

What contribution can Lesslie Newbigin's approach to Christian authority make to the ecclesiology of fresh expressions of church in the Church of England?

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Abstract

Over the last 20 years, the Church of England has been nurturing the development of an estimated 2,000 fresh expressions of church. Research shows that these churches often do not have traditional structures of leadership and worship; instead they are seeking culturally relevant ways of 'gathering around the risen Jesus'. This presents an ecclesiological question: how do we recognise fresh expressions of church as part of the Church of England?

This thesis draws on Lesslie Newbigin's approach to Christian authority to explore this question. Newbigin's missional ecclesiology has been influential in the development of fresh expressions of church. His approach to Christian authority strongly emphasises divine authority that creates and sustains the Church, but recognises that the task of proclaiming and acting out the confession that Jesus is Lord does not begin from a blank canvas. It is both a continuing and united confession; continuing from that of the historic Church and united with that of all Christians today. It is in the Church that the statement 'Jesus is Lord' finds its meaning.

Against this background, this thesis explores three questions of authority for fresh expressions of church. Firstly, how do we know a fresh expression of church is a church? This question addresses the sources of authority for fresh expressions of church. Secondly, how can unity and continuity between the Church of England and fresh expressions of church be expressed? This question addresses the authorisation and forms of ministry. Finally, what is the basis for exercise of personal authority? This question addresses the purpose, and operation, of authority.

The thesis concludes that whilst Newbigin's approach to authority should not necessarily be adopted, it does enable key questions about the ecclesiology of fresh expressions of church to be raised and addressed.

Dedication and Acknowledgements

Arriving at the end of this project and looking back makes me feel very grateful for all the love, prayers, support and encouragement I have received. It would not be possible to name everyone who has journeyed with me, but I do want to thank some specific groups and people. My thanks to the Research Degrees Panel of the Church of England Ministry Division, several individuals, and grant making bodies who have made it possible by providing financially for my course fees and other costs. My supervisor, Rev Dr Jon Coutts, has been consistently encouraging, questioning, and speedy with feedback. His desire for the Church to engage with difficult questions, and to see the Church be theologically literate has been inspiring. I have also been extremely grateful for other support from the academy via Professor Tom Greggs, Canon Dr George Lings, Dr Justin Stratis, Dr Lucy Peppiatt, and Revd Dr Gabrielle Thomas; as well as many others at Trinity College Bristol and Westminster Theological Centre.

Half way through this thesis I was ordained in the Church of England, and am working as a pioneer curate. The opportunity to mutually inform praxis with theological research has been invaluable, and I am grateful to the Diocese of Gloucester for both creating the curacy, and giving me time for research. I have learnt a lot from being part of Crossnet church whilst studying at Trinity College Bristol and now being in Cheltenham Network Church. Both communities are fresh expressions of church and it has been great to reflect with them about the contribution that fresh expressions make as part of God's calling on the Church at this time. They have also faithfully prayed for me and encouraged me, for which I am very grateful.

Throughout the project my family have been immensely supportive and encouraging. I would also never have made it to the end without the constant friendship of Sarah, and all those, in particular Sarah, Sarah, Ali, Lucy, Gabby, Hellie, Pearl and Liz, who prayed for me regularly and carried me over the finish line! Thank you all for continuing to believe I could do it!

Finally, I want to dedicate this thesis to Lesslie Newbigin. I never met him, but feel I have come to know him in a small way during this project through reading many of his publications and his personal correspondence now archived at the Cadbury Research Library in Birmingham. I have been inspired by his love of Jesus, and his love of the Church. I am convinced, as he was, that our human story is caught up in a greater story of God's love for the people and cosmos He created and sustains. The Church, through no qualities or abilities of her own, has been given this story to tell and to share. I am challenged and provoked by Lesslie Newbigin's clear thinking about what this means for the Church, her unity, and her participation in God's mission, and I am convinced that Newbigin's thinking continues to have a big contribution to make to the Church.

Author's declaration

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the requirements of the University's Regulations and Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes and that it has not been submitted for any other academic award. Except where indicated by specific reference in the text, the work is the candidate's own work. Work done in collaboration with, or with the assistance of, others, is indicated as such. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author.

SIGNED:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. Heston', written in a cursive style.

DATE: 29th April 2017

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Chapter 1 Introduction

Christians believe that God is the ultimate authority. However, there are differing views of how human authority relates to divine authority, and how human sources of authority should be exercised and accepted in the Church and in the world. Phyllis Tickle says that Vatican II triggered the question ‘Where now is our authority?’ and this question has become ‘ubiquitous’ across all parts of the Christian Church.¹ In this thesis, I have chosen to look at fresh expressions of church (fxc) in the Church of England.² I propose that to date they have failed to adequately address the issue of authority, and that to do so would contribute to the ecclesiology of fxc. To forward my argument, I have undertaken a detailed examination of the work of Lesslie Newbigin. Newbigin is widely quoted in the *mission-shaped church* report and within Fresh Expressions (FE) literature, and his work is recognised as foundational to the ecclesiology of fxc. However, his ecclesiology is directly informed by his understanding of authority. Therefore, in this thesis I have established Newbigin’s approach to Christian authority to show how this could additionally contribute to the ecclesiology of fxc in the Church of England.

My thesis is developed in the following way: I begin by stating why the issue of authority is important in relation to ecclesiology and provide a brief overview of the understanding of authority in the Church of England. This reveals a flexible understanding of authority which I suggest is both conducive to the development of fxc and can provide a framework for considering the contribution of authority to the ecclesiology of fxc. My thesis then turns to the work of Lesslie Newbigin. Beginning with a chronological literature review which highlights the range of contexts to which he directed his writing, and the consistency of authority as an underlying (and at times explicit) theme for him, I establish the key elements in his understanding of authority. I then draw these elements together to summarise his approach first to the authority for faith, second the authority of the Church and finally the exercise of personal authority. I move from this to the literature surrounding fxc, observing where the issue of authority is raised, but conclude that there is a lacuna in the literature with respect to how the ecclesiology of fxc relates to authority. To conclude I use Newbigin’s approach to authority to address three key questions of authority arising for fxc.

¹ Phyllis Tickle, *Emergence Christianity: What It Is, Where It Is Going, and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2012), p. 72. Tickle explores this question further on pp. 191-199.

² There can be some confusion regarding the term Fresh Expressions and, thus, this paper will use the capitalised form ‘Fresh Expressions’ (FE) to refer to the original working party and now charitable company that ‘exists to champion and support the fresh expressions movement’ (<https://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/about>. Accessed 13th October 2015). When referring to Christian gatherings that consider themselves to be a ‘fresh expression’, the lower case will be used or the abbreviation ‘fx’, and I will use ‘fxc’ to denote fresh expressions of church.

1.1 Authority

1.1.1 Authority and ecclesiology

The Church of England, as with all Christian denominations, looks to the triune God as the ultimate authority.³ However, each denomination has a different understanding of how this divine authority is exercised in and through the church.⁴ Therefore, Julian Charley rightly states that 'ecclesiology is profoundly affected by the question of authority'.⁵ In 2013, the World Council of Churches, of which the Church of England is a member, produced a paper about the Church which arose from 30 years of ecumenical discussion.⁶ It identifies the following 'sources of authority' for the Church which are 'recognised in varying degrees by the churches': ministries of leadership, Scripture, Tradition, worship, councils, synods, and the holy lives of believers.⁷ The paper begins to provide us with a framework for a Christian understanding of authority.⁸ First, authority is described as a gift of the Holy Spirit.⁹ Second, all authority is given to Jesus, who is the model for exercise of authority.¹⁰ Third, Jesus 'shared' his authority

³ The language of God as the ultimate authority is not explicitly used by the Church of England in her core doctrinal documents. However, this belief is nevertheless implicit in the creedal statements which the Church of England treats as the basis of faith, and in Article I of the 39 Articles which underpin the doctrine of the Church of England the statement is made that: "THERE is but one living and true God, ever-lasting, without body, parts, or passions; of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness; the Maker, and Preserver of all things both visible and invisible. And in unity of this Godhead there be three Persons, of one substance, power, and eternity; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost." Articles XI, XXV, and XXXIX all refer to Jesus Christ as Lord, which demonstrates His authority. I have chosen to use the language of 'ultimate authority' since this is the way Lesslie Newbigin refers to God in his writing on authority, see for example Lesslie Newbigin, *A Word in Season: Perspectives on Christian World Missions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 81, and Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An introduction to the Theology of Mission* (London: SPCK, 1995), pp. 15 and 164 (initially published in 1978). I therefore use 'ultimate authority' as a shorthand reference to the fuller understanding of this term contained in the Church of England doctrinal documents. Ultimate authority indicates that God is source, creator and sustainer of all life, God is before and after time and will judge the living and the dead.

⁴ When I use 'Church of England' this will be with a capital 'C' since it is the proper name of the church. I refer to a denomination normally as a church, and only use the Church with a capital 'C' for the universal Church.

⁵ Julian W. Charley, *Agreement on Authority: The Anglican-Roman Catholic Statement with Commentary* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 1977), p. 3.

⁶ I begin the discussion of authority in the Church with the World Council of Churches (WCC) because this is the broadest gathering of Protestant and Orthodox denominations. At the date of this thesis, the WCC has 348 member denominations, and has 'close links' with the Roman Catholic Church who are represented in the Commission on Faith and Order. It is 'a voluntary fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour', and so the WCC has no 'authority' over the Church of England. However, the Church of England contributes to the dialogue and production of statements such as this one on the Church.

⁷ Commission on Faith and Order, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013), p. 28. Whilst these are described as 'sources', and I will continue to use this term, it should be noted that they are not sources of authority in their own right. They have derived authority and only hold authority in the Church in as far as they are under God's authority and point to God's authority. Thus, whilst they are 'sources of authority' for the Church they are more accurately described as means of revealing and pointing to God's authority.

⁸ Commission on Faith and Order, *The Church*, pp. 27-32. Sections 48 to 57 provide a framework for understanding the 'gift of authority in the ministry of the church'.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 28. Thus, it is not simply assumed by a person or given by a community. It originates from God.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 27-28. Thus authority 'must be understood as humble service, nourishing and building up the *koinonia* of the Church in faith, life and witness...It is a service of love.' Such authority in the Church should also 'assist believers in growing to full maturity in Christ', 'ecclesial communion', 'ongoing *metanoia* and holiness of life'. The statement

with the apostles and their successors, but the whole Church participates in recognising this authority as an authentic gift, and accepting it as a means of the Church growing to maturity.¹¹ This is the basis from which I make the definitions for the thesis.

1.1.2 Definition of authority and 'sources of authority'

This thesis is concerned with Christian authority and how this authority is exercised in 'ordered relationships ... which reflect God's lordship'.¹² There is a category distinction between divine and human authority. God is the authority, and all human authority is subordinate to God's authority.

I define the 'sources of authority' as those things which reveal, or bear witness to, God's authority. None of these sources have authority independently, but together they provide a Christian framework for understanding and living under God's authority. They, therefore, only have meaning as 'sources of authority' within the Church that accepts them as authoritative.

I define human exercise of authority as the legitimate use of power where power is 'the ability of an actor to bring about or help bring about outcomes'.¹³ Authority is legitimised when it reflects and reveals God's authority as this is understood in the framework provided by the 'sources of authority'.

Finally, the purpose of Christian authority is to enable those who believe in and confess Jesus as Lord to grow up together into Jesus Christ who is the head of the Church.¹⁴

It is not part of this thesis to carry out a detailed study on authority in the Church of England, but it is necessary to establish which 'sources of authority' are important in the polity of the Church of England, and how these impact the ecclesiology of the Church of England.

resists equating authority with power. Power is linked to dominion and coercion, the exerting of power over others. Authority comes from following Christ to the cross.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 28.

¹² Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich (eds.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), p. 150 state that in the New Testament, *exousia*, the word used for authority, contains three main concepts: power/freedom to decide or act, exercised in ordered relationships which reflect God's lordship, and authority as divinely given which brings freedom for the community. W.E Vine, Merrill F. Unger and William White Jr., *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1996), p. 543 says *exousia* holds the concepts of liberty of doing as one pleases, the ability or strength with which one is endued, the power of authority, the right to exercise power, and the power of rule or government.

¹³ Keith Dowding, *Power* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 5. This definition of power is one of many sociological definitions of power. I have chosen it because it focuses on the actuality rather than potentiality of power, and relates strongly to the biblical concept of authority that is the power or freedom to decide or act.

¹⁴ Ephesians 4.1-16. See also Robert Runcie, *Authority in Crisis? An Anglican Response* (London: SCM Press, 1988), p. 26 who suggests that 'the goal of Christian authority is to bring human beings into a mature relationship with God and their fellows'.

1.1.3 Authority and the Church of England

Questions of authority in one sense birthed the Reformation and the subsequent formation of the Church of England, and 450 years later the question of how authority operates in the Church of England is still under discussion.¹⁵ It should be noted that whilst we are concerned with the question of authority in the Church of England, much of the discussion and academic publication surrounds the nature of authority more broadly in the Anglican Communion, and in ecumenical relations.¹⁶ Stephen Sykes has written specifically about authority in the Church of England. He states she has 'voices of authority' which are the 'distribution of God's gifts to the whole Church.'¹⁷ He draws on a statement from the Lambeth Conference of 1948 which states that authority is 'derived from a single Divine source' and:

is distributed among Scripture, Tradition, Creeds, the Ministry of the Word and Sacraments, the witness of saints, and the *consensus fidelium*, which is the continuing experience of the Holy Spirit through His faithful people in the Church.¹⁸

This is described as 'dispersed authority' and shows a flexible understanding of authority.¹⁹ The bishops who wrote this statement called dispersed authority a way to guard against 'the dangers of unchecked power'.²⁰ However, Stephen Ross White notes negatively the difficulty of resolving debates in the Church of England and Anglican Communion due to a lack of clear understanding of authority.²¹ Nevertheless this concept of dispersed authority remains at the core of the ecclesiology of the Church of England. Sykes states that the concept of dispersed authority has 'gained authority by use', and Robert Runcie calls it 'an accepted way of referring to authority in the Church of England'.²² Robert Jeffrey advocates for dispersed authority in the Church of England arguing that 'the various strands of authority need each other for their

¹⁵ See Ellen K. Wondra, 'Questioning Authority?', in *Anglican Theological Review* 97.2 (Jan 2015), 307-327, p. 308.

¹⁶ For example, see Robert Runcie, *Authority in Crisis? An Anglican Response* (London: SCM Press, 1998) written ahead of the Lambeth Conference in 1998, The Lambeth Commission on Communion, *The Windsor Report 2004* (London: The Anglican Communion Office, 2004), and the three reports of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) on *Authority in the Church I* (1976), *II* (1981) and *III* (1998).

¹⁷ Stephen Sykes, 'Authority in the Church of England', in Robert Jeffrey (ed.), *By What Authority?* (Oxford: A.R. Mowbray & Co. Ltd, 1987), p. 11 and 15. I prefer Sykes' use of 'voices' of authority but since most writers use the phrase 'sources of authority' I will continue using that, even though it is recognised that these 'sources of authority' do not have authority in their own right.

¹⁸ Sykes, 'Authority in the Church of England', in Jeffrey (ed.), *By What Authority?*, p. 14.

¹⁹ Stephen W. Sykes (ed.), *Authority in the Anglican Communion* (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1987), p. 285.

²⁰ Sykes, 'Authority in the Church of England', in Jeffrey (ed.), *By What Authority?*, p. 14.

²¹ Stephen Ross White, *Authority and Anglicanism* (London: SCM Press, 1996), pp. 2-6.

²² Sykes, *Authority in the Anglican Communion*, p. 12 and Robert Runcie, *Authority in Crisis? An Anglican Response* (London: SCM Press, 1988), p. 43. Additionally, the *Windsor Report 2004*, p. 41 paragraph 97 recognised dispersed authority as a 'great strength' but having 'inherent weakness' in resolving divisive issues in the Anglican Communion. Jeffrey W. Driver, *A polity of persuasion: gift and grief of Anglicanism* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2014) traces the understanding of authority within Anglicanism over the last 150 years before concluding on p. 64 that 'the Communion as a whole is far from ready to move away from its model of dispersed authority.'

fullness', and he recommends 'an acceptance of a dispersed authority where all is open to challenge and all must be held together.'²³

The concept of dispersed authority is applicable in three ways to the development of fxc within the Church of England. Firstly, dispersed authority enables an element of risk-taking that a more centralised, hierarchical approach to authority might understandably resist.²⁴ The commitment to fxc opens the possibility of substantially re-shaping the ecclesiology of the Church of England due to congregations developing outside the normal parochial basis for ministry.²⁵ Parish ministry operates a well-established pattern of structural authority and has a strong commitment to the 'cure of souls' of all people in the parish. Thus, parish churches give a worshipping voice, through their liturgical practices, to relationships that already exist in that geographic location.²⁶ The ministry of a fxc, whilst likely to be based in a parish, is not focused through the parish church and may often arise from a network rather than geographic basis. This raises questions about authorisation of ministry leaders and the link between a community and its worship which requires fresh ecclesiological thinking.²⁷ This re-shaping of the ecclesiology of the Church of England is a situation viewed with distress from staunch supporters of the parish system,²⁸ and with delight from those excited by the willingness of an institutional church to be 'experimenting' in this sort of way.²⁹ This highlights a need for all groups to contribute to the dialogue around fxc, to determine whether this is an authentic development which God is bringing about in the Church of England.

Secondly, dispersed authority enables different forms of church to remain in communion with each other within the Church of England whilst establishing the components that enable mutual recognition. This means that a fxc can have a certain independence of forms but this is limited by the need to demonstrate catholicity, continuity, and communion with the 'inherited' Church of England. Finally, dispersed authority

²³ Robert Jeffrey, 'An Agenda for the Church?', in Jeffrey (ed.), *By What Authority?*, pp. 67 and 75.

²⁴ Kenneth A. Locke, *The Church in Anglican Theology: a historical, theological and ecumenical exploration* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2009), p. 112.

²⁵ Louise Nelstrop, 'Mixed economy or ecclesial reciprocity: which does the Church of England really want to promote?', in Louise Nelstrop and Martyn Percy (eds.), *Evaluating Fresh Expressions: explorations in emerging church* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2008), p. 187.

²⁶ In our post-Christendom culture, however, the focus on practices drives a process of behaving and believing in order to participate in belonging to the church; generally relationships follow this once you 'belong'.

²⁷ As we will see later, statistical analysis show 76% of fxc remain with parish (or benefice) boundaries (George Lings, *The Day of Small Things: An analysis of fresh expressions of Church in 21 dioceses of the Church of England* (Sheffield: Church Army's Research Unit, 2016), p. 193) and yet in terms of the leaders of fxc (p. 105) 48% are lay people (of whom 85% have no recognised church training) with no established pattern of authorisation. It should be noted that 'the Sheffield Centre' became the Church Army's Research Unit in 2013, and so will be described in the term appropriate to the period of the research I am referring to.

²⁸ Andrew Davison and Alison Milbank, *For the Parish: A Critique of Fresh Expressions* (London: SCM Press, 2010), pp. vii-viii.

²⁹ Brian McLaren, 'One, Holy, Catholic and Fresh?', in Steven Croft and Ian Mobsby (eds.), *Fresh Expressions in the Sacramental Tradition* (London: Canterbury Press Norwich, 2009), p. 26.

describes the way that divine authority is distributed in the church in interdependent 'sources', which together reveal what it looks like to accept and live under the authority of God. As already noted, the 'sources of authority' in the Church are in fact subordinate to divine authority. Their authority cannot be established independently, and they only have authority when that authority is accepted.³⁰ Nevertheless, the concept of dispersed authority provides fxc with a framework for identifying what makes the Church the Church.

Kenneth Locke states that for Anglicans 'authority ideally exists not to resolve or put an end to debate, but to ensure that all sides receive a fair hearing while continuing to live in communion with each other.'³¹ As a result the Church of England can hold together groups with quite divergent views, but only if each group continues to remain in communion with the others.³² This is where the strength of dispersed authority lies because it creates space for dialogue and conflict within which the Holy Spirit can lead the church in discerning truth, and allows for local adaptation of the church.³³

The classical Anglican theological methodology places reason alongside Scripture and Tradition as a 'source' of authority.³⁴ Whilst reason is not explicitly mentioned in the definition of dispersed authority, it is implicit as the means of understanding and enabling dialogue between the 'sources of authority'. Articles XX, XXI and XXXI of the Church of England's Thirty-nine Articles of Religion address the authority of the Church and Councils, and submission to Scripture. They make it clear that the Church has authority to establish and alter traditions and make doctrinal statements, and is 'a witness and a keeper' of Scripture, but the Church can 'err' and Scripture remains the final arbiter.³⁵ The 'Tradition' which the Church of England looks to are the catholic creeds, its historic formularies, the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, *The Book of Common Prayer* and the Ordering of Bishops, Priests and Deacons.³⁶ It is necessary to distinguish between the 'Tradition' which is the doctrinal and structural basis of the Church of England, and 'tradition' more broadly, which it is

³⁰ Thus, within the Church the noted 'sources' of authority are those which, over the history of the believing Christian community we call the Church, have been accepted by the consent of the faithful to reveal and bear witness to the ultimate authority of God. The Church accepts and submits to these 'sources' as having authority.

³¹ Locke, *Church in Anglican Theology*, p. 115.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 121.

³³ Ellen K. Wondra, 'The Highest Degree of Communion Possible': Initial Reflections on the Windsor Report 2004', in *Anglican Theological Review* 87.2 (Jan 2005), 193-206, pp. 197-203.

³⁴ John St-H. Gibaut, 'Reason as a Source of Authority in the Anglican Tradition', in Tamara Grdzeldze (ed.) *Sources of Authority Volume 2: Contemporary Churches* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2014), p. 91.

³⁵ Scripture narrates the story of who God is and God's relationship with creation, and the Church accepts that it reveals the authority of God. The debate over how Scripture has authority is wide ranging and so cannot be addressed in this thesis, but I assume that Scripture becomes authoritative for Christians.

³⁶ *The Canons of the Church of England 7th Edition* (London: Church House Publishing, 2016), C15 Of the Declaration of Assent.

the way the church lives out its faith.³⁷ Whilst 'experience' is not as widely recognised, the definition of dispersed authority does include experience as one of the 'sources' of authority for the Church of England.³⁸ There is a reasonable basis therefore for accepting that Scripture, Tradition, reason and experience are the key 'sources of authority' in the polity of the Church of England.³⁹ Of these, Scripture is accepted as having primacy, but nevertheless operates as a source of authority interdependently in the believing church community with tradition, reason and experience.⁴⁰ Together these four sources operating within a believing community provide a way for the Church of England's approach to Christian authority to be understood in the terms of this thesis.

This brief overview of authority within the Church of England reveals a flexible understanding of authority which I suggest is both conducive to the development of fxc and enables foundational aspects of the ecclesiology of fxc to be addressed. In chapter 3 I draw out some of the key issues that have been highlighted surrounding the ecclesiology of fxc, and track how the issue of authority has been addressed in the literature.

Prior to that, I now turn to the work of Lesslie Newbigin, examining his approach to Christian authority and the way that this relates to his ecclesiology.⁴¹ I then suggest how these insights might contribute to the ecclesiology of fxc. Despite Newbigin not being Anglican, and his ecclesiology being developed in an ecumenical framework within an overseas missionary context, I think there are sufficient grounds to choose

³⁷ Giving to the poor is an example of tradition, it is not a doctrine or a structure, but is a traditional activity of the church pursued in response to Jesus' words in the Bible and in continuity with the actions of the early church. Pastoral care, the pursuit of healthy relationships, and so on fall into a similar category. To draw a distinction between these, I will therefore use a capital 'T' when referring to the doctrinal Traditions, and a lowercase 't' when referring to the broader tradition of the church.

³⁸ <http://www.churchofenglandglossary.co.uk/dictionary/definition/authority>. Accessed 28th August 2015. Also, as noted in the Report of an Anglican-Methodist Working Party, *Fresh Expressions in the Mission of the Church* (London: Church House Publishing, 2012), p.17 even if experience is not part of the normal Anglican theological method it does not mean 'the role of Christian experience in forming the collective mind of the Church' is rejected.

³⁹ The report from the Anglican-Methodist Working Party, *Fresh Expressions*, p. 16 and 20 confirms this by saying: Scripture is 'the primary source of authority', and that 'Scripture, Tradition, reason and Christian experience' should be drawn on together to discern 'that what actually 'happens'...is truly the Church'.

⁴⁰ Lambeth Commission, *Windsor Report 2004*, p. 27 paragraph 54 clarifies this further by stating that the phrase 'authority of Scripture' should be treated as shorthand for 'the authority of the triune God, exercised through scripture'. Paragraphs 55-62 then address how the Christian community should read, interpret and respond to Scripture. Thus, Scripture has a distinctive role in revealing God's authority within the believing community. Although this is an overgeneralization, the Church of England could be said to hold together four groups each with a different emphasis on where the weight of authority lies within a commitment to all four: evangelicals with Scripture, Anglo-Catholics with tradition, liberals with reason and charismatics with experience. None of these strands holds more authority than any other, and the framework of dispersed authority is therefore one that enables all to be held together (most of the time). This, as has been noted, is both a strength and frustration within the Church of England.

⁴¹ As he says in Lesslie Newbigin, *Christ Our Eternal Contemporary* (Madras: Christian Literature Society of India, 1968), p. 7: 'No presentation of the Christian faith can side-step ... the question of authority.'

Newbigin as the interlocutor for this thesis.⁴² His influence on FE thinking is widely recognised, and he remains widely quoted in the literature surrounding fxc.⁴³ He is acknowledged to have a missional ecclesiology which is at the heart of a fxc ecclesiology.⁴⁴ His approach to mission anticipated many of the challenges that postmodernity offers to the Church, and so remains relevant.⁴⁵

Additionally, Stephen Bevans identifies Newbigin as a key proponent of the countercultural model of contextual theology.⁴⁶ At its best I see fxc as seeking to develop this model which takes culture seriously, but also places high value on the gospel as a story which calls people to repentance and transformation.⁴⁷ This model, as well as Newbigin, stresses the need for 'rootedness in scripture and Christian tradition' which is a necessity for fxc if they are to remain part of the Church of England.⁴⁸ Finally, Newbigin's approach to Christian authority begins from the same basis as the Church of England by recognising divine authority as the ultimate authority, and Scripture, tradition, reason and experience as sources that the church accepts as authoritative. Whilst this does not mean Newbigin's approach to authority should necessarily be adopted, it does enable key questions about the ecclesiology of fresh expressions of church to be raised and addressed.

