid. p.39.
[108] Lesslie Newbigin, *Truth to Tell: the gospel as public truth* (London: SPCK 1991) p.81.

within. He writes: 'If I understand the teaching of the New Testament on this matter, I understand the role of the Christian as that of being neither a conservative nor an anarchist but a subversive agent.'[109] The dilemma that Christians must solve is at what point they need to participate fully and contribute to the broad discussion and action, and at what point they hold themselves apart to reflect and pray in the light of the Christian story.

A recent ethnographic study by Maria Nita on Christian climate activism observes Christians holding themselves apart from the other activists. She writes:

> 'Although the Christian informants took refuge at dusk in the Christian tent for the evening worship, they took part some of the creative and artistic activities of the camp [sic]. In one instance, a Buddhist activist wished to join in as the singing in the Christian tent had created a very lively atmosphere, but for the most part Christians and non-Christians maintained separate spiritual spaces.'[110]

She observed that: 'Despite the profound changes they underwent, most activists retained their primary Christian identities in the climate movement and thus reported that they were motivated to act on climate change by their faith rather than any other political or secular concern.'[111]

While there is participation by Christians in broader activities, including the 'heart and soul' element of Transition Towns, their core belonging is Christian.[112] Nita observes Christians both embracing the mainstream green vision that is diverse, multi-cultural, and plural but at the same time: 'more privately participants will often talk about the relevance of 'a community in Christ', or the church as an 'epicentre' of the place community.'[113]

It is tempting to critique the Christians observed by Nita for holding back from full engagement: that may be fair as a certain nervousness of Christians around full engagement with interfaith activities is not uncommon, though the need to be refreshed in the Christian perspective is important. Stroud's practice at first glance is starkly contrasted from Nita's activists in that there is profound intersection between the different faith communities.

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[109] Ibid. p.82.
[110] Maria Nita, *Praying and campaigning with environmental Christians* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2016) p.166.
[111] Ibid. p.6.
[112] https://transitionnetwork.org/ accessed 11 February 2020.
[113] Nita, *Environmental,* p.176.

However in Stroud too, care is taken to provide places which are explicitly Christ-centred so that the integrity of Christianity is not lost.

Nita found that alternative green spirituality, as described by non-Christians, retains many Christian components such as 'care for creation', Christian language, such as 'communion', and even elements of Christian eschatology. She writes: 'Informants who identified themselves as 'spiritual but not religious', or 'coming from' a Druidic or Pagan tradition, often used the same language Christians did, at least in content if not in form.'[114] This means that the work of Christians as 'subversive agent', as Newbigin describes, has been highly successful. It also means that it is a fairly straightforward task for Christians in Stroud to connect with this spirituality in a gently Christian framework, it is simply a matter of making explicit what has been previously expressed more subtly.

At this time of research, there were significant expressions that actively sought openness beyond the churched Christians, as well as the regular congregation which provided a spiritual home for those comfortable in such a setting. The 'Cowshed' service, Taizé and 'Stillpoint' were noted in the previous chapter and a fourth expression has started more recently, 'Still Moving' which describes itself as: a new expression of Christian contemplative prayer through music and dance.'[115] This provides various options for a rootedness in Christianity to run alongside the broader partnership working.

Both Nita's study and observation of SSMF's practice indicate a complex relationship between Christian spirituality and the broader 'spiritual but not religious' practice of the climate movement overall. Both find value both in gathering as Christians and in broader interaction, though it seems that Stroud is pushing more radically into partnership working across the faiths. That said, explicitly Christian space is sought out, offered in a variety of forms, with the regular church congregation an option for some, but also the Cowshed service and Stillpoint for those who prefer a more open, though still Christ-centred form of spirituality.

Conclusion

The pioneering in Stroud shows a sophisticated and nuanced approach that works with all in the community who share their commitment to peace and justice concerns. In offering a

[114] Ibid. p.166.
[115] https://www.stlaurencefuture.org.uk/our-regular-services.html accessed 11 February 2020.

spirituality for activism, a means of not burning out, the end-goal of the work of St Lawrence and SSMF is not primarily to build their various expressions of Christian community, but to enable political and societal change with respect to the natural world. The climate and ecological emergency is currently in the forefront due to XR's headline grabbing actions, but this is also with respect to ongoing local initiatives.

SSMF is pushing boundaries in ways which feel uncomfortable for some Christians. It does so because a rejection of the barriers between people and a commitment to togetherness is a necessary part of activism. Working with others is essential: it does not mean we lose our distinctiveness, but we do lose our fear of the other in order to fully join the conversation and the work.

The work is within the range of orthodox responses to interfaith engagement and chimes particularly with Newbigin's insights which prioritise eschatological movement over questions of individual salvation. Care is taken to maintain Christian expressions that support this work: in putting concern for the church's growth secondary to peace and justice concerns, the church has become an attractive community to join for those who find Christianity a good place to root their spiritual connection and is in fact a growing community.

Chapter 5: Gospel insight from an earthed spirituality

This final chapter draws threads together against the background of the broader UK context, beyond the localities explored in the fieldwork. The hope is that the insight learned in these contexts may be of value to others engaged in Christian mission in other places. Explorations focus on the missiological implications of an earthed spirituality, as practice interacts with the pioneers' understanding of Good News. Their understanding of Good News has been uncovered by looking at both what they express verbally, their 'espoused theology', and the 'operant theology' embedded in their practice.[1]

There are practical implications for an approach that seeks interconnections, prioritising building kingdom communities over individual salvation. There are implications too for mission which follows the kenotic model of Christ in incarnation and journey to the cross, and in understanding the interconnection between individual and societal freedom. This contrasts with a form of Christianity which while speaking of the cross, lives in ways which avoid the journey to the cross, focussing solely on the 'success' of resurrection.

Much of the thinking expressed here has a long foundation, both in missiology and in the wider academy. It is however lacking in prominence in the strategic priorities of the Church of England.[2] While aspects of the new Church of England vision are welcome, with much to celebrate in the headline of 'simpler, humbler, bolder' and the normalising of the mixed ecology, there is no real clarity about what we are doing this for other than to ensure the survival of the church. It is not clearly articulated that the purpose of missionary discipleship is not church but kingdom, nor that in our pluralist society we need partners from other faiths and worldviews in our work, nor that the Christian route to success passes through the model of cross and resurrection.

This research therefore stands both as worked example and challenge. Each context illustrates what lived faith can look like when rooted and grounded in an earthed spirituality, 'down to earth' and 'of the earth.' This results in a vision that goes beyond the church as questions of community, planet and lived experience are primary. The church, and individual discipleship

[1] Helen Cameron et al, *Talking about God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology* (London: SCM 2010), p.53ff.

[2] https://www.churchofengland.org/about/leadership-and-governance/emerging-church-england/vision-church-england-2020s accessed 3 August 2021.

are within view, but church growth is not the primary goal. Church is always the servant of a wider vision that is earthed and grounded in lived realities and the challenges of our times.

The three contexts illustrate this vision in practice. The pioneering in Kingsholm points us particularly towards the way in which a depth of community engagement reflects the kenotic dynamic and is therefore an appropriate model for Christian mission. In Tewkesbury, the reality of broken lives is prominent, resulting in a theological exploration of the interplay between personal and communal liberation, in a community that is not highly valued. In Stroud, human and ecological issues of justice are in the forefront, with pioneering offering spiritual support to activists of a variety of faith traditions, in order to resource the critical shared vision.

