

# **What are the perceptions of God and the church on an urban outer estate, and what are the implications for mission?**

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## Abstract

In this dissertation I argue that estates residents are open to God and there is a fondness and appreciation towards the church. This research demonstrates that Bevans and Schroeder's Prophetic Dialogue is an effective approach to mission in an estate context.

This research has a two-fold aim; firstly, to challenge the wider church to continued presence on estates and secondly to help practitioners currently engaging on estates to reflect on good practice.

I chose participants from the estate where I live and work and engaged them in semi-structured interviews. I used principles and methods from ethnographic pastoral listening, and life story narrative for interviews and tools from theological action reflection to listen to the data.

I discovered an overall openness to God, through three themes:

- 'Multiple Overwhelmings'
- Accompaniment
- Indifference

I also identified an overarching fondness and appreciation toward the church as it was perceived to be:

- a place to get help
- a sense of family
- a place where participants had a positive history

Using 'Prophetic Dialogue' as a framework I have suggested implications for mission based on three principles: presence, enabling and proclamation.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

'We have a crisis'<sup>1</sup>, argued Bishop Phillip North back in 2016. Church attendance is declining however, nowhere is that more dramatically evident than in poor communities and on estates. Estate parishes are those identified as having 500 or more social housing units.<sup>2</sup> Lyndsey Hanley describes estates as often forgotten about corners of cities and towns in which people do not travel to or through unless they have a reason to and are frequently described in negative connotations.<sup>3</sup> In a recent publication edited by Al Barratt, Bishop North outlines the stark news 'congregational decline in estates churches is four times the national average and forty percent of applications for church closures are in the 10 percent most deprived communities.'<sup>4</sup>

Madeleine Davis claims 'the anxiety that the church is not reaching the working classes is not a new phenomenon.'<sup>5</sup> Quoting Bishop David Shepherd, in the wake of the 1985 Faith in the City report concluded that the issue is 'generations deep.'<sup>6</sup> In addition, Davis quotes Rev Sharon Prentis who suggests 'the Church has always been involved in working-class areas and those of greatest social need. However, it was often the case that people from a different social background were the leaders.'<sup>7</sup>

Church growth strategy and vision in recent decades has been to establish new churches in university towns by encouraging mobile middle-class Christians to relocate, reaching people like themselves.<sup>8</sup> I believe this is short-sighted, will widen the gap and add to the divide, filling our churches with more of the same types of people. The only way for things to change is for us to listen with those in our community and discern how God's Spirit might be prompting us to act.

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<sup>1</sup> Bishop Phillip North, 'Putting the poor first', *Church of the poor? A call to action for churches in the UK*, <<http://www.church-poverty.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Church-of-the-Poor-report-web.pdf>> accessed [10/10/22].

<sup>2</sup> The Diocese of Southwark, Southwark Diocese has the second highest number of estates parishes in the country. But what is an estate parish? <<https://southwark.anglican.org/southwark-diocese-has-the-second-highest-number-of-estates-parishes-in-the-country-but-what-is-an-estates-parish/>> accessed [02/02/23].

<sup>3</sup> Lyndsey Hanley, *Estates: An Intimate History* (London: Granta Books, 2017), p.xiv, p.5-7.

<sup>4</sup> Al Barrett, *Finding the Treasure: Good news from the estates* (London: SPCK, 2023), p.1.

<sup>5</sup> Madeleine Davis, Is the C of E still a class riddled act? <<https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2021/25-june/features/features/is-the-c-of-e-still-a-class-riddled-act>> accessed [23/11/22].

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Natalie Williams & Paul Brown, *Invisible Divides: class, culture and barriers to belonging in the church* (London: SPCK 2022) p.2.

I entered this research with these questions in mind: Are those from social housing estates a hard population to reach? What could we be doing differently? What are the perceptions of God and the church in our estate parishes and how can we learn from them to effectively share Christ in those settings? I wanted to discover how open or resistant might estates residents be to God and the church, especially in the light of well-established barriers to inclusion.

The Church, more specifically the Church of England is unique in that it has, in theory at least, a presence in every community. One would hope that its congregants would be representative of their localities but unfortunately this is often not the case in particular estates and urban parishes. Williams and Brown argue that 'when it comes to the working class, we are mostly absent from church.'<sup>9</sup> Additionally, they quote Evangelical Alliance research which found that '81 percent of people in British Evangelical churches have a university degree, compared with 27 percent of the population as a whole.'<sup>10</sup>

My research is important for three main reasons. Firstly, it is important theologically and I will expand on this later using Bevans and Schroeder's work on 'Prophetic Dialogue'. Secondly, it matters for the wider Church to challenge the narrative that working class people are hard to reach and resistant to the gospel.<sup>11</sup> In addition, by listening to voices of those marginalised the Church can gain understanding and empathy and thus bolster the Churches commitment on estates. Finally, this research is important to the local community in that through the deep listening of the research process participants have felt heard, valued and their contribution helps to shape local church engagement.

I structure this dissertation by introducing the topic in chapter one, chapter two outlines my methodology, in chapter three I present my results which reveal an openness to God and a fondness and appreciation of the church. Chapter four is a

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<sup>9</sup> Williams & Brown, *Invisible*, p.7.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p.9.

discussion on themes that emerged from my research, and I present 'Prophetic Dialogue' as an approach to mission on estates. Finally, I end in chapter six with my conclusions, recommendations, and personal reflections.

In this dissertation I argue that estates residents are open to God and demonstrate a fondness towards the church despite barriers to inclusion. This research demonstrates that 'Prophetic Dialogue' as an approach to mission will be effective in an estates context and I will explore three key implications for mission: presence, enabling and proclamation.

I am encouraged by what I see happening in the Church of England. The Diocese of Southwark this year appointed the first Dean of Estates Ministry, investment and progress is being made, the church seems like it is listening. This year there have been conferences run by National Estates Churches Network (NECN)<sup>12</sup> and by the Gregory Centre for Church multiplication (CCX), called Multiply Estates.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, there is an Estates Evangelism task group and their conference this year was called, Not Forgotten: Finding Treasure on the Margins.<sup>14</sup> It is positive to know that there are discussions happening and there are some amazing people committed to serve and work shoulder to shoulder with those who reside in some of the poorest communities in the UK. However, questions remain which require deep listening to those in our communities. My research seeks to do this.

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<sup>12</sup> National Estate Churches Network (NECN), <<https://estatechurches.org/2023/04/conference2023/>> accessed [10/01/23].

<sup>13</sup> The Gregory Centre for Church Multiplication, <<https://ccx.org.uk/content/story-multiply-estates-mission/>> accessed [10/01/23].

<sup>14</sup> NECN, <<https://estatechurches.org/2023/03/not-forgotten-finding-the-treasure/>> accessed [02/03/23].



## Chapter 2: Methodology

In this chapter I start by setting out my position as a researcher and outline the methodological commitments that have shaped my research. I have been influenced by three main approaches, Moschella's **ethnographic pastoral listening**<sup>15</sup> and Bold's **life story narrative**<sup>16</sup> have informed my approach to qualitative interviewing, and I have used tools from **theological action reflection**<sup>17</sup> (TAR) to listen to the data in community with the Holy Spirit's help to discern themes.

I go on to introduce my participants, how I recruited them, their relationship to the local church and their demographics. Hereafter, I describe the procedure I followed which includes some ethical considerations and how I analysed the data. I finish the chapter acknowledging some of the limitations of this study along with its validity as a contribution to contemporary conversations around mission in estates context.

### Researcher positionality

I am currently employed as a Pioneer in a Church of England Estate Parish. This study has formed part of a deeper listening exercise in which the church leadership team are engaged in. We have been listening to discern what God might be doing in our community and consider how we might join in. As a church we want to hear the stories of people who live on the estate. To help understand their view of the world, God, and the church and to consider implications for mission. Also, to reimagine creative ways to engage our community as we share the good news of Christ.

I was born on an outer urban estate. As a family we experienced some of the difficulties that many people on estates face including relative poverty, domestic abuse, and addiction. Sadly, the Anglican church on the edge of that estate does little to engage with those who live there even to this day, hosting events aimed at

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<sup>15</sup> Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a pastoral practice: An introduction, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2023).

<sup>16</sup> Christine Bold, *Using Narrative in research* (London: Sage Publications, 2012).

<sup>17</sup> Theological Action Research Network, <<https://theologyandactionresearch.net/theological-action-research/>> accessed [14/11/22].

attracting a different demographic. Instead, it was the little Shaftesbury missional church that had a wide reach and varied program engaging those in the town from a working-class background. This missional church is where I attended as a child and where I learnt about Jesus through the lives, words, and actions of church staff and volunteers. For the last twenty years I have been actively engaged in mission initiatives and Christian community engagement. Whilst involved in this work I have sensed a growing dis-ease and discomfort about some 'doing to/for' approaches of social action that lead me to further studies including completing this MA programme. I am particularly interested in how to engage and effectively share the good news of Christ with those on estates, to live out an incarnational approach to wholistic mission.

The estate where I now live, and work comprises of over two thousand social housing units. There are many challenges, though it is full of some of the most wonderfully resilient, brave, and resourceful people I know. Nearly two years ago we started a listening exercise to hear from local people about the hopes and dreams they have for themselves, their families and the estate and we've continued to listen. Paul Tillich indicates that the 'first duty of love is to listen'<sup>18</sup> and I am part of a team who hold this as a high value. We have adopted a culture of listening, and this continues to inform our practice today.

## Participants

Much has changed in the public sphere to ensure more diverse voices are heard, however the same can't be said of the academic world. Braun and Clarke acknowledge that much scholarly research is dominated by the 'usual suspects'<sup>19</sup> who are the educated, white, middled-class, straight people<sup>20</sup>. My participants are deemed to be from the 'hidden population' of those who could be perceived as stigmatised due to educational attainment, employment, or housing. This is why I

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<sup>18</sup> Paul Tillich, *Love, Power, and Justice: Ontological Analysis and Ethical Applications* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), p.82.

<sup>19</sup> Virginia Braun & Victoria Clarke, *Successful Qualitative Research: A practical guide for beginners* (London: Sage Publications Ltd, 2013), p.58.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

am grateful for this platform which enables my neighbours' voices to be heard, affording us the opportunity to learn with them.

For this study, I chose six participants to interview, two men and four women, all residents on the estate where the church is located. I chose the participants as they live near the church, engage fairly regularly in activities held at the church but are not regular attendees at Sunday church services (regular deemed attending at least twice a month). My participants are those who could be considered on the fringes of church. People who I have connected with at various activities as a fellow attendee. However, they know I am employed by the church, which places me in positional power which I was mindful of as I carried out interviews. The names of participants have been changed to protect their identity and pseudonyms have been given which I use throughout the essay. Below is a table of each participant's connection to church. Four of those I have interviewed have attended a church service, but this has been less than once a month or in most cases a rare appearance at a special event.

*Connection with local church*

The church hosts a weekly coffee drop in which is attended by the local council and various community groups, each providing staff from the following services once a month, GP advice, social prescribing services, benefits advice, and family support. There is a community choir in partnership with the NHS and an exercise class sponsored by Sport England.

Name	Attends occasional Church Service	Attends coffee morning (weekly)	Attends community choir	Attends exercise class
Cara				X
Clive	X			
Katherine				X
Mark	X	X	X	

Sarah	X	X		X
Valarie	X	X		

*Breakdown in age, ethnicity, gender, and religion*

Name	Gender	Age group	Occupation	Ethnicity	Religion
Cara	Female	40-49	Unemployed	White British	?
Clive	Male	30-39	Unemployed	White British	None
Katherine	Female	40-49	Full time	White British	CoE
Mark	Male	70-79	Retired	White British	Christian
Sarah	Female	40-49	Unemployed	White British	None
Valarie	Female	30-39	Part time	White British	CoE

## Procedure

In this section I will describe my approach to this study, participant recruitment, how I carried out interviews and analysed the data.

