

**Developing a Shared Ecclesial Identity in Large Rural
Benefices: An Investigation**

Sharon Roberts

Sarum College

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Abstract

Recent literature indicates that complexity, fragility, and a mission imperative are key features and also challenges for large rural multi-church benefices. This study investigates whether a shared ecclesial identity might help to mitigate these challenges.

The investigation uses a 'Theology in Four Voices' approach to ensure a variety of perspectives are considered. It begins with my own leadership experience, considers organizational theory, and then proceeds to examine the contributions of incumbents and lay representatives from three different dioceses to understand perspectives on a benefice shared identity.

The tension between the autonomy of individual churches and the possibility of a shared identity is explored in detail and theological resources and practical processes are examined which may contribute to a shared identity. It is suggested that an expanded view of 'parish' and 'place', a 'communal calling' and a shared commitment to mission would all be key features of a shared ecclesial identity.

150 words

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Chapter 1: Rural Multi-Church Benefices - an Introduction

1.1 A Starting Point

In the summer of 2022, I was on an extended placement as an ordinand in a rural Multi-Church Benefice (MCB) of ten churches. For a variety of reasons, the incumbent was in the process of talking with the ten separate parochial church councils (PCCs) about a new model of governance. The benefice already had a team council whose brief was to consider benefice matters, but the suggestion had been made that it might be beneficial to move from a team council model to a joint council model. The latter model takes advantage of recent changes in *Church Representation Rules* (Church of England, 2022) and allows a joint council to take on some or all properties, rights, liabilities, and functions of individual PCCs. If agreed, this move would have meant individual PCCs giving up a considerable amount of their autonomy. By the end of the placement, it was clear that the majority of the PCCs did not support the move and eventually the proposal was turned down. This was despite several of the churches not being able to recruit key posts to their own PCCs and some of the churches having very small and fragile congregations.

During the placement, I heard almost nothing from congregation members to indicate that there was a sense of a benefice identity or a sense of the purpose of the benefice. I also saw little shared work amongst the churches and the small amount there was, was led by clergy. It felt as though the majority of PCCs were only interested in the maintenance of their own village church and saw joint governance as a threat

rather than as support. It was clear that much more work would be needed on their joint identity and purpose before a step towards shared governance could be taken.

At the time of the placement, I was still in paid employment as Director of Education in one of the largest Multi-Academy Trusts (MAT) in the South West. I was used to working and leading across many institutions that worked in deep partnership and achieved more together. Much of what I observed on the placement reminded me of the early years of our MAT. Initially, we heralded the autonomy of individual schools but by 2022, we had arrived at a place where we knew we were stronger together and our work together strengthened what happened in each individual school. It seemed to me that there may well be learning that could be passed from one part of my life to the other.

The placement was inevitably a tiny snapshot of the life of an MCB at a particular point in time. Nevertheless, the colliding of these two worlds as an ordinand and as Director of Education led me to ask several questions:

- Is it ecclesiological and/or organisationally important for churches in large rural MCBs to work effectively together?
- If it is important, how might they best do this and can learning from secular organisations be used to support this process?
- What theological and ecclesiological resources are there that might inform an MCB identity?
- Finally, how might this shared identity be grown in an MCB?

This dissertation will investigate these questions within the wider question of whether developing a shared ecclesial identity in a large MCB is important, but first some further information about the current situation of rural MCBs.

1.2 Large Rural Multi-Church Benefices in 2024

Since the early 1970s the number and size of MCBs has increased dramatically. Milbank (2023, p.36) traces the largescale development of MCBs back to 1963 and Paul's report on *The Deployment and Payment of Clergy*. Gaze (2006, p.97), writing specifically about the rural situation, looks back to 1974 and the introduction of the Sheffield Formula for determining the deployment of clergy as the start of the largescale use of MCBs in rural areas. Both Gaze and Milbank point to the decline in the overall number of clergy as a key reason for the increasing size of MCBs. Milbank notes a decline of almost 50% from 14,184 FTE clergy in 1960 to 7, 335 FTE clergy in 2020 (2023, p.35). This reduction has clearly had a direct impact on the average number of churches in each MCB.

The move towards MCBs has not always been welcomed or indeed easy. Grundy (2015), in one of the key texts on MCBs, notes that:

Adaptions of old parochial and ministerial models no longer work in some situations. Where one stipendiary minister has 'charge'... of between four and 20 congregations in nearly as many parishes, something new is needed. The changes which have already taken place are producing many examples of good practice... Many of these are pragmatic and can only be made more robust and enduring when connected to the theological and organizational understandings of the mature Church. (2015, p.36)

Grundy goes on to describe nine different models for MCBs based on how clergy and ministry teams are deployed (pp.37-43). He then proceeds to develop a theology of multi-congregation ministry which he argues will help to 'move on from pragmatic restructuring towards a deeper understanding of what God is calling the Church to become in the future' (p.50). Basing his argument on the Lima Document (WCC, 1982) he writes about 'watching over one another in love' and argues that:

[...the] unifying concept of oversight [...] has the potential to give a sense of renewed sense of community and identity to churches in great danger of further fragmentation and division. It forms the theological basis for ministries of oversight in multi-congregation situations. (2015, p.73)

Grundy's emphasis on the clergy's pastoral care of congregations, together with his focus on the role of the leader in the rest of his work, locates the identity of an MCB in ministry and leadership alone rather than in the vocation of the churches to be the body of Christ or on the urgency of contextual mission initiatives and for these reasons it fails to be adequate.

MacNaughton (2023) instead describes four models for an MCB, and these are based on the relationships between the churches rather than on clergy deployment. Her four models are:

- A minster model where one church is dominant.
- A federal or cluster model where each church enjoys a similar status and where some might have special ministries that contribute to the whole.
- A franchise model where a group of churches will have some form of Group Council that sets policy and agreed values and vision.

- A hybrid model which is a mixture of minster and federal models. (2023, pp.33-36).

Neither Grundy or MacNaughton make any link between models and the size of an MCB, and this is an important missing element in their presentations. The number of churches in an MCB necessarily presents a greater degree of organisational complexity and demands more from incumbents as they manage larger ministry teams. This complexity is further increased by the often-competing demands of individual churches, the maintenance of patterns of worship, pastoral care and mission, combined with the significant burden of the maintenance of many Grade 1 or 2 historic buildings. 'The prevalence and inherent complexity of the multi-church unit (p.3)' is acknowledged in the Church of England paper *Shaping Strategies for Mission and Growth in Rural Multi-Church Groups* (Bell &Hopkinson, 2017).

If organisational complexity is one key feature of rural MCBS, there is also another feature of rural benefices which none of those cited so far consider, and that is fragility. Lawson first defined five features of a fragile church in her paper in *Rural Theology* (2019). Further research during the pandemic indicated that these features had become more pronounced (2021, Francis, L. J., Village, A., and Lawson, A.,) and subsequently Lawson further refined and added to the features of a fragile church in 2023. The six features are:

- Financial pressure on the church and congregational anxiety about dwindling resources.
- An actual or feared inability to replace churchwardens and other officers or volunteers.

- The relentless nature of keeping going, that saps energy and thwarts new initiatives.
- A lack of critical mass of children and volunteers to work with them.
- Congregations of a dozen or less people, with an increasing age profile.
- The demands of maintaining historic buildings (Lawson A., 2023, pp.40 - 51).

Fragility does not however necessarily mean that a church's future is automatically determined and that it is on the way to closure. Some fragile churches will need palliative care toward closure (Lawson, A., 2020) but others may be in small hamlets where numbers attending have not particularly declined over time and where there may be large congregations at festival times. Nevertheless, fragility is a concern for incumbents leading large numbers of such churches in a benefice as, without lay officers to share the workload, this inevitably increases clergy workload. (Lawson, A., 2020). This lack of volunteer officers was recently highlighted again in a report by Davies (2024) on the impact of wider societal shifts and the ageing demographic of congregations.

A further element that also appears to add to the work of incumbents in MCBs is the focus on mission from the central church and the diocese. This element has been a growing focus since the publication of *Mission-Shaped Church* (Church of England, 2004) and is clearly illustrated in the current *Vision and Strategy of the Church of England in the 2020s* (Church of England, 2021). The focus on mission often appears to lead to the development of additional services and groups specifically designed to meet the needs of those who are not naturally drawn to traditional services. This adds a further pressure which is illustrated in Wilson's comment:

...if the diocese sees the incumbent as its local executive, this will affect the relationship with the benefice and parishes. How this works out depends on personalities, but the self-confidence of the vicar can be affected. If the diocese encourages emphasis on the benefice and innovative mission, while the people show no great enthusiasm for such centralisation, something has to give. In my experience most parishes get on as best they can. (2019, p.120)

Complexity, fragility, and the call to mission are undoubtedly features of rural MCBs and particularly in the post pandemic era where many congregations have seen some decline. Any of these factors might contribute to organisational or what might be described as 'problem-solving' reasons for developing closer working between the churches and a shared benefice identity, but whilst organisational or problem-solving reasons may provide enough reason for developing a benefice identity, there may also be strong theological, ecclesiological, and missiological reasons for doing so too. It may be that the nature of rural benefices also demands a more context-specific ecclesiological focus which encompasses elements of rural theology and practice (e.g., Theology of place as espoused by Gibson in 2010, Inge in 2016, and Rumsey in 2017). If this is the case, then any developed identity becomes more than just 'problem solving' but how things 'ought' now to be. It is to ecclesiology and methodology that I now turn.