In drawing together the threads from this whole project, the starting point is the chapter examining evangelism from the perspective of holistic mission, which outlined the urgency of uncovering language for mission that engages with current realities. Language is needed which moves on from that which was good contextual theology in a different era, towards something that speaks more fully to contemporary concerns, both human and environmental.

The literature review identified 'Earthed Spirituality' as a helpful lens through which to explore connections between the Christian tradition and contemporary spirituality. This has meant that the dual focus of 'down to earth' and 'of the earth' has been kept within sight throughout this project, and that theology, spirituality and practice have been considered inseparable. Examined through this lens, the three contexts have opened out perspectives that have potential to support mission in new directions, engaging at depth with our wider culture and using language, concepts and action that resonate with societal concerns.

Distinctiveness

There are clear differences in approach between the three contexts, with each standing alone in previous chapters. A particular contrast is between the approaches to interfaith engagement described in chapter 2 and chapter 4. In Kingsholm, the pioneering is more conservative in approach, clear that only Christian spirituality can be expressed. In Stroud however there is greater openness to seeing God at work within other faiths.

It could be argued that this reflects a difference in theological tradition between the two pioneers, and there may be some truth to this. This is not the whole of the answer though as their difference is not extreme, both identify as evangelical though Simon is Anglican and Ian

has a Vineyard background. The practice itself has elements in common: even within Stroud's openness there are some boundaries in place. The church will host gatherings that include a variety of faiths but when another faith is leading independently, different town centre venues are sought out.

The most likely explanation of the difference is that the context in Stroud has triggered exploration of this question at greater depth whereas this is more marginal to the calling in Kingsholm. Pioneering is always led by context: for Bohemian Stroud this is a primary question that can't be ignored whereas in Kingsholm, the priorities are elsewhere.

The fact that Stroud has pushed further into interfaith engagement due to the nature of their calling and context is in fact illustrative of a core premise of this research, that pioneers pushing missional boundaries make theological discoveries that are of value to the whole church. The literature review noted Bosch's observation that this is the theological method of the biblical writers, engaging in mission and then reflecting theologically on what they found in the field.[3] Bosch writes of a: 'church which, because of its missionary encounter with the world, was forced to theologize.'[4] This is exactly what has happened in the three contexts, each putting most energy into reflecting on the questions directly raised by their contexts. Bosch also notes that the New Testament writers differed from one another: 'the New Testament does not reflect a uniform view of mission but, rather, a variety of "theologies of mission".'[5] So too in contemporary Gloucestershire. Simon has been forced to theologize at great depth on interfaith concerns due to the nature of his context. Ian's reflections have engaged with different concerns, so different theologies of mission are emerging from the different contexts.

Another example of difference between the pioneers is the way in which the pioneering in Kingsholm leans further into ABCD and community co-creation than does Celebrate in Tewkesbury. Again, both churches identify as evangelical so this isn't theologically rooted. Rootedness is more clearly in vocational calling. In Kingsholm through Roots, calling is to the thriving of neighbourhood and the building of community, and in Tewkesbury, while community is in view, the wellbeing of individuals and individual families is more at the forefront.

These differences and multiple theologies of mission mean that the intention of this concluding chapter is not to force the three into a unified whole. That said, the foundational epistemology is not one that is fragmented, rather the Pauline model whereby each of us see with limited

[3] David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis 1991) p.16.
[4] Bosch, *Transforming*, p.16.
[5] Ibid. p.16.

clarity something which is itself whole.[6] Our vision is enlarged as we consider what others have discovered, each in their unique context. Each of the three are offering gifts to the conversation, arising out of their contexts and calling.

This means that while all pioneering, and indeed ethnographic research, is by nature local and contextual, insight does not need to stand as isolated fragments. The theological assessment of these initiatives provides a foundation within the breadth of the Christian tradition and offers a rootedness within the whole. This enables the local wisdom to connect with wider perspectives that others may find helpful in their own contextual mission. Differences between the contexts mean that the intent is not to create a rigid orthodoxy, either in terms of theology or practice, rather a tapestry that others might like to explore, in order to find where there might be resonance with their local situation. Theological assessment allows the reader to examine these lived examples against the background of a broader foundation of the Christian tradition that goes beyond the local.

Commonalities

In drawing together the whole, despite the differences, two overarching themes emerge. These are the profound differences to missiological and theological approaches that come when mission leads with kingdom perspectives, and when there is an insistence on approaches following the dynamic of incarnation and cross alongside resurrection.

Kingdom perspectives are rooted in an 'earthed spirituality', one which refuses to separate the life in the Spirit from the practical concerns of individuals and society. Seen in this way, it is impossible to live faithfully as Christians without having the dramas of everyday societal concerns in mind, whether human or environmental. The incarnation holds this perspective firmly within the person of Christ as the divine and human were united, a reminder from the core of our faith to keep an earthedness to our spirituality.

When lived out, the rootedness in lived reality makes it impossible to avoid the way of the cross. When earthed in the stuff of life then we can't focus on growth and success without passing first through difficulties and loss. Neither do we remain at the cross, unable to offer hope, but the cross cannot be avoided. There is a clear challenge to preaching of the cross that offers growth and success without walking that road ourselves.

[6] I Corinthians 13.12.

These are basic Christian principles that are in many ways uncontroversial. We live however as Christians in a society that is continually drawing us towards the perspective of the individual, and of success. It is all too easy therefore for Christians to inhabit these perspectives and for these to lead and guide our mission. The call in this conclusion is for us to notice our Christian distinctiveness and to opt instead to live in ways which prioritise incarnation, cross and kingdom. This means choosing the way of the cross over more obvious paths to success, with an all-creation kingdom perspective always within view.

The societal backdrop

While space doesn't allow full discussion, some reference is needed to the backdrop against which this discussion is taking place. In contemporary Britain we are living against the background of news of the undervaluing of lives, both human and wider creation. A current high profile example as I type is the potential for the criminalisation of Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI) when they rescue asylum seekers in the English channel.[7] We are approaching the COP26 climate talks, with hope but also realism concerning how hard the structures of our society make it to respond in the ways that are urgently needed.[8] We are experiencing a catastrophic increase in the need for foodbanks, concerns around ethnicity and immigration, huge gaps between rich and poor, and a lack of a coherent value system to resolve these concerns. Running against this are counter-movements which seek justice, integration and the wellbeing of the planet. These latter include Christians but not exclusively so, we find many partners of goodwill around us.

Of concern is whether in a pluralist society we can find a shared ethic from which to guide our direction as society. Monbiot writes of this in terms of the loss of a story to live by. He writes: 'You can't take away someone's story without giving them a new one. It is not enough to challenge an old narrative, however outdated and discredited it might be. Change happens only when you replace it with another.'[9]

Monbiot goes on to outline various life-denying stories that have claimed space within the vacuum, with particular reference to neo-liberalism, an extreme form of capitalism that is destructive, both for people and planet: 'In its current incarnation, at any rate, economic

[7]Sophia Purdy-Moore, *It looks like Farage's attempts to discredit the RNLI have backfired* https://www.thecanary.co/trending/2021/07/29/it-looks-like-farages-attempts-to-discredit-the-rnli-have-backfired/ accessed 6 August 2021.
[8] https://ukcop26.org/ accessed 2 August 2021.
[9] George Monbiot, *Out of the Wreckage* (London: Verso 2018) p.1.

growth seems incompatible with the protection of the living planet. This is another way of saying it is incompatible with the continued prosperity of humankind.'[10] He argues that we need different stories that will draw people into a better approach.