### Ethnographic pastoral listening

I used ethnographic pastoral listening as an approach in this study as I was already engaged in this by living and working on the estate amongst those who I hoped to hear from. Mary Clark Moschella claims:

‘Ethnography is the study of people and culture, of “ethnos.” Rooted in the discipline of cultural anthropology, it involves doing fieldwork, immersing yourself in the life of a group of people in order to learn something about and from them.’<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Moschella, *Ethnography*, p.4.

Furthermore, Moschella describes why the practice is used:

‘When we develop the ears to hear our people in their cultural complexity, we will likely come to appreciate them more, to feel compassion, admiration, or to understand a bit more about them.’<sup>22</sup>

This practice of listening is important as it can change us and Moschella maintains that ‘honest engagement requires this: that our view of a person, a community, and ourselves be enlarged in some way.’<sup>23</sup>

Ethnographic pastoral listening requires paying close attention to local people in the community. The church listeners take what they discover and ask questions such as ‘what is the Spirit saying or showing through this data?’ ‘How do we sense God is calling us to be in light of what we are hearing?’ ‘Are there any themes emerging, does anything resonate or relate to what we might be hearing through scripture?’ In this way the listening is extended to listening to God’s voice, discerning His purposes for mission in this place.

## Recruitment

I personally invited participants to be part of this study. Prior to interviewing, participants were provided with an information sheet and then asked for written consent. Participants were also required to complete a separate form for their ages and ethnicity to easily ascertain diversity (or lack of it). This form also contained a question about religion which enabled them to self-identify their religious beliefs. Interviews were conducted between November and December 2022, and each lasted approximately forty-five minutes. Aware of the power imbalance I gave participants a choice of location and time for interviews. Three interviews were conducted at homes, two were in the church and one in a private room at council offices where the individual was attending a course. On one occasion a participant brought her child who wasn’t at school, and I had to respond quickly and creatively to

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p.xv.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

find an activity to occupy the child. In the settings where I had some control, I tried to make the space welcoming, much like a front room and offered refreshments. I wanted to create an environment which would put the participant at ease and help them feel like they were just having an informal chat. No notes were made during the interview so that I could give full attention to the participant and facilitate more of a conversational approach. Each participant was encouraged to speak freely about the topic and to respond with as much or as little information as desired. The participants were advised that their responses would be documented using two audio recording devices, the data would be protected by a password, and destroyed after the assessment has been marked.

### Semi Structured interviews

The semi-structured qualitative interview consisted of seven open-ended questions. I chose a life-story interviewing approach which focuses on the narrative of the storyteller.<sup>24</sup> The first question was an invitation for participants to talk about the highs and lows of their lives regarding what had made them who they are today. I was paying attention to the different people or events that had been significant in their stories. I had follow-up questions and sub questions to be used as backup and prompts if the conversation lost its flow (for questions see appendix 5).

### Data Analysis

On completion of each interview, transcripts were produced, and data was anonymised. Prior to reading each transcript I prayed, thanked God for the person and their story and asked that God would give me eyes to see and ears to hear what the Spirit might be saying through their story. Then prayerful attention was given to the transcript. Butler compares this kind of prayerful attention to the ancient practice of *Lectio Divina* reading the scriptures in a deliberate fashion of prayerful devotion to data<sup>25</sup>. The transcripts were then read several times to immerse myself in the information. I used a complete coding approach<sup>26</sup> to identify anything and everything

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<sup>24</sup> Christine Bold, *Using narrative in research* (London: Sage, 2012), p.97-98.

<sup>25</sup> James Butler, 'Prayer as a Research Practice?: What Corporate Practices of Prayer Disclose about Theological Action Research', *Ecclesial Practices* 7 (2020), 241-257, p.244.

<sup>26</sup> Braun & Clarke, *Successful*, p.206-207.

relevant to my research question. I gave a code or label which was a word or phrase that encapsulated the essence of what I felt was being said.

I have been influenced by the work of Theological Action Research (TAR)<sup>27</sup> which finds its roots in Practical Theology and Action Research. I appreciate TAR as it is theological all the way through, collaborative and action orientated. It is cyclical in methodology as it systematically looks at practice, reflects on it and has a liberative element that brings about change to practice and theory.<sup>28</sup> It is collaborative in several ways. Participants are not seen as objects but as subjects involved in an insider group, shaping, and designing research as well as carrying it out and reflecting on it. An outsider group of academics and practitioners are also involved. The two groups design the research and then listen to the data together. If I'd had more time, I would have liked to have designed my research and included my participants as an insider group in a similar fashion. However, due to time and resources I could only draw on some of the practices, namely the listening and analysing the data in community. The collaborative nature and listening to God in community was of particular importance to me and so as a team, my two colleagues and I attended a retreat centre for the day to pray, read the transcripts, and listen to what God might be revealing to us through them. I gained permission from my participants for this and had anonymised the data. Each of us had two transcripts and I used some helpful listening questions supplied by James Butler, MA Lecturer for CMS, Research fellow at Roehampton University and actively involved in Theological Action Reflection Network (TARN) (see appendix 7). My colleagues were encouraged to read through the instructions along with the transcripts and we then came back together to discuss each one. I took notes on these discussions and then compared and analysed these with my original theme findings. Afterwards clusters of themes were extracted, arranged into tables, and given descriptive labels to produce a list of major themes. Quotes from participants were arranged in tables under each theme.

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<sup>27</sup> Theological Action Research Network, <<https://theologyandactionresearch.net/theological-action-research/>> accessed [14/11/22].

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

## Limitations

I acknowledge that my position and emotional attachment to this subject matter has shaped how I have approached the study to elevate marginal voices. Furthermore, my positional power as a church employee could have skewed the data as participants might have been more favourable in their opinions of God and the church. Despite my insistence in our interviews that they were free to be honest.

Additional limitations are the fact that my participants were white and over 30 years of age. Although approximately 65% of the population of the estate are white British this research is poorer for that fact that we don't hear from that further 35% of non-white people. The estate is now considered to be mixed occupation, with approximately forty percent of residents living in social housing. The other sixty percent are owner occupiers or private rental accommodation. The participants of this study are all social housing tenants, and it would have been beneficial to hear from those in private rental and owner-occupied accommodation.

Despite the limitations I've identified, the results are nonetheless valid for the purposes of addressing my research question.

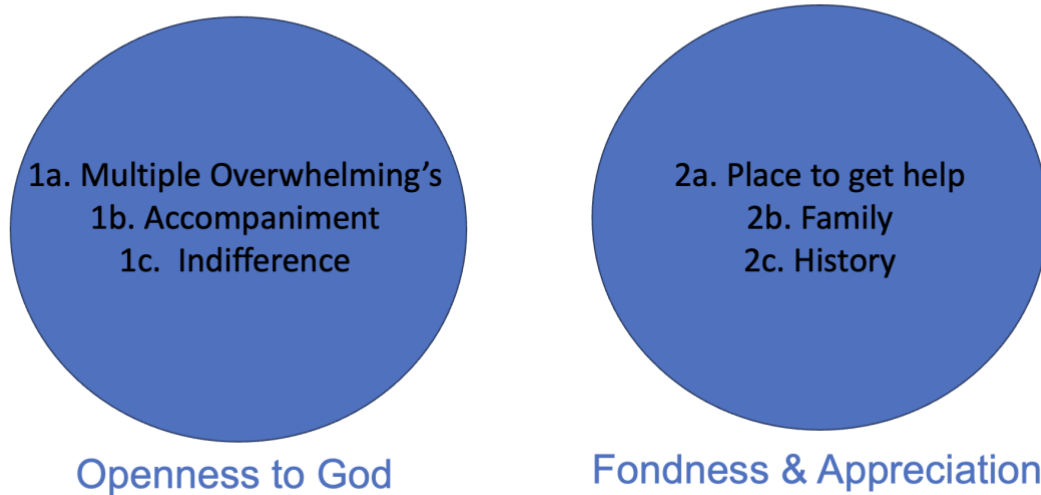
In the next chapter I will present the results of this study.



## Chapter 3: Results

The main themes emerging from this research were twofold. Firstly, around perceptions of God, there was an overarching theme of openness toward God, evidenced by three sub themes which were ‘overwhelmings’, accompaniment, and indifference. Secondly, under perceptions of the church I found a central theme was a fondness and appreciation of the church. This was evident by the subthemes of the church as a place to get help, family, and a positive history with the church.

### 1. Perceptions of God    2. Perceptions of Church



#### 1. Perceptions of God: Openness

In this section I describe the overarching theme of an openness to God, and I describe this in three ways:

- a) Through multiple overwhelmings
- b) Accompaniment
- c) Indifference

## 1a. Multiple Overwhelmings

David Ford coined the phrase 'Multiple Overwhelmings'<sup>29</sup> as a metaphor to speak of the normative experience of being human. He notes huge events such as war, a massacre, a stock market collapse and health epidemics as well as more personal ones such as falling in love; the birth of a child; divorce; serious illness; finding or losing a job; bereavement.<sup>30</sup> Slee expands on Ford's metaphor and describes the experience of being overwhelmed, 'is of being caught up, carried along or bowled over, by some event, force or person, over which one has no control.'<sup>31</sup>

In the forward to Al Barrett's 'Finding Treasure: Good News from the Estates', Ann Morisy also draws on the phrase from Ford relating it to the multiple levels of hardship those who live on estates contend with she writes:

'...many residents of housing estates who likewise experience multiple overwhelming – whether through disappointment, lack, humiliation, addiction, and much more besides. Labouring under the impact of these emotional and sometimes physical assaults can bring scarring that impedes both personal and communal flourishing, but this does not have to be the case.'<sup>32</sup>

When I asked my first question to my participants in this study, I was not wholly prepared for the responses I received. I had made ethical considerations and planned to signpost participants to relevant agencies such as local counselling and pastoral services if necessary. However, I was surprised at how much of their story my participants willingly shared with me, opening up and baring all despite only having only known me a short while. This level of trust and rapport, built in a short time, left me feeling extremely honoured and grateful. But also, it made me feel a huge weight of responsibility, to hold the treasure of what they had shared and to tell their stories in a way they did them justice and honoured them. The level of candour

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<sup>29</sup> David Ford, *The Shape of living* (London: Canterbury Press, 1997).

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p.xix-xx.

<sup>31</sup> Nicola Slee, 'A Spirituality for Multiple Overwhelmings', *Practical Theology*, 10:1 (2017) 20-32, p.21.

<sup>32</sup> Al Barrett, *Finding the Treasure: Good news from the estates* (London: SPCK, 2023), p.ix.

and frankness in which they shared some harrowing and painful stories was what surprised me the most.

The participants I interviewed had experienced acute levels of suffering and trauma, multiple negative overwhelmings. This is confirmed in Tim Chester's term 'struggle'<sup>33</sup> used to describe characteristics of working-class areas. There were three main ways in which these experiences had come about: through addictions, abuse, and loss. Interestingly, these three issues regularly come up in conversations with other residents too. What was clear was that the fact participants had rarely been given opportunity to talk about their lives. They talked about incidences in a very matter of fact way, disassociating and perhaps minimising the level of harm the events had caused them. They also shared how access to professional support was limited, with long waiting times which compounds the impact on their wellbeing. I think it is important to hear some of the stories for a couple of reasons; firstly, we rarely hear from this demographic in academic studies, as already mentioned and secondly by listening to these stories we can be changed, have more compassion and empathy for those enduring such trials. During the listening phase of this project with my two colleagues one of them remarked "wow, dealing with one of those issues would have been hard but all three of those things, that's a lot." As a team we have grown and changed because of hearing from our neighbours.

I introduce you to these experiences of multiple overwhelmings as I believe for us to appreciate the participants perceptions of God, we must understand their experience of the world which colours the lenses through which they see.

