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# **Present in Every Place: The Church of England and the Parish Principle**

William John Foulger

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## **Abstract**

This thesis is an evaluation of the Church of England's formal recognition of non-parochial churches and the surrounding debate. It explores the claim made frequently by critics of recent changes that the parish system, in contrast to other church forms, values place and is accordingly a vital counter to the placelessness that is perceived to be a defining feature of modernity.

The driving argument of this thesis is that such critiques have tended to assume too smooth a movement between the theological principle (presence in place) and practice (the parish system). Such arguments are, like the parish system itself, inherently spatial: they impose predefined categories onto given situations. It is claimed that in contrast a more helpful model, drawn from Anglicanism's own theological resources, is one in which principle and practice are held as interrelated but distinctive. Following this model allows for an evaluation of how the principle might play out in situations.

From an exploration of human geography's description of place as 'bounded openness', and a survey of the Church's historical praxis, the working theory is developed that since place is a more complex phenomenon than mappable space, the commitment to presence in place will necessarily entail complexity in church form. This theory is in turn taken into dialogue with four different Church of England churches. The findings from this broad ethnographic approach are presented in the form of narrative vignettes and it is shown that the theory is defensible. Churches relate to the world in terms of place and it is places rather than mapped spaces that become objects of love. The consequence of this for the Church's praxis is that rather than pursuing geographical coverage as an end, it must find ways of establishing and equipping churches that are present to places as they are found.

# **Present in Every Place**

## **The Church of England and the Parish Principle**

William John Foulger

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Theology  
and Ministry in the Department of Theology and Religion,  
Durham University

2017

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## Declaration

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None of the material contained in this thesis has been previously submitted for a degree in this or any other institution. The thesis is my own work.

## Statement of Copyright

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The copyright of this thesis rests with the author. No quotation from it should be published without the author's prior written consent and information derived from it should be acknowledged.



# Acknowledgements

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When a tradition is in good order it is always partially constituted by an argument about the goods the pursuit of which gives to that tradition its particular point and purpose [...] Traditions, when vital, embody continuities of conflict. Indeed, when a tradition becomes Burkean, it is always dying or dead.

— Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*

Then he said to them, “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath”.

— Mark 2. 27

# Introduction

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In recent years the Church of England has increasingly recognised and established non-parochial churches.<sup>1</sup> Following the 1994 report *Breaking New Ground*, which attempted to find a place within the Church of England for the growing number of church plants and house churches, *Mission-shaped Church* [MSC] was published in 2004 and paved the way for a number of pieces of legislation which gave official status to these ‘fresh expressions’ of church.<sup>2</sup> Through Bishop’s Mission Orders (BMOs), Bishops now have authority to ordain pioneer ministers and establish new churches, many of which work outside of existing parish structures. The last few years have seen an increase in such initiatives. A large number of dioceses have recently established new church plants and, in 2015, the Church of England appointed its first Bishop for church planting. Martyn Percy’s claim that, ‘never before has [the Church of England] sought to legalize a move outside the traditional parish system’,<sup>3</sup> is of course overstated. The Church of England has always consisted of more than the (geographical) parish; the place of chaplaincy being just one example of this. However, he is right to claim there is something new: formal and legal recognition of non-parochial *churches* - of churches that relate to the world other than through a geographically designated area. It is fair to say therefore that the developments of the last few decades mark a new chapter in the story of the Church of England as the national church.

This thesis looks at some of the theological and ecclesial questions that arise out of this development. I ask specifically: what might it mean for the Church of England to

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<sup>1</sup> In this thesis I have followed recent theological trends by not capitalising ‘church’. Where I have capitalised the term, it refers to the institution of the Church of England.

<sup>2</sup> Church of England, *Breaking New Ground: Church Planting in the Church of England* (London: Church House Publishing, 1994); Church of England, *Mission-shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of Church in a Changing Context* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Martyn Percy in *Evaluating Fresh Expressions: Explorations in Emerging Church*, ed. by Louise Nelstrop and Martyn Percy (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2008), p.xxi.

establish churches that relate to the nation other than as parish churches? At its broadest then, I am concerned in this thesis with the question of the relationship between the Church of England and the nation. The parish system has offered a particular imaginary of such a relationship, with the system it is claimed establishing a Church which serves all, irrespective of membership or attendance. The system concretises an ecclesial vision in which the Church is understood to act out of service to the world and as minister to the nation; what Ben Quash describes as ‘chaplaincy to place’.<sup>4</sup> The various arguments around fresh expressions and church plants [hereafter Fx/CP] therefore go to the heart of the Church of England’s self-identity. What are we here for? Can we continue to hold to this vision of the Church as open to all, in every place, without question? In light of a decline in numbers, the awareness that an ever-increasing number of people do not identify themselves as connected to any church, let alone their parish church, alongside the well-documented problem of clergy numbers, is it really possible to maintain such an ecclesiology? For many, we have indeed moved into a different relationship, one in which the connection between people and church can no longer be assumed. In response, what many of the critics of Fx/CP argue is that we have by embracing non-parochial churches risked a move away from, even loss of, this sense of commitment to the nation; that, rather than defending this historic role, we have instead chosen to accept such changes as representing an irreversible breakdown. Put simply, their point is that the espoused vision - ‘a Christian presence in every community’ - is still *the* vision of the Church of England and is the hope worth battling to hold on to.<sup>5</sup> My aim in this thesis is not to defend one side of this debate against the other, but rather to offer some insight, and perhaps clarity, on the particular issues that have arisen out of it. What I do argue here is that the discussion about Fx/CP has frequently been marked by the unhelpful drawing of dichotomies, even intransigence, with the consequence that many of the terms and concepts have been deployed without care. This unconsidered use of terms - or, better, an

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<sup>4</sup> Ben Quash, *Found Theology; History, Imagination and the Holy Spirit* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), p.13.

<sup>5</sup> For the Church’s strapline, see <<https://www.churchofengland.org>> [accessed 18/01/16].

assumed givenness to their meanings - inevitably perpetuates certain entrenched positions.

In this thesis, the two such terms with which I shall be most concerned are 'presence' and 'place'. Much of the theological work in this discussion comes through recent theological critiques of modernity, and especially of the 'flattening out' of place, perceived to be so definitive of this cultural moment. Within this critique the parish is frequently held up as the system that challenges the patterns of the world; a church that values rootedness over endless flows, place over placelessness. The parish in this case becomes the ecclesial, or embodied form, of the theological critique of modernity. There is much here with which I have sympathy. My claim therefore is not so much that the theological narrative (place overcoming modernity's placelessness) is deficient per se, but rather that the outworking of that position is often oversimplified. Indeed, what marks many of these accounts is failure to attend to the movement between the theological principle - so a commitment to 'place', which includes particularity, concreteness, embodiment, etc. - and the specific ecclesial system of the parish. Rather, the relationship between the two is simply assumed: the system upholds the theological principle, and the principle leads to the system. This thesis can therefore be understood as an attempt to bridge that gap in some way. I aim to explore the connection between the theological principle assumed to be upheld in the parish system, and the system itself. Is it the case that the one leads to the other and, if not, what else shapes a church that it might be more or less 'present' to a place? Specifically, what has guided my research is a conviction that since the parish is a system of spatial mapping, it can only ever be a tool in the Church's vision to be present. Place is a far richer concept than space, and certainly more so than any entity which is defined by mappable space. As such, I suggest that the Church's vision to be truly present in place will necessitate a range of church forms rather than one single model. In this sense I am seeking to separate the concept of the parish and the ministry therein (what I refer to as the parish principle, which is based on an understanding of the centrality of presence) from the

parochial structure. This will in turn allow for consideration of how the Church might embody the parish principle outside of its current ecclesial form. Again I am not seeking to build a case for this position, attempting to defend recent developments; rather I aim to explore what the consequences of this might be for how the Church of England thinks about its ecclesial praxis. It should also be noted that parish principle – the term I shall use throughout the thesis – is not so much a concept which can be detached from actual happenings but instead includes within it certain given expressions. The parish as a principle is therefore about the ministry of presence in a place which, as I shall outline later, includes at least three strands: obligation and responsibility, universality (existing for all), and particularity (each place received as unique). The expression of these three is a certain way of doing ministry that would, for example, include occasional offices which can be seen as a deep expression of a pastoral relationship between Church and nation. To this we might also add a priestly ministry (the priest for his or her parish) and all that this entails (ongoing prayer on behalf of that place, alongside the regular administration of sacrament and word). The parish principle then is an attitude or direction of ministry focus; it is a way of speaking about how the Church (and churches) should exist in the world and especially in terms of how they view their responsibility towards their places. Andrew Rumsey's description of the parish helpfully includes all that I would wish to include in what I describe as the parish principle:

Parish (like all descriptions of place) is part idea, part way of life: formed in the creative interplay of ontology, revelation, tradition and vocation [...] locale is first apprehended then acted out in practice.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Andrew Rumsey, *Parish: An Anglican Theology of Place* (London: SCM, 2017), p.180. Rumsey's book was published after my research and my initial reading and as such I have not engaged with his arguments here.



My research is a piece of practical theology. I am interested both in the way in which our theological principles shape and guide our ecclesial practices and in how those practices, as well as contexts, non-theological insights, and situations impact upon those principles. Specifically, I am concerned with the interface between the theological discussions in this debate – especially those around parish and place – and current situations and moments of praxis in churches. The general shape of the thesis is therefore a conversation between theological approaches, some church history, multidisciplinary insights (here specifically, human geography), and an empirical study of four very different Church of England churches. This is an approach I take to be faithful to a certain Anglican theological methodology. Such an approach values God's activity within the world by considering this activity precisely as that, as worldly. It is a methodology which takes seriously the materiality of our practices, endeavouring to think theologically through concrete happenings and situations since it is precisely in these, and not simply in theological reasoning, that God is expected to be at work. I shall present my methodology in detail in the following chapter; however at this stage I should point out that the two works I have found to be most helpful in this regard have been Nicholas Healy's *Church, World and the Christian Life*, and Ben Quash's *Found Theology*.<sup>7</sup> Healy's work has been crucial as I have sought to understand the limitations of various theological constructs in shaping or connecting with ecclesial practices, even if we hold these constructs to be valid or even vital. Where Healy writes from a Roman Catholic perspective, albeit one which I suggest offers a great amount to Anglican thought, Quash as an Anglican seeks explicitly to present a theological model that he understands sits within that tradition. The title - *Found Theology* - captures the sense Quash has that theology must draw upon its 'givens' (scripture, tradition, etc.) in order to meet God in what is 'found'; new situations, fresh challenges and insights. It is a theology, as he puts it, 'which understands ongoing history as a gift of the Holy Spirit, to relate us to God in Christ'.<sup>8</sup> Quash draws heavily here on the

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<sup>7</sup> Nicholas Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Quash, *Found*.

<sup>8</sup> Quash, *Found*, p.1.

work of Daniel Hardy, for whom revelation is found only in the ‘interaction’ between the given and the found, and claims accordingly, along with John Milbank, that we can think of a ‘found theological approach’ as ‘ultramediatory’.<sup>9</sup> In no sense am I claiming that Quash would agree wholeheartedly with my theological method, but what I see in Quash’s work is room for an approach which embraces a range of tools for ‘finding’, even as Quash himself employs mainly aesthetic or linguistic ones. It seems to me that these tools must also include the range of approaches commonly labelled ethnography or empirical study, as well as a critical appreciation of other (non-theological) disciplines.

It is significant that Quash himself uses the Anglican imaginary of the parish as a touchstone in his theological project. For Quash, the parish becomes that pattern which models this valuing of particularity over abstraction. The Church of England, he claims, has arranged itself according to the principle that God is to be found in the world and accordingly that it can be only as we commit ourselves to concrete particularities - actual communities, neighbourhoods, dwellings, etc. - that we will truly meet and therefore be able to witness to God. It is in Quash’s work therefore that I find an explicit connecting of the methodological concerns (an approach which engages theological principles with actual goings-on) with the object of investigation (the parish system). This connection between the methodology and the object of study has been something I have repeatedly come back to in the course of this research. Put simply, I recognise a correlation between an Anglican approach to theological method, and an Anglican approach to the parish itself.<sup>10</sup> What matters is refusing to collapse the theological principle into practice and

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<sup>9</sup> See *ibid.*, p.10. That is, seeing all reality as an opportunity for new revelation. For John Milbank’s arguments about mediation see Milbank, ‘Culture, Nature and Mediation’, *The Immanent Frame: Social Science Research Council*, (2010) <<https://tif.ssrc.org/2010/12/01/culture-nature-mediation/>> [accessed 21/09/16].

<sup>10</sup> It is important to be aware of the dangers of talking about an ‘Anglican’ mode of reasoning or approach to theology as if it were (and ever was) a monolithic entity. There is an important revisionist account of Anglican history which needs to be heard, one which shows, for example, how the historical reality of the English Reformation is more complicated than the descriptor ‘Anglican’ can suggest. (See, for example, the essays in *The Oxford Handbook to Anglican Studies*, ed. by Mark Chapman, Sathianathan Clarke and Martyn Percy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016)). I use ‘Anglican’ here therefore not to imply an historical fact, but rather according to Rowan Williams’ ‘reasonably generous definition’; that type of theological approach best demonstrated in Hooker and in the Prayer Book. See Williams, *Anglican Identities* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2004), p.3.

instead allowing the two to shape one another in constructive ways. Just as this results in a theological methodology of dialogue between the given and the found, practically this should lead to an ecclesiology which holds apart form and principle, refusing to see any one form (be it parish or not) as the definitive encapsulation of the principle. Therefore I want to hold the dialectic that springs from this theological approach both methodologically and in discussion of ecclesiology. In terms of the latter, it seems to me that just as certain proponents of Fx/CP have indeed tended to separate form and principle altogether, supposing particular church form to be secondary to a core set of 'values' or 'vision', so many of their critics in responding have tended to overemphasise the connection between the two. My argument throughout will be that the principles of a church and its particular form are separate, but co-constructive of one another. The thesis is an exploration of that relationship from one particular angle - that of the parish system. How is the form (parish / non-parochial) connected with the principles (the ministry of presence in place)?

There is a further connection between method and object of study that marks this thesis and it lies in the correlation between a lack of empirical insight (a fact I outline in Chapter 2), and the overly positive presentation of the parish system. In the critiques of Fx I explore, I suggest we witness a similarity between the spatial form that is the parish system, which, as I have suggested, is essentially 'flat' - a neutral tool designating mappable sites - and the reliance upon idealised theological narratives. Both are constructs. Again, this is not to claim that they are unhelpful or even 'false'. Far from it; our constructs, whatever they may be are essential. My claim here is rather that as constructs they can only do so much. Certainly, they are limited in the purchase they can give us on the situational and contextual demands that arise from ministering in the world; that is, the world God has given us to minister in. Place therefore becomes the critical category in this thesis. We are set by God to minister not within spaces, but within places. Unlike what we might call a 'spatial theology' then - which deals mainly in abstraction, applying constructs unchecked directly onto actualities - a 'placial theology' would be one that

responds to what it finds within the world and seeks to uncover what is there so as to make sense of it and, in hope, bring us and it, 'into relation to God in Christ'.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, an ecclesial system that seeks to be present in place (rather than space) will need to wrestle with the issue of how it perpetuates its form, so that it might be not simply a Church that is everywhere, but a Church that is everywhere as present. I see this thesis as a contribution towards that wrestling.

The next chapter is the foundation for what follows. I begin by summarising some of the most significant critiques made of Fx, from Andrew Davison and Alison Milbank, John Milbank and Martyn Percy respectively. This serves a dual purpose: firstly I want to give voice to the theological and practical concerns they identify, which will form the theological background for the thesis as a whole, and secondly I wish to highlight what I see as the basic methodological deficiency that unites them, namely that they work with a theology, and a theory of praxis, that are overly idealised. This critical work will allow me to move on and give an account of my own methodological approach which I outline by drawing on (what I see as) an Anglican form of theological reasoning. This I find mainly in Richard Hooker, especially as read through Rowan Williams; however I suggest that it finds more recent support through the insights of Healy, whose criticism of 'blueprint ecclesiologies' is especially helpful in addressing some of the limitations of over-simplified rationales of the parish system. It is in this chapter that I outline why I see this form of Anglican theology as defined by a refusal to collapse practice and principle into one another, holding them instead as co-constructive. This first chapter is therefore the conceptual bedrock of what follows, both methodologically and thematically.

In Chapter 2 I argue that in contrast to the three critiques of Fx, an exploration of this issue calls for a theological study that is rich both theologically and empirically; a piece of theological empirical work. I claim that such a study necessarily has pitfalls on both sides, either swallowing up the theological concerns in empirical study, or failing to listen well to the empirical situation because of an overly dominant theological narrative. As

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<sup>11</sup> Quash, *Found*, p.3.

such I follow Luke Bretherton in drawing on the work of Michael Burawoy, who advocates an empirical approach in which theory has primacy and is taken into dialogue with the empirical site of investigation. Chapter 3 is therefore an explanation and justification for what follows, showing how the subsequent chapters form a conversation between the theological and historical reflection on the parish ideal, as well as insight from human geography (all of which might be labelled the ‘theory’ in Burawoy’s system), and the empirical study of four churches. The goal of such an approach, argues Bretherton, is for ‘refinement and further specificity in theology as judgement on practice’.<sup>12</sup> The practices this thesis are concerned with are those around ecclesial structure.

Having established the methodological basis of the thesis in Chapters 3 and 4 I develop the theory that I take into dialogue with the four churches. In Chapter 3 I describe how the model of reasoning outlined in Chapter 1 - whereby the parish principle and the parish system are held as distinct but co-determinative - has allowed the Church of England through its history to evaluate the structure. This historical-theological study is far from a comprehensive account of the parish system’s history. My aim here is simply to show how I see the parish system as an implementation of a certain principle (presence, abiding, etc.) rather than as a static form. In particular I will look at how the Church responded to the challenges presented by rapid urbanisation and industrialisation in the inner-cities; I aim to show that the parish system in its given form required a huge amount of adaptation to remain meaningful in relation to the principle it was understood to exist for. As a final step I outline more recent reflections on the parish system from within the Church of England, each of which have called for the Church to find ways of better modelling the parish principle in light of change. From these observations I draw out what I see as the core findings that emerged as the Church carried out these assessments of the system. Following, in Chapter 4 I seek to bring clarity to some of the

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<sup>12</sup> Luke Bretherton, ‘Generating Christian Political Theory and the Uses of Ethnography’, in *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography* ed. by Pete Ward (Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2012), pp.145-166, (p.165).

terms in the debate, and specifically 'place' and 'space.' I draw here on human geography, which recognises a distinction between the terms. In geography, as I seek to demonstrate, place is a far richer concept than is often assumed to be the case in the debates around the parish system. In light of this I offer the suggestion that we should expect our commitment towards place to involve more than simply a spatial form; that presence in place will necessarily involve complexity. Defining the terms in this way should also give more clarity to what I suggest the Church was and is seeking to do in its evaluations of the system. It is following these two chapters that I am able to offer the working theory that I took into dialogue with the four churches.

In Chapter 5 I describe the specific research methods I follow in the empirical study of the four churches. At each church I ask the question: how is this church imagining its relation to the world outside of itself? The empirical research is therefore aimed at finding where and how the theological and historical conceptualities addressed in Chapters 2-5 find traction. Specifically, I want to uncover what 'presence' looks like for these churches and what factors might (or might not) lead a church to imagine itself to be more or less present to its context. What I have called the churches' imaginaries are therefore at the heart of my research: my goal is not so much to quantify the ministry of presence each church is enacting but rather explore how churches are imagining themselves in relation to their context, and explore whether the particular ecclesial model leads to a certain imaginary. I outline how my research at each church involves a research core, from which I am able to follow a responsive and participative approach.

In Chapter 6 I move on to the account of my research findings. I present these findings in the form of research vignettes followed by analysis. I outline the reasons for presenting my findings in this way in Chapter 6 though I should say at this stage that one of the most important reasons for using narrative vignettes was to model something of the placial theology I have explored in theory. I have sought to present each church - parish or non - as a particular place, not wholly definable by theological or ecclesial categorisations, but through an awareness of the complexities of relationships,

interactions, history and resources within it. To state again, my goal in this empirical work is not to prove or disprove the thesis, rather it is to take my theory - so, that the complexity of place will necessitate a variety in ecclesial form - into concrete sites with the aim of sharpening it.

In the final chapter I seek to bring the various strands of the discussion together. To come back to Bretherton's summary of his theological methodology, the aim of this chapter will be to unpick the various insights from the thesis so as to refine our ecclesial judgements. If the empirical work in Chapter 6 is essentially descriptive, this final chapter will offer pointers towards normative claims about the Church of England's praxis. I stress here the word 'pointers': my aim in this final chapter is not to establish a total or definitive theology of parish, presence and place, and nor do I wish to present a vision for the Church of England's polity. Rather this chapter will serve my overall goal of bringing clarity - or, as Bretherton puts it, refinement - to the debate. The constructive work here will be to offer some suggestions as to the possible consequences of these refinements on the Church's current praxis. All this I shall do by bringing together the theological, historical, geographical and empirical reflections. The question that will guide this final chapter is then: given what has been said about the complexity of place, and the insights from the four churches, how might the Church of England need to think about its ecclesial form so that it might model a polity of presence in our current context?

# Chapter 1 / Theological Approach

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## 1.1 Introduction

In this chapter I establish the theological approach I shall take in the rest of this thesis. I shall do this by outlining the theological significance of the parish system before moving on to consider some of the criticisms that have been made of Fx churches. I have two goals here. First, I aim to establish the core theological concerns that surround the parish system, that is, I want to outline the theological debate as it stands. This debate has included a number of different voices; however in the work of Ben Quash I find not only an extremely rich account of the theology of the parish, but also a helpful synthesis of the theological work that lies behind much of the conversation. It is Quash therefore who shapes my reflections on the theological significance of parish and from whom I explore the three critiques of Fx from Andrew Davison and Alison Milbank, John Milbank and Martyn Percy respectively.<sup>13</sup> Second, I wish to use this exploration of the critique to name what I see as an unhelpful way of doing theology when addressing the issue of ecclesial form. Following the type of Anglican mode of reasoning modelled by the likes of Quash should, I suggest, lead us to hold apart principle and practice and allow for a critical engagement with the parish system rather than a simple either-or choice.

## 1.2 A vision of the parish

Before moving on to offer a more detailed picture of the theological importance of the parish system, I begin with broad brushstrokes. At the most basic level, the parish system is a system ingrained - or mapped - on space. This, in turn, is understood to present the

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<sup>13</sup> Andrew Davison and Alison Milbank, *For the Parish: A Critique of Fresh Expressions* (London: SCM, 2010); Martyn Percy, 'Old Tricks for New Dogs: A Critique of Fresh Expressions', in *Anglicanism; Confidence, Commitment and Communion* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2013); John Milbank, 'Stale Expressions: The Management-Shaped Church', *Studies in Christian Ethics*, 21 (2008), 117-128.



Church with three things. First, the system places each parish church within a field of responsibility, it has 'cure of souls' for a particular area. In this sense responsibility is not a choice but a given; each church has an obligation to the people in its vicinity and is *for* them. Second, the parish system means that the Church has coverage. Each and every person in the country lives and works within a parish, that is, within the field of a particular church's responsibility. Wrapped up within both of these then is a broad missiology. There is no sphere of existence with which the Church is not interested; the responsibility is to people and communities in their geographical area and not simply to those whom it chooses to serve or those parts of life it deems worthy of its interest. It could be argued then that the parish system is at the very heart of the church-state relationship in England. Indeed, the system is the given form of that relationship since it positions each church as servant to the communities it sits within. Third, the parish system situates the Church in the local and particular. That is to say, the system is understood to result in the Church being simultaneously national and deeply connected to the smallest units of the nation's life. It is Church for the nation in the sense that it is a Church for each community in its particularity. I take these three then - responsibility, coverage, and locality - as the foundation of any perceived value of the parish system.<sup>14</sup>

One way in which the Church of England has sought to gather these three values of the parish and use them to describe its place in the world is through the language of presence. Indeed, in recent times the Church has defined itself through this concept, and it is a designation echoed in many reflections on its purpose and mission.<sup>15</sup> As the 2006 report, *Presence and Engagement* states:

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<sup>14</sup> The importance of locality is not unique to the Christian faith. In the geographical study of religion, for example, one of the cornerstones of the definition of 'religion' is held to be what Roger Stump calls its 'multiformity.' (Roger Stump, *The Geography of Religion : Faith, Place, and Space* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), p.4.) That is, religion as a phenomenon involves a movement from the universal and abstract to expression at the local level, what Stump calls, 'the contextuality of religious belief and practice.' (Stump, p.20).

<sup>15</sup> See above, footnote 5.

The Church of England has continued to understand itself to be called to be present corporately in all the localities of the country. At the heart of this self-understanding is the parish church, a Christian community called to be present and to engage actively with all who live in the neighbourhood irrespective of their Faith or none.<sup>16</sup>

Ben Quash has argued that the Anglican Church might therefore best be described as a 'polity of presence'.<sup>17</sup> Quash here draws on Daniel Hardy's argument that the Church is called to 'place the intensity of the Gospel in the closest affinity to those lives and societies to which it is addressed';<sup>18</sup> that is, the Church is called, 'in every age and place to maximise its presence in the world - for the sake of the world's salvation'.<sup>19</sup>

For Quash the parochial system is the embodiment not just of Anglican forms of praxis, but Anglicanism's very form of reasoning. Specifically what Quash sees in the system is an expression of the Anglican commitment to that which is received, or - to use his terms - *found* in the world.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, that which is gifted by the parish system through responsibility, coverage and locality, can be understood as an outworking of a particularly Anglican sense that the church must situate itself within, and respond to, existing social constructs, patterns of existence, and human polities. Quash develops his argument here with the help of Peter Ochs' reflections, particularly on the work of Hardy. For Ochs, the strength of the Anglican form of reasoning modelled by Hardy is its acknowledgement of the situatedness of our knowing. 'For Anglican theology', he writes, 'reason does not begin with itself, but with the 'found objects of the world''.<sup>21</sup> Such reasoning is, of course, deeply pneumatological. For Ochs, there is an emphasis in Anglican thought upon the work of the Spirit as going before the church, present in the world, and opening up new understandings from within it. The point is that the

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<sup>16</sup> Archbishops' Council, *Presence and Engagement: The Churches' Task in a Multi-faith Society* at <<https://www.churchofengland.org/media/36607/presence.pdf>> [accessed 02/01/16]. para.17.

<sup>17</sup> Ben Quash, 'The Anglican Church as a Polity of Presence', in *Anglicanism: the Answer to Modernity* ed. by Duncan Dormoor, Jack McDonald and Jeremy Craddick (London: Continuum, 2003), pp.38-57.

<sup>18</sup> Daniel Hardy in *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Quash, *Found*.

<sup>21</sup> Peter Ochs, *Another Reformation*, (Grand Rapids, M.I.: Baker Academic, 2011), p.170.

movement of such a view of reason must always be towards - more deeply into - the given realities of the world. If wisdom is developed through conversation between the given and the found, then there is a call to uncover more, to embrace the particularities of time and space so that we might discover more of God. The move from this Anglican view of reason back to the parish system starts here. Seeing all reality as gift through which we might encounter God means that each and every reality - be it a place, a happening, a person, etc. - is bestowed with significance and invites exploration. This wisdom *wants* to be involved in actual goings on, in actual places. As Timothy Jenkins puts it, 'The first principle [of Anglican vocation] may be called 'paying close attention'. It is, he states, 'less one's job to bring God into a place than to discern him in it'.<sup>22</sup> Going further, what Ochs sees in this 'Anglican' expression of theology is a refusal to theologise through universals, but rather to stress particularity and contingency. The universalising basis of this theology (Christ is, through the Spirit, everywhere present) is seen to lead to a greater valuing of particulars. As Quash writes, 'the sacramental form of Christ is 'everywhere in particular' by the work of the Spirit'.<sup>23</sup> The move from the Anglican view of reason is not therefore simply towards actualities but towards particularities. Wisdom is gained not by theorising about actual instances or places, but rather through engagement in those instances or places which, in turn, allows for the careful creation of analogies.<sup>24</sup> Locality then - being in a particular place - is central for Quash because only in this sense can the church truly find anything at all. This is why both John Milbank in his critique of Fx, and the Church report *Faith in the City*, cite G.K. Chesterton's claim that only what is local is real.<sup>25</sup> The Church can be said to love and serve the world because it loves and serves particular communities and individuals.

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<sup>22</sup> Timothy Jenkins, *An Experiment in Providence: How Faith Engages with the World*, (London: SPCK, 2006), p.7.

<sup>23</sup> Quash, *Found*, p.22.

<sup>24</sup> Quash here refers to John Milbank's reflections on 'pleonasm': 'not so much excess verbiage as non-identical repetition...[each] in its particularity can hope to find insights in its own tradition [that are] non-identically repeated in others.' Ibid., p.21.

<sup>25</sup> The Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on Urban Priority Areas, *Faith in the City: A Call for Action by Church and Nation* (London: Church House Publishing, 1985), p.74; John Milbank, 'Stale', p.124.

The desire to move towards actualities in their particularity leads to a valuing of the parochial system. This movement, from Anglican modes of reasoning to the parish system, is made explicitly by Quash and it is worth quoting him in full here:

[A] sense of obligation is one form of that more general pneumatological openness to meeting Christ 'wherever and however he appears', which Ochs identifies as a general mark of Anglican Ecclesiology. This pneumatological openness takes a political as well as ecclesial form in the Anglican settlement. The Church of England in its established form is committed to the parish structure to minister to all who live in England. Every area of land is covered by a parish, and every resident of every parish - whether he or she is an Anglican or not - is someone to whom the Church has an obligation. They are 'souls' for whom the parish understands itself to have 'curatorial responsibility'. The parish and its priest enact a 'chaplaincy to place', not just a targeted ministry to those individuals who are signed up members of the institution. In these terms, no one ought to be regarded as just 'happening to be in the area'. Each person is to be treated as a significant 'finding'.<sup>26</sup>

Ultimately what is modelled here is a church which, in Jenkins' terms, allows the world to 'set the agenda'.<sup>27</sup> What is clear though is that neither Quash, Ochs, Hardy nor Jenkins imagine that such a relationship will result in a church unable to speak *to* the world. Quash expounds this when he speaks of the interplay between the church's givens and the found; 'each', he writes, 'must be in a mutual and dynamic relationship with the other'.<sup>28</sup> In this sense, the Anglican vision is not so much about a denial of the Church's voice in the world, as about conversation, which starts from, and constantly returns to, close listening and appropriate response. Importantly this conversation is held to be possible only as it takes place locally. The Church's voice in society stems from its commitment to the particularities of the nation, so that it speaks from and to actual people, places and situations. It can offer an alternative vision - a different narrative - *because* it is embedded within, and seeks to understand, those concrete realities. Going further, in the Anglican vocation it is precisely fidelity to the norms of the Gospel that

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<sup>26</sup> Quash, *Found*, p.13.

<sup>27</sup> Jenkins, *Experiment*, p. 7.

<sup>28</sup> Quash, *Found*, p.17.

leads to such a focus on locality. In Quash's account for example, it is Christ who provides the model of the church's finding and, in contrast to the patterns of the world that seek instead to pre-define and exploit, the church follows him by opening itself up to the world as it finds it. Therefore presence, consisting of close listening and responsiveness, is not about compromise but is in fact itself the modelling of the kingdom of God. Put simply, the church seeks to be present *as* the people of God, and its work in and for the world stems from its commitment to the God whose Spirit is already in the world, going ahead of it. In this sense - whether or not he is finally accurate in his presentation of Gabriel Hebert's own theology - Andrew Bishop's claim that the parish could model a *via media* between an 'accommodationist' and 'conversionist' church presents at least a helpful insight.<sup>29</sup>

The parish is therefore seen to gift the Church of England a model of church-world relationship in which the church is first and foremost present to the world, open to finding it in its particularity and responding to what it finds. Such an understanding of church-as-presence requires a great deal more fleshing out, and in large part it will be precisely this task that will concern me in the final chapters of the thesis. At this point this picture will suffice as I move on to consider some of the criticisms that have been made of Fx/CP, from Andrew Davison and Alison Milbank, John Milbank and Martyn Percy. In each instance the concerns that they express stem from a theological imaginary that resonates with the picture I have just been outlining. I want now to unpack these critiques in turn, starting first with the way in which each articulates these central theological commitments, and moving on to trace the connections between them. Ultimately I aim to show how each of the critiques rests upon a close tying together of a) the theological concerns with b) the ecclesial model of the parish, in a way which is deeply unhelpful. That is to say, by exploring these critiques I hope to highlight my thesis: that we should

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<sup>29</sup> Andrew Bishop, 'Eucharist Shaping Church, Mission and Personhood in Gabriel Hebert's Liturgy and Society' (Unpublished PhD Thesis, Kings College London, 2013), p.132.

hold a distinction between the parish principle as outlined above (all that is captured in the concept of ‘presence’) and the parish structure.

### **1.3 Critiques of Fx/CP: Davison and Alison Milbank, Percy and John Milbank**

The first of the critiques is also the most substantial and I start with it here since it does in large part cover the themes that shape the other two. *For the Parish* by Andrew Davison and Alison Milbank is, in its own words, ‘a thoroughgoing critique of fresh expressions on theological and philosophical grounds’<sup>30</sup> which repeats John Hull’s claim that the movement that arose out of *MSC* lacks sufficient theological foundation.<sup>31</sup> There are three core criticisms that the authors level at Fx. The first is that the movement is founded on a philosophical mistake, namely the assertion that form can be divorced from content. For Davison and Milbank however, following Wittgenstein, this distinction is untenable. As they argue, the church *is* its form just as, for example, the meaning of a piece of art lies in its physicality.<sup>32</sup> So too they point out that a strong theology of incarnation - they draw here on von Balthasar - recognises that Christ’s form is the unity of his being<sup>33</sup> and it is this ultimately which breathes life into a theology of sacrament in which, ‘there is the most intimate link between the outward elements and the inner reality’.<sup>34</sup> Thus, ‘The church is herself a kind of sacrament - an outward sign of an inward and invisible grace’.<sup>35</sup> The fundamental charge laid at the door of Fx/CP, is that it is essentially ‘intellectualist’, seeing faith as a set of ideas rather than as ‘practices, structures of relation and forms of life’.<sup>36</sup>

The second and third criticisms flow out of this initial perceived mistake. Taking the third first, once it has been determined that the church’s ‘kernel’ can be separated from its

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<sup>30</sup> Davison and Alison Milbank, p.viii.

<sup>31</sup> John M. Hull, *Mission-Shaped Church: A Theological Response* (London: SCM Press, 2005).

<sup>32</sup> Davison and Alison Milbank, p.7.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.7-8.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p.5.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p.5.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

‘husk’,<sup>37</sup> there is a tendency to do away with that which has gone before, in favour of that which is new. Thus the authors are critical of the Fx movement which, they claim, values ‘new over established’, ‘innovation over common worship’, ‘novelty over stability’, the ‘chosen over the given’ and ‘pastiche over authenticity’.<sup>38</sup> Second, once the church’s essence is reduced to a series of beliefs or propositions and its *being* as an entity of practices is accordingly seen as secondary,<sup>39</sup> it becomes difficult to affirm the church *itself* as part of the goal of God’s redemptive activity. And they argue that salvation has an ‘ecclesial dimension’; that is, it is imperative that church - in its outward forms - lives out of its eschatological *telos* to be the people of God. For them this necessarily looks like the church as ‘mixed and harmonious in the face of difference and enmity’.<sup>40</sup> And it is at this point that authors find Fx most problematic. They argue that in line with thinking from the ‘Church growth movement’ (what they describe as a ‘market approach’ to ecclesiology<sup>41</sup>), Fx advocates the creation of churches that are targeted at a particular demographic so that they become established upon individual preference and like-minded individuals.<sup>42</sup> The movement then is one that encourages ‘segregation’, a tendency towards ‘homogeneity’ and thus serves to be a denial of the Gospel of reconciliation.<sup>43</sup> In both cases, they point out ‘sociology is allowed to triumph over theology’,<sup>44</sup> and with it comes, ‘a failure of confidence, a denial of responsibility and a thoroughgoing underestimation of the revolutionary nature of the church’.<sup>45</sup>

It is this ‘failure of confidence’ that is identified by John Milbank and Martyn Percy, for whom the Church is called to be first and foremost true to itself as *church*. In contrast,

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., pp.22; 27; 117.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., pp.93-116.

<sup>39</sup> ‘Fresh expressions literature writes the Church-as-goal out of theology. It leaves us with the Church as ‘means’. Ibid., p.55.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p.49.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p.81.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p.57-9.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., Various places but especially pp. 55; 64f; 68.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p.80.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p.81.

what they each see in the Fx movement is a ‘collusion’.<sup>46</sup> For Percy, with ‘contemporary cultural obsession with newness, alternatives and novelty’,<sup>47</sup> ‘post-institutionalism’<sup>48</sup> and ‘pluralism and individualism’<sup>49</sup> and, for Milbank, with capitalism and ‘managerialism’.<sup>50</sup> In particular, both pick up on the feature of Fx which sees new forms of church aimed at a particular demographic. Such churches, argues Percy, model a consumeristic culture in which, ‘God, religion and faith have become consumable commodities’.<sup>51</sup> One passage from Milbank makes this point with force:

[The] idea that the church should ‘plant’ itself in various sordid and airless interstices of our contemporary world, instead of calling people to ‘come to church’, is wrongheaded, because the refusal to come out of oneself and *go to church* is simply the refusal of church *per se*.<sup>52</sup>

In each of the three critiques there is a sense that what the Fx movement is missing is a strong enough belief in repentance and discipleship. That is, what Milbank and Davison, Percy and John Milbank claim is that entry into church is entry into a particular pattern of existence. For these authors what counts ultimately is that the confidence to simply be the church is more true to the Gospel than the move that they perceive the Fx movement to be making, namely making the church more accommodating so that it might grow. As Davison and Milbank put it, ‘What would it profit the church to gain the whole world but to lose her own soul?’<sup>53</sup>

### 1.3.1 Why then the parish?

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<sup>46</sup> Percy, ‘Old Tricks’, p.123.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p.123.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p.125.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p.127.

<sup>50</sup> Milbank in particular picks up on what he sees as the particularly ‘Protestant’ character of Fx. Those within the movement, he claims, posit the Gospel as product; they collude with capitalism in offering what he calls a ‘voluntarist theology’. Milbank, ‘Stale’, p.121.

<sup>51</sup> Percy, ‘Old Tricks’, p.124.

<sup>52</sup> Milbank, ‘Stale’, p.124.

<sup>53</sup> Davison and Alison Milbank, p.84.



In each of these critiques it is the parish that is offered as a juxtaposition to the Fx movement. So it is argued: if Fx is full of theological and methodological pitfalls, then it is the parish system that best embodies the alternative. In each case a move of logic is made: Fx are weak for reason x, in contrast, reason x is effectively addressed in the parish system. The first thing to note about these critiques then is the ease of movement from their ecclesiological vision to the parish structure. The system itself is assumed to embody the contrasting theological picture. The next thing to note however is the difference in these ecclesiological visions. On the one hand there are those, represented here by Percy, who emphasise the parish as establishing the church *in* the world, for the Common Good. On the other, as in the case of John Milbank, are those who claim that the parish is a defence of the church away from the world, that is, it enables the church to prophetically model an alternative form of existing as place. For Percy, the parish system is therefore the system that best sustains what he calls ‘spiritual and social capital’.<sup>54</sup> Parish churches, he claims, are ‘committed to deep local extensity’ which promotes ‘local commitment (i.e. duty, obligation, etc.)’<sup>55</sup> In contrast to Percy, Milbank’s support for the parish system has a distinctly less missiological feel. For him, the parish is the system within which the Church is simply allowed to ‘*be* the body of Christ’.<sup>56</sup> To be human, he claims, is to dwell specifically in one place and, thus, to embrace our given particularity is more theologically true of us than is the longing for universality. Further, the church must necessarily be a body which embraces difference and, since ‘[only] pure geography encompasses all without exception’,<sup>57</sup> the church must necessarily exist in a parochial form. One church in one place is the best image we have of what Christian community should be: the ‘assembly of humanity’<sup>58</sup> can be most fully realised in a system that puts particularity above universality and heterogeneity over homogeneity. Thus it is the geographical embrace of

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<sup>54</sup> Percy, ‘Old Tricks’, p.132.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p.126.

<sup>56</sup> Milbank, ‘Stale’, p.122.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p.125.

<sup>58</sup> John Milbank, *The Future of Love* (London: SCM, 2009), p.273.

the parish which offers true unity in difference, refusing the capitulation to ‘violence’ of an attractional model that embraces rather than works against segregation and labelling. It is John Milbank’s position that is the one more often encountered in *For the Parish*. The parish church is, Davison and Milbank claim, ‘a politically charged act of resistance’;<sup>59</sup> ‘It is the primary duty of the church *to be the church*’.<sup>60</sup> Thus, where Percy posits the parish as the system that best connects the Church with the world, Milbank and Davison and Milbank see in the same system an embodiment of the sense that the Church’s positioning vis-a-vis the world must be one of delegitimisation; the church is that human society, governed by love, which deconstructs all other narratives. Of course, the distinction between these two approaches is far from absolute. John Milbank, for example, would want to argue that the church true to its calling, distinct from the world, is precisely the church which the world needs. And it is this formulation - that it is out of her difference that the church offers anything to the world - that is more fully fleshed-out by Davison and Milbank. They unpack, in a way John Milbank does not, how the parish church offers value to common life.<sup>61</sup> The fundamental contrast does remain however. Where for John Milbank, and Davison and Milbank, the Church’s collusion with a culture of consumerism and choice is tragic because it will lead to the Church being unable to offer any genuinely faithful alternative, for Percy the problem with consumerism and choice (within which he would include post-institutionalism) is that it moves the Church away from sacrificial service on behalf of the world.<sup>62</sup>

In drawing out the differences between these two approaches I wish to make the simple observation that these authors advocate the parish system as a counter to the

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<sup>59</sup> Davison and Alison Milbank, p.92.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p.82.

<sup>61</sup> See Ibid., pp.170-208. Such accounts form a part of my critique in Chapter 2; I argue there that they simply lack the depth to be useful as empirical data with which to engage the theological principles they are speaking of.

<sup>62</sup> Percy, ‘Old Tricks’, p.132. The differences between these two perspectives, which lead to the differing conception of the parish are made explicit by Martyn Percy in *Engaging with Contemporary Culture*, in which he outlines his own cultural theology as a contrast to Radical Orthodoxy. The latter, he argues, ‘wants to reinstate theology as a primary narrative for social, political, cultural and philosophical discourse’. (p.67) See Martyn Percy, *Engaging With Contemporary Culture, Christianity, Theology and the Concrete Church* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), especially pp.66-70.

dangers they see implicit in the Fx/CP movement but do so for different reasons. At the most basic level this suggests that 'the parish' is a more complex theological proposition than is suggested by any one of these writers. These authors each feel able to 'use' the parish system to meet very different ecclesial commitments; the parish functions differently for each.<sup>63</sup> I suggest therefore that what we discover in these critiques of the parish is a separation between the thing itself - the parish - and the theological significance that is attached to it. The separation is of course not absolute and indeed there are very good reasons for seeing either one of these approaches as modelled or held within the parish system. My claim here however is simply that the line between the ecclesial system and the theological significance is not a direct one so that even before any reflection on experience or pursuit of empirical findings, the claim that 'the parish' presents a uniform theological vision, in contrast to 'networked' or 'attractional' church models, must be questioned.

One of the central claims of this thesis is that the 'parish system' is better thought of as neutral. Accordingly, the important discussion is not 'Fx/CP or the parish system' but rather around the theological commitments that are so often seen to be upheld in either. Indeed, once the theological constructs are allowed to be untied from the particular system, the argument becomes much richer. So, instead of asking 'what type of Church are we left with in such and such a system,' we are able to ask, 'what might the Church look like if it took these theological constructs seriously?'. In this way, I want to affirm the theological vision as presented by Quash and others, as well as by the three critics of Fx/CP explored here. Here then the parish principle - which I have described as the Church committed to being present - is central. The divergence comes at the point of the outworking of this principle, that is, whether it is necessary that the 'parish' must necessitate the parish structure. I claim that it need not; that the parish principle might in fact cause the Church to require a variety of ecclesial models if it is to fulfil its vocation.

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<sup>63</sup> I employ the term 'use' here with care. I am in no way insinuating that these authors are manipulative in their employing the parish system; I have no doubt that each holds very important experiences of the parish which confirm their theological sense of what it might offer.

