

BEING CHURCH IN LONGBRIDGE:
PRACTICAL THEOLOGY OF LOCAL CHURCHES
IN A POST-INDUSTRIAL COMMUNITY

by

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ABSTRACT

2005 saw the closure of the car factory that was once economically, socially and culturally central to Longbridge, Birmingham. Following this, this thesis examines how the Church communicates the Gospel there. Employing practical theological methodology, a case study approach exploring the practice of two local churches using ethnographic methods is offered. An account of their practical theologies and their significance for God's mission in Longbridge is given.

Data analysis revealed that, over many years, 'post-industrial' Longbridge had lost its heart and sense of place, wrestled with belonging locally and faced future uncertainty. The local Anglican church uses incarnational theology which views locality as the arena for God's purposes, and counter-culturally preserves local identity amidst deconstructive post-industrial forces. The local Methodist church emphasizes the 'social holiness' of Godself, providing multiple ways to belong and reviving relatedness between local residents.

This thesis demonstrates the complexities of shaping a practical theology within a rapidly-changing, destabilised environment, whilst claiming the importance of locally-based church practice. Although the churches cannot offer blueprints for ecclesial life, their comparative experiences indicate principles for a practical theology of local churches in post-industrial communities, based upon vulnerability, commitment to presence and a conscious seeking to serve God's mission afresh.

Dedicated to the memory of

Rev. Richard Goodhand

1951-2013

Post-industrial priest and friend

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INTRODUCTION

0.0 Introduction

The closure of the MG Rover car plant in Longbridge, south Birmingham, on 8th April 2005 proved to have far-reaching implications. Internationally, it signalled the demise of a once-global player in motor manufacturing. Nationally, it symbolised the loss of ‘the last bastion of the indigenous British motor industry,’¹ and yet another episode in the story of the decline of large-scale industry in Britain. Across the city and region, the economic impact of the loss of nearly six-thousand jobs, and the knock-on effect in related supply-chain industries, was huge. Former employees, many of whom had worked there for a considerable length of time, found themselves in a vastly-different employment market, calling for local politicians and strategists to respond accordingly.

Locally, however, for the communities surrounding the plant, the closure’s impact was complex and far more than economic. Since Herbert Austin first opened his car factory there in 1905, the plant and its locality had an intense and multi-layered relationship. Subsequent development of housing and infrastructure was, in large part, to serve this industrial expansion, and for almost one-hundred years, Austin’s factory was the main source of economic vitality in the area. But alongside providing employment, the plant was part of the place’s physical and social fabric, central to its identity, patterns of community life and the stories of many local families. The demise of the plant therefore brought significant change

¹ Gillian Bardsley and Colin Corke, *Making Cars at Longbridge: 100 Years in the Life of a Factory* (Stroud: The History Press, 2006), p. 153.

for the locality, further compounded by its demolition and the redevelopment of the vast site on which it once stood.

It is the community surrounding the Longbridge plant with which this thesis is concerned. More specifically, considered from a theological perspective, it seeks to explore Christian discipleship and practice, examining what it is to 'be Church' in such a setting. The changes undergone in Longbridge, surrounding death and new life, community and identity, economics and justice, raise profound questions to the Christian faith, what the Gospel means and how it may be effectively communicated there. This research will explore how the Church does this in the 'post-industrial' community of Longbridge and the theological principles it employs.

Recent literature exploring the nature of 'Church', notably the Church of England report *Mission-Shaped Church*,² has highlighted the dialogical relationship between Church and context for authentic Christian practice, demonstrating that the Church is fundamentally missional in focus. This thesis offers an in-depth study of how the Church enacts this mission within a particular context, and in so doing, contributes to knowledge surrounding this contextual approach to ecclesiology and mission. The research also has affinity with urban theology, concerned with theological reflection on the social, cultural and economic features of urban life. Most specifically, through the analysis of this context, it focusses specifically on 'post-industrial' urban settings. Despite the changes experienced in Longbridge being shared by countless similar contexts nationally since the 1970s, the nature of Christian practice in such contexts has received little explicit, detailed attention. This research therefore

² Church of England, *Mission-shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of Church in a Changing Context* (London: Church House, 2004).

offers focussed exploration of ‘post-industrialism’ in Longbridge, drawing attention to the theological, ecclesiological and missiological issues at stake in similar communities. In particular, it explores Christian engagement with the ‘working-class’ when notions of class are being significantly reconfigured.

0.1 Methodology: Practical Theology

In its exploration of Christian practice and ‘being Church’ within Longbridge, this study belongs in the field of practical theology. Concerned with the connection between theology and Christian practice, recent years have seen developments in the discipline which reconceive their relationship. Understood as the ‘critical reflection on faithful practice,’³ practical theology is underpinned by an epistemology which claims that theological knowledge is situated and emerges from experience. Based on an incarnational theology, its foundational premise is that the world is the ‘stage’ for the redeeming activity of God, and specific contexts are the ‘place of encounter with the infinite mystery of God.’⁴ Drawing an analogy with a play, Swinton and Mowat assert that practical theology concerns ‘the faithful performance of the gospel’⁵ in contextually-appropriate ways, whilst remaining consistent with the basic plot and structure of Christianity.⁶ Hence, it is a hermeneutic discipline, which recognises that theological knowledge exists only through the lens of human experience and God’s interaction with the world. Concrete situations are the starting point of theology, posing critical questions to faith’s resources and traditions to shape new theological

³ Elaine Graham, Heather Walton and Frances Ward, *Theological Reflection: Methods* (London: SCM Press, 2005), p. 2.

⁴ Helen Cameron, Deborah Bhatti, Catherine Duce, James Sweeney and Clare Watkins, *Talking about God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2010), p. 23.

⁵ John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM, 2006), p. 4.

⁶ Swinton and Mowat, p. 4-5.

awareness for that context.⁷ However, emerging from practical concerns, this new theology informs Christian response. Therefore, practical theology is properly located within the Church, the community committed to faithful action in the world.⁸

Consequently, examining the life of a Christian community within a specific context reveals its understanding of God which informs everything it does. This ‘theological identity’⁹ is unique to each Christian community and is evident through the broadest understanding of ‘Christian practice’, to include any and all aspects of their habits, worship and structures. Christian practices are ‘performative speech acts’¹⁰ about God and ‘faith-carrying words and actions,’¹¹ shaped by context and experience.

However, a contextual understanding of theology invites questions over its relationship to inherited theological tradition and value judgements about its perceived faithfulness to the Gospel. A seminal text here has been Bevans’ *Models of Contextual Theology*, which models six ways in which the Gospel (theology) and culture (context) have been understood to interact. At each end of a continuum, the translation model sees theology as a static, unchangeable core of ideas, which simply needs translating into the idioms of a new culture,¹² whilst the anthropological model privileges culture, asking how God is present with little reference to pre-existing doctrines or concepts.¹³ The middle ground is occupied by the synthetic model, which sees the context, pre-existing theological ideas, and other insights as

⁷ D. J. Tidball, ‘Practical and Pastoral Theology’ in David Atkinson and David Field (eds.), *New Dictionary of Christian ethics and Pastoral Theology* (Leicester: IVP, 1995), p. 42.

⁸ Swinton and Mowat, p. 24.

⁹ Helen Cameron, *Resourcing Mission: Practical Theology for Changing Churches* (London: SCM, 2010), p. 4.

¹⁰ Cameron et al, *Talking about God in Practice*, p. 13.

¹¹ Cameron et al, *Talking about God in Practice*, p. 14.

¹² Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology. Revised edition* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002), chapter 4.

¹³ Bevans, chapter 5.

dialogue partners engaged in a mutually-informing conversation.¹⁴ The transcendental model privileges subjectivity, seeing theology as a changed mindset where one recognises the self in relation to God.¹⁵ The praxis model starts with culture to engage theological reflection to purposely shape action to liberate the oppressed.¹⁶ Finally, the counter-cultural model engages with culture, but maintains a critical stance and prophetic theology and practice.¹⁷ Bevans does not promote one model as better than the others, but declares that different circumstances demand different approaches to the relationship between theology and culture.¹⁸

Following Bevans' line, in literature surrounding practical theology, two models and their accompanying methodologies dominate, as noted by Ward.¹⁹ In texts viewing practical theology as a tool to shape contextually-appropriate Christian action, the praxis model is prominent, often employing the pastoral cycle as a solution-focussed way of engaging with culture, as shown in Cameron's *Resourcing Mission*, a handbook for practitioners seeking to reflect on their context and hone their practice.²⁰ Similarly, congregational 'action researchers', such as Moschella,²¹ employ similar principles. Conversely, theological congregational studies, such as Fulkerson's theological account of the practice of a multi-cultural congregation,²² are influenced by the dialogic approach of the synthetic model (often

¹⁴ Bevans, chapter 7.

¹⁵ Bevans, chapter 8.

¹⁶ Bevans, chapter 6.

¹⁷ Bevans, chapter 9.

¹⁸ Bevans, p. 140.

¹⁹ Helen Cameron, Philip Richter, Douglas Davies and Frances Ward (eds.), *Studying Local Churches: A Handbook* (London: SCM, 2005), pp. 23f.

²⁰ Cameron, *Resourcing Mission*, pp. 8-10.

²¹ Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2008).

²² Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010)

called ‘critical correlation’) to describe the various experiences and theological resources which have shaped a congregation’s life and nurtured their distinctive theology.

By examining the practice and theology of churches within the context of Longbridge, recognising the complex ‘conversational’ process by which they have been shaped by experience, history, theology and other insights, this thesis fits most comfortably within the latter approach. However, it is important to note developments and critiques within the Gospel/culture debate. For Ward, in *Participation and Mediation*, a significant account of practical theology for the contemporary Church, such dualistic discussions are problematic: overcomplicated and indicative – unintentionally, in Bevans’ case²³ - of practical contextual theology’s modernistic roots.²⁴ For him, theology is inherently cultural (for even the work of the professional theologian is a cultural practice deriving from contextual concerns²⁵), rejecting the notion that theological reflection on culture and context can be done as an objective process.²⁶ Practitioners are unavoidably culturally-embedded; they cannot step outside of it to reflect, and this thesis acknowledges this of the ‘conversations’ which have shaped the theologies of the churches studied. Rather, he emphasises practical theology’s missional character, oriented towards expressing God’s purposes through practice in concrete contexts: God’s mission is, again, incarnational and realised in culture. A key concept is ‘participation’: through participating in Christian practice in the Church, one also participates in the divine life of the missional, communal, Triune God,²⁷ meaning that the study of Christian practices is not simply a sociological study of human actions, but a spiritual

²³ Pete Ward, *Participation and Mediation: A Practical Theology for the Liquid Church* (London: SCM, 2008), p. 56.

²⁴ Ward, pp. 33, 55.

²⁵ Ward, p. 41.

²⁶ Ward, p. 48.

²⁷ Ward, chapter 5.

endeavour to articulate divine activity.²⁸ His second key concept is ‘mediation’: expressing theology in the Christian community, whether through word or practice, ‘mediates divine being’²⁹ in concrete, contextual ways. This study examines how Christians participate missionally in God’s activity and mediate God’s being in the post-industrial context of Longbridge.

Ward highlights how practical theology blurs boundaries between traditional theological sub-disciplines. It is explicitly missiological, but he also implicitly indicates its alignment with ecclesiology, in its concern with the life and being of the Christian community. However, such ecclesiology should recognise what Healy describes as the ‘concrete church’: that is, a messy reality shaped both by human activity, with all of its sin and failure, *and* the site of the activity of the Holy Spirit.³⁰ For him, the only way to study and understand expressions of Church is theologically.³¹ For him, ecclesiology cannot be a blueprint, an ideal concept of how to ‘be Church’, but a recognition of a plurality of local, practical ecclesiologies emerging through the theological, missional practice of Christian communities serving their contexts.³²

This study explores practical theology, the ‘faithful performance of the gospel’, on the ‘stage’ which is Longbridge, with its numerous challenges and changes as a post-industrial community. The study begins (chapter one) with a review of the literature surrounding the relationship between local churches, as contextual expressions of the Church, and their cultural context, examining trends in how it has been understood theoretically, studied

²⁸ Ward, p. 98.

²⁹ Ward, p. 98.

³⁰ Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University: 2000), pp. 4-5.

³¹ Healy, pp. 4-5.

³² Healy, p. 39.

practically and explored in relation to contemporary urban experience. Chapter two then focusses on the specific urban context of Longbridge, employing historical and socio-economic insights, alongside the voices of policy-makers and local residents to build a thorough understanding of the community and the prevailing issues to which Christian practice and mission must respond and address.

Chapter three then explores Christian practice in this context. It explores the practice of local churches, recognising that each possesses a unique ‘practical theology.’ Appropriate to the scale of this thesis, two churches were examined, to demonstrate contrasting ways they operate within this post-industrial context. Whilst both were situated in Longbridge, the precise geographic location of the churches and their historic relation to the plant bring different missiological and ecclesiological emphases to their practice. Further, the churches were deliberately-chosen to be of different denominations, Anglican and Methodist, to demonstrate how the theological motifs held as especially authoritative by each tradition have shaped local practical theologies. Chapter three therefore gives a thorough description of each church community, introducing the form, features and main themes of their practice and highlighting the unique combination of experiences, insights and resources which have shaped it.

Chapters four and five draw the preceding insights together. From an exploration of context and description of local church practices, an account of the ‘practical theology’ of each will be given, describing the theological, missiological and ecclesiological principles underpinning their life, with attention to how each ‘mediates’ the Gospel practically in the particular setting of Longbridge. The specificity of context and the integrity of the process by which each

church has uniquely formulated its practice in Longbridge means that the goal of this thesis cannot be to propose a universal, generalizable theory by which local churches should 'be Church' in Longbridge, nor in similar post-industrial communities. However, it can highlight issues, stimulate thinking and contribute to the practical theological awareness of other practitioners and theologians. Consequently, the thesis concludes with an exploration of how it develops pre-existing thinking in the field exploring the relationship between the local church, theology and culture, particularly contemporary urban culture, whilst proposing principles for a practical theology for changing, post-industrial communities.

0.1.1 Qualitative research

This study's epistemology states that knowledge is situated, interpreted and practical. Hence, a qualitative methodology is most appropriate to study the life and practices of the two churches. Denzin and Lincoln assert that 'qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.'³³ Like practical theology, qualitative research does not produce universally-applicable knowledge, adopting instead a 'grounded theory' approach where the researcher suspends prior assumptions and *discovers* a theology in the field.³⁴ Grounded theory is a fluid process of interaction between empirical data, research questions and secondary reading, from which knowledge gradually emerges.³⁵ Hence, the central research question needs to be 'simple and modest', a research purpose designed to give an entry into the field.³⁶ The question, field and methods employed may change, evolve or refine as more is discovered. This study's concern with Christian practice within a particular community

³³ N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln, *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1998), p. 3, cited by Swinton and Mowat, p. 29.

³⁴ Uwe Flick, *An Introduction to Qualitative Research, second edition* (London: SAGE, 2002), p. 41.

³⁵ Swinton and Mowat, p. 54.

³⁶ Swinton and Mowat, p. 54.

proved sufficiently modest to enable focus, yet open to complexities and unexpected insights. The theory that develops is not a statement of empirical fact, but is, ultimately, another ‘version’ of the world, a perspective through which the field is perceived.³⁷ Hence, qualitative research, like practical theology, provides a ‘thick description’, not a universal theory, which raises questions and opens possibilities for those reflecting on other contexts: it can ‘enable someone interested in making a transfer to reach a conclusion about whether transfer can be contemplated as a possibility.’³⁸

Whilst qualitative research comprises a range of theoretical positions,³⁹ the symbolic interactionist approach accords most clearly with practical theology. Symbolic interactionism similarly connects actions, meanings and experience, asserting that people ‘act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them,’⁴⁰ acknowledging that meanings are revised in the light of experience.⁴¹ Research explores the meanings subjects attribute to their situation and behaviour.⁴² Since this study explores the practice and the underlying theologies used by local churches within the Longbridge context, its primary concern is with reconstructing the subjective viewpoints of the Christian practitioners in the congregations.

0.1.2 Participant observation

Participant observation is a dominant method in symbolic interactionist qualitative research, and formed the basis of this fieldwork. It is an ethnographic method where the researcher participates in the field for a sustained period to ‘understand the lives of people in their own

³⁷ Flick, p. 43.

³⁸ Y. S. Lincoln and E. G. Guba, *Naturalistic Enquiry* (London: Sage, 1985), p. 316, cited by Swinton and Mowat, p. 46.

³⁹ See Flick, pp. 16-28.

⁴⁰ H. Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 1969), p. 2, cited by Flick, *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*, p. 17.

⁴¹ Flick, p. 33.

⁴² Flick, p. 16.

terms,⁴³ and discern the habits, symbols and language that is ‘meaningful, reasonable and normal’⁴⁴ there. Through immersion in the field’s everyday rhythms and practices, the researcher understands these ‘reasonable’ meanings that shape and are shaped by experience. As DeWalt and DeWalt explain, participation in ordinary life gives access to both ‘explicit’ and ‘tacit’ aspects of a culture: that is, features explicitly acknowledged by participants and those that ‘largely remain outside our awareness and consciousness.’⁴⁵ However, this involves negotiating a fine line between participating and observing: Fielding comments that ‘creative insight’ emerges from the tension between being simultaneously an insider and an outsider:⁴⁶ enough participation is required to recognize fully the experiences of subjects, but too much means that the symbols and habits become too ‘reasonable’ and normal that they become invisible to the researcher. Rather, ‘one must maintain a certain detachment in order to take the data and interpret it.’⁴⁷

In January-April 2009, I spent eight weeks at each church consecutively as a participant-observer, immersed in their life and culture, by attending worship, events, community work and other official church activities. ‘Christian practice’ was considered broadly, based on the awareness that all aspects of church life are informed by an underlying practical theology. Access to each church was negotiated through the leading minister, with whom I discussed the study’s aims and purpose, what my involvement would entail and ethical matters. They then were given a Research Agreement and Ethical Code (appendix A), which they were invited to change where they saw appropriate, after which it was signed by both myself and

⁴³ Paula Maykut and Richard Morehouse, *Beginning Qualitative Research: A Philosophical and Practical Guide* (London and Philadelphia: Routledge/Falmer, 1994), p. 69.

⁴⁴ E. Goffman, *Asylums* (New York: Doubleday, 1961), pp. ix-x, cited by Nigel Fielding, ‘Ethnography’ in Nigel Gilbert (ed.), *Researching Social Life* (London: SAGE, 1993), p. 156.

⁴⁵ Kathleen M. DeWalt and Billie R. DeWalt, *Participant Observation: a Guide for Fieldworkers* (Walnut Creek: Alta Mira Press, 2002), p. 1.

⁴⁶ Fielding, p. 160.

⁴⁷ Fielding, p. 158.

them. Each minister was informed that although the churches would be identifiable, names and identifying details of informants and interviewees would not be used within fieldnotes, transcripts or the finished thesis, and all data will be stored securely in password-protected files. The minister retained the right to withdraw consent for any or all data to be used at any time before submission. Since I was accountable to the minister as both gatekeeper and one with pastoral charge of the church community, I entered various aspects of church life only with their consent. I also met with the ministers at the beginning, during and at the end of the fieldwork, to clarify questions, discuss emerging themes and ask for suggestions for routes forward. However, I was conscious of over-relying on each minister's perspective, and developed relationships with several key informants at each church to provide variety and breadth. It was valuable that both ministers, when introducing me to their congregations, encouraged participants to converse with me and invite me to any activities they thought relevant, which participants often did. After analysis and a substantial draft of the thesis was written, but before submission, I met with the ministers to present a verbal and written summary of the findings and conclusions about their church (appendices J and K) to maintain their awareness of the study's progress. As one of the ministers later left their position, contact was made with the new minister to share the summary and ensure their awareness of the project.

My researcher status was overt throughout, since covert behaviour was neither necessary nor ethical. It also enabled me to freely question informants. This openness enabled participants to become 'collaborators' in the research process, and, as Maykut and Morehouse assert, 'mutually shape and determine what we come to understand about them and their situation.'⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Maykut and Morehouse, p. 70.

However, since many church events were public gatherings, where not all people would be aware of my project, I took many opportunities to reiterate my role. At the beginning of involvement with each church, I addressed the congregation in worship, describing the aims, process and confidentiality of the research, and inviting them to contact me for any clarification. A 'Participant Information Sheet' (appendix B) summarizing this information in accessible language and my contact details was displayed in each church for the duration of the research. This outlined their right to see references to themselves in the fieldnotes and withdraw comments at any time. When attending activities, I ensured the relevant leaders were aware of my status. Additionally, at their invitation, I addressed the Parochial Church Council (the decision-making body) of the Anglican church at the beginning of the research, who gave their permission for the fieldwork to be undertaken. This church also described my research and printed my contact details in its weekly bulletin over several weeks.

Throughout the fieldwork, I made detailed fieldnotes (appendix C), initially briefly recording my observations in a notebook or on a dictaphone, in the field where feasible, before typing more detailed notes as soon as possible afterwards. Each entry was numbered for referencing purposes. These notes purely described observations and recorded facts for later analysis. As far as possible, I recorded speech verbatim, indicating instances where only a précis was offered. Any personal interpretation or analysis was recorded separately to avoid colouring subsequent analysis. I also separately recorded my feelings at participating in the fieldwork, which, as Fielding notes, helps to understand the shifts in perspective as time progressed.⁴⁹ To ensure confidentiality, use of names was avoided in fieldnotes, and each informant was

⁴⁹ Fielding, p. 162.

identified by a letter (not their initial). Fieldnotes were stored securely in a password-protected computer file.

As fieldwork progresses, participant observation becomes increasingly focussed, from a general introduction to the field, to identifying dominant themes which are then tested and revised.⁵⁰ For the first three to four weeks at each church, participant observation was the sole method employed, enabling orientation to the general culture of the church through immersion in all aspects of its life. This period also encouraged trust to develop between myself and participants, where questions could be asked by both sides and responses freely given. However, participant observation had limitations. A frequent challenge was finding clarity over what constitutes ‘church activity.’ For example, there was ambiguity around the status of events supported by the church and held on church premises, yet not formally managed by the church. Here, I was guided by what church participants considered to be ‘church.’ Similarly, surrounding ‘official’ church activity is a network of informal relationships and interactions between church participants which may be understood as expressing Christian community, but about which I was unaware and in which I was unable to participate. Further, there were some necessary restrictions on access, particularly surrounding sensitive pastoral ministry.

0.1.3 Questionnaires

These limitations led me to supplement participant observation with other complimentary research methods. After the initial orientation to the field, an overview of the demographic and other factual features of the congregation was necessary to provide a context to the

⁵⁰ Flick, p. 139.

cultural and symbolic aspects of the church. Consequently, participants were asked to complete an anonymous questionnaire (appendices D and E) given out at worship which explored demographic data, proximity of respondents' home to church, frequency of attendance, length of involvement, reasons for attending and other significant sites for them locally – all issues which arose in the initial participant observation as having possible relevance. The questionnaire also gave an opportunity to obtain qualitative data, so five short-answer, open-ended questions were included concerning respondents' experiences and perceptions of both the church and the local area. These were extremely valuable in highlighting and affirming recurring themes discerned in participant observation. Before the questionnaires were circulated, a copy was shown to the minister for approval and comment, with one minister usefully suggesting a valuable additional question. The wording of the questionnaire varied between churches to account for denominational differences. Questionnaires were available in church for several weeks, both at Sunday and mid-week services. Whilst response rates were high (around 73% of the average Sunday congregation for the Anglican study, around 60% for the Methodist study), it is acknowledged that the results are not necessarily wholly representative, since they may not include responses from the very young or illiterate, and may also have been completed by one-off visitors. Despite this, the results were valuable in the process of grounded theory, highlighting salient features of the field for further exploration and revision.

0.1.4 Semi-structured interviews with church participants

By emphasizing concretely-observable phenomena, participant observation is limited in its capacity to reconstruct the 'biographical processes or stocks of knowledge which are the

background of practices that can be observed.’⁵¹ Consequently, interviews commonly supplement participant observation, and, in this study, interviews with church participants were undertaken during the second half of the fieldwork period at each church. ‘Church participant’ refers to those who consider themselves part of the church, through regularly attending worship and church activities. Following that reality is only accessible through interpretations, interviews allow interviewees to articulate their ‘subjective theory’, their ‘complex stock of knowledge’, about the topic being studied.⁵² Here, narratives are particularly valuable sources of information, offering complete accounts of a respondent’s interpretation of their experiences.

Given this, careful decisions were made about the amount of interviewer intervention. Standardized interviews rely, like questionnaires, on a strict format enabling the comparability of data, but restricting the free expression which yields a complete account of the interviewee’s subjective theory. Alternatively, unstructured interviews allowing for narrative flow, possibly with one question to start the conversation, exemplify the open-mindedness of ethnography, but restrict comparability. Wengraf distinguishes between theory-building interviews, used to broadly explore a given field or topic, requiring less structure, and theory-testing interviews, requiring more.⁵³ Since the interviews were used once several key themes had emerged, the ‘semi-structured interview’, a middle-way, was chosen, which tested and explored these themes in greater depth whilst retaining some freedom for new insights to develop. An interview guide was used which outlined topics to be covered, with suggested (not compulsory) questions to elicit the desired information (appendix F). This approach

⁵¹ Flick, p. 145.

⁵² Flick, p. 80.

⁵³ Tom Wengraf, *Qualitative Research Interviewing: Biographic Narrative and Semi-structured Methods* (London: SAGE, 2001), p. 60.

required a flexibility to divert from the interview guide where potentially fruitful data emerged, changing the order of questions and making judgments as to when topic areas have been covered in the appropriate depth.

Since the interviews were used to explore emerging themes under the model of grounded theory, it was appropriate to employ a ‘theoretical’ approach to defining the interview sample. Since questions of involvement in the church – reasons for, length and nature of – and age, presented themselves as especially relevant for understanding participants’ experiences of church and area, the chosen sample reflected these, alongside more general categories of gender and socio-economic background. The majority of interviewees were resident in the immediate locality, which both reflected the locally-based nature of each congregation and revealed first-hand experiences of the area. Each church’s minister was approached with these categories, for which they suggested numerous people from which I chose a useful range. Ten interviews were undertaken at each church, including the minister. Of the twenty undertaken overall, four were with couples and one with a family with adult children. Whilst eliciting the views of more people, this also recognized that ‘constructing social reality’ frequently occurs in ‘common narratives of family members for example.’⁵⁴ Different voices can jog memories and stimulate new insights⁵⁵: indeed, rich data was often yielded when couples explored and disagreed over topics in discussions where the interviewer played a minimal role. A disadvantage of this approach is that individual viewpoints can be obscured,⁵⁶ but it acknowledges that for these people, their experience of church is intrinsically-linked with their fellow interviewee(s).

⁵⁴ Flick, p. 112.

⁵⁵ Flick, p. 113.

⁵⁶ Flick, p. 123.

Each interview lasted between one and two hours, and most took place at the interviewee's home, or at the church if they preferred. Prior to the interview, I explained the purposes of the research, the interview format, and interviewee's right to refuse to answer or withdraw consent at any time. They were assured that any names would be anonymised and any identifying details would not be used in the finished thesis. They were given an Interviewee Information Sheet (appendix G) with this information and my contact details. Permission to record the interview was sought and they were informed of their right to request recording to be ceased at any stage. Each interview was transcribed (appendix H) afterwards and sent to the interviewee for correction and the opportunity to indicate comments they wished to retract or not be quoted. In the transcripts, each interviewee was identified by a letter (not their initial), and for referencing purposes, each of their comments sequentially numbered.⁵⁷ Interviewees from St. John's church are referred to as SJ Interviewees, and those from Longbridge Methodist as LM Interviewees.

Interviews covered two main areas: firstly, the interviewee's experiences and views of the church, and secondly, their experiences and views about the context, in order to explore processes of reflection on context that have shaped church practice. Demonstrating the complex and organic nature of practical theological reflection, the sections were not necessarily explored in a mutually-exclusive fashion. Following Maykut and Morehouse's suggestion, each section began with 'non-controversial' questions,⁵⁸ factual enquiries about interviewees' involvement with the church and area, before moving onto questions requiring the expression of opinions. The more challenging, thought-provoking questions – for example about the church's purpose, changes in the church or area and predictions for the

⁵⁷ For example, the sixtieth comment made by Interviewee B is referred to as B60.

⁵⁸ Maykut and Morehouse, p. 94.

future - came in the second-half of each interview, once trust and rapport had developed. However, the opportunistic nature of the semi-structured interview, where interviewers must be flexible and responsive to the interviewee's comments,⁵⁹ meant that each interview, whilst covering the desired topics, varied considerably in structure. At the end of every interview, I encouraged interviewees to add any comments they thought relevant.

0.1.5 Semi-structured interviews with 'non-church' informants

Interacting with and interviewing church participants living locally gave a broad understanding of the features of Longbridge and the experiences of living and ministering there. However, to probe more thoroughly into these features, their insights were supplemented by interviews with ten other people (divided between the two immediate locations of the churches) living or working locally, but not closely identified with the churches. Identified with the help of the ministers, although not necessarily known personally by them, interviewees were chosen to represent a specific area of community experience that had proven worthy of further exploration during participant observation, including those from community organizations, youth work and local businesses. These interviews functioned as 'expert interviews' as described by Flick, where much of the discussion focussed on their experience in their specific field.⁶⁰ Each was made aware of the purposes of the research, matters of confidentiality and their rights to withdraw data concerning them. Owing to time constraints, these interviews were not recorded or transcribed, but comprehensive, anonymised notes made. Within the thesis, these informants are described as 'Community Interviewees.'

⁵⁹ Maykut and Morehouse, p. 94.

⁶⁰ Flick, pp. 89-90.

0.1.6 Documentary and other data

Church documents such as mission statements, church magazines, newssheets, minutes of meetings and histories were also analysed as sources for discerning the priorities, meanings and values of each church.

Alongside written data, the spaces and visual artefacts of each church were similarly valuable. Changes in the physical structure of the church buildings and how each space is arranged and used, as well as displays, proved powerful symbols about church self-identity, sense of purpose and social interactions. Symbolic interactionism and practical theology assert that nothing is insignificant: all words and actions are the bearer of meaning.

0.1.7 Reflexivity

If understanding emerges through interpretation and reflection on experience, and that interpretation is informed by multiple voices and influences, then the researcher is not neutral and objective, merely reporting facts, but is actively engaged in constructing an interpretation of the situation. Swinton and Mowat claim that the researcher is the ‘primary research tool’⁶¹ who needs to exercise careful reflexivity, ‘a mode of knowing which accepts the impossibility of the researcher standing outside of the research field and seeks to incorporate that knowledge creatively and effectively.’⁶² Whilst immersion in the field encourages an appreciation of participants’ viewpoints, I reflected critically on how my existing worldview and biases shape my process of interpretation, and attempted to scrutinize and minimize their impact. In particular, as a practicing Anglican, I have been aware of how my engagement with the Methodist case study differed to the Anglican study because of my relative

⁶¹ Swinton and Mowat, p. 50.

⁶² Swinton and Mowat, p. 59.

unfamiliarity with Methodist tradition, theology and structures. This unfamiliarity may have potentially been an advantage, increasing my attentiveness to the setting and my willingness to ask questions. However, as the second church I engaged with, I was also aware that my engagement with it lacked the ‘innocence’ I brought to the first, for by then I had pre-conceived ideas about the context and Christian practice that I had to monitor to remain attentive to its distinctive features.

Further, when researchers become participants, it must be recognized that they are ‘co-creators’ of the ‘mode and content of the encounter.’⁶³ This requires further self-awareness of the ways in which their presence affects the reality under study, managing this sensitively and accounting for its impact on the research where necessary. As an ordinand during the fieldwork, I was conscious that this status could carry associations (such as power and authority) which may affect - positively and negatively - participants’ interactions with me. Therefore, I distanced myself from roles associated with clergy, such as leading worship and activities. Also, in a community which has been the subject of much research recently, use of the word ‘researcher’ may carry other associations. Hence, I was careful to fully describe the nature of my research, often referring to it as a project. In order to reduce the sense of difference between myself and the participants, I was conscious to dress and speak appropriately, and monitor the ‘messages’ given by my appearance and demeanour. However, there were some aspects of myself I could not alter, such as my gender, age, accent and ethnicity, which, I was conscious may condition the ways people engaged with me.

⁶³ Swinton and Mowat, p. 61.

Reflexivity surrounding the process through which each church has shaped their practical theology was also necessary. Practical theology is a hermeneutic enterprise and my analysis of it should involve a ‘hermeneutic of suspicion’: that is, as Swinton and Mowat describe, recognising the ‘reality of sin, the need for redemption and the inevitable uncertainty and fickleness of human knowledge and understanding.’⁶⁴ For example, it was important to recognise how the demographic, social and cultural features of each congregation shape their experience of their context and discernment of God’s mission there, and acknowledge opportunities where the integrity and Christian faithfulness of this process may be compromised.

0.1.8 Analysis

In grounded theory, analysis of the vast amounts of data gleaned occurs throughout the fieldwork period. Reflecting on their experiences and observations, the researcher is in a continual process of interpretation, identifying prevailing themes and noting potential theories, which are then tested, reviewed and refined until a thorough grasp of the setting has been achieved. This process was aided here by the keeping of separate notes and reflections which recorded and enabled interpretation, and by engagement with a breadth of secondary literature which drew attention to and encouraged deeper exploration of multiple aspects of the setting.

However, systematic analysis was also required at the end of the process, to bring ‘order, structure and meaning to the complicated mass of qualitative data.’⁶⁵ Qualitative research involves the generation of a series of dense ‘texts’, such as fieldnotes, transcripts and

⁶⁴ Swinton and Mowat, p. 10.

⁶⁵ Swinton and Mowat, p. 57.

documents, interpreted accounts deriving from the researcher and participants that function as a 'substitute for the reality under study.'⁶⁶ Before commencing analysis, I allowed a short time to elapse to bring fresh perspective and insight to the task. I then returned to the emergent themes and examined the data thoroughly to test these further. I indexed texts and data against the initial themes, which were then revised or expanded as I grew more fully aware of the nuances of the emerging 'theory.'⁶⁷ Although this process was complex and time-consuming, it enabled thorough familiarity with the data. The result was a clear and manageable document which gave an evidenced account of the patterns, themes and theories in a thorough and multi-faceted fashion (appendix I). From this, the process of presenting the findings and giving an account of the social, cultural and theological features of Longbridge and the churches studied could begin.

⁶⁶ Flick, p. 30.

⁶⁷ A description of this approach to analysis is found in Fielding, pp. 167-168.

CHAPTER ONE

LITERATURE REVIEW: CULTURE AND THE LOCAL CHURCH

1.0 Introduction

In recent years, academic interest in the dynamic between local churches, their context and theology has been broad and interdisciplinary, emerging from varied concerns and privileging different aspects of their relationship. This chapter will review the dominant strands within this field to facilitate a deeper understanding of where this study is situated and contributes to knowledge. It begins by examining literature primarily concerned with the study of local churches, before exploring work which considers the dominant features of contemporary culture and how Christian practice and local churches may respond. The review demonstrates the natural links between this field of enquiry and the developments in the discipline of practical theology witnessed in recent decades.

1.1 Congregational studies

As a study of specific local churches, this research is most obviously situated in the field of congregational studies. Whilst congregations have been studied for more than fifty years, it has been since the 1980s that ‘congregational studies’ has emerged as an identifiable, yet still rather amorphous, discipline. In the initial chapter of their anthology concerned with the growth of congregational studies within the UK,⁶⁸ Woodhead, Guest and Tusting helpfully identify two major strands within the field’s global development. Firstly, ‘extrinsic’

⁶⁸ Woodhead, Guest and Tusting, ‘Congregational Studies: Taking Stock’ in Mathew Guest, Karin Tusting and Linda Woodhead (eds.), *Congregational Studies in the UK: Christianity in a Post-Christian Context* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 1-23.

congregational studies, the older of the two strands evident from the 1950s, are primarily concerned with studying local churches as part of broader social and ecclesial agendas: for example, the field of church-growth/health, and a concern for perceived social breakdown and how churches exemplify or address this.⁶⁹ Conversely, from the 1970s, they identify the emergence of ‘intrinsic’ studies of local churches, and it is these that are most commonly associated with the emergence of the specific discipline of ‘congregational studies’.⁷⁰ Intrinsic studies are more introspective, seeking to ‘provide a portrait of analysis of a congregation (or congregations) on its (or their) own terms and for its (or their) own sake.’⁷¹ The aim is primarily (self-)understanding and they assert that this is the dominant direction congregational studies has most recently taken in the United Kingdom.⁷²

This development is undergirded by a notion that each congregation possesses its own unique way of being and identity, most neatly summarised by Becker, in her influential study *Congregations in Conflict*, as ‘idioculture’.⁷³ She, and others, assert that local churches have distinct understandings of their ‘core tasks’ and ‘legitimate ways of doing things,’⁷⁴ which emerge from a unique combination of factors, including, amongst others, history and experiences, size, polity and theological ideology.⁷⁵ Becker shows that congregational studies is primarily the task of providing a ‘thick description’ of the idiosyncratic features of church groups and their way of being. Her work demonstrates how intrinsic congregational studies do not provide generalizable theories or overarching blueprints for local church life. Rather,

⁶⁹ Woodhead et al., pp. 2-9.

⁷⁰ Woodhead et al, pp. 9-18.

⁷¹ Woodhead et al, p. 9.

⁷² Woodhead, Guest and Tusting, ‘Congregational Studies: Taking Stock’, p. 18.

⁷³ Penny Edgell Becker, *Congregations in Conflict: Cultural Models of Local Religious Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999), p. 9.

⁷⁴ Becker, p. 7.

⁷⁵ Becker, p. 5.

it aims to provide in-depth awareness of specific churches to highlight pertinent issues and contribute to a broadened awareness of congregational life, often in relation to specific issues.

Within intrinsic congregational studies, Guest et al identify four major types: self-contained, typologizing, contextualising and multi-focussed. ‘Self-contained studies’ give purely self-referential accounts of congregational life, seeking simply to understand them on their own terms,⁷⁶ as exemplified by Hopewell in his influential text *Congregation*, which sought to tell the internal symbolic ‘story’ of a series of local churches.⁷⁷ ‘Typologizing studies’, whilst recognising the idiosyncrasies of individual congregations, seek to identify commonalities between groups of churches.⁷⁸ In her concern with conflict, Becker discerned four models of congregation, who shared similarities in the ways they expressed and managed conflict. These models outlined the theological and ideological principles which underpinned church life, consciously circumventing previous attempts to understand congregational life based predominantly on demographic or external factors such as size or polity. However, that said, Becker acknowledges her models’ limitations and maintains their non-generalizability, carefully noting that the congregations she studied were from the same locality sharing similar demography, and that other typologies may emerge in other contexts.⁷⁹ In his emphasis on story, Hopewell also strays into this strand of intrinsic study by grouping his congregational stories together into the dominant narrative types of types of tragic, comic, ironic and romantic.⁸⁰ Thirdly, ‘contextualizing studies’ aim to ‘relate congregations to their wider socio-cultural contexts, but have no wider or pragmatic agenda’, other than aiming to

⁷⁶ Woodhead et al, pp. 9-11.

⁷⁷ James Hopewell, *Congregation: Stories and Structures* (London: SCM, 1988).

⁷⁸ Woodhead et al, pp. 11-12.

⁷⁹ Becker, p. 220.

⁸⁰ Hopewell, chapter 4.

‘illuminate church and wider society with reference to one another.’⁸¹ For example, Jenkins’ study of ‘religion in English everyday life’ explored the function and meaning of three expressions of religion in contemporary society in a mutually-illuminating study.⁸² Finally, ‘multi-focussed studies’ use a combination of approaches.⁸³

Within the breadth of approaches to congregational studies, they also emerge from a range of motivations and disciplines. Cameron, Richter, Davies and Ward, in *Studying Local Churches*,⁸⁴ position themselves within the dominant UK trend towards intrinsic congregational studies, seeking to provide a handbook for those aiming to paint a ‘portrait of the congregation on its own terms and for the sake of understanding it better.’⁸⁵ Within this, they identify four (not exhaustive) disciplines from which congregations can be explored, highlighting their accompanying epistemological assumptions and methodological approaches. They then examine four prominent aspects of local church life from the perspective of each of these disciplines, highlighting the insights and emphases they bring. Firstly, anthropology, the study of humanity and its ways of being, symbols and culture meaningful to a church. Anthropology is ‘generally agnostic’ about God’s existence.⁸⁶ Sociology focuses on patterns of social interaction, behaviour and belief within local churches, seeking to discern how these are meaningful to the social actors, often relating them to the wider social structures and systems in which they are set.⁸⁷ Organisational studies is concerned with how organisations – here, local churches – are run and managed, their

⁸¹ Woodhead et al, p. 13.

⁸² Timothy Jenkins, *Religion in English Everyday Life: An Ethnographic Approach* (New York: Berghahn, 1999)

⁸³ Woodhead et al, p. 16.

⁸⁴ Cameron et al, *Studying Local Churches*.

⁸⁵ Cameron et al, *Studying Local Churches*, p. 8.

⁸⁶ Davies provides an introduction to the discipline of anthropology, Cameron et al, *Studying Local Churches*, p. 13.

⁸⁷ Richter provides an introduction to the discipline of sociology, Cameron et al, *Studying Local Churches*, pp. 14-15.

structures, polity and perceived key tasks.⁸⁸ Finally, they explore the approach of practical theology to the study of local churches, recognising the interaction between theological tradition and contemporary experience within congregational life.⁸⁹ Here, the parallel development of the disciplines of congregational studies and practical theology in recent years is clear. Both are concerned with defining an 'idioculture', an account of local church practice, recognising how it is shaped by a unique combination of theological, contextual and experiential factors.

Whilst Cameron et al comment that each disciplinary approach has its accompanying methodological approaches to suit its aims and motivations,⁹⁰ clearly ethnographic and qualitative methods prevail: participant observation and interviews, and the broad examination of documents, artefacts and any available data pertaining to congregational life dominate in intrinsic studies of this kind. The authors assert that these four strands are not always mutually-inclusive, and no one discipline can give a full and complete understanding of church life and culture.⁹¹

Within the breadth of approaches and disciplines from which congregational studies emerge, there are varying degrees of concern for the relationship between local church and context, and a range of ways to investigate it. Guest, in his exploration of evangelicalism today, undertook a single-congregation sociological study of a thriving evangelical church, and

⁸⁸ Cameron provides an introduction to the discipline of organizational studies, Cameron, et al, *Studying Local Churches*, pp. 15-16.

⁸⁹ Ward provides an introduction to the discipline of theology, Cameron et al, *Studying Local Churches*, pp. 17-18.

⁹⁰ Cameron et al, *Studying Local Churches*, pp. 19-26.

⁹¹ Cameron et al, *Studying Local Churches*, pp. 243-244.

investigated how it functioned in response to the culture and experience of members.⁹² For Guest, context and culture are multi-layered, from the immediate local and geographical experience, to wider cultural trends and social patterns pertinent to members.

Another contrasting approach to examining the relationship between congregation and context is offered by Eiesland in her 'religious ecology'.⁹³ She examines the exurb of Dacula, an area which has seen rapid change as nearby Atlanta has grown and subsumed the former farming community, seeking to explore its impact on local churches and their accompanying response. Her approach is an ambitious one, undertaking sociological ethnographic studies of twenty-four churches, seeing the congregations as part of a larger 'religious ecology' which has shifted and changed as their context has.

Stringer's approach offers a third method to explore the church/context relationship. He employs congregational studies at the service of a concern for understanding the 'definition of religion' in contemporary Britain, which emerges from an awareness of decline and change in traditional Christian practice.⁹⁴ His starting point is traditional definitions of religion.⁹⁵ He develops an interesting 'collective approach' to congregational studies, comparing an array of local church ethnographies to examine various aspects of these definitions and explore their sufficiency.⁹⁶ He systematically debunks notions of religion as unified, transcendent and transformative – and notices that seeming spiritual practices are predominantly employed as a form of 'coping religion', to enable subjects not to transform but to cope with the challenges

⁹² Mathew Guest, *Evangelical Identity and Contemporary Culture: A Congregational Study in Innovation* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2007).

⁹³ Nancy L. Eiesland, *A Particular Place: Urban Restructuring and Religious Ecology in a Southern Exurb* (New York: Rutgers University: 2000).

⁹⁴ Martin D. Stringer, *Contemporary Western Ethnography and the Definition of Religion* (London: Continuum, 2008).

⁹⁵ Stringer, pp. 5-13.

⁹⁶ Stringer, pp. 30f.

of life.⁹⁷ He exposes conventional understandings of religion as biased towards a protestant Christian exemplar,⁹⁸ and instead, following Tylor, sees ‘animism’, an awareness of the non-empirical within life, as basic to understanding religion today.⁹⁹ Whilst upholding the uniqueness of each local church, Eiesland and Stringer show in contrasting ways how comparing congregational studies is a useful tool to draw closer attention to the significance of context, highlighting dominant themes and shared experiences, which may prove valuable in the comparative approach of this study.