⁴² Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2002), p. 151. Kärkkäinen unfortunately identifies Newbigin as 'an Anglican churchman'. Whilst Newbigin was a bishop in the Church of South India which is part of the Anglican communion, he primarily identified with the URC whilst in the UK, and overall would probably resist denominational labelling due to his strong commitment to ecumenism.

⁴³ See for example: Steven Croft (ed.), *Mission-shaped Questions* (London: Church House Publishing, 2008), p. 15 who says Newbigin's 'books are widely read and remain influential', David Wilkinson, 'What are the lessons from evangelism and apologetics for new communities?', in Croft (ed.), *Mission-shaped Questions*, p. 110 calls Newbigin's proposal of the congregation as the hermeneutic of the gospel 'much-quoted' and a 'key understanding for many involved in fresh expressions', and Gareth Powell, *A Critique of the Ecclesiology, Missiology and Sociology of the Mission-Shaped Church report* (Unpublished PhD thesis, Pembroke College, Cambridge: 2014), p. 53 says Newbigin's missiology is a primary source for *msc*.

⁴⁴ Kärkkäinen, *Introduction to Ecclesiology*, p. 151 and Scott W. Sunquist and Amos Yong (eds.), *The Gospel and Pluralism Today: Reassessing Lesslie Newbigin in the 21st Century* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2015), p. 20.

⁴⁵ Paul Weston, *Mission and Cultural Change: A Critical Engagement with the Writings of Lesslie Newbigin* (Unpublished PhD thesis: Kings College, University of London, 2001), pp.138-139. Sunquist and Yong (eds.), *Reassessing Lesslie Newbigin*, p. 24 note that although Newbigin's ecclesiology has a modernist backdrop he is highly critical of both modernity and post-modernity.

⁴⁶ Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (New York: Orbis Books, 2002), p. 124.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 117 and 120.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

Chapter 2 Lesslie Newbigin

Lesslie Newbigin (1909-1998), for almost all his adult life, was committed to work in the Church, and in particular the Church in mission.¹ He spent blocks of time with the Student Christian Movement, as a missionary and bishop in India, as a key influencer in the World Council of Churches, as a lecturer and URC pastor in Birmingham, and writing and lecturing as part of the Gospel and Our Culture Movement.² The question of authority – where it comes from, how it is mediated and/or delegated, and how it is exercised and submitted to – implicitly underpins much of Newbigin's thinking and writing.³ This leads George Hunsberger to describe the question of authority as Newbigin's 'persistent question of a lifetime.'⁴ In section 2.2 I provide a summary of Newbigin's approach to Christian authority.⁵ To lay the foundation for this the next section provides a brief chronological overview of Newbigin's corpus highlighting salient themes and developments.⁶

¹ I am using the convention of a lower case 'c' for church when I refer to a denomination, and upper case 'C' when I refer to the universal Church. Later I will use congregation to refer to a local gathering of the Church.

² Dr Michael W. Goheen, *'As the Father Has Sent Me, I Am Sending You': J.E. Lesslie Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology* (Zoetermeer: Uitgeverij Boekencentrum, 2000), p. 422. Further biographical details of his life can be found in Lesslie Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda: An Updated Autobiography* (London: SPCK, 1993), Geoffrey Wainwright, *Lesslie Newbigin: A Theological Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), George Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1998), and Lesslie Newbigin, *Faith in a Changing World*, ed. by Paul Weston (London: Alpha International, 2012).

³ This can be seen from some of his earliest writing in J.E. Lesslie Newbigin, 'The Duty and Authority of the Church to Preach the Gospel,' in *The Church's Witness to God's Design, Amsterdam Assembly Series, Vol. 2* (London: SCM Press, 1948), pp. 19-35 right through to some of his final publications such as Lesslie Newbigin, *Truth and Authority in Modernity* (Leominster: Gracewing, 1996), as well as in chapters in key texts such as Lesslie Newbigin, *Christ Our Eternal Contemporary* (Madras: Christian Literature Society of India, 1968), pp. 7-22, Newbigin, *Open Secret*, pp. 12-18 and Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (London: SPCK, 1989), pp. 39-51.

⁴ Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness*, p. 69.

⁵ It should be noted from the outset that Newbigin never wrote a systematic theology, and much of his writing was in response to issues arising around him. Nevertheless, most commentators note a consistency to his thought and writing which enables a summary of his approach to authority to be developed drawing on work throughout his life.

⁶ Goheen, *Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology*, pp. 12-114 provides a full overview of Newbigin's life and work. As well as that within Goheen's book (pp. 443-462), there are other extensive bibliographies of Newbigin's work available, see Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness*, pp. 283-304, and Thomas F. Foust, George R. Hunberger, J. Andrew Kirk, Werner Ustorf (eds.), *A Scandalous Prophet: The Way of Mission after Newbigin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 252-293. It is outside the scope of this project to address the 300 published books, articles and lectures, as well as much unpublished material in the form of articles, lectures and correspondence which Newbigin produced, but this project gathers up the major contributions to his thought related to authority and ecclesiology.

2.1 The life and work of Lesslie Newbigin

Newbigin grew up in the north of England, and went on to Cambridge University during which time he became a Christian. After graduating he worked for the Student Christian Movement in Glasgow, before returning to Cambridge to pursue ordination training. He was sent as a Church of Scotland missionary to India in 1936. Whilst Newbigin had several articles and lectures published in the early years of his ministry, his book *The Reunion of the Church: A Defence of the South India Scheme*, written in defence of the formation of the Church of South India (CSI) in 1947, seems to be the first to garner significant attention.⁷ The book was written in response to the threatened excommunication of the CSI by the Anglican Communion, and demonstrates the consistent basis on which he develops his arguments, reasoning from a position of faith drawing from the sources of Scripture, tradition and experience.⁸ In the book, he highlights the decisive place of Scripture as the standard of faith.⁹ His argument, particularly around ordination, hinges on the authority of God being placed higher than the authority of the Church.¹⁰ This shows the early roots of his approach to Christian authority. Newbigin alludes to the category distinction he sees between divine and human authority, whilst also speaking of the Church 'transmitting' God's authority.¹¹

God as the Author of life is the authority. Christ is the self-revelation of God, and humanity is confronted by this authority in the living Jesus Christ.¹² He says that the Church, called into being by God, is not 'an extension of the Incarnation' and so by saying 'transmits', Newbigin does not mean authority is no longer held by God.¹³ The Church witnesses to God's authority as it submits to God's authority.¹⁴ Thus, the visible life of the Church, including exercise of authority, demonstrates the character of God and the truth that Jesus is Lord.¹⁵ This links to a key strand of Newbigin's theology - his doctrine of election.¹⁶ Newbigin's

⁷ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Reunion Of The Church: A Defence Of The South India Scheme* (London: SCM Press, 1960). This book was initially published in 1948, and subsequently republished in 1960 with an extended (30 page) foreword reflecting on the original manuscript and the development of the CSI (pp. vii-xxxvi).

⁸ Although Newbigin would not articulate this as a specific schema until decades later it is apparent that he will be schematising the way he has presented arguments from the earliest days of his published theology.

⁹ Newbigin, *Reunion Of The Church*, p. xix.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. xxiv.

¹¹ 'Transmit' is Newbigin's word, see for example Newbigin, *Reunion Of The Church*, p. 61.

¹² Newbigin, *Reunion Of The Church*, pp. 126-7.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 30 & 61. Whilst his outright statement about the Church not being an extension of the incarnation could be seen as opposed to Catholic theology, his ecclesiology (articulated more clearly in *Household of God*, for example) places a strong emphasis on the continuing community that Jesus founded, but it is a point of distinction that Newbigin does not view divine authority to be delegated to that community which became the Church.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 127. He says that in Jesus Christ there was 'the authority of the Truth, demanding of men the personal response of faith. When the Church claims to have a deposit of infallible truth which requires only the submission of her members, and which is untouched by the errors and misunderstanding of men, she has lost the only true authority.'

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

doctrine of election separates authority from the imposition of power over others. The 'Gospel of God's love' is a relation between persons, therefore it cannot be established by force, or inferred from a set of propositions.¹⁷ This would be a cause of 'egotism'; instead all are dependent on the mercy of God, and this dependence is demonstrated through God choosing 'one' to bear the gospel to another.¹⁸

In 1947, the CSI was formed and Newbigin became one of her first bishops serving the Diocese of Madura and Ramnad until 1959. During this time Newbigin's fourth major book, *The Household of God* was published in 1953, and it provided a more theological approach to outlining his ecclesiology.¹⁹ His understanding of the relation of divine authority to the authority of the Church is articulated as he emphasises the difference between the *essence* of the Church, as its God-given nature, and the *forms* of the Church, which 'matter a great deal' but are nevertheless provisional.²⁰ He says the forms (which are the practices and structures) of the Church should therefore be open to change because it is only the grace of God that ultimately maintains the existence of the Church.²¹ The forms as they reflect the essence make

¹⁶ Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness*, pp. 45-112 provides a detailed analysis of Newbigin's doctrine of election. He sees this (p.70) as Newbigin's answer to the two questions of where the authority for the Church to preach and to believe comes from.

¹⁷ Newbigin, 'Duty and Authority', pp. 29-30. This quote comes from an article contributed by Newbigin to a preparatory volume of work published ahead of the World Council of Churches Assembly in 1948, and so was written at the same time as he was writing *Reunion of the Church*. It demonstrates that the doctrine of election was part of his theological framework from an early period and that his doctrine of election nuances his approach to authority. Christianity shouldn't be considered superior to other beliefs because it exists in a different category. The gospel of Jesus Christ is 'the final and universally valid truth of human existence'. Yet, this is revealed not through God overpowering humanity with this unavoidable fact, it is revealed through a call to personal relationship with the one who in self-forgetting love died on a cross for the salvation of all. Similarly, the Church cannot force a response to this love, only offer the invitation.

¹⁸ Ibid. The gospel is the message of God's universal salvation. If we could know it and experience it apart from others now, this would be at odds with the nature of salvation. This is the same line of argument that Newbigin uses later for the Church being a genuine foretaste of the kingdom.

¹⁹ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1953) was the publication, with minor corrections, of a series of lectures that Newbigin gave in Glasgow at the end of 1952 on the nature of the Church. It has become highly influential, has been widely translated, and is described by Wainwright as a 'classic' (Wainwright, *Newbigin*, p. 98). At the time, he was serving as one of the first bishops of the newly formed CSI, and in the book, he wanted to 'think systematically about what that experience had to teach' about the nature of Church (Newbigin, *Household of God*, p. 9).

²⁰ Newbigin, *Household of God*, p. 85. The essence of the Church is its God-given nature which is described in the creeds as one, holy, catholic and apostolic. This creedal confession was established at the first Council of Constantinople in 381CE, and most churches in the East and West hold to this confession including the Church of England which through Article VIII of the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion affirms that this creed is to be received and believed.

²¹ Ibid. Whilst Newbigin does not begin to use the word 'provisional' for denominational structures and liturgical forms until the 1970s, he clearly implies this throughout *Household of God*. More explicit use of the term comes in articles such as: Lesslie Newbigin, *Bible Study on Romans 8*. Unpublished study given at the Conference on 'Church in the Inner City' held in Birmingham, September 1976. <http://newbigin.net/assets/pdf/76bsr8.pdf>. Accessed 4th February 2016, Lesslie Newbigin, 'The Form and Structure of the Visible Unity of the Church', in *One In Christ* 23.1 (1977), 107-126 and Lesslie Newbigin, 'The Basis and the Forms of Unity: Second Peter Ainslie Lecture', in *Mid-Stream: The Ecumenical Movement Today* 23 (Jan 1984), 1-11.

visible the Church's participation in God's mission of salvation to the world.²² Newbigin focuses most of his attention on the forms which reflect the unity and catholicity (or continuity) of the Church. Here he begins to express the *interdependence* he believes there must be between word and sacrament, apostolic ministry, and the power and presence of the Holy Spirit within the Church.²³ Since they are forms they should not be claimed as the essence of the Church, but they are the ways the Church is both incorporated, and understands her incorporation, into Christ.²⁴

It was in the *Household of God* that Newbigin suggested the local congregation should have primacy as a unit within the Church.²⁵ This became a key feature of his ecclesiology and he would later describe the congregation as the hermeneutic of the gospel.²⁶ The importance for Newbigin is that the reality of the truth of the gospel is made visible in the life of the congregation as a sign and foretaste of the coming kingdom rule and reign of God. The life of the Church is a participation in, and demonstration of, the authority of God.²⁷

In 1959, Newbigin finished his first term as a bishop in the CSI and began six years of work with the International Missionary Council (IMC) and World Council of Churches (WCC) based in London and then Geneva. During this time, he encountered the idea that the Christian congregation was the basic unit of healing.²⁸ This increased his commitment to strengthening local congregations of lay people because of the pivotal role he saw they had in relation to mission. It also built on thinking he had outlined in *Household of God* about the congregation being the place that expresses the gospel of God's love for the world as people

²² Thus, Newbigin talks about the Church living and acting (in her forms as divided, unclean and forgetting her missionary task) in ways that 'contradict her essential nature' (one, holy, apostolic) and yet is used by God in his grace, and continues to be the Church through his mercy alone. The Church, by her continued existence, demonstrates God's grace and mercy, but should seek after forms that demonstrate who God has created her to be (one, holy, catholic and apostolic), and thus show 'her life is...a real participation in the life of God Himself'. See *Household of God*, pp. 84 and 147-8.

²³ He dedicates sections of the book to what he views as Protestant (see p. 49 in 'The Congregation of the Faithful', pp. 32-59), Catholic (see p. 76 in 'The Body of Christ', pp. 60-86) and Pentecostal (see p. 94 in 'The Community of the Holy Spirit', pp. 87-110) ecclesiological emphases, concluding that each is important *and* that each needs the others to provide correctives for their own weaknesses (p. 111). I suggest that he later uses the short hand of Scripture, tradition and experience to describe these three different emphases.

²⁴ Newbigin, *Household of God*, p. 30. Newbigin's later work pays much more attention to these aspects as a framework of understanding.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

²⁶ Newbigin, *Gospel in Pluralist Society*, pp. 222-233. See also Goheen, *Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology*, pp. 29-30.

²⁷ Although Newbigin does not state this in the same way, it is clear when he talks about the Church forgiving or praying in the name of Jesus to 'cast out sickness and evil' he views this as a participation in divine authority. See for example Newbigin, *Household of God*, pp. 61-62.

²⁸ Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, p.204. 'The Christian understanding of healing begins from its place in the ministry of Jesus. There it was the sign of the breaking into human life of the powers of the Kingdom of God, and of the dethroning of the powers of evil. The health which was its fruit was not something static, a restored equilibrium; it was an involvement with Jesus in the victorious encounter of the Kingdom of God with the powers of evil.'

are built up in love within it.²⁹ During this period Newbigin was instrumental in bringing the IMC into the WCC, a move that he thought critical because it demonstrated that 'mission belongs to the very substance of the Church's life'.³⁰

In 1965, Newbigin returned to India as bishop of Madras within the CSI for a further nine years, and continued to write and speak widely on the Church and mission. Key publications during this time were *Honest Religion for Secular Man*, *Christ Our Eternal Contemporary* and *The Finality of Christ*.³¹ These books mark the start of a key stream of Newbigin's writing focussed on the gospel as 'public truth'.³² His consistent advocacy of the gospel as public truth is a natural corollary to the emphasis he places on God being the ultimate authority.³³ If God is the ultimate authority, then God is the creator of all things and all things are subject to God. Scripture tells the story of how God reconciles creation to himself through Jesus Christ who is the revelation of the meaning of history. Therefore, the gospel is public truth because it is true for all.

Newbigin began to draw on the work of social philosophers, such as Michael Polanyi, to challenge the false dichotomies he saw for example between knowledge and belief.³⁴ This led him to state that 'one must believe in order to understand'.³⁵ This became a foundational statement about authority for Newbigin. To believe is to identify what has authority for me. This is conversion. To express belief in Jesus Christ entails conversion from an old belief system to one where Jesus is Lord and so holds ultimate authority over your life.³⁶ However, this is a 'personal relationship of love and truth and faithfulness'.³⁷ Conversion is a work of the Holy Spirit, not the Church, and so in that sense is 'from above', but it is not a disembodied spiritual experience, it entails a 'relationship with the existing community of believers'.³⁸ Thus, belief is understood

²⁹ Newbigin, *Household of God*, pp. 129, 134 and 147. Later in Lesslie Newbigin, *The Good Shepherd: Meditations on Christian Ministry in Today's World* (Leighton Buzzard: The Faith Press, 1977), p. 72 he would say: 'The whole congregation is called to be a healed and healing fellowship, in which the healing love of God is ever at work to bind up the wounds of the members. And beyond this, the healing work is to spread beyond the congregation into the community around it.'

³⁰ Newbigin, *Household of God*, p. 144.

³¹ Lesslie Newbigin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man* (London: SCM Press, 1966), Newbigin, *Eternal Contemporary* and Lesslie Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ* (London: SCM Press, 1969).

³² Although I cannot find reference to Newbigin using this precise term until Lesslie Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1984: Questions for the Churches* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1983), p. 26.

³³ Newbigin, *Finality of Christ*, p. 48.

³⁴ Newbigin, *Honest Religion*, pp. 83-84. Here he builds upon the work of Polanyi in *Personal Knowledge*. He would later go on to address similar dichotomies between facts and values and reason and revelation.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

³⁶ Newbigin, *Finality of Christ*, pp. 90-91.

³⁷ Newbigin, *Eternal Contemporary*, p. 19. In expounding this concept Newbigin draws heavily on Polanyi's work on 'Personal Knowledge'. See Weston, *Mission and Cultural Change*, pp. 79-137 for a detailed exposition of how Newbigin uses Polanyi's work in this area.

³⁸ Newbigin, *Finality of Christ*, p. 107.

in the context of tradition. It is in the Church that the statement of belief that Jesus is Lord finds its meaning. This is where the discussion about the forms of the Church becomes crucial because it is these forms that visibly demonstrate the unity and continuity of the Church. The fundamental forms for Newbigin are drawn from Scripture and are the apostles' teaching, baptism, breaking bread and a believing fellowship.³⁹ Newbigin follows Scripture to see spiritual efficacy in these forms, but the existence of the Church is not dependent on them.⁴⁰

Throughout the period of Newbigin's bishopric in Madras (mid-1960s to mid-1970s), there was an increasing divide in the Church between ecumenists and evangelicals on the nature of mission, with the former seeing it as driven by concerns for social renewal and the latter by proclamation. Newbigin saw that both were important and attempted to provide a biblical bridge between these two positions.⁴¹ This led him into prolonged engagement with two interlocutors (Donald McGavran and M.M. Thomas) who sharpened his thinking on, and belief in, the visibility and unity of the Church which he used as an approach to handling the relationship between conversion and culture.⁴² Newbigin saw that the forms of the Church could and should change to be culturally appropriate, but the starting point must be the existing tradition of the Church because the Church is 'One' and already exists in history. This avoids the absolutizing of cultural forms which has twin dangers of closing off future options for relevant forms for the Church, and of undermining the prophetic judgement that the gospel brings to culture in anticipation of the eschatological judgement.⁴³

³⁹ Ibid., p. 109. Here Newbigin uses Acts 2.42 to make this statement. Overall his approach to fundamental forms of the Church always reverts to those identified in Scripture as means of a believer participating in Christ. The three main forms are preaching/teaching Scripture, baptism and Eucharist. The Scriptural basis can begin to be established from the following passages: Romans 10 says people can make the confession 'Jesus is Lord' as a result of hearing the gospel preached. Romans 6.3 and Galatians 3.26-27 speak of being baptised into Christ or Christ's death, and this is established as a tradition of the community. 1 Corinthians 10-11 address the Eucharist through which people participate in Christ through bread and wine, and implies the Church is to continue the tradition Jesus gave to the community.

⁴⁰ Newbigin, *Household of God*, p. 76.

⁴¹ Goheen, *Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology*, pp. 89-90.

⁴² Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness*, pp. 174-193 summarises these debates between Newbigin and M. M. Thomas and Donald McGavran. Newbigin also wrote a helpful summary paper in this area republished several times between 1972 and 1977, see Lesslie Newbigin, 'The Form and Structure of the Visible Unity of the Church', in *One in Christ* 13 (1977): 107-126. The debate with Thomas establishes the necessity of the Church in giving meaning to mission. The debate with McGavran may be informative for FE because it deals with the ethical and ecclesial implications of the homogenous unit principle of church growth proposed by McGavran and quoted in the *msc* report. However, there is no space to explore in this thesis.

⁴³ The former is a situation that Newbigin saw to be the case with denominations that had become stuck in cultural forms to the point of viewing their own forms as the essence of the Church. This prevented movement towards unity between churches because to seek unity would be to deny the ecclesiology they had established. The latter, for example, in relation to my later argument, means that the church simply accepts the culture of consumerism rather than challenging the assumptions behind it.

At the end of his time in India, the sermons that Newbigin had given to his clergy at their monthly Eucharist together were gathered and published in *The Good Shepherd*, which became the Archbishop of Canterbury's Lent book in 1977.⁴⁴ This book gives the most practical exposition of the forms Newbigin believes the Church should have, based on his view of the exercise of pastoral ministry. Here we see his view that the exercise of authority in the Church is grounded in following Jesus to the cross and discerning together what it means to submit to divine authority.⁴⁵

In 1974, Newbigin 'retired' to the UK, and took up a teaching post at Selly Oak College in Birmingham for five years, during which he also acted as Moderator for the United Reformed Church (URC) for a year. Whilst he continued to write on the unity of the Church,⁴⁶ the overall emphasis of his writing shifts in this period to conveying 'why the Church has to be missionary', an endeavour that led to the writing and publication of *The Open Secret* in 1978.⁴⁷ It is here that we begin to see the issue of authority take centre stage in Newbigin's thinking.⁴⁸ The previous 25 years had seen increasing Christian reflection on the concept of *missio Dei*. This indicated a shift in emphasis from 'church-centred mission to mission-centred church'.⁴⁹ In *Open Secret*, Newbigin follows this shift, and in keeping with his understanding of God as ultimate authority, is explicit in stating that 'the mission is God's'.⁵⁰ Once again, he is keen not to marginalise the role of the Church by saying this, and describes the mission of the Church 'to act out in the whole life of the whole world the confession that Jesus is Lord of all'.⁵¹ Thus God does not pass authority to the Church in such a way that mission becomes dependent on the Church, but rather the privileged place of the Church relates only to its responsibility to 'bear the witness' of the truth of the gospel. This understanding of mission mitigates against it being a triumphalist extension of the Church or legalistic

⁴⁴ Newbigin, *Good Shepherd*.

⁴⁵ Newbigin, *Good Shepherd*, pp. 54-57.

⁴⁶ For example, 'Lesslie Newbigin, "What is "a local church truly united"?' in *The Ecumenical Review* 29.2 (April 1977): 115-128. In this paper, he considers the implications of unity for the local church particularly in their relation to denominations. He accepts congregational separation based on language and culture to enable the most genuine encounter with the gospel, but this can only be provisional 'for the sake of a more authentic sharing of diverse gifts in a Christ-given unity.' He also identifies the relationship of a congregation to the bishop as a way of expressing unity locally. This is part of the larger visible unity of the Church demonstrated in the relationship between bishops.

⁴⁷ Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, p. 242. In part this was also an attempt to develop his earlier writing which he now saw as an understanding of mission that was too church centred (*Unfinished Agenda*, p. 198).

⁴⁸ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (London: SPCK, 1995), pp. 12-18 is his opening chapter entitled 'The Question of Authority' and the book builds on his affirmation 'that the Christian mission rests upon a total and unconditional commitment to Jesus Christ as the one in whom all authority inheres' (p. 160).

⁴⁹ See David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Orbis Books, New York: 2012), p. 379. The term *missio Dei* was coined by Karl Harkenstein in his reflections on the 1952 Willingen Conference of the International Mission Council, see Wilhelm Richebacher, 'Missio Dei: The Basis of Mission Theology or a wrong path?', in *International Review of Mission* 92 (2003): 588-605, p. 589. Use of this term shifted the agenda for mission which became viewed as coming from God's own nature and initiation rather than that of the Church.

⁵⁰ Newbigin, *Open Secret*, p. 18.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

obedience to a demand of God.⁵² Newbigin encourages Christians to participate in everyday dialogue with others committed to different authorities. This dialogue risks assumptions about the gospel being challenged, and so is 'mission which seriously expects the Holy Spirit to take what belongs to Christ and show it to the church, thus leading the church into new truth.'⁵³ This highlights once again the authority of God, made manifest in the work of the Holy Spirit, over the authority of the Church.

In *Open Secret* the centrality of the doctrine of election in Newbigin's thinking also becomes clear.⁵⁴ Newbigin, like his contemporary Karl Barth, starts with the total fact of Christ. Christ is the 'elect of God' and 'our election is only by our incorporation in Him.'⁵⁵ However, Newbigin's doctrine of election diverges from that of Barth because for Newbigin election happens in history. Election gives Newbigin a rationale for mission because it is the means of God's purpose being fulfilled. This purpose is to bring salvation (wholeness) to the world through Jesus Christ, and to bring knowledge of this salvation through a 'believing community chosen, called and sent' by God.⁵⁶ The authority for a Christian to believe the gospel, and to preach the gospel, comes from this election, this choosing by God.⁵⁷ Election does not mean 'spiritual privilege', but rather it involves 'missionary responsibility'.⁵⁸ God's choice makes God's people 'trustees on behalf of all the nations', and the 'bearer of blessing for all.'⁵⁹ Thus, ecclesial authority is rooted in God's election of a people to bear the witness of God and participate in the *missio Dei*.

Paul Weston says that 'how we know' is another feature of Newbigin's work from 1974 onwards.⁶⁰ This resulted in a deeper engagement with theories of knowing and with the work of sociologists and philosophers such as Michael Polanyi, Peter Berger, Alasdair MacIntyre and George Lindbeck.⁶¹ On his

⁵² Newbigin, *Open Secret*, pp. 59-60 and Lesslie Newbigin, 'Context and Conversion', in *International Review of Mission* 68 (July 1979): 301-312, p. 308.