## 1.4 An alternative construal of Anglican theology

In stating that we should detach the theological significance of the ecclesial system from the system itself I am aware that I open myself up to the very critique made against the Fx/CP movement, highlighted above. Am I advocating a view of church form that is at best separate from, and at worst secondary to, theological conceptuality? To reiterate, the questions the critics above ask - and which they see as demanded by a particular Catholic theological vision - is: how can we ensure that our ecclesiology is not incidental to our particular missiology? In what ways must the church embody in her very being, and in each local expression of that being, the very truth for which she exists? However, my point here is not that church form is insignificant; far from it. Rather, I claim that it is precisely an over-focus on structure alone that can leave us blind to ways in which theological conceptions are actually embodied. For the idea that the church's form is not insignificant to its message, that theological principles are always embodied, should make us wary of attaching certain theological principles to church structure by *necessity*. Such assumed necessity poses a risk on two counts. First there is a danger that we might miss the value of the principles in the first instance because they are no longer engaged with but simply assumed. Second, it risks failing to adequately evaluate or critique the system and how it is practiced because of an overly naive assumption that the system, because it is *that* system, must therefore be of theological value.

A similar claim is made by Nicholas Healy in his critique of what he calls the 'new ecclesiology', those recent ecclesiologies which, he argues, have attempted to refocus attention on Christian practices.<sup>64</sup> Despite being clear about the potential such accounts hold, Healy is largely critical of these accounts in their failure to offer a solid definition of practice. What is lacking so often from the accounts, he claims, is any explication of human agency. As he puts it, 'practices are not mere behaviour patterns; they are actions

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<sup>64</sup> Nicholas Healy, 'Practices and the New Ecclesiology: Misplaced Concreteness', *IJST*, 5:3 (2003), 287-308.

performed by human agents' and as such, in considering the value of any practice, one must reflect upon the intentionality of the actor performing it or, in church practices, of the 'recipient'.<sup>65</sup> Healy manages in his critique - and I shall endeavor to manage it similarly in this thesis - to hold agency and practice together in such a way that the latter retains a certain integrity. The philosophical claim that the likes of Stanley Hauerwas are making is that practices should be registered as actions *shaping* human behaviour; not so much reliant on human intentionality, rather as the very tool which shapes that intentionality. Healy's claim is simply that although it is right to posit practices as having integrity, such practices require a further level of interpretation and analysis beyond the performance of the practice if they are to function as truly Christian practices. As example, Healy draws upon the practice of signing oneself with holy water as one walks into a church. In each instance and for each actor the practice is the same, however the intentionality or understandings of such an action may vary wildly between them. What if, Healy asks, the intentions behind the act are misguided (based on superstition, maintaining sectarian boundaries, or on guilt)?:

In such a case, performing the practice would not contribute to the formation of my Christian character, but would instead strengthen my *non*-Christian identity. Thus what, abstractly described, is a perfectly good practice from within a Roman Catholic construal, may concretely be a substantially different practice, even a 'socially established' and 'internally consistent' counter-Christian one.<sup>66</sup>

Such a practice is inherently different from Wittgenstein's concept of the rules of a language game. In this instance, the rules are not learnt simply by observation and imitation, but rather require a level of explanation if they are to be the practices they are intended to be. 'Character', Healy argues, 'is indeed formed through practices, but only as they are performed with appropriate intentions and construals'.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p.292.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p.295.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p.294.

Healy's claim should not be a surprising one to Anglicans. Arguably it is a wrestling with this particular expression of the relationship between practice and theological conceptuality that has shaped much of Anglican ecclesiology. The legacy of being a Reformed Catholic church is that often the theological questions that arise in this tradition will concern the nature of our practices and, furthermore, such questions will need to be answered in a way which refuses to collapse the practice and principle into one another. Following Rowan Williams' reflections in *Anglican Identities*, my claim is that Anglicanism has sought to hold God's freedom as central so that, as he puts it, this sacramental church, '[refuses] to bind God too closely to material transactions', but rather highlights 'the free activity of God sustaining and transforming certain human actions done in Christ's name'.<sup>68</sup> For Williams, Richard Hooker's critique of the Roman doctrine of transubstantiation can be understood precisely in these terms. According to Williams, Hooker's stress on the 'effects' of the sacraments, as opposed to the manner of their working, should be understood as positing God's freedom as primary, with God working through given practices (sacraments) to effect salvation. For Hooker it is God who gives himself to us in the eucharist; this is the sacrament and, accordingly, any attempt to systematise the *manner* of this gift - say by asserting that salvific efficacy is dependent upon Christ's actual presence in the elements - will necessarily detract from the freedom of God in the act. According to Hooker, it binds God within a particular movement of logic and reasoning. It is more 'plain than true' as he puts it.<sup>69</sup> Williams describes Hooker's position:

It is not [...] that Christ's presence needs somehow to be 'in' the bread and the wine before we receive them; the bread and the wine are vehicles of Christ's action to make us partakers of his life, and any further analysis of how this might happen is at best irrelevant and at worse impious.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Williams, *Identities*, pp.2-3.

<sup>69</sup> Hooker, *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, Book V, 1ii., ed. by John Keble in *The Works of that Learned and Judicious Divine Mr. Richard Hooker*, Arr. by John Keble, 3 vols; 7th edn., rev. by R.W. Church and F. Paget (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888) <<http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/hooker-the-works-of-that-learned-and-judicious-divine-mr-richard-hooker>> [accessed 23/01/16].

<sup>70</sup> Williams, *Identities*, p.28.

For Williams there is something foundational here for Anglicanism in the way it makes sense of its given practices, and the nature of the God who is free in bringing life. In Hooker's understanding the sacraments are God given - 'a secret and sacred gift' - performed by (finite) human beings.<sup>71</sup> This is not, to return to the language used in the discussion of Fx/CP above, a 'kernel and husk' view of church practices: at no point does Hooker allow the centrality of God's freedom to cause particular practices to become secondary and dispensable. Indeed such a move he sees as the particular failure of his puritan interlocutors. Rather, for Hooker, God gives himself to work in this manner - the particular act is itself vital - yet, if it is to remain a gift of grace, then it must remain fully God's act.<sup>72</sup> The balance Hooker is trying to strike here is made explicit in his claim that a sacrament must consist of three parts: the gift of grace, the physical element which signifies the grace, and the word which expresses what has been done. It is then the relationship of the three things - distinct but held always together - that is crucial. Indeed, by emphasising the relationship, Hooker can sound contradictory at points: 'they [the sacraments] really give what they promise and are what they signify'<sup>73</sup> sits with, '[the sacraments] contain in themselves no vital force or efficacy'.<sup>74</sup> But for Hooker it is the fact of the relationship between God's action and our action (or better, our participation in the acts He has given us) that allows for these to be held alongside one another. Sacraments are those acts, 'the use whereof is in our hands, the effect in His'.<sup>75</sup>

Two interrelated points can be drawn from this reading of Hooker's sacramental theology, both of which share something of Healy's concern about the new ecclesiology and its focus on practices. Firstly, it should be clear that Hooker and Healy share common ground in their concern about tying together conceptuality or principle, and practice.

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<sup>71</sup> Hooker, *Laws*, Book V, l.

<sup>72</sup> 'For of the sacraments, the very same is true which Solomon's wisdom observeth in the brazen serpent, 'He that turned towards it was not healed 'by the thing he saw, but by Thee, O Saviour of all.' Hooker, *Laws*, Book V, lvii.

<sup>73</sup> Hooker, *Laws*, Book V, lvii.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

What we find in Hooker is a rejection of two extremes: he is wary of overbearing the sacrament with interpretation, and yet he wants to avoid seeing the sacrament as itself the meaning. What is important is the way in which Hooker carefully navigates the relationship which avoids a collapse of signifier into signified.

Secondly, an important outworking of this relationship for Hooker is the need for words of explanation. For Hooker, no matter how tightly we hold the relationship between signifier and signified, between the physical element or performance and the grace which is bestowed, there is within their performance a need for more: a need for meaning to be given. Once again, the relationship between the two is always of a particular arrangement so that, as he puts it, 'the one [the words of explanation], might infallibly teach what the other [the thing or performance] do most assuredly bring to pass'.<sup>76</sup>

Of course, sacraments and church structure are of a different order and it would be incorrect to assume that what Hooker says about the sacraments he would also say about the form of church structure. Rather, I am here following Williams in identifying within Hooker's arguments around sacraments something fundamental to this type of Anglican reasoning. Within Book Five of the *Laws*, there is something of the general Anglican approach which above all sees practices as gifts, the effects of which are God's grace. Such an approach refuses both reductions: stressing God's freedom that practices become insignificant and over-emphasis on God's commitment to a particular pattern of finite action, that the action itself becomes the grace.

In the following chapter I will develop this line of thought as it relates to the nature of the theological task itself, and explore what sort of methodology might arise out of this sense that praxis must account for both performance and its assigned significance. At this stage I simply wish to consider the observations from Healy and these brief reflections on an 'Anglican' approach to praxis, as they relate conceptually to the idea of the parish system. Of course there is a difference between what Healy takes here to mean

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.



‘practice’ and an ecclesial system. However, it is not too great a leap to conceive of the parish system as a sort of practice. Indeed, it would be fair to say that for most of the writers on the parish system I have been exploring, this is precisely the sense in which it is meant: the parish is more than just a system of ecclesial structure, it is for them a particular set of activities and actions - a way of acting in the world. Therefore it is by taking the parish as a concrete expression of a theological reality that I find a crossover with these reflections on practice. Healy’s claim is significant: ‘practices as concretely performed are not patterns of behaviour with sufficiently fixed meanings’.<sup>77</sup> What is necessary therefore is a proper accounting of the relationship between the practice itself (the parish) and the meaning of that practice. My claim is that the critics of Fx detailed above do not do this, but rather too readily conflate the two things. Alternatively, Healy echoes the assumption made by the *Book of Common Prayer* [BCP] in its opening section ‘On Ceremonies’: practices are not faultless, they might in fact - either by intention or ignorance - lead away from grace rather than towards it. The gift is not a given. The BCP does not contrast practices with no practices, or even ‘pure’ worship with ‘tradition’, but rather ceremonies that are ‘dark [or] dumb’ and those which are ‘so set forth that every man may understand what they might mean, and to what use they do serve’.<sup>78</sup>

Might the moves within the Church of England to support and encourage non-parochial forms of church be understood, following the pattern of the BCP, to be part of the assessment, re-evaluation, and clarifying of the parish system? I suggest that they might be or at least that there is no reason that they could not. Once we acknowledge the separation of signifier and signified, a debate opens up about the potential for other non-parochial forms to embody the principle, that is, the vocation to presence. My critique of the approaches of Davison and Milbank, Percy and John Milbank at this juncture is not that they are blind to reality (though in the next chapter I shall argue that the lack of empirical observation in their accounts does leave them somewhat deficient) but that they

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<sup>77</sup> Healy, ‘Misplaced Concreteness?’, p.295.

<sup>78</sup> The Church of England, *The Book of Common Prayer* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004), p.xii.

attribute too much value to the system itself. Therefore, what I want to challenge is the formula, used in varying forms throughout their critiques, that 'Fx/CP results in x, where the parish leads to y'. Such a formula implies that the system itself *does* something. I hope to have shown that, at least in Anglican reflections on praxis, there is an unease about this sort of language because of the awareness that practices or systems are not in themselves sufficient. The mode of Anglican reflection on praxis I have outlined here should lead us to see the choice as being not between different systems, but rather between the desire to be faithful in our practices or not. This is the challenge of receiving traditions, as Alasdair Macintyre argues.<sup>79</sup> In the case of the Church of England's ecclesiology then, the task is to seek to find systems and patterns of ministry that best allow the Church to be what it is called to be. Put differently, it is to continually push our church forms that they might better signify the principle for which they exist.

## 1.5 Summary

I claimed at the start of this chapter that behind the theological appropriations of the parish system is the conviction that the Church of England is called to model a polity of presence. This polity is seen to be closely tied to the parish structure given that the structure establishes a church that is local, has coverage, and is responsible for all who fall within its bounds. The question to be asked is whether such an account is necessarily tied to the system itself. I have made a case here that in the Anglican mode of reasoning, there is no reason to say so. The principle - the vocation to be present - should be allowed to stand independently of the system at least for the moment. For it is not the parish system that makes the Church present, open to finding the world. The vocation to be present is primary and the system is its servant. Once this distinction is acknowledged it becomes possible to engage with the system in a more fruitful way, liberated from the false choice

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<sup>79</sup> See the quotation at the start of this thesis on p.10. His account of tradition can be found in *After Virtue*, (2nd ed., London: Duckworth, 1985), pp.204-225.

between wholesale abandonment and total acceptance. Indeed, if we take the vocation itself as the goal - how can the Church become more present to the world? - we are called towards a theological task that is much more like the one Quash describes. For in this case the work is about careful interplay between found and given. The parish system *is* where the Church of England finds itself, and it is has given the Church a particular place in the nation. But, this historical givenness is not the final word, it is rather one basis from which we seek greater fulfilment of the vocation. If the principle is to have value then the givenness of the parish system must be brought into conversation with what is found, in experience and cultural and social realities. This task has been carried out throughout the Church of England's history, both in its formal and less formal reflections on mission and governance. I will explore some of these pieces of work in Chapter 4. Before that however I will outline what I see to be the methodological implications of the type of Anglican reasoning described in this chapter.

## Chapter 2 / Methodology

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### 2.1 Introduction

In this chapter I outline the methodological commitments that have shaped my research. I begin with a reflection on the weakness of overly idealised ecclesiological study, precisely the problem I see within the critiques of Fx that I have been analysing thus far. I claim that in order to explore the questions of praxis posed by Fx/CP, we need a theological-empirical investigation. This will mean finding a dialectic between the theological realities I have been exploring (so of presence and place etc.) and the concrete reality of churches, which does not subsume or silence the latter within the former. This to me makes best sense of studying the church as a human society moved by God. I argue that such a dialectic might be achieved by appropriating the methodology of Michael Burawoy, whose claim that social research must involve taking theory into a social situation, will shape the methodology that I follow in the rest of the thesis.

### 2.2 A theological-empirical study?

According to the critics of Fx that I identified in the previous chapter, a commitment to the 'parish' is as much about an ideological truth as it is about empirical reality. For these writers, what the parish system holds is a sense of coverage, locality and responsibility. It is a particular vision of what the Church of England is and what it should be doing. Fx churches then, because they work outside of the parish system, are understood to be inherently lacking. Before the theoretical discussions however, it is important to note that in making these claims none of these thinkers engage with any empirical data. In raising this as an area of contention, I am in no way suggesting that 'theoretical' theology or ecclesiology (so what is traditionally doctrinal or systematic theology) is deficient per se. Rather, I am simply questioning whether, given that these authors do claim to be speaking

about something tangible (parish churches in contrast to new forms of church) it is sufficient to offer a purely theoretical critique. One senses that the authors are aware of this deficiency; thus each of them does offer examples or instances they see as highlighting or embodying their particular claim; ‘reality checks’ upon the general theory. And yet none of these examples are genuine engagements with empirical data. The examples they do give tend to be either anecdotal or hypothetical in nature, or so specific as to be redundant in terms of offering insights into wider contexts.<sup>80</sup>

It is one of the underlying concerns of this thesis that what I described in the previous chapter as an Anglican form of reasoning challenges us to attend to the actual goings-on of churches. If there is a difference between the signifier and signified, then the signifier becomes an essential object of enquiry. In line with Williams’ claims about Hooker’s approach, as well as with the tenor of the BCP, it is right that we pay close attention to the way in which our theological principles are worked out in actual terms, that is (in the case of ecclesiology) with what Healy calls the ‘concrete church’.<sup>81</sup> For Healy, such an approach must endeavour to hold the tension between the church as both ‘theological’ and non; the ‘concrete church’ is constituted by the Holy Spirit who works in and through human activity. As he puts it:

[the Church’s] identity is constituted by action. That identity is thoroughly theological, for it is constituted by the activity of the Holy Spirit, without which it cannot exist. But it is also constituted by the activity of its members as they live out their lives of discipleship.

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<sup>80</sup> For example, John Milbank claims, ‘One can’t set up a church in a café amongst a gang of youths who like skateboarding because all this does is promote skateboarding and dysfunctional escapist maleness’. Milbank, ‘Stale’, p.124. *For the Parish* has similarly underdeveloped ‘observations’, for example: ‘In one Nottinghamshire village at garden-party time, a variety of men of the village will suddenly emerge, tools at the ready, to erect the tents. They attend the Songs of Praise service held later the same day but rarely appear again before next August. Yet this work has strong religious meaning for them, and gives them a sense of belonging to the Church.’ (See Davison and Alison Milbank, p.164). Neither could be called an ‘empirical’ observation in any meaningful sense, given that they fail to explore in any depth the various understandings and perspectives of those being observed or indeed the multitude of ways this event might be interpreted. When connecting the ‘empirical’ and the ‘theological’ the authors always give the latter precedent. The former function as exemplars or models of the theological concerns.

<sup>81</sup> Healy, *Church*.

As such:

[If] ecclesiology is to contribute to the health of the church - and by 'health' I do not mean, of course, merely success in terms of numbers or prestige - it must examine our human activity as it concretely is: thoroughly human.<sup>82</sup>

Given that the underlying concern of much of the critique of the Fx movement is that it fails to take theology seriously - instead focusing on pragmatic or cultural concerns - it is Healy's claim that ecclesiology must be an inherently *theological* discipline which is especially significant.<sup>83</sup> It would be all too easy to respond to the critics of Fx/CP with pragmatism: 'Fx is working - the numbers show it'; or 'research suggests that in fact Fx/CP are no more homogenous than traditional parish churches', etc. However, I argue that to do so would be a failure to attend properly to the concerns of these critics. For underlying the criticisms is a valid concern that the Church should be defined and measured according to her own rules of grammar rather than by, say, sociological analysis or numerical 'successes' or 'failures'.

I feel the weight of such concerns and so distance myself from (though not reject entirely) approaches to ecclesiology which assume that in order to understand what is going on in churches, we must suspend our theological concerns or indeed approach the church as if it were any other social or cultural group. Such an approach seems to come unstuck when it is confronted by post-modern ethnographic approaches which stress the locatedness of the observer. There is no 'view from nowhere'; I write as a theologian, with theological concerns exploring a particular theological critique of a church movement. This research was motivated and shaped by my own theological concerns, namely around the place of the Church in the nation and whether and how it can continue to call itself a Church that is present. Furthermore, the idea of suspending theological

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p.5.

<sup>83</sup> So, 'We must indeed insist that the only adequate form of reflection upon the concrete church is that of theology.' Ibid., p.5.

assumptions or concerns is based on a false assumption about what the church is. In John Webster's words:

Ecclesiology has both a proximate and principal *res*. Its proximate *res* is a form of human society...its principal *res* is the temporal processions of God and the eternal processions from which they are suspended.<sup>84</sup>

Webster questions any ecclesiology that would seek to explore the church's identity simply as it arises from the actual happenings of the church itself. The church is an 'alternative society' not simply by virtue of its practices (of sacrament, hospitality etc) but rather by the nature of its calling by God, who, out of his gracious movement towards the world, establishes a human community to be the locus of his redemptive work. For Webster it is thus a theological rather than empirical truth that determines the church as 'an alternative society'; the practices it embodies reflect or flow out of this theological reality. Therefore, "To speak of the church's being, dogmatics is required to speak of God"<sup>85</sup> and, accordingly, the acts of the church are, 'modes of action whose movement is itself moved'.<sup>86</sup> Webster's account is offered therefore as a warning against any neat tying up of the church's empirical reality with its theological status. My claim here is that we must hear Webster's argument, and allow it to do its work precisely as warning.

Ultimately, I am suggesting that we hold a dialectic between the empirical and theological elements in ecclesiology. It is right that we should pay close attention to the concerns about the church's integrity aired by John Milbank and Milbank and Davison, but we need to also acknowledge that alone these accounts do not help make sense of the church concrete. What is missing therefore is any attempt to explore the precise relationship between Webster's two movements: God's movement of the church's movement. For, as Healy argues, there is not a smooth line of causation between the two, and the reality of the church's sin is one immediate sign of this fact. Therefore although one part of

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<sup>84</sup> John Webster, "In the Society of God: Some Principles of Ecclesiology", in *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, ed. by Pete Ward (Cambridge: Wm B. Eerdmans: 2012), pp.200-22.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p.204.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p.214.

ecclesiology lies in accounting for God's act in establishing and upholding the church, it must be the case that another vital part lies in working out the ways in which this act has been shaped - even marred - by the human act. It is in this task that Healy's 'practical and prophetic' ecclesiology is helpful. *Practical* in that it is focused on the church *in via*, as it exists concretely, and *prophetic* because it is above all motivated by a concern to understand this reality theologically, bringing the full weight of theological reflection to bear upon it.

To bring the discussion back to the issue at hand. If after extensive research it was discovered that a group of Fx churches were on the whole less homogenous and more engaged in their communities than the parish churches in the same area, I would argue that those exploring the theological underpinnings of the parish system would need to pay attention. It would certainly be a strange move to ignore this fact altogether and continue to draw a stark contrast between the Fx model and parish model because of a particular theological concern. Of course there is the key question of what one does with this information. I am not suggesting that if we did discover this we should, for example, abandon the parish model (this too would be a move based on idealism, only this time a sort of idealism of effectiveness and hard strategy). Rather it is simply to say that the theological position which sees in the parish system a counter to the prevailing narratives of choice and individualism, and an emphasis on the church as that community which is necessarily *for* the world, must at some point address the issue of whether, in fact, these things are actually being achieved by that system and, if they are not, whether it is sensible to perpetuate this idea. Therefore, in order for this discussion to hold any weight it is important that we pay close attention to both the theological principles (about the nature of the parish, the dangers of homogeneity, etc.) as well as the actual goings-on of both parish and Fx churches. This is what this thesis aims to do.

In terms of methodology, 'dialectic' is my chosen term to describe the necessary process of engagement between the theological and empirical constructs. Because of the ecclesiological vision I have been outlining - in which the church is always



‘inevitably, and dangerously, mixed’<sup>87</sup> - it makes no sense to suggest a clear delineation between the two parts. It is for this reason that some have questioned the validity of anything like a ‘pastoral cycle’ in practical theology,<sup>88</sup> given the way it attempts to hold apart experience, analysis and theological reflection as separate stages<sup>89</sup> or phases<sup>90</sup> or tasks.<sup>91</sup> Rather, as I have argued, such a holding apart misrepresents the theological reality of the church *in via*. What is needed is neither simply a theological reflection on the empirical reality of the church, nor an empirical check on our theological constructs but an ongoing conversation between the two. It is, however, a conversation in which the theological voice must be kept at the fore, the voice which shapes the discussion. The theological here is what I referred to in the previous chapter, following Quash, as the church’s ‘givens’. The challenge is thus to respond to what is found - in the world but also in the church - from the place of these givens but in such a way that the ‘findings’ retain integrity. In line with Webster’s concerns, because the church has its primary *res* in its calling to be His witness in the world we need to read the empirical observation from, and back towards, the theological position.<sup>92</sup>

The question to be asked then is how are we to model such a theological-empirical study? There are pitfalls in a variety of approaches. On the one hand, if we prioritise theological commitments we risk drowning out the situation being investigated. On the other hand, if we study a site ‘neutrally’ then we risk the theological analysis becoming an afterthought or a second-step in the research, no longer integral to the investigation itself. In neither case would the theological understanding be enriched by the empirical study: in the first instance because the situation is subsumed by a theological paradigm, and in the second because the analysis is an imposition on the situation. How

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<sup>87</sup> Stephen Sykes in Healy, *Church*, p.5.

<sup>88</sup> See, for example, Pete Ward, *Participation and Mediation* (London, SPCK, 2008), pp.33-50.

<sup>89</sup> So see Paul Ballard and John Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action: Christian Thinking in the Service of Church and Society* (London: SPCK 1996), pp.77-78.

<sup>90</sup> Emmanuel Lartey, 'Practical Theology as Theological Form', in *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*, ed. by James Woodward and Stephen Pattison (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp.128-34.

<sup>91</sup> Richard Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2008), p.4.

<sup>92</sup> For Healy the normativity in the conversation comes through Saint Paul’s ‘rule’ (Gal. 6:14). The church is called to be that body which witnesses to, and disciples people in, Jesus Christ. Healy, *Church*, p.7f.

then might we proceed with a theological-empirical study which holds the integrity and uniqueness of the site and is motivated by, and aimed at, richer theological understanding?

### 2.3 Generalisation and theorisation

This is not an issue that is unique to theological investigation. Indeed, it resonates with a more general question in the social sciences about the very possibility of empirical research. Along with Roger Gomm et al., I see this issue as containing two interrelated problems: generalisation (whether and how it is possible to make general conclusions beyond the field of investigation from specific instances), and prior theorisation (the relationship between prior theory, or existing frameworks, and the data being collected.)<sup>93</sup> Both issues are divisive within social science, largely because the field is poised between a postmodern acknowledgement of the specificity of situations, and the need to offer general conclusions. The tension, as Charles Ragin puts it, is between the desire for depth on the one hand, and breadth on the other.<sup>94</sup> The question is whether it is possible to do both. It is interesting for example to note the way in which the authors of *Congregational Studies in the UK*, divide studies of congregations into 'extrinsic' and 'intrinsic' studies.<sup>95</sup> Here, the authors therefore make a presumption that the *focus* of each study differs between those that investigate a congregation for 'some broader good',<sup>96</sup> and those that are, 'capable of standing on their own, irrespective of their wider purpose'.<sup>97</sup> The two issues highlighted are thus at play. Is it really the case that some studies seek to make no generalisations, that is, to offer no relevance beyond that particular instance? As Gomm et al. argue, all cases must be a 'case of something'.<sup>98</sup> They are selected because they are

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<sup>93</sup> Roger Gomm, Martyn Hammersley and Peter Foster, eds, *Case Study Method* (London: SAGE, 2000).

<sup>94</sup> Charles C. Ragin, *Fuzzy Set Social Science* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p.21f.

<sup>95</sup> The terms perhaps originate from R.E. Stake, who refers to 'intrinsic case studies'. See Stake, 'Case Studies', in *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* ed. by Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 1994).

<sup>96</sup> *Congregational Studies in the UK: Christianity in a Post-Christian Context*, ed. by Mathew Guest, Karin Trusting, Linda Woodhead (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), p.2.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p.9.

<sup>98</sup> Gomm and others, p.102.

instances of a wider phenomenon and, even if broad generalisations are not explicitly made in the study, there is an assumed understanding that this analysis might offer some more general insight. Secondly, categorising some studies as ‘intrinsic’ - set against ‘extrinsic’ versions - can imply that theorising belongs solely to the latter. It is the flip-side of the postmodern concern that by upholding the specificity of instances, the researcher is seen to be similarly ‘specific’, bringing a set of prior assumptions and theoretical frameworks to the case. In this sense then, no data can ‘stand alone’ as a neat extrinsic/intrinsic paradigm might suggest, rather, all data is approached, collected and analysed through existing theorisation and categorisation. Ultimately then, the question is not whether generalisation or prior theorisation should form a part of investigating cases, but rather, given that they do, how can they be done well? It is in answer to this question that I find Luke Bretherton’s appropriation of Michael Burawoy’s Ethnographic method – the Extended Case Method - especially helpful, and I offer a description of it here.<sup>99</sup>

## 2.4 Burawoy’s Extended Case Method (ECM)

Burawoy’s research approach is based on a rejection of two ‘reductions’. The first, which he labels the ‘positivistic reduction’, ‘reduces social science to the natural science model and suppresses the hermeneutic dimension’.<sup>100</sup> The goal here is to discover ‘truth’ in a specific case and thus the researcher must try to remove herself as far as possible from the data. She is seen to be successful in so far as she is a ‘neutral outsider’.<sup>101</sup> The other, the ‘humanist’ or ‘postmodern’ reduction, rejects any scientific dimension, seeing science as ‘simply another worldview’.<sup>102</sup> Here, such emphasis is placed on the specificity of both the case and researcher that the task of theorisation is itself questioned. For Burawoy then,

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<sup>99</sup> Bretherton, ‘Uses of Ethnography’.

<sup>100</sup> Michael Burawoy, *Ethnography Unbound: Power and Resistance in the Modern Metropolis* (CA: University of California Press, 1992), p.3.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid. Burawoy takes from Jack Katz, ‘four prescriptive tenets’ of positive science: neutrality; standardisation (reliability); replicability; and representativeness (that this specific case is in some way representative of the whole). See Burawoy, ‘The Extended Case Method’, *Sociological Theory*, 16:1 (1998), 4-33 (p.10).

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

both tendencies contain elements of the truth but taken as the totality of the social method they are deeply flawed: the positivistic approach because it underplays the situatedness of researcher and researched, and the postmodern approach because it cannot allow for the concept of objectivity beyond the specific instance being observed. How then are generalisation and prior theorisation approached in these respective models? For the more positivistic approach, the issue of generalisability is crucial; instances are only seen to be valid in so far as they are universally applicable.<sup>103</sup> The danger here is that by seeing a particular instance as a *sample* one misses the complex factors that have served to make that particular case what it is. In contrast, the postmodern approach is faced with the opposite problem because of this emphasis on the particularities of cases. Thus, if generalisations in the positivistic model are too shallow, then arguably the postmodern approach is unable (or unwilling) to generalise because of each case's recognised uniqueness.<sup>104</sup>

In light of positivistic and postmodern reductions therefore, Burawoy argues that a better paradigm is that of 'reflexive science', an approach which embraces the postmodern emphasis on the situatedness of researcher and object of research, whilst not succumbing to either an absolute relativism or an assumption that the most we can offer is autobiography.<sup>105</sup> 'Reflexive science' therefore endeavours to hold the strands together: the importance of generalised theory, alongside the contextualised nature of both

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<sup>103</sup> See Bent Flyberg, 'Case Study' in *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* ed. by Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 1994), pp.301-316. Like Burawoy, Flyberg sees generalisability as one of the tenets of positivistic science.

<sup>104</sup> There are those who continue to argue that it is possible to work from the specific to the general. The classic example of this is Geertz's 'Balinese cockfight'. See Clifford Geertz, 'Notes on the Balinese Cockfight' in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1973), pp.412-444. Norman Denzin argues for what he calls 'universal instances'. (See Norman, K. Denzin, *Interpretive Interactionism* (Newbury Park, CA: SAGE, 1989). Others advocate 'naturalistic generalisation' (See Stake, 'The Case Study Method in Social Inquiry', in *Case Study Method*, ed. by Gomm and others, pp.19-26) or 'transferability.' (See Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba, 'The Only Generalisation is: There is no Generalisation', in *Ibid.*, pp.27-44).

<sup>105</sup> Burawoy, 'Extended Case Method'.

researcher and the object of research.<sup>106</sup> And for Burawoy, the key to doing this lies with seeing the situatedness of the researcher as the very starting point of the empirical investigation:

We can either live with the gap between positive principles and practice, all the while trying to close it, or formulate an alternative model of science that takes context as its point of departure, that thematises our presence in the world we study.<sup>107</sup>

Thus, in differing from both positivistic and postmodernist approaches, Burawoy argues, 'we advocate neither distance nor immersion but dialogue'.<sup>108</sup> It is here then that the prior theorisation of the researcher finds its place; not as something to be avoided but the very basis from which to approach a situation. It is through prior theory that we 'read' the object being investigated. Thus, for Burawoy, the problem of both generalisability and prior theorisation are overcome by the fact that the micro is seen as the focal point for an investigation into the macro. Put another way, the specific social situation becomes the site in which both wider theories and wider social factors or influences are explored. The approach avoids the problem of seeing the site merely as a 'microcosm' however, because it stresses its uniqueness. Applying this theory to Geertz's analysis of the Balinese cockfight as a 'paradigmatic event', Burawoy highlights that Geertz misses the very specific cultural factors - the 'historically specific causalit[ies]' - that have produced this phenomenon.<sup>109</sup>

One can understand Burawoy's approach by way of a further contrast, this time with grounded theory, a contrast Burawoy draws on throughout his work.<sup>110</sup> In both approaches there is a dual commitment to a close reading of the situation and to the

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<sup>106</sup> Burawoy's approach might therefore be best described as 'critically realistic'. For a summary of critical realism in practical theology see Andrew Root, *Christopraxis: A Practical Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), pp.191-241.

<sup>107</sup> Burawoy, 'Extended Case Method', p.7.

<sup>108</sup> Burawoy, *Ethnography Unbound*, p.4.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p.281.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p.8., and, 'Extended Case Method', pp.16; 25.

potential for this site to reveal something of broader significance. For Burawoy however, there is an inherent difference in the two approaches, marked by the fact that grounded theory is essentially inductive. Thus, where grounded theory analyses situations and, through comparative close analysis, moves to general conclusions, Burawoy's ECM starts not from a position of neutrality but from prior theory and uses the analysis as a way of exploring and refining it.<sup>111</sup> As he states:

Where Glaser and Strauss are concerned to discover new theory from the ground up, we on the other hand seek to reconstruct existing theory [...] Rather than theory emerging from the field, what is interesting in the field emerges from our theory.<sup>112</sup>

How then does Burawoy envisage the prior theory shaping the act of research? Essentially, this 'reconstruction' is an invasive act. Research is the point at which our theory is put into battle - to be exposed and potentially torn apart. 'Our stance toward theory', he writes, 'is kamikaze.'<sup>113</sup> In our fieldwork, 'we do not look for confirmations but for theory's refutations'.<sup>114</sup>

Burawoy draws two inferences here. First, what is most revealing about each case are the anomalies; the points at which existing theory struggles to explain a particular phenomenon. It is in taking seriously such divergences that one is able to reconstruct theory so that it does not simply explain trends or patterns, but fully accounts for the complexities of each situation. Second, this 'kamikaze' approach means that the positivistic concern about the researcher's 'interference' should be abandoned. Rather than seeking to neutralise the influence of the researcher we should see the very act of intervention into

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<sup>111</sup> Iddo Tavory and Stefan Timmermans argue that the contrast between grounded theory and Burawoy's approach should be seen as one of a difference in 'framing' or 'casing.' Where grounded theory establishes the 'case' from within the field, Burawoy uses 'a-priori theoretical framing'. Iddo Tavory and Stefan Timmermans, 'Two Cases of Ethnography: Grounded Theory and the Extended Case Method', *Ethnography*, 10:3 (2009), pp.243-263.

<sup>112</sup> Burawoy, *Ethnography Unbound*, pp.8-9.

<sup>113</sup> Burawoy, 'Extended Case Method', p.20.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

the world of the participants - through participant observation or interviewing - as the means through which meaning comes to the fore.<sup>115</sup> For Burawoy, the researcher's job is to actively engage the theory with the situation, seeking opportunities to test and correct it through questioning.

Essentially then, Burawoy's work applies the concept that, 'discovery and justification [are] part of a single process'<sup>116</sup> or that discovery is, in Charles Ragin's words, 'a dynamic interplay between theory and data'.<sup>117</sup> This understanding of social science - which is in turn indebted to Hans Georg Gadamer<sup>118</sup> - posits that the relationship between particular and universal is a dialogical one, whereby the specific object of enquiry - the 'case' - becomes a vehicle to reconfigure and change prior theorisation as the theory is taken to it. I agree with Luke Bretherton's claim that this reflexive science model is important for practical theology more generally then, because it offers a way of understanding how prior (in this case theological) convictions relate to empirical observation, which at once refuses to suspend theological assumptions whilst avoiding the danger that the object of enquiry might be subsumed by them.<sup>119</sup> What Burawoy models is a way of engaging theological constructs with the situation from the outset. In this approach however it is the theological principles that shape the empirical study itself: we are looking for where the theological constructs make sense of, or, perhaps more importantly, do not make sense of, what is going on in situations. My use of Burawoy's approach in this thesis is therefore analogous to Bretherton's application of the ECM as he researched London Citizens. I thus agree with Bretherton that, '[Burawoy's approach] points to how particular and often anomalous case studies can help enrich and develop

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<sup>115</sup> 'In the view of reflexive science, intervention is not only an unavoidable part of social research but a virtue to be exploited.' Ibid., p.14.

<sup>116</sup> Burawoy, *Ethnography Unbound*, p.8.

<sup>117</sup> Ragin, *Fuzzy Set*, p.xiv.

<sup>118</sup> See for example, Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd edn. (London: Sheed & Ward, 1988), p.446f.

<sup>119</sup> Thus I see Burawoy's approach as a working out of John Swinton's argument that practical theology must move away from correlative methods, towards the fact that the theologian researches precisely as a theologian. See John Swinton, "'Where is Your Church?' Moving Towards a Hospitable and Sanctified Ethnography', in *Perspectives*, ed. by Ward, pp.71-92.

conceptualisations [...]; where Bretherton completes the sentence, ‘of the relationship between Christianity and politics’, so I would have, ‘of the Church of England’s engagement with place’.<sup>120</sup>

## 2.5 Summary

I began this chapter by suggesting that one way in which the critiques of Fx model an overly idealized account of the parish is in the way they fail to engage with empirical data. What I have endeavoured to do here is establish the methodological foundation of a theological-empirical approach, from which we are able to evaluate the Church’s ecclesial praxis. I have argued that Michael Burawoy’s approach offers us a model; an investigation into a social reality which is committed to questions of theological normativity, without allowing the situation to disappear within predetermined theological categories.

Bretherton summarises the relevance of Burawoy’s approach to theological research:

[Making] judgements requires dialogic encounter with practice and the ways preexisting theological judgements fail to connect with practice, and practice challenges existing theological frames of reference. Flux and multiplicity become occasions for refinement and further specificity in theology as judgement on practice.<sup>121</sup>

The judgements this thesis is concerned with are those around the Church of England’s vocation to presence and its ecclesial structures. My goal is to bring together the various theologies of place that are wrapped up in the discussion about the parish structure (Chapter 1), the Church of England’s reflections on its praxis (Chapter 3), as well as reflections from Human geography (Chapter 4) into this ‘dialogical encounter with practice’, so as to help make better judgements. In the following two chapters I shall seek to develop something resembling Burawoy’s ‘theory’; the basis from which I will be able to enter into dialogue with the four church places.

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<sup>120</sup> Bretherton, ‘Uses of Ethnography’.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., p.165.



# Chapter 3 / The Task of Re-examining the Parish in Historical Perspective

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## 3.1 Introduction

A crucial aspect of the type of theological-empirical approach I have been advocating in this thesis is what Healy calls ‘theological history’.<sup>122</sup> Since, as he puts it, ‘the church’s concrete identity is historical’, it is important that we reflect on the history of the church’s engagement with the theological principles that concern us. This reflection should be seen as the first part of my move into empirical observation, before the research of the four churches. My aims are twofold. In the first instance I wish to demonstrate that the type of evaluation of the system I have advocated so far is not a new phenomenon but has been carried out before; indeed with careful consideration of the parish principles outlined in Chapter 1. Second, I wish to draw out the common threads in these reflections which helped to shape the working theory I took into conversation with the four churches.

## 3.2 The parish and change: urbanisation and E.R. Wickham

I shall focus my analysis in this section on the reflections around the parish structure that have taken place in the last few centuries. However, it would be amiss not to highlight the fact that the parish system has never been a static reality, unresponsive to change. Not all of this responsiveness was as a result of a desire to more faithfully embody the calling to be present.<sup>123</sup> However even a brief survey of the history reveals that the parish structure

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<sup>122</sup> Healy, *Church*, p.158.

<sup>123</sup> More often than not it was financial factors - for example the need to collect tithes, or the ability of freemen in cities to build churches - that shaped the boundaries of England’s parishes. See, for example, N.J.G. Pounds, *A History of the English Parish* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp.69; 72; 77. And Nick Spencer, *Parochial Vision: The Future of the English Parish* (London: Paternoster, 2004). However, it is important to note how changes in the seventeenth century for example did have a more theological, or ‘ministerial’ objective. See Pounds, p.109.

has evolved because of changes to the social, political and geographical make-up of the nation. Thus Anthea Jones highlights the differing 'pastoral patterns' which shaped the parish structure in the Anglo-Saxon period with the system a mesh of 'Roman', 'Gallic' and 'Irish' models of ministry.<sup>124</sup> Likewise, in the south of the country, different patterns emerged through the tenth century as a result of the differing theological and ecclesial visions of its Bishops.<sup>125</sup> Even following the Norman Conquest, at the point when parish boundaries were defined and tightened<sup>126</sup> to give the more consistent pattern we find in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, there remained huge variety in what constituted a 'parish church'; the differences remained for example, between villages and towns or cities.<sup>127</sup> This 'adaption and modification'<sup>128</sup> continued throughout the parish system's history. Indeed, the variety in church structures - through the breakdown of the minster model to parish churches, chapels of ease, oratories, chantries and wayside chapels - highlights the fact that the forms of ministry in the church across the country varied as they responded to particular demands.<sup>129</sup> The question of the goal of this responsiveness is one that lies beyond my focus here, my point is simply that the history of the parish system demonstrates that it has always been a system that changes, growing up out of England's agricultural practices and evolving as these practices and patterns of living developed through history.

One of the greatest change in these patterns has come through the urbanisation of the country following the Industrial Revolution. The parish system, based as it was on an agricultural form of life, struggled to make sense in more urban contexts and the towns

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<sup>124</sup> Anthea Jones, *A Thousand Years of the English Parish: Medieval Patterns and Modern Interpretations* (Gloucester: Windrush Press, 2000), p.42f.

<sup>125</sup> So, Dunstan, Oswald and Aethelwold. See Jones, pp.68-71.

<sup>126</sup> Jones notes the Norman Conquest as the point at which parish boundaries can be said to have become 'fixed' in the way we know them today (Jones, p.49). So also Pounds writes of 'an emerging system of parishes in this period'. Pounds, p.32.

<sup>127</sup> See Spencer, pp.16-20.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, p.20.

<sup>129</sup> So Pounds, 'there were always ambiguities and uncertainties [... some of which] were not settled until the parliamentary enclosures of the eighteenth century or the tithe awards of the nineteenth'. Pounds, p.37.

and cities tended to have their own more fluid forms of ecclesial structure.<sup>130</sup> However the changes that arose as a result of mass urbanisation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries resulted in particularly acute challenges. In particular the rate of population growth quickly stretched a system which had relied on there being one official parish church for an urban district. In Leeds for example, by 1841 the parish church was serving over 150,000 people.<sup>131</sup> Likewise in Liverpool, which was considered to come under the remit of one rectory, the population grew from 10,000 in 1700 to almost 150,000 by 1831. Though the Church's response in each city differed, common reactions were to restructure dioceses, build new churches and create new parish boundaries or districts. The 1851 Religious Census revealed that there had been over 1255 subdivisions of parishes and districts up to that year.<sup>132</sup> Even when new churches were built and boundaries created however, the question remained as to whether the principle of parish and parochial responsibility could really work in these new urban settings: indeed, in the latter half of the century there were many within the Church who questioned this principle of subdivision. For instance, the drawing of boundaries was seen to be far more complex in urban settings, where there were less defined centres of culture and economy.<sup>133</sup> Furthermore, it was felt by some that the rapid building of churches and creation of parishes micronised the system, with too many parishes sitting alongside one another. This had the immediate impact of stretching resources - as churches and

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<sup>130</sup> See Pounds, pp.113-114. Sheridan Gilley argues that at the start of the nineteenth century, pastoral provision was so focused on the rural South and Midlands, with parishes in the North so large that the Church was unprepared for urbanisation. Thus, 'the Church of England could be said to have lost the modern urban working class in the very decades of its formation'. Gilley, 'The Church of England 1800-1900' in *A History of Religion in Britain*, ed. by Sheridan Gilley and W.J. Shiels (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), pp.291-305. There are of course a number of other factors - including the increased separation of the Church and welfare provision and the social divide between clergy and people - that led to the Church being unable to respond to urbanisation. See, for example, Frances Knight, *The Nineteenth Century Church and English Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p.66-71 and Kenneth Hylson-Smith, *The Churches in England from Elizabeth I to Elizabeth II*, vol.3 (London: SCM, 1998), p.168.

<sup>131</sup> Jones, p.272.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., p.268. The impetus for building churches came not so much from the Church as from Parliament, who saw the Church in its local form as a force to control social unrest. See Pounds, p.507.

<sup>133</sup> Jones, p.383.

rectories were built - but also tended towards a parochialism rather than a combined, strategic ministry.<sup>134</sup> In 1851, Horace Mann, who wrote the report on the Census of that year, argued that the Church's policy of establishing 'much minuter subdivisions of existing districts - with the erection of much smaller churches', should be seen as just one option for the Church. For him the preferred strategy was for, 'additional agents as auxiliaries to the regular incumbent' in each district. Thus, '[there is] no scheme for giving to a clergyman the cure of souls, within a small and definite locality, apart from the very onerous duties which attach to the possession of a church'.<sup>135</sup> For Mann therefore it was not that the system itself was wrong, but rather that it needed applying in a particular way - specifically the move towards greater numbers of clergy working from one (larger) parish - if it was to truly allow the Church to be what it desired to be. Likewise the architect Gilbert Scott argued in 1871 that the parochial system was being 'pushed to the extreme'. Where the accepted practice of the age was to create smaller and more 'local' church boundaries, for Scott, 'to meet the real wants of the day, everything should be large'.<sup>136</sup>

Perhaps one way of making sense of the debates around the parish in the nineteenth century then is to say that urbanisation presented the Church with a new 'finding' to which it was forced to respond. The nature of this response, and how the Church took the particular given of the parish system into this new situation, is all-important: in large part it seems as though in this period the givens of parish functioned, in Richard Murphy's terms, as 'mythology'.<sup>137</sup> Such a description is apt here, for 'myth' carries precisely the sense of an all-encompassing, accepted narrative which functions

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<sup>134</sup> It is important to note that in this period the Church - in its parochial form - was not completely disconnected from communities but could be present in very rich ways. Hylson-Smith for example highlights the work of the 'slum-priests'. See Hylson-Smith, pp.65-9.