1.2 Denominational cultures

Intrinsic congregational studies respect the uniqueness of each congregation. Even work to identify models of church life, or studies surveying multiple churches with a shared context, do so without attempting to offer a universal blueprint for ‘true’ congregational being. However, studies do recognise the numerous influences which shape local church idioculture, some of which may be shared with other congregations. For the interests of this thesis, which examines one Anglican and one Methodist church, work exploring the influence of ‘denominational cultures’ is particularly significant. Richter, in his essay concerning the significance of denominations within congregational studies,¹⁰⁰ notes that ‘denominational cultures have seldom been widely considered within the field of congregational studies,’ and how emphasising congregational particularity has distracted from exploring the comparability of cultures within churches of the same denomination.¹⁰¹ He argues that, despite trends indicating the decline of denominational loyalty, denominational structures, symbols and

⁹⁷ Stringer, pp. 80f.

⁹⁸ Stringer, p. 100.

⁹⁹ Stringer, pp. 103f.

¹⁰⁰ Richter, ‘Denominational Cultures: The Cinderella of Congregational Studies?’ in Guest et al, pp. 169-184.

¹⁰¹ Richter, p. 169.

expectations remain a ‘major source for the construction of local church culture,’¹⁰² conditioning the resources from which churches may construct their identity. Indeed, within Becker’s congregational models, some congregations are more likely to use some models than others,¹⁰³ and similarly, Cameron, in *Resourcing Mission* where she identifies five ‘cultural forms’ which describe dominant understandings of the local church, draws parallels between the forms and specific denominations.¹⁰⁴ Richter helpfully highlights how congregational idioculture is set within ‘wider frames’¹⁰⁵, including denominational frames, which ‘limit’ the resources available for a church to construct its culture, citing Becker’s claim that ‘local religious cultures are seldom completely idiosyncratic; they are patterned by the larger institutional environment that limits their range of variation.’¹⁰⁶

1.3 Ethnography and theology

Whilst congregational studies emerge from a range of disciplines and motivations, it remains a field largely dominated by sociology and descriptions of the social life of churches. However, increasingly, theologians and religious practitioners are finding it a fruitful avenue for exploring their concerns. Indeed, literature has recently emerged making an explicit case for the use of ethnographic studies of churches within theology.

Scharen and Vigen edited a volume exploring the theoretical basis of using ethnography within both theology and ethics, giving worked examples of its use.¹⁰⁷ Their concern with theology and ethics stems from an awareness of their interrelation – theology being ‘god-talk’

¹⁰² Richter, p. 172.

¹⁰³ Becker, pp. 11-12 cited by Richter, p. 172.

¹⁰⁴ Cameron, *Resourcing Mission*, chapter 2.

¹⁰⁵ Richter, p. 173.

¹⁰⁶ Becker, p. 7, cited by Richter, p. 172.

¹⁰⁷ Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen (eds.), *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics* (London and New York: Continuum, 2011).

whilst ethics is the perceived normative ways of being related to this understanding of God.¹⁰⁸ For them, the particularity of context or community contributes to theological awareness and knowledge. They recognise that ‘thick descriptions’ of practice gleaned by ethnographic methods may simply illuminate ‘what is’ and ‘what ought to be’, when read alongside existing theological awareness.¹⁰⁹ However, they propose a further step, whereby exploration of situations actually yield new theological insights and understandings. ‘Local theology’ and lived practice has an integrity to be respected,¹¹⁰ demonstrating an explicitly incarnational approach whereby each context and situation explored provides a new revelation of God. The connections with developments within practical theology and concepts of its contextual, incarnational nature are clear.

Consequently, after defining ethnography, they claim it is more than a descriptive and non-generalisable tool, asserting that from every study of a Christian community there can emerge new knowledge and learning which can ‘teach us about reality, truth, beauty, moral responsibility, relationships and the divine, etc.’¹¹¹ They believe ethnography uncovers ‘what God and the world looks like’¹¹² from the subject’s perspective, recognising that the particular fosters awareness of theological and ethical universal questions of who God is and how humans should live. Their assertions describe a curious dichotomy which recognises both the integrity of local theology *and* the local’s insights for universal theological awareness, a ‘bottom-up’ process of theological meaning-making which resists simplistic top-down application of perceived universal theological norms in a given situation.

¹⁰⁸ Scharen and Vigen, ‘Preface’, p. xvii.

¹⁰⁹ Scharen and Vigen, ‘Preface’, p. xxii.

¹¹⁰ Scharen and Vigen, ‘Preface’, p. xxii.

¹¹¹ Scharen and Vigen, ‘Part One: Prolegomena’, p. 16.

¹¹² Scharen and Vigen, ‘Part One: Prolegomena’, p. 16.

Scharen is frustrated that congregational studies has largely resisted engagement with theology, remaining simply a 'sub-discipline of the sociological study of religion', when, for him, the practices of Christian communities are inherently 'lived theology.'¹¹³ He and Vigen explore criticisms of the use of ethnography by theology. Citing Milbank and Hauerwas, these largely centre on the notion that theology, by offering an ideal social vision, is itself a 'social theory' and therefore incompatible with other social theories, including sociology and its associated methods which omit God.¹¹⁴ In response, Scharen and Vigen claim it is possible to employ ethnography in a 'theory free' way, simply as a tool to 'write culture.'¹¹⁵ If theological epistemology results from reflection on the 'quadrilateral' of scripture, reason, tradition and experience, they claim greater attention to experience¹¹⁶ as the 'interpretative vehicle'¹¹⁷ through which theological knowledge is gained. For them, as for practical theology, all knowing is 'embodied knowing'¹¹⁸ and ethnography uncovered the meaning of experience.

Scharen and Vigen cite Fulkerson's study of Good Samaritan United Methodist Church¹¹⁹ as a valuable example of a theological congregational study conducted through ethnography. Good Samaritan was hailed a success in its racially-inclusive nature, and Fulkerson sought to 'theologically read' the church and its values. However, this became more complex than anticipated. The theological character of the congregation was discernible not just in worship nor in explicit theological statements, but in the 'embodied' practices and habitus of the congregation. Hence, she advocates 'worldly theology', evident in the implicit 'bodily' and

¹¹³ Scharen and Vigen, 'Part One: Prolegomena', p. 34.

¹¹⁴ Scharen and Vigen, 'Part One: Prolegomena', p. 48.

¹¹⁵ Scharen and Vigen, 'Part One: Prolegomena', p. 50.

¹¹⁶ Scharen and Vigen, 'Part One: Prolegomena', p. 61-64.

¹¹⁷ Scharen and Vigen, 'Part One: Prolegomena', p. 64.

¹¹⁸ Scharen and Vigen, 'Part One: Prolegomena', p. 64.

¹¹⁹ Fulkerson, cited by Scharen and Vigen, 'Part One: Prolegomena', p. 65

‘visceral’ aspects of congregational life. Ethnography enabled access and attention to congregational practice in its broadest sense, exposing the theological in the most unanticipated aspects of congregational life,¹²⁰ where ‘practical theology’ is expressed predominantly in implicit practices rather than through explicit belief statements.¹²¹ She brings honesty to the quest for theological knowledge, overcoming theology’s tendency to ‘miss or obscure the worldliness’¹²² of life, by confronting not only the success and the joys, but also the struggles and the tensions within particular contexts. For her, theology must acknowledge these and remain ‘messy’, exemplifying the ‘incarnational’ character of both contemporary practical theology and Scharen and Vigen’s approach to theological knowing.

Scharen and Vigen assert that the difference between ethnography and theology is that whilst ethnography is primarily descriptive, theology is also inherently ‘normative’, in that it has a telos and understanding of what reality should be.¹²³ This is the major difference between theological and sociological congregational studies, and is central to a second strand on ‘theological ethnography’, where it is consciously used by Christians to transform themselves and the world. Moschella proposes ethnography as a ‘pastoral practice’ to explicitly aid the mission and ministry of the Church,¹²⁴ a deliberate process of producing a ‘narrative account’¹²⁵ of congregational practice in order to expose and critique the implicit and explicit, positive and negative aspects of local church life. She – and other proponents of ecclesial ‘action research’¹²⁶ – interrogate ethnography’s ‘thick description’ to change and develop

¹²⁰ Fulkerson, pp. 5-11.

¹²¹ Fulkerson, p. 10.

¹²² Fulkerson, p. 6.

¹²³ Scharen and Vigen, ‘Part One: Prolegomena’, p. 3.

¹²⁴ Moschella.

¹²⁵ Moschella, p. 4.

¹²⁶ For example, see Cameron et al, *Talking about God in Practice*.

more faithful practice, ‘holding a mirror’ to a congregation for ‘healing and freeing a community up for change.’¹²⁷

1.4 Contemporary culture and the local church

In its concern with exploring the place of local churches within an area of significant social, economic and cultural change associated with the shift to a post-industrial society, this thesis is also situated alongside literature which explores the nature of contemporary society and the church’s place within it. Again, such literature emerges from a variety of disciplines, motivations and approaches.

Lockwood’s 1993 study *The Church on the Housing Estate*¹²⁸ shares many of this study’s concerns with the place of the church in (ex-)industrial, working-class communities. As a practitioner in a number of such contexts, he describes estate life and highlights challenges faced by estate churches, before proposing a model of mission appropriate to this context. He paints a bleak picture of (mainly post-war) estates as impoverished and with basic amenities, with residents preferring football, beer and television, to cricket, wine and dinner parties,¹²⁹ yet ‘in spite of all this the people on the whole remain amazingly cheerful.’¹³⁰ He comments how estate churches were built without an understanding of working-class life and a false expectation that residents would instinctively find a home within their traditional structures.¹³¹ However, he claims that their enduring presence is a powerful theological affirmation that

¹²⁷ Moschella, p. 10.

¹²⁸ Trevor Lockwood, *The Church on the Housing Estate: Mission and Ministry on the Urban Estate* (London: Methodist Church Home Mission Division, 1993)

¹²⁹ Lockwood, chapter 1.

¹³⁰ Lockwood, p. 19.

¹³¹ Lockwood, p. 22.

estates are ‘worth it’, reminding churches of their call to be ‘faithful not successful.’¹³² For him, local churches should develop a local character, taking seriously the context and shaping ecclesial life accordingly.

However, Lockwood’s anecdotal and generalised approach, unsupported by clear evidence or stated methodology, and lack of attention to the nuances within wider cultural and ecclesial contexts limits his contributions to wider scholarly debate. Yet, although not engaging with the rapid socio-economic changes more recently faced by working-class communities, his work offers an early example highlighting theological principles and ecclesial issues for practitioners in working-class areas.

Under the banner of ‘public theology’, recent years have seen more rigorous explorations of the nature of contemporary society and the place of theology and Christian practice. For this study, Baker’s practical theological exploration of the ‘hybrid’ character of today’s cities has significant insights.¹³³ Modern life was characterised by stable, hierarchic categories of identity, closely associated with colonial and industrial discourse.¹³⁴ However, in a post-modern, post-colonial, post-industrial globalised existence, boundaries have blurred, literally and metaphorically, within urban areas.¹³⁵ Undoubtedly, Baker’s prime concern is with the meeting of diverse cultural and religious identities within contemporary cities, whereby residents feel disoriented and which has potential to descend into dangerous power struggles.¹³⁶ However, although largely implicit, his work has more subtle relevance to

¹³² Lockwood, p. 28.

¹³³ Christopher Baker, *The Hybrid Church in the City: Third Space Thinking* (London: SCM, 2009).

¹³⁴ Baker, p. 15.

¹³⁵ Baker, pp. 16-17.

¹³⁶ Baker begins his text with a vivid description of the London terrorist attacks of 7th July 2005 as an example of the potential problems caused by urban changes and fear of the Other, pp. 1-2.

working-class residents in post-industrial areas, who, as will be shown, find themselves in equally unfamiliar environments. He draws on the sociological concept of the Third Space as the literal and metaphoric arena where identities can meet safely and positively.¹³⁷ Although so often at the mercy of globalised economic and cultural forces (indeed, the closure of MG Rover resulted from global developments in car manufacture), local space becomes an extremely important ‘Third Space’, a ‘site of resistance’ to globalising forces and power struggles, away from the state and the market.¹³⁸ Within this, local churches become significant ‘third spaces’, citing examples where churches have successfully overcome alienating and dangerous forces of contemporary life, building relationships and reciprocity between diverse peoples.¹³⁹ He urges churches to adopt a ‘third space social ethics’, a ‘local performative theology’ for hybrid existence, based not on overarching, top-down (modernistic) concepts of the ‘common good’ or codes of behaviour to which all are expected to conform, but on ethics as a ‘process’, principles for ‘being-with-others’.¹⁴⁰

Whilst Baker is unrelentingly positive about the theological importance and potential of the local to be harnessed for God’s mission and faithful Christian practice, other scholars recognise how the local is, for many, a contested and increasingly problematic concept in contemporary urban experience, and consequently in ecclesial thinking. In *Studying Local Churches*, a section is devoted to exploring the dynamic between the local and the global in congregational studies from the four perspectives of anthropology, sociology, organisational studies and theology.¹⁴¹ Theologian Baker describes the rise of the network society, where people are more mobile and consumeristic, choosing which ‘communities’ they associate in,

¹³⁷ Baker, p. 16.

¹³⁸ Baker, p. 53.

¹³⁹ Baker, pp. 111-125.

¹⁴⁰ Baker, pp. 125-135.

¹⁴¹ Cameron et al, *Studying Local Churches*, pp. 44-88.

meaning that human interaction and sociability are less associated with geographic locality.¹⁴² For churches, this has meant the rise of the ‘gathered church’, actively chosen by its members for a variety of reasons. Sociologist Woodhead describes how ‘the importance of the relationship between congregation and local context must be investigated rather than assumed.’¹⁴³

Indeed, studies have shown this to be an important dynamic that local churches need to carefully negotiate if they are to survive meaningfully. In his sociological congregational study of St. Michael-le-Belfry, Guest noted the search for stable community within mobile, networked lives by the largely middle-class congregation.¹⁴⁴ Such members also demonstrate the diversity and fluidity characteristic of post-modern life – of commitment, of thought, of beliefs, of spiritual expression. He demonstrates how the church adapted the rigidity of traditional evangelicalism to develop a ‘common public discourse’, which, notably avoids ‘moral prescriptions,’¹⁴⁵ where diversity could be accommodated, community maintained and conflict avoided.¹⁴⁶ His conclusion relates his very local findings to broader thinking about the development of evangelicalism, offering questions for future research,¹⁴⁷ but his account also has insights for churches of other traditions negotiating the local-global dynamic. Similarly, Eiesland’s study of the rapidly changing community of Dacula explored the ‘significant alterations in the ways in which home, work, church and neighbourhood are knit together.’¹⁴⁸ She noted how ‘oldtimers’ and ‘newcomers’ had differing patterns in which they belonged locally, with newcomers less locally-bound and exercising consumer choice as to

¹⁴² Cameron et al, *Studying Local Churches*, pp. 80-81.

¹⁴³ Cameron et al, *Studying Local Churches*, p. 55.

¹⁴⁴ Guest, p. 69.

¹⁴⁵ Guest, p. 100.

¹⁴⁶ Guest, p. 97.

¹⁴⁷ Guest, chapter 8.

¹⁴⁸ Eiesland, p. 134.

what meets their needs, factors which carried over into religious participation.¹⁴⁹ Combining both patterns within one congregation has the potential to cause conflict and schism.¹⁵⁰ The religious ecology of the community altered and shifted as churches adapted – or failed to adapt – to their new climate.

In an attempt to image how local churches might function in a globalised, networked world, Baker, in *Studying Local Churches*, proposes four ‘emerging typologies’. Firstly, the church as an ‘idealised moral community’, a ‘locus of moral discourse’, emphasising a way of living authentically together in today’s world.¹⁵¹ Secondly, he identifies a liberation model, where local churches become communities of resistance for the poor and the significant numbers marginalised from globalised networks.¹⁵² Thirdly, there is a ‘local/institutional’ model, exemplified by the Parish Church, where church is a counter-cultural force which maintains local memory and narratives.¹⁵³ Finally, the ‘network’ model, where churches connect together for local transformation, both echoing the nature of networked society whilst seeking to overcome its divisive tendencies by consciously bridging between networks.¹⁵⁴

The questionable place of local churches in the public sphere has also been explored within thinking surrounding secularisation and its variants. Through an ethnographic study of several congregations in Swansea,¹⁵⁵ Chambers sought to test out the pervasive notion that religion has lost its socio-political power, and is no longer a major force in public life. He notes that secularisation theories depend largely on an institutional understanding of religion,

¹⁴⁹ Eiesland, p. 171.

¹⁵⁰ Eiesland, p. 139.

¹⁵¹ Cameron et al, *Studying Local Churches*, p. 81.

¹⁵² Cameron et al, *Studying Local Churches*, p. 83.

¹⁵³ Cameron et al, *Studying Local Churches*, p. 84.

¹⁵⁴ Cameron et al, *Studying Local Churches*, p. 85.

¹⁵⁵ Paul Chambers, *Religion, Secularization and Social Change in Wales: Congregational Studies in a Post-Christian Society* (Cardiff: University of Wales, 2005).

whereby there is clear evidence of the decline local churches, numerically and in terms of public influence.¹⁵⁶ As a sociologist, he explores secularisation by examining the ‘linkages between religious institutions and their surrounding populations,¹⁵⁷ and deliberately focussed on Wales as a ‘special case’ because of how religion has historically been integral to Welsh culture and identity.¹⁵⁸ He cites several case studies of local churches in decline, and two of church growth, examining the reasons for these changes. Ultimately, this is a sociological text concerned with numerical growth and decline, rather than more nuanced understandings of how local churches engage theologically or in mission with their surrounding populations. However, he does challenge the simplicity of the secularisation thesis by considering the numerous local and cultural factors contributing to religious change. By focussing on churches in Swansea, a post-industrial context not unlike Longbridge, he demonstrates that the decline of industry and the related destabilisation of local communal life and ‘social networks’ have been a major influence on the disembedding of church and locality.¹⁵⁹ Indeed, the examples of church growth he gives are from churches who consciously engage with their surrounding locality in ways which take seriously the nature of fragmented local life today.¹⁶⁰ These he characterises as ‘associational’ local churches, as opposed to ‘communal’ churches, which historically originate from an industrial era when employment, social interaction and churchgoing were locally and closely aligned.¹⁶¹

Another challenge to the simplistic thinking of secularists who see the local church as in decline and increasingly irrelevant to public life is provided by those who explore the concept

¹⁵⁶ Chambers, p. 25.

¹⁵⁷ Chambers, p. 41.

¹⁵⁸ Chambers, pp. 1-5.

¹⁵⁹ Chambers, pp. 201-202.

¹⁶⁰ Chambers, chapter 7.

¹⁶¹ Chambers, p.. 204.

of the ‘post-secular’. Beaumont and Baker describe a resurgence of ‘faith and spiritual values’¹⁶² within contemporary urban thinking in a collection of essays from a range of disciplines.¹⁶³ They identify seven ‘areas of debate’ which demonstrate this shift, ranging from the increased use of the language of ethics and the sacred within urban planning and thought, to an awareness of urban space as increasingly diverse and a hub of religious and multi-cultural dynamics, with an associated and growing commitment to social justice, to an explicit acknowledgement and embracing of the contribution of faith communities to local politics, governance and service delivery.¹⁶⁴

Urban planners Sandercock and Senbel describe their pioneering form of urban planning that, in contrast to the rationalist agendas of modernist planning, consciously embraces ‘spiritual values’ – hope, faith, the sacred – to combat the potentially negative effects of urban life today.¹⁶⁵ In cities where (often global) movements of people, instability and rapid change threaten belonging, neighbourliness and sense of community in real, serious ways, they assert that these values are fundamental to creating safe and just cities where all are included. Although their work is not specifically about churches, it paves the way for an appreciation of local churches to make positive contributions to local life. Indeed, Governments and policy makers have undoubtedly acknowledged this by partnering with faith communities as valuable components of civil society which can make localities ‘liveable’. Theologically, Davey and Graham pick up on Sandercock and Senbels’ themes in their exploration of the

¹⁶² Justin Beaumont and Christopher Baker (eds.), *Postsecular Cities: Space, Theory and Practice* (London: Continuum, 2011). p. 4.

¹⁶³ Beaumont and Baker.

¹⁶⁴ Beaumont and Baker, p. 4.

¹⁶⁵ Sandercock and Senbel, ‘Spirituality, Urban Life and the Urban Professions’ in Beaumont and Baker, p. 89.

enduring parochial presence of the Church of England in urban areas.¹⁶⁶ Whilst they emphasize diversity – cultural, social and religious - in contemporary cities, their awareness of the divided nature of local space in post-modern, post-industrial and post-colonial cities and its potential for social breakdown and isolation also has relevance for more mono-cultural communities like Longbridge, which, as will be shown, has experienced similar fractures in local experience and belonging. They argue that churches can be valuable sources of local social capital which can effectively negotiate diversity and build local relatedness,¹⁶⁷ and assert that churches must embrace a utopian, inclusive theology to become places of welcome that unite local people.¹⁶⁸

Paddison's reflections in that volume offer a more theoretical and methodological reflection on the task of theologically engaging with the contemporary city.¹⁶⁹ He critiques the concept of 'public theology' as operating under a secularist logic which implies that theology is normatively a private matter.¹⁷⁰ Rather, a theology which takes the incarnation seriously will necessarily engage in the public sphere.¹⁷¹ Similarly, he is wary of its potential to be used simply to support state or other political agendas, particularly in light of the rise of governmental rhetoric which seeks to partner with faith communities to deliver local goals.¹⁷² Rather, he advocates 'theological politics', a truly post-secular approach, recognising that the character of contemporary urban existence necessarily raises theological questions with which the Church must engage.¹⁷³ Drawing on Yoder, he sees 'the Church's primary political

¹⁶⁶ Andrew Davey and Elaine Graham, 'Inhabiting the Good City: The Politics of Hate and the Urbanisms of Hope' in Beaumont and Baker, pp. 120-134.

¹⁶⁷ Davey and Graham, p. 131.

¹⁶⁸ Davey and Graham, p. 131f.

¹⁶⁹ Paddison, 'On Christianity as Truly Public', in Beaumont and Baker.

¹⁷⁰ Paddison, p. 226.

¹⁷¹ Paddison, p. 224-225.

¹⁷² Paddison, p. 227.

¹⁷³ Paddison, p. 231f.

contribution to the city is to be a *witness* to the Kingdom of God, pointing the city to ‘new possibilities of life together.’¹⁷⁴ Churches are primarily *worshipping* bodies, a central feature of congregational life often overlooked by public theology, and in Paddison’s vision, worship is the means by which churches ‘re-narrate our world’ to demonstrate how the Kingdom of God might look within the contemporary city.¹⁷⁵ For him, the Church’s role is not service delivery or to be ‘effective’, but simply to live faithfully and authentically to God’s Kingdom within the challenges of the contemporary city.¹⁷⁶

Paddison’s assertions highlight the focus on the prophetic calling of the local church evident in post-secular literature, which is also emerging in practical theology, in work such as Healy’s ‘practical-prophetic ecclesiology’, which emphasises how the church is primarily called to ‘witness’, offering in its practice and life a vision of an alternative mode of being different to the fractured cultural life surrounding it.¹⁷⁷ Significantly, again, ethnography is cited as one tool by which churches may be enabled to live more faithfully, by describing the concrete church and exposing sin and failure which can be amended.¹⁷⁸ This sentiment is also at the heart of Fulkerson’s engagement with post-modern place theory, and her description of how Good Samaritan church has become a ‘place’ – for ‘appearing,’¹⁷⁹ in this case with its concern for racial inclusion. She understands place as a ‘territory of meaning,’¹⁸⁰ a space embedded with memory, associations, expectations, and ‘constituted by practices’ which are enacted there.¹⁸¹ Local churches create ‘place’ within the wider contexts and cultures they are situated. At Good Samaritan, members created a theologically-meaningful, racially-inclusive

¹⁷⁴Paddison, p. 231

¹⁷⁵ Paddison, p. 231-232.

¹⁷⁶Paddison, p. 232.

¹⁷⁷ Healy, p. 108.

¹⁷⁸ Healy, pp. 168f.

¹⁷⁹ Fulkerson, p. 18.

¹⁸⁰ Fulkerson, p. 28.

¹⁸¹ Fulkerson, p. 32.

place which was of the radically-prophetic nature that Paddison seeks, speaking powerfully to the wider culture and wider church of an alternative way of being.

This review of the literature surrounding the connection between local church and culture, as examined primarily through a theological lens, demonstrates that this thesis is an ‘intrinsic’, contextualising study of two congregations, providing an account of each church’s theological ‘idioculture’, their ‘practical theology’ by which they operate. Employing ethnographic methods in this theological task, it will highlight the various conversation partners which have uniquely-shaped local church life, whilst recognising the potential of the findings to contribute to wider theological awareness. Finally, by examining the particular experience of working-class residents in a post-industrial community, it focuses on a particular aspect of contemporary urban experience which has received little sustained attention within literature which has generally emphasised its culturally-diverse character. Through this, this study tests and extends work to explore how local churches may contribute meaningfully to today’s urban culture through their mission and witness.

CHAPTER TWO

NARRATING THE CONTEXT: LONGBRIDGE

2.1 Longbridge: from agricultural countryside to industrial suburb

Just over a century ago, the place known today as Longbridge was an agricultural region of the Worcestershire countryside. But, just seven miles south-west of Birmingham, a major manufacturing centre of the time, the area was ripe for industrial development, and, in 1895, a printing company opened a factory adjacent to the railway lines there.¹⁸² Later, this site was purchased by engineer Herbert Austin, setting in motion changes which would dramatically alter the area forever. In 1905, Austin opened The Austin Motor Company, manufacturing motor cars. Some distance from the city, the site proved to offer the atmosphere and room for expansion necessary for this growing industry.¹⁸³ Indeed, the factory grew rapidly: from four-hundred workers in 1907, by 1914 it had grown to a ten-acre site requiring two-thousand employees.¹⁸⁴ During the First World War, production shifted towards munitions, and the plant employed over 20,000 on a site which, by 1919, had grown to 60 acres.¹⁸⁵ Between the wars, although employee numbers decreased after war work, car production remained high, and following another period supporting the war effort during World War II, by 1949, The Austin became the country's leading car manufacturer.¹⁸⁶ In the early 1960s it employed 21,000 people and 'was once one of the largest manufacturing plants in the world.'¹⁸⁷

¹⁸² Austin Memories, *Longbridge Factory* (<http://www.austinmemories.com/page24/page24.html>, accessed 26/1/11).

¹⁸³ Carl Chinn, 'The Austin: A Dreamer's Dream', in Carl Chin and Stephen Dyson, '*We Ain't Going Away!*': *The Battle for Longbridge* (Studley: Brewin, 2000) p. 6.

¹⁸⁴ Chinn, p. 8.

¹⁸⁵ Chinn, p. 8.

¹⁸⁶ Chinn, p. 15.

¹⁸⁷ Birmingham City Council and Bromsgrove District Council, *Longbridge Area Action Plan* (April 2009), p. 1.

Accompanying this industrial expansion was residential redevelopment. Whilst many employees would commute, including by rail to Longbridge station which opened in 1915,¹⁸⁸ Austin understood the need for residential development closer to the factory. In 1917, the Longbridge Estate, known today as the Austin Village, was built, comprising 252 homes, the majority of which were innovative, pre-fabricated bungalows, with its own village hall, churches, schools and other facilities. More generally, south-west Birmingham was expanding into an industrial hub, with firms such as Cadbury and Kalamazoo,¹⁸⁹ also demanding local residential development for employees. The recurring narrative in local histories of the communities surrounding the Longbridge plant is the transformation from isolated, agricultural countryside to suburbs,¹⁹⁰ as rural settlements were gradually subsumed by the city – as reflected in later city boundary changes. Inter-war housing developments were supplemented by municipal building in the 1950s and 1960s, including that for rehousing ‘occupants of substandard inner city accommodation on new suburban estates.’¹⁹¹

Consequently, south-west Birmingham, including the area surrounding the Longbridge plant, became characterised as ‘the heartland of Birmingham’s white working-class,’¹⁹² with a prevalence of residents employed in skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled manual work. In 1981, 60% of people in Longbridge Ward and 52% in Northfield Ward (the two wards containing the particular areas upon which this study is focussed) were classified in those socio-economic groups.¹⁹³ Whilst socio-economic classifications have since changed, this

¹⁸⁸ Austin Memories.

¹⁸⁹ Dennis Smith, ‘“Not Getting on, Just Getting by”: Changing Prospects in South Birmingham’, in Philip Cooke (ed.), *Localities: The Changing Face of Urban Britain* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), p. 238.

¹⁹⁰ For example, Ann Fitzgerald, ‘Rubery’, *Warwickshire & Worcestershire Life*, July 1978, p. 30; R. E. Tupling, *The Story of Rednal* (Birmingham: Birmingham Public Libraries, 1983), p. 1; The Parish Church of St. John Baptist Longbridge, *The Parish Church of St. John Baptist Longbridge: Silver Jubilee*, pamphlet, 1982, p. 4.

¹⁹¹ Smith, p. 239.

¹⁹² Smith, p. 235.

¹⁹³ Smith, p. 240.

picture endures (although reflecting changes in the types of available work): in 2001, in Longbridge Ward 42% of adults were classed as skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers, and 36% in Northfield Ward, compared with 32% for the national average.¹⁹⁴ The Socio-economic Baseline Report written to prepare the Longbridge Area Action Plan for the redevelopment of The Austin site post-closure, citing the 2001 Census, describes such an image for the 'Longbridge Context Area', the ten wards one to two kilometres from the factory that have been and will be most affected by the closure and redevelopment of the plant.¹⁹⁵

However, whilst Longbridge developed in common with more regional economic growth, in local perception, the presence of the car plant is widely-understood as the dominant force: the Socio-economic Baseline Report states that 'housing in the Southern Periphery of Birmingham was constructed largely to feed the Longbridge plant.'¹⁹⁶ Factory and locality were interdependent – both economically and socially. The economic centrality of the plant to its immediate environs for several decades enabled many workers to develop, as Smith, writing in 1989, notes, 'strong roots in the locality.'¹⁹⁷ Indeed, the combination between employment and local residence engendered familial and friendship ties between employees. Smith comments that 'quite extensive networks mixing kin, neighbours and friends in which Longbridge and Bournville [Cadbury] employees, past and present, may be found.'¹⁹⁸ He also cites a survey of Longbridge employees living in south-west Birmingham, where 34 of

¹⁹⁴ Source: 2001 Census data for the Approximated Social Grade of All People Aged 16 and Over in Households, Office for National Statistics, *Neighbourhood Statistics (2001 Census)* (available from <http://www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk>, accessed 11/2/11).

¹⁹⁵ Halcrow Group Limited, *Longbridge Area Action Plan: Socio Economic Baseline Report* (September 2006), p. 17.

¹⁹⁶ Halcrow Group Limited, p. 33.

¹⁹⁷ Smith, p. 239.

¹⁹⁸ Smith, p. 256.

the 59 sampled identified one or more relatives who works, or had worked, at the factory.¹⁹⁹ In local political life, also, the factory was significant: Smith vividly traces the connection between workplace restructuring and local voting patterns.²⁰⁰

2.2 The changing face of Longbridge: the plant and the community

Since the Second World War, the fortunes of the motor plant varied considerably. In 1952, to compete with foreign competition, The Austin merged with Morris, another prominent British car manufacturer. This created the British Motor Corporation (BMC), which was the first of many incarnations by which the Longbridge plant was known to reflect its various partnerships and directions. However, whether officially known as BMC, British Motor Holdings, British Leyland, Austin Rover or MG Rover, locally, the plant was, and remains, popularly-known as ‘The Austin’, acknowledging the significance of its foundations. This thesis will use ‘The Austin’ to refer to the Longbridge plant throughout its various guises. Nationally and internationally, ‘Longbridge’ became synonymous with British car manufacture. Indeed, the Longbridge Area Action Plan begins with the claim that ‘the Longbridge Works were both physically and emotionally the true heart of Britain’s motor industry.’²⁰¹

Expansion meant that The Austin became ‘like a small town.’²⁰² It saw significant successes, notably the production of the iconic Mini in 1959 and the Metro in the 1980s. During the 1960s, thriving production, in common with other local industries, meant Longbridge and south-west Birmingham became known for working-class prosperity and wages above the

¹⁹⁹ Smith, p. 256.

²⁰⁰ Smith, p. 257f.

²⁰¹ Birmingham City Council and Bromsgrove District Council, p. 1.

²⁰² Chinn, p. 18.

national average.²⁰³ Since then, however, lack of (government) investment,²⁰⁴ recessions,²⁰⁵ foreign competition²⁰⁶ and others forces have been cited as contributing to the gradual decline, both in sales and in employee numbers, of the plant. Accompanying this, there arose what Chinn and Dyson describe as a ‘popular mythology’ that the factory was ‘strike prone’²⁰⁷ as it drew notoriety as the home of Trade Union activist ‘Red Robbo’ and the location of union activity in the 1970s and 1980s.

The prosperity of the 1960s was gradually replaced with unemployment through successive waves of redundancies: in 1977, there were nearly 19,000 hourly-paid employees, whilst in 1982 there were around 11,000.²⁰⁸ In 1994, ‘The Rover Group’, comprised of a number of factories of which The Austin was one, was sold to German manufacturers BMW. However, by the end of the decade, the company was broken up because of losses, and the Longbridge-based ‘MG Rover’ was bought by a consortium of businessmen called the Phoenix Group. However, their attempts to maintain large-scale car production failed, and in April 2005, almost 100 years after Herbert Austin opened his factory, MG Rover went into administration. The entire workforce, around 5,800 people, lost their jobs.²⁰⁹ Yet with a supply chain employing around 27,000 people,²¹⁰ many other jobs were lost indirectly. Half

²⁰³ Smith, p. 241.

²⁰⁴ Chinn, p. 18.

²⁰⁵ Chinn, p. 19.

²⁰⁶ Bardsley and Corke, p. 108.

²⁰⁷ Chinn, p. 20.

²⁰⁸ Smith, p. 241.

²⁰⁹ Caroline Chapain and Alan Murie, ‘The Impact of Factory Closure on Local Communities and Economies: The Case of the MG Rover Longbridge Closure in Birmingham’, *Policy Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 3, September 2008, p. 308; MG Rover Task Force, *Closure of MG Rover: Economic Impact Assessment. An Interim Report*, (Altrincham: Regeneris Consulting, July 2005), p. 2.

²¹⁰ Birmingham City Council and Bromsgrove District Council, p. 1.

of those made redundant had worked at Longbridge for more than twenty-one years, and 80% were aged over 40.²¹¹

Car production remains in Longbridge, on a vastly-smaller scale, as Chinese motor company Nanjing lease a small part of the site. But as the last major British-owned motor company in Britain, and yet another British manufacturer to die, the closure of The Austin was of national significance. However, it also had a profound, multi-faceted and less obvious impact on the immediate locality. Although ‘the closure of the MG Rover works in Birmingham conjured up an image of job loss, a sudden increase in unemployment and an immediate shock impact on households and local communities,’ the reality was far more nuanced, as Chapain and Murie note.²¹² In 1998, 1919 people, 14.7% of MG Rover employees, came from Longbridge and Northfield wards, those of principle concern to this study. Yet by the time of the closure, although still representing 14.7% of the workforce, this figure had reduced by over half, as 920 people locally were made redundant.²¹³ The remainder of redundancies came predominantly from across the West Midlands. The Austin had always drawn its employees widely,²¹⁴ and its initially-isolated location and the later ability of more affluent workers to move further away seeking housing of their choice²¹⁵ added to this. Also, the gradual decline in employees over many years meant that the interdependence between plant and locality had waned. Where once there was a strong identification with the Longbridge plant and residents of the immediate locality - the factory’s growth necessitated the area’s growth - since the 1960s, this trend had gradually reversed. Even in 1989, Smith notes:

²¹¹ Amicus, *MG Rover Survey Report* (London: Amicus the Union, <http://www.amicustheunion.org/pdf/MGRoverSurveyReportJN102.pdf>, accessed 11/2/11), p. 7.

²¹² Chapain and Murie, p. 307.

²¹³ Citing data from MG Rover payroll dataset of employees, Chapain and Murie, p. 309.

²¹⁴ For example, in 1937, just 10% of employees walked to work, Smith, p. 238.

²¹⁵ Chapain and Murie, p. 310.

‘In the past, the city council has been under pressure to build new homes for people flocking into that part of the city to take up readily available jobs. More recently, however, the need has been felt to encourage new businesses and investment capital to move into south-west Birmingham to provide jobs for people who are already there.’²¹⁶

Undoubtedly, the highest concentrations of redundancies came from the immediate locality around the factory,²¹⁷ and symbolically, the closure signalled a dramatic end to the area’s identification with and reliance upon manufacturing. Of those employed in manufacturing, around 50% in Longbridge Ward and 40% in Northfield Ward were lost when the plant closed.²¹⁸ However, in real terms, 2005 did not mean large-scale *economic* devastation locally. Instead, it was the final severing of an economic interdependence between factory and locality that had been waning for several years, as numbers of employees gradually decreased.

2.3 The redevelopment: ‘a new heart for Longbridge’?²¹⁹

The impact of the 2005 closure of The Austin on the immediate locality of the plant should therefore be understood more broadly than purely economic. Indeed, accompanying the gradual socio-economic shifts with the changing fortunes of The Austin, the closure also had an immediate physical impact locally. By the time of the closure, the Longbridge factory occupied a vast space, leaving over 350 acres²²⁰ of land to be redeveloped. In the three years following the closure, the factory (apart from Nanjing) was demolished and cleared. In April 2006, preparation of the ‘Longbridge Area Action Plan’ for the redevelopment began. The

²¹⁶ Smith, p. 240.

²¹⁷ MG Rover Task Force, p. 6.

²¹⁸ Chapain and Murie use 2001 Census data and 2005 MG Rover employment data to reach these figures, p. 308.

²¹⁹ ‘A New Heart for Longbridge’ one of the five ‘Transformational Themes’ outlined in the Longbridge Area Action Plan underpinning the vision for the Longbridge redevelopment, Birmingham City Council and Bromsgrove District Council, p. 9. It has been a slogan used in publicity for the redevelopment.

²²⁰ Birmingham City Council and Bromsgrove District Council, p. 2.

Longbridge AAP emerged from ‘wide-ranging public participation with local residents, community organisations and other stakeholders’²²¹ and drew on numerous ‘baseline reports’ about relevant socio-economic, employment, transport, housing and community needs. The Action Plan considered the requirements of the existing locality alongside wider regional and national strategies, demonstrating the numerous stakeholders in the future of Longbridge. After more consultation, the final Plan, covering 2008-2023, was eventually adopted by the relevant local authorities²²² in April 2009, some four years after the closure. The fieldwork in this study ran as the AAP was being finished and submitted, before any physical rebuilding, and the resulting thesis refers to this period.

The AAP calls the redevelopment a ‘new chapter’²²³ for Longbridge. Where once the Longbridge site was a global player in car manufacture, planners intend to maintain its innovative identity, ensuring that the area is again central to the economy of the West Midlands, which is described as ‘positioned at the centre of the global economic stage driving forward investment and business.’²²⁴ The Plan asserts that ‘the Longbridge site is critical to the success of the city’s and region’s economic growth and investment agenda.’²²⁵ The redevelopment is to be employment-led, promising to deliver around 10,000 new jobs and renewing the battered economy. However, work will be very different to the large-scale manufacturing of before: the redevelopment aims to ‘diversify the local and regional economy’²²⁶ and reduce its dependence upon big industries. Much focus is placed on high-

²²¹ Birmingham City Council and Bromsgrove District Council, p. 7.

²²² i.e. Birmingham City Council and Bromsgrove District Council.

²²³ Birmingham City Council and Bromsgrove District Council, p. 1.

²²⁴ Birmingham City Council and Bromsgrove District Council, p. 1.

²²⁵ Birmingham City Council and Bromsgrove District Council, p. 12.

²²⁶ Birmingham City Council and Bromsgrove District Council, p. 6.

technology employment,²²⁷ but also on creating employment in ‘finance, professional services, retailing, education and leisure’ alongside aiming to ‘protect and promote existing industrial operations.’²²⁸

The AAP also seeks a return to the former close alliance between employment and locality seen in The Austin’s early days. The vision is to create a ‘self-sufficient community in which the need to travel has been minimised.’²²⁹ For this to happen, re-skilling the local workforce in an economy no longer dominated by manufacturing is essential. New educational and training opportunities are vital to ‘enable local people to successfully compete for new employment opportunities at Longbridge’²³⁰ (significantly, the new Bournville College of Further Education was one of the first facilities to be built). This serves the drive to attract investment: the goal is that no investment is ‘lost for the lack of suitably qualified and skilled people.’²³¹

However, a significant change is the Longbridge site is not solely for employment purposes. Although employment-led, community and stakeholder consultation revealed a preference for a mixed-use development.²³² Consequently, the redevelopment will also involve building 1450 new homes,²³³ alongside leisure, retail and recreation facilities, and necessary

²²⁷ The emphasis on high-technology industries connects with existing regional employment and redevelopment strategies, notably the growth of the ‘Central Technology Belt’, which seeks to create a swathe of high-tech and information-rich industries and research organisations (including three universities and several hospitals) along the A38 road (which runs past the Longbridge site) between Birmingham and north Worcestershire.

²²⁸ Birmingham City Council and Bromsgrove District Council, p. 12.

²²⁹ Birmingham City Council and Bromsgrove District Council, p. 6.

²³⁰ Birmingham City Council and Bromsgrove District Council, p. 13.

²³¹ Birmingham City Council and Bromsgrove District Council, p. 12.

²³² Birmingham City Council and Bromsgrove District Council, p. 7.

²³³ In line with the ‘Regional Spatial Strategies’ house-building target, Birmingham City Council and Bromsgrove District Council, p. 6.

infrastructure.²³⁴ Yet, following community consultation, the Plan states that ‘one of the ‘overriding wishes of the local community’ is that the redevelopment should have a ‘real heart and focus.’²³⁵ The Plan aims to create a ‘real sense of place with a strong identity and distinctive character,’²³⁶ somewhere of which residents can be ‘justifiably proud’²³⁷ and which fosters belonging.²³⁸ It involves building a ‘centre’, with facilities that meet local needs, which intends to be a ‘heart for the community.’²³⁹ The AAP begins by describing how the factory dominated the ‘working and social life of the area,’²⁴⁰ and infers that the site should again function that way – providing both necessary employment and the means to create a healthy social life. Implying that the factory was once the area’s focus, now the site will provide a ‘new heart for Longbridge,’²⁴¹ a phrase used extensively on the redevelopment’s publicity and hoardings surrounding the empty site. However, the site’s former incarnation will not be forgotten: a heritage centre and visitor attraction which ‘celebrates the enterprise, people and history of the Longbridge Plant’ has gained much community support and interest.²⁴² This will be located near the new Longbridge centre, and will be called, significantly, ‘The Austin.’

2.4 The socio-economic context: post-industrialism

The decline of car-making in Longbridge, and its associated impact on the locality, are not isolated cases in the UK. Since the 1970s, there has been significant decline in large-scale industry that had been the lynchpin of British and other capitalist economies. As Atherton

²³⁴ Birmingham City Council and Bromsgrove District Council, p. 6.

²³⁵ Birmingham City Council and Bromsgrove District Council, p. 6.

²³⁶ Birmingham City Council and Bromsgrove District Council, p. 9.

²³⁷ Birmingham City Council and Bromsgrove District Council, p. 11.

²³⁸ Birmingham City Council and Bromsgrove District Council, p. 9.

²³⁹ Birmingham City Council and Bromsgrove District Council, p. 13.

²⁴⁰ Birmingham City Council and Bromsgrove District Council, p. 1.

²⁴¹ Birmingham City Council and Bromsgrove District Council, p. 13.

²⁴² Birmingham City Council and Bromsgrove District Council, p. 24.

notes, 'in 1969, 34% of the economically active population was employed in manufacturing in Britain, falling to 18% in 1992-93.'²⁴³ By the 2001 Census, the figure for England was 15%.²⁴⁴ This shift not only destabilised the foundations of the UK employment structure, but has been both a cause and consequence of a vast range of social, cultural and economic shifts. The closure of MG Rover in 2005, and the gradual decline in car manufacture in Longbridge that preceded, are recent expressions of these global shifts.

These changes have been theorized in several ways, initially by Daniel Bell, who first developed the theory of 'post-industrialism' in 1973.²⁴⁵ Whilst his original predictions have been critiqued in light of subsequent experience,²⁴⁶ the term 'post-industrial' has been maintained in this thesis to express the situation of the Longbridge community in the aftermath of the closure of The Austin. De-industrialization in the UK is complex, and connects with an array of social and cultural phenomena, including globalization, the information revolution, decentralization, consumerism and post-modernism.

Whilst all theories concerning the move from an industrial-based economy acknowledge the importance of knowledge and developments in information technology to maximise profits, theories of 'informationalism'²⁴⁷ and 'the information(al) society'²⁴⁸ place these as central. Although Castells carefully notes that knowledge generation drove productivity growth in

²⁴³ John Atherton, *Public Theology for Changing Times* (London: SPCK, 2000), p. 29.

²⁴⁴ 15% of all people aged 16 to 74, who were usually resident in England and were in employment at the time of the 2001 Census, Office for National Statistics.

²⁴⁵ Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: a Venture in Social Forecasting* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

²⁴⁶ See Krishan Kumar's account of the development and decline of Bell's original predictions, and the subsequent emergence of new theories of 'post-industrial society', *From Post-Industrial to Post-Modern Society: New Theories of the Contemporary World* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), pp. 1-5.

