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STUDENT DECLARATION

This assignment is entirely my own work, and has not been submitted for another validated HE module. All material from the work of others not involved in the assessment is acknowledged, and quotations and paraphrases are suitably indicated.

Or: In the case of work assessed as a group project, the work has been prepared in collaboration with other members of the group.

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1. ABSTRACT

Ecological rewilding contends that given a chance, the forces of nature will naturally allow rich and vibrant ecosystems to develop, with minimal involvement from humanity, apart from restoring keystone species to help regulate the food chain, and allowing enough space for birds and animals to roam. This study explores the idea that the church too is in need of rewilding, that it too has been 'overfarmed', driving out or excluding those who don't or won't fit, and becoming a static monoculture which is unsustainable in a rapidly changing cultural landscape. It is contended that if equivalent 'rewilding' strategies are applied to church, sustainable and healthy new church ecosystems can develop. Qualitative research was conducted to explore the rewilding metaphor in the context of three fresh expressions. It identified a number of behaviours of flourishing "rewilded" fresh expressions. Leadership is facilitative and shared, not a means of controlling doctrine or behaviour, and encouraging individuals to grow in faith on their own trajectory. Communities are sustained by relationship with one another, with the community around them, and through their focus on Jesus Christ. Boundaries between insiders and outsiders are blurred, and communities expect to find God at work in the community around them. Research suggests that the Gospel does not need to be protected within a mass produced liturgical, doctrinal or ecclesial 'greenhouse', kept away from the wrong kind of 'wildlife' lest it be corrupted, or packaged up with a list of exacting requirements for how it should be grown elsewhere. Rather it finds that the seed of the gospel can be planted, distributed or simply allowed to grow and cross-pollinate in all kinds of contexts, finding fresh expression and connecting in with the work of God already active in those places, and blossoming into local expressions of Christ's liberation and redemption.

2. INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to be “fresh” - How useful is the metaphor of rewilding in describing and evaluating fresh expressions of church?

In his 2016 book, “Church planting in the Secular West”, Stefan Paas uses an agricultural metaphor to liken the challenge of starting new worshipping congregations in western Europe to planting a garden in ‘hard soil and an arid climate’:

The first option is to keep adding tons of water and fertilizer. In this way, oil sheiks grow exuberant parks in deserts. The possibilities are virtually limitless. You could even create a tropical forest in the Arctic tundra, as long as you spend huge amounts of money to arrange the right conditions. The result, of course, is highly artificial even if it looks spectacular. As soon as you quit, your beautiful garden would wither and die’. Many new churches in Europe are like those gardens. They depend on models imported from other continents, which are only sustainable because every year dozens of missionaries or immigrants fly in to replenish their numbers. Or they continue to draw Christians from other churches to grow their ranks.¹

He draws a distinction between the unsustainability of industrial, intensive farming methods, and the unsustainability of some church planting models. He then brings modern insights from agriculture and ecology to suggest a solution, suggesting that the answer is to work with intimate knowledge of the land, the climate and the local vegetation, to end up with ‘a garden that is sustainable’.² He suggests that ‘skill’, ‘effort’, ‘expertise’ and persistence’ will be required to achieve this goal.³

In 2020, Steve Aisthorpe’s book ‘Rewilding the Church’, diagnoses a similar sustainability challenge, but offers a quite different solution, borrowing the ecological concept of rewilding.

The ecological idea of rewilding has emerged over the past 20 years. It contends that given a chance, the forces of nature will naturally allow rich and vibrant ecosystems to develop, with minimal involvement from humanity, apart from perhaps restoring key predator species to help regulate the food chain, and allowing enough space for birds and animals to roam. The solution is therefore not more effortful and persistent involvement from humanity, but

¹ Stefan Paas. “Church planting in the Secular West” (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016). “Introduction”, para 1. Accessed 1st June 2021 <<https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/2015502/6>>

² Ibid., para 3.

³ Ibid., para 3.

rather doing the minimum activity to allow the ‘biotic potential’ of nature to take the reins. Fundamentally, the goal is not a “garden”, but rather a diverse ecosystem sustained by multiple self-regulating and symbiotic relationships.

In church terms, the contention is that it too has been overly ‘farmed’, thereby stripped of its natural diversity, and allowed to become a static monoculture which is not sustainable in a rapidly changing cultural landscape. It is contended that if similar ‘rewilding’ strategies are applied to church, sustainable and healthy new church ecosystems can develop. Specifically Aisthorpe questions “institutional ways of following Jesus”⁴, suggesting a church which ‘is thought to stand for certainty, dogma and fixed practices’ is increasingly unable to satisfy many people’s ‘spiritual hunger’.⁵ It is a call to abandon ‘blueprints’ and managerial strategising⁶, to reject the frantic ‘busyness’ associated with church, and move “*from institutional to organic, from complex to simple, from large to small.*”⁷

The idea of relationality and interconnectedness is crucial in Aisthorpe’s vision of rewilded church - just as species in ecosystems are dependent on one another in complex ways, for example in the wood-wide web of fungi linking forest plants, similarly rewilded church communities should be rooted in not in a structure or adherence to a set of propositions, but in relationship with the person of Jesus Christ, with each other and with the community. It is not a call for “accommodation with culture”⁸ but rather a call to “refocus on Jesus’ call to love God and one another,”⁹ with Jesus positioned as a ‘keystone species’ whose inclusion will have a disproportionately positive impact on the way the community operates.¹⁰

Diversity is also intrinsic to Aisthorpe’s vision. He uses the “subversive”, all-encompassing and boundary-crossing nature of Jesus Christ’s example and teaching to call for a “huge diversity of expressions” of church, which reflect the diversity of humanity and creation.¹¹

Why it’s interesting

The idea that missional communities need to be profoundly relational as well as diverse and co-created in their own particular cultural contexts supports current thinking in missiology,

⁴Steve Aisthorpe, “Rewilding the Church”, (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2020), p59.

⁵Ibid., p49.

⁶Ibid., p48.

⁷Ibid., p166.

⁸Ibid., p49

⁹Ibid., p96

¹⁰Ibid., p46

¹¹Ibid., p59-60.

specifically the Missio Dei idea that the mission is already God's, that God is already at work in the world, and the church's role is to participate in that.¹² This connects with the theology of 'Mission Shaped Church', which also references the Missio Dei and calls for "a pattern of diversity and unity", rather than simply replicating the structures of traditional church.¹³ Mission Shaped Church is also replete with organic imagery for describing and envisioning ways in which new church communities might form and grow.

However, looked at through the lens of rewilding, it becomes clear that when it comes to methodology, Mission Shaped Church remains largely dependent on the agricultural rather than wild approach featured in the earlier 1994 report "Breaking New Ground"¹⁴. Different kinds of church plant are identified, including "runners", "grafts" and "transplants".¹⁵ For all three, there is a strong emphasis on the extension of an existing model, with strong links back to a parent church. Only the final approach, seeds, goes beyond an agricultural model, with 'seed teams' moving to a new context to "identify more deeply with it." and ultimately "disappear".¹⁶

Furthermore, although Mission Shaped Church emphasises starting with the mission rather than the church, its recommended 'good planting methodology' nevertheless belies a dualistic approach which envisions Christians 'doing' the mission for a particular group. Although the third question asks who the mission is 'with', it refers to other Christians one might want to partner with, not the community the mission is 'for':

Good planting methodology asks three questions, in this order:

- *Who is the mission for? – mission goal questions*
- *Who is the mission by? – mission resource questions*
- *Who is the mission with? – mission partner questions.*¹⁷

This business approach of planning, resourcing and setting goals with a particular target group in mind is perhaps harder to align with the Missio Dei idea of God taking the initiative than the rewilding approach of "*allowing the unpredictable wind of the Spirit to guide and*

¹² Steve Bevens & Roger P. Schroeder. "Constants in Context" (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004), p27.

¹³Mission and Public Affairs Council (Church of England). "Mission Shaped Church", (London, CHP, 2009), Kindle Edition, Loc. 529.

¹⁴Church of England General Board of Finance, "Breaking New Ground: Church Planting in the Church of England" (London: CHP, 1994)

¹⁵ Ibid., Loc 2921.

¹⁶Ibid., Loc 2972.

¹⁷Ibid., Loc 2985.

*empower*¹⁸ Rewilding provocatively challenges church strategising, pointing to nature, where the relationship between species and environment is always changing.¹⁹

Another reason for exploring a rewilding approach is that it seeks to address a key reason cited for people leaving more traditionally ‘farmed’ expressions of church. According to 2016 Church of England data, an 81 year old is eight times more likely to be a church-goer than a 21 year old,²⁰ and Emma Nash relates this in part to the much documented post-modern embrace of individualism, citing a 2003 study which showed that although most people claimed high moral standards for themselves, they rejected those standards being imposed upon them.²¹ Callum Brown, in ‘The Death of Christian Britain’ shows how this growing individualism has accelerated church decline since the 60s and concludes:

*Unless we can imagine a reversal of the increasing cultural autonomy of the individual, secularisation must be seen as irreversible.*²²

Rewilding advocates argue the world needs new forms of church which set aside hierarchy, and allow people with a greater diversity of doctrinal and ethical beliefs to belong.

Finally, a further rationale for exploring the idea of rewilding as a model for church growth comes from new insights from the growing and vibrant field of eco-theology, which challenges the way inherited church has understood the way God works in the world, and specifically the relationship between God, nature and humanity. Richard Bauckham contends that inherited dualistic theology has “dedivinised and desacralised” nature, characterising it predominantly as a chaotic force over which humanity has God-ordained dominion.²³ Instead, Bauckham shows God portrayed in scripture unleashing extravagant rewilding, where forests rise up in the wilderness, and all God’s creatures are provided for.²⁴ Jesus himself challenges us to consider the birds of the air and the lilies of the fields²⁵, plus the parables of Jesus also use wild imagery to describe the nature of the kingdom.

¹⁸Aisthorpe, “Rewilding the Church”, p49.

¹⁹Ibid., p8.

²⁰ Harriet Sherwood, ‘Church of England expects attendance figures to fall for next 30 years’, *The Guardian*, 17 February 2016, para 3.

²¹Emma Nash, “*Redefining sin*” in *The Pioneer Gift: Explorations in Mission*, ed. Jonny Baker and Cathy Ross (London: Canterbury Press, 2014) p197.

²²Steve Bruce, “*The Social Process of Secularization*”, in “The Blackwell Companion to Sociology of Religion”, ed Richard K. Fenn (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003) p262

²³Richard Bauckham. “Bible and Ecology” (London: DLT, 2010), p86.

²⁴Ibid., p115.

²⁵Aisthorpe, “Rewilding the church”, p2.

If mission is an action of God in which the church participates, then the idea that nature shows us the ways of God is an argument for using rewilding as a metaphor to understand how God works in the world and through the church.

To conclude then, there is evidence that some Fresh Expressions thinking and planning relies on farming and business metaphors which accord a strong degree of control to those running the church or mission to shape it and manage its development. Evidence from cultural studies, from eco-theology and from missiology suggests that these approaches can downplay the influence and involvement not only of the people who the mission is aiming to connect with, but also of the Trinitarian, relational God who is already at work in the world. This results in an institutional, unyielding church which struggles to connect with those with an individualistic mindset. By contrast, the metaphor of rewilding suggests an approach to mission which is more relational, less focused on models and strategies, and therefore likely to result in 'fresher' fresh expressions.

Approach

This study aims to investigate the phenomenon of rewilded church primarily from a missiological perspective, looking at how three different communities behave within themselves as well as in relationship with their own cultural contexts, with God, and the community beyond themselves.

There are also ecclesiological implications, looking at how each fresh expression relates to inherited church and church structures, how and in what way the community has tapped into ancient streams of tradition, and to what extent natural 'biotic control' manages to ensure a diverse and healthy community.

Finally, because the thinking which informs 'rewilded' ideas of church relies on trinitarian ideas about God at work in and reaching out to the world, this study will also touch on pneumatology, looking at how each fresh expression aims to discern the will and work of God in its context.

As this idea is relatively new, there is a sense in which the research will need to do two things, both evaluating what rewilding might look like in the context of missiology and ecclesiology, and to what extent the communities featured are good examples of this. The literature review will cover in more detail how rewilding has been understood by Aisthorpe and others,

Before the literature review, however, it is perhaps important at this stage to note some of the significant challenges to the idea of rewilding the church.

Responding to what he caricatures as 'romantic' ideas of the spontaneous and the organic, Stefan Paas points out that weeds, cancer cells and obesity demonstrate that organic growth is not always good.²⁶

This throws into question the sustainability and validity of "rewilded" fresh expressions, asking if Christian communities necessarily slide off down a slippery slope of syncretism, apostasy and sin if clear boundaries are not maintained by a hierarchical leadership? Alternatively, can the integrity of individual Christians discerning the will of God, in the context of a community committed to love, the Gospel and relationship with Jesus Christ mitigate against this?

Is rewilding merely a metaphor for describing church in a more romantic way for a new eco generation? Or is it a generative metaphor which can help us understand how God works in the world and in the church in new ways, and provide a fresh new way of evaluating and birthing fresh expressions?

²⁶Paas, "Church Planting in the Secular West", Chapter 5.2.2, Paragraph 2.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

A great deal has been written about rewilding. My objective here is not to evaluate rewilding as an ecological practice, but rather to provide an overview of the theory, practice and controversies of rewilding, in order to explore the lessons from it in the context of missiology. I have identified key rewilding behaviours, drawing heavily but not exclusively on Aisthorpe's initial model, which provide a starting point for investigating rewilding in the context of my data.

In the last ten years, books by George Monbiot²⁷ and Isabella Tree²⁸ have brought the idea of rewilding into mainstream public awareness, both of which have been drawn on heavily in Aisthorpe²⁹ and Bradbury's work³⁰. Applying the metaphor of rewilding to missiology is a recent innovation, Aisthorpe's book "Rewilding the Church" was published in 2020.

Rewilding dates from 1998, when Soulé and Noss identified the 'three C's': cores (large, protected reserves), corridors (connecting up reserves) and carnivores.³¹ Put simply, a healthy ecosystem requires carnivorous 'keystone species' to control numbers of grazing animals, enabling the formation of scrubland habitats which enable greater 'trophic diversity'.^{32,33}

A famous example of this kind of 'trophic cascade'³⁴ is the reintroduction of grey wolves to Yellowstone Park. This controlled the elk population, encouraged aspen trees to grow, increased canopy cover, and allowed more species of plant, animal and insect to thrive, including beavers and bison.³⁵

²⁷George Monbiot. "Feral: Rewilding the Land, Sea and Human Life" (London: Penguin, 2013)

²⁸Isabella Tree. "Wilding". (London: Picador, 2018)

²⁹Aisthorpe, "Rewilding the church".