<sup>135</sup> Mann in Jones, p.268.

<sup>136</sup> Gilbert Scott in Jones, p.283. Additional non-parochial ministries did indeed develop in this period with district visitation societies, described by Hylson-Smith as 'a supplement to the traditional piecemeal visiting'. See Hylson-Smith, p.65.

<sup>137</sup> So, writing about the 1850 Act which allowed for the creation of new parishes and divisions of existing districts, Murphy writes, 'The possibility of any concerted effort to tackle its problems was deferred indefinitely by the triumph of Anglican parish mythology in the Manchester Rectory Division Act.' Jones, p.272.

apart from the level of evaluation and critique.<sup>138</sup> Seen thus, the counter-response might not be a denial of this narrative altogether, but a move to find ways in which the narrative might be evaluated and applied so as to retain its gifts without being bound to any one outworking.

One example of such a re-evaluation of the parish system in light of urbanisation is E.R. Wickham's *Church and People in an Industrial City*. I highlight Wickham's book here – despite Wickham working and writing in the mid-twentieth rather than the nineteenth century – because it is asking the same question: how might the Church in its commitment to be present, deal with the very different situation it is confronted with in post-industrial, urban Britain?<sup>139</sup>

Wickham opens his book with a blunt reading of the situation as he saw it, naming the 'transparent' fact of the 'weakness and collapse of the churches in the urbanised and industrialised areas of the country'.<sup>140</sup> He suggests that at the heart of the failure to engage in any meaningful way with the working classes is an overfocus on the 'religious' elements of the Church's life, rather than living out its 'prophetic role',<sup>141</sup> one which, 'apprehend[s] the totality of human life.'<sup>142</sup> Drawing on P.T. Forsyth, as well as Barth, Wickham is critical of a theology which concerns itself solely with 'sick souls', rather than the fullness of human existence, including its social situatedness. Such a theology he argues, 'demands a concept of the church engaged in persistent, purposeful permeation of the world'.<sup>143</sup> The church, he writes:

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<sup>138</sup> Specifically, this myth was bound to a rural vision of church-world relationship, the context within which the parish had its origins. As Adrian Hastings argues, 'English Society by 1920 was overwhelmingly urban, the Church of England's clerical deployment and pastoral vision was still fundamentally rural.' Hastings, *A History of English Christianity 1920-2000* (London: SCM, 4th ed., 2001), p.65. I see this same 'rural' myth in more recent defences of the parish structure, with *For the Parish* being a good example.

<sup>139</sup> E.R. Wickham, *Church and People in an Industrial City* (London: William Clowes and Sons, 4th Impression, 1962).

<sup>140</sup> Wickham, p.11.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., p.14.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., p.224.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

seeks neither to manipulate nor dominate the world, nor escape from it, nor reflect a voluntarist religious aspect of it, but to understand it, prophesy within it, interpret it and stain it.<sup>144</sup>

Wickham's vision of the church's place within society resonates with the concept of presence I outlined in the Chapter 1, albeit with an emphasis on the church as working for the common good as articulated by Martyn Percy. Wickham is working with a foundational concept of church as existing within the world's givens, the church's inherent 'secularity'.<sup>145</sup> We need, he argues, to 'seek God's will for the world' in its fullness.<sup>146</sup>

From this basis, Wickham is critical of the parish structure for at least two reasons. One, the Church's vocation to take the givens of the world seriously means that it needs to be responsive to the fact of secularisation. The Church's structure, he states, 'was inherited from ancient time, and ideally presupposes a conformist population and even a 'theonomous' society'.<sup>147</sup> As Wickham sees it, the reality was that the Church, especially in working-class areas, had ceased to be of relevance in any meaningful way to people's lives. The structure that emphasises simply 'being there' - the cure of souls taken in a purely responsive fashion - ceased to fully meet the vocation to 'permeate' society. Two, not only do people's theological commitments differ, but their pattern of living is fundamentally unserved by a model of territorial coverage. It is not only the case that urban areas are far denser, or that people are more transient - living, working and socialising in a variety of locations - but the very structure of social grouping has changed. Wickham acknowledges that people now gather, not on the basis of location, but according to employment, interest, or political affiliation. Given the situation, argues Wickham, it would be tempting to reject the parish system altogether. However:

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid., p.230.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., p.242.

This is not to condemn the existing [parish] structure for what it can do, but for what it cannot do. It still can express the Church in local, visible congregations, and bring an influence upon personal and family life in the locality.<sup>148</sup>

Therefore, in all of the suggestions he puts forward, Wickham consistently adds the caveat that the parish system itself is not the problem. Indeed, in line with the arguments of Chapter 1, I read Wickham as arguing that the discussion must move away from overfocusing on systems. It can be the ‘devil’s work’ he claims to separate the parish and non-parochial forms and ‘set the one against the other’.<sup>149</sup> For this reason, his discussions of the parish and non-parish forms are always focused on the goal of engaging with the givens of the context. That is, he asks what sort of church might be expressed in these new contexts based on the Church’s vocation. The answer as he sees it will not necessarily be a particular system but the wise application of the values of responsiveness and commitment to the givens of society; what I have here described as the Church’s vocation to presence. In this sense the parish offers what it did prior to the breakdown of the church-state relationship envisaged by Hooker: an ability to ‘express’ the Church visually and locally, and bring influence. The difference is that, according to Wickham, these ideals cannot be taken for granted in the current context. He writes that the parish system is ‘lamed’ unless it can find ‘new living means and permanent machinery of engagement with mammoth populations’. Wickham shares here the sense outlined in the Church report *Presence and Engagement*, produced nearly 50 years later, that genuine presence requires engagement: churches are called to move into contexts and situations proactively, rather than simply being located.<sup>150</sup> Wickham suggests that this can in part be learned from the Methodist class structure, wherein smaller gatherings of individuals might be established within parishes and focused on mission. Importantly, he describes these as

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid., p.245.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., p.246.

<sup>150</sup> Archbishops’ Council, *Presence and Engagement*, p.8.

‘indigenous expressions of the Christian community’; their strength will lie precisely in their being local and responsive to the particularities of any given context.<sup>151</sup> The unique offering in Wickham’s book however remains his argument for the need for ‘supplements’ to the parish system and specifically for expressions of church that offer sustained engagement in industry. Industrial cities, argues Wickham, demand a different sort of response given the unique way in which patterns of life function. Of industrial areas such as Sheffield, Wickham writes, ‘industrial principalities [...] make the town and determine its social structure’.<sup>152</sup> Taking the concept I have been developing in this chapter, we might say that for Wickham, if the Church seeks to be present in such contexts, it must be present to the spheres of life, work and gathering to which the people themselves identify. Further, for him there is a sense that the church which lives out this ‘secular’ gospel must engage with people in the fullness of their existence and not just on the basis of where they live. Such engagement, suggests Wickham, will be based ‘on a web of relationships’ and by ‘personal contact over a large area and within institutions’.<sup>153</sup> In this sense, the Industrial Mission resembles a traditional chaplaincy model of ministry. The difference for Wickham is that the mission is itself church. It encourages worship and fellowship within the industrial context rather than, say, offering pastoral care in this context but finally encouraging individuals to go to the parish church. Furthermore, Wickham stresses the need for such engagement to be ‘continuing and permanent’.<sup>154</sup> The distinction is that where the parish expresses this permanence in terms of a commitment to be in one locale - ‘historical continuity of the place of worship’<sup>155</sup> - these new contexts demand a different sort of permanence, based instead on fidelity to relationships with people and institutions.

*Church and People in an Industrial City* is therefore far from a critique of the parish but rather of the way in which the system is implemented. Running through Wickham’s

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<sup>151</sup> Wickham, p.267.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., pp.243-4.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., p.245.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.



argument is a commitment to the principles embodied within the system, namely a Church that is local, permanent, responsive to need and concerned with the breadth of human experience. I see Wickham's book as a sustained attempt to show how the principles of the parish might be implemented in new and creative ways to meet the challenges of what it finds in the world.

### **3.3 From Paul to *A Measure for Measures***

I have looked at some examples of the Church's response to the 'finding' of cultural change and specifically the challenges presented by population growth and urbanisation. I now want to explore some of the significant pieces of work that led to *MSC* in 2004 and which, I suggest, demonstrate the same type of reimagining of the parish principle.

The reports, *The Deployment and Payment of the Clergy* (1964) and *A Strategy for the Church's Mission* (1983) by Leslie Paul and John Tiller respectively, demonstrate the Church of England's examination of existing patterns of ministry in light of the rapid changes in the country.<sup>156</sup> Though the world changed a great deal in the twenty years between Paul's report and Tiller's, their diagnosis of the challenge facing the Church of England is strikingly similar in tone. Both reports are underwritten by an acute awareness of the decline in attendance and the increasing disconnect between the life of everyday people and the Church.<sup>157</sup> Although their descriptions of social and cultural change differ, they share an awareness that the Church is failing to meet its vocation, struggling to find its place in the nation.

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<sup>156</sup> Leslie Paul, *The Deployment and Payment of the Clergy* (London: Church Information Office, 1964); John Tiller, *A Strategy for the Church's Mission* (London: Church Information Office, 1983). The Paul report stands out as the first sustained engagement with the empirical data on decline and social change. See Robin Gill, *The 'Empty' Church Revisited* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), p.205.

<sup>157</sup> The reasons they offer for the situation differ in emphasis. By the time Tiller wrote his report he could stress more confidently the process of secularisation, characterised by a general 'permissiveness' and 'pluralism'. Paul's description of the situation is more focused on the result of industrialisation, urbanisation, population growth and the atomisation of post-war Britain. See Tiller, pp.11-16 and Paul, pp.35-52.

Paul writes in his introduction that, ‘One of the necessary tasks today is to see the pastoral charge of the Church over against the social patterns and demographic groupings given by history.’<sup>158</sup> The ‘givens’ he speaks of here refer both to the Church’s own ‘social patterns’ and to those of the nation. The task is to reflect on both, that is, to consider the response of the Church to social change, but only by taking stock of the social norms of the Church itself. What is clear throughout Paul’s report is that the parish, as a foundational ‘given’, must be evaluated accordingly. However the report should not be seen as anti-parochial, or even anti- the parochial clergy, as some of its critics suggested,<sup>159</sup> but rather should, like Wickham’s book, be recognised as an engagement with the system. For example, Paul emphasises the strides that had been made in creating team and group ministries, as well as the importance of chaplaincy and secular ministries, and his recommendations focus on giving Bishops more freedom in formalising these as well as redefining groups of parishes as single benefices.<sup>160</sup> For Paul, commitment to locality could be enhanced by giving a number of clergy responsibility for one (larger) area, what he calls ‘major-parishes.’<sup>161</sup> He suggests that such parishes would have a single PCC but would be constituted by a ‘college’ of stipendiary and non-stipendiary priests as well as lay ministers.<sup>162</sup> One way of interpreting Paul’s report then is to say that it values ministry over strict territoriality. This focus on people does of course make sense given Paul’s remit to consider the deployment of clergy. There is a strong theme in the report though that the emphasis in the Church’s ministry must shift from maintenance of a system of parishes, towards a placement of ministers within a locality who would be able to better serve that location. It is in this same way that the highlighting of sector ministries should be viewed. Paul labels these ‘extraparochial places’ since they focus on ‘institutions’ or

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<sup>158</sup> Paul, p.15.

<sup>159</sup> See Welsby, pp.134-136.

<sup>160</sup> Paul, pp.174f. The list of recommendations are found on pp.210-211.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., pp.176-177.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid. It is Paul’s comments on ‘major-parishes’ that are picked up by Spencer who claims, I think convincingly, that the recommendations in Paul’s report can be seen as pushing the Church towards a minster model. See Spencer, pp.128-135.

‘establishments’ within existing parish boundaries; his recommendation is that the Bishop should have the freedom to define ‘pastoral responsibility’ in such situations.<sup>163</sup> Overall then, Paul’s approach to the parish is best summarised by his comments early on in the report:

[The parish system] has served the Church well [...however] it was a system inherently more suitable to a country where the population was dispersed over the countryside than to one where, as now, it is concentrated in towns: the increasing urbanisation of England has more than ever revealed the inadequacies of deploying clergy territorially irrespective, for the most part, of population concentrations.

As such:

What originally was the common sense policy of providing one priest for every natural community has become in effect in our time a haphazard distribution of men.<sup>164</sup>

What is important is Paul’s description of both past and future. In the first instance, his claim is that the parish always *was* about a ‘strategy’, that is, it was established and perpetuated in this way because it made sense of the Church’s vocation and how it worked it out given the situation that it found itself in, namely an agricultural pattern of life. The argument follows that in the very same way, the Church needs again to be strategic: not to abandon the vocation (total coverage, forming communities, responsive to ‘natural community’, as Paul expresses it) but rather to find ways of working it out in a new and very different situation. Specifically for Paul this means finding new ways to ensure that what shapes the Church’s mission to localities is ministry rather than territoriality.

The Tiller report follows the same pattern as the Paul report in offering what Tiller calls a ‘reassessment’ of the parochial system in light of cultural and social change.<sup>165</sup> However Tiller is more acute in his focus on mission - which he contrasts with

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid., p.177.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., p.23.

<sup>165</sup> Tiller, p.50.

‘maintenance’ - as the imperative of the Church. The parish system then, ‘may cover the ground very well [...] but does it necessarily constitute the best way of ministering the Gospel in the highly urbanised society of modern Britain?’<sup>166</sup> In answer, Tiller offers six reasons why he sees the parish as a ‘weak tool for mission’. Of these, the first three are of particular interest for my purposes. First, the parish system, he argues, perpetuates an ‘emphasis on maintenance’. Second, the parochial boundaries are essentially meaningless, both because of the rate of geographical development, but also because of their insignificance to everyday people. And third, the system tends towards ‘isolationism’ rather than cooperation in ministry.<sup>167</sup> Significantly however, after outlining the problems, Tiller highlights what he sees as the three strengths of the parish system: the availability of pastoral care, community as opposed to ‘attractional’ churches, and offering a public face to the Church. The Church, writes Tiller, must be ‘always there’, able to ‘say something’ about social issues rather than simply ‘fulfil individual need’, and welcome ‘any and all’.<sup>168</sup> How then does Tiller carry through these features into his evaluation of the parish? In many respects he shares Paul’s recommendations: primarily that need should be met by a focus on ministry, not mapping. This includes, just as the Paul report suggested, more formal procedures for creating and establishing team ministry, but also for building up lay involvement.<sup>169</sup> For Tiller, what is essential is the move towards rediscovering the importance of the diocese as the basic unit of responsibility for mission and ministry, with the Bishop given more freedom to respond to particular missional needs. It is a linguistic feature which stands out in Tiller’s report however: he advocates a move from parochial ministry to one focused on ‘locality’. Thus, alongside the stress on the episcopate, the other essential idea of the report is that, ‘The local church, as the Body of Christ in a particular place should be responsible for undertaking the ministry of the Gospel in its

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., p.72.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., pp.74-5.

<sup>169</sup> See Ibid., pp.65-70.

own area'.<sup>170</sup> Later, Tiller describes what he means by 'local church'. It is, he states, essentially a deanery, consisting of various ministers, congregations and what he calls 'cells'. The important thing to note is that, for Tiller, the 'local church' continues to be encapsulated by a geographical area of responsibility.<sup>171</sup> In one sense then, Tiller's report takes up Paul's recommendations about team ministry, but provides a new language to understand it: in the place of 'colleges' or 'major-parishes', he speaks instead of 'localities'. It is of course possible to see this stress on locality simply as the broadening out of the principle of the parish, that is, Tiller simply makes the parish bigger. However, the implication is more subtle than this. 'Locality' is a looser construct than the parish. As with the Paul report, it emphasises ministry rather than territory. Here the territory which is designated - the deanery - is far more of an administrative tool than a theological commitment. The commitment towards locality and presence remains but the geographical designation is not itself the defining feature of this commitment. Rather for Tiller, the commitment is defined by the ministry.

The shift in language from 'parish' to locality is also a defining feature of *Faith in the City*. In this report, as in Tiller's and Paul's, the parish principle is praised. The parish embodies the Church's 'responsibility', it 'offers an immediate sphere for Christian compassion, concern and solidarity with others'.<sup>172</sup> The unique contribution of *Faith in the City* though is the way in which the authors allow this theological vision to form the basis of the very evaluation of the parish system. Specifically, they stress that the structure must itself be responsive to the particularities of the environment it seeks to be part of, that is, if the parish system embodies close listening and collaboration, then the structure must reflect the unique identity of places as they are given. Thus:

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<sup>170</sup> Ibid., p.48.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., p.76.

<sup>172</sup> Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission, *Faith in the City*, p.59. The parish is the embodying of a theology which 'recognizes that God is at work in society' (p.76).

The recognition of the significance of the neighbourhood for the local church is very much in the Anglican parochial tradition. Parish boundaries were originally designed to make each parish coterminous with a virtually self-contained community.<sup>173</sup>

Urban priority churches, the authors argue, 'must be sensitive to the local cultures and life-styles in its leadership, worship and manner of operating'.<sup>174</sup> As such, the language used throughout the report is of 'neighbourhoods', rather than parishes:

By a neighbourhood, we mean that part of a locality which is defined more easily by the people living there than by bodies such as Diocesan Pastoral Committees. People know where their neighbourhood begins and ends [...] a neighbourhood may be larger than an existing parish and may cross existing parochial boundaries.<sup>175</sup>

In terms of the praxis that might follow from this approach, *Faith in the City* makes particular recommendations about the need for flexibility in parish boundaries but again shares much of Tiller and Paul's reflections on the need to focus on larger ministry areas (the report highlights the deanery as the most obvious unit), and for the importance of new smaller missional churches to grow up within these areas that will have a 'commitment to a locality, and not simply to a congregation'.<sup>176</sup> Unique to the report - but certainly following a line of thought that can be traced through Wickham's reflections - the authors suggest that within these larger ministry areas, there will need to be an increased focus on sector ministries and ministries aimed at specific groups with whom the parish church would otherwise fail to connect.

The final report I wish to highlight here is the most recent. *A Measure for Measures [MM]* was produced in 2004 - almost simultaneously with *MSC* - with the focus of assessing the various measures passed by the Church of England in the previous thirty or so years which had sought to provide greater flexibility in the Church's ecclesial

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid., p.93.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., p.75.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., p.93.

structures.<sup>177</sup> The recommendations in *MM* would lead to a new Pastoral Measure in 2005 and, in 2007, to a reforming of the 1983 Pastoral Measure to create one new Measure. The report is therefore the basis of the Church's legislation on Fx/CP and BMOs as it currently stands.<sup>178</sup>

As with *MSC*, the report begins with a narrative of change: the shift from a 'local' to a more networked and transient society.<sup>179</sup> Accordingly, the report follows the trajectory of the reports and thinking analysed here, seeing such change as requiring a 'mixed economy' of churches. The suggestion is that what is needed to meet the challenge of providing 'cure of souls' across the nation is a mixture of 'parish and network churches'.<sup>180</sup>

The report is framed by a theological account by Malcolm Brown, whose approach in large part models the type of Anglican approach to ecclesiology I have been outlining in this thesis.<sup>181</sup> Addressing the call for a single, unequivocal pronouncement of the Church of England's missional or ecclesial strategy, he argues, 'For a church to make up its mind in that way would mean that it had foreclosed on a number of equally authentic Christian understandings of what the church is called to be'.<sup>182</sup> For Brown the task of the Church today as it considers its ecclesial structures is precisely to draw on the Church of England's inbuilt heterogeneity and especially the central tension between - put crudely - mission and distinctiveness. Brown plays, for example, with the important Anglican balance between the local and the central. The problem is not the balance, he suggests - indeed such a balance may well be precisely one of the 'gifts' offered by the system - rather it is that if 'locality' changes meaning in society, we may need to reassess how it is that we *are*

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<sup>177</sup> Archbishops' Council, *A Measure for Measures in Mission and Ministry, Report of the Review of the Dioceses, Pastoral and related Measures* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004).

<sup>178</sup> A summary list of recommendations can be found on pp.96-105.

<sup>179</sup> *Measure for Measures*, p.1.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, p.2,

<sup>181</sup> Malcolm Brown, 'Whose Church? Which Culture?: Discerning the Missionary Structures for Tomorrow', in *Measure for Measures*, pp.107-128.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, p.107.

local. The problem as he sees it is that some ‘versions’ of locality are difficult to align with the gospel model of sociality:

[There are hazards] in choosing the network as the model of the church in an age when networking has been used more for creating the divisions beloved of marketing theories [...] than for expressing the interdependence and mutuality of the gospel’s social vision.<sup>183</sup>

At each point Brown’s analysis is cautious. In line with the type of Anglican approach I have outlined, he is wary of holding up any one structure or system over another. The call, he states, is not so much faithfulness or obedience, as ‘discernment’.<sup>184</sup> It is beyond my remit here to assess the results of this discernment, by evaluating the specific recommendations made. Rather I simply wish to highlight that the character of these recommendations is one of reflection and evaluation. Summarising, Brown argues in terms consistent with my argument up to this point:

The report represents a cautious step toward freeing the Church of England to become more structurally adaptable whilst retaining the virtues perceived to subsist in the structures it already has. That caution is a measured response to the uncertainty of the age and the difficulty of reading the times accurately in the light of the gospel.<sup>185</sup>

The discernment that characterises Brown’s theological investigation and the Measures which followed is, I would suggest, a basic feature of the more recent reflections on the parish system since *MSC*. The collection of essays, *The Future of the Parish System*, for example, can be seen as a cautious exploration of some of these ecclesial developments, again seeking to hold to the core tensions identified by Brown.<sup>186</sup> Rowan Williams, in his essay examining some of the theological questions posed by such re-evaluations, writes of the negative ‘potential’ in each ecclesial approach - for the parish to offer ‘mild religious

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid., p.121.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid., p.122.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid., p.128.

<sup>186</sup> *The Future of the Parish System*, ed. by Steven Croft (London: Church House Publishing, 2006).



gloss' to culture, and for non-parochial churches to become 'separatist, self-sufficient [and] unconcerned with wider relationships'.<sup>187</sup> The task is therefore always a dynamic one: to hold to the vision of the parish (which Williams identifies as the Church being 'simply there [...] accessible', and pronouncing the, 'sheer local availability of God' and of His people who are in 'solidarity' with the world)<sup>188</sup> whilst recognising the problems of aligning oneself to any particular expression of this value. Specifically, and in line with the reflections we have seen up to now, Williams emphasises locality over geography since, as he puts it, the Church's relationship to society always transcends boundaries. The Church is called to 'show itself credible by being where people are, literally and culturally'; but such a positioning 'is not something like the occupation of a territory over and against the rest of human interest'.<sup>189</sup> And so, argues Michael Moynagh, it might be that the Church of England in the future may need to become 'more local than in the past' and that as traditional, geographically defined patterns of life fall away, the Church needs to become responsive to the less obvious ways in which people inhabit spaces.<sup>190</sup>

### 3.4 Summary

This has been a brief overview of a selection of the multiple pieces of work carried out that explore the parish system and the Church of England's ecclesiology. My goal in exploring it has been to help shape my working theory, from which to engage with the four churches. What I hope to have shown is that alongside the historical fact of the parish system's flexibility and adaptability, there have been in the last few centuries a number of concerted attempts to evaluate the effectiveness and appropriateness of the parish system in meeting the Church's vocation to presence. In the first chapter I argued that such reflection on praxis is faithful to an Anglican model of reasoning. My claim has been that what unites these reflections is a commitment to upholding what I have called

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<sup>187</sup> Rowan Williams, 'Theological Resources for Re-Examining Church.' in Croft ed., pp.49-60, (p.55).

<sup>188</sup> Ibid., p.54.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., p.55.

<sup>190</sup> Michael Moynagh, 'Good Practice is Not What it Used to be' in Croft ed., pp.110-124, (p.118).

the principles of the parish system, namely a church that is present to each and every community of the nation, responsive to what it finds in the world. What is offered in these reflections then is not a different system to replace the old, nor an undervaluing of the strengths of the parish, but rather an attempt to draw out these strengths and allow the Church to better fulfil its vocation. That is, in each case, an argument is put forward that the parish principle and the structure are not one and the same thing, but that the former may need to be implemented in a variety of ways. I suggest that there are three common threads that run through these reflections following this initial premise. First, there is a reimagining of the parish system in terms of ministry rather than (merely) territory. Second, there is an untying of 'parish' and 'local' with the latter recognised to refer to a number of different forms, from 'neighbourhood' to 'where people are'. This, as I shall examine more closely in the following chapter, is where space/place theory begins to connect. Parish as a spatial system is different from the commitment to be present in place. What unites the reflections explored in this chapter therefore is an awareness that place is a necessarily complex phenomenon and that the parish structure, which is necessarily spatial, is unable to cater to the type of presence that place in its variety demands. In this sense, they are seeking to be faithful to places as they are found, rather than to predetermined spaces. Third, there is a challenge for the Church to offer greater flexibility in its structures so that it might be better placed to implement these previous two threads.

## Chapter 4 / Space and Place

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### 4.1 Introduction

Central to the defences of the parish system I have referred to in this thesis is an appeal to the importance of place, over what is perceived to be the modern condition of placelessness. Where the parish presents a church grounded in a specific locality, responsive to the particularities of that place, so Fx/CP is perceived to be non-specific, constructed through association and networks. In Chapter 1 however, I argued that a commitment to presence in place will entail more than a simple reinforcing of the parochial system, and in the previous chapter I explored some of the pieces of work that were wrestling with this fact. In this chapter I wish to examine these issues through a different lens, namely human geography. My contention here is that although the underlying anxiety about placelessness is an important one, finding resonances in much recent theological writing, the resulting rejection of Fx and subsequent support for the parish system is unhelpful. As humanistic geographers convey, place is a more complex phenomenon than such critiques imply. I hope that this exploration of space and place will therefore give language to some of the re-imagining of the parish system in the Church's history I described in the previous chapter. A full account of this issue would set the exploration of place within a wider discussion of secularism, which is described by Charles Taylor as the retreat of religion from the public space.<sup>191</sup> In this sense, the downplaying of the parish system - at least in the UK - has been explicitly identified as part of the process of secularisation. Specifically, the perceived 'loss' of the parish is held as an example, even cause, of the de-sacralisation of place - its flattening out - inherent to secular modernity.<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> See, e.g., Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007) and "Foreword," in *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*, by M. Gauchet (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. ix-xv, ix-x.

<sup>192</sup> Milbank, 'Stale', p.125.

## 4.2 Place overcoming placelessness?

An affirmation of place has been a feature of much recent theological writing<sup>193</sup> and indeed of the Church of England's own recent ecclesial reflections.<sup>194</sup> God, it has been claimed, is met only in the particularities of human experience and time; in place. In the incarnation - the prototypical theological event - God is discovered not through abstract reasoning, but is encountered, through the particularity of a human life. The incarnation therefore models what is true of us as created persons, that we have significance not as 'types' but as human subjects constructed as physical, and not merely sentient, beings. To be human is to be embodied, to be in place. And it is precisely this commitment which underpins the critiques of Fx. Where Christian theology is recognised as a movement back into the earth as it were, so this ecclesiology, which appears to value relationality and network, is perceived to be a legitimisation of placelessness; a *dis*-embodied way of being. In the claims that Fx fails to connect physicality with ideal (Davison and Alison Milbank), that it accepts wholesale certain anti-gospel modes of association (John Milbank) or that it sacralises 'newness and alternatives' (Percy), the underlying anxiety is consistent. Fx are an example of a de-physicalised ecclesiology, one which too readily embraces modernistic notions of abstract space and network flows. In contrast, the parish is espoused as valuing place. Parish churches are situated: not only do they respond to particular locales, but they also act *as* places; they offer the world place where it frequently finds only consumption.

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<sup>193</sup> So, John Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003); David Brown, *God and the Enchantment of Place* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Philip Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred: Place, Memory and Identity* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001); Timothy J. Gorringer, *A Theology of the Built Environment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); and Oliver O'Donovan, 'The Loss of a Sense of Place', in Oliver O'Donovan and Joan Lockwood O'Donovan, *Bonds of Imperfection: Christian Politics, Past and Present* (Grand Rapids, M.I.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004), pp.296-320. For an overview of some of these approaches see Sigurd Bergmann, 'Theology in its Spatial Turn', *Religion Compass*, 1:3 (2007), 353-379.

<sup>194</sup> See for example, Church of England, *Report of the Church Buildings Review Group*, (2015), at <[https://www.churchofengland.org/media/2383717/church\\_buildings\\_review\\_report\\_2015.pdf](https://www.churchofengland.org/media/2383717/church_buildings_review_report_2015.pdf)> [accessed 03/07/16], esp. 17-38.

This concern in theology is shared across the social sciences, and not least within human geography which has been concerned in recent times with the relationship between space and place. Specifically, what marks much human geography as it finds itself within the 'spatial turn', is how to deal with the perceived prioritising of space over place in modernity.

The modern understanding is seen to have its roots in the Enlightenment's favouring of generalities over particulars, universal principles over particular happenings, and a Cartesian self who stands *over* space, observing.<sup>195</sup> For geographers, Kant's role is seen as especially important here: his description of geography as a 'propaedeutic' discipline - simply concerned with the raw material upon which activity occurs - is seen as something of a high point in modernity's conception of space.<sup>196</sup> Ultimately then it is claimed that in the modern western conception, space is conceived of as a *tabula rasa*; understood on the basis of Euclidean geometry, 'absolute and infinite as well as empty and a priori in status'.<sup>197</sup> Space, as Michel Foucault would have it, was treated within modernity as, 'the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile'.<sup>198</sup> Place becomes important in that it offers an holistic and experiential conception of spatiality. If 'space' is understood to be uniform, homogenous and abstract, place is seen as specific, lived and experienced. According to Jeff Malpas, the distinction between space and place can be traced back to the Greek terms. Where 'space' - *spadion* or *stadion* - conveys the sense of measurability and distance, place holds, in the case of *topos*, a sense of boundary or limit

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<sup>195</sup> See Timothy Cresswell, *Place: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp.18-21; Rob Shields, 'Knowing Space', *Theory, Culture & Society* 23: 2-3 (2006); Edward Casey, 'How to Get From Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time: Phenomenological Prolegomena', in *Senses of Place* ed. by Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso, (Santa Fe, N.M.: American Research Press, 1996) pp.13-52, (p.35).

<sup>196</sup> Kenneth R. Olwig, 'Landscape as a Contested Topos of Place, Community and Self' in Paul C. Adams and others, eds, *Textures of Place: Exploring Humanist Geographies* (Minneapolis, M.I.: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p.101. So also Crang and Thrift can speak simply of 'the Kantian perspective on space' as a sum of modern, western Enlightenment thought. Mike Crang and Nigel Thrift, eds, *Thinking Space* (London: Routledge, 2000), p.3.

<sup>197</sup> Casey, p.14.

<sup>198</sup> Foucault in Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: the Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989), p.4.

or, in *chora*, the idea of 'ground or matrix' which 'carries over into contemporary ideas of place as a locus of meaning, memory and identity'. Malpas argues:

Since space can indeed be understood in terms of such measurable and uniform expansiveness, so it need not carry within it any sense of its own bound – given any space, one can always conceive of its possible expansion [...] By contrast, place[...]has a content and character that belongs to it – and as such place is essentially qualitative – but the content or character that belongs to place is also such that it encompasses that which is present within it.<sup>199</sup>

Central to the difference between space and place is the concept of boundedness. There is a limit to a particular place: this place is not another place. In contrast, space is not bounded and there are, as Malpas suggests, always other conceivable spaces of that type.

The complexity is found in the fact that, aside from certain renderings, on the whole humanistic geography seeks to avoid perpetuating an absolute distinction between the terms, that is, they work in some sense to reconcile rather than pull apart space and place. They are seen as co-constructive.<sup>200</sup> In this way, the movement 'back into place' - though an important part - is a somewhat oversimplified narrative of what human geography seeks to do in challenging modernity's understandings of spatiality. In this sense, there is a level of complexity to place that I would suggest is frequently underplayed in the 'place / placelessness' narrative employed in some of the theological defenses of the parish system.

### 4.3 Reconciling space and place

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<sup>199</sup> Jeff Malpas, 'Thinking Topographically: Place, Space, and Geography' <<http://jeffmalpas.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Thinking-Topographically-Place-Space-and-Geography.pdf>> [accessed 03/04/16].

<sup>200</sup> These are broad brushstrokes: I acknowledge that speaking about 'human geography' risks synthesising what is an incredibly multifaceted field. I should also point out that human geography is not united in the assumption that space and place need to be held together. Much neo-Marxist thinking for example swallows up place in space: each place is simply an outworking of general (economic) space (see Agnew, p.86). Non-Representational Theory (NRT) on the other hand argues that place is myth. So, Nigel Thrift argues for what he calls a fundamentally 'weak ontology': 'everything is spatial'; 'there is no such thing as a boundary'. (Nigel Thrift, 'Space', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 23: 2-3 (2006), 139-155).

There are several dialectics that play out in the reconciling of space and place. Allan Pred's work on developing structuration theory in geography is particularly significant here.<sup>201</sup> For him, geography's focus on happenings in time and space develops structuration theory so that places become seen as temporal and spatial instances of unfolding structures embodied in practices. Places in this way are instances of the tensions between local/global and individual actors/existing structures. Within place we find an interplay of structures, institutions, power relations, practices and individual identities. As he argues:

Place is therefore a process whereby the reproduction of social and cultural forms, the formation of biographies, and the transformation of nature ceaselessly become one another at the same time that time-space specific activities and power relations ceaselessly become one another.<sup>202</sup>

What Pred's argument captures is the way in which 'place' refuses any tight definition or connection to a particular model of human experience. For example, one of the dangers of speaking about space and place is that it can imply a distinction between local and global; where 'space' refers to meta-processes such as capitalism, place is about the local and the small. This can in turn play into ideas of space as the 'unreal' and place as the genuine or real. Such appropriations are resisted in the strongest terms within human geography. Space, it is argued, is in place, and place is always the basis of space. In Pred's terms, 'power relations' (traditional 'space') and 'time-space specific activities' (traditionally, 'place') become one another. For Pred, this means that the most appropriate language when referring to place is that of process. Place is always a becoming, as these various factors meet. It is a similar concern that lies behind Doreen Massey's attempts to overcome the distinction between space and time. In what could be conceived of as a criticism of certain appropriations of phenomenology - and especially Heidegger's *Dasein* - what Massey sees as wrong with many divisions between the two categories is that they

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<sup>201</sup> Allan Pred, 'Place as Historically Contingent Process: Structuration and the Time-Geography of Becoming Places', *AAAG*, 74(2), (1984), 279-297.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

posit time to be dynamic, with place accordingly held to be essentially static and 'non-progressive'.<sup>203</sup> Rather, for Massey, it is better to think of 'space-time'.<sup>204</sup> As she puts it:

[The] search after the 'real' meanings of places, the unearthing of heritages and so forth, is interpreted as being, in part, a response to desire for fixity and for security of identity in the middle of all the movement and change. A 'sense of place', of rootedness, can provide [in this sense] stability and a source of unproblematic identity.<sup>205</sup>

Much of this correlates with the theological appropriations of 'place' which, I am suggesting, have a tendency to contrast place with space in the sense of the former being 'fixed' or 'real' or 'authentic'. For Massey and Pred however there simply is no 'unproblematic' place. Thus, the nature of place is such that the search for the *grounds* of a place - its 'authentic character'<sup>206</sup> - will always prove to be an elusive one. There is, as Massey puts it, 'no authenticity of place'.<sup>207</sup>

Significantly then, neither Massey nor Pred reject 'place' altogether in favour of unending, constant 'flows'. They reject instead the either-or choice between fixity and endless movement. Place is therefore redefined so as to recognise its complexity. Places are at once porous and yet constant enough to be meaningful, 'both interconnected and interdependent'.<sup>208</sup> They contain 'both an element of order and an element of chaos'.<sup>209</sup> It is this 'both' which defines the work of Edward Soja, who appropriates Henri Lefebvre's writing to establish a theory of space as a 'third' between the apparent absolutes of neutral space and pure subjectivity. In *The Production of Space*, for example, Lefebvre talks about what he calls the 'abyss' between, 'the mental sphere on one side and the physical and

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<sup>203</sup> Ibid., p.135.

<sup>204</sup> What is known as 'space-time compression.' Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Cambridge: Blackwell/Polity Press, 1994), especially, pp.249-269.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid., p.151.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid., p.121.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

<sup>208</sup> Massey with Pat Jess, eds, *A Place in the World?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p.69.

<sup>209</sup> Massey, *Gender*, p.265.



social spheres on the other'.<sup>210</sup> According to Soja, Lefebvre's whole project should be understood as an attempt to move beyond this binary opposition and establish through 'thirthing-as-othering'<sup>211</sup> a 'heuristic reconstruction' of this duality.<sup>212</sup> It is this understanding which Soja's labels 'thirdspace'. Here there is a creative interplay between 'firstspace' ('spatiality that is directly comprehended in empirically measurable configurations')<sup>213</sup> and 'secondspace' thinking ('reflexive, subjective, introspective, philosophical and individualized').<sup>214</sup> For Soja, thirdspace is indeed best described - as in his book's subtitle - as both 'real and imagined' at once. Thirdspace is, in other words, equivalent to the understanding of place as Massey has it. As thirdspace, place is a necessarily complex phenomenon; in constant tension with space and always both a result and a constituent of particular imaginaries. Physicality is indeed important - and Lefebvre demonstrates this in his central thesis that physical space is constitutive - however place is always more than this.

According to the authors of the *Dictionary of Human Geography*, human geographers in the last few decades can thus be understood to have 'destabilised' three sets of 'oppositions': time and space, absolute and relative space, and abstract and concrete space.<sup>215</sup> Such transcendence of oppositions is simply part of the field and is taken for granted in debates within human geography. What then might a place actually look like in this reconstruction? Is not 'place' here, redefined so as to include spatiality, a misnomer? It is in answering this that the work of Jeff Malpas is helpful, given that he offers a critique of many of the attempts to hold space and place together, including those I have identified above. I use Malpas here though as a counter to demonstrate that even in his work, which

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<sup>210</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. by Donald Nicholson Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p.6.

<sup>211</sup> Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p.60f.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*, p.81.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, p.74.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*, p.78-9.

<sup>215</sup> 'Space' in *The Dictionary of Human Geography*, ed. by R.J. Johnson et al., 4th edn. (London: Blackwell, 2000), p.771.

seeks to reassert 'space as opposed to 'spatialities',<sup>216</sup> there remains a complexity to place that is often lacking in the theological discussions.

For Malpas, the approaches explored above fail to offer a fully worked topography, that is, they do not engage with the 'phenomenon of space'.<sup>217</sup> They have tended to accept theory at the expense of a practical reasoning and ontology, with the consequence that place has become swallowed up in a meta-account of spatiality:

Within much contemporary literature, in geography and beyond, space appears as a swirl of flows, networks, and trajectories, as a chaotic ordering that locates and dislocates, and as an effect of social process that is itself spatially dispersed and distributed.<sup>218</sup>

Massey's account is a particular focus of Malpas' critique here - hers is used as the paradigmatic example of the collapsing of place into space. For Massey, writes Malpas, 'the way place [appears] is almost entirely in terms of a 'meeting' of relational flows or trajectories', and thus, 'place becomes simply a moment (a meeting point) in space - a moment constituted through spatial flow and movement'.<sup>219</sup> Malpas sees Massey's account as missing the sense of place as bounded, the concept he sees as so central to the Greek ideas of *topos* and *chora*. Each place is its own place and not another: there is an essential 'regionality' to place.<sup>220</sup> In this regard, Malpas' arguments could be read as a direct endorsement of the place overcoming placelessness narrative that is significant in the dismissal of Fx. Against the 'heady swirl of spatial trajectories and flows',<sup>221</sup> Malpas would seem to be reasserting the heterogeneity of place, even a more 'humanistic' understanding.<sup>222</sup> To read Malpas' argument in this way however would be to

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<sup>216</sup> Jeff Malpas, 'Putting Space in Place: Philosophical Topography and Relational Geography', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 30 (2012), 226-242.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

<sup>221</sup> Malpas, 'Space in Place'.

<sup>222</sup> Malpas, 'Thinking Topographically'.

misappropriate his central claim. For Malpas, the point is not to reassert place over space in a fashion that leaves place as fixed and static, but rather to reestablish the importance of boundary for the type of relationality spoken of by the likes of Massey. Both *topos* and *chora*, argues Malpas, contain the concept of boundary, but also of ‘openness’ and ‘extendedness’. ‘[No] place exists except in relation to other places’ as he puts it.<sup>223</sup> The narrative of modernity’s understanding of space is therefore a more complex one than the place/placelessness paradigm assumes. As Malpas states:

Given the way in which boundedness is itself tied to openness (that is, to a form of extendedness), so it would also be a mistake to view the shift [in modernity] as one that moves simply from a notion of the bounded to a notion of the extended. Instead, the shift is from a concept of bounded openness to a concept of openness or extension though apart from bound.<sup>224</sup>

It is this ‘bounded openness’ of place that is critical to this thesis. For Malpas, the choice is not so much between place and placelessness or, at least, between a model of the human person as defined by boundedness or by relationality. Rather place itself implies both boundedness and openness /extendedness. Better, a place’s boundedness is the basis of the relationality to other places. Malpas’ critique therefore is not so much about the centrality of networks or flows, rather it is about the ontological basis for these. My point here is that the resulting conception of place is no less about relationality, network and complexity than in any of the accounts above. Indeed, Malpas - aware of the counter-response to his argument - challenges those views of place which focus on the notion of boundary, without acknowledging the openness inherent in place and which, accordingly, can become the basis of a reactionary, regressive or ‘exclusionary’ worldview. In such accounts, place becomes a holder for a static historiography: ‘the preservation of identity’ through ‘the preservation of place’. In response, however Malpas claims:

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<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

<sup>224</sup> Malpas, ‘Space in Place’.

[Such] arguments typically rely on treating place in a way that actually goes against the character of place itself: they tend to disregard the way place is itself bound up with both identity and difference as well as with plurality and indeterminacy.<sup>225</sup>

Malpas therefore defines his own project as commending more ‘self-questioning and self-critique’ to the social sciences. ‘Turning back to place’ writes Malpas, ‘is a turning back to the human, but to the human understood as always in relation, always in place, always in question.’<sup>226</sup>

I do not wish to smooth over the differences between Malpas’ argument and those of the humanistic geographers above. For to do so would be to undercut the distinction Malpas wishes to make of his own work in relation to other developments in the field.<sup>227</sup> I employ Malpas here in order to show that even in his account of place, with which theologians might well find greater resonances, there is an ongoing critique of place as static and concrete as set against a perceived unending system of flows and relations. Even in Malpas’ presentation, which entails a far stronger ontology of place, we find that place is necessarily complex, relational and extended. Malpas would disagree then with any concept of place which sees it as static, either in the sense of it being restricted to a predefined locale (mappable), or as necessarily constant through time. For Malpas a place must certainly exist ‘somewhere’ – physicality is integral to what place *is* – but it always extends beyond a set physical boundary in all of the ways that matter. Likewise what a place is or does is in flux; constant enough to hold it as ‘this place and not that place’, yet always undergoing change and open to interpretations. Above all, this means that there is

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<sup>225</sup> Malpas, ‘Thinking Topographically’.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid.

<sup>227</sup> On this, I do see the difference as one of emphasis rather than substance. We might well question for example whether the boundedness of place is underemphasised in, say, Massey as Malpas proposes. Her point is not that places do not really exist, but rather that they are created through the gathering of relations in particular moments. In the dialectic between boundedness and openness, Massey, in light of her own particular concerns, stresses instead the nature of place as continually constructed and changing. Her question to Malpas might therefore be about the origins of particular places. They may be bounded, but where did they originate in the first instance?

an inherent subjectivity to place, that ultimately, as Cresswell puts it, ‘places are very much things to be inside of.’<sup>228</sup> In this sense, places cannot be predefined from the outside, but must be known or experienced. This too is a cornerstone of the theological reassertion of place that underlies many of the defences of the parish system; where space is a ‘fictionalised’ categorisation, place captures the sense that what is real is what one experiences or, to use the language used throughout this thesis, what one *finds*. My claim here is simply that the parish structure is a different sort of thing to this. That as a system of spatial mapping it risks doing precisely what is feared of modernity’s obsession with space, namely imposing a category from outside rather than respecting the givenness of place in its complexity.

#### **4.4 Summary of space and place**

I started this chapter by identifying what I described as the narrative of place overcoming placelessness. It is this narrative that frequently underpins many of the defences of the parish system as opposed to non-parochial churches. What I hope to have shown from the brief overview of human geography is that place is a more complex entity than this narrative often suggests. Indeed, what these geographers each challenge in some form is the type of binary thinking that frequently lies behind such a narrative, in which place frequently comes to stand for what is local, static, bounded and authentic versus abstract space or network flows. I suggest place should be understood by what Malpas describes as a ‘bounded openness’. Physicality and embodiment are necessary features of place, however place always transcends the boundedness of a particular location, or given meaning, and is established not so much through definable spatial boundaries as through the particularities of the relationships, subjective appropriations, and shared identities that happen there. Further, places are always part of other places; constantly constructed by and constructing other places.