²⁴⁷ Manuel Castells has chosen to speak of 'informationalism' rather than post-industrialism, *The Rise of the Network Society, second edition (Volume 1: 'The Information Age')* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 219.

²⁴⁸ Kumar describes such theories as describing 'the information society', chapter 2. Castells prefers the description 'informational society', *The Rise of the Network Society*, p. 218.

industrial economies, the crucial change is that it now provides ‘an infrastructure for the formation of a global economy.’²⁴⁹ De-regulated and de-centralized, information technology is loosened from the control of nation states which were integral to industrial economies, and undermines the limitations of time and space, enabling ‘novel methods of acquiring, processing and distributing information’²⁵⁰ to an intense and unprecedented degree. Within a *global* economic network, information is vital at every stage of the ‘production-to-consumption chain’, from being employed to develop the technology that drives production, to the advertising and marketing that drives consumption.²⁵¹ Consequently, information and knowledge become the most important commodities: whereas in industrial society, with its emphasis on mass-production in large-scale factories, human labour and capital were the central variable which governed production,²⁵² now information is ‘the most important input into modern production systems.’²⁵³

However, another complementary account of the move from an industry-based economy has been pervasive, which emphasises different aspects of the phenomena: the shift from mass-production to ‘flexible accumulation,’²⁵⁴ commonly described as the move from a Fordist to a post-Fordist society. ‘Fordism’ describes a mode of production particularly associated with the post-war economic boom, involving the mass-production of standardized products for the mass-market, central to which was the large-scale manufacturing of industrial society. Whilst Fordist production offered reliable employment,²⁵⁵ it also deskilled many by routinizing and

²⁴⁹ Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, vol. 1, p. 219.

²⁵⁰ Kumar, p. 3.

²⁵¹ Kumar, pp. 32-33.

²⁵² Kumar, p. 12.

²⁵³ T. Stonier, *The Wealth of Information: a Profile of the Post-Industrial Economy* (London: Thames Methuen, 1983), p. 8, cited by Kumar, p. 12.

²⁵⁴ As described by David Harvey, *The Condition of Post-modernity: an Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1990), p. 145.

²⁵⁵ Harvey, p. 140.

removing initiative from employment. Consequently, a collective working-class identity, expressed through Trade Unionism, arose. The system relied upon a 'tense but nevertheless firm balance of power that prevailed between organized labour, large corporate capital, and the nation state.'²⁵⁶ Unions influenced state social policy that ensured, for example, adequate wages, social security and equality,²⁵⁷ alongside which states concentrated public investment into areas, such as utilities, transport and welfare, which underpinned mass-production and mass-consumption.²⁵⁸ Finally, 'large corporate power was deployed to assure steady growth in investments that enhanced productivity, guaranteed growth, and raised living standards whilst ensuring a stable basis for gaining profits.'²⁵⁹ This is typified by the Longbridge and south-west Birmingham of the 1960s, with booming productivity, an affluent working-class and active union participation.

Fordism relied upon predictability, both of consumption and of labour. However, these began to fragment from the late 1960s with changing consumer demands and workplace resistance.²⁶⁰ Kumar describes how the mass-market became exhausted, and mass production was unable to respond to new markets and new lifestyles.²⁶¹ Harvey comments that the relationships between labour, state and business precluded flexibility: for example, calls for greater flexibility met resistance from labour movements, hence the abundance of strikes during that period.²⁶² For Longbridge, this was certainly a difficult time. In 1974, British Leyland Motor Corporation, the company that owned Longbridge then, collapsed, and the

²⁵⁶ Harvey, p. 133.

²⁵⁷ Harvey, p. 139.

²⁵⁸ Harvey, p. 134.

²⁵⁹ Harvey, p. 134.

²⁶⁰ Robin Murray, 'Fordism and Post-Fordism', in Charles Jencks (ed.), *The Post-Modern Reader* (London: Academy, 1992), p. 269.

²⁶¹ Kumar, p. 43.

²⁶² Harvey, p. 142. Harvey states that the only flexibility allowed was the printing of more money, which, accompanied by the raising of oil prices, led to the recession of 1973 (p. 142-145), the date he designates as the end of the post-war boom and the mass-production associated with it (p. 124).

Government intervened to save it.²⁶³ Indeed, production was falling across the British motor industry as a whole, and British Leyland, which the company became, was struggling to compete with foreign competitors.²⁶⁴

Subsequently, theorists describe a shift to a more flexible system of production. Niche markets arose, both prompting and prompted by a shift from ‘manufacturer’s economies of scale’ to ‘retailer’s economies of scope.’²⁶⁵ Again information and knowledge are crucial, for both identifying (and creating) new consumers through tightly-managed marketing and advertising,²⁶⁶ and for the development of technologies able to produce the specialized goods.²⁶⁷ Product-life shortened, fashions and trends could constantly change. However, ‘flexible accumulation’ demands systems and a workforce capable of adapting and responding quickly to changing markets and knowledge. Consequently, there was a move away from large-scale producers, like Longbridge, to smaller industries catering to specialized markets. Today British-owned car manufacture typifies this, where the only remaining companies are those producing prestige and niche-market vehicles on a smaller scale. Further, from a stratified labour structure founded upon a large working-class, this era saw the rise of a two-tier workforce. There is a stable, although diminishing core of employees whose work, skill and knowledge are vital to drive their industry into the future, surrounded by a shifting periphery of workers – those previously part of the working-class - who are more flexible, with time or skills, whose deployment changes according to market needs. Increased

²⁶³ Chinn, p. 19.

²⁶⁴ Chinn, p. 19.

²⁶⁵ Murray, p. 270.

²⁶⁶ Kumar, p. 33.

²⁶⁷ Harvey, p. 159. See also Murray’s description of the ‘just-in-time’ model of production, where consumer demand is monitored closely and smaller batches of goods can be produced or distributed quickly in response, p. 270.

outsourcing and subcontracting complement this flexible workforce.²⁶⁸ Hence, there has been an increase in part-time, flex-time, casual and temporary working for this second tier,²⁶⁹ with a move away from the traditional forty-hour working week and increase in employee mobility.²⁷⁰

As complementary accounts of recent shifts, ‘informationalism’ and ‘flexible accumulation’ have radically altered the socio-economic structure of the UK and many other nations, in a globalized system of production and consumption. Aided by the global network, much manufacturing has been re-located to developing nations to avoid workforce activism²⁷¹ and where production may be cheaper. Thus, the UK has experienced a shift from a pre-dominance of manufacturing jobs, to ‘service industries’ which support this system.²⁷² Castells notes sharp increases in ‘producer services’, the research and development that produce the information, innovation and technology needed to support the global economy.²⁷³ In the redevelopment of Longbridge, the emphasis on creating high-technology, information-rich industries vitally recognises its key role in the economic renewal of the area.²⁷⁴

These economic shifts also represent radical social change. Gender roles, once so clearly-defined in working-class culture, have shifted with changes in the nature and forms of

²⁶⁸ Harvey, pp. 150-152.

²⁶⁹ Harvey, p. 150.

²⁷⁰ Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, vol. 1, p. 282; Harvey, p. 150.

²⁷¹ Murray, p. 268.

²⁷² Even in 1989, Smith describes the decline of manufacturing and rise of service employment in south-west Birmingham, p. 245.

²⁷³ Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, vol. 1, p. 227. See also Harvey, pp. 156-157

²⁷⁴ The Central Technology Belt aims to move ‘the economy away from a reliance on motor manufacturing and related industries towards new sectors including medical technologies and healthcare, advanced materials, transportation technologies, energy and the environment, digital media,’ Central Technology Belt, *Welcome to the Central Technology Belt* (<http://www.centraltechnologybelt.com>, accessed 12/11/09).

work.²⁷⁵ More fundamentally, the hierarchic class system, dominated by a large working-class of skilled and semi-skilled manual workers, is ruptured, as white-collar employment has grown in both scale and significance,²⁷⁶ demanding a more qualified workforce, as recognised in the AAP's emphasis on education. However, whilst (highly-paid) professional and managerial jobs are increasing, so are semi- and low-skilled (poorly-paid) service jobs,²⁷⁷ resulting in an income inequality and polarized income distribution.²⁷⁸ This era has seen the rise of 'poor work', often associated with the flexible, peripheral workforce of post-Fordism: insecure jobs, lacking in innovation, often temporary, poorly-paid and lacking employment benefits.²⁷⁹ The concepts of the 'job for life' and 'full employment'²⁸⁰ and, in an ever-changing employment market,²⁸¹ opportunities to 'work your way up' are limited.²⁸²

Undoubtedly, it is the former working-class, the manual, operative or craft-based worker once so central to the economy that have experienced these socio-economic changes most sharply. Without adapting and re-skilling, they face the insecurity and low-pay of 'poor work'. Of those made redundant from MG Rover, those who were in full-time employment 6 months after the closure found themselves earning an average of £3,534 a year less,²⁸³ Also lost is their power, as trade unions, through which rights were negotiated, have struggled to adapt to more flexible employment in smaller-scale organisations.²⁸⁴ The declining scale and

²⁷⁵ Atherton, p. 30.

²⁷⁶ Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, vol. 1, p. 233.

²⁷⁷ Linda McDowell, *Redundant Masculinities?: Employment Change and White Working-class Youth* (Malden, Mass and Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), p. 31; Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, vol. 1, p. 235.

²⁷⁸ Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, vol. 1, p. 235; Maureen Mackintosh and Gerry Mooney, 'Identity, Inequality and Social Class', in Kath Woodward (ed.), *Questioning Identity: Gender, Class, Ethnicity, second edition* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 90.

²⁷⁹ McDowell, chapter 2; Harvey, pp. 150-152.

²⁸⁰ Atherton, p. 31.

²⁸¹ Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, p. 282.

²⁸² McDowell, p. 33.

²⁸³ Kathy Armstrong, *Life after MG Rover: A Report Prepared for BBC Radio 4* (London, The Work Foundation, March 2006), p. 5.

²⁸⁴ Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, p. 301; Harvey, p. 153.

instability of employment has also undermined the creation of friendships between colleagues that developed in large, stable industries like The Austin.²⁸⁵ Similarly, where a long-standing, large-scale industry (or similar types of industry) dominating an area once engendered local rootedness and shaped local cultures, smaller-scale, less permanent work does not foster the same affinity between work and locality.²⁸⁶

Further, ‘work-based’ collective identities have declined. Previously, one’s work was foundational to an individual’s identity and relatedness to wider society and geography. Now, work is an ‘unstable personal journey,’²⁸⁷ as individuals ‘slip in and out’ of a variety of work- and non-work-based identities.²⁸⁸ Drawing on Sennett, McDowell describes how ‘the old solidarity of the industrial working-class has been replaced by fluid networks of highly individualized workers, acting largely on the basis of self-interest.’²⁸⁹ With a shifting, flexible culture, Harvey describes a move from ‘collective norms and values, that were hegemonic at least in working-class organizations’, to a culture of ‘competitive individualism.’²⁹⁰ Here, two responses emerge. Firstly, as Castells asserts, ‘in a world of global flows of wealth, power, and images, the search for identity, collective or individual, ascribed or constructed, becomes the fundamental source of social meaning.’²⁹¹ Hence, he describes the rising importance of, for example, gender, ethnic and religious identities and those based on geography. Such identities are often the only means for self-mobilisation in an age where organisations and institutions have fragmented.²⁹² Secondly, in a consumer-driven culture, patterns of consumption become signifiers of social distinction, shaping both

²⁸⁵ Mackintosh and Mooney, p. 96.

²⁸⁶ Graham Day, *Community and Everyday Life* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 74-75.

²⁸⁷ Mackintosh and Mooney, p. 106.

²⁸⁸ Atherton, p. 31.

²⁸⁹ McDowell, p. 44.

²⁹⁰ Harvey, p. 171.

²⁹¹ Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, p. 3.

²⁹² Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, p. 3.

individual and group identities,²⁹³ and recognising that ‘individuals play an active role in the construction of their own identity’, their sense of self and relatedness to others.²⁹⁴

2.5 The local narrative: the experiences of the residents

The processes of de-industrialisation and the shift towards a globalised, service-based, consumption-driven economy amounts to an overhaul of the social, cultural and economic bases of the UK. In the case of The Austin, the locality around the plant has experienced its impact at the most immediate level, and has undergone post-industrial changes for many years, culminating with the closure of MG Rover in 2005. Once exemplifying a fairly-stable, working-class, industrial community, it has seen changes to its economic foundations, patterns of work, relatedness to neighbours, significance of locality and understandings of community identity. For over thirty years, local residents have negotiated this increasingly alien environment. Now, the area also faces the redevelopment of the site, promising to bring renewed economic and social vitality and a ‘new heart.’ Alongside accounts of the area from sociologists, historians, policy-makers and statisticians, fieldwork here has revealed a local narrative, describing the experiences of those living through the shifts occurring in Longbridge. A full appreciation of the context and the lives into which local churches seek to ‘faithfully perform’ the Gospel must involve careful attention to these human voices.

2.5.1 The Austin: vitality and identity

For local residents, The Austin was extremely important in the area, at least in the past. They vividly describe its dominant role in local employment: exemplifying the responses of many, when asked to describe what the factory meant to local people, SJ Interviewee I replied:

²⁹³ Mackintosh and Mooney, pp. 106-107.

²⁹⁴ Mackintosh and Mooney, p. 97.

‘Oh well, I mean, they were nearly all employed there.’²⁹⁵

Others expand, noting how a whole range of local jobs depended upon the plant:

‘An awful lot of people round here were... either worked at Longbridge or were linked with it in, not just industry, but in things like local shops and restaurants and cafés...’²⁹⁶

But more than purely providing employment and economic vitality, The Austin engendered a dense network of relationships. One who worked there for many years described the ‘camaraderie’ between employees, saying:

‘...The euphemism was it was the centre of their universe, working down The Austin [laughs]. It was like a church in itself really...’²⁹⁷

The plant’s social role is summarised by SJ Interviewee G:

‘I think even Rover was a community in itself. [...] And the workers were so devoted to it, you know. It was more than just a car factory, it was a way of life, a whole way of life, you know... But then people would be there for each other, people who worked at Rover, it was a strong sense of community.’²⁹⁸

Several interviewees described the overlapping of work and familial ties that Smith observed. LM Interviewee H describes how ‘a lot of families sort of followed on and worked there, you know. Your uncle works there, your dad works there, your granddad worked there, and you work there,’²⁹⁹ and LM Interviewee C recounts those employees she was related to: ‘all my brothers and my father, [husband’s] father, [husband] himself. Everybody we knew had a link with The Austin...’³⁰⁰ At one time, with so many workers living locally, colleagues were not

²⁹⁵ St. John’s Interviewee I57.

²⁹⁶ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee J94.

²⁹⁷ Quote is unreferenced to preserve the anonymity of the interviewee.

²⁹⁸ St. John’s Interviewee G60.

²⁹⁹ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee H13.

³⁰⁰ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee C107.

only friends but often also relatives and neighbours. SJ Community Interviewee A described how the plant once ‘felt like’ the community’s centre: ‘you either worked there or you knew someone who did...’³⁰¹

The Austin plant also dominated the area physically. SJ Interviewee A captures this:

‘Well, you used to come up the top of Longbridge... you know where you come up Longbridge Lane onto the main road, well right opposite there was a huge...well, the factory, I think that was... – I can never remember – I think that was North Works up there, but it was huge and it completely filled the area. And then there was factory all the way down Longbridge Lane to the main road. There was a huge car park on the right hand side of Longbridge Lane from where the few houses are after the station and all the rest of that area there was a huge car park. And there was the factory all down the side of Longbridge Lane from Sunbury Road onwards, from where the Greenlands Club is onwards, that was totally factory. Totally factory up Lickey Road. A lot of that up the top end was the office block, but, I mean, it was a huge, huge area that was covered.’³⁰²

But the factory was not only visibly dominant, but its rhythms affected those of the surrounding area. A repeatedly-told anecdote was the description of the area’s roads at the change of shifts. For example:

‘The traffic used to be terrible; when it was Rover leaving time you couldn’t move round here.’³⁰³

‘If we ever came on our bikes on a ride, you made sure you went anywhere near Lickey Road when it was the end of the day shift, you know, ’cause they used to *swarm* out of the gates, you know, you’d have got knocked over.’³⁰⁴

‘...as a kid I used to come home from school on my bike and I had to get through the mouth of Longbridge Lane [...] And it coincided with the 5 o’clock shift coming out, so I was coming back from school, 4 o’clock from the other side. And they would come out of the gate like a football crowd coming out, and just *surge* across the road and it was as far as the eye could

³⁰¹ St. John’s Community Interviewee A9.

³⁰² St. John’s Interviewee A105.

³⁰³ St. John’s Interviewee F126.

³⁰⁴ St. John’s Interviewee J26. Similar comments describing the busy streets when shifts changed at the factory were made by St. John’s Interviewee I57, Longbridge Methodist Community Interviewee D13 and in Longbridge Methodist Fieldnotes Entry 35.

see there were people, pushing across the road to get on coaches, to be driven home or trams and buses taking them everywhere.’³⁰⁵

The metaphor of the ‘heart’ used by planners is an appropriate one. In different ways, at different times during its history, local people experienced The Austin as setting its pace and rhythms, and bringing vitality - economic, social, physical and symbolic - to the area. However, the most potent symbol of The Austin’s dominance in community life is the difficulty many show in defining the area called ‘Longbridge.’ LM Interviewee E asserts, ‘it’s very difficult to know where Longbridge begins and where it ends.’³⁰⁶ LM Interviewee L describes ‘Longbridge’:

‘...what Longbridge has become is this area of housing that has built up in and around it [the factory]. But it doesn’t really have a centre. It doesn’t really have a focus. Doesn’t really have a beginning or an end. You know, there’s a parish of Longbridge but it’s a bit nefarious. Like I said, we’re called Longbridge [Methodist Church] but we’re really in Rednal, but then we also have... It is fair to call us Longbridge because we’re so close to the Longbridge Austin car works.’³⁰⁷

For many, ‘Longbridge’ is simply synonymous with The Austin plant. When asked where or what Longbridge is, SJ Interviewee C states ‘to me I’m afraid it’s the car factory.’³⁰⁸ LM Interviewee I comments, ‘I always classed it as one particular area. It was where the works was. I never saw it as an area within its own... People would say ‘Longbridge’ and everybody would just think of the works.’³⁰⁹ SJ Informant A describes ‘Longbridge’ as an ‘international brand,’³¹⁰ where ‘Longbridge isn’t an actual place, but the ‘L word’ draws

³⁰⁵ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee D108.

³⁰⁶ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee E46.

³⁰⁷ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee L20.

³⁰⁸ St. John’s Interviewee C16.

³⁰⁹ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee I59 and I60.

³¹⁰ St. John’s Fieldnotes Entry 13.

people in nationally.’³¹¹ LM Interviewee L summarises: ‘take the car manufacturing out of it, and you’re left with this thing called Longbridge that’s very hard to define.’³¹²

2.5.2 *The closure*

Occupying such a fundamental place within local life and history, when residents describe the closure of The Austin in 2005, a complex range of experiences and emotions are displayed. Naturally, many speak of the economic effects on the locality: the loss of jobs and unemployment³¹³, the impact on associated businesses³¹⁴ and residents needing to take work in a very different employment market,³¹⁵ often with less pay.³¹⁶ However, when questioned, numerous interviewees also stated that the impact of the closure proved less significant than anticipated - particularly in reference to the amount of local people made redundant at the time. Longbridge Methodist Interviewee H sums up the feelings of many:

‘I don’t honestly think it was as huge as we expected it to be when it closed, the impact.’³¹⁷

Indeed, several comment that, by the time of the closure, relatively few local residents were employed there, compared with the mass employment of before. Echoing the comments of others, LM Interviewee C remarks that ‘by the time it closed, a lot of the workers were not local people; they were people who’d come over from Halesowen and Dudley, you know, the Black Country, people from Coventry had come in. One or two were people who lived round

³¹¹ St. John’s Fieldnotes Entry 18.

³¹² Longbridge Methodist Interviewee L20.

³¹³ For example, St. John’s Interviewee H60 and Longbridge Methodist Interviewee I32.

³¹⁴ For example, Longbridge Methodist Interviewee B114 and Longbridge Methodist Community Interviewee A2.

³¹⁵ For example, Longbridge Methodist Interviewees K79 and H19.

³¹⁶ For example, Longbridge Methodist Interviewee P36.

³¹⁷ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee H13.

about but not many.’³¹⁸ Others observe that, by the time of the 2005 closure, employment numbers generally were vastly fewer than its heyday. Expressing the gradual separation of plant from locality, SJ Interviewee A comments how the plant ‘gradually kind of wound down, and when Rover went there was not the impact on the area I think that we expected it to be.’³¹⁹ LM Interviewee C summarises the experience of many of The Austin’s closure:

‘...the decline to be honest has been gradual rather than sudden.’³²⁰

Yet, contrasting with these pragmatic and economic-focussed observations of the closure is a counter-reaction, where many local residents employ very emotive language to describe the impact of the events of 2005. It was called ‘devastating,’³²¹ a ‘really, really sad time’³²² and something that ‘knocked the heart out of the area.’³²³ Others describe how it left people ‘depressed’³²⁴ and the area ‘on its knees.’³²⁵ Some express strong feeling about those who they feel contributed to the plant’s demise, including the Government,³²⁶ and BMW.³²⁷ Similarly, LM Interviewee J, although never working at The Austin, describes how ‘we had a thing about BMWs for a long time, because BMW let us down big time.’

Since the majority of interviewees and informants, and their families, were not directly affected by redundancy in 2005, such dramatic reactions display a strength of feeling towards

³¹⁸ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee C108. Similar remarks are made by St. John’s Interviewee E119 and St. John’s Community Interviewee D24.

³¹⁹ St. John’s Interviewee A90.

³²⁰ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee C108.

³²¹ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee B113. St. John’s Interviewee J26 also described how the 2005 closure has ‘devastated’ the area.

³²² St. John’s Interviewee G36.

³²³ St. John’s Interviewee J26.

³²⁴ Longbridge Methodist Community Interviewee B15 described how local people were ‘depressed’ and ‘very depressed.’ St. John’s Interviewee G36 also described how there were ‘so many people depressed and out of work.’

³²⁵ St. John’s Informant P, St. John’s Fieldnotes Entry 24.

³²⁶ Longbridge Methodist Community Interviewee A1; St. John’s Interviewee I58.

³²⁷ LM Interviewee J, although never working at The Austin, describes how ‘we had a thing about BMWs for a long time, because BMW let us down big time,’ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee J103.

the plant and its closure which is more than purely economic. Indeed, many simply found it incredulous that it had actually happened: ‘who ever would have thought Rover would close?’³²⁸ Through the difficulties it had faced, The Austin had always managed to continue: LM Interviewee H describes ‘every time it was almost on the brink and it suddenly magically, you know, came out of the ashes.’³²⁹ So, as SJ Interviewee B comments, the final closure was a ‘shock’ to many:

‘They thought, at least there’s going to be something here, no problem. They could never close the door completely. It never even entered their heads about closing completely.’³³⁰

The Austin was a sign of permanence, continuity and therefore future for the area. Although not reliant upon employment there, LM Interviewee M lost ‘stability’ through the closure:

‘But it was like some stability gone. Because it had been there such a long time, suddenly for that to go, that was quite a big change, isn’t it? It was something that I grew up knowing Rover was always there, and then suddenly something that’s always been there disappears.’³³¹

M’s comments hint at a symbolic power that the factory held locally. For some, such as LM Interviewee K, the closure is lamented as yet another loss for British, and Birmingham’s, industry.³³² For others, the plant’s symbolic resonance was more locally-focussed. For LM Interviewee P, the factory symbolised local heritage. They lament its demolition, commenting that it is ‘a shame that the history part of it [the area] has been washed out’ and that ‘such a big thing was there for so long and it just took seconds to get rid of it.’³³³ Indeed, many others comment on the speed of the demolition. When asked how the closure affected local people who were not employed at the plant, SJ Interviewee G expresses a loss of

³²⁸ Longbridge Methodist Community Interviewee C13

³²⁹ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee H26.

³³⁰ St. John’s Interviewee B38.

³³¹ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee M66.

³³² Longbridge Methodist Interviewee K63.

³³³ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee P49.

something significant (albeit difficult to articulate) to the area and a loss of familiarity common to all interviewees:

‘...I never worked there, [but] I got a sense of ‘oh this is part of the community’. And I felt very sad myself when they knocked the buildings down. And you just saw this vast space and... Yeah, I felt really sad because since I was, you know, I’ve been living here all my life and just to see that not there. [...] It’s kind of ‘oh gosh, that *was* a part of our community’. I mean, perhaps that kind of final thing, you know, with Rover all coming down was...that makes you think how much it did mean to the community, the people around here, how much it was part of them. ‘Cause at the time it was as if we’d lost...you know, it was like a bereavement all around the area.’³³⁴

Physically, when the ‘heartbeat’ of Longbridge stopped, the physical rhythms of local life changed too. As SJ Interviewee I said ‘it was a sad day when The Austin went, ‘cause it was always so busy and plenty of everything around.’³³⁵

2.5.3 *Towards post-industrialism: a long journey*

Although the closure of the plant in 2005 did not have the dramatic economic effects it would have had decades before, local residents tell a narrative of economic, social and cultural change experienced by the area with the waning fortunes of The Austin over the previous thirty years. Interviewees illustrate first-hand the complex economic and employment shifts and their effects noted by socio-economic theorists. Several describe the move from a large-scale production-based to a small-scale service based economy. This is neatly summed up by LM Interviewee I:

‘There’s no big employer’s round here... They’re warehouses, most of it now. The factory I worked for, that went bump. And they converted it into a warehouse. Whereas it used to employ 130 people, as a warehouse it employs a dozen.’³³⁶

³³⁴ St. John’s Interviewee G61. See also St. John’s Interviewee F125 and Longbridge Methodist Interviewees H14 and E57.

³³⁵ St. John’s Interviewee I60.

³³⁶ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee I33.

This Interviewee describes how many people now have ‘little jobs’, such as self-employment in window cleaning, plastering, painting and decorating, because ‘there’s just no big factories round here anymore, no big employment.’³³⁷ LM Community Interviewee A astutely acknowledges that, although the redevelopment promises to offer twice as many jobs as those made redundant in 2005, these will be very different to the manufacturing of The Austin.³³⁸

Many lament these changes: LM Interviewee H, exemplifies the feelings of many:

‘...I’m quite sad to see manufacturing go. Round here, there was that factory [The Austin] and there was Carrington’s and there was some other factories in Bromsgrove and, like, the Black Country. And there’s very little manufacturing in this country, which I think is quite sad because we haven’t got the skills now. All we’ve got the skills to do is to ask if you want fries with your McDonald’s...’³³⁹

H and others recognise that the new employment demands different skills to those traditionally possessed by local Austin workers. LM Interviewee K notes:

‘You know, if you’re a manager, you can go and manage Woolworths or... Whereas, if you know how to put widgets on a motor car, you know how to put widgets on a motor car. And it’s much more difficult to learn how to do something else.’³⁴⁰

Some tell anecdotes of redundant workers re-skilling and re-training,³⁴¹ and some, like LM Interviewee H note how this has offered exciting new opportunities for some, whilst others have found it difficult.³⁴² Such stories also describe a shift towards ‘poor work.’ Several commented that many of those made redundant now earn less in their new jobs.³⁴³ SJ Community Interviewee A also notes that not only do they miss the good pay, former Austin

³³⁷ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee I36.

³³⁸ Longbridge Methodist Community Interviewee A2.

³³⁹ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee H18. Longbridge Methodist Interviewees K83 and M66, and St. John’s Interviewee C31 also lament the loss of (British) manufacturing.

³⁴⁰ Longbridge Methodist K79.

³⁴¹ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee I36. See also Longbridge Methodist Community Interviewee A2 and Longbridge Methodist Interviewee H19.

³⁴² Longbridge Methodist Interviewee H19.

³⁴³ For example, see St. John’s Community Interviewees A5 and B9, Longbridge Methodist Interviewees H13, K84 and P36.

workers miss the good conditions and benefits that trade unions there fought for.³⁴⁴

Moreover, the new employment lacks the security of which Austin workers used to boast: LM

I summarises:

‘I think most people are in employment, but nobody’s in *certain* employment.’³⁴⁵

However, alongside employment changes experienced by local residents, people also narrate corresponding social and cultural changes. Many people describe the importance of ‘neighbourliness’ to the area, particularly in its past. SJ Informant A comments that ‘what has sustained the area is neighbourliness’, strong relationships and associations between near neighbours.³⁴⁶ Indeed, several people testify to the friendliness and support they continue to receive from their neighbours³⁴⁷ and make comments such as ‘if I need any help, if I’m stuck they’ll help me out’³⁴⁸ and ‘everyone knows each other.’³⁴⁹ Yet, there is also a prevailing attitude that ‘neighbourliness’ is being eroded. Discussing the area after the Second World War, longstanding resident SJ Interviewee I states:

‘Now, I mean, the neighbours, they were golden. You’d find them sitting out on the walls, you know, and having a natter in the afternoon, a cup of tea here and a cup of tea there. And if you were bad [ill], they’d come and look after the children. And there was a real community, you know. But all that’s gone. I don’t know half of the people that live in this road now. There’s only two of us - no three of us – who are originals.’³⁵⁰

³⁴⁴ St. John’s Community Interviewee A14.

³⁴⁵ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee I33.

³⁴⁶ St. John’s Fieldnotes Entry 12.

³⁴⁷ For example, Longbridge Methodist Community Interviewee C21, St. John’s Interviewee F130.

³⁴⁸ St. John’s Interviewee G49. Similar comments are made by St. John’s Interviewee H61, and Longbridge Methodist Community Interviewee C21.

³⁴⁹ St. John’s Fieldnotes Entry 23. Also, Longbridge Methodist Community Interviewee C21 commented how they ‘know everybody.’

³⁵⁰ St. John’s Interviewee I51.

Similarly, LM Interviewee A states ‘...I knew all the neighbours down the road and I couldn’t tell you who lives down the road hardly now.’³⁵¹ Even SJ Interviewee G, whilst still maintaining close links to their neighbours acknowledges some decline. They describe how, in the past:

‘...it was the type of place that just to walk from up here to up the top of the road it would take me ages, ’cause I’d bump into people... you know what I mean? It was a real community, um, place... And although it’s not to that extent, it’s still... I think we’ve still retained a lot of that.’

When asked what they believe has contributed to a loss of local neighbourliness, people describe the lifestyle changes associated with post-industrial society. Several comment that people today are busier,³⁵² particularly with work, and that a range of different shift patterns and ‘unsociable’ hours mean that neighbours often do not cross paths.³⁵³ LM Community Interviewee B6 describes this from personal experience.³⁵⁴ People note the contribution of the rise in women working. Typifying these ideas, and describing a loss of neighbourliness as a decline in ‘community spirit’, SJ Interviewee G comments:

‘I mean, we [local residents] have seen a lot of change but I think, but I think that’s partly due to, you know, changes in society – people are busier working, you know. It used to be that the wife was at home all day while the husband went to work and they’d [the wives] have a chat and a cup of tea together. I mean, we have a young couple next door to us who we don’t see, hardly at all. So I suppose I’ve seen... there is still community spirit but not to the extent there was when I was younger...’³⁵⁵

Alongside changed working patterns, several note that increased mobility has undermined local neighbourliness. LM Interviewee B comments:

³⁵¹ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee A100. An informant at Longbridge Methodist makes similar comments, describing how she does not see her neighbours and stating how ‘it’s not like it used to be where neighbours would pop into each other for a drink’, Longbridge Methodist Fieldnotes Entry 11.

³⁵² For example, St. John’s Interviewees H73 and G58, Longbridge Methodist Interviewees C63 and L11.

³⁵³ St. John’s Interviewee G58.

³⁵⁴ Longbridge Methodist Community Interviewee B6.

³⁵⁵ St. John’s Interviewee G49. Similar comments about how the rise of women working has contributed to social change locally are made by Longbridge Methodist C63 and St. John’s Fieldnotes Entry 37.

‘...I don’t know how, whether, neighbours are quite the same, you know, friendly... I think when people take their children to school [on foot], they get to know each other and are friendly, but I think in the days with the car, neighbours tend not to know each other in the same way.’³⁵⁶

Speaking from personal experience, LM Interviewee K described how mobility means that local space holds little significance for them:

‘We hardly know the names of any of our neighbours because when we’re here we’re *in* the house. When we’re not inside the house, we go to places. You know, we don’t actually spend that much time locally.’³⁵⁷

Illustrating the way that work and locality have gradually separated, LM Interviewee G directly links increased mobility with the decline of the factory:

‘As I said, the original population now have all died and there is now more mobility, particularly now the Rover has gone. People maybe working here, there and everywhere, whereas years ago it used to be they just walked down the road and they all lived round here. You used to see them streaming in their 1000s. Whereas now they have to go all over the place.’³⁵⁸

Further, SJ Community Interviewee A, describing how locals would once both live and work together, comments that the closure of The Austin ‘broke up community cohesion’ and that ‘friendships fell apart.’³⁵⁹ Here, ‘community’ refers to relationships between local people around a shared local identity, and echoes the sentiments of many who believe that, with the demise of The Austin, the area lacks a ‘focus’ or ‘centre’ to engender relationships and identity:

‘...Longbridge, it was built to serve a very big employer basically. Or a number of very big employers. They just aren’t there anymore. So it’s got this sort of, it’s still artisan housing but what’s the focus of the place? It’s not Cadbury’s, it’s not Austin. So you live here, but you’re going to commute somewhere for your work quite often. Commute or something...’³⁶⁰

³⁵⁶ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee B87.

³⁵⁷ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee K98.

³⁵⁸ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee G40.

³⁵⁹ St. John’s Community Interviewee A6.

³⁶⁰ St. John’s Interviewee K40.

‘The Rover obviously was a sort of focus for the community at one time.’³⁶¹

‘One of the things that’s coming out of this redevelopment is that’s going to be a centre to Longbridge. Well, there isn’t a centre there. Maybe it was the motor works in the past but can’t say there’s a centre there. It’s very difficult to know where Longbridge begins and where it ends.’³⁶²

That the economic and social lifestyles of the past have been radically destabilised in Longbridge over recent decades is demonstrated in a common and recurring concern for young people in the area. Particularly regarding their employment prospects, the demise of The Austin and other industries means young people lack secure and ready sources of work. Exemplifying the feelings of several, LM Interviewee H comments:

‘I’m not sure what it’s going to be like when those people come out of school at eighteen, nowhere to go, no jobs to go to. ’Cause, good or bad, at one time in this area, you came out of school and you went to work at The Austin or the Rover or whatever it was called at that particular stage. Or a lot of boys did. Or went into some apprenticeships...you know, there were lots of jobs like that.’³⁶³

LM Community Interviewee B believes there ‘aren’t any’ job prospects for young people³⁶⁴ and an informant at St. John’s declares ‘there’s nothing for them to do.’³⁶⁵ SJ Community Interviewee E perceives that unemployment, life on benefits and teenage pregnancy are very real options for young people now employment prospects have changed.³⁶⁶ With a lack of role models in attainable employment for young people, SJ Interviewee C expresses concern that worklessness could develop³⁶⁷ and LM Interviewee H believes there’s ‘a danger of

³⁶¹ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee G45.

³⁶² Longbridge Methodist Interviewee E46.

³⁶³ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee H12. Similar comments were made by St. John’s Community Interviewees A13 and E32, and St. John’s Interviewee C5.

³⁶⁴ Longbridge Methodist Community Interviewee B19.

³⁶⁵ St. John’s Fieldnotes Entry 23.

³⁶⁶ St. John’s Community Interviewee E32f.

³⁶⁷ St. John’s Interviewee C5.

getting a completely disinterested generation.’³⁶⁸ Young people are believed to lack a vision and direction for the future. SJ Interviewee B believes they need ‘something to do’, ‘a purpose in life, better goals, a better future, better ideals’³⁶⁹ and LM Interviewee M believes they are ‘lost’, without able people to direct them:

‘When you speak to young people nowadays – spoke to one - they seem a bit lost as though they haven’t got any plans for the future. They’re not aware they’re actually going – does that make sense? – going in a direction, whereas they seem to be leaving school and getting to that age and suddenly it’s ‘ok, what do I do now?’ [...] There doesn’t seem to be the support there for them, or anyone to guide them to say ‘what do you want to do? And this is how you can do it’.’³⁷⁰

SJ Interviewee C believes they lack ‘hope’. During the consultation about the redevelopment, they spoke of telling the redevelopers ‘you’ve got to put in more ideas of what do with the youth to give them some hope.’³⁷¹

2.5.4 *Imagining the future?*

Considering the economic, social and cultural changes faced by the local area in recent decades, and the prevailing concerns for young people, interviewees’ responses varied as to what they see for the future there, within around 10 years. A few, all of which were from Longbridge Methodist, did not envisage much change, with life continuing as now.³⁷² Some expressed concerns about and hopes for the future, such as for employment, young people and ‘community life.’³⁷³ But, however people feel about the future, they recognise that the

³⁶⁸ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee H12.

³⁶⁹ St. John’s Interviewee B14.

³⁷⁰ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee M82.

³⁷¹ St. John’s Interviewee C11.

³⁷² Longbridge Methodist Interviewees C132 and I54.

³⁷³ For example, St. John’s Interviewee C5 expresses concern about a change in working ethos following the decline of industry, St. John’s Interviewee H86 hopes for a ‘thriving community’ and Longbridge Methodist E67 describes the importance of addressing the needs of local young people in the future.

redevelopment of the former Austin site will play a role, in various ways. For some it is the deciding factor for the future. When asked what they saw for the area in ten year's time:

'I think we've got to wait and see how this area that's been demolished is redeveloped and what kind of effect that's going to have.'³⁷⁴

'Well, I think *if* the redevelopment goes through, it should affect everything.'³⁷⁵

'Depends very much on the redevelopment of the Rover site, doesn't it?'³⁷⁶

For others, the impact of the redevelopment is described less dramatically, but nonetheless all described their hopes for the site. The most common desire is that it brings economic regeneration, particularly through job opportunities for local people.³⁷⁷ However, some are more specific, recognising that jobs need to be of a different nature to large-scale manufacturing, focusing on new technologies, smaller-scale industry and opportunities for people to set up their own businesses.³⁷⁸ People also express a desire for something for the 'community' – a focus or facilities for the area, which The Austin itself used to give.³⁷⁹ LM Interviewee G comments that the redevelopment 'could give it [the area] a new heart and a new soul in it if they can get it going.'³⁸⁰ But also, in a contrast to what was there previously, and reflecting a consumer-based society, several people express a desire for shops. When asked what they would like to see on the redevelopment, LM Interviewee J neatly exclaims 'an Ikea and a Lidl!'³⁸¹ Similarly SJ Interviewee G declares 'I would say Ikea! No... or a

³⁷⁴ St. John's Interviewee A102.

³⁷⁵ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee E67.

³⁷⁶ St. John's Interviewee E135.

³⁷⁷ For example, the desire for new employment opportunities on the Austin site is described by St. John's Interviewees A94, B28, C4 and I66

³⁷⁸ St. John's Interviewee A94 and Longbridge Methodist Interviewee E63 call for employment centred on new technologies, and St. John's Interviewee J33 recognises the importance of smaller-scale industry. St. John's Interviewee J33 and Longbridge Methodist E63 both hope for opportunities for people to set up their own businesses.

³⁷⁹ St. John's Interviewees G64 and H86.

³⁸⁰ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee G50.

³⁸¹ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee J103.

great big Tesco's!' before quickly reiterating their desire 'to see something there for the community, definitely.'³⁸²

Whatever residents hope for the redevelopment, they express an overwhelming desire to see the work move forward. At the time of interview, three years after the closure of the plant, with the majority of the site demolished and the Area Action Plan not quite finalised, there is real frustration at the redevelopment's seemingly slow progress. SJ Interviewee A exemplifies the feelings of many:

'It seems to be taking an awful long time to get... It didn't take them long to pull it down but it's taken an awful long time to get things shifting to go.'³⁸³

LM Interviewee A asks 'why don't they get on with it now and do something with it anyhow.'³⁸⁴ For some, there is eagerness to see *something* replace the sight of the empty site.

LM Community Interviewee A feels that the start of building work will 'boost morale', and similarly SJ Interviewee J comments:

'Well, I think everybody's thinking, especially... that the sooner they get on with it and get something done instead of, you know, that great big empty space. It looks as if nobody cares for it anymore. You know, as if that's the end of the world...'³⁸⁵

Whilst some feel positively included in the redevelopment's consultation process, there is also a common sense of powerless about the site's future, for, ultimately, this is in others' control.

LM Interviewee H asserts 'There's always a 'they': 'they haven't done this and they haven't

³⁸² St. John's Interviewee G64.

³⁸³ St. John's Interviewee A90. Other comments expressing frustration at the slow pace of the work are given by Informant P in St. John's Fieldnotes Entry 24, St. John's Interviewees H83, I61 and J32, St. John's Community Interviewees A11 and F20, Longbridge Methodist Fieldnotes Entry 30, Longbridge Methodist Interviewees D116, E60, G48, H19 and J105, and Longbridge Methodist Community Interviewee D20.

³⁸⁴ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee A112.

³⁸⁵ St. John's Interviewee J32.

done that.’ This big ‘they’ haven’t done it and haven’t done it.’³⁸⁶ LM Interviewee L admits to being ‘slightly sceptical about what will happen, how it will end up, how long it will take and all those things.’³⁸⁷ Some say they won’t ‘hold their breath’ about the plans,³⁸⁸ whilst others wonder what will come to fruition after all that has been said about the redevelopment.³⁸⁹

Since Herbert Austin opened his factory in 1905, residents of the area have been affected by what has happened on that site. It was the major factor in the area’s residential growth, provided economic sustenance, nurtured social life and even conditioned the ways in which people physically experienced the area. Its subsequent decline brought changes for local people, in terms of employment, lifestyle and ‘community’ - relatedness to others, belonging in a place and local shared identity. Longbridge clearly demonstrates the changed and contested nature of the ‘local’ in contemporary urban experience – but has highlighted the particular intensity with which ‘working-class’, post-industrial areas experience it. Baker’s concept of the ‘hybridity’ of contemporary life, explored by him largely with reference to the post-colonial meeting of people of different cultures, has relevance, but with particular nuances for the largely white-British Longbridge. It has experienced the breakdown of a clear, stable class and employment structure which was tightly-woven into its socio-cultural habitus. Today, although the community may look similar to how it did, have a similar socio-economic profile, and, indeed, be home to many of the same residents, the gradual erosion of the underlying networks in an economically-flexible, mobile employment market has been especially disorienting. Here, ‘hybridity’ involves the loss of stability, neighbourliness and

³⁸⁶ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee H24.

³⁸⁷ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee L19.

³⁸⁸ St. John’s Community Interviewee A20 and Longbridge Methodist Interviewee H19.

³⁸⁹ St. John’s Interviewees A91 and E137, Longbridge Methodist Fieldnotes Entry 1.

shared ways of life upon which working-class experience was built. One could say that, for Longbridge, 'hybridity' raises questions less of people of *differing* identities, but of the co-existence of people who have *lost* their identity, and struggle to find a stable one in today's fluid socio-economic environment. Their environment is alien, economically, socially and physically. These are the issues to which the local churches must respond: questions of community and identity, stability and uncertainty, new life and hope.

With the redevelopment of the former factory site, the lives of local people are poised to change again, as once more, they area affected by the fortunes of the space commonly known as 'Longbridge.' As the planners state, the redevelopment will bring a 'new heart' for Longbridge, new rhythms, patterns and life for the local area. Although people are unsure of what 'new life' will come, positive or negative, the future redevelopment promises revival. Of the empty Austin site, SJ Interviewee J states:

'It needs to be filled, it needs to be energized. You know, it's...that land is dormant, almost, and it wants something to get it going again.'³⁹⁰

³⁹⁰ St. John's Interviewee J32.

CHAPTER THREE

NARRATING CHRISTIAN PRACTICE: TWO LOCAL CHURCHES

3.0 Introduction

Having explored the historical, social, economic and cultural features of the Longbridge context, this chapter will explore Christian practice of two local churches seeking to ‘faithfully perform the gospel’ there. These will be purely descriptive accounts, giving an historical and social background to each church before introducing the form, features and emerging themes in their life and practice, and highlighting the main experiences and sources that have shaped the life of each church. In the subsequent chapters, these descriptions, combined with the awareness of the context, will then give an account of the practical theology of each church and its significance within the post-industrial setting of Longbridge.

The churches examined in this research are two of the closest congregations to the former MG Rover site. The stories of both are woven with the story of the predominantly-industrial development of the area, yet they serve two relatively-discrete geographic areas with their own character, history and relationship to The Austin, separated by the Bristol Road, a main route out of the city.

3.1 The Parish Church of St. John Baptist, Longbridge

The Anglican church of St. John Baptist on Longbridge Lane has been home to a worshipping community since its consecration on 4th December 1957, which also saw the formal creation of the Parish of Longbridge, an area to the north and east of the former Austin site, directly bordering the main redevelopment land. In the history of the church, The Austin looms large.