Drane considers this as a Christian commentator: 'As things are today, however, I am not at all convinced that most people in the Global North have any sort of coherent worldview, and the lack of any meaningful framework of reference within which to understand ourselves or the world is one of the biggest challenges we face if our civilization is not to implode on itself.'[11]

While it is not our task as Christians to save any particular civilization, it falls upon us, working with others of goodwill, to encourage a positive narrative and value system on which to build a society. This is where wisdom from the Christian tradition has much to offer, Good News for all creation. We can't aim to build a new Christendom, that era has passed, but we can offer wisdom, insight and practice as we work with others to establish new foundations for a thriving society.

Good News

As has been said, our pioneers are not identical and would not always agree with each other. They are however each responding faithfully to their context, with some threads in common, each with insight to offer which is of value to the wider church as we seek to live our gospel lives in a troubled society. Their approaches take seriously the lived realities in their context, living out an earthed spirituality that is engaged, 'down to earth' and 'of the earth' in varying proportions in each location.

The following sections draw some themes together that offer Good News to a society in need of resources to enable the thriving of people and planet. Within a pluralist society, not all who engage with such Good News will chose to become a part of the Church. However, we have seen that the spiritual searching around us is far greater than traditional Christian adherence. There is openness to wisdom and spirituality that will enable positive engagement.

[10] Ibid. p.46.
[11] John Drane, *After McDonaldization* (London: DLT 2008) p.8.

Abundance and freedom

Wisdom from Christianity offers Good News to the societal conversation about the allocation of resources that are perceived to be scarce. New perspectives are available concerning how to enable all to thrive with enough to go around. There is hope because provision is rooted in the abundant gift and freedom offered by God in self-giving love. Blinded by our culture, we often don't realise we lack freedom and abundance, meaning these can best be found when the story of hope is given clarity against the backdrop of the damaging stories of our times.

Chapter 2 explored Brueggemann's perspective on the 'scarcity narrative', a particularly destructive aspect of our cultural narrative. It is a necessary part of neo-liberalism as the maintenance of growth and consumption requires perceived lack. Block, Brueggemann and McKnight write:

> Economic systems based on competition, scarcity, and acquisitiveness have become… the kingdom within which we dwell. That way of thinking invades our social order, our ways of being together, and what we value... It produces a consumer culture that centralizes wealth and power and leaves the rest wanting what the beneficiaries of the system have.[12]

Drawing on both biblical principles and insights from *Asset Based Community Development*, the missional community in Kingsholm chose to live out of abundance rather than scarcity. This transforms their relationship with their community and offers an alternative vision for society, which in turn offers the opportunity to issue the invitation to explore the way in which this different way of living finds its basis in the story of God. Ian defaulted to narrative whenever he was pressed theologically, and when asked about evangelism, he said: "I tend to tell stories."[13]

Closely associated is the question of liberation, explored in chapter 3 in the light of missional practice in Priors Park. Again, disentanglement is needed from life-denying narratives which promise freedom but in reality create enslavement within consumerism. The language of freedom is a positive language that takes seriously the reality of sin without being in danger of adding an unhelpful burden. In taking both personal and structural sin seriously it avoids adding extra afflictions to people who are feeling shamed by destructive narratives or sinned against

[12] Peter Block, Water Brueggemann, John McKnight, *An Other Kingdom: departing the consumer* culture (Hoboken NJ: Wiley 2016) p.xiii-xiv.
[13] IM interview, 26 January 2018.

through personal history or the structural sins of our society. Salvation includes being saved from the false narratives that undo our self-worth, instead reconnecting with the God of a different story, and participating in ways that encourage a positive sense of purpose.

Liberation theology was identified in the Literature review as providing a theological basis for the 'Earthed Spirituality' which is at the core of this project. The focus on liberation of the poor from oppression provides significant underpinning to the liberative element of the story. Gutiérrez writes: 'Sin demands a radical liberation, which in turn necessarily implies a political liberation.'[14] The black theology of Howard Thurman and Delores Williams was explored in chapter 3: both writers investigate the personal disciplines necessary to retain inner freedom even when living in situations with limited socio-economic freedom.[15] Thurman writes: 'The disinherited will know for themselves that there is a Spirit at work in life and in the hearts of men which is committed to overcoming the world.[16]

The Good News held with Christian faith therefore offers liberation from personal and structural limitations to our freedom. In rooting ourselves in Christ we begin to assess life by different criteria, freed from both guilt and shame to find positive purpose in our participation with God.

Salvation, interconnection, and community.

All three projects encouraged participation in community, lived out in very different ways in the diverse contexts. The prioritisation of relational connection changes how we understand salvation, inviting consideration of perspectives that go beyond the eternal destination of individual souls. Chapter 3 discussed how salvation includes both individual and communal elements, including the liberation of communities from structural injustice alongside individual elements. Chapter 4 explored how a wider perspective on salvation allows different faith and worldviews to work together for a common purpose. This follows the model offered by Newbigin which invites us to prioritise the common good over individual salvation, without neglecting to share the story that inspires our commitments.

In Kingsholm this was lived out in the Church's prioritisation of their vision for the whole community. Church members lived by noticeably different commitments and were ready to

[14] Gustavo Gutierrez, *A theology of liberation* transl. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (London: SCM 1974, 2001) p.174.

[15] Delores S Williams, 'A Womanist Perspective on Sin', in Emilie Townes (ed) *A Troubling in my Soul* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis 1993) and Howard Thurman*, Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon 1949, 1976, 1996)

[16] Thurman, *Disinherited,* p.98.

respond with the story of Christ when asked. This self-giving love embeds a story of hope within a forward movement. Block, Brueggemann and McKnight consider that: 'A citizen is one who is a participant... one who chooses to create the life, the neighbourhood, the world from their own gifts and the gifts of others... A consumer is one who has surrendered to others the power to provide what is essential for a full and satisfied life.'[17]

The kenotic movement underpins the vision. Within a community this is very practical: if we don't give of ourselves in relationship with others then we become withdrawn and inwardly dead, whereas giving of ourselves is life-giving both for ourselves and others and is the foundation for a new and more positive future.

Participants in Forest Church advocate for a broadening of the definition of community beyond the human, so that we also understand ourselves in relationship with wider creation. Within Forest Church, there is a depth of understanding of the intersection between human and all-creation concerns, expressed both in their mode of worship and their environmental practices. The reciprocal relationship is taken into wider perspective as we receive abundantly from the natural world, both in terms of our everyday needs for food, and our mental and spiritual wellbeing; in return we give by considering an environmental ethic in our life choices. While explored at greatest depth in the Forest Church article, this was prominent too within the activism in Stroud, and an important concern for Roots café, expressed in their environmental ethic, though given less space for discussion within this project.

This depth of interconnection between humanity and the whole created order, held within God, is significant to the story that we need to rediscover. On the latter, Boff hints here at the false story that holds as, as well as the story of God that promises freedom: 'We are hostages to a paradigm that places us - against the thrust of the universe - *over* things instead of being *with* them in the great cosmic community.'[18] Brueggemann's *The Land* is foundation theology for this perspective. He writes: 'If Christians could be clear that the gospel entrusted to Christians is also about land, perhaps a new conversation could emerge.'[19]

[17] John McKnight, Peter Block, *The Abundant Community* (Oakland CA: Berrett-Koehler 2010) p.7.
[18] Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* tr. Phillip Berryman (Maryknoll NY: Orbis 1997) p.xii.
[19] Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: place as gift, promise and challenge in biblical faith* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress 1978, 2002) p.202.