⁵³ Newbigin, *Open Secret*, p. 189.

⁵⁴ Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness*, pp. 69-79 steps through Newbigin's argument in *Open Secret* showing how the thread of the doctrine of election holds his argument together.

⁵⁵ Newbigin, *Household of God*, p. 102. This approach is in distinction to the Reformers who viewed election as a divine decree of the Father. Newbigin, whilst affirming his belief in the 'pure grace' of God coming by the Holy Spirit to bring 'regeneration', notes the danger of this displacing the fact of Christ as the 'determinative centre' of history.

⁵⁶ Newbigin, *Open Secret*, p. 90.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁵⁸ Newbigin, *Household of God*, p. 132.

⁵⁹ Newbigin, *Open Secret*, pp. 17 and 71.

⁶⁰ Paul Weston, *Mission and Cultural Change: A Critical Engagement with the Writings of Lesslie Newbigin* (Unpublished PhD thesis: Kings College, University of London, 2001), p.79.

⁶¹ There is not room in this thesis to explore the influence of these and other scholars on Newbigin, but the following books and theses provide a good introduction to the evolution of Newbigin's thought in this area: Thomas F. Foust, *Christology, Restoration, Unity: An exploration of the missiological approach to modern western culture according to Lesslie Newbigin and Dean E. Walker* (Unpublished PhD Thesis: University of Birmingham, 2002), Krishna Kandiah, *Towards a Theology of Evangelism for Late-modern Cultures -a critical dialogue with Lesslie Newbigin's doctrine of revelation* (Unpublished PhD thesis: University of London, King's College, 2005), Mark T. B. Laing and Paul Weston (eds.), *Theology in a Missionary Perspective: Lesslie Newbigin's Legacy* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2012), Donald Le Roy

return from India, Newbigin had been shocked at the privatisation of Christian faith, and saw an urgent need for the Church to engage in mission within Western culture. At the age of 70, Newbigin became pastor of a URC congregation that had been at risk of closure. He continued in this post for 8 years during which he was challenged to put into practice his beliefs about what it meant to be a missionary congregation in the West.⁶² He began to write and speak much more on the subject of the gospel and culture, becoming an active leader of the Gospel and Our Culture movement, and had three notable texts published: *The Other Side of 1984*, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, and *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*.⁶³ In these Newbigin returns to questions of authority and the relationship of truth to epistemology.

The theories of knowledge provided Newbigin with a new language for the importance that he placed on the unity and continuity of the Church. It is this that provides the *plausibility structure* within which the confession of Jesus as Lord has meaning.⁶⁴ Kandiah says that Newbigin ‘misreads Berger’s definitions’, and that Berger would see the congregation as the plausibility structure.⁶⁵ However, this is precisely what Newbigin does say in *Foolishness to the Greeks*.⁶⁶ Thus, it seems more likely that Newbigin uses the term flexibly, at times to refer to the congregation and at times to ‘patterns of belief and practice’. The latter is his framework of Scripture, tradition, reason and experience.⁶⁷ This is consistent with Newbigin’s later writing on authority where Scripture, tradition, reason and experience function as interdependent sources of authority within a believing community, and so together form the Christian plausibility structure.

Newbigin also applies Polanyi’s work about the authority of tradition in the scientific community to the Christian community.⁶⁸ Once again this gives Newbigin language for concepts he has proposed in earlier work, and he begins to examine ‘the role of an authoritative tradition in Christian believing.’⁶⁹ It is the tradition of the Church leading back to the community that Jesus gathered around himself that ‘embodies and carries forward certain ways of looking at things, certain models for interpreting experience.’⁷⁰ It is only by indwelling this tradition that someone begins to understand the world correctly, and at some point this

Stults, *Grasping Truth and Reality: Lesslie Newbigin’s Theology of Mission to the Western World* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2008), and Weston, *Mission and Cultural Change*.

⁶² Goheen, *Newbigin’s Missionary Ecclesiology*, pp. 104-5.

⁶³ Newbigin, *Other Side of 1984*, Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (London: SPCK, 1986), and Newbigin, *Gospel in Pluralist Society*.

⁶⁴ Newbigin, *Gospel in Pluralist Society*, p. 8. Although both Weston, *Mission and Cultural Change*, p. 230 and Kandiah, *Theology of Evangelism*, pp. 313-318 note that Newbigin’s use of the term ‘plausibility structure’ differs from that of Peter Berger who coined the term.

⁶⁵ Kandiah, *Theology of Evangelism*, p. 316.

⁶⁶ Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, p. 58.

⁶⁷ Newbigin, *Gospel in Pluralist Society*, p. 8.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 39-51.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

will involve a decision about whether to believe Jesus is Lord or not.⁷¹ Conversion therefore involves three elements: 'an inward turning of the heart and mind, commitment to a visible fellowship, and commitment to a kind of conduct.'⁷² In terms of authority, this could be described as the reordering of relationships to enable life to be lived firstly, under the authority of Jesus; secondly, as part of a believing community (which means a commitment to the authority of tradition), and thirdly, through the exercise of authority over one's own life and relationships. These three aspects will be used in the next section to summarise Newbigin's approach to Christian authority under the headings of authority for faith, authority of the Church and personal authority.

The Church should be open to change to reflect the new congregation that has now formed with the convert(s) included.⁷³ This means the authority of tradition is extended to address the experience of the new convert, and their reading of Scripture will add to the Church's understanding of the gospel.⁷⁴ However, the unity of the Church in the present and the continuity of the Church through history must visibly remain.⁷⁵ Additionally, the trajectory towards the manifest rule and reign of Jesus must guide the legitimacy of changes since the Church must remain a sign, instrument and foretaste of the coming kingdom to fulfil her calling.⁷⁶

In the final decade of his life Newbigin wrote and taught as part of the Gospel and Our Culture movement. He further developed his idea of mission in the context of a 'three-cornered relation' between the gospel revealed through Scripture, the Church, and 'culture'.⁷⁷ He also continued to write about authority, and Newbigin's book, *Truth and Authority in Modernity*, published just two years before he died, contains his most mature thought on divine authority and its mediation.⁷⁸ In it he has a confident exposition of the interdependence of Scripture, tradition, reason and experience, within a believing Christian community, as the framework for the mediation of divine authority. Thus, whilst these five elements function together as

⁷¹ It should be noted here that Newbigin does not give much attention to the process of reasoning that leads to a decision of faith, but the believing congregation plays a key role here in demonstrating their trust in Jesus which gives substance to their confession of Jesus as Lord.

⁷² Newbigin, *Finality of Christ*, p. 98.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 104.

⁷⁴ Newbigin, *Gospel in Pluralist Society*, p. 64 says the 'whole body' plays a part in discerning whether this is a genuine addition to the tradition; it is not enforced by a 'centralised authority'. See also Newbigin, *Open Secret*, p. 147 and Newbigin, *Finality of Christ*, p. 110.

⁷⁵ Newbigin, *Finality of Christ*, p. 109.

⁷⁶ See for example Newbigin, *Household of God*, p. 26.

⁷⁷ Newbigin, *Open Secret*, p. 149. Weston, *Mission and Cultural Change*, p. 218 and Kandiah, *Theology of Evangelism*, p. 140 both note that Newbigin at times has a 'homogenising' tendency in his writing that fails to do justice to the diversity of culture, and can lead to confusion about distinction he is making between the Church universal and the local congregation. However, Kandiah, *Theology of Evangelism*, p. 222 suggests that Newbigin's triangular model can be helpfully used at a local congregation level.

⁷⁸ Newbigin, *Truth and Authority*.

a plausibility structure, they are more than a plausibility structure, because the authority of God is actually present through them.

Newbigin ends *Truth and Authority* by summarising the Church's authority for mission and belief:

The only way in which we can affirm the truth and therefore the authority of the gospel is by preaching it, by telling the story, and by our corporate living of the story in the life and worship of the church. ... I have been called and commissioned, through no merit of mine, to carry this message, to tell this story, to give this invitation. It has no coercive intent. It is an invitation from the one who loved you and gave himself up for you.⁷⁹

These sentences provide an overview of Newbigin's approach to Christian authority, which I will outline in the next section.

2.2 Newbigin's approach to Christian authority

The preceding section highlighted some of the key strands of Newbigin's approach to Christian authority. This revealed a consistency to his thought across five decades of publications, whilst he also adopted new language which brought clarity to his thinking. Hunsberger sees a shift in emphasis from the 1960s as Newbigin moved from a focus on the Church's 'authority for mission' to the authority for belief.⁸⁰ However, the basis of his argument remains the same because the authority is rooted in the nature of the Church within the purposes of God. The Church has authority for mission because, as the people called by, and incorporated into, Christ, she continues and extends Jesus' mission in the world.⁸¹ The Church has authority for belief because her belief is in Jesus, who is the truth, the one in whom all authority resides. However, the Church can only offer Jesus' invitation to belief, which is a personal call: 'Follow me'.⁸² As has already been seen Newbigin's approach is based on his faith in Jesus, directed by his exegesis of Scripture and informed by life in the Church and the world.⁸³ In chapter 4 I will address three questions of authority that could contribute to the ecclesiology of fxc. In this section I lay the groundwork for chapter 4 by summarising Newbigin's approach to Christian authority with reference to three questions. First, what is the authority for Christian faith? Second, what is the authority of the Church? Finally, how should personal authority be exercised?

⁷⁹ Newbigin, *Truth and Authority*, pp. 80-82.

⁸⁰ Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness*, p. 62.

⁸¹ Newbigin, *Household of God*, p. 52 and 113. Newbigin's key Scripture for the Church's authority for mission is John 20.21: 'As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you'.

⁸² Newbigin, *Finality of Christ*, p. 115: 'To claim finality for Jesus Christ is not to assert either that the majority of men will someday be Christians, or to assert that all others will be damned. It is to claim that commitment to him is the way in which men can become truly aligned to the ultimate end for which all things were made. The Church which believes this will not be afraid to address confidently to every generation and every people the call which it has received from him: Follow me.'

⁸³ This is how Newbigin describes himself at the beginning of his exegesis of John's Gospel (see Lesslie Newbigin, *The Light Has Come: An Exposition of the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), p. viii).

Before I proceed however, it is important to note that although Newbigin does not use the term himself, the underlying concept for Newbigin is the authority of love.⁸⁴ It would be possible to answer the three questions I have noted by saying that the authority for Christian faith is that 'God so loved the world he gave his only Son'.⁸⁵ The authority of, and in, the Church comes through the visible embodiment of love: 'just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'⁸⁶ In what follows, the term 'authority' must be primarily understood from this perspective.

2.2.1 *The authority for Christian faith*

Newbigin's approach to Christian authority begins with the assertion of God as ultimate authority.⁸⁷ Divine authority is the authority, and there is a category distinction between divine and human authority. God's authority is made known through revelation, in particular through Jesus Christ, and God gives humans capacity to recognise and receive that revelation.⁸⁸ Since Jesus is God, his authority is not derived but is 'the authority of God himself present in the midst of human history'.⁸⁹ This confronts people with a crucial decision about whether to accept or reject his authority, but their response is 'wholly free' because he 'safeguards the freedom of men to reject him'.⁹⁰ The ultimate authority of God does not depend on human recognition, but people accept it as authoritative once they recognise and confess Jesus as Lord.⁹¹ The question is how can people know who Jesus is and what their confession of Jesus as Lord means?

Newbigin always begins his answer with statements such as: 'Jesus did not write a book. He chose, called, and prepared a company of people.'⁹² The presence of the Messiah in human history was anticipated in Jewish Scripture, and Jesus explained who he was from these Scriptures and called people to believe in him.⁹³ Jesus formed a community around himself whom he taught. He also established traditions for how they would relate to him and each other, and he gave them the Holy Spirit who would lead them into the

⁸⁴ Newbigin, *Household of God*, p. 129: 'love must be the final normative term in all thought about the Church.'

⁸⁵ John 3.16.

⁸⁶ John 13.34-35 and Leviticus 19.18. Newbigin, *Sin and Salvation*, p. 48.

⁸⁷ See for example Newbigin, *Study on Romans*, Newbigin, *Open Secret*, p. 15, and Newbigin, *Word in Season*, p. 81.

⁸⁸ Newbigin, *Truth and Authority*, p. 2 and p. 14.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 10. See also Newbigin, *Open Secret*, p. 14.

⁹⁰ See also Lesslie Newbigin, *A Faith for this One World?* (London: SCM Press, 1961), pp. 62-64.

⁹¹ Newbigin, *Truth and Authority*, pp. 12-13.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁹³ Luke 24.27, 32 and 45, and John 6.29. Newbigin refers to the later in *Household of God*, p. 32. John 1.43-46 explains how the process of call and witness around Jesus began. Jesus found Philip and called Philip to 'Follow me', Philip found Nathanael and said 'We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph'.

fullness of truth about Jesus.⁹⁴ This community was called to 'be Christ's representatives in the world', to 'have His authority in the spiritual world'; they were 'incorporated into Christ' and so made participants in His mission to the world.⁹⁵ Thus this community was now authoritative for understanding firstly what it meant that Jesus is Lord, and secondly what it looked like to be a disciple, to follow Jesus as Lord.

This community became known as the Church, and her mission was to show what it looked like to respond in faith to the gospel which tells of the self-revelation of God in Christ.⁹⁶ By doing this, the Church became part of the gospel because it makes visible (by proclamation and act) the reconciling work of God to bring together in one body all people, nations, tribes and tongues.⁹⁷ The gospel and the Church therefore cannot be separated in one sense, but it is also key for Newbigin that the Church recognises it is not the possessor of absolute truth; rather the Church is being led into the fullness of truth which is in God.⁹⁸ Newbigin sees the danger for the Church in this area whenever it begins to think it *possesses* the truth rather than *points* to the truth.⁹⁹ The relationship to truth marks the distinction between divine authority (which is/possesses the truth) and human authority (which points to the truth). There are two implications of this distinction for the Church. First, conversion is an act of God not the Church, and second, the essence of the Church which is formed is given by God.

It should be noted here that use of the language of conversion has altered in the period since Newbigin was writing. Michael Moynagh describes it as a change from the language of a *point*, to that of *process* and now to a *pathway*.¹⁰⁰ This is a helpful clarification, and there is a greater understanding now of the role the visible believing congregation, which Newbigin so passionately advocated, plays in enabling an authentic encounter with the gospel. This encounter is part of the pathway of faith, which nevertheless must include a point of conversion. This "point of conversion" may or may not be articulated as such, but it will involve a commitment to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. Thus, when I use Newbigin's language of conversion it refers to this decision to submit to the authority of Christ. This decision may not even be conscious, but it

⁹⁴ Newbigin, *Truth and Authority*, pp. 28-30. See also the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, and specific texts within these such as Luke 22.19 and John 16.13.

⁹⁵ Newbigin, *Household of God*, pp. 61-62, 66-67, 71, 146 and 149.

⁹⁶ Kandiah, *Theology of Evangelism*, pp. 35-113 dedicates a chapter of his PhD thesis to unpacking the nature of the gospel as revelation in Newbigin's work. He sees Newbigin's gospel as revelation having ten dimensions which Kandiah describes as: Christocentric, incommensurable, historical, particular, salvific, narrative, invitational, contextual, eschatological and communal.

⁹⁷ Newbigin, *One Body, One Gospel, One World*, p.26.

⁹⁸ Newbigin, *Truth and Authority*, p. 70.

⁹⁹ Michael Goheen, 'The Missional Calling of Believers in the World', in Foust, Hunsberger, Kirk and Ustorf (eds.), *Scandalous Prophet*, p. 47.

¹⁰⁰ Michael Moynagh, *Church for every context: An introduction to theology and practice* (London: SCM Press, 2012), p. 338.

becomes more so because 'faith is a daily renewed fight against unbelief'.¹⁰¹ Thus Newbigin says: 'Conversion is in one sense something which happens once for all, but in another sense it is something which has to happen daily afresh.'¹⁰²

Conversion is an act of the Holy Spirit; and so expresses divine authority: the human response is one of recognising and accepting the authority of God.¹⁰³ Therefore, conversion to Christ is a liberation from other authorities. Coming to 'know' God in this way is an 'experience of personal relationship',¹⁰⁴ and this relationship is established by Jesus who chooses his disciples.¹⁰⁵ This relationship is 'constituted by His love for me' and the response of faith is to love God and love neighbour.¹⁰⁶ Therefore, 'there can be no private salvation, no salvation which does not involve us with one another'.¹⁰⁷ These are also key elements in Newbigin's doctrine of election.¹⁰⁸ Election is God exercising divine authority in choosing people to bear the witness of God's salvation to others. The authority for Christian faith comes from being chosen by God. This 'chosen-ness' for Newbigin must exclude both 'rationalistic universalism' and 'any temptation to set limits to God's grace'; it is an exercise of divine authority that defies human judgment.¹⁰⁹ However, there are two implications, first, recognition of being chosen, called and sent by God is a recognition of the authority of God, and second, God's election means incorporation into Christ, it is corporate not individual. The Spirit incorporates the new believer into the Church; this 'growth' is not an accomplishment of the Church. Thus, Newbigin states that the Church 'exists wherever God in His sovereign freedom calls it into being'.¹¹⁰ Therefore, the Church is constituted by God, and given her essence by God.

¹⁰¹ Newbigin, *Household of God*, p. 119.

¹⁰² Newbigin, *Sin and Salvation*, p. 112.

¹⁰³ Newbigin, *Finality of Christ*, p. 115: 'To claim finality for Jesus Christ is not to assert either that the majority of men will some day be Christians, or to assert that all others will be damned. It is to claim that commitment to him is the way in which men can become truly aligned to the ultimate end for which all things were made.'

¹⁰⁴ Newbigin, *Eternal Contemporary*, p. 14.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 21. Here Newbigin quotes from John 15.16 where Jesus says to the disciples 'You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit.' For Newbigin, the basis of knowing God can only begin from being called and then beginning to confess what you know of the one who has called you. This is to place your trust in who God is, and that you will come to know Him as He knows you.

¹⁰⁶ Newbigin, *Household of God*, p. 124.

¹⁰⁷ Newbigin, *Gospel in Pluralist Society*, p. 82.

¹⁰⁸ Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness*, p. 103 says that for Newbigin the necessity of his doctrine of election is driven by 'the nature and destiny of humanity', 'the personal character of God', and 'the nature of salvation'.

¹⁰⁹ Newbigin, *Gospel in Pluralist Society*, p. 88. Newbigin is clear that Scripture forces consideration of the 'possibility of finally missing the mark'. He therefore encourages 'both a godly confidence and a godly fear' about personal standing before God.

¹¹⁰ Newbigin, *Household of God*, p. 133.

The essence of the Church is that she is one people, made holy through Christ. Having an authoritative tradition that continues from the community around Christ, she participates in the mission of God and indwells God's story revealed in Scripture.¹¹¹ However, Newbigin notes that the Church continually contradicts her essence through being 'divided', sinful and forgetful of 'her missionary task'.¹¹² Despite this, the Church is 'accepted by God and used as a means of His grace', and therefore she 'exists solely by His mercy'.¹¹³ As we move on to examine the forms of the Church in the next section it should be kept in mind that whilst the essence of the Church is a continual gift, the Church should also be seeking through her forms of life to be one, holy, catholic and apostolic.

2.2.2 *The authority of the Church*

This section considers authority in two parts. First, how is the 'authority of tradition' continued in the Church? This addresses the forms and ministry of the Church. Second, what authority does the Church have in the world?¹¹⁴

2.2.2.1 The 'authority of tradition'

Newbigin distinguishes between the essence of the Church (true for all time and in all places) and the forms (practices and structures) of the Church which he describes as provisional. In section 2.2.1, an account was given for how the community Jesus formed around himself gave meaning to the revelation of Jesus Christ. The sources of authority for this community were the Jewish Scriptures, the teachings of Jesus gradually written down by the early church, the traditions Jesus gave to his community, the experience of the Holy Spirit, and reasoned prayerful reflection on these, some of which was also written down. Whilst these did not have authority in their own right, they became authoritative for the Church. Thus, amongst other things, they also gave a means of understanding when human authority is being exercised legitimately.¹¹⁵ This will be addressed in section 2.2.3.

¹¹¹ This is Newbigin's approach to the essence of the Church described by the four marks: one, holy, catholic and apostolic. See Newbigin, *Household of God*, pp. 77, 85 and 129, also Newbigin, *Good Shepherd*, p. 30. This parallels the understanding of the four marks laid out in the Church of England doctrinal statement: House of Bishops, *Eucharistic Presidency – General Synod report GS1248* (London: Church House Publishing, 1997), pp. 20-21 which demonstrates some commonality of ecclesiological basis between Newbigin and the Church of England.

¹¹² Newbigin, *Household of God*, p. 84.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 84 and 133.

¹¹⁴ There is not room in this thesis to explore Newbigin's approach to relations between Church and State. It should be noted that there are differences of opinion as to where Newbigin's approach would ultimately lead. For example, Andrew L. Fitz-Gibbon, *In the World, But Not of the World: Christian Social Thinking at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2000), p.112 sees Newbigin as supportive of a Christianised nation, whereas Jeppe Bach Nikolajsen, *The Distinctive Identity of the Church* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2015), p. 91 thinks Newbigin eventually backed away from this position.

¹¹⁵ For example, Jesus' teaching and model was that those with authority were those who were humble, who loved and served others. In one sense, it had nothing to do with the role that people had, but as Acts and the Epistles show,

It is this 'authority of tradition' existing in the community of faith that enables the Church to give meaning in each generation and culture to the faith in Christ that she confesses. To avoid confusion of terms, I will refer to the 'authority of tradition' existing in the Christian community as the plausibility structure for faith. Over time and through the handling of heresy, this plausibility structure acquired creeds, settled on a canon of Old and New Testaments, and drew on foundational teaching of the Church Fathers and Mothers.¹¹⁶ This has established a level of orthodoxy and structures of training and leadership which enable the framework of faith to be taught and passed on. However, this does not mean the plausibility structure is infallible; this would deny that a response of faith is required to the revelation of Christ.¹¹⁷ In fact, Newbigin says that the Church must remain ever aware 'that she who confesses is sinful and fallible'. Nevertheless, by grace God uses sources of authority to reveal God's authority. Newbigin describes this as the mediation of divine authority.¹¹⁸ He identifies the interdependence of Scripture, tradition, reason and experience, within a believing Christian community, as the framework for the mediation of divine authority. Therefore, for Newbigin the Christian plausibility structure is more than an epistemological framework, it also mediates divine authority.

Whilst the four 'sources of authority' are interdependent, they also have distinct roles. Newbigin always begins with Scripture which he views as a lens through which to look at and understand the world; thus Scripture 'functions as the true story of which our story is a part.'¹¹⁹ It is not a set of timeless propositions, but a story that Christians must learn to 'indwell' and with which they bring their own cultural understanding into dialogue.¹²⁰ As it becomes their story it gains more authority for them than their culture.¹²¹ However, they can only know what it truly means to submit to Jesus when they are part of the fellowship of the Church.¹²²

the character of a person was most important in identifying them as suitable for holding a leadership role in the community.

¹¹⁶ Newbigin, *Reunion of the Church*, p. 132 makes clear his belief that this process was not the expression of personal taste, but rather 'like a court sifting evidence in order to obtain the most reliable account of what really happened. The controlling fact was that Christ had lived, taught, done mighty works, died, risen again and appeared to His disciples.' Thus, orthodoxy is 'the expression of the fact that it is the actual event of God's work in Christ which is the supreme and decisive standard for the Church.'

¹¹⁷ Newbigin, *Reunion of the Church*, p. 128: 'The conviction that [God] must have provided some safeguard against error other than that which is known in the act of faith itself rests upon the same human anxiety which is the basis of idolatry.'

¹¹⁸ Newbigin, *Truth and Authority*, p. 24. Newbigin consistently uses the term 'mediating' in the sense bearing the witness of the authority of God, and so I continue to use this as matter of convention.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 43 and 70.

¹²¹ This 'indwelt story' also over time gains more authority than the cultured Christianity that has enabled them to encounter God and the Bible. Thus, Newbigin refers to a triangle of relationships when he talks about the gospel encountering culture which has the three corners of Scripture, local culture and the 'ecumenical fellowship representing the witness of Christians from other cultures' (see Newbigin, *Open Secret*, p. 153). This is of great

The traditions of this fellowship tell the story of all those who have previously been adopted into God's story, therefore tradition cannot be separated from Scripture. However, as a closed canon, Scripture has a normative role in relation to tradition. Tradition is a broad term and the content of tradition varies between denominations because they are 'the memories and practices of a community and have to be understood in the context of its life'.¹²³ Newbigin is clear that 'the supremely authoritative practices are the sacraments of baptism and the eucharist'.¹²⁴ It is these two sacraments together with Scripture that 'define what Christianity is and, conversely, are rightly understood only in the context of Christian tradition.'¹²⁵ However, Newbigin does mention many other practices that he would expect to be present in a church such as prayer and service, the apostolic ministry, almsgiving, fasting, and love for and care of others.¹²⁶

It may seem surprising that Newbigin does not include the Apostolic and Nicene Creeds in his fundamental forms. This is a point where a distinction needs to be made between his approach to the Church and a congregation of the Church. The creeds are part of the 'authority of tradition' of the Church that guards 'its common life from errors destructive of the faith, from interpretations of the faith that transgress the bounds of "reasonable liberty."'¹²⁷ However, Newbigin says that reciting the creeds cannot be regarded as a compulsory practice of public worship for a congregation.¹²⁸ Thus, for the Church of England, the creeds form part of the doctrinal structure of the church which provides the Tradition of the church. It is this Tradition that gives continuity within the Church of England, and enables the Church of England to provide a basis for mutual recognition of ministry with other denominations. As an aside, it is also the commitment of a denomination to their Tradition above a commitment to the unity of the Church that leads to what Newbigin describes as the 'intolerable anomaly' of Christian disunity.¹²⁹ Therefore, not all Traditions that are passed on are to be accepted.¹³⁰

importance to Newbigin, and shows his resistance to a monocultural interpretation of what it means to live under the authority of Scripture.

¹²² Newbigin, *Truth and Authority*, p. 49.

¹²³ Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, p. 87.