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<sup>228</sup> Cresswell, p.28.

Understanding place in this way helps to explain some of the evaluations of the parochial system that I explored in the previous chapter. The givenness of place, and especially in the flux caused by urbanisation, was seen to lack connectivity with the static structure. The places that the Church wanted to engage with, be they cities, suburbs or industrial centres, existed outside of the defined spaces of the parish. The move to the language of neighbourhoods or localities is therefore representative of this complexity, and the focus on ministry over territorial coverage a way of imagining how the Church might move into greater presence within the relationships and subjectivity that makes a place.

#### **4.5 The working theory and next steps**

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From my claim in Chapter 1 that an Anglican mode of reasoning calls us to evaluate the way in which the parish principle might be implemented, the previous two chapters have been an attempt to develop a working theory from which to engage with the four churches. In Chapter 3, I explored how the parish structure has been critiqued in recent history. Ultimately the structure was seen to lack correspondence with new cultural realities: be they urbanisation or increased transience and isolationism. These pieces of work highlighted the challenge for the Church to respond to what it finds in the world by establishing churches that are not defined purely through territoriality but rather formed on the basis of 'neighbourhoods' or 'localities'. Further, they sought to read the Church's relation to such localities through the lens of ministry rather than territorial coverage. In this chapter I have tried to give further conceptual basis for such arguments by suggesting that these moves are an attempt to imagine how the Church might relate to place rather than space. I defined place as 'bounded openness': including but not reducible to physical space and always contested, affecting and affected by other places. As flat - that is, geographically mapped - space, the parish structure is limited in the hold it can have on such places. In terms of the broader discussion about the parish system and Fx/CP therefore, we might say that certain defences of the parish system can be described as 'spatial'. That is to say, they apply the theological principle unilaterally and see the system

as holding the principle by necessity. In contrast, my claim is that the Church would do better to think from the basis of a placial theology - precisely the model I see as expounded by the likes of Quash - in which there is an interaction between the given and found. Here the Church responds to places as they are found, that is, the localities or neighbourhoods that people understand themselves to belong to.

My argument is therefore that we need to disconnect 'parish' and 'parish ministry' (what I have called the parish principle) from the particularities of the parochial structure. The Church of England, I have claimed, recognises itself as having what I have called a vocation to presence; a vocation which, though multifarious in outworking, has at least three strands: obligation and responsibility, universality (existing for all), and particularity (each place received as unique).<sup>229</sup> Following the previous two chapters, I believe it now makes sense to develop my earlier descriptions and name this vocation as a call to be present *to place*. In other words, we can describe the parish principle as concerned with a Church that is placial. Thus, where in modernity spatiality takes priority (what Malpas refers to as the unbounded), the Church is called to value places - and the people therein - as they are found. In doing so, what the Church is refusing is the temptation to impose pre-defined church models onto places unquestioningly, in a sort of homogenisation. Rather the Church finds a place, embeds itself there and seeks to minister according to the nature and needs of that place. This is then the parish principle that I suggest must be held as distinct from the specifics of the parochial structure. And it is this distinction that allowed the likes of Tiller to distinguish parish ministry from the parish structure: the ministry is precisely the ministry of presence in place. However the challenge as I have argued it, and as I think Wickham, Tiller and others saw, is that precisely because of its nature as bounded openness, place refuses a universal means by which this ministry is worked out or deployed. In other words, because of the nature of place the Church will need to

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<sup>229</sup> See p. 21-22.

be responsive and creative about *how* it ministers according to this parish principle in different places.

In light of these conclusions my working theory became:

The parish principle is concerned with a Church committed to place rather than space. The parochial system as a system of spatial designation exists towards this end. If the Church wishes to maintain its commitment to presence, it may well need to embrace non-parochial and extra-parochial church forms.

This was the theory I took into conversation with the four churches, with the goal of seeking refinement and greater clarification. Holding this theory prior to the research stage meant that I entered each church site with a set of questions I wanted to explore. Before moving on to give an account of the results of this process, in the next chapter I shall outline the questions I was interested in, and the methods I employed in the empirical process.



# Chapter 5 / Empirical Research Method

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## 5.1 Introduction

I have described my research as a theological-empirical study. In this chapter I want to outline the methods used in researching the four churches. I start with some of the underlying convictions that shape these methods.

My goal in the empirical research is to take my theory into conversation with the churches to seek challenge and refinement. My intention is not to complete a thorough congregational study of each church. At the broadest level, I am interested in the particular theological imaginary of each church, and specifically how they think about their relationship with the place within which they exist. In other words, what are the churches thinking-practising (praxis) as regards their engagement with the world, and what factors affect this? To what extent does a spatial designation, i.e. the parish, shape a church's theological imaginary of its place and the place(s) it exists within? Alternatively, what might a church look like that lacks such a spatial commitment: does it think differently about its relationship to the wider community? This is to say that my research is a study of perceptions at each church. My intent is therefore not to try and prove or disprove the church's imaginaries - to find an objective verification for claims - but rather to explore how the churches themselves perceive and understand their place.

Before proceeding with the research at the churches, I carried out a full pilot study at a church local to me and experimented with elements from my research core at another, very different, local church. This pilot study helped to refine the core methods as well as highlighting some of the underlying principles I wanted to adopt in researching across the four sites.

## 5.2 The object of my research: what is a 'church'?

Burawoy's ethnographic approach begins with the claim that, prior to the research being carried out, the researcher should avoid tightly delineating the boundaries of the site being explored. For Burawoy, since it is not so much the situation as the theory that is under scrutiny, there is not the pressure - as, for example, within a more positivistic model - to ensure the site of investigation is 'closed'. In fact, given the emphasis upon structuration, it is important that the site be seen as 'open' as possible; at once shaping and shaped by multiple outside factors. Burawoy's approach therefore allows for the tension found in the congregational studies literature between the assertion that a church has a certain definable 'character', and that a church is complex and multifarious. Accordingly, we should neither be looking for a 'core thing' that all churches have, nor assume instead that churches are fundamentally idiosyncratic.<sup>230</sup> Instead of seeing here an unresolvable problem, my suggestion is that it is better to hold a tension. I agree therefore with Mary McClintock Fulkerson's claim that a church is thus best understood as a 'place'. Indeed, McClintock Fulkerson employs the type of place theory I have explored in Chapter 3 to argue that church as 'place' must be understood to encompass both subjective and objective realities. A church is at once the 'objective' realities of building, symbol, praxis and common narrative but also the subjective relationships to each of these. As she argues:

[Place] is a gathering of meanings that endures through practices [...] It is affectively and reflectively ordered, temporary and multilayered, and imbricated in power relations [...] it is precisely this complexity, this density, this fragility, and this fluidity that make place real.<sup>231</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> So, for example, James F. Hopewell's assertion that each church has its 'story', which gives the congregation its 'personality' is contrasted with those who stress instead 'culture' as definitive. (Hopewell, *Congregation: Stories and Structures* (London: SCM, 1988), especially, p.29.) Al Dowie employs the latter theory but applies Geertz's sense of 'webs of significance' so that finding a church's 'culture' is about appreciating the commonalities whilst recognising a diversity of appropriations. (Dowie, *Interpreting Culture in a Scottish Congregation* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2002), pp.46-47). Timothy Jenkins is critical of both approaches, arguing instead for an anthropological, over a sociological, approach which looks for what he calls 'indigenous' rather than predefined categories (Timothy Jenkins, 'Congregational Cultures and Boundaries of Identity', in *Congregational Studies in the UK*, ed. by Mathew Guest, Karin Trusting, Linda Woodhead (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp.113-123. (p.114)).

<sup>231</sup> Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p.36.

Seeing a church as a 'place' enables us to speak at once of a particular church, whilst acknowledging the multifarious and contested nature of its identity. Another way of comprehending this is to say that what I am interested in is the cohesive elements of the church, as well as the various reflections on these.<sup>232</sup>

One result of seeing a church as a place is that considerable importance must be given to discourse, without assuming it to be the sole conveyor of meaning. As Stringer claims, discourse must be particularly central to a study of churches, given that in churches the practices and formal descriptors often do not portray the 'reality' of people's theological understanding.<sup>233</sup> However, it would not be right to focus solely on discourse, as many have pointed out.<sup>234</sup> Indeed, taking church seriously as place means that I remained open to a range of potential signifiers of meaning. Ultimately then, I take Ammerman's summation of a church as consisting of activity, artefacts (so documentation, literature etc.), and language and story, as a helpful model of what it was I was aiming to explore when researching each church as a place.<sup>235</sup> This also helped in responding to the danger of imposing meaning upon a situation. For instance, where discourse about missional engagement is alien (or unfamiliar), the activity and artefacts in the church are as important to the investigation as is listening to the language being used. At All Soul's, for example, it is significant that the parish magazine is facilitated by the church but produced by the community.

In summary, I define my research as an exploration of each church's imaginary of 'place' - and specifically in its understanding of how it relates to the world outside itself - through its artefacts, activities, language and story.

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<sup>232</sup> In this I therefore broadly follow Al Dowie's 'semiotic' approach, which focuses both on signs and the appropriation of these signs. See Dowie, pp.47-50.

<sup>233</sup> See Martin D. Stringer, *On the Perception of Worship* (Birmingham: University of Birmingham Press, 1999), pp.65-72.

<sup>234</sup> For example Jenkins, in countering Stringer's approach; 'transparency is not a common feature of the social'. Jenkins, 'Congregational Cultures', p.114.

<sup>235</sup> Nancy T. Ammerman, *Congregation and Community* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), pp.54-62.

### 5.3 Why four churches?

My approach differs from Burawoy's at the very first step given that I investigated four churches. This deviates from the commitment in the methodology to explore a theory through a single case. In agreeing with the claims of Burawoy's approach, however, one need not abandon the possibility that cases might be generalisable on the basis of similarity to other cases. Indeed, the ECM itself offers a way forward, given that it deliberately rejects a method for establishing what the 'case' actually consists of. Where the ECM explores theory through one broad case, my research does the same through investigation into four different sites, united by the fact that they are all part of one diocese in the Church of England. That said, I do want to ensure that I protect the integrity of each site. I therefore follow the insights of Michael Bassey, who argues that we can rightly make generalisations through comparison, without necessarily underplaying the uniqueness of each situation. For Bassey, 'fuzzy generalisations' are, 'the kind of statement that says: in cases similar to the cases studied it may be found that x leads to y'.<sup>236</sup> Applying Bassey's reflections to my own research, it is perfectly appropriate to use a comparison between parish church A and parish church B as the basis for a limited generalisation in terms of my theory about how, say, parish churches relate to place, so long as one is clear about the differing ways in which each is a parish church. It is an important part of my research for example that two of the churches are non-parish churches, and two are parish churches. This is not to allow immediate generalisations to be drawn - a contrast between how parish and non-parish churches conceive of space - rather it is a way of offering a 'fuzzy generalisation' about how churches of a type may

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<sup>236</sup> Robert Stake, cited in Michael Bassey, 'Fuzzy Generalisation: An Approach to Building Educational Theory', Paper presented at the British Educational Research Association Annual Conference, (1998) <<http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/000000801.htm>> [accessed 29th January 2015]. There is a similarity here then with the found theological approach in its careful use of the analogies. See p.24.

imagine themselves as places. If therefore there turns out to be similarities or differences between the two parish churches or between the two non-parish churches, this would not be definitive, but it would offer some insight.

#### 5.4 Participative research

Burawoy's approach, which has shaped the theological-empirical study I am following in this thesis, is not without its pitfalls.<sup>237</sup> Specifically, as Tavory and Timmermans point out, because of its non-inductive methodology, there is a danger that it falls foul of what Burawoy sees as a danger in the positivistic approach, namely drowning out the uniqueness of the site. I would agree with Robert Stake however, that in terms of a resulting method, '[an] ethic of caution is not contradictory to an ethic of interpretation'.<sup>238</sup> The challenge is not to abandon theory but rather to employ tools of enquiry that allow for close listening, i.e. that enable the object of enquiry to be heard on its own terms. This is what Josh Cadji and Alison Hope Alkon, who follow Burawoy's approach, describe as a 'call and response between emic and etic'.<sup>239</sup> In answering how we might do this, it seems to me that the description of the situation must be accurate and faithful to the situation being observed. In seeking 'dialogue' then, how can we ensure that this is not simply a one-way conversation; that the participants have the freedom to engage in ways that are true to their own conceptual frameworks rather than having these (even if non-intentionally) closed down by the agenda of the researcher?

I was aware for example of the extent to which the type of discourse I am using - that is, analytic, critical, theory-laden - might well fail to connect with many of the people I come across, something which Malcolm, the vicar at All Souls, helped to point out to me. Further, for many, the language of 'mission' or 'missional engagement' is simply

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<sup>237</sup> Tavory and Timmermans, 'Two Cases', p.257.

<sup>238</sup> Bassey, 'Fuzzy Generalisation'.

<sup>239</sup> Josh Cadji and Alison Hope Alkon, "One Day the White People are Going to Want these Houses Again": Understanding Gentrification Through the North Oakland Farmers Market', in *Incomplete Streets: Processes, Practices and Possibilities*, ed. by Stephen Zavestoski and Julian Agyeman (Oxford: Routledge, 2015), pp.154-175 (p.161).

not at the forefront of many people's thinking or central to their experience of church life. In both instances the issue was how to engage with people around my key questions - the theory - in such a way that I did not impose concepts upon them. It was in answering this question that I recognised the need for a more participative and collaborative approach to research. Employing participatory methods should be seen as crucial for any theological-empirical study. As Pete Ward and Sarah Dunlop argue, 'taking 'ordinary theology' seriously means that practical theology needs to work at the forms in which it produces knowledge of the ordinary'.<sup>240</sup> It is for the purposes of 'studying the ordinary' then that I suggest theological-empirical research should pay close attention to the movement within the social sciences known as Participative Action Research (PAR) given the way in which it advocates a collaborative approach to research.<sup>241</sup>

The emphasis in PAR is that research must involve a 'mindset'<sup>242</sup> of 'dialogical' encounter between researcher and participant(s). To be clear, my research involves a limited application of a PAR approach given that my focus is not on transformation, that is, on 'action or change for the better'.<sup>243</sup> I followed a limited PAR approach in two ways. Firstly, I wanted the engagement of my theory to be a work of collaboration between myself and the churches. I saw the process of finding meaning not as a work of observation followed by analysis, but rather as conversation. From the outset I was open with each church about what my theory was. My hope and expectation was that the

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<sup>240</sup> Pete Ward and Sarah Dunlop, 'Practical Theology and the Ordinary: Visual Research among Migrant Polish Catholic Young People', *Practical Theology* 4.3, (2011), pp.295-313. For 'ordinary theology' see p.296.

<sup>241</sup> See, for example, *Participatory Action Research Approaches and Methods: Connecting People, Participation and Place*, ed. by Sarah Kindon, Rachel Pain and Mike Kesby (Oxford: Routledge, 2007), p.1.

<sup>242</sup> So, '[PAR] is more about the value orientation of the work and its approach [...] than about specific techniques used.' Sarah Kindon, 'Participatory Action Research', in *Qualitative Research Methods in Human Geography*, ed. by Iain Hay, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp.259-277 (p.261).

<sup>243</sup> Following the likes of Paulo Freire, PAR sees research as a means of empowerment by which individuals or communities might be led to affect ground-up and, especially, emancipatory change. See Kindon, Pain and Kesby, p.10. Interestingly, though not my stated intention, it became clear to me that this research was valued by the churches. Each church described this differently: 'an outside pair of eyes'; 'a helpful way of us developing our vision'; 'it's forced us to think together about what we actually do'. I acknowledge that much of this was possible because of my position: as an ordinand training for Church of England ministry I was endowed with a high level of trust.

churches would respond to my theory, reflecting on it, questioning it and challenging it. Secondly, I wanted to employ methods that would enable the participants to speak according to their own 'language and symbol systems',<sup>244</sup> in ways that were 'grounded in [their] experience, expressed through [their] stories and images'.<sup>245</sup> This meant developing a research plan which included not only interviews but also visual approaches.

Because research in a PAR approach is about giving space to participants, it will necessarily be more organic than other research projects.<sup>246</sup> In keeping with this, my research was 'messy' in terms of the amount of time, types of conversations and forms of encounter at each church. It took the form of a to-and-fro with the congregations and leaders as I spent time with them, analysed the conversations/pieces of data and then presented back to them so as to engage in further conversation. In order for this messiness to function however, my research involved a research core, from which I was able to engage in the more responsive elements.

## **5.5 The research core: mapping task, photograph collection and focus group, and questionnaire**

### **5.5.1 Visual approaches**

I followed a similar approach to that taken by Ward and Dunlop in their investigation into Polish Roman Catholic immigrants, which they describe as 'narrated photography'.<sup>247</sup> In their research participants were invited to take and then, at a later date, to discuss in a semi-structured interview, the photographs they had taken. For Ward and Dunlop, the pictures proved to be an entry point into the participants' own conceptual frameworks and experiences. Once the pictures had been taken, the analysis took place at two levels.

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<sup>244</sup> Kindon, Pain and Kesby, p.554.

<sup>245</sup> Reason, cited in Maria Stuttaford and Chris Coe, 'Participatory Learning: Opportunities and Challenges', in *Participatory Action Research*, ed. by Kindon, Pain and Kesby, p.188-195 (p.9).

<sup>246</sup> See Rachel Pain, 'Participatory Geographies', *Environment and Planning A*, 39 (2007), pp.2807-2812.

<sup>247</sup> Ward and Dunlop, p.295.

The first was the semiotic task: ‘what is this picture revealing?’. The images were used to, ‘dig beneath the surface of a social situation’.<sup>248</sup> It is clear for example that visualisation can play a significant role in any research which seeks to explore themes of space and place given that it models an interplay between physicality and conceptuality.<sup>249</sup> Secondly, the photos in Ward and Dunlop’s research provided a way into conversation with the participants that was of a richer type than if it had relied on standard interviewing, a process Douglas Harper describes as ‘photo-elicitation’.<sup>250</sup>

I employed visual research in two ways. Firstly, six or seven participants from each of the four churches were invited to collect three photos that captured the mission of their church [see Appendix 2]. Following this they attended a focus group in which each person had the opportunity to look at and discuss the different pictures that were collected. Secondly, I employed a mapping exercise. This involved asking members of the congregation after a service to come and place a sticker on a map on which the church is marked, corresponding to where they live.<sup>251</sup> This exercise served a quantitative function for me in that it provided an instant snapshot of where people came from to attend the church service. The resultant map also gave me another image from which to engage in conversation. I used the map in interviews, especially with the church leaders, asking them to reflect on what they thought the map revealed.

### 5.5.2 Focus group

I employed a focus group method rather than interviewing the participants of the photo collecting task individually. The reason for this is that I was primarily interested in a congregational, communal perspective on the church’s engagement. My experience of

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<sup>248</sup> Ibid., p.299. See also, Jon Prosser, ‘Visual Methodology: Toward a More Seeing Research’, in *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. by Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, pp.479-495 (p.481).

<sup>249</sup> See, for example, Helene Hjorth Oldrup and Trine Agervig Carstensen, ‘Producing Geographical Knowledge by Visual Means’, *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 94: 3 (2012), pp.223–237.

<sup>250</sup> See Douglas Harper, ‘An Argument for Visual Sociology’ in *Image Based Research: A Sourcebook for Qualitative Researchers*, ed. by Jon Prosser (London: Falmer Press, 1998), pp.33-38.

<sup>251</sup> I did not carry out this task with Skelton Fx given the lack of any one core congregation or group.



working with focus groups up to this point had led me to appreciate how they can enable a different level of discourse than one-to-one interviewing. To borrow Ian Dey's words, a focus group embodies the fact that meaning is 'constructed in terms of an inter-subjective language'.<sup>252</sup> They make space for what George Kamberelis and Greg Dimitriadis refer to as the 'constitutive power of discourse', something which was crucial in my investigation into the placial imaginaries at work in the different churches.<sup>253</sup>

### **5.5.3 Questionnaire**

Alongside these more participative tasks, members of each church were also invited to complete a short questionnaire [Appendix 3] that was distributed after a service, or in one of the Hub groups in the case of Skelton Fx. The questionnaire functioned both as a way of gaining some insight from the largest number of people, and as a way of quickly gathering quantitative data about the demographic of each church. This data then formed part of the overall picture and was brought into conversation with other findings from the church. I was interested in understanding the congregation; specifically for how long people had attended (i.e. was this a transient community, or more static?) and how they had come to be there (had they, for example, come in 'cold' or had they made the connection through existing friendship groups or networks?). Also I wanted to get an idea of the congregational attitudes towards mission and engagement and of the understandings of place underlying these attitudes. As well as the congregation, I also invited each church leader to complete the questionnaire, and we discussed their answers together as a semi-structured interview.

### **5.6 Other research elements**

Alongside these core elements I carried out semi-structured interviews with the leaders of each church. I used a standard set of questions for the first interview, however, from this

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<sup>252</sup> Ian Dey, *Qualitative Data Analysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p.10.

<sup>253</sup> George Kamberelis and Greg Dimitriadis, *Focus Groups* (Oxford: Routledge, 2013), pp.43-6.

point on I adapted the questions to relate to what I was finding in each church. Likewise in other interviews - with other leaders or key members in each church - I allowed the participant to respond to a variety of stimuli (such as the pictures or the map or other artefacts) other than just my questions. The information that I collected from interviews, the photo and mapping tasks, as well as the various artefacts and observations of activity from each of the churches was treated as 'text'. These texts were gathered and analysed as I went along, using a basic coding, or classification, approach. I was looking not so much for close similarities of wording, but common themes that seemed to make sense of how each church envisaged its engagement with the world outside of itself. Over time I discussed these 'themes' with church members and leaders, inviting them to respond.<sup>254</sup>

### **5.7 Time spent at Each Church**

I carried out the research over a period of around nine months. The number and character of the visits to each church varied. At each, I attended at least three services, spread across the nine months, as well as the focus group.<sup>255</sup> Alongside these I also visited for interviews or to observe other activities through the week; a further two or three visits to each place in the nine-month period. Further, some of my interviews took place over the phone or in other locations. At All Souls and St Andrews I visited at the end of the research period to present some of my findings. This happened within the service and I incorporated my research into a sermon. I then invited the congregation to feedback to me any of their reflections on my work. All of this I incorporated into the analysis of each place. Because of demands of time I was sadly unable to carry out this process at Skelton Fx and S4.

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<sup>254</sup> For the notion of follow-up interviews as revisiting participants' responses, see Jamie Baxter and John Eyles, 'Evaluating Qualitative Research in Social Geography: Establishing 'Rigour' in Interview Analysis', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 22:4 (1997), 505-525.

<sup>255</sup> At Skelton FX, it wasn't possible to attend 'services' because of the nature of the initiative. I did attend the Hub group three times as well as one of the Sunday@4 services.

## 5.8 Writing up the findings: the narrative vignettes

I agree with Paul Atkinson that the form of an ethnographic account is not incidental but integral to that account.<sup>256</sup> This claim stems from the broad assumption that non-complex correspondence is an impossibility and that any account, even those which self-define explicitly as 'factual' or 'scientific', are always constructions. Since, 'texts themselves are implicated in the work of reality-construction', the challenge for the ethnographer is to think carefully about how her construction is to be carried out.<sup>257</sup> Writing such accounts - this 'craft' or 'art' - is, to borrow John Van Maanen's terms, 'officework [...] not fieldwork'.<sup>258</sup> Such an approach fits into the general methodological position I outlined in Chapter 2. Put simply, I have attempted to justify the tension between theological theory and empirical account or experience: I simply wish to extend this broader position into the writing of the account itself. How might we represent the theological-empirical approach, that is, how should we write up or report the results of this type of investigation? The question I asked of my own work then was how I should go about offering a representation of the social situation investigated, whilst respecting both the fact that I read the situations out of a set of theological conceptualities, and that the situations themselves have been shaped (whether explicitly or implicitly) by a wrestling with many of these same conceptualities. As one possible answer to this question I decided to write the accounts of my time with each church in the form of what Van Maanen calls 'impressionist tales'.<sup>259</sup> For Van Maanen, impressionistic tales attempt to weave together personal experience (myself as researcher), empirical observation (from transcript data, field notes, photo collection etc.) and (some) theoretical analysis, in the form of a narrative. 'Impressionist' is a helpful term here for, as Van Mannen intends, it captures the

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<sup>256</sup> Paul Atkinson, *The Ethnographic Imagination*, (London: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>257</sup> Ibid.

<sup>258</sup> John Van Maanen, *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography* (Chicago I.L.: University of Chicago Press, 2011), p.4.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid., pp.101f.

sense of portraying a scene as it is viewed, but also as it is experienced, inviting the viewer into the act of representation. Of course, as with the methodological position outlined in this chapter, this approach is worked out not by following a set formula but more as a constant to-and-fro between various concerns: the impressionistic tale is a reaction against naive realism, but works hard to avoid total subjectivity. The point then is that the impressionist account embraces narrative, ‘metaphor, phrasing, imagery’<sup>260</sup> as means by which the social situation might be communicated; it assumes that what are often perceived as obstacles (or, at best, ‘ornamentation’<sup>261</sup>) are in fact vehicles for understanding. As Van Maanen puts it:

The story itself, the impressionist’s tale, is a representational means of cracking open the culture and the fieldworker’s way of knowing it so that both can be jointly examined [...] The intention is not to tell readers what to think of an experience but to show them the experience from beginning to end and thus draw them immediately into the story to work out its problems and puzzles as they unfold.<sup>262</sup>

Taking this approach might also offer a more helpful way of exploring the central concern of this thesis, namely that of place. Atkinson describes one of the goals of ethnographic writing as capturing the ‘spirit of place’, and I take seriously his sense that place (as opposed to simple ‘space’) can only be expressed through metaphor and narrative.<sup>263</sup>

What then of the boundaries of such accounts? For Van Maanen and, to a greater extent, Atkinson, such boundaries - the need for a certain objectivity - in ethnographic accounts must be negotiated by each writer who is obliged to present herself as self-critical and transparent as possible. I concur with this. Indeed, my hope is that since these accounts sit within the thesis as a whole, the wider conceptualities, themes and theories that concerned me as I wrote each account will be perfectly clear. I do also agree however,

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<sup>260</sup> Van Maanen, p.102.

<sup>261</sup> Atkinson, p.175.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid., pp.102-103.

<sup>263</sup> Atkinson, p. 63.

with Michael Humphreys and Tony Watson that the ultimate ‘truth’ of such an account should depend on the extent to which a social actor might be able to function within the social situation being described on the basis of the account alone.<sup>264</sup> I could not impose this rule comprehensively onto my own accounts - Humphreys and Watson are speaking of richer, less thematically-driven ethnographic accounts than mine - yet the principle, that accounts should offer a ‘way in’ for an outsider, has been a helpful reminder for me as I have written them. For Van Maanen, these accounts should hold off from interpretation as far as is possible. It is at the end of each account that I have therefore offered some explicit analysis of the church, that is, how each spoke into and connected with my theory. A final work of interpretation, which will in part involve bringing these accounts and separate pieces of analysis together as a whole, will make up the final chapter. As a final note, it should be pointed out that in the interests of anonymity I have changed the names of the four churches, places, and individuals.

## 5.9 Summary

My research is a perceptions study, aimed at engaging my theory with four sites by exploring each church’s placial imaginary. I sought to respect the complexity of each church as a place through attentiveness to artefacts, activities, language and story, as well as by making the research as participatory as possible. In this way my approach resonates with Mindy Fullilove’s description of ethnographic research as a ‘feel-forward’ task.<sup>265</sup> I used the research core as a way to uncover some of the depth of each church’s understanding of place, but then sought to react to the findings so as to converse more

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<sup>264</sup> Michael Humphreys and Tony Watson, ‘Ethnographic Practices: From ‘Writing-up Ethnographic Research’ to ‘Writing Ethnography’, in *Organizational Ethnography: Studying the Complexities of Everyday Life*, ed. by Sierk Ybema and others (London: SAGE, 2009), pp.40-55.

<sup>265</sup> Mindy Fullilove in *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics*, ed. by Christopher Scharen and Anna Marie Vigen (London: Continuum, 2011), p.228.

precisely with each site. In the next chapter I offer the descriptive vignettes and analysis of each church.

## Chapter 6 / The Imaginaries of the Four Churches

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## 6.1 All Souls, South Reckton

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It occurs to me as the bus pulls up at the market square that perhaps we have been guided here by the church clock tower. On the journey from the city centre bus station to this satellite town it is the clock tower which is visible above the other buildings in the area. I'd later discover that during the world wars the tower was used as a lookout station. It was from here that people looked across the flat industrial landscape and caught the first glimpse of enemy bombers, on their way to bomb the factories and docks that defined this area. The first warnings of danger came from the tower.

As I step off the bus I experience the same confusion I have each time I visit for a Sunday service. It is deserted. There is, quite literally, not another person anywhere to be seen. I am standing on the market square; a huge football-pitch-size area of concrete and brick (the vastness of open space surprised me at first given my expectation of an 'urban' centre) and it is empty. Doors are closed, shops shut up. White net curtains hang across every window. The lack of movement or apparent life is accentuated by the emptiness and urban-ness of the surroundings: grey, harsh lines. The square forms the centre of a massive redevelopment project in the area and is thus bordered by new housing and a modern-looking health centre. But even this newness is starting to fade. The market square is in that in-between moment - not worn, but not shiny either.

The church building is a contrast to all this. It is not merely the tower which gives it prominence. Where grey and concrete dominate the scene, the church sits at the far end of the market square and is vibrant in red brick. It is surrounded by grass and trees.

Attached to the church building itself are the church halls and these are no less conspicuous. They are the sort of wooden and glass construction you might expect from a visitor's centre at a wildlife park. Taken together then the space stands out. Unlike so



much of the environment here the church building, above all, looks planned, purposeful. It is not an accident of functionality. And it seems ignorant of the fading newness of everything else; it is neither old nor new, it is different. When I come back on a Tuesday - market day - the picture is antithetical to the one before me this Sunday. It is busy and noisy. The market square has become the centre of everything. On this day the church doors are fully open and there is a steady stream of people coming in and out for the weekly cafe. People come to the market, shop, and then sit in the centre for a chat and a coffee. The police gather in the cafe too, using this quieter space to hold surgeries. For the hours the cafe is open the church building space is very much part of the market space - beyond walking through the doors you would not appreciate any distinction between the two.

The first people I do see on the Sunday I visit are there because of the church: two elderly ladies who have just lifted themselves out of their car begin to walk slowly towards the church building. They force me to shift my direction; their route reveals that the entrance to the church for a Sunday service is through the side door, the opposite side of the church from the centre. It is beside this door that I first meet Malcolm, the vicar. He is standing in front of a small, 'Welcome to All Souls' hand painted sandwich board, and is ready for the service. Cassock, surplice and a bright green chasuble which matches the green of the lawn. He stands out as much as does the church. Liturgical dress connected with nothing else in the situation.

Malcolm shows me into the church and introduces me first to his wife, Susan, and then to four or so other people sat at the back of the church who, at this point, make up about 50% of the congregation. I work out that this group includes the churchwarden, the treasurer, PCC secretary, and the deacon for that Sunday. I am interested to note that the churchwarden is keeping the register: attendees, Sunday by Sunday. The members of the group are dressed well; certainly smarter than most of the other congregants. There was a

revelatory moment in the research process when Malcolm and I sat down and analysed the map which shows where people live in relation to the church. 'There's a divide', Malcolm said, almost in his own moment of realisation. 'All my key leaders are out of the parish...they've aspired out.' The stark social reality of South Reckton [SR] I discovered is that for every mile you move out of the centre 'up the hill', you add one year on to your life expectancy. And the church's leadership - most of the sit-at-the-back group - had made precisely this move. And so there is in the church a separation between those 'natural' leaders, and the people whom the church has most contact with, namely those of working-class, limited-educated background, asylum seekers; those 'people with complex needs.' The challenge therefore, as Malcolm puts bluntly, is this: 'where are the next generation of lay leaders going to come from?'

The first thing I note about Susan is how much she is rushing around. I discover when the service begins that she is leading large parts of it. However, at this stage, she is greeting people, checking they are seated OK, that the children have activities, that the people who might be participating in the service know what they have to do. This first impression is an accurate one. Susan does a lot for this community. As well as working as a Godly Play practitioner, she has also served as Development Officer in a joint diocesan and Church Urban Fund project, seeking to equip churches working in contexts of urban deprivation. It says a great deal about Susan however that I could never work out *exactly* what her role is. In one conversation she told me about sessions she is heading up in which single mothers are being taught to use ingredients in their cooking so as to produce cheaper, healthier food. Another time she mentioned taking furniture and essentials round to the house of an expectant mother who has been resettled in SR as an asylum seeker. Her role, it seems to me, is to be there: identifying need and working within the appropriate channels to see it met. Though it seems that often - and especially when it comes to the immediate needs of congregation members - she is herself that appropriate channel.

Malcolm is meeting people with a priestly welcome at the door, Susan is rushing around making sure that everyone experiences that welcome in practice: a chair, space for the children, crayons, and so on. The couple's central role in all that goes on at All Souls is a defining feature of my observations during my time with the church. This is the sort of church where leadership is crucial - people spoke very fondly of previous priests, each of whom it seems are well-known characters in the church and the community. But I was surprised by the extent to which it is Malcolm and Susan who seemed to make things happen. This is something they are very well aware of, as Malcolm's reflections on the map demonstrated. For example, he spoke about the fact that he and his family stand out in SR due not only to their education but also to their financial security in a place of very little security. 'I'm living in a poor place, but I'm not myself poor.' And then, after a pause: '[I'm] a sojourner, a stranger, a foreigner in this land.' If there is a sense of dependency then it is in part a necessary one. The resources (in terms of skills, people, time and experience) are simply limited in the community. But, more importantly, in their own discourse, Malcolm and Susan spoke about their desire to shift a culture, rather than about headstrong leadership. This is the real task - the 'deep work' as Malcolm put it. So people in the church have to be taught how to welcome people, they said. It has not come naturally. They have held training days with the welcome team for this, as well as other sessions with the whole congregation, on mission, on the 'marks of the healthy church'. They are seeking to give people responsibility and to equip them. And it is - as far as I can see - working, albeit slowly. The trustees of the All Souls Centre, for example, come from the congregation. But this has taken strong leadership and someone to make it happen. The culture will not shift by accident. 'How come All Souls is so welcoming of difference?' I asked Malcolm and Susan over coffee once. Susan looked at Malcolm as if to check it was OK to say it. 'Bloody hard work', she said. Malcolm nodded in agreement.

As people start to drift into church (and drift is the right word; there is an informality and ease with which people enter), I notice immediately the incredible diversity in the

congregation. According to statistics, 88.2% of the population of SR are white. This is not the case in All Souls on this Sunday. I sit on the back row, behind an Iranian family. To their right sits another Iranian man with his son. Coming into the church just now are two African mothers with their little boys in pushchairs. I notice that seated with the band is Nisha, from India, whom I had chatted to a few weeks previously. But, as I sit there and look harder I realise that it is not just skin colour that encapsulates the diversity of this church. It is truly mixed. A carer helps in an older lady who sits - every week - at the front in her electric chair. I discover later that the two older ladies who I'd followed into the church are in fact 'South Reckton through and through'; locals who've lived here all their lives. They remember the church as it was, and had seen it burned down and rebuilt. Michael, sitting a few rows in front of me, lives opposite the church and survives on disability benefit following a long-term illness. A young mum from the city finds enough space amidst the paper and crayons at the back of church to wrestle coats off her two toddlers. Pat and John - middle row, to my right - live outside of SR in a more affluent part of the city but they come each week, and help in the All Soul's Centre after hearing about the good work the church does. The band is led by Karl who would later volunteer to sit on the focus group. Karl came to All Souls after experimenting with Buddhist and Hindu spirituality and found a home. As well as playing the guitar and leading music, meditation is still an essential part of his faith expression.

Nisha has settled in SR after fleeing domestic abuse in India. During my time at the church I heard other harrowing accounts from Malcolm and Susan about some of their congregants. People I'd met, chatted to each week - shared the 'after the service tea and biscuit' with - are, it turns out, living the latest chapter of what has been up to this point an horrific story. All of these stories have thus in some sense become part of the story of All Souls. There are asylum seekers in the church, Malcolm told me, because around six years previously the city and SR had become a relocation point for many refugees and asylum seekers due in large measure to the amount of cheap and available housing. In

actual fact, Malcolm's words did not tell the whole picture. There are certainly asylum seekers in SR because of government programmes; however their presence in church was not a foregone conclusion. I remember for example the notices written in Farsi which greeted me as I first entered the church. I also remember hearing how Malcolm was in a battle with Church House to get the Emmaus Course translated and produced in Farsi. I think of Susan and the curate, Mary, driving around SR dropping off baby clothes and furniture for new mums from Nigeria or Uganda. And of the unseen work - battles with local authorities, legal challenges, visa appeals processes - that make up much of Malcolm's working day. The acceptance of asylum seekers at All Souls is not an accident of a government programme: there has been - as with so much else that goes on here - hard work, a commitment to welcome, a proactivity of reception.

At an Easter vigil that year Malcolm had - under promise of secrecy and limited publicity - baptised a number of Iranian Christian converts, and would be doing so again the following Easter. I thought of the two old ladies who had worshipped at All Souls all their lives. I thought of them sitting watching this secret initiation ceremony and I wondered what they made of it all.

The service begins with the procession, led by Malcolm and Susan's son and Karl on guitars. Given the modern building, and the informality with which people have entered the church, this moment of formality takes me by surprise. For Malcolm however, such 'show' - procession, robes, candles - is an essential part of his vision for All Souls. As he would remind me on a number of occasions, there is an embrace of such multi-sensual worship in what is a largely non-book culture. For Malcolm, the liturgy is brought alive for people by its enactment, by its tangibility. And by music. In the services at All Souls everything is about music. As well as hymns, the greeting, Kyrie eleison, Gloria, gospel acclamation, the Psalm and Sanctus are all sung. The music itself is not 'high' - Malcolm uses simple chants, call and response, many of which are fairly recent pieces. He did away with the organ a few years ago and now the music is led by guitar and by his own

bodhrán. For Malcolm, the important thing is that the music is accessible and simple. Music, he tells me, draws people in and allows people to access the service - even if they can't grasp the concepts, they can participate in the rhythms and tunes. The musicality of All Souls thus creates at once a welcome to all, and yet also a sense of difference. In the heart of this urban environment a group of people gather every Sunday to sing Celtic chants led by a vicar banging a drum. It is, as Karl would point out in the focus group, mysterious and peculiar: unique rhythms amidst the everyday sounds of the city. Totally appropriate, totally strange.

The service is one long celebration. Unlike the other services I attended - where a child is presented with a Bible before leading out the rest of the children into a side hall - on Pentecost Sunday the young people are very much involved. The ten or so boys and girls are invited to the front and they come forward, led by Susan but essentially rabble-like, shaking colourful objects they have created for the retelling of the Pentecost story. As the story is read they wave their objects - their tongues of flame - at the appropriate points. From here Susan delivers a talk on the meaning of Pentecost for today. Her message is simple (God brings together a diverse group of people and they are united in their understanding of the gospel, what Susan calls the 'language of love') and yet she speaks it with passion, visibly moved. The reason for her emotion is obvious as she moves into the end of her talk. 'So, we're going to do this this morning. We have people here from all over the world. If you feel comfortable, why don't you come forward and praise God in your own language.' People do come forward to offer their praise. Some prayers, some songs, some simple statements, in Farsi, Hindi and Swahili. And it is a profound moment. As many miles away as years, Pentecost does not need to be imagined on this Sunday in this church in SR - it is being enacted in a very tangible sense, as much a reality now as then.

The peace lasts for about four minutes. Every person in the congregation greets every other person. Many hug, some chat for a while. It has the feel of a family gathering.

After the service, about half the congregation leave immediately. This split is not clear-cut, but it feels like more of the white (and older) South Reckton 'locals' depart first. The other half mill about chatting before moving into the main hall in the All Souls Centre for tea and a biscuit before the fellowship lunch. The Centre and sanctuary are connected by a garden space, which was the original nave before the church was burned down. It is a beautifully-crafted walled garden, with a paved labyrinth in the middle and seating around the edge. What immediately catches my attention in this area is a large colourful mural on the far wall of the garden. The mural is significant to All Souls and was created by people in the local community; anyone who wished to be involved. It shows a river flowing from a Christ-like figure, and surrounded by trees, plants, animals and people. The image clearly made an impression on the researchers from Theos and CUF who came to All Souls to explore how churches offer value to their communities, who used it as a centerpiece of their report. In that report they included a description by Malcolm alongside the picture. Malcolm claimed the image as symbolic of All Souls' vision: 'a place where life and goodness flow out to all parts of South Reckton [...] where everyone is able to grow and flourish'.

The Centre and All Souls Youth run as independent entities yet are connected to the church in important ways. They are separate physically - in the week you can enter the Centre without setting foot in the church - but also because the day-to-day organisation is carried out by non-church members. On the other hand, the separate governing bodies were established in such a way that they are led by Malcolm and will always include members of the church. Furthermore, many in the church serve in the Centre and volunteer as part of the youth programs that run throughout the year. As Chloe, the All Souls Centre administrator told me, the central image is of the triquetra: the Centre, All

Souls Youth and All Souls are separate entities and yet each is a part of the whole, overlapping in significant ways. The distinction is largely pragmatic - funding and employment opportunities are greater if the centre and youth programme are independent from the church. As Susan and Malcolm pointed out to me, it also offers a way of the church engaging with the community in a way which doesn't carry so much baggage. The Centre and youth work are run and administered professionally, and have created their own reputations: 'they are not 'churchy' enough to put people off' and, as such, they serve to break down some of the boundaries between church and city.

As I walk into the Centre I sense once again the informality of the gathering. Children are running around, some playing football in the hall, and the whole thing feels more like a community centre drop-in than coffee and tea after church. On the walls I note the adverts and publicity for various events that run throughout the week. These are many. There are also plenty of information sheets up around the place - some from the local council, others from the police or health service.

Malcolm (who by this stage has taken off his chasuble) is proud to usher me into the hall to look at the planning boards for the 'Big Local' project. The Big Local project is a core part of what All Souls is doing in SR. The project is a government development initiative which seeks to work against some of the problems of government development initiatives. Specifically, the one million pound budget is spent not by local government or policy teams, but rather by a group of local people: residents, faith leaders, community organisers, etc. who are given the responsibility for establishing key areas of development. All Souls involvement in this is a complex one. During my time at All Souls I sat in on a Big Local meeting, attended by councillors, housing planners and local residents. As I sat there I could have been misled into thinking that the project was the church's own: the meeting was held in the Centre, and was chaired by Malcolm, with Susan making important contributions throughout. However, All Souls merely serves the project which



is in fact led by the group, and held to account by higher powers. Malcolm became chair after being selected by local residents and decision makers to do so. Essentially then, All Souls facilitates the project, holding the space as it were, for the group to meet and reach decisions. One moment stood out in the meeting: a passionate young mother spoke confidently to a local councillor about the need to counter the unfair rental practices of landlords in the area. It was a moment of authentic and effective prophetic speaking to power. And yet, as I reflected on it I realised that this speaking was not the church's own. The church was equipping local people with some power to change their community.

The fellowship lunch is being set up behind me as I sip tea and chat. Even in these preliminary stages of setup it is clear that this isn't going to be the sort of church lunch I am familiar with. There isn't a quiche in sight. Instead I see bowls of curry, grilled meats, rice and couscous, colourful salads. Very quickly the table becomes its own symbol of everything different and vibrant about this place.

Eating together is an important part of people's experience of All Souls. This came through strongly in the photos and focus group, and in conversations with congregation members. People described All Souls as a family, and highlighted the shared Easter or Christmas meals as examples of this. Indeed they are just one example of the experiential nature of many people's understanding of All Souls. What struck me in the focus group was just how quickly people moved from my 'what is the mission of All Souls?' question into a very visceral reflection. In fact there was something of a divide in the group between those who spoke about raw experiences - 'the sense of belonging', 'amazing experiences of God', 'the depth of the present moment', 'eating together[...]so friendly and happy', 'the community coming together', 'grabbing [hold of] and caring for' - and those who offered interpretation, or perhaps, gave the theological framework for, such experiences. The reality they spoke of was of course the same, it's just that the categories were wholly different. For many at All Souls, the 'meaning' of the church and of its place

in SR is not about theological constructs or mission plans or vision, it is more visceral than this. It is an experience - as tangible as sung choruses, a drum or a meal with friends.