³⁰Paul Bradbury, "Wilding the church", 11th June 2019, <<https://pioneer.churchmissionsociety.org/2019/06/wilding-the-church/>> [accessed 12 May 2021] para. 1.

³¹ Aisthorpe, "Rewilding the Church". p22.

³² Ibid. p21.

³³ Monbiot, "Feral", Kindle Loc. 1475.

³⁴ Ibid. Loc 212.

³⁵ Ripple, William J., and Robert L. Beschta. "Trophic cascades in Yellowstone: the first 15 years after wolf reintroduction." *Biological Conservation* 145.1 (2012): p205.

Behaviour #1: Healthy ecosystems require the reintroduction of ‘keystone species’.

Aisthorpe argues that healthy church ‘ecosystems’ also require diversity, and asks who is missing.³⁶ Aisthorpe specifically identifies ‘intuitive thinkers’ as a ‘species’ missing from church ecosystems where the asking of questions is taboo, and calls for church communities generous and bold enough to include those who don’t easily conform.³⁷

However, the overwhelming focus of Aisthorpe’s book identifies Jesus Christ as the keystone species par excellence, whose presence in a church ‘ecosystem’ is disproportionately influential. He draws on Paul’s description of Christ as the ‘cornerstone,’³⁸ and contends that overfarmed churches have ‘crowded out’ Jesus ‘the Great Interferer’. He calls for a refocusing of the church at every level on the person of Jesus Christ, summarising the entire book in Jesus’ words ‘Follow me.’³⁹

This first behaviour throws up much to explore, asking to what extent do communities operate like ecosystems, either of individuals interacting with one another, or combinations of beliefs, habits and practices operating together? Who is missing and who is present, and how do changes in that affect the broader community ecosystem? And what does it look like for communities to prioritise Jesus above all?

Behaviour #2: Being rooted in the ongoing story of the land.

Andreas Schweiger talks about land having “Ecological memory” which needs to be understood in rewilding projects, identifying the species which have shaped the ecosystem, and whose reintroduction could therefore reinvigorate it.⁴⁰ Isabella Tree talks about feeling they “*were doing something with the land rather than battling against it*”.⁴¹ George Monbiot quotes Scottishrewilder Alan Watson Featherstone:

“I asked myself: what’s the message in the land? What’s the story it’s telling us?”⁴²

³⁶ Aisthorpe, “Rewilding the Church”, p118.

³⁷ Ibid. p130.

³⁸ Ibid., p62.

³⁹ Ibid. p68, p202.

⁴⁰ Andreas H. Schweiger, et al. "The importance of ecological memory for trophic rewilding as an ecosystem restoration approach." *Biological Reviews* 94.1 (2019): 1-15.

⁴¹ Tree, “Wilding”, p43.

⁴² Monbiot, “Feral”, p96.

Paul Bradbury references the idea of 'knowing the land' or context in the context of fresh expressions.⁴³ Leslie Newbigin talked about the church as a "truth-seeking community that seeks to understand reality from its own vantage point"⁴⁴ Insights from post-colonial theologies reveal that all expressions of church are culturally expressed.⁴⁵

In this there are two dangers. One is to become too focused on the recent past, which Monbiot describes as 'shifting baseline syndrome', where ideas about the land are driven by nostalgic memories of a relatively recent and overfarmed past. Rewilding requires us to search back further in time for a more ancient story of the land, and to get to know its ways intimately rather than attempting to force a new usage upon it. In church terms, Aisthorpe is particularly scathing about 'traditionalism', the veneration of things that have "always been this way"⁴⁶ which results in churches which are "ghettos for those who wish to cling on to an archaic, monocultural ritual".⁴⁷

The other risk is to become so led by local culture that the Gospel is sidelined:

*"Our vocation is not to find accommodation with culture, but rather, like Christians of every previous generation and culture, it is to faithfully allow the gospel to engage with culture and participate in what emerges"*⁴⁸

Research will investigate how intimate knowledge of the local 'land' or culture, its past and present has informed the shape of sustainable and life-giving fresh expressions of church, whilst avoiding both traditionalism and syncretism.

Behaviour #3: Removing damaging species

Species introduced from elsewhere can damage an ecosystem. For example, the hedgehog's introduction to New Zealand has decimated local birdlife, which had evolved entirely without land-based mammals, so had few defences against them.⁴⁹

⁴³ Bradbury, "Wilding the Church", Para 5.

⁴⁴Velli-Matti Karkkainen, 'The Church in the Post-Christian Society'. In 'Theology in Missionary Perspective', ed. Laing, Mark & Weston, Paul. (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012), p143.

⁴⁵Christopher Duraisingh, "Towards a Postcolonial Re-visioning", in "Beyond Colonial Anglicanism", (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated, 2001), p345.

⁴⁶Aisthorpe, "Rewilding the church", p173.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p40.

⁴⁸Ibid., p49.

⁴⁹Tess McClure, "Killing machines: humble British hedgehog causes havoc in New Zealand", The Guardian, 7 May 2021, para 3.

Aisthorpe identifies toxic busyness, criticism and negativity⁵⁰, traditionalism⁵¹ and acquisitive capitalism as ‘invasive species’ which should be removed from a church setting.⁵²

In church contexts, what decisions need to be made to allow a balanced ecosystem to thrive? How can challenging individuals, behaviours or beliefs be addressed without overcontrolling? How ‘hands on’ does leadership need to be, without crowding out the voice of the spirit or of those inside and outside the community.

Behaviour #4: Prioritising interconnection: mutuality and symbiosis

Another rewilding insight comes from the symbiotic relationships between organisms in an ecosystem. Isabella Tree describes the symbiotic relationships between plants and mycorrhizal fungi, which enable the transmission of water, nutrients and information.⁵³ Individual species are habitats for other creatures - in the UK, the oak supports 284 species of insect, whilst the non-native rhododendron supports none.⁵⁴ Mutuality and symbiosis are hallmarks of a functioning ecosystem.

Aisthorpe uses scriptural images of the body of Christ and the vine to assert that “our connectedness is a theological fact”⁵⁵ and that the foundation of Christian faith is relational, rooted in the person of Christ.⁵⁶ He also notes that relationships with fellow Christians drive spiritual growth, referencing the ‘soul friendships’ which sustained Christians in the Celtic tradition.

In ecclesiological terms, Dulles’ model of church as ‘mystical communion’, a community united to God and to one another, connects closely with this idea, in contrast to ideas of church as a structured institution, or herald proclaiming the gospel.⁵⁷ Bosch describes how Paul’s understanding of church assumes a strong familial-like structure, with each accountable to the other.⁵⁸

⁵⁰ Ibid, p162.

⁵¹ Ibid., p175.

⁵² Ibid., p171.

⁵³ Tree, “Wilding”, p20.

⁵⁴ Monbiot, “Feral”, Kindle Location 2482.

⁵⁵ Aisthorpe, “Wilding the church”, p142.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p46.

⁵⁷ Dulles, Avery. ‘Models of church’. (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1987), p39.

⁵⁸ Bosch, David J. “Transforming Mission” (New York: Orbis, 2005), p166.

This also connects with trinitarian ideas which derive the missional nature of the church from the missional nature of the triune God.⁵⁹ Mike Moynagh draws on the work of Bulgakov via Rowan Williams to demonstrate the self-giving and generous nature of this relationship.⁶⁰

*The Father gives everything he is to the Son, the Son gives up his life for creation in obedience to the Father, and the Spirit points back to the Father and Son in its work.*⁶¹

In particular, there is a reciprocity about the relationships between a church community and the wider community beyond.⁶²

Stefan Paas paints a picture of mission through community in describing how Irish monks evangelised Celtic islands through forming community rather than by simply preaching.⁶³

Viewing a church community as an organic network of interdependent relationships, both internally, with God and with those around it, is a key area for exploration in this piece of research. I will look at how community is fostered and prioritised, and how this is modeled in leadership structures.

Behaviour #5: Removing the fences

Sustainable ecosystems require large keystone species, which require space to roam.⁶⁴ Building bridges and tunnels, and removing fences and walls to link up wild areas, are key to allowing rewilding to occur.

Aisthorpe points out that Christ's teaching and behaviour was often subversive, breaking Sabbath rules, crossing religious, cultural and gender boundaries. He expresses frustration that institutional church inflicts boundaries of doctrine, practice and denomination on people, driving many out of the church, particularly those of a 'thinking' disposition.⁶⁵

⁵⁹ Martyn Atkins, "What is the essence of the church". In 'Mission Shaped Questions', ed. Steven Croft (London: Church House Publishing, 2008) p18.

⁶⁰ Michael Moynagh, "Church in Life". (London: SCM Press, 2017), Chapter 7, para 4.

⁶¹ Ibid., chapter 7, para. 5.

⁶² Ibid., Chapter 7, para 4.

⁶³ Paas, "Church planting in the Secular West", p260.

⁶⁴ Soulé and Noss. "Rewilding and biodiversity", p22.

⁶⁵ Aisthorpe, "Rewilding the church", p60.

This research will investigate ways in which boundaries are maintained or destroyed within communities, particularly exploring boundaries around inclusion and doctrine, examining how community integrity may be maintained, and how issues of sin or brokenness are managed.

Behaviour #6: Allowing nature to find its own way

Rewilding places importance on the idea of 'biotic potential', the idea that nature's processes will naturally grow towards a more complex ecosystem without interference from humanity:

Rewilding is a progressive approach to conservation. It's about letting nature take care of itself, enabling natural processes to shape land and sea, repair damaged ecosystems and restore degraded landscapes... Nature knows best when it comes to survival and self-governance.⁶⁶

This means operating without a blueprint:

Rewilding has no end points, no view about what a 'right' ecosystem or a 'right' assemblage of species looks like. It does not strive to produce a heath, a meadow, a rainforest, a kelp garden or a coral reef. It lets nature decide.⁶⁷

Even though the institutional church from Aisthorpe's perspective cannot be resuscitated, he believes in the church's "biotic potential" to 'bounce back' in new and unpredictable ways.⁶⁸ For Aisthorpe, the equivalent force of nature in the church is Jesus the 'Great Interferer'.⁶⁹ Christians must discern where God is leading, abandon church growth strategies, and participate in what is emerging:

"We will find ourselves doing a new thing because God is always doing a new thing. Our Creator is still creating. Our calling is not to be attenders or consumers but to be accomplices of Jesus, partners with God"⁷⁰

⁶⁶ <https://rewildingeuropa.com/what-is-rewilding/> (last accessed 13 June 2021)

⁶⁷ Monbiot, "Feral", Loc 230.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p201.

⁶⁹ Aisthorpe, "Rewilding the Church", p202.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p49.

Rewilding for Aisthorpe is “the opposite of intensive agriculture”⁷¹ just as journeying with Christ sits uncomfortably with certainty and dogma:

“Churches perceived as standing for certainty, dogma and fixed practices are no place for pilgrims, but when Church is understood as what emerges from an open-hearted journeying with Christ, we will find many fellow travellers.”⁷²

Again we see elements of the ‘Missio Dei’ as described by Bevans, with churches needing to creatively and open-heartedly involve themselves in what Christ is doing.⁷³ Martin Atkins suggests that it is due to traditional churches’ failure to heed the Missio Dei that fresh expressions of church are rising up.⁷⁴

Research will explore the question of how the Missio Dei is being discerned.

Behaviour #7: Embracing mess, death and decay

Influential Dutch biologist Frans Vera’s work suggests that northern Europe was not fully wooded, but rather contained a ‘mosaic’ of shifting grassland, scrub, solitary trees and groves, maintained by large grazing ungulates.⁷⁵ Scrub is described by Tree as ‘habitat on the move’, providing a nursery for tree saplings to develop, protected from grazing animals.⁷⁶ Open ground becomes scrub, which becomes forest, which in time will die and create open space again. Constant change is part of a healthy ecosystem, and part of that is death and decay.

To quote Monbiot on public objections to the untidiness of rewilded landscapes:

they appear to have confused a functioning ecosystem with a tidy one.⁷⁷

Paul Bradbury talks about knowing when it is time to stop, when a particular direction is no longer fruitful.⁷⁸

⁷¹Aisthorpe, “Rewilding the Church”, p48.

⁷²Ibid., p50.

⁷³Steve Bevans & Roger P. Schroeder. “Constants in Context” (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004), p27.

⁷⁴Atkins, “What is the essence of the church”, p24..

⁷⁵ Frans Vera “The Dynamic European Forest”. *Arboricultural Journal* 2002, Vol. 26, p179.

⁷⁶ Tree, “Wilding”, p125.

⁷⁷ Monbiot, “Feral”, Loc 2769.

⁷⁸ Bradbury, “Wilding the Church”, para 5..

In research then, how do communities experience, tolerate or encourage mess or uncertainty?

The Counter Argument

In the interests of balance, it is important to acknowledge that ecological rewilding is not an uncontroversial idea.

As we have seen, Aisthorpe's largely non-interventionist approach to rewilding is drawn from Monbiot and others, for whom great faith is placed in the biotic potential of nature to create healthy ecosystems on its own. The only role of humanity is to restore some of the species which have been lost, and get out of the way.⁷⁹ The key point of reference for rewilders is prehistoric - before humanity arrived.⁸⁰

However, rewilding critics point to a middle way between purist rewilding and intensive farming, pointing out that humanity can coexist with nature and be part of a functioning ecosystem. Academic Kim Ward critiques the North American origins of rewilding in the National Parks Movement as having erased the historical presence of indigenous people.⁸¹ In pre-industrial Europe, techniques such as coppicing enabled people to live sustainably with nature, shaping but not destroying landscapes.⁸² In Isabella Tree's more managed rewilding, grazing animals help retain a more open landscape but remain sustainable, allowing farming of pigs, deer and cattle⁸³, and creating space for human recreation.⁸⁴

Research must explore whether some of these controversies have counterparts in church rewilding. Just as humanity may still have a role in a rewilded ecosystem as a sustainable participant, perhaps it is also possible to make a case that church may also have shaped missiological ecosystems in positive ways too, that inherited church can be a sustainable partner in the *missio Dei*, rather than always an over-institutionalised barrier to its functioning. Perhaps the ecclesiological equivalent of small scale farming working with nature is preferable to "letting go of the steering wheel" altogether.⁸⁵

⁷⁹ Monbiot, "Feral", Loc 226

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p2457.

⁸¹ K Ward, "For Wilderness or Wildness? Decolonising Rewilding", published February 2019. <<https://pearl.plymouth.ac.uk/bitstream/handle/10026.1/13705/Wilderness%20and%20Rewilding%20Chapter.pdf?sequence=1>>. Accessed 1 June 2021.