### *Addictions*

The NHS reports that there are high levels of alcohol related admissions to the local hospital of those living on the estate.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, as a team we are in contact

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<sup>33</sup> Tim Chester, *Unreached: Growing Churches in working class and deprived areas* (Nottingham: IVP, 2012) p.47.

<sup>34</sup> NHS Trust anonymised.

with other local people who are in recovery themselves or have a close family member with a similar concern.

Two of my female participants shared in detail about their own experience of alcohol addiction.

*I used to be a drinker and liked to drink every day. Not wake up drinking but I wouldn't go to bed sober.*

*I remember being grounded for the six weeks holidays at twelve because my mum was out clubbing and I was babysitting my brother who was eight years younger than me, so he was, what four? And I got really drunk on white lightning. So, from twelve to nineteen I was just always drunk. Valarie*

Cara gave birth to a still born baby at thirty-five weeks and then experienced several miscarriages. Following this her husband was in hospital having been diagnosed with a serious condition.

*During that time, I started to have a few extra wines and stuff like that, just to sleep. Cara*

Sarah's parents were young when they had her, and she believes that alcohol and drugs contributed to a violent incident that led to her and her sibling being taken into care.

*My mum was fifteen or sixteen when she had me... You know it was drink and dad, my dad was the same, they were just too young and silly to do anything.*

## Abuse

Domestic abuse is when violence is committed by someone within the victim's domestic circle, a close partner or family member. On the estate violence against women is a top priority for the local police neighbourhood team due to high incidences and is therefore a regular agenda item on every ward police meeting.<sup>35</sup>

Three participants had experienced abuse as children to varying degrees. Clive had been a victim of abuse at the hand of a parent, Sarah had witnessed violence towards her brother and Valarie had been in a turbulent relationship with the father of her children, but had also witnessed the domestic abuse of her mother.

*I'd say my life when I was growing up wasn't amazing. I don't get on with my dad, very sort of abusive man, sort of controlling, bit narcissistic. I used to get the belt all the time. He used to wrap it round my face and everything. Clive*

Sarah and her brother were both under five years old when they went to live with foster parents after a traumatic incident occurred with her birth mother and brother.

*I was in the room when my mum actually strangled, or tried to strangle him, he was in hospital.*

All four of the women who participated in my study had experienced some form of controlling relationship. Two had been in a women's shelter and one was receiving support from a women's centre.

*I knew, I knew, I knew I shouldn't have been with him, and I knew each time I left him I didn't want him to find me anymore, cos I knew he was a wrong'en, but he still did and each time he charmed his way back in... I couldn't go anywhere. I couldn't do anything... I mean he didn't beat me*

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<sup>35</sup> Police team anonymised.

*for the first year it was mental, ground and wore me down. Wore me to the stage of life, there was no life. Katherine*

*My dad said to me you know when you see on the news, a woman was stalked previously by their partner for months or years and then they were eventually killed. We didn't know if that would happen. He was so obsessed by controlling me and the children - Katherine*

There was evidence of generational domestic abuse, interviewees had experienced abuse and so had a parent or grandparent.

*My parents lived with my nan and my mums' siblings, but it wasn't, you know, great. My nan had fled domestic violence. There shouldn't have been children living there.' Sarah*

*My mum split up with my dad when I was like eleven. My mum was in domestic violence, really bad to the point where she couldn't even see her parents. Valarie*

## Loss

There is a life expectancy gap between those in the poorer parts of the borough which include the estate and the more affluent parts.<sup>36</sup> One report suggests that a man on the estate can expect to live to 74 years of age and a woman three miles away in the borough can expect to live to 87 years old, which is a thirteen-year gap.<sup>37</sup>

Three of my participants had experienced the death of a close relative under the age of sixty. Sarah describes the impact of that on her life.

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<sup>36</sup> Statistics from 2021 Joint Strategic Needs Assessment of area (omitted from references due to anonymising of research).

<sup>37</sup> 2014 local newspaper report (reference omitted due to anonymising of research).

*I had a massive trauma losing my brother and that really has had an effect even today, twenty years later, a massive thing.*

Mark described being happily married for thirty-six years to his wife with whom they had one son. She tragically died at the age of fifty-six after a four-year battle with cancer.

*The high of my life was of course marrying Julie, and Darren, our son coming along and then of course the low was when Julie went, she just went so soon.*

Cara was looking after her mum who was recovering from two large operations to remove cancer and various treatment.

*I was with her every single day cos me dad had to work... Then one day I got a phone call, and she was like 'I can't breathe'. Dad was like 'your mum is really sick, you need to get round there', cos he was at work, and I got round there, and she was dead.*

Two of the participants experienced multiple miscarriages.

*I got pregnant, had a miscarriage, I got pregnant again, had Ariel at 35 weeks but she was still born. Then I went on to have another four miscarriages. Cara*

*'I have Buddy, who's like our little angel, we call him that cos unfortunately we lost two kids before we had Buddy. One around 23 weeks and one around 24 ½ weeks and obviously Anna had to give birth to them, and I was there the whole time, it's hard, honestly, it's hard, I get choked even talking about it, I'm choked.'* Clive

What was clear however, was that these often traumatic events led them to view God through this lens of multiple negative overwhelmings. Overall, this led them to be open to God and to ask questions around the existence of God and how a good God can allow good people to suffer.

Gumbel writes ‘the issue of suffering is the most frequently raised objection to the Christian faith.’<sup>38</sup>

*I do have that sense of my brother's death was so unfair and if, you know, that if God exists why does bad things happen to good people?  
Sarah*

Sarah was not alone in her questioning.

*If there is someone there, why is he taking my kids? Why is there disabilities and why is there cancer?” Clive*

It seems perfectly understandable that people question the existence of a good God during such suffering. Katherine had recently experienced the death of a friend.

*I do believe there is a God, but I don't understand Him a lot of the time and I question him. Why have you taken...? (crying) Why do things happen to good people?*

Perhaps much of this was because of childhood connection with church, youth groups or a Christian school which caused them to have a God consciousness. All six participants spoke of a childhood connection to Church or a Christian school.

*‘I mean God is there because of my upbringing.’ Sarah*

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<sup>38</sup> Nicky Gumbel, *Searching Issues* (London: Hodder & Stoughton Ltd, 2018) Google ebook: location 85.



Each participant described being open to the idea of God and particularly around times of hardship or loss. Despite Mark's experience of the loss of his wife he had a positive view of God, one of being embraced and comforted.

*I've always got one image of God, just a picture of just like Him with his arms out, reaching for ya. It makes me feel like you're wanted, like he's looking after ya and makes you feel free, you know if you think of it, you can feel his arms coming out toward ya.*

There was a longing to know, which was predominantly driven by need for reassurance that lost loved ones had gone to a better place and they were often looking for, asking and open for signs. Conversations with those on the estate led me to hear that there is a belief that dead relatives visit in form of a bird or feathers as a sign from loved ones in heaven. Conversations with others outside of my participants had revealed that attending a spiritualist church or medium is not an uncommon practice among those on our estate who had lost people as they sought comfort.

When I asked Valarie about the role of prayer in her life, she shared about talking to a robin as if it was one of her lost loved ones.

*I feel silly, if I'm honest. But I dunno, I don't know how to pray. I talk to like, there will be like a little robin or something. I am like "who are you? Are you grandad, are you nan?"*

Sarah recalls having a spiritual experience after her brother died.

*I think when my brother died that was the time when I really sort of tried a little bit and I felt like there was something. I saw him after he died and things like that and I knew that he was OK coz he smiled at me and that was the sort of only real time that I did feel quite close to God.*

Valarie's beliefs were wrapped up with further questioning and perhaps superstition around whether life would be better if her mum was Christened.

*My mum has four sisters, and she is the only one, my mum lives in a council house, they all have mortgages, they are still with their husbands. She is the one going through lung and brain cancer, I'm like maybe you should get Christened, I feel like, dunno if you'll be allowed up there if you are not Christened. Valarie*

Our church leader confirmed that there are some who might have a magical view of baptism, they ask to be baptised and afterward they never attend church again.

Valarie described actively searching.

*Cos every single night, let me just find it, I'm searching on YouTube yeah sorry, I'm not sure if I'm looking at the good stuff or... You know when it comes up on YouTube, like last night I fell asleep to Wayne Dyer, that's more like law of attachment. I think its grace purpose I usually listened to. It's all about a lot of things from the Bible, God is Love, amazing grace.*

The experience of multiple overwhelmings has caused people to question, to look for God and in fact the overwhelmings caused by the global pandemic may have enabled people to be more open and interested in matters of faith. The authors of the 'Talking Jesus' report indicated that when they originally conducted the research in 2015 that 1 in 5 people were interested in having a conversation about Jesus.<sup>39</sup> However, in 2022, seven years on, 1 in 3 are now interested and that could be because people are asking the big questions of life since the pandemic.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, the report indicated the main influence for adults that caused them to come to faith was indeed a life event.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Church of England, Talking Jesus <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oVcZotVdDGM&t=1349s>>, accessed [23/05/23].

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

## 1b. Accompaniment

One strong theme that emerged from the participants was that they had experienced key people in their life who had shown them what God was like. Some could in a very direct way identify a person who had been a 'guardian angel'. They made a reference to God or a divine being considering the person or could acknowledge God's kindness to them through a person.

Mark and his wife would not have called themselves Christians, but they did know the local women who did attend. Mark and his wife would attend the church for certain events, mainly at Christmas.

*Julie used to do the hair of ladies from the church, and we went to the Carol service and we never used to stay for the coffee. On the way out April (the Priest) was waiting at the door and she said, "Julie I know, the ladies have told me about what you are gonna go through, and just to let you know I work for the local cancer hospital and I'll be with you all the time" and from that moment on she never left Julie. I didn't find out till after, even if we just went there for Julie to take blood, April would be there to see her, and she was with her every day when we was there, she was there with Julie.*

When Julie's illness progressed, she was transferred to a local hospice where Reverend April continued to visit. Mark describes the time when he told April that Julie had weeks to live.

*I told her (April) that they told us Julie's only got a couple of weeks to live and she wants you to do her (funeral) service and she said "I'll be honoured". And er, then she said, "could I go and see Julie on my own?" and she did, I dunno what they said. But she was with her all the time, and she texted her every night. She was brilliant. If you think of God, then you think of April. Yeah, she was I mean, there was a God*

*then, every night they text each other and said a prayer over text. I didn't know that till Julie went and we went through her phone. Every night. It must have really helped her, because all through that time she was so calm with it all. And even, even to the end she didn't, she just seemed so calm and seemed to it accept that she was gonna go. That's what made me believe that there is a heaven, cause I know that's what she thought.*

Here Mark's wife's calmness, acceptance and assurance of heaven reassured him and enabled him to believe.

Valarie also shared her experience of a Christian who attends church who had supported her and was alongside her through various ups and downs. Paula doesn't work in an official role for the church, but she does have a supportive role in a Women's Centre where she views her work as her vocation, placed by God among survivors of domestic abuse and their children.

*... I called up Paula from the Centre, she's my guardian angel, I love that lady so much... So she got me on this and that (referring to courses). I've just got a message from her today, she's got me into counselling. But if I didn't have Paula I don't know where I'll be right now.*

Clive recognised a person who had been supportive of him and who had gone the extra mile. Trinny, like Paula doesn't work in an official church role but does hold a role supporting parents in the community and is growing more to see this as a vocation. It is not hard to understand why as Clive talks about her witness and support.

*Trinny is a big one for me because she's been, she's another hero for me. I mean the last 11 months that we've had, working with her she's been amazing, she has changed everything for us, she has done so much, I couldn't, I dunno where we'd be without her to be honest, she*

*has done so well. Trinny has been brilliant, I can't thank her enough, I tell her every time I ring her, I say if you need me just tell me, lifting something, just ask me. I see the struggle that she went through, I felt the struggle, I felt it, that's why we get on so well because we've both lost and we've both grieved and we've both been a bit similar. Obviously not on the scale that she has had it. A lot of losses on a quick time that's... (long sigh), I dunno how she's cracked on but she's a hero, a hero for it man.*

Importantly here though what had made an impact on Clive was also Trinny's own struggle and her resilience and determination to carry on despite multiple overwhelmings.