¹²⁴ Ibid. Although Newbigin repeatedly affirms this he does also want to safeguard the ultimate authority of the Holy Spirit to join people to the Church, and so would include Quakers as part of the Church, even though he sees them as missing the fullness of what it means to be the elect people of God because they do not celebrate sacraments. See Newbigin, *Household of God*, p. 102.

¹²⁵ Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, p. 87.

¹²⁶ See Newbigin, *Finality of Christ*, p. 110, Newbigin, *Household of God*, p. 21 and Newbigin, *Good Shepherd*, pp. 10 and 14.

¹²⁷ Newbigin, *Reunion of the Church*, p. 146.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Newbigin, *Household of God*, p. 17.

¹³⁰ Newbigin, *Truth and Authority*, p. 47. Thus, the closed canon of Scripture takes priority as a means of mediating the authority of God and Newbigin believes that Christian traditions must be open to being questioned by Scripture as much as any other cultured tradition must be open to being questioned by Scripture.

Reason is necessary for understanding both Scripture and tradition, but can only be used rightly if it is also indwelling the Christian story.¹³¹ Newbigin highlights the danger of invoking reason as a 'parallel or supplementary authority to scripture and tradition' which he sees as a way of Jesus and his gospel being co-opted into other worldviews.¹³² Only alongside Scripture and tradition can reason about the gospel lead to transformation of culture. Finally, experience is also interpreted through the framework of belief. Experience is the testimony and power of the Holy Spirit in the life of a Christian believer, enabling a willing and joyful submission to the authority of God.¹³³ Without experience alongside Scripture, tradition and reason, Newbigin sees a danger of an 'unwilling or uncomprehending submission to authority which is a mark of slavery'.¹³⁴ Thus, it is clear why Newbigin refers to the four as interdependent sources, seeking to separate one of the 'sources of authority' from the others will distort the meaning of the gospel.

It can be seen from this section that Newbigin's approach to authority provides one way to understand the notion of dispersed authority as the plausibility structure for Christian faith within the Church of England. A Christian plausibility structure gives meaning to the revelation of Jesus, but is not infallible and not static because the Church is on a journey of deepening knowledge and experience of the truth in Jesus Christ which will only be revealed at the eschaton. The whole Church must confess it is not yet what it will one day be: 'the union in one fellowship of all who accept Christ as Lord'.¹³⁵ The Church points to the now and not yet of the kingdom. She is called to manifest the rule and reign of God's kingdom in her life, but is also caught up in God's mission that will culminate in the eschaton. This results in what Newbigin calls the 'logic of mission': the 'public truth' of the story entrusted to the Church must be shared so that all can have an opportunity to respond.¹³⁶ Therefore, Newbigin sees a specific role for the Church in challenging 'public life with the gospel', but this will only have integrity if it is 'rooted in and [leads] back to a believing community'.¹³⁷ This is because it is only the believing community/congregation that Newbigin says can provide the 'hermeneutic of the gospel'.¹³⁸

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 57. Therefore, reason should not be set in opposition to revelation because we reason within a system of revelation whereby our Creator (he uses Author) speaks and we respond.

¹³² Ibid., pp. 56-57. See also, Newbigin, *Gospel in Pluralist Society*, p. 96.

¹³³ Newbigin, *Truth and Authority*, p. 61.

¹³⁴ Ibid. This is because experience brings personal confrontation with the authority of God whereas the other three 'sources' are to an extent the related experience of others. In an ideal world, Scripture, tradition and reason would not be manipulated to suit the selfish ends of those who handle them, but Church history shows that they have often been used to exert power over others rather than to establish the authority of God. This is the situation that was in view in Morisey's writing about authority in the Church in section 3.2.3.

¹³⁵ Newbigin, *Reunion of the Church*, p. xxx.

¹³⁶ Newbigin, *Gospel in Pluralist Society*, p. 125.

¹³⁷ Ibid., p. 227.

¹³⁸ Ibid., p. 232.

It is this thought which guides Newbigin's approach to the authority of the Church in the world to which I now turn.

2.2.2.2 The Church and the world

Newbigin says that 'God is at work in manifold ways outside the bounds of the Church' but we must also assert that 'the clue to God's dealings with [humanity] is to be found in the Church'.¹³⁹ Newbigin speaks often about the Church being a sign, instrument and foretaste of the kingdom. Therefore, the key question to be asked of any congregation is whether it is 'actually functioning as first-fruit, sign and instrument of God's new creation for that bit of the world?'.¹⁴⁰ The 'supreme foretaste of eternal life' is love.¹⁴¹ This is love of God and love of neighbour.¹⁴² Returning the role of Newbigin's doctrine of election in his approach to Christian authority; the authority for mission, for sharing the gospel with the world, comes because God chooses a people to bear the witness of God's salvation in the world.¹⁴³ It may seem offensive that 'public truth' must come to from one person to another, from a particular Jewish culture but with universal application. However, for Newbigin this relationship between the particular and the universal is absolutely necessary to reveal the nature of God as a personal God, the nature of humanity as 'being-in-relatedness' with lives of mutual responsibility towards each other and creation, and the nature of salvation as a corporate healing of relationships.¹⁴⁴ By presenting this as his foundational understanding, Newbigin locates the authority of the Church in the world as the bearer of the blessing of the truth about God and God's purposes in the world.¹⁴⁵

At a congregational level, the congregation must be the Church for a place. This means the forms of the congregation must be contextual.¹⁴⁶ However, whilst contextualisation is the faithful result of participation in God's mission, a culture only comes to a revelation of the truth of the gospel through the action of the Holy Spirit. Newbigin has a high view of culture informed by Scripture. He identifies the 'distinct existence' of nations as 'the first fruit of God's primal covenant of blessings' in Genesis 9-10, the blessing of language diversity in Acts 2, and the treasures of the nations being 'brought into God's City' in Revelation 21, as three

¹³⁹ Newbigin, 'Duty and Authority', p. 30.

¹⁴⁰ Newbigin, *Good Shepherd*, p. 88.

¹⁴¹ Newbigin, *Household of God*, p. 129.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 124.

¹⁴³ Newbigin, *Gospel in Pluralist Society*, p. 85.

¹⁴⁴ Newbigin, *Gospel in Pluralist Society*, pp. 82-5, and Newbigin, *Open Secret*, pp. 68-70.

¹⁴⁵ Newbigin, *Open Secret*, p. 71.

¹⁴⁶ In Newbigin, 'Context and Conversion', in *International Review of Mission* 68 (July 1979), 301-312, he outlines five key factors for contextualisation: (1) the 'Gospel must be in the language of the hearers'; (2) the gospel is 'proclaimed in word and celebrated in sacrament and enjoyed in the life of a caring community'; (3) the Christians are 'deeply involved in the life of the society around them'; (4) the Christians are able to give an account of the hope they have; and (5) the Christians 'respect and welcome' the gifts of others.

signs of diverse culture being God given.¹⁴⁷ Therefore the revelation of the gospel in a culture is the start of bringing the gifts of that culture into the Church. This is part of the process of God's story where the Church remains incomplete until all things are summed up in Christ. The high value of culture means that Newbigin also expects the living God to be at work in people and cultures ahead of the gospel being proclaimed.¹⁴⁸ This means that conversion is 'a relationship both of continuity and of discontinuity'¹⁴⁹: continuity because the new believer now recognises that God has always been present with them, and discontinuity because prior allegiances to authority are severed when the authority of Christ is confessed.¹⁵⁰

The Church must not fall into the temptation of providing Christian answers to the problems it sees in a culture, since it does not possess the truth, only points to the truth. Neither should the Church impose adherence to a set of forms, or indeed ethical standards, on new believers. Instead the Church should say: 'Be a Christian in the sense which I have defined, and let the Holy Spirit who has brought you to Christ teach us too what it means to be a Christian.'¹⁵¹ Newbigin says that 'the Church can never be wholly at home in the world' and that 'it deliberately and systematically transgresses the boundaries of nation and culture'.¹⁵² This means that the Church must resist syncretism and allow the gospel to retain its voice of judgement over culture.

In terms of authority, the Church cannot expect any of her sources of authority to be accepted as authoritative by culture, but she can nevertheless bear witness to God's authority in her life. Newbigin recognises that the Church has succumbed to imperialism in the past, an action which denies the truth of the gospel.¹⁵³ One way to guard against this is the process of personal and communal discipleship which is the final part of Newbigin's approach to Christian authority.

2.2.3 *The exercise of personal authority*

As part of the visible form of the Church, the exercise of authority should be a genuine participation in the work of God in the world. In the definitions I established at the start of this thesis, I stated that authority is exercised in ordered relationships for the purpose of bringing the Church to maturity in Christ. In comparison to the rest of Newbigin's work there is relatively little about the specific exercise of personal

¹⁴⁷ Newbigin, 'local church truly united', p. 121.

¹⁴⁸ Kandiah, *Theology of Evangelism*, pp. 195 and 209 suggests that Newbigin had a 'subconsciously different approach' to western culture which resulted in a negative stance 'despite his conviction that God communicates in and through all cultures.' This thesis assumes that Newbigin's contextual approach to mission can be as equally applied to England by the Church in England as to cross-cultural mission.

¹⁴⁹ Newbigin, *Finality of Christ*, p. 60.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., p.110.

¹⁵² Newbigin, *One Body, One Gospel, One World*, p. 31.

¹⁵³ Lesslie Newbigin, 'The Gospel and our Culture: A Response to Elaine Graham and Heather Walton', in *Modern Churchman* 34.2 (1992), 1-11, p. 8.

authority. He does write about ordained ministry, but this is mainly in the context of the CSI, and so it is not appropriate for this thesis to directly apply his thinking about ordained ministry to fxc.¹⁵⁴ However, some general principles can be established particularly about the ordering of relationships which enable the authority of tradition to be maintained and developed as a grounding for belief.

The first point to make is that authority is a gift for every Christian and is not linked to particular offices or roles within the Church. Obedience to Christ's authority means a Christian must exercise authority over themselves, and be committed to their own maturity in Christ. This is as much a participation in the mission of God as any external 'missionary activity'. Newbigin returns to Scripture to provide a pattern for leadership which is grounded in Jesus' statement: 'take up your cross and follow me'.¹⁵⁵ Therefore, being a disciple begins with repentance and a decision to follow Jesus. This is the only basis for the exercise of personal authority. It is in his writing about ministry in books such as *Good Shepherd* that it is possible to glimpse the practical application of the theory that I have examined so far. He gives most attention to the roles of Scripture and tradition, but his application is reasoned from that basis and consistently takes into account experience.

Scripture plays a normative role in Newbigin's life.¹⁵⁶ He expects Scripture to be reading him rather than vice-versa, and for this reading of Scripture to alter his actions and his view of the world.¹⁵⁷ He has a strong conviction about the power of the Holy Spirit working through Scripture who will 'create his own forms of obedience and holiness, and to bear his own witness to Christ'.¹⁵⁸ The plausibility structure of the congregation provides the expected norms of personal behaviour guided by Scripture, but these are not a set of rules to be followed. Fundamentally, a Christian is called to love and to forgive others as a response to being loved and forgiven.¹⁵⁹ These are deeply related. Accepting God's forgiveness means accepting God's judgement of personal sin, it is amid this judgement that God's love and mercy are revealed.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁴ Although much of the ordination material is not in conflict with the understanding of the Church of England there is no space in this thesis to explore the nuances of the differences and so I have made the decision to seek general principles from this material.

¹⁵⁵ Newbigin, *Good Shepherd*, p. 55. Here Newbigin quotes from Matthew 16.24.

¹⁵⁶ For example, in Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda*, p. 152, he talks about how focused reading of the Bible changed his perspective on God at work through the Church and directly in the world.

¹⁵⁷ Newbigin, *Good Shepherd*, p. 26. Newbigin advocates preaching from the lectionary so that Scripture can confront 'my own limited ideas and emotions'. He adds that wrestling 'with an uncongenial text can be the source of endless insight.' Also in Lesslie Newbigin, 'Christ and the Cultures', in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 31.1 (1978), 1-22, p. 4, Newbigin talks about the effect that reading the Gospels has as people are confronted with 'the figure of Jesus' in a 'real personal meeting'.

¹⁵⁸ Lesslie Newbigin, 'The Work of the Holy Spirit in the Life of the Asian Churches' in *A Decisive Hour for the Christian Mission* (London: SCM Press, 1960), p. 30.

¹⁵⁹ Newbigin, *Household of God*, p.185.

¹⁶⁰ Newbigin, *Sin and Salvation*, p. 80.

Newbigin says:

if there is no sense of the transcendence of God's will over our particular ethical decisions, then there is no escape from the self-righteousness which ends up by identifying my cause with God's will and my opponent's with the devil.¹⁶¹

Thus, whilst conversion will require a commitment to changes in behaviour, 'conversion is an event which is more than its ethical implications'.¹⁶² Conversion is a commitment to a personal relationship with God. It is a commitment to obey God, a task at which all will fail. It is at this point that the authority of Christ needs to be confessed because without this Newbigin sees no hope of a genuine relationship with another person. Newbigin states:

it is because he has forgiven that I can forgive and be forgiven. It is because he has reconciled us both that my neighbour and I can be reconciled. I learn true love when both my beloved and I know that there is One to whom we both owe an allegiance that has priority over the allegiance we owe each other.¹⁶³

Thus, the exercise of personal authority begins with exercising the authority Jesus gives to his disciples to forgive those who sin against them.

Newbigin is very clear that no personal authority passes from God to individual people.¹⁶⁴ By this, Newbigin means that an individual cannot stand alone claiming full divine authority has been given to them, but he does allow for individuals, by grace and in the power of the Spirit, to exercise authority on behalf of God.¹⁶⁵ This is authority exercised 'in the name of Jesus' and so participates in the exercise of God's authority as it demonstrates the character of God's authority.¹⁶⁶ This exercise of authority will therefore always be a sign of the coming kingdom.

Newbigin views leadership as fundamental for the Church to be able to fulfil God's purpose for it.¹⁶⁷ Leadership is not necessarily synonymous with ordination, but ordained people are expected to lead. The purpose of this form of leadership is to enable, liberate and mobilise the congregation.¹⁶⁸ Thus, leadership is one of the gifts the Spirit gives to the Church but should not be exalted above any other gift.¹⁶⁹ Newbigin speaks often about the priesthood of all believers, and the necessity of all Christians to act as priests where

¹⁶¹ Newbigin, *Honest Religion*, pp. 71-72.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 74.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

¹⁶⁴ Newbigin, *Household of God*, p. 104.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

¹⁶⁶ Newbigin, *Reunion of the Church*, p.163. This for example might involve forgiveness of sins, exercise of spiritual gifts such as healing and miracles, and prayers of binding and loosing.

¹⁶⁷ Newbigin, *Good Shepherd*, p. 56.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

¹⁶⁹ Newbigin, *One Body, One Gospel, One World*, p. 21.

they are in the world.¹⁷⁰ In order for this to happen effectively however, he sees a need for ‘a ministerial priesthood which serves, nourishes, sustains, and guides this priestly work.’¹⁷¹ This ministerial priesthood does not ‘take away the priesthood of the whole body but enables it.’¹⁷² The ministerial priesthood also acts as a means of providing order in the Church, acting both as a way of recognising where the ‘local presence of the universal Church is’ rather than a faction, and of enabling the united witness of the Church in an area.¹⁷³

2.3 Summary of Newbigin’s approach to Christian authority

In summary, Newbigin’s approach to Christian authority is this: God is the ultimate authority. God’s authority is exercised towards humans not through the requirements of legalist obedience, but through the invitation to personal relationship. This invitation, made flesh in Jesus Christ, confronts humanity with a decision. Accept the invitation to believe that Jesus gives meaning and purpose to history, and participate in that purpose, or reject the invitation and continue to live under the authority of another belief system. Either way, the authority of God is unchanged. However, personal relationship cannot be divorced from the context which gives a relationship meaning.¹⁷⁴

It was the community gathered around Jesus that first provided the context. Each individual is in a personal relationship with Jesus, but as a result also bound to one another in love. A visible community must embody this spiritual reality because a belief cannot be known until it is acted upon. Belief in God is a belief that God is made known through personal relationship. This means that one is chosen to bear the witness of who God is to another.¹⁷⁵ The community that began around Jesus continues to live out her faith through the reading and enacting of Scripture. This ‘indwelling’ of Scripture means the congregation becomes the ‘hermeneutic of the gospel’. The forms of enactment begin with baptism and the Eucharist and expand into a plausibility structure that bears the witness of God and enables Christians to mature in their faith and grow up into Christ. The plausibility structure will become a rigid framework of dry religion without reasoned flexible growth in response to new experiences of the Spirit at work.¹⁷⁶ Thus, the community

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 235.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., p. 235.

¹⁷² Ibid., p. 235.

¹⁷³ Newbigin, ‘Lay Presidency’, p. 180, and Lesslie Newbigin, ‘Bishops in a United Church’, in Peter Moore (ed.), *Bishops, But What Kind?* (London: SPCK, 1982): 149-161, p. 150.

¹⁷⁴ Newbigin, *Household of God*, p. 77. For example, I could say I love my parents, but this has no meaning without a story behind it of their love, and my birth, of the social, economic, and personal framework within which our relationship has grown over the years, and equally importantly the visible observation of how we relate and communicate.

¹⁷⁵ I am using ‘bear the witness of’ rather than ‘bear witness to’ because this is Newbigin’s terminology. It is God through Jesus and the Holy Spirit who bears witness to Godself. Humans can only ‘bear the witness of’ God to Godself, they are not able to bear witness directly themselves.

¹⁷⁶ Newbigin, *Honest Religion*, p. 96: ‘Today’s religion can become the enemy of tomorrow’s faith.’

reinterprets the gospel to itself as it also makes it known through relations with the world (or 'cultures') in which it is placed.¹⁷⁷ Humans will not fully know God until the eschaton, but in the meantime, each new personal and cultural reconciliation with Christ brings greater revelation of who Christ is, and so should bring change to the plausibility structure.

The Christian plausibility structure operates at several different levels. At the universal Church level this includes recognition of the canon of Scripture and creeds.¹⁷⁸ At denominational level this includes the doctrinal statements and structures. At congregational level, there will be local customs and cultural norms of behaviour. All these inform the framework of faith for individual belief. Whilst not so much a factor in Newbigin's time, the network level is also becoming significant for Christians.¹⁷⁹ Therefore, the authority of the church is exercised by bearing the witness of God in four main ways: (1) proclaiming the gospel at a structural level of society, (2) holding and passing on the doctrinal understanding of the Church, (3) choosing forms that reflect the God-given essence of the Church and (4) enabling members of the Church to bear the witness of God in their day-to-day lives. The exercise of personal authority is also to bear the witness of God through proclaiming the gospel and living out that faith. This involves loving one another (for which the authority to forgive is crucial), and encouraging each other with the hope that is in Christ.

As this thesis now moves from analysis of Newbigin's approach to Christian authority to examine the literature surrounding fxc, a final word from Newbigin will guide the journey. A driving concern throughout his life was for the unity of the Church. He saw this as an expression of the Church's submission to the Lordship of Jesus Christ and so speaking about the Church Newbigin says:

Its unity with those who have gone before does not consist in its being bound to the details of their practice; it consists inwardly in its obedience to the same living Lord whom they obeyed, and outwardly in the maintenance, so far as that obedience permits, of continuity with them in one visible institution.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁷ The community 'knows' God through participating in God's mission, see Newbigin, *Eternal Contemporary*, p. 21.

¹⁷⁸ All major Christian denominations accept the Hebrew scriptures (which is the Protestant Old Testament) and the New Testament canon as divinely inspired and authoritative. Beyond this, there are books of the Hebrew Scriptures which are accepted as canonical by Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches.

¹⁷⁹ For example, with churches publishing sermons and teaching notes on the internet the influence of 'trusted' churches such as HTB, Hillsong, and Willow Creek is much wider than the congregation that gathers on a Sunday. There is no room in this thesis to address the impact of these networks on congregational frameworks of belief but it seems inevitable that it will introduce much greater diversity at a local level than there would be even a decade ago when the whole congregation would largely receive the same teaching from the Sunday sermon. In my experience, the huge choice of Christian perspectives now available can undermine the perceived authority of the Bible if it is treated as a set of infallible propositions. Thus, Newbigin's approach of 'indwelling' the story which enables dialogue and a variety of response to Scripture seems vital because the authority of Scripture is maintained whilst allowing for flexibility in the interpreting tradition.

¹⁸⁰ Newbigin, *Reunion of the church*, p. 134.

Louise Nelstrop states the development of fxc calls for a re-examination of 'the Church's ecclesiological make-up, be it liturgy, hierarchy or authority'.¹⁸¹ Newbigin says this must happen within a commitment to the visible unity of the Church. The questions that guide the remainder of the thesis build from Newbigin's quote: How does a fxc know she is being obedient to her Lord? And what level of continuity with the Church of England should fxc seek to maintain?

¹⁸¹ Louise Nelstrop, 'Mixed economy or ecclesial reciprocity: which does the Church of England really want to promote?', in Louise Nelstrop and Martyn Percy (eds.), *Evaluating Fresh Expressions: explorations in emerging church* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2008), p. 187.

Chapter 3 Fresh Expressions and fresh expressions of church

The term ‘fresh expressions of church’ (fxc) was coined by the authors of the *mission-shaped church (msc)* report to indicate both that something new was happening in the Church of England and to link this new thing to the history of God at work in the Church.¹ The definition of fxc which this thesis will use, since it has been common currency since 2006, is:

A fresh expression is a form of church for our changing culture, established primarily for the benefit of people who are not yet members of any church.

- It will come into being through principles of listening, service, contextual mission and making disciples.
- It will have the potential to become a mature expression of church shaped by the gospel and the enduring marks of the church and for its cultural context.²

Several things should be noted from this definition. First, there is no reference to any denomination, and indeed FE has formal partnerships with a range of Christian organisations, denominations and streams.³ This thesis is concerned with the Church of England and fxc that consider themselves to be part of the Church of England. Thus, this definition will be considered to refer to ‘a form of church in communion with the Church of England’ rather than ‘a form of church’ in general. Second, there is a move away from the definite article with reference made to church rather than ‘the Church’. This raises a question about the relation of the local to the universal Church, and how FE perceives this, which will be shown is not yet adequately addressed in the literature. Third, there is an intentional focus on cultural context and enabling this to shape formation of new churches in a framework that matches Newbigin’s triangle of relations between gospel, church and culture. The relative authority of each of these three elements will need to be identified, as well as the sources of knowing what ‘the gospel’ is.⁴ Finally, the phrase ‘potential to become mature’ points to an expected trajectory that addresses continuity with the inherited church expressed through the marks of the Church.⁵

¹ Church of England’s Mission and Public Affairs Council Working Group, *mission-shaped church: church planting and fresh expressions of church in a changing context* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004). p. 34. The term itself, echoes the Declaration of Assent that Church of England clergy make when they are licensed ‘to proclaim [the Christian faith] afresh in each generation.’ See <https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-worship/worship/texts/mvcontents/preface.aspx>. Accessed 7th November 2015.

² See: <https://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/guide/about/whatis>. Accessed 12th October 2015. This definition was initially proposed in Steven Croft, ‘What counts as a fresh expression of church?’, in Nelstrop and Percy, *Evaluating Fresh Expressions*, p. 10 with the exception that the phrase ‘contextual mission’ in the first bullet point has now replaced the phrase ‘incarnational mission’ which appeared in the initial definition.

³ See: <http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/about/partners>. When accessed on 19th October 2015, 10 formal partnerships were noted of which the Church of England was one of five partner denominations. I am using the abbreviation FE for the Fresh Expressions movement.

⁴ There is no explicit reference to Scripture here which opens the question of how the gospel is known.

⁵ Although in the *msc* report itself maturity is linked more pragmatically to the realisation of Henry Venn’s (nineteenth century missionary) three ‘self’ principles of becoming self-financing, self-governing and self-propagating. See *mission-shaped church*, pp. 121-3.

This ecclesiological trajectory occupies a central part of this thesis: How do we know ecclesologically that a fxc is part of the Church of England?

It is estimated that more than 2000 fxc have started since 1992.⁶ The Church Growth Report of November 2014 highlighted this area of ministry as being one of the key areas of growth in the Church of England.⁷ The implication is that fxc are becoming an increasingly significant part of the Church of England. Whilst this is accepted across most dioceses as the current 'state of play' there is still relatively little theological reflection on what this means for the ecclesiology of the Church of England. It should be noted here that fxc is a catch-all term for a huge variety of Christian congregations. At the date of this thesis, 21 different 'types' of fxc have been identified which range from new congregations of existing parishes to new forms which look radically different and largely operate outside 'normal' Church of England structures.⁸ This means that establishing a one-size-fits-all ecclesiology for fxc is not straight forward.⁹ However, in this thesis I am arguing that beginning with an account of authority enables the relations to God and the inherited Church of England to be clarified, which will contribute to ecclesiological development.

Within the Church of England, fxc are part of the so-called 'mixed-economy of church'.¹⁰ Louise Nelstrop states that this term assumes fxc and the 'inherited' Church of England function as 'equal partners'.¹¹ However, there is little to suggest that there is equality and most fxc are almost totally dependent on the inherited church for their continued existence.¹² Despite this George Lings identifies a change of language within the Church of England between 1994 and 2004 in which fxc moved from being referred to as

⁶ Church Army's Research Unit, *Church Growth Research Project Report on Strand 3b: An analysis of fresh expressions of Church and church plants begun in the period 1992-2012* (London: Church Army, October 2013), p. 32 provides this estimate based on extrapolating the data of 518 Fresh Expressions across 25% of the total number of dioceses. It is supported by further data published in November 2016. Whilst the msc report recommends that separate vocabulary of fxc and planting are used (p. 34), it is also stated that fxc 'embraces two realities: existing churches that are seeking to renew or redirect what they already have, and others who are intentionally sending out planting groups to discover what will emerge when the gospel is immersed in the mission context.' Subsequent studies and reports have tended to include church planting as a type of fxc and so this thesis will do the same (for example see *Church Growth Research Project*, pp. 108-110).

⁷ See: <http://www.churchgrowthresearch.org.uk/UserFiles/File/Reports/FromAnecdoteToEvidence1.0.pdf>. Accessed 12th October 2015.

⁸ *Church Growth Research Project*, pp. 108-111.