1.3 An Underpinning Ecclesiology and Methodology

Given the starting point for this dissertation, it might be assumed that a standard cycle of theological reflection from Practical Theology (e.g., See, Judge, Act) will be used; this is not the case, as a standard pastoral reflection cycle can imply a process whereby

theology critiques praxis. Instead, I will use Watkin's *Theology in Four Voices* methodology (operant, espoused, formal, and normative) to support my investigation. This is a 'theology all the way through' approach and represents an 'integrated whole-theology' (2020, p.43). It does not privilege formal or normative voices over espoused or operant voices because 'the integrated nature of theology-and-practice [is] assumed as the dynamic of divine revelation' (2020, p.42).

Watkin's methodology answers Healy's challenge of 'blueprint' ecclesiologies (Healy, 2000, pp.25-51) as it acknowledges that either a focus on 'particular, detailed contextual manifestations of church' or one that is 'committed to speaking doctrinally and normatively of church as a mystery of faith... presuppose a blueprint mentality' (Watkins, 2020, p.6). Instead, Watkins argues for an 'intentionally non-correlational' approach which is 'authentic to the epistemological assumptions of our own time' (2020, p.7) but which also 'sees Christian practice as a source of theology...[and] is against modern epistemological assumptions and seek[s] another sort of knowing'. (2020, p.32).

For Watkins, conversation between voices is vital. She writes:

The understanding of theology of four voices makes conversations across discipline, traditions and perspectives as well as practices (including scholarly practice), essential. This is essential not only – or primarily – as a pragmatic consideration of method but as a quality intrinsic to the way in which theology as such is here envisioned in the interplay of the four voices. It is in this conversation of theologically authoritative 'voices' that truth – something of the word and action of God – might be discerned. (2020, p.40)

To succeed in this approach within the confines of a dissertation, I will draw on formal ecclesiology together with literature from other areas of the academy but also use autoethnography and ethnography established through qualitative data via questionnaires. The latter ethnography will provide an understanding of normative, espoused, and operant voices on the practice of both developing a shared ecclesial identity for a benefice and the decision not to do this.

Inevitably, some of the richness of Watkins' approach will be lost in this dissertation because there can be no opportunity to bring together those who have provided qualitative data for communal discernment in 'conversations of disclosure' (2020, p.46). Nevertheless, I would want the sections of this dissertation to be seen as a dialectical conversation between the voices. I now outline the structure of the dissertation and how this investigation will proceed.

1.4 The Shape of the Dissertation

In Chapter 2, I will consider the experience I bring from Education and knowledge from other disciplines, such as Strategy as Practice and will ask whether this can or should be used in a church context. Having established that I believe that it can, I will argue that a shared identity is both a powerful way of bringing people together and a lens through which to make strategic decisions to manage complexity.

Chapter 3 will focus on ethnographic qualitative data collected from questionnaires received from six incumbents and six lay representatives across three different dioceses. This data set provides much of the operant and espoused voice in this work. It is also

the way in which I have assured that I have investigated the importance of a shared identity in current praxis.

In Chapter 4, I consider theological and practical resources which might be used to bring parishes together in rural MCBs. In the light of the evidence from Chapter 3, I will argue that a shared identity will need to involve an expanded view of place, a communal calling, and a commitment to mission. I will also consider the process by which such a shared identity can be nurtured.

In the Conclusion, I will bring together the findings of the investigation and dialogue between the voices of formal, normative, espoused, and operant ecclesiology. I will also point forward towards actions for MCBs and the wider church.

Chapter 2: Previous Learning, Organisational Theory and How These May be Applied to Rural Multi-Church Benefices

Having outlined some of the challenges facing large rural MCBs, I now describe my experience and learning from leading in a multi - academy trust (MAT) and also consider work on identity from organisational theorists. I cannot however assume, without some question, that this experience or knowledge is automatically applicable to the way in which a benefice might be organised and so I also consider this issue.

2.1 My Experience and Learning in Leading in a MAT and the Importance of Identity

In this short autoethnographic section I position myself within my research. Here 'personal experiences become important primarily in how they illuminate the culture under study' (Ellis, 2008, p.50). I therefore acknowledge the huge influence that this experience has had on my thinking and that this undoubtedly influences the way in which I instinctively approach the challenges of large rural MCBs.

A MAT is defined as 'a charitable non-profit company with a board and Chief Executive Officer which operates a varying number of academies via a funding agreement with the Secretary of State for Education' (Greany and McGinty, 2021, p.312). When a school or a stand-alone academy joins a MAT, it ceases to exist as a single legal or financial entity as this status passes to the MAT. All MATs need to make decisions about the delegation of powers and finance to their academies and most enable schools to retain a local governing body with some powers ascribed to them through a Scheme of Delegation. Writing in 2020 Carter, the first National Schools

Commissioner, stated that one of the five features of great academy trusts was ‘The multi-academy Trust operates as a single organisation where the workforce is the ‘faculty of education’ and the schools are the campuses that deliver great learning’ (2020, p.35). This emphasis on being a single organisation is key to a MAT’s effectiveness.

I was one of five headteachers who together formed a MAT in 2016. Our initial vision was ‘Excellence of learning and care for children and young people rooted in collaboration between their schools’. We talked about the Trust being ‘back office’ and heralded the autonomy and individuality of each school by advertising ‘our style’ as ‘significant delegated authority to each Headteacher and Governing Body’. We talked about ‘*the Trust*’ as something that was clearly external to our schools. Schools chose to join us because we were ‘safe’, allowing schools almost full autonomy.

By the time COVID struck in March 2020, we had become a Trust of 24 schools with some 11,000 pupils. Any sense of wanting autonomy for each school fell away almost immediately as we all faced challenges we had never faced before. We soon discovered we were stronger together as we developed a shared online curriculum offer. Each school’s individually designed curriculum, the very thing that so often defined a school’s individual identity, was put aside in favour of working collaboratively on something that was shared.

In a review of the Trust Strategic Plan in Summer 2021, we erased all references to autonomy and an emphasis on a new level partnership became key. We began to describe ourselves as ‘A deep partnership between our schools in which our children and young people flourish’ (LSP website). This kind of partnership has been termed a

‘Trust Dividend’ where schools achieve more than the sum of their parts through ‘a significant and persistent level of performance that is contingent on the existence of the Trust’ (Nicolls, Feb 12, 2023).

MATs and MCBs face similar challenges in bringing groups of people together. Putting aside deeper ecclesiological understandings for a moment, schools and churches are both community-based not for profit organisations linked to specific geographical areas. They also vary in size and hold very different levels of human and financial resource. Finally, they are communities which traditionally have developed their own ethos and celebrate uniqueness.

There are also of course some significant differences because of the statutory nature of schooling versus the voluntary nature of church and these include the financial resources available, and the ease with which clear measurable goals can be described. However, the most significant difference is that from the very start of a MAT governance changes and schools cease to exist as separate legal entities. This is not the case in MCBs as, in the main, churches retained PCCs and there was no requirement for governance at MCB level. This difference ‘bakes’ autonomy into an MCB in a way that it was never possible to do in a MAT.

My learning throughout this experience was that how we understood ourselves together determined action and priorities – in short, a shared identity was key. I now briefly look at how identity is used in current organisational theory.

2.2 Identity as Resource, Lens and Work

The role of identity within the wider task of strategy formulation has been explored in academic field of Strategy as Practice (SAP). This body of research, developed since 2000, moves beyond exploring the effects of strategies on performance and towards ‘a more comprehensive, in-depth analysis of what actually takes place in strategy formulation, planning and implementation’ (Golsorkhi, Rouleau, Seidl and Varra, 2015, p1).

Writing specifically on identity formation as strategic practice, Oliver (2015) notes that ‘The ability of organizations to inspire identification among members or ‘the perception of oneness or belonging to some human aggregate’ can strengthen in-group cooperation within that organization’ (2015, p.333). He goes on to outline three ways in which identity work has been seen to act in an organisation – as a resource, as a lens and as work.

Identity-as-resource points to the fact that a strong identity can help an organization to weather difficult times but can equally lead to “hubris, myopia and inertia”(Oliver, 2015, p.334). Oliver recognises therefore that identity is something that an organisation must evaluate, measure and control. Secondly, from the identity-as-lens perspective, identity ‘acts as a frame influencing how organizational members perceive and interpret their environment and consequently develop strategic agendas’ (Oliver, 2015, p.335). Here, Oliver notes the role of identity in shaping priorities, the evaluation of resources, new knowledge creation, and its influence on new mergers and acquisitions. Finally, Identity-as-work offers a further perspective; here Oliver notes that this perspective

‘refocuses attention on how organizational identity is constructed through identity work and how it is negotiated, affirmed, contested and maintained as an ongoing accomplishment’ (2015, p.336).

It is my contention that Oliver’s analysis of the importance of the role of identity in SAP literature, together with my own learning, are important for the work of large rural benefices but before I can continue further, I need to consider if this learning can or should be applied to the Church.