As the area was being transformed from rural area to industrial suburb to serve the growing factory, here Herbert Austin built the ‘Austin Village’ in 1917, which began the residential expansion. The 1920s and 1930s saw further homes built to the north-east of the plant, and with significant municipal home building in the post-Second World War period, the transformation was complete. Coupled with the expansion of The Austin, requiring better transport links for employees and materials, it is industrial development that local histories (including, a church-produced history) cite as the main factor that has shaped the area.³⁹¹

St. John’s has its roots in the mission ‘Church of the Epiphany’, built in 1918 as a daughter church of St. Nicholas’, King’s Norton, the closest town, to serve the factory workers on the Austin Village. It is described by St. John’s in a later history as a centre for worship, social events and welfare for the burgeoning community.³⁹² The 1920s and 1930s saw the emergence of a house church at 10 Coombs Lane, in the residential developments there. This was soon subsumed into The Epiphany and is remembered informally amongst participants of St. John’s.

However, by the 1950s, the major development of the area necessitated the formation of a new parish with a permanent Anglican church building. In 1956, work began on St. John’s, one of six churches built in an initiative of Birmingham Diocese called ‘Circles without Centres’, to build churches for the new estates built post-War.

³⁹¹ For example, The Parish Church of St. John Baptist Longbridge, *The Parish Church of St. John Baptist Longbridge: Silver Jubilee*, p. 6; Derek Walker, ‘The 20th Century’, *A Very Concise History of Northfield*, (<http://rtubb.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/northfield/7.htm>, accessed 26/10/12).

³⁹² The Parish Church of St. John Baptist Longbridge, *The Parish Church of St. John Baptist Longbridge: Silver Jubilee*, p. 6.

Continuing the work of The Epiphany to be a spiritual and social resource for the community, churches like St. John's were to provide 'centres' for these newly-created sprawling neighbourhoods, which were perceived to lack cohesion, relatedness and unity. Indeed, the Parish of Longbridge³⁹³ lacks a coherent geographic logic and unity, and has increasingly done so as the area's development continued. Today, whilst the Bristol Road and the former Longbridge plant site provide clear boundaries to the south and west, the northern and eastern edges are less natural and clear, arbitrarily bisecting the sprawling housing estates, and incorporating parts of Northfield, West Heath and Turves Green. Whilst the parish has two small parades of shops, there is no clearly-defined centre to the locality, no 'high street', and today, the 'community spaces' in the parish are three social clubs, two pubs, a community hall, a dentist, medical centre, five schools (drawing children from a wider area), a Baptist church and Christadelphian and Jehovah's Witness meeting halls, all of which are geographically-spread across the parish. A survey of places in which the congregation do their main shopping indicated that all except one regularly travel outside the parish.³⁹⁴ So, although the parish may be called 'Longbridge', the term does not imply a defined community. One resident described how the parish is called 'Longbridge' and contains Longbridge train station, yet it is in Northfield Ward not Longbridge Ward, and does not contain Longbridge Post Office.³⁹⁵ As shown, for many, the term simply refers to the car plant.

³⁹³ A map of the Parish of St. John Baptist Longbridge, also showing its location in relation to The Austin redevelopment site, can be found at A Church Near You, *St. John the Baptist Longbridge: Find Us* (<http://www.achurchnearyou.com/longbridge-st-john-the-baptist/>, accessed 5/12/12)

³⁹⁴ The congregational questionnaire demonstrated that church participants are not unified in which larger centre they relate to outside the parish. The most frequently-cited areas in which they do their main shopping are Rubery (cited by 40% of respondents), Northfield (38%) and Redditch (27%). Many respondents gave more than one answer to the question.

³⁹⁵ St. John's Fieldnotes Entry 7.

In its early days, St. John's indeed provided spiritual and social opportunities for the community to come together. It held three Sunday services and one mid-week communion, and hosted varied activities, such as Scouts and Cubs, Guides and Brownies, Women's Fellowship, Young Communicants and Old Time Dance, some of which continue today. Naturally, as the parish church, it was also a centre for pastoral offices: in 1963, 120 infant baptisms were conducted.³⁹⁶ The local-centredness of the vision for St. John's remains today. Serving a parish of around 8000 residents, it continues to hold events and activities for all ages, such as a club for 7-11 year olds, Parents and Toddlers and two Women's Fellowship groups. The church supports a local Youth Project and the vicar regularly visits local schools. Whilst mainly run by non-worshipping volunteers, Scouts, Guides and Brownies still bear St. John's name and are hosted on church premises. Similarly, whilst numerically reduced from the 1960s (in common with national trends), St. John's remains a centre for pastoral offices: in 2008, 20 baptisms, 5 weddings, 31 funerals (whether in church or at the crematorium) were conducted by the church. Worship continues to be the focal point, with two Sunday services (8.30am Holy Communion and 10.30am 'Family Service'), and two mid-week communions. This emphasis on the parish is reflected in a congregation that is similarly geographically-focussed. Of the members of the 2008 electoral roll, 75% are resident in the parish, and of the respondents of the congregational questionnaire, 83% defined themselves as living in the church's immediate locality, with another 8% having previously lived locally. In accordance with the Anglican parish model of church, which relates religious belonging and locality, when asked why they started attending St. John's, half of those who answered cited that it was the nearest church as a reason.

³⁹⁶ This figure is cited by John Morris, *Report to Bishop from John Morris 8th May 1964*, 1964, p. 8.

However, in contrast to the rhetoric of the early years, of a church intimately-bound with the parish, today, although living locally and retaining a ‘local vision’, the congregation does not necessarily reflect contextual characteristics. The congregation is female-dominated (70% of questionnaire respondents), compared with roughly equal numbers living locally. Today it also has an older age-profile: 79% of questionnaire respondents were over 60, whilst the 2001 Census showed that less than a quarter of parish residents were in that category.³⁹⁷ Most notably, St. John’s congregation has few children: whilst no questionnaires were completed by anyone under 20, attendance at the Sunday children’s groups run during the 10.30am Sunday ‘Family Service’ averages three.

Given the changes in working patterns that the locality has experienced with de-industrialisation, the older age-profile of the congregation, and its largely-female congregation, means that generally they will have had a very different work experience to those in the parish. Today, 8% of the congregation work full-time, 8% part time with 73% retired, compared with 29%, 9% and 10% respectively locally³⁹⁸ – although the factory closure and the economic recession will have affected this since the 2001 Census from which these figures come. Whilst a cluster of congregation members worked at The Austin, and many others in associated industries or with familial connections, the predominance of retired people in the congregation and the numerical decline local people employed at the plant, meant that when MG Rover collapsed in 2005, less than a handful of the congregation were directly affected. However, the church had remained indirectly involved in The Austin: in the last years of its life, the vicar was also chaplain to the plant, supported workers through the

³⁹⁷ All data given is for the Parish of Longbridge held by the Diocese of Birmingham and taken from the 2001 Census, Diocese of Birmingham, *2001 Census data for the Parish of Longbridge*.

³⁹⁸ Figures are for the percentage of 16-74 year olds, Diocese of Birmingham, *2001 Census data*.

closure, and, during the fieldwork, sat on local committees and community groups involved in the redevelopment and continuing support of the area post-closure.

3.1.1 Stability and continuity

It is commonly-perceived that the area has a generally stable population: Community Interviewee E comments that ‘people do not move from that one area,’³⁹⁹ and Informant A described a ‘stable rump’ of people living locally, often also with extended family close by.⁴⁰⁰ Its older profile means that St. John’s also displays this strong local rootedness. Those who live locally (the vast majority) have done so for an average of 44 years, with nearly two thirds, 65%, of people living there for more than 40 years, and 28% for more than 50 years. They are therefore deeply aware of the development of the area: Interviewee A describes first-hand how the area looked when the present church building was opened:

‘...there were houses on the... the side where Edenhurst [Road] and Thursletone [Road] is, on that side of Longbridge Lane – Coombes Lane - that was there, but there wasn’t a great deal between the Austin Estate [i.e. the Austin village] and Longbridge Lane.’⁴⁰¹

Reflecting the congregation’s rootedness in the area is a similar sense of stability within the church. Not only does St. John’s have an older congregation, attenders have done so for many years, with the average length of attendance being 30 years, but with a significant 15% attending for over 50 years - practically the whole life of the church. Consequently, not only are participants aware of the locality’s development, they are also very aware of the ‘St. John’s story’, from its origins in The Epiphany to today: through a strong collective memory, Informant A commented that even people who were not present when the church opened still

³⁹⁹ St. John’s Community Interviewee E43.

⁴⁰⁰ St. John’s Fieldnotes Entry 5.

⁴⁰¹ St. John’s Interviewee A83.

feel they know the ‘story’ well.⁴⁰² This is a congregation which is vitally aware of the intimate link between church and community: whether experiencing it personally, or having heard the narratives of those who did, participants know how they have developed alongside each other. Interviewee K comments that ‘it never ceases to amaze me that nearly everything around here is about the same age as St. John’s.’⁴⁰³

The stability and continuity within the congregation is exacerbated by the small number of vicars the church has had: just four since 1957, with the present in post since 2001 and the longest serving for 29 years, from 1964 to 1993. These elements combine to create what the church perceives as a difficulty managing change - a recurring theme throughout the ethnography. Interviewee G describes a ‘resistance to change,’⁴⁰⁴ whilst Interviewee A describes how ‘a lot of us don’t like change.’⁴⁰⁵ Change means loss, as Interviewee B comments:

‘You do get that attitude somewhat, when people are stuck and they don’t want to change. [...] They don’t want to embrace change because they feel it’s not for them and they feel they’d be losing what they’ve got already...’⁴⁰⁶

However, the stability of the congregation has also nurtured a tightly-knit fellowship. When asked what they liked about the church, over half of questionnaire respondents described an aspect of fellowship or friendliness, with some describing a rootedness or belonging, with comments like ‘I feel I belong here’ and ‘it’s my church.’ Many describe the church in homely, familial terms: Interviewee A describes St. John’s as ‘almost like an extension of my

⁴⁰² St. John’s Fieldnotes Entry 4.

⁴⁰³ St. John’s Interviewee K11.

⁴⁰⁴ St. John’s Interviewee G16.

⁴⁰⁵ St. John’s Interviewee A108.

⁴⁰⁶ St. John’s Interviewee B11.

family really,’⁴⁰⁷ Interviewee G as ‘just like a big family really’⁴⁰⁸ and Interviewee I says it ‘seems like a second home.’⁴⁰⁹ When asked what is important to people at St. John’s, Interviewee G replied ‘belonging and family. And it’s definitely a social thing as well.’⁴¹⁰ This fellowship has been a valuable support: ‘there are so many wonderful people there that I’ve found that were there for me when I needed them.’⁴¹¹ The friendship between participants is tangible within services: for example, the Peace is a significant part of each communion service - not ending until every person has greeted everyone else.

3.1.2 Commitment and participation

The stability of the congregation has been fostered by, and has fostered further, a culture which values commitment, whether of time, talents, energy or finances. This ethos has been central to St. John’s since its beginning, with a key symbol being the Regular Giving Plan, a home grown-initiative still in operation conceived in the church’s first years to ensure regular financial income. Members pledge an agreed sum for the maintenance of the church and its work, including a serious commitment to regular overseas charitable giving. Alongside the RGP, early in the church’s life, teams of people were established to ensure the undertaking of tasks necessary to run the church. In his report to the 1962 annual Parish Meeting, the first vicar described the ‘large number of us at work in St. John’s’⁴¹² whilst in 1967, the second vicar explained that the church was ‘by no means short of layworkers,’ applauding their loyalty.⁴¹³ So significant were these initiatives that recalling ‘memorable occasions’ from the life of St. John’s, a booklet produced on its 25th anniversary in 1982 listed the RGP first and

⁴⁰⁷ St. John’s Interviewee A51.

⁴⁰⁸ St. John’s Interviewee G12.

⁴⁰⁹ St. John’s Interviewee I14.

⁴¹⁰ St. John’s Interviewee G14.

⁴¹¹ St. John’s Interviewee G12.

⁴¹² John Morris, *Vicar’s Report*, for Parish Meeting, Parish Church of St. John Baptist, Longbridge, 1962.

⁴¹³ John Oakes, *Postscript*, in Minutes of Parish Meeting, Parish Church of St. John Baptist, Longbridge, 1967.

describing the annual ‘Stewardship Suppers’ ‘held for both new and existing members of the plan.’⁴¹⁴

The valuing of commitment continues today. The maintenance, cleaning and catering teams remain very active. Attendance at services is frequent and regular: 83% of questionnaire respondents attend at least weekly, and a further 15% several times a month. A significant number – 13% – choose to attend both Sunday services, and several more attend midweek also. When asked how they would describe the church to someone unfamiliar with it, Interviewee G said:

‘I’d describe it as a church which is... consists of lots of committed people. Whether it’s committed to the jobs they do or whatever. People do give their all, seem to give their all at St. John’s.’⁴¹⁵

Echoing the words of the vicar in the 1960s, this language of employment emerged often: Interviewee C described how ‘everybody there is ever so competent... They can all do their job exceptionally well,’⁴¹⁶ and Interviewee I, comparing them with others, describes another participant as ‘a worker.’⁴¹⁷ When a service was cancelled, it was described as ‘an evening off,’⁴¹⁸ and Interviewee I, demonstrates a sense of duty to the church, described how they ‘felt guilty not being there.’⁴¹⁹ However, Informants A and F demonstrate how this duty is driven by genuine love for the church. When discussing the beauty of the immaculately-kept church building, F says ‘there’s a lot of love in this church... A lot of care been taken over it... You can feel it... it almost oozes out of the walls.’⁴²⁰

⁴¹⁴ The Parish Church of St. John Baptist Longbridge, *The Parish Church of St. John Baptist Longbridge: Silver Jubilee*, p. 10.

⁴¹⁵ St. John’s Interviewee G12.

⁴¹⁶ St. John’s Interviewee C37.

⁴¹⁷ St. John’s Interviewee I12.

⁴¹⁸ St. John’s Fieldnotes Entry 34.

⁴¹⁹ St. John’s Interviewee I14.

⁴²⁰ St. John’s Fieldnotes Entry 20.

In this culture of commitment and contributing, longevity and long-service is highly regarded. Interviewee E describes ‘as time goes by, you get more and more involved; you get roped into doing more things and we’re now quite heavily involved.’⁴²¹ However, although many experience it as a welcoming and loving fellowship, it can take time for newcomers to penetrate fully into the church. Interviewee H comments that ‘when I first came to St. John’s, I felt...for a long time that I wasn’t part of St. John’s.’⁴²²

At St. John’s there is a tendency to equate belonging there with ‘doing and giving.’⁴²³ The most potent demonstration of this is the language of ‘membership’, which has been used since the very beginning of the church. ‘Members’ are those who regularly attend, and with membership come expectations towards commitment of one’s resources for the good of the church and its work. Interviewee K describes the church as a ‘club’, albeit ‘a very friendly open club and ‘please come and join us and you’ll quickly learn what rules there are’.⁴²⁴ Indeed, there was occasional evidence of tensions between the open parish model of church and this tighter sense of membership. Interviewee I describes her reaction when some local people refused to give to a church fundraising campaign:

‘But I thought, ‘no, but you’d want the three services – you’d want the baptism, the marriage and the funeral.’ But no, they don’t think that somebody has got to work hard to keep that church going.’⁴²⁵

⁴²¹ St. Johns Interviewee E2.

⁴²² St. John’s Interviewee H28.

⁴²³ St. John’s Interviewee A51.

⁴²⁴ St. John’s Interviewee K8.

⁴²⁵ St. John’s Interviewee I17.

3.1.3 *'Feeling fragile'*

However, St. John's feels that its vision of a stable community of people with strong local roots, upheld by caring fellowship and committed participation, is threatened. Most prominently, the congregation is concerned about numerical decline. Informant N describes how they have (numerically) 'seen this church go down and down,'⁴²⁶ and during the researcher's first visit to a Sunday service, one participant described how 'these pews used to be full, but now people are dying and no one is coming in.'⁴²⁷ When describing the changes seen in the church's history, several interviewees emphasised reduced numbers attending worship: Interviewee A responds 'the main thing of course was that there was a lot more people there.'⁴²⁸ Interviewee I, describing the church's early years, characterised it as 'absolutely packed.'⁴²⁹

In 2008, combined numbers for the Sunday services averaged 66 meaning that sustainability under its current model is challenged. Financially, income from the Regular Giving Plan no longer covers basic church expenses, and extra fundraising is required.⁴³⁰ Further, the older age-profile brings restrictions: despite willingness, Interviewee J comments that 'everybody is that much older and hasn't necessarily got the energies to do things.'⁴³¹ Interviewee E similarly describes how 'an ageing congregation' means 'the ability of that congregation to go out and do things is very limited.'⁴³² Interviewee C explains 'the church, as a community church, isn't big enough. And we're getting smaller by the day almost, as everybody's been

⁴²⁶ St. John's Fieldnotes Entry 17.

⁴²⁷ St. John's Fieldnotes Entry 6.

⁴²⁸ St. John's Interviewee A36.

⁴²⁹ St. John's Interviewee I5.

⁴³⁰ St. John's Interviewee D18.

⁴³¹ St. John's Interviewee J9.

⁴³² St. John's Interviewee E45.

ill and dying off.’⁴³³ The church, as Informant A describes, is ‘feeling fragile,’⁴³⁴ and the congregation laments its lost past. When asked what they considered to be the greatest need or weakness of St. John’s, the most common responses concerned the need to grow numerically, or attract younger people.⁴³⁵ Perceived to be most at risk is the community surrounding the 8.30am service, already smaller in number and older in age-profile. However in a culture where longevity is valued, this congregation is also home to those Informant A describes as the ‘big players’⁴³⁶ in the church.

But numerical decline is not simply linked to the ageing profile of the church, nor is it perceived to affect only services. Both Tuesday Club and Women’s Fellowship, two women’s groups in existence for several decades, whilst appreciated by many, fail to attract the young women and mothers they once aimed to. However, most potent in participant’s minds is the decline in young people engaging with church. Describing the children’s activities which happen in the church hall during Sunday services, Interviewee J remembers how there was once ‘so many’ children that they could not begin the service with the adults in the church before going to their activities as they do now.⁴³⁷ Similarly, there is concern about falling numbers at Buccaneers, a mid-week group for 7-11 year olds, the majority of which are not regular worshippers.⁴³⁸

Numerical decline has intensified the church’s ethos of commitment. Participants, particularly those more physically-able, are under pressure to commit time and energy to

⁴³³ St. John’s Interviewee C42.

⁴³⁴ St. John’s Fieldnotes Entry 16.

⁴³⁵ Around 40% of questionnaire respondents who answered that question.

⁴³⁶ St. John’s Fieldnotes Entry 3.

⁴³⁷ St. John’s Interviewee J2.

⁴³⁸ St. John’s Fieldnotes Entry 7.

sustain church life. Encouraging people to contribute to necessary tasks, Informant A said ‘I know we’re all ‘aarrgh, numbers are dropping,’ but we need people to serve on the rotas!’⁴³⁹ However, whilst commitment and participation is still promoted, people also perceive a resistant counter-trend. Several participants voiced dissatisfaction when some are reticent to get involved. Interviewee H comments ‘nobody seems to want to do anything.’⁴⁴⁰ When asked what a weakness of the church is, Interviewee I replied ‘not offering, not volunteering,’⁴⁴¹ ‘it’s all sort of ‘somebody else will do it’, you know. They can’t put themselves out, and that does annoy me.’⁴⁴² When asked what they wished was different at the church, Interviewee A comments:

‘...the thing that I wish is that people would not be ...quite often I think they are quite apathetic and they... always think ‘oh well somebody else will do that’. And that annoys me a bit because quite often they’ve got just as much ability to do things as the other people. They are expecting other people to do things. They are expecting the facilities and the... organizations and things to be there but they don’t actually want to contribute to them.’⁴⁴³

Although possibly exacerbated by lower overall numbers of participants, some see this as a recent cultural trend. Interviewee J exclaims:

‘I think it’s very sad that people nowadays don’t seem to be prepared to commit themselves. You know, they’ll join in things and come if somebody else organizes them, but as for... initiating them and starting something new, they don’t want to.’⁴⁴⁴

Indeed, many perceive difference in attitudes to church participation between older and younger people. Interviewee I asserts ‘some of we old ones, we can show the young ones

⁴³⁹ St. John’s Fieldnotes Entry 11.

⁴⁴⁰ St. John’s Interviewee H21.

⁴⁴¹ St. John’s Interviewee I15.

⁴⁴² St. John’s Interviewee I16.

⁴⁴³ St. John’s Interviewee A55.

⁴⁴⁴ St. John’s Interviewee J9.

what can be done.’⁴⁴⁵ They describe the resolve and resilience of older people compared to the young: in a bout of bad weather, there were more people at the smaller, ‘older’ 8.30am service compared with the larger, ‘younger’, 10.30am, because, as Interviewee I asserts, ‘the old ones had made an effort to get there.’⁴⁴⁶ Similarly Interviewee H, frustrated when people do not actively contribute and lighten the load for the whole, explains that ‘there’s a lot that aren’t able bodied, really, that still do things.’⁴⁴⁷

Some believe this is associated with recent social, lifestyle and employment changes. Interviewee A questions ‘whether people have got much wider lives now and so they... you know, they are going off in other directions doing other things.’⁴⁴⁸ Community Interviewee D, describing similar patterns of ageing and decreasing participation in other local churches, explained how older people were doing tasks for the younger people, asking ‘has life at work changed so much?’⁴⁴⁹ Additionally, the changing nature of women’s work was cited by many – possibly because of the dominance of women in the congregation – as significant. A group of women discussing shrinking and ageing congregations across several local churches made comments such as ‘[women’s] way of life is so different to ours’, ‘out at work so late’ and ‘taking the kids here, there and everywhere.’⁴⁵⁰ After Informant S described St. John’s as ‘an older person’s church’, the researcher asked ‘is the area mainly older folk?’ Informant S replied, ‘no, there’s all ages. But they [younger people] just don’t want to come. With the mother working... the weekend is the only time they get a rest or a lie in.’⁴⁵¹

⁴⁴⁵ St. John’s Interviewee I43.

⁴⁴⁶ St. John’s Interviewee I43.

⁴⁴⁷ St. John’s Interviewee H21.

⁴⁴⁸ St. John’s Interviewee A55.

⁴⁴⁹ St. John’s Community Interviewee D36.

⁴⁵⁰ St. John’s Fieldnotes Entry 8.

⁴⁵¹ St. John’s Fieldnotes Entry 7.

However, this apparent unwillingness to contribute to church life concerns more than the practicalities of time and energy. A number of participants, particularly those younger than the congregational average, display dissatisfaction with the ‘commitment’ model of church. Interviewee F describes a difficult time, when ‘it was all just getting too much, ’cause every time I was going, I was doing something. And there wasn’t any time to go and just be, be there.’⁴⁵² Some describe how the demand to undertake tasks actually prevents them from worshipping. Interviewee E asserts how ‘it’s nice just to go and worship and be able to get your mind set on what you’re actually doing in the service, rather than concentrating... ‘where’ve I got to be next...?’⁴⁵³ Interviewee H comments, when undertaking many tasks, they do not feel they ‘can’t get anything out of the service.’⁴⁵⁴ When asked why younger people are apparently less willing to get involved, H replied ‘I think people just want to come and go.’⁴⁵⁵ H seeks more flexibility in the ways people can choose to engage with church: ‘you need people there to do things, but it’s ok for people not to as well. Because I think that’s the way they want to worship and that’s how they feel close to God...’⁴⁵⁶ Similarly, Interviewee F affirms different ways of church belonging, asserting that ‘people’s faith in God can be broad and they just show it in different ways. I don’t think one way is right or wrong; it’s just right or wrong for you. And what you’re comfortable with.’⁴⁵⁷

These tensions between commitment and flexibility are most evident in discussions about a growing church nearby, mentioned because it contrasts with St. John’s in its ability to attract large numbers. Because of its size, Interviewee F celebrates how participants have ‘the

⁴⁵² St. John’s Interviewee F8.

⁴⁵³ St. John’s Interviewee E22.

⁴⁵⁴ St. John’s Interviewee H21.

⁴⁵⁵ St. John’s Interviewee H25.

⁴⁵⁶ St. John’s Interviewee H32.

⁴⁵⁷ St. John’s Interviewee F74.

opportunity to lose yourself’ without being asked ‘to do anything.’⁴⁵⁸ Moreover, they affirm church belonging based on personal preference rather than a sense of obligation or duty: ‘everybody’s different and it’s obviously what fits them and suits them, you know.’⁴⁵⁹ However, Interviewee E, wrestles with this perceived focus on self-satisfaction, implying that ‘having a good time’ is not necessarily ‘worship’:

‘I wonder if people go to somewhere like [growing church] on the back of the bandwagon, if you like, because it’s a good time. Rather than to worship God.’⁴⁶⁰

Discussing the same church, Interviewee G expresses a real struggle between a desire for self-satisfaction and commitment to St. John’s. They recognise that the other church could offer much: ‘it’s like if you go and buy something, you want the exact thing that you’re after.’⁴⁶¹ However, ‘that’s no reason to just go up and leave to the church that’s thriving.’⁴⁶² Having visited this other church, they assert:

‘I did enjoy the services there and I can see why everybody’s going to those churches. But... but I’m just a little campaigner really: ‘save our church’. But if we go, ok, maybe we’re fighting a losing battle maybe, but we don’t want to give...really...think that. We want to keep our church going for as much and as long as we can. But I do get sad ’cause I do think, you know... [We] could be having so much fun.’⁴⁶³

As G indicates, many question what the future holds for St. John’s. About the numerical decline of Sunday attendance, Interviewee H asks ‘if it keeps going down, then what will happen to the church?’⁴⁶⁴ Some are completely pessimistic, finding envisioning the church’s future near impossible. When asked what they see in around ten year’s time:

⁴⁵⁸ St. John’s Interviewee F113.

⁴⁵⁹ St. John’s Interviewee F69.

⁴⁶⁰ St. John’s Interviewee E77.

⁴⁶¹ St. John’s Interviewee G41.

⁴⁶² St. John’s Interviewee G41.

⁴⁶³ St. John’s Interviewee G41.

⁴⁶⁴ St. John’s Interviewee H36.

‘I’m afraid it won’t be there. I can’t see that they’re all going to be there. If I was churchwarden the first thing I would do is shut the place because I just don’t think it’s viable.’⁴⁶⁵

‘Well, there are people at the church who say maybe our church is dying... I do worry about that because I think ‘where are we going?’⁴⁶⁶

‘I think we’d be lucky to have a church. Because it’s... congregation’s dwindling.’⁴⁶⁷

Participants recognise a vital need for the congregation to grow. Some are baffled as to how: Interviewee I says ‘there’s nothing I can see that I can do to make it any better.’⁴⁶⁸ However, many others assert that, to survive, the church *must* change. Some talk in terms of making church life more appealing to people: Interviewee B comments ‘we’ve got to make ourselves more attractive to them.’⁴⁶⁹ Here, B recognises that a fundamental change has taken place in the way that local residents relate to the church. They comment:

‘...I do feel that the Church of England hasn’t really projected itself outwards to try and welcome more people in; it’s always relied on people just coming through the door – the footfall coming through the door. Well, that footfall is getting smaller and smaller now, so things have to change now.’⁴⁷⁰

Interviewee B observes the decline in natural traffic between the locality and the congregation, through worship and pastoral offices. Whilst remaining a parish church that is a spiritual and community resource for the local area, today participants feel there is a chasm between the community and the church, which requires creative thinking to overcome. Interviewee K comments ‘we’re a bit of a mystery building,’⁴⁷¹ whilst Interviewee J states that ‘you need something to – and I don’t know what it is – to join the community to the

⁴⁶⁵ St. John’s Interviewee C43.

⁴⁶⁶ St. John’s Interviewee G41.

⁴⁶⁷ St. John’s Interviewee H45.

⁴⁶⁸ St. John’s Interviewee I48. Similarly, Informant GA believes that the church’s difficulty is that they do not know how to attract young people, St. John’s Fieldnotes Entry 23.

⁴⁶⁹ St. John’s Interviewee B10.

⁴⁷⁰ St. John’s Interviewee B10.

⁴⁷¹ St. John’s Interviewee K17.

church. You know, there seems to be a block.⁴⁷² When asked how they think local people view the church, Interviewee G answers ‘I think for lots of people I don’t think the church has a role,’⁴⁷³ whilst Interviewee H states that ‘they wouldn’t sort of associate it with going to church. It’s just a building...’⁴⁷⁴ When asked what they thought St. John’s was there to do or be, many described how it ‘helps people to worship God.’⁴⁷⁵ Today, however, local people appear not to want this service. To the same question, Interviewee B replied ‘well, it was a centre of worship in the area, wasn’t it? And I think a lot of people went there years ago because it was *the* place to go.’ But now, ‘times have changed...people have changed.’⁴⁷⁶

Consequently, many recognise the importance of a new approach in relating to the community. Many describe how the church must now ‘reach out’ to the locality. Interviewee E comments ‘I don’t think we’re very good at outreach. We don’t go out into the community very much.’⁴⁷⁷ Interviewee A asserts ‘we’ve got to be very open in our approach – we can’t be like a...well, we mustn’t be like a closed community... And we’ve got to be open to fresh ideas.’⁴⁷⁸ Interviewee K describes how St. John’s needs to be ‘open to the community more,’⁴⁷⁹ citing, alongside several others, that using the church hall in more and new ways could help:

‘We would have to use the building in creative ways; we’ll have to try and get the hall more to the service of the community, rather than just the church hall, to sustain the existence of the church financially and spiritually and in all sorts of ways.’⁴⁸⁰

⁴⁷² St. John’s Interviewee J17.

⁴⁷³ St. John’s Interviewee G27.

⁴⁷⁴ St. John’s Interviewee H43.

⁴⁷⁵ St. John’s Interviewee G21.

⁴⁷⁶ St. John’s Interviewee B15.

⁴⁷⁷ St. John’s Interviewee E150.

⁴⁷⁸ St. John’s Interviewee A108.

⁴⁷⁹ St. John’s Interviewee K17.

⁴⁸⁰ St. John’s Interviewee K17.

Participants at St. John's recognise that the model of church it previously employed is being challenged, and must be reviewed if it is to move confidently into the future. Whilst some participants struggle with envisioning a different way, puzzled as to why it no longer works, others are beginning to imagine a church attractive to outsiders, possibly with a broader sense of belonging. Returning to the parish-centred vision established when it was built, St. John's recognises that the future of the church rests upon how it interacts with its local community.

As Interviewee A comments when asked where the church will be in ten years time:

‘A lot of it depends on people outside the church, I think; depends on what people outside the church think about the church.’⁴⁸¹

3.2 Longbridge Methodist Church

Longbridge Methodist Church began in 1938 and, from 1967, has fronted the busy Bristol Road South, a major route into Birmingham and out of the city. Whilst St. John's parish is to the north-west, Longbridge Methodist is situated half a mile west of the redevelopment land, and at the time of research facing the empty site of the MG Rover West Works. Next to a parade of shops and opposite 'Great Park' retail and leisure park, behind this bustling front is Rednal, a residential estate, and to the west is Rubery with its own high street and shops. The area is on the very edge of Birmingham – the border of Birmingham and Worcestershire falls through Rubery – and is surrounded by countryside, notably the Lickey and Waseley Hills.

This area, again, experienced its biggest growth in the past 100 years. After centuries dominated by agriculture, by the early 1900s, the area was showing signs of residential and industrial development. Rubery was fast becoming a 'well-defined village'⁴⁸² and 'a rising

⁴⁸¹ St. John's Interviewee A78.

⁴⁸² Tupling, p. 1.

commercial neighbourhood.⁴⁸³ An asylum and industries, including the growing car plant, brought employment opportunities. Transport links were improving and Birmingham was reaching ever-further into the suburbs. The inter-war period saw a flurry of building, particularly on the 'Rednal Triangle', the area behind the church's current position bounded by three larger roads. However, the most concentrated activity was, again, in the 1950s, when post-war municipal building 'filled in the gaps.'⁴⁸⁴ But unlike the sprawling area around St. John's, the Rubery-Rednal locality finds a focus in Rubery's high street and, recently, in the Great Park shopping area: for example, Rubery was cited as the most common place where church participants shop.⁴⁸⁵ Rubery, as stated in a local history, 'has not lost its 'village' character,'⁴⁸⁶ maintaining a sense of local identity despite the changes of the twentieth century. Residents met during the fieldwork commonly describe it as 'the village.' Interviewee H claims 'it is still... quite a village community,'⁴⁸⁷ although Interviewee M acknowledges that 'although it's still called Rubery village, it's quite big to be a village.'⁴⁸⁸

The history of the area, again, is intimately linked to the car plant. In 1983, local historian Tupling wrote that 'just as Rednal is overshadowed, physically, by the Lickey Hills, so the district was to fall, economically, under the shade of the giant car factory that developed at Longbridge,'⁴⁸⁹ describing how, with such great numbers of local people employed there, the fortunes of the area were intimately linked with the fortunes of The Austin. However, the Rubery-Rednal area also had another major employer: a vast complex of hospitals that developed from the initial asylum. All but one of these were closed and in 1993-1994

⁴⁸³ *Bromsgrove Directory*, cited by Rubery Historical Society, *Rubery: a Guide* (Rubery Historical Society: Rubery, 1971), p. 13.

⁴⁸⁴ Tupling, p. 37.

⁴⁸⁵ Cited by 64% of questionnaire respondents.

⁴⁸⁶ Rubery Historical Society, p. 18.

⁴⁸⁷ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee H4.

⁴⁸⁸ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee M61.

⁴⁸⁹ Tupling, p. 31.

demolished, making the area around Longbridge Methodist familiar to the kind of redevelopment (albeit on a smaller scale) now being seen on the former car plant site. In 1993, the area started its transformation into Great Park, a retail, leisure and industrial park.

As Rubery and Rednal have developed and changed, Longbridge Methodist has undergone its own evolution. Longbridge Methodist Society was established in 1938, as a result of the Circuit identifying a need to develop its boundaries out of Birmingham as the region grew.⁴⁹⁰ Although the church today has a Rednal address, at the time of the Society's establishment, the closest dominant landmark would have been the Longbridge factory, leading some to conclude that the church's name derives from its proximity to the plant: Interviewee L comments, 'I'm certain it got called Longbridge because of its proximity to the car works. Longbridge is the car works.'⁴⁹¹ Indeed, like St. John's, in its early days, the church served a community of mainly Austin workers: one who remembers those days described how, locally, 'most of them were Austin workers. And the people who came to the church were around that neighbourhood.'⁴⁹²

Much of the church's story can be told through its buildings. The Society met initially in the Co-operative Assembly Room on Bristol Road South, not far from its present position, after which a permanent home was sought as the congregation grew. Land was bought on the corner of Ryde Park Road and Bristol Road, and a church built from what are commonly described as two 'huts', the Society's home from 1941. Rapidly expanding young people's organizations and other groups, in 1948, more land was bought and a concrete pre-fabricated

⁴⁹⁰ Longbridge Methodist Church, *Longbridge Methodist Church, July 1st 1967*, commemorative booklet from the opening of the present church building, 1967.

⁴⁹¹ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee L20.

⁴⁹² Quote is unreferenced to preserve the anonymity of the interviewee.

‘youth hall’ built to supplement the existing building. By 1960, as ‘more and more houses were built around,’⁴⁹³ and the neighbourhood expanded further, Longbridge Methodist needed to also, and plans were made for a larger building. More land was bought adjacent to the Ryde Park Road site, and on 1st July 1967, the new Longbridge Methodist Church opened, after much fundraising. It was a complex containing a worship space (still described today as ‘the church’), alongside a hall with a stage, vestries, kitchen and classroom. The youth hall remains today.

Over the years, extensions were made to increase space for children’s work and other groups, storage areas built and pieces of the original land sold – all of which reflect the differing needs and requirements of the church and its perceived function. The most significant recent alterations came in the late 1990s, under the banner of the ‘Vision 2000’ project. A ‘Quiet Chapel’ was made, a welcoming space for visitors to spend time in prayer or reflection. In the ‘youth hall’, an out-of-school club began, run by paid workers, and the complex continued to host many community groups and activities who hire the building, such as a pre-school, a group for stroke-sufferers, an Over-60s friendship club and Alcoholics Anonymous. However, the project’s focal point was ‘The Coffee Pot’, a café open every weekday, with a paid manager, offering drinks and food at very reasonable costs. This grew out of a Coffee Shop initiative that had been gathering momentum in the previous years.

The church now welcomes hundreds through its doors every week, and the worshipping congregation, which averages around seventy people at the weekly Sunday service, is one part of a broader community that exists in and around the building. In lengths of time

⁴⁹³ Longbridge Methodist Church, *Longbridge Methodist Church, July 1st 1967*.

participating, the congregation reflects the building's changes. The average length of attendance (although possibly connected to a diverse age-profile) is 19 years, with 52% of questionnaire respondents joining the church in the last 15 years, about the time when the 'Vision 2000' initiatives were gathering momentum, and 42% since the physical restructuring of the church building. Over three-quarters⁴⁹⁴ of questionnaire respondents lived locally (within two miles) of the church, and of these, the average time doing so is 31 years. Notably, there are high numbers of people who have lived locally for 50-54 years,⁴⁹⁵ and for 10-14 years⁴⁹⁶; that is, those who have known the area since its early major development and those who have since the decline of industry and closure of the hospitals. Whilst some of these figures are inevitably connected with the broad age-profile of the church, it nonetheless represents a congregation with varying experiences of local life.

Demographically, the church is similarly diverse (especially in comparison with St. John's). Although a large proportion are over the age of 60 (59% of respondents), 10% were under 20 - although it is likely that the questionnaire precluded responses from the very young. The 'Sunday Special', activities for children during the Sunday service, has a weekly attendance of around twenty. This may reflect the relatively young age-profile of the area, which has a high concentration of the populace in their 30s and declining with age.⁴⁹⁷ Whilst no exact figures exist, the congregation is also more ethnically diverse than would be expected in a

⁴⁹⁴ 76%.

⁴⁹⁵ 15% of questionnaire respondents who live locally to the church.

⁴⁹⁶ 19% of questionnaire respondents who live locally to the church.

⁴⁹⁷ Office for National Statistics. The statistical data for the locality of Longbridge Methodist Church is comprised from 2001 Census data for the eleven Lower Layer Super Output Areas surrounding the church in which high concentrations of participants live and which forms the 'natural community' to the church. Because Longbridge Methodist Church draws worshippers and others who attend activities and facilities there from a wide area, the locality of the church is understood as occupying a larger area than St. John's, which has a clear clearly-defined parish to which it ministers.

context where 92% are white-British,⁴⁹⁸ with participants estimating that 20-25% of the congregation are black.⁴⁹⁹

However, the worshipping congregation does not wholly represent the demographics of the area, in common with St. John's and churchgoing trends nationally,⁵⁰⁰ which generally sees older, female-dominated congregations. 69% of questionnaire respondents are female. In terms of economic activity, 55% are retired, in comparison with 16% of 16-74 year olds living in the immediate vicinity of the church. Just 21% of the questionnaire respondents are employed (7% full-time and 14% part-time), compared with 61% of 16-74 year olds locally (43% full-time, 12% part-time and 5% self-employed).⁵⁰¹ More own their own home than local residents. Again, very few participants were directly affected by the Rover closure. Similarly, notably, there are very few participants in their 20s and 30s.

3.2.1 Welcome, openness and relationships

Longbridge Methodist has long sought to serve not only its worshippers but also the surrounding community. In April 1967, before the opening of the present church building, the minister wrote in the church newsletter: 'one of the things I rejoice in at Longbridge [Methodist Church] is that you have an out-ward looking spirit... If we live to serve, we shall live!'⁵⁰² Vision 2000 is the most recent expression of the church's desire to respond to needs identified locally, by creating a facility that can be used by local people. The project aims to

⁴⁹⁸ Office for National Statistics.

⁴⁹⁹ For example, Interviewee D92: 'probably a quarter of our population is black'; Interviewee G17: 'up to 20% of our congregation is black.'

⁵⁰⁰ For example, see Jacinta Ashworth, Research Matters and Ian Farthing, *Churchgoing in the UK: a research report from Tearfund on church attendance in the UK* (Teddington: Tearfund, April 2007, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/03_04_07_tearfundchurch.pdf, accessed 26/10/12), p. 15.

⁵⁰¹ Office for National Statistics.

⁵⁰² Charles A. Clark, 'Pastoral Letter' in *The Methodist Church, Longbridge: The Log*, April 1967.

‘make the building a more welcoming environment.’⁵⁰³ As well as renovating existing spaces, this was achieved in two key ways. Firstly, a courtyard, designed to reduce the noise of the busy road and local industry, was roofed and a servery built to become the Coffee Pot. Secondly, where a solid brick façade facing the road existed before, which ensured nothing was seen as well as heard from outside, clear windows were placed, opening both the Coffee Pot and the worship space to a view of the area. All who use the building enter into the welcoming Coffee Pot area, from which they pursue their chosen interests

Its aim to be a welcoming environment for all is deeply-embedded in the culture of the church. When asked to describe Longbridge Methodist, a prevalent questionnaire response was its friendliness and welcoming attitude to all. Interviewee M describes the church as ‘like a house’, ‘where everybody’s welcome.’⁵⁰⁴ Describing the congregation’s generous and relaxed hospitality to the multiple ways the building is used, Interviewee L comments ‘what I really love about Longbridge [Methodist] is [...] that nobody gets precious about this building getting bashed about.’⁵⁰⁵ The church is prepared to be flexible and responsive to the needs of those it encounters. In particular, the Coffee Pot, as the first point of contact for visitors, often serves more than just food, giving practical, emotional or spiritual assistance where necessary:⁵⁰⁶ the church website states that it ‘provides local people with the opportunity of a listening ear and a peaceful refuge.’⁵⁰⁷ Describing the church-run elderly Day Centre, which runs two days a week, Informant Q expresses how the initiative is ‘their group’ for the guests to ‘do what they want,’ and those who attend are certainly appreciative of the service

⁵⁰³ Longbridge Methodist Church, *Vision 2000 planning report*, 1996.

⁵⁰⁴ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee M29.

⁵⁰⁵ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee L3.

⁵⁰⁶ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee P22.

⁵⁰⁷ Birmingham Methodist Circuit, *Longbridge Methodist Church*, (<http://birminghammethodistcircuit.org.uk/index.php?page=churches>, accessed 9/11/12).

offered.⁵⁰⁸ Further a number of volunteers running church initiatives have social or emotional needs: Informant Q describes how encouraging them to help shows they are valued and ‘gets them out of the house.’⁵⁰⁹

Welcome and inclusion is also important within the worship of the church, as demonstrated in the congregation’s relative diversity. Many participants cite the welcome given to children and young people as particularly special. Interviewee E describes a:

‘...general feeling that people welcome young folk into the church; they’re actually glad to see them there, you know. And there are things for them to do and they do feel involved and they do have - to a limited extent, which I’d like to see increase – ownership of the church. People do listen to them.’⁵¹⁰

This ‘feeling’ has been corroborated by young people who describe the church as somewhere they are valued and listened to.⁵¹¹ Informant GA, a young person, describing the way that people can often be wary of young people, explained how they can come to church in a ‘big group’ and ‘not be judged.’⁵¹² Another young person describes how adults ‘will come and sit and talk to us after church [...] Everybody gets on. Young people talk to the older people.’⁵¹³ After Sunday Special, the children and young people re-join the service, and share what they have learned or made. One participant comments ‘I never like the phrase ‘the children are the Church of the future,’ ’cause I always say ‘no, they’re not. They’re the church of now’.’⁵¹⁴

Similarly, whilst recognising the area is overwhelmingly white, several people celebrate the comparatively-high proportion of those of other ethnicities (mainly black) within the

⁵⁰⁸ Longbridge Methodist Fieldnotes Entry 11.

⁵⁰⁹ Longbridge Methodist Fieldnotes Entry 11.

⁵¹⁰ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee E4.

⁵¹¹ Interviews with younger members of the congregation demonstrate this. However, the interviews are unreferenced to preserve the anonymity of the interviewees.

⁵¹² Longbridge Methodist Fieldnotes Entry 40.

⁵¹³ Interview is unreferenced to preserve the anonymity of the interviewee.

⁵¹⁴ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee B82.

congregation. Interviewee P exclaims ‘the best thing about it [the church] is that you’ve got all different cultures and people. You know, it’s not just white people or black people.’⁵¹⁵ Further, Longbridge Methodist recognises different patterns of attending: one informant commented positively that the church accepts that people ‘go when they can’ and still be welcomed, because it acknowledges that people may have other commitments.⁵¹⁶ This is reflected in attendance rates: whilst most (71% of questionnaire respondents) attend worship at least weekly, this is significantly less than St. John’s. 24% worship several times a month and 5% less often.

Preferred styles of worship also reflect openness to diversity. Interviewee C describes how the church has moved from traditional Methodist worship, with long sermons and Wesleyan hymns, to embrace ‘all kinds of different ways of worshipping,’ including drama, meditations, visual images and creative symbolism.⁵¹⁷ Indeed, the church has developed its own stand of seven candles, which is used in various ways throughout the liturgical year where candles are either lit or extinguished symbolically. Interviewee E celebrates how the church has increasingly embraced world church music, recognising that it engenders a ‘feeling of not community in a very localized sense but the world community.’⁵¹⁸ Interviewee K describes worship as ‘freer’, ‘it changes and is responsive’ to different situations in contrast to churches which employ a set liturgy.⁵¹⁹

The ethos of openness and welcome creates and is created by an emphasis on relationships within Longbridge Methodist. The congregation is shaped first and foremost through a

⁵¹⁵ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee P12.