Cara described the surprising kindness from another attendee of the exercise class whom she also realised was a churchgoer.

*It was like when I was in the exercise class the other night and a lady came up to me and asked me how my son was, I was like 'I haven't written anything in the chat...', I said, "Yeah, he's fine thank you". She said "after his operation..." and I'm still standing there thinking 'hmmm okay' yeah "when your husband said about it" and I realised she's from the church then she was like "Are you going to the party?" and I said "it's too far to get to" she was like "I can pick you up" and she doesn't know, she only knows me through my husband and she was willing to do that.*

Cara had other examples of church members being kind and helping her family.

*They helped David a lot when I was ill and when my son was in hospital James would ring up and say 'if there is anything you need get in touch'. Bless, he brought round an amazon gift card from the church for my son to keep himself occupied.*

Sarah's foster mum was a regular church goer, attending every week, and whilst Sarah didn't directly correlate her foster mum's faith to her motivation to foster, she does acknowledge her kindness.

*She was great. She had adopted one and fostered lots. At one point there was 11 of us. She did the best she could for us, definitely. She just wanted to help children; she always did... She was just really caring and thoughtful.*

Kathrine described rebelling from her parents and how they responded to her.

*They were disgusted that I could have been with someone so much older. I mean I was very fortunate that even though my parents didn't agree, whatever my parents have thought they **have always left that door open for me**. Even when I got kicked out of that first house, and they had to bail me out of that. They've always, always left that door open for me to walk back in and my mum has **never shut the door** and welcomed me back into the home when I've needed her to stay strong for me. Yeah so, they didn't like him in anyway at all, but they have never passed judgement, they were always really, really, good and **kept that door open** and I could take him home whenever I wanted to.*

In this above description, Katherine's parents modelled to her an aspect of God's nature to welcome and forgive and they left a way back for their child even if they disagreed with her life choices. This reminded me of a modern-day retelling of the parable of the lost son in Luke 15 and the father who waits for his son's return and enables full restoration into the family.

### 1c. Indifference

This theme, although was not prevalent in all participants, was present as an attitude in two. I have named the theme indifference, but it could equally have been called uninterested or dismissive of God.

Although Clive grew up attending a Church of England school, he has never professed to have a faith.

*I actually went to a Church of England school, and I used to do the plays when I was younger, mostly I was the donkey. When people say the word God, I always think of my childhood and going to the church and plays. That's what I think. It's not bad, but that's what I think of. It was never for me; it never was really something that screams out at ya. I know people say they believe in God, and I say that's fair enough. I have conversations about it...I say, "believe what you wanna believe." **But It's never really been a thing for me.** I sort of live my life day by day. I don't think there has ever been a time where I thought 'you know what, I actually believe'. There's never been a time.*

Sarah's foster family were regular church goers and was made to go every weekend. She also attended the youth group but admits:

***It was never really the God side of it, I suppose. I never really got, you know involved myself.***

Interestingly, Sarah did describe being 'close to God' in a description above, after her brother died and she had an experience of seeing him that made her feel reassured, that he was ok. Both participants who shared some indifference towards God did however contradict themselves when they shared stories about calling out to God at difficult times and each shared a hope for lost loved ones of a heaven or a better place which offered them comfort.

In summary of these results, I found an openness to God confirmed by Canon Gary Jenkins, first Dean of Estates Ministry, who maintained that one of the aspects of working-class culture is a Theism.<sup>42</sup> A belief, an openness to the idea of a God and creator, calling it a 'warm reception to God, often distant but warm.'<sup>43</sup> Even those who claimed to have no belief could still give examples of calling out to God in times of distress and had feelings of disappointment or anger with unanswered prayer.

## **2. Perceptions of the church: Fondness and appreciation**

In this section I will explore the participants' perceptions of the church. I identify these as being rooted in a fondness and appreciation of the church, which comes out in three themes:

- a) The church is a place to get help.
- b) The church gives a sense of family.
- c) The local church holds for them positive memories / history.

To some degree, these findings echo with Stephen Hance's work. Hance identified four ways in which his participants view the church: benign indifference, fondness and appreciation, local trumps national and the last embarrassed about God.<sup>44</sup> My participants also had a fondness and appreciation for the church and only referred to church in terms of the local.

Whilst each participant shared about the church in a positive light, they also caveated this by describing some negative aspects of the church too and I highlight these contradictions at the end of each section.

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<sup>42</sup> Canon Gary Jenkins, *National Estates Church Network (NECN), London Regional Conference 2023: The Kingdom on estates*, session 'engaging with the working class', 2<sup>nd</sup> Feb 2023.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Stephen Hance, *Seeing ourselves as others see us: perceptions of the Church of England* (Cambridge: Grove Books Ltd, 2021), p2.



## 2a. A place to get help.

This theme is about participants identifying church as a place to get help and half of my participants referred to this.

Sarah recalled attending various events with her children at different churches as her children were growing up.

*It's always been helping us in some way. I always knew in the past that if we needed help with something that was where we could go, down to the church. You just knew you go to church if you need help.*

Sarah referred to the church as being a caring place, she described it as diverse and mentioned feeling included.

*The first word that came to my head just then was caring. I like coming to the coffee morning. I like chatting to people yeah and it's all different people, different ages and I just really like it because it's not false you know, I don't have to come to church every Sunday to be included in this which is nice.*

Like Sarah, Mark doesn't attend on a Sunday. Due to family commitments, he attends only occasionally. However, when he shared, he talked about a real sense of being involved and included.

*I do coffee mornings; I help put the chairs out and things like that and then helping whatever way I can. Then I help setup for choir, I didn't think I was going to enjoy that, but it's really good, I've really enjoyed it. You can come and get involved with people and be part of it.*

Whilst participants were appreciative of the church, they also were honest about negative perceptions.

*I used to feel that when I went to church, I couldn't go and be honest myself because, I don't live a conventional life, there are things in my life that would be seen by other people or looked upon as not acceptable in the church. Katherine*

When asked what would make church more accessible and inviting Sarah responded by asking what was meant by church, Sunday services or things like café?

*I think things like the coffee morning and Christingle type events like that are great and I don't see why anyone wouldn't come because you don't have to, they don't have to be religious you know coming to church.*

Valarie and Clive's responses to this question gave further insight:

Valarie

*When I hear the things on YouTube where they read things out of the Bible, I feel like I need it translated to my language, so I get it.*

Clive

*For me, like, some of the sermons and stuff are a bit long winded and a bit out there sometimes so maybe like, for kids, make it, shorten it off a bit. Make it more appropriate for kids.*

## **2b. Family**

This theme describes how participants identified the church as family.

Mark doesn't attend Sunday church regularly due to other family commitments, however he regularly attends the coffee mornings and the community choir and volunteers in the setup.

*The sermons are good, and people are brilliant, it's like family, you can walk in there and you haven't been there for weeks and weeks but like you're just part of their family.*

Cara's first response was:

*Do you know what now I would say it's more family.*

Some participants identified the negative aspects of church which is not dissimilar to some family situations.

*I think we've also said the nice side that I have found but also the, you know the there is a judgement or there can be a judgemental side. You sense that people treat you differently perhaps... Sarah*

Sarah didn't elaborate on this further, but she did say there has been a sense of feeling different her whole life that is perhaps linked to her being adopted.

After initially giving a positive description of church Cara followed with:

*At the same time, I've had, not bitchiness but the judgemental side of it. and there are people that are in there and they are judgemental, and they still turn their nose up at me if they see me. I mean we bumped into someone the other day and she talked to David and completely blanked me.*

## **2c. History**

In this theme the participants describe their connection with church growing up.

Both Mark, Sarah and Cara had fond memories of attending church youth events as young people too.

*I used to go to Sunday school. We used to go Sunday school there and it was good fun. I just remember baking cookies and doing some drawing. Cara*

Mark describes attending a youth group.

*We had a talent night yeah and things like that and we went away, he was a lovely Vicar, his brother had a farm, and we went there for an Easter weekend, in fact we went there even spent the two-week holiday there camping so yeah.... during the day we did different actives at night we spoke about God and that and went to the Church on a Sunday and I'd always remember that that church, I'd never forget it.*

Katherine had fond memories of attending church as a child with her family.

*I used to love going on a Sunday. I used to go to church when I was little, we always went to Christingle, Christmas day we were in church...I felt safe in church, I loved it.*

Sarah acknowledged that she enjoyed church growing up.

*I used to go for pizza evenings, and I used to be in the junior choir and things like that which I enjoyed.*

Whilst Sarah did have some positives, she also acknowledged some negatives.

*When I think of church I think of itchy tights and Laura Ashley dresses.  
Sarah*

In summary of this section, I have identified an overarching fondness of the church as participants have named church as a place to get help, likened it to family and was able to give examples of positive experiences of church growing up.

## Chapter 4: Discussion

From the results above I am using Bevans and Schroeder's 'Prophetic Dialogue' as a framework to discuss practical and theological implications for mission.

I will now set out the justification for choosing this framework. Andy Weir addresses the tensions in urban mission through the debate about social action and evangelism.<sup>45</sup> Those on the social action side would often wrongly cite St Francis 'preach the gospel at all times and where necessary use words'<sup>46</sup>. They may also argue that scripture maintains, 'let your light shine before men that they might see your good works and glorify your father in heaven.'<sup>47</sup> However, those on the evangelism side argue from a scriptural standpoint that 'faith comes through hearing the word,'<sup>48</sup> not through deeds. Weir draws on NT Wrights description of Cross or Kingdom Christians<sup>49</sup>. 'Kingdom Christians' are concerned with the socio-economic concerns of the community, drawing from a liberal theological agenda, concerned with collaborative working with secular agencies but there is often a coyness on speaking about Jesus.<sup>50</sup> On the other hand, 'Cross Christians' have a saving souls for heaven agenda, which is individualistic, but often suspicious of partnership working, viewing culture as negative.<sup>51</sup>

Whilst the two-sided approach is a helpful way to examine the debate, I propose Bevans and Schroders' 'Prophetic Dialogue' to be more advantageous, I will now consider this.

Bevans and Schroeder argue that there are three prominent understandings of mission as:

- **Missio Dei;**

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<sup>45</sup> Andy Weir, *Creative Tension in Urban Mission: Reflections on missional practice and theory*, (Cambridge: Grove Books Ltd, 2015), p.8.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Matthew 5:16.

<sup>48</sup> Romans 10:17.

<sup>49</sup> Weir, *Creative*, p8.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

- liberating service in the reign of God;
- and proclamation of Jesus Christ<sup>52</sup>

Bevans and Schroeder propose a fourth understanding of mission that of '*Prophetic Dialogue*' which synthesises elements of all three strains. 'Prophetic dialogue' is a dance of the Trinity in the world that invites all creation to participate.<sup>53</sup> Bevans and Schroeder maintain that 'it is based on the beautiful but complex rhythm of dialogue and prophecy, boldness and humility, learning and teaching, letting go and speaking out.'<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, 'the key thing as Christians engage in Mission is to discern the kind of rhythm and posture that is needed for a particular version of that dance.'<sup>55</sup>

I favour this approach because it is a synthesis and more integral approach to mission. Therefore, in my implications linked to the findings of my research I will set out three themes associated with the three understandings in 'Prophetic Dialogue'.

I will explore this through three headings: Presence, Enabling and Proclamation.

## **Presence**

This theme links to the first understanding outlined in 'Prophetic Dialogue' and called *Missio Dei*. This theme is about presence in two ways: firstly, God being actively present in the world and secondly through His people.