2.3 The Church – a Special Case or Can Insights from Other Organisations be Applied?

There is a small and largely historic field of writing on the Church and its links to organisational theory: Rudge (1968 and 1976), Thung, (1976), Pattison (1997), Watkins, (1991 and 1993), and Shakespeare (2016). All these writers raise questions about whether it is possible to use organisational theory in the Church or whether the Church is such a distinct and special case that the insights from other fields are irrelevant. Where these writers are critical of the use of organisational theory or management techniques, they tend to be critical of specific theories and techniques rather than dismissing all insights and it is often the setting of goals and objectives that are of particular concern.

The most recent critique of the use of organisation/management theory in the Church comes from Milbank (2012 and 2023). Milbank admits the value of ‘a church community sitting down to audit its strengths and weaknesses and having a close look at the area it serves as well as planning ahead’ but is deeply critical of ‘the functionalism of

the SMART managerial goals, which belong to a profit-making business seeking a growth of market share rather than a church' (2023, p.54). Building on the work of Pattison (1997) she states:

... care is needed if the Church is not to substitute sub-goals such as control and calculability for its ultimate aims, which are eschatological. Our purpose as the body of Christ is to worship God and bring the whole world to union with him, but these goals can be easily lost once measurable targets take centre stage. (2023, p56)

Ultimately, it is Milbank's ecclesiology that causes her to discard the use of a specific management practice, but it is also clear that she is not necessarily discarding all management or organisational insights.

Milbank's argument does however indicate that a more thorough examination of the nature of the Church is needed before specific management theories or insights can either be used or discarded. Watkins highlights the challenge of this task when she writes 'the theologian who seeks to employ insights from social science approaches [...] must be aware not only of the ordinariness of the Church but also of its traditional sense of its own extraordinariness' (Watkins, 1993, p.369). Indeed, it is how this ordinariness and extraordinariness are held together or balanced that will naturally determine how open a church is to elements of management practice.

When the extraordinariness and the invisible nature of the Church is emphasized through an understanding that the Church was instituted through Christ and his Apostles either by divine revelation in Christ (e.g. Barth), or by its sacramental nature (e.g. Congar), in what might be called 'an ecclesiology from above', then the admission of management insights will be limited. Watkins comments:

An ecclesiology which wishes to assert that certain aspects of ecclesial structure are 'ontologically' anterior to the community would appear to have some problems in employing management science in the ecclesial realm. In this case the institutions themselves are so radically bound up with the divine that managerial analysis and reform would be inappropriate. (1993, p.372)

Alternatively, in what might be called 'an ecclesiology from below', where the ordinariness and extraordinariness of the church are separated out so that the institutional structures of the church are understood as simply a human attempt at 'a structural expression of the mysterious, essentially undefined community of Christ' (Watkins, 1993, p.374) then it will be more acceptable to employ organisation insights without particular concern.

Watkins instead argues for a 'middle way', which she describes as a 'sacramental or incarnational ecclesiology' (1993, p.377), and is based on the work of Rahner and Bonhoffer. This seeks to hold theological and organisational insights in a creative tension. From this perspective:

[...] the specialness of the Church is to be fundamentally witnessed to in all ecclesial living, however apparently mundane. It is because the institution is sacramental that its importance warrants detailed analysis and constant renewal; but it is also precisely its sacramental nature which prevents this analysis being the proper task of managerial sciences alone. (Watkins,1993, p.377)

Underpinning Watkin's ecclesiology are particular perspectives on three key theological themes: the nature of divine revelation, theological anthropology and finally the task of discerning work of the Holy Spirit and I now consider these.

A consideration of the nature of divine revelation is important because it is only possible to hold theological and organisational insights in a creative tension if one can

affirm some kind of natural theology where God continues to reveal Godself in creation, human history, and the community of faith. Watkins comments:

... a stronger doctrine of natural revelation will allow a more positive approach to be taken to managerial sciences in principle, enabling a critical dialogue open to the possibility of finding the Word of God within the sociological disciplines. (1993, p. 380)

This is a view of revelation allows for the church to discover new truths. It also commits one to the understanding that the 'integrated nature of theology-and-practice [is] the dynamic of divine revelation' (Watkins, 2020, p.42).

Secondly, Watkins considers that a perspective on theological anthropology will also be important to sustain a creative tension between theological and organisational insights. An understanding that human beings are both created in and bear the image of God and are also a priestly people will necessarily provide a critique to some organisational theories and approaches and will make human flourishing a key desired outcome of the use of any organisational theory or practice.

Finally, according to Watkins, the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is:

[...] the real problem for ecclesial management. [...] With regard to the Church, the Spirit is both assured to the organisational reality, and radically free from it. The question of the Holy Spirit is always one of location, and then one of discernment. (1993, p.381).

This is the absolute reason for Watkins that the Church is a special case, and it is not possible to simply apply organisational insight. Discernment of the work of the Holy

Spirit together with an understanding of who has the power or authority to discern will also need to be held in creative tension with any management insights.

This brief consideration of the challenges of applying either experience from leading another organisation or organisational theory to the Church has indicated what a complex task this is. Nevertheless, Watkin's 'sacramental or incarnational ecclesiology', with its further theological foundations, provides a basis for me to proceed.

2.4 Ecclesial Identity as a Way Forward

This chapter has covered much ground, but an understanding of identity has been an important theme running throughout it. I have described both my own learning and the insights of Strategy as Practice on the importance of identity. The latter might be described as the 'formal voice' in Watkin's Theology of Four Voices and provides the 'conversation across disciplines' which she sees as essential and a means of discernment (Watkins, 2020, p.40).

I have noted Milbank's criticism of the use of organisation theory in the Church and have justified its use with an incarnational ecclesiology which takes seriously the nature of progressive revelation, theological anthropology and the work of the Holy Spirit but welcomes critical dialogue with other sociological and organisational disciplines in order to further discern the work or Word of God.

All of this indicates that there may be strong ecclesial and organisational reasons to focus on a shared identity in a benefice. Indeed, it is not without significance that this kind of work on identity is also suggested by others who are keen to employ

organisational insight in the Church. Elford (2012 and 2022) suggests that there are three main tasks for leadership in an organisation and, also within the Church. He describes these as managing the present, nurturing identity, and creating the future (2012, p.22) and sees these as actions that 'organizations *of all kinds* do to remain viable [and] effective and sustainable' (2013, p.21).

Elford notes however that many church leaders say that they spend more time on managing the present than on the other two tasks (2013, p.20). Given both the complexity and the current fragility of the rural MCBs, as described in Chapter 1, it would not be surprising if a focus on managing the present might well be the focus of incumbents' work in rural MCBs. If this is the case, then this increases the potential fragility and viability of the MCB because no future is imagined and furthermore, no identity is created which would allow change to be made in such a way as to forge alignment and command support.

In his discussion of identity formation, Elford (2013, pp.68-80) points to the importance of clarifying purpose and values:

At one level defining identity is a simple enough activity. It is about answering two straightforward questions: 'What are we here for?' and 'What are the beliefs and principles that guide us in living out our purpose?' It will be necessary however to undertake the enquiry in a way that allows sufficient thought, depth, and authenticity. (2013, p.72)

Whilst I agree that identity formation includes the consideration of purpose and values, there are in fact three questions in identity formation, and these are: 'Who are we?' (a question of identity), 'What then are we here for?' (a question of purpose), and finally 'How then shall we live?' (a question of values and actions for the future). The

order in which these questions is tackled is important as there can be a temptation to go straight in to writing mission action plans instead of doing the preliminary work on establishing the identity of the MCB. This rush towards action planning can also be unintentionally forced on an MCB by a diocese as it seeks to implement national vision and strategy with funding from the national Church.

It is my contention then that it is not possible to either manage the present well or create a future until the identity of an MCB is secure and understood by both leaders and members of congregations. It is now time for me to test this by listening to the voices of those in a variety of large rural MCBs. I want to know whether the way in which leaders and congregations understand the identity of their MCB makes a difference in how it is organised and how decisions are made about both the present and the future. It is to this that I now turn.

Chapter 3: Listening to Those Leading Large Rural Benefices

In Chapter 2, I presented an argument about the importance of identity in an organisation and began to illustrate how this might be helpful in the life of a benefice. I now need to listen to the experience of those who are leading large rural benefices to understand how identity is currently understood; whether, for example, there is a focus on the autonomy of individual churches within the MCBs or a greater focus on a shared ecclesial identity across the MCB. I then need to understand whether, where there is a shared identity, this acts as a resource and a lens to meet the three challenges of large rural benefices, as set out in Chapter 1, of complexity, fragility, and mission. These voices will help me to understand both the espoused and operant voices in Watkin's Four Voice ecclesiology.

This chapter first outlines the process I went through to gain these voices and then moves to analysis of the data.

1.1 Data Collection and Reflexivity

Given the confines of the word limit of this dissertation, it was important to collect a manageable but varied set of data. It was decided to focus on six MCBs, each with a range of between seven and twenty-two churches. This range is considerable, but its upper limit provides an insight into the operation of the growing number of very large rural benefices. Two of the benefices were at the upper end of this range whilst the other four were at the lower end of the range. All the benefices used in the study

operated in rural areas but were not in areas of significant sparsity or remoteness as this would have added an additional variance. It was however decided to invite responses from two MCBs in three different dioceses as this allowed some exploration of whether diocesan initiatives, particularly in mission, impacted on questions of benefice identity.