⁵¹⁶ Longbridge Methodist Fieldnotes Entry 7.

⁵¹⁷ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee C21.

⁵¹⁸ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee E17.

⁵¹⁹ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee K12.

network of relationships, rather than, for example, geographic proximity. When asked why they started worshipping at the church, over three-quarters cited the warm fellowship, a personal invitation or that their friends were there. Interviewee M describes church life as much more than worship and spiritual activities. At Longbridge Methodist, people:

‘...can get more involved than just the religious side. And it is making friendships, isn’t it? So a lot more than just the religious side.’⁵²⁰

Indeed, when describing the church as welcoming and friendly, several people made reference to the importance of speaking to newcomers. Interviewee P explains how ‘we make it our business to go to strangers when strangers do come in or when they come into church and you say ‘well, how did you find today?’ or ‘did you enjoy coming?’.’⁵²¹ Similarly, for Interviewee A, this is an ideal the church strives for: ‘I like to think 99% of people get a welcome when they come.’⁵²² Interviewee J describes with horror an incident when a newcomer was not spoken to after a service, saying ‘that is something we need to be very much aware of.’⁵²³ When the researcher asked a group of participants whether all of the congregation were committed the vision of the church, they responded that whilst not everyone is *practically* involved in assisting or maintaining the church, the best measure of commitment is whether they are prepared to speak to newcomers after services.⁵²⁴

The result of this relational emphasis is a congregation which, whilst firmly seeing their task as serving the locality, is drawn from a broader geographic area than St. John’s. Whilst most (76% of questionnaire respondents) do live within two miles of the church, with

⁵²⁰ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee M12.

⁵²¹ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee P11.

⁵²² Longbridge Methodist Interviewee A18.

⁵²³ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee J52.

⁵²⁴ Longbridge Methodist Fieldnotes Entry 28.

concentrations in Rubery and Rednal, there are also some for whom Longbridge is not their nearest Methodist church.

The church's emphasis on building relationships also underlies its aim to be a meeting place for local groups. Community Interviewee C describes the church as 'somewhere to come and to meet other people.'⁵²⁵ However, two church initiatives most clearly express its commitment to enabling relationships. Firstly, the Coffee Pot, the centrepiece of Vision 2000, and symbolically-prominent as the first space encountered when entering the church, aims primarily to provide opportunities for people to meet: its aim is not to make money but, as one participant describes, 'service to the community.'⁵²⁶ When asked what Longbridge Methodist brings to life locally, members of a group which uses the church described the Coffee Pot positively, valuing its openness and availability for locals to simply 'drop in.'⁵²⁷ Echoing the church's aim to be open and present to the local community, one person commented how the Coffee Pot showed people that the church is a 'going concern.'⁵²⁸ However, participants see a fundamental aspect of its work is to enable people from the disparate groups that use the space, including the worshippers, to meet and associate with each other. Several interviewees described its significance for parents of the 'Jelly Babies', the pre-school held in the hall on weekdays. As Informant D described, the Coffee Pot provides space not previously available for parents to associate with each other as they take

⁵²⁵ Longbridge Methodist Community Interviewee C6.

⁵²⁶ Longbridge Methodist Fieldnotes Entry 7.

⁵²⁷ Longbridge Methodist Community Interviewee D24.

⁵²⁸ Longbridge Methodist Community Interviewee D24.

and collect their children.⁵²⁹ Further, Jelly Babies eat a meal there once a week, as does the Over 60s Club and the monthly Ladies Tuesday Luncheon Club.

Secondly, the church holds an annual pantomime, described by Interviewee E as ‘the most important part of the life of the church.’⁵³⁰ It began around 1990 primarily as a fun activity for the congregation to enjoy together. Since then, the pantomime has grown to include a wide range of people, from the congregation, groups associated with the church and other interested parties who produce a show which runs for several nights in the church hall every February. Several hundred local people come to watch, and ticket sales raise significant amounts for charity. Again, embodying welcome and inclusion, Interviewee C describes how the pantomime is:

‘...for all ages and all types of people. We don’t say some people can be in and some people can’t. And because it’s amateurish, you haven’t got to be brilliant, you know. All abilities can be accommodated. And all skills.’⁵³¹

Special scripts are written to include humorous local references. Several months of hard work and commitment are outweighed by the benefits it brings in terms of fun, friendship and achievement. When asked why so many like to take part, Interviewee E comments that it’s ‘the idea of belonging and finding things that they can do which they didn’t know they could do.’⁵³²

The pantomime expresses another feature that participants view as central to the church: fun.

Interviewee J comments that ‘the vision of the pantomime is to show that people can have

⁵²⁹ Longbridge Methodist Fieldnotes Entry 5. Similar comments about the importance of the Coffee Pot for the parents of children in Jelly Babies were made by Informant H in Longbridge Methodist Fieldnotes Entry 10 and by Longbridge Methodist Interviewees M33 and P9.

⁵³⁰ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee E6.

⁵³¹ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee C13.

⁵³² Longbridge Methodist Interviewee E11.

fun.’⁵³³ When asked to describe the church, Interviewee O describes it as a ‘fun church’⁵³⁴ and a ‘happy church’⁵³⁵ and Interviewee P describes it as ‘bubbly.’⁵³⁶ Indeed, laughter is a regular part of worship. Through this, many participants see the church as deconstructing a traditional image of ‘Church’ as solemn and serious. Describing the pantomime, Interviewee D comments:

‘Traditional idea of ‘the church’ is that it’s a dour place. They come in the doors at Longbridge [Methodist Church] and, you know, ‘church’ is a fun place.’⁵³⁷

Evoking the ‘traditional’ image of church, Interviewee G explains how Longbridge Methodist has moved away from being a ‘churchy church,’⁵³⁸ and Interviewee O, when asked how the parents of ‘Jelly Babies’ view it, comments that ‘I don’t think it’s seen as a *church* church.’⁵³⁹

3.2.2 *Belonging: the spiritual and the social*

This culture of welcome and relationality has resulted in a very broad community which exists in and around Longbridge Methodist Church. Consequently, there is a looser sense of what it means to ‘belong’ there, as indicated in the multiple ways that the term ‘church’ is used. It is used in reference to the entire physical complex, the worship space, the act of worship, the worshipping congregation and all the activities that go on in and around that place: Interviewee H comments ‘I think it’s not just that hour’s worship that is the church, it’s the whole kind of... well, the ethos of it and the... outward-lookingness of the church.’⁵⁴⁰ The church possesses a large ‘fringe’ of people who use the building for purposes other than

⁵³³ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee J41. Similarly, Interviewee E8 describes the pantomime as ‘a good laugh’ and how those who take part are ‘here to have fun.’

⁵³⁴ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee O5.

⁵³⁵ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee O6. Interviewee I7 similarly describes the church as ‘happy.’

⁵³⁶ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee P11.

⁵³⁷ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee D15.

⁵³⁸ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee G15.

⁵³⁹ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee O25.

⁵⁴⁰ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee H36.

worship but who share some sense of belonging there: for example, Interviewee H comments ‘it’s like you can still feel part of the church family even if you don’t necessarily go to the Sunday service.’⁵⁴¹ This is often expressed through stories about non-worshippers who have requested funerals there. For example, as Interviewee K recounts:

‘I think for me, what sums it up is something [minister] said, I think it was in a service and it was during a funeral, or after a funeral. [...] But when he [minister] was talking to the family, he said ‘how come you chose to come here?’ And mum said ‘ ’cause this is my church. This is where I come to Weight Watchers.’⁵⁴²

Indeed, participants perceive that figures for baptisms, weddings and funerals are higher than expected for a church that size, and are frequently undertaken for non-worshippers.⁵⁴³ These sentiments are echoed within some of the groups held there, who are appreciative of the church and its initiatives: the leader of one group describes how they are ‘impressed’ with the church’s activities and ‘do feel part of the family’ of the church, despite not being a ‘religious’ group.⁵⁴⁴

However, many church participants hope the breadth of belonging at Longbridge Methodist cannot only challenge traditional understandings of church, but draw new people into worship and the Christian life. Indeed, many cite examples of people from groups held there who have been consequently drawn into some worship or faith. Describing how many children from Jelly Babies take part in the congregation-led Easter children’s activity morning which concludes with an act of worship, Interviewee M explains:

‘I think because they’d been to Jelly Babies, it’s not a strange place, the Coffee Pot’s not a strange place and the church isn’t a strange place. They’re

⁵⁴¹ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee H38. Similar comments were also made by Longbridge Methodist Interviewee A23.

⁵⁴² Longbridge Methodist Interviewee K26.

⁵⁴³ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee C31.

⁵⁴⁴ Longbridge Methodist Community Interviewee B21.

all happy to bring the children, probably makes it's easier for them; it's like a step, isn't it? Like a stepping stone.'⁵⁴⁵

Further, the pantomime is seen as being the most effective 'way in' to the worship of the church. Alongside many others, Interviewee D describes 'the number of people who've come into our church purely because of the pantomime and have stayed,' and the researcher heard several stories from people for whom the pantomime has been significant in their attendance at worship. A number of people describe the pantomime as a way to, as Interviewee L explains, 'dip your toe in the water' of church, recognising that 'people are very reluctant, find it very hard to go from non-church attendance, you know, going to a car boot sale on a Sunday morning and spending it with the family, to full-blown worship.'⁵⁴⁶ Similarly, Interviewee K describes the pantomime as:

'...an initial bridge for people as a reason to come in and see the place, I think it's been remarkable in what it's done. And I suppose in many ways it's a bit like, I don't know, almost like the sales pitch from outside: 'come in and see our pantomime and then when you're there...' It's like when you're in a supermarket, you go in to buy one thing and you buy lots of others. 'What do you do on Sunday in Sunday Special?' 'What's this Coffee Bar used for?' 'You mean I can come and have breakfast here?' And then people get interested in the services and they start to come. So it's an opportunity for people to find out what the church is about.'⁵⁴⁷

Interviewee K summarises this approach neatly: 'I guess it's belonging before believing, in a way. It gives people a chance to belong, then that can lead to belief, or even express belief that was there.'⁵⁴⁸

Consequently, this notion of a worshipping core with a broad fringe is reflected in the congregation of Longbridge Methodist. Alongside less frequent patterns of attendance, less

⁵⁴⁵ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee M37.

⁵⁴⁶ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee L8.

⁵⁴⁷ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee K37.

⁵⁴⁸ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee L8.

than three-quarters were an official member of the British Methodist Church, which involves a commitment to regular worship, learning, service and evangelism. Interviewee A recognises that, for many, ‘church’ is about belonging to the local, rather than to a wider denomination:

‘I say, we’ve only got 90-odd official members, but some of those we never see, but there are quite a few who come who aren’t members. You know, you hope that you’ll get more of those really; there’ll be more people who are not really committed to being a member but they’ll want to be committed to a church, rather.’⁵⁴⁹

Similarly, Interviewee K describes how ‘my loyalty’s more to Longbridge [Methodist Church], because of the way it is, rather than any Methodist tradition,’⁵⁵⁰ and both Interviewees H and J also comment that its denominational affiliation is not their primary reason for attendance, but the experience and character of church life.⁵⁵¹ This fits entirely with a church which places a high value on contextualised worship, belonging and mission, and has developed a local style of church. Echoing this, Interviewee G comments that Longbridge Methodist highly values local ecumenical links, and how there is ‘as much sort of attention now to the Council of Churches as there is to the Methodist Circuit.’⁵⁵²

However, the fluidity between ‘belonging’ and ‘believing’ has also led to some tensions around the relationship between the ‘social’ and those described as the ‘spiritual’ aspects of church life, that is, the relational aspects of church and the explicitly Christian activities such as worship or prayer. Some participants indicate a concern that the ‘spiritual’ is not explored adequately by many in the congregation. Whilst recognising the ‘deep spirituality’ that ‘goes on in the church,’ Interviewee C describes how ‘I don’t think we have anything like enough

⁵⁴⁹ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee A70.

⁵⁵⁰ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee K12.

⁵⁵¹ Longbridge Methodist Interviewees H35 and J5.

⁵⁵² Longbridge Methodist Interviewee G53.

housegroups⁵⁵³ that explore the Bible, prayer and discipleship. Of the worshipping congregation, the core of Longbridge Methodist, there is a further distinction: between those who are seen as, in Interviewee G's words 'spiritually-inclined,'⁵⁵⁴ of which there is only a small proportion, and those who are not. Whilst social activities and events gain good support, Interviewee E notes that 'it's the more spiritual meetings that we have that are more poorly attended.'⁵⁵⁵ Interviewee G comments: 'it would be lovely to see a deepening spirituality in the whole place.'⁵⁵⁶

Conversely, other participants form a more nuanced view, recognising that the distinction between the social and the spiritual can be unclear. Interviewee B, wrestling with whether the church's goal is to encourage more people to worship, comments:

'...I don't know, I think if we've got people here using the building and they come in, I sort of feel that... it isn't so important that they come to church [i.e. worship]...' ⁵⁵⁷

3.2.3 *'Moving on'*

Longbridge Methodist is a church committed to being open and available to people within and around it: as Interviewee E claims, 'it is very much the heart of whatever community there is in that area.'⁵⁵⁸ Throughout its history, the church has evolved in different ways to enable this, and Vision 2000, involving both physical change and a renewed ethos, is the most recent example. Consequently, there is consensus that this is a church that generally faces and

⁵⁵³ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee C47.

⁵⁵⁴ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee G10.

⁵⁵⁵ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee E14.

⁵⁵⁶ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee G10.

⁵⁵⁷ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee B83.

⁵⁵⁸ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee E21.

manages change well. Interviewee B observes that ‘just a sprinkle’⁵⁵⁹ of people resisted the changes under Vision 2000, whilst Interviewee D says ‘whatever changes anyone has ever wanted to make, with a bit of muttering, it’s gone ahead.’⁵⁶⁰ Interviewee E summarises:

‘...ever since I joined the church, we were always looking forward to something. There was always something round the corner. We didn’t sit there and think ‘oh, this is the way it is and this is the way it’s always going to be.’ There was always a feeling that we were moving forward.’⁵⁶¹

Within their vision, it is essential that the minister, as the public face of the church, is open, welcoming and able to relate to those within the locality. Interviewee E observes how previous ministers have encouraged ‘the community to regard it as their community church.’⁵⁶² The minister in post during the research period was praised in this regard, and Interviewee B describes him as a ‘great ambassador for the church.’⁵⁶³

Occasionally, participants mention, like St. John’s, a lack of people who practically commit to carrying out the tasks necessary to keep the church going. Interviewee K describes how ‘there’s two or three people, if they weren’t regularly attending and giving the time that they do, there are serious questions about how the church would manage.’⁵⁶⁴ However, this does not present major concerns, and it is seen as a feature of ‘any church.’⁵⁶⁵ Moreover, their commitment to enabling people to engage with life there in many ways overrides this concern: although ‘it would be nice to have more people getting involved’, Interviewee M

⁵⁵⁹ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee B10.

⁵⁶⁰ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee D36.

⁵⁶¹ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee E13.

⁵⁶² Longbridge Methodist Interviewee E3.

⁵⁶³ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee B70.

⁵⁶⁴ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee K15.

⁵⁶⁵ For example, see Longbridge Methodist Interviewees J26 and K15.

asserts that ‘it’s also, I think, very, very important that people can come to church and just come to church. And not have any pressure on them to do anything else.’⁵⁶⁶

Nonetheless, Longbridge Methodist Church is moving forwards confidently and the vast majority speak optimistically about its future. Numbers of worshippers remain steady, people rejoice that young people seem to be staying and the community work is thriving. For some, an important proviso is having a minister, who is both capable of continuing their vision,⁵⁶⁷ and is not given extra responsibilities which mean they lack adequate time for their church.⁵⁶⁸ Others, however, recognise that their vision requires constant work and attention. Interviewee M comments that ‘a lot of people don’t know it [the church] exists still,’⁵⁶⁹ whilst Interviewee L wishes that ‘that more people would kind of discover the treasure of Longbridge [Methodist].’⁵⁷⁰ Interviewee E states that ‘it has to really reassert itself; it has to go into the community – people *need* to know what it’s for’⁵⁷¹ (emphasis original). But this will, necessarily, involve change, as Interviewee J neatly sums up: ‘we need to keep moving on.’⁵⁷²

⁵⁶⁶ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee M94. The same sentiment is echoed by Longbridge Methodist Interviewee K16.

⁵⁶⁷ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee H50.

⁵⁶⁸ For example, Longbridge Methodist Interviewee C76 is concerned that lack of resources and finances may mean that the church’s minister may gain responsibility over another church or churches in the future.

⁵⁶⁹ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee M29.

⁵⁷⁰ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee L11.

⁵⁷¹ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee E26.

⁵⁷² Longbridge Methodist Interviewee J52.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE PARISH CHURCH OF ST. JOHN BAPTIST, LONGBRIDGE: A PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

4.0 Introduction

This study has so far provided a ‘thick description’ of the post-industrial context of Longbridge and the Christian practice of two local churches within it. This, and the following chapter, will draw these insights together by providing accounts of the ‘practical theologies’ employed by each church. Practical theology concerns the theological significance of the words, actions and assumptions of Christians within a particular setting, recognising that such meaning and practice has been generated from questions (implicit and explicit) posed by experiences to the resources of Christian tradition - such as scripture and denominational emphases. These chapters therefore make explicit the theological purpose of each church’s practice as they respond to the Longbridge context outlined in chapter two. These practical theologies are by their nature ecclesiological, describing how each community seeks to faithfully and authentically ‘be Church’ in Longbridge, and also missiological, demonstrating how each participates in God’s mission to establish God’s reign there. However, demonstrating the multi-disciplinary nature of practical theology, emerging from a mutually-critical ‘conversation’ between experience, theology, tradition and other disciplines, these practical theologies also necessarily refer to social, cultural and historical insights to elucidate their meaning.

4.1 St. John Baptist Parish Church, Longbridge

4.1.1 *Parish and place*

On opening in 1957, St. John's emerged with a well-defined understanding of 'Church' and how it should function locally, deriving primarily from its denomination. Its opening signalled the formation of the new Parish of Longbridge, declaring how, as a parish church, its mission, ministry and purpose are predominantly geographically-defined. The parish system operates on an intimate relationship between church and context: it is the foundational structure of Church of England ecclesiology, dividing the nation into geographic units each with its own church. It is radically-inclusive, seeing churches as serving all parish residents, regardless of religious beliefs or church involvement. The incumbent is charged with the 'cure of souls' of all, meaning that churches must not only provide 'spiritual care' through opportunities for worship and occasional offices (predominantly baptisms, weddings and funerals), but also be proactive in ensuring the welfare of the entire area. The parish church, as Percy notes, declares that there's 'room for all', demonstrating God's generous grace and hospitable love by enabling all to discover their 'place in the heart of God.'⁵⁷³ The encompassing emphasis on physical space declares that this welcoming God is encountered through the concrete, firmly rooted in an incarnational theology which recognises how God was made real in Jesus Christ in a specific context, and continues to move through creation through the Holy Spirit. The comprehensiveness of the parish system is 'a sign of God's accessibility'⁵⁷⁴ locally. For Graham and Lowe, it expresses 'an understanding of the whole of the created order in a particular area as belonging to God.'⁵⁷⁵ The parish church, 'as the

⁵⁷³ Martyn Percy, 'Many Rooms in my Father's House: The Changing Identity of the English Parish Church', in Steven Croft (ed.), *The Future of the Parish System: Shaping the Church of England for the 21st Century* (London: Church House Publishing, 2006), pp. 3-4.

⁵⁷⁴ Rowan Williams, 'Theological Resources for Re-examining Church', in Croft (ed.), p. 54.

⁵⁷⁵ Elaine Graham and Stephen Lowe, *What Makes a Good City? Public Theology and the Urban Church* (London: DLT, 2009), p. 49.

spirit-filled Body of Christ can help to further God's mission in that place,' claiming that physical space is the 'arena' for the redemptive work of God.⁵⁷⁶ Therefore, the parish system demonstrates a highly-contextualised understanding of Christian praxis based on 'a relation of *loyalty* between church and society'⁵⁷⁷ (emphasis original), which recognises that God is made incarnate in each spatial-temporal locality in specific ways. Parish churches should follow the movement of God's mission in their setting, 'incarnating the life of God there in ways that are both local and catholic,' as Percy states.⁵⁷⁸ Williams describes how active parish churches should strive to make God's Kingdom known locally, demonstrating to their communities through word and action 'what...is possible for human beings' in that place.⁵⁷⁹

The 'Circles without Centres' initiative in the Diocese of Birmingham from which St. John's was built exemplified this territorially-based incarnational theology with contextually-specific emphases. The 1950s and 1960s saw the clearance of inner-city slums after the war to new estates like Longbridge. Although the area had grown since the beginning of the century as The Austin developed, this period saw more rapid development as municipal building meant people from across the city quickly became neighbours. 'Circles without Centres' provided churches in such neighbourhoods. Defending the decision to build new churches and create new parishes rather than fund improvements to existing ones, the Diocesan initiative exemplified the denomination's commitment to incarnating God and enabling people to encounter God locally: in publicity material, the Bishop describes how the project is 'to help

⁵⁷⁶ Graham and Lowe, p. 49.

⁵⁷⁷ Williams, p. 54.

⁵⁷⁸ Percy, p. 15.

⁵⁷⁹ Williams, p. 53.

the Church... to establish and widen Christ's kingdom.'⁵⁸⁰ A local church would make this real.

However, in new estates, like Longbridge parish, widening of Christ's Kingdom took a specific form. 'Circles without Centres' claimed that these areas lacked cohesion, relatedness and unity. Diocesan publicity material states:

'new estates, well-designed and spacious, are being swiftly built. But their inhabitants are strangers to one another, uprooted and often lonely. The estates are circles without centres.'⁵⁸¹

As shown, St. John's parish indeed lacks geographic coherence that moulded it into a recognisable place. Into such disparate communities, the new churches, with their commitment to openness and the inclusion of all, were intended to provide 'centres' creating local unity:

'For generations, strangers have become friends around the parish church. From the roots of English worship there springs up many groups, clubs and organizations, open to all, which most of us need if we are to live as persons in a society and not as units in a crowd. The new estates will make their full contribution to our way of life when they are communities with centres of worship and service.'⁵⁸²

From their open, worshipping heart, the new churches were intended to create local community and belonging through providing opportunities for interaction between residents. 'Witnessing to the Christian Gospel in the new areas,'⁵⁸³ as 'Circles without Centres' aimed to do, focussed on establishing a broader community around the worshipping heart of the parish church. This model accords with Church of England ecclesiology, focussing on

⁵⁸⁰ Industrial Committee of the Bishop of Birmingham's Jubilee Appeal, *Circles without Centres: The Facts of the Case...*, pamphlet, c. 1956, p. 16.

⁵⁸¹ Industrial Committee of the Bishop of Birmingham's Jubilee Appeal, p. 3.

⁵⁸² Industrial Committee of the Bishop of Birmingham's Jubilee Appeal, p. 3.

⁵⁸³ Industrial Committee of the Bishop of Birmingham's Jubilee Appeal, p. 16.

envisioning the possibilities for local existence through the creation of healthy society. 'Circles without Centres' declares that, in God's purposes, authentic human existence is relational, reflecting the relational character of the Trinitarian God. Recognising the importance of right communal living in realising God's purposes, when urging support for 'Circles without Centres', publicity material cites how human community evokes the character of the Trinity:

'[O]nly in company with others can we understand the full meaning of our God, Jesus Christ and the guidance of the Holy Spirit in all affairs of our daily life.'⁵⁸⁴

Indeed, early documentation from St. John's paints a vivid picture of an active community church, suggesting success in achieving the goals of 'Circles without Centres.' The first vicar, in his report for the annual 'Parish Meeting' at the end of the first full year of the church's life, described how 'many hundreds of people of all age groups have made contact with their new parish church', declaring that 'St. John's is fast becoming what every parish church should be – a powerful *centre* of Christian worship and friendship and service'⁵⁸⁵ (emphasis added). In 1969, over a decade into its life, the rhetoric of the church as providing a sense of local belonging remains evident. In an article published in 'Contact: the Monthly Paper of Longbridge Parish Church' distributed both to those in the regular congregation and residents of the wider parish, the anonymous author, describing the work of 'Circles without Centres' in new suburbs like Longbridge, comments how parish churches are 'to provide for the needs of the people':

'The crying need of the suburbs is for community life, and a vigorous church can meet this need. Youth can find purpose and an outlet for their energies. Women can find friendship. All can learn that a Christian family cannot always stay behind the door of a comfortable little house. Such a family must be outward-looking. It must spread to share in the life of the neighbourhood,

⁵⁸⁴ Bishop of Birmingham's Appeal, *Circles without Centres: The Second Mile*, pamphlet, c. 1962.

⁵⁸⁵ John Morris, *Vicar's Report*, for Parish Meeting, Parish Church of St. John Baptist, Longbridge, 1959.

and it must be interested in the needs of God's family throughout the world.'⁵⁸⁶

The article addresses a twelve year-old church, calling it to renew its commitment to nurturing local community: 'we may be proud of our church building, but it is no use unless it stands among us as a worshipping and working fellowship.'⁵⁸⁷ It also comments that 'a new generation is already moving in to carry on where the first pioneers are laying down their tasks. The workers change; the work goes on.'⁵⁸⁸ Indeed, the parish magazine itself, as denoted by its name, was seen as a key way that St. John's made links with local people.

However, in December 1969, *Contact* announced it would cease publication for financial reasons. A 'farewell article' described the paper's achievement in helping to link 'with hundreds of friends we have in the parish and far beyond,' and described how it was distributed to 'over 1000 homes, which, in terms of families alone represents maybe 3/4000 people who see it.'⁵⁸⁹ Demonstrating a local sense of ownership over the church, the author described how its recipients, 'whether they came to church very often or not, they liked to have a link with *their* parish church and at least there two centre pages of local news provided just that! We tried to make it an outwards looking paper for the hundreds of friends we have in the parish and far beyond'⁵⁹⁰ (emphasis original). Significantly, the author describes how 'the most popular feature of our parish newspaper has been the Parish Records – Baptisms, Marriages and the Departed. The majority of these concerned families who had little or no associations with the church, but they were eagerly read. Here the church was making

⁵⁸⁶ Author unknown, ' 'This is our house,' they told this man of vision', *Contact: the Monthly Paper of Longbridge Parish Church*, July 1969, p. 6.

⁵⁸⁷ Author unknown, ' 'This is our house', p. 6.

⁵⁸⁸ Author unknown, ' 'This is our house', p. 6.

⁵⁸⁹ Author unknown, 'Contact: a Tragic Announcement', *Contact: the Monthly Paper of Longbridge Parish Church*, December 1969, p. 6.

⁵⁹⁰ Author unknown, 'Contact: a Tragic Announcement', p. 6.

CONTACT.’⁵⁹¹ Such rites of passage are important events in community life, changing its shape. That the church serves local people at these significant times demonstrates its powerful role in building, shaping and supporting community life locally. Reporting these events in the magazine was an important gesture which maintained local belonging. The article laments the loss of a key means by which church was integrated into community life: the fear was that ‘without our parish newspaper this contact will be lost. Whether those outside the minority group – our own congregation – come to church or not, we have a responsibility to at least keep them in touch. This is what CONTACT has been doing.’⁵⁹² Demonstrating its centrality to St. John’s very *raison d’être*, the author describes how such contact between church and parish is fundamental to ‘the pastoral and missionary task of the church at parish level.’⁵⁹³

Today, St. John’s remains a parish church, both in name and in the minds of regular participants: when asked what St. John’s is here to do or to be, Interviewee K comments that it aims to ‘bring God’s love into the community around,’⁵⁹⁴ and Interviewee H says it ‘just keeps coming back to community.’⁵⁹⁵ The occasional offices of baptisms, weddings and funerals for local people remain a significant part of its life. It runs social and purposeful activities for parish residents and is variously involved in initiatives of local significance – notably, the vicar is involved with community organisations addressing the Longbridge redevelopment and the area’s ongoing welfare in the aftermath of the factory’s closure. Also, the church is almost wholly comprised of parish residents: the close, almost familial, bonds that they share are evidence that the church has, in some ways, fulfilled its aim of providing

⁵⁹¹ Author unknown, ‘Contact: a Tragic Announcement’, p. 6.

⁵⁹² Author unknown, ‘Contact: a Tragic Announcement’, p. 6.

⁵⁹³ Author unknown, ‘Contact: a Tragic Announcement’, p. 6.

⁵⁹⁴ St. John’s Interviewee K1.

⁵⁹⁵ St. John’s Interviewee H39.

belonging and community to local people, the legacy of an ecclesiology which sees strong relationships as the foundation of faith.

The rhetoric of ‘community’ employed in St. John’s practical theology and self-understanding, where the church sees itself participating in God’s mission by facilitating contact between local people, connects with recent broader thinking about the ‘network society’ and how ‘community’ is formed from networks of social relationships. A key thinker about social networks, Wellman defines ‘community’ as created from ‘networks of interpersonal ties that provide sociability, support, information, a sense of belonging and social identity.’⁵⁹⁶ His use of network vocabulary echoes that of Castells, another major figure in this field, although Castells uses ‘network society’ to describe contemporary, flows-based society as opposed to traditional, geographically-focussed society. However, following Wellman’s assertion that all communities, place-centred or otherwise, are shaped from networks, then Castells’ notion of ‘nodes’ as focal points within networks elucidates how St. John’s functions in the locally-centred network of Longbridge. Castells describes ‘nodes’ as places in a network which are ‘the location of strategically important functions,’⁵⁹⁷ where concentrations of people intersect. Wellman describes the function of ‘public spaces such as bars, street corners and coffee shops’⁵⁹⁸ as vital for the formation of place-based networks which create local community. Here, St. John’s, with its open inclusive approach to participation, where local residents can engage in various formal and informal, intense and loose ways, would have functioned as a key hub locally – the *centre* to the *circle* it desired. However, ‘Circles without Centres’ envisaged the new estates without any existing focus, and

⁵⁹⁶ Barry Wellman, ‘Physical Place and Cyberplace: The Rise of Personalised Networking’, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, vol. 25.2, June 2001, p. 228.

⁵⁹⁷ Manuel Castells, ‘The Space of Flows’ (1996, second edition 2000), in Ida Susser (ed.), *The Castells Reader on Cities and Social Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), p. 345.

⁵⁹⁸ Wellman, p. 234.

the church would, ideally, form *the* heart. In Longbridge though, as we have seen, St. John's was not alone as a community 'node'. The Austin was the beating heart, economically, socially, culturally and physically, the true centre to the circle that was Longbridge and the main node of countless relationships locally. St. John's took its place alongside this heart and other community foci as nodes in a 'network of neighbourliness', reinforcing and sustaining the community which found its main vitality in the car plant.

By working alongside The Austin and other local nodes to create local community and belonging, St. John's practical theology is underpinned by a narrative about the creation of a 'sense of place' within Longbridge. Wellman, following his network-focussed definition of community, views 'place' as the location of these networks. Contemporary thinking contrasts 'place' with 'space', and Wellman, alongside others, comments that the space in which relationships occur is transformed into a place once ascribed with 'meaning, belonging and identity'⁵⁹⁹ deriving from social interactions. He says 'spaces continue to be places, where in-person meetings or passive observations provide a tangible sense of personal identity, a feeling of community.'⁶⁰⁰ Blokland and Savage recognise that space is not simply a neutral context for community formation, but becomes imbued with meanings through the interactions within them, meaning that social networks cannot function fully when apart from the *place* with which they are associated. They comment: 'place, the specificity of the particular landscape, seems to matter too. Although how it matters, and how it is assigned meanings, is subject to contest rather than given.'⁶⁰¹ Whilst Castells does not believe that physical space *per se* shapes human behaviour or identity, he recognises that through the way

⁵⁹⁹ Wellman. 247.

⁶⁰⁰ Wellman, p. 247.

⁶⁰¹ Talja Blokland and Mike Savage, 'Networks, Class and Place', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, vol. 25.2, June 2001, p. 222.

that ‘life is shared somehow’, ‘new meaning may be produced’⁶⁰² which is associated with that space.

Consequently, as Sheldrake asserts, there is also connection between place and memory.⁶⁰³ He recognises that the formation of a sense of place is a gradual process, and so is intimately-connected with memory and narrative deriving from the ways human community and sociality has been conducted there over time.⁶⁰⁴ He cites Brueggemann, who describes how ‘place is space which has historical meanings, where some things have happened which are now remembered and which provide continuity and identity across generations.’⁶⁰⁵ Consequently, a sense of place is not only shaped from human interactions, but also has the power to in turn shape interactions, as certain behaviour and values are associated with the meanings it holds.⁶⁰⁶ This formation of meaning through memory and interaction is a complex process of combining different narratives that have permeated that place, as exemplified in Massey’s vivid description of her childhood home of Wythenshawe.⁶⁰⁷ Her narrative combines the personal, familial, communal, official, regional, national and historical stories of that place, describing how ‘the crisscrossing of social relations, of broad historical shifts and the continually altering spatialities of individuals, make up something of what a place means, of how it is constructed *as* a place.’⁶⁰⁸

⁶⁰² Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity, second edition* (Malden, Mass.; Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p. 64.

⁶⁰³ Philip Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred: Place, Memory and Identity* (London: SCM, 2001), p. 1.

⁶⁰⁴ Sheldrake, pp. 16ff.

⁶⁰⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977; London: SPCK, 1978), p. 5, cited by Sheldrake, p. 7.

⁶⁰⁶ David Canter, *The Psychology of Place* (London: The Architectural Press, 1977) pp. 9-10, 158-9, cited by Sheldrake, p. 12.

⁶⁰⁷ Doreen Massey, ‘Living in Wythenshawe’, in Iain Burden, Joe Kerr, Jane Rendell (eds.), *The Unknown City: Contesting Architecture and Social Space* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT, 2000), pp. 458-475.

⁶⁰⁸ Massey, p. 462.

Places are, as Sheldrake describes, ‘texts, layered with meaning.’⁶⁰⁹ But in its concern with human identity, belonging and relatedness, he asserts that place is also a ‘theological and spiritual issue.’⁶¹⁰ Brueggemann describes how space is an objective, neutral reality, whilst place is deeply-associated with human history and experience: ‘whereas pursuit of space may be a flight from history, a yearning for place is a decision to enter history with an identifiable people in an identifiable pilgrimage.’⁶¹¹ Consequently, ‘place’ is central to Christianity’s understanding of an incarnate God who entered, and continues to enter through the Holy Spirit, human life and history in particular places, and, through this, redeems them. God is not simply made real in the physicality of creation and space, but through the systems of meaning, memory and identity which structure our lives as individuals and communities.

Hence, the concept of place is fundamental to the Church of England’s parochial ecclesiology. In its commitment to engaging with society and working to incarnate God in specific localities, the Church declares, in Williams’ words, that ‘we can cope with the culture and history of this place, with this language and memory.’⁶¹² Indeed, Graham and Lowe, citing Bergmann, comment that the parochial structure is about ‘God taking place.’⁶¹³ Parish churches are embroiled in the intimate connection between place, memory and history, symbolising the enduring presence of God in a place through, as Northcott describes, ‘the identification of Church with the historical continuity of land and place.’⁶¹⁴ Percy describes how, traditionally, parish churches have relied upon the relationship between church and place. Historically, parish churches existed in a symbiotic relationship with their local

⁶⁰⁹ Sheldrake, p. 17.

⁶¹⁰ Sheldrake, p. 1.

⁶¹¹ Brueggemann, *The Land*, p. 5, cited by Sheldrake, p. 7.

⁶¹² Williams, p. 55.

⁶¹³ Sigurd Bergmann, ‘Making Oneself at Home in Environments of Urban Amnesia: Religion and Theology in City Space’, *International Journal of Public Theology* 2(1), pp. 70-97, cited by Graham and Lowe, p. 49.

⁶¹⁴ Michael Northcott, ‘A Place of our Own?’, in Archbishop of Canterbury’s Urban Theology Group, *God in the City: Essays and Reflections from the Archbishop’s Urban Theology Group* (London: Mowbray, 1995), p. 120.

communities. In a Christendom era, where the parish church was integral to local governance and played a crucial welfare and spiritual role, the ‘church needed a parish, and the parish needs its church’, and the ‘viability of a church was deeply connected to the viability of a community.’⁶¹⁵ A parish was a recognised place where a community lived out its existence, in which the church was integral.

Since these times, there have been multiple challenges to church-parish interdependence. Significantly for Longbridge, with urban sprawl, parishes are often not recognised as a unified ‘place’ in the experience of residents.⁶¹⁶ Indeed, in Longbridge Parish, boundaries are not clear and bisect areas of differing names. Here, parish churches are compelled, as Percy describes, to ‘find their place’ in order to incarnate God authentically in the human narratives and relationships there: ‘to be a parish church, a church must find a community and locate itself within it.’⁶¹⁷ Indeed, this is precisely what St. John’s sought to do in 1957. When it was built, the church needed to actively *find* - even *create* - a sense of place before it could incarnate God locally there. In this, it journeyed alongside other key ‘nodes’ – particularly The Austin - in the burgeoning community. The notion of a parish church opening God-given possibilities *for* a place is more striking when it first needs to open the possibility *of* a place for God to be present.

It is therefore significant that alongside creating place and community through nurturing relationships in and around its worshipping life, St. John’s is also a congregation which remembers, holding the area’s significant narratives which have shaped its identity. Referring to the way that parish churches enable God to ‘take place’, Graham and Lowe describe how

⁶¹⁵ Percy, p.5.

⁶¹⁶ Percy, p.9.

⁶¹⁷ Percy, pp. 14-15.

churches must maintain a sense of place as ‘bearers of memory.’⁶¹⁸ Through the stability of the congregation and local residents, St. John’s has a strong sense of its history both as a church and as a local community. Artefacts and verbal anecdotes reinforce this story. For example, Epiphanytide was referred to as ‘a very St. John’s time’, referring both to the church’s roots in the Church of the Epiphany and to Christ’s baptism by John the Baptist remembered during that liturgical season.⁶¹⁹ A series of banners which hang alongside each other in the church are visually significant. Centrally is a depiction of John baptising Jesus. To the right, another banner tells the story of the church’s development through its buildings. At the top is a depiction of St. Nicholas’, King’s Norton, the original parish church before the area’s residential development and the mother church of The Epiphany, depicted next, built on The Austin Village in the estate’s characteristic wooden-style, to serve an area growing to serve the factory. Finally, St. John’s is pictured, the permanent building required by a bigger, more permanent residential area. The banner also lists the names of the four incumbents that have served at St. John’s. However, to the left of the baptism banner is another depicting key aspects of the community. Declaring the centrality of manufacturing to the area, it portrays the industries - including The Austin - that have been important locally. Balanced either side of the baptism banner, the narratives of the church and the community make a visual statement which weaves church and community together. Indeed, on the church’s 50th Anniversary in 2007, a 50 year-old Austin A7 car was displayed, and congregation members present at the church’s opening were photographed alongside it, a strong statement associating the church with the plant’s presence. By guarding the area’s memory, St. John’s maintains a sense of place which enables local belonging, opening possibilities for God to ‘take place’ and

⁶¹⁸ Graham and Lowe, p. 157.

⁶¹⁹ St. John’s Fieldnotes Entry 4.

partaking in God's mission to create community embodying God's communal, Trinitarian character.

4.1.2 Belonging at St. John's: membership and stewardship

The inclusivity of the parish church means that local residents can 'belong' to it in many and varied ways. However, this expansive approach questions the status of regular worshippers, the 'congregation', in the midst of this broad community. Whilst recognising its responsibility to all parish residents, fundamental to St. John's practical theology is an understanding of 'membership', a vocabulary generally absent from Church of England ecclesiology, to denote those who participate actively in the church's life and worship. Membership at St. John's denotes commitment and responsibility towards maintaining and supporting the church. This approach was exemplified succinctly in the Regular Giving Plan established soon after St. John's was opened. Early publicity materials describe how the new church looks towards future opportunities, but considers seriously how this future will be financially sustained. However, St. John's is adamant that this responsibility falls not to local people, but to active church participants. In 1959, the first vicar declares that 'we have a gospel to preach, a mission to serve, a worship to offer and a faith to share', but that:

'To do this work money must be provided. Surely, the right way to provide it is not to go scrounging and begging around the parish, but for each one of us who cares for St. John's to undertake a definite share of responsibility for its future.'⁶²⁰

Rhetoric repeatedly describes how giving – whether of time or money – is a 'Christian responsibility'⁶²¹ and a 'duty.'⁶²² Underpinning this is a theology which describes the need for Christians to 'give as they have received', understanding that God is the source of their

⁶²⁰The Parish Church of St. John Baptist Longbridge, *Preparing the Way*, pamphlet, 1959, p. 2.

⁶²¹The Parish Church of St. John Baptist Longbridge, *Preparing the Way*, p. 2, p. 5.

⁶²²Morris, *Vicar's Report*, 1959.

skills, energy and resources. In the booklet *Preparing the Way*, produced in the late 1950s to publicise the RGP to church members, three Bible verses were cited, each describing how Christians must give of themselves in response to that which God has given to them:

‘Freely ye have received...Freely give.’⁶²³

‘Everyman shall give as he is able according to the blessing of the Lord thy God which He hath given thee.’⁶²⁴

‘Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store as God hath prospered him.’⁶²⁵

Giving to the church is understood as giving back to God, in thanksgiving for God’s gifts: the publicity states ‘we ought to give to him out of gratitude for all that he has given to us,’ with the new church building understood as a key gift.⁶²⁶ Such giving includes the offering of ‘our time, our service, our worship and our money to his Church.’⁶²⁷ Stewardship of one’s resources is an expression of worship and an outcome of faith: in his report for the 1958 annual Parish Meeting, the first vicar taught how the stewardship plan teaches ‘us all to give seriously as part of our Christian duty and relates our giving to our worship in a very proper way,’⁶²⁸ and in *Preparing the Way*, he describes how the plan ‘is a logical application of serious faith.’⁶²⁹ In a church which sees its very existence and mission as making God incarnate locally through creating and sustaining community life, stewardship is an expression of discipleship, by sustaining the church so its mission can continue. Indeed, it is significant that St. John’s commitment to ‘overseas and other Christian work outside the parish’⁶³⁰

⁶²³ Matt. 10: 8.

⁶²⁴ Deut. 16: 17.

⁶²⁵ 1 Cor. 16: 2.

⁶²⁶ The Parish Church of St. John Baptist Longbridge, *Preparing the Way*, p. 5.

⁶²⁷ The Parish Church of St. John Baptist Longbridge, *Preparing the Way*, p. 5.

⁶²⁸ Morris, *Vicar’s Report*, 1959.

⁶²⁹ The Parish Church of St. John Baptist Longbridge, *Preparing the Way*, p. 2.

⁶³⁰ The Parish Church of St. John Baptist Longbridge, *Accounts and Budget for 1960*, 1959.

(which continues today) was also integral to its income derived from regular giving - the plan was not simply concerned with sustaining the church for its 'members.'

The emphasis on stewardship and commitment continues today, with clear responsibilities expected of participants. Consequently, St. John's displays a dual-layered understanding of church belonging. Firstly, all parish residents have 'claims' to the church, and the church provides them with opportunities for worship, rites of passage and activities which reinforce local community life. But secondly, there is the inner core of 'members', who take responsibility for the continuance of the church as an expression of their faith. Members are those who are openly-committed to sustaining the church to enable its incarnational mission to the local community.

Historically, the parish system was established when such a distinction did not exist. There was a symbiotic relationship between church and parish, where the church provided vital community services, religious and otherwise, and the community in turn paid tax for its maintenance. However, the proliferation of other denominations and faiths led to the abolition of the church tax in 1964, signalling the beginning of the 'present anomalous situation, whereby the whole parish had access to the parish church for baptisms, weddings, funerals and other rites, but only members of the congregation are obliged to pay for the upkeep of the building.'⁶³¹ Recent thinking has wrestled with the tension between dual levels of 'belonging' in the Church of England, and gives insights on how they relate in St. John's ecclesiology. The 1996 Church of England report *The Search for Faith and the Witness of the Church* asserts that in today's church, there are two layers of belonging, that of the whole

⁶³¹ Percy, p. 9.

community of the baptised, who ‘are invested with a belonging which is inescapably part of their identity and which may bring them to church at major intersections in their lives,’⁶³² but also the community of dedicated people who belong, of identified Christians who have made public profession of their belief, and of those who regularly attend church or who are on membership rolls.’⁶³³ The whole Church can accommodate such diversity. Examining Paul’s concept of the Body of Christ,⁶³⁴ being ‘incorporated’ to Christ in baptism means becoming part of a diverse community, comprised of members with different characteristics, roles, weaknesses and strengths. In this way, the Body of Christ is generous enough to incorporate a diversity of confessional beliefs and levels of participation, leading the report to question ‘whether there is a difference between being ‘in Christ’ and ‘in the Body of Christ’ which can be expressed as a continuum of strength of commitment.’⁶³⁵

However, whilst this report demonstrates that ‘Church’ incorporates various levels of participation as at St. John’s, its emphasis on baptism as the basic layer of belonging is insufficient to recognise those who experience an affinity with church, maybe through children’s groups or social organisations, yet are possibly not baptised. Indeed, Thomas, in his exploration of church membership echoes the sentiment of the breadth of what is understood to be ‘Church’, but in a way that may elucidate how the parish system works. He similarly distinguishes between ‘active’ and less active members: those involved in the daily life of the church, like the ‘members’ of St. John’s, are ‘participant’ members, whilst he also recognises the presence of a broad fringe of ‘associative’ members, who feel some affinity

⁶³² Church of England, *The Search for Faith and the Witness of the Church* (London: Church House, 1996), p. 33.