Bosch quotes Aagaard and argues that *Missio Dei* is the understanding that 'God is a missionary God.'<sup>56</sup> He is already present and at work in the world, redeeming and reconciling all things to Himself despite us, the church. Mission is seen as a movement from God to the world and the church is an instrument of that.<sup>57</sup> Bosch

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<sup>52</sup> Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today*, (New York, Orbis Books, 2004), p.283-385.

<sup>53</sup> Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue: Reflections of Christian Mission Today* (New York: Orbis Books, 2011), p.9-10.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid p.156.

<sup>55</sup> Cathy Ross & Stephen Bevans, *Mission on the road to Emmaus: Constants, Context and Prophetic Dialogue* (London: SCM Press, 2015), p.x.

<sup>56</sup> David Bosch, '*Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*', (New York: Orbis, 2001), p.390.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

maintains that 'to participate in Mission is to participate in the movement of God's love towards people, since God is a fountain of sending love.'<sup>58</sup>

One of the implications of this theme is listening, I argue that to listen is an act of love.

## Listening

Catholic Theologian Albert Nolan who teaches that the first steps of mission is to 'listen, listen. Ask questions. Listen!'<sup>59</sup> In addition the authors of 'Prophetic Dialogue' liken mission to being 'visitors in someone else's garden'<sup>60</sup> and as we enter there we admire and see the beauty of the garden through our hosts eyes.<sup>61</sup> What might be deemed as a weed to the visitor might be a beautiful wildflower to the host.<sup>62</sup> The listening enables us to see through their eyes. Furthermore, Moschella expands this arguing that:

'...transformative pastoral leadership requires open engagement and attentive listening to the lives of particular people and communities. Religious leaders have to be willing to be curious, to be surprised, to be moved'.<sup>63</sup>

Reflecting on this caused me to remember on one occasion following an interview I received a message from a participant I'd interviewed earlier that day. It read 'thank you for today, really therapeutic talking sometimes.' This message encouraged me and reminded me of the importance of listening and giving people space to share their stories. This isn't to say that this listening replaces proper counselling and professional support but that it is of equal value. I had been concerned that by enabling people to share deep and traumatic events in their history they might be

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Bevans & Schroeder, *Prophetic* p.59.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, p.31, 33, 72.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Moschella, *Ethnography*, p.xv.



retraumatised. However, the act of listening had a therapeutic effect. The next implication builds further on this practice of listening.

## Being with

In this section I discuss being with people through the ups and downs of life. This directly correlates to the theme in my results where my participants acknowledged those who had accompanied them.

The church has a unique ministry engaging with people at key stages in their lives. The church is in contact with families through its work with children around baptism and toddler groups. There is contact with people through the rites of marriage and funerals. More than this though, the church is full of individuals, Christians, those called to be salt and light in the world who are friends and sojourners with those who experience the similar ups and downs of life as them.

Jesus knew what it was to experience the highs and lows of life alongside his sojourners. He knew pain and suffering of his friends and wept at the tomb of his friend Lazarus<sup>64</sup> and he celebrated at the union of friends at their wedding feast.<sup>65</sup> In my research my participants shared how people accompanied them through loss and other difficult events.

I observed how each participant could identify a person in their life who had shown them characteristics or traits of the divine. In some cases, they directly name them as a 'guardian angel', 'if I think of God I think of ...' or 'a hero'. In other cases, they were less explicit but a participant talked about a parent 'always leaving a door open.' In support of this concept of accompanying, Sam Wells claims the most important word in theology is 'with.'<sup>66</sup> The good news of the gospel is that God is 'with' us. He argues that the true predicament in life is not limitation but isolation.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> John 11:35.

<sup>65</sup> John 2:1-12.

<sup>66</sup> Samuel Wells, *A Nazareth Manifesto: Being with God*, (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2015), p.3, 11.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, p.43.

Wells claims that to celebrate the gospel we should be 'with people in poverty and distress even when there's nothing we can do for them. By being with people in grief and sadness and loss even when there's nothing to say.'<sup>68</sup>

Grinnell argues that Wells' 'being with' approach doesn't go far enough and is 'passive in the face of dehumanizing structures.'<sup>69</sup> I agree with Grinnell and will now introduce 'Missional Pastoral Care' which I propose is a step on from 'Being With'.

### **Missional Pastoral care**

In this section I will briefly explore this approach. Missional pastoral care is the name Anna Ruddick gives to 'an intentional form of missional living shaped by seven elements which are; being among people who are different, living locally, being available, taking practical action, long-term commitment, consistency and love.'<sup>70</sup> It is a fusion of *mission* and *pastoral care*.<sup>71</sup> Ruddick coined this term after her work hearing from Eden team members and community members who lived alongside each other in areas of social deprivation.<sup>72</sup> The team members ministry involved supporting and caring for people without the care being a means of simply evangelising.<sup>73</sup> Ruddick argues that 'Missional pastoral care is a way of life that seeks to share in the mission of God by participating in communities who have been marginalized, developing significant and mutual relationships with people with an eye on the common good.'<sup>74</sup>

In my research the participants valued not only another's presence, but they valued the practical help and care provided. For example, Mark shared about text messages of care and concern sent by Anna to his wife during her sickness. Cara appreciated practical help in the form of a voucher when her son was sick. Valerie appreciated Paula's messages and help with enrolment on courses. Whilst these

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid, p.5.

<sup>69</sup> Andrew Grinnell, *Just Friendship: The Political and Societal Implications of the Practice of Relocation* (Durham E-Thesis, 2019), p.225.

<sup>70</sup> Anna Ruddick, *Reimagining Mission from Urban Places: Missional Pastoral Care*, (London: SCM Press, 2020), p.1.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid p.1-2.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, p.21.

participants appreciated the physical presence of a person accompanying them the practical element is a step on from simply 'being with'. This speaks to a further approach to mission.

However, critiques of 'missional pastoral care' would argue that this is a social science approach, or a secular model and ask the question where is Jesus in all this? The answer would be living within the Christian. As we mutually share the ups and downs of our life stories, we instinctively share Jesus. Therefore, we need to equip those in our congregations to have the confidence to live in this way. Each participant I interviewed gave an example of a Christian accompanying them and helping them in practical ways.

I will now go on to expand the role of storytelling and questioning.

### **Create a culture of storytelling and make space for questions and doubt.**

The earlier comment by Katherine is extremely helpful, '*I believe but I question*'.

Some church traditions do not welcome questions and are not comfortable with the disappointment and grief of unanswered prayer. They would likely skip quickly passed Good Friday or Holy Saturday, wanting to arrive at resurrection Sunday and the celebration, bypassing the grieving, doubting, and lamenting stage. This is why I particularly appreciate being part of the Church of England, as it journeys through the whole narrative of the Bible.

When we think about examples of suffering in the Bible the obvious might be Job. He experiences multiple overwhelmings and losses including possessions, family members and good health.<sup>75</sup> He describes being 'overwhelmed with misery.'<sup>76</sup> Job and his friends question why these overwhelmings have occurred without perhaps any real answers. Furthermore, Jesus, in the garden of Gethsemane is deeply distressed and troubled and says to His disciples "my soul is overwhelmed with

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<sup>75</sup> Job 1:13-19, Job 2:7.

<sup>76</sup> Job 9:18.

sorrow...<sup>77</sup> He also questions the Father asking if He really must go through this and if God would take the cup of suffering away.<sup>78</sup> This is an example of Jesus' humanity, and the fact that Jesus was overwhelmed with sorrow, experienced human emotions of suffering and trials gives us a sense of hope and having a God in Christ who understands what it's like to experience overwhelmings.

Since the pandemic the authors of the Talking Jesus report maintain that the main question people are asking is 'will everything be ok?'<sup>79</sup> followed by 'what happens when I die?' and these questions seemed to resonate across the generations in their research.<sup>80</sup>

Those in our community do have questions, doubts and overwhelmings and we need to create space for stories, questions, and lamenting. Furthermore, it is not just those outside of the church community who doubt or who are asking questions. In Matthew 28 we hear Jesus' last words to His disciples before He ascends to the Father and it says of the disciples, 'some doubted'. Despite being with Jesus, hearing His teaching, seeing the miracles, witnessing His death and resurrection, some doubted. And still, He calls us, His believers, those ordinary ones who doubt and question with the good news to share with others. This is so amazing and refreshing to those we meet outside of the faith. Christians who don't have all the answers and wrestle with the big questions too.

Whist encouraging a culture of storytelling and of making space for lament and sorrow we should also allow space for hope and celebration. From my experience working on the estate, I have found it a place where people know how to party and celebrate too. One of the beautiful things that happens in our church and surprises us is the way on a Sunday people clap the prayers, the reading of scripture and the sermon.

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<sup>77</sup> Mark 14:34.

<sup>78</sup> Mark 14:36.

<sup>79</sup> Church of England, Talking Jesus <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oVcZotVdDGM&t=1349s>> accessed [23/05/23].

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

In this section I have discussed presence, recognising God is present in the world as a missional God and secondly acknowledging His presence through people. I began this section discussing the importance of listening and then demonstrated how 'being with' is part of listening and how 'missional pastoral care' builds on this along with making space for storytelling, doubt, and questioning. I will now look at the theme of enabling.

## Enabling

In addition to 'missional pastoral care' this theme further develops on the idea that more can be done to enable residents' voices on estates to be heard and to empower them to engage in their communities. Bevans and Schroeder call this understanding of mission: *Liberating Service as the Reign of God*.<sup>81</sup> In this model, mission is viewed as continuing the work of Jesus on the earth.<sup>82</sup> Salvation is seen as all people need internal spiritual healing as well as external physical healing.<sup>83</sup> This is heavily influenced by liberation theology and takes the side of the poor and excluded.<sup>84</sup> The risk of this approach is that this can lead to 'mission as mere humanization and development work.'<sup>85</sup>

To introduce this next implication, I will first examine social action.

Hannah Rich, the author of the Growing Good report acknowledges that over the past decade the Church of England's contribution to society through social action has increased.<sup>86</sup> The paradox is that at the same time church attendance has declined by as much as 15-20% between 2009-2019.<sup>87</sup> The report also argues that the 'church's social role is ever more important, and the church should embrace it even more than it already has, and acknowledge that this is now a key pillar of its establishment...'<sup>88</sup> Smith warns that in doing so we could just 'sew a few holy

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<sup>81</sup> Bevans & Schroeder, *Constants*, p.305-322.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, p.322.

<sup>86</sup> Hannah Rich, *Growing Good: Growth, Social Action and Discipleship in the Church of England*, (London: Theos & Church Urban Fund, 2020), p.12.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, p. 144-145.

patches over an extremely holey and unsafe welfare net.<sup>89</sup> I think the church should proceed with caution and engage in deep theological reflection, critiquing social action approaches.

There is a rise in the number of people accessing Foodbanks and getting Debt advice from church based social action projects. Many social action approaches are based around needs and are about 'working for' others, (see appendix 8). Ecckley and Ruddick offer four critiques of the service delivery approach.<sup>90</sup> It can have a negative impact on people who are identified by their needs, it can dehumanise both client and provider, it reduces complex problems to a tick box exercise, it can divide communities as people are segregated by needs or problems and it can weaken community bonds as people turn to professional services.<sup>91</sup>

However, Asset-based community development starts from a different perspective and asks what the assets and strengths of a community are and how can we find creative solutions based on these strengths?

## **Asset Based Community Development**

Al Barratt describes it as follows:

'Asset-based community development, or ABCD, is an approach to community development that uses the skills and capacities of local residents, the power of local associations, and the support of local institutions, to build stronger, more sustainable communities for the future.'<sup>92</sup>

Barrett acknowledges that ABCD isn't explicitly Christian, but the values and principals resonate deeply with Christian theology and practice.<sup>93</sup> In his theological reflection he likens ABCD to the feeding of the 5000 where the people are hungry,

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<sup>89</sup> Greg Smith, *Faith, Progressive Localism and the Hol(e)y Welfare Safety Net*, (William Temple Foundation, 2015) Google ebook: p21.