Insight from Christianity therefore celebrates relationship and connection, to both people and the natural world, in a society that has lost the skills of neighbourhood and become disconnected from the land. As we live out and speak the Christian vision of relationship, interconnection and community, in God, we offer a perspective much needed within contemporary society. This cuts to the heart of our understanding of Good News, as we consider perspectives on salvation that concern the liberation of communities as well as individuals, within an all-creation perspective.

Kenotic hope

The Christian story is rooted in hope: for ourselves, others and the planet, from present situation towards eschatological fulfilment in Christ. In this project, the theme of hope has particularly been explored in chapter 4 against the background of environmental activism in Stroud. Hope for the future is rooted not in an activist's current wins and losses, but in the work of God. This protects the activist from burnout and hold her in hope, enabling the important work to continue. Both the literature review and chapter 4 noted how this perspective is particularly prominent within Moltmann's theology. All Christian life finds itself part of the overarching story of God, forward moving, rooted in what God has done and what God is doing as we journey towards eschatological future. This means that whatever our present, there is hope for the future.

The kenotic dynamic, explored in chapter 2, is central to the story of hope. The incarnation demonstrates the dynamic throughout, most profoundly at Jesus' passion, death and resurrection. Coakley describes kenosis as: 'the spiritual paradoxes of 'losing one's life in order to save it.''[20] Within this dynamic there is always a letting go in order for hope to be realised. Polkinghorne takes kenosis even deeper into the story of God by showing how it is necessary to the process of creation: the whole of the story of life and hope in God, from start to eschaton involves the kenotic dynamic.[21]

Chapter 2 made particular reference to power dynamics embedded within the kenotic movement, as the church in Kingsholm shared power with the wider community. Insight from kenotic perspectives encourage a quiet confidence in personhood and calling, allowing

[20] Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell 2002) p.4.
[21] John Polkinghorne, *Kenotic Creation and Divine Action,* in Polkinghorne (ed) *The work of love, creation as kenosis* (London: SPCK 2001)

generous giving to one another within community. The story of Jesus shows that the giving of power is ultimately empowering, as resurrection follows the cross.

Chapter 4, in the context of speaking hope to activists articulated language around the cross in terms of the 'triumph of love'.[22] Metaphorical death and resurrection is the lived reality for activists who have to push through multiple setbacks in order to fulfil their goals: the story of Christ holds this reality within the bigger story of God.

The dynamic held within the Christian story therefore can offer hope when all seems hopeless. Letting go into what feels like failure may be the beginning of hope and what enables us to continue to strive for a positive future.

Sharing Good News

All of this needs to be articulated as well as lived. Connections between life choices and the Christian story need to be verbalised, so that the life-giving alternative choices can be shared more widely and others invited to participate. This strengthens the alternative narrative within society so that it has potential to stand against those that are life-denying. There is no reason not to consider this as evangelism, a sharing of the Good News in Christ and an invitation to join with God's movement for change.

The evangelism article referenced Stuart Murray's writing on post-Christendom mission. He says: 'Community engagement that excludes evangelism does not appreciate the fast-diminishing Christendom capital it relies on for workers.'[23] In post-Christendom realities, we cannot expect people to make automatic connections between the lived choices we are making and the Christian story that underpins these choices. We need to articulate the story within which our lives participate. This enables two things: first it speaks the alternative narrative that is so needed. Second, it allows people to understand that different stories are available to give meaning and structure to life, which in turn gives them freedom to choose to reject society's unhealthy narratives and to join us in living by a different story. Zscheile describes this process as he reflects on his own missional practice: 'Mission as companionship and conversation means

[22] SH interview.
[23] Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster 2004) p.228.

listening to others' stories and helping them place their story in God's story, as companions on the way.'[24]

The evangelism article also articulated how important it is for the *telos*, the end goal of evangelism to be the kingdom of God, rather than individual personal salvation. This was also touched on in discussions on the nature of salvation in chapters 3 and 4, referencing missional practice in Priors Park and in Stroud. The article explored how important this *telos* was for the early evangelicals, though eroded over time. Wallis, one of the practitioner-theologians referenced in chapter 4, wrote: 'The revival Wesley and others led helped to change the conversation in England about what was right and what responsibilities people had to one another.'[25]

What is being proposed here, connecting evangelism into an articulation of a new vision for society and the created order, is therefore nothing new. Rather it is reconnecting with the vision of the early evangelicals, alongside other significant movements within church history, that consider hope for a new order, lived and spoken, to be foundational for Christianity, but doing so in new ways appropriate for our post-Christendom society.

Perspectives on pluralism

Significant to the reality of our contemporary context is that the Christian story is not the only one seeking to express an alternative vision for society. In the fieldwork this was explored at most depth in chapter 4 through the pioneering in Stroud, where interfaith engagement was an important part of their practice.

In order for this to be taken seriously within contextual mission, two realities need to be held in tension: other faiths and worldviews that are partners in the work of seeking new vision; and the unique contribution from Christianity that needs to be valued and expressed. Chapter 4 explored Newbigin's approach, reminding us both to celebrate these new partnerships and ensure that the Christian story is told.[26]

[24] Dwight J. Zscheile, 'Beyond Benevolence: Toward a Reframing of Mission in the Episcopal Church' *Journal of Anglican Studies* Vol.8:1 (2010) p.98.
[25] Jim Wallis, *The (Un)Common Good: How the Gospel brings hope to a world divided* (Grand Rapids MI: Brazos 2013,2014)
p.277.
[26] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a pluralist society* (London: SPCK 1989)

Against this backdrop, Wallis writes on the emerging faith of young activists: 'They define themselves less by tribe and more by relationships and networks. They are people of deep faith, and at the same time respectful of interfaith identities. They are activist and contemplative, people who connect their spirituality with social change.'[27] An example is the 'Order for the Sacred Earth' which is conceived and co-authored by people representing different faith traditions that have gathered around a shared alternative vision for earth and society.[28] Nita's ethnographic study of 'green' activists found that within alternative streams, outward facing approaches are rising in significance: 'inside the green movement there has been a departure from a spirituality for the self to a more aggregated spirituality that can (or at least aims to) serve a community.[29]

Some of the partners in seeking a life-giving vision for our society, are adherents of other traditional faiths; others are outward expressions of the contemporary spiritual streams identified in the literature review. They may identify with the Pagan and earthed traditions, though many are closer to the spiritual reality named as 'fuzzies', following Voas' terminology.[30] For 'fuzzies', strict adherence to the doctrine of a particular path is not especially valued, nor are traditional patterns of adherence, but a broad sense of spirituality is celebrated.

Against the life-denying stories that need to be countered, it becomes clear that such fuzzy fidelity doesn't have enough clarity to stand in opposition. Fuzziness is not an alternative vision for people to gather around and live by. It is however, an indication of an openness to seek alternative wisdom and insight and is the spiritual culture into which we live and speak. Activists from a variety of streams are engaging positively, advocating for fuzzy spirituality to become active, engaged in a positive movement for society and the earth.