⁶³³ Church of England, *The Search for Faith*, p. 33.

⁶³⁴ See Rom. 12 and 1 Cor. 12.

⁶³⁵ Church of England, *The Search for Faith*, p. 33.

with church or faith yet choose not to commit to the institution.⁶³⁶ Although he primarily describes these as those expressing nominal religious belief, his categories are also useful when considering those who associate with their church less regularly, through pastoral offices and community activities. Common to both Thomas and *The Search for Faith* is an emphasis on relational understandings of Church. The latter describes how Christ's community of disciples was primarily built upon a fellowship which nurtured belonging, and that only within such a fellowship could faith develop.⁶³⁷ It describes how Paul's 'Body of Christ', demonstrating the same relational ideals as 'Circles without Centres', primarily expresses *koinonia*,⁶³⁸ fellowship, in which people find belonging in Christ, and expresses the character of God's Kingdom through 'an image of a various community life lived according to God's intention.'⁶³⁹ The local church should be a 'moral community,'⁶⁴⁰ expressing through its life what is understood as 'the way to behave under God.'⁶⁴¹ In the Anglican parish, the whole community is *potentially* part of this moral community, but the worshipping congregation of active 'members' stands at the centre, deliberately committed to modelling 'a new kind of life together.'⁶⁴² Bradshaw describes Anglican ecclesiology as a series of concentric circles, at the heart of which is the reality of the Trinitarian God.⁶⁴³ Such an image includes people at all stages of faith and commitment, with the aim of bringing them to the centre, 'to the feet of Christ.' In their worship and discipleship, the congregation stands at 'the foot of the cross' and seek to draw others to worship too.⁶⁴⁴ The Church's task - and St.

⁶³⁶ Richard Thomas, *Counting People In: Changing the Way we think about Membership and the Church* (London: SPCK, 2003), pp. v-vi.

⁶³⁷ Church of England, *The Search for Faith*, p. 17.

⁶³⁸ Church of England, *The Search for Faith*, pp. 33ff.

⁶³⁹ Church of England, *The Search for Faith*, p. 34.

⁶⁴⁰ Church of England, *The Search for Faith*, p. 33.

⁶⁴¹ Church of England, *The Search for Faith*, p. 33.

⁶⁴² Williams, p. 52.

⁶⁴³ Tim Bradshaw, 'The Christological Centre of Anglicanism', in Robert Hannaford (ed.), *The Future of Anglicanism: Essays on Faith and Order* (Leominster: Gracewing, 1996), p. 94.

⁶⁴⁴ Bradshaw, p. 97.

John's repeatedly asserts this of themselves - is to encourage more people to join its worshipping fellowship and embrace its values. However, this aim is intensified as anxiety grows over declining numbers of participants – and therefore stewards - who will ensure the continuance of the church.

St. John's is a 'moral community' that expresses the reality of life in God through its principles of self-giving and commitment - something which has undoubtedly fostered the tightly-knit fellowship they enjoy. The first vicar's words in *Preparing the Way* demonstrate this succinctly: he says of the RGP, 'it will bring us nearer to God.'⁶⁴⁵ In fact, through its ethos of giving 'in a spirit of real generosity and sacrifice,'⁶⁴⁶ St. John's understands their congregational life to be a fuller, more *proper* expression of 'Church': *Preparing the Way* says 'to be a proper church St. John's must be A GIVING CHURCH. This can only happen if each of us is A GIVING MEMBER'⁶⁴⁷ (emphasis original). With this clear concept of who is and is not a member, inevitably throughout its life, there have been tensions surrounding the coexistence of the participative and associative (to use Thomas's terms) modes of belonging at St. John's. In a report to the Bishop on his departure as vicar, the first vicar describes frustrations that the majority of parents (associative members) who bring their infants for baptisms 'are not wildly enthusiastic about increasing their connection' with church in the future.⁶⁴⁸ Similarly, today, this is evident in comments from participants describing their frustration when people use the church for their own ends, but are not willing to contribute to its maintenance and upkeep.

⁶⁴⁵ The Parish Church of St. John Baptist Longbridge, *Preparing the Way*, p. 2.

⁶⁴⁶ The Parish Church of St. John Baptist Longbridge, *Preparing the Way*, p. 6.

⁶⁴⁷ The Parish Church of St. John Baptist Longbridge, *Preparing the Way*, p. 5.

⁶⁴⁸ Morris, *Report to Bishop*.

4.1.3 *De-stabilising the foundations*

Since its beginning, St. John's has understood its mission and *raison d'être* firmly-based in its locality, working to maintain an identifiable sense of place in which God's purposes can be revealed and in which local residents can belong and experience the reality of life in God. At the centre is a worshipping congregation who aims to be a 'moral community' modelling the Kingdom of God through responsibility, commitment and sacrificial giving as an expression of discipleship and service.

However, the fieldwork showed that St. John's is facing a crisis of self-understanding, with some questioning the effectiveness and sufficiency of this existing theology and practice. Numbers in the congregation are declining and the age-profile increasing. Participants are uncertain how to remedy this and there are murmurings of dissent from within against some of the church's prevailing values and expectations of belonging. Some assert that the church must change its ethos and approach, and although many are at a loss as to how this may be done, others make tentative suggestions.

Overall, just as there is a common uncertainty from local people surrounding the future of the area, so the church is unsure as to what theirs may hold. As a church firmly-embedded in the locality and committed to a way of 'being Church' which contextualises the Gospel by making God incarnate locally in culturally-meaningful ways, much of the destabilising of their ecclesiology is connected to major social and cultural change, both locally and more broadly, connected with the shift from an industrial to a de-industrialised, informational society. These changes have undermined some of the foundational premises upon which St.

John's exercised its practice and mission, and are both associated with the closure of The Austin in 2005 and the more gradual post-industrial decline of the plant preceding it.

St. John's is built upon an understanding of churches as communities which live out a healthy and God-given model of human society, both in its congregational life but also in the wider locality. However, the shift towards a post-industrial society has established a new structure which has fundamentally challenged the way that individuals participate in society and understand themselves in relation to others. Although firmly convinced of its theological justification, by seeking to be a moral community based upon the values of commitment, responsibility and stewardship, it is clear that St. John's enforces a mode of participation and understanding of discipleship which strongly echoes that of the industrial age. Then, as has been shown, understandings of citizenship were derived from one's position within systems of production, meaning that work and one's social class were the primary signifiers of one's identity and place in society. 'Producer' society relied upon the stability and long-term security of large-scale industries, consequently promoting longevity and commitment in its participants. Bauman describes how this system demanded 'compliant and conforming subjects' from the working-classes,⁶⁴⁹ and was driven by a strong work ethic which understood work as moral, intrinsically valuable and – in words which echo St. John's emphasis on stewardship – a 'duty well done.'⁶⁵⁰ The structure and ethos surrounding industrial society extended far beyond the workplace to determine values, norms, standards and patterns of living, and was integrated with and reliant upon 'the strong and stable patriarchal family with the employed ('bread providing') male as its absolute, uncontested

⁶⁴⁹ Zygmunt Bauman, *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor, second edition* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2005), p. 18.

⁶⁵⁰ Bauman, *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor*, pp. 30-33.

ruler.’⁶⁵¹ At St. John’s, this intimate connection between one’s ‘work’, identity and patterns of life is expressed neatly in another booklet from the mid-1960s to publicise the RGP. The connection between work and family life is alluded to when the church is compared with a house, where members of the household are charged with ensuring a steady income. Encouraging people to commit to the RGP, the then vicar comments:

‘Your money, of course, is your own affair, but I would ask you to look at this matter from the church housekeeper’s point of view. At home things are made much easier when there is a regular income to budget from.’⁶⁵²

Indeed, in a culture where people are judged by what they produce, St. John’s shares the same emphasis on commitment, with the expectation that to fully belong and participate meaningfully, ‘members’ have to contribute practically. The language of work and jobs are frequently employed in relation to church participation, and it is possible to ‘work one’s way up’⁶⁵³ within St. John’s, as it was in the stable workplaces of industrial society: generally it is the longer-term members that have gained most responsibility and influence, for example, the 8.30am service congregation.

Culturally, however, this ‘producer’ mode of self-understanding and social participation has gradually been eroded and replaced by a society in which consumption is the basis of identity and social organisation. The former age, built on large-scale institutions employing huge numbers and supplying to mass markets, relied upon stability and security. The Austin itself, although numbers employed were gradually declining, was frequently understood as a symbol of permanence and a reliable source of work and economic security. However, the move to

⁶⁵¹ Bauman, *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor*, pp. 17-18.

⁶⁵² John Oakes in The Parish Church of St. John Baptist, Longbridge, *This is about your Church...and its Regular Giving Plan*, pamphlet, c. 1966.

⁶⁵³ McDowell notes that this was possible in the workplaces of industrial society, but such ‘prospects of upward career mobility’ have declined ‘in postwar Britain’ and particularly from 1990 onwards, p. 33.

an informational society with more flexible modes of production to respond to the changing demands of a more specialised market resulted in the decline of such large-scale institutions. Consequently, the job market and the work lives of those within it were no longer characterised by stability and longevity, but by insecurity and uncertainty.⁶⁵⁴ In such a system, a stable, collective identity based upon the work-structure is no longer possible. Bauman describes how in a flexible economy and society, the notion of commitment is compromised: since the future is uncertain and out of one's control, 'to avoid frustration one had better refrain from developing habits and attachments or entering lasting commitments.'⁶⁵⁵ Instead, feeding the flexible, market-driven economy, and in the absence of an alternative, people assume 'the role of the consumer,'⁶⁵⁶ opting for 'instant gratification' by privileging the present moment and grasping what it may offer.⁶⁵⁷

Similarly, multiple elements have combined to challenge St. John's emphasis on commitment and 'producing.' Undoubtedly, its work ethic has both encouraged and been enabled by the stability of the 'personnel' in the congregation, which is now being rocked by the older age-profile, with the deaths or declining energy levels of members. Further, the destabilising of family life and changing gender roles have played a role. Following the analogy of St. John's as a household requiring breadwinners (typically gendered male), then it also required those who work practically for its maintenance (typically gendered female). It is therefore no surprise that women's increasing involvement in the workforce as industrial society declined

⁶⁵⁴ Zygmunt Bauman, 'Europe and North America', in Junker-Kenny, Maureen and Tomka, Miklós (eds.), *Faith in a Society of Instant Gratification*, Concilium 1999/4 (London: SCM, 1999), pp. 4-5.

⁶⁵⁵ Bauman, 'Europe and North America', p. 5.

⁶⁵⁶ Bauman describes how 'in its late-modern, second-modern or post-modern stage, society engages its members – again *primarily* – in their capacity as consumers. The way present-day society shapes up its members is dictated first and foremost by the need to play the role of the consumer, and the norm our society holds up to its members is that if the ability and willingness to play it', *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor*, p. 24.

⁶⁵⁷ Bauman, 'Europe and North America', p. 5.

is repeatedly cited as something which threatens the life of the church as women have less time to commit to church.

However, the stewardship ethos of St. John's is also challenged by participants who experience a tension between the identity and role they are asked to assume in church and that assumed in wider society. Bauman describes the cultural shift from a 'work ethic' based on 'duty', to an 'aesthetics of consumption,' based on 'sublime experience,' where whatever is done or consumed is expected to hold some aesthetic satisfaction for the consumer.⁶⁵⁸ This was exemplified in discussions comparing St. John's with the nearby growing church which is perceived to offer a more aesthetically self-satisfying experience of churchgoing, compared with the self-sacrificial emphasis of St. John's. Hence, where once undertaking the tasks needed to ensure the smooth running of the church was understood as an expression of worship, some now question whether this actually prevents them from worshipping - struggles to encourage people to undertake church tasks also indicate this. More broadly, it is perceived that younger people, those whose primary experience is of post-industrial consumer society, struggle with St. John's call to commit.

Previously, St. John's motto of 'freely you have received, freely give', effectively gave theological affirmation to the modes of participation in producer society. Becoming a member involved harnessing society's prevailing emphasis on commitment for the purposes of discipleship and serving God's mission in Longbridge by supporting the life and work of the church. Now however, participating in St. John's involves embracing values which are radically counter-cultural to those of contemporary society. St. John's becomes, especially

⁶⁵⁸ Bauman, *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor*, pp. 30-33.

since the final closure of The Austin, a last bastion of a former way of life, nurturing a sense of stability and collective identity in the face of forces which seek to fragment it. However, joining this community is demanding, requiring a conscious decision to commit that is at odds with prevailing social trends. This, and the associated general move away from organised religion in British culture, explains why the age-profile of the congregation has gradually increased as it has failed to attract new participants. It is also understandable that they wrestle with how they may do this. However, this is seen as essential, to both serve God's evangelistic mission to create more disciples, but also to ensure there are enough people to undertake the tasks necessary for the church to continue - indeed, current participants believe the future relies on this. Some are genuinely baffled as to how to grow. Others, using the language of consumer culture, consider ways to make the church more attractive. Some are beginning to think more creatively about how the church can 'reach out' and engage with the community in new ways. And others still are pondering whether its counter-cultural ethos needs adaptation or change. St. John's must seriously consider whether to be confidently counter-cultural, maintaining its emphasis on stewardship, or somehow adapt its practical theology for a post-industrial climate.

4.1.4 Losing its place

However, the post-industrial changes that the context of Longbridge has experienced with the decline and closure of The Austin also challenge St. John's practical theology in another, vital sense. The significance of local space has fundamentally changed, with important consequences for the church's mission to create a sense of place, local identity and healthy community in which to make God incarnate. The Austin, the beating heart of the area, the main node which cemented and maintained community life socially, economically, culturally

and physically, is no more. Yet further, the fieldwork shows that alongside the plant's closure, others also lament the decline of other 'foci' for the local community, including the closure of community centres,⁶⁵⁹ smaller local shops⁶⁶⁰ and local pubs.⁶⁶¹ The networks that were once located in Longbridge were dense and multilayered, shaped from the lives of many who were living, working, shopping and relaxing in the same area. However, multiple forces have reduced the density of local networks: increased mobility and improved communications mean people 'live' and interact in multiple locations over a broader areas, the loss of large-scale industries concentrated in one area have been replaced by smaller workplaces in a range of locations and the decline of long-term employment have undermined the duration of work-based networks. Networks of community have been loosened from particular locations. Wellman describes how society has shifted from 'door-to-door connectivity', community networks concentrated in particular locations where individuals know each other well and communicate 'door-to-door.' Here, public spaces, 'nodes', enabled people to interact and strengthened community networks. However, society has shifted to 'place-to-place communities': mobility has enabled the connection of more places, meaning social relationships are not geographically-limited.⁶⁶² In line with a consumer society, relationships and communities are also 'more voluntary and selective than the public communities of the past.'⁶⁶³ Indeed, as the fieldwork showed, local people have sharply experienced this loss of local connectivity, and repeatedly lament the decline of the 'neighbourliness' that was once so vital to local life.

⁶⁵⁹ St. John's Interviewee G64.

⁶⁶⁰ Comments about the closure of smaller local shopping areas are made by St. John's Interviewees A100, C22, and F120, St. John's Community Interviewees A7, A8 and D12, Longbridge Methodist Interviewees B110 and H9 and Longbridge Methodist Community Interviewee D2f.

⁶⁶¹ The closure of pubs as focal points for the area are discussed by St. John's Interviewees B44 and H75f, St. John's Community Interviewee D13 and Longbridge Methodist Community Interviewee D9.

⁶⁶² Wellman, pp. 231ff.

⁶⁶³ Wellman, p. 234.

If place is understood as the location of social networks and derives its meaning from them, then the changed experience and significance of local space has led some to describe a ‘crisis of place.’⁶⁶⁴ The intimate connection between human narrative, memories and space is loosened. With the decline and closure of industry, Longbridge, what was once a place with a clear identity, interwoven human narratives and common history has lost its meaning, becoming a mere space. This is symbolised most powerfully in the empty Austin site. That space has powerful symbolic meanings: the factory that stood there was central to the history and memory of the area, the very reason for its existence. Hence, the name ‘Longbridge’ was indeed synonymous with the factory. However, this meaning-filled site has become mere empty space, and ‘Longbridge’ (the site) has lost its narrative and meaning. If spaces are attributed narratives deriving from memories, then the destruction of the factory is a potent sign of the loss of memories and stories around which local people gathered and through which community life was strengthened. Further, the loss of the plant has also fundamentally altered community life by changing the way locals physically interact with each other. Massey describes how architecture is ‘the frame of social relations through which we live,’⁶⁶⁵ and indeed, as has been seen, The Austin had a powerful influence on the physical patterns and rhythms of people in that place. Hence, local residents do talk with such force and drama about the closure. Although acknowledging its impact was less significant than expected in terms of lost jobs, the closure meant the area was ‘on its knees’ and ‘depressed’, for it meant the way of life centred around that factory, the narrative of an industrial community that had shaped the area’s identity for so long, although declining for many years, was finally lost forever. Therefore, it is no surprise that people find the future hard to envisage whilst the space lies empty. Many are naturally frustrated at the redevelopment’s slow progress and are

⁶⁶⁴ Sheldrake, p. 2.

⁶⁶⁵ Massey, p. 462.

extremely keen to see work begin – with some more concerned that it happens soon than with the content of the development. Significantly, concern for the future was more pronounced by those in the area around St. John's, since that area is physically closer to the empty site, with one edge of the parish bounded by it. For them, the empty site is an unavoidable reminder of the loss of the past.

Consequently, this loss of 'place' - which occurred both gradually over time with post-industrial forces, but with increased force with the closure of the plant and demolition of the site - has seriously challenged St. John's mission to create and sustain 'place' locally through nurturing a community with a shared identity and memory. Once, the church was woven into the fabric of the place both serving and drawing its vitality from community life. Now, St. John's seems increasingly disembedded from its parish. Hence, whilst being a life-giving and supportive 'family' for its existing 'members', the church has struggled to attract new participants in recent years, resulting in an older age-profile and demographic that does not reflect the wider parish. This is exacerbated by its counter-cultural emphasis on stewardship and by the declining influence of Christianity in Britain generally, where the once taken-for-granted traffic between community and church has waned. However, more potently, the connection between church and place that is so integral to St. John's mission as a *parish church* is destabilised. Indeed, there is a prevailing sense that it feels itself isolated from its context: many participants commented on the need for the church to be more proactive in its outreach, whilst others describe their frustration at not being able to encourage more participants, and others again see the future of the church as critically dependent on what local people think of the church. Whilst community groups involving non-worshipping locals still continue at St. John's, these involve fewer numbers and are less integrated with the

worshipping congregation: for example, the uniformed organisations are no longer involved in regular ‘parade services.’

Participants at St. John’s are therefore restless and questioning. Many struggle to see what the future holds for the church. They believe it necessarily depends on the future of the area, and since that is hard to envisage whilst The Austin site is empty, so too the future of St. John’s, historically woven into the life of the parish, relies upon what happens there. The redevelopment promises a ‘new heart for Longbridge,’ a new chapter in the Longbridge narrative which will create a new place and a new parish in which St. John’s can make God incarnate once again.

4.1.5 *Presence... and engagement?*

Until the redevelopment of The Austin site happens, St. John’s is a parish church that has ‘lost its place.’ Indeed, in a denomination whose ecclesiology is based on God’s mission ‘taking place’, the changing significance of ‘the local’ has been an issue that the Church of England wrestled with in recent years. Whilst firmly committed to a contextual, incarnational ecclesiology, working to realise the Kingdom of God in creation, the Church of England recognises that the parish system needs reform or re-conceptualisation if it is to function faithfully in contemporary Britain. Percy says ‘in the complex, porous and ambiguous *spaces* of our future, the Church [of England] will need to find its *places* in society once again’ (emphasis added).⁶⁶⁶ If, as Wellman asserts, ‘place’ is the setting of social networks, then a ministry of place needs to encompass those non-geographic places in which human

⁶⁶⁶ Percy, p. 15.

community and relationality is lived – a central emphasis on the 2004 Church of England report *Mission-shaped Church*.⁶⁶⁷

However, alongside this, the Church of England is also reasserting the importance of locally-based mission, despite (or because of) the changing significance and experience of place. *Presence and Engagement* (2005) comments that ‘most people are aware of neighbourhood in however restricted a sense,’⁶⁶⁸ and as one space in which we are present, however loosely or tentatively, Christians are compelled to ‘discover the Kingdom of God’ in their localities. At the root of this remains the Anglican conviction in the centrality of the incarnation of God and God’s mission to all arenas of life, and the commitment to discovering and furthering the incarnation in such areas.⁶⁶⁹ Whilst the parish system has always organised its ministry around a commitment to ‘comprehensive presence’⁶⁷⁰ across all local spaces, in contemporary society, this assumes a more prophetic and radically counter-cultural character. When localities are characterised by mobility, temporariness and abandonment by the workplaces, shops, pubs and other features that formerly shaped their life, and in a society that lacks commitment and permanence, the enduring and stable presence of the Church of England is a ‘powerful counter-cultural symbol of the unchanging love of God for humanity.’⁶⁷¹ However, parish church *presence* must be accompanied by *engagement*, an active involvement with local people enabling the ‘discovery of the real presence of Christ amongst those who seem to

⁶⁶⁷ Church of England, *Mission-shaped Church*.

⁶⁶⁸ Church of England Mission and Public Affairs Council, *Presence and Engagement: the Churches' Task in a Multi faith Society* (London: General Synod, 2005), p. 12.

⁶⁶⁹ Church of England Mission and Public Affairs Council, p. 8.

⁶⁷⁰ Church of England Mission and Public Affairs Council, p. 11.

⁶⁷¹ Church of England Mission and Public Affairs Council, p. 12.

be ‘other’ to the churches.’⁶⁷² This enables and expresses God’s mission to ‘bring humans being into relationship with each other in love’⁶⁷³ in God’s Kingdom.

These words reflect the aims of ‘Circles without Centres’ upon which St. John’s was built: that parish churches can actively *create* unity within fragmented communities. St. John’s is being called to return to its origins and assert its ‘place-building’ mission anew. Echoing the concept of church as a ‘node’ in community life, Graham and Lowe urge parish churches today to use their buildings for the service of the wider community,⁶⁷⁴ something which is increasingly important with the decline of ‘community spaces’ generally. Indeed, many at St. John’s are calling for the building to be used more creatively in mission and outreach. However, the crucial difference with this model of place-building Christian mission today is that, rather than harnessing prevailing social trends for the purposes of the Gospel, this involves challenging and battling against opposing forces which constantly undermine local place, resisting the negative forces of fragmentation, insecurity and individualisation which characterise much of globalised, post-industrial, consumer society. Another Church of England report, *Faithful Cities* (2006), acknowledges that the ‘commitment to neighbourhood’⁶⁷⁵ shown by parish churches plays a crucial role in forming the social capital necessary to create community cohesion, regenerate urban areas and overcome social problems that have accompanied the fragmentation and diversification of localities.⁶⁷⁶ Castells similarly notes how local spaces are crucial ‘sites of resistance’ where locally-based groups can become a key source of collective empowerment ‘against the unpredictability of

⁶⁷² Church of England Mission and Public Affairs Council, p. 11.

⁶⁷³ Church of England Mission and Public Affairs Council, p. 8.

⁶⁷⁴ Graham and Lowe, pp. 136ff.

⁶⁷⁵ Church of England Commission on Urban Life and Faith, *Faithful Cities: a Call for Celebration, Vision and Justice* (London: Methodist Publishing House & Church House, 2006, p. 3.

⁶⁷⁶ Church of England Commission on Urban Life and Faith, pp. 1-4.

the unknown and uncontrollable.’⁶⁷⁷ *Faithful Cities*, citing Cavanaugh, describes how churches must demonstrate an ‘alternative performance’, a way of being that rejects the negative features of contemporary society.⁶⁷⁸ Potentially then, there *is* space for St. John’s to remain a moral community shaped around the (counter-cultural) values of commitment and stewardship as an expression of discipleship, promoting a vision of belonging based on mutually-dependent relationships which not only embody the character of the Trinitarian God but also resist the individualising forces of ‘consumer society.’ However, this may not be easy, congregational growth may prove slow and participants will continue to experience the tension between the selves that church and culture call them to embody.

However, it remains that if St. John’s is to be present *and* engaged, currently it has lost a place to be engaged with. The former Austin site adjoining the parish promises to provide countless opportunities with which the incarnational practical theology St. John’s can engage. Yet whilst the site is empty, and ‘Longbridge’ is being remade, then St. John’s will find it difficult to fulfil its mission to the Parish of Longbridge.

Although St. John’s is uncertain about its future, its very commitment – and St. John’s takes commitment seriously - to presence locally means that it is poised to engage with the local area in faithful mission in the future. Interviewee J commented that the church has ‘quite a strong instinct for survival but survival into what I’m not quite sure.’⁶⁷⁹ It declares the ‘identification of Church with the historical continuity of land and place,’⁶⁸⁰ demonstrating the constant love of God which has accompanied the community through the past and will

⁶⁷⁷ Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity, first edition* (Malden, Mass.; Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), p. 61.

⁶⁷⁸ William Cavanaugh, cited by Church of England Commission on Urban Life and Faith, p. 49.

⁶⁷⁹ St. John’s Interviewee J19.

⁶⁸⁰ Northcott, p. 120.

continue to in the future. Although the area has lost its heart - The Austin - and many other symbolic places and spaces which formerly shaped and maintained the community's identity, St. John's role as 'guardian of memory' is more significant than ever before. Through this, the church can ensure that the new Longbridge that emerges does not represent a break from the past but continues the narrative of place, offering some stability at a time of uncertainty and, consequently, hope for the future. Here, St. John's use of the name Longbridge for its parish takes on new significance. Sheldrake comments that 'names give the landscape a particular meaning in relation to human memories. No name is arbitrary. Every name, even a single word, is a code that, once understood, unlocks a world of associations, events, people and their stories.'⁶⁸¹ Although 'Longbridge' is a contested term, not frequently used in church participants' addresses and used in a variety of ways, it is generally associated with The Austin plant. Whether this was its original intention at the beginning is uncertain, but St. John's, as the church for the Parish of Longbridge links the church and the area in some respect to the factory that once stood, providing much-needed continuity with the past. Indeed, local people clearly see this: the Area Action Plan describes how there has been 'considerable community interest' in 'marking the history and heritage of the area' through a special centre which celebrates and remembers the past to be built on the redevelopment.⁶⁸²

When parish churches are required to undertake such a challenging mission in a changing and unfamiliar environment, the temptation is to develop an 'inward-looking mentality and a tendency towards sectarianism.'⁶⁸³ Instead, Sledge comments that churches are required to embrace 'vulnerability', recognising that Jesus' own mission took him out of the secure and

⁶⁸¹ Sheldrake, p. 1.

⁶⁸² Birmingham City Council and Bromsgrove District Council, p. 13.

⁶⁸³ Church of England Commission on Urban Life and Faith, p. 47.

certain and to rely on the strength of God.⁶⁸⁴ Thomas asserts that parish churches need to ‘enter fully into the experience of crucifixion’ and the way of the ‘self-emptying God, who accepts death in order to release life.’⁶⁸⁵ As we have seen, St. John’s faces the strong temptation to retreat from its community, aided by its strict demarcation of boundaries and its self-confessed difficulty with ‘change.’ Indeed, with a congregation that does not wholly reflect the demographic of the parish and an apparent disembedding of church from community, a hermeneutic of suspicion must be applied when exploring its practical theology which recognises this risk. However, at the same time, St. John’s does clearly embrace the way of vulnerability, crucifixion and death. It clearly recognises that it is at a crossroads, a time for self-examination and reconsideration of its practices and ethos. Some are recognising the importance of changing, and developing an outward-looking attitude to embracing the community. But it is also experiencing the way of crucifixion and vulnerability through the literal death of its ageing congregation, and the loss of the stability and commitment which has sustained the church since the beginning. Both the church and the area, whose fates were so intimately-tied, have experienced and are experiencing the pain and loss of crucifixion. They both now feel the loss and emptiness of Holy Saturday, where the future is difficult to imagine. But, in its commitment to enduring presence, the church gives a glimmer of hope towards Easter Sunday - to new life beyond death. It may not know what the future holds, but the very presence of St. John’s points to a constant and loving God of Resurrection, who has been incarnate in Longbridge throughout its history and promises to be there in the future.

⁶⁸⁴ Tim Sledge, ‘Afterword’ in Paul Bayes and Tim Sledge, *Mission-shaped Parish: Traditional Church in a Changing Context* (London: Church House, 2006), p. 135.

⁶⁸⁵ Thomas, p. 89.

CHAPTER FIVE

LONGBRIDGE METHODIST CHURCH: A PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

5.1 Longbridge Methodist Church

5.1.1 *Serving the community: outgoing love*

Whilst it does not have an explicit and clearly-defined connection to a specific local space as in the parochial ecclesiology of St. John's, Longbridge Methodist Church has always, and continues to, understand its role, place and mission in terms of a commitment to the local area. The rhetoric of a church which seeks to *serve* the locality and meet its needs has been prevalent throughout the church's history. In 1967, publicity material surrounding the opening of the present church building describes it as the next stage in the church's 'great adventure of Christian witness and service in this community,'⁶⁸⁶ and similarly they 'pray for a new beginning in us, the Society at Longbridge, to match the needs and challenge of the time to come.'⁶⁸⁷ Leaflets from 'Celebrate 88', events to commemorate fifty years of Methodism in Longbridge, describe how the church's activities and initiatives demonstrate the way it is 'trying to serve the community in the area around us.'⁶⁸⁸ It says, 'as we look forward to the next fifty years, we pray that God will guide us as we seek to meet the needs around us.'⁶⁸⁹

⁶⁸⁶ Longbridge Methodist Church, *The New Longbridge Methodist Church: An Invitation to Look over the New Building*, leaflet, 1967.

⁶⁸⁷ Longbridge Methodist Church, *Longbridge Methodist Church, July 1st 1967*.

⁶⁸⁸ Alan Merchant, *An Invitation*, letter of invitation to Celebrate 88: 50th anniversary of Longbridge Methodist Church, January 1988.

⁶⁸⁹ Longbridge Methodist Church, *A Brief History of our Church*, in information about Celebrate 88: 50th anniversary of Longbridge Methodist Church, January 1988.

Most recently, the ‘Vision 2000’ project of the 1990s clearly re-stated this locally-based mission. The project drew heavily on the language of ‘outreach’, employing the tag-line ‘reach out to others because God reaches out to you’⁶⁹⁰ - an ethos clearly shared by church participants. Indeed, when asked what Longbridge Methodist is here to do or be, several interviewees echoed these sentiments of sharing love, reaching out and serving those in the local community. Interviewee B responded with ‘an outreach to people outside’⁶⁹¹ and Interviewee J commented ‘I instinctively think of community and outreach.’⁶⁹² Interviewee L asserts that ‘I think the underpinning value of this place is sharing the love and grace of God that people have discovered for themselves with the wider community.’⁶⁹³ Interviewee C describes the church’s aim as ‘to proclaim the Gospel of Christ, to say that we are here [pause] to show the love of Christ, love of God to the community.’⁶⁹⁴

By understanding its aim and purpose as reaching out and sharing with others that which God has shared with you, Vision 2000 – and indeed the rhetoric of the church since its very beginning - is clearly informed by a central aspect of Methodist ecclesiology. *Called to Love and Praise*, the British Methodist statement on ecclesiology of 1999, describes the Triune God as the centre and source of the Church. The Trinity, most vitally, is the source of the *missio Dei*, the mission of God, which began with the Father’s work at Creation.⁶⁹⁵ This mission continued ‘in a ‘fallen’, divided world’, ‘focussed on one nation whose ancestor was Abraham.’⁶⁹⁶ Israel’s history described in the Old Testament tells ‘the story of the divine

⁶⁹⁰ Longbridge Methodist Church, *Vision 2000*.

⁶⁹¹ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee B65.

⁶⁹² Longbridge Methodist Interviewee J34.

⁶⁹³ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee L3.

⁶⁹⁴ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee C68.

⁶⁹⁵ Methodist Church, *Called to Love and Praise: A Methodist Conference Statement on the Church* (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 1999), p. 9.

⁶⁹⁶ Methodist Church, *Called to Love and Praise*, p. 9.

quest for a responsive people.⁶⁹⁷ However, from the Father proceeds the Son Jesus Christ, who continued this mission by proclaiming the ‘Kingdom of God’, ‘the sovereign presence and activity of God.’⁶⁹⁸ Whereas previously the Kingdom was considered to be the ‘final salvation, the ultimate state of well-being intended by God for all humankind,’⁶⁹⁹ Christ made the God’s Reign real and present through his healings, proclamation of forgiveness, challenges to religious systems and demonstration of love to all, especially the marginalised.⁷⁰⁰ Jesus’ crucifixion was a ‘powerful statement of the healing, forgiving love of God,’ and the Resurrection the ‘vindication’ of Jesus’ life and work, and ‘the completion of God’s mission and the decisive evidence that God reigns.’⁷⁰¹ The Church is a ‘new community who have experienced this ‘foretaste’ of the Kingdom of God, the divine life, intended by God for all humankind.’⁷⁰² Initially, the Church consisted of Christ’s followers who witnessed his life, death and resurrection, but latterly are those who have experienced the Kingdom through the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father and the Son and who continues the mission to establish God’s reign. It is the Holy Spirit who ‘alone makes possible the credibility of the Church as a witness and sign in the world of new life in Christ.’⁷⁰³ The community of Christ’s disciples, the Church, enabled by the Holy Spirit, is called to continue this mission to ‘proclaim God’s reign as Jesus had done.’⁷⁰⁴ The Trinity is characterised by the outward movement of a mission of love, ‘the outgoing, all-embracing love of God for his creation.’⁷⁰⁵ Hence, in Methodist understanding, and exemplified in Longbridge Methodist’s ethos of service and outreach to those outside the worshipping

⁶⁹⁷ Methodist Church, *Called to Love and Praise*, p. 9.

⁶⁹⁸ Methodist Church, *Called to Love and Praise*, p. 9.

⁶⁹⁹ Methodist Church, *Called to Love and Praise*, p. 9.

⁷⁰⁰ Methodist Church, *Called to Love and Praise*, p. 9.

⁷⁰¹ Methodist Church, *Called to Love and Praise*, p. 9.

⁷⁰² Methodist Church, *Called to Love and Praise*, p. 10.

⁷⁰³ Methodist Church, *Called to Love and Praise*, p. 10.

⁷⁰⁴ Methodist Church, *Called to Love and Praise*, p. 10.

⁷⁰⁵ Methodist Church, *Called to Love and Praise*, p. 10

congregation, ecclesiology and missiology are intimately connected: the Church is a community that has witnessed and experienced this missional love of God for themselves – ‘God reaches out to you’ – and is consequently compelled to join this outward movement – ‘reach out to others’ and continue the mission through the Holy Spirit.

5.1.2 Social holiness and a new connexionality

The aim of ‘reaching out’ and ‘meeting the needs’ of the local community has resulted in a symbiotic relationship between Longbridge Methodist and its local context that has been evident from its very beginning. Like St. John’s, the very existence of the church is intrinsically connected to the existence of the Longbridge area, with the Longbridge Methodist Society being established in 1938 in response to the industrial and residential development that had been occurring there since the beginning of the twentieth century. The name ‘Longbridge’, whilst now seemingly at odds with its postal address of Rednal and seeming affinity of local people with Rubery is, nonetheless, like St. John’s area, a clear declaration of the widely-understood connection between the Austin factory, the locality and the church at the time. Since then, as the area has changed and developed socially, culturally and economically, Longbridge Methodist has necessarily had to undergo renewal and change in order to stay faithful to its mission to serve. The church has evolved significantly in response to changes locally, an evolution most obvious through the development of its buildings, as new buildings were built and extensions and adaptations were made to enable them to respond to the growth of the community and meet its needs in appropriate ways.

However, for the purposes of this thesis, the most recent and significant evolution in the life of Longbridge Methodist is the Vision 2000 initiative which is underpinned by a very clear

strategy of how they seek to ‘reach out’ to the community. The project sought to bring the congregation closer to its context, by providing a striking visual reminder of their mission to be integrated and responsive to the locality. Planning documents describe the project’s concern with shaping ‘a church that is moving physically closer to those it is trying to serve.’⁷⁰⁶ The solid façades of the former design of the building ‘removed’ the congregation from its environment: previously, as Interviewee E explains, ‘people couldn’t look in at us; we couldn’t look out at them.’⁷⁰⁷ The simple insertion of clear windows in the Coffee Pot and worship area opened both the social and worship life of the congregation to the sights and sounds of the locality which were previously deliberately hidden from them - notably the A38, Great Park and what was the West Works of MG Rover, but during the fieldwork was an empty space prepared for redevelopment.

But these physical changes were not only a sign to the congregation about the integration between the church and the area. Rather, they were also to declare to the locality that the church was present and active, and the work also sought to make the church more visible from the outside. The congregation of Longbridge Methodist was conscious that many in the community were simply unaware of what the church and its purpose was, and it was perceived that the physical design of the building exacerbated this. Interviewee G describes how the previous design ‘looked sort of rather like a prison’⁷⁰⁸ and ‘gave the approach that the church was, looked as if it was...sort of off a bit from the world,’⁷⁰⁹ whilst Interviewee A

⁷⁰⁶ Longbridge Methodist Church, *Vision 2000*.

⁷⁰⁷ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee E5.

⁷⁰⁸ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee G2.

⁷⁰⁹ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee G3.

describes how one local person mistook the building for a library.⁷¹⁰ Consequently, improved signage and the insertion of windows achieved this.

Yet, these physical changes not only asserted anew the integration between church and area, but demonstrated a reconfiguration about how this is to be realised. Fulfilling the aim of ‘reaching out’ and ‘serving the community’ was actually interpreted to involve welcoming more and more people *into* the Longbridge Methodist Church complex. The church had begun to offer its spaces for use by community groups in a more concerted way than previously. Similarly, for several years, the church had been developing new projects held on site which responded to perceived local needs, notably a coffee shop, Day Centre for the elderly and an after-school club, which were engaging a variety of local people who were not explicitly concerned with ‘faith.’ Rather, Vision 2000 sought to make Longbridge Methodist home to a range of activities which encourage relationships between local people. The centrepiece and key symbol of this is the Coffee Pot, the space of welcome and interaction which immediately greets all who use the building, and is evidenced in the ethos of inclusion and valuing of diversity of which many church participants speak. Vision 2000 is underpinned theologically by an ecclesiology centred on the receiving and sharing of God’s love. The project’s vision statement demonstrates its social emphasis: ‘Longbridge Methodist Church aims to be a welcoming fellowship where God’s love is shared through worship, spiritual guidance, practical help, support, friendship and recreation.’⁷¹¹ Today, the church building is a space in which the local community in all its diversity can find welcome, support and an enjoyable place to be.

⁷¹⁰ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee A12.

⁷¹¹ Longbridge Methodist Church, *Vision 2000*.

Like the church's other evolutions, Vision 2000 resulted from a recognition that the task of serving the community required renewal: documents describe how the project was concerned with 'reaching out in a *new way* to the community around us'⁷¹² (emphasis added). Centring on breaching a chasm that had seemingly opened between the church and the area, undoubtedly the wider cultural framework in which the project was set was the shift towards a post-Christendom society, where the natural traffic between communities and their churches had waned. However, more specifically to its local context, and relevant to the focus on post-industrialisation of this thesis, Vision 2000 came in the aftermath of major changes in the area which raised questions about the nature and experience of community locally in ways similar to those being faced in St. John's parish. In 1993 and 1994, all but one of the psychiatric and geriatric hospitals which had, alongside The Austin, been central to the economic well-being of the Rubery-Rednal areas were closed and almost entirely demolished. In 1993, the site started its transformation into Great Park, a retail, leisure and industrial park which now dominates the area. Importantly, this makes the community around Longbridge Methodist familiar with the kind of change and redevelopment now being seen on the former car plant site. Indeed, Rubery-Rednal had already experienced – and continues to experience – the changing significance of locality, and the associated experience of local 'community', currently felt in St. John's parish. Significantly, it was in the aftermath of these local changes that Longbridge Methodist conceived Vision 2000 as a practical theological response.

Echoing Wellman's concept of community as constituted by dense networks of interpersonal relationships which occur within a given space over time to create a sense of belonging and place, many of those local to Longbridge Methodist have experienced the loosening of local

⁷¹² Longbridge Methodist Church, *Vision 2000*.

networks and the undermining of local ‘community.’ For example, many lament the decreasing opportunities for relationships to develop between local people. That mobility is threatening a sense of locally-based community is expressed by Longbridge Methodist Interviewee B, who comments, ‘I think in the days of the car, neighbours tend not to know each other in the same way.’⁷¹³ Similarly, Interviewee M, who feels that Rubery has lost a sense of community, when asked what ‘community’ meant, replied ‘everybody walking and everybody... I mean, at that time, children all walked to school and parents walked with them.’⁷¹⁴

Similarly, several people described the decline of smaller local shops, those ‘nodes’ in which high concentrations of people meet which are vital for integrating relationships and place. For example, Community Interview D and Interviewee H describe in negative terms the changes in Rubery’s High Street. H comments:

‘We don’t like the way the village, a lot of local shops has closed down, because it’s always been a place where there’s been, like, family businesses.’⁷¹⁵

Community Interview D complained of the closure of specialist shops which once comprised the High Street, saying ‘there’s no shoe shop, no men’s clothes shop, no haberdashers, no wool shop anymore.’⁷¹⁶ Again, these changes are seen to have a detrimental effect on ‘community’. Interviewees A and B discuss:

LM B110 ‘I think as far as the buildings go, it’s mainly the shops. The shops that used to be here aren’t here anymore or they’ve changed and, in Rubery anyway, there are a lot of charity shops and round here there are a lot of sort of places where you

⁷¹³ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee B97.

⁷¹⁴ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee M74.

⁷¹⁵ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee H12.

⁷¹⁶ Longbridge Methodist Community Interviewee D4.

can eat. Since they've built Morrison's a lot of the shops have gone. There used to be...'
LM A100 'Well, there's not the community here now as there was years ago I think because of that, isn't it?'⁷¹⁷

Significantly in a post-industrial society, such smaller shops have been seen to have been replaced by service industries like take-aways.⁷¹⁸

The complex of hospitals, as a major employer, would have functioned similarly to The Austin as a site where local relationships could be cemented. In contrast, its replacement Great Park, although functioning as the main centre for shopping, has an ambiguous relationship to local 'community.' When asked to describe the 'focal points' - the nodes - of the area, Interviewee G comments:

'Great Park over here and the McDonalds I suppose is a bit of a focus. Great Park, Morrison's, the superstore. An amount of people go shopping, although quite a lot of those come from miles away, they're not people who've walked. Nearly all people with cars. So that's not really a focus for the local community. So, I'd say there isn't much of a focus.'⁷¹⁹

Whilst acknowledging that Great Park is a significant landmark in the area, it is not a node for locally-based community, simply because it draws from such a wide area. G's comments demonstrate the way that the places where one lives, works, shops and relaxes are now spread over a broader geographic area, thus decreasing the density of networks of relationships which form a sense of 'community' and identity in a specific local space. The detachment of place and human relationships exemplified in the Great Park development is also expressed by St. John's Interviewee C, who exclaims that 'there is actually a community there. But it's a very cold community,' and that 'in the daytime it's not so bad cause there are people

⁷¹⁷ Longbridge Methodist Interviewees B110 and A100.

⁷¹⁸ Longbridge Methodist Interviewees H12 and B110, and Community Interviewee D2.

⁷¹⁹ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee G45.

around, but night-time obviously everything's open, but it's not open in a sort of family way, it's open in a sort of business way.'⁷²⁰

More generally, people describe a feeling of change or loss in community locally, particularly around Rubery. Although Rubery grew significantly with the industrial expansion of the early twentieth century, it differs from the area around St. John's in that it already existed as an identifiable village before that time – that Rubery is often described as a 'village' despite its subsequent growth testifies to this. Several people describe the area as having a sense of local identity and 'community': Interviewee H describes how 'it is still [pause] quite a village community',⁷²¹ and Interviewee C explains how 'there's a sense of community within Rubery'.⁷²² However, several describe changes in Rubery's identity and character over time. In particular, its expansion has challenged its village character: Interviewee I comments that 'it really was a village. You know, it really, really was... It's just all been developed.'⁷²³ This is understood by several to have been to the detriment of 'community': Interviewee M says 'we came to Rubery because it was a small area and it had got that community feeling, and I think the more, the bigger everywhere, you lose that community feeling.'⁷²⁴

Hence, Longbridge Methodist renewed its mission with Vision 2000 at a time when social, cultural and economic forces were threatening to erode identity, belonging and social relatedness locally - something which has since intensified with the declining influence and subsequent closure of The Austin, the area's 'heart', in 2005. Into this changing experience of locality and perceived loss of 'community', the church seeks to enable the building of

⁷²⁰ St. John's Interviewee C18.

⁷²¹ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee H4.

⁷²² Longbridge Methodist Interviewee C88.

⁷²³ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee I50.