<sup>90</sup> Bethany Eckley, Anna Ruddick and Rachel Walker, *Fullness of life together: Reimagining Christian engagement in our communities* (London: Livability & Church Urban Fund, 2015), p.3.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Al Barrett, *Tackling Poverty in England; An Asset-Based Approach*, (London: Church Urban Fund, 2013), p.1.

<sup>93</sup> Al Barret, *Asset-Based Community Development: A theological reflection*, (London: Church Urban Fund, 2013), p.2.

and Jesus initially responds by asking the disciples to go and see, to identify what resources they already had, and He then did a miracle with that.<sup>94</sup>

ABCD is about discovering and celebrating what is already there, building from the inside out, starting with local people and local knowledge (instead of having professionalised services working for people) and is relationship based.<sup>95</sup>

My participant Sarah identified above that church was a place she knew she can go to get help, however my participant Mark expanded on this further and talked about church in terms of his involvement, belonging and contribution.

In the Growing Good report Rich identified a set of characteristics 'shared amongst churches that are growing numerically, and flourishing through their engagement in social action, and helping people grow in their faith.'<sup>96</sup>

1. Being **present** and connected to its local area, recognised as being active in giving to their community.
2. **Persevere** in their presence in the community: growth can occur after years of focused activity or engagement.
3. Those who offer **hospitality** and **generosity**.
4. **Participation**, churches that offer opportunities to volunteer can enable people to engage with the Christian faith.<sup>97</sup>

Whilst the above characteristics are consistent with the three themes I am presenting here of presence, enabling and proclamation, I would urge that proclamation must not be lost here and churches should be intentional as Pope Francis warned by focusing on just this area the church could simply become a 'compassionate NGO.'<sup>98</sup> I will discuss this further in the proclamation section.

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid, p.1-6.

<sup>96</sup> Rich, *Growing*, p.12-13.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Wells, *For*, p.34.

When we first were listening on the estate many people told us that there was nowhere to meet on the estate. Apart from a couple of cafes and a library there is no formal gathering place, we realised that our building was an asset in the community, and we considered how we could use it. I will now look at the theme of hospitality.

### **Hospitality: Our church buildings are important!**

Church buildings can be considered a community asset, places of welcome, connection and belonging. Smith recognises that one area of learning from forty years of Urban Mission is that buildings are important.<sup>99</sup> It is about using what we have in its very simplest form: a building, tea, and biscuits.

Alongside Sunday worship services our building is used to host youthwork, mental health training, food life skills courses, an exercise class, a drop-in café space and a community choir. These are not hall hire endeavours they are genuine partnerships with local organisations and charities working for the good of our community. Our choir and exercise class are sponsored by secular statutory partners so we can continue with this premise of overwhelming generosity in the way we use our church building around hospitality. At coffee mornings we provide free refreshments and people know to help themselves. We do not serve people as our motto has become 'if we serve you, you are a guest, if you help yourself, you are at home.'

In the last two years we have hosted street parties on the back of the Jubilee and Coronation events. The steering groups for these events have been made up of the residents from the street including representatives from the church. Attendees are often overwhelmed at the fun, generosity and community building that happens. Neighbours who lived next door to each other for seven years met for the first time at the coronation event!

We talk about every inch of our buildings being used for the glory of God. We believe that God cares about fitness and people coming together in an aerobic

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<sup>99</sup> Greg Smith, *Urban Mission forty years on: towards an ongoing presence*, (William Temple Foundation, 2021), p.30.  
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dance fitness class. In fact, when listening to God and the community and whilst studying a module about mission, Bevans and Schroeder's 'Prophetic Dialogue' captured my imagination. They described the Godhead in a dance and furthermore they likened mission to a conga line dance, and we were merely joining in and inviting others to the dance.<sup>100</sup> Then during the exercise class one week our instructor introduced a dance like the conga and it was like God was confirming to us that this class was indeed mission. A year on and 'missional pastoral care' happens in this class, genuine, mutual, and supportive friendships have been made. Stories are shared, Jesus is shared.

If buildings close what message does that say to our community? I agree with Ruddick who maintains that 'if spaces for people to meet and begin to get to know one another are removed, the potential for developing mutual relationships with 'others' is dramatically reduced, making fragmentation, segregation and isolation more likely.'<sup>101</sup>

By using our building in this way, we are recognising the key holy value of hospitality at its core. Offering welcome and hospitality can enable us to be present to people by creating space to share life together. They can be spaces where friendships can be made. Since Covid, bumping spaces (places in the community where we can bump into our neighbours, where shared life happens) are few and far between. Nouwen describes hospitality 'as the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place.'<sup>102</sup>

I don't have more space to dedicate to this, but I do want to say that being committed to **children's youth work** in this setting is important. Young people need safe spaces to feel welcome to question and doubt just as much as adults. My participants all had a fondness for the church that was linked to their engagement with the church as children or in their youth. Many Council run youth initiatives have

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<sup>100</sup> Bevan & Schroeder, *Prophetic*, p.10.

<sup>101</sup> Anna Ruddick, *From the Ground Up: Creating Community Cohesion through Incarnational Mission*, (William Temple Foundation, 2017), p.22.

<sup>102</sup> Henry Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The three Movements of the Spiritual Life*, (Glasgow: William Collins, 1976).

been abandoned in our area due in part to funding however, it is short-sighted the church should be present to young people on estates.

In this section I have talked about Enabling, specifically ABCD and how this can help us consider healthier approaches to mission and finally I considered hospitality and church buildings. Morisy argues that needs-meeting approaches can distract us from the 'primary task of the Church: that of helping people to discover the scope for relationship with God through Jesus.'<sup>103</sup> I will now go on to look at proclamation.

## **Proclamation**

Understanding *Mission as Proclamation* of Jesus Christ as Universal Saviour falls within a growing movement of the Pentecostal and Evangelical tradition.<sup>104</sup> There is a fervour and enthusiasm to share the gospel, with the motivation is that all people have the right to the fullness of truth.<sup>105</sup> This 'theology of mission presents a clear and unequivocal statement of the particularity of Christ and the Christian faith.'<sup>106</sup> Whilst there is no risk of diluting the faith here there is a danger of the spiritualising of conversion and religious life.<sup>107</sup> Moreover, due to a futuristic eschatological outlook and negative approach to culture there is a risk of an acceptance of the status quo with regards to the injustices in the world.<sup>108</sup>

Here I am recognising two ways the gospel can be proclaimed, in informal ways in which the gospel is gossiped among friends and secondly in more formal settings such as in church services through liturgy and sermons and recognising that faith exploration courses are another way.

## **Courses**

Faith exploration courses are good for several reasons, they provide explanation around the tenants and foundations of the faith, enabling discussions around some myths and superstitions that arise about faith. There is often much space built in to

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<sup>103</sup> Ann Morisy, *Journeying out: A New Approach to Christian Mission* (London: Continuum, 2004), p.23.

<sup>104</sup> Bevans & Schroeder, *Constants*, p.323-347.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p.347

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.* p.343.

allow for questions and discussion and this further enables people to share their stories and build friendships. Ruddick quotes Guest and Warner who suggest that 'exploring Christianity courses are acknowledged to have been more successful in helping people find and continue in the Christian faith than large-scale events.'<sup>109</sup> However, Hunt offers the critique which argues that they can be seen as 'marketing a particular perspective on Christian faith without attention to the context and perspectives of those receiving the materials.'<sup>110</sup> In our context we have found courses to be a helpful way to create space for discussion and questioning and these spaces have enabled people to share more of their stories further deepening friendships.

### **Instil Confidence**

Whilst most Christians understand their responsibility of telling the gospel, they do not always feel confident in doing so. This is confirmed by the authors of the Talking Jesus report who assert that 75% of practising Christians believe that it is their responsibility to share their faith however only 42% of them felt confident in doing so.<sup>111</sup> The impact of accompanying others in our community is clear from the stories of my participants. Churches have the responsibility of equipping those in our congregations to be able to do that with confidence. The Church of England has a course called Leading in evangelism,<sup>112</sup> this seems to be aimed at church leaders and whilst I feel that it is important for leaders to be equipped in this way the Talking Jesus report indicated that people were more likely to talk to Christian friends than Church leaders. Therefore, it is the congregation members that need confidence to live in this way. Church Army also run a course called Envoy<sup>113</sup> which is aimed at laity, and it will be the laity who speak the language of the people.

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<sup>109</sup> Anna Ruddick, *Reimagining*, p.187.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Rachel Jordan-Wolf, *Talking Jesus Report 2022: What people in the UK think of Jesus, Christians and Evangelism*, (Evangelical Alliance, Church of England and Hope Together), p.22.

<sup>112</sup> The Church of England, <<https://leadinginevangelism.org>> accessed [06/06/23].

<sup>113</sup> Church Army, <<https://churcharmy.org/growing-faith/envoy/>> accessed [06/06/23].

## Speaking the language of people

There are certain church practices that can seem strange or alien to newcomers and further act as a barrier to belonging in church. Reading the Bible in the midst of the congregation, common prayer books, being able to read, or understanding the triangle symbol, knowing when to pause and understanding liturgy. But these practices can sometimes overwhelm, make people feel like they are not proper Christians, and the whole thing can be alienating and upsetting. As we have had some new people attend, we have tried to explain things as we go along and still have liturgy but a simple form that is less wordy and still beautiful. Even then some among us are illiterate and so we let them know it is ok to let the words wash over them and not feel panicked about not being able to read them. When the use of symbols and practices have been explained, often people have valued and appreciated it and it has served to enhance their experience of God giving them even more awe and reverence.

### *“Itchy tights and Laura Ashley dresses”*

When Sarah said this about church it conjured up in my mind images of Laura Ingle from Little House on the prairie dressed in her Sunday best for church. On reflection Sarah could have meant several things; that you had to dress and behave a certain way to attend church, that church was outdated and a bit twee, that it ‘isn’t for people like us’ and possibly her experience of church made her as uncomfortable as the itchy tights she was made to wear. She could have also been referring to issues of class. Laura Ashley dresses can now be purchased from a popular high street shop however, growing up, Laura Ashley products were out of our families’ price range. I agree with Southwark’s Dean of Estates ministry Revd Gary Jenkins who argues,

‘If we are serious about reaching more working-class people for the gospel then a greater effort needs to be made to create indigenous working-class churches, not just to graft working class converts into middle class churches. **We need to divest the Gospel of its middle-**

**class clothing.** Training methods, styles of teaching, and the recruitment of pastors and teachers needs to take into account the needs and preferences of working-class people.<sup>114</sup>

Valarie described an active searching for God on YouTube and maintained that she needed it translated into her language. Whilst Clive recommended making sermons less 'long winded' and appropriate for kids. I agree and argue that preaching in an estate setting needs to be creative and engaging people who have different learning styles.

Furthermore, this poses questions about the raising up local leaders on estates who can communicate the gospel in the local dialect. Church Army and partner organisations have produced a report exploring ways in which this is already happening across the country called 'Growing leaders on Urban Estates.'<sup>115</sup>

## Summary

In this chapter I have named some implications for mission under three headings: presence, enabling and proclamation, which are adaptations of 'Prophetic Dialogue's' three understandings of mission. No one understanding is the full picture and alone each has weaknesses however, 'Prophetic Dialogue' is a synthesis of all three.

Cathy Ross and Stephen Bevans draw parallels from the Emmaus story and place it next to 'Prophetic Dialogue' as an understanding of mission<sup>116</sup>. The disciples in the story are dejected, grief stricken and downcast, the bottom has fallen out of their world as the person whom they thought was the Messiah, has been killed.<sup>117</sup> Their hopes are dashed, and they are on the road walking away from Jerusalem when the risen Jesus appears to them as a stranger initially.<sup>118</sup> He journeys with them asks questions and listens, guides them through the scriptures and they invite Him to be their guest.<sup>119</sup> This stranger then takes the bread, says the blessing and broke

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<sup>114</sup> Canon Gary Jenkins, <<https://www.psephizo.com/life-ministry/where-are-the-working-class/>>, accessed [8/11/22]

<sup>115</sup> Church Army, *Growing Leaders on Urban estates*, (2023).