To eliminate possible bias on my part towards choosing MCBs with a shared identity, I approached archdeacons in the three dioceses with a request for two suggestions of incumbents to contact. I emphasized that it would be helpful if they 'were able to suggest *contrasting* benefices which take different approaches to working together'. I also emphasized that it was 'as important that I hear from benefices where a shared identity is a priority as that I hear the views of those who do not think this is a priority'. The six MCBs used all came from the initial suggestions of the three archdeacons.

It was also important to collect a lay perspective from each of the six MCBs to understand how much shared understanding there was of how each MCB operated. It was initially assumed that I might be able to ask the Lay Chair of a Benefice Council to complete the Lay questionnaire, but prior to sending out the questionnaires it became clear that not all MCBs have this role and so I had to rely on the incumbent to find a suitable lay representative. This means that incumbents may have chosen someone who held similar views to their own, but this was certainly not the case in all the data received.

Further information about the six MCBs has also been gathered from benefice websites, where these exist. In one case, a benefice profile was provided which had been used in the recent recruitment of the incumbent; this also provided helpful insights into how they understood themselves.

To ensure both comparability of data and time efficiency, questionnaires were designed to be emailed to both incumbents and a lay representative in each MCB. The design of both questionnaires was influenced by the issues I wanted to investigate, personal experience as already outlined and by my reading about the challenges of leading rural benefices. To gain an initial understanding of how the questionnaire might be received, I asked for feedback from an incumbent leading a large rural benefice in my own diocese (not one of the three used in data collection). Discussion with this incumbent enabled me to refine both questionnaires. (For final versions of the questionnaires see Appendix 2: Incumbent Questionnaire and Appendix 3: Lay Representative Questionnaire).

I also made the decision to include some multiple-choice questions to force a stated position on several issues (e.g., understanding of the benefice, view on church buildings and governance) although I also provided space for further comment once a position had been chosen. Completed questionnaires therefore provide both quantitative and qualitative data.

1.2 Data Analysis

All data has been anonymised and each MCB is referred to by a number allocated to the diocese followed by the reference number for the benefice (e.g., D3.B5). Data from the questionnaires about the six MCBS has been collated in table form and is found in Appendix 1. Tables 1-5 provide background data about the MCBs. Tables 6-18 are referred to throughout the following discussion of benefice identity. Any data which

might allow a reader to identify a particular benefice has been redacted and so whilst I know the number of churches in each MCB, this is not shown in the data. To further eliminate the chance of an incumbent being identified data is not provided about how long each incumbent has been in post, but this ranges from two months to nine and a half years.

1.3 Complexity, Fragility and Mission

The complexity of leading an MCB was apparent in all the incumbents' comments, especially in the challenge of enabling worship across many churches. All were required to lead or coordinate large ministry teams and had complex monthly patterns of worship (See Appendix 1: Tables 1 and 4).

All the incumbents identified fragility, as defined by Lawson (2023), in a very high number of the churches in their MCBs (Appendix 1: Table 2). It was common for almost all the churches in each MCB to meet the criteria. All had congregations where between 56% and 85% were between the ages of 65 and 80+ (Appendix 1: Table 3). None of the incumbents could guarantee the sustainability of current worship patterns beyond three years and for some worship patterns were even more vulnerable (Appendix 1: Table 4). These facts alone may indicate that collaboration and shared identity are becoming even more vital as mission activities carried out by individual congregations are naturally vulnerable given the demographic of congregations. The data here then confirms my description of MCBs in Chapter 1. Further comment about mission follows in Section 3.49.

A further key finding was the clear evidence of the stress and 'stretch' involved in managing an MCB. One incumbent commented: 'Time – it takes longer to do things together and everyone is very stretched' (D2.B3). Another described 'The large total number of churches across which ministry resources are stretched, compounded by the small populations that each serve' (D3. B6). Certainly, findings here confirm earlier research by Lawson (2018) which showed that, even before COVID, there were significant stressors on clergy who have responsibility for fragile rural churches. Lawson's 2018 work looked at benefices with three or more rural churches, so it is likely that where the number of churches has increased significantly beyond three, it becomes a multiplying factor for increased stress.

1.4 Analysis of Data on the Question of the Identity of the Benefices

In this section I first consider the importance of a name and the identity derived from it and then go on to consider straplines and visions. I then consider other aspects which might provide, or impact on, a shared identity before summarising my conclusions.

3.41. What's in a Name? Geography and Identity

Five out of six of the MCBs had a reference to the geographical area in which they were based in their benefice name, and this clearly contributes to MCB identity. The remaining MCB's name was linked to a strapline aligned to a vision drawn up in 2012 but now considered out of date.

Practically, identification with a geographical area would seem to be beneficial in helping people understand which area is covered by the MCB. The link with a geographical area was also reflected in one website where a photograph of the area was used rather than photographs of churches, the ministry team, or other Christian symbols. Identification with place is a strong theme in rural theology and was referred to frequently in the qualitative data. This will also be further explored in the next chapter as a way of providing shared identity.

3.42. What's in a Name? 'Group', 'Team' or 'Benefice'?

The choice of which of the above terms was used is clearly determinative for identity. All the MCBs are legally defined as benefices as a 'benefice' refers to the office to which a priest is appointed, and this may comprise one or more parishes. Whether the term is helpful in a secular age is however questionable; it is unlikely that the term is known or understood outside ecclesiastical contexts.

The decision to use either 'Group' or 'Team' in either the title or in a description of the MCB is more interesting. Much has been written on the use of the terms. Schein and Bennis in 1965 describe 'a group' as 'any number of people who interact with each other, are psychologically aware of each other and who perceive themselves to be a group' (quoted in Cameron and Green, 2015, p.61). In contrast, the use of the word 'team' implies some working together to achieve 'specified, shared and valued objectives' (Morgan et al 1986, quoted in Cameron and Green, 2015, p.61). This level of clarity was not however seen in the data.

None of the MCBs used the term 'group' in their title but one did in other documentation provided. This documentation indicated that they 'were a group of [...] parishes' who were seeking to 'strengthen our working together' (D1. B1) thus indicating that joint working was more of an ambition than a current reality.

Five of the MCBs described themselves as 'a team' either in their title or in the questionnaire or on their website but the degree to which this was a description of the way in which the ministry team worked together or the way in which a team of churches worked together varied considerably. Four of the five benefices explicitly linked the word 'team' to the team of people involved in ministry and so defined benefice identity in relation to the ministry performed there. One incumbent commented: 'The clergy [...] see the 'Benefice' as a framework in which we support each other as clergy' and 'My observation is that the 'Team' has never really operated as a 'team'; but rather we are a loose collection of different 'Groups' of churches/parishes' (D3.B4).

Only one MCB defined itself as a team of churches with a shared identity and purpose: 'we are a team of [...] churches, serving God and the people of [..]' (D3.B6) The incumbent of D3.B6 also noted the intentional work the MCB had done using the CPAS Thrive Programme in conjunction with the Diocese, to help them to think about their vision and purpose as a team of churches. Benefice D2.B4 had a similar sense of the purpose expressed on some of the individual church websites but this was not reflected in the questionnaire data. It may be relevant that these two MCBs were the two largest MCBs with larger ministry teams/capacity (B4 and B6).

In another diocese with a considerable number of rural MCBs, the phrase 'Mission Community' is combined with the geographical locality to provide a name a benefice.

This may offer an alternative which assumes collaborative working with a focus on mission, because the way in which we describe ourselves often determines action, although there will still be considerable work need to gain alignment of understanding when using such a phrase.

3.43 Identity – Individual Church Autonomy or One Organisation with a Shared Identity and Purpose?

Early in the questionnaires I presented both incumbents and lay representatives with five alternative descriptions of the relationships between the churches in the MCB and their purpose. I asked respondents to specify what they thought might be the general perception of laity in the MCB, their own understanding of the current reality and finally asked them to detail their wish for the MCB. Their full responses are set out in Appendix 1: Table 6.

Answers indicated a considerable divergence of opinion between the incumbents' own perceptions and their perception of how laity viewed the MCB. In four of the MCBs, it was the incumbent's perception that the laity either viewed their benefice as 'a way of sharing clergy' or as 'a way of keeping our church going'. This echoes Hopkinson's perception that:

[...] groups of churches are thought of as being organised around one or more ministers rather than as churches present in different communities for the benefit of the people, which are served by the same minister or ministers. This misrepresentation in the minds of most people belies the true purpose of multi-church groups, which is to facilitate worship and mission. (2015, p.44)

In one of the MCBs, the incumbent indicated that the view of the laity was more positive about working together than their own perception of reality. In contrast, one incumbent felt that there was a growing sense of parochialism; this might stem from a sense of fragility and the fear of loss post COVID.