It means too that when gospel wisdom and insight is expressed, it should be done so with an awareness of the breadth of the counter movement as many of those we are speaking with will inhabit the breadth. It also should be done in a way which is respectful of partners rooted in different traditions, working towards the same goal of an alternative story, compelling enough to counter the life-denying narratives we inhabit.

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[27] Wallis*, (Un)Common Good,* p.295.
[28] Fox, Wilson, Berit Listug, *Sacred Earth.*
[29] Maria Nita, *Praying and campaigning with environmental Christians* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2016) p.163.
[30] David Voas, 'The Rise and Fall of Fuzzy Fidelity in Europe' *European Sociological Review* Vol.25:2 (2009)

Conclusion

The lens of 'Earthed Spirituality' has focussed the attention on mission that is holistic, 'down to earth' and 'of the earth', with a depth of understanding of God's interaction with the earthy realities of life. This is held within the broader perspective of the whole story of God, beginning from the kenotic self-giving of God in Creation and Incarnation; with hope for future fulfilment significant for our ability to work with God in present challenges.

In the background to the core fieldwork is an understanding of holistic evangelism. The evangelism article noted its long history, sadly eroded over the course of modernity. It has potential for renewed significance in a post-Christendom context that has lost any common rootedness in key stories of meaning.

In-depth engagement with three pioneering initiatives has brought into focus key aspects of their practice, as they engage in holistic mission and evangelism. The research has demonstrated the theological integrity of a core aspect of each initiative, showing the way in which the prayerful instinct of a pioneer, working with the principles of contextual mission results in a solid contextual theology. This theological integrity means that while details of each project are contextual and local, there are theological strands that have wider applicability and potential to engage with other contexts in creative ways suitable to that place. Each offers possibilities to wider society as we seek a shared story that enables a different vision for our common future.

The variety of perspectives in this project illustrate the importance of earthing our missional approach in particular places and contexts. We cannot decide one top-down strategy which will bear fruit universally, rather we push into what we find locally and allow the context to determine our priorities. Each of these pioneers has followed this method, rooted in the '*missio dei*' in order to flourish in very different ways, according to their unique situations and opportunities.

While the variation is to be celebrated as an outcome of an earthed spirituality, two themes stand out across all three. The first is the importance of mission being led by kingdom rather than church. We have a bigger vision in mind that involves all that God has made, and our efforts towards church are in service of this bigger vision rather than an end in itself.

The second concerns the model of the cross for all that engages the energy and focus of Christians. If we are followers of Christ then we cannot focus solely on success. Resurrection hope only comes as it follows the way of the cross, the kenotic letting go of power and control in order to make space for God to work.

The scale of the project has allowed exploration of a few initiatives but there are many others working in similarly creative ways. It would be good to see similar projects exploring theologically with other pioneers in order to add additional perspectives to the insight found here.

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Appendix A: Participant information and consent.

Participant information sheet

What possibilities can an 'earthed spirituality' offer to healthy mission and ministry in the emerging era?[31]

The following study is being undertaken by Cate Williams as part of a Professional Doctorate (PhD Missiology) based at Cliff College (University of Manchester). Before you decide whether to participate, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

Aims of the research

'Earthed spirituality', that is spirituality that is connected with real life issues and with the whole of creation, appears to offer valuable possibilities in terms of connecting missionally with those who have little or no understanding of the Christian faith. It is a perspective that is often expressed within the work of pioneer ministers, though not necessarily using the term, as they listen to God within their local context and seek language and practices that connect with the people around them.

This project aims to explore the unique perspectives found within the practices and language used by pioneers. The hope is that as a result of this exploration, insight will come to light that is worthy of wider attention, and that offers possibilities for the mission of both other pioneers and the wider church.

What will participation involve?

The practical element of the research will incorporate four main strands:

- Attendance by the researcher at a variety of events and meetings in order to observe the practices that characterise the project.
- An interview with the lead pioneer. This will be audio recorded.
- A focus group with the core leadership team, where appropriate. This will be audio recorded.
- An examination of written materials where available, such as website and fliers.

[31] Draft title, which was changed after fieldwork.

The practical elements of the research will take place for each project over a three month period, between September 2017 and December 2018, on a mutually agreed timetable. The interview and focus group will take place towards the end of the three month period. A report from the research will be shared with the project with the hope that the presence of an external observer may bring a perspective that is of value to the pioneering as well as useful for research purposes. There is no payment for participation.

Choosing to participate

It is up to you whether you participate, having had time to read the information and ask any questions that may arise. Should you choose to participate, you will be given the information sheet to keep, and asked to sign a consent form. There is no obligation to take part and participants may withdraw at any time without needing to give a reason and with no detriment to themselves.

Use of quotes

The interview and focus group will be audio recorded. Quotes retrieved from the audio recordings will be used in the final report. It is not going to be possible in this project to guarantee total anonymity as the description of the context will indicate who is involved. Some limited anonymity will be provided for focus group participants although quotes will be traceable to the leadership team. Quotes may be vetoed if it proves impossible to find a way to reduce any sensitivities to an acceptable level. In addition to the feedback report for each project, interviewees will be welcome to read the full report if they would be interested to do so and can be sent electronic copies. This is particularly to be encouraged if there are sensitivities around some of the participants where care needs to be taken to protect any individual. The audio recording will be destroyed within two years of completion of the research; prior to this it will be stored securely, accessible only to the student researcher.

If the resulting dissertation is of a quality that would be useful to others and therefore publication sought, the researcher will contact the participants in order to discuss issues of confidentiality, and whether participants are comfortable with how material from the interviews is being used in the study.

Safeguarding

The researcher has up to date DBS clearance and safeguarding training.

What if something goes wrong?

If a participant wants to make a formal complaint about the conduct of the research they should contact the Head of the Research Office, Christie Building, University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester, M13 9PL.

Consent form

Project contact details

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Declaration of consent

Please initial each statement and sign below.

I confirm that I have read the information sheet concerning this research project, had an opportunity to consider and have had questions answered satisfactorily.

I understand that I am free to withdraw from this project at any point if I so wish.

I understand that the interview and focus group will be audio recorded.

I understand that quotes will be used which will be anonymised where possible though will be known to belong to a member of the project.

I understand that when quotes cannot be anonymised, or are particularly sensitive, then the individual will have the right to veto use of the quote should they so wish.

I agree to take part in the above project.

Signature . . . . . .

Name (printed in full) . . . . . .

Date . . . . . .