<sup>116</sup> Ross & Bevans, *Mission*, p.xxi.

<sup>117</sup> Luke 24:13-35.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

bread at which point they recognise Him!<sup>120</sup> Ross and Bevans reflect that in this story 'a stranger becomes a friend, a guest becomes a host, one who listens becomes the one who proclaims.'<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Cathy Ross & Stephen Bevans, *Mission*, p.xxi.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

In this conclusion I will summarise the purpose of the study, restate my findings, make recommendations, and provide a personal reflection.

The purpose of this study was to identify the perceptions of God and the church on an outer urban estate and consider implications for mission. I have found that people were open to God, they had experienced multiple overwhelmings which cause them to ask big questions about suffering, calling out to God for help. My participants could also identify a divine presence at work through people who had accompanied them. Despite this a couple of people were indifferent to God. I found a fondness and appreciation of the church as people described it as being a place to get help, likened it to family and had a positive history with it. Whilst these were positive overall, participants did feel that it could be a place where people were judgemental. As a result of this I presented 'Prophetic Dialogue' as a way of engaging in mission on estates through three main ways which I identified as presence, enabling and proclamation.

### Recommendations

I recommend that the Church of England continue its commitment to churches on estates by resourcing and supporting them. I argue that those who live on estates are not hard to reach, they are open to God. There are assets on our estates, people with gifts and we need to raise up indigenous leaders who will be able to communicate the good news of Jesus in the language of the people.

For practitioners on estates, I recommend three things, firstly a continued active listening to those in your community with the Holy Spirit. Secondly, those of us who work on estates are often activists and I would urge practitioners to be contemplative activists. Committing to reflective practice and taking time to study their current approaches to mission and social action considering theological reflection and critiques of needs-based approaches. Lastly, it's important for practitioners to

maintain a healthy spiritual life and practice good rhythms and continue with spiritual practices such as prayer, bible study, silence, retreat, spiritual direction, among other disciplines.

## Personal reflection

This MA has been a journey of discovery, overwhelming at times and disorientating. When I started the MA course I was working as a debt advisor for a local church, and we'd give Christmas hampers to families on low income. But as I met those families at the school gates picking up my kids, I noticed they would look sheepishly away as I tried to say hello. I felt more uncomfortable about the approach to mission I was engaged in and hence went on this educational journey to explore theology, mission, and ministry to improve my practice. Since studying I have understood more about my discomfort for paternalistic approaches to mission and could no longer continue in that role.

I have also struggled with and felt hugely overwhelmed at times around issues of my own identity. I always described myself as working class. We grew up on an estate in a tower block initially then a council house. We played out in the street with the other kids, on the odd occasion the mums would be out fighting in the street in their bras! We hid behind the sofa when the gas man knocked. We ate Birdseye waffles for dinner with tinned peaches or pears for dessert. Our schooling was substandard, classes were always disrupted for bad behaviour (which I often instigated). I did leave with some GCSE's; however, I joke that one of them was an A\* for fighting.

As I look back, I think the distance must have started when my parents brought the council house, we lived in. After which mum was courageous enough to go it alone without my dad. She sold up and moved to the nicer part of town (less than half a mile away). She worked two jobs at that point, in an office during the day and waiting tables at night to keep a roof over our heads. That distance though from one part of town to another was perhaps the distance widening that was more than just physical. As I obtained employment in various fields and then a degree as a mature



student the gap continued. No one in my family had graduated from university and not many from my year group at school. Lynsey Hanley has written quite eloquently on this quoting Hoggart who identified an 'essential loneliness as every exam he passed took him further away – in travel and in experience – from his working-class neighbourhood.'<sup>122</sup> However, unlike Hanley and Hoggart, I do not feel comfortable or confident in a middle-class bracket. I often feel lonely in this weird liminal space, a stranger in both camps, some would argue that I am no longer working class, but I don't feel or want to be middle class at times. I am like a fish out of water and have found the academic world and Church of England quite hard to navigate at times. Lynsey Hanley describes being upwardly mobile as 'a sense in which you buy, or are sold, a one-way ticket. You can go back, but never again on the same terms.'<sup>123</sup> What has been important for me on this journey is to be honest about how I feel and to own my positioning in this weird liminal space, it is not always comfortable.

In addition to all this I often feel in a liminal space concerning the tension around mission being words or deeds which is why 'Prophetic Dialogue' has felt like a third road, a place of solid ground that resonates and provides a way through.

As I think about the theme of multiple overwhelmings I realise what a deeply immersive experience this research and my studies have been. I have been living, working, building relationships on the estate, and listening to my participants and neighbours alongside studying and reflecting about mission on an urban housing estate.

I have known the privilege of hearing the treasure and precious stories from people who I've grown to love and admire and felt the pressure of wanting to share their experiences well. But have often felt completely overwhelmed too.

Overwhelmed as I have wrestled with my past parochial approaches to mission, overwhelmed as I have considered the use of power and 'doing to' approaches to

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<sup>122</sup> Lynsey Handley, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/17/lynsey-hanley-how-i-became-middle-class-respectable-experience-of-class-extract>> accessed [22/6/23].

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

mission and evangelism. Overwhelmed by the stories and by the hardships my neighbours have experienced. Overwhelmed by my own emotional response as I noticed echoes of my own experiences whilst listening to theirs. At times I was aware that perhaps I'd overstepped the boundary of researcher as I teared up and cried with those who cried, and my human response seemed to trump the researcher role. It was hard to relisten to the stories and reread them time and time again. The black text on the white screen seemed to make them more harrowing but I was also overwhelmed at the beautiful ways God seemed to be revealed through and in the stories. Additionally, during the time of the interview process our home had several attempted break-ins, one of which I interrupted. This resulted in me not being able to sleep, being hyper vigilant and anxious. Thankfully my neighbours and friends were extremely supportive during this time. I could access support and was gifted time away on retreat. This helped me reorient myself toward the One who overwhelms and refreshes my soul. Slee maintains that 'God is present and at work in the overwhelming'<sup>124</sup> furthermore that the 'experience of being overwhelmed is an invitation to a greater and fuller life.'<sup>125</sup>

My faith in Christ is the anchor for my soul and has been an important place for me to continually re-story myself through the grand narrative of the salvation story.

It reminds me of the story of Mary and Martha and Jesus says to Martha 'you are worried (*overwhelmed, concerned, my additions*) about many things but Mary has chosen the better thing.'<sup>126</sup> Lastly, quite simply I believe participation in God's mission is standing shoulder to shoulder with others in community and inviting them to the dance and to encounter the One who saves and overwhelms with love, grace, mercy, and forgiveness. The kind of mission that is required is Paul's description of the disciples living amongst those in Thessalonica:

*'...so we cared for you. Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well.'*<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Nicola Slee, *A Spirituality*, p.27.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Luke 10:41-42.

<sup>127</sup> 1 Thessalonians 2:8.

In this study I have argued that 'Prophetic Dialogue' is an appropriate missional response which will not only engage with working class people more faithfully, but will also offer a more robust and supportive framework for mission practitioners within an estate context.

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## Appendices

1. Ethics approval form.
2. Participant information sheet.
3. Participant consent form.
4. Participant information form.
5. Semi structured interview questions.
6. Exert from interview transcript.
7. Listening to the data information sheet.
8. Models of community engagement.



## Appendix 1 – Ethics approval Form

### RIPON COLLEGE CUDDESDON COMMON AWARDS RESEARCH ETHICS APPROVAL FORM

#### SECTION A

##### STUDENT INFORMATION

Name: [REDACTED]

Tel. No.: [REDACTED]

Email: [REDACTED]

TEI/Formational Centre: Ripon College Cuddesdon

Module name and code TMM 42360

Assignment title Dissertation in Theology, Ministry and Mission

#### SECTION B

##### INITIAL DECLARATION

This investigation will include research involving children or young people under 16: **No/Yes**

This investigation will include research involving young people aged 16-18: **No/Yes**

This investigation will include research involving adults: **No/Yes**

This investigation will include research involving vulnerable adults: **No/Yes**

NB This form covers research involving human participants through the use of questionnaires, interviews, focus groups or observations of activity. Separate advice and permission must be sought for any research activity not covered under these headings.

All students must complete all sections of this form. You should include with your application a copy of your proposed Consent Form and Information Sheet for participants.

Completed applications should be submitted to the Academic Administrator:

[jane.king@rcc.ac.uk](mailto:jane.king@rcc.ac.uk).

## SECTION C

Please answer all the following questions.

Where Yes/No is requested, give details if answering Yes (or if necessary to explain No)

1. What are the aims of this study/project?

**The aim of this research is to gather information from non-church attending residents from an Outer urban estate as to their perceptions of God and the Church and then, based on the findings to consider implications for mission within the Parish.**

2. How will the study be carried out? (e.g. interviews, questionnaires, observation)

Please include copies of any questionnaires with your application

**Semi-structured interviews**

3. How many participants will be recruited, and by what criteria will they be selected?

**I would like to interview six participants who live on an outer [REDACTED] estate but would not particularly consider themselves Christians and are not regular church attendees. I would like to have three male and three female participants.**

## SAFEGUARDING

4. Does the study involve participants who are under 18 or particularly vulnerable or unable to give informed consent?

**No/~~Yes~~**

5. Have any safeguarding issues have you identified? If yes, provide details of the arrangements you will make to ensure safeguarding good practice.

**No/~~Yes~~**

**I will let the participants choose the time and location of the interviews and this will potentially involve being alone with a participant at their home address. The participants that I am considering are known to me, however, to reduce the risk I will ensure my colleagues & family know the location and check in with them after.**

6. Will the study involve discussion of sensitive topics not usually addressed in your placement work?

**No/~~Yes~~**

**I am asking participants about times in their life where they might have been aware of God, and it is possible that they might talk about times of loss, grief or struggle.**

7. Could the study induce psychological stress, anxiety, or cause harm or negative consequences to the participants beyond the risks encountered in normal life?

**No/~~Yes~~.**

**It is possible that the participants might disclose details around a traumatic experience in their life and I will signpost to relevant local agencies should the need arise.**

8. Will financial inducements (other than reasonable expenses) be offered to participants?

**No/~~Yes~~**

9. Do you foresee any other particular ethical issues?

~~No~~/Yes.

**I am aware that as an employee of the local Church there will be a power imbalance in the interview conversations. I hope to address this by allowing the participants to choose the location and time of the interview.**

#### **INFORMED CONSENT**

10. Will you ensure informed consent from individual participants? (please include a copy of your information sheet and consent form with your application)

~~No~~/Yes

11. Do you need to seek permission from any institution or service-providers?

~~No~~/Yes

**I do not have to seek specific permission, but I have discussed it with both my line manager and Archdeacon.**

12. Will any interviews be audio or video recorded?

~~No~~/Yes

#### **CONFIDENTIALITY AND ANONYMITY**

12. How will confidentiality of individual participants be maintained?

**Participants data will be anonymized throughout the study. I alone will have access to raw data which will be password protected.**

13. How will the confidentiality of the placement or context be maintained?

**The nature of this study means that the local context will be anonymised as I do not intend to name the housing estate or Parish.**

**When referring to evidence of the nature of the context I will exercise discretion and sensitivity. When referring to parish demographics or local authority data I will render the citations general, referring to the page and publication year, but not the specific parish**

14. Who will have access to the data gathered?

**I will be the only person to have access to the raw un-anonymised data, which I will store with password protection. My supervisor may have access to anonymised data at various stages of the study and this would also be available to any internal and external examiners should they request it.**

15. Who will have access to the final piece of work?

**Myself, research supervisor, internal and external examiners, and the leadership team of the Parish and potentially the Diocese.**

#### **DATA PROTECTION**

16. How will data be collected (e.g. recording, written notes)

**Digital recording and written notes.**

17. How, and for how long will the data be stored?

**For the duration of the project all data will be electronically stored with password-protection. It will be stored until results are issued from the Exam Board unless this is otherwise justified.**

18. I confirm that data for this project will be handled in accord with the TEI Data Protection Policy and IT Acceptable Use Policy.