### 6.1.2 All Souls Analysis

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What then of All Souls in relation to my theory? Firstly, All Souls is in many respects that ideal parish church as portrayed by the likes of Davison and Alison Milbank in *For the Parish*, albeit situated in an urban context rather than a rural village. It is racially, economically and socially diverse. The core of its life is its worship; the rhythms of the liturgical year, daily offices, and the weekly gathering around the Lord's Table. The church lives by a different pattern of association and gathering, and yet it reaches out from this difference to serve and love the community it sits within. It is open, with a very public face. It is deeply local, defining itself as existing for SR, truly integral to the area and complicit in its life. It has found itself in a unique position of facilitating the community's own discussion about its future: not pushing a 'church agenda', but holding the space within which agencies and local residents have been able to work together for the common good. If someone did wish to defend the parish ideal, they would find here at All Souls a great amount to support their case. It simply seems to make sense here.

Malcolm himself identified All Souls' strengths as particularly 'parochial', and framed his understanding of All Souls' place in the world in the language of parish and presence. Indeed, our conversations would more than often turn back directly to the topic of my theory: the role of the parish church in contrast to, say, associational or fresh expressions churches. And Malcolm didn't hide his unease about the latter. He was proud of the fact that, in contrast to what he characterised as the 'suits you sir' ecclesiology of Fx, All Souls was truly diverse because it worked out of what he described as a 'theology of place'. Drawing together the various conversations we had over my time there, this theology of place captured for Malcolm a church that is incarnational, working with a

broad missiology which seeks not to convert but simply to serve, and deeply hospitable to all, without condition. On more than one occasion, Malcolm told me that part of his vision for All Souls was to show that 'the parish system can work'. If there is one thing that I discovered quite quickly at All Souls it is that his vision is being realised. There is no doubt that All Souls is showing that the parish church can work, and more, that it can work in a profound way.

Is it the case then that All Souls challenges my theory about the need for complexity in the ecclesial structure? Does this church highlight the strengths of the parish structure, that is, if it can create churches like All Soul's? What I found at All Souls does challenge - or at least push back on - my theory in particular ways. What fascinated me from my first visit to All Souls though was just how abnormal the church was as a parish church. This, quite simply, was the basic observation that drove most of my questioning during my time there. Why was this parish church modelling the principles of the parish so well? Why did this parish church stand out from all the other parish churches in the area which (as far as I could see) were struggling, struggling, that is, in all the ways you imagine a Church of England parish church in an urban centre might struggle? These questions thus lead me to my most basic conclusion about All Souls as I saw it: All Souls is a church that is profoundly present to its community; however it is so not because it is a parish church, but because it has proactively inhabited its identity as a parish church in concrete ways. In this way it is a church which has become present to its community. I hope to have shown in the narrative above how I see that this conclusion makes sense of All Souls, however it is worth expounding it slightly.

I deliberately use 'community' here because I found that at All Souls it was not the parish so much as the local area which was understood to be the church's area of concern. Malcolm certainly used the language of parish in formal interviews, however in normal conversation even he matched the congregation's use of 'SR' as the primary descriptor. This is not an incidental fact but one which I would suggest is central to understanding All Souls relationship to place. In all my conversations at All Souls, people identified

responsibility for the area, however this was not a parochial area, rather it was the local area of SR. The descriptor 'SR' refers then not so much to a space as to a place: 'SR' is established through innumerable factors and, in line with the definition of place as bounded openness explored in this thesis, is at once necessarily undefinable and yet holds together enough to make sense as a unified entity. Some of what 'binds' SR as a descriptor is of course its physical space. It is the territory that is south of the river, east of the city, just across the flyover, etc. Further, unlike many places, this particular place is especially identifiable and known locally by its geography and, primarily, by its urban centre (the market square and the shops). However its identity - like that of any other place - is not captured by these territorial facts, but is instead an amalgamation of history, culture, systems of gathering and association, primary gatekeepers and power holders. And of course, as a place, SR is both in flux, and open to multiple interpretations. Even amongst the church members I found, for example, differing perspectives on the increase in numbers of refugees and asylum seekers to this traditionally white, working class area. My basic point then is that in their understanding of the relationship between the church and the world the congregation (and leadership) at All Souls understand the area of responsibility not as a parish but as a place, in all of the complexity and lack of clear definition that this entails. The church does have a parish - Malcolm can and did trace the lines on a map - however in reality who could ever determine where the church's sphere of responsibility and influence extended? SR is a far looser descriptor than any boundary would allow for.

To draw on the themes discussed in this thesis to this point then, I understand All Souls to be deeply local without being 'parochial'. Furthermore, this being local is highlighted not only in the church's self-understanding but also in its praxis. All Souls is engaged with its community as a place, in all of the diversity this entails. Much of this is held by Malcolm and Susan who, for example, are in close contact with various gatekeepers in the area, including local project managers and charity groups, as well as with the local council. This close relationship was highlighted by the decision to appoint

Malcolm as the chair of the Big Local board. The point is that these relationships are more about 'network' than about geography. Many of these gatekeepers and decision makers work from outside of SR - from the city for example - and so contact and involvement with them involves engagement with the various 'flows' of power relations in that broader area. To this type of engagement - that is, an engagement beyond pure geography - I could also highlight the Godly Play work in a local school which was made possible through relationships with particular individuals in the school, as well as the use of social media to form communication channels with full-time parents. And beyond Malcolm and Susan, there is a more general sense that the church's 'reaching out' happens through relationship and certain networks. All Souls does not relate to SR as if each person were an isolated individual who happens to dwell within a defined area, but rather as part of a group or community or web of relationships. Some of these are about friendships and contacts - people knowing other people and bringing them into contact with the church - but other networks are about existing structures (schools for example) or social groups (the Iranian asylum-seeker community). Once again it would be incorrect to assume that the area itself is insignificant. These networks and relationships gather and are part of what makes up SR and thus the church's working through them is part of its presence to this particular place. The point is not about abstract networks in contrast to, say, locality but rather about what it means to be committed to place. All Souls is present to the place of SR because it understands and works proactively through the given networks and web of relationships which make it the place that it is.

By 'proactive' I mean all of the things that All Souls has done, and is doing, to *become* present. This might, however, suggest a unilateral movement; the church deciding on a plan or course of action in advance and implementing it. What I mean by proactivity in All Souls case is more about openness and responsiveness. All Souls is proactive in the sense of being ready and willing to respond to opportunities as they arise. To refer to terms used throughout this thesis, it is a church which seeks out, and takes hold of what it finds. This proactivity can be seen in numerous ways: the

welcoming of asylum-seekers, the setting up of the family-friendly space at the back, the Godly Play work with local schools, the grasping of the Big Local opportunity, and the decision to create a community centre to replace the old halls, are just some examples. In each case, the church opened itself up to, or responded to, a perceived need. It is also interesting to note that All Souls does not have the high number of occasional offices one might expect of a church so closely intertwined with its community. (Malcolm compared experiences here with his previous parish where there were a very high number of occasional offices, especially funerals). This is important: occasional offices can provide a given or 'natural' connectivity with a community whereby people come to the church as 'pastor', and the church fulfills this need. The need that All Soul's meets however is one that it has worked at rather than received; it has sought out areas of need and created spaces where these can be met rather than – as some accounts of parochial occasional offices can assume happens – simply welcoming the community as it moves towards the church. In the meeting of the community's needs the initiative lies with the church rather than with the local community.

Likewise, the fact that All Souls embodies a different - we might say 'gospel shaped' - pattern of existence in the midst of the patterns of the world, is itself no mere accident. This is important to point out in light of the critique that Fx embody a model of association and gathering that is essentially antithetical to the gospel and that, in contrast, one of the primary callings of the church is to exist as a different sort of place, formed by a different *leitourgia*. All Souls certainly has established itself as such a place, one marked by commitment to a different calendar and liturgy as well as by the virtues of hospitality to the stranger, unity in diversity and self-sacrificial love. My point is that this has come about through particular commitment and hard work – an active openness to what is found - rather than as a natural consequence of its being a parish church.

Two further points are important here. The first is the role of history, or what we might call capital. Though what All Souls is experiencing currently seems new - something highlighted by the consistent narrative of change expressed by many in the congregation - in actual fact it is the expression of deeper values, commitments and

identities which have defined the church. The church has a history of engagement in the community; something which arguably goes back to the church's origins, where one can see the close intertwining of the life of the church and the area. Likewise, the church has had respected leaders in the past who have led the church towards a particular place in the community. And then of course is the fact of geography. This cannot be overstated. All Souls enjoys a central position in the town and is therefore not simply visible (and thus 'public'), but capable of involving itself in the life of the community through, for example, the open coffee morning on market days. Likewise, the position of the building, and even its burning down which offered the chance to create a new space, has contributed to its place and identity within SR. Each of these then - history, past leaders, and geography - is a basis, or piece of capital, from which the church is able to be present. But the church is not simply present because of these things. Rather, it has built upon them, making the most of their benefits.

The second important point is about the role of current leadership. I see Malcolm and Susan's role as critical in two ways. One, they have sought to affect a shift in the culture in the church so that it is more welcoming and accessible: more like a community than simply a gathered congregation. Much of this has been about creating a discourse of welcome and inclusion as well as a structure of worship which is appropriate in its rhythmic nature, simplicity and accessibility. Two, they have established the church as an effective presence within the local area. In this way, Malcolm and Susan are more representative: they *are* All Souls' engagement with the community. This is seen for example in their roles in the Big Local project, Godly Play, and in their leadership of the Centre. Thus, although others from the church are involved in these areas, Malcolm and Susan have been at the forefront. In both ways then, All Souls has become present to its community through effective leadership. In my meetings with Malcolm and Susan I found them to be alert to the unique culture and challenges of the city and SR, to the needs of congregation members, to the history of the church, and to potential avenues of support and funding. As stated previously, they are aware of and in contact with, the key

stakeholders within the informal and formal power structures of the area. And in all of this they are driven by a strong vision and commitment to see the kingdom of God realised in tangible ways in SR. In particular, they believe passionately that the church should be meeting the needs of the most vulnerable in the community.

To claim that All Souls is the church it is because it is a parish church therefore seems to me not only a failure to capture the reality of the church, but also does a disservice to its congregation and leadership. Rather, All Souls engages not with a geographically defined area but rather with the place that is SR and, further, the real story of All Souls is the way in which it has *become* present to its community, through hard work, commitment and responsiveness. It is of course impossible to establish the extent to which the commitment to SR I witnessed at All Souls, in both its leaders and congregants, has come about *because* it is a parish church. One might claim, for example, that the parish principle which was so definitive of All Souls was only possible given its historical and present identity as a church within the parish system. The argument here is that, although the parish system does not work in each and every instance (the fact I observed to be true of this area) it is the system that can lead to churches such as All Souls: it is the environment within which other 'All Souls' grow. Put differently, the parish system has formative potential. These arguments have weight to them and I shall return to them in the final chapter.

It should be pointed out that All Souls is far from being comprehensively present to the community of SR and, indeed, that there are significant challenges to its ministry of presence. The lack of indigenous leadership, as well as the challenge of connecting with certain demographics (especially working-class, white males) each point to the fact that the church's presence is not total. The challenge for the church is perhaps shown in the way in which it engages with so many white locals from the community during the week through the Centre, but struggles to attract them to Sunday worship.<sup>266</sup> The church and

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<sup>266</sup> The issue of gender, in relation to church attendance, is an important area of research, however it lay beyond the remit of my study. It would have been interesting for example to explore how the concept of



the Centre have different entrances. Were the church to move forward in these areas it would be because of a renewed commitment and determination; the very features that have defined its engagement to this point. Perhaps then All Souls is a good example of the fact that one church will struggle to be present in every sense. Of course the church is always open to everyone and does welcome all, for example, through occasional offices. However, this is a church which has consistently refused to settle for a presence which is simply about openness and has instead battled to be a church which is active in meeting need and welcoming people into its life. Malcolm in particular is discontented about the issues above and wants to see them change. And so the church is faced with a desire to deal with these issues and an awareness that they may indeed lie beyond their capabilities. If Fx could ever make sense in this context then it would make sense in this way, that is, in being part of All Souls's vision to be present to the whole of its community. It lies beyond my purposes here to imagine what such a Fx might look like. However, one could imagine ways of forming worshipping communities out of the existing groups that use the Centre. A crucial issue for such a community however would be the extent to which they connected with the existing congregation. On the one hand it would seem unwise to start something new, outside of All Souls given its capital. However, it might in fact be the case that this capital is insignificant - or even a hindrance - for particular demographics. In this way any new expression of church would need to exist at a certain distance from the present congregation. I suspect however, that this is not a vision of church that would appeal to All Souls' leadership and congregation, for whom the current experience of unity in diversity has been so important.

In summary then, All Souls is a church deeply present to the place of SR. SR is a place in all the complexity the term entails; including - though not reducible to - a physical space. This presence has been and is a becoming. Through good leadership, responsiveness to need and building on social capital, the church has become present to

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place is received by males and females, as well as to explore whether and how dominant portrayals of maleness in certain areas might affect male attendance.

the people who live in this area. This presence is far from total and there is room to explore Fx or forms of church that would be connected to the central church body, but which might focus on the particular demographics the church is struggling to reach.

I struggle to find S4 on my first Sunday visiting. When I pull into the carpark of the community college in Franton there is no indication that this is the right place for me to be. The car park is full, however there are a number of people playing football on the next door MUGA pitches and it seems as though the cars belong to them. It is only when I notice the group of people going into the building, sound equipment under their arms, that I feel I might be on the right track.

The church has been meeting in the community centre in Franton, a suburb of Backston city, for the past five years. Franton is traditionally a more deprived part of Backston; evidenced on my brief drive around the area looking for the carpark. When I do the mapping exercise with the church it becomes clear that most of the people attending church travel in from outside the area. There are a few though, I discover, who've settled here. It's not exactly intentional living they tell me, 'we just think people should know if Christians live and gather in a place, so we try to show them God's love in how we live'.

The church has begun to connect with some of the footballers who play on the pitches next to the car park. It is a new and unexpected venture, but something that they're proud of. It crops up in a few different interviews: the leader of S4, Theo, mentions it to me as an example of where 'we're doing more of the parish thing'. Another leader points out the significance: 'We've got that bit of trust: the council gave us the keys to the pitches - they said they wanted someone to engage with the young people. It's a privilege.' It seems to be a good way then for those who are more 'outreach minded' to serve outside of the formal church structures: 'there's no agenda, we just show up and play and chat [but] some of them have started coming into the services after they've played.'

Another church uses the community centre in the mornings. There is therefore a switch-around period in the day; the morning church packs down and S4 sets up. I witness this setting up when I walk into the building (I've come early to offer my help): about fifteen or so people are milling around putting out chairs and tables (the space is laid out in a cafe style about ten tables) and refreshments, and setting up sound equipment. Before the community centre they were meeting in a gym; their first 'home' after they were formed by a group from the large evangelical church in the city centre. Two venues in ten years, twinned with the constant 'pack up / pack down' here, means that there is an inbuilt sense of transience to S4's existence. By the time I come to write up this research they will have moved to a different part of the city. 'It's a better venue', one of the church members told me recently, 'it's easy to gather there for worship and feel close together'.

There is music playing over the speakers when I come in. Beyoncé and Justin Bieber. Shortly before the service it switches to contemporary worship music. I found out from conversations that S4 is not seeking to be 'cool' or 'relevant' per se. There is however a very natural acceptance of current cultural forms, marked not only by the music but also by the importance they place on their social media presence. Indeed, my first impressions of S4 - as I assume is true of many others - come not via the gatherings but their Instagram profile.

At the back of the hall is an information stand and a collection point for one of the Backston foodbanks. I'm later told that the foodbank is on S4's radar because one of the church members is involved there. The stand and the collection has become an integral part of the setup each Sunday. It is representative of the pattern of S4's outreach and ministry in that it exists not as an 'S4' project but as a project run by someone in S4. The church's ownership of it - and it does take ownership - is in this form. It's the same with the running of the student 'ministry campervan', involvement with a local social housing project and indeed with the football pitches ministry. On the surveys I was surprised by

how many people had ticked 'work in local schools, hospitals, prisons, etc.' as important for the mission of S4, given that I hadn't seen any evidence of S4 being involved in such ministry at all. But the point of course - as Theo had to explain - is that members of S4 are involved in these activities, and the rest of the community hears about them, or spend time doing them themselves. S4 doesn't visit prisons, but Jonathan does.

The hall starts to fill up and I head over to the refreshments table. I'm met by what is a pretty standard Church of England fare of drinks and biscuits. I'm surprised by the simplicity of the offering. Something about 'S4', Fx, 'student church' suggests smoothies and espresso machines. But the choice here is basic: more in keeping with the community centre surroundings than stereotypes of 18-30s church plants. S4 couldn't be described as flashy. There is a band for example (bass, keys, drums, and worship leader) but no lights, no backing tracks, no wall of speakers. It is understated.

There is a welcoming messiness to these pre-service moments. People are dispersed around the hall, some sitting, some standing, some leaning against the chairs, but everyone conversing. It is relaxed. People are comfortable here (each has made it his or her own space in this moment). The children are happy running around or playing with toys on the playmat, their shouts and laughs just audible over the noise of conversation and music

The gathering is diverse. Overall it is more young than old, but I notice some elderly couples toward the front as well as the children and young families at the back and the sides. One table seems occupied solely by teenagers and they are sat with someone I assume to be a youth leader. It is good to have the opportunity for face-to-face conversation; most of my meetings with S4 folk are held over the phone, since I live too far away to arrange last-minute meetings. This seems to be the character of the social forms around S4. People's lifestyles are more transitory and they seem busier than in the

other places I researched. You don't tend to 'bump into people' here or drop in for a visit, instead you book in a coffee meet-up for the next week. This is perhaps the character of urban forms of association; both the geography (spread out across a city) and culture seems to necessitate a certain way of connecting. At this moment on a Sunday however, everyone is in one place at one time.

I take my tea and sit at a round table where five or six others have already settled. By now the tables and chairs are spread around the room, in front of the stage. The idea is that everyone sits around a table with others, forming a sort of organic 'group'. This 'round table' setup is a particular feature of S4 and it is mentioned several times in the interviews. It has its origins I'm told, in the roots of S4's story, when the church grew out of an Alpha course / Explore Christianity gathering. The form then was initiated to encourage discussion and questioning. It is an aspect of S4's identity that's still very important to the leaders and congregants I spoke to: 'no question is too stupid'; 'it's ok to ask questions here and not know why stuff happens like it does'. Even if there has been a shift ('it used to be basically a religious studies lesson every week [but] we realised we needed to go deeper and sort of like 'do church' more') the round tables perpetuate the character of informality and discussion.

It's at this point that I'm struck by just how enthusiastic people are. There is no hesitation in chatting - people on my table ask me all the right questions, they are interested in me. And they seem keen that the service should start; there's that same atmosphere of expectation you get waiting before the curtain is pulled back at the cinema. I push one couple on this; 'yeah, we really look forward to church each week, we love it here'. In interviews this same energy comes through: people like their church and they're proud of it, they like talking about it.

Before the service starts I take stock of the physical surroundings. Beyond the tables and chairs and band setup, the church's impact on the community centre space is minimal. The standout features are the large self-standing banners that flank the stage. I had seen them being pulled out of their metallic boxes earlier; the kind of banner you might find at a convention or in an exhibition centre. 'Welcome to S4'; 'Vision'; 'Join Our Clusters', each one presents an aspect of S4's identity. Alongside the words they also employ high resolution photos: a group of students, people worshipping, people chatting, etc. I connect the visuals of the banners with what I have seen online on the church's Facebook and Instagram accounts. As with the banners, detail here is limited; it is a predominantly visual representation. New pictures showing services or events, posted with regularity.

That the 'clusters' banner should take pride of place is significant. Clusters are integral to what S4 is - the expectation is that to 'belong' to S4 will involve belonging to one of these groups. There are three: students, 20-30s and families, and each one consists of further smaller groups or gatherings. It was to become hard to pin down what these groups looked like in practice, yet I sensed that this is precisely part of the appeal. Some are more outward focused, others resemble traditional church small groups. Each cluster is led by a member of the staff team. The one I hear most about is 20s-30s. I am told that they organise social events (on Facebook), encouraging church members to bring along friends who might not go to church, and so aim to form social groupings where church and non-church folk might mix. Though there is gathering at Sunday services then, there is a strong emphasis on the belonging that happens in these groups. One of the most interesting things to come out of the focus group was the five minutes of small talk between some of the group members, several of whom were meeting one another for the first time.

The service begins with thirty minutes or so of sung worship. The songs are all contemporary worship songs, with a few modernised hymns thrown in. The singing is

interspersed with some Bible readings and prayers from the guitar player leading the worship. After the worship, two students come up to the stage, both carrying a seemingly oversized brightly coloured microphone. I later discover that the students are called 'hosts'. They welcome everyone and offer their thanks for our being here on this Sunday. After another prayer, they invite the speaker to the front - a man in his twenties, wearing a checked shirt and jeans. I find out after the service that he is on the leadership team of the church and was an undergraduate at Backston before choosing to stay on in the city, partly to stay connected with S4.

The sermon or 'talk' seems to form the central part of the service. It's almost as if everything was building up to this. 'Speaking upfront' is a big part of S4's identity and is an important aspect of Theo's vision for the church to 'raise up and train new leaders'. Every month, the service changes slightly and becomes 'Ignition Sunday'. Here three people who are new to public speaking, are invited one after the other to give a five minute TED-style talk on a theme of their choosing. It's been an important part of what is seen as a 'journey' by many of those I spoke to during the research.

We are invited to turn and chat to the people on our table for a few minutes before the talk gets going.

This week the talk lasts around twenty-five minutes. It's engaging, full of stories, and the interest level is kept high through the use of regular visuals on the screen. The talk doesn't really end as such, but rather flows into a time of questions: we are invited to discuss the topic of the sermon around our tables. I'm surprised by just how naturally people do this. I keep an eye on the rest of the room whilst trying to chat with people around me. It seems most people are genuinely engaged. Some stay quiet of course, but everyone turns in and presents themselves as pensive and attentive. Following the questions the speaker returns to the front to give one further thought before he issues a challenge to us to reflect on. At



this point the band, it seems spotting their cue, return to the stage and begin to play quietly over the reflective pause now left open by the speaker. After a short while, the speaker returns with one final challenge ('I just feel God wants to say something this morning, so allow yourself to hear him') before handing back over to the band.

After a few more songs it is the two hosts who bring the service formally to a close. 'Thanks everyone for coming. We hope we see you again, have a really good Sunday. Goodbye.' They step off stage and the pop music starts back up again. I notice there are still a fair few people praying or being prayed for near the front of the stage.

I stay behind at the end to chat and to get to know some more people. The pack down happens quicker than I was expecting and before long it seems that it is time to leave. Before walking out I turn back to look into the main hall. The banners are back in the boxes now and the band have packed away. The refreshments tables, wiped down, are leaning against the wall. It's a community centre again now, S4's presence in this space gone, put on hold until next week.

I am, however, invited to the pub - some folk from the 18-30s cluster are gathering to eat together. 'It's sort of what we do' says one person, 'we go to [the local pub] every week after church and invite people to join us'. As it happens I'm not free this Sunday and need to drive back home. As I leave the carpark I'm struck by the two images I've been left with. The empty vacated hall on the one hand, and the large group of people gathering together at the pub. Empty and full. S4: nowhere and everywhere.

### **6.2.1 S4 Analysis**

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S4 is a fresh expression of church that openly works on the basis of 'networks' rather than a parish structure. As Theo put it to me in our initial interview:

I think we see S4 as a network more than something that's like a parish, and obviously we're not a parish in the strictest sense [...] our centre is where we meet on Sunday [...] I think on the whole we work through, "who are our friends, who do we know?".

Theo's statement here was represented by the pictures people had selected for the focus group task. They showed both a missional involvement that was dispersed across the city rather than focused on one particular locale, as well as an emphasis on people - on gatherings. Likewise, basic coding of the interview transcripts revealed that 'network' and 'community' were high frequency terms. S4 then is essentially formed on the basis of relationships; on a Sunday afternoon (so the service being structured around tables and discussion), but also in the clusters, where value is placed on invitation and hospitality. People come to S4 and remain involved because they have formed relationships with people from within the church. The parish, as one interviewee put it, 'simply isn't our paradigm.'

When using the term 'community' then, what members of S4 were referring to was S4 itself. There is a fundamental difference here from, say, how the term was used at St Andrew's, where community referred in the first instance to the church and locale (village) as a whole. Here the 'community' consisted of the people who had come to S4 (the common language used here, including by Theo, was that of 'members') and were part of the church. Indeed, it would be a struggle to say that Franton really held any role in the church's life at all. This is not totally the case, as the commitment to the football sessions shows. However, what I never found at S4 was any worked-through understanding of what Franton was like or who lived there. I heard many generalised statements: it is 'more deprived'; a 'trickier place to live'; 'it has lots of issues there', for example. What I never heard was anything that could be described as presenting insight into the particularities - what Mark Wynn refers to as a place's 'supra-individuality'<sup>267</sup> - of

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<sup>267</sup> Mark R. Wynn, *Faith and Place: An Essay in Embodied Religious Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p.46f.

Franton. What each of these descriptions of Franton demonstrate is that it had been understood as an example of a type (deprived, working class, etc.) but not as a unique place in itself. Indeed, it would be possible to describe S4's existence in Franton as functional rather than committed. This was exemplified in the packing up/down of the service each Sunday and the way in which the church was able to move from Franton to a different part of the city without any obvious change to the church's identity. The community centre in Franton was therefore incidental to S4's existence; it was where S4 happened to meet and did not shape its ministry or mission. Both from the survey and interviews it was clear that the building was seen in functional terms; a space within which the 'place' that is S4 could gather. In this sense then S4 was not bound to Franton and Franton certainly had no role in shaping S4 itself; it was not a church defined by the (local) community. Everyone I spoke to was aware of S4's position vis-a-vis Franton: a close tying of the church with the local community was simply not part of the church's expressed or lived imaginary. On its own terms then, S4 was not in any sense 'failing' Franton, it simply did not conceive of itself as existing to serve that place.

To take this in a slightly different direction, I found that S4 is shaped not by the local place in which it exists but is rather self-constructed. Its identity is crafted rather than given to it by its local place. If there is one observation that I kept returning to it is how well S4 shapes, perpetuates and disperses its identity and vision. Physically, this 'presentation of vision' is evident in the banners on a Sunday as well as the website and social media presence. There is a continuity across these forms. Likewise S4 regularly holds 'vision Sundays' where Theo and key leaders outline the vision and direction of the church to the congregation. Indeed, from the interviews, two high frequency terms were 'culture' and 'values' both of which often appeared alongside 'shaping' or 'constructing'. In this sense, members of S4 see the church as a culture which is constantly being formed through a set of values that are similarly constructed rather than 'given'. In the words of one of the core team, 'we are not defined by the fact that we meet here, just as we weren't defined by meeting in David Lloyd gym. We're defined by the values God's called us to

and who we are as a community'. There is then a very explicit discourse at S4 around vision and purpose. In part this springs from S4's roots as a missional project; it did not arise 'naturally' but proactively with a clear purpose and, as time has gone on, the church has continually needed to define itself. In this sense, S4 does not 'have' an identity - a building, a history of community engagement etc. as is the case in an inherited parish context - but is consistently needing to shape this through the language of vision, purpose and values.

The vision itself - espoused as 'S4 is a church with a vision to help people discover and follow Jesus Christ' - is church-centric rather than focused on the locale or city. This carried through into the interviews and focus group where people spoke primarily about the church community (what the church was like) before anything else. In the surveys a majority of people ticked 'helping Christians grow in their faith' as the purpose of S4, and a high number saw 'existing members' as the church's focus (second only to 'anyone who wishes to come'). Similarly, Theo's vision sermon focused in large part on the need to grow new leaders; an ideal that played out in the commitment to offering people opportunities to preach and lead on a Sunday. Indeed it is the Sunday gathering that takes up most of the space on the website and in social media; it is the centre of the church's identity. What is clear is that the church does not see any of this as introversion or focus on its own identity. Rather, there is a conviction that in order for the church to make a missional impact, it needs to do (gathered) church well. The development of new leaders, for example, is explained not in terms that implied the church needs to perpetuate itself, but so that people can be sent out to plant and lead other churches. This formulation can also be seen in the most frequently occurring description of S4 by its members as offering something different from other churches, and in particular from 'traditional church'. S4 then is 'not churchy'; 'I like it because it's not what I'd expect from church'; 'it's different from a traditional church - lots of people wouldn't come into a church like that'. One interviewee expressed a fear that S4 was becoming too much like a 'normal church'. S4 then is a mix of, on the one hand, a very strong sense of ecclesial identity - not traditional

church, a community, a safe space, a pioneering project etc - and on the other a very low ecclesiology. Often, for example, I heard a contrast drawn between 'the Kingdom' and 'the church'. It seems to me then that the strong ecclesial identity is a constructed one, that is, the church seen not as central to the gospel message, but acting as a conduit for that message. Certainly not incidental to, but neither *part* of that message.

On the face of it then, S4 challenges my theory in at least three ways. In the first instance, the church seems to have a limited understanding of place. This is significant because my thesis supposes that, although they might differ in form and in their given area of responsibility, what matters is that each church should value the place it finds itself within - that it might hold something of the parish principle if not the system. What then of this emphasis on network over locality? Secondly, and related, this apparent lack of a theology of place manifests itself in a functional relationship to the locality. I see this seeming lack of love for local place as a significant issue. Thirdly, S4 presents a picture of a church formed around a constructed vision rather than out of a deep engagement and interaction with place, as seems to me central to the found theological approach I have advocated here. Out of the four churches then, S4 presents the biggest challenge to my theory. Given what I found at S4, can my theory, that the Church of England requires a variety of church forms, really be sustained? At worst, does not S4 suppose that, loosed from a parish structure, churches have the possibility, if not the propensity, to become detached from place? The picture is more complex than this, as I shall explain below. In what follows however, I do not wish to blunt the point of these concerns. I believe it would benefit both S4 and the Church of England to think seriously about what type of churches it wants to establish and perpetuate, especially in their relationship to place(s). My theory points to an acceptance of churches that relate to place in a different form than the parish structure. I do not believe that S4 is the perfect example of what such churches might look like; but it does offer more than perhaps the initial or synthesised critique above suggests.

My central claim is that S4 does in fact relate to place, it is simply that this place is bigger than the particular locality of Franton. Specifically, central to S4 is the language of 'the city': S4 recognises itself as existing for the city. In interviews and conversations, one of the phrases I repeatedly heard was 'I love it here', or, 'I love this city'. S4 has in fact a fairly high number of members who moved to the city for university but who have then stayed, building careers or starting families within the city. Further, the mapping task demonstrated that S4 was formed of people from across the city - there was no one particular area of the city people came from: it was a wide geographical spread. A number of things can be said from this.

First, S4 does reflect the nature of (certain aspects of) the place of the city. In this sense it is responding to what it finds in the world and is allowing itself to be shaped by it. Specifically, in its forms of gathering and relationality, it reflects a cosmopolitan version of place, owned most predominantly by students and younger professionals, that in many ways therefore marks the city itself. S4 is thus shaped by the place it exists for - the city - by very nature of its network and non-local approach. This is an important part of S4's self-understanding. In my first phone interview with Theo for example, he suggested that, 'most people today' don't exist within contained geographical areas, but rather in networks and a variety of (chosen) centres of gathering. This observation was repeated in a number of interviews. The form of the church then, from the Sunday meeting to the communication strategies and style of gathering, are all in this sense deliberate; recognised to be the way of connecting with a certain demographic.

It would be incorrect to describe S4 as a 'student church' based on a Sunday gathering; it is far more mixed than this. However, it is obvious that S4 was able to appeal in particular to students; the relaxed feel of Sunday meetings (which includes the time of the gathering) and the emphasis on community as expressed in the dispersed cluster groups, each contributes to this. Further, S4 is essentially, as one interviewee put it, 'heady.' The meetings are shaped around the discussion and the sermon, with the obvious emphasis therefore on faith as a cognitive exercise. Again, I do not think that S4 could be

described as presenting purely this type of faith. The centrality of relationship, the emphasis on 'experience' in the descriptions on the surveys, and the fact that people from a non-literate background find home here suggests there is far more going on. However, S4 is basically shaped by a demographic who are used to approaching faith through questioning and intellectual endeavour, that is I suggest, by a demographic that would self-define as citizens of 'the city'. Many of this demographic are indeed students, and it is important to recognise the work that S4 is doing to connect with them. There are two large universities in the city, and students make up a higher than average number of the population. Importantly then, this is not so much a case of 'demographic targeting', and certainly not in the sense of church as an interest group (so Martyn Percy's fear), but is rather a church being shaped by the nature of the city itself: cosmopolitan and educated. with a high number of students.

This is also seen in the modes of connection and community used by the church. In particular they rely heavily on social media. Their website, Instagram and Facebook pages are updated regularly; they are a key means of their functioning as church and when I spoke to people at S4 it was clear that they engaged with the church through these media. These approaches again are about connecting with a certain demographic.

I also see something important in the way in which S4 shapes itself around being a church that is 'unlike traditional church'. It became clear in conversations and interviews for example, that many people at S4 have some church background and had since moved away from any consistent Christian practice. Many of the students, for example, describe being at S4 after 'rediscovering' (another common term) the faith they had participated in at a 'home church' and which they had not practiced since coming to University. There is something relevant here then in the fact that, amidst the variety of parish churches in the area, S4 connects with people who find traditional church difficult for a variety of reasons. S4 will of course develop and perpetuate its own connotations of the word 'church', but it is certainly serving those who have a desire for Christian expression but who can't

(won't?) imagine this to look like many given Church of England ecclesial forms and practice.

Second, it is important to point out that the church is developing a richer understanding of what its connection with those outside of itself entails. As I see it, the church has moved from what I would call a traditional 'evangelical' strategy - one based around meeting 'unchurched' or 'de-churched' people and bringing them into an Alpha course type setting - towards a more holistic approach to mission. In his book *Evangelical Identity and Contemporary Culture*, Matthew Guest writes about the changes in, and the types of, evangelicalism.<sup>268</sup> It seems to me that S4 is reflecting some of the ongoing changes in the evangelical world in the UK and US, the precise character of which lies beyond my remit here. The characteristics of the newer model though could be summarised as a widening of eschatological hope (new creation and redemption over, simply, 'heaven') and, correspondingly a connecting of social justice with evangelism, resulting in a broad missiology. Most significantly for my purposes, much of this expresses itself in a call to 'love the city'; the theme of one of the sermons from S4 that I listened to in the course of the research. Members of the church were encouraged to 'serve God in whatever [they] do' and to 'love without agenda'. In at least one sermon for example, the congregation was invited to divide into various areas of the life of the city - education, healthcare, infrastructure, etc. - based on their interests or professions, and pray for each. Likewise I was surprised by the number of people who saw 'work in local schools, hospitals, prisons or institutions' as important on the survey. There is more that needs to be said about this (see below) but it is significant in itself: people at S4 do recognise the importance of social justice issues, or service opportunities, something also represented in the food bank station and commitment to missional giving on the website. I was fascinated therefore by what I saw as a modelling of many of the themes captured in the parish principle - an emphasis on service, commitment to place, a theology of

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<sup>268</sup> See Matthew Guest, *Evangelical Identity and Contemporary Culture: A Congregational Study in Innovation* (London: Paternoster, 2007).



embodiment, the common good - all of which at S4 originated from a very different source than Anglican theology and practice.<sup>269</sup> It is important to note then that aside from its praxis, S4's missional *imaginary* – the operant theology of church-world relationship – is one that does fit within the parish principle. S4's imaginary of place was one of church as different from, but existing for, the world. One interviewee for example, made the claim that, 'Baptism is what we most exist for'. S4 thus perpetuates a strong sense of differentiation between church and world but it does so with a missional agenda. In its difference - its calling of people out from the world - it desires to reach and serve the world. The difference therefore is not one of exclusion (church as a retreat from the world) but is rather one in which each member is seen to have a responsibility to love and serve the city. I hope to have shown, for example by outlining the different emphases of Percy and John Milbank, that the parish principle can act as a holder for a number of approaches. It seems to me that S4's imaginary can very much exist within this broader principle, with the difference being how it is expressed. Where in the parish structure the principle means geographical mapping and smaller areas of responsibility, for S4 the same principle has led it to serve a larger, intermediary place, namely the city.

Third, S4's relationship to place happens through dispersal. Whereas the parish system imagines the central point of community engagement to be each individual church within its given space of responsibility, S4 acts more like a hub, reaching out into a variety of places. It does this through the cluster/cell groups, church planting and, more generally, an emphasis on individuals or groups taking responsibility for the place they exist within. What is interesting therefore is that S4 is in fact very 'close' to certain places (the University for example) as in the image of the parish presented by its defenders, but it is so through multiple collectives rather than as a central body. Theo's vision therefore is openly to 'release people' to act, what he described as a culture of 'innovation':

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<sup>269</sup> In S4's case, a large amount of this type of thinking had come from Tim Keller's ministry in New York City. A Presbyterian, Keller's work focuses on the need for the church to contribute to the Common Good of the city. See, for example, Keller, *Center Church* (Grand Rapids, M.I.: Zondervan, 2012).

We give permission to people to try...we didn't want to innovate from the top down, that would make no sense, it needed to come from the grass roots because you're the expert of your friends [...] what's God put on your heart and then let's help you develop that...

And Theo's understanding did seem to find resonance in the rest of the church members' discourse. In another comment:

We're not here to put on a list of events, but to get people to think of themselves as missional Christians in the workplace and in whatever they're doing.

I honestly think if there was a group of students who wanted to start a group in Franton, Theo would be like, "great: how do we do this better?"

These comments came in the context of discussing the photos that people took for the focus group, which showed a wide variety of activities from across the city. Indeed, one focus group member had taken photos of her local suburb and of her family in that place; she saw herself as 'facilitated' by S4 to go and 'be a Christian' where she lived. Likewise, the 'projects' that S4 is involved with are not really 'church' projects at all but are rather headed up by individuals from within the church. The foodbank falls into this category, as does the prison visiting and schools work, each of which people had identified on the surveys to be 'central' to S4's ministry. Interestingly, one of these areas of influence centred on Franton. When I first heard of a 'missional community type thing' in Franton I imagined that I was looking for a structured group. In fact this 'community' consists of a few families in S4 who decided to meet together where they live in Franton and have begun to make connections with local residents there. Again, this is not a 'church' group - I discovered that many in the church weren't aware that it existed. And yet it isn't at all 'separate' from S4; those involved simply see it as the outworking of their involvement in the church. In Anglican terms then we might speak of this as S4 having a high view of the priesthood of all believers, and a strong vision to equip the laity. Whatever the language, S4's imaginary is one in which the church exists within the places that members found themselves; that it has social and spiritual capital in the city not on the basis of centrally-

run events or a public space, but through the influence of members in various contexts. In the final chapter I shall return to this image of church as a hub, allowing for dispersal. For now it is worth saying that in this form, S4 models something true of the larger city place it imagined itself as existing for, that is, as an intermediary place which consists of a variety of different places. Just as the cosmopolitans in the city would self-define as belonging to 'the city' whilst simultaneously finding identity within a variety of other groups, so too members of S4 recognise themselves as part of S4, expressed through a variety of differing social groups.

As I claimed above, the latter half of this section has not been an attempt to assimilate S4's approach to mission and ministry within the claims of my theory. I do see S4 as presenting some significant questions. For example, although serving the place of the city, it must be asked how S4 imagines its relationship to other 'bounded' parts of the city, like Franton, that do not adhere to a cosmopolitan version of place but are more provincial in outlook and practice. 'Place' in such communities is necessarily geographically local. Can and should S4 - by imagining itself to be 'for the city' - have a responsibility to these places too? Likewise, where should S4 draw the line in what it 'accepts' as true of the nature of place, thinking that is out of its Christian vision and tradition? Should the cosmopolitan version of place be embraced, or is there a need also to challenge this vision with an alternative? As with each of the churches I researched, it is important to note the variety of perspectives within the church and avoid synthesis. There were differences of opinion about the nature of place for example, with some being clear that they do want S4 to be more connected with Franton. Likewise, there is a tension that came through in the research between those who lean more towards church as incidental, and those who see it as crucial; is church a vehicle for the message and the dispersed ministry, or is the church itself part of that ministry? S4, like any other community, must wrestle with such questions.

I have argued that far from lacking a theology of place, S4 in fact sees itself as intricately tied to a place, albeit a bigger place than the parish. It is shaped by and for this

place in its forms of gathering and association. Further, S4 sees its role as one of dispersal across this place. In this sense, it connects with smaller places, i.e. with the places that members found themselves within, some of which are geographically defined and some of which are not. In terms of my theory, S4 demonstrates the potential for attractional churches that reach across intermediary spaces (such as a city) to form a crucial aspect of the Church's ministry of presence in place. That said, the church also highlighted some dangers in structuring church this way, namely overlooking or avoiding other bounded places within the larger city place. I shall return to this tension in the final chapter.

### 6.3 St Andrew's, Thornbury

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I have written already of the theological vision of the parish that is wedded to the rural imaginary.<sup>270</sup> Such an imaginary is certainly about people and relationships and patterns of life. My suspicion however, is that it is also captured by certain physical representations, one of which is the quintessential English country parish church. As I turn off the main road into the carpark of the pub opposite St Andrew's, I am struck by the extent to which this church fulfils this picture. The stone wall and lych gate. Gravestones and church surrounded by freshly cut lawn; a balance of grey stone and darker slate tiles, wooden beams, colourful stained glass and the vibrant green of the trees and grass. It is picture perfect. Maybe, I think, its physical statement is even too much? 'The building is often quite imposing', a member of the focus group suggested. For another though, the building's age and beauty and sense of otherness - away from the world - establishes it as sacred space; it is 'a spiritual building'.

The church building itself is not all that old. Built in 1857 it replaced a previous stone-built church which had itself been built as a replacement for the Early Medieval church. The current building is built to look old - a classic gothic revival church. And it *feels* old of course; stone and stained glass a direct contrast to the starkness of the tarmacked 'A' road and petrol garage a few meters away. The point though is that the overriding sense - that the church must have been here *forever* - is not strictly accurate.

As I walk towards the church I note just how loud the bells are when you stand beneath the tower. They are rung before each service, stopping just as it starts. Like magic, I think to myself. The automation of the bells however, is not mechanical, but in fact relies on a team of ringers. A few weeks previously I had joined them before the service, to witness

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<sup>270</sup> See p.57, footnote 136.

their work. The biggest surprise, considering I have attended before, was that I didn't recognise anyone - a whole room of people, ringing the bells, none of whom I had met, or indeed, would meet again. The ringers don't attend church, instead they ring the bells as a hobby. Each Sunday at 10am they meet at the base of the tower, wind slowly up the claustrophobia-inducing spiral staircase, perform their work, and then clamber back down again for home. Many people know St Andrew's by its bells. Indeed, the bells are thought of fondly by the congregation, held as a sign of the love and responsibility they have for the village (commenting on the pictures in the focus group one lady stated that, 'the bells ring out across the whole of Thornbury'). Yet the bells are rung not by church members, but rather by the bell ringers. The team. Who go home just as the organist finishes the last few bars of the opening hymn, and the congregation sits-or-kneels for the confession.

The church is busier than usual. Attendance for a Sunday service at St Andrew's can be in the single digits but is most commonly around fifteen. I attended one Sunday when a baptism was being held and there were fifteen communicants and over fifty in the congregation. (The baptism party were the last in church that Sunday: when I arrived they were waiting around outside in a large group - suits, ties, dresses, formal, wedding-like - and had to be invited in by one of the wardens just as the service was about to start). On the 'big occasions' - Christingle, Harvest, Easter Day, Mothering Sunday - the congregation will be in the hundreds. Likewise, at one of the monthly family services I attended, there were close to forty people, with numbers of children in double digits. This Sunday the number is high because it is a unique service, celebrating the life of the village. A lot of people have been invited, from the young farmers to the local MP. Alongside these, it is clear that today is one of the 'occasionalies' when the 'I only come very occasionally' folk do indeed come.

There is always an air of formality to the services at St Andrew's - standard attire is suit and tie or blouses and jackets - but today is more formal than the norm. At the side of

church a table is set out: white tablecloth beneath an even whiter iced cake, and a hundred or so wine glasses. The table is as well-dressed as the congregation. On the front row, least casual of all, sit the various dignitaries.

At the back I notice Rachel, the churchwarden, and see that she is more focused and attentive than usual. I figure that her attentiveness on this particular Sunday is due to the fact that this service is very much her project; she, like so much else going on at the church, has made it happen. Next to her stands David, the vicar, for whom St Andrew's is one of six parish churches he has responsibility for. Their roles, and place within the church, are in many respects captured in this moment: Rachel taking command of the scene, surveying to ensure that the plans came off smoothly, and David, focused on fronting it all, playing his part within these plans. Rachel's role at St Andrew's is recognised by David, but also by other members of the congregation - 'It's Rachel' I would hear often, 'she doesn't like to hear it, but actually a lot of what happens here is down to her.'

Someone hands me a notice sheet as I take my seat. On the front of it are two flags - the county flag of Backstonshire, and the Union Jack.

Rachel opens the service with a welcome before David takes over and leads. The service is a standard Common Worship Sunday morning worship, with some creativity around the liturgy worked in. There are opening prayers of thanks for the life of the community and for the gift of public service with one prayer a petition for a renewed commitment to 'the common good'.