⁸² <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/little-dartmouth/features/what-is-woodland-coppicing> (last accessed 13 June 2021)

⁸³ <https://knepp.co.uk/wild-range-meat> (last accessed 13 June 2021)

⁸⁴ <https://knepp.co.uk/glamping-camping-safaris> (last accessed 13 June 2021)

⁸⁵ Aisthorpe, "Rewilding the Church", p159.

Conclusions

Many parallels have been drawn between rewilding in nature and rewilding of church. The idea of nature's innate biotic potential, able to create abundant life unassisted, connects to the idea of the Missio Dei, where the Spirit of God is already at work in the world drawing people to God and building the kingdom. Furthermore, the idea of stepping back and letting nature take over in an ecosystem is a provocative way of thinking about allowing a church community to develop.

The seven behaviours of a rewilded ecosystem identified in rewilding literature, are a useful starting point for investigating the phenomenon, and the controversies identified in rewilding projects are a useful springboard for investigating some of the tensions in developing fresh expressions along rewilded lines, namely how they co-exist with other more managed forms of church, and to what extent management from a leader or leadership team is still useful or necessary, and in what way.

4. METHODOLOGY

Objectives

Specifically I aimed to

- explore the idea of 'wildness' as a useful way of understanding, evaluating and bringing fresh insight into fresh expressions of church, using insights from the ecological phenomenon of rewilding.
- Explore to what extent and in what ways this comes to life in the context of three different fresh expressions.
- Contribute to conversations around the ecclesiology and missiology of fresh expressions of church.

Situating the research epistemologically

To clarify my methodological and epistemological approach, I used the following model:⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Helen Cameron & Catherine Duce, "Research Practice in Ministry and Mission". (London: SCM, 2013), Chapter 3, paragraph 5.

Methodology	Epistemology	Understanding of theory	Typical methods but not limited to these
A Objectivist	Positivist	Predictive	Surveys, experiments, statistics
B Critical	Critical realism	Subordinate to meta-narrative	Interviews, observation, documents
C Interpretivist	Social constructivist	Heuristic	Interviews, observation, documents
D Action research	Pragmatic	Praxis – theory and practice are inseparable	Action – reflection – action – evaluation cycles including data collection

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Locating this piece of research epistemologically is complex, for several reasons. The first is that given the non-denominational nature of all three communities, it is difficult to identify normative theology. Secondly, many people across communities struggled to locate themselves with respect to the relationship between lived experience and scripture and revelation, and many had shifted their position considerably. However, as all three communities came from charismatic evangelicalism, and had chosen to remain at least on the fringe of it, it was true to say that fidelity to the Christian tradition, and to scripture, remained important, whilst flexing in response to experience. For this reason, I located this piece of research within a critical realist epistemology, whereby the ecological metaphor of rewilding is brought into dialogue with the experience of community members in the context of the metanarrative of the Christian tradition, specifically exploring how useful it is shedding light on operant theology and praxis in fresh expressions. This study aims to explore the points of connection between rewilding and the metanarrative.

Although farming and organic language is found throughout scripture and the church tradition, with churches being “planted”, “pastors” offering “pastoral support” and bishops wielding crooks, the idea of rewilding is a relatively new idea in missiology.

⁸⁷ Ibid. paragraph 6.

This begs the question of to what extent it is appropriate to work with a metaphor beyond the way it has been used in the tradition, i.e. whether or not new knowledge drawn from a metaphorical ecological context can legitimately be used to reveal insights about the missiological context.

In his analysis of the Biblical metaphor of 'God as host' in the Pentateuch, Robert C. Stallman explores various approaches for understanding the role of metaphors in the Christian tradition, from Absolute Literalism, whereby metaphors are merely a 'rhetorical form useful for stylistic purposes', to a radicalism whereby all ineffable theological ideas can only be understood via metaphors.⁸⁸ He alights on a middle way, a 'critical metaphoricalism' which recognises that metaphors can make literal points at the same time as helping people understand the ineffable nature of theological concepts. He makes a case for biblical metaphors being able not just to disclose truth, but to "aid in the exploration of new truth":

"A person can start with an understanding of a biblical model for God as it is evidenced by specific instances of metaphors, and then use that knowledge as a starting point for further reflection. A biblical metaphor, then, suggests a model with heuristic importance."⁸⁹

The metaphor of 'Rewilding' is in this study a theory which is being used in a heuristic way to theologially reflect on the experience of participants in three fresh expression communities, and to shed light on the metanarrative of God's work in the world through the church and particularly fresh expressions of church.

Situating the research theologially

Pete Ward describes a spectrum of liberal to conservative views in 'Introducing Practical Theology'. He contrasts a liberal approach, where human experience is reflected upon in a theological way, using the work of Bonnie Miller-McLemore, with a more conservative approach which looks for the work of God in the world. Finally Ward suggests his own approach drawing on the spirituality of the Gospel of John, where Christ describes himself as the Way, the Truth and the Life, suggesting that truth in Christian terms is based in relationship with the person of Jesus Christ, in journeying and in living.⁹⁰ This is arguably quite different to Miller-McLemore, whose focus is very much on uncovering insights about

⁸⁸ Stallman, Robert C. "Divine Hospitality in the Pentateuch: A metaphorical perspective on God as host", (Published DPhil Thesis: Westminster Theological Seminary, 1999) p46

⁸⁹ Ibid. p63

⁹⁰ Pete Ward. "Introducing Practical Theology". (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), p49.

human experience using the language and thought-forms of Christian theology, or the conservative position, who starts with particular doctrines and explores how this plays out in people's lives.

The idea of rewilded church sits comfortably with this John-focused approach, in that it assumes God is knowable and at work in the world and in people's lives. However, unlike the conservative model Ward describes, this biological, organic model allows for the Spirit to be at work and for faith to be understood as relational. It also is flexible enough to acknowledge the reality of people's lives as they are experiencing them, rather than needing to make sense of them via a doctrinal framework.

The research is theological because it is not merely about the mechanics of fresh expressions, but rather is a question about the theological framework around fresh expressions, particularly its missiology and ecclesiology.

Discussion was focused on what people in fresh expressions think the theology of what they are doing is, and how is it expressed? How does their idea of God, mission, the Holy Spirit, Jesus connect in with their behaviours?

Ontologically then, I start with the assumption present in the idea of rewilded church that there is a triune God revealed in Jesus Christ who is at work in the world and people's lives, which one might see as the Spirit fulfilling the Missio Dei through partnering with people and Christian communities.

Epistemologically, my assumption is that the truths of the Christian faith are known and lived in ever new ways through relationship with the person of Jesus Christ via the Holy Spirit, and through relationship in community with others, not merely as received points of doctrine received in scripture and tradition.

In terms of **research method**, I adopted an open-ended qualitative approach, given that this was exploratory work, aimed at navigating a complex and in some ways uncharted territory where nuanced theological reflection is key.

My methodology focused on encouraging people into discussion with me and with one another. It saw people's lives as living texts, written in dialogue with God and with one another, and encouraged people to reflect on them in dialogue with the idea of rewilding.

Recognising the truly subjective nature of reality as it is experienced and remembered by different people, I spoke to four people from each community, with at least two from each community interviewed in a **pair** where possible, rather than individually in order to bake challenge and discussion into the research, and then conducted the others individually. My own role in the discussion was as a neutral moderator, offering up stimulus to provoke discussion rather than offering my own perspectives. Research was conducted via Zoom after consent had been given, and transcripts were created for each one.

Pseudonyms have been used for respondents and communities.

This is emphatically not a large-scale project which can quantify or conclude anything on the state of rewilding. Rather it is an exploratory project aimed at using Aisthorpe and others' understanding of rewilding as a generative metaphor to identify and explore what 'rewilded' behaviours might look like in the context of faith communities, and to provide more insight to support and flesh out the contention that rewilding provides a useful and inspirational way of understanding and developing fresh expressions of church'.

In order to achieve this, I deliberately narrowed my focus to communities which already appear to connect with some of the criteria Aisthorpe and others have suggested as 'rewilded behaviours'.

Firstly, I chose three communities where there is some evidence of success at reintroducing a dechurched or unchurched group of people. Cedar community focuses on un- and dechurched young people, Sycamore on LGBTQ un- and dechurched people, and Hawthorn on people with an activist mindset.

Secondly I have chosen communities which are innovative in terms of the way they are led and governed, typically where leadership is a function shared among a representative group of members. None of the communities have a classic hierarchical structure with a priest or lead pastor having overall control, and all have a greater degree of perceived and actual power to govern spread across the community.

Thirdly I have chosen communities where there is a degree of boundarylessness surrounding involvement in the community, rather than a strictly policed and controlled membership policy dependent on particular doctrinal or behavioural ways of behaving.

Within that I have ensured there is diversity in the following ways:

- **Geographical location** - a suburban commuter town, a provincial city centre church, and a gathered community meeting in London but drawing from all over the UK and with a strong online community.
- **Demographics** - young adults, LGBTQ people and middle-aged families, and a range of ages and genders within the sample. However, all were white and British (apart from one Australian respondent).
- **Origins** - one community evolved out of an existing Baptist church with a congregation and a building, one was loosely planted out of another charismatic evangelical network church, and one was started from scratch by a group of founders.
- **Involvement** - in all three communities I spoke to I spoke to those closer to the leadership or governance, and those who participated in the communities, but weren't in a position of leadership.

However, in one area I have deliberately chosen to keep things narrower. All three of the communities have their roots in the charismatic evangelical fold. The fact that all three communities have in their heritage the same kind of inherited church model, it means that all three are reacting against or with the same macro-culture, and the unique ways they have done that can be more easily compared or contrasted, than if they had come from churches with very different assumptions about the way leadership or worship liturgy or social action should operate in a church context. In addition it is the church tradition I am personally from and am most familiar with, plus is a tradition which has found it relatively easy to innovate, and has subsequently informed and birthed a great deal of the fresh expressions movement.⁹¹ This also opens up conversation and dialogue with others writing in that tradition, including Doug Gay and Anna Ruddick. However, a larger scale project could be able to supplement these insights with valuable information about what rewilding might look like in a Roman Catholic, anglo-catholic or orthodox context.

Further assumptions

Across all three communities, there was evidence of either a full or partial acceptance of LGBTQ identities and relationships, in some cases based merely on a desire to include without judgment, in other cases, based on an understanding of the Christian tradition and of scripture which would consider LGBTQ identities and relationships to be acceptable. Whilst this remains a live issue, particularly within evangelical circles, the position of most of those

⁹¹ Doug Gay. *Remixing The Church*. (London: SCM Press, 2011), Chapter 5, paragraph 5.

throughout the research is that a range of views are now accepted as compatible with Christian orthodoxy. For the purposes of this research, I have not explored or addressed these arguments, which are addressed in detail elsewhere, but have assumed that the inclusion of LGBTQ people does not exclude a community from being seen as an orthodox Christian community.

Post-script: Weaknesses in the approach

Research took place during the Covid lockdown in the first few months of 2021, meaning I could not visit respondents or take part in community gatherings as I had intended. Whilst I was able to watch online meetings, respondents from all three communities commented on the fact that given the interactive and socially-led nature of each community, the online gathering was an inadequate way of experiencing the community. As a result, I was dependent entirely on respondents' own perspectives.

Additionally, as someone who has been involved in Sycamore community since it began, I have strong insider knowledge, and Sycamore respondents all knew that. However, discussions were moderated across the communities in a way which didn't reference my own views.

5. INTRODUCING THE COMMUNITIES

1. Introducing Cedar

Cedar was founded by “a small bunch of friends”⁹² in their 20s in a Home Counties commuter town. Meetings were held in living rooms and then pubs, a community was built up through midweek social activities and a Sunday evening worship service emerged, mainly attended by young adults. A second ‘community’ of young families meets in a different venue on a Sunday morning.

Cedar’s original founders had been involved in a large charismatic evangelical church aimed at young adults, which their website describes as the ‘Mothership’, and which continues to influence their worship style. Both Sunday gatherings involve sung worship, a worship band, and a Bible-based talk:

we sing the same songs and we we do we say the same words during ministry time because we're all brought up by [Mothership church] so we we speak the same language in that sense⁹³

Cedar can be considered an example of what Mission Shaped Church calls a “seed” church plant, in that it wasn’t officially planned by the parent church, and came about via a small group of people wanting to do something similar but more contextually appropriate in a new area which would be more open to those who weren’t Christians. For this reason there is a greater emphasis on mission - the founding premise of “Cedar” was the belief that there was not a church in their town to which they could confidently invite someone from an unchurched background, which meant less focus on singing, and other typical church culture:

to begin with, it was non-traditional in the strongest sense in that it didn't meet on a Sunday and there were things that probably some vicars would be horrified by - they didn't have sung worship sometimes. Without like completely kind of stripping away everything that church is about i think there's a sense of like trying to work out what what will create that space for someone where they feel like they can be safe and they can come in⁹⁴

⁹² Rebecca, Cedar 110

⁹³ Matt, Cedar 344

⁹⁴ Rebecca, Cedar 113

Specifically this meant encouraging questions and discussion, reflecting their congregation's more postmodern and individualistic outlook:

the generation of people that we were aiming to reach were a bunch of people who didn't want to be told what to think⁹⁵

One of the community's values is 'create debate', and 'good disagreement', particularly on 'issues other people would shy away from discussing' was cited as a key feature of the community.

The second difference is an emphasis on **social connections**, built deeply into the DNA of Cedar. Social meet-ups during the week remain a mainstay of the community's life together. One member describes being invited along, drawn in to a great night in the pub, and continuing to come based on friendships forged. As the community has grown over the years, a system of 'mini-hubs' has been introduced, whereby each term new opportunities for connection with different combinations of people are offered, from marriage courses and video game nights to Alpha and cookery classes.

In rewilding terms then, despite being the community with the closest affiliation to mainstream evangelicalism, in taking seriously the challenge to reach an audience of younger adults comfortable with post-modernity and plurality, this community nevertheless has embraced rewilding behaviours. Its focus on respecting people's individual perspectives, whilst drawing them together in close and loving community, has driven them to lift barriers and accept back people many conventional evangelical churches would struggle to, notably LGBTQ people, mentioned without prompting by all respondents.

2. Introducing Sycamore

Sycamore is a good example of a community whose genesis is not covered by Mission Shaped Church's methodology, in that there was no sending church as such. Rather a group of mainly LGBTQ folk from charismatic evangelical backgrounds had started Sycamore having met via a previous community which had stopped meeting following the retirement of its founder, and which had been quite different in form, offering confidential support to a closed 'discipleship group' who met fortnightly.

⁹⁵ Rebecca, Cedar 229

Sycamore is more open and visible in nature, and pre-Covid-19, between 100 and 200 people would meet five times a year on a Saturday afternoon in a central London Baptist church for a fairly conventional evangelical-style worship service, with a time of sung worship led by a worship band, a testimony, and a longish talk, often by a guest speaker.

In terms of rewilding behaviours, interconnection and community is one way which this community operates in a distinctive way. It is a gathered community drawing people from all over England and Wales, and structured in such a way as to build connections quickly, not only with extended coffee times before and after each meeting, but also through organised social spaces in two different central London venues after each meeting. As with 'Cedar', the socialising is an official part of the community activity, with a West End pub venue for more extrovert types to connect up, and a restaurant venue where smaller groups are seated together, hosted by community members, enabling new and more introverted people to connect in a quieter and less stressful environment. Beyond meetings, the community's active online Facebook group connects up around 400 people online, including ad hoc Zoom events with speakers and a series of weekly Zoom small groups and discussion groups on weekday evenings.

There is no single leader, but rather a ten-person steering group, who meet up five times a year and at a residential weekend to discern new direction for the community, and to be a close supportive community for one another. Representing significant diversity in terms of age, sexuality and gender identity, the group makes decisions by consensus and through discussion. For the first six years, nobody on the steering group had had any formal experience of church leadership.

Pastoral care is also not formally organised in terms of givers and receivers, but rather experienced through friendship and community. This was partly driven by a lack of paid-for staff, partly as a response to some very negative and damaging experiences of 'pastoral care' being done to people in contexts where LGBTQness was stigmatised, but also out of a positive belief that needs are better dealt with in and by community rather than by an organised hierarchy.

In rewilding terms, the removal of boundaries and fences is also evident at Sycamore, with fewer expectations of doctrinal correctness:

it's just a fellowship of believers or wanting to be believers who are not having to self-censor everything that comes out of their mouth or every thought in their head. It feels like permission to be and it feels like how you imagined or fantasized church should be or could⁹⁶

Significantly, compared to other LGBTQ groups, there is no requirement to be LGBTQ either:

I love the fact that you couldn't assume that the person beside you is gay, straight or whatever. I love the fact that we have parents we have clergy. We have a diverse constituency and I love the fact that people seem to find a home there, people seem to find a comfortable place to be themselves and of course in that context then being LGBTQ+ is meaningless, it's irrelevant, it's just a fellowship of believers or wanting to be believers⁹⁷

Sycamore, then, provides an interesting case study for rewilding in that it is a community formed by 'missing species' from mainstream evangelical churches, and has rejected some of the more formal leadership and pastoral care structures from conventional churches which many in the community have experienced as exclusive or spiritually abusive. Instead, it has focused on relationality and community to discern direction and to meet pastoral needs, and removed many of the 'boundaries' put in place in conventional churches on beliefs and behaviour of not only leaders but also members. As we move on to compare it with the two other churches, a key focus for analysis will be how the lack of imposed boundaries and model do not result in a loss of focus for the community.

3. Introducing Hawthorn

Hawthorn is unlike the other two communities in that it emerged from a conventional expression of church, having been a town centre Baptist church. The church had dabbled in mainstream charismatic evangelical networks, having sought to adopt a Willow Creek model under the previous pastor.

However, in the last five years it has chosen to shift its direction and structure significantly, joining a network of Christian communities committed to social justice. Instead of a church leader, there is a 'hub leader' who has oversight of community as well as church activities.

⁹⁶ Patrick, Sycamore, 36.

⁹⁷ Patrick, Sycamore , 31

The shift to a church-based community organising model happened whilst the church community were reconsidering their stance on inclusion issues, which has drawn in new people who identify as post-evangelical or progressive. The hub leader is a woman in a same-sex marriage (Deborah).

Rewilding-wise, Hawthorn has welcomed in the missing or excluded species, specifically those with an activist mindset, who connect with God through taking action on social justice issues. This has seen an influx of people to the wider community who have no church allegiance but want to get on board with the activism.

Their commitment to social justice work also extends beyond the church community. The new hub leader sees the community as a host, catalyst and partner to other groups doing justice work.

Like the other two communities, fostering connections within the community is a priority, and three different kinds of fortnightly groups run at the church, promoting either learning (eg. T-shirt printing), kindness (doing an elderly person's garden) or connection (mums' support group). Some have overt faith content, some do not.

A monthly afternoon 'communion' service sees the community sitting down and sharing a meal together.

Dialogue, conversation and asking awkward questions is also key at Hawthorn, with some regret about the monological nature of their Covid services (on YouTube). Diversity is also baked into their decision making process, which is run by a 'hub steering group' rather than an individual.

Hawthorn, whilst growing out of a more traditional church, has embraced a wilder way of being through their focus on activism, broader community building and inclusion as the hallmarks of their identity, and the abandoning of doctrinal and behavioural hallmarks as the basis of belonging.

6. ANALYSIS OVERVIEW

The analysis section is in three parts. Each explores a different angle on what happens when a fresh expression forms and grows with a more 'wilded' and less 'farmed' approach, i.e. when leadership is less controlling and more facilitative, when models and blueprints are set aside, and the missio dei is discerned and participated in by the many not the few.

The **first** section (p32) explores evidence from all three communities which largely supports the rewilding hypothesis, where 'biotic potential' appears to enable Christian communities to exist together in mutually fulfilling relationship with one another, with God, and with the surrounding community, in the absence of a controlling 'farmed' leadership structure.

The **second** section (p45) explores a hypothesis emerging from this piece of research that one of the ways rewilded communities find meaning and structure is through germinating and nurturing inherited seeds of doctrine, practice and structure.

The **third** section (p50) explores the way in which this piece of research challenges the rewilding hypothesis, particularly the largely non-interventionist approach to rewilding Aisthorpe draws from Monbiot and others.

6a: Rewilded communities are self-regulating

Introduction:

Industrial farming has demonstrated how the ripping up of hedgerows and use of chemicals, whilst it can ensure a consistent single-species end product in the short term, is not sustainable in the long term, impoverishing the soil, killing off pollinators and dramatically reducing species diversity.⁹⁸ Rewilding advocates claim the answer is less control, that complex ecosystems of symbiotically related species will develop naturally, assuming the reintroduction of certain keystone species.

As we have seen, Aisthorpe claims that there are parallels here with church, that church decline is partly due to controlling church leaders creating a monoculture which restricts beliefs and behaviours.⁹⁹ He calls for rewilded church communities to thrive on the margins, far from the ‘centres of control’ and for a reintroduction of Jesus as the ‘keystone species’, forced out of too many ‘overfarmed’ churches.¹⁰⁰

There is evidence from these three communities that greater doctrinal and behavioural freedom has contributed to their functioning as diverse, sustainable and healthy Christian communities.

All three communities have moved away from the ‘centres of control’

All three communities had their roots in charismatic evangelicalism, and many of the respondents had been formed by or were still part of that tradition. Anna Ruddick talks about how enlightenment epistemology and a binary conversion narrative combine in evangelical churches to create a culture where members need to subscribe to tightly-defined narratives¹⁰¹ generated by an evangelical subculture.¹⁰² These ‘identity narratives’ shape an “evangelical worldview” which is “received as articulating true religious identity and so must be navigated in relation to the complexity of daily life”.¹⁰³

⁹⁸ Monbiot, “Feral”, Loc 2670.

⁹⁹ Aisthorpe, “Rewilding the Church”, p198.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. p197.

¹⁰¹ Anna Ruddick, “Reimagining Mission From Urban Places”, Chapter 10, paragraph 25.

¹⁰² Ibid., Chapter 6, para 19.

¹⁰³ Ibid, Chapter 5, para 6.

Respondents in this piece of research echoed the idea that there were certain 'package deals' whereby these subcultures were embraced wholeheartedly by communities they had been part of:

They said you should grapple with your faith and process it, but it's kind of like the subtext was "within these guidelines and don't step outside them"¹⁰⁴

I was raised in a world where you had to believe before you belonged¹⁰⁵

The Cedar community was still the most comfortable with evangelical subcultures, with respondents acknowledging their debt to the 'mothership' church they had come from. We've already heard how the community had deliberately deviated from the subculture in the interests of being less like 'church' and more able to build relationship with the 'missing species' of unchurched and dechurched young people:

I used to go to church when I was younger and then I just stopped. I had so many questions as I got older that I just stopped going. I traveled quite a lot, I lived abroad quite a lot and it just didn't really seem to fit with who I was.¹⁰⁶

Respondents believed wholeheartedly that it was a safe place for questions and a range of beliefs:

it doesn't matter what you've come with, if you have issues, if you believe in God and Jesus, if you don't, there just because you like a cup of tea and a chat - it doesn't matter, it really is that kind of environment where you can just be yourself¹⁰⁷

In the two other communities, there was a more decisive shift away from evangelical subcultures:

it's people that would class themselves as post-evangelical, who have been part of quite a charismatic evangelical church and had experiences where that's been damaging to them or to family members or friends.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ Anna, Sycamore , 469.

¹⁰⁵ Patrick, Sycamore , 237.

¹⁰⁶ Susie, Cedar 134

¹⁰⁷ Simon, Cedar 104.

¹⁰⁸ Amy, Hawthorn 305

Specifically in the case of Hawthorn, it is the activists who are the missing species who have struggled to fit in other churches:

activists are often pushed out in terms of church life because they don't want to sit around and discuss the bible in a home group and they don't want to sit and listen to a talk on a sunday or sing songs. They want to get on and do stuff and that's often seen as sort of subsidiary really¹⁰⁹

The Willow Creek model the community had attempted to embrace had been rejected as too controlling:

During the willow creek years it all got a bit professionalized in some ways. You'd be trained how to greet people, this is what you should do, don't do this and offer a handshake. There were points where people weren't allowed to be part of the welcome team because they weren't very good at doing it supposedly. The danger is then that you lose the heart of it. You lose this sense of we're just an ordinary bunch of people¹¹⁰

Sycamore was also felt to be a space where one could be free to be and say what you like:

I think everyone's like well we'll think what we think and everyone's on a journey and we're all processing our own space¹¹¹

Models in particular are rejected in favour of relationship:

the whole talk of "models" just repulses me. just makes my blood run cold, but it also it reveals more to me to my mind about the folks who are coming asking those questions in terms of assuming that there is a model that will work for this day and age. No it's relationship, yeah that's what it is, it's relationship with God and with each other and with ourselves. Authentic relationship and I think that reflects the Trinity. I think it also is fertile ground for new stuff to emerge¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ Richard, Hawthorn 405

¹¹⁰ Richard, Hawthorn, 246.

¹¹¹ Anna, Sycamore , 424.

¹¹² Dermott 450

Belonging is sacred

This deep commitment to respecting the individual and changing beliefs, behaviours and identities of those who are part of the community is balanced across communities by a deep commitment to sustaining community connections, with social and group activities baked into the schedule of church, with mini-hub groups at Hawthorn and Cedar building community connections throughout the week, and organised pub-time built into the service time at Cedar and Sycamore. The metaphor of ‘home’ or ‘family’ reinforced this. More than this, ‘hanging out’ was talked about as sacramental across all three communities:

I think there is on a very raw level something about just a bunch of people intentionally hanging out and setting aside that sacred time. It's the Hebrew word 'kadosh' (sacred) - even if we're just at the pub together there's that "holy holy holy" sort of environment that we've created just by the mere presence of Christians. I think social stuff is the the heartbeat of the [community]¹¹³

It's something that is holy that is beyond just sharing food. It's the conversations, the depth of connection, the permission to ask questions and to discuss and debate and disagree. That's all done over food and that's seen as a holy thing to do and that that's church¹¹⁴

There is a blurring of the binary distinction between Christian and non-Christian found in more conservative contexts. Simon from Cedar remarked on how he would still be held within the community even if he signed up ‘as a terrorist guerrilla in the woods’, in contrast to Anna from Sycamore’s observation about her conservative mum, for whom ‘backsliding’ was unforgivable:

I describe my mum all the time as the person who is more likely to be friendly to a complete stranger if it looks like she might be able to show them Jesus or you know bring them to a conversion than she would mind her manners when, for instance, my auntie introduced her to her girlfriend.¹¹⁵

In more ‘rewilded’ communities then, both adherence to evangelical doctrine, and veneration and replication of evangelical sub-culture is subordinate to the bonds of relationship which

¹¹³ Matt, Cedar , 213.

¹¹⁴ Deborah, 415.

¹¹⁵ Anna, Sycamore , 156.

hold the community together and appeal to those beyond it. All four respondents in Cedar spoke warmly of a gay man in his 60s who found a home among their mostly straight, mostly evangelical congregation:

*it wasn't just because it was church but because it was community so he ended up you know coming back*¹¹⁶

Leadership operates as a shared function rather than individual role

If evangelical sub-cultures can be seen as analogous to intensively “farmed” environments, where diversity of belief and behaviour may be discouraged, then it is the leaders of evangelical churches who have been experienced by respondents across churches as the ‘farmers’ responsible.

In contrast, all three communities in this research appeared to have a flatter hierarchy than the charismatic churches they had come from. All members had a voice and felt ownership of the community:

“Rebecca might be a the head of the community, but it’s almost as though everyone runs it”¹¹⁷

Deborah points out how the democracy in their inherited Baptist tradition enabled them to move with the will of the congregation away from the position of the Baptist Union:

the great thing about being part of the baptist church is that there is a sense of democracy. Every church should be free to discern the voice of God for their own locality which i think is really good and we've like rinsed that to its fullest extent even if it annoys the baptist union¹¹⁸

Sycamore takes this furthest, with leadership having always been a function shared by a group of ten unpaid lay people, rather than a role occupied by a small paid-for leadership team

¹¹⁶ Susie, Cedar 213

¹¹⁷ Simon, Cedar 175

¹¹⁸ Deborah, Hawthorn 135

“I guess I’d call it a “well-distributed leadership model” Basically we spread it out just enough that nobody can quite tell who’s in charge.”¹¹⁹

On the basis of this piece of research it is possible to see one of the central claims of rewilding may come about, namely the idea that when a community culture respects the individuality and diversity of its members, without making inclusion dependent on their acquiescence to a particular leader, or particular way of behaving or believing, that the community starts to self-regulate and find its own healthy and sustainable balance.

Gemma describes how in their online community, the degree of ownership felt by members of the community encourages people who often are deliberately argumentative in other communities to take greater care and responsibility over their actions in the Sycamore online community.

One guy who was being quite sexist; people took him to task on it and he stormed out in the end. That’s an interesting one, isn’t it, where the community itself is strong enough. That’s the thing I love about the online community and I don’t quite know how we’ve done it but we have a remarkable degree of resilience. If somebody comes in and starts telling people what to do everyone’s like “no” and literally just ignores it¹²⁰

Gemma suggests that this resilience comes from a lack of obvious single leadership figure:

You can’t walk into [Sycamore] and say “who’s the leader, and how can i get them to tell me what to do” and i think that’s quite important and certainly it was a conscious thing in the online space that we were establishing it as a group for adults who are going to be adults in their spiritual life and take responsibility for themselves and not come in and look for a black hole of compassion to dump all their rubbish into. We don’t have a sacred leader and I think having a sacred leader provides a authority figure to rebel against¹²¹

In this sense, these are communities where in terms of the Ego State model of transactional analysis, there is an adult to adult relationship between members, in contrast to the

¹¹⁹ Beth, Sycamore 1030.

¹²⁰ Gemma, Sycamore 947.

¹²¹ Gemma, Sycamore 952

parent-child dynamic observed elsewhere, which can result in controlling behaviours and rebellious responses.¹²²

none of us **are**, none of us **have** everything we need and hopefully put enough people in a room help aiming to help each other and we've all got enough of the other things other people need that we can get through¹²³

This also counteracts a vulnerability Anna had experienced in a previous more traditional evangelical churches, when a pastor had an affair which resulted in the community being thrown into disarray:

*that just kind of blew everyone's mind a little bit it just shattered the church because they just had no constructs for that*¹²⁴

Gemma talks about how the tendency in the charismatic tradition to put leaders on pedestals can become abusive, and contrasts it directly with a community where the onus to tell stories, encourage one another and build relationship is on everyone:

That's my biggest fear, is that you appoint somebody as a small group leader and they get high on steroids of "I am a Christian leader, I can tell people what to do". No you're not telling anybody what to do, you're just making a space where people can come and share their stories and build relationships and encourage each other. It is not your job to tell them what to do, that's the Holy Spirit, so get out of the way. The power hit is just too big and that's where the spiritual abuse happens¹²⁵

Interestingly, Frank Viola's 'Reimagining Church' reports a similar phenomenon:

My experience has been that when the fundamental aspects of love and servanthood are mastered in a church, the issues of authority and submission amazingly take care of themselves. (In this connection, those who put undue emphasis on these subjects are typically more interested in making themselves an authority figure than they are in serving their fellow brethren.)¹²⁶

¹²² <https://ejop.psychopen.eu/index.php/ejop/article/download/390/html?inline=1> (last accessed 21 June 2021)

¹²³ Gemma, Sycamore , 237.

¹²⁴ Anna, Sycamore , 388.

¹²⁵ Gemma, Sycamore , 473

¹²⁶ Frank Viola, "Reimagining Church", p207.

This also connects to a third attribute which helps sustain a rewilded community:

Rewilded communities feed and nourish themselves, rather than looking to networks beyond the community.

Ruddick also remarks on the importance of particular personalities and speakers in evangelical subcultures in defining this 'particular way of being a Christian'.¹²⁷ Even at Cedar, this was seen as a distraction from building those core relationships within the community which sustain it:

the thing I've found to be honest with other churches has been that we put some people on pedestals and we focus on our relationship with them as opposed to our relationship with our local community or with what's happening on the ground.¹²⁸

Furthermore, there is a sense in a community led by community that input from within, from those who are intimately connected to the lives and perspectives of others in the community is generally more valuable:

I think we've made a bit of an effort the last few years to consciously try and develop voices within our own community because we want to develop the gifts of the people who've maybe not been allowed to develop their gifts in the conventional ways. Actually that's often been some of the most meaningful content because we know it connects directly to our experience and to where we're coming from¹²⁹

Furthermore, these contributions from within are not set in stone and unquestioned, but are discussed, debated and digested in all three communities, with Q&As, structured discussions and informal discussions at organised social gatherings very much part of the way a message from the front was dealt with, giving all members a chance to contribute to the message landing and being understood:

one of the big things I love about [Cedar] is that the leadership, the teaching, doesn't just come from the front - we all sort of teach each other i guess¹³⁰

¹²⁷ Ruddick, "Reimagining Mission from Urban Places", Chapter 5, paragraph 10.

¹²⁸ Matt, Cedar, 307.

¹²⁹ Gemma, Sycamore 837

¹³⁰ Susie, Cedar, 771.

One could tentatively contend that the invitation to join a rewilded community is not simply to belong and then believe, but that in belonging, one is invited to the possibility of impacting on and shaping the belief and certainly praxis of the community.



Figure 6: Rewilded community praxis is shaped by their members.

Relationship with Jesus the Keystone Species

For Aisthorpe the foremost reason a rewilding approach will lead to a healthy and thriving community is through focusing on the reintroduction of Jesus, who he likens to a keystone species, i.e. one whose presence will have a disproportionate effect on an ecosystem, transforming and renewing both individuals and the church.¹³¹

In one sense, the language of renewal, and the idea of Jesus as a knowable presence, both revealed in scripture and encountered in prayer and worship, was a focus inherited from all three group's charismatic backgrounds, rather than something which was new to any of the communities, and the way in which relationship with Jesus was focused on took largely familiar charismatic forms.

For example, Hawthorn's forays into social justice were prefigured by a series of Saturday morning prayer meetings. Patrick describes how the ten founders of Sycamore went through an 18 month period of discernment between first getting together to explore working together, and their first public meeting. Cedar's addition of 'challenge injustice' to their vision resulted from people in the community feeling led to it by God, and a series of prayer evenings were laid on to discern still further their call, culminating in a strand of work with refugees in Calais.

¹³¹ Aisthorpe, "Rewilding the Church", p53.

they were like “this is something that God's put on our heart” and then we've journeyed with them a bit on that and then they said to me a couple of weeks ago “we just feel really called to pray about this and so we're wondering about doing an evening of like prayer and intercession kind of worship and stuff and particularly around this topic of challenging injustice”¹³²

Deborah at Hawthorn talks about how words of knowledge have always been a part of how the community has sought to discern God's will:

we believe that God is a God who speaks to us and who speaks to us as a community and sometimes speaks to people so that they'll share that thought with the community. That's what's led the church I think to where it is now really¹³³

Relationship with Jesus is therefore perhaps one way in which the charismatic movement is already somewhat 'wild' in its outlook. However, as we saw in the last section, there was a strong sense among some participants that whilst relationship with Jesus had supposedly been paramount in the traditional charismatic contexts they had come from, that in reality they felt it was mediated or even distorted via particular leaders and via an evangelical subculture. Gemma talks about people needing to grow up and learn to have confidence in their own relationship with Jesus, rather than relying on the church subculture to mediate it:

a lot of queer people have a complete lack of trust in their own conscience, in their own emotions, in their own intellect, in their own ability to hear God and a very unhealthy dependency on a christian leader to tell them who they are, what to think and what to do. One of the most important things you have to do as a queer christian is get that locus of control back, not in the sense of you know saying i don't need other people or i don't need God, but being the person that god called you to be as a child of god who is accountable to god and can hear god and is loved by god¹³⁴

Similarly in Cedar, Matt suggests that although everyone might find themselves on different trajectories, there is shared direction of travel, which is towards the person of Jesus:

¹³² Rebecca, Cedar 330

¹³³ Rebecca, Cedar 516.

¹³⁴ Gemma, Sycamore , 439.

I always talk about orientating ourselves towards Jesus as opposed to turning away from something because it's sort of by saying to someone actually let's look at the person of Jesus and walk in that direction¹³⁵

In one sense then, the rewilding of these communities expresses itself in the form of a recalibration and rediscovery of the relationship with Jesus they already aspired to.

Relationships beyond the community

A final way in which relationality gives form and integrity to rewilded communities is in their relationships with those beyond the community. Freed from the binary narrative of the lost and the saved, relationships become more mutual and reciprocal, with a 'Missio Dei' recognition that God is at work beyond the church.

Moynagh quotes Moltmann's pointing to human rights and ecology groups to show how the world can be good news for, and indeed ahead of the church.¹³⁶ For example, at Hawthorn, the 12 step programmes meeting in Hawthorn's building were felt strongly by Deborah to be something the church could embrace, listen to and learn from, coalescing in her understanding with an inherited Christian conviction that God's vision for people was holistic and not merely spiritual:¹³⁷

rather than just see them as people who hire a room, we've recognised that what they do as a 12-step fellowship is amazing and so aligned with who we are - this sense of needing the help of a higher power and being set free from addiction, of peer support and empowerment. So rather than just giving them a set of keys, why don't we actually develop a relationship with them and understand what they do more and listen to them about how the building can be improved and what we can do to help them do what they do. ¹³⁸

At Sycamore, Patrick's involvement in his local gay bar is reciprocal in a different way. Patrick and his partner find a community they can fully feel accepted and welcome within,

¹³⁵ Matt, Cedar, 200.

¹³⁶ Moynagh, Michael. "Church in Life". (London: SCM Press, 2017). Chapter 7, 'What type of gift?'. Accessed 11th December 2018 at <<https://hub.commonawards.org/mod/book/view.php?id=603&chapterid=7848>>

¹³⁷ Bevans, "Models of Contextual Theology", Chapter 5, para 1.

¹³⁸ Deborah, Hawthorn 365.

and yet can give back to, bringing their spirituality and an expression of God's love to the friends he finds there:

there was a lad who got talking to us in the bar and came along to Sycamore and took communion for the first time in 20 years and every time we have a meal together he holds his hands out at the start of the meal to say grace together... ...for me one of the biggest shifts is the mutuality of sharing in that it's not all one-way traffic it's just about sharing your life and having conversations. ...The fields are white unto harvest, people just longing for understanding love, acceptance, belonging and I find myself wanting to be an expression of that to folks in the LGBT community.¹³⁹

There is also a sense in which the community's visible Christian presence at Pride contributes to the wider LGBTQ community, in providing an alternative narrative and opposition to the conservative Christian protestors, and visually representing a meaningful connection between two communities who would often not connect:

you've always got the the yellow sign brigade at pride telling everybody they're going to hell and the importance of providing an alternative message to that for people to see and know that not every Christian thinks that and telling people God loves them is really important¹⁴⁰

Relationship enables an authentic sharing of faith and the riches of the Gospel with the community around, not diluting or undermining, but rather giving expression to each communities' commitment to the Gospel. These are all also examples of Moynagh's conception of the church as modelling the Trinity in being 'self-giving' and generous, in a reciprocal relationship with the community beyond.¹⁴¹ They also arguably model John Taylor's 'ideal shape of the church', involving "the least possible withdrawal of Christians from their corporateness with their fellow men in the world".¹⁴²

Throughout this study respondents across all three communities have reflected on the fact that their communities offer them greater freedoms to believe, behave or identify differently from other charismatic evangelical communities they had been part of. However, what is notable is that there was also evidence that the greater flexibility and freedom seemed to

¹³⁹ Patrick, Sycamore , 227.

¹⁴⁰ Gemma, Sycamore 264.

¹⁴¹ Moynagh. "Church in Life" Chapter 7, para 7.

¹⁴² Aisthorpe, "Rewilding the church", p108.

encourage the community to self-regulate. When inclusion is not dependent on acquiescence to a particular leader, or particular way of behaving or believing, the community finds its own sustainable and healthy balance, in the same way that rewilded ecosystems find their own balance without the controlling chemicals and machinery of intensive farming.

This first section of three largely corroborates Aisthorpe's vision of rewilded church communities located in the margins, far from the centres of control, where leadership is shared and negotiated rather than imposed, and it starts to show us what a self-regulating rewilded community might look like, governed by its commitment to each other, to Christ and to the furthering of the Kingdom.

6b. SEEDS AND CROSS-POLLINATION

In the previous chapter, we saw rewilded communities maintaining a sense of continuity and integrity through a focus on cultivating relationships, both within and beyond the community and with Christ, Aisthorpe's 'Great Interferer'.

Research suggests there may be a second way in which continuity and integrity can be maintained in rewilded communities, which connects with how inherited doctrine and practice are shaped and negotiated within this more relational and organic context.

Frank Viola talks about it in terms of church having distinctive DNA, pointing out that just as a bigleaf hydrangea will never produce thorns or thistles, that

The church of Jesus Christ - when planted properly and left on its own without human control and institutional interference - will produce certain features by virtue of its DNA.¹⁴³

Although a rewilded ecosystem may appear chaotic and out of control from a gardener's perspective, each plant and creature within it is shaped and guided by its DNA, passed on through seeds of various kinds taking root in new soils, and growing up in relationship with other organisms in the ecosystem.

The metaphor of seeds is flexed in a more complex way by Bevens, who uses seed metaphors throughout 'Models of contextual theology'. In his 'translation model', perhaps akin to Viola's description, the seed represents a core and unchanging Gospel truth surrounded by a changing cultural husk, growing up in different cultural contexts¹⁴⁴. However, it is in his 'synthetic model' that Bevens' use of seed language starts to resonate with the rewilding metaphor as explored in this piece of research.¹⁴⁵ What we see in this research is not an identical plant growing in different cultural contexts, but rather a plant which grows, responds and cross-pollinates with local culture to create more seeds which can blow and find fresh expression elsewhere. The 'DNA' of the gospel message is present and definitive, but finds unique and particular expression in response to local conditions.

¹⁴³ Viola, Frank. "Reimagining church", p46.

¹⁴⁴Bevens, "Models of Contextual Theology", Chapter 4.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid. Chapter 7, paragraph 14.

For all three there was a strong sense of being shaped by, fed by and given life by inherited seeds of belief or practice cross-pollinating with seeds from a new context, to give new life in new ways.

The rediscovery of contemplative practice at Cedar or of sacramental worship at Sycamore would perhaps fit this model - pieces of Christian practice which had fallen out of usage in the evangelical tradition, but which once upon a time had been part of the Christian ecosystem. Like a seed for a single plant, it also can be reintroduced 'unbundled' from the rest of perhaps would have been its ecosystem in the past. Rebecca from Cedar describes an Ignatian brother leading them in a meditative 'imaginative Bible story telling' which she describes as 'completely alien' but which 'people really enjoyed and got something out of'.¹⁴⁶ Matt remarks that using a traditional cathedral Maundy Thursday liturgy met with resistance from those who carried what he called 'baggage' from the evangelical subculture, but was well received by the unchurched members of the community.¹⁴⁷

Another example of cross-pollination with another Christian tradition which is instructive for this piece of research is Anna Ruddick's call for evangelicals to embrace a seed from elsewhere in the Christian tradition, namely the doctrine of the 'imago Dei' present in all people, rather than dwelling on the lostness and original sin of those beyond the church. This resolves her diagnosis that one of the issues of evangelicalism is an "absence of affirmation of personhood, which is necessary for human flourishing"¹⁴⁸

"The starting point of imago Dei enables the building of communities of resilience and camaraderie."¹⁴⁹

Respondents from Sycamore talk about discovering a similar insight outside the Christian tradition via their involvement in the surrounding LGBTQ community, which starts to touch upon Bevans' anthropological model. The community's presence at Pride in London is an example of how their expression of faith has cross-pollinated with the LGBTQ community and found new expression. Participating in the parade has been seen as a rite of passage, even a transformational sacramental experience for LGBTQ members of the community:

It's important for us to walk in Pride i think just you know you know walking down this Regent Street to cheers from loads of people when you've been told that you're not

¹⁴⁶ Rebecca, Cedar 217.

¹⁴⁷ Matt, Cedar , 245.

¹⁴⁸ Ruddick, "Reimagining Mission From Urban Places", Chapter 5, para 10.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid. Chapter 6, para 12.

*allowed to be gay.... ..it has a sacramental impact, you know, the change in people from before they walk in Pride and after is sometimes very noticeable. There's definitely something redemptive about it*¹⁵⁰

Cross-pollinated with inherited seeds of evangelical belief, this sense of joy in finding self-acceptance brings new life and energy to the Sycamore community, and is experienced as a confirmation of God's love and faithfulness rather than a rejection of it. For example, Patrick points out how messages he had always seen as the core of the gospel, namely 'God's healing love for us' and the 'Let my people go' narrative of the Exodus, has produced new fruit away from the constraining, crushing, bruising church contexts of his past:

*it is a testimony to God's work in each one of our lives that the things that used to absolutely destroy us or crush us or bruise us, or wound us deeply have been robbed of the ability to do that as we have come to understand and experience God's healing love for us. I was thinking even just yesterday of the the plagues in Egypt and Moses going to Pharaoh. I still believe that the song of the spirit of the Lord is "Let my people go."*¹⁵¹

Gemma at Sycamore spoke about how her deep inherited appreciation for scripture in her charismatic evangelical context, uncoupled from what she sees as inherited prejudices, has flourished in a new context. She realises the 'seeds of liberation' were there all along:

*Recognizing that the traditions we come from actually contain the seeds of what we need to find our liberation is quite important for people. You don't have to throw everything out and adopt a completely foreign language in terms of your faith and your approach to scripture and your approach to God to find yourself as a queer person in the Bible and find your place in the church. the seeds are already there in what you've already been told*¹⁵²

Similarly, worship songs from evangelical subcultures take on new meaning at Sycamore:

Singing songs about how

*"I am who you say I am"*¹⁵³

¹⁵⁰ Gemma, Sycamore 260.

¹⁵¹ Patrick, Sycamore , 178.

¹⁵² Gemma, Sycamore 298.

¹⁵³ *"I am chosen, not forsaken
I am who You say I am*

and things like that when you're coming from a queer perspective has a whole different level of power when you've been told you're not and then you hear that word into your life, yeah God made you as you are and God loves you as you are then that is even more powerful¹⁵⁴

Gemma also gives an example of how a core inherited belief in the doctrine of sin, once used to shame, has cross pollinated with insights from the LGBTQ community about the damaging effects of conversion therapy to reveal a new truth about sin and what it does to people:

we've been told a lot about sin, usually that we are being sinful because we can't repent of who God made us. We start to talk a lot more about the sin of homophobia and the institutional barriers of white supremacy - the things that that stop people being able to live their full lives, and the little sins of people's lack of generosity and understanding and listening; that harm and that hurt¹⁵⁵

In one sense, this connects with Anna Ruddick's description of the way in which members of the Eden community have adapted and reframed elements of their inherited evangelical tradition to make sense of the new context in which they found themselves, where specifically their expectations of how mission might work were forced to change faced with the complex reality of a deprived area where God was already at work.

"when passages which were once meaningful for team members become problematic due to their experience, a new way of reading must be found"¹⁵⁶

Like Ruddick's Eden respondents, Hawthorn and Sycamore respondents believe they are not completely "diverging from the evangelical tradition" but rather

"innovating within it: drawing on elements of a broader Christian tradition fuelled by their engagement with Scripture and the Holy Spirit in their daily lives."¹⁵⁷

*You are for me, not against me
I am who You say I am"*

Songwriters: Reuben Timothy Morgan / Benjamin David Fielding
Who You Say I Am Lyrics © Hillsong Publishing

¹⁵⁴ Gemma, Sycamore , 342.

¹⁵⁵ Gemma, Sycamore 617

¹⁵⁶ Ruddick, "Reimagining Mission From Urban Places", Chapter 6, para 25.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., Chapter 6, para 27.

In rewilded communities, then, there is a sense that it is in these messy rewilded areas, the “wild patches” away from what Aisthorpe describes as the ‘centres of control’¹⁵⁸ that the central tenets of evangelical faith are not abandoned, but are allowed to cross-pollinate with the reality of people’s lives beyond the community, and seeds of tradition or life from other traditions, from the past, or from secular culture and new expressions of faith are emerging. A rewilding model points to how it is in the mess and disorder, that new seeds of faith are being given the light and the nutrients to grow, not as shiny new ‘fresh expressions’ emerging from factories in pristine packaging, but as reexpressions of very old truths growing out of the fallen and decaying corpses of trees of the past.

NB: This is explored to a certain extent in Mission Shaped Church’s ‘seed’ model of church planting, in that the original ‘seed’ “dies to its previous identity in order to reincarnate the gospel and church in the mission context”. However, the model is an agricultural one where there is a ‘sending church’ planting the seed’, and ‘seed’ refers to a group of “highly motivated and possibly highly skilled people” rather than the seeds being the message of the Gospel itself, falling from existing plants, finding new soil and growing from there unsupervised.

¹⁵⁸ Aisthorpe, “Rewilding the church”, p197.

6c. Re-wilding and Intervention

It is important to flag that none of the three communities featured are perfect exemplars of 'rewilded church'. Whilst all three show evidence of rewilded behaviours, as we have seen, there are also ways in which all three churches remain committed to the structures and behaviours of inherited church in certain key ways.

Cedar is in many ways a plant of a mainstream evangelical network, whose leaders still consider themselves firmly part of the evangelical subculture, expressing strong allegiance to HTB and others, and finding it difficult to articulate why they are different to the 'mothership' church. Sycamore is a geographically disparate community, so the links between members are not as tight as the rewilding idea would perhaps call for, and the meetings, led from the front, largely follow the form of an attractional model inherited from the evangelical tradition. Hawthorn is in some ways still a regular Baptist church with a legacy congregation and a building.

Furthermore, in all three communities there are examples of where a non-interventionist rewilded approach has been rejected, where Christian leaders have very deliberately not "taken their hands off the steering wheel", and where there is a strong case for that having been the right course of action.¹⁵⁹

Whilst Deborah at Hawthorn recognised that intervention on the part of leaders in the life of the community "*can become an excuse for being controlling and for micromanaging people and being judgmental*",¹⁶⁰ she also spoke of it being nevertheless necessary to challenge toxic and damaging behaviours in those people in the community:

*a lot of what we're what we need to do is to confront difficult and damaging behaviour in people and encourage them to become more whole and healed because all of that behaviour comes from unresolved pain, in my experience*¹⁶¹

Interestingly, Deborah justified this using the language of 'protecting the ecosystem' of the community and enabling others to thrive within it. This she believed required her to not be 'intentionally passive' as things played out in the community. In Aisthorpe's understanding of

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, p159.

¹⁶⁰ Deborah, Hawthorn, 230.

¹⁶¹ Deborah, Hawthorn, 221.

rewilding, this could arguably be incorporated into a rewilding paradigm under the heading of 'exterminating what impedes biodiversity'.

However, although rewilding suggests a different criteria for judging whether intervention is appropriate, there is nevertheless a judgment call required. Furthermore, as Aisthorpe repeatedly uses scripture to justify his position and exhorts people to uncover the "streams of tradition that carry the riches of our faith", even within his paradigm there will be leaders choosing direction and taking action based on understanding of scripture and tradition.

We observe the leaders of Sycamore making judgments which exclude certain views, attitudes and behaviours based on their understanding of scripture and the Christian tradition, only allowing speakers who subscribe to an inclusive rather than conservative reading of scripture on sexuality, for example. Furthermore, despite having an entirely lay leadership with no theological training for the first five years, respondents from Sycamore community spoke of their reliance on drawing in those who were theologically trained and experienced to speak in the early days:

I remember years ago when we first launched Steve Chalke challenging us about not being a hospital for the wounded but also needing to look out and it's absolutely right¹⁶²

Cedar have been integrated into the Church of England, enabling funding and theological training for their leaders. Although doctrinal alignment is not seen as crucial to belonging, there is still a strong sense of authority and control concerning what comes from the front and is sanctioned by the leadership, as seen in the way in which the subject of termly 'mini hub' groups are approved and sanctioned.¹⁶³

In effect then, we see all three communities nevertheless exhibiting control, having red lines, having people who decide direction and people who have less influence. All three either have leaders who are trained theologically, or draw heavily on theologically educated speakers and church leaders from elsewhere.

What we see in all three communities is not a total rejection of the idea that church communities ever require management, encouragement or intervention from church leaders, and in its place a totally open field, worship, doctrine and practice wise. Rather, in all three

¹⁶² Patrick, Sycamore , 210.

¹⁶³ Rebecca, Cedar 295.

communities we see a degree of management which aims to hold dear certain values and intentions (seeds of ideas which need looking out for), and in all three communities there is an attempt to protect against what is harmful to the community, whether it is called toxicity (Deborah at Hawthorn), sin (Patrick at Sycamore) or brokenness (Matt at Cedar).

All three communities effectively find themselves on a spectrum somewhere between very institutional and intransigent expressions of church and wilder, freer expressions of church. All three seek to maintain an appropriate and healthy balance between either being too institutionalised and closed off to the Spirit and to diversity of personalities and practice, or completely unboundaried, where toxic people, practices and beliefs may be allowed to flourish unchallenged.

This is analogous to some of the perspectives referred to in the literature review which question ecological rewilding from a humanitarian perspective, calling not for the exclusion of humanity from ecosystems, but for the finding of an appropriate balance between humanity and nature.

7. CONCLUSION

The question this dissertation sought to explore concerned the “freshness” of fresh expressions. It began with the theological foundations of Fresh Expressions in ‘Mission Shaped Church’; a vision of a Trinitarian God, endlessly reaching out in creative and diverse ways to partner with those in the church and beyond to carry out the *Missio Dei*. Rejecting the idea of “church-centred” reproduction which looks simply to perpetuate the institution, Mission Shaped Church called for incarnational new communities demonstrating unity in diversity.

However, we also noted that much of the methodology of Mission Shaped Church fails to live up to this vision, recommending church planting strategies which replicate existing churches, and mission strategies which are carried out by Christians, possibly in partnership with other Christians, to a target group who are not yet Christian.

The idea of rewilding, borrowed from the sphere of ecology, frames the challenge of initiating fresh expressions differently, arguing that inherited church has been overly controlled (overfarmed) to the point of failing to allow people to thrive, and hampering the work of the Spirit in the church. Conversely, the theory contends that communities of Christians, like wild ecosystems, have an in-built biotic potential to find a sustainable and healthy balance outside the structures of inherited church. The work of God in relationship with people is put to the fore, whilst controlling church leadership structures, and doctrinal and liturgical correctness are subjugated to second place.

Research was conducted to explore the rewilding metaphor in the context of three fresh expressions, and has made a number of specific contributions to shape the conversation around rewilding in the context of fresh expressions.

Firstly, it feeds into the debate around church decline and its connection to a post-1960s culture of individualism and pluralism which resists institutional authority. These rewilded communities demonstrate that the downplaying of institutional authority called for by Aisthorpe and others, in order to embrace those with a more individualistic mindset, need not result in a community losing its distinctive Christian identity. Instead, by taking seriously the reality and dignity of people’s often hard won faith journeys, this research suggest that communities of Christians can grow and flourish without needing to be marshalled, sanctified by or held accountable to a particular leader or subculture.

Secondly, this research feeds into the current debate within the Church of England about the viability of lay-led fresh expressions. There is tentative evidence that rewilded communities where leadership is a function spread across a group of lay people, with decision-making discerned and negotiated by many, rather than concentrated into one trained and ordained person, can not only result in the wider community feeling greater ownership of what goes on, but in some ways liberate individuals to take responsibility for their own faith, behaviour, discernment of scripture and relationship with Jesus the 'Great Interferer', rather than relying overly on a church leader. Part of the way this is achieved is also through the intentional cultivation of mutually self-giving relationships between members of communities, with 'hanging out' being seen as sacramental. It demonstrates the way in which rewilded churches have a tendency to develop along the lines of Dulles' 'Mystical Communion' model.¹⁶⁴

Thirdly, this piece of research sheds light on the process of contextualisation in post-modern British contexts, suggesting that Bevans' seed metaphor is a useful organic model to integrate into the rewilded church metaphor, shedding light on how rewilded communities find continuity and integrity.¹⁶⁵ Inherited doctrines and practices are experienced as seeds which grow in communities, find fresh expression, cross-pollinate and adapt in new contexts to create new life and diversity.

Fourthly, this study sheds light on ways in which rewilded mission can be inclusive and non-dualistic, taking seriously the idea of a *Missio Dei* God who is at work in the world and outside the church planting seeds of liberation.¹⁶⁶ It demonstrates Mike Moynagh's assertion that mission happens in the context of a reciprocal, two-way relationship between those inside and outside, and blurring the distinction between the two.¹⁶⁷

Fifthly, it is also a study of how people with an experience of having been excluded from inherited church (LGBTQ Christians in these three instances) might contribute to an understanding of rewilded church, as people who have been forced to 'go wild' and reimagine their faith journey outside the climate-controlled polytunnels of the charismatic evangelical churches where they originally found faith. Forced to explore relationship with God outside the context of inherited church, cross-pollinated with insights from the secular

¹⁶⁴ Dulles, 'Models of church', p39

¹⁶⁵ Bevans, "Models of Contextual Theology", Chapter 7, paragraph 14.

¹⁶⁶ Steve Bevans & Roger P. Schroeder. "Constants in Context" (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004), p27.

¹⁶⁷ Moynagh, "Church in Life" Chapter 7,

LGBTQ world revealing the Imago Dei in all people, new ways of living the ‘goodnewsness’ of the Gospel in wilder communities emerge.

Finally this study also advises caution around the extent to which rewilding completely does away with the need for intervention and church structure. All three communities talked about sin, brokenness and toxicity still existing within communities and needing to be discerned and dealt with. Whilst Aisthorpe’s approach allows for intervention which removes that which “inhibits diversity”, the call to rewild may not in reality be as purist and non-interventionist as he has suggested, and perhaps need not involve a complete rejection or dismantling of the ecclesial landscapes shaped by generations of church people living out the gospel in locally shaped ways.

APPENDICES

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B: EXAMPLE CONSENT FORM

CMS CONSENT FORM

Title of Project:

MA Dissertation Research

Student Name: XXX

Supervisor Name: XXX

Please read and sign:

I agree to the interview being audio and video recorded via Zoom.

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet about the above-named project and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

I understand that participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time prior to the research project being written up, without giving a reason.

I agree to take part in this project.

Name of participant:

Signature:

Date:.....

Name of student: XXX

Signature:

.....

Date:

Participants will be given a copy of this signed, dated consent form. The original signed consent form will be kept by the student.

C: EXAMPLE TRANSCRIPT

Patrick, Sycamore Community, Conducted 26th January 2021 via Zoom.

I've been involved with [Sycamore] on and off for about 10 years given that we've just had our eighth anniversary and we really were the guts of two years in preparing preparing to see what would emerge and yeah so i'm part of the furniture when it comes to [Sycamore] or I've been part of the furniture. been around a long time. so originally part of the steering group to see would there be a need for something like [Sycamore] and then we launched and it has been amazing just to watch how it has grown, the number of folks that keep coming, the number of new faces that keep rocking up and the the fact that it seems to be meeting a very real need that other expressions of churchmanship or church doesn't seem to touch.

Three words to describe it would be

um I think loving and familiar in the sense that my stable was charismatic evangelical so there's something about it that feels familiar and I think also I would have to use the word safe a place of safety so I think this will be my three my three words loving familiar and safe

I could give you many more words those are the first three that spring to mind other words like like progressive like prophetic yeah like like being an expression of the kingdom being lived into being that hasn't quite been there before hasn't quite scratched that evangelical itch before so those are immediate thoughts

how would you describe it to somebody you've never heard of it before?

I think I would say that it's a group of folks impacted by lgbt plus issues who are looking for a safe place to fellowship to have conversations and to consider what it means to follow jesus christ when there is an lgbtq plus impact upon your life

I love the fact that you couldn't assume that the person beside you is whatever gay straight or whatever but I love the fact that we have parents we have clergy we have really I suppose buzzword diverse constituency and yeah I love the fact that people seem to find a home there people seem to find a comfortable place to be themselves and of course in that context then being lgbtq plus is meaningless it's irrelevant it's just a fellowship of believers or

wanting to be believers who are not having to self-censor everything that comes out of their mouth or every thought in their head so it's a safe place and I think it's a prophetic place

Tell me about prophetic

Well I think the the church's handling I was going to say treatment but perhaps handling of lgbtq plus issues and people has not been good from those who have a perplexed sense of genuinely not knowing what to do with you through to those who are overtly hostile or consider that whatever way you identify or whatever you find yourself attracted to has to be prayed away and fixed and and I think that has cost the church dear I think it is costing the church dear and I increasingly think that the prophetic place of lgbt believers coming together unapologetically just as themselves to worship and encourage each other to grow on their faith I think that's a prophetic statement to the church where the church will one day have to acknowledge actually these people are just doing it for themselves without our approval say so or whatever and and God seems to be rocking up and things are happening and people are growing, are being like are being set free from baggage being moved into healthier more wholesome places in terms of how they relate to themselves and each other and even God and I genuinely think that the the giftings of the lgbtq community to the church are phenomenal

I appreciate that they're terrifying too because when you've been on the margins on the margins if you've been somewhat oppressed or treated with suspicion you have a lot of life learning to bring to the table one of which one of which elements I think is this pathological need well it's not pathological it's it's a it's a wonderful need for honesty and reality and truth and a pathological aversion to telling lies about the truth of who we are and about telling lies about how we have to present ourselves

I think I and I hope that for many lgbt folks of faith nowadays that those days are more behind them than in front of them I hope so generally so

What sort of people would typically come to [Sycamore]?

oh I love the fact that we have a we have a wide range range from teenagers through to young adults for whom this is not so much of an issue except for those who are raised in the charismatic evangelical stables and for whom they're told that it is an issue right through to folks in their 70s and even above who have lived through some phenomenal changes over the past 50 60 70 years and who remember much darker times so I love the fact that there is

a spread of ages which again is relatively unusual I think in a church context now because you either get a younger happy clappy kind of expression or the faithful gray-haired holding the fort for the kingdom until they all die off one by one and and I love the fact that within [Sycamore] you genuinely have a wide range of ages and also not just folks directly impacted but allies and clergy of on people who are questioning and parents so I I I love that I also love the fact that we have more and more new faces every time we meet there are new faces there are new stories and one of the interesting things about the pandemic why we're all getting a bit bored with zoom meetings is that it has allowed people more remotely situated to join into the [Sycamore] meetings and and that has been interesting that's been interesting do any of us

Could you give me a couple of examples of individuals who have kind of come along and connected with something at [Sycamore] or have found life there in some way?

well I think of one young man who visited several times before plucking up the courage to come in and that's not unusual the parallels between him and me were numerous both in terms of geography and career and um and churchmanship and I think he came into his own by coming into [Sycamore] terrified as he was absolutely terrified as he was he came into his own in terms of being able to realize that there are people who are gay and actually have an act of fear as opposed to feeling that you have to jettison one in order to embrace the other.

I think too of another man whom I met oh a good 20 years ago as part of an ex-gay ministry who prayed over me with my ex to be delivered of my same-sex unwanted same-sex attractions

we called it them and and who in the past couple of years rocked up to [Sycamore] and as soon as I saw him I remembered him and it was a joy and a privilege to pray with him as he makes his journey into greater honesty and greater truth about himself and then again being shocked to learn that it is possible to have a faith and to be gay yeah and

what does [Sycamore] actually do? what are the things that happen?

okay we we have the services five times a year and we have afterwards with very much a social time the service will consist of probably a fairly run-of-the-mill evangelical type gathering probably on the lower end of churchmanship in terms of ending in churchmanship we'll have announcements we'll have worship song we'll have bible readings we'll have speakers we'll have testimonies we will have a great singing great with some terrific musicianship and that in itself I think is a gift to the church but anyway and afterwards we will

part with a blessing and then our folks want to have a prayer of blessing they can relocate to a side chapel and receive a simple prayer of blessing to touch them to hold them before God where they are for where they are in their lives I think one of the things that I appreciate too about [Sycamore] is that I never thought there was any pressure for folks who were working out where they were on their journey of faith and sexuality there was never any pressure you must come down on this side of the argument or that side of the argument it always had to be a safe place where people were just allowed to be wherever they were to have conversations to mull it over to come back or not come back and there was no it was there was never an obligation to adopt one particular stance and then after our services I appreciate the fact too that we have a social time get a cup of coffee about going for a drink in the public going for a meal but that's an incredibly important part of what we do and people are crying out for just crying out for connection and honesty and reality and and to be able to do that in the context of a faith family begins to feel for many of us coming from not supportive backgrounds in fact backgrounds that were actively opposed to what we're doing that feels like a breath of life but it feels like permission to be and it feels like how you imagined or fantasized church should be or could be and yeah it and I think it's prophetic it's widening extending the borders over to tent and it's bringing more people in who were previously excluded and that I think is the kingdom of God

can you tell me a little bit about how [Sycamore] is led and how that works

yes having been part of the leadership for a good many years, there is a core team of about 10 to 12 people depending on folks coming and going as they're able and we don't have a single head we have quite a flat leadership and we meet maybe once a month every month every six weeks or so to plan and discuss to consider how we can improve things to consider the sensitivities of those coming and the vulnerabilities of what was coming we're concerned. we have a a very big emphasis on a genuine and sincere and safe welcome. the decisions that are made are made pretty much by consensus and we may through we may rattle our subject around the room a few times with those who are more for it than others at times but some generally we seem to arrive at a a consensus that people can live with and can work with and can support with and part of that work of leadership team too that we become almost like a home group almost like a fellowship group with a greater understanding of each other and where we're coming from and what perhaps we could be carrying or struggling with where we could be vulnerable so that although it's a leadership to a steering group one of the better word for the delivery of [Sycamore] I think it functions pretty much as a caring home group as well and yeah and people come on and often pretty much by invitation and yeah so there's no dominant one person heading it up. It's a flat

structure from that point of view and folks can focus on the leadership team the steering group found a better word would be coming from similar-ish expressions of churchmanship, not exclusively, but we are non-denominational or interdenominational and we but most of us would be coming from an evangelical or charismatic evangelical or middle-of-the-road kind of churchmanship because that's the world that we understand and it's the world where we see potentially most damage being made out to lgbt folks

how is the the leadership structure and the decision-making structure different to other church contexts that you've known well I suppose in the in a traditional church setup often the vicar or the clergy person would have quite a quite a say in steering how things go and you would have a diagonal or an eldership or a pcc kind of working to facilitate or but I think often too such groups look to one person for leadership or vision and whereas with 323 anybody from the steering group could kind of chip in with a thought or a perspective or what about

and there were deacons and elders in the minister and those decisions were made pretty much by

the deacons and elders who were elected as opposed to being volunteers the steering group and [Sycamore] are all volunteers nobody's paid we all do it out of a genuine concern for folks to come into a deeper understanding of God's love for them because of our own journey into a deeper understanding of God's love for us and therefore I think that folks here in the steering group have had to wrestle to hold onto their faith and to get a sense of how to fight for their right to believe when those around about growing up would have painted a different story with the best of intention usually but nevertheless I think would have given out very toxic messages so again I think that's a gift to the church that you have people here who have had to you know work out their own salvation in a sense fight for it to fight to keep believing to keep trusting God and to treat keep a hunger to encounter Jesus and yeah and I think that's at the heart of the steering grip that would be the heart of it more than a functioning executive group with a task in hand it from that point of view I think it's very different in terms of the the this is going to sound very judgmental but the spiritual caliber of the personal lives and personal feel that the people in the steering group is deep it is deep and often remarkably articulate about personal faith and personal stories and again I think that's a prophetic gift of the church what holds that together. what holds people together is a love and respect for each other and a love and respect for the people coming and a genuine understanding of the people coming on their fears anxieties you hear another wounding story and you feel the pain because you know it and uh

and you would want and I think two part of it is a testimony to God's work in each one of our lives where the things that used to absolutely destroy us or crush us or bruise us wound us deeply have been robbed to an extent of the ability to do that as we have come to understand and experience God's love for us God's healing love for us and wanting to see others come into the good of that without being prescriptive but just knowing that God is good and God is a good father and God wants his children set free I was thinking even just yesterday of the the plagues in each out and Moses going to Pharaoh and I I the phrase that keeps coming to my mind is I still believe that the song of the spirit of the Lord is let my people go let my people go I still believe that the the heart cry of God towards people and by his people and the people I mean people is let my people go so that the things that would oppress or hold on or or bind or limit freedom or limit freedom of thought or belief no let my people go I think we share that kind of passion to see people come into greater freedom greater understanding of God's love for them God's passion for them and God's desire to be in relationship with them for who they are as they are not getting bent out of shape for as to what others would need them to be in order for others to feel comfortable

and just thinking about kind of connections to the wider church and how [Sycamore] would connect in with that I mean you talked a bit about the sort of roots in kind of drawing on kind of evangelical charismatic yeah sort of baptist free church kind of expressions of faith are there particular expressions of that? how does that live on do you think in in what [Sycamore] is now and to what extent is [Sycamore] still connected in with that?

I think [Sycamore] is still connected to that because many of the folks who rock up to our meetings are either still in such kinds of churches or have had a foot in such churches or are clinging on by the skin of their teeth to being part of such churches while at the same time recognizing that an environment like that can be toxic and damaging and and yet there's that yearning to be connected, to belong that yearning to belong to a faith community that is not going to be abusive okay and so I think that there is still a yearning and a longing and an understanding and a foot in that camp. I think too for folks who perhaps have been on their journey a little bit longer they may be dipping their toes into other expressions of churchmanship and finding things that connect more than others. Many of us will be green belt regulars okay this festival of arts and justice with a Christian kind of ethos where people are allowed to think new thoughts have conversations. I think too of some of the churches that are beginning to put their heads above the parapet and not only be accepting but becoming affirming and I think their numbers will grow particularly not so much by theological conviction but out of absolute necessity because we're all getting older and for

the younger generation this is a non-issue and if you want to survive you're going to have change okay I would love it to be by revelation of the spirit of God that actually these people have love and light and truth to bring to the church which would be a gift but I suspect that ground is given with bad grace rather than out of a genuine belief in what i've just said. But there are increasing numbers of churches and they tend to be a different kind of expression of churchmanship perhaps more liberal or progressive and for folks coming from an evangelical stable liberal was a dirty word so trying to work out what it means to understand a more liberal approach to theology to understand the faith of those in that context and to understand is there a place for me and what is my place in this kind of fellowship.

For me that that is a journey I found myself not in a more liberal progressive baptist church than the world in which I was raised which was conservative evangelical baptist but increasingly I find myself at liberty to use solidly evangelical language like I still believe we need a personal relationship with Jesus Christ I still believe that praying is about is an expression of trusting God that isn't just about asking for things but that speaks of a desire for a relationship a genuine relationship a real relationship and and the liberal liberal more liberal progressive churches at first I think may seem uncomfortable with that kind of language but I think in their heart of hearts yearned for the generalization of my part but I genuinely I genuinely think that so I think churchmanship is on a journey and and we are on the journey and that's not to say that there aren't churches that are battenning down the hatches with regard to this on a whole range of other issues uh

Interesting i've just finished finishing reading a book Brad McCann's new book about faith after doubt and his future vision of the church is a breaking down of interdenominational barriers that you will have folks gathering who don't identify as Anglican baptist methodist whatever they will be like-minded believers who are happy to fellowship together because they want to grow and learn together and again part of my journey has been I was raised in a world where you had to believe before you belonged whereas now I genuinely want to put expressions of churchmanship where you belong before you believe and and belonging is I still want people to come to believe I do but I think belonging is is such a fundamental human desire human needs that we need to know we're connected somewhere somewhere of that and with conversations happening with a mutual sharing and a mutual respect that yeah so I think we're all still on our journey many of us are having a journey out of the kind of tight churchmanship of our background but at the same time wanting to to filter to sift it and to hold on to the good truths and to perhaps let go of the stuff that actually isn't isn't helpful anymore or is dying very damaging

In terms of how [Sycamore] connects with the community around it obviously it isn't a geographically located parish church without the parish in in anglican terms but kind of thinking about how it relates to say the wider lgbt community maybe not as itself but via the people that come to it or part of it?

I was raised in a tight evangelical background where you had to evangelize on a bit like becky manley peppered I thought that evangelism wasn't something you'd do to your dog let alone your best friend and the and yet I find myself burdened that folks in the lgbt community would come to know that there's a God who loves them and I I I smile at that because that is so alien to how I viewed evangelicalism or evangelism as a younger man I think my my ground is shifted on who's going to reach out to the lgbt community to let people know that God loves them except lgbt believers and I think there's a call here for us I remember years ago when we first launched steve chalk challenging us about being a hospital for the wounded but also needing to look out and it's absolutely right so I who did not think about evangelism with something you should do to your dog end up being burdened about the folks that i've come across in a gay bar and just wanting to build relationship with no other agenda than building a relationship my understanding of evangelism has changed it isn't about imparting what I know what I know to those who need to know what I know it's more a sense of well let's just talk and connect and the important stuff will always come up and at some point it will come up that I have a fear that I pray that X and I pray together every day that that God is good and we believe that God is good and so we

there was a lad who said that he's a big lad he got talked to us in a gay bar and came along to [Sycamore] and took communion for the first time in 20 years and every time we have a meal together he holds his hands out at the start of the meal to say grace together and so things like like that relationships being built but again for me one of the biggest shifts is just the mutuality of sharing in that it's not all one-way traffic it's just about sharing your life and having conversations. There's been other lads that have really emptied me with the conversations in the bar with their honesty their lack of guardedness their lack of defensiveness there's almost a naivety and a child like simplicity that I find utterly endearing utterly beguiling and The fields are white unto harvest. people just longing for understanding love acceptance belonging and I find myself wanting to be an expression of that to folks in the lgbt community and that when I think about that in terms of the journey that I have made it's hilarious it's absolutely hilarious. but that's God's work in my life and that's great it's absolutely fantastic in a sense bring it all but I genuinely think that there's a place for us to share the good news of God's love in jesus christ to those who have been excluded who have been told they are less than who are to be have been treated wickedly by the church I

would even go so far as to say satanically by the church and when the heart of our father is that there's a place at the table for you welcome to sit down and even fellowship with us

and I think for those of us who are lgbt plus believers then I want to be the same person I am in church as I am in a gay bar I want to be the same personality work in the same personality just by being ourselves by rocking up and being present conversations happen and who knows what God does who knows what God does I mean.

I remember one of the first nights we were like the bar this really moved me so deeply, I was sitting with the back of the wall because I haven't been in the gay bar before in my life kind of just scanning the scenes thinking is this place safe? Is this a den of iniquity yada yada this guy had come up to talk to us. As it happens, it was a sunday evening and X and I had been at a gospel choir service at church that night and then they walked around to the pub afterwards and to come up conversation where were you today or where were you tonight so we said we were in church and of course that was an unexpected answer. so what church was that. that was bloomsbury central baptist church was the church that we got married in. and what were you there for we were at a gospel concert gospel choir and and all of this. I mean you could hear the cogs wearing in his head. this was this was unusual conversation for him in a gay bar and it turns out this lad was from an eastern european country where less than half of one percent of the population identifies baptist and he came from a line of baptist preachers and here he was in a gay bar in london as the black sheep of the family meeting two guys who had been married in the baptist church and had just been to a service in a baptist church and you said think lord you're amazing this is your work and every time he saws afterwards: "were you in church this week?" yes we were at church this week so conversations that that you can't force or contrive but to let you know whether God is around. mark oakley talks like I think is it oh I can't remember which one he was but mark oakley quotes the idea of God being like a gentleman who stands in the shadows and occasionally coughs to give himself away and it's this idea in that conversation God was coughing to give himself away for this lad but also for us for me to realize. All I did was tell him what I was doing that night because he asked what you're doing tonight and somehow God is in the conversation and I think it was where that will lead. That's exciting. That's the kingdom

compared to other churches you've been part of how do you think people in the church would describe or relate to God?

the churchmanship of my younger life God was a fearful distant character who meted out vengeance on his enemies and who was kind of scary so he was proper scary and and that

just wasn't being an lgbt kid that was pretty much across the board in terms of solid evangelical background and I think I think evangelical and charismatic evangelical churches have had struggled perhaps most within other expressions of churchmanship to modify that image of God.

I genuinely view God very differently now I see God as loving playful yearning for a relationship with us yearning to take us on journeys and adventures and fully understanding and accepting of us as we are so I think yeah I think the previously understood models of God for wanting a better phrase are often deeply angry and often often wired into our dna if we've been raised as church kids and that is a long slow process of being unlearned of being redeemed yeah of being redeemed and it's right it ties into it your understanding of the bible and our reading of the bible if you have a lens in your glasses that is tinted with the idea of God's and angry so and so then everything you read is filtered through that lens and it's about getting clarity into our lenses getting truth setting us free and you learn to read things differently and you see things that you never saw before because you couldn't see before

do you how do you think God sort of guides the community or how do you think people have as how do people discern what where God is taking them or directing them

I have two kind of thoughts there one is in a sense the slow grind of life day by day just seeking in one's heart and mind to be open to God so I think that's one thing but that's one element but I think there's another element of steps that are very definite steps that are often made out of pain and made unwillingly or made in great fear my journey with faith and sexuality was literally made in fear and trembling and and I understand that verse it says work out your own salvation with fear and trembling I understand it because I could not stay where I was because it was just too painful but I did not want to leave where I was I didn't want to move from where I was but eventually I had to because it was killing me and the so I think yeah these two intertwined strands of ideally trying to be open to God as best one knows hi at that time but at the same time I think God loves us too much to leave us in places that ultimately are damaging or may have served a purpose but are no longer fit for what we need next to grow and to grow into him and those are painful steps but definite actions and that may mean leaving behind as a not not a passive drifting but as an active decision in a sense but like Abraham leaving Ur, setting out not knowing where he was going and having to trust God in that journey when really you don't trust yourself you don't trust what's going on does that make sense

What about sin how is sin understood?

I can only come from my own background here which was tight conservative evangelical very reformed so sin was what we did wrong that offended God that made God angry with us and that God was going to burn us on hell forever and ever and ever unless we repented and gave our lives to Jesus and then Jesus dealt with our sin all of which was summed up as an environment growing up in which meant that the constant effort was on sinning less you must sin less you must try harder to sin less

which would be not how I see things now suddenly I think of as being missing the mark or believing lies about ourselves or believing lies about God or others that they'll serve us and that keep us from freedom and from greater truth and growth and I think my journey with sin and my lifetime has often been about repenting of the agreement that I gave to the lies that I believed about God, the lies that I believed about his nature, his kingdom, his church, me.

I also think that sin can still be used in a patronizing judgmental damaging way to seek to control people the notion of sin and usually preface nowadays but well we're all sinners but okay and and I think I'd articulate this correctly - sin matters but I don't think that God is as hung up on it as we are and I genuinely believe that what Jesus accomplished on the cross which is many ways a mystery to me but there was something happened there that broke the power of sin and death forever and increasingly I believe that he broke it for everybody forever not just those who happen to believe whatever somebody says they should believe so my journey with sin from must try harder to sin less and be a good boy - it's a really unhealthy focus when we should be you know there's there's so much beauty and goodness and love of God to dwell on, to feed on, to nourish on. My sin has been taken care of. I'm happy to let it go at that. It's not to say that our actions don't have consequences of course they do am I forgiven yes I'm forgiven am I loved yes I'm loved does my sin make me unlovable I don't think so not in God's eyes

Does that make sense very much say you mentioned about mystery as well that there was a sort of mystery to it do you think that's a is that something that generally people at [Sycamore] would connect with, the idea of mystery?

I do I do I think because many of us are coming from a stable when when that place where you have been no longer fits or is painful and you have to step out and you step out not knowing where you're going then actually your mind and your heart can be expanded to see and encounter God in different ways and in different places I think of Molly speaking recently about the the mystics and the divines of yesteryear I think about. many of us have come to

and part of this is I mean this is not an lgbt issue this is a growing up in your faith issue becoming... many of us have become more comfortable with a sense of "I don't understand at all but I trust God and the idea of having to have everything nailed down and fully understood is much less important it's knowing that God is good God is loving God who loved the world God still loves the world and there's still much to wander on and I can be moved to tears by hearing a bird sing or by smelling a flower or watch a lioness take care of a new cub and you simply think what is going on there there's something mysterious going on there that these things happen and can move and touch you deeply I think of it as worship actually alex is what I think of it much more comfortable with that a sense of wonder a sense of awe a sense of a sense of wonder that takes your words away and you're left in silence if there's anything on your lips or your heart it's a simple thank you thank you that's a very different language from the world in which I was raised but it's genuine and it's real and it's true

and how this might not be an easy question to answer but how do you think the how does [Sycamore] connect with that is it about kind of permission to see things that way or is that how people are encouraged to see things?

I also think I also think it's hearing other people's stories and realizing that i'm not as alone as I thought it was that there's a whole family of us out there and that when you hear how God has moved and worked in another person's life it can sometimes just expand your ability to understand or see or appreciate how God might work in your life not not as a blueprint but just to realize God is bigger and more different than I thought he was and he's more kind more loving more present more concerned and I think to the whole when we have communion together again my churchmanship is not particularly anglican but there is a mystery to me in in the eucharist there's a mystery to me and the bread of breaking of bread and wine and the receiving of the body and blood of jesus christ as folks have done for two thousand years and there's something unifying in that and these are mysteries

that are just wonderful they're just wonderful that don't to try and explain what's going on just seems. I don't know inappropriate or naive in some way it just seems no there's a mystery here and we receive it with gratitude

How do you feel about models of church?

in terms of fresh expressions and i'm conscious there's been quite a bit of comment quite a bit of negative comment about the use of management speak in terms of church structures

and trying to kick start church growth again and I I confess it does leave me cold and it leaves me just it speaks of human effort and with with more than a whiff of desperation about it um it's speaking to my my minister just before christmas we're having a conversation and I was saying about what was on my heart and so I think the whole rewinding thing is to use up that term is in a sense trying to discern what is God's spirit up to what where is God at work and and and somehow joining that trying to put a contrived fixed model of a new way of doing church is going to feel because it's just that a fixed contrived model of doing church whereas I think the desire of people's hearts is very different and what people want in their hearts are very different and what they want from a faith community is different and this idea of middle-aged and elderly people deciding what it takes to get young people into church it's laughable okay I think it's I think it's a question of trying to discern where is God's spirit at work or where is God's spirit breaking out or doing things in a sense of rewilding and trying to facilitate is too important a word but observing and and giving oneself to that I think is what future churchmanship could look like and I think the idea of brand the clarence is cross-denominational groups of not so much like-minded parts like questioning believers who are looking for somewhere safe to be themselves to be told that actually as you are you're enough and you're welcome uh

it's it's it's an enormous challenge because there's part of our humanity our broken humanity I would say that likes rules and regulations because we know we where we stand with those and I think that that grace doesn't work that way that grace is God effectively saying I am head over heels in love with you and you're pissed off you're angry or you you're or you're sinning whatever I still love you the best I still think you're adorable and and I think books are crying ideal genuinely crying idea that not you must try harder to be this way or that way the other way because I think what what bad churchmanship can buy into is people's discomfort with themselves and I think it was the american writer john henry thoreau who said that most men live lives of quiet desperation and I think our churches are full of people whose lives are quiet desperation

this is this is new ground there wasn't anybody else to learn from and again I think the I think one of the reasons why this actually took off and got legs was because the people on the steering group I had real personal stories of jesus to tell and were living out of that and were wanting more of that that there was a deep faith and there's a set at times a hard one and bruised and battered fear but nevertheless there was an encounter with God that had changed us and that that we couldn't walk away even when we wanted to and we couldn't

walk away from God even when we wanted to because we were his and there's something about that that really encourages me is the sense of that I have set my love upon you and you are mind so you can do what you're like but basically you're [__] your mind and and and I so love that I so love that and I think that has been maybe that's the mycelium from which the mushrooms grow that's in a sense the the undercurrents the bedrock the organic stuff within each one of us that allow something to come to the surface and and be seen that didn't have to apologize for itself or or or seek permission to be you know itself and that to me is the spirit of God that's that's God's kingdom coming and that's

the whole the whole talk of models just repulses me just makes my blood run cool i've left the room already but it also it reveals more to me to my mind about the folks who are coming asking those questions in terms of assuming that there is a model that will work for this day and age no no it's relationship but yeah that's what it is it's relationship with God and with each other and with ourselves authentic relationship and I think that muddles out the trinity I think it also is fertile ground for new stuff to emerge

D: DISCUSSION GUIDE

- Introductions and warm-up.
 - Name, what you do, your church background.

- Tell me about your church community.
 - What is it like, what makes it different to other communities you have been involved in.
 - What does it do, how, when, where does it meet?
 - How did it come about? In response to what?
 - What sorts of people typically get involved? Why do you think that is?
 - What sort of people would not connect with this kind of community, and why might that be?
 - How did you get involved in it?
 - What is your involvement these days?
 - Do you enjoy it? What do you enjoy, what don't you enjoy?
 - What are the things which work well?
 - What are or have been the challenges?
 - How is the community led? How does it make decisions? Can you give an example? How does that work?

- Rootedness in the wider church
 - What makes it different from other communities that are out there and/or that you've been involved in?
 - What does it have in common with other church communities that are out there or which you have been involved in?
 - Does it connect with other church communities locally?
 - Do you think it draws on or affiliates to other church networks or festivals or denominations? In what way?
 - What are the things which are important to the church?
 - Probe: place and role of scripture, attitude to sacraments, role of sung worship, what does prayer mean? How important is tradition?
 - Are there individual speakers or artists out there who are really beloved by people in the church? Why is that, how does their influence show up in the way the community operates?

- Rootedness in the wider community

- How does the church community connect with those in the wider community?
Who and how?
- What do you think they think about the church community?
- Does the church community partner with other organisations at all in any of their activities?
- How might outsiders get involved in this community? How might they be received?
- How would you describe the church community to someone in the wider community?

- Rootedness in God
 - How might people in the church describe or relate to God?
 - Do people have a sense of God guiding the community? How might they talk about that?
 - Where is God found for people in the community? (probe scripture, nature, other people, sacraments, worship, prayer)
 - How is the community's idea of God different to other church's ideas about God, if that's true?
 - How might people in the community talk about Jesus?
 - What do people in the community understand by the Holy Spirit?

- Final questions
 - What keeps you engaged and involved in this community?
 - What are you excited about for the future?

E: RESEARCH SCHEDULE

Name	Community	Date
Gemma & Beth	Sycamore	26 Jan 2021
Patrick	Sycamore	26 Jan 2021
Simon & Susie	Cedar	28 Jan 2021
Deborah & Amy	Hawthorn	2 Feb 2021
Rebecca	Cedar	3 Feb 2021
Matt	Cedar	5 Feb 2021
Richard & Julie	Hawthorn	12 Feb 2021
Anna	Sycamore	19 Feb 2021

Each interview lasted an hour and was conducted and recorded via Zoom.

All names are pseudonyms.