⁹ Martyn Percy, *Shaping the Church: The Promise of Implicit Theology* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2010), p. 76.

¹⁰ A term coined by Archbishop Rowan Williams in his foreword to *mission-shaped church*, p. vii.

¹¹ Louise Nelstrop, 'Mixed economy or ecclesial reciprocity: which does the Church of England really want to promote?', in Louise Nelstrop and Martyn Percy (eds.), *Evaluating Fresh Expressions: explorations in emerging church* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2008), p. 187.

¹² George Lings, *The Day of Small Things: An analysis of fresh expressions of Church in 21 dioceses of the Church of England* (Sheffield: Church Army's Research Unit, 2016), pp. 205-6 shows that nearly 88% of fxc have no legal identity and remain vulnerable to clergy changes that may not continue to be supportive.

supplementary to the parish system to being complementary to it.¹³ The language of ‘mixed economy’ is now most commonly embraced and expresses the pragmatic need to invest in both fxc and the existing parish based structure within the Church of England. The language remains mainly in the arena of story-telling and the pragmatic,¹⁴ with limited research so far on what an ecclesiology of fxc might involve, or how this impacts the ecclesiology of the Church of England. It is hoped that this thesis will contribute to the ecclesiological conversation around fxc and the mixed economy Church of England through addressing three questions. First, how do we know a fresh expression of church is a church? Second, how can unity and continuity between the Church of England and fresh expressions of church be expressed? Finally, what is the basis for exercise of personal authority?

In the following sections I examine the key literature addressing the ecclesiology of fxc and identify how Newbigin’s approach to Christian authority contributes clarity. I have chosen to begin with the *msc* report since this first expressed the intent for development of an ecclesiology to undergird fxc.¹⁵ The *msc* report was produced by ‘a working group of the Church of England’s Mission and Public Affairs Council’ and accepted by General Synod in February 2004.¹⁶ It set out the ‘cultural context of the Church of England’s mission’, reviewed stories from fxc since the *Breaking New Ground* report, and made theological and practical recommendations for contextual forms of the Church.¹⁷ As part of the analysis of *msc* I include contributions from three critiques of the report, and the most recent (2016) statistics about the structures and practices of fxc which indicate the trajectory of their development to date.

¹³ George Lings, ‘A History of Fresh Expressions and Church Planting in the Church of England’, in David Goodhew (ed.), *Church Growth in Britain: 1980 to the Present* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2012), p. 173.

¹⁴ This was a key feature of *mission-shaped church* which itself built on the story-telling approach of the *Breaking New Ground* (London: Church House Publishing, 1994) report.

¹⁵ I will not be addressing literature prior to 2004, notably this includes the *Breaking New Ground* report which *msc* was initially intended to report on and update. *Breaking New Ground* focused on church planting in response to 177 new churches planted in the decade prior to the report. Of these, most had diocesan approval but four were planted without approval which led to the House of Bishops wanting to investigate further. The report highlighted areas which the *msc* report would go on to address in more detail such as the nature and legal status of plants, authorisation of leaders and relationships of church plants to current structures. Thus, whilst the *Breaking New Ground* report is of interest in the development of fxc, this thesis is concerned primarily with development of fxc after the publication of the *msc* report in 2004. This report triggered increasing diversity in fxc beyond what was primarily church planting or development of new churches in new housing areas prior to 2004.

¹⁶ *mission-shaped church*, p. ix. See also The Archbishops’ Council, *Report of Proceedings 2004 General Synod February Group of Sessions Volume 35 No. 1* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004), p. 158.

¹⁷ *mission-shaped church*, p. xii-xiii.

3.1 *mission-shaped church* report and critiques

3.1.1 *mission-shaped church* report (2004)

One of the express aims of the *msc* report was 'to ensure that any fresh expressions of church that emerge within the Church of England, or are granted a home within it, are undergirded by an adequate ecclesiology', and the report outlined some theological principles to guide this.¹⁸ There has been some subsequent debate regarding whether it outlined an approach to missiology rather than ecclesiology, but since the *msc* report is a key early influence in the development of fxc, examination of the ecclesiology of fxc must begin there.¹⁹

The *msc* report dedicates a chapter to 'theology for a missionary church', and explores this under four main subsections.²⁰ The largest theological subsection of the report is titled 'salvation history'. It addresses the span of creation to redemption focussed on Christ and draws conclusions about incarnational and contextual ministry from Christ.²¹ There are clear statements that place the report's doctrine of the Church firmly within an understanding of the mission of the triune God, with the Church participating in this *missio Dei*.²² The report's second major theological strand deals with the thesis that the Church is designed to reproduce.²³ The report states that it is not every local church which should be growing, but that it is normative for the national church to be doing so.²⁴ The language is of growth by reproduction, and so implies numerical growth, achieved through mission and church planting.²⁵

The third theological strand of the *msc* report examines the four classic marks of the Church.²⁶ It is a strength of the report that it seeks to re-present the Church's call to mission by examining this through the

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 84.

¹⁹ Steven Croft, 'Fresh expressions in a mixed economy Church', in Croft (ed.), *Mission-shaped Questions*, p. 14.

²⁰ *mission-shaped church*, pp. 84-103.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 84-93.

²² For example, *mission-shaped church*, p. 85 quotes David Bosch "There is Church because there is mission". Also p. 86: 'We join his mission.'

²³ This thinking draws on the work of Lings which later formed part of his PhD thesis completed in 2008: George Lings, *The Church's Calling and Capacity to Reproduce* (Unpublished PhD thesis: University of Manchester via Cliff College, 2008).

http://www.churcharmy.org.uk/Articles/413197/Our_work/Research/SCOLER/SCOLER_Library/The_Churchs_Calling.aspx Accessed 26th October 2015. In this thesis, Lings argues for 'reproduce' to be considered a fifth mark of the Church alongside one, holy, catholic and apostolic.

²⁴ *mission-shaped church*, p. 93. It is not clear however at what level the expectation of growth should begin or whether by 'national church' the report means the Church of England, or the national body of Christians.

²⁵ *mission-shaped church*, p. 95. The report notes that Jesus clearly intended His disciples to make other disciples and meant for these followers to be witnesses to Him in the power of the Spirit to the ends of the earth. Matthew 28.18, Acts 1.8 and Acts 9 and 10 are noted as some of the biblical passages that reinforce this message.

²⁶ The four marks of the Church were first included in the creedal statement coming from the Council of Constantinople in 381, and continue to be part of the Nicene Creed. The four marks refer to the statement of belief that there is 'one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church'. Hans Küng, *The Church* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1992

lens of the four marks. This shows commitment to being part of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church whilst providing a distinctive understanding about what this means for the task of fxc. In the report, unity comes through baptism.²⁷ Unity is strongly linked to diversity and interdependence between different expressions of church.²⁸ This suggests that there must be a means of each expression of church being able to recognise each other as a church, but how this happens is not addressed. On holiness, the report focuses on being set apart by God for God's purposes, and so being prepared to die to one's own culture and preferences.²⁹ On catholicity, the report shows a classic understanding of diversity of ecclesial expression within the limits of a common belief in the one gospel.³⁰ Catholicity is limited to groups who, regardless of form, believe in the Christ of Scripture.³¹ This gives an authority to Scripture as a way of revealing who Christ is. On apostolicity, the report focuses on the Church in mission as sent by Jesus in continuity with the Father sending the Son to the world.³² Whilst the missional element of the apostolic mandate is emphasised, this is bounded by the need for continuity to be expressed between the apostles commissioned by Jesus and the Church today. Here, the report seems caught between the recognised need for continuity of message, which inevitably must give some authority to Tradition, and the desire not to be bound by Tradition, a tension that is not explicitly stated or resolved.³³ This subsection of the report concludes with an innovative modelling of the marks which equates them with four dimensions of church life: up, in, out and of.³⁴ The marks are described with unity being the 'in' dimension, holiness related to 'up', apostolicity linked to 'out', and catholicity being the 'of' dimension.³⁵

10th edition), p. 263 describes these marks as giving the nature of the Church. The form of the Church varies but it should always be true to this nature.

²⁷ It appears this is sacramental baptism and so highlights the potential difficulties that arise for fxc in terms of where and by whom new Christians are baptised.

²⁸ *mission-shaped church*, p. 96. Classical understandings of the Church as One are not mentioned. These include unity in the Spirit, being part of the one body of Christ, or of Jesus' prayer for unity in John 17.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 96-7. Whilst there is a call to live holy lives, there is no exposition of what forms this might take. Classical understandings of holiness as a mark of the Church include the Church being holy because of the gift and presence of God and this being shown through participation in key practices of the church.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 98. The report does not refer to the classic dimensions of apostolic succession (adhered to by the Church of England, but traditionally a Catholic and Orthodox understanding) and apostolic teaching (Protestant focus). In his PhD, Lings argues that the Church has neglected the missional aspect of the apostolic mandate through being over-focused on issues of leadership succession and doctrinal inheritance. See Lings, *Calling and capacity*, p. 147.

³³ *mission-shaped church*, p. 87. When the report talks about conversion it is concerned that Church culture (i.e. Tradition) is not imposed from an existing church onto a fxc, but that the Church is changed as a result of including the new converts. This matches Newbigin's conclusion, but is missing an account of the continuity of the Church.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

³⁵ *Ibid.* The danger of this modelling of the marks can also be noted immediately because whilst on *mission-shaped church*, p. 96 the statement is made that 'The Church is one through baptism', the 'in' dimension is referred to only as love within a church gathering. It is this sense that then perpetuates through the FE literature (for example see Claire

The final strand of the theological chapter of the *msc* report examines Anglican ecclesiology and how fxc might fit within this. It begins by making the point that for Anglicans ‘there is no straightforward doctrine of the Church but an ongoing theological formation of church life.’³⁶ Emphasis is placed on the common understanding which churches within the Church of England share, despite their diversity, because their leaders make the Declaration of Assent and look to the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral of ‘Scripture, the Creeds, the dominical sacraments and the Historic Episcopacy’.³⁷ This is the first clear indication in the report of the foundational elements for understanding fxc as part of the Church of England. At the end of this section I have an excursus that summarises findings about current practices in fxc. Divergence from the foundational elements identified in the *msc* report understandably raises questions about how continuity between fxc and the Church of England is established. Finally, there is encouragement that fxc should fit into the current structure of relationships with the Church of England which involve both ‘authority and responsibility’.³⁸ Subsequent parts of the report raise the issue of how lay leaders might be given authority. The onus here rests on the bishop and the importance of episcopal authorisation to give both ‘Anglican legitimacy’ and oversight.³⁹

Overall the report clearly expresses a concern for the gospel to be proclaimed in word and deed throughout the nation, but is essentially focused on the church structures which make this possible.⁴⁰ In this sense, it seems that the *msc* report is ‘requesting’ that the traditional governance structures of the Church of England make room for fxc, and delegate an authority to experiment with new structures. The move towards maturity is described in the report as one of financial and legal status which, while important, effectively side-lines the discussion about what maturity might look like from an ecclesiological perspective.⁴¹ In section 3.1.2 I draw together questions that the *msc* report raises about the nature and forms of the Church, and the approach to Christian authority that is implicit within the report. Before proceeding to critiques of the *msc* report, I turn briefly to review the research that has been carried out into the forms of fxc.

Dalpra, ‘When is Messy Church ‘church’?’, in George Lings (eds.), *Messy Church Theology* (Abingdon: The Bible Reading Fellowship, 2013), p. 22).

³⁶ *mission-shaped church*, p. 100.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 135 and 138.

⁴⁰ For example, the report alerts the Church of England to her structural dependence on the parochial system whereas the nature of society in England has shifted so that geography is not a prime means of encounter with church. Thus, the report highlights a need for networks to offer this.

⁴¹ *mission-shaped church*, pp. 121-3 and 126.

Excursus: Church Army Research Reports

Since 2012, the Church Army Research Unit has been undertaking detailed research on fxc.⁴² Whilst their 2016 report notes that ‘church identity is a deeper theological reality than either ecclesial maturity, or missional effectiveness’, it nevertheless includes helpful data in these areas.⁴³ The report proposes four measures to indicate ecclesial maturity: (1) the ‘three-self’ responsibilities – self-financing, self-governing and self-reproducing, (2) discipleship, (3) celebration of the two dominical sacraments, and (4) engagement with Scripture. The findings of the data follow.

The data collected looked at ‘steps taken’ towards three-self responsibility. For self-financing, 52% of fxc met the minimum criteria of having some form of giving.⁴⁴ 69% of fxc had a leadership group that could make decisions without support of a PCC; this is the minimum step towards self-governance. The first step to self-reproducing was indigenous leadership being established, and this was the case for 41% of fxc. It should be noted that by using the three-self responsibilities as measures, fxc have also recognised that emphasis also needs to be placed on the interdependence with the wider Church.⁴⁵ 80% of fxc have pursued at least one route of developing discipleship.⁴⁶ However, concerns are noted that many fxc face the continued challenge of moving members from being ‘consumers to disciples’.⁴⁷ In terms of celebration of sacraments, 46% celebrate communion and 42% baptism.⁴⁸ Additional data for communion showed a further 38% were on a trajectory towards this, 10% did not see the need for it to form part of their

⁴² The research drawn on here has been jointly funded by the Church Commissioners of the Church of England, and builds on research work carried out over a much longer period. By November 2016, 21 dioceses had answered detailed questions about the development of fxc within their diocese. The reports that summarise the findings and make recommendations are Church Army’s Research Unit, *Report on Strand 3b* and George Lings, *The Day of Small Things* published in 2013 and 2016 respectively. The reports provide close to 400 pages of research and analysis and so there is no scope for detailed engagement here.

⁴³ Lings, *Day of Small Things*, p. 81.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 107-108. A small amount of additional analysis was required to establish the figures for three-self responsibility since the data was split into the findings from the first 11 dioceses and then the later 10. The figures I am using are the average across all 21 dioceses based on the two numbers given.

⁴⁵ See for example Andy Weir, *Sustaining young Churches: A qualitative pilot study of fresh expressions of Church in the Church of England* (Sheffield: Church Army’s Research Unit, 2016), p. 18, and Moynagh, *Church for every context*, pp. 405-408.

⁴⁶ Lings, *The Day of Small Things*, p. 197. Messy Church is one of the key groups of fxc, and it is notable that they have begun to develop an approach to discipleship which is detailed in Paul Moore, *Making Disciples in Messy Church: Growing faith in an all-age community* (Abingdon: The Bible Reading Fellowship, 2013). The book shows the current emphasis on the non-formal and socialisation dimensions of discipleship but begins to examine possible formal catechesis as part of discipleship.

⁴⁷ Weir, *Sustaining young Churches*, p. 41.

⁴⁸ Lings, *Day of Small Things*, p. 110. This data can be further nuanced by data gathered across 10 dioceses on the regularity of celebration of the sacraments. This showed that for fxc meeting monthly communion for 55% of fxc happened annually or less frequently, whilst fxc that met more often 71% celebrated communion at least monthly and often more frequently (p. 157).

gathering.⁴⁹ Figures were similar for baptisms, with 40% on trajectory towards it and 15% seeing no need.⁵⁰ This indicates that the sacraments are not yet formative for fxc in establishing their ecclesial identity. The data shows engagement with Scripture in all but one fxc, with 7 different types of engagement noted ranging from public reading and sermons through storytelling to memory verses.⁵¹ It is not possible to assess from this how normative Scripture is for a fxc, but this would indicate Scripture has some sort of authority for fxc.

In terms of establishing continuity with the Church of England, statistics about leadership and area of operation for fxc are also helpful. Examination of the leaders of fxc showed 51% of leaders were ordained; of the lay leaders, 41% fell into the lay-lay category of no formal recognition or training. In terms of connection to parishes, 75% of fxc operated within a parish boundary and remain largely dependent on this link.⁵² The move away from liturgical traditions puts higher emphasis on the leaders of a fxc to act as points of continuity with the inherited church. This data may suggest that the majority have a good connection to the parish which may indicate some recognition of authority for the lay-lay leaders from ordained leaders in the parish. What is not clear is what implications there are resulting from lack of training in lay-lay leaders, and how this relates to their own maturity in the faith.

Overall, this data shows a degree of continuity can be established between the inherited church and fxc. Progress is being made towards ecclesial maturity in the four areas identified by the report. However, fxc remain largely dependent on the inherited Church of England structures, and questions of sustainability for fxc are being raised which reinforces the need to establish a clearer ecclesiological basis for fxc as part of the Church of England.⁵³

3.1.2 *Questions of ecclesiology and authority arising from the mission-shaped church report*

The *msc* report gave 20 pages to outlining a theology for a missionary church which inevitably resulted in a limited theological framework. However, the outline provided does raise questions about how the report understands the nature and forms of the Church, and about what approach to authority is being taken.

⁴⁹ Lings, *Day of Small Things*, p. 156. This data does however disguise that celebration is infrequent particularly in fxc which meet monthly.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 109. Only one instance in 1109 cases had no engagement with Scripture. A sermon/talk happened in over 80% of fxc, 66% had a creative activity/resource and 60% had Scripture reading.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 179 and Weir, *Sustaining young Churches*, p. 48.

⁵³ See for example Weir, *Sustaining young Churches* and Percy, *Shaping the Church*, p. 79 notes the challenges of maintaining the inherited church structures whilst also funding fxc which are unlikely to make a net financial contribution in the early years of existence.

It is noticeable that the report gives little attention to the ‘invisible dimension’ of the Church.⁵⁴ Hans Küng says ‘the Church will be heading for disaster if it abandons itself to its visible aspects and, forgetful of its true nature, puts itself on the same level as other institutions’.⁵⁵ At times the *msc* report does exactly this, for example identifying the kingdom as a divine activity and the Church, in contrast, as a human community.⁵⁶ Also, the section on the four marks of the Church, uses the marks only as a target for what the Church is ‘seeking to be’. This ignores the divinely given nature of the Church. The essence of the Church is that she is one, holy, catholic and apostolic by grace and calling. Failure to acknowledge this reiterates the aspirational trajectory, noted within fxc literature, to become a church, rather than recognising that God creates and sustains the Church. If this is forgotten, the Church becomes the same as any other human institution where ‘success’ or ‘growth’ is focused on human effort measured by the achievement of outcomes.⁵⁷ Additionally, if exercise of authority in the Church is solely about achievement of outcomes, then it potentially becomes disconnected from showing what it means to live under the authority of God. The result is that the ‘achievement’, for example, of unity would come about by the imposition of forms for the Church, the very thing that fxc are seeking to avoid.

Although the report locates the doctrine of the Church within the *missio Dei*, there is inconsistency in establishing how the Church should be viewed as a result. At one point, the report draws on Lesslie Newbigin’s work to affirm the Church as ‘signs and first fruits, but not to be seen as agents’, and later states the Church is ‘both the fruit...and the agent of God’s mission’.⁵⁸ Overall though, the report emphasises the agency of the Church. Reproduction and growth is linked to the Church strategy, structures and programmes, without suggesting that conversion is a work of God. This obscures the role of the Holy Spirit who at times simply becomes one who empowers the Church to act.⁵⁹ The result is that the existence of the Church is not understood purely as a grace of God, but appears to be under the control of the institution. At worst, this suggests that the authority of the Church is greater than the authority of God; at best, it

⁵⁴ An exception to this comes on *mission-shaped church*, p. 89, where the Church is described as a source of hope, ‘plants of God’s future world’, which implies something more than a human institution.

⁵⁵ Küng, *The Church*, p. 37.

⁵⁶ *mission-shaped church*, p. 86. Graham Cray, ‘Communities of the Kingdom,’ in Graham Cray, Ian Mobsby, Aaron Kennedy (eds.), *Fresh Expression of Church and the Kingdom of God* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2012), pp. 14-15 returns to this statement to clarify the intent not to deny the Church is a ‘supernatural community’ but to distinguish between the kingdom as the ‘totality of the reign of God’ and the Church as a ‘community of the kingdom’. This is an example of how early theological statements surrounding fxc have been corrected or clarified over time.

⁵⁷ For example, the up dimension is described as ‘becoming like God in holiness’ (*mission-shaped church*, p. 99). Biblically holiness is only possible through being joined to Christ. This makes a believer holy, no human action could achieve it.

⁵⁸ *mission-shaped church*, p. 34 and 85. This is also recognised in Lings, *Calling and capacity*, p.77. Here, Lings attributes the confusion in part to ‘hurried editing’ whilst also hinting at a difference in theological views between those who provided draft chapters for the report.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 86: ‘it is the work of the Spirit to empower the Church’ and the Spirit ‘inspires and directs the form the gospel community takes in each culture’.

provides an account of God's authority being delegated to the Church to the extent that the Church grows by human effort.⁶⁰ If the Church does have delegated authority to act on behalf of God, then some account of how this authority related to divine authority, and how it is exercised on behalf of God should be given.

Since the approach to Christian authority is not clear in the *msc* report, one result is confusion about the authority of the Church in the world. At times the report indicates a return to Christendom when it speaks of 'conversion of culture', but it also uses Newbigin-type language of Christians being 'called to live, within each culture, under the lordship of Christ'.⁶¹ This indicates a need for greater clarity about whether the gospel should be expected to change all aspects of culture, or whether there is good in culture that can be affirmed by the gospel. The report presents contextualisation as a conversation between the gospel as 'revealed in Holy Scripture and embodied in the Catholic creeds', Church tradition, and the culture where the gospel is being proclaimed.⁶² The result is a 'church embodying the gospel in a way appropriate to the local context'.⁶³ This reveals an underlying suggestion that there is a 'pure gospel', separate from the Church and culture, that can be distilled from Scripture and the creeds. This presents two problems. First, the reciprocal relationship between the gospel and the Church is not acknowledged. This has implications for how we should determine what needs to be maintained for the Church to remain identifiable as the Church. The failure to identify any core forms at this point sows the seed for future confusion about how we know a fxc is a church. The suggestion that Scripture acts only as a static 'foundation for the Church' rather than providing the story within which the Church continues to dwell disconnects tradition from Scripture.⁶⁴ Second, the separation of the gospel from embodiment within a culture inevitably reduces the gospel to an abstract, ahistoric form. This undermines the biblical account of a necessarily personal and historic gospel. Overall, there is no attempt made to show how Scripture, tradition and experience may be interdependent means of revealing the purpose of God in creation, or means of establishing the authority of God in the Church. These points show the need for a more explicit account of the nature and purpose of the Church than that provided by the *msc* report, and show again the close connection between questions of authority and ecclesiology.

⁶⁰ It should be noted that Lings, *Calling and capacity*, p.14 is clear in his PhD thesis that 'reproduction of the Church does not mean something that the Church can do *unaided by the Holy Spirit*.' Later, on p. 63, he draws on Newbigin's concept of election (Newbigin, *Household of God*, pp. 25-26) to confirm that the reproduction of the Church is not 'all within our own hands'. However, this balancing perspective is not included in the *msc* report.

⁶¹ *mission-shaped church*, p. 87-88.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

3.1.3 Critiques of the mission-shaped church report

I now turn to consider three critiques of the theology of the *msc* report produced by John Hull (2006), by Andrew Davison and Alison Milbank (2010) and by Gareth Powell (2014).⁶⁵ Hull supported the fresh expressions initiative but questioned whether the theological basis was sufficient.⁶⁶ Davison and Milbank were much more polemical in their dismissal of the concept of fxc, seeing them as a rejection of the parochial basis for the Church of England.⁶⁷ Powell follows Davison and Milbank to an extent but includes a detailed analysis of the discontinuity he sees between the ecclesiology of fxc and the inherited Church of England.⁶⁸ This thesis uses their critiques to identify further areas where the ecclesiology of fxc could be strengthened.

3.1.3.1 Mission-Shaped Church: A Theological Response (2006)

The first critique Hull makes is about the confusion in the *msc* report between the Church, kingdom and mission, a point I have already noted.⁶⁹ This, and Hull's strongly functional view of the Church, highlight again the question of the agency of the Church. Second, Hull states that the language of the report can be regarded as 'announcement of imperialism' which 'is bent upon world domination'.⁷⁰ Whilst I am sure the authors of the report would say this misunderstands their intent, I agree with Hull that the language of reproduction set in a context which understands the Church merely as a 'human institution' does carry these connotations. Following Newbigin's approach to authority would enable church growth to be separated from institutional power.

⁶⁵ John M. Hull, *Mission-Shaped Church: A Theological Response* (London: SCM Press, 2006), Andrew Davison and Alison Milbank, *For the Parish: A Critique of Fresh Expressions* (London: SCM Press, 2010), and Powell, *Critique of the Mission-Shaped Church report*.

⁶⁶ Hull, *Theological Response*, p. x. Hull seeks a more radical approach to fxc than that outlined by the *msc* report and is clearly disappointed by what he views as a proposal for 'church-shaped mission' which seeks only 'different kinds of local church' (pp. 35-36). Hull advocates dying to the nature of faith and theological principles, not just the forms and structures of the Church (p. 27).

⁶⁷ Unfortunately, they include a derisory element to their critique which detracts from their theological presentation, for example, noting that 'fresh expressions' is also an American brand of cat litter, Davison and Milbank, *For the Parish*, p. x. They also make assumptions about fxc which are not factual, i.e. on p. 16 they state that 'the average Fresh Expression has had little or nothing to do with its parish, deanery or diocese' whereas research (Church Army's Research Unit, *Report on Strand 3b*, p. 68) has shown that the clear majority (83%) have strong parish links. Interestingly, Davison and Milbank view Hull as being representative of FE. Thus, in *For the Parish*, p. 51 they (rightly) claim Hull wants to forego the Church in favour of mission. This leads them to label FE as positive about mission and negative about the Church, whereas ironically Hull criticises FE for being too church-centric. That these two critiques can come to opposite conclusions about the FE approach to the Church and mission shows the *msc* report is unclear.

⁶⁸ Powell, *Critique of the Mission-Shaped Church report*, p. 150. Powell uses the ecclesiology of William Temple (1881-1944 who served as Archbishop of Canterbury from 1942-1944) to critique the ecclesiology of the *msc* report.

⁶⁹ Hull, *Theological Response*, pp. 1-9. For Hull, church is agent and Kingdom is the goal (p. 3).