The intercessions are led by a number of people and groups, each of which represent a facet of the church in its relation to the community. A 'young farmer' prays for agriculture, a doctor for the caring professions, a representative from the Parish Council

for Local government. A stand-out prayer comes from the chair of governors at the local CofE primary school, who prays for those involved in education. The relationship with the school is something of a given for St Andrew's, though its actual form is constantly changing. The school hold an annual carol service in the church and play some part occasionally in family services, however these occasions have been made difficult since the church and school were divided by the 'A' road - the children need to be bussed in if they are to use the space. David is on the board of governors, however he has struggled to give this the time he would like to given the extent of his commitments (as well as serving as governor for two schools and sitting on various committees, he is also a trustee for a number of organisations). Perhaps more significant then are the less formal church-school relationships which have come about/been established. The chair of governors attends services occasionally and Rachel and another congregation member have visited the school to spend time with the headteacher. I got used to the fact that whenever I broached the topic of 'community engagement' or 'mission' with members of the church the conversation would quickly turn to relations with the school. People feel it to be central - 'we have the school' - it was almost symbolic of their understanding of the church's place in the community. And yet, when pushed, more than often people were unaware of the actual nature of the current relationship, of what the connection consisted. It is an assumed reality, part of the fabric, details secondary. Others though, Rachel very much included, were working to bring new life to this piece.

One of the Bible readings chosen is Paul's reflections on love and the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12. It's an interesting choice of passage given the context and overall message of the service. It dawns on me as I sit there that the body of Christ here has been chosen to refer not to the *ekklesia* - to the gathered faithful few of faith in St Andrew's - but rather to the village itself; the numerous 'parts' and gifts functioning together not as church but as this community. Farming, schooling, policing and governing each interdependent, working together towards the common life of Thornbury.



Into this imagining, the sermon breaks, and it is a dichotomy with all else. The preacher is the Dean of the Cathedral, and she chooses to preach not on the Pauline passage but rather on the gospel reading; the Good Samaritan. Into the scene of farmers, MPs, school teachers and Lords of the Manor, Union Jacks and wine glasses, she raises the issue of Syrian refugees and the migrant crisis across Europe. She is direct: 'Who is my neighbour? It is the most vulnerable amongst us - often the last people we would expect to be welcoming, perhaps, maybe, those across oceans who are suddenly now before us, lying in our own road.' And then, speaking about the failures of the priest and levite who walk by the man, she warns: 'Most of all we must beware of cosy, self-seeking, comfortable *decency*. This is hard for us Brits to hear.' I look around the congregation, expecting to see some sort of response. There is none. After the service it is the first question I ask (maybe a little too excitedly) - I am fascinated by the impact of this message in this context - 'what did you think of the sermon?!'. The replies fail to reach my own level of fascination: 'it was really nice; lovely of her to come down' said one, 'I think that's a good message - that we need to be kinder to each other here', another.

As the service comes to an end (*Jerusalem*, followed by a blessing from the Dean) I notice that on the back of the notice sheet is an invitation:

We hope to see you again soon. You're very welcome to join us at St Andrew's for any of our regular services.

Given all else that has been said in the service, I am interested to know to whom the 'we' and the 'you' refers. In the focus group one of the pictures that stood out for people was of the church tower, looming above the trees and rooftops: 'It's just there...[and] that's quite comforting for a lot of people'; '[it's that] constant presence - reaching out all the time.'

The church was often expressed in terms that broke down the us and them - it's *our* church; the village's. So why the 'we'? This invitation - 'thank you for coming, please come again' - spoke of a deeper wrestling.

After the service I am drawn to speak to a younger couple I don't recognise. They look to be about the same age as me and so stand out. The couple have just moved out of the city and into one of the neighbouring villages and are in this regard representative of some of the changes that the village and church are facing. Younger couples and families moving into the area, commuting to work in the cities around. New houses are being built all the time. One Sunday, David took me to see some of these new properties. I noted then just how many of them seemed to come with high walls and gates as standard. In the village but not of the village. This particular couple tell me that they're just looking around for churches, that they really want to be part of one of the bigger charismatic churches in the city, but that they wanted to at least try and commit to a local congregation too. 'We're just looking around I suppose' they tell me, 'trying to find a church that's right for us'.

After the conversation with the couple I speak to Chris, the husband of one of the women I'd met a few times and who usually came to church without him. He caveats our conversation: 'I should warn you - I'm not a regular'. It's a phrase I hear a lot during my time at St Andrew's. I ask him why he decided to come today. 'I don't know really', he says, 'I felt it was a big occasion for the village - you know, to come together and celebrate all that goes on'. I then enquire about the role of the church in his life, and in the life of the village. It turns out he's positive on both counts; 'It's definitely my church and, you know, there's lots of people who live here who see it as their church, but they'd never go on a Sunday, maybe just occasionally'. I hear a similar message from a number of other people I'd not met before. 'This place is so important to me and to the village.' And then the rider again, 'I wouldn't come on a normal Sunday though'.

It transpires that Chris is part of the committee that helps to organise some of the village-wide events and, when I push him a little it becomes clear that he's there as part of this commitment to the life of the village. Above all I'm taken by his comment about the challenge of organising village events: 'People don't want to get involved as much as they

used to - it's not the same sense of community as it was.' Again, it was an observation that I heard expressed a number of times over the course of the research. What's notable though is that it's exactly the same narrative as the one I would hear of the church - that St Andrew's too is struggling for numbers and for people to 'muck in' and lend a hand. Even in the narrative of change and challenge the church and village were intertwined, sharing a concern.

I chat wine, cricket and ordination with a few familiar faces. As ever I feel very welcomed in this place. On most Sundays it is a small congregation and so I got to know a few people fairly well. They are keen to find out about me and to hear about the research. I am aware that I stand out in this place anyway - younger than the average congregant, an ordinand from the south, a researcher - but of course I am also simply new. I quickly got used to the opening gambit: 'I don't recognise you, are you new to the village?' Often people invite my family to various things; they want to meet them and open the possibility that we might enjoy St Andrew's together.

The drinks table and gathering at the end of the service is significant because it represents the possible future for St Andrew's who have been fundraising to reconfigure the space at the back of church. The plan is to replace one section of the existing pews with tables and chairs, install a kitchen, and create a gallery space for some of the historical artefacts owned by the church (the congregation is particularly proud of their 'legless knight' from the fourteenth century). What interests me is the number of different reasons for, and interpretations of, the work. Part of the issue is the need to secure Lottery Heritage Funding: 'It will bring new life to the history of the place.' But for others it has a broader purpose, connected I sensed with an expressed perception of declining numbers: Lent groups, more social events, usability for school groups, a greater sense of communal gathering after services. (p.139)

After the congregation finish their wine and cake, and the tidying up is complete, I find myself part of the last-to-leave group. Rachel is there of course, along with her husband, Tim, and June, one of the people to volunteer for the focus group. I help Tim carry some boxes out to his car. The pub carpark across from the churchyard is full, and over the noise of the road we can just about make out the muffled sound of a PA system announcement. 'There's obviously something happening in the village', says Tim. 'Is it the Campervans?' he shouts back over his shoulder. Rachel shouts back - 'I'm not sure - I think so. I think it's the rally this weekend'. Boxes loaded in the boot, we drive back to Tim and Rachel's for lunch.

### **6.3.1 St Andrew's Analysis**

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St Andrew's is a church shaped by what might be called a 'parochial imaginary', the central feature of which is the blurred boundaries between village and church. There is an assumed connection between the two things, so that the congregation think and reason from the basis of the fact that the village and church will necessarily interrelate in various ways.

The community service stands as a good example of this blurring, as does the quarterly parish magazine, which is delivered to every house in the benefice. Described as 'church and village news', it is an interesting merging of church notices and announcements (as well as each edition containing a reflective message from David, the church's AGM notes are published each year) with village news, and adverts. What is explicit in the magazine also came through in conversations. In the narrative above I note for example how people are happy to speak of the church as, in whatever sense, 'theirs', whilst acknowledging that this does not express itself in regular attendance. This is very common at St Andrew's. Many in the village therefore feel that the church is significant to their lives; attendance rates at key services throughout the year indicate this as do the

numerous stories of family connections, and memories of significant events that have been held here. Similarly, many people help out with and in St Andrew's either practically (a group of men for example spoke to me of their pride at cutting the grass around the gravestones) or financially, through the *Friends of St Andrew's* group. A common feature of my time at St Andrew's were conversations about recognition. 'I didn't recognise her', 'it was good - lots of new people - some of them I didn't even recognise'. The expectation was that at church events one should be able to recognise every one else because that is the expectation of living in the village.

Likewise, the *Friends of St Andrew's* group, and the literature which surrounds it offers numerous insights into the life of the church and village. In the introductory leaflet, David writes:

The whole community benefits from the church building; from its architectural and spiritual values, as a final resting place for many in the parish and as a venue for christenings, weddings and funerals. It therefore acts as a focal point for all the sad and joyous occasions of life but as in all things, it comes at a price.

The group then - created by regular attendees<sup>271</sup> - is for someone who 'cares about the fabric of the church but is not necessarily a church goer'. The leaflet highlights that it is often the building itself which is held to be the object of people's interests in the church. Thus the 'gift', or better, 'value' which is seen to be offered to the village is the (physical) church space. It is the building that is at the heart of the parish imaginary in Thornbury. What this value consisted of is expressed in different ways - some stress the building's historical value, others its beauty, others the opportunity it offers for tranquility and peace.

St Andrew's does therefore - despite all of the changes in the village - identify itself very much as Thornbury's church, and the community service is a good example of how

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<sup>271</sup> Because of the blurred boundaries, I found myself very early having to use 'regular attendees' to distinguish those who come and worship regularly - what could be called the church's 'core' - from those who consider themselves members but who neither attend regularly, nor contribute to the church's week-to-week business and life.

St Andrew's seeks to act as a 'holder' for the village's life and expression of purpose and identity. Above all though, it was when discussing the changes in the village, of which more below, that I really began to witness this imaginary at work. There is throughout the congregation a real desire to see the church more involved in the life of the village and a frustration that it perhaps doesn't currently receive the expected level of recognition from villagers. My point is that in the face of change, the fallback position for those attending regularly, is the assumption that the village and church should be connected and that the church should be a central part of the place that is Thornbury.

There are a few further general observations to make about the relationship between the church and the village.

Firstly, it is worth noting that St Andrew's parish imaginary is sustained in large part because of the nature of Thornbury itself, as a place. In simple terms, the church can assume itself to be so entwined with the life of Thornbury, because Thornbury is clearly bounded. Though the life of the village is changing, as a signifier 'Thornbury' continues to capture the geography, history and community of this place; geographically, because the village is an easily definable space, separated from other villages and habitations by countryside; historically, because it defines the space within which relationships of lord and landowners have played out; and culturally, because it is sustained through a number of pieces of social capital, from the parish council and magazine, to the very obvious gathering spaces (local pub, shops, etc.) and community events. Thornbury is thus one of those contexts where the parish boundary maps coherently onto the place itself: the two - parish and village - are largely synonymous. This then is the first point to note about St Andrew's in relation to my theory: the parish imaginary makes sense in this context, because of the qualities of the place it sits within. To put it differently, during my time in Thornbury I started to imagine what a Fx might look like in this context and, what I found myself imagining was a church that looked very similar to St Andrew's. There was a given community in Thornbury, a need for a central communal space, and a desire for a gathering force within the village; a focus for its sense of values, identity and purpose. In

this sense it is questionable whether a church which sought to be present here would ever need to establish something other, that is, beyond further groups or new facets of the existing church's life.

Secondly, in terms of the ways in which St Andrew's seeks to be present in this place, it is important to note the vital contribution Rachel has made to the church's engagement with the village. She has taken a lead on a great amount of what happens at St Andrew's, and this is widely acknowledged by the congregation members I spoke to. Likewise, though not quite having the same extent of impact across the church, it was a few individuals who had taken responsibility for starting and managing the monthly family service. It interests me then to see the difference that one or two individuals can make in the process of a church responding to change, becoming increasingly present in place.

Thirdly, we should note the importance of relationships in the church's engagement with the village. This can be witnessed in the increased strengthening of ties between the church and school. Here the existing formal relationship has become more of a reality through personal encounter and conversation. Relationship is also important in the family service where the congregation has grown out of connections with the local nursery school. I am not suggesting that St Andrew's has become a 'network' church, rather pointing out that even as a very spatially-constituted church, St Andrew's is necessarily connecting to the village through networks of relationships. In the terms of my thesis, I see this therefore simply as an example of the church functioning within a place, rather than space. Like any other place, Thornbury is constituted by a complex series of relationship structures.

What then of the parish imaginary at St Andrew's? What I discovered was that it is actually very difficult to say anything much about this parish imaginary, beyond the fact that it involves the church thinking from an assumption that its position vis-a-vis the village is one of mutuality and blurred boundaries. And, although one might wish to go on from here to say that the church therefore imagines itself to be implicated in the life of the

village, or at its service, or (even) present within in it, my research consistently forced me to reject such conclusions. That 'responsibility' or 'presence' or 'engagement' must be imbibed in the church's imaginary is an unhelpful assumption to make because these terms convey a sense of purpose or, even, mission, that I simply did not find at St Andrew's. What I did see was the way in which the parish imaginary - this sense that the church and village somehow interrelate - is a) theologically underdeveloped, and, b) historically received. By theologically underdeveloped, I do not mean to imply that it is therefore flawed or wrong.<sup>272</sup> I simply wish to point out that the perceived interconnectedness between village and church - both in imaginary of the past and present, and the desire for the future - is not, for example, established by mission statements or created through an espoused theological vision, rather it is assumed. And so when I asked people about the reasons why they felt the church needed to do things differently, or why it was they had taken some of the recent steps they had, I received a host of different replies. Here are some examples, taken from a roughly twenty minute section of the focus group:

[We] were reaching out to the community.

We were trying to reach non-church goers, to get them to come.

It's all about the church just being involved in the community.

Hopefully people will feel it's more their church, rather than it's our church.

It's about providing a space for people to come and enjoy peace and quiet.

It's getting people to come to church.

It's nice to show people that [the church] is here if they need it.

It doesn't matter whether people come or not, it's just nice to serve them.

We're an ageing congregation: you've got to pass it on...that heritage, inheritance.

It can't stand still...we don't want our church to close.

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<sup>272</sup> I keep in mind here the best instincts of the 'four voices' of theology approach; that a lack of formal theological expression must not be taken as a lack of theological reasoning per se. See Helen Cameron and others, *Talking about God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2010).



There is no one narrative of church-village relationship at St Andrew's. What unites each of these comments is a desire to see the church in *some way* become more central, more known, to the village. This 'some way' is the essence of the parochial imaginary at St Andrew's. The consistency of this imaginary through the variety of differing expressions was certainly evident in the focus group where the reasonings given for the church's increased involvement in the village differed and, in fact, occasionally contradicted a previous expounded reason and this was not at all a problem. What mattered was that the church was doing something - anything - to become more a part of the village. This is what I mean here by the parish imaginary. My second observation - that this imaginary is historically received - follows on from this. It is historically received in the sense that if one listens to the conversations of people at St Andrew's, it becomes clear that to a great extent the desire to see the church involved in the life of the village leans heavily on an impression of what has gone before. This is far from a sanctifying of the past, or an unrealistic expectation of the present. My point is that the desire springs from a ~~recognition~~ perception of what things were once like; from the expressed experience of many congregation members of the church and village in a relationship of mutual flourishing and care. The imaginary about the church in relation to the village comes then from history (or, at least, the impressions of that history) as much as from the ecclesial system or principle.<sup>273</sup>

Perhaps what interests me most at St Andrew's though is the way in which they are negotiating change from out of this parish imaginary. The church is navigating its perception - that the village and church are interdependent, and that the church therefore

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<sup>273</sup> Again, it was beyond the reach of my research to uncover the accuracy of these perceived changes. I did however note that service attendance had declined across the five or so years that were recorded in one of the service registers. Further, the perceived decrease in involvement in the life of the church and village would correlate with wider social trends in the western world. See, for example, Robert D. Putnam's claims about the decline of social capital in *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2000). Significantly, Putnam is clear about the dangers of nostalgia; his approach is therefore deeply empirical. (See, for example, pp.25-6). My ethnographical research differs from his: I am interested in these moments of nostalgia and what they might tell us about the nature of the parish as being a formative force.

matters to people in the village - through the facts which seem to increasingly challenge it. The narrative of change in the church is a complex one but it expresses itself in a few consistently aired concerns: a decline in congregational numbers, people in the village becoming increasingly disconnected from the worshipping life of the church, and a lack of young people. Within this list I might also add the perceived change to the ministry pattern as the benefice (and therefore David's responsibilities) have grown. In summary, there is a felt sense that the church and village are not as connected as they once were and that people don't hold the church in quite the same regard they once did. It would be wrong to say that, amidst these observations, the overall feeling is one of failure or disappointment. Instead the church is very much wrestling.

On the one hand then is the narrative about the church in the centre of the village: that, despite numbers at Sunday worship, it is still significant to people and that the blurred boundaries speak most of all about the church's value. Significantly, David's own reflections reveal this sense of positivity about the place of the church in the community. He mentioned on several occasions - not only in conversation, but also in preaching - what he described as the 'rural church' context. The nature of such a church for him is one in which church and village are wedded together in important ways, firstly through relationships (so, in one sermon: 'I met [name] in the petrol station, and I'd not seen him for years. That's what church life in the village is about - being in the midst of people, sharing the same places as them'), but also through personal influence. At one point in an interview for example, David spoke about his first experiences of rural ministry training:

I said [to this rural minister] "where's your church in the community?" And he said, "well, actually, you know, Mrs Jones works for the youth group, she runs two nights a month there, the other one you know she works in the library, the other one works in the doctors surgery, they're all doing very valuable things as Christians within their own particular sphere".

From this he went on to speak about the role of faith in people's lives, a reality, he argued which could not be determined by the fact of whether they attended church or not. 'It

might not be a big part of their life, but they've still got that faith.' In the focus group, similar perspectives were aired.

My point however is that because of the nature of change in the village, this positive, confident vision is only one part of the picture. For alongside it I also heard - often from the very same people who had portrayed this positive account - the anxiety about the present and the future.

The church has sought to respond to some of these perceived changes. The community service, the first of its kind at St Andrew's, is one example of this. So also the church has established a monthly family service, it has made contacts at the local annual wedding fair to advertise the availability of the church for weddings, it is working through the redevelopment of the church space and seeking Lottery funding, and it has sought to increase relationships with the local school. In the last few weeks of my time at St Andrew's the church had also begun running a weekly drop-in cafe in the village.

Early on in the focus group one participant offered a comment which seemed to shape the discussions that followed. She was reflecting on the picture of the church tower, standing high above the trees and rooftops of the village - the image of the church as 'always there' as she put it. The church, she said, is 'kind of in the background of the village, in people's lives'. She meant it as a positive comment, yet it provoked some interesting discussion. What does it mean to be in the background? Church as parish church here is in the background in the sense of being behind all things; not separate from the village, not taking centre stage, but rather in and through it all. The leaven in the bread. Yet it was clearly a slightly concerning concept for some people too. Might not 'background' be too close to irrelevant? Missable? What if the term is employed as part of the more negative preceding phrase: the church as 'fading into the...'? This, I sense, is the nature of the wrestling at St Andrew's. And so it would simply be untrue to say that the church is comfortable in its position as parish church for the village. Even in David's case, what followed the description of the 'rural church' imaginary, was a despondency about the possibilities of putting this into practice given the current situation. Ultimately then it

would not make sense of the actual experience of the congregation and leadership to suggest that they are living out of a positive parochial imaginary. Much to celebrate, certainly, but also much to long for.

This is the central point I wish to draw out from this analysis. The congregation at St Andrew's are wrestling with the challenges of how to be the parish church for the village. The imaginary - an assumption that the church is implicated in the life of the village - is a given, irrespective of how one might claim it has arisen. And yet, because of the cultural and social changes that are shaping the village, they are having to rediscover what this imaginary is going to look like in practice. In this sense, what St Andrew's demonstrates is the fact that the parish missiology working itself out into reality is not a given, but is constantly being reimagined and re-grasped. In St Andrew's case it is a wrestling it has not had to engage in before, at least not in the living memory of the congregation. The stories I heard at St Andrew's suggest that these questions had been irrelevant, that there was a given reality of the church in relation to the village and defined by blurred boundaries of church and village and of the mutual flourishing of both. Much of this, as I have pointed out above, remains: the boundaries *are* blurred in multiple respects, and the church remains important in many ways to people's lives, and to the village as a whole. But what does the church do when numbers on a Sunday are so low as to render some services unfeasible; when the worshipping and the voluntary life of the church is in such doubt? How does the church respond to this new situation? And it is a strange situation for the church to find itself in precisely because asking the question is itself to redefine something of the relationship between village and church. That is to say, for the church to be thinking about how it might become *more* a part of the village is at once to acknowledge its distinctiveness from the village - to think of itself as a separate entity and, accordingly, to offer its own purposes in regards to the village. This can be witnessed in the nature of the church's occasional offices. There has been a shift in mindset; from the expectation that local residents will want to be married (in fact weddings had been on the decline because of the movement out of the village of the

younger generation), baptise their babies and have their funerals here, towards a seeking out of these opportunities. For people in the congregation occasional offices were now less about fulfilling pastoral responsibilities for the village and more about missional potential. This is what lies behind the church's decision to advertise the church space at a nearby wedding fair.

This redefining presents its own challenges. So long as the church and village are seen as coterminous, the crossover from one to the other is not so great. What might St Andrew's look like however, if it redefines itself based on purpose or 'mission'? At one point in conversation, David spoke to me about the difference between attractional churches (he was speaking of one of the big city centre evangelical churches) and parish churches: 'attractional churches - they demand something of their membership' he said. His point is an interesting one. If St Andrew's, as a result of changes, redefines its positioning in relation to the village, will it necessarily also lose something of the open door, 'everyone is welcome', character which David sees as definitive of the rural parish church? From my time at St Andrew's I sense that the congregation is a long way off from embracing this change in positioning regards the village. The parochial imaginary is the defining narrative from which they undertook their changes in practice, and so there was throughout my conversations there, more than often, a sort of inbuilt optimism - 'yes we are struggling, but the assumed picture is of the church as integral to the village, and this is what we are working towards'.

Might St Andrew's therefore suggest the need to distinguish between three different things? There is at once the *parochial imaginary* which, as I have argued, describes the general sense that the church and village are (and should be) connected and is an inherited, historical set of assumptions; the *parish principle*, which contains the various missiological commitments expressed by the likes of the authors of *For the Parish* and John Milbank, and which had become part of David's espoused theology; and, finally, the *missiological practice*, that is, the outworking of these in action and process. These are different things and the relationship between them is not one of simple causality. What I

found at St Andrew's was that the parochial imaginary does not imply a parish principle, nor does it lead to any certain outworking. In the face of change, the church is effectively forming a new praxis, which is not just about 'doing new things' from the basis of the existing imaginary - this certainly may have been the starting point, or even the reason for its response to the change - but is actually beginning to affect the very imaginary itself. Again, at no point did I sense that this was an explicit process: there is no deliberate effort to reimagine the parish model or to form a new 'mission'. Rather, the church, out of its imaginary, is seeking to respond to change. This is shown in the variety in rationale given for the church's recent activity: there is no one defined purpose or strategy but simply a desire to hold on to the imaginary, that is, to retain the place of the church as central to the village. Again therefore, this is not so much about faithful presence, incarnation, witness, or service - the concepts that form the parish principle - instead there is a movement to hold on to the givens of the received parochial imaginary. In these terms it would be a mistake to see St Andrew's as a good example of the parish principle becoming imbibed into a church imaginary through the ecclesial system, given that the church itself simply does not recognise itself as holding such a principle. It does not, for example, love the village or long to see Thornbury flourish because it is the church of God and claims this mission for itself, so much as because it holds to a parochial imaginary in which a) the people in church identify as members of the village and, b) because past experience speaks of a healthy flourishing of church and village together.

In summary, the congregation are working with an imaginary of the church as bound to the life of the village. This imaginary functions partly because of the nature of Thornbury as a definable, discrete place. However, the congregation are wrestling with how they work out this imaginary in the light of perceived changes in the life of the village. Put differently, in contrast to a situation where the relationship between church and village is a given, they are having to be proactive in putting this into practice. I have argued that we can therefore see in Thornbury a distinction between a parish imaginary, the parish principle, and the 'missional' practice. In Thornbury these three things play

around each other but there is no clear chain of causality between them. What is clear then is that the ecclesial system is in no sense formative of a parish principle or a corresponding praxis, instead it is its particular parochial imaginary that is guiding the church's activity. Yet, at the same time, its response to change is itself shaping a different praxis, one based more on a distinction between church and village and in which it is having to act to, with and for the village, rather than as the village.

## 6.4 Skelton Fx

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### Skelton Fx

The first contact I had with Skelton Fx was over the phone, when I spoke to Jo. In many respects, Jo *is* Skelton Fx or, at least, was: the project exists in that she was appointed ‘deanery missionary’ in 2008 after the diocese decided not to fill a vacant incumbency but to facilitate new forms of church in the deanery. At the point of our conversation, Jo had been in Skelton for six years. Despite the fact that the Fx project she headed up had a number of different forms across the deanery (prayer spaces on the beach and local farm, as well as various initiatives set up by local churches such as Messy Church) she was really keen that I should come and visit one of the Hub groups that meet on a Wednesday night. ‘It’s an amazing space’, she told me. Jo was incredibly warm on the phone. Not chatty, but not reticent either. She played herself down; there was no sell here, and that slightly surprised me given the strength of the reviews I’d been given from others about the Fx work there. All she wanted was for me to see what was going on. She was proud, she said, of ‘what God’s doing in Skelton’.

I visit Hub for the first time on a dark autumn evening. Arriving early, I have planned to chat to Jo before everyone else arrives. The meeting has been in the calendar for weeks and we’d spoken the day before, however, she greets me with an air of relaxed surprise, as if she didn’t know I was coming but is so delighted that I have. We start chatting immediately: there is to be no ‘formal’ start to the conversation. I have to interrupt her to ask if she is happy that I record some of the conversation. It isn’t clear where chit-chat stopped and Fx talk starts. It all seems one. At other points I seek clarification on chronology and order. Jo speaks in a constant flow of observations and anecdotes. All with passion, and all about people. People she’s met, people in Hub, people in Shoreham. I am struggling to connect the stories with the concrete forms of Fx. Fx as presented by Jo



seems like one long intertwining web of narratives and happenings. It is me who teases out details: history, times of meetings, numbers of groups and people, demography.

Despite the conversation being just between the two of us (and a microphone) I get the sense that she would be telling any of this to anyone. No secrets, nothing to hide. She presents it all as simple, obvious - 'I've got no good ideas really, it's all just listening to God.' Sure enough, ten minutes into our conversation the doorbell rings. 'Sue's early', Jo says. I have arrived twenty minutes late, and Sue has arrived twenty-five minutes early (apparently it was common for people to come 'anytime after 7 really', especially if they have something they wanted to chat through), meaning that my conversation with Jo would have to be curtailed. In fact what happens is that the conversation continues as it had left off, only now it also involves Sue. Jo speaks exactly as before. I interrupt again to ask Sue if she is happy to be recorded. She is, and the conversation continues.

Jo and Sue speak as a unit. Certainly Sue speaks very highly of Jo (played down by Jo) but there is a sense that this is a shared project; that Hub, and the various other Fx ventures, is 'theirs'. Jo 'leads it', but together they own it.

Twenty minutes later more people start to arrive. Jo sits chatting to me whilst others open her door and make tea and coffee. People greet one another with a hug and a kiss and sit down to chat. When they do come to sit down, they are interested by my being here but not at all surprised; they are used to having new faces in the group. Indeed I am made to feel particularly welcome, and they make an effort to include me in conversation. I notice the way that people seem to fall down into the sofas. One person offers a restful sigh as she sinks. It is as if she has found her place, here at this point in the week.

I discover in my conversations that most of the people here have come to be part of the Hub group through relationships - either with Jo, or with another member. Originally the

groups, of which there are now several across Skelton, had formed out of an Alpha course which Jo had started as one of the first Fx projects. She realised that, as she put it, 'people just had nowhere to go after the course - church was too big a step for them'. And so the Hub groups were born.

Some of the members then had come along to Alpha and stayed in Hub because they had come to know and trust Jo. This gives Jo a significant role in the group. It is obvious from conversation that she is held in high regard in this setting. In the course of my time at Skelton Fx I become used to Jo being almost the first mention when I asked questions. At Hub however, I see no recognition of the formal role Jo has to play in leading Fx. Rather, her importance is presented in affective terms. People love her and they trust her, she is significant as a friend and confidant.

There is no formal start to the group, the chatting simply continues well past the 'start-time'. Eventually however, the disparate conversations flow into one group chat, and Jo speaks loudly enough to grab attention. She properly introduces me and then hands over to Diane. Diane is a Church Army Evangelist, who works part-time with Skelton Fx and is part of the Hub group. It interests me that there is a 'professional' in the group who is leading something. I wonder how it will affect the up-to-now relaxed and informal feel. When I talk to Jo about this later she speaks about how Hub is about learning, 'bringing people on in their journey [...] about discipleship'. It's important for her then that there is some input, some teaching. And so the culture has clearly been established that this is part of the proceedings; there doesn't seem to be a disjuncture between before and after Diane welcomed everybody. People don't shuffle in their seats or begin to look uncomfortable. It is all very informal.

The session begins with everyone sharing a 'high and a low' from their week. I am invited to share too. After this we pray for one another in a time of open prayer. Once this section

is finished, Diane tells us that in the session we are going to think a little about prayer and about how we might use images to pray and to connect with God. She lays out a number of pictures on the floor, some of which are overtly religious - Christian icons and symbols, etc. - but others that aren't - scenes from nature, paintings and so on. Diane then gives us some time (with music playing) to reflect on the images and think through a few questions: which image grabs our attention; which one best captures what we think God is like; which one leads us to want to pray.

The rest of the evening is a discussion around the pictures. Conversation flows; people are not hesitant to share, but offer an eclectic mix of insights and observations. Some are fairly generic, others are personal. I am interested by the ease with which the group moves between metaphor and personal reflection. Normally when I have used, or seen used, pictures in a group setting like this, the aim has been to draw people out of logical or practical thinking towards more expansive and imaginative reflection. Often this is hard work, as some of my focus group sessions testify to. Here however, the group seems completely familiar with this form of processing and they embrace the pictures. They see in them a natural way into talking about their faith and their praying and everyday experiences. The language of 'journey' occurs frequently; faith is presented not as something to be understood but rather to be lived into, experienced.

I notice multiple things in this time of discussion, but two are worth mentioning here. One, with my focus group hat on I can't help but see and hear the constant nods and sounds of approval and affirmation as people speak. Two, it is at this point that I realise that I am the only non-female in the room. When I ask Jo she tells me that this hasn't always been the case, that Hub is open to anyone and that some men had been part of the group. I can't help feeling however, that it would be a big step for a man to join this group. Then I realise that in fact it might be a big step for *anyone* else to join. It is not exclusive or judgemental of course; far from it. But it is close, intimate, and with an atmosphere of

vulnerability and openness; deeply significant in the lives of its members. More than one member spoke of Hub as a sacred space.

Diane closes the session by playing another piece of music and leaving a quiet time to reflect. Out of the quiet she reads a short prayer from a book of collects, I think from St. Francis of Assisi.

Contrary to my best research instincts I need to leave the session immediately after the official 'end-time' has passed ('we don't really 'finish', we sort of just chat and people go when they need to'). It feels to me as I do so that I am breaking something of this moment. Just as the initial conversations have led so smoothly into the session, so too they lead back out again. People chat to one another, picking up on things that have been said in the session and referencing the pictures that remain on the floor in front of us. My departure then seems to end something that isn't ready to end yet. It is at this point that I feel most personally the insight that I would hear time and again in my research here, that Skelton Fx 'isn't like a church'. A church service, I think to myself, offers one the chance to leave; there is a definitive end. Here however, the session simply goes on as long as people are here. 'It's not like a church, not traditional, we're sort of more organic than that.' Or another, 'I do go to church, but it's not like church: God is wherever we are together, with him'.

Eastway Welcome Centre (EWWC)

My first taste of the work going on in Eastfield's estate is on a visit to the 'Sunday@4' service at the church of the Holy Trinity, the estate's parish church. The church, and the EWWC building, which is the former vicarage, sit right in the heart of the estate. They are prominent in this space. The church had been closed for a number of years – leaving the local RC church as the sole Christian church in the area - prior to being re-opened as part of the development of EWWC.

The time begins, as with the Hub group, with an extended time of conversation and milling around. I notice there are lots of children around, most of whom look like the children I'd seen moments earlier playing around on the estate's green open space. In the foyer some people are working on refreshments, another on a sign-in for the kids' group.

As a physical space, the church looks somewhat abandoned. There are no pews here and minimal decoration. It is a blank space. Within this are arranged collapsable tables and some plastic chairs in a circle around a central point where there is a projector with screen and a guitar propped against its stand. What there is in the church then - a few icons, the hymn board, altar, etc. - all feels incidental to what is happening in the space now. Not forgotten, but just not front and centre. As if they were guarding the space until this happening unfolded itself within it.

The church is filling up fairly quickly, and soon the air of abandonment leaves. It suddenly feels busy. The contemporary worship music which begins playing out of a set of speakers adds to this rapid habitation.

It is Claire, the curate, who gets the service off to a start. Claire is young in Church of England terms and before ordination worked as a pharmacist. She joined Jo, as she puts it, because she 'wanted to do something different, something that was missional'. Claire joined Jo a year before I came to Skelton Fx, and her arrival marked something of a shift in the Fx project since she was ordained to serve the Eastfield's parish, rather than sit within Jo's BMO. In turn Jo herself was licensed to Holy Trinity so that together they are now incumbent and curate for Shoreham. Jo tells me that they had to get the church resolutions changed so that she could preside at communion; 'it's really exciting, I can be the vicar here now'.

The service gets going with a few songs. They're aimed mainly at the kids, but I notice a fair few of the adults enjoying them too. Once the songs have finished and the kids are taken out into another space, we watch a short video about prayer before Claire leads us in a discussion at our tables. I enjoy chatting to a lady from the estate who has come with her three children. She met Jo in EWWC and comes along now each month. 'I used to go to church as a kid', she tells me, 'but I lost my way a bit'. The service ends with Claire leading us in some creative prayer ideas. We are invited to take home some prayer ideas on a piece of paper, as well as a short 'how to pray guide' to read at home.

After the service Jo is keen that I see the EWWC centre. It's a strange experience because the centre is empty, and it's late. But even in this environment it's possible to see just how busy the place must get. Everything is set up ready to go. I note that behind the front desk are post-it notes full of information and reminders.

The next time I visit EWWC is on a Thursday, the busiest day for the centre. It is thriving. I attend morning prayer with the volunteers before the centre is officially opened up, an Alpha course (held in the daytime for those out of work, and adapted to suit those with limited literacy), a midday communion service, and have lunch in the drop-in cafe. Though I spend most of my time in the main spaces, I note the number of people who visit the off-shoot rooms for debt advice, counselling or health issues. The majority of these services are provided by secular agencies. Jo is proud of this; 'we don't want to reinvent the wheel', she tells me, 'we just want to help this community and so if you want to help too then that's great'.

In the midday communion I'm privileged to witness a beautiful moment. John, a middle-aged man with Downs Syndrome, calls out with joy in the middle of the liturgy, right at the point of the Epiclesis. Claire had told me that he does this each week and that it is one of her weekly highlights. So I watch her and Jo's faces throughout. I get to see their joy as

John stands up right at that point. For me it is a moment that marks the depth and significance of EWWC. Because of morning prayer and the communion, I find myself imagining this place as a sort of religious community. No residents, but rather volunteers from across the deanery. United in prayer and service, facilitating a space in which all - church members or not - are able to be loved and to love well.

#### **6.4.1 Selton Fx Analysis**

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From the outset I found it very difficult to determine what Skelton Fx actually *is*. There seems to be a number of different elements, united (it seems to me) by Jo's role and activity. This complexity is accentuated by the fact that the people I spoke to, Jo included, spoke about Skelton Fx as if it were a unified entity with common vision and purpose. The way I have structured the vignettes demonstrates the fact that I witnessed at Skelton Fx what I saw as two distinct elements; the projects, events and groups across the deanery, and the work on the Shoreham estate respectively. The former consists of Hub groups, work to equip churches, 'sacred space' on the beach, and prayer labyrinths. The latter includes the EWWC centre, and the ministry of Holy Trinity. The division between the two things is therefore my own rather than what was presented to me; it is my way of making sense of what I saw as implicit even if it was not expressed explicitly by those I met. The fact that people themselves did not draw this distinction is important.

I take the distinction to represent the fact that where the Hub groups focus on gathered forms of church expression, drawing people from across a wider area, the Shoreham project focuses on one smaller place and is determined by the needs of that specific community. From the outside then, the Shoreham work resembles what we might call traditional parish work. Indeed it is significant to note the fact of Jo and Claire's roles; the shift in Jo's role from deanery missionary to priest-in-charge (and Claire to curate) is

representative of the difference between the two things and the nature of the work in Shoreham.

The first implication then is that Skelton Fx's story is one of moving from being spread across a wide area, to becoming increasingly focused on one specific community. In the comments I made in Chapter 2 about generalisations, I hope to have shown that it would be too much to see here a universal pattern. However, it is not insignificant for my analysis that a project which was given a wide area of responsibility, should narrow as it has done. Is this an example then of the placial (in contrast, say, to 'networked') praxis being more dominant? This may well hold some weight, however I want to suggest there is more going on in Skelton than this. In the first instance, it is clear that the people involved with Fx that I spoke to recognised Skelton to be a place, just as Shoreham is a place. That is, although the primary imaginary is one that does not include the parochial, it would be wrong to say that Skelton Fx were uncommitted to place prior to the work in Shoreham. Fx was seen to be *for* Skelton, and the Shoreham work then was understood to be consistent with this vision, indeed it was seen as its outworking. Thus, it mattered for example that projects were held at the beach: 'a place people love, it's their space'. Likewise, 'we are really keen that we do things that draw on the beauty of the area; it's such a beautiful place'.

Second, the difference between the work at Shoreham and the wider Fx projects was articulated through a dominant category and language of 'space'. I was surprised to discover just how central spatial imagery was in Skelton Fx - both in articulated vision and in the reflections of those involved. A few examples include:

[Hub is] a coming together of like-minded people but in a completely different space.  
— *Hub group member*

Here I've got the space to have the relationship I've got with God, it's not the same space as everyone else. — *Focus group member*

[Hubs group are] a space to explore contemporary issues and faith. — *Skelton Fx website*



Summer Nights Sacred Space: Come and light a candle. — *Skelton Fx website*

Diane is a Church Army Officer [...] she provides and facilitates space to explore God's love through creativity. — *Skelton Fx website*

The EWWC building used to be used by the NSPCC, it was seen as a really important space by the community. — *Jo*

[Holy Trinity Church] is a really open space, there are no pews. — *Jo on Skelton Fx blog*

The way 'space' is used in relation to Fx is looser than in relation to EWWC. In the case of the latter it refers to a concrete, physical location - the church or the centre - but in the former it is a more abstract entity: space as context; group; situation or moment. Yet, what is interesting to note is the way in which this looser usage of 'space' carries across even into discussion of the physical space. Thus, although grounded in the physical place of Shoreham, the sense of space as context, group, situation or moment remains the dominant category. The work at Shoreham is seen as simply a different expression of the primary ministry of creating 'spaces'. This then is the core imaginary at work in Skelton Fx.

It is worth unpacking what this spatial imaginary consists of. At the most basic level 'space' here refers to spaces of contact; people and God, people and one another. 'Moment' is an important term because it demonstrates that this space is held to be dynamic; it is *what* happens as much as where it happens. I heard numerous times Hub described as a 'safe space'; and this in two senses; either to explore faith/encounter God, or to be vulnerable with others (and fairly frequently both at once). In terms of Shoreham, as one focus group participant expressed it, 'EWWC draws people into a safe space where they meet the presence of God'. Ultimately therefore, what carries across all of the conversations and data I collected from Skelton Fx is an understanding that what is most important is a subjective experience of encounter - with God and with others. 'Space' is a way of expressing this reality.

This is significant because it demonstrated that lying behind the particular expressions of church form - one 'network based' and one more 'parochial' - is a dominant narrative or understanding of spatiality (what I have described throughout as an 'imaginary') which has in turn established each instance. The motivation for the Shoreham project then had arisen precisely from this hunger for spaces that matter to people. The imaginary was primary, and the praxis secondary. Importantly I would also include theological reflection within this secondary step. There is, for example, a great amount of theological insight about both parts of the Fx project. In the specific case of Shoreham, I heard about how the project seeks to meet people where they are, to respond to people's love of place, to form church that is 'rooted here', even to be 'incarnated'. Indeed, it was at this level that the language of 'place' was used: Shoreham is a 'place with particular needs'; EWWC is a 'wonderful place'. Yet again however, the placial language was secondary to the imaginary of space. Place was used in a similar sense to space as moment or experience, so that Holy Trinity or EWWC were seen as sites within which the spatial moment happened. At Skelton Fx then it is impossible to make sense of people's leaning into church structures or forms - be they parish or non - without appreciating the fundamental imaginary lying behind these leanings. In this sense it would be incorrect to imply that the move towards the more obvious place-based ministry at Shoreham came about simply as a result of the dominance of a narrative of place. I certainly didn't encounter this. Rather, the place narrative became important as an outworking of the more fundamental imaginary of spaces of encounter. And this had become vital because of a desire to see people brought into this reality.

Before moving on it is important to stress one point here, namely, that this spatial imaginary could not be described as inauthentic, individualistic or consumeristic. The space of encounter that was spoken of here is understood by those involved to be not only deeply vital, but holistic, and communal. Thus, although there is high value given to concepts of 'personal faith journey' (a phrase I heard numerous times at Hub) and choice, people at once also recognise their commitment to the group or to the EWWC centre.

Indeed, there seemed to me to be a healthy relationship between Hub and EWWC: Hub members had a very natural and tangible means to express their faith through the work at the Centre. It would be difficult therefore to claim that the Fx project in any sense offers an escapist faith expression. Certainly, high value is placed on the importance of Fx projects as 'safe' places; the Hub group in particular is held to be vital by those who attend because it offers people 'a safety net' or a 'lifeline'. Yet, as one group member pointed out, it is striking that none of the pictures in the focus group were explicitly 'Christian' or showed Christian practices: 'faith is sort of in everything we do, and we want faith to play out in all of our life.'

What I did hear repeatedly at Skelton Fx was a contrast between the space of encounter and 'church'.<sup>274</sup> This, above all, was the theme that shone through in the focus group. There was variety in how this was expressed:

The beach is a space where people can access God, they'd never go into a church building.

God seems more immediate, more tangible, more touchable, closer to me. I enjoy church worship and I enjoy the formality and the rhythm of communion service and the anticipation of what you know is going to happen and you can focus on that communion with God, it doesn't speak to me about my everyday life and everyday problems.

And it's just not like being in a church - it's freer.

F: I haven't found a church that I feel sort of comfortable in, in fact sometimes I go to church and feel really uncomfortable, like I don't know, like awkward, like I don't belong. But Hub doesn't feel like that at all, a lot more relaxed...

[interrupted by another group member]

G: ...There's no hierarchy is there?

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<sup>274</sup> In my discussions, I found that 'church' was often caveated with certain adjectives - 'traditional', 'normal', 'ordinary'.

The final comment highlights the fact that in the group it was this issue - of the relationship between church and Fx - that caused the biggest response from group members, represented here by the interruption. It also demonstrates however, that the particular reasoning in each case differed, as the attempt by G to re-explain what was just said shows. There is a shared understanding that Hub and church differs in significant ways, yet the reasons for why are secondary. For some, the distinction is more personal and visceral, for others it is about the possibility of mission: Fx is seen to offer more opportunities for non christians (an indigenous term) to access the space of encounter. What is common to each of these however is a sense that in contrast to 'church' Fx is something that people could *be inside of*. Where church is seen to be something that 'happens' and which it was possible to participate in occasionally, Fx is perceived to offer people a chance to become involved and connect their own identity with it. In this sense, traditional church is seen as one type of space, and Fx is another: the former you do, and the latter you become part of. It is beyond the remit of the thesis to evaluate these comments, beyond observing again that the desire at Skelton seems to be for involvement rather than for consumption; what matters to people is that 'church' - Fx or not - offers them a chance to make faith vital to their experience. This vitality looks like, a) an involvement back in local churches (so a good number of the Hub group had 'come back' to church or joined churches for the first time and attended regularly) and, b) service (so it was natural for Hub group members, or others that Fx had connected with, to become involved with EWWC, and help out there).