Appendix B: Fieldwork schedule

Kingsholm, Gloucester

- 23rd October 2017: Family fun day
- 1st November 2017: Monthly church
- 6th November 2017: Brief visit to book for community lunch
- 12th November 2017: Community lunch
- 13th November 2017: Work meeting with Imam Ismail using Roots as a venue
- 24th November 2017: Full day spent in the coffee shop
- 6th December 2017: Monthly church
- 17th December 2017: Coffee and carols
- 18th December 2017: Chocolate party
- 26th January 2018: Interview with Ian Meredith
- 5th February 2018: Focus group
- Social media throughout

Priors Park, Tewkesbury

- 10th March 2018: 3pm cafe church at school
- 15th March 2018: Thurs morning Going Deeper
- 17th March 2018: 11am Saturday Celebrate at 89 York Road
- 1st April 2018: Easter Sunday 3pm at 89 York Road
- 14th April 2018: 3pm Cafe church at school
- 5th May 2018: Jesus Deck training
- 10th May 2018: Going Deeper
- 15th June 2018: interview Wendy Ruffle (lead pioneer)
- 20th June 2018: Fare Share
- 20th June 2018: interview Ed Sauven (pioneer curate)
- 21st June 2018: focus group
- Tewkesbury Abbey website

Stroud

- 21 October 2017: Night of the thin veil
- 21 December 2017: Solstice Spiral
- 1 July 2018: 'Cowshed' service
- 7 July 2018: Stroud Sacred Music Festival
- 18 July 2018: Music Festival debrief meeting
- 25th September 2018: Stillpoint meeting
- 28th September 2018: Seckou Keita concert
- 29th/30th Sept 2018: Brother John Martin Sahajanda at Prinknash Abbey
- 3rd Oct 2018: interview Simon Howell
- Social media and website

Appendix C: Excerpts from fieldwork

Focus group excerpt (Kingsholm)

A: the church always did have a big focus on mission, ever since we started. We wanted to live authentically within our community, and build relationships with people in our community, and that initially looked like things like, well A and I, our kids were little when we started, so we used to do a Mums group, and have people round with young kids in our house every week. We got to know a lot of local Mums through doing that, and the guys used to play football together, and got to know a lot of their partners, of those people, through doing that, and we do community breakfasts, every month, for donkey's years now, for the same reason. And we were always wanting to know how we could serve our community better, and seeing a lot of needs in our community, and not quite knowing how to meet those needs, or what to do about them, or what vehicle to use. So we experimented with various things that never really took off, and then the idea for turning this building into a venue that could be used to serve and benefit the community came about, and that was kind of shared with church, and church people got onboard with that, and helped to make it happen. So it's part of what church has always been about and wanted to be, but it's not the total of it, and it's not a replacement for it, it's just the continued outworking of what church has always been about, and now we have a focus in the community where we can do the kind of things we want to do, and meet the needs, well try to meet some of the needs that we want to meet, using this as a vehicle. But as P says, its completely separate on it's own, and it's not dependant on church to keep it going, and it's open to completely non Christians and non church members to be part of the Roots membership team, and be involved in that, and, you know, part of the management team are nothing to do with church at all. So it is part of our church's outworking of our, passion for mission I suppose, if that makes any sense?

Cate[32]: yeah, it completely makes sense. Um, it's organisationally separate, but relationally, missionally, there's quite a…

[32] *My name written in full for clarity as there was also a participant with the initial C.*

I: Members are a part of the church are... they're part of the vision, the passion. But there's so much of church that is nothing to do with Roots. And there's so much of Roots that is nothing to do with church. That's probably the simplest.

?: As time goes on…

I: I think the simplest way is, yeah, as time goes on…

?: Yeah it was, for a very short time it was, and now it's still got some overlap. And in five years time, it might be that there's very little overlap.

I: I think the beauty of this, Roots is a tool for other groups, and in fact other Christian groups. So there are other churches, other church groups that use Roots as a tool for mission, and as a venue, and as an opportunity to come and serve here. So I think that's where you're probably feeling a bit of rebuff when you're trying to say it is the same thing, because to say that they are the same just negates the doors that we're trying to do. And it also pigeon holes what church is for us into only ten percent of what our church is. And to say its…

C: It's potentially a trajectory of two things. I think the trajectory of Roots might be different from the trajectory of the church, and that there's a freedom in that. No-one's trying to make the two the same.

? : We never wanted it to be a church project as such, or a Christian coffee shop or anything like that.

Cate: There's a value in relying on that choice, isn't there, which is quite interesting. I wonder if we can talk about that a little bit?

(general laughs)

P: It's about not growing the church organisationally. Trying to avoid, just to be negative, the empire building attitude amongst other churches, potentially. To avoid that. Also, just the black hole tendencies towards churches sucking in everyone's time and energy and resources - that's definitely what we're avoiding. In our church, lots of things **could** be done but we don't

do them, because loads of us haven't got time to do them. We don't just start stuff and keep it going, and absorb, take up loads of time. Which is quite a slow way to grow the church, in some ways, but it means that we don't burn out, particularly. It's very relational and authentic. And we're not trying to do more than we can do. And in terms of keeping them separate, part of it the church is relational, and about that kind of thing, not being about building something so we can say 'our church has done this'

Cate: Ok, so avoiding the empire building, that it all has to be church front and centre. So what's the alternative that you're aiming for?

P: I guess we wanna do good, we want to build the kingdom of God, not build our own egos. And I guess part of our church as well is that we're all, those of us that are a part of the leadership team, we're all amateurs. So all, but obviously to run Roots you need to have professionals. So in my case, both, cos I work at Roots... but I'm not employed by the church, I'm employed by Roots. And then employing people within a church context creates all sorts of conflicts of interest.

A: The vision is to see the kingdom of God come in the area that God's placed us in, in our community. So that's not just about - it **is** about I hope people coming to know Jesus, and coming to faith, but it's also about seeing transformation in your community. People's lives getting better. Surely if the gospel is good news, always that's what it should mean. So to me, having a project like Roots is bringing transformation to the community and that's part of bringing the kingdom of God to Kingsholm. And what we are, what we do as church helps us grow as disciples of Jesus, helps us love and support each other and is open and welcoming to other people who are on that journey of wanting to explore that as well, and a lot of those people we will meet through our interactions and groups. So we meet people. So it's kind of, more of a holistic view of what the Christian life is about, what the kingdom of God is about I think.

C: One of the driving concepts as we've developed is the concept of 'to bless'. To bless the community, to be a blessing. So this is one format of that, the church is wanting to bless, to be a blessing. So the breakfasts, once a month, just open to everybody, and a very strong interaction there with neighbours, who have, who initially were quite wary of what's this all about - why - and then after a couple of years, very comfortable, and looking forward to it, etc

etc. And realising that there is no agenda to the breakfast, it is about getting people together. But in the midst of that, people would then themselves raise issues of - questions of faith, understandings of Jesus etc which works through. So, yeah. And just to come back to that who concept of 'to bless' and 'to be a blessing', it has been one of the driving DNA forces that.

P: And I always think that, a part of Roots as well is that we're trying to create a genuine shared space. So it's not that we've built a church building and then tried to invite people to our cafe in the front, but it's still ours - we're genuinely trying to make it something that belongs to the community. If we're serving the community then we're serving the community, but we're inviting everyone to come in and invest in it, and be a part of it, genuinely, trying to not have too tight a hold on it. So we're not going to go, well actually this is ours, and then people hopefully, genuinely feel that this is part of Kingsholm community, not that it's the church building that they may or may not be comfortable coming into.

Cate: That phrase you're using, not having too tight a hold, can we kind of, unpick that a little bit? That's an interesting choice of phrase - in a good way, that's a positive comment, just kinda…

P: I mean part of it comes back, I mean obviously we're not wanting to overstretch ourselves in terms of what we can do. And then if you want lots of stuff to happen, you have to be prepared for other people to come in and do it, and they'll probably not come in and do it the way we'd want to do it. People who come to run stuff don't come to run stuff that we'd have thought of running. Like Tai Chi lessons, or what was drum thing?

C: How did that sound bath go?

P: …or drumming circle, or

I: That was fifteen quid a pop, mate! You only need three people!

(Giggles)

I: I'm going to do one for fourteen quid!