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

Third, Hull encourages consideration that God is at work in cultures ahead of the arrival of the Church.⁷¹ The *msc* report notes that the concept of *missio Dei* provides common ground in fxc, but it does not unpack the implications of the concept, one of which Hull picks up here.⁷² *Missio Dei* assumes that mission ‘has its origin in the heart of God’ and so the Church is both sent by God and participates in the ‘movement of God’s love toward people’.⁷³ Therefore if *missio Dei* is core in the ecclesiology of fxc then Hull is correct to flag up that there should also be an expectation of God at work outside the Church.⁷⁴ In terms of authority, the concept of *missio Dei* places God clearly as the ultimate authority with any human creation or act subordinate to God. Thus, the church should not view itself as ‘above’ the culture it is bringing the gospel to, but look for where God is already at work in that culture.

Finally, whilst the *msc* report does state that culture should change in response to the gospel, I think Hull is correct to observe that overall cultural phenomena such as consumerism are simply accepted, and perhaps even endorsed, by the report instead of asking whether this is something the gospel should confront.⁷⁵ This highlights an inconsistency in the report about the relative weights of authority given to the gospel and to culture.

3.1.3.2 For the Parish (2010)

Although Davison and Milbank pick up many of the points already noted above, they also highlight four additional areas of relevance. First, they highlight that the ‘content’ of the Church cannot be separated from its forms.⁷⁶ The identity of the Church can and should be *distinguished* from the way it is ‘lived and embodied’ but these cannot be *divorced* from each other.⁷⁷ Davison and Milbank are concerned that Tradition is being dismissed by the *msc* report as simply a style, or set of clothing. However, whilst defending Tradition they do not allow for the possibility that the form of the church could look radically different whilst still being recognisably the church. Thus, the critique becomes more constructive when it highlights that fxc need to pay attention to their forms because this provides meaning to the question ‘what is the Church’?⁷⁸

⁷¹ Hull, *Theological Response*, p. 26.

⁷² *mission-shaped church*, p. 20 says that a common theme amongst fxc is that ‘The Church derives its self-understanding from the *missio dei*’.

⁷³ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, pp. 370, 390 and 392.

⁷⁴ There may need to be some caution about the place of *missio Dei* as a core concept since it is only mentioned twice in the report.

⁷⁵ Hull, *Theological Response*, p. 19.

⁷⁶ Davison and Milbank, *For the Parish*, p. 2.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁷⁸ When I use the word ‘forms’ from here on, I use it to mean the practices and structures of the church. For example, practices include celebration of sacraments, preaching of Scripture, patterns of prayer, and giving. Structures include

Second, and related to the first, Davison and Milbank point out that the affirmation 'Jesus is Lord' needs to be lived out in a community to have meaning.⁷⁹ They draw on Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic framework to show that for words to have meaning they must have a context. This thesis has established the same principle from Newbigin's work. Thus, an ecclesiology for fxc should acknowledge the connection between the essence and forms of the Church, and so be intentional about developing forms that reflect the essence of the Church.

Third, *For the Parish* details mediation as a key concept in understanding the relationship between God and man.⁸⁰ They state that 'God entrusts the message, work and legacy of salvation to the human community of the Church'.⁸¹ This takes the mediating role of the Church beyond a more Protestant understanding of salvation, but they do flag up here a link between divine and human authority, for example in forgiving sins.⁸² Thus, Davison and Milbank rightly state that the Church is fundamental to participation in God's mission, and this should be made clear in the ecclesiology of fxc.⁸³ However, they fail to consider that fxc are part of the Church.⁸⁴

Finally, Davison and Milbank present a vibrant image of the parish at its best, and ask why fxc could not be recast as 'parish mission initiatives'.⁸⁵ Whilst this could indeed be the case for many fxc, it is certainly not the case for fxc which are network focused and/or cross parish boundaries.⁸⁶ Overall it is a shame that Davison and Milbank are not able to consider that fxc may offer something complementary to the parish system and so direct their undoubted ecclesiological expertise towards understanding what the Spirit may be saying to the Church of England through fxc.⁸⁷

the ordering of bishops, priests and deacons, with related dioceses, deaneries and parishes with their respective synods.

⁷⁹ Davison and Milbank, *For the Parish*, p. 21. They quote from George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), p. 66 where Lindbeck says 'to assert this truth [Jesus is Lord] is to do something about it, i.e., to commit oneself to a way of life.'

⁸⁰ Davison and Milbank, *For the Parish*, p. 28ff.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁸⁴ Ironically, this is a form of the critique they level at the *msc* report which they say seeks to dispense with the Church, see Davison and Milbank, *For the Parish*, p. 38.

⁸⁵ Davison and Milbank, *For the Parish*, p. 227.

⁸⁶ This is because the parochial structure of the Church of England prevents clergy from undertaking 'ministry' activities outside their parish. The introduction of a Bishops Mission Order (BMO) has alleviated this situation a little by allowing clergy of BMO's to preside at communion or baptise people who live in parishes within the licensed area of the BMO.

⁸⁷ For example, Davison and Milbank, *For the Parish*, p. 49 say that 'Fresh Expression thinkers are comfortable with homogeneous and segregated congregations', but they do not acknowledge that the same critique could be directed at parish churches, and they do not engage with fxc are drawing people to faith in different ways from parish

3.1.3.3 Gareth Powell's PhD critiquing the *mission-shaped church* report (2014)

Gareth Powell identifies sacramentalism, catholicity and incarnation as three theological foci missing from the ecclesiology of the *msc* report.⁸⁸ He notes the desire for fxc to be sacramental, but criticises this as an 'aspirational goal' rather than a way of 'enabling the Church truly to be the Church.'⁸⁹ Whilst the grace of God in calling the Church into being must be the starting point for ecclesiology, there is no doubt that biblically the sacraments are means of incorporation into, and participation in, the body of Christ.⁹⁰ Powell's critique of the lack of sacramentalism within fxc does seem to be borne out by the Church Army Research. However, Powell's suggestion that the ecclesiology of fxc would lead to a lack of catholicity or an insufficient breadth of socio-economic engagement to be truly incarnational is not supported by subsequent research.⁹¹ There is solid evidence that fxc are reaching proportions of the population that parish churches are not generally engaging with. This suggests that fxc are complementing parish ministry.

Powell views the *msc* report as endorsing consumerist culture through the severing of bonds to historic Christian faith. He says the prior 'sources of authority' are viewed as constraints to be replaced by 'new sources of authority [that] can be created and assimilated in an instant'.⁹² Powell rightly assesses that it is the authority of tradition that enables cultural critique to be made, and so disconnecting from Tradition makes fxc 'captive to a privatised understanding of religion'.⁹³ He thus sees the Christianity of fxc being a 'consumer life-style choice'.⁹⁴ It is in this area that, despite there being 'considerable overlap between Newbigin's theology and that advocated by MSC', Powell notes that the *msc* report diverges from Newbigin.⁹⁵ He states that the *msc* report 'misses that Newbigin in particular stresses the need to understand, and work with, the existing theological and philosophical traditions of the British context'.⁹⁶ This is precisely the point that this thesis is building on. However, Newbigin's analysis shows a more serious issue, because it is only the claim of the total fact of Christ, and the Church's calling to point beyond itself to this fact, that enables the Church to truly show that God's salvation is for the entire world. Christianity is

churches. Thus, they fail to constructively consider how existing Church of England structures could be used to support and enable fxc as part of mission strategy.

⁸⁸ Powell, *Critique of the Mission-Shaped Church report*, p. 83.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

⁹⁰ See for example Romans 6.3-4, 1 Corinthians 10-12, Galatians 3.26-28 and Colossians 2.12.

⁹¹ George Lings, *Day of Small Things*, pp. 57, 131-132 and 139. In summary, this shows a breadth of churchmanship across the traditions of the Church of England. Also, when comparisons of averages from fxc and parishes were made the research found fxc had a greater proportion of 'estate' ministry, a greater engagement of children and young people, and a higher percentage of non-churched and de-churched attendees.

⁹² Powell, *Critique of the Mission-Shaped Church report*, p. 178.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 55. The primary areas of overlap he notes are Newbigin's focus on missional ecclesiology and a commitment to contextualisation (p. 56).

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

public.⁹⁷ The whole world has access to the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Thus, the Church is no longer truly being the Church if she makes the *private* invitation to ‘come and join us’; she can only say ‘come and join Jesus’, and demonstrate what this response of faith looks like in the life she leads. The challenge to fxc is to recognise that development of fxc must be committed to working within the authority of tradition precisely because of the nature of the mission that Christ has called his Church to participate in.

3.2 Unpacking the fresh expressions concept (2006-2012)

Alongside the theological critiques of the *msc* report, there have been several publications which began to unpack the concept of fresh expressions in different contexts. Whilst the issue of authority is rarely explicitly addressed, Scripture is implicitly, and occasionally explicitly, recognised as a primary source of authority. There is notable use of the language of shared values, rather than requirements, in identifying the forms of fxc. It is important to note whether these values are shared, or ‘imposed’, since this signals the root of authority.⁹⁸

3.2.1 *mission-shaped series*

The *mission-shaped* books published in the years following the *msc* report looked at the concept of being mission-shaped in six ministry areas: *parish* (2006, republished 2009), *spirituality* (2006), *rural* (2006, republished 2011), *children* (2006, republished 2010), *youth* (2007) and *evangelism* (2010).⁹⁹ The style of these books is very similar to the *msc* report, diagnosing the issues being faced in that particular ministry area, using stories to illustrate points, carrying out limited reflection and drawing conclusions. Although some questions were asked about the ecclesiology of fxc, including the key question of whether fxc are churches, the answers mostly repeat statements from the *msc* report.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ See for example Newbigin, *Other side of 1984*, p. 33.

⁹⁸ Newbigin draws on the work of MacIntyre to address the relationship between facts and values in several of his later publications, see for example Newbigin, *Gospel in Pluralist Society*, p. 17 and *Proper Confidence*, p. 56. In the former he states that without common purpose based in fact, ‘the language of “values” is simply the will to power wrapped up in cotton wool’. Thus, it is important to establish the purpose behind any statement of values. If values have a shared purpose of realising the unity of the Church to reflect the fact of God calling people be part of God’s One Church, then this is very different to the imposition of values because that is the way that one person thinks a church should function. Again, the role of authority is crucial, the selection of values is either a mutual submission to the authority of God, or the exercise of personal authority (which may or may not be in submission to divine authority).

⁹⁹ Susan Hope, *Mission-shaped Spirituality: The Transforming Power of Mission* (London: Church House Publishing, 2006), Graham Cray, Chris Russell, and Tim Sudworth, *Mission-Shaped Youth: Rethinking Young People and Church* (London: Church House Publishing, 2007), Paul Bayes and Tim Sledge, *Mission-Shaped Parish: Traditional Church in a Changing World* (London: Church House Publishing, 2009), Steve Hollinghurst, *Mission Shaped Evangelism: The Gospel in Contemporary Culture* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2009), Margaret Withers, *Mission-Shaped Children: Moving Towards a Child-Centred Church* (London: Church House Publishing, 2010) and Sally Gaze, *Mission-Shaped and Rural: Growing Churches in the Countryside* (London: Church House Publishing, 2011).

¹⁰⁰ For example, Gaze, *mission-shaped and rural*, p. 74ff asks this question and answers it through looking at the four creedal marks and the three ‘self’ principles.

I explore the example from *mission-shaped youth* as an illustration of the critique that could be applied to the approach of this series of books. It is noticeable that the key elements of a church are framed in the language of 'pivots'.¹⁰¹ The 3 'pivots' around which a youth congregation meets are listed as worship, belonging and discipleship. Here worship assumes 'constituent elements' of 'praise, prayer, word, sacrament and confession' but not necessarily expressed in traditional ways. Whilst Scripture is included, its primacy is not asserted. Tradition is recognised as the source of the constituent elements, but the source of the choice of these five elements is not acknowledged. There is a large focus on relationship and belonging to a community, but this comes with no explicit statement about who or what determines that such a community is expressing 'the life of Christ.'¹⁰² Discipleship is not following 'a list of do's and don'ts ... but ... a shape of living'.¹⁰³ The need to 'trust the Holy Spirit to enable [the teenagers] to live their lives fully for God' is expressed.¹⁰⁴ It may well be that the leader of the congregation in this example, who is ordained, does point to Scripture as the basic framework for the Christian life, but in this book there is no recognition that discipleship must exist in a framework of authority to enable growth in Christian maturity. Discipleship requires some judgement about what is right and wrong, and so requires some sources of authority.¹⁰⁵ Without sources of authority, decisions become based on personal preference.

In the few places where authority is explicitly mentioned, it is noted that there is a 'breakdown of confidence in institutional authority'¹⁰⁶ and that 'Christianity is no longer a universally accepted authority'.¹⁰⁷ These statements are linked to the cultural phenomena of the demise of Christendom, rejection of Christian truth claims and the rise of the authority of personal experience. However, there seems a reluctance in these books to engage with the implications of this for fxc. Steve Hollinghurst notes that Scripture and tradition have been previously held up as having authority but says our culture views both as having been used wrongly in attempts to dominate others.¹⁰⁸ He does not offer an account of whether or how these might remain authoritative for the Church. Susan Hope notes that authority is given to Christians to extend the ministry of Jesus to 'heal ... raise ... cleanse ... drive out',¹⁰⁹ and Hollinghurst adds making disciples and forgiving sins.¹¹⁰ Two points can be noted from this: Scripture is treated as

¹⁰¹ Sudworth, *mission-shaped youth*, pp. 106-111.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 110.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 113.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 112.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 113. This is suggested because discipleship is referred to as a costly following of Jesus, but the sources of authority to determine right and wrong are not identified which suggests that it may in the end be determined by personal preference.

¹⁰⁶ Hope, *mission-shaped spirituality*, p. 81.

¹⁰⁷ Gaze, *mission-shaped and rural*, p. 24.

¹⁰⁸ Hollinghurst, *mission-shaped evangelism*, pp. 35 and 162.

¹⁰⁹ Hope, *mission-shaped spirituality*, p. 93.

¹¹⁰ Hollinghurst, *mission-shaped evangelism*, pp. 112-3.

authoritative, and the exercise of human authority in the identified situations should be 'in the name of Jesus' by people 'living under the Lordship of Christ'.¹¹¹

Overall the indications are that fxc are shying away from talking about authority because of the negative connotations of control. However, without an account of authority in the Church, and how this relates to living under the authority of God, the authority of personal preference becomes dominant. This potentially becomes open to manipulation, for example by those with financial means, social media skills or other ways of becoming a dominant voice in a community or network. There is no obvious framework for restraining this if there are no recognised sources of authority. Whilst there are implicit signs that Scripture remains an authority for fxc, there is no account of the part played by the traditions of a believing community. There is also an incomplete account of leadership authority which moves away from legalistic operation but fails to explore the sources of authority for the exercise of judgement and discipleship.

3.2.2 *Ancient Faith, Future Mission series*

A second series of books was published under the title of 'Ancient Faith, Future Mission' and covered three areas in relation to fxc: the *sacramental tradition* (2009), *new monasticism* (2010) and the *Kingdom of God* (2012).¹¹² These books are all collections of essays addressing the key theme of the book, and as such present a range of opinions and observations rather than a consistent approach within FE. Again, I draw out points of significance for this thesis.

The *sacramental tradition* book speaks of the Church as a 'called out' people who remember that they are not simply a 'human gathering'. This is the first book that has engaged with the God-given nature of the Church at any length. Implicitly Scripture, tradition and experience are identified as ways the Church knows who she is in relation to God.¹¹³ The issue of authority is raised by Phyllis Tickle as she identifies the current emerging of fxc as part of an every-500-years cycle of reformations in which the central question of 'where now is our authority?' becomes a driver for reform.¹¹⁴ She notes that these times have never destroyed the core of Christian orthodoxy, but have always resulted in a broadening and deepening of the Church's theology. She sees Anglican ecclesiology as well placed to accommodate this, through principles of hospitality and openness to adapting forms. She does not note the contribution that the concept of

¹¹¹ Hope, *mission-shaped spirituality*, p. 93.

¹¹² Steven Croft and Ian Mobsby (eds.), *Fresh Expressions in the Sacramental Tradition* (London: Canterbury Press Norwich, 2009), Graham Cray, Ian Mobsby, Aaron Kennedy (eds.), *New Monasticism as Fresh Expression of Church* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2010), and Cray, Mobsby, Kennedy (eds.), *Kingdom of God*.

¹¹³ For example, Rowan Williams, 'Address to the Fresh Expressions National Pilgrimage', in Croft and Mobsby (eds.), *Sacramental Tradition*, p. 8: The Church remembers it is not simply a human institution through the sacraments presided over by recognised ministers and 'Scripture becoming a contemporary happening'. These create space for an active transforming encounter with God. There is no stipulating of particular forms these might take.

¹¹⁴ Phyllis Tickle, 'Liturgy and Cultural Engagement', in Croft and Mobsby (eds.), *Sacramental Tradition*, p. 163.

dispersed authority makes to this but I see the openness to dialogue that it encourages as a form of the hospitality she mentions.

In his essay in *Kingdom of God*, Graham Cray brings clarity to the relationship between the Church and the kingdom of God.¹¹⁵ He does this in the context of 'ultimate authority', and draws on the work of Newbigin (amongst others) to do so.¹¹⁶ He says 'the Church is the community that has submitted to that rule [of Christ] and seeks to live under it' and the kingdom is where Christ rules 'over all creation'.¹¹⁷ Cray presents this as a competing claim to the narrative of the world about where authority ultimately lies. The Church believes that ultimate authority lies with Christ, and so the Church's mission is to be 'God's active partner' in 'show[ing] forth visibly in the midst of history, God's final purposes for humankind'.¹¹⁸ Cray moves from this to detail the journey of starting a fxc. The faith and active discipleship of the founding group are recognised as key models within this. However, although Cray comes close, he does not state the sources of authority for this faith and so the connection to the authority of Christ is not finally made.¹¹⁹

In the conclusion to the book, the editors draw on Newbigin to summarise a key theme emerging from the book, that the Church is to be 'for the place where it is located...in the light of God's purposes for that place'.¹²⁰ Place is understood in multiple ways throughout the book, including geographically, demographically and via common interest networks, and there is a focus particularly on how authentic expressions of worship are developed by each community.¹²¹ It is suggested that such worship may not be immediately sacramental because of the need to build relationships first. The aim is to avoid a fxc feeding consumer culture by becoming an 'event to attend, rather than a community of disciples to join'.¹²² Once relationships are established, then forms of worship that are authentically 'for the place' can develop. This is part of the trajectory towards maturity as an expression of the universal Church and as such the

¹¹⁵ Graham Cray, 'Communities of the Kingdom', in Cray, Mobsby, Kennedy (eds.), *Kingdom of God*, pp. 13-28.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 14.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 14.

¹¹⁸ Graham Cray, 'Communities of the Kingdom', in Cray, Mobsby, Kennedy (eds.), *Kingdom of God*, p. 15. The second quote is a requote from House of Bishops, *Eucharistic Presidency – General Synod report GS1248* (London: Church House Publishing, 1997), p. 16.

¹¹⁹ In the chapter as a whole, Scripture, baptism and Eucharist, worship, prayer, listening and service are all noted as part of growing relationships within a believing community. However, Scripture is not given primacy, and the identified elements are not stated as an authoritative framework.

¹²⁰ The Editors, 'Afterword', in Cray, Mobsby, Kennedy (eds.), *Kingdom of God*, p. 172 quoting Lesslie Newbigin, 'What is "a local church truly united"?' in *The Ecumenical Review* 29.2 (April 1977): 115-128, p. 118.

¹²¹ Richard Sudworth, 'Recovering the difference that makes a difference: Fresh ideas on an older theme', in Cray, Mobsby, Kennedy (eds.), *Kingdom of God*, pp. 29-41 is particularly strong about this and he delineates a helpful route between the *msc* report and the critiques of Hull and Davison and Milbank regarding content and form by proposing rediscovery of public worship as a role of the church for a place.

¹²² Graham Cray, 'Communities of the Kingdom', in Cray, Mobsby, Kennedy (eds.), *Kingdom of God*, p. 25.

worshipping community must include 'Word and sacrament'.¹²³ It is not clear from this why the core group of Christians starting a new community would not seek to be sacramental from the outset. Rowan Williams lays down exactly this challenge when he asks fxc: 'how do we keep the focus on the action of God, rather than on the choices and preferences of human agents?'¹²⁴ His answer is that sacramental practice is the discipline that keeps 'the emphasis on the absolute priority of God's action, not ours'.¹²⁵

It can be seen from this section that Newbigin's approach to Christian authority can contribute to addressing some of the issues being raised around the ecclesiology of fxc by making explicit the link between the authority of Christ and the Church's framework of faith.

3.2.3 Questioning and evaluating *msc* and *Fresh Expressions*

In this section I look at three collections of essays with a more intentional focus on issues of ecclesiology and authority arising from the *msc* report.¹²⁶

In *The Future of the Parish System* (2006), Steven Croft suggests that the activities associated with bishops, priests and deacons are needed in fxc whether carried out by lay or ordained people.¹²⁷ However, he maintains ordained ministry is necessary as a particular calling within the Church, in part to release and authorise lay people in their callings.¹²⁸ The high level of lay leadership in fxc does require ways of 'authorising' this leadership if it is to be recognised by the wider church.¹²⁹ This relates to the question of how continuity with the Church of England is established which will be addressed in the next chapter. In her essay Ann Morisey proposes three domains in which the Church works 'to make God credible'.¹³⁰ This

¹²³ The Editors, 'Afterword', in Cray, Mobsby, Kennedy (eds.), *Kingdom of God*, p. 178.

¹²⁴ Rowan Williams, 'The Cross and the Kingdom', in Cray, Mobsby, Kennedy (eds.), *Kingdom of God*, p. 9.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.10.

¹²⁶ Steven Croft (ed.), *The Future of the Parish System: Shaping the Church of England for the 21st Century* (London: Church House Publishing, 2006), Steven Croft (ed.), *Mission-shaped Questions* (London: Church House Publishing, 2008), and Louise Nelstrop and Martyn Percy (eds.), *Evaluating Fresh Expressions: explorations in emerging church* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2008). There are other publications such as Percy, *Shaping the Church* which have also addressed FE as part of a wider project.

¹²⁷ Croft, 'Serving, sustaining, connecting', in Croft (ed.), *Future of Parish System*, p. 87.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

¹²⁹ There are many questions surrounding this, such as what authorisation do lay leaders need to start a fxc? Do they start a fxc and then seek recognition? How are their leadership supported and training needs met?

¹³⁰ Ann Morisey, 'Mapping the mixed economy', in Croft (ed.), *Future of Parish System*, pp. 125-137. In the explicit domain (Morisey's name for formal acts of public worship), Morisey says the focus is 'on enabling people to have confidence that God is with us in Jesus and that Jesus' teachings carry authority.' This is a very functional view of worship which does not appear, for example, to allow for worship being an overflow of praise and awe offered to God in response to revelation of who God is. Morisey believes this domain is becoming increasingly inaccessible and so needs new forms that enable people to approach it. Therefore, she proposes the 'foundational domain' that enables people to encounter 'the possibility of God'. In this domain, worship is brought into the community to help people see their story as part of God's story. The 'vocational domain' is more personal and involves encouraging all people to become who God has created them to be.

schema shows the shift Morisey detects from prior ways of understanding oneself as under the authority of God (through obeying Scripture or the traditional teaching of the Church), to that of direct experience of God and understanding your story as part of God's story. This points to the authority of God in a more directly personal way, but runs the risk of the corporate nature of involvement in God's story being undervalued. This is demonstrated in the discussion question at the end of the chapter:

In the past, religious experience has tended to be underplayed by the Church because it gives people personal confidence in God that can threaten the authority of the Church. Now that our church life is not about authority is there scope to be more hospitable to religious experience?¹³¹

Here the emphasis is on authority as something wielded by the Church as an institution that disempowers people. This disconnects authority exercised by the Church from divine authority and elevates experience above tradition (to the point of disconnection) without exploring the necessary role of tradition for giving meaning to experience. It also suggests that religious experience is for personal confidence only, rather than for example, corporate growth in understanding the presence of God with God's Church. Morisey articulates a relatively common approach within fxc which, having rightly identified that a significant part of the UK population cannot engage with Traditional forms of worship, therefore seeks to dispense with the 'authority of tradition'. Newbigin's approach to authority helps to articulate that the authority of tradition is vital to give meaning to faith, and so points to the necessity of establishing points of continuity rather than dispensing with tradition.

In Ian Cundy's essay, the issue of authority is addressed again, he notes two possible models of exercise of authority – dispersed and central.¹³² The function of both is to provide effective decision-making in the Church, the 'dispersed' model places decision-making locally unless there are 'wider implications' and the 'central' model 'delegates decisions to the local'.¹³³ This points to authority being exercised in mutual submission driven by a vision for mission facilitated by decision making happening at the right levels. He values the Anglican concept of 'bishop-in-synod' for the way 'it speaks of an authority exercised in relationship, communally with the people of God, collegially with episcopal colleagues.'¹³⁴ This understanding of the authority of the bishop fits well with the concept of authority as an ordering of relationships that enables maturity in Christ.

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 137.

¹³² Ian Cundy, 'Reconfiguring a diocese towards mission', in Croft (ed.), *Future of Parish System*, p. 156.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid., p. 164.

In the conclusion to the *Future of the Parish System* Croft proposes a set of five commitments which he hopes fxc that consider themselves part of the Church of England will share with parish churches:

1. a commitment to Scripture;
2. a commitment to the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion;
3. a commitment to listening to the whole Christian tradition and seeing that tradition expressed in the historic creeds;
4. a commitment to the ministry and mission of the whole people of God and to the ordering of ministry through the threefold order of deacons, priests and bishops;
5. a commitment to the mission of God to the whole of creation and to the whole of our society as defined and described in the Anglican Communion's five marks of mission.¹³⁵

By presenting these as commitments, it offers the option not to accept them as authoritative. This provides continuity between fxc and the inherited Church of England, but suggests that they are not essential to recognising the Church. Thus, the commitments are helpful, but the importance of committing to them could be articulated more clearly. Newbigin is helpful here because he removes the 'authority of tradition' from the control of an institution where these sorts of 'commitments' could be resisted as imposed. Instead he relocates the 'authority of tradition' as a God-given framework of faith which is a necessary part of participating in the mission of God.