Three out of the six incumbents felt that the current reality was that 'they were beginning to work together more closely but it is sometimes hard work' (Option c). Two incumbents felt that they were 'a missional partnership which enables us to work together to serve the area' (Option d). Three of the incumbents wanted their MCBs to become missional partnerships (Option d) and the other three wanted to go further so that 'It is a mission partnership, and we make prayerful decisions about the focus of work. We put this work about the needs of our individual churches' (Option e). In most cases the view of the lay representative was in line with the view of their incumbent.

This divergence between the incumbent's perception of the laity's view of the MCB and the incumbent's desire for the MCB indicates a significant tension that incumbents are having to navigate. This tension is further confirmed by incumbent and lay representative answers to a question about whether the MCB was referred to as '*The benefice*' or '*Our benefice*'. In all cases there was a significant majority answering '*The benefice*' (See Appendix 1: Table 7). This may indicate that laity and often also the ministry team, see the benefice as something that exists beyond individual churches rather than something to which they all belong.

When asked about what made it hard to work together there were a variety of responses although the issue of distance, managing change and the value still placed in the local parish/communities were more frequently cited (See Appendix 1: Table 9). It is

interesting to note that church tradition was not mentioned as a difficulty in working together; all the benefices had all or the vast majority of churches identifying as 'central' and so that whilst this may be a reason stated in urban areas for finding it hard to work together, this is not a concern in rural areas.

3.44: Identity Expressed in a Strapline

Three of the MCBs indicated that they had straplines. One of these was based to a previous vision. One had the strapline 'Parishes in Partnership', but this was not referred to in any of the answers to the questionnaire and other comments indicated that it was not a reality. One further MCB had a strapline 'Churches and School working together to share God's Love in our communities', and this was clearly embedded in benefice activity and identity.

3.45 Identity Expressed in a More Detailed Vision Statement or Action Plan

Despite advice from the national church that MCBs should be working in collaboration with an intentional focus on mission with a clear strategy and an 'appropriate mechanism such as a mission or Growth Action Plan' (2017, Bell and Hopkinson) this was not evident in the majority of MCBs in the sample. (For full details see Appendix 1: Table 8.)

Two of the MCBs indicated that their vision needed to be updated and that this was a work in progress. One incumbent provided a clear theological rationale for the lack of a vision statement:

For me, the local church and village community is very important. It is where we are most incarnational, and it is our best opportunity for connection. So, whilst the ministry of the Benefice is key, I wouldn't put it above the individual church communities.

Nevertheless, the MCB had a vision through shared values described as 'valuing the local presence, serving our communities, celebrating our buildings as worship, prayer and community spaces and enabling all to grow in faith' (D2. B3).

One MCB had nothing further to define itself beyond the benefice name because 'people really don't identify with the benefice. The individual parishes are where most peoples' focus is' (D3.B5). This was also supported by the lay representative in the benefice who noted the reason for not having a more detailed vision or plan as 'The requirement to spend time formulating and implementing one and unnecessary bureaucracy. The church is not a business where profit and loss is the driver, it is a voluntary sector service provider at Parish level' (D3.B5).

Only one incumbent provided considerable further detail about the MCB's understanding of its identity by referring to a more detailed vision statement. The incumbent noted that the Team Council had recently amended their vision from 'to see the Kingdom of God come to [the geographical area]' to 'see the Kingdom of God growing in [the geographical area]' because they wanted to 'affirm all those things, both within and beyond church life, that display Kingdom Values'. The incumbent commented further about the theology which had influenced the existing vision but felt that it was 'not widely understood, nor had there been any specific programme of promulgating what it meant'.

Two MCBs referred to a change in diocesan bishop, focus and strategy and the subsequent need to update their own vision in the light of this. Furthermore, two

incumbents believed that diocesan or deanery work negated the need for more detailed visioning as they were happy to align with this. One incumbent felt that this had taken over from individual benefice identity work. The intersectionality of contextualising and implementing national or diocesan visions in MCBs will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 4.

3.46. Benefice Identity as Strategic Tool: Resource, Lens and Work

Only one incumbent detailed how the benefice vision/identity was used in the day-to-day life of the benefice and individual churches. In this MCB, the vision document helped shape benefice priorities, helped PCCs see the bigger picture and was regularly referred to in worship, Team Council and PCC meetings. Commenting further the incumbent noted:

It has helped us reimagine the role description for our [vacancy]. It has prompted us to ask questions around how we enable the Kingdom of God to grow in sections of the communities that are under-represented within the current demographic of church life and where the Kingdom of God is already growing and present beyond church life. (D3.B6)

It may be significant that where there was an absolute commitment on the part of the incumbent to do everything possible to keep all churches open in the MCB there was little, or no energy put into any sense of a shared vision. Whereas, when there was a vision to serve the whole area of the benefice there was also a recognition that the MCB had too many church buildings to sustain and that decisions needed to be made about which buildings to keep open (See Appendix 1: Table 11). This indicates that a

commitment to the place of the church in each individual community and a theology of place, both of which are key parts of Anglican identity, may hinder joint working.

3.47 Other Expressions of Shared Identity: Benefice Worship

Benefice worship is an obvious way in which might build a sense of a shared identity and bring people together to help create this. All the MCBs offered this but data shows that the vast majority of MCBs only attracted around 25% of the usual congregations to these services (See Appendix 1: Table 10). Five out of six benefices had a service roughly quarterly on the fifth Sunday, but it is likely that this is too infrequent for embedding identity. It is however interesting to note that in the one MCB with stronger attendance at shared worship this was a weekly practice and had been somewhat forced on people by a reduction in clergy.

3.48 Other Expressions of Shared Identity: Joint Governance

The questionnaire also considered new options for shared governance under a Joint Council which was made possible under the *Church Representation Rules* (Church of England, 2022) whereby a Joint Council can take on some or all properties, rights, liabilities, and functions of individual PCCS (see Appendix 1: Table 12).

At present, all the MCBs retain individual PCCs which clearly put significant demands on clergy. Four out of six MCBs also had some form of team council to enable the benefice to work. One incumbent commented on why they would not look to shared

governance in the following way: ‘People are concerned to protect their church building and so want to retain control’. However, the incumbent of D3:B6, where there is already a strong sense of the churches working as a team together to serve the area, was aiming to move towards this in the coming year as part of the process to update the vision. Another incumbent felt that a Joint Council would become inevitable as recruitment of Churchwardens became increasingly difficult (D2.B4).

One lay representative commented that they would be working towards a Joint Council “because it makes practical sense, particularly in the light of the difficulty in filling PCC posts” (D1.B2) and another was keen to watch how a new Joint Council was working in their diocese but was alert to the challenges in that ‘all members would need to adopt the same principles of generous giving, lay worship, streamlined bank accounts etc’ (D1.B1).

3.49 Other Expressions of Shared Identity: Joint Mission

In four out of six of MCBs mission opportunities were largely led at individual church level although these are vulnerable given the fragility of the churches involved. One MCB employed a Schools Worker across the benefice, and another offered warm hubs across the benefice. In D3.B6, where there was a clear vision and identity to be a team of churches serving an area, a significant number of mission initiatives were cross-benefice. Here, it would seem that the capacity they have as a large team of churches combined with a clear identity of being a team feeds into mission initiatives.

1.5 Training and Support for leading MCBs

Whilst issues of training and support do not necessarily point directly to questions of identity, it can be argued that specific training on leading large rural benefices would help incumbents to identify challenges and opportunities around identity. Findings around training issues are presented in Appendix 1: Tables 14-16 and Table 18.

Two of the incumbents noted that they had worked in a large benefice in curacy but experience in curacy does not necessarily mean that helpful models of structuring an MCB have been learnt. One incumbent noted that 'I have enjoyed lots of leadership training which I have been able to use within this context, but I am not sure if I have had much specifically focused training' (D2.B3). Another noted:

There is very little available across the board specifically aimed at leadership in large benefices. Some CPAS webinars are relevant. Regular sessions with a reflective practice group and one to one meetings with a work mentor/coach provide a safe place but this is not unique or specifically tailored to leading a large benefice. (D3.B6)

Four of the incumbents noted Deanery Chapter as a network for support. Further investigation would be needed to establish how effective this kind of support from close colleagues is, as it might not provide the opportunity for honesty or challenge that a coaching conversation or cross-diocese course might provide.

Incumbents did however identify specific training for laity that may have an impact on a possible shared identity. Four of the six incumbents noted that future training was needed on leading worship; this was also identified by three of the lay representatives. This might again indicate that worship patterns across the MCBs are vulnerable but that

there is still a desire to see all churches in the MCB regularly open for worship (See Appendix 1: Table 16).

Finally, there was an important strand of comments on further support incumbents felt would most support their work. Three of the incumbents pointed to central services from their diocese to support their work and again these comments point to the level of 'stretch' felt by incumbents (See Appendix 1: Table 18). Significant comments were:

Better central support from the Diocese, for governance, policies and human resources [...] Employment law/contracts/maternity pay. (D1.B2)

[...] a church maintenance project that we could sign up to, and pay for. So that a central team could keep the buildings in good shape and we could focus on maximising our missional potential (with the buildings and the communities). (D2.B3)

I don't know of any parish administrator who has had specific training in parish administration and I don't know of clergy who have had similar training. I'm certain that administrators and clergy could work much better together if we had the opportunity of some training. (D3.B5)

3.6. Summary of Learning and Ways Forward

In Chapter 2, I argued that a shared identity rather than individual autonomy was vital to secure the viability and potential of an organisation and to achieve a dividend. I also noted that identity could be used as a strategic tool and lens to support decision making for the future. I referred to Elford's argument that there are three tasks in leadership: managing the present, nurturing identity, and creating the future (2013, p.22) and noted that I consider these three tasks are key in the life of fragile rural MCBs.

Only one of the six MCBs in the sample models something that is close to what I argued for and had a very clear shared identity. This MCB also used their shared identity to help shape strategic direction for the future action. One benefice modelled a sense of shared identity though shared values but put greater emphasis on the individual communities because 'it is where we are most incarnational and it is our best opportunity for connection' (D2.B3). A further benefice modelled a shared identity by working together to employ a schools' worker, but this was not an expressed feature of a defined identity or plan. In three of the MCBs a shared identity was not evident beyond the ministry team and more emphasis was put on ensuring the autonomy of individual churches but given the fragility of the churches this appears to also risk the long-term viability of the MCB.

Nevertheless, all of the incumbents in the sample wanted their MCB to become a missional partnership whilst also witnessing to a reluctance on the part of laity to engage beyond their local community. In some cases, there was also a commitment on the part of clergy to keep all church buildings open at all costs and thus further foster individual autonomy rather than shared purpose. Fostering missional partnership and at the same time fostering individual autonomy is extremely challenging and is perhaps almost impossible as to do one is to undo the other.

Above all, this data points to a very clear tension between the historic commitment of the Church of England to the maintenance of parish system within an MCB structure, and the current realities of the complexity and fragility of many rural MCBs together with the imperative for mission in a time of decline. Underlying this lies another tension between a theology of parish or place and a missional ecclesiology which espouses the

need to create new approaches to church which are far less concerned with historical and geographical boundaries.

Whilst listening to the voices of incumbents and lay leaders in the six MCBs, and thereby to both operant and espoused ecclesiologies of MCBs, and also noting the challenges facing all incumbents in rural ministry, it remains my view that a shared identity across an MCB is now an urgent need as this is the most likely way for mission to continue and that this may also be the only way to maintain a Christian presence in rural areas into the future. I now turn to consider the theological issues involved in determining a shared identity and to look at some of the theological resources available to support this.

Chapter 4: Nurturing a Shared Ecclesial Identity: Theological Resources and Practical Processes

In Chapter 3, I described how all the incumbents and lay representative wanted their MCB to be a missional partnership but that the data also witnessed to clear a tension between the autonomy of individual and often fragile churches and the possibility of developing a shared identity in an MCB. In this chapter I will consider both normative and formal theological voices and bring them into conversation with the espoused and operant (Watkins, 2020) voices heard in Chapter 3. I do this with the intention of providing a theological underpinning for a shared identity. I will argue that a shared ecclesial identity in a rural setting must involve three distinct elements: an expanded understanding of place, a communal calling, and a shared commitment to mission. It is only with such a shared ecclesial identity in place that ministry and mission will continue and flourish in rural MCBs. Finally, in this chapter I will consider the process by which this identity can be established.

I begin by considering how three of the strongest carriers of individual and autonomous identity described in Chapter 3 will need to be reimagined.

1.1 Parish, Place and Church Buildings – Evolving and Expanding the Realities

The importance and the interconnectedness of understandings of parish, place and church buildings lies at the heart of the challenge of creating a shared identity and purpose in all rural MCBs. Each concept is individually complex and is capable of being a carrier of an autonomous identity; they are first individually briefly described below.

4.11. Parish

In his consideration of 'parish' Rumsey (2017) points to the complexity of 'parish' when he describes it as "a threefold cord of soul, soil and society" (2017, p.157). His detailed study of the understanding of parish is traced through ecclesiastical history and geography and concludes with the following threefold understanding of the vocation of the parish: it is first 'national and in symbiotic relation with its national counterpart, creating a unique compound of sacred and secular society'; it is secondly an 'enduring archetype of English neighbourhood whose territorial boundaries have left a monumental, if mixed cultural legacy'; finally, it is 'inseparable from the physical or natural landscape, in both imagination and practice'(2017, p.181). As described, this vocation is certainly significant, and it is clear why 'parish' is such a strong carrier of identity.

4.12. Place

Brueggeman (1997), in his consideration of the concept of 'land', noted that 'place is a space which has historical meanings, where some things have happened which are now remembered and which provide continuity and identity across generations' (1997, p.5). Inge, in his detailed theology of place, points to the complexity of 'place' for ecclesial identity because place is 'the seat of relations between God and the world' (2003, p.68). Rumsey develops a theology of place based on 'Christ in our place' which is both Christological and eschatological. He writes: '[...] belief in the incarnation

charges the Church with the task of 'place-forming'; fostering in each locality the conditions that enable loving encounter with God and neighbour' (2017, p.59).

4.13. Church Building

Finally, and particularly within a rural landscape where church buildings often date back over a thousand years, the complex understandings of 'parish' and 'place' are played out and 'incarnated' in an ancient church building so that the building itself is a very significant carrier of identity. Inge comments:

[...] churches have a significance much deeper than being just places to meet. They stand witness to the fact that this world is not a system closed upon itself and, as such, can help those who feel rootless to find their identity in God. (2016, p.9)

Coakley describes a similar sense of a church building being a carrier of identity when she writes that:

[...] buildings in which 'prayer has been valid' are more like people than stone or brick [...] each such building holds the memories of a particular geographical community, it is well to be aware of its remaining symbolic power – even if it now seems neglected, under-used or actively vandalised. (2008, p.12)

Not everyone however views church buildings in this light. Moynagh, writing on the building of churches in the nineteenth-century sees an 'entrenchment of ecclesial imagination centred on church buildings' so that it 'reinforced the idea that church was about worshipping in a building near where you lived' and that this 'was the first call on

the church's resources ' so that there was 'no mental space [...] to imagine a different way of being church' (2017, p.126).

4.14. Moving forward

It was clear from the data set that all the incumbents felt the weight of these three carriers of autonomous identity in the way in which the MCBs functioned. In combination, they form a deeply complex web of ideas and navigating this requires considerable wisdom and agility or nimbleness of mind. This nimbleness is even more important when the autonomy of each individual parish and church building was 'baked' into the MCB at its formation by permitting each church to retain its PCC and thereby its ability to make autonomous decisions.

There is however a danger that both incumbents and laity fail to consider working towards building a shared identity in an MCB because they view each of these three carriers of identity as immutable, when in fact history, geography and theology would indicate that all have been fluid over time and can be re-imagined again in the light of the current and increasing fragility of the church in the rural landscape.

4.15. Reimagining 'Parish'

Several Anglican Ecclesialogists have questioned the significance and the expressions of 'parish' in recent years. Writing on Anglican Ecclesiology, Avis notes four levels or manifestations of the Church: The universal Church, the provinces, the diocese, and the parish. He points to the fact that:

In Anglicanism, the diocese, as the community united in its bishop and as the bishop's sphere of ministry, is regarded ecclesologically as the 'local church'. It is the locus or sphere of the bishop's oversight and of the bishop's collegial ministry [...] in every place. (2007, p.167)

Avis goes on to note that whilst, in the Church of England, it is 'the geographical parish, rather than the worshipping community itself, that is recognised' this is not the case everywhere. He concludes:

The universal and local (diocesan) expressions of the Church are essential and interdependent: the provincial and parochial expressions are in a sense contingent and not essential. (2007, p.167)

This understanding of the expressions of Church within the Church of England somewhat minimalizes the weight of 'parish' as a carrier of identity.

Writing in 2013, Percy describes the different understandings of the Anglican parish there have been over time. He argues that there is now a loss of a conscious sense of belonging to a parochial space (2013, p.77) and a loss of parish-type communities. He draws the conclusion that there is a need for 'the recognition of local churches, and that this is arguably the key mutation of modernity for the Parish Church; its identity is shifting from the parochial to the local' (2013, p.85) .

Rumsey too notes the need for 'restructuring of localities' (2017, p.184) and whilst arguing for the parish still to be 'the Church's basic expression of locality', he argues that the parish system needs to 'be permeable and open to a measure of social negotiation' and to become 'a little less systematic'. In addition, he argues that the burden of 'governance and coordination of ministry, mission and resources may increasingly be removed from it – most likely to a revitalised and empowered deanery as

John Tiller envisaged' (2017, p.184). Interestingly, this is a theme that is becoming increasingly common in dioceses and is noted by Thomas when he argues that the deanery's decisive moment has now arrived (2020).

In a further and more radical move, Robinson (2020) redefines 'parish' in a completely new way as he considers the New Parish Movement in America. Here 'parish' becomes 'our neighbourhood' and both 'parish' and 'neighbourhood' sit entirely outside any traditional notion of a parochial system.

4.16. Reimagining 'Place'

If the concept of 'parish' can be expanded, so too can the concept of 'place'. Rumsey rightly reminds us that 'all forms of place are (and always were) characterised by flow and interrelation' (2017, p.187). Whilst Milbank notes that in the Church of England 'place is now being stretched to encompass areas that no one locally would think of as a single 'place' at all' (2023. p.89), there is undoubtedly much more flow and interrelation between small rural locations than there ever was in the past. Most residents no longer live and work within a single village or parish and the percentage of people who have lived in a village for the whole of their lives is also decreasing. This means that 'place' has already been expanded for most people in the most parts of their lives and so an MCB that makes geographical sense would seem to be a very reasonable reconsideration of place. Rumsey helpfully sums this up:

If social space, like skin, is constantly renewing itself, then it is essential that the Church's spatial praxis is intelligible in a contemporary situation – enabling the recognition of 'Christ in our place' wherever that place happens to be. (2017, p.185)

4.17. Reimagining the Role of the Parish Church and Building

There are several different considerations here. The easier issue is where a church in an MCB is still trying to do everything that one parish church might try to achieve but where increasingly material and human resources are diminishing. In this situation Percy comments that:

Parish Churches, rather than stretching themselves to the limit in all things, may be able to contemplate a degree of specialisation within a culture of collaboration. (2013, p.86)

Data from the questionnaires to incumbents would however indicate that the degree of fragility being experienced in rural MCBs needs a more radical solution than that offered by Percy. Increasingly, fragile congregations based in parishes with very small populations simply do not have the resources to maintain often Grade 1 and 2 historic buildings. In this situation, Rumsey argues that the explicitly 'sacred' space of church buildings must be radically re-opened to the secular' (2017, p.183); he does however seem to forget that such a move often requires expensive alterations to improve accessibility. The alternative practice of nominating churches as Festival churches has also become an increasingly popular solution. However, both of these solutions were rejected by one of the incumbents in the data set:

Several may be good candidates for festival church status, but this doesn't solve the major challenges of paying parish share, finding officers, etc. There is very limited scope for re-ordering with a view for more community use without setting the church up in competition with village halls, only 4 churches serve villages with no village hall. (D3.B6)

Writing back in 2006, Gaze argued that there was a need for ‘pruning the vine’ in the rural church. The last sentence of her chapter on pruning ends in the following way:

A failure to prune at national, diocesan, and local level will severely hamper the health of the vine and its ability to bear fruit. (2006, p.101)

Evidence from one incumbent in the data set indicates that making moves towards ‘pruning’ is far from an easy process:

It’s difficult to have sensible business-like thoughts about ancient church buildings because the Diocesan approach is that ‘we don’t want to close any church buildings because they become our liability’. I have tried to have a serious conversation with the hierarchy – but until something breaks down, there is no incentive to address the looming problem. I have even filled in CBC forms about the closure of three churches and submitted them some years ago to the diocese – no response whatsoever. It’s in the ‘too difficult to handle’ box. (D2.B4)

Another incumbent in the data set offered another solution:

Closing churches is not the real answer, instead we need a radically different model for funding, maintaining and overseeing the maintenance of these buildings. It needs urgent and concerted action from the church nationally in dialogue with government, bodies, tourism and others who currently benefit from the existence of this major element of our historic, architectural assets without contributing any meaningful level of finance to them, while also safeguarding the principal of these being places of worship, not museums, frozen in time and divorced from their ancient purposes as both sacred places and places for the benefit and use of the whole local population. (D3. B6)

This latter model for maintaining church buildings is something that has been taken up by the National Churches Trust in their campaign ‘*Every Church Counts*’, launched in February 2024. They highlight the very significant number of churches at risk and call on

the UK Government, heritage organisations and Christian denominations to work together to tackle what they describe as ‘the UK’s single biggest heritage challenge’. It will be interesting to see if this campaign attracts any traction particularly given the economic climate of recent years.

One other alternative, before considering closure, seems to be to ask the local community to donate towards upkeep, but this may over time involve what many would consider to be unreasonable sums of money. A final alternative offered by one of the dioceses in the survey is to allow churches to be put into a period of ‘rest and review’ so that this allows time for other possibilities to emerge.

Closure of ancient church buildings and their sale is no doubt a difficult and challenging task, but this is something that clearly incumbents need significant support in addressing. In 2020, Braithwaite, the Church Buildings Officer produced a report on *Struggling, Closed and Closing Churches*, his closing remarks are salutary:

[...] the challenges facing churches should not be underestimated and the continuing run of casework through the system indicates a major structural change taking place in slow motion. If it goes on in this manner for another generation, or if it accelerates in any significant way, then a challenge of a different order will be faced. This might be seen in historical terms, comparable to other major events or movements in the long history of the Church. Such a perspective may help focus the minds of leaders and policymakers on the pressing need to address an issue which may fairly be described as a matter of national significance. (2020, p.66)

There is no doubt that the way in which an historic building acts as a carrier of identity is the most difficult challenge facing rural MCBs and there is clearly work needed from dioceses and the central church to support and address the deep level of reimagining needed.

4.18. Using Parish, Place, and Building as Part of a Shared Benefice Identity

This examination has shown that the concept of 'parish' and 'place' are, and always have been, open to change and that they can be stretched and expanded. It has also demonstrated that there are some possibilities for reimagining Church buildings too.

Stretching and expanding these carriers of autonomous identity require a leader to be brave enough to step outside traditional stories, concepts, and imaginings and to lead a disparate group into becoming a team with a new story in a new place. This is also courageous leadership in a context where often congregations would 'prefer to keep the church building and lose the services of a priest, rather than the other way around' (Smith, 2008. p.46). It requires leaders to challenge the settled nature of what is a 'pilgrim people' (Rumsey, 2017, p.186). This is leadership that is not simply maintaining the present, it is about nurturing identity and creating a future (Elford, 2013, p.22).

It would seem then that a theology of place, but an expanded and geographically sensible place or neighbourhood, is key in the development of a shared ecclesial identity for a rural MCB. This kind of 'place-forming' will be a vital part of the work of any incumbent in a rural MCB that seeks to share a common identity, but those involved in diocesan pastoral reorganisation and the National Church must also play their part in supporting this.

1.2 Developing a Communal Calling in the MCB

If expanding the understanding of 'place' is important, so too is an expanded understanding of the vocation of the Church in that place. This process is clearly

expressed in the Church of England's 2017 publication on *Shaping Strategies for Mission and Growth in Rural Multi-Church Groups* when it states:

[...] multi-church groups need to take time and prayer to discover and act on the communal calling to be the body of Christ in that place, welcoming everyone to take part [...] The mission of God's church in rural communities is a corporate undertaking requiring the whole congregation to be involved. (Bell and Hopkinson, 2017, p.3)

There are two key ideas within this advice: the first is to discover a 'communal calling to be the body of Christ in that place' and the second is a responsibility for mission. I now consider the first of these.

The deliberate choice made by the authors of the report to select one of the most familiar Biblical metaphors, that of 'the body of Christ', to address ecclesiology and identity is significant. Writing on Organisational theory, Morgan (1997/2006) notes the importance of metaphor for an organisation:

Metaphor is often regarded just as a device for embellishing discourse, but its significance is much greater than this. The use of metaphor implies *a way of thinking* and *a way of seeing* that pervade how we understand our world generally. (Morgan 1997/2006, p.4 – authors italics).

To talk of a 'communal calling to be the body of Christ in that place' is to generate a way of thinking and seeing so that all the churches in an MCB share one calling and identity. The authors of the 2017 paper go on to outline five specific characteristics that a rural MCB would demonstrate as the body of Christ. These are:

Incarnational – being a visible and active presence within the wider community, rooted within it, with a commitment to be a sacred space available for all [...] *Relational* – stressing the importance of welcome and personal relationships; understanding and expressing love of neighbour, especially for ‘people who are not like us.’ [...] *Contextual* – responding to and engaged with the realities of the local community, its particularities, strengths and weaknesses.[...] *Participatory* – being the body of Christ in that place creating space for all to offer their gifts and skills. [...] *Spiritual* – being the body of Christ in a place that shows in deed and word the life-giving, life changing love of God. (Bell and Hopkinson, 2017, p.4)

There are, of course, other metaphors and theologies from a variety of church traditions which could be used to support a communal calling. Dow (2015, p.14) draws on an understanding of the Kingdom of God as a way of discovering identity and in the data set D3.B6 also used this to build a shared identity - ‘to see the kingdom of God growing in the [geographical area of the MCB]’. Dulles’ five models of the church (1987) would also act as a resource for communal calling. Alternatively, Greenwood (2016) suggests a theme of God’s blessing and provides a framework for whole congregations to be involved in determining identity and purpose through an appreciative inquiry model.

Few metaphors however can hold as much possibility as the metaphor of the Body of Christ and help to answer the question of ‘Who is God calling us to be at this time?’. The strength of this image lies in its Christological and sacramental links with a sense of where Christ is abiding. As Rumsey comments ‘belief in the incarnation charges the Church with the task of ‘place-forming’; fostering in each locality the conditions of loving encounter with God and neighbour’ (2017, p.59) and it is to the third element of a shared ecclesial identity for a rural MCB that I now turn.

4.3. A Shared Commitment to Mission

Writing on ecclesiology and mission, Cray is clear that the use of Biblical metaphors alone is not sufficient to provide ecclesiological identity. He argues that a metaphor must have a contemporary application and that all 'ecclesiologies must be contextual, if they are to be a service to the ecclesia [because] ecclesiologies must have a focus for their time'(2024. p.11) and for Cray, the default setting for the Church today must be mission.

An Anglican missional ecclesiology was first developed in the *Mission-Shaped Church Report* (Church of England, 2004), and this is reflected in *Shaping Strategies for Mission and Growth in Rural Multi-Church Groups* (Bell and Hopkinson, 2017) when it puts mission and growth at the heart of the purpose of an MCB. Few could argue that mission should not be a focus given the decline in church attendance, although others have challenged the implicit assumption that mission is the goal of the church, preferring to argue that the church should be missionary 'for ends that lie beyond mission' (Davidson and Milbank 2010, p.54).

The way in which Bell and Hopkinson's report embeds mission in the rural setting reflects *The Five Marks of Mission* (Church of England, 2017) and clearly addresses a culture where there is stronger engagement of congregation members in community life, as well as a commitment to the integrity of creation often seen in rural ministry.

Since 2017, missional ecclesiology has however been further defined in *The Vision and Strategy for the Church in the 2020s* (Church of England, 2021). This describes a church of 'missionary disciples', 'where a mixed ecology is the norm' and which is also

‘younger and more diverse’. It seeks ‘a parish system revitalised for mission’ and invites ‘dioceses and parishes to examine and develop existing strategies and processes in the light of these ideas’ (Church of England, 2021). Additional funding is available for dioceses via applications to the Strategic Mission and Ministry Investment (SMMI) fund to support diocesan implementation of the national strategy through costed plans with measurable outcomes for the diocese, its deaneries, and parishes.

All of this is a very significant challenge for small fragile rural congregations and their leaders. The intersectionality and layering of the above adds further complexity to leadership of an MCB as incumbents and multi-church groups are tasked with looking ‘upward’ to both the national church and diocese and ‘outward’ to their locality to as they discern how to contextualise a central vision with congregations that may feel very distant from national or diocesan initiatives. This is made even more challenging as implementation may also be required to be undertaken alongside further pastoral reorganisation as clergy number diminish.

Regardless of the particular expression of missional ecclesiology that an MCB adopts (i.e., one based on the Five Marks of Mission or on the National Strategy), it is very hard to argue that it would be wise for each individual church within an MCB to try to engage with these priorities independently. If a mixed ecology is to be developed so that different demographics and interest groups can find a relevant expression of church, then the churches in rural MCBs will need to work together to look at what can be offered across the MCB. If churches in the MCB understand that together they are the body of Christ in a locality this will both set them free from trying to do everything

and allow for collaborative mission. It is in this way that a communal call to mission becomes the necessary third element in a shared ecclesial identity.

4.4. Nurturing a Shared MCB Identity: Practical Processes

In this chapter I have outlined the three main elements I believe are required for a shared ecclesial identity in an MCB: an expanded understanding of place, a communal calling, and a shared commitment to mission.

I now proceed to look at how this shared identity can be intentionally developed over time in an MCB. This work should be a priority of any newly formed MCB after pastoral reorganisation, or for those considering a move towards a joint council or as part of the work of an incoming incumbent. This work may begin with a smaller groups, such as individual PCCs, or with Team/Joint Council members, but ultimately wider congregational involvement will be needed to ensure understanding and alignment.

4.41. Narratives for Identity Formation

Roberts and Sims (2017) provide a thorough consideration of the work of identity formation in their work on leading by story in churches. They note how it is possible to 'live long in a weak story' (p.54) and suggest that the 'central task of leadership is to give people a better story to live by' and 'one that is a springboard to a better future' (p.55). Given the witness of the incumbents on the challenges of leading MCBs and the new possibilities already explored in this chapter, it would seem that to continue to try to live as autonomous parishes in an MCB may now be 'a weak story' and that to discover

a communal calling with others in the locality may well be a 'better story to live by'. If this is the case, then the challenge becomes how to create that story and that shared identity.

Roberts and Sims (2017, pp.107-124) examine the role of three types of story in the creation of identity: Historical Narratives, Organisational Narratives and Personal Narratives. As I explore these, I will also make links to the recent work of MacNaughton (2023) on enabling MCBs to thrive.

Drawing on Ricoeur's work on time and narrative, Roberts and Sims explain how the telling of historical narratives help to make sense of current experience. MacNaughton, enriches this theme in a more informal and practical way by providing initial structured conversations about mapping the past, present, and future of each church in an MCB (2023, pp.14-27). Whilst she advises that churches need to hear the individual stories of each church, she also notes that all the churches also need to understand the history of how they came together into a benefice. These stories will also illustrate how change has always been a factor in the life of each church and parish and that it is possible to expand understandings of parish and place into the future.

In their consideration of the importance of organisational narratives in the development of identity, Roberts and Sims consider the use of organisational metaphors. I have already explored this in the consideration of the metaphor of the 'body of Christ' but an exploration of what this means in the specific context of each MCB will be important. In these discussions MCBs will also need to consider the organisational metaphors or descriptors they currently use to understand the ways in which the churches relate to one another. MacNaughton provides a model structured

conversation to facilitate this (2023, pp.28-41). Her use of the metaphors of a 'jazz band', 'children playing happily in a circle', 'circus performers' and 'independent allotment gardeners' adds an element of joviality, but also help to explore relationships between the churches and to shed light on current realities. It would also be helpful to look at the language already used to describe the MCB because, as we saw in Chapter 3, the language of 'a group', 'a team', 'a partnership' or 'a Benefice' will determine a direction of travel.

Finally, Roberts and Sims consider personal narrative. There will be many different personal stories which will sit alongside the historical and organisational narratives in an MCB. For example, the incumbent's story will be very different from that of someone who has lived in a village for over 80 years. Tellingly, Roberts and Sims note however that 'to understand why someone is recounting the *organizational* story that they are telling will necessarily require understanding their *personal* story as well' (2017, p.120).

4.42. Weaving the Stories Together into a New Story

Once stories have been told and the theological underpinnings of a shared identity have been explored each church community will begin to be able to feel a sense of belonging to something bigger. It is then possible to begin to answer questions of purpose and values and to move to consider creating the future. This will be the appropriate time to draw up a shared mission action plan and the new shared identity will provide a lens through which to do this. Bell and Hopkinson describe such a plan as 'essential' as it will 'help every benefice and every parish within the benefice to develop an intentional focus on mission and evangelism' (2017, p.12).

It is not within the parameters of this dissertation to consider the details of mission action planning but there are plenty of resources to support this for individual churches: Smith (2009), Greenwood (2013 and 2016), Elford (2013). MacNaughton (2023) specifically looks at this for MCBs. There are also a growing number of strategies and consultancies that will support this process (e.g., The Grove Strategic Planning Model, CPAS Thrive and Lead Academy) and these are increasingly being taken up by dioceses to support incumbents in this process.

4.5 Summary

This chapter provides a response to the challenges described by both incumbents and lay representatives in leading MCBs as presented in the previous chapter. It has specifically addressed the tension between the autonomy of individual churches in an MCB and the desire and need to work together. Relying on the earlier work in Chapter 2, which demonstrated the importance and possibilities of a shared identity, I have sought to provide specific theological resources which hold the potential to address the key carriers of autonomous identity, and which also support a communal calling. I have also sought to outline a process by which this new shared identity can be developed and owned by all congregations in the MCB.

In the light of the challenges facing incumbents described in Chapter 3, I have argued that a shared ecclesial identity in a rural MCB needs to have three key features: an expanded understanding of place, a communal calling, and a shared commitment to mission and have also provided theological underpinning for each of these. 'Parish' and

'place' remain important, but it is possible to expand the understanding of these as churches seek to serve a locality together. The communal calling that churches in an MCB have 'to be the body of Christ in that locality' provides a clear new carrier of a shared identity and, when combined with a missional ecclesiology, provides a particular expression of a shared identity for this time.

This new shared identity will also help to address the challenges outlined in Chapter 1 of fragility, complexity and the call to mission and also provide a lens and a resource to enable mission action planning in a way that helps manage the present, nurture identity and create the future.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This dissertation has investigated the possibility of developing a shared ecclesial identity for large rural benefices in the Church of England. The investigation was inspired by my own experience of working across a large organisation and previous learning about the importance of identity work to strengthen organisational purpose and viability. Although this learning naturally influences the way in which I approach other leadership tasks I have not automatically assumed that this experience is necessarily relevant to the formation and development of large rural benefices. Instead, I first justified why organisational insights might be relevant in ecclesiology and then ensured that I listened carefully to the voices of those currently leading large rural MCBs.

Watkins' 'Theology in Four Voices' methodology (2020) has underpinned my work. Her methodology has framed the investigation and ensured the contributions of formal, normative, operant, and espoused theology and ecclesiology. Significant and detailed original research has taken place to gather and hear the voices of incumbents and lay leaders of MCBs as a way of ensuring the contribution of operant and espoused ecclesiology. Watkin's methodology has also ensured that no voice was privileged over another and that each voice has been brought into conversation with the other over the course of the dissertation.

I began by describing three current challenges in leading rural MCBS: managing complexity, managing fragility, and fulfilling a mission imperative. I also noted what I believed to be a tension between the autonomy of the individual parishes and the

collective work or shared identity of an MCB as a whole