P: Well, if the management of Roots are going, well we want these events to happen, and we're going to make them happen, and no-one else is allowed to come in, we want volunteers to come in and do this stuff we want to do, well generally we'd be like, well... There is some negotiation about whether it's a Roots event or they pay to use the room, but we promote stuff if it's in the room. I think that's it, cos we could have loads of great ideas, but the few of us who are doing it, even in our church, we haven't got the time or energy to do everything. So if you want other people to be involved and to genuinely feel an investment in 'this is **their** thing' we've got to let them do it. Whether it's good, or not so good, that's what happens. If someone wants to come in with something and no-one comes to it, you just try to be as supportive as you can, but that's just real life, isn't it. We're not trying to keep hold of it.

Cate: I can't help thinking there's more to it than avoiding burnout. There's a positive in the giving away?

I: It's finding out who people are. Finding what their gifts are and their passions are! Yeah I know, ok with God's grace, some random collection of people came together and found the resources to make this happen. That's a really rare thing. But for some people - and it needed a certain group of people with a certain gift mix - but for some people, they never do something unless they are encouraged, and hand held, and given space to do it, and even do it with somebody else, but actually they find their passion and do it. And that empowerment and using a breadth of people is far more than not burning out. But then again, that's something that church values. You know, the way we lead church is very much - we ain't got staff, so if you don't get up off your backside and do it, it ain't going to happen! In one way! But also finding that beautiful image of the body of Christ that says, well I'm really good at being a thumb, I need you because you're a foot,

C: I think that the, one of the issues with respect to the church side is, I've been involved in different organisations where the organisation is trying to be something which pulls the group, just gives the group a focus of something to work through. But you'll still here language of 'X should do this', I mean, 'the name' of the organisation should do this. We are that, what should we be doing? Now I've never heard that in the church, I've never heard anyone in the church, and we are now at over thirty, saying 'church should be doing this'. In the sense of, without that concept of 'we should be doing this'. There isn't a concept of something bigger than me

that I can talk about and winge about or have expectations of. If I'm critiquing the church, I'm critiquing myself, and I've never heard that within - have you? Guys?

A: Around the church?

C: In **our** church.

A: In **our** church? no.

C: Whereas we can hear people saying 'Roots should' etc, but I've never heard that within the church part.

Field journal excerpt (Tewkesbury, Easter Sunday)

(notes: with the exception of leaders, names anonymised, including my husband and daughter who accompanied me on this occasion. Not the first visit to this venue – venue description is earlier in the field notes.)

On arrival, people milling around. S,K with baby. Kids out the back. J and W in the kitchen. Chatting to Ed. H and S with me, E-J invites S to come and play "come on, this is where the children play." S seems happy to go through despite a meltdown before leaving home over the jumper she wanted to wear being in the wash so arriving feeling slightly fragile.

Move into living room for the service. Adults sat at living room end of the room, kids playing at conservatory end, near the screen. S (one of the kids) invited to lead the opening section - Alleluia Christ is risen responses x3. First time whisper, second time spoken, third time shout. Great to have a child lead. She was a bit shy to do the shout, Ed asked her to do it again louder but she didn't want to so in the end he did the third time.

Two songs:

Light of the world

Ed: "It's all about love."

Worthy of all praise (Jesus, Lord of creation)

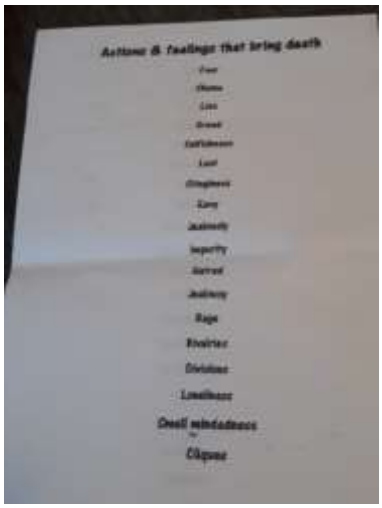
People mostly seated, Ed and Wendy standing. Children playing, not really engaging.

Ed draws children back in. Talks about the candle lit on the table, a 'down to earth' candle bought on Ed's recent trip to Tanzania, made from a recycled can. Lighting the Paschal candle from this candle. Ed talking about Jesus coming to earth and being like us, symbolised by an ordinary kind of thing, but also God, symbolised in the Paschal candle.

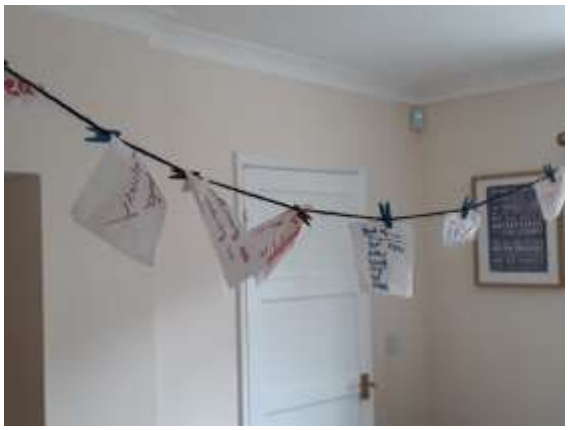
Song for the children - light, carry the light (new wine kids.) Giving out instruments - shakers, drums etc. Kids much better engaged with this one, S drumming, another drummer, various shakers etc

“What changed at Easter? The most amazing thing happened and no-one saw it. No-one was there, no choirs of angels. It might seem like nothing changed - so what did change?”

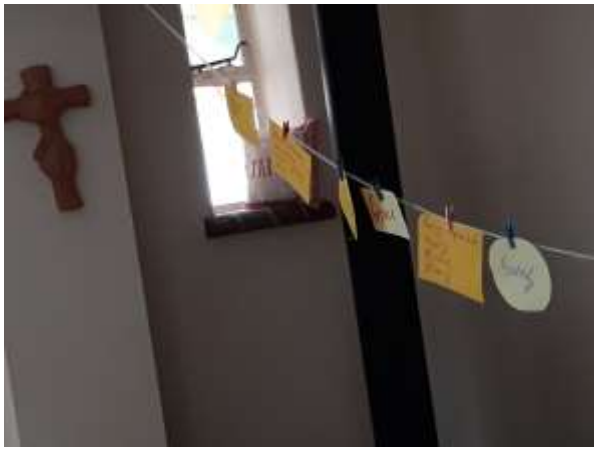
Washing lines. Writing on magicians paper (without being told what it was) the rubbish things in life that we have to deal with and others have to deal with, the things that make us shrink. The opposite of life. Some suggestions on a sheet but feel free to write your own.



People write a word, or several words, peg to washing line.



Write things that make us thrive - on yellow paper, pinned to a different line.



“Both are powerful. sometimes these ones (pointing to the negatives) can have a real hold on us. Lies, shame, all these negatives hold a deep power over us.”

“So what I'm going to do is take these (takes them down and collects into a bowl). This is the difference that Easter makes.” Lights them from the small lamp. Big flash, disappear. “Where's it gone?”

Conversation - K – “you can't get to the good stuff without the bad.” Conversation about this is why some negatives aren't there. Pain and sadness for example, they are still there, they aren't abolished.

“Dealing with sin. The power is gone.”

“It is sometimes called the victory of love.”