Jo's own way of talking about this difference was through the language of 'kingdom'. In my first conversation for example, Jo commented on the fact that people from Hub came from different churches, 'It's kingdom work, isn't it? We're not building empires'. Indeed, Jo claimed that it was this that first attracted people to the work of Fx: 'We went round all the churches and said, 'we want to help you, but we're about the kingdom, not parish boundaries' [and] God called people together around this'. With this

perspective comes a pragmatism about her role. This ran through all of our conversations; a lack of interest in 'the parish' or structures (or even my thesis!) but a desire to see people encounter God, and churches facilitating this and - as became increasingly evident - especially in the particular community of Shoreham. She deliberately hasn't, for example, sought to change the existing services at Holy Nativity, instead adding the 'Sunday@4 service'. 'People like those traditional services, but it's not for everyone, so we needed to do something different as well'. Indeed the way Jo spoke about the whole project in Shoreham was couched in pragmatism:

We just felt we needed to do something, and the building was there. It's not very 'Fx' to use a building like that, or to be in a church, but it's what was needed and it's a great space.

The contrast between kingdom and church, alongside (or out of which flows) a certain pragmatism, means that Jo therefore sees no conflict between Fx and parish churches. As she described her team in the early days, 'We told people we wanted them to be ambassadors, not to give up on the local parish church'.

The move into EWWC and Shoreham is effectively Jo's own embodiment of a journey from a peripatetic ministry which was supra-parochial, towards a micro-place-based one. This has in turn meant that new life has been brought to an existing parish church, re-invigorating the Church's presence in a local space. Both things however have come about because of planning and, I have suggested, a particular theological imaginary. This imaginary, which I have here described as a spatial one focused on encounter, has enabled the Fx project and Jo in particular to bring new vitality to the church's ministry of presence.

It would be amiss then to end this evaluation without mentioning Jo's unique role in the work in Skelton. Her importance in the work of Skelton Fx is firstly a positional one: quite simply, the project is Jo's role, and vice versa. In conversations and interviews however, I was able to witness just how important her work is on the ground. I would describe her work as one of proactive facilitation. Thus, Jo does not 'do' everything - there

are many volunteers at EWWC for example – however, she certainly makes it happen. I witnessed something of her role at the focus group. Listening back it struck me just how frequently Jo offered an interpretation or summarisation of what had been said by the group members. These took the form of stories (to illustrate what was just said), a theological reflection or a counterpoint. Just occasionally there was a disjunct between what was said and Jo’s follow-up, but more than often her words were in-tune. What the focus group evidences therefore is that Jo’s role, alongside starting up new happenings, is one of casting the foundational spatial imaginary and providing a grammar through which others are able to reimagine their place in the deanery. In Skelton Fx at least, the importance of leadership, and specifically, a theological or visionary leadership, cannot be overstated. Significantly for my purposes here, this leadership does not exist apart from the existing church forms and structures of the deanery (for example Jo did not form her own church) but rather within and alongside them. To the point about Fx in Skelton as adding value to existing church forms therefore, it is critical to add the importance of theological leadership in this. This connectivity to existing church form however only worked as Jo was given the freedom and responsibility to allow her to flourish in the ways she has.<sup>275</sup>

In summary, Skelton Fx is shaped and underpinned by a dominant imaginary, which I have described here as ‘space of encounter’. Importantly this imaginary exists apart from both current structures as well as the new church forms. The imaginary has an inbuilt pragmatism: what is seen to matter is whatever enables people to ‘encounter God’. In terms of the Fx elements, it is significant that this dominant imaginary has resulted in both networked and geographically defined forms. The dominant narrative then has resulted in an attitude of doing whatever is seen as necessary to create spaces of encounter, and in the instance of Shoreham – a smaller, geographically bound place

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<sup>275</sup> I am thankful for Michael Volland’s comments in various conversations on this point. His book, *The Minister as Entrepreneur* explores this theme of the importance of visionary leadership, and especially as it relates to existing church forms. Jo can be described as an entrepreneurial minister in Volland’s sense. Michael Volland, *The Minister as Entrepreneur* (London: SPCK, 2016).

– this has meant a form resembling traditional parish ministry. There is a great amount that we might wish to question at Skelton Fx, and not least the exact substance of the ‘space of encounter’ imaginary. However, it is important to recognise in the first instance just how significant this dominant imaginary is in Skelton as it has been carried forwards through leadership. It has underpinned new church forms across the place of Skelton through both new and existing churches, and at least one of which – at Shoreham - has meant the Church being meaningfully present in a new way to the community.

## Chapter 7 / Conclusions

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### 7.1 Introduction

In the opening chapter of this thesis I argued that Ben Quash's description of 'finding' is a helpful way of understanding the Church of England's commitment to being present. According to Quash, rather than predefining the terms of engagement, the Church is called to take the givens of its story and praxis into encounter with what it finds in the world. 'Being present' is therefore simply a way of describing the Church's refusal to treat places as incidental to its mission and ministry, but rather the grounds upon which God works. For this reason, the commitment to be present in place is rightly seen as a vital counter-narrative to the problem of placelessness - or evacuation from place - that is such a definitive feature of modernity. The question that has interested me in this thesis however, has been how this principle of presence in place corresponds with praxis in churches and, thus, with the Church of England's ecclesial structuring. I have argued, for example, that many of the critiques of Fx/CP demonstrate an overly idealised account of the movement between the principle and practice, by assuming that the structure itself must be the means by which the principle is enacted. As I outlined in the introduction, there is therefore a correspondence between the methodology I have employed, and the object of study, namely the parish. Just as the parish is a spatial structure overlaid onto place, so too I have found that many of the theological constructs that uphold the parish similarly struggle to map onto actual goings-on in churches or what Healy refers to as the church concrete. The difference between space and place is thus mirrored in the gap between the theological appropriations of the parish, and the Church's praxis.

I suggest that we should be surprised by the weakness in the arguments at this point given that the distinction between space and place is so often implicit in the defences of the parish system. The inconsistency in the arguments is therefore that,



whereas the undergirding narrative is that of place overcoming the modern problem of placelessness (so embracing all of the themes explored in the opening chapter, namely the importance of locality; an affirmation of physicality; the givenness and situatedness of our human condition, and so on), the insistence that this can be affected *only* through the parish structure seems to rely precisely on a 'placeless' theological approach. Here the theological movement is unilateral - from theological principle to practice - rather than responsive or dialogical, as in the found theological approach I have described here. A found theological approach refuses to collapse signifier into signified or, in this case, the parish principle of presence and finding, into a particular ecclesial form. Rather, it holds the two as different, which in turn allows for dialogical encounter and the opportunity to critique praxis. This approach might therefore be called a placial theology, as opposed to a placeless or spatial one. Within such an approach it might be that we find the parish system does not do everything that some of the critics of Fx/CP want it to, that is, it might not be the best way for the Church of England to model its commitment to being present in place. The argument of this thesis then has been that on the issue of ecclesial structure we need sharper thinking or, to borrow Bretherton's terms, better theological judgement on existing praxis.

I explored the theoretical aspect of this question in Chapters 3 and 4. Here I offered clarity to the terms of the discussion, arguing that place is best understood as 'bounded openness' and is thus a more complex phenomenon than mappable 'space'. This in turn helped make sense of the Church's historical attempts to evaluate the parish system, which can be understood in terms of a shift from static (or 'spatial') conceptions of parish boundaries towards more organic conceptions such as 'neighbourhood' or 'community'. Such categories, however, far from being contrary to the principle of presence in place, were in fact seen as the outworking of it. Within the definition of place as bounded openness, these categories should be seen simply as a way of reconceiving what presence might look like apart from mapped spaces. The resulting theory, which I took into dialogue with the four churches, therefore became:

The parish principle is concerned with a Church committed to place rather than space. The parochial system as a system of spatial designation exists towards this end. If the Church wishes to maintain its commitment to presence, it may well need to embrace non-parochial and extra-parochial church forms.

In this final chapter I want to explore the results of this process of dialogue between this theory and the four churches. Some of this work was done in the previous chapter through the four reflections and analysis, however here I gather the threads of those theological-empirical pieces to offer broader insights into the Church of England's praxis. Praxis is the significant term here; the normative claims I want to make in this final chapter are not primarily about procedural outcomes. Rather, in line with the thesis as a whole, my goal is to offer insight into the thinking behind the Church of England's ecclesial structure. That is, to question *how* we might think about structure, instead of *what* we might think. Where I do offer suggestions about the latter, I do so that they might serve as exemplars rather than policy recommendations. The guiding question here is thus: given the theory established in Chapters 2- 5, and the findings and analysis presented in the previous chapter, how might the Church of England think about its ecclesial structuring?

I begin by outlining three central findings from my research: that churches think about their engagement with the world on the basis of place rather than space; that churches move into the world from the basis of an imaginary that transcends the particular ecclesial system, and that presence is a becoming rather than a state. Following this, I unpack and reply to four critical responses or questions to these three core findings.

At the heart of this thesis are the four case studies, carried out at four very different Church of England Churches. To summarise: I found at All Souls 'presence' is achieved (or not) - what I describe as a 'becoming' - rather than being a given. At All Soul's presence was being realised through focused leadership, as well as a maximising of certain social capital (including geography and history), the church is

present to its community. Secondly, I suggested that although the church is a parish church, it relates to South Reckton as a place rather than as according to the parish bounds. In this sense, for All Souls 'parochial' refers to 'local.' For St Andrew's in contrast, Thornbury and the parish are synonymous, which makes sense of not only the history but also the geography and social form of the village. However, the church is having to negotiate its place; as the village changes, St Andrew's is having to think through how it connects with the village as parish church. In this sense, St Andrew's - as All Souls has done successfully in South [Reckton](#) - is having to learn how to become present to its community. In terms of how it is doing this, I observed that alongside the role of proactive leadership there were three important conversations: a parish imaginary (which was assumed by the church itself and concerned the assumed nature of St Andrew's as the village's church), the parish principle (the theology of parish, much of which I have been exploring throughout this thesis), and the parish praxis (the new thinking-doing of the church demanded by the new social and cultural moment). My claim was that, much like at All Souls, one should therefore not assume that the parish principle is the main imaginary at work in a church. This fact was also supported by my research at Skelton Fx, where I encountered a dominant imaginary (spaces of encounter) which proceeded any reflection on specific places and the church's connection to them. In Skelton this dominant imaginary led to a certain openness and pragmatism which had, in turn, resulted in a very parish-like model of church being established in a small, bounded place. I suggested that there was room here to explore how a church movement which transcends particular bounded places might in fact allow for the creation and enabling of church expressions that serve such bounded places, as well as existing parish churches. This final possibility was also highlighted by S4, which very much existed across the city place in terms of dispersal. In other ways however it was S4 which most challenged my thesis given that it presents as a 'de-placed' church. I explored though how, although indeed limited in its engagement with smaller more bounded places, S4 did have a deep commitment to the place of the city

and, further, that it was proving effective in reaching cosmopolitans who would similarly identify themselves as residents of the city rather than as belonging to any intermediate or smaller places.

## **7.2 Churches related to place rather than space**

In each of the four churches the congregation and ministers understood themselves to relate to a particular place rather than a space. This finding should not come as a surprise. The theological appropriations of place I outlined in Chapter 4 highlight that place is integral to what it means to be human. Place therefore is not an additional frame through which we comprehend reality; it is the very means by which we as humans navigate our existence in the world. What I saw at the churches was an outworking of this.

Starting with the parish churches, both All Souls and St Andrew's, although situated within a parochial area, understood themselves to be in relation first and foremost to a place; for All Souls, with SR, and for St Andrew's with Thornbury. This was the language people used at each church; the only time I heard mention of the 'parish' was in interviews with the respective ministers where the discussion turned to a more formal theological reflection on their church's missional purpose. The norm then was for congregants and church leadership to speak of the place within which the church was set, that is, the community itself where people lived, gathered and felt a sense of belonging to.

We might say that for St Andrew's and All Souls, the parish boundary existed therefore as *fiction*. By fiction I mean simply that it held no immediate correspondence with actual goings-on, either with the concrete factors or imaginaries that go towards establishing SR or Thornbury as places. It therefore corresponds to the sense of parish as 'myth', which I highlighted in Chapter 5.<sup>276</sup> Fiction does not mean 'false' but rather predetermined constructs which are imposed onto the realities that are place. Again, it is precisely through such fictions that places are constructed and function. The difference

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<sup>276</sup> See above, pp.56-57.

therefore between these fictions and the parish system is about their hold on places as they have been accepted and owned. My argument is that the parish system as a static, geographically-mapped system does not necessarily map onto such places. They are not therefore fictions that serve to create and form places. They *may* do this, however this is not the case through necessity. Instead what my research suggested is that the fictions that are the parish boundaries were at best secondary, but most commonly, irrelevant, to each church's engagement with its place.

I wish to avoid synthesis here. There are significant differences between the way in which Thornbury and SR are places. Thornbury for example is geographically smaller and has more definable boundaries than does SR. Also Thornbury has a greater number of social and cultural bindings.<sup>277</sup> Yet both function as places in that they are held to be identified as such - both are 'this place' and not 'that place', irrespective of how clear or blurred the boundaries may in fact prove. This corresponds with Malpas' definition of place as 'bounded openness', which I explored in Chapter 4. Ultimately, these are places because a) they are 'bound' by particular cultural bindings and b) the communities and individuals who find themselves living there identify themselves according to these descriptors. The nature of this boundedness therefore is very similar to the way in which the larger places of Skelton and Backston are themselves bounded. In this way, all four churches are responding to what is found, to the places they are situated within.

One of the most important reminders to theological appropriations of place then is the way in which place is always received, that is, there is a subjectivity to place. What S4 and Skelton Fx as the non-parochial churches had embraced is the fact that those who lived or worked within those places identified them precisely as 'Skelton' and 'Backston'. Neither Skelton nor Backston are designations created by the churches, but are in fact known and used by the people who live and work within them. As such both are base

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<sup>277</sup> There is a difference between explicit and implicit pieces of cultural binding. To the former belongs pubs, community centres, town halls, churches etc. These alone however do not necessarily mean strong social capital and cohesion. Implicit pieces include shared history, cultural identity and purpose. On this line of thought it may well be possible to argue that in many ways South Reckton is actually a more cohesive place than is Thornbury.

identifiers and accordingly are primary (rather than secondary, or fictionalised) places. Neither church is working towards a fictional or imagined place, but instead towards an actual and bounded place.

I am in no doubt that the questions which flow out from this preliminary observation are perhaps the more controversial ones, and thus more interesting for my purposes here. Yet what I have shown is that thinking in terms of place is not only a helpful theological tool, but makes sense of the ways in which churches engage with the world. Relying on a hard 'space vs. no space' (i.e. parish vs. non) contrast will therefore not do justice to the complexities involved in creating a structure within which the Church is deeply engaged in particular places. Bluntly, the four churches showed that the question, 'is the parish effective or not', is unhelpful and misguided if it is the first or only question asked. It misses the fact that the churches themselves do not (and will not) exist in the world on these terms. We need therefore a sharpening of how such terms are used. Specifically, 'parish' cannot be synonymous with 'place'; churches themselves will not allow this construct to function.

### **7.3 Love of place**

Phrases such as 'missional engagement' or 'community engagement', which I have used throughout my research, have a tendency to become slightly clinical; sanitised of the complexities of human beings in place. It is of interest therefore to return to the frequent defences made of the parish system which, as I have shown throughout, involve a kind of juxtaposing of dispassionate 'strategic' or 'effective' modes of church, with a fully embodied, holistic ministry of service. And it is the latter, so the narrative goes, which is embraced by the parish system. Whereas non-parochial churches then, either networked, or 'gathered', necessarily endeavour to connect with people on the basis of their standing vis-a-vis the church - either to bring them 'in' from 'outside', or to minister to those already 'in' - what the parish system models is a church that *loves*. To 'love' the world, argues Milbank, is to commit to the part of it - the place (and in the line of his argument

he means 'parish') - one finds oneself within; to 'simply accept it and therefore love it and try to improve it'.<sup>278</sup> And yet it is here I would suggest that we see perhaps the greatest inconsistency in holding firmly to the parish structure. For what is it that people love, apart from place? A space, as a neutral projection onto place, can never captivate desire, whereas places (including relationships with persons and gatherings of meaning) can be and are objects of desire. We love places and not spaces. In this way, true parochial vision, which is that commitment to place argued for convincingly by the likes of John Milbank, is expressed not through structural necessity but through deep compassion for place. And this was where the conversations at each church became most interesting: when people were expressing something of a passion for place. More than just what they felt they should be doing, but what they actually wanted to be doing - their desires, their loves - people loved the community they existed within, or the people, institutions and physical spaces they had relationship with. I experienced the fact that a church will move outwards into loving service because it finds itself situated within a place that it loves.<sup>279</sup> The 'givenness' of place, which is of such importance to so many defences of the parish system represented by Milbank here, must therefore refer to the fact that places exist independently of, and prior to, our ecclesial naming of them. In the context of ecclesiology, places are 'given' because they do really exist, not because they have been mapped and distributed. As such, Milbank's call to the Church to love through commitment to a particular part cannot be met through a simple application of a parochial structure. Rather, to follow through his logic properly must entail in the first instance identifying where places - the parts - are already in existence and, accordingly, finding ways of connecting churches with them. To impose a preconstructed space upon the world and place a church within it is to make a category mistake about what Milbank calls the 'accidental givenness of place'.<sup>280</sup> The parish principle is that we respond to and love

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<sup>278</sup> Milbank, 'Stale', p.124.

<sup>279</sup> Mark Wynn helpfully points out that the language of love is fully appropriate when speaking of places. Places, he argues, can become like true friends; they can exist 'not for the sake of extrinsically enabling some further activity.' There is a 'non-instrumental appreciation' for them. Wynn, p.27.

<sup>280</sup> Ibid.

what is found. My argument is simply that the parish structure does not (necessarily) do this, but rather it works the other way around: mapping onto the world ‘places’, and then distributing churches accordingly. My research has showed that in all the ways that really matter, that is, as objects of love, places are given to churches not by the ecclesial system, but rather by the world. How ‘places’ are conceived by those within them is therefore a critical aspect of what it is that the Church ‘finds’. This is what Tiller spoke of as the Church needing to be ‘coterminous’ with given places.<sup>281</sup> Accordingly, the four churches I researched were modelling the very intentions of the parish system in its inception, that is, as a way of ministering to the places that were found to exist. What this suggests is that good ecclesial structuring is a more complex task than a simple parish system allows for. Whereas a mappable system can be created from a distance without necessary recourse to happenings ‘on the ground’ (beyond, say, obvious physical bounds), establishing a church that is in and for place requires careful attention and responsiveness.

#### **7.4 Becoming present**

As well as relating to place rather than space, each church displayed a desire to *become* present to its place. In this sense, presence was not a given identity for these churches but was something they had established and were continuing to form. There was therefore at each church, parish or non, deliberation and activity – what the report *Presence and Engagement* refers to as ‘engagement’ - that sought to bring the life of the church into contact with the life of the communities they found themselves within.<sup>282</sup> Certainly the understanding of what this ‘life’ consisted of differed in each instance. For example, St Andrew's shared history, community gathering and place of memory, stands in contrast to S4's focus of dispersed impact across the city - just as Skelton Fx's strong ‘spaces of encounter’ differed from All Souls' self-identity as a place of service and community

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<sup>281</sup> See above, p.65.

<sup>282</sup> See above, p.59.



leadership. In each case, the church held perceived goods that it in turn sought to bring into the life of the wider community. There was a desire for connection, for the church's presence to be apparent and to make a difference. In terms of the parish system, therefore, what matters is not the givens of space so much as the desire and intentionality to engage with that space. My experience at All Souls, for example, was that the church is deeply present to a community that might otherwise be forgotten, yet it was not so much the parish structure that had created this reality, as the positioning of a particular church, vicar, and congregation within and for this community. SR was not a forgotten community because there was a church here that was being led well and held within it a deep love of this place. Put differently, what matters most is how each church moved 'out of itself', out from its imaginary of place - be it 'the parish' or 'the city' - and into the place as it found it.

Central to this understanding of the nature of presence is the concept of relationship. Ultimately, this was the category that defined each of the four churches' ministry of presence with their communities. They had a relationship with these communities, both at the individual level (particular persons or families) but also at a broader level (with institutions, community groups, policy makers etc.). Thus, it was clear from conversations, and especially from the picture task, that each church thought of the place that they found themselves in not so much in terms of a 'territory' or 'sphere' as a set of relationships and interactions. By saying, for example, 'we want to bless the city' (S4) or 'we want to be a church for SR (All Souls), the community was referred to, rather than as an area of engagement. Emphasis was on the people and institutions that make this place *this* place and not another. As Mark Wynn so clearly articulates in *Faith and Place*, place is always about the dialectic between location or site, and relationship (friendship). Wynn is more concerned with the ways in which place is integral to friendship, than with how friendship shapes place. Yet this understanding underlies his reflections. It is clear, for example, that the story he uses as the basis of his reflection, namely of a relationship between two Oxford students and the remembering of their time together there, assumes

that just as their friendship was shaped by that place, so too the place itself is what it is to them because of the friendship that took place there. Indeed the place becomes a holder - what Wynn calls a site's 'storied identity' - of these interactions and memories of relationship.<sup>283</sup> For Wynn therefore, we simply cannot disconnect place and relationship, and there is no easy 'causal sequence' between them.<sup>284</sup> The extent to which a church is more or less present is ultimately about the strength of relationships between the church and the community. The point is that just as 'friendship' only has meaning as it refers to what Wynn calls 'contact' - shared memories, ongoing communication - so too, the church's relationship with the world must consist of actual encounters and interactions.<sup>285</sup> Thus, the church becomes present as a friendship becomes vital, that is, as the relationship is fostered and brought to life or, better, as the church's ministry is felt and experienced by the community.

There is little here that critics of Fx/CP would question. That the parish needs to become more of what it could be – held with more regard, better resourced and staffed etc. - is one of the central claims of *For the Parish*. However, I want to hold to the distinction between being and becoming present for two reasons. First, I want to at least offer some clarity around the terms since, as I argued earlier, one feature of the debate around new church forms has been the laziness with which terms have been employed. 'Presence' has been one of those terms, with an assumption that parish and presence are synonymous and, accordingly, any non-parochial church must therefore be less than present. Here the debate about parish or non-parish is in fact an interference to the question of *how* churches become present and how therefore the Church should facilitate this. Second, and related to this, much of the writing around the parish works with a conception of presence that is tied purely to physical space, despite an espoused desire to effect practical change. In such accounts, 'a Christian presence in every community' simply refers to the parish structure, that is, the givens of the spatial mapping of the nation so

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<sup>283</sup> Wynn, p.41.

<sup>284</sup> Ibid., p.35.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid., p.41.

that every space is 'covered' by a given area of jurisdiction, a parish church and by the ministry of word and sacrament therein. Ultimately, churches are present simply by way of 'being there'. The fact that churches *are* - physically locatable, for example - is essential for any ecclesial form, given the twin assertions that part of being human is to exist in place, and second that 'place' necessarily encompasses the givens of physicality. However, it will not do to stop here; to claim that physical location is the totality, or approximation of, presence. Ultimately, if presence in place includes but is always more than physical presence, then we need to ask whether a blanket commitment to the parish system – as a mappable structure - is the best way of ensuring the Church is most present to the nation. Again I return to the claim made throughout this thesis and observed in the discussions about the system in the nineteenth century that such a commitment could be in fact a hinderance to such a ministry.

If becoming present is therefore about relationships (ministry) with place that becomes actualised, then a critical question to ask is how best our ecclesial form facilitates this. Once again I do not wish to create a dichotomy between (the task of) ministry and the calling to be physically present through time, and I address some of these concerns below. However, if the Church of England wishes to fulfil the calling of being a Christian presence in every community, then it will need to think hard about how it distributes its ministry so that it is best placed to form churches that are becoming present to their communities. At the most basic level this will mean being less cautious about the *coverage* of ministry (i.e., whether and how we can cover as much space or parishes as possible with the ministerial resources we have) and more willing to strategise about where and how ministers might be deployed. Skelton Fx is a good example of where a different approach to ministerial deployment - Jo given responsibility for growing and developing new initiatives across a deanery - can be effective in moving individual churches towards increased presence.

A critical aspect of a church becoming present is the role of leadership. Such leadership is intentional about the vocation to presence and seeks to bring it into reality.

At All Souls this intentionality stemmed from the persons of Malcolm and Susan; their 'bloody hard work' comment highlighted at once their ownership of the responsibility to lead, and their 'distance' from a majority of the congregation whom they were leading. Further, Malcolm and Susan's leadership was made possible by the intentional leadership of those who had come before them, stretching back to the very origins of the church. At St Andrew's the leadership was not an ordained leadership, and came predominantly from Rachel, but also through the likes of those helping with the Family Service. At S4 there was a culture of enabling others and facilitating leadership across the congregation and so, as well as Theo's leadership, the numerous expressions of S4s community across the city had originated through the activity of church members and small group leaders. Perhaps most strikingly Skelton Fx and the Westway Open Arms project that had resulted from it, had come about because of the deanery's decision to establish a different type of ordained ministry than the parish form and then to support this new role through a curate. If there is a critical issue to the Church's ability to become present then it concerns the role of leadership, both lay and ordained. It is important to note, for example, the way both the Paul and Tiller reports assume a connection between the Church's spatial structuring, and its ministerial deployment. The assumption inbuilt into the parish system is that ministry need be arranged on the basis of one ordained minister for each church. In contrast, embracing non or extra-parochial church forms simultaneously calls for complexity in clergy/laity deployment.

### **7.5 Churches move into the world from the basis of a theological imaginary**

The theological imaginaries at play in each church were critical to their engagement with their places. Where many defenses of the parish imply that the parish structure gifts to the Church a particular way of imagining its relationship to the world, in the churches I researched I found that what drives the church's relationship to its community is in fact a certain theological imaginary that transcends its particular ecclesial form. In this way what I found was an embodiment of the observation that undergirds this thesis, namely that

there is a distinction between principle (what in the case of the churches I labelled an 'imaginary') and praxis. My research suggests that rather than it being the ecclesial system that forms a placial imaginary in each church, it is rather an imaginary which is central, with the system interpreted in that light. I drew out this point out in the analysis of St Andrews and Skelton Fx particularly. In the former I distinguished the parish principle, the parish imaginary, and parochial praxis, and in the latter emphasised the role that the core imaginary of 'space of encounter' played. The same can be witnessed at S4, where the dominant imaginary was that of 'the city', and a broad missiology of cultural engagement and transformation.

It was at All Souls that the imaginary most resembled what I have described in this thesis as the parish principle and where the imaginary and ecclesial form most aligned. The church models the parish principle in practice, and Malcolm and Susan articulate the church's vision explicitly in parochial terms. However, even here the theological commitment is being discovered and implemented rather than inherent to the church. Specifically, the imaginary of the parish is one that Malcolm and Susan are working hard to bring about; it is their theological commitment and they are teaching it to the congregation. This was seen quite clearly in the way Susan guided some of the discussions at the focus group, as well as the steps Malcolm had taken to bring the church into a closer relationship to SR. The parish principles therefore - of place, the importance of service, of creating a demographically mixed congregation - had been brought to the congregation by Malcolm and Susan, and the imaginary existed as an interplay between Malcolm and Susan's operant theology of parish (which Malcolm could articulate in formal theological categories) and the operant theology of the congregation. My point is that rather than arising organically out of the church by nature of it being a parish church, the imaginary of place was a taught and a learned one.

What this suggests is the importance of fostering a parochial imaginary in a church. In the first instance this means moving away from the assumption that I have questioned repeatedly here, that the parish system itself will necessarily foster churches

with this vision. This is to underestimate the primacy of theological imaginaries that exist apart from the particular ecclesial form. The question to ask therefore is what it is that does form churches with such an imaginary. Of course the answer to this will necessarily be complex. In my research I found that an imaginary was formed in the different contexts through a web of historical factors and theological commitments, some of which lie beyond the English parish system.<sup>286</sup> Certainly this question does not stand apart from questions of structure: how can the Church shape itself to ensure churches are being formed in a habitus of presence? What training or discipleship forms will need to be employed to form churches like this? Further, and given the points above about the role of leadership in the task of becoming present, how might the Church train its clergy and equip lay leaders so that they are able to understand, articulate and envision congregations with a parochial imaginary?<sup>287</sup>

## **7.6 Challenges: parish as formative, coverage and scale, abiding, and difference**

Engaging the theory with the four church contexts brought to light three key issues in the Church of England's ecclesial praxis. First, churches are called to respond to places rather than spaces, and that it is places that can become objects of love. If, as Massey argues, one might be fully committed to a 'locality', whilst missing actual places, the important question to ask of our ecclesial form must be how churches can be structured and positioned to love places rather than a predefined spatiality.<sup>288</sup> This is what lies behind the move in Church of England reports to use other designators than parish such as 'neighbourhood' or 'community' (see Chapter 3) and Martyn Percy's tentative claim, made

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<sup>286</sup> So S4s appropriation of Tim Keller's ministry in New York City. A number of recent books have sought to 'rediscover' a 'parish principle' - the themes of locality and commitment to place as counter to modern trends of isolationism and individualism - and many of these are aimed at newer church plants or grafts. See for example, Paul Sparks, Tim Soerens and Dwight J. Friesen, *The New Parish* (Downers Grove, I.L.: IVP, 2014).

<sup>287</sup> In terms of theological leadership, the obvious anomaly was St Andrews, where I witnessed a disconnect between David's espoused theology of the parish and the imaginary and praxis of the church. Even this instance was demonstrative of the point however: the disconnect existed largely because of David's absence from the life of the community as a result of his being stretched across numerous parishes.

<sup>288</sup> Massey, *Space, Place and Gender*, p.129.

in spite of his critique of the Fx movement, that the Church of England will need to distinguish between the 'parochial' and the 'local', and increasingly embrace the latter.<sup>289</sup> Second, churches become present to their communities through ministry, facilitated through leadership. Finally, churches relate to the world on the basis of a theological imaginary which transcends the particular ecclesial form. Each of these findings challenges the Church to think about how the parish principle is enacted, namely a move away from seeking to perpetuate the parish structure, towards an approach in which: (i) churches might become present to given places; (ii) ministry is deployed not to cover space, but to shape and lead churches that love places. I will address what I see as four of the most important questions that arise from these claims, each of which flow from a reading of the critiques of Fx/CP and defences of the parish system that I have drawn upon throughout the thesis. My goal in dealing with these critiques however is not merely to defend my stated claims. The task is a constructive one. By identifying and responding to these concerns, I aim to present a sharper impression of the type of ecclesial praxis (i and ii above) that is necessary for the Church of England to fulfil its vocation to presence.

### **7.6.1 Parish as Formative**

In Chapter 3 I highlighted Lefebvre's critiques of modern philosophies of place, namely that they failed to see that place shapes our thinking as much we shape places. This is a significant claim, since it implies that we should be wary of underplaying the importance of structures and physical forms (for example, the parish system and parish churches) in the formation of imaginaries. To my claim that what is primary is the theological imaginary, with the structure interpreted through this, it might be argued that the structure has in fact more importance over a longer period of time. Put differently, it is worth asking whether an absence of a spatial structure would, over time, lead to a Church that increasingly becomes detached from place into its own imaginary. Connected to this

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<sup>289</sup> Percy, 'Many Rooms in my Father's House', in Croft, pp.3-15 (p. 13).

is the observation that the imaginary of a church such as S4 – despite it currently being overtly committed to place – is essentially fragile, that once divorced from a clearly-bounded physical space, it has the potential to lose its commitment to place at all.

I am not proposing that the ecclesial structure is irrelevant. To return to Hooker's terms I employed in the opening chapter, our practices are gifts, the effects of which are grace; and I claimed there that we should see the givens of the parochial system in such terms. It is rather that, following Hooker, once we refuse to see a direct causation between the two things - principle and form - the question becomes about the nature of the relationship between the two. It will be the case that the principle is protected, and indeed becomes vital, with the existence of the structure. It is for this reason then that I want to affirm the importance of ecclesial structure in the Church's engagement with place in contrast to, say, a system in which each church defines its own area of engagement. I am claiming that what matters however, is not so much the particular spatial mapping of areas of engagement, so much as the givenness of a sphere of responsibility - a place - from which each church must determine its life. What brings the parish principle to life, and protects it from being lost amidst various counter-narratives and cultural tendencies, is precisely the commitment to love and serve actual places - a church having a place that it is called to be faithful to and to serve. Ultimately therefore, what the parish principle and the Church of England's embracing of it means is a recognition that each Church of England church must have a place that it exists for and is part of a wider strategy for a region. This wider strategy could be a deanery or diocese, as I highlight below. The point though is that this is about finding where places are, and equipping the churches within them.

If formation towards a love of place does happen then it does so within the church qua church, gathered around word and sacrament, rather than because of the parochial system. This is a critical fact in this discussion and one which perhaps addresses some of the issues around the question of dispersed and eclectic church 'expressions'. The fear is that as churches are formed around and for particular communities, they might



begin to lose the essence of what it is to *be* church. The dispersed communities I saw in my research however, so especially at Skelton Fx and S4, had at their very core ‘church’, i.e. in the Anglican sense of a people consistently gathering around the Christian story in word and sacrament and led by a recognised (ordained) person. The dispersed - or micro - communities accordingly moved out of and back into this core, that is, they were sustained by it. When I speak of micro expressions of church becoming present to a variety of different places, this is what I have in mind. Indeed, this form of relationship between a core ‘church’ and its possible multiple expressions correlates with the understanding of place I have employed throughout this thesis, that is, each place as constituted by multiple other places. In this sense, a church as a ‘place’ might be comprised of numerous different expressions and communities, held together through shared praxis. Such a model is argued for by the likes of Nick Spencer who suggests that the Church of England needs to rediscover the category of Minster church.<sup>290</sup> According to Spencer, the Minster model relies on the assumption that the way of being physically close to a community is not by delineating and distributing parish responsibility in advance but rather to resource larger churches - each of which has a given territory of responsibility - so that they might reach out with multiple smaller expressions of church and ministry. My point here however, is that the forming that must take place happens as a church gathers around the Christian story and its practices, rather than because it owns a geographical area of responsibility. The corresponding challenge therefore is that regardless of what is done in a deanery or diocese to bring the Church into greater presence with place, whether it is new smaller expressions, or church planting and grafting, there must be a prioritising of the church gathered around word and sacrament. This gives room for imaginative and organic expressions of ‘church’ in particular places: from this core, other expressions of church can flow, retaining their connectivity back to it.

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<sup>290</sup> Spencer, *Parochial Vision*.

### 7.6.2 Parish as coverage and scale

As I have claimed throughout this thesis, one of the central tenets of the parish system is that it establishes a church that has coverage, what the report *Presence and Engagement* refers to as ‘universal geographic presence’.<sup>291</sup> What then are the implications of a church structure based around particular places rather than territory? Specifically, is there a danger that by focusing on particular places others might be forgotten? This point was brought home to me during my time with All Souls church given their commitment to serving those who are most vulnerable and isolated in the community. In conversations about Fx/CP, Malcolm expressed above all a concern that such people might be bypassed, that as ecclesial strategies move towards an emphasis on the gathered and attractional, people (or even communities) who are necessarily less mobile or time-wealthy might be left outside of the Church’s ministry. The parish system makes sense here therefore, firstly because it places churches across all territories, rather than in places that it has deemed in advance would make the best locations. Further, churches are distributed across a large area, bringing them (physically) as close as possible to the communities they serve. The parish principle also assumes that such coverage establishes a particular relationship between the micro and the macro, namely, that places are covered by as small a unit as possible. This is what lies behind Quash’s claim, noted in Chapter 1, that the Church is able to contribute at a national level from the basis of its deep knowledge of specific local concerns.<sup>292</sup> Ultimately then, this commitment to the totality of the nation in the small and the ‘local’ is seen as the greatest counter to the modernistic tendency of homogenisation and corresponding erosion of place. In contrast, the model held by the likes of Skelton Fx and S4 seems to pull the church in precisely the wrong direction since, as with all attempts to widen spatial focus, it inevitably begins to homogenise place rather than becoming present to particular places within the whole.

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<sup>291</sup> Archbishops’ Council, *Presence and Engagement*, p.11.

<sup>292</sup> Quash, ‘Polity of Presence’.

How then should we think about a system based on place, rather than the coverage of space? The first point to make is that there is no inherent reason why a system that is modelled on responsiveness to place should not in the first instance seek coverage as a necessity. What I mean by this is that dioceses or deaneries should still map out their geographical area of ministerial responsibilities as they currently do, so that no place is forgotten. However, because presence is always a becoming, I suggest that communities that are 'covered' by a parish and yet lack a church that is becoming present are just as forgotten as any other. In this sense 'coverage' is neutral: it is not the fact of coverage that ensures such communities are loved, but rather the way in which this coverage is enacted. Coverage then must be a first step in the process of becoming present; the Church should aim to have everywhere 'covered' by a ministry, and not least because of the possibility that some communities and places might be forgotten. However, it is the steps that are taken from that point on that matter most. Once a territory is marked, the question then to be asked is how the Church might become present to the place or places within that designated space.

It is critical however that the Church reflects on the nature of the terms themselves. Drawing on the assertions from human geography made in Chapter 4, we must be extremely careful of correlating 'place' with 'local', or 'particular' with 'small'. There is enough criticism within human geography of such binary thinking - micro vs. macro / local vs. global etc. - to question the validity of this form of reasoning. The central concern aired by human geographers then, is about the danger of assuming (smaller) scale relates to particularity and - worse - with the 'authentic'. In this way of thinking, it is the small that is held as necessarily more genuine whereas the macro (often categorised as the 'global') is viewed as a fiction which inevitably serves an agenda of some kind, most likely an economic one. 'Place' is seen as embracing that which is small, over and in reaction to, the macro identifiers. Yet, as I argued in Chapter 4, such an imaginary relies on a category mistake about place. To 'place' we might well add the descriptors, 'particular' or 'unique' but it is impossible to speak of place as necessarily 'small' or 'local'. Place is established

through an interplay of smaller and larger forces; the micro and the macro, global and local. Accordingly, it might indeed be possible to be committed to the smallest possible units, and yet miss place entirely. In contrast, what All Souls was doing so well was committing itself to the particular place of SR, without missing the fact that it was connected to the larger city place through governance, relationships, infrastructure and shared history.

This relationship between designated space and ministry is significant in terms of occasional offices also. The parish principle is, as I said at the start of the thesis, wedded to the idea of occasional offices since these are expressions of the Church's pastoral care for the nation. The parish 'space' is therefore critical because it serves as the delineation of these offices: each person exists within a space within which they have a right to their parish church for the liminal moments in their life story. Although the ways in which occasional offices connect church and community was not a focus of my research given that I was interested in the perceptions of the congregants rather than the details of the churches' engagement, I do acknowledge on reflection that I did not give enough time to their role; especially in the two parish contexts. Further research would look at how the church perceived the place of occasional offices and whether they formed a central part of the church's sense of vocation.<sup>293</sup>

It was interesting to me that occasional offices did not play a central role in the photo task and focus group. In fact, the only reference to an occasional office in the focus groups was from S4, where a participant had brought a photo of one of the adult baptisms. This absence could be put down to the type of question I was asking, namely about 'mission' rather than, say, 'pastoral care.' Yet this itself reveals something; none of the churches initially recognised occasional offices to be a central part of their mission to their local community. I had to ask about the role of occasional offices in each instance. In Thornbury, as I outlined in the analysis, the perception around occasional offices had shifted from being seen as a given, to a missional opportunity. Therefore in the place where there was most overlap between parish and locale, occasional offices (certainly weddings and baptisms) had declined and their

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<sup>293</sup> The questionnaire did ask about the role of occasional offices. However, as stated in the methods section, these answers can only provide limited insight. Besides the questionnaire I also asked each church leader about them.

importance was having to be re-discovered. In South Reckton, again occasional offices were valued by Malcolm for their missional potential. The church did not carry out as many occasional offices as might be expected for such a locally focused church, and it had instead focused energy on other ways of connecting and serving the community. So, within the bounds of my investigation, it would not be possible to claim that occasional offices are a critical part of what it means for these churches to be parish churches, at least not in their own perception. Occasional offices functioned here as just one part of the church's wider movement outside of itself into the community and, in both cases, the question was being asked about how occasional offices *become* more significant.

Once again therefore, we see something of a disjuncture between the spatial system of the parish, and the nature of place. It will not do to assume that a commitment to the particular will be met solely through the parish, that is, through areas of responsibility that are as physically small as possible. Put another way, it will not be the scale of the ecclesial system that best protects the commitment to the particular and works against the tendency to forget. Rather it will be through establishing churches with areas of responsibility that respect the givens of place, be they small or large.

Given this, the necessary coverage should be best understood in larger units than the traditional parish. Here I follow the arguments of the Tiller and Paul reports.<sup>294</sup> A place-based and responsive ministry of presence seems to me to call for ministry flowing out of the deanery or diocese primarily, and the 'parish' secondarily. Certainly churches should hold their specific places of responsibility, however because institutions, local government and social structures so frequently transcend our ecclesial boundaries it is important that a wider perspective is taken on how the Church is present in an area. This is where the parish system's greatest strength - its positioning of local churches that have small areas of pastoral responsibility - can also be its limit. The Church across an area might not be as present as it could be precisely because each church has its own area of care. The parish disperses the Church's focus and resourcing based on geography rather

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<sup>294</sup> See above, pp.61-65.

than on need or in response to given places. It might be the case however, that one church with a much larger number of resources (not simply financial, but in terms of ministry capability) may be more able to impact the presence of the Church across a region than other smaller local churches. It is here that wider deanery or diocesan strategic thinking becomes helpful: how might a resource-rich church serve or support the ministry of presence across the region, in other parishes? Where are the gaps –the places not currently being met by a church presence – and what needs to be done to meet this need? It is out of this type of strategic thinking that church plants or grafts become especially significant.

What such a move does entail then is the unlinking of ministry from the parish boundary. Instead of (necessarily) being responsible for a specific geographical area, clergy here would be organised to work effectively in areas of perceived need.<sup>295</sup> Again, some ministers may well be given a geographical remit due to the specific nature of the place in question. Others might however serve across a larger area, perhaps with a particular sphere of responsibility. The latter might include places such as a city centre, a business district, or housing development. This way of distributing ministers, so that the ministry of presence rather than the space of presence takes precedent, might also work against a number of issues faced by clergy and by their deployers. As clergy numbers decrease for example, this may be a far more effective way of administering care and service across a deanery or diocese.

Within the churches that define themselves as existing for a larger place, of which S4 and Skelton Fx are examples, I see the managing of the micro and macro happening fairly organically. The story of Skelton Fx, for example, is important precisely because of the way it evolved from a macro project (establishing new forms of church across the deanery) to a micro expression of ministry in one particular housing estate. Likewise, though not perhaps as dramatic, members of S4 found themselves moving from ‘loving

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<sup>295</sup> I am here assuming the understanding that ministry and mission are not the sole responsibility of clergy, but that the critical aspect of clergy responsibility is to act as servant, facilitator and enabler of the whole church.

the city' to serving in very particular communities, including Franton. In both cases this movement towards the smaller had happened as a response to perceived need rather than because of a premeditated missional task. Might we say then that what both S4 and Skelton Fx witness to is the pull toward the smaller, irrespective of the stated area of responsibility? Even if a church defines itself as existing at the macro level (city or district) it might be that as it seeks to serve and opens itself up to possibilities, it will necessarily find itself committing to the unique challenges of a particular locale. Simply, this may be a natural tendency - one that perhaps springs from the theological convictions inherent in the Christian faith about place (whether they are explicit in that community or not) or indeed from the very givenness of our humanity. I see Skelton Fx choosing to fully embrace this reality, beginning to structure the entirety of its life around a particular community, whereas S4 has not. My point then is that 'management' is perhaps too strong a term for what will be a more organic relationship between micro and macro. Once again, the important thing is the attitude of ministry in place, that is, whether the church is open to serve the place it exists for, and is responsive to its particularities. If this is fostered then, like at Skelton Fx and S4, churches will find themselves committing to particular localities. The management element then becomes a secondary step: how is this church to hold within itself, both the commitment to the micro and to the macro? Further, how might the Church at a deanery or diocesan level respond to this organic process of a church developing a love for a particular place? To use Skelton Fx again, the diocese here responded positively by formalising the roles of Jo and her curate, and finding ways of tying the work at Eastway with the parish of Holy Trinity. In other contexts this process of recognition will happen from within the church itself, such as at S4 for example, where smaller expressions of community - some of which are based around specific locales, and some which are gatherings of relational networks - are held within the one larger worshipping community.