The *Mission-shaped Questions* book (2008) published presentations given under the theme of 'Hard Questions' at a series of day conferences organised by FE during 2007.¹³⁶ The book includes several chapters on ecclesiology and the recognition that fxc require questions of ecclesiology, authority and discernment of the Spirit to be revisited.¹³⁷ Martyn Atkins asks 'What is the essence of Church?' and suggests that this is a question that the inherited Church of England and fxc should be asking each other.¹³⁸ He clearly states the 'derived nature' of the Church as utterly dependent on God, although the fact that he feels he needs to defend this implies that it is not a commonly stated perspective.¹³⁹ Atkins questions the move to articulate the 'essence of church' through values. He sees this as abstracting the Church rather than recognising that knowing something comes through concrete forms of what something does and how it does it.¹⁴⁰ He concludes with the observation made earlier in this thesis, that we know what the Church is

¹³⁵ Croft (ed.), *Future of Parish System*, p. 181. He bases this set on the Lambeth Quadrilateral plus the Anglican marks of mission, but note that no.4, which in the Quadrilateral mentions only the historic episcopate, here begins with the ministry of the whole Church. This is in line with Church of England doctrinal statements such as House of Bishops, *Eucharistic Presidency*, p. 23 which views baptism as a calling to ministry, and is an important element for fxc which have such a high level of lay leadership.

¹³⁶ Croft (ed.), *Mission-shaped Questions*, p. ix.

¹³⁷ Wilkinson, 'What are the lessons?', in Croft (ed.), *Mission-shaped Questions*, p. 106.

¹³⁸ Martyn Atkins, 'What is the essence of Church?', in Croft (ed.), *Mission-shaped Questions*, pp. 16-17.

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 24: 'This account of the essence of the Church has not dropped out of heaven!'

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 27. Here Atkins echoes Newbigin in challenging the distinction modernity made between 'fact' and 'value', although he misses the opportunity to accept the language of values for the Church if set in the context of the fact of Christ.

from her forms, and so attention must be paid to 'structures, traditions and practices'.¹⁴¹ In the following chapter, Lindsay Urwin notes the reluctance of fxc to be sacramental and concludes that 'the source of reticence is a wrong-headed notion that sacraments are institutional events'.¹⁴² She calls for a re-understanding of sacraments as something 'Christ does with and through his people'. The consistency of this call in some parts of the FE literature does not match the indifference in practice, and so raises the question of how the theory and practice can be brought together.

The final book in this grouping is *Evaluating Fresh Expressions* (2008) which is also the product of conference papers presented in 2007.¹⁴³ Croft suggests that authority for the development of fxc in the Church of England has come through a combination of 'formal endorsement and popular support'.¹⁴⁴ This shows the operation of dispersed authority with both traditional structures and the consent of the faithful playing important parts in the development of fxc. Sara Savage asserts that 'the social shape that fresh expressions take is non-hierarchical and non-authoritarian', an opinion that she does not back up with evidence but which does express a prevalent view of fxc.¹⁴⁵ Savage's statement relates to the rise of networks as social shapes that rely on consensus. Consensus is not a dismissal of all potential sources of authority within fxc, but rather shows that previously accepted sources of authority can no longer simply be accepted as authoritative. She indicates that this means a new 'plausibility structure' comes into place.¹⁴⁶ Savage draws on the work of Newbigin several times noting that innovating in a Tradition requires mastery of that Tradition, and so points out the need for 'active collaboration of both emerging and traditional church in a sustained dialogue'.¹⁴⁷ Related to this, in her conclusion to the book, Louise Nelstrop suggests that because fxc advocate that all elements of the 'Church's ecclesiological make-up' can 'be legitimately challenged', including authority, this can lead to defensiveness from the 'inherited' church.¹⁴⁸ She notes nevertheless that fxc want the security of the authority of tradition within which to explore the 'uncertainties' arising about the nature of church.¹⁴⁹ The dialogue proposed by both Savage and Nelstrop

¹⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 27-28.

¹⁴² Lindsay Urwin, 'What is the role of sacramental ministry in fresh expressions of church?', in Croft (ed.), *Mission-shaped Questions*, pp. 29-31.

¹⁴³ Nelstrop and Croft (eds.), *Evaluating Fresh Expressions*, p. vii.

¹⁴⁴ Steven Croft, 'What counts as a fresh expression of church?', in Nelstrop and Croft (eds.), *Evaluating Fresh Expressions*, p. 5.

¹⁴⁵ Sara Savage, 'Fresh expressions: the psychological gains and risks', in Nelstrop and Croft (eds.), *Evaluating Fresh Expressions*, p. 60. See for example Eddie Gibbs and Ian Coffey, *Church Next: Quantum Changes in Christian Ministry* (Leicester: IVP, 2000), p. 72 who say that a feature of post-modernism has been a distrust of authority and hierarchy.

¹⁴⁶ Savage, 'Fresh expressions: the psychological gains and risks', in Nelstrop and Croft (eds.), *Evaluating Fresh Expressions*, p. 60.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 64.

¹⁴⁸ Louise Nelstrop, 'Mixed economy or ecclesial reciprocity: which does the Church of England really want to promote?', in Nelstrop and Croft (eds.), *Evaluating Fresh Expressions*, pp. 187 and 202.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 200 and 203.

would enable the Church of England as a whole to discover together the right framework, or plausibility structure, that enables the confession that Jesus is Lord to have meaning.

Savage's view about consensus being the social shape of fxc should be juxtaposed with the point raised in Mark Mason's chapter that some involved with fxc would 'rather ignore or pretend' that exercise of power does not happen in fxc. He urges fxc to recognise that 'questions of power...are already shaping any community' and suggests that becoming 'a viable, healthy ecclesial expression' means addressing the 'issues of power that exist in any ecclesial construct'.¹⁵⁰ A potential way forward, that addresses hidden power dynamics and provides a way for consensus to be achieved, is to reconsider the purpose and operation of authority in a Christian community. Newbigin says that in Jesus 'we are truly free' because 'we are bound in love and trust and responsibility to the one who is the author of our freedom because he is the author of our being'.¹⁵¹ Thus a Christian has freedom in Christ, but it is an ordered freedom because it is within the body of Christ. When freedom and order clash in differences of opinion 'there will be a need for a common seeking of the Spirit's guidance'. However, being in Christ means that someone is 'more eager to claim freedom for his brother than for himself, and more ready to submit himself to good order than to impose it on his brother'.¹⁵² A mark of godly authority is love for the other, and for the body of Christ. This must be the basis for all dialogue that is grounded in submission to the authority of Christ.

Before concluding this section, a note must be made of the chapter from Pete Rollins, which in contrast to the rest of the book, urges caution for fxc in pursuing a mixed economy.¹⁵³ He sees the mixed economy as a way of sublimating fxc within the Church of England's 'hegemonic economy' which will result in the prophetic voice of fxc calling for reform from the margins being lost.¹⁵⁴ This contrasts with Hunsberger's analysis of Newbigin's approach to the prophetic voice. He says that Newbigin cautions that a prophet must not lose connection with the one who gave him 'authority to speak', and that to do so 'easily becomes moralism'.¹⁵⁵ Except in extraordinary Spirit-led circumstances, the Bible shows prophets being called to speak to their own culture and tradition. Thus, whilst Rollins' concern should be kept in mind, it is wise to

¹⁵⁰ Mark Mason, 'Living in the distance between a 'community of character' and a 'community of question'', in Nelstrop and Croft (eds.), *Evaluating Fresh Expressions*, pp. 90-91.

¹⁵¹ Lesslie Newbigin, *Authority: to Whom Shall We Go?* (Unpublished sermon preached on the text John 6:66-71: St. Mary's University Church Cambridge, 6 May 1979).

¹⁵² Newbigin, *Household of God*, p. 105.

¹⁵³ Pete Rollins, 'Biting the hand that feeds: an apology for encouraging tension between the established church and emerging collectives', in Nelstrop and Croft (eds.), *Evaluating Fresh Expressions*, p. 84.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

¹⁵⁵ Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness*, p. 146.

remember that even the Protestant reformers saw their actions as ‘provisional and regrettable necessities, and longed for a time when they would cease to be so.’¹⁵⁶ A prophetic voice must have a concern for unity.

3.3 Criteria for assessing whether a fxc is a church

One of the notable features of the development of fxc has been a consistent concern with trying to identify what makes a fxc a church. There have been two quite separate approaches to this, one stemming from George Lings and the Church Army Research Unit that has been investigating the development of fxc, and the other from a joint Anglican-Methodist working party.¹⁵⁷ This section analyses the difference between these sets of criteria noting the difference in intent behind each set and addressing who has the authority to determine what fxc look like.

3.3.1 *Revisiting the story so far (2011)*

The *msc* report triggered a large amount of experimenting with the meaning and reality of church. In his review of the ‘story so far’ in 2011, Lings noted that fxc had become a term that was too broad, and as a result detailed a set of 10 criteria which the Sheffield Centre began to use to assess whether something was a fxc or not.¹⁵⁸ The criteria ask whether the fxc is (1) new and Christian; (2) ‘engages with non-churchgoers’; (3) meets ‘at least once a month’; (4) has a name; (5) intends to be a church rather than a bridge back to existing forms of church; (6) is Anglican; (7) has some form of recognised leadership; (8) acts as the main church for the majority of members; (9) aspires to the four creedal marks; and (10) intends to become self-financing, self-governing and self-reproducing. It is immediately noticeable that there is hardly anything explicit about the doctrine or practices that might make a fxc part of the Church. The two exceptions to this are criterion 6 where being Anglican is assessed by whether the ‘Bishop welcomes it as part of the diocesan family’, and criterion 9 which includes the statement: ‘We see the two dominical sacraments as a consequence of the life of a missional community which follows Jesus, not the sole or even best measure of making something church.’¹⁵⁹ Criteria 1, 6 and 9 (and to an extent criterion 7) all rely on a judgement being made that assumes an ‘authority of tradition’; without this no-one can know for example if something is Christian. The sources of authority which enable such a judgement to be made are not clear.

¹⁵⁶ Sykes, ‘Authority in the Church of England’, in Jeffrey (ed.), *By What Authority?*, p. 7.

¹⁵⁷ George Lings, *Encounters on the Edge no.50: A Golden Opportunity – Revisiting the story so far* (Sheffield: The Sheffield Centre, 2011), pp. 19-21 initially detailed a set of 10 criteria which have continued to be used with very minor adjustments. See Lings, *Day of Small Things*, p. 18. Note here, that in the 5 years since George Lings first proposed the set of 10 ‘parameters’ or ‘criteria’ for recognising a fxc as a church, the Church Army language moved away from criteria to ‘indicator’. Lings, *The Day of Small Things*, p. 21 reasons that ‘indicators’ are a ‘less demanding set with more space for intention and aspiration.’ The Anglican-Methodist Working Party, *Fresh Expressions*, p.114 developed a set of 8 criteria in parallel with the initial development of Lings’ criteria, although the working party report was published later.

¹⁵⁸ Lings, *A Golden Opportunity*, pp. 19-21.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

Overall, these criteria relate to the issue of intent, and seek to identify a trajectory for development of a fxc. This begins from the initial act of ‘double-listening’, whereby the initiators of a fxc bring culture into contact with the gospel revealed in Scripture.¹⁶⁰ The eventual aim is to become a worshipping community that inhabits that culture rather than imposing existing forms of church onto it. The difficulty with this set of criteria, from a traditional perspective, is that they identify the intent-to-be-church and then describe the communities that meet the criteria as ‘church’. The questions lying behind selection of criteria are: who has authority to set the criteria, and what is the purpose of having them? The Church Commissioners of the Church of England commissioned the Church Army Research into fxc and these 10 criteria were established precisely to identify the intent-to-be-a-new-church rather than being parish mission initiatives designed to draw people into existing churches. The purpose of the criteria therefore was to create an appropriately bounded set of data which could be used to assess the development of fxc. Confusion arises if the same criteria are used for the wrong purpose, for example to determine whether a fxc is a congregation of the Church of England.

Nevertheless, the definition of ‘Anglican’ here marks a significant shift from the definition provided by the *msc* report. As well as a ‘proper relationship with the bishop’ the report also expects three further factors. First, Scripture, the Catholic creeds and the historic formularies of the Church of England as the foundation of faith; second, leaders of fxc to ‘make the Declaration of Assent’ which includes only using ‘forms of service which are authorised or allowed by Canon’, and third, ‘an authorised practice of baptism and the celebration of the Eucharist’.¹⁶¹ The lack of clear explanation for this shift in understanding of how a fxc would be identified as Anglican leads to confusion about what this set of criteria is trying to do. A statement addressing the intent-to-be-church basis for the criteria and a call for further ecclesiological work to be done to understand the nature of fxc would have brought greater clarity.

A very different approach to identifying whether a fxc is a church was highlighted the following year in the report of a joint Anglican-Methodist Working Party, *Fresh Expressions in the Mission of the Church*.

3.3.2 *Fresh Expressions in the Mission of the Church (2012)*

In 2009 the Church of England and Methodist Faith and Order groups appointed representatives to a joint Working Party whose task was: ‘to undertake critical study of the explicit and implicit ecclesiology of fresh expressions’.¹⁶² The Church of England General Synod received the working party’s report in a motion that

¹⁶⁰ *mission-shaped church*, p. 104.

¹⁶¹ *mission-shaped church*, pp. 100-101. See also Canon C15 of the Canons of the Church of England.

¹⁶² Anglican-Methodist Working Party, *Fresh Expressions*, p. 196.

recognised 'Fresh Expressions as authentic manifestations of Anglican ecclesiology' and called for the report and recommendations to be incorporated into the future work of the church.¹⁶³

The report suggests a set of eight criteria that could be used to recognise a fxc as a church. In stark contrast with the criteria proposed by Lings at the end of the last section, these criteria are all linked to doctrine and practice.¹⁶⁴ The criteria are: (1) being a community of people called by God to be disciples of Jesus; (2) who assemble regularly for worship and are sent out in mission; (3) who proclaim the Gospel and (4) teach the Scriptures; (5) who confer baptism and (6) celebrate the Lord's Supper; (7) who have authorised ministers that preside at the Lord's Supper and exercise pastoral care; and (8) who are united to other churches through communion, commitment and common ministry.¹⁶⁵ Whilst acknowledging that some fxc may meet some of these criteria and so be 'on the way to becoming a church', this report very clearly wants the term *church* to mean *mature expression of church*.¹⁶⁶ However, the criteria have two major flaws which make them not specific enough to be either denominational or more broadly ecclesial criteria. Firstly, since the report is intended for two different denominations it does not get specific enough to determine whether a fxc is a congregation within the Church of England.¹⁶⁷ Secondly, it makes huge assumptions about the authority of tradition to which it appeals, for example baptism is in 'appropriate circumstances' and eucharistic presidency by 'appropriate authorised ministry'.¹⁶⁸ Despite this the criteria do give an indication of the trajectory a fxc would need to move on from Lings' 10 criteria to being a congregation of the Church of England. This trajectory could also be guided by the five commitments outlined by Croft in *Future of the Parish System* (see section 3.2.3). I will return to the question of how a fxc could be considered to be a congregation of the Church of England in chapter 4.

To conclude this section, I return to the Church Army research report of 2016. This report included an outline of the relative merits of the 8 'criteria' of the 2012 joint Anglican-Methodist report and the 10 'indicators' which the Church Army identify.¹⁶⁹ Concern is raised about the measurability of the Anglican-Methodist criteria, and the subjective nature of establishing whether they have been met. This is a valid critique if the purpose of the criteria is to judge a data set. More importantly, it is also noted that the Anglican-Methodist criteria are practice heavy, and light on 'grace led virtues'.¹⁷⁰ This gives an indication of

¹⁶³ The Archbishops' Council, *Report of Proceedings 2012 General Synod July Group of Sessions Volume 43 No. 2* <https://www.churchofengland.org/media/1527142/july%202012%20.pdf>. Accessed 11th July 2016.

¹⁶⁴ Anglican-Methodist Working Party, *Fresh Expressions*, p. 114.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ This purpose is slightly obscured due to the report being a joint report of Anglicans and Methodists, therefore it does not cite a need to follow Church of England Canon Law requirements for services, for example.

¹⁶⁸ Anglican-Methodist Working Party, *Fresh Expressions*, p. 114.

¹⁶⁹ Lings, *Day of Small Things*, pp. 20-22.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 22.

one of the issues that the development of fxc is raising, and that is whether ecclesial maturity should be judged simply on the presence of denominationally specified practices or whether something more intangible such as “their love for one another” is a suitable marker.

3.4 Further exploration of the ecclesiology of fxc

The years following the initial unpacking of the concept of fxc have seen a considerable number of books published with stories of pioneering fxc.¹⁷¹ The ecclesiology of fxc has also continued to be explored in more depth, for example in Michael Moynagh’s *Church for every context* (2012) and John Walker’s *Testing Fresh Expressions* (2014).¹⁷² In this section, I briefly draw out some key themes that arise from the most recent literature that are relevant for this thesis. These are the discussion about relationships versus practices, the question of being a church or not a church, discipleship and the engagement between fxc and culture.

3.4.1 Relationships versus practices

One theme that has emerged in the reflection on fxc is whether relationships or practices should be prioritised. Moynagh has articulated this at the greatest length in *Church for every context*.¹⁷³ He returns to the four sets of relationships: ‘up, in, out and of’ from the *msc* report to find a way of talking about the essence of the Church that includes the concepts of both mission and community.¹⁷⁴ Here he prioritises relationships over practices seeing the former as the ‘essence of the church’ and the latter as ‘for the good of the church’.¹⁷⁵ Moynagh views practices as ways of exerting power because they determine what it means church should look like, however he does not dismiss them and says that to be in relationship to the rest of the Church means ‘paying attention to practices that the wider church has come to value.’¹⁷⁶ Moynagh’s approach would be helped by drawing the distinction noted in Newbigin’s work between the liturgical Tradition that a denomination attaches to fundamental practices of the Church, and the practices themselves. Practices are ways of exerting power, but a distinction needs to be made between commands

¹⁷¹ David Goodhew, Andrew Roberts and Michael Volland, *Fresh! An Introduction to Fresh Expressions of Church and Pioneer Ministry* (Norwich: SCM Press, 2012), Lings (eds.), *Messy Church Theology*, Paul Moore, *Making Disciples in Messy Church* (Abingdon: The Bible Reading Fellowship, 2013), Michael Moynagh, *Being Church, Doing Life* (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2014), Phil Potter, *Pioneering a New Future: A guide to shaping change and changing the shape of church* (Abingdon: The Bible Reading Fellowship, 2015), David Male, *How to Pioneer (Even if you haven’t got a clue)* (London: Church House Publishing, 2016), and Andy Milne with Michael Moynagh, *The DNA of Pioneer Ministry* (London: SCM Press, 2016).

¹⁷² Moynagh, *Church for every context* and John Walker, *Testing Fresh Expressions: Identity and Transformation* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2014).

¹⁷³ Moynagh, *Church for every context*, p. ix. This is a substantial 450-page book and represents the most detailed engagement so far on the ecclesiology of fxc. In the book, he looks at the theological rationale for fxc, and methodologies for starting them and helping them grow towards maturity.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 106-7.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 110-111.

of Jesus, and exertion of power in pursuit of human preference.¹⁷⁷ Priority must be given to practices which have been accepted by the Church as revealing the authority of God over the Church. The same logic must also apply to relationships.

Newbigin says, regardless of the disparity of doctrine and forms, Christians are compelled into ‘an existential relationship’ with each other through their mutual recognition of ‘the lordship of Christ and the finality and sufficiency of what he has done’.¹⁷⁸ This relationship is more than tolerance, and Newbigin describes it as one of ‘mutual responsibility’ that leads Christians to wrestle with their differences in a way that leads to a ‘deeper insight into God’s nature and will’.¹⁷⁹ This makes the point that the authority of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection, which directly confronts humanity with the authority of God, has to be the grounding place for Christian relationships. Thus, relationships cannot be looked to as primary, any more so than forms, without being set in this context of the ultimate authority of God. It is important that sources of authority are also identified at a human level, because what is a ‘right’ sort of relationship needs to be determined. An abusive relationship is still a relationship, but it could not be said to be bearing the witness of who God is. Relationships and forms are both susceptible to being empty of the gospel when they do not demonstrate belief in Jesus and are not open to being inhabited by the Holy Spirit. Thus, it is not sufficient just to move the focus from forms to relationships; both need an undergirding account of the relation of divine and human authority.

Having said this, the renewed focus that fxc are bringing to relationships inside and outside congregations, and between congregations, exercised in practices such as welcome and hospitality, should rightly provoke reflection in the wider Church of England.¹⁸⁰

3.4.2 *Determining whether a fxc is a church or not a church*

The definition given at the start of chapter 3 has continued to drive the ecclesial identity of fxc as ‘shaped by the gospel and the enduring marks of the church’.¹⁸¹ The question about whether a fxc is a church or not has also begun to be explored in section 3.3. It remains a persistent question, and the answers given to the question: ‘what is church?’ are almost always answers related to the forms of the church. For example, Phil Potter says the answer is ‘quite simple and can be defined in three words: worship, community and

¹⁷⁷ For example, Luke 22.19 ‘Do this in remembrance of me’ and Matthew 28.19-20 ‘Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you’.

¹⁷⁸ Lesslie Newbigin, “The Quest for Unity Through Religion” in Paul Weston, *Lesslie Newbigin: Missionary Theologian – a reader* (London: SPCK, 2006), p. 73.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

¹⁸⁰ *Mission-shaped church*, p. 82 suggests that being relational is a value of a missionary church, and this is ‘characterised by welcome and hospitality’. Some fxc have an expectation the congregation will eat together when they gather, as a result the shared meal has become part of their liturgy.

¹⁸¹ See: <https://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/guide/about/whatis>.

mission'.¹⁸² This demonstrates continued confusion over the essence and forms of the Church which results in the rejection of some forms and the endorsement of others whilst the necessary statement that church is a gathering of people who confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour (to return to the WCC basis of membership) is lost.

To illustrate this issue further, *Messy Church Theology* begins with chapters by Claire Dalpra on 'When is Messy Church 'church'?' and Steve Hollingshurst on 'When is Messy Church 'not church'?'.¹⁸³ Messy Church is the most popular form of fxc making up just over 32% of the total number of fxc researched across 21 dioceses.¹⁸⁴ Dalpra devotes the chapter to considering how a Messy Church would be assessed against the 10 Church Army indicators, although she does not reference these directly. Dalpra gives most attention to the four marks of the Church, within this, sacraments have a purely functional role of enabling the wider church to recognise a Messy Church as a church.¹⁸⁵ Dalpra also refers to 'debate' about how crucial the dominical sacraments are in Anglican ecclesiology, but it is not clear how she makes this assessment since the references she draws on deal broadly with how 'church' should be defined rather than specifically with Anglican ecclesiology.¹⁸⁶ However, despite this confusion, there are indications that sacraments should be encouraged.¹⁸⁷ Overall, the chapter deals with functional ways to identify a church, but the crucial observation comes at the end:

there is a sense in which these Messy Churches are stuck on their ecclesial journey: they cannot return to the assumption that Messy Church might act as a bridge to existing church, yet moving forward to see their Messy Church mature as a church in itself seems a very daunting task.¹⁸⁸

If this is symptomatic of a broader sentiment in fxc then it points to a real need to address the ecclesial relationship between fxc and their local parishes in a way that enables fxc to flourish.

Hollingshurst's chapter addressing 'When is Messy Church 'not church'?' adds helpful clarity to questions about whether a fxc is really a fresh expression of outreach, or of worship or of mission. He rightly observes

¹⁸² Potter, *Pioneering a new future*, p. 145.

¹⁸³ Claire Dalpra, 'When is Messy Church 'church'?' and Steve Hollingshurst, 'When is Messy Church 'not church'?', in George Lings (ed.), *Messy Church Theology* (Abingdon: The Bible Reading Fellowship, 2013), pp. 12-47.

¹⁸⁴ Lings, *Day of small things*, p. 41.

¹⁸⁵ Dalpra, 'When is Messy Church 'church'?', p. 23.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 23. See also George Lings, Unravelling the DNA of church: How can we know that what is emerging is 'Church'?, in *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, Volume 6 number 1, March 2006, p. 113 who calls the 'route towards celebration of the two sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist' 'non-negotiable', and Moynagh, *Church for every context*, p. 109 who whilst not explicitly mentioning the Church of England does say that sacraments 'are practices expected by virtually the entire church'.

¹⁸⁷ Dalpra, 'When is Messy Church 'church'?', p. 28.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 29.

the issues already raised in this thesis of defining a fxc as 'church' before 'it has really become a Christian community'.¹⁸⁹ This shows the need for further clarity of ecclesial definitions.

Returning to the specific issue of authority, in *Church for every Context*, Moynagh asks who decides whether a church is becoming mature.¹⁹⁰ He suggests that answering this draws on perspectives from the worldwide Church not just one culturally bound denomination.¹⁹¹ Additionally, new churches such as fxc should have a say in determining their own level of maturity, although this should be based on Scripture and 'attentive to the tradition'.¹⁹² Finally he suggests that imagination be employed about 'requirements' for what a church looks like.¹⁹³ This suggests an approach to authority that gives weight to views from both fxc and the inherited Church of England to explore an arising ecclesiology through dialogue rather than determination by the inherited Church of England. This resonates with Newbigin's approach which would accept fxc as part of the Church and then ask how much the 'authority of tradition' of the Church of England is willing to flex to enable fxc to play a full part.

3.4.3 Discipleship

Discipleship has been a key feature identified within the ecclesiology of fxc, and is increasingly addressed in the literature.¹⁹⁴ Discipleship is linked firstly to a commitment to building relationships in a believing community, and is centred around common practices such as sharing a meal together, prayer and bible study.¹⁹⁵ Although the research into fxc has shown that sacramental participation needs further development, the literature around fxc increasingly includes statements such as: 'communities that seek explicitly to be church will want to celebrate the sacraments of baptism ... and Holy Communion'.¹⁹⁶ The literature also explores how to address the desire of a believing community to be sacramental if there are no ordained people as part of the community. Secondly, discipleship comes through 'living out the gospel concretely'.¹⁹⁷ Acts of service in the community and a commitment to loving and walking alongside people through life are frequently mentioned. Although 'sources of authority' which provide the framework for discipleship are not mentioned explicitly it is clear that the fxc under review have a commitment to drawing

¹⁸⁹ Hollinghurst, 'When is Messy Church 'not church'?', p.31.