⁷²⁴ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee M72.

relationships between local people. In line with an understanding of ‘community’ as formed through face-to-face interaction between people in a given space over time, the church has interpreted its aim of ‘serving the community’ as providing the space and opportunities for such interaction to occur. Using Castells’ language of networks, the church has become a ‘node’, a point of intersection for many networks and individuals locally. Indeed, several people describe the church as a ‘meeting place.’ Community Interviewee C describes it as ‘somewhere to come and to meet other people.’⁷²⁵ When asked to describe focal points and significant places locally, some interviewees describe how the social clubs and pubs are important to some local people,⁷²⁶ although Interviewee I describes how there are fewer pubs now than in the past.⁷²⁷ Others describe local community centres in Rubery where groups of people can meet,⁷²⁸ including those provided by churches and local organisations such as football clubs.⁷²⁹ However, many felt that Longbridge Methodist offered something quite rare in the area, especially in Rednal, the immediate environs of the church, just slightly removed from the centre that is Rubery. Interviewee L comments, ‘I think there’s no real community provision in Rednal, so I think we do provide something that is unique.’⁷³⁰ Interviewee K says that ‘you’ve got to travel quite a distance to find the next meeting place, I think.’⁷³¹ Indeed, many people who attend the different groups held at Longbridge Methodist describe the value they find within the relationships they form there. This is most evident in groups of elderly or infirm people, for whom mobility is a problem. For example, several attendees of the Stroke Club and Over 60s Club which are held on church premises, and those who are part

⁷²⁵ Longbridge Methodist Community Interviewee C6.

⁷²⁶ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee L17; Longbridge Methodist Interviewee A93f.

⁷²⁷ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee I50.

⁷²⁸ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee H41.

⁷²⁹ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee H44.

⁷³⁰ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee L6. Community Interviewee C7 also describes Longbridge Methodist as ‘unique’ in this respect.

⁷³¹ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee K31.

of the church-run Day Centre for the elderly describe the importance of ‘getting out of the house’⁷³² and enabling them to interact with other people.⁷³³

However, Longbridge Methodist’s mission goes further than simply offering its spaces for local people like other local community centres. Rather, its most creative and intentional work involves making relationships *between* the different groups who share the same space. Nodes are points of intersection, places at which networks of relationships cross, and Longbridge Methodist seeks to build up the density of the relationships that happen within its spaces. Two initiatives are particularly important here. Firstly the pantomime, which was initially focussed towards the worshipping congregation, has now, in the words of Interviewee E, ‘expanded and expanded until it’s now a monster, a huge monster, which involves, you know, the whole of the community,’⁷³⁴ including school children, members of other churches, and, of course, those who are part of the different organisations at the church. Indeed, Interviewee E describes how, rather than being called ‘Longbridge Methodist Church Drama Group’ or something similar, those involved intentionally call themselves the ‘Longbridge Players’ to show the pantomime’s breadth beyond the worshipping congregation.⁷³⁵ The value of the pantomime is found not simply in the finished show, but in the process of putting it together. The show is radically inclusive, incorporating people of all ages, backgrounds and abilities who are invited to take part in whatever way they wish. Interviewee J explains its popularity as about ‘being involved and being an equal part... In the main everybody is equal in the pantomime, whether you’ve only got one line to say, whether you’ve got no lines to say, whether you’ve got so many to say you don’t know what your next words are. It gives

⁷³² Longbridge Methodist Fieldnotes Entries 11 and 17.

⁷³³ Longbridge Methodist Fieldnotes Entries 5, 6 and 11.

⁷³⁴ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee E7.

⁷³⁵ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee E11.

everybody the opportunity to join in.’⁷³⁶ When asked why the pantomime attracts so many to take part, Interviewee L explains:

‘I think people do want to be part of a group and have friendships. I think the all-age part of it is a big thing. Most clubs these days are pretty age specific, or even gender specific.’⁷³⁷

Through this, the pantomime is a succinct expression of Longbridge Methodist’s aim to build ‘community’ by intensifying the density of networks and relationships that cluster around the church space. Informant A comments that ‘one of the most important things about the panto was that people get together – it’s a real community thing,’⁷³⁸ and similarly Interviewee L describes it as ‘an expression of community spirit,’⁷³⁹ whilst Interviewee E describes its capacity to create ‘fellowship, belonging, community.’⁷⁴⁰

Secondly, the Coffee Pot is understood as one of the fundamental ways in which Longbridge Methodist seeks to unite and enable relationships locally. Interviewee L explains:

‘I think one of the defining things in recent times has been the building of the Coffee Pot. I really feel that if there’s one thing that really, really defines us, it’s this area [*motions towards the Coffee Pot*]. Not ’cause it’s about having a café, that’s not what it’s about. This space of gathering, this space of being, this space of meeting and sharing, coming together in the community, a space where people from four or five different groups actually share a bit of space together. And the ethos of the place, I think that captured the core value of what we’re about.’⁷⁴¹

Several people describe how parents bringing their children to the pre-school have found the Coffee Pot somewhere to meet and form relationships.⁷⁴² Informant A describes how the

⁷³⁶ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee J46.

⁷³⁷ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee L9.

⁷³⁸ Longbridge Methodist Fieldnotes Entry 1.

⁷³⁹ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee L9.

⁷⁴⁰ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee E7.

⁷⁴¹ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee L3.

⁷⁴² Longbridge Methodist Interviewee M33; Longbridge Methodist Interviewee P9.

Coffee Pot has formed a focus for and enhanced the possibilities for relationships within the worshipping congregation, by providing space to socialise and meet before and after the service.⁷⁴³ ‘Lonely people’⁷⁴⁴ and others find it a good ‘place to meet and be with other people.’⁷⁴⁵ Some of the community and church groups choose to eat and drink in the space as part of their meeting.⁷⁴⁶ It is an open, inclusive and welcoming space, where ‘no one is turned away,’⁷⁴⁷ and where the price of the food and drink does not preclude – even those who cannot afford it may be given free refreshments when necessary.⁷⁴⁸ It is also a point of contact for people in need, providing practical and emotional support where it can.⁷⁴⁹ Physically, the Coffee Pot is the point of intersection, the most inclusive space in the church complex: it is the reception from which people enter and exit the building, and from which the worship space, the Quiet Chapel, the hall, the office and the other community rooms are accessed. It is the node within the node, the point where relationships are most dense. Some visitors go on to pursue their diverse chosen activities *from* this inclusive, relational space, whilst others may come in simply *for* the interaction the space provides.

Indeed, that Longbridge Methodist works to create ‘community’ is demonstrated through the sense of belonging to the church that many describe. Some of the worshipping congregation describe it as a ‘second home.’⁷⁵⁰ However, it is generally recognised that, as Interviewee H comments, the ‘people who hire the rooms, [pause] I think, tend to think of themselves as part

⁷⁴³ Longbridge Methodist Fieldnotes Entry 12.

⁷⁴⁴ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee P9.

⁷⁴⁵ Longbridge Methodist Fieldnotes Entries 2 and 19.

⁷⁴⁶ For example, from the community the Jelly Babies Nursery and Pre-school, Over 60s Club, and from the church, the Prayer Breakfast, Ladies Luncheon Club and the Easter Children’s workshops.

⁷⁴⁷ Longbridge Methodist Community Interviewee C6. Also, Longbridge Methodist Interviewee P22.

⁷⁴⁸ Longbridge Methodist Interviewees B27, P6 and L3.

⁷⁴⁹ Longbridge Methodist Community Interviewee C6; Longbridge Methodist Interviewee P8 and P9.

⁷⁵⁰ For example, Longbridge Methodist Fieldnotes Entry 42; Longbridge Methodist Interviewee E21.

of the main body of the church.⁷⁵¹ Oft-cited evidence of this are descriptions of instances when people who attend community groups at the church have chosen to arrange funerals there. For example, when a woman was asked why she had chosen Longbridge Methodist as the location for a family funeral, Interview K describes that she had said ‘this is my church. This is where I come to Weight Watchers.’⁷⁵² Indeed, two of the major community groups who use the building have respectively described a close connection with the church,⁷⁵³ and that they feel like part of the ‘family’⁷⁵⁴ at Longbridge Methodist. This is a natural consequence of an attitude within the worshipping congregation of welcome and generosity. The most frequent response to being asked to describe the church in the questionnaire was that it was welcoming. Interviewee G, describing the mission and purpose of the church, says that ‘it has moved I think from being our [i.e. the congregation’s] little building’, and instead offering it to the community.⁷⁵⁵ Interviewee L treasures how generously the worshipping congregation offers its building to the community, describing how ‘nobody gets precious about this building getting bashed about, battered about.’⁷⁵⁶ Indeed, the very diversity of the worshipping congregation in terms of age, social background, ethnicity, frequency of attendance and length of time as participants, a large proportion of whom started attending after the Vision 2000 changes, testifies to the church’s goal to be an inclusive meeting place. Furthermore, the emphasis on ‘fun’ shows that the church’s key aim is to simply provide an enjoyable place for people to be. Through shaping itself as a node in which local networks and relationships can interact, Longbridge Methodist gives Rednal, and the wider area, a focus when other foci are diminishing: echoing the language of vitality frequently used to

⁷⁵¹ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee H39.

⁷⁵² Longbridge Methodist Interviewee K26. A similar incident was described by Longbridge Methodist Interviewee A25.

⁷⁵³ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee M3.

⁷⁵⁴ Longbridge Methodist Community Interviewee B21.

⁷⁵⁵ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee G19.

⁷⁵⁶ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee L3.

describe how The Austin once functioned locally, Interviewee E explains, the church ‘is very much at the heart of whatever community there is in that area.’⁷⁵⁷

Longbridge Methodist therefore understands its purpose to continue God’s mission by serving the local area by sharing with it God’s love through the creation of a space where all are welcomed in their diversity, and by enabling relationships to form and a sense of local belonging be found in the face of forces which have challenged and deconstructed an experience of community locally. Here, the church draws on the concept of ‘social holiness’ at the heart of Methodist theology, mission and practice, but in a way that responds to post-industrial urban experience. As explored above, if the root and source of the Church and of Christian discipleship is the outpouring of love that issues from the Triune God, then this offer comes through God’s grace. Methodism understands this as ‘responsible grace,’⁷⁵⁸ grace that evokes a response from the recipient. John Wesley understood God’s grace to be ‘effective.’ Jennings comments that ‘for Wesley, grace really works. It really changes things, people, relationships and the world,’⁷⁵⁹ hence, in Methodist tradition, there is an emphasis on lived experience and the feelings that emerge when God’s grace is received.⁷⁶⁰ Wesley identified two forms of grace: justifying grace, in which the recipient is ‘set free from the guilt of sin,’ and sanctifying grace, in which they are ‘set free from the power of sin.’⁷⁶¹ However, this ‘grace remains inoperative’ without a ‘response of faith’ in the recipient.⁷⁶² Shier-Jones notes that ‘God offers all that is necessary for sanctification and justification, but individuals

⁷⁵⁷ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee E21.

⁷⁵⁸ Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Abingdon, 1994).

⁷⁵⁹ Theodore W. Jennings, *Good News to the Poor: John Wesley’s Evangelical Economics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), p. 141.

⁷⁶⁰ Jennings, pp. 142-143.

⁷⁶¹ Margaret Jones, ‘Growing in Grace and Holiness’ in Clive Marsh (ed.) *Unmasking Methodist Theology* (New York and London: Continuum, 2004), p. 157.

⁷⁶² Jones, p. 161.

must respond by participating in the working out of their salvation.’⁷⁶³ Jennings comments that ‘a life that was unchanged in behaviour was a life without faith, a life in which whatever measure of grace has at one time been received was squandered, frittered away, lost. The experiential evidence of faith is a fundamentally transformed life.’⁷⁶⁴ This emphasis on grace and a response of faith and obedience to God explains the centrality of the motif of Covenant between God and humanity within Methodist tradition.⁷⁶⁵

The transformed behaviour emerging from the justifying and sanctifying grace of God which is accepted by faith is articulated in Methodist tradition as ‘holiness.’ Craske describes ‘the primary meaning of holiness is about dedication to God,’ but by exploring its etymology, also recognises that holiness is ultimately about wholeness and healing, and as such is concerned with completeness, integrity but also restoration.⁷⁶⁶ Indeed, Clark describes holiness as about things being ‘what God intended them to be,’⁷⁶⁷ where, as Jennings notes, individuals are restored to ‘the whole human being, the image and likeness of God.’⁷⁶⁸ In this way, the personal quest for holiness is ultimately part of God’s work of salvation.⁷⁶⁹

However, holiness is not an individual matter. It affects one’s relationships, and is necessarily indivisible from communal transformation. Wesley himself states that ‘the gospel of Christ knows no religion but social, no holiness but social holiness.’⁷⁷⁰ If holiness involves

⁷⁶³ Angela Shier-Jones, ‘Being Methodical: Theology within Church Structures’ in Marsh (ed.), *Unmasking Methodist Theology*, p. 30.

⁷⁶⁴ Jennings, p. 145.

⁷⁶⁵ Methodist Church, *Called to Love and Praise*, p. 14.

⁷⁶⁶ Jane Craske, ‘The Threads with which we Weave: Towards a Holy Church’ in Jane Craske and Clive Marsh (eds.), *Methodism and the Future: Facing the Challenge* (London: Cassell, 1999), pp. 177-178.

⁷⁶⁷ David Clark (ed.), *Reshaping the Mission of Methodism: A Diaconal Church Approach* (Buxton: Church in the Market Place, 2010), p. 178.

⁷⁶⁸ Jennings, p. 147.

⁷⁶⁹ Jennings, p. 147-148; Craske, p. 178.

⁷⁷⁰ Methodist Church, *Called to Love and Praise*, p. 39.

the restoration of the image of God within people, then it involves ‘the formation of a Christ-like character.’⁷⁷¹ And God, as a unity of three distinct persons, is inherently communal, and as such is characterised by loving relationships. In this way, ‘love is the real test of holiness.’⁷⁷² God’s love for humans offered through grace ‘awakens love in the one who receives it,’ who then ‘becomes not only the loved subject but also the loving subject.’⁷⁷³ But through this, humans are drawn into the Trinitarian community characterised by loving relationships and ‘incorporated into its dynamic.’⁷⁷⁴ Here, the quest for individual salvation through holiness is ultimately but one part of God’s broader project to redeem and restore all by drawing it into God’s community of love. *Called to Love and Praise* states that God’s mission is that humankind ‘finds its lasting centre and home in the divine love.’⁷⁷⁵ Jennings pushes this further, stating that Wesley placed human transformation through social holiness into the broader eschatological horizon of the ‘new creation,’ where it ‘can serve as evidence for’ the transformation of the cosmos.⁷⁷⁶ Consequently, building community becomes a Christian imperative, and this is precisely what Longbridge Methodist aims to do by becoming a centre for the formation of local community, firmly based on an ethos of sharing God’s love which is its ultimate source.

Called to Love and Praise recognises that since holiness is characterised by love, then ‘holiness finds its natural milieu in, and not apart from, Christian fellowship.’⁷⁷⁷ Methodist ecclesial structures have developed with a strongly communal basis, which recognises that the nurturing of and realisation of God’s mission of holiness occurs within a social context.

⁷⁷¹ Maddox, p. 179.

⁷⁷² Methodist Church, *Called to Love and Praise*, p. 39.

⁷⁷³ Jennings, p. 150.

⁷⁷⁴ Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley’s Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), p. 103.

⁷⁷⁵ Methodist Church, *Called to Love and Praise*, p. 54.

⁷⁷⁶ Jennings, pp. 152-153.

⁷⁷⁷ Methodist Church, *Called to Love and Praise*, p. 39

Today, the structures of Longbridge Methodist echo this ethos, albeit in a revised form for the contemporary situation. Traditionally, all Methodist members were placed in classes, small groups which met weekly for ‘prayer, bible study, mutual confession and support,’⁷⁷⁸ who were accountable to each other for their journey in holiness.⁷⁷⁹ Classes were grouped together in societies, and societies grouped in to Circuits. The nationwide network of Circuits continues to be called the ‘Connexion.’ This structure ensures ‘mutual support and encouragement’ for all,⁷⁸⁰ and enables the sharing of resources and their deployment to areas of greatest need.⁷⁸¹ It also preserves both the integrity of individuals and local groups and recognises their interdependence in their search for holiness, and that their ‘true identity’ and ‘full potential’ is deepened as more relationships develop and deepen.⁷⁸² *Called to Love and Praise* sees this connexional ecclesiology as embodying Paul’s image of the Church as the Body of Christ, which, whilst recognising the validity and distinctiveness of each individual part, asserts that they are ultimately part of a ‘living whole’, united in one God.⁷⁸³ Connexionalism recognises that God’s mission to restore holiness is concerned with unity, ‘since the Triune God who commissions the Church is one, seeking to reconcile and bring the world itself into a unity in Christ.’⁷⁸⁴ Yet, within this unity, diversity is affirmed, echoing the diversity contained within the community of the Triune God. As Clark notes, ‘holiness treasures the riches of diversity.’⁷⁸⁵

⁷⁷⁸ Runyon, *The New Creation*, p. 119.

⁷⁷⁹ Runyon, *The New Creation*, p. 123.

⁷⁸⁰ Runyon, *The New Creation*, p. 115.

⁷⁸¹ Methodist Church, *Called to Love and Praise*, p. 52.

⁷⁸² Methodist Church, *The Nature of Oversight: Leadership, Management and Governance in the Methodist Church of Great Britain* (Report to the British Methodist Conference, 2005), 2.1, 2.3.

⁷⁸³ Methodist Church, *Called to Love and Praise*, p. 48

⁷⁸⁴ Methodist Church, *Called to Love and Praise*, p. 28.

⁷⁸⁵ Clark, Part 2, p. 179.

However, McMaster comments that ‘social holiness needs to be extended beyond ecclesial *koinonia*.’⁷⁸⁶ As embodied in the Trinity, this inclusive, all-embracing love reaches ever outwards, driven by the ‘widest possible focus, the unity of *all* humanity’⁷⁸⁷ in the goal of the new creation. Drake asserts that Methodism must extend the ethos of connexionalism and social holiness to form partnerships with other churches and secular organisations.⁷⁸⁸ Craske comments that ‘these are the networks which expand our vision; they grow out of love and they express love.’⁷⁸⁹

Longbridge Methodist Church, in its ethos of inclusion and welcome, its generous offering of its building and resources, and its openness to relationships with diverse people and organisations, embodies the spirit of connexionalism and the broadest understanding of social holiness. Whilst connexionalism is traditionally a form of ecclesial organisation in the Methodist Church, Longbridge Methodist has applied its principles to its mission and commitment to the local area. Its mission is to create locally-based community at a time when numerous forces threaten it, and through this, God’s love can be experienced and shared by nurturing relationships. Indeed, of the congregational questionnaire respondents, over three-quarters came to regular worship through relationships with existing worshippers, whether through a personal invitations, following friends or enjoying the ‘warm fellowship’ found there. The community that centres on the church building is comprised of distinct individuals and groups, who are there for various reasons, purposes and lengths of time. The church respects and accommodates the integrity and needs of all these people and groups, and

⁷⁸⁶ Johnston McMaster, ‘Wesley on Social Holiness’ (January 2002, http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/emtc-paper-wesley_on_social_holiness.doc, accessed 24/5/10)

⁷⁸⁷ Richard Andrew, ‘An Impoverished Catholicity: Theological Considerations for a Methodist Future’ in Craske and Marsh (eds.), p. 22.

⁷⁸⁸ Philip Drake, ‘Joining the Dots: Methodist Membership and Connectedness’ in Marsh (ed.), *Unmasking Methodist Theology*, p. 139.

⁷⁸⁹ Craske, p.172

people genuinely value and celebrate the diversity found there. Interviewee H says that the church ‘kind of caters for everybody; it accepts them,’⁷⁹⁰ and Interviewee C describes the church as ‘a caring church, where people – everybody – can come and be accepted.’⁷⁹¹ Very many informants and interviewees rejoice in the mix of ages, the relative variety of ethnicities (compared with the local area), the range of denominational backgrounds, and levels of faith, commitment and attendance at the church. But within this variety, unity is sought. Both Interviewee F and Interviewee M, separately, describe how there are ‘no divisions’ at Longbridge Methodist.⁷⁹² Similarly, in accordance with this ethos of openness and inclusivity, people are welcomed to belong to the church community in varying ways with varying degrees of regularity and commitment. Some may be formal members of the Methodist Church with a commitment to regular worship, whilst others may express their belonging through being part of a community group held there, whilst yet others may only come into contact with the ‘connexion’ informally and infrequently, by watching the pantomime or visiting the Coffee Pot, for example.

Through Longbridge Methodist’s locally-based expression of connexionalism, we see similarities between connexional principles and the rhetoric of networks, nodes and communities employed by Castells, Wellman and others. The concept of community as shaped through the interaction of networks at nodal points echoes the connexional notion of unity within diversity. But most significantly, through this model, the church takes seriously the reality of a post-industrial, ‘networked society’, where mobility and the decline of large-scale industries and organisations have, amongst other things, loosened individuals from geographic restrictions, meaning that they primarily interact with like-minded others within

⁷⁹⁰ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee H38.

⁷⁹¹ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee C68.

⁷⁹² Longbridge Methodist Interviewees F1 and M8.

freely-chosen associations, rather than those they simply share a space with. However, at the same time, the church manages to maintain and promote an experience of locally-based community which network society is typically seen to undermine (which has been the particular experience of the Longbridge area as post-industrial processes have taken hold), by shaping itself as a node where networks can cross and thereby intentionally increasing the density of interactions there. By holding firm to their ethos of locally-based mission, the church has found a way in which network society can be acknowledged, but whilst challenging the negative effects of this structure, such as isolating individuals on a local level and reducing the diversity of people with whom one associates. This counter-cultural vision is driven by the firm belief that the new creation and our God-given wholeness can be found in broad, inclusive and loving relationships. Indeed, Craske sees connexionalism as overcoming the prevailing individualism of contemporary culture,⁷⁹³ and describes it using the language of networks and relationships. It is, in Shanahan's words, 'an idea whose time has come.'⁷⁹⁴ For Clark, social holiness has the potential to be the 'gospel for our time', for it declares that diverse community *can* be built *from* distinct communities⁷⁹⁵ – a belief which is declared by the connexional principle and embodied at Longbridge Methodist. The church offers a taste of a redeemed and restored community which reflects the reality of a God of diversity, unity and outgoing love. Rather than being shaped around a specific set of beliefs, the church is concerned with shaping a 'way of being' in those who belong at the church in whatever way. Longbridge Methodist demonstrates that Methodist ecclesiology is, ultimately, a virtue ethic, described by Jones as a 'character-forming community.'⁷⁹⁶

⁷⁹³ Craske, p. 173.

⁷⁹⁴ Christopher Shannahan, 'Singing Songs of Freedom: Methodism as Liberative Praxis', in Craske and Marsh (eds.), p. 34.

⁷⁹⁵ Clark, p. 173.

⁷⁹⁶ Jones, p. 156.

5.1.3 The centre of the circle: pilgrimage towards perfection

In and around Longbridge Methodist Church there is a 'connexion', a community comprised of relationships between a wide range of groups and individuals. Whilst the concept of 'connexion' functions like a 'network' in the rhetoric of communities, the key distinction is that, theologically, the church has an understanding that there is a centre, a source, of this network: God. The love and grace that pours from the Triune God is understood to motivate and sustain the relationships within the connexion. Here, the worshipping congregation, as those who recognise and openly declare themselves to have received God's love, and have consequently sought to respond to this grace in faith by seeking to create both personal and social holiness by sharing God's love with others, are fundamental to God's mission to build community: they, in the words of the Vision 2000's tagline, 'reach out to others because God reaches out to' them. Effectively, they stand closest to the source, and are the conduits through which God's love flows outwards. The congregation are committed to creating the means of grace by building opportunities for experiencing God's love. A discussion about the church's mission at a house group expressed the congregation's self-understanding succinctly. When asked whether many of the worshippers were actively involved in the practical day-to-day running of the church, the response was that some were more than others. However, this did not matter, because a more significant measure of commitment to the church is whether people are prepared to speak to new people they encounter after worship services,⁷⁹⁷ in other words, committed to creating relationships and maintaining the connexion. At Longbridge, relationships are the fundamental 'means of grace', which, in Wesley's thinking, are the concrete ways through which God's love is experienced. The sacraments, prayer, meditation and self-examination, are, amongst others, considered means of grace, but in a movement

⁷⁹⁷ Longbridge Methodist Fieldnotes Entry 28.

where community and loving relationships were understood as evidence of one's growth in holiness, 'living and conversing with others was of vital importance' and 'rightly ordered conversations administered grace.'⁷⁹⁸ This awareness of God through relationships is expressed neatly by Interviewee E in a discussion about the pantomime. Although primarily a social initiative about fun and enjoyment, E describes:

'We've got this, I mean, *amazing* spiritual feeling. ...Pantomimes and spirituality – never saw the connection before, but we've got this tremendous determination to keep involving people.'⁷⁹⁹

Such an experience certainly accords with a church who declares its aim as sharing the love of God through fellowship, inclusion and reaching out in relationship with others. Similarly, Interviewee K expresses an important truth about the spiritual aspect running throughout the whole of Longbridge Methodist community's life when they say 'it's still a church. And it's not a meeting hall which has services.'⁸⁰⁰

However, although worshippers hold firm to their aim of sharing God's love through relationships, there is also a dominant desire that involvement in the Longbridge Methodist community should develop beyond the purely social activities. Many recount instances where involvement in the varying activities held at the church have led people into regular worshipping attendance. By far the most commonly-cited initiative for this has been the pantomime. Interview D comments on 'the amount of people who've come into our church [i.e. the congregation] purely because of the pantomime and have stayed.'⁸⁰¹ It is believed that the pantomime, and also other relational initiatives at the church, build a bridge which

⁷⁹⁸ John M. Haley and Leslie J. Francis, *British Methodism: What Circuit Ministers Really Think* (Peterborough: Epworth, 2006), p. 37.

⁷⁹⁹ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee E7.

⁸⁰⁰ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee K29.

⁸⁰¹ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee D11. See also Longbridge Methodist Interviewees M29 and L8.

makes entering the worshipping life of the church easier. Interviewee L claims that the pantomime is:

‘...a very good way of people being able to connect with Christian community here and, as it says in all sorts of leaflets about mission, ‘dip your toe in the water. [...] I guess it’s belonging before believing, in a way. It gives people a chance to belong that then can lead to belief, or even express belief that was there.’⁸⁰²

Alongside this, people express more generally the hope that the relationships formed at the church will lead to active worship. Interviewee G asks:

‘how do you enthuse, get people, these hundreds of people who come into groups and things, so they don’t just see it [the church] as a community hall, and that something spins off, hopefully they may realise it’s a church and they might be tempted to come along some time?’⁸⁰³

Even within the congregation itself, there is a desire for deepening of ‘spirituality’. Despite holding that God can be experienced through relationships, several people make a curious distinction between social activities, and those considered to be ‘spiritual’ or ‘religious.’ Interviewee E, despite their rhetoric about the spirituality of the pantomime, also notes that ‘it’s the more spiritual meetings that we have that are more poorly attended. [...] But this has always been us.’⁸⁰⁴ Interviewee G comments that not all of the regular congregation are ‘spiritually inclined’, that is, interested in activities such as home groups. They comment that whilst more social activities are well-supported within the congregation, the ‘spiritual’ ones struggle numerically: ‘it would be lovely to see a deepening spirituality in the whole place.’⁸⁰⁵

This language of the ‘spiritual’, as opposed to the ‘social’, whilst ambiguous, describes the desire for a deepening awareness and explicit articulation of the God who is the source and

⁸⁰² Longbridge Methodist Interviewee L8.

⁸⁰³ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee G11.

⁸⁰⁴ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee E14.

⁸⁰⁵ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee G10.

sustainer of the relationships in and around Longbridge Methodist Church. The most overt attempt to nurture the shift from the social to the spiritual is the ‘pantomime service’, which has, over recent years, been added to the programme of events surrounding the pantomime. After several performances of the play which culminate on a Saturday evening, the following Sunday morning, the usual worship service becomes a service of celebration, praise, prayer and reflection about the experience of the pantomime. The service brings several of the songs and themes from that year’s story into the context of worship, and into conversation with insights from the Bible and Christian tradition. For example, the service for the 2009 production ‘Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves’, took the theme of transformation of the show’s ‘baddies’, and reflected upon it in relation to the story of Zacchaeus from Luke’s gospel. However, the service is primarily for those who have been involved in the pantomime’s production and reflects on the experience of taking part. In the 2009 service, the importance of community and welcome were emphasised: that people ‘get together’, both those who have been involved for many years and those for whom it is their first time, in what was described in the service as ‘a real community thing.’⁸⁰⁶ The pantomime service brings the whole experience of family, fellowship, community and achievement into the context of God and articulates explicitly that sense of ‘spirituality’ that is found there.

Indeed, Interviewee E describes how the pantomime service was first introduced to give a focus to the emotions surrounding the ending of the show, but reflect on them in the context of praise and prayer to God. E says:

‘...we introduced the panto service when [minister] first came. He said that he’d got... his actual words were ‘there’s an actual sense of bereavement when the pantomime was finished. They’re all so upset that this has stopped now, we’ve got to do something, we can’t just stop.’ Well, I had this feeling

⁸⁰⁶ Informant A, Longbridge Methodist Fieldnotes Entry 1.

for years but never quite sure how to do it, so we conceived this idea of a panto service...'⁸⁰⁷

But more than this, Interviewee E hopes that by taking a social event and developing a spiritual awareness from it, people may be drawn into more regular worship. They continue:

‘...and one thing leads to another and so they come back next week. ‘Oh we like it here.’ And the young people go off to Sunday Special and they like it in there. And so it is our church is expanding and I think it’s quite a lot to do with the pantomime.’⁸⁰⁸

The pantomime service is the clearest expression of a widespread desire to draw people from social relationships to an awareness of God, by drawing them into the worshipping heart of the church, the congregation, which is that specific group who both recognise and articulate God’s activity in their lives, but also who sustains God’s activity and mission by sharing the love they have received with the wider community. This accords with the Methodist emphasis on responsible grace, where an experience of God’s grace calls forth a personal response and growth in holiness. Within Methodist understanding then, a central missional task is, as Marsh asserts, ‘the identification and articulation of... human interaction as grounded in divine action is the main (mission-oriented!) responsibility of the church.’⁸⁰⁹ *Called to Love and Praise* describes the centrality of worship here: worship is the celebration of God’s offer of grace, from which recipients offer their lives in return, to grow in personal and social holiness by sharing God’s love. Worship and mission are therefore inextricably linked, and mission is the ‘inevitable consequence of worship.’⁸¹⁰ Longbridge Methodist, therefore, aims to draw those in the broader community surrounding the church deeper into

⁸⁰⁷ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee E10.

⁸⁰⁸ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee E10.

⁸⁰⁹ Clive Marsh, ‘A Training Ground for Forgiveness: Methodism and Fellowship’, in Craske and Marsh (eds.), p. 113.

⁸¹⁰ Methodist Church, *Called to Love and Praise*, p. 36.

the worshipping heart, transforming them from (unwitting) recipients of God's grace into responsive individuals committed to joining the church's mission to share God's grace.

That Longbridge Methodist recognises that all people are called ever deeper towards God, the centre and source of mission and community, expresses a central tenet of Methodist theology that faith is a pilgrimage. Shier-Jones describes Methodists as a 'pilgrim people,'⁸¹¹ and that 'the pilgrimage that binds all Christians together begins with the first stirrings of prevenient grace and ends with the full perfection promised in Christ.'⁸¹² Salvation and its evidence holiness – expressed here as 'perfection', another Wesleyan concept – are not (usually) received instantaneously, but are the culmination of a journey in faith, the goal of which is holiness, sharing in the character of God for which Christ is the paradigm. Shier-Jones goes on to assert that 'when they [Christians] cease to worship, to study the Scriptures, the pray and to serve God and their neighbour in the world, they cease to avail themselves of the means of grace by which God offers them perfection in Christ.'⁸¹³ Consequently, at Longbridge Methodist, regular attendance at worship is not simply the goal, but one aspect of an ongoing journey with God, and that even within the congregation, people are at different stages in their pilgrimage towards Christ-like perfection and holiness: from those whose attendance is infrequent, to the inner core of people who are more 'spiritually inclined', exploring a deeper awareness of God.

Longbridge Methodist is therefore a connexion, at the heart of which is God and the goal of Christ-like holiness towards which all are drawn. Here, the church models what Hirsch and

⁸¹¹ Angela Shier-Jones, *A Work in Progress: Methodists Doing Theology* (Peterborough: Epworth, 2005), p. 195.

⁸¹² Shier-Jones, *A Work in Progress*, p. 196.

⁸¹³ Shier-Jones, *A Work in Progress*, p. 197.

Frost describe as a ‘centred set’, as opposed to a ‘bounded set’ community.⁸¹⁴ Dominant understandings of Church from Christendom were ‘bounded sets’, ecclesial communities that sought to attract people through a notion that the Gospel can only be encountered by drawing people into church. Such churches have clear boundaries and understandings of insiders and outsiders. In contrast, centred set churches operate around a more incarnational, rather than attractional understanding of church. They seek to draw near to human contexts, and envisage a Christian community which, like Christ, responds to its setting, much like Longbridge Methodist. Through this, Christ is made real within human relationships, creating a community that does not have a boundary, but a clear centre: Christ. Whilst Hirsch and Frost’s words are more specifically ‘Christ’ focussed, whereas Methodism emphasises the Triune God as the centre and source of ecclesial community, the similarities are striking. Rather than being defined by formal membership or adherence to rules, a centred set is defined by core values, a way of living together, where people are at varying distances away from the centre. Indeed, Longbridge Methodist has flexible boundaries and belonging can be expressed in a variety of ways. In this way, the centred-set church exists in tension with traditional Methodist understandings of membership. Methodism’s societal origins led to the development of clear understandings of belonging and commitment, and today membership involves commitment to regular worship, learning through Bible study and fellowship, service to others and evangelism. However, as expected in a centred-set, formal membership to the denomination is deemed less of a priority. Because it has been built through relationships rather than relying upon a sense of inherited identity, many in the church do not have a Methodist background, nor will they have chosen to worship there because of its Methodist affiliation. Its style of worship, drawing on music and forms outside of Methodist tradition,

⁸¹⁴ Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the Twenty-First Century Church* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003), chapter 3, particularly pp. 47-51.

echoes the church's commitment openness and making connexions. Indeed, Interviewee G describes how the church 'is certainly moving away from being sort of 'Methodisty' to 'Christian':'⁸¹⁵ many participants define themselves primarily as Christian, with Methodist identity assuming less importance.

However, this does not mean Longbridge Methodist is not authentically Methodist. It shows clear commitment to the Methodist tenets of relationship, connexionality, social holiness and perfection, but in so doing, has made matters of self-designation and denominational identity secondary. The church makes real an important emphasis in Wesley's original ecclesiology.

As Runyon asserts:

'[Wesley] does not draw the usual sectarian distinction between those who adhere to certain doctrines or practices and those who do not. All are welcome. Yet he does distinguish between those who are honestly 'on the way' and those who are not. The church is not exclusively for the saints, but it is for those who believe that God always has more to give and are open to that gift.'⁸¹⁶

Authentic Methodist identity therefore comes not from conforming to shared beliefs, practices or behaviours, nor even from proof of one's holiness, but rather through being on a pilgrimage towards the centre, towards holiness. At Longbridge Methodist, all people are being called towards the Christ-like centre through the extension and gift of God's loving grace. The people there are at varying levels of commitment – or even awareness – on this pilgrimage. On this journey, some may choose to become formal members of the Methodist Church, as a public act of commitment to seeking holiness and responding to God's mission. Others may worship regularly, but not feel it appropriate to yet make such an act.

⁸¹⁵ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee G29.

⁸¹⁶ Runyon, p. 107.

Here, Longbridge Methodist again has developed as an ecclesial community which responds to contemporary social trends, by creating a church which wrestles effectively with the current shift away from formal commitment. Rather than church being an alternative community, bringing its own demands, culture and commitment, the church aims to model social holiness and a vision of the new creation through being embedded in the local community. In the words of Hirsch and Frost, Longbridge Methodist is an incarnational community, making God's love real in the lives of those in which it comes into contact, but seeking to draw them into a recognition of God's love that they may respond themselves by joining God to further even more God's mission to restore all of creation – people, places, communities – into the new creation. In this way, Longbridge Methodist redeems local space to become again an arena for God's purposes, bringing local experience into God's vision of social holiness. The principle of the eschatological New Creation recognises the physical aspect of salvation, the locatedness of the community of the Triune God into which all are invited.

With Vision 2000, Longbridge Methodist clearly wrestled with the post-industrial forces which deconstructed local experience and a sense of 'community' in the same way St. John's does now in the aftermath of the closure of The Austin. The church has reached into the resources of its tradition to develop a practical theology which creatively responds to these challenges. It is significant that Methodism emerged in a similarly 'social and economic environment that was destroying natural community which from medieval times had provided the structure of human society.'⁸¹⁷ The connexional structure of classes and societies provided a 'tight-knit fellowship of mutual support and encouragement' in the midst of the

⁸¹⁷ Runyon, p. 118.

urban migration accompanying the industrial revolution.⁸¹⁸ But because of this, and also possibly because the church does not face the reality of the empty site with the same intensity as St. John's because it is slightly further away and its people focus more towards Rubery, Longbridge Methodist is generally optimistic about its future. Many participants describe their frustration at the slow pace of the redevelopment of The Austin site, and recognise that it may bring both positive and negative changes to the area. However, the ethos and practice of Longbridge Methodist has meant that the church has faced the closure of the factory and the subsequent changes with confidence. Unlike St. John's, there is no sense that the future of the church relies upon the redevelopment, and the church believes it is equipped with the tools and theology to manage whatever change may come. Indeed, many are excited about change and embrace the need to 'keep moving on,'⁸¹⁹ and for some the redevelopment of Longbridge simply brings more challenges and opportunities with which the church can engage. As Interviewee G describes:

'I feel it's an opportunity for some more housing just over the road from the church – great.'⁸²⁰

⁸¹⁸ Runyon, p. 118.

⁸¹⁹ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee J52.

⁸²⁰ Longbridge Methodist Interviewee G48. Others also expressed comments about the challenges and opportunities the redevelopment of the site would bring to Longbridge Methodist: for example, Longbridge Methodist Interviewees B119f, H23 and J49.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has presented theological and missiological accounts of two churches wrestling with the dramatic cultural changes experienced by its context. When MG Rover closed in 2005, Longbridge became the latest of many industrial communities impacted by global socio-economic forces since the 1970s. Yet, Longbridge, like all of these localities, tells a particular narrative, more nuanced than popular mythologies promote. The economic impact was dramatic, but regional. Conversely, the local impact was broader in time and scope. The ‘Longbridge story’ is one of gradual change, community fragmentation, loss of identity and de-stabilisation. At the time of the fieldwork, residents looked with uncertainty towards the post-script: the rebuilding of fabric, shared identity and local community.

Here, the two churches witnessed to God’s mission in distinct ways. As intrinsic congregational studies, Christian practice was explored broadly, where explicit and implicit, verbal and bodily aspects of each’s habitus, in Ward’s terminology, ‘mediated’ theological meaning and ‘participated’ in the being and mission of God locally.⁸²¹ Denominational traditions proved to be significant resources. Creatively drawing on Methodism’s social emphasis, Longbridge Methodist is a God-centred place of welcome, building local relationships to overcome the alienating aspects of contemporary existence. This approach emerged after dramatic changes in the 1990s, as the hospitals once central to the socio-economic vitality of the area were closed, demolished and redeveloped. St. John’s, shaped by its Anglican structures but also its uniquely-developed approach, in contrast, symbolises

⁸²¹ Ward, p. 98.

memory and continuity with the past, maintaining a sense of place in a displaced environment, and modelling a counter-cultural alternative to the unstable culture around it.

Undoubtedly, one church appears to thrive, whilst the other struggles – with its future, identity and the strange culture around it. One church is confident, whilst the other is questioning. One has a clear self-identity, whilst the other has little certainty about anything. Side-by-side, they represent churches at different stages of their post-industrial experience, illustrating the complexities of negotiating practical theology within a changing context.

The fieldwork took place beyond the initial furore over lost employment and during planning for Longbridge's redevelopment, when the theological priority for both churches was wrestling with the deconstruction (and reconstruction) of local place and erosion of community. Their responses illustrate, differently, Baker's concept of the Third Space, for the safe and constructive meeting of identities.⁸²² They are 'sites of resistance' against the negative effects of diverse, hybrid existence,⁸²³ and indeed demonstrate a 'Third Space ecclesiology' which shapes shared-identity and togetherness.⁸²⁴ Longbridge Methodist consciously became a much-needed hub for local relationships. St. John's, amidst Longbridge's deconstruction, is a Third Place almost by default, standing as a symbol of memory and continuity with the past, around which the new community can create renewed, shared identity.

Here, both practical theologies involve the creation of counter-cultural, alternative local narratives – a common theme in post-secularisation literature. In highly-valued, near-familial

⁸²² Baker, p. 16.

⁸²³ Baker, p. 53.

⁸²⁴ Baker, pp. 111-125.

relationships between members, they have prophetic – and, as Paddison describes, political⁸²⁵ – power which envisages new possibilities for local life amidst its literal and experiential erosion. Both churches exemplify a dominant motif in post-secular literature and practical theology: that the primary role of churches is simply to be ‘faithful’⁸²⁶, worshipping God and witnessing to God’s Kingdom. These Longbridge congregations show that it is not in elaborate projects that local churches primarily find their mission in fragmented urban space, but in its most basic calling to simply ‘be community.’ This study strongly claims the importance of locally-focussed ecclesial mission, regardless of challenges experienced amidst contested understandings of the local in a globalised culture.

Whilst Longbridge, like similar working-class, post-industrial areas, experienced the sharp-end of urban change, this study has shown that its churches have necessarily experienced their own pain and disorientation. For Longbridge Methodist, in the sub-context of Rubery-Rednal and its earlier post-industrial experience, this came when they wrestled with re-inventing themselves within a new environment during ‘Vision 2000’. For St. John’s, however, the pain was evident during the fieldwork, a difficult period of uncertainty, loss and questioning, as the area around them addressed dramatic physical and social change. It’s a church struggling to find identity and place within a place it no longer understands. This study has shown the truth of Ward’s assertions that Christian practitioners – which local churches are – are inherently cultural,⁸²⁷ challenging trends in practical theology to posit church and culture as distinct entities. Rather, churches intimately share the fortunes of their context. If industrial communities like Longbridge face significant change, then their churches will too.

⁸²⁵ Paddison, p. 231.

⁸²⁶ Paddison, p. 232; Lockwood, p. 28.

⁸²⁷ Ward, p. 48.

Indeed, this thesis has clearly demonstrated the complexities and nuances inherent in the formation of congregational practical theology, particularly amidst contextual shifts. As their surrounding community changed, both churches found their meaning as ‘Church’ altered significantly. The theology based on noble industrial values of stewardship and hard-work which St. John’s proudly promoted, became, unintentionally, a counter-cultural attempt to maintain a traditional – albeit theologically-justifiable – lifestyle in non-committal, consumer society. Longbridge Methodist, fifteen years before, recognised that its very architecture of windlownless walls had unintentionally become missiologically problematic in a changed culture. This thesis concurs with Ward’s criticism of dominant trends within practical theology which present it simply as objective theological reflection by Christians on their contexts to shape a considered response.⁸²⁸ However, if he asserts that churches are inherently cultural, this study goes further, by showing that they are also inherently theological. Churches cannot objectively ‘reflect on theology’ just as they cannot objectively ‘reflect on culture’, as if they stand separate from both. Rather, churches are cultural entities and also theological entities – inherently, intrinsically and unavoidably, a further argument for more sustained attention to theology within congregational studies. The experiences of Longbridge, in the 1990s and post-2005, *thrust* the churches into new practical theologies, where changed context unintentionally changed the meaning of their established missiology. Practical theology can be a useful tool to discern future direction (indeed, this thesis could be used by the churches as ‘action research’, as espoused by Moschella, to review their mission and re-focus), but it also happens *in spite* of local churches, especially during times of contextual change, forcing churches like St. John’s, and previously Longbridge Methodist, to ‘play catch-up’. Practical theology is ‘inevitable’; simply, it is the unavoidable outcome of

⁸²⁸ Ward, p. 48.

the presence of a local church within a context. Once a congregation describes itself as 'Church', it defines itself in relation to God and can instantly be read theologically. Its actions and life necessarily gain theological meaning, especially considered against its context. With its telos in the establishment of God's reign, some may question the sufficiency of that theology, but nonetheless, from that mere designation as 'Church', the complex interaction between local church and context will constantly shape and re-shape its practical theology, whether intentionally or otherwise. In an area of cultural change, like Longbridge, churches need to re-gain control over their identity and mission – which Longbridge Methodist did in the 1990s, and which St. John's was starting to explore. Local churches, and their practical theologies, are where the theological and cultural, divine and human, meet and are challenged to grow into each other, a messy process where humans learn to discern and join God's mission in their context.

The specific experiences of churches in post-industrial, working-class localities has received little direct and sustained attention in literature about contemporary globalised, post-modern urban existence, which often focuses on cultural diversity. This study aims to address that absence. It shows that working-class communities like Longbridge experience local change in particularly sharp and complex ways. Each church tells its unique narrative of mission and identity, meaning they cannot offer a blueprint for how to be a 'post-industrial congregation'. However, the comparative approach of exploring their two practical theologies has demonstrated common experiences which enable principles to be offered for a 'post-industrial practical theology' for local churches in similarly changing communities.