What then of those communities, spoken of above, which have the character of being less transient and more geographically bounded? Certainly the statistics show that

the group Malcolm was referring to are far from an insignificant minority. Furthermore such groups are frequently marginalised in society, lacking representation in the media, culture and local or national governance. The tendency therefore, and especially as decisions are made at national or diocesan level, is to follow this general pattern and miss such communities and individuals. This is particularly a danger when decisions are made on the basis of resources or attendance figures. Such a concern has been aired recently by the Bishop of Burnley, Philip North, who has spoken about what he perceives to be the failings of the Church of England to connect with those living in urban estates.<sup>296</sup> It seems to me that if the Church desires to be present in every place, then it must become as physically close to such communities as possible. How it does this is a different question. My point is that this move towards physical closeness in certain communities must be the secondary one of missional necessity rather than as a result of predefined commitment to coverage. But once the conceptual disentangling of presence and coverage has taken place, a number of possibilities open up as to how exactly churches and ecclesial structures can best become present to less mobile communities. The parish system limits the Church of England because it imagines that the possibility of such closeness lies solely with a parochial distribution. If the locus for ministry and mission is the parish, then presence can only happen through one church and (ideally) one priest responsible for that particular area. This, of course, demands a large amount of resourcing, and the type of presence will be determined by the resources and personnel in that church.<sup>297</sup> If ministry is detached from the parish however, then it becomes possible to imagine various types and forms of physically close churches. Bishop North points out, for example, that of the churches required by the context of outer urban estates, not all will resemble traditional

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<sup>296</sup> Bishop North addressed General Synod in 2016 with these concerns. He also delivered a paper to the Estates Evangelism Conference in 2016, which can be found at <<http://www.blackburn.anglican.org/images/News/Estates%20Keynote.pdf>> [accessed 02/01/17]. I see resonances with Bishop North's comments in the recent European referendum and the apparent underestimating of the 'provincial' vote. Why people voted as they did is not so important here as the fact that many did vote in such a way, and that it surprised those who felt they had known the political situation of the nation.

<sup>297</sup> Cf. Richard Mann's comments in 1851: See above, p.56.



parish churches.<sup>298</sup> The type of coverage which I am suggesting is required is therefore best represented by Skelton Fx. Here, coverage of the larger unit (Skelton deanery) was expressed in terms of smaller church units and forms. What the project modelled is the way in which the Church is able to become more present within an area by, a) taking a larger overview of that area (in contrast to each church taking responsibility for its parish) and, b) allowing flexibility in church forms so that churches arise out of response to need, shaped by the character of the place it seeks to serve.

Likewise, it might be that certain places are better served by having fewer, larger and in one sense more 'attractional' churches, than by having lots of smaller churches that seek to be physically close to where people live.<sup>299</sup> This will certainly be the case in cities for example, where 'place' has the character of consisting of a larger geographical territory. Here it will be possible for a church to be present to its place despite not being physically close to where any one particular community live. If people identify themselves as 'belonging' to the city - as opposed to, say, a certain neighbourhood - then a church in the city might be just as much 'theirs' as the more physically-proximate parish church. There is of course a nervousness within the Church of England about larger attractional churches that are situated outside of residential or urban areas, for example in industrial or trading estates. I see this nervousness as completely appropriate in light of the parochial principle. However, such attractional churches are very different from the churches I am presenting here which are situated within (or at least very close to) city centres. Out-of-city, large, attractional churches because of their location and character may well struggle to form the sort of community that naturally reaches out to become present in place. However, this judgement is different from the one that is made in advance, i.e. that because a church is not within a residential space it will be less present to a community.

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<sup>298</sup> Bishop North, 'Address.'

<sup>299</sup> Once again I suggest that an unhelpful dichotomy exists in the debate between 'attractional' and 'gathered' church forms. I found that such a distinction failed to make sense of the way in which the parish churches relied on a level of attractional appeal (so St Andrew's family service for example) nor of the fact that the attractional churches of Skelton Fx and S4 held a desire to become deeply present in their communities, and reach those geographically close.

My basic claim applies: presence is not achieved by physical (spatial) placement but rather by the ministry of presence in that place. Therefore, in a city, such a ministry of presence will look very different than it would do in a suburb, village, town or an outer-city estate. Here the critical question becomes, as stated above, 'what are the boundaries of the place in question and, in particular, how do the people within that place understand these boundaries?'.

Alongside micro and macro, 'local' and 'national', we find various intermediary places, of which cities are just one example. Thus, just as Quash's understanding of the relationship between macro and micro was between the national church and parishes, we need to consider a wider range of bounded places. Indeed, what organisations such as Citizens demonstrate is the necessity to engage with such intermediary places as 'wholes' rather than as a collection of discrete places.<sup>300</sup> Citizens therefore does not deny the local, indeed it prides itself on its ground-up approach to social and political change. However, it recognises that such change becomes possible as the various smaller bodies, institutions and groups work together across the city place. This is the type of micro-macro relationship that is necessitated in the cities and the Church of England might benefit from following such a pattern. The challenge again is to remember communities that can feel isolated by the imposition of a 'city identity' upon them and which - though assumed to exist within the space and character of the city - do not themselves feel any belonging to it. Although 'Backston' and 'Skelton' are primary designators, they will not be the primary designators for all people, and many communities will recognise themselves as situated within potentially 'smaller' places rather than as belonging to the whole, or to any intermediary place. Therefore, any church which determines itself to exist for a larger or intermediary place will necessarily have to find ways to recognise and respond to these 'places within places', just as indeed Skelton Fx has done with the Eastfield's estate. This is a particular challenge for a church like S4, as I pointed out in the analysis. How can a

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<sup>300</sup> For an introduction to the Citizens movement and to the theological questions it presents, see Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics: The Conditions and Possibilities of Faithful Witness* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

church such as this ensure that it sees not just ‘types’ of place - ‘outer-city’, ‘working class’, ‘more deprived’, etc. - but unique places, communities, with their own story and values?

Another way of expressing this tension between micro and macro places, and between various types of place is through the principle of subsidiarity, which has been central within Roman Catholic social teaching. Although the principle is often confused with federalism, or with simple decentralisation, subsidiarity in fact concerns ‘feasibility’ of structure.<sup>301</sup> Its claim is that decisions should be taken at the ‘lowest practicable’ level.<sup>302</sup> My argument is that the ‘practical’ here should refer to the nature of the place itself. So, where the parish principle embraces an element of subsidiarity in holding a bias towards the smallest possible unit - the Church seeking to embrace particular rather than generalised or fictitious spaces - I suggest that in fact the Church’s structures should reflect places as they are, rather than simply seeking to be ‘small’. Thus, if the nature of a place is that it is discrete, well bounded and/or is inhabited by people who are less transient, then the church structure needs to reflect this (so smaller, geographically-close church). However, if a place is bigger geographically and is comprised of multiple places then the structure required will be very different. In both cases the impulse is to be as close as possible to places, it is just that it is the places themselves that must determine what such ‘closeness’ should look like.

### **7.6.3 Parish as abiding**

How can such an approach model the value of long-term commitment to place? As I outlined in Chapter 2, the parish church is argued to be a space of continuity amidst a world of transience and flux. Indeed, the physical space - the church building - embodies a continuity with the past and holder of meaning into the future and is, in this sense,

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<sup>301</sup> David Golemboski, ‘Federalism and the Catholic Principle of Subsidiarity’, *Publius: The Journal of Federalism*, 45:4 (2015), 526-551.

<sup>302</sup> John W. Bridge in Michelle Evans, ‘The Principle of Subsidiarity as a Social and Political Principle in Catholic Social Teaching’, *Solidarity: The Journal of Catholic Social Thought and Secular Ethics*, 3:1 (2013), 44-60.

timeless. The parish church is committed to place then in that it is always in that place, irrespective of the changes that occur there: it abides.<sup>303</sup> It is this reliability of the parish church that is seen by many to be under threat from the emphasis on Fx/CP or indeed from any move away from a commitment to the parish as the focus of the Church's mission and ministry. Such a critique is more complex to respond to because it transcends the basic response I have offered up to this point, that is the drawing of a distinction between the parish system and the parish principle. The criticism assumes that there is something about the specific that is vital, that the principle itself necessitates a certain physical outworking.

I felt the weight of this criticism in the course of my research at S4. It was clear to me that the church is finding connections with the local community it finds itself within. I claimed previously that such connections are an inevitable part of being a church, situated within a particular place, and carrying a missiology of cultural flourishing. Arguably the more dominant narrative at S4 though is the perceived transience of the community and the light holding of its cultural bindings. That the church could leave Franton, for example, and move into a different part of the city without any obvious change to its mission suggests that the church understands its connection to the local community in only a loose sense. And to this, the critics of Fx would rightly ask in what sense S4 offers anything fundamentally different to other agencies or institutions that use, rather than serve, place. Is there not something fundamentally evanescent about a church which has a form like S4's?

The point about abiding needs to be made with greater clarity however, if we are to move forward in this discussion. Certainly a certain level of uneasiness about a church like S4 is appropriate. S4 needs to work out how it ensures its relationship with the place of the city – which I have argued is genuine and vital – is simultaneously sustainable and deep. Thus, although numerous individuals would miss S4 were it to disperse, can we

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<sup>303</sup> I take the term 'abiding' as a descriptor of the parish from Quash. See *Abiding* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2012).

really say the same of the *city*? Where S4's norm is therefore to seek relationship with the city place on the basis of person-to-person contact, it does need to ask how it can grow its wider capital in the city. This means working with institutions and other cultural forms so that its presence transcends the comings and goings of particular individuals in the city; that it might model the 'interdependence and mutuality' with the city spoken of by Malcolm Brown.<sup>304</sup> And yet, although it is important to question the lack of a sense of abiding in churches such as S4, in line with the tenor of this thesis, this critique cannot be reliant simply on a hagiography of the parish as physical space. Physical presence clearly should matter to the Church of England, and this I believe to be demonstrable through the explorations of place and space in Chapter 4 and my encounters with the four churches. If the Church is to be present in place then, it cannot happen solely through imagined structures or boundaries. To do so would be to make the same mistake of relying simply on the coverage of the parish structure, only this time using bigger boundaries. The critical point again is that it is the proactive ministry of presence which moves a church into its vocation of presence. This must have a tangible physical element - the Church must be seen and experienced as present – but is not reducible to this physicality. Put differently, it will not suffice to perpetuate a system of resourcing based on parochial coverage under the assumption that so long as there is a church in every space, the Church is thereby committed and consistent across time.

It is here that we see a difference between a church's own imaginary of its presence, and the community's awareness of this fact. For example, there is a great amount of promise in the idea of the parish church as physically present; an old (and quite possibly ancient) building situated within a space and set apart for service into the future. What if however, the building is seen by its community in negative terms: cold, uninviting, corresponding (only) with death and the past? Such a situation shares much in common with Nicholas Healy's example of the signing with holy water I highlighted in Chapter 1; here the practice (in this case the parish church) does not in fact signify that

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<sup>304</sup> Brown, in Church Report, *Measure*, p.121. See above, p.67.

which it was intended, and has in fact become misleading. This indeed was the fear held by those at St Andrew's, that its presence in place was not being experienced by the community of Thornbury. Again, it was not that the congregation held its physical space and history to be invalid, it is that they wanted there to be life and a future in these appropriations; a change from church as concerned with the past only, towards a vision of the church as significant and relevant in the present and future. Just as All Souls has done therefore, St Andrew's has begun to find ways to bring the consistency of the church's ministry into present reality for the community. Along with the issue of coverage, what matters most is the proactive ministry which brings these principles into actuality. 'Consistency', like coverage, is a neutral reality.

The debate must at this point be shaped by two interrelated perspectives about the church's ministry to place; the first concerning the nature of place, and the second, the nature of the Church's calling to be present. In the first instance we should recognise that the nature of place leads to a different understanding of abiding. For each place is necessarily in flux and is transient; this is simply what place refers to. The moment a place stops changing, it ceases to be a place and becomes instead a value or ideal. As I have argued, each place is determined largely by its past, however, it is never simply the sum of the historiography in that location, but also contains the present interpretation of that history, the forms of life currently within it, as well as the particular imaginings of its future. My claim therefore is that a church that is consistent in place will necessarily need to find connections with each one of these elements. A physical presence may well connect with the history of a place - it acts as a holder of that place's history and memory - however, the movement into the place's present and future demands a different type of relationship. To return to Mark Wynn's understanding of place and relationship, we might say that a church that is present to place will need to be continually responsive to relationships; something that is possible only through person-to person-interaction. This is what lies behind the way in which individuals from St Andrew's have begun to meet with the headteacher at the local school, bringing personal relationship to an institutional

and historical relationship. Further, their desire is to see the physical church space begin to model the relationship, by creating room for the school to come and use the building more regularly. The critical distinction in an ecclesial system that takes place seriously is therefore between ministry and space. Such a distinction allows us to recognise the importance of church buildings, without assuming that such buildings must therefore necessarily be the focal point of the church's ministry to an area. The problem with perpetuating the parochial system, as one church within one area of responsibility, is once again that it limits the Church's ability to commit itself - in the deeper sense I have been talking about, of relationality and person-to-person contact - to consistency of ministry. It might offer a way of holding to physical commitment, but it might hinder the Church's commitment to people's present living in place.

The second perspective worth considering is what the Church's ministry of commitment entails, as part of its goal to be a 'Christian presence in every community'. In other words, it is worth asking to what the Church is committed. The answer must be that in the first instance it is committed to Christ. It is on this basis that the Church moves into the world, loving and serving - seeking to be present to the world - in the model of Christ. It is within this foundational call then that the Church must recognise its responsibility to stand as a place of continuity through transience and flux. The continuity is a continuity in Christ rather than a continuity of its own life or of a past vision of the community it sits within. This is a crucial difference. For example, what a graveyard signifies is not simply 'the past', not even the story of past faithfulness (though it does these) but, in this instance, the faithfulness of Christ who was at work 'then', is at work now, and who promises (through resurrection) to be at work in the future. In other words, what a church's commitment offers is not so much the story of this particular place, but the story of Christ and, then, Christ in this particular place. This is why it cannot ever be enough for a church to understand its purpose simply as a holder of placial memory. This was certainly the challenge facing St Andrew's. I am not claiming that holding placial memory is insignificant, but it cannot be the basis of the

Church's purpose. Furthermore, just as Christ is, was, and is to come, so the Church if it is to be consistent in witnessing to him, must also bring its witness into current (and future) actuality; it cannot witness to him 'then', unless it witnesses to him now and in the future. No matter how committed to a place therefore, the Church also points away from its given form to the kingdom that is to come. It proclaims that Christ has been present and is present here, but refuses to accept that this place will always be as it currently is. This too is the nature of the church *in via*.<sup>305</sup>

#### **7.6.4 Parish as difference**

Finally, any understanding of the Church's purpose that stresses responsiveness to place, must at some point address the concern that such a Church is in danger of failing to offer anything that is truly different. The extent to which this is a concern largely depends upon the type of ecclesiology one is working with. I identified in Chapter 2, for example, how the parish can function for Martyn Percy as a way of the Church embedding itself in the life of the world whilst, at the same time, for John Milbank, serving as a means by which the Church names and rejects the world's systems of human gathering. That said, even if we do not hold to all of Milbank's ecclesial convictions, there is surely something critical in his assertion that each church is called to recognise and model a new way of being human – formed through what I described in the analysis of All Souls as a differing *leitourgia* - so that it might present something truly Christlike to the world. What the parish is seen to offer here then is a counter to what are held to be dehumanising trends in our current context - essentially a sacralising of individuality and choice - by calling people to commit to the particularities and givens of place.<sup>306</sup> It is the concern that has been at play in each of the three previous critiques: unlike the world, the church commits

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<sup>305</sup> See page 44 of this thesis, and Healy, *Church*.

<sup>306</sup> So Oliver O'Donovan: place counters, 'the homogenising effects of liberal universalism and voluntarism'. O'Donovan and O'Donovan, p.20.



to all places unconditionally and in their particularities (coverage and scale); it is not transient but faithful (abiding); its structures are forming it into a church that models each of these (parish as formative). In each instance the concern is that the Church be different from the world, embedding within its very form, its theological convictions about God's creation of, commitment to, and redemption of place.

The first observation to make here is that it would be difficult to accuse any of the four churches of not modelling a vision of place in contrast to that of the world. Each was creating Christian, gospel-shaped places. This is clear in the case of All Souls, St Andrew's and Skelton Fx, each of which was working from the basis of the church as place, shaped by particular practices and forms of life that were counter to prevailing attitudes and habitus. Certainly there was variety across the churches, both in the extent of these differences, and in the way they were understood. Malcolm, for example, had a very developed theology of the church as place, and was able to describe almost each element - from the style of worship, to the welcoming of refugees - as a type of counter-narrative or formative praxis. At St Andrew's the language was less theologically formal than this ('everyone [in the village] is so busy all the time, we want our church to be peaceful and calm'). The more complex context was S4. Here there was an acceptance of more modern patterns of life; something seen not only in Theo's assertion of S4 as 'network based', but also the emphasis on church more as happening than being - a kind of innate transience - which was demonstrated in the way the church was able to move out of Franton to a different part of the city, or stop gathering during the vacation periods. Even in the case of S4 however, there was an implicit understanding that what was happening on a Sunday or in the various gatherings of the community across the city, offered something different from the city's accepted forms of human existence and gathering. It mattered, for example, that church on a Sunday was 'family', that 'everyone was welcome' - students mixing with locals for example - or that the gatherings in halls offered free food where people sat down and 'actually speak to each other'. I am not claiming here that S4 knew it was 'upholding place against placelessness'; if it was doing so - and I think it was - it was doing it

implicitly rather than explicitly. I simply wish to make the claim that, just as with the tendency towards particular localities that I highlighted above, any church that gathers, worships, prays and seeks to foster fellowship, will inevitably and naturally model an alternative place. Once again, this is not to say that all churches will do this well, or that there is not an ongoing challenge for churches to make more of this.

What is clear is that from my research I found no clear line of causation between the parish structure and the success of the challenge to model a place of difference. As with the assertion that presence is a becoming, so what matters is the way in which churches become places. Once again, there is a tendency to equate physical space with place; to assume that because a parish church has a building, situated within a geographical space, it must therefore be more of a place than a church that meets in a school hall or a nightclub and has no parochial area of responsibility. I hope, from the account of place I have given in this thesis, that the weakness of this assumption is clear. Taking, for example, St Andrew's as contrasted to S4, what is clear is that although St Andrews modelled place through the openness of its building or the care of the graveyard etc., it lacked the kind of welcome of difference or authenticity of fellowship that marked S4. Neither exists as fully as a Christian place as they might - they each faced challenges in the opposite direction - yet in no way did St Andrew's being a parish church make it more of a counter to placelessness than S4. Further, we might add to this the tendency at St Andrew's to equate church with the life of the village, evidenced most strikingly by the tone of the community service. There has been enough good work done on the interactions between faith and village life to temper some of the concerns some might have about this service,<sup>307</sup> however, it is clear that the type of counter-narrative the likes of John Milbank, or Andrew Davison and Alison Milbank suppose to be true of the

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<sup>307</sup> I am thinking especially of Timothy Jenkin's ethnography of various aspects of rural religious life. Jenkins' claim is that many of our standard measures of religious expression do not make sense of rural expressions of faith, but that a truly ethnographic approach shows much of the (hidden) vitality of faith, belonging and religious identity in these contexts. See, for example, Jenkins, *Religion*.

parish, was lacking from St Andrew's, given its struggle to unravel the place of the church from the place of the village.

The call to model authentic place as a counter to prevailing cultural forms is encapsulated in the 'Christian' element of 'a Christian presence in every community'; the Church is called to be present to place in the form that is true to its theological imaginary. Again there is a far broader question here about the relationship between church and world, and of the particular form this takes in Anglican ecclesiology. However, I suggest that the creation of places as offering alternatives to the placelessness of modernity is not achievable merely by attempting to maintain the parish structure. What matters is how the church - parish or non - becomes an authentically Christian place, not merely in its physicality but also its patterns of association, forms of community and in its ministry of service. One element of this - history, and a connection with the past - is of course vital to the sense of place that many critics of Fx/CP advocate, given what they perceive as the particular tendency in modernity towards innovation at the loss of wisdom found in tradition. Therefore, within an area of church engagement (such as a city or deanery) we should expect to affirm ancient spaces. Whatever the mixed economy of churches that a ministry of presence will inevitably entail, churches that are tied physically to the past must be as crucial as those which, though lacking the physicality of connection with tradition, do so through their forms of worship and gathering. Likewise, it might be that new expressions of church such as church plants, will be called to recapture something of a previous (perhaps lost) church form or history or at least have a way of highlighting to their congregations the riches of ancient spaces. Church grafts of course do this quite naturally, bringing new life to a struggling church place. Yet this same principle, of establishing places that are not simply tied to what is new or 'fresh' but in some way deeply connected with what has gone before, will be essential if churches are to be present to place as church.

The final comment to make in response to this concern is about the nature of churches that determine themselves based on place as understood in the most fluid sense,

namely through and for specific social groups. Such churches are seen to fall particularly foul of this challenge to offer a place as different from cultural place since they seem to prioritise the good of consumer choice over and above the challenge of belonging to a community of difference. Given that my research was focused on two Fx churches that were not defining themselves this way, but were rather aimed at creating demographically mixed churches through a ministry to a particular territory, I am limited in the insight I can offer. What is clear however, is that the understanding of place that this model of church seems to rely on - at least in the abstract - is at odds with the description of place as bounded openness I have employed throughout this thesis, which entails physicality. Churches that determine themselves around specific social groups cannot be understood to be present in 'place' in the full sense I have outlined here. To claim that they are would require a much looser understanding of place (for example, place as a 'flow' or as interrelations of persons) than I believe is credible or consistent with the geography I outlined in Chapter 4. What it is possible to affirm however, is that such church expressions might be one part of the Church's presence in place. It seems to me a vital part of the Church's refusal to forget, that it should seek out the more isolated and separated social groups and find forms of church that can work there. There is therefore a qualitative difference between, say, a church formed in a nightclub, meeting at midnight and engaging with people who would have no intention of walking into any church space, and the type of middle-class interest group criticised by Percy.<sup>308</sup> In the former, the intention is to reach those who have been forgotten by more traditional forms of church, in the latter the result is acceptance of consumer demand. The challenge, of course, is to find ways of celebrating the life of the whole church in its complexity; of churches and the individuals within them (eventually) living out the call to be family across social and cultural divisions. What my research highlighted was that this same challenge exists in all four churches. Once again we can see that it is the fact of ministry, rather than the parish itself, which works against homogeneity in churches; for example, at All Souls the

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<sup>308</sup> Percy, 'Old Tricks'.

changing demographic from white locals and those that had ‘aspired out’ to a genuinely mixed community had taken time and effort. The diversity of All Souls was not a given by nature of its being a parish church, since left alone the church may well have perpetuated a particular demography that would not have been truly representative of SR. Likewise, it was part of St Andrew's story that it was wrestling with how to gather a congregation that was more representative of the village in light of the demographic changes Thornbury has undergone. In line with my earlier reflections on subsidiarity, and the relationship of the whole to its parts, it might be that the Skelton Fx and S4 model something of the way in which expressions of church - for example aimed at particular demographics - might be held within the whole. In this sense, a better model of engaging with isolated or harder to reach demographics through expressions of church that are specific to them, might be through a similarly collegiate system, in which one church exists across a territory in a variety of forms and expressions, all the while ‘held’ in the central eucharistic community.

## **7.7 Conclusion**

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In this final chapter I have sought to bring clarity to the Church of England's praxis of ecclesial structuring by outlining the results of taking my theory into dialogue with the four churches. I argued that the theory is essentially defensible; that in the Church's pursuit of presence in place, the parish structure should not be seen as the necessary goal, but rather a part of the vocation to create churches for every place. In turn, the Church will need to encourage non-parochial and supra-parochial church forms.

As Burawoy imagines however, engaging theory with site is a more fruitful task than simply affirming (or refuting) it. In the course of the research new understandings emerged: the reality of place as an object of love; the primacy of placial imaginaries; the centrality of ministry as that which establishes presence; the importance of leadership in directing such ministry, and the theological claim that presence must be defined by witness to Christ, who is present in place. Each of these can be seen as a new ‘finding’

which arose in the process of taking certain givens (in this case a theological theory) into conversation with particular sites.

In this concluding chapter I have outlined what I see as the three core findings from my taking the theory into encounter with the four churches, namely:

1. Each church imagined the place it existed for in placial rather than parochial terms. Indeed, its affection or love for its community can only be understood when we recognise that the churches - parish and non - existed within and for a place rather than a spatial territory.
2. Presence is a becoming rather than a given. Churches become present to their communities in numerous ways, but this happens as a proactive move and is facilitated through leadership.
3. Churches relate to the world on the basis of a theological imaginary which transcends the particular ecclesial form of the church.

What do these three findings mean for the Church of England's ecclesial praxis? I suggest that primarily the Church should begin from the commitment to presence in place rather than from a commitment to the parochial structure itself. This is a methodological issue as much as anything else: the discussion is not furthered by a placeless theology which struggles to map theological principles onto actual goings-on. Rather, a placial theology is one which seeks to think carefully about how our theological principles – in this case around place and presence – find traction with church praxis, and reaches ecclesial judgements accordingly. In the more immediate, practical sense however, this commitment to place will mean finding where places are, and responding to them. As I argued in Chapter 3, the parochial system has its origins in such a commitment; it emerged as and with the emergence of places. In this sense, the 'parish' simply consisted of what was found; the given habitations and gathering points of human communities. As it seeks to become present therefore, the Church needs to continually ask: where are the

actual places that people exist within, and how can we be present to these? Further, given my claim that what matters most to the Church of England's vocation to be a Christian presence in every community is its ministry as it is actively led, I suggest that the Church needs to find better ways of facilitating the ministry of presence beyond spatial distribution of ministers. As the Tiller report noted, these two issues – of a flexibility in ecclesial form, and the role of ordained ministers – go hand in hand. In particular, he highlights the need for an increase in lay training and leadership. This accords with my research. If the Church is to embrace the model of responsiveness to place and a ministry strategy across a wider area, then it will simultaneously need to move away from an over-reliance on its ordained leaders as the Church's primary face to place. Here then, the nature of ordained ministry as enabling and equipping the whole people of God to fulfil the calling of witness to Jesus in every place, becomes critical. What matters is the way in which ordained ministers across the macro (or intermediate) place, envision and enable various micro expressions of church to be present to its place.

How then might we think about the ecclesial system that flows out of this placial theological approach, one concerned with existing places, and focused on churches becoming present? In responding to what I identified as some of the potential critiques of my theory, I suggested that such a Church would:

- (i) Continue to seek total coverage as a goal, but would do so in larger units (so, for example, the deanery) rather than on the basis of parishes.
- (ii) Ensure that each Church of England church had a place that it existed for. These places will vary – some will be large, some will be small. The critical factor is: how do the people in that place define it?
- (iii) Pay particular attention to communities that are less transient or mobile, and seek to be as physically close to them as possible.
- (iv) Recognise the importance of historical spaces as witness to God's faithful presence through time and seek to bring these stories to life.

- (v) Be more imaginative about the ways in which the macro and micro might work together; in particular, it would seek primarily to form *churches* - communities gathered around word and sacrament - in the first instance, but find ways for these to be dispersed within and for other places.
- (vi) Work strategically across larger areas, with ordained ministers given responsibility for moving the Church into increased presence in all places. This will look like some ministers being geographically positioned in particular places, with others having a non-geographical ministerial responsibility.
- (vii) Find ways of increasing the number of leaders –lay and ordained – who are capable of leading these macro and micro expressions of church. A critical part of their training will be around theological imaginaries and how to foster an imaginary that leads to churches becoming present in their places.

I believe that the task the Church of England should engage in is in fact the very task it has been called to from the start, namely situating itself as present within each and every place of the nation, and finding people and places in their particularity. This is a more complex and indeed messier task than parochial coverage. However, that messiness is integral to the definition of place, that is, to the reality of human community. The Church is called to rediscover ways by which it can hold messiness within its structures so that it might love places, even as they are loved by God. This is at least one way in which we might interpret Pope Gregory's dictum to the pioneering Augustine, 'For things are not to be loved for the sake of places, but places for the sake of good things'.<sup>309</sup> The parochial system, as 'thing', is a means to the end of the good things - Christ's church finding him in place. When it becomes itself an object of love we are in danger of losing these goods. A recovery of them will, as Gregory suggests, in part entail prising ourselves away from our

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<sup>309</sup> Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, trans. by Judith McClure (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). Book I section 27 part II.



misdirected loves, and recovering a love of place. And as we love places we might find the good thing: him ahead of us at work in his world.

# APPENDIX 1 : The Four Churches

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## A1.1 All Souls, South Reckton

All Souls is a vibrant multicultural parish church at the heart of its community. Our services are a mixture of both modern and traditional styles.

Alongside its pastoral and evangelistic ministry the church engages in two major pieces of social action, the All Souls Centre and All Souls Youth & Children's Project. The Centre is a multipurpose facility offering a wide range of community activities and is available to hire for meetings, conferences and events.

All Souls Youth & Children's Project works with local Children and Young People aged 0-19 to encourage their creativity and confidence. We offer a variety of after school activities and holiday clubs. In 2006 we opened the first dedicated Godly Play room in the region which has become an important training centre.

*- All Souls, South Reckton – A Church Near You website<sup>310</sup>*

The claim that All Souls is at the 'heart' of the community certainly holds in physical terms given that the church building is quite literally at the centre of town. This is something of a concrete representation of the relationship between church and town given the close intertwining of their histories. The church began as a gathering within the then newly built town in 1858, four years after the commencement of the building of SR, and was established by the town's founder. Likewise, changes to the church building - its enlarging in the 1880s for example - reflects something of the rapid growth of the town.

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<sup>310</sup>I have avoided giving specific ULRs to maintain the anonymity of the churches. Acknowledgements however to 'A Church Near You' website (<https://www.achurchnearyou.com>), accessed in each case between 28/08/2015 and 01/02/2016.

Due to remodelling and rebuilding following a fire in 1977, the church building today reflects the styles of the 1980s rather than the 1860s. What stands out above the modernistic and minimalist style of the sanctuary, is the 'cloister garden'; a garden space created in 2007 within the 'ruins' of the old nave and aisles.

In 2003 the All Souls Centre was built on the site next to the church as a 'redevelopment' of the old church halls. This is a very modern and clean building which, as well as being used for church-run activities is also available to hire for conferences and social functions. It consists of several well equipped meeting rooms as well as a fully professional kitchen and larger hall. The sanctuary and the Centre are connected through the garden, and the Centre itself has an entrance straight from the market square.

There is a particular relationship between the All Souls Centre, the church, and the children's work project - 'All Souls Youth and Children's Project', imagined around the symbol of the triquetra. The All Souls Youth and Children's Project exists as a registered charity (established in 2007), however the incumbent of All Souls is ex-officio chair of trustees and the PCC nominate two other trustees annually. The All Souls Youth and Children's Project employs an administrator and development officer, Centre co-ordinator and two children's workers, none of whom are regular worshippers at All Souls.

The main act of worship for All Souls takes place on a Sunday morning in the form of a one-hour Common Worship communion service at which there are, on average, around 55 attendees.

South Reckton has struggled with the loss of industry. According to the Index of Multiple Deprivation, it is at the very bottom of most deprived parishes in the diocese, and the bottom few percent of parishes in the country. It is around the fortieth most deprived local authority ward in England and Wales. Unemployment is high, with the standard

mortality rate at 130.7 where the national average is 100. Child poverty is at almost 60%. Furthermore, the town is rapidly changing. Around six years ago, due to the cheap cost and availability of rented housing, the area became a key location for the resettlement of migrants and asylum seekers.

According to census results, there has been a 5.4% increase in the BME population from 2001 to 2011 in South Reckton.<sup>311</sup> The wider city of which South Reckton is a part also has the highest number of re-settled asylum seekers of anywhere in the country.<sup>312</sup> This change is felt by all those involved with All Soul's, and it was common for members of the church to speak first of the church's work with people from different backgrounds.

## A1.2 S4

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Welcome to S4. Whether you're exploring faith, looking for a church or just wanting to visit - you are very welcome at S4. We are a church that loves and accepts everyone - come and join us to find out more. Our vision is to help people discover and follow Jesus Christ and we are looking to live out this vision in everything we do as a church.

- S4 - *A Church Near You* website

S4 began 9 years ago as an experiment, and that pioneering, entrepreneurial spirit continues...we want S4 to be different: an exciting experiment in the gospel and in following Jesus Christ...we're not about changing the truths of the Bible or rethinking what it means to follow Jesus in a different kind of way but we are wanting to avoid duplicating good things that other churches are doing.

- *Theo, S4 Leader*

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<sup>311</sup> At [https://www.middlesbrough.gov.uk/sites/default/files/Census-2011\\_Population\\_and\\_Identity.pdf](https://www.middlesbrough.gov.uk/sites/default/files/Census-2011_Population_and_Identity.pdf) [accessed 27/6/18].

<sup>312</sup> See BBC, 'Why does Middlesbrough have the Most Asylum Seekers?', at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-34597022> [accessed 27/6/18].

S4 is an Fx church which holds a Bishop's Mission Order. It began in 2006 as a project run by a large evangelical church in the city centre. In its earliest form S4 was a development of an Alpha course type gathering aimed at meeting and engaging people from a non-church background. Those involved in the establishment of S4 describe it as an evangelistic project. It met originally in a gym: a deliberate move to reach those who would be uncomfortable entering into a church space, however in 2010 they moved to a community centre in Franton and since the completion of the planned elements of my empirical research have relocated to a Methodist Hall, closer to the city centre, after the community centre was closed.

Franton itself is a suburb, about ten minutes by car from the city centre. It has a reputation for its pockets of deprivation and, given the spread of cheaper housing stock, the area has a high proportion of student property.

Alongside the move in location, S4 has also undergone something of a shift in terms of its form. Put simply, S4 has become more of a 'church' as time has gone on, that is, it has evolved from being a discussion group aimed at non-Christians, towards a stable congregation of regular worshippers. Part of this shift was due to its taking on a discrete identity as a body in its own right, apart from (though still very much connected to) the establishing bigger church. Thus, although originally run by worshipping members from the larger church, at some point S4 established its own leadership structure. It is now 'run' by a staff team of five people, headed up by an ordained pioneer priest. Alongside this staff team a 'strategy team', made up of church members and staff, is responsible for the wider direction and vision of the church.

The discussion element is still crucial to S4's identity, however on a Sunday now the service consists of sung worship, prayer and a sermon. They meet on a Sunday afternoon, however they encourage their members to connect with Clusters, which are smaller

groups that meet through the week. On a Sunday there will be around one hundred congregants. In 2016, S4 planted their first new congregation, into the city centre.

The wider city (which I have called Backston) is becoming younger. Between 2001 and 2011 there was an almost 40% increase in 20-24 year olds.<sup>313</sup> This can be put down largely to the increased number of students attending one of the two city universities. S4 does not claim to be a church 'for young people' – and there is a level of age diversity in the congregation – but its forms of communication, visual portrayal, as well as the fact that it stops meeting over university breaks – show that it seeks to connect in a particular way with this younger generation.

### **A1.3 St Andrew's**

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St Andrew's is the parish church of Thornbury, a rural village seven miles south of the city. The village has approximately 1,500 residents across approximately 350 households. The church was built by the local landowning family and a member of the family retains an honorary position in the church.

The church is part of a multi-parish benefice of six churches, however the incumbent, Malcolm, is priest-in-charge of nine churches, after taking on responsibility for another group a few years ago.

The church holds two services each Sunday – an early BCP matins which is attended by on average five people – and a 'main' service at 10.45. This second service is split between a Common Worship Communion service twice a month, and a family service and service of the word on the other two Sundays. On average, each of these services is attended by around 20 people.

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<sup>313</sup> At <[https://www.york.gov.uk/downloads/file/85/census\\_2011\\_overall\\_population\\_briefing](https://www.york.gov.uk/downloads/file/85/census_2011_overall_population_briefing)> [accessed 27/6/18].

St Andrew's has a strong 'friends of' group which fundraises for the church building. The building itself is known by the village and many support the church financially without necessarily attending regularly. It is known as an historic space and congregation members are proud of the historical artefacts in the building. The church is currently undergoing a project to reorder the space at the back of church. The intention is to make a more welcoming and usable social space, and to better present the church's historical artifacts.

The church has a church school, and a few members of the congregation have recently joined the board of governors there, as a way of increasing the connection between the church and school.

#### **A1.4 Skelton Fx**

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In November 2008, the Reverend Jo Russell was appointed as the Fx Pioneer Missioner for the Skelton Deanery. Her role is to find new ways of integrating faith into the community across the region, and to encourage people to become more involved in church without necessarily having to go to a place of worship on Sundays.

*- Skelton Fx website*

I started this job six years ago when I was asked to apply for the post to work across Skelton deanery of 26 churches and to work with those churches in order to take the gospel out onto the streets and the beach; places where the church didn't already have a presence.

*- Jo Russell, Pioneer Minister, Skelton Deanery website*

Skelton Fx is an anomaly in my group of four churches given that it is not a 'church' as such. Most simply, it is clear that instead of a church, or even a one church or para-church project, Skelton Fx designates a deanery strategy or project for Skelton Deanery. The

strategy is focused around the ministry of Jo Russell who, as the descriptions above highlight, was given the role of pioneer deanery missionary in 2008.

Jo's role was to facilitate mission across the deanery and she did this by working with local churches and, in particular, lay members who showed an interest in mission. These lay members remained part of their existing congregations but became part of a Fx 'team' which also includes a full-time Church Army officer.

Skelton Fx today takes a number of 'concrete' forms from activities such as 'Sacred Space', an evening event in which people are invited to light a candle on the beach to 'Healing on the Beach' and labyrinth experiences at certain times of the year. Out of an Alpha course, started in a local Travelodge, 'Hub' groups were formed. These groups meet weekly in people's homes and take different forms, but are based around conversation and shared experiences of faith. Jo is herself part of a Hub group which meets in her home each Wednesday, but aside from this she has no role in the running of any of the other groups; they are self-sufficient.

Jo's focus has shifted somewhat over the seven years she has been in her role. In particular, Skelton Fx has become focused on one part of the deanery, Shoreham, a deprived estate within which the Anglican church has had little presence. In 2003, the Fx team established a charity there - Eastway Welcome Centre (EWWC) - which works out of the old church vicarage. EWWC is now a community centre serving the needs of the community through a foodbank, debt advice and pregnancy crisis care, as well as functioning as a meeting point. Alongside this, there are morning prayers every day, and a short, informal act of worship on a Thursday afternoon. Every fourth Sunday EEWc holds a Messy Church-style family service, Sunday@4, which is attended by around twenty people. Many of those connected to or attending the Hub groups are also involved in volunteering at EEWc. There is a relationship of sorts between EEWc and the parish



church of Holy Trinity with which it is connected (for example, Jo leads services there) however EWWC, and its ministry to Shoreham, are a separate entity. The movement from a deanery-wide strategy to a more narrow focus upon Shoreham is represented by the way in which Jo's role changed during the course of my research from deanery pioneer missionary to leader of a Bishop's Mission Order to the Shoreham estate and then priest-in-charge at Holy Trinity. Furthermore, the new curate, Claire, has become licensed curate at Holy Trinity.

## APPENDIX 2: Photo collection task [given to focus group participants]

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### What is the Mission of [name of church]?

This project is looking at how churches within the Church of England relate to the world around them. You have been invited to contribute to a part of this project which involves taking pictures that show the mission of [name of church].



You should take **3 pictures**. They can be of anything you like with the aim being that they show **the mission of [name of church]**.

You have around 4 weeks to take the pictures. After this you will be invited to share some or all of your pictures at a group session with other members of [name of church] who have also taken part. Here you will have a chance to look at what other people have produced and discuss the different ideas expressed in the pictures.

The pictures you take won't be seen by anyone else beyond this group. However, after the group session I will ask you if you would be happy for me to use your pictures in my final thesis. You should also be aware that you are free to withdraw from the exercise at any stage.

My details are given below. If you would like any further information about the task, or would like to ask some questions as you take the pictures, I would be more than happy to speak with you at any stage.

Researcher: William J. Foulger *[email]* / *[phone number]*

Supervisors: *[name /contact details of supervisors]*

### FOR THE PARTICIPANT [to be filled out at the Focus Group]

- I voluntarily agree to take part in this picture exercise.
- The nature and purpose of the research in which I am involved has been explained to me in writing/verbally.
- I acknowledge that my work will not be shown to anyone outside of the group and that request shall be sought at a later date for reproducing my work in a final thesis.
- I understand that I can ask further questions at any time.
- I understand that I may withdraw from this research and remove permission for any data obtained from me at any point without having to give a reason for withdrawing. If I wish to withdraw permission, I will contact the researcher or supervisor to request this.
- I have received a copy of this consent form for my own records.

Your name:.....

**Address:**

.....

.....

**Telephone number:** .....

**Email:** .....

**Signature:** ..... **Date:**

.....

### **Guidelines for Taking Pictures**

- Imagine that someone asked you: **‘what is the mission of [name of church]?’**  
Your pictures should be an answer to that question.
- You should take 3 pictures
- You can take the photos using any means you like (camera / camera phone / tablet etc.)
- Some of your pictures may be well thought-through and planned, others might be spontaneous.
- Be as imaginative as you like. They might show actual people or places but they might also be symbolic, representative or abstract.
- The quality of the pictures is not all that important. Do feel free to put in as much/little effort as you feel happy to.
- Once you have taken the pictures, you will need to give them to Will before the group session starts so that he can label them. The best way to do this will be to email them to him. If you can’t do this, you can always print them out and bring them to the group with you. If you’re stuck, don’t worry, please feel free to ask Will for guidance.
- **If you are taking photos of people, you should make sure that you have their permission. If you are taking pictures of people it is best to try and make them non-specific or take a group photo rather than one that is focused on one or two individuals.**
- **If you want to take photographs of children, please speak to Will or [church leader] about this before doing so: this way we can be sure we are abiding by [name of church] policy on photographing children.**

## APPENDIX 3: Questionnaire

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CRANMER HALL  
DURHAM



**Hello, and thank you for taking part in this survey. It is part of a piece of research into how churches engage with their local communities.**

You have been invited to take part as a member of [name of church]. The completed surveys will be read by myself, and by no one else at [name of church]. The survey is completely anonymous, however, if you would be willing to be contacted for a follow-up interview you can complete the personal details section at the very end of the questionnaire.

The questionnaire should take no more than 8 minutes to complete. Hopefully all the questions are easy to understand. If however you do need help with any questions, or if you would like more information, please do not hesitate to ask. If you would like to discuss the survey further, please feel free to get in touch with Will at [contact details].

Thank you again for your time. I hope that you enjoy completing the questionnaire.

Will Foulger  
University of Durham

*If you are under 18 at the time of completing this questionnaire, you will need to get permission - in the form of a signature - from a parent or guardian before you can take part in this survey.*

Signature of parent/guardian \_\_\_\_\_

### 1. How long have you attended [name of church]?

☐ Less than 1 year   ☐ 1-2 years   ☐ 3-5 years   ☐ 6-9 years   ☐ 10-15 years   ☐ 16 years +

### 2. How did you come to be involved at [name of church]? Please tick all that apply.

- ☐ I attended as a child
- ☐ It is local to where I live
- ☐ I was invited by a friend / family member
- ☐ I attended a church-run activity or event
- ☐ I attended after seeing an advert or publicity
- ☐ Through contact with church leader or vicar
- ☐ Through an occasional office (baptism, wedding, funeral etc)
- ☐ Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

*Please turn over for the next set of questions*

3. This is about the purpose of [church]. When you think about what [church] exists for, how important should each of these be in your opinion? *For each, please tick the box that most applies.*

	Unimportant	Not very important	Neither important nor unimportant	Important	Very Important
Being a Christian influence in the local area					
Making new Christians					
Worship					
Meeting the needs of non-church members					
Helping existing Christians to grow in their faith					
Administering the sacraments					
Providing a Christian space in the community					
Occasional offices (weddings, baptisms, funerals etc)					
Other ( <i>please specify</i> ):					

3a. On the previous table, please put an X somewhere next to two that you think should be the most important.

4. In your opinion, who should [name of church] be for? *For each one please circle a number from 6 (less important) to 1 (most important).*

	Less important					Most important
<b>The people in the parish</b>	6	5	4	3	2	1
<b>Church members</b>	6	5	4	3	2	1
<b>Anyone who wishes to come</b>	6	5	4	3	2	1
<b>The people in the local area</b>	6	5	4	3	2	1
<b>A specific group or type of person</b>	6	5	4	3	2	1
<b>Other (<i>please specify</i>):</b>	6	5	4	3	2	1

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**5. This question is about the Church building. For each statement please tick the box that most applies.**

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
The building is important to our ministry					
The building is an important part of the local area					
Local people value the building					
It would <i>negatively</i> affect the mission of this church if it moved to another premises					
The church building plays an important part in my faith					

**6. When you think about [name of church]'s mission, how important do you think each of these should be? For each statement, please tick the box that most applies.**

	Unimportant	Not very important	Neither important nor unimportant	Important	Very Important
Evangelistic events and/or courses					
Work in local schools, hospitals, prisons or other institutions					
Providing a space for people to use					
Meeting people's practical needs					
Individual friendship and relationships					
Occasional offices (weddings, baptisms, funerals etc)					
Other ( <i>please specify</i> ):					

*Please turn over for the next set of questions*

**6a. On the previous table (question 6), please put an X somewhere next to two that you think should be the most important.**

**7. If you had to sum up [name of church] in 4 words, which words would you use?**

*Please write up to 4 words here:*

**Thank you very much for your time - this is the end of the questionnaire.**

It might be however that you have some thoughts about [name of church]'s mission that would be useful to this research. If you do, please feel free to write your comments here:

Would you be willing to be contacted for a follow-up interview? No ☐ Yes ☐

*If yes, please complete this personal details section:*

Name:

Age:

Contact Email:

Contact Number:

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