**SECTION D (Supervisor(s))**

**Placement Supervisor (where applicable)**

Name: Anna Ruddick

Address: [REDACTED] Leics, LE18 1DD

Tel: [REDACTED]

Email: annaruddick@storiesoflife.org.uk

I have read this form and support the student in their proposed study

Signature: ...  .....Date: 4/10/22

**Module Supervisor – No approval will be given unless this part of the form is signed.**

Name: Cathy Ross

Address: Church Mission Society, Watlington Rd, Oxford OX4 6BZ

Tel: 01865 787400

Email: Cathy.ross@churchmissionsociety.org

I have read this form and support the student in their proposed study

Signature: .....Cathy Ross.....Date: 4/10/22

**SECTION E (Student) – No approval will be given unless this part of the form is signed.**

I agree to conduct this study in line with the ethical guidelines laid down in the document 'Common Awards Research Ethics Policy'.

Signature: .....



.....Date: 28/09/22

ETHICAL APPROVAL HAS BEEN GRANTED/~~REJECTED~~

COMMENTS: approved on the assumption that the requested changes will be made BEFORE research is started

CONDITIONS (if any): Ethics form: (3) question 17: data should be deleted after the Exam Board, unless this is otherwise justified. (\* Q17 now edited to reflect this 4/11/22)



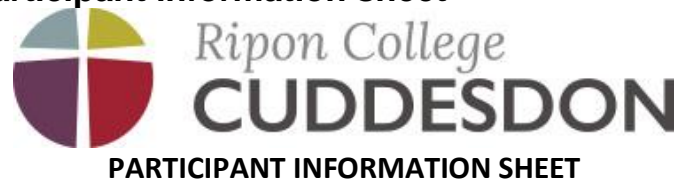
Signed:

Name: Susanna Snyder

Role in TEI: Academic Dean

Date 03.11.22

## Appendix 2 – Participant information sheet



**Project Title:** Perceptions of God and Church on an Outer London estate and implications for mission for the Parish

You are being invited to take part in a research study. In order to help you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully. You may wish to discuss it with others. For any further information or questions about my research, please contact me on: [contacthrh@gmail.com](mailto:contacthrh@gmail.com)

**Objectives:** This research will seek to explore the views of residents from an Outer London estate about God and the local church to help the church to consider how the church engages in the local community.

**Selection:** You have been invited to participate as a local resident who is not a regular church attendee.

**Informed consent:** You are free to decide whether or not to take part. If you decide you do wish to take part, you are free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason. It is usually not practical to withdraw after the research project has been written up. If you take part, you will be asked to sign a consent form, and you will be given a copy of it to keep.

**Involvement of participants:** Participation will involve a single interview, lasting approximately 40-minutes, conducted by myself and will take place at a time and location that is convenient for you. The interview would, with your consent be digitally recorded.

**Risks and benefit:** This study involves minimal risk. The benefits of the study will offer you an opportunity to reflect on your own views and experiences of God and the Church and may help to identify how the local Church engages with residents on the St Helier estate.

**Confidentiality:** All information you provided for the interview will be kept confidential, except where the researcher believes there is a serious risk of harm or danger to either the participant or another individual. Those having access to data will include: the researcher, the research supervisor, internal and external examiners.

**Data:** All data will be anonymized so that individuals cannot be identified. Data will be stored in electronically password-protected files. The digitally recorded files of the interview will be destroyed once the assessment has been marked. You will have up to seven days after the interview to withdraw and the data will then be destroyed. The project results will be part of my final year dissertation.

**Further information:** Thank you very much for your time and participation in this study. If you have any queries, or wish to know more, please contact me at:

**Email:** [REDACTED]

My research supervisor: Anna Ruddick

This study adheres to the guidelines of the Ripon College Cuddesdon Research Ethics Policy. This can be viewed at: <https://www.rcc.ac.uk/sites/default/files/inline-files/Research%20Ethics%20Policy%20from%202018.pdf>

### Appendix 3 – Consent form



**Participant Identification Code:**

**Title of Project:** Perceptions of God and the Church on an Outer London estate and implications for mission for the Parish

**Student Name:** [REDACTED]

**Supervisor Name:** Anna Ruddick

**Please read and sign:**

- I confirm at I have read and understand the information sheet about the above-named project and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
- I understand that participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time prior to the research project being written up, without giving a reason.
- I agree to take part in this project.
- I agree to the interview being digitally recorded.

Name of participant: .....

Signature: ..... Date: .....

Name of student: .....

Signature: ..... Date: .....



## Appendix 4 - Participant information form

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Age (Tick as appropriate):

20-29	<input type="checkbox"/>
30-39	<input type="checkbox"/>
40-49	<input type="checkbox"/>
50-59	<input type="checkbox"/>
60-69	<input type="checkbox"/>
70-79	<input type="checkbox"/>
80+	<input type="checkbox"/>

Occupation:

Full time / Part time

Ethnicity:

Religion:

## **Appendix 5 - Interview questions**

### **Perceptions of God and the church on an outer Urban estate and implications for mission in the Parish.**

#### **Dissertation questions**

1. Tell me a little bit about your life, maybe some of the highs and lows and experiences that have made you who you are today?
2. Are there any times in your life that you have felt particularly close to God?
3. Can you tell me about any experiences or dealings you have had with church?

#### ***Sub questions***

When I say the word God what words or images come to mind?

Could you describe a point in your life where you think you have been or might be more open to God or in need of God?

If you could ask God one thing, what would it be?

What part if any does prayer play in your life?

When I say the word 'church', again what words or images come to mind?

What would make church more attractive, accessible, or inviting to you?

## Appendix 6 - Exert from transcript.

Interviewer: If I say a word to God what words or images come to mind?

C: Erm, Love. Cos every single night, let me just fine it...I'm Searching on YouTube yeah sorry, I'm not sure if I'm looking at the good stuff or...

You know when it comes up on YouTube, like last night I fell asleep to Wayne dyer, that's more like law of attachment. I think its grace purpose I usually listened to. it's all about a lot of things from the Bible, God is Love, amazing Grace I think it's all that one inspiration motivation. I'm asleep by a few minutes.

Interviewer: Do you have any experience of prayer or what part has prayer played in your life?

C: I dunno, I feel silly, if I'm honest. But I dunno, I don't know how to pray. I talk to like, there will be like a little robin or something. That day I had my dream, you've just reminded me. Things happened throughout the next day. I was like is this to do with my dream. Normally when you go out, they fly away, but it was just there, I was like who are you? Are you Lee, or grandad, are you nan?

Interviewer: You said Lee or nan, you've lost people in your life?

C: Lee was a family friend, he died when he was 27, my grandad dies 17 years ago now. That's why my mum don't believe because she says why would grandad have a stroke while nan was at the church? She has always been from then why? Why would something like that happen?

Interviewer: Some people feel angry with God when bad stuff happens. How do you think those deaths affected you?

V: When Lee died it was around the time of my 30<sup>th</sup> birthday. He was ringing me to say he was gonna come round and stuff, cos I was a big drinker. It affected me at the time to see my mum really bad. But I keep listening to all these things like you're a soul having a human experience, and things like happen for a reason, and all things like that I believe.

Interviewer: Do you think you are open to God?

V: Ummmm yeah, I am but I just don't understand it, I dunno if it's like I'm stupid. Do you know if you're not Christened. Cos my mum has four sisters, and she is the only one, my mum lives in a council house, they all have mortgages, they are still with their husbands. She is the one going through lung and brain cancer, I'm like maybe you should get Christened, I feel like, dunno if you will be allowed up there if you are not Christened.

## Appendix 7 - Listening to the data

Information sheet from James Butler CMS and Roehampton University, TAR

### ***Some points to help us prayerfully reading this interview.***

A good way to start is to simply read through a whole transcript without making any comments or recording thoughts (although it can be helpful to begin to underline or highlight things which particularly stand out). Having read it, try writing down some initial thoughts. Remind yourself of the research question

### **“What are the perceptions of God and the church on an outer estate and what are implications for mission?”**

and re-read allowing yourself time to highlight and comment. Try not to react to the things written in the transcript and try to avoid the temptation to think purely in terms of what you agree and disagree with.

The following questions might help:

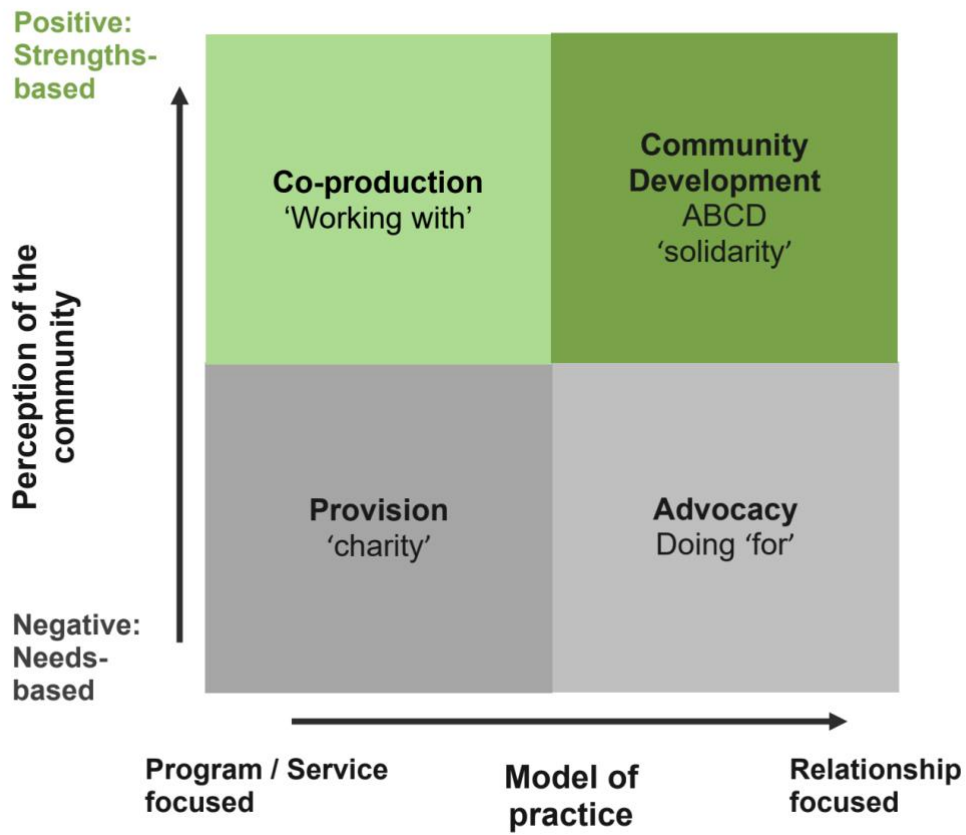
- What surprised you?
- What beliefs and values are seen in the transcript?
- What phrases or thoughts brought particular insight?
- What opinions were particularly different from your own?
- What insights does it bring to the research question?
- Where do you see God in the data?

### **These are some other things to look out for**

- o Themes and learning points;
- o BUT ALSO the surprise theme or point, that maybe only comes up once, but which is particularly striking
- o Direct references to scripture
- o BUT ALSO things that are said that remind reflectors of scripture passages etc.
- o Data that clashes - where different accounts are given.
- o ‘Small voices’ and minority voices need to be heard as well.

## Appendix 8 – Models of Community Engagement

### Models of Community Engagement



Devised by Dr Anna Ruddick (Livability 2020).