6.1 A theology of vulnerability

Pain and disorientation amidst significant cultural change has featured prominently in the experience of both churches. However, acknowledging this pain is an important first step to rediscovering a confident sense of identity and mission. At Longbridge Methodist, this came some years ago, at the realisation of a gulf between themselves and their community. The physical ‘opening’ of the building, the development of the Coffee Pot and pantomime and the growing ethos of welcome emerged and shaped the self-confident theology it demonstrates in the face of the factory redevelopment. At St. John’s, its vulnerability was palpable during the fieldwork. It is aware that its position locally is tenuous. Despite their despondency about the future, there is, as one interviewee described, a ‘strong instinct for survival.’⁸²⁹ Awareness of vulnerability without a will to survive leads to death. Instead, they are starting to explore how they need to change, as discussions comparing themselves to numerically-thriving nearby churches demonstrated.

Fulkerson speaks of practical theology ‘emerging at the site of a wound’⁸³⁰; for these churches, their woundedness at the changes that have occurred around them has proven, or is proving, to be the motivator for new practical theologies and review of their mission.

6.2 A theology of presence

As shown, presence is the only prerequisite for practical theology. Indeed, despite questioning their identity and future, in its mere presence, St. John’s carries messages about God’s enduring presence, powerful in an area of discontinuity and instability. As Lockwood

⁸²⁹ St. John’s Interviewee J19.

⁸³⁰ Fulkerson, pp. 12f.

asserted in the early 1990s,⁸³¹ simply by being there, churches symbolise the incarnational God who lives alongside people – a concept so fundamental to practical theology.

For local churches within post-industrial – or, indeed, all changing – communities, a commitment to remaining present is the foundation upon which a clearer mission and identity can be built. For churches like St. John's, simple presence may be all they can offer for some time whilst they discern their future.

6.3 A theology of seeking

Vulnerability and presence, whilst foundational, are only the start of a post-industrial practical theology. Churches also need to actively seek a more robust sense of mission and identity. Incarnational theology will not simply recognise God's presence, but join God's missional work. Acknowledging vulnerability is kenosis, the Biblical concept of emptying oneself of power, but only to offer oneself for God's use. Indeed, both churches' post-industrial stories involve recognition that they no longer possess a taken-for-granted local influence and power. However, at Longbridge Methodist, this enabled a prophetic theology to emerge, and St. John's is starting to explore how to serve God afresh. Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this study to discover how it has progressed in its explorations, and whether, how or when it moves beyond mere presence.

Churches in changing, post-industrial communities may feel like they are in Easter Saturday, waiting for the Resurrection, both of their locality and their church, but they must also develop a 'Magdalene theology' of active seeking, of going to the tomb. As they do, they will

⁸³¹ Lockwood, p. 28.

find, like Mary, new life in unexpected ways. Certainly, Longbridge Methodist did. For St. John's, in the loss and rebirth of its community, this is a pivotal time, being called to actively seek God's mission and join it in a new environment. This will necessarily involve change and adaptation, as Longbridge Methodist showed, and may itself be difficult, but it is essential to its survival and authenticity as Church.

The changes faced by Longbridge and other working-class communities are particularly difficult and intense examples of the changes faced by all urban areas within a globalised, post-modern, post-industrial world. Consequently, these principles for a 'post-industrial practical theology' have broader relevance for churches in other changing, urban contexts. Churches must grow adept at responding to contextual change in the shifting experiences of contemporary existence, if they are to operate with a practical theology, missiology and ecclesiology which is robust, appropriate, and God-centred. Through learning from the experience of two congregations in Longbridge, this thesis offers to theology and the Church an attitude by which local churches may negotiate this environment. Embracing vulnerability, committing to presence, and seeking God's will, in the often-painful experience of the urban world, will enable churches to discover their calling to more authentically become Church.

APPENDIX A
RESEARCH AGREEMENT AND ETHICAL CODE
(issued to each church and agreed with minister prior to the fieldwork period)

Case study
Research Agreement and Ethical Code

ThD Research Project:
‘Being Church in Longbridge:
Mission and Ecclesiology in a Post-Industrial Community’

Researcher: Mrs Caroline Phillips, Anglican Ordinand

[Redacted]
[Redacted]
[Redacted]
[Redacted]
[Redacted]

Tel:
Email:

Case study: _____ church, Longbridge, commencing on ____DATE____

This research will investigate what it means to ‘be Church’ in the changing, post-industrial community of Longbridge. It will explore the social, economic and cultural features of Longbridge and the theological, missiological and ecclesiological principles employed by local churches aiming to exist in a relevant and meaningful way in that context.

From the research a 50,000 word thesis will be written, which is hoped will contribute to discussions around how churches can engage effectively with the working-class and communities facing major change. The study is part of the researcher’s training for ordination in the Church of England.

The research will comprise two case studies of local churches, of which _____ will be one.

This will involve:

- eight weeks ‘participant observation’: the researcher will be involved in the church’s life - attending worship, community initiatives, events, interacting with the congregation, etc
- semi-structured interviews with a sample of church attenders and other relevant persons
- analysis of relevant data, documents and artefacts

The researcher will:

- access areas of the church's life only at the invitation of the minister and the informed consent of leaders of all groups/activities
- be transparent and open about the reasons for her presence throughout
- address the congregation at the beginning of the project, explaining the aims and purpose of the research, how it is to be carried out and used. Further explanations will be given to group/activity leaders as necessary.
- keep fieldnotes to record observations
- use any data gathered only for the purposes of this research
- use the name of the church within fieldnotes, transcripts and the finished thesis
- preserve the anonymity of participants within fieldnotes, transcripts and the finished thesis. Use of proper names will be avoided and each participant referred to will be allocated an alphabetical letter, known only to the researcher.
- ensure that all data gathered remains confidential to the research and written thesis (unless it concerns safeguarding, involvement or potential involvement in serious criminal activity or is subpoenaed)
- provide the church with a summary of the research's findings after analysis, if requested by the church.
- destroy any data held on the submission of the thesis.

The minister may:

- withdraw consent for the church to be part of the research at any stage

Leaders of groups/activities may:

- withdraw consent for the group/activity to be part of the research at any stage

Participants may:

- request further information about the project at any stage during the research
- view any fieldnotes concerning themselves and amend or withdraw comments

In addition to the above, regarding interviews:

- interviewees may withdraw consent for the interview to be used as data at any stage
- interviewees may terminate the interview and refuse to answer any question
- interviewees may refuse the use of recording equipment
- the researcher will give a copy of the transcript to each interviewee as soon as possible after the interview. Interviewees may correct the transcript and request parts of the text not to be quoted.

Signed _____ (researcher)

Signed _____ (minister)

Date _____

APPENDIX B
PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET
(displayed in each church for the duration of the research)

Participant Information

ThD Research Project:
'Being Church in Longbridge:
Mission in a Post-Industrial Community'

Researcher: Mrs Caroline Phillips, Anglican Ordinand
[REDACTED],
[REDACTED]
Tel:
Email:

Case study: _____church, Longbridge, commencing on
____DATE____

- This research will look at what it means to 'be Church' in Longbridge, particularly with its recent changes. I will explore the theology, mission and understanding of Church in two local churches – of which _____(church) is one.
- The study is part of my training for ordination in the Church of England and I hope it will give me skills and knowledge for my future work.
- I will write a 50,000 word report which I hope will help churches work effectively with the working-class and communities facing major change.
- I will be involved with _____(church) for eight weeks. I will attend worship, church events, community involvement, talk to people I meet and generally get involved in church life. I will also conduct some interviews.
- I will take notes about the things I observe.
- I will only use notes and information for the purposes of this research.
- The notes and the finished report will be anonymous. I will not use your names or initials. However, I will use the name of the church.
- You may ask me for more information about my research at any stage

- If you wish, you may look at notes concerning yourself and amend or withdraw any comments you do not want me to use.
- Leaders of groups/activities may withdraw consent for the group/activity to be part of the research at any stage
- You may request a summary of my findings after the research is finished.

Many thanks for allowing me to conduct my research here. I look forward to working with you

Caroline Phillips

APPENDIX C
SAMPLE OF FIELDNOTES:
EXTRACT FROM FIELDNOTES FOR FIELDWORK
AT LONGBRIDGE METHODIST CHURCH

Date: Weds 11/3/09	No. of hours:	Entry No. 5
Time arrived: 3pm	Time left: 4.45pm	
<p>...I also spoke to [D] and [I]. We were talking about how the church grew – [D] had mentioned something about extensions. I asked if it had always been this busy. They didn't seem to certain...I think they sort of said yes. I kind of asked how the church had developed. I was told that the church began in the late 1930s as a house church, then it moved to above the co-op, and then was a tin hut (or wooden hut???CHECK) on Ryde Park Road, and then they got these premises. They said that it sort of grew from there. The lounge was extended, and that the coffee pot used to be a courtyard, which was covered over and became a café. They worked out this was probably 12 or 13 years ago, but The Coffee Pot had started in the lounge a couple of years before – I got the impression that [I] started it or at least was involved in its beginnings. I asked if the church part had always been there and like it is – they said yes, but it never used to have windows, only the skylight. The woman from [REDACTED] said 'it was to stop people looking out', but [D] and [I] said it was supposed to be that it would hide the noise from the road. But they said that it made the church look cut off, and told a story how a local policeman hadn't actually realized it was a church [I thought there's a sense that the church grew in its openness to the community]</p> <p>[D] said that before, the mums used to drop their kids off at Jelly Babies and just go again, but now they stay and chat and meet each other. He said that the coffee pot is a good outreach into the community and how it gets a lot of people through the door and they can see that church is a friendly place to be and not strange. They said that the Coffee Pot loses money, but that's not what it's there for – it's there as an outreach, so they're not too worried that it loses money.</p> <p>Another lady said that she hoped I'd have a good time there. She said she's not actually a member there, but started [church fellowship group - name removed to preserve anonymity] a year ago after [group at another church] closed. She described how the group had originally been mum's and tots, but how it wasn't attracting new members because these days women go out to work to pay the mortgages they had. Another woman close by said that their women's fellowship also had closed. The first lady said that she wishes she'd found [fellowship group] long ago. She says she pops to Coffee Pot a couple of times a week with her daughter and enthuses about it. I asked if there's any other friendly places locally you can go like that, and she said 'no.'...</p>		

APPENDIX D
CONGREGATIONAL QUESTIONNAIRE:
ST. JOHN BAPTIST PARISH CHURCH

St. John's Parish Church - Congregational Questionnaire

I would be grateful if you would help me by completing this questionnaire. It is part of my research on '**Being Church in Longbridge**' and will give me some valuable background to St. John's and its congregation. The questionnaire is anonymous. Please complete the questions you feel able to.

Where appropriate, please circle or tick the correct response.

1. **Gender** Male Female

2. **Age** Under 10 10-19 20-29
 30-39 40-49 50-59
 60-69 70-79 80+

3. **Employment** – Are you:

In paid employment (full-time)	Responsible for home/family
In paid employment (part-time)	Student / at school
Retired	Unemployed
Other	

If you wish to answer, what is your occupation? If you are retired, what was your occupation before (include housewife)? _____

4. Do you own your own house? Yes No

5. Do you live in the immediate neighbourhood? Yes No
 If yes: How long have you lived locally? _____ years
 Have you moved house during that time? Yes No
 If no: Have you ever lived locally? Yes No

6. Where do you go to do your main shopping? _____

7. Apart from church, what places or organizations are important to you locally?

8. Which Sunday service(s) do you usually attend?

8.30am	10.30am	9.30am (2 nd Sunday)
--------	---------	---------------------------------

9. How long have you attended this church? _____ years
10. How often do you worship here?
At least once a week Several times a month Once a month or less often
11. What influenced you to start coming?
- | | |
|----------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Nearest church | Warm fellowship |
| Preaching | Style of worship |
| My friends were here | I grew up at this church |
| Minister's visit | Community activities/commitment |
| Literature from the church | Through a baptism/wedding/funeral |
| Visit from church member | Invitation from a friend/neighbour |
| Other (please state)_____ | |
12. How would you describe this church?
13. What do you like about this church?
14. What do you think is the greatest need or weakness of this church?
15. How would you describe the community in which the church is placed?
16. What do you think are the main needs or challenges of this community?

Many thanks for your time and effort. Please return this form to Caroline Phillips.

APPENDIX E CONGREGATIONAL QUESTIONNAIRE: LONGBRIDGE METHODIST CHURCH

Longbridge Methodist Church - Congregational Questionnaire

I would be grateful if you would help me by completing this questionnaire. It is part of my research on **'Being Church in Longbridge'** and will give me some valuable background to Longbridge Methodist and its congregation. The questionnaire is anonymous. Please complete the questions you feel able to.

Where appropriate, please circle or tick the correct response.

1. **Gender** Male Female

2. **Age** Under 10 10-19 20-29
 30-39 40-49 50-59
 60-69 70-79 80+

3. **Employment** – Are you:

In paid employment (full-time)	Responsible for home/family
In paid employment (part-time)	Student / at school
Retired	Unemployed
Other	

If you wish to answer, what is your occupation? If you are retired, what was your occupation before (include housewife)? _____

4. Do you own your own house? Yes No

5. Do you live locally to the church (within 2 miles)? Yes No

If yes: How long have you lived locally? _____ years

Have you moved house during that time? Yes No

If no: Have you ever lived locally? Yes No

6. Where do you go to do your main shopping? _____

7. Apart from church, what places or organizations are important to you locally?

8. How long have you worshipped at this church? _____ years

9. Are you on the membership list of the Methodist Church? Yes No

10. How often do you worship here?

At least once a week Several times a month Once a month or less often

11. What influenced you to start coming?

Nearest church

Warm fellowship

Preaching

Style of worship

My friends were here

I grew up at this church

Minister's visit

Community activities/commitment

Literature from the church

Through a baptism/wedding/funeral

Visit from church member

Invitation from a friend/neighbour

Other (please state)_____

12. How would you describe this church?

13. What do you like about this church?

14. What do you think is the greatest need or weakness of this church?

15. Think about the area in which the church is placed. How would you describe this area and its people?

16. What do you think are the main needs or challenges of this area?

Many thanks for your time and help. Please return this form to Caroline Phillips

APPENDIX F

GUIDE FOR SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS WITH CHURCH PARTICIPANTS

About them

How long have you been at (*church*)?

Did you attend church elsewhere before that?

Where do/did you work?

About the area

If local... How long have you lived around here?

How did you come to live round here?

Are your family local?

What is 'Longbridge'? What does 'Longbridge' mean to you? Where/what is it?

[Tell me about your time living in this area]

How would you describe this area? The people?

What things are important to people here?

What are the good things about this area? Strengths

What are the bad things about this area? Challenges/problems

The past/changes...

What was this area like in the past? What's different/changed compared to now?

What changes have you seen during your time around here?

What have been the most important things or moments in the life of this area?

(Tell me a story from this area's past that you think is important)

Thinking about Rover...

What did it mean for this area to have the factory there? How did having the factory there affect this area? (What kind of relationship did this area have with Rover/Austin?)

What impact did the decline and closure of Rover have on this area?

How did people react? What did they feel?

Four years on, what effect has it had on the area?

What do you think/feel about the redevelopment of the site? What do people generally think?

The future...

What do you think this area will be like in 10 years time?

What do you see for the future?

About the church

Why did you start coming?

Tell me about your time with the church.

What services do you come to? Why?

What other activities are you involved in?

What words would you use to describe (*church*)? The people?

What things are important at (*church*)?

What do you like about (*church*)?

What's kept you coming to church for so long? (if a long time)

What do you get out of coming to church?

What is not so good about (*church*)? What don't you like? What could be improved?

Think back over your time at (*church*)...

What was it like in the past? How has it changed?

(in the early days? In the beginning?)

What have been the most important things or moments in the life of (*church*)?

(Tell me a story from this church's past that you think is important/significant?)

About the church's role or purpose...

What is (*church*) here to do/be?

What purpose does (*church*) serve?

What place/role does (*church*) have in this area?

How do people in this area see the church?

What do local people think about (*church*)?

Looking forward...

Where will the church be in 10 years time?

Why should this church be here in 50 years time?

APPENDIX G
INTERVIEWEE INFORMATION SHEET FOR
SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS WITH CHURCH PARTICIPANTS
(issued to each interviewee at the time of interview)

Information for Interviewees

ThD Research Project:
'Being Church in Longbridge:
Mission in a Post-Industrial Community'

Researcher: Mrs Caroline Phillips, Anglican Ordinand

[Redacted]
[Redacted]
[Redacted]
[Redacted]
[Redacted]

Tel:

Email:

- This research will look at what it means to 'be Church' in Longbridge, particularly with its recent changes. I will explore the theology, mission and understanding of Church in two local churches – of which St. John the Baptist is one.
- The study is part of my training for ordination in the Church of England and I hope it will give me with skills and knowledge for my future work.
- I will write a 50,000 word report which I hope will help churches work effectively with the working-class and communities facing major change.
- This interview will take between 1 and 1½ hours
- I will use audio recording equipment. You may refuse the use of this if you wish.
- You may withdraw consent for the interview to be used at any stage
- You may terminate the interview and refuse to answer any question
- I will give you a copy of the transcript of the interview as soon as possible afterwards. You will be able to correct where you feel it is necessary. You may also request that parts of the interview are not quoted.

With many thanks for your help and support
Caroline Phillips

APPENDIX H
SAMPLE OF AN INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT:
EXTRACT FROM INTERVIEW WITH ST. JOHN'S INTERVIEWEE J

- Res14 Can I ask what do you think that St John's is here to do or here to be? What do you think the purpose of St, John's is?
- J16 [pause] well, cos originally it came into being under the 'Circle without Centres' thing, but [pause] we were never really in the centre. There isn't really a centre of Longbridge. It's amorphous, I think, it might be the right word. But definitely to be a presence for people to know that we're there. People assume that churches will always be there when they want weddings or funerals and things like that, don't they? And [pause] we've had sort of community things so – we always used to have a summer fair and sometimes a winter one as well, so you got lots of people coming to those. And [another church participant] will turn around and tell you this as well, 'people keep asking me when we're going to have a summer fair', she says, 'it should be for the community.' It's [another church participant], you see. But it's a way of showing the community that you are a living, viable thing, you know. But people seem to be quite happy to walk past on the outside and never think about coming in. And it's coming in that we need to encourage. Quite how you do it I don't know.
- Res15 Has that changed? So had that always been the case throughout the church's life?
- J17 No, I don't think [pause] ...because, sort of in the beginning when the church first came about, there wasn't [pause] there wasn't the activities on Sundays that there is now. You know, Sunday trading really didn't help. And a lot of other things children get taken to or they don't get up early enough. Parents are so busy earning money to keep the roof over their heads that Sunday's their day for shopping or something like that. So they don't have *time* to bring children. And if you don't get the children, you don't get the adults. It's easier to get the adults in if they come with children. When occasionally when we get the Scouts, Beavers and Cubs, really, we do get extra parents and what-not then, and I think perhaps we ought to have more of those and then perhaps we ought to extend, perhaps the anniversaries of baptisms. A block for the winter ones and a block for the summer ones. Something like that, you know. but I do remember [previous church participant] saying that the population of Longbridge was rather....he didn't say nomadic, but he said 'they do move', which makes it difficult to keep in touch with families who've children have been baptized, you know. I think it's probably settled down; more people don't move out quite so much now. Because originally a lot of the people that came to live on the new estate, Longbridge and Northfield, were from the inner city. But they're getting old now, the people that have moved out of the city, you know, and I'm not quite sure about the next generation coming up. They don't have the same...loyalties, really, I think might be the word. They've got other priorities in their life and so church doesn't come very high up the list. But I think they like to know that it's there. In fact, we nearly had more people come to the car wash than we do to church [laughs]. Strange that is, where the people come from, you know. There's one man who comes from [REDACTED] which, you know, is not just next door. But he always comes to get his cash washed and a lump of bread pudding. Yes, so you need something to – and I don't know what

it is – to join the community to the church. You know, there seems to be a block. I know [another church participant]’s always talking about his doors. Have you heard him mention doors? Because it’s his one...one of the bees in his bonnet about the fact the entrance is...when the doors are shut nobody can see what’s going on inside. What we really need is some glazed doors, you know, really, so people can see what’s going on. So, you know, it seems as if that door is a block to the community, you know, they don’t seem to think that they can open the door and can come in. Perhaps we ought to have it open a bit more. Mind you, I think the wind tends to blow that way! [laughs]

Res16 So glass would be fine – you could see in and no wind.

J18 Yes, we’ll have to have glass, yes.

Res17 Where do you see the church in 10 years time? What do you see happening to it?

J19 [pause] This is [another church participant]’s picture, probably told you, the fact that, you know, he can see that we won’t have our own vicar, that we’ve got to be sharing; there won’t be enough to go around. There won’t be the finance, that’s the problem. It’s the finance that’s a problem. The trouble is – well, one of the troubles – church’s get very parochial, and they want to keep things how they’ve always done it, you know. And to survive, we’ve got to do things in a different way. [thinks of things she’s done at church in the past]... Oh and then course I joined the PCC a bit later on and I know one of my pet things was that, ‘well, we’ve got to learn to do things, we’ve got to learn because we might not have a vicar of our own.’ So we’ve got to learn how to be responsible for all sorts of things, you know, vicars do at the moment. And I mean, it is going that way really. There are quite a lot of things that lay people do now that 10 years ago they wouldn’t have done. They wouldn’t have been allowed really. So I think there’s quite a strong instinct for survival but survival into what I’m not quite sure. Maybe, if you make people more responsible, it’s like if you give somebody a job to do then they’re more likely to come – be a sidesman or coffee or something – they come don’t they; they’re very regular at doing that. Maybe if you can get it across to people that if you don’t do things, then there isn’t going to be anybody to do for; there’s not going to be a church to do it for. It comes to that commitment thing, I think it comes back to that in the end. But in 10 years time...? It will be interesting really because I don’t know what’s going to happen down the bottom of the road. And how much we could be involved in that. I think the fact... The Jolly Tots were useful in a way; it was a good source of income and it helped to keep the place going. But it did tie up the church hall all the week, really. And I mean, 2 of the ladies that were on the lay pastoral care with us are now running a lunch club at [REDACTED] Well, no way could we do that at St. John’s at the moment, because you can’t use the kitchen while they’re there. There used to be a long time ago, a Wednesday afternoon meeting. They called it the Jack and Jills, you know, it was open to men and women. And of course, the men’s things have totally gone at St John’s. I just don’t know, you know; they haven’t got anything really. I think at one time they used to have a night where, you know, they’d play table tennis and billiards and things like that but there’s not that now. I know, [previous church participant] tried to revive the men’s club but his was far more serious – discussions about Christian doctrines and things like that. Didn’t go down very well. Well, I’m not quite sure I was quite as deep as that but it was certainly with a little bit of purpose behind it. Yes, I think we’ve got to develop the social side so that the community at least knows what we d-... That we’re there and we do things and are visible.

APPENDIX I

SAMPLE OF DATA ANALYSIS:

EXTRACT FROM THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF DATA FROM FIELDWORK AT LONGBRIDGE METHODIST CHURCH

Key:

LM FN8 Longbridge Methodist Fieldnotes Entry 8

LM J34 Longbridge Methodist Interviewee J, comment 34

How the church describes itself:

- *Friendly, welcoming, fellowship (see also comments describing church as 'inclusive')*
 - 'Man called [F]... said 'we say we're a very friendly church so it would be good to see what you think.' LM FN1
 - "'we like to think we're a friendly church' – several people have said that to me.' LM FN41
 - LM A17; 'I like to think 99% of people get a welcome when they come.' LM A18
 - 'very lively, active, welcoming church' LM C44
 - 'It's a welcoming church. It's a church that takes everybody seriously. [pause] It's a church of contrasts. It's a community church. It's a listening church; a supportive caring church' LM E13
 - LM G9, LM G15, LM I2
 - 'it's very welcoming and caring and wanting to bring other people in without kind of preaching at your throat, sort of thing' LM H38
 - I7 – friendly and welcoming
 - LM M10: 'I would say everybody's welcome. It doesn't matter who you are'
 - 'we make it our business to go to strangers when strangers do come in or when they come into church and you say 'well, how did you find today?' or 'did you enjoy coming?' LM P11
 - 'Second home', LM FN42
 - 'it's a fellowship of like-minded folk really, who come and be together, and we can meet in a week as well.' LM A29
- *A community (but NB, a v diff model of community to St. John's)*
 - 'It's like a community' LM FN9
 - LM FN10 – by 2 separate people!
 - 'a community, church is now' LM G14 – in the past it was more like a 'churchy church'
 - 'I think it's a fabulous community.' LM H37
- **Working-class**
 - 'more of a **working-class church** than a middle class church' LM C44; 'down to earth' LM C45. Don't dress 'dolled up' LM C51

- 'It's also the acceptance of everybody and the way people speak... People in all sorts of jobs come and people with no jobs' LM C53
- 'this is a church which has a sense of being from a working-class community, and I think that's very true' LM L1. Although there *are* some professionals, 'most people, their stories of growing up, what formed them and shaped them as human beings was not from a place of privilege often.' LM L1

Characteristics of a working-class church:

- 'I don't think it's a church that takes itself too seriously and I think that when I've worked in churches in a more middle-class professional background, people get quite uppity about how things all work and how all the processes, you know, and have we got everything all as it should be and all that kind of stuff. And Longbridge is more a kind of 'oh well, if it works that'll do for us.' LM L2
- **FUN** 'People coming in at the grassroots level don't feel out of their depth... think if you're from working-class stock, you like to feel comfortable with people. They are, I mean, there's some highly intellectual people at our place but because of the fun, it levels it out.' LM D45 *** links fun to working-class-culture
- **FUN** 'There's a bit more laughter, and some of the things that you...there are some things that I say here that I couldn't have said in [a previous church], it was a professional middle-class church, full of professional middle-classes' LM L2
- LM L2 – actually, a lot of people *do* do things, compared with other churches he's worked in: 'Longbridge is a doing, you know, it's a church that we can get people to do things'.
 - **BUT** 'But we struggle to get people to take on the more – capital A – Administrative roles. So when it comes to sort of meetings and circuit meetings and steward processing everything and all that kind of stuff' LM L2. *There's not a 'professional' approach to work, rather 'we just muckle along. But we muckle along effectively' – people pitch in when they can, and things get done.*

Fun, happiness

- 'we're open to fun' LM D44
- 'Happy church', LM I7, LM O6
- 'bubbly' – fun, not serious, LM P10

Open to change

- Has a vision, not afraid to change, LM G15
 - Similar, 'it's a church which knows where it's at and where it needs to go' LM E13
 - 'we're open to change' LM C46

General

- Mixture of worship, LM G9
- 'caring', LM I8

'What is LMC here to do/be?'

Outreach/serve the community

- 'Outreach', 'an outreach to people outside and to be here for anybody that wants us', LMB65

- ‘I instinctively think of community and outreach. Church as well as being there for people to praise God, go and get together with the rest of the family praising God like on a Sunday, everything that’s done in that church throughout the week is still serving God but serving the community as well.’ LM J34
- ‘We’re in a place serving a community which hardly exists because there’s little or no community around the church...but it’s to serve the community’ – e.g. Coffee Pot and Day Centre. LM D61-62 [interesting play on community – does it try to create community where there is none]
- ‘it’s the spiritual wellbeing of the people who use it. But I’ve also noticed with this church, it does try and get very much into the community’ LM I16
- ‘It seems that it’s not a club for the people who belong but – perhaps you’ve often heard it said that the church exists for those outside it. I won’t say everybody will accept that, but it has moved I think from being our little building’ LM G19
- ‘a sanctuary’, ‘a community centre’, ‘a second home’. ‘It is very much the heart of whatever community there is in that area’ LM E21
- ***Sharing the love of God***
 - ‘To proclaim the Gospel of Christ, to say we are here to [pause] show the love of Christ, love of God to the community; to be caring, to be a caring church, where people – everybody – can come and be accepted... To say, you know, this is a place where you can come and find care and acceptance and love in the agape sense.’ LM C68
 - ‘we show a Christian presence in the community’ LM A55
 - ‘I think the underpinning value of this place is sharing the love and grace of God that people have discovered for themselves with the wider community’ LM L3

Welcome and include all people

- About welcome and inclusivity: ‘It kind of encourages like, youth again really. It kind of like, it’s not a religious sort of thing. It’s kind of...it’s somewhere you can come and we can go and pray if you want to. And like you’re not judged as being like a ‘youth’, kind of just, when you walk into the church, it’s kind of nice cos you’re kind of welcomed as just you.’ LM O24
- ‘it is like a house, isn’t it, where everybody’s welcome, which I think is very very good’ LM M29
- ‘it’s here for everybody, isn’t it? It’s not... [Pause] We don’t turn anybody away really. [Pause] We listen to what people got to say and then if we can help then we will.’ LM P22

General

- ‘“But in an acquisitive society, people want somewhere that will give them something and it has to be something and it has to be something that’s given in a practical way. We give practical help through the church as well.’ LM D64
- ‘I come down here and listen to the services and you realize ‘this is what matters.’ ...’being around good people’ LM I5

APPENDIX J
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS FROM FIELDWORK
AT ST. JOHN'S PARISH CHURCH, LONGBRIDGE
(given to the minister of the church prior to submission of thesis)

Caroline Phillips, ThD research: 'Being Church in Longbridge'

Summary of findings and analysis - case study of St. John's Church, Longbridge, Jan-Feb 2009

Presentation of findings

History of the church:

- Began as the Church of the Epiphany, daughter church of King's Norton, built as the Austin Village was developed
- St. John's opened in 1957 with the creation of a new parish for the residential area that developed as the factory grew and with post-war inner-city clearance
- Built as part of the Birmingham Diocese 'Circles without Centres' scheme for the new post-war estates, aiming to give a 'centre' to these sprawling suburbs. As a parish, Longbridge indeed lacks a geographic focus, such as a high street. This is shown in the different ways 'Longbridge' is defined by local residents.
- In its early history, the church was successful in giving a 'centre' to the 'circle': worship, occasional offices, social groups, uniformed organisations.

Facts about the church today:

- Parish of 7928 people
- Continues to be locally focussed: 73% of electoral roll live in the parish; half of the congregation started attending because it is their local church.
- Continues to host groups for all ages.
- Continues to hold high numbers of occasional offices (compared to national average)
- However, the congregation does not reflect the local demographic:
 - 79% over 60 years old (less than a quarter locally)
 - A lot less work and a lot more are retired than local average
 - A lot more are/were in managerial, professional and intermediate employment than local average
 - Less are/were in semi-routine/routine jobs than local average
- Average length of attendance is 30 years (with 15% attending for over 50 years!)
- Congregation is also strongly rooted in the area: average length of time living locally is 44 years
- Average combined Sunday congregation is 66

Key features of the congregation/church:

1. An emphasis on stability and commitment:

- With such a 'long-serving' congregation, many of whom have known the church since its early days, there is a strong awareness of where it has come from: e.g. as shown on the banner showing the 3 church buildings and listing the incumbents.
- But also, with deep roots in the area, the congregation are aware of how the church and the area's history are also strongly woven: e.g. the Austin A7 car at the church's 50th anniversary, the banner in church depicting the area's industries
- The stable congregation has nurtured a tightly-knit fellowship - many describe a strong sense of 'belonging' or 'home' or 'family'.
- Stability of the church exacerbated by the small number of vicars. People describe how having a vicar for 29 years gave them 'routine'.
- The stability of St. John's means that people describe a dislike of change.
- Alongside 'stability' the church values commitment, since its very beginning: e.g. the 'Regular Giving Plan' and the 'teams' (maintenance, catering, cleaning) which managed practical tasks. Such commitment is seen as a 'Christian duty' and related to worship.
- A culture of commitment and contributing continues to be evident today: attendance is frequent and regular (83% are weekly worshippers). Attenders talk about 'jobs' and 'work' and 'doing things' at St. John's. Also the language of 'membership' is common: a member is a regular, contributing attender (a contrast to traditional CofE ideas of the parish and 'belonging'). There are occasional tensions between their clear idea of 'membership' and the looser sense of parish belonging.
- 'Long service' is also highly regarded. Some people describe how it can be difficult to be new at St. John's.

2. Feeling threatened and sense of lament

- Multiple factors are undermining the vision of a stable, committed church:
 - Numerical decline, ageing congregation and lack of finances: in the past, the congregation was self-sustaining, both in terms of the jobs that needed doing and the finances required. Both worship and other church-run groups have declined numerically, and people describe this vividly. People describe 'feeling fragile' and people frequently describe and lament this perceived 'decline'.
 - A perceived decline in willingness to do things at church: there is clear anxiety over a lack of volunteers to do essential tasks. People seem less willing to commit - and some say younger people in particular! Some people link this to recent lifestyle changes (work, leisure, changing status of women, etc)
 - Some people within the congregation seeking a less demanding experience of worship and church: a small but significant number of people describe a desire to be able to come to worship without having to be required to 'do things'. They contrast St. John's to a large evangelical church nearby which seems to offer this 'consumerist' approach to churchgoing, where you go to have a good time. But they ask, is simply 'enjoying yourself' really worship?

3. A concern for the future and a recognition of the need to change

- St. John's appears trapped between an existing idea of church and churchgoing centred upon commitment and work, and a contemporary culture which is very different. People sense a chasm between the church and the community outside
- When asked what they saw for the future of the church in 10 years time:
 - Some are completely pessimistic - will it still be here? Is it viable?
 - Some recognise the need to grow numerically - but how?

- Many others recognise that it needs to change. It needs to *attract* people in, and can no longer rely on a natural traffic between parish and church. It must *reach out*, be more *open*.

Theological analysis of St. John's

Parish and place

St. John's was founded upon, and continues to express, the 'parish model' of church, where church and its locality are intimately linked. It is based on an incarnational theology, in which the local space is understood as the site of God's activity and the mission of the parish church is to make God's Kingdom known locally. In 1957, for the newly-built estate of Longbridge, this mission was interpreted as creating a sense of community from disparate people, and St. John's was built to provide a 'centre', a point of unity for the community. The church's success in this aim was evident for several decades in the different groups and occasional offices and is shown in the feeling of 'home' and 'belonging' that the congregation experience. St. John's was one 'node' in the network that created community in Longbridge, and other nodes were things like shops, pubs, and most significantly, the Austin. St. John's and these other nodes gave the area a sense of 'place', filled with meaning and identity. This understanding of place is at the heart of the incarnational theology of the parish system: when God is made incarnate and real locally, God 'takes place' amongst the identity and meaning in a place. Indeed, St. John's is skilled at holding and maintaining the sense of identity and meanings that are important in the area. It is a community which remembers: it has a strong sense of its origins and of its links with the Austin. Even its use of the name 'Longbridge' is important when 'Longbridge', for many, is being redefined.

Belonging: Membership and Stewardship

The parish system incorporates the idea that people belong to their parish church in many and varied ways. However, St. John's has developed a clear idea of 'membership', of regular and committed involvement with the church, of those who sustain the life and mission of the church practically and financially. This 'stewardship' and 'giving' is understood as the heart of Christian discipleship and worship, for it is this that sustains St. John's mission to be a 'centre' to the 'circle'. Some tensions exist between this defined concept of membership, and the looser ways that others belong at St. John's, and the regular 'members' seek to draw those on the fringes towards more committed belonging and towards the expression of true discipleship they understand themselves as showing.

De-stabilising the foundations

However, some at St. John's are questioning whether their existing ways need to change in the face of different threats, notably social and cultural change, both locally and more broadly. The church's values of commitment, longevity and stewardship belong to the industrial age, when people were defined by their job and their position in large-scale industries (like the Austin!) In the post-industrial age, people are defined by what they consume. St. John's becomes a counter-cultural community.

But the locality has also changed radically too. Many of the other nodes which maintained that community have gone: many shops, pubs, and especially, The Austin. In the past, people would live, work and socialise in the same place. But in post-industrial society, local space and local community is less important. The sense of 'place' in Longbridge has changed, particularly after the Austin declined. Indeed, the demolition of the factory symbolically destroyed the sense of memory and identity of the area. Many local people find it hard to imagine the future until the site is rebuilt. Longbridge has 'lost its place' and St. John's lost its parish - and hence the church feels disconnected from its locality.

Consequently, it's no surprise that the church also finds it hard to imagine the future, because it relies upon what happens on the Austin site.

Presence... and engagement?

In a world where local space is less important, people are more mobile and associate more in networks, the central premise of the parish system to make God real in geographic communities, now becomes a counter-cultural and prophetic task. Indeed, when other local focal points, such as shops, pubs and - in Longbridge - The Austin, have disappeared, the Parish Church is committed to remain there as a sign of God's enduring love. But churches like St. John's must be *engaged* as well as *present*. So St. John's has come full circle, returning to the original aim of 'Circles without Centres': to create community and sense of place where there is none. St. John's is important because it does 'maintain the memory' of Longbridge of the past.

Until the redevelopment happens, St. John's is unsure of what its place is, and how best to engage with it. Both the church and the area have experienced the pain and loss of Good Friday as the sense of local place has gone. And now St. John's is in a place of waiting, in the loss and the emptiness of Easter Saturday. Here it is hard to imagine the future. But as a parish church, they are committed to being present, waiting for the resurrection and new life of Easter Sunday, both for themselves and the parish they serve.

APPENDIX K
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS FROM FIELDWORK
AT LONGBRIDGE METHODIST CHURCH
(given to the previous and current ministers of the church prior to submission of thesis)

Caroline Phillips, ThD research: 'Being Church in Longbridge'

Summary of findings and analysis - case study of Longbridge Methodist Church, March-April 2009

Presentation of findings

History of the church:

- Longbridge Methodist Society was founded in 1938 as the Circuit extended as the area developed. Whilst Rubery was already a village, the area owes its expansion to the development of the Austin and the clearance of the inner cities post war. Although in Rednal, the church was named 'Longbridge' because of the area's connection with the plant and its workers.
- The church moved from Co-op Assembly Room to the two 'huts' in 1941. Present church building opened in 1967. Vision 2000 brought the most recent building changes to reflect the church's aims (most notably the building of the Coffee Pot and the placing of windows to connect church and the locality)

Facts about the church today:

- Average Sunday congregation of 70.
- Average length of attendance 19 years.
- Worshippers living locally have done so for an average of 31 years
- Diverse demographic profile: broad age range, diverse sectors of employment, greater ethnic diversity than the area
- Beyond the congregation, the church welcomes 100s of people through its doors every week
- Most people in the church and area identify with Rubery (both the high street and Great Park)

Key features of the congregation/church:

1. An emphasis on outreach and welcome:

- Evident in the church throughout its history, but particularly driving Vision 2000: 'reach out to others for your God reaches out to you'. Vision 2000 sought to bring the church and community closer - as reflected in both the architectural changes and the different projects (e.g. Coffee Pot, Day Centre, After-school club)
- Here, 'reaching out' means 'welcoming in' - making the church available for local people to use in a wide variety of ways. The congregation are committed to making

the church open and accessible, and is flexible and responsive to the needs of its users.

- Ethos of welcome is reflected in the diverse profile of the congregation. Children and young people feel especially valued and included. Also, there are a wide variety of patterns of attendance at worship: the church accepts that people have other commitments and 'go when they can'. Recent years have seen the inclusion of different styles of worship.
- Consequently, there is an emphasis on building relationships. When asked why they started attending church, over $\frac{3}{4}$ of people cited the 'warm fellowship' or through friendships. Church life is understood as much more than simply attending worship and the church community is formed through a network of relationships. Hence, whilst the congregation are broadly local residents, people come from a wider distance than the immediate locality.
- The emphasis on building relationships is demonstrated through the church's work to be a 'meeting place' for local groups. The church sees itself fulfilling a vital need locally by providing this.
- However, 2 key initiative express most clearly the 'relational ethos' of the church: the Coffee Pot and the pantomime. Both of these aim to unite people from across the various groups that meet in the church. The pantomime is seen to create a sense of community and belonging.
- The church emphasizes fun and happiness, and through this sees itself as challenging the traditional image of church. Some link this to its 'working-class' roots.

2. *Belonging: the spiritual and the social*

- The ethos of welcome has resulted in a very broad community at Longbridge Methodist, and people 'belong' in a wide variety of ways. There is a wide 'fringe' who may not worship, but still feel a sense of belonging.
- However, the congregation hope that the church's non-worship activities can draw people into the Christian life. Many people give examples of how the 'social' becomes 'spiritual'. The pantomime, in particular, has been an effective way in to the worshipping life of the church for many people. It's seen as a way of 'dipping your toe in the water' of church.
- The idea of a worshipping core with a broad fringe is reflected within the congregation. Only 71% were official members of the Methodist Church. For some, the most important affiliation is to the local church, and people describe a move away from understanding themselves as being specifically 'Methodist' to more generally 'Christian'.
- However, from some, there is a tension around the relationship between 'spiritual' (specifically 'religious' activities, like prayer and worship) and 'social' (more general relational activities) aspects of church. Some are concerned that the spiritual is an area that needs developing for many people. Some people identify that there is only a small proportion who are more 'spiritually inclined'. They also feel that the more 'spiritual' activities and events are less well supported than social activities.
- Others, in contrast, recognise that the relationship between what is considered 'spiritual' and 'social' is more nuanced, and identifying which is which can be difficult. For example, one person vividly described a 'spiritual feeling' about the pantomime.

3. *Change and the need to keep 'moving on'*

- Longbridge Methodist believes it is a church that faces and manages change well - as shown throughout the many changes and developments in its history.

- The minister is seen as very important and many comment that they have been blessed with several good ministers. The minister is understood as the 'public face of the church' - which is crucial for their aim of reaching out to the community.
- Vast majority speak optimistically about the church's future, although some recognise that they constantly need to work hard at maintaining their vision. The optimism about the church's future is reflected in a general optimism for the future of the area.

Theological analysis of Longbridge Methodist

Serving the community: outgoing love

Throughout its history, Longbridge Methodist has sought to serve the local area, and most recently articulated this as sharing the grace they have received from God with the community. Through this, the church expresses a key emphasis of Methodist ecclesiology: that the outpouring of love from the Trinitarian God is the source of the Church. The Church is a community who have experienced a foretaste of the Kingdom of God and express it in their life. Consequently, the Church is called to continue the outgoing mission of God, pouring out God's love beyond itself. Vision 2000 expresses this 'outgoing love' succinctly.

Social holiness and a new connexionality

The emphasis on 'outreach' and 'meeting needs' has resulted in a symbiotic relationship between community and church since its very beginning. The church owes its very existence to the area's industrial expansion (as shown through its naming as 'Longbridge') and has changed several times in response to the area's development. Most recently, Vision 2000 sought to enable the church to reach out to a community that had changed considerably after the closure and demolition of the hospitals and the building of Great Park. Yet for Vision 2000, 'reaching out' to the community involved 'welcoming them *in*'. Many local people describe how there are few places to nurture relationships between people locally now. Some describe how increased mobility has meant the local area is less important for people. Others describe how Rubery seems to have lost a sense of community. Others talk of the decline in local shops, meeting places and 'foci' for the community. Great Park is a very different kind of community to what was there previously. Vision 2000 seeks to counteract the loss of social relatedness locally by providing opportunities for local people to interact. It is a much-needed 'meeting place'.

However, the church's most creative work - especially the pantomime and the Coffee Pot - is in enabling people from the various networks to cross and interact with each other. The church's success in building relationships is demonstrated in the strong language of belonging and even family that people use to describe their experience of it.

In its emphasis on relationships, the church expresses the central Methodist concept of 'social holiness' in a way that responds to post-industrial urban experience. When a person receives God's grace, it remains inoperative without a response of faith and discipleship, which is described as holiness, sharing in the character of God. However, holiness is a deeply social matter, for the character of the Trinitarian God is social. The Trinitarian community is characterised by loving relationships, and hence the call to holiness is also the call to loving relationships and to build loving community whose ultimate source is God. In its motto of reaching out to others just as God reaches out to you, Longbridge Methodist is a contemporary expression of social holiness.

An expression of social holiness, and modelling Paul's ecclesial motif of the 'body Christ', Methodism has a 'connexional' structure expressing unity within diversity. In its ethos of inclusion and welcome, its generous offering of its building and resources and work to build relationships between diverse groups, Longbridge Methodist has applied the principles of connexionalism to its mission and commitment to the local area. The church demonstrates

that connexionalism takes seriously the structure of contemporary 'network society', comprised of various networks that dissect at nodal points. But at the same time, this 'new connexionalism' seeks to maintain a sense of locally-based community which is often seen at odds with network society, by encouraging local people to build relationships.

The Centre of the Circle

God is the source and centre of the community in and around Longbridge Methodist, the point from which love flows outwards. Here, relationships are a key 'means of grace.' The congregation stand closest to this 'centre', openly committed to sharing God's love outwards towards the 'fringe'. But there is also a desire to draw the fringe into an explicit awareness of God's grace in the relationships they have, that they in turn may partake in God's mission and grow in holiness. Here is where the church seeks to move people beyond the social to the more explicitly 'spiritual'. The Pantomime Service is the clearest expression of this. Longbridge Methodist is a community defined by its centre (God) rather than by any clear boundaries of who's 'in' and who's 'out', and in this way contrasts with the traditional Methodist understanding of membership and belonging. Indeed, Methodist identity appears to matter less to many at the church. Returning to some of the original emphases of Wesley's thought, labels matter less than embodying authentic Methodist principles.

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