“It is a big powerful light, conquering darkness, also a little light wanting to be our friend. The big pascal candle, the small lamp…

Mary in the garden, first word - Mary. Friendship…

As well as Lord and saviour, also our closest friend…

Jesus is the little light and the enormous light.”

The sorrys:

Easter egg - holding it tight to ourselves, not sharing. Prayers about not sharing.

Broken egg shells - what is broken

Mini eggs - forgetting the small people, the forgotten, the people on the margins.

Passing round the mini eggs with the absolution/blessing.

Daffodils for thanksgiving - hold one, what do we want to say thank you for.

Jagged stone - hurting places and people.

Simple communion using the 'this is our story' liturgy. Children gathered round, all received. Under 8s bread only, Seren in both kinds.

Final song: What a beautiful name it is. Hillsong.

Interview excerpt (Stroud)

C: So in terms of putting your finger on why it connects, it's the east meets west?

S: Seems to be. It seems to be.

C: And what is it about the east meets west?

S: I think it's the fact that, so if you take a place like this, the idea that our movement, our fitness, our diet, our prayer life, our scripture absorption, these are all one and the same thing. They are not something subservient to doing quiet times, read the bible of whatever, or reading some scripture every morning. They are – so the wholeness aspect of it, which I suppose is inevitable in a place like this. There's that wholeness aspect of it. And the message of interconnectedness. Which can be deeply Christian. So it's very difficult to take both of those out – wholeness and interconnectedness, out of the message here, of what spirituality is, and then still come up with something. It's very interesting, you know we do the walk of witness through the centre of town, and I organise the music for that, and often one of the more evangelical churches brings out a speaker who speaks about a message that I know would work quite well in a different context, and they speak it out from the Subscription Rooms forecourt, and its just completely falling on deaf ears. People are literally walking away from this. Its not, it's more than not interesting, it's just the wrong message.

C: Is that a classic, sort of sin and repentance?

S: Yeah, yeah. And of course that would work in a different context but it doesn't work here. So I think it's to do with wholeness, I think it's to do with interconnectedness, I think it's to do with, what we've discovered, our particular contribution to this is the beyond words aspect of it. That is deeply held, but wasn't being expressed, and that's where we've been particularly helpful in that context. Because, as you know, most interfaith dialogue reaches an inevitable brick wall. But if you do it through the arts, it doesn't. And, we only discovered that by doing that. It reaches a profound place of transcendence, that I didn't know was there before I came here.

C: Ok, I don't think I knew that, that it was, that you discovered it along the way rather than bringing that with you.

S: No, it was a shock to me, it was a shock. Because I've told you this story, but I was leading the band in, it happened to be in a multifaith context. We had just been singing the word Hallelujah, and we were ending the whole evening, and I was ending it from the keyboard. And for some reason, the song ended with that, it just so happened, and everyone was singing it,

and there was like 400 people there, and I just slowed down, like you would do in a church, just slowed down, and let them carry on singing, told everyone to take their hands off their instruments and just let them – and everyone got on their knees – multifaith setting – got on their knees, and there was a silence that went on for about four or five minutes. Totally unprepared. And so we literally got beyond the veil, at that moment, and it was a stunning moment. And it wasn't a one-off. That's I think our particular contribution on the interfaith front. What was the question again?

C: Um I can't remember! But I'm very grateful to have that story on tape so I don't really mind!

S: So you can imagine, so I was taught in college that you can't do that. Literally, from the front, told that that should not happen. A) I shouldn't do it, and b) if you did do it, you'll end up with a mishmash of pick and mix religion which means nothing. And exactly the opposite happened.

C: So going beyond words – that's where we started wasn't it? Going beyond the words.

S: Literally, the opposite to that happened. So I went home that night, and I thought, 'what on earth just happened?' And so did most people.

C: And how – have you had a chance to have conversations with other people who were there on the day, particularly those who might represent different faiths, what they reckon was going on?

S: Yeah, and they - and there was – you know like in any situation like that, there's a moment of corporate realisation that we've shifted beyond this realm into a different one, and that realm is to a greater extent, where God is, I think that kind of language works, unless you're opposed to – that kind of language is fine. So the event you came to, we called it 'Beyond the Veil'

C: Yes I remember.

S: For that very reason. And I led a liturgy, whereby the huge veil that we had, the lights went down your side, and the lights came up the other side. So that kind of language is very helpful. I met an artist this morning who wants to show her work in St Lawrence, and that's the language she was using to describe the use of light. So that's very common language. We've gone off the specifically Christian, which is what you started with. What was the question about that?

C: Um, my question was, well, we were conversing around what connects with Stroud people in terms of gospel. I think, we've said quite a lot. I think I need to backtrack to, what was I going

to ask you? Practical stuff, like the relationship between the music festival and Stillpoint, and the churches, and peace and justice work.

S: That again, I deliberately let evolve. So, people wanted that tied down very quickly. I think this is where it has settled. So I think what will happen, talking about the future a bit here, St Lawrence Church will exist as a church, obviously, and will host lots of things, but it will exist very much as a church. It will have an interconnected ministry called the 'Stroud Centre for Peace and the Arts', with a subtitle of something like interfaith .....education, er, it will have an interfaith strong aspect to it, in the subtitle. And because it's now called peace and the arts, the music festival which I thought was a subset of something else is in fact the multifaith overlap, I realise that it complicates it to try and add any other layers. Now, if you say 'Sacred Music Festival' in Stroud, everyone knows that that means. And a lot of, very interesting, the other day I was in a Churches Together meeting, and you can imagine, not everyone loves what I do, but from the evangelical side, they wanted to join with me on the big carol concert we're doing, which is a Sacred Music Festival event using the choral scholars from Cardiff University, which I often work with, because you don't pay them (note: said tongue in cheek), and they asked if they could be involved in it, and they said could it be under the Sacred Music Festival banner, because everyone knows what it means. And I thought: "well that's interesting! There's a movement there!" And so adding another layer to that is not going to help. So you've got the centre for something, which is the Stroud Centre for Peace and the Arts, the umbrella organisation for that is the Stroud Sacred Music Festival, so any events that will happen will come under that kind of banner, the host church is at the stillpoint of it, that's why we call it Stillpoint, the stillpoint of that activity, and the host church will have a number of congregations. We already have, something called the Cowshed, which you've been to. We also, we already have a Taizé, inevitably, a Taizé service. We're working on a dance based service at the moment. But we also have a core group that meets in a person's house, called Stillpoint, and I'm not sure quite what's happening to that, except it's growing like topsy, so I assume that is another sort of – well a lot of that group contains the workers, who put their time in. And Steve, is looking to become a local non-stipendiary pioneer sort of person, and so he kind of leads that. But the, a lot of the workers congregate there. You've been to that, haven't you?

C: Yes I went last week. Yeah.

S: Actually what happens now, is a lot of people are coming to me and saying 'can I join it?'. Because there isn't many groups where you can go and express your doubts, as well as what

you believe, if you see what I mean. And not be knocked for it. And you don't have to be a Christian to go. You just have to be, you just have to, the trajectory is that direction.

C: It was fairly, the one that I went to, I don't know if it was typical, it felt fairly Christian.

S: They want to be rooted in the Christian faith. Steve's very clear on that. And that's very helpful. So of course the difference is that we believe that interfaith encounter is part of discipleship. More than that. An essential part of discipleship. It is the way you go deeper into your own faith. Or a major way you go deeper into your own faith. Because you have to make sense of that situation.