¹⁹⁰ Moynagh, *Church for every context*, p. 116. Ecclesial maturity for Moynagh relates to how the Church is realising her purpose of being sign, first-fruit and instrument of the kingdom. This is thinking and language drawn direct from Lesslie Newbigin (although not acknowledged here).

¹⁹¹ Ibid., p. 117.

¹⁹² Ibid., pp. 117-118.

¹⁹³ Ibid., p. 118.

¹⁹⁴ Moore, *Making Disciples in Messy Church*, Moynagh, *Being Church, Doing Life*, pp. 180-235, and Milne with Moynagh, *DNA of Pioneer Ministry*, pp. 119-133.

¹⁹⁵ Moynagh, *Being Church, Doing Life*, p. 185.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 194.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 187.

‘upon the wisdom of Scripture and our Christian heritage’ to provide a framework of faith, and to teach from.¹⁹⁸

3.4.4 *fxc and culture*

In *Testing Fresh Expressions*, Walker includes a chapter on the ecclesiology of fxc. In this he rightly highlights the danger of any one part of the mixed economy thinking that its part of the picture holds the whole truth about what it means to be the Church.¹⁹⁹ Walker, however, devotes most of the chapter to addressing contextualisation. The *msc* report makes a variety of statements about the church and culture,²⁰⁰ leading Walker to assign fxc to Richard Niebuhr’s type of ‘Christ and Culture in Paradox’.²⁰¹ It is hard to justify this assessment however, because Niebuhr describes it as a dualist position which sees nothing positive in culture, assuming a sinfulness in all human activity and thus having an eschatological focus.²⁰² These aspects are not clear in the FE literature and the *msc* report is much more positive about culture than the dualist position.

Taking the evidence from the *msc* report alone, it is possible to also identify elements of three of the other types identified by Niebuhr. The type ‘Christ of Culture’ is touched on in a call for the church to die to its structures and ways of doing things.²⁰³ ‘Christ transforming Culture’ is present in the positive regard and hope that fxc have for culture and a recognition that a response to Christ means living counter-culturally without separating from society.²⁰⁴ There is also a strong implicit sense of ‘Christ above Culture’, because the language of the report is that of “in and through the Church”. Niebuhr describes this as a synthesist position which has proved difficult to achieve in Christian history because, having ‘translated’ the Gospel into a culture, a strong need to conserve that culture arises and the relationship between Christ and the

¹⁹⁸ Moore, *Making Disciples in Messy Church*, pp. 34 and 100-103.

¹⁹⁹ Walker, *Testing Fresh Expressions*, pp. 217-231. This observation, drawing on the work of F.D. Maurice, fits with the necessity of dialogue between different perspectives that was noted as a benefit of dispersed authority. Walker notes the shift that has taken place from early partisan statements about where the future of the Church of England lies, to a more balanced view from 2010 onwards about the need for a truly mixed economy advocated by Graham Cray (2010), Martyn Percy (2010) and Michael Moynagh (2012).

²⁰⁰ For example, *mission-shaped church*, pp. 86-87 has the following statements: that the church under the empowering of the Spirit is ‘to preach and embody the gospel in ways appropriate to each cultural context’; the church should both identify with culture and take a counter-cultural stand within it; and conversion of individuals should lead to ‘their culture enriching the cultural life of the Church.’

²⁰¹ Walker, *Testing Fresh Expressions*, p. 226. See H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951) for more detail on Niebuhr’s five main types of Christian ethics which he uses to describe the essential mission approach of particular groups or periods of history.

²⁰² Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, pp. 149-189.

²⁰³ *mission-shaped church*, pp. 88-9. The kenosis of Christ is seen as a normative example for the Church who is ‘most true to itself when it gives itself up’, so ‘in each new context the Church must die to live.’

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 91. ‘Inculturation seeks the gospel transformation of a society from within.’ And p. 87: ‘A truly incarnational Church is one that imitates, through the Spirit, both Christ’s loving identification with his culture and his costly counter-cultural stance within it.’

culture is institutionalised, with the law of Christ becoming synonymous with the law of the church.²⁰⁵ This is what has happened during Christendom. The *msc* report began with the recognition that culture has changed and so new forms of the Church are needed to enable the gospel to be encountered. Overall, Niebuhr's taxonomy does not enable fxc to be categorised, but it does highlight the need to be aware of the risk of absolutizing the gospel into cultural forms. Newbigin's view of Christ above both the Church and the world undertaking his mission through the Church in the world gives the following ordering to relationships.²⁰⁶ Christ revealed in the gospel takes priority, the gospel is made visible through the Church who building on her 'authority of tradition' proclaims and embodies the gospel in culturally relevant ways.²⁰⁷ The gospel brings challenge to the culture, but the cultural understanding of the gospel also brings challenge to the Church.

Overall, one of the strongest elements of writing coming from the experience of fxc has been a recounting of the process of contextualisation that different fxc have undertaken. This is increasingly well-documented and the principles, from the definition of fxc, of listening, service and contextual mission can be easily identified.²⁰⁸ This is exactly the approach that Newbigin would endorse. However, the fxc literature pays little attention to how the Christian life and growth of the 'missionaries' is founded and being maintained. It is here that Newbigin's approach to authority can contribute by encouraging a group seeking to start a church to examine the 'authority of tradition' that it brings with it. It is critical to Newbigin's approach that a congregation is shaped by the gospel (living under the authority of Christ), whilst also identifying deeply with the culture of the place to which it brings the gospel. It is only in this way the 'good' aspects of culture can be redeemed and brought into the Church, and the 'bad' aspects be judged. Whilst the *msc* report was silent over the work of the Holy Spirit outside the church, later writing within FE has shown the expectation of the church joining in with what God is already doing in the world.

²⁰⁵ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, p. 146.

²⁰⁶ Newbigin, *Open Secret*, p. 145 observed the limitation of Niebuhr's work which addressed only the mono-cultural engagement between the gospel and a culture. From Newbigin's missionary experience he saw that the relationships were more complex than portrayed by Niebuhr.

²⁰⁷ Newbigin, *Open Secret*, p. 146. As part of this there is a priority to translate the Bible into the language of the culture in which the gospel is being proclaimed.

²⁰⁸ See Moynagh, *Being Church, Doing Life*, which has 'over 120 pioneering stories' and unpacks the process of contextualisation that fxc have been using of 'listening, loving and serving, form community, explore discipleship', for example see p.126ff. Also Male, *How to Pioneer*, and Milne with Moynagh, *DNA of Pioneer Ministry*.

3.5 Summary

In the preface to the *msc* report, Rowan Williams suggested church could be described as ‘what happens when people encounter the Risen Jesus and commit themselves to sustaining and deepening that encounter in their encounter with each other.’²⁰⁹ Williams goes on to allow for variation in form and structure of churches provided ‘we have ways of identifying the same living Christ at the heart’. Variations on this statement by Williams continue to feature widely in FE literature summarised in the phrase: ‘Church happens when people gather regularly around Jesus.’²¹⁰ This statement immediately raises the question of authority. How does a fxc know it is gathered around the same Jesus Christ as the rest of the Church of England? What is the authority for this belief?

This brings the thesis back to the same questions raised by the quote from Newbigin at the end of chapter 2. The analysis of the ecclesiology of fxc has shown a deficiency in the literature regarding the divinely given nature of the Church. Without an account of the relation of divine authority to human authority, fxc are struggling to define what a church is without recourse to forms. However, this creates a tension because fxc are moving away from the Traditions of the Church of England whilst remaining largely dependent on the Church of England for both financial and governance support, and ministry oversight. The question of who has authority to decide whether fxc are churches or not can then only sit with the inherited church. The result is fxc battling to prove their ‘value’ against pragmatic measures. In the next chapter I will show how Newbigin’s approach to Christian authority could offer a better way forward.

More concerning is the consistent underlying sense that the authority of personal preference is driving the shape of fxc. At best this is resulting in flourishing contextual forms which are taking seriously the need to maintain unity and continuity with the Church, at worst there is a loss of Scriptural and sacramental engagement which will inevitably result in failure to truly embody the gospel. Either way, a more robust account of how God’s presence is made known in and through the Christian plausibility structure is important.

²⁰⁹ *mission-shaped church*, p. vii.

²¹⁰ Clare Watkins and Bridget Shepherd, ‘The Challenge of Fresh Expressions to Ecclesiology,’ in *Ecclesial Practices* Vol 1:1 (2014): 92-110, p.98 quoting from the guide to setting up a fxc published by FE.

Chapter 4 Contribution of Newbigin to questions of authority in the ecclesiology of fxc

In chapter 3, I completed a review of the literature related to fxc and drew out points of analysis highlighting areas of the ecclesiology of fxc which need to be addressed. I also began to make connections with Newbigin's approach to Christian authority which was outlined in chapter 2. In this chapter I show how Newbigin's approach to Christian authority could be applied to address three key questions arising for fxc. First, how do we know a fxc is a church? Second, what would enable unity and continuity between the Church of England and fxc to be expressed? Finally, what is the basis for exercise of personal authority?

4.1 How do we know a fxc is a church?

The analysis of Newbigin's work shows that the question about whether a fxc is a church or not is irrelevant if approached from a foundational understanding of the authority of God, and the authority of the Church in relation to the authority of God. The Church is called into being by God, it is not self-determining. If a fxc meets together to confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour (as per the WCC statement noted in section 1.1.1) then it meets as an expression of the universal Church, and only God can judge whether it is indeed being part of God's Church.¹ By establishing this as the primary statement, the discussion about whether a fxc is a church or not can be seen to be a question about human authority.

In section 2.2.2.1 I noted the distinction between the Tradition of a church, for example the doctrinal structures of the Church of England, and the tradition that Newbigin identifies for a congregation that gives it unity and continuity with the universal Church. It is this tension that is being played out in the discussion about whether a fxc is a church or not. At the most basic level, Newbigin would ask whether the congregation meets with the acknowledgement that Jesus is Lord. Clearly any congregation will include people who do or do not believe that Jesus is Lord at that moment. This was the case when the risen Jesus appeared to the eleven disciples on the mountain and some doubted.² Every Christian moves between faith and doubt, but the reason to gather as a congregation is to recognise a commitment to the confession of the lordship of Jesus. This can be the only way a congregation can be recognised as part of the Church, and Newbigin would call this the presence of the Holy Spirit, since it is only by the Spirit that the confession 'Jesus is Lord' can be made.³

If God has called a fxc into being to make this confession as part of God's Church, then a fxc is called to do two things. Firstly, a fxc is called to be in fellowship with the wider Church. This is an exercise in humility which recognises that a fxc has been called to be part of the one people of God already visibly present in

¹ Newbigin, *Household of God*, p. 133: 'I think that if we refuse fellowship in Christ to any body of men and women who accept Jesus as Lord and show the fruits of His Spirit in their corporate lives, we do so at our peril. With what judgment we judge we shall be judged, It behoves us therefore to receive one another as Christ received us.'

² Matthew 28.17.

³ Newbigin, *Household of God*, p. 95. See also 1 Corinthians 12.3.

the world. This must be the starting point, because a fxc only knows who Jesus is, and understands her experience of the presence of Jesus in her midst, through the plausibility structure of the church that enabled her existence. Therefore, a fxc must begin by articulating how she expresses her unity and continuity with the wider Church. This does not need to be doctrinally complex but must be clear about the sources of authority that are being accepted.⁴

Secondly, a fxc is called to proclaim and embody the gospel in the place she exists as a sign and foretaste of the kingdom of God.⁵ This is a commitment to a certain way of life, to a pattern of individual and communal discipleship that demonstrates life lived in obedience to God.

The next two sections address these two implications of a fxc being called to be part of the Church.

4.2 How can unity and continuity between the Church of England and fxc be expressed?

Since this thesis is concerned with fxc in the Church of England, then the unity and continuity of fxc with the wider Church will be established through unity and continuity with the Church of England. Thus, the question is raised: how can we know whether a fxc is part of the Church of England or not? It is the Church of England that must judge the answer to this. However, fxc are as much part of the Church of England as the 'inherited' church. Therefore, a dialogue should begin that is centred on what needs to be present in the tradition of a fxc for unity and continuity with the Church of England to be established.

There are many lessons from the history of the Church about what happens when 'fresh expressions' within the Church begin to be stirred up by God. In the Protestant tradition, there is a history of defining a new church in opposition to another part of the Church, and the focus becomes one of maintaining a distinctive identity. Newbigin's approach to authority, that resists all claims to a higher authority than God's, pushes the Church to work for unity. This is not simply an administrative unity, because the Church is not merely functional.⁶ It is a unity that repents of division caused by human preference, even if this was sought as a means of safeguarding the orthodoxy of faith.⁷ Newbigin's challenge is that that Church loses her faith by defending division above seeking unity because she has sought a way of life that goes beyond her identity as one people called by God. Newbigin's hope is:

a form of unity which enables all who confess Christ as Lord to be recognizably one family in each place and in all places, united in the visible bonds of word, sacrament, ministry and congregational

⁴ For example, in the words of the Declaration of Assent of the Church of England, this is a calling to profess 'the faith uniquely revealed in the Holy Scriptures and set forth in the catholic creeds'.

⁵ In the words of the Declaration of Assent of the Church of England, this is a calling 'to proclaim afresh' the faith of the Church.

⁶ Newbigin, *Household of God*, p. 149.

⁷ Lesslie Newbigin, 'Anglicans and Christian Reunion,' in *Theology* 61, Issue 465 (June 1958), 223-227, p. 226.

fellowship, and in the invisible bond which the Spirit Himself creates through these means, one family offering to all men everywhere the secret of reconciliation with God the Father.⁸

It would be easy to mock this as idealistic, but perhaps it is a timely moment in the development of fxc to ask if this should be the aim of any dialogue that considers whether fxc are part of the Church of England. Newbigin sees seeking unity such as this as intrinsic to mission.

The value of the episcopacy was an area where Newbigin changed his opinion over the course of time.⁹ In the end, Newbigin came to describe the bishop as the 'centre of unity and authority for the life of the church' in a locality.¹⁰ In the Church of England, unity and continuity is visibly shown through relationships to and between the bishops. The implication of this is that fxc can be recognised as part of the Church of England through their relationship to the bishop, which may be via the parish priest. This provides some measure of accountability, but should not be a means of fxc avoiding responsibility for maturing as a congregation. Whilst this is in process, the bishop remains a key figure in encouraging the development of fxc and giving them legitimacy as well as negotiating their position in the diocese and amongst the parishes where they operate.¹¹

In the Church of England, the bishop is bishop-in-synod which gives an overlapping authority between the personal ministerial leadership of a bishop and conciliar government.¹² Within the Church of England, the synod system allows for dialogue, but this remains closed to fxc currently because it is structured on the parish system. This means supporters of fxc can contribute to the potential reshaping of the Church of England in response to the development of fxc, but it is difficult for practitioners to do so.¹³ A commitment to dialogue also means committing to training leaders of fxc to enable them to engage with the theological and ecclesiological issues that fxc raise for the Church of England.¹⁴ If practitioners are not able to contribute to dialogue at this level, then decisions, for example about how to judge maturity of fxc, will be made by the inherited church alone.

⁸ Newbigin, *One Body, One Gospel, One World*, pp. 55-56.

⁹ He came from a strongly Reformed tradition which valued ordination but did not have a part for bishops and apostolic succession within its polity. When the Church of South India was formed however, he was in the first cohort of bishops to be consecrated in 1947, and he came to see the episcopacy as a gift to the Church and a way of drawing it into unity. See Wainwright, *Lesslie Newbigin*, p. 150 and Newbigin, 'Bishops in a United Church', p. 150.

¹⁰ Lesslie Newbigin, 'Life of the Asian Churches', p. 31.

¹¹ *Mission-shaped church*, p. 138.

¹² Newbigin believes this model of leadership is a good one for the Church, and in his ideal structure he sees it existing at four levels of human society: the local group which might be geographic or linked to work or leisure, the region, the nation-state and the world.

¹³ With research showing around 15% of Church of England attendance is in fxc the absence of a representative voice is a significant loss to the synod dialogue.

¹⁴ Pioneer ministers who are trained within existing ordination pathways but are involved in pioneering new congregations are also well placed to contribute to dialogue since they 'speak the language' of both the inherited church and fxc.

If the Church of England agrees with Newbigin's assessment that Scripture and the dominical sacraments are the supremely authoritative elements for a new Christian community to be recognised as part of the Church of England, then everything possible must be done to give this opportunity to a fxc as soon as possible in her development. This will mean a commitment to training lay leaders, and fresh liturgical consideration of Eucharistic services.¹⁵ A note when considering possible revision of forms is the ecumenical conversation that has been part of FE from the writing of the *msc* report onwards.¹⁶ The recommendations of the *msc* report and the subsequent development of the FE team have included a commitment to ecumenical working, but formal processes of undertaking this are still seen as too cumbersome.¹⁷

Two of the measures that have been used to assess the ecclesial maturity of fxc are evidence of the four marks of the church and progress against the three-self principles. Newbigin's work challenges fxc to recognise that the four marks are primarily the given identity of the Church. This means that forms that are pursued to reflect these marks are in obedience to God's calling on the Church rather than something imposed by the Church on itself. In terms of the three-self criteria, whilst these are useful for measuring development, Newbigin says that criteria for 'success' for a congregation are not about size, growth or wealth, but rather about whether it is 'functioning as first-fruit, sign and instrument of God's new creation for that bit of the world.'¹⁸

4.3 What is the basis for exercise of personal authority?

Moynagh has a small section in *Church for every context* on 'the role of authority' explored in the context of leading worship.¹⁹ He says authority is to be exercised appropriately 'under Scripture' and 'will empower gatherings to explore how they can worship in ways that are faithful to God and who they are.'²⁰ Later he does note the relationship between authority and wider leadership, and describes leadership within fxc as having similarities with the model of authority he sees in the book of Deuteronomy. Here authority is 'dispersed, self-correcting and ultimately in the hands of the people'.²¹ Whilst the operation of this authority should be 'in the character of Jesus' and led by the Spirit, the higher context of authority being

¹⁵ There is already considerable flexibility in Common Worship with guidance given to the structural blocks that should be part of a service, and it is only in a eucharistic service that prescribed forms of words are required for collects and eucharistic prayers. See The Archbishops' Council, *New Patterns for Worship* (London: Church House Publishing, 2012).

¹⁶ The members of the working group that produced the *msc* report came from the Church of England, the Methodist Church, the Church Army and the Church Mission Society, *mission-shaped church*, p. ix.

¹⁷ *mission-shaped church*, pp. 145-146, and Lings, *Day of small things*, p. 200. The research reports 2.6% of fxc are formal Local Ecumenical Partnerships, with a further 13.3% being informal partnerships.

¹⁸ Newbigin, *Good Shepherd*, p.88.

¹⁹ Moynagh, *Church for every context*, pp. 372-377.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 372.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 397.

exercised under the authority of God is missing.²² Newbigin's commitment to this authority being understood through the interdependent framework of Scripture, tradition, reason and experience gives an appropriate context to 'self-correcting' and consensual authority because they are based on an agreed commitment. Even if Moynagh is assuming this basis, for the current generation which has strong links to the inherited church such assumptions may be valid, but an assumed commitment to the authority of tradition is not the same as an expressed commitment which is taught to new generations.

It is still very early in the development of fxc and attention is beginning to be given to issues of longer term practical sustainability and the role the wider Church can play in that.²³ One of the identified issues is how to recognise the authority of lay-leaders.²⁴ Whilst it has not been a focus of this thesis, Newbigin's work addresses this in some detail, and this may be a fruitful area of research.²⁵ As models of leadership training for fxc are developed there will clearly be a line to be navigated between resistance to hierarchical forms of leadership, and the need for leadership that can be a focus of unity and continuity with the wider church and that will serve, nourish and enable the members of a fxc for their mission as disciples in the world. Earlier I noted how Newbigin's doctrine of election separates authority from the imposition of power over others. God has chosen to reveal who God is through personal relationships. This means that one is chosen to bear the witness of the gospel to another. All Christians have this responsibility, but there is also a responsibility for the Church to establish herself structurally in such a way that she can give meaning to the confession of Jesus as Lord. The logic of election is that within the Church some people will be chosen to fulfil such roles on behalf of the Church.

Finally, it is impossible to read any of the literature surrounding fxc without being struck by the emphasis on personal story. It is typical to read about Christians with a longing for the people around them to have an encounter with Jesus, and then setting about creating a little Christian community that tells her story about the difference that Jesus has made for them, and loves the people around them. The study of Newbigin has shown that this is his definition of the Church. As fxc develop, they offer the Church of England a model of telling their story as part of God's story. There is no higher calling. The responsibility of

²² Ibid., pp. 310-311. See a similar point related to discipleship in footnote 105 where I noted that the exercise of authority in the Church must acknowledge and to submit to the ultimate authority of God otherwise it will become the exercise of power of personal preference.

²³ Weir, *Sustaining young Churches*, pp. 43-44.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 44.

²⁵ Newbigin, 'Life of the Asian Churches', p. 31. Newbigin advocates an apprenticeship model of lay leaders learning from ordained ministers. Although Andrew Wingate, 'NSM in India' in *Theology* Vol 87 (Jul 1984), 259-265 found that Newbigin's experiment was unsuccessful mainly because he left and the bishop who replaced him did not believe that this was the way to do it. The lesson from this for fxc is that new patterns of ministry need to be supported in the wider church to have long term sustainability and so bishops should not just use their authority to raise up new forms of leadership and church but to ensure that they are embedded in the form of the wider church as effectively as possible.

members of fxc is to allow the fullness of Scripture to keep shaping them as they reflect on their experience, and to remember that their story is also the story of the Church in that place.

Chapter 5 Conclusion

It may be right to ask whether the concept of 'authority' can ever be disentangled from the connotations of abuse of power. There can be no doubt that fresh expressions of church are arising in a society that has become critical and dismissive of authority claims. It is incumbent on fxc not to incorporate this into their 'institutional' make-up, but instead to 'reclaim' authority as a part of the Christian narrative. Lesslie Newbigin's approach to Christian authority has shown that a right understanding of human authority can only come through relating it to the authority of God revealed in and through Jesus Christ. The Church bears the witness of this Jesus who lived in Galilee 2000 years ago, who is now her living Lord, and who will return as King ruling and reigning over a kingdom that utterly reconfigures human notions of power.¹ Obedience to the authority of this Jesus is the starting point for fullness of life because Jesus holds the meaning and purpose of all life. As this thesis has shown, God has chosen the Church to be the means of this fact being made known.² The work of Newbigin has shown that continuity in the 'authority of tradition' provides a way for this fact of Christ to have meaning.

Newbigin can use strong language at times, and his guidance in *Household of God* for those parts of the Church that over-emphasise experience and dismiss tradition is worth repeating:

When the claim to possession by the Spirit, attested perhaps by abnormal signs of spiritual power, is made the ground for treating the unity and order of the Church with contempt, and for despising the great mass of 'nominal Christians' ... we must say bluntly as St. Paul did, that this is not the work of the Spirit but of the flesh. There is one Body as there is one Spirit, and there are no grounds for thinking that we can try to separate one from the other without disastrous error.³

This is perhaps helpful for fxc to bear in mind. Any Christian can only know who Jesus is because of the witness of those who have gone before. The authority of the Church's tradition is one that needs to be carried faithfully in this generation too, and faithful carrying means adapting tradition from within the tradition with a careful eye on what unity and continuity within the Church means. It takes courage to adopt and adapt forms, to work hard for consensus in structural change and to keep loving each other in the process. The good news is that the Church does not do this alone. Jesus, in whom our lives have meaning and purpose, in whose mission we are humbly called to participate, has sent us the Holy Spirit to guide us into all truth. The Church has and will get it wrong. In the grace of God, this becomes part of the testimony of the gospel, that the divine authority chooses love of the other as the way to be revealed. The mission of God that the Church is called to participate in is the reconciliation of all people to God in Christ.⁴

¹ It is being increasingly recognised that this sort of Biblical and theological language (almighty, lord, king, rule) has lost much of its right meaning in part due to the way the Church has used her own power at the heart of a Christendom society. So the task to reclaim the language of authority is not straightforward.

² Ephesians 3.10.

³ Newbigin, *Household of God*, p. 105.

⁴ Newbigin, *Household of God*, p. 148.

Newbigin would say to fxc that it is only as part of the Church, united and continuing, that they will truly demonstrate to the world the truth of the salvation to be found in Christ.

The development of fxc in the Church of England has released a passion for God's mission in congregations across the breadth of the church. The research undertaken into fxc has shown that they are genuinely complementary to parish churches and are enabling encounters with the gospel for new groups of people. However, as this thesis has shown, there are several areas within the ecclesiology of fxc which remain confused and inconsistent. The Church of England has a tremendous opportunity to build on developments so far and her model of dispersed authority encourages dialogue as a means of establishing what is authoritative in the church at any point in time. To fully engage with this model will mean drawing together tradition with experience, to examine these through the lens of Scripture and to reason together what it may be that the Holy Spirit is leading the Church of England into as a form and structure of the church for this time and place.⁵ The study of Lesslie Newbigin's work has enabled constructive thinking about the role of authority in shaping ecclesiology and has pointed to some key areas where an understanding of authority can contribute to an ecclesiology for fxc in the Church of England.

In the final chapter of *Mission-shaped Questions*, Croft calls for a re-imagining of ecclesiology that enables discussion and reflection 'about what it means to be the Church in dialogue with Scripture and our tradition.'⁶ My hope is that this thesis will contribute to this discussion.

⁵ David Goodhew, Andrew Roberts and Michael Volland, *Fresh! An Introduction to Fresh Expressions of Church and Pioneer Ministry* (Norwich: SCM Press, 2012), p. 70.

⁶ Steven Croft, 'Mapping ecclesiology for a mixed economy', in Croft (ed.), *Mission-shaped Questions*, pp. 186-198.

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List of Abbreviations

BMO	Bishops Mission Order
CSI	Church of South India
FE	Fresh Expressions
fxc	fresh expressions of church
IMC	International Missionary Council
msc	mission-shaped church
URC	United Reformed Church
WCC	World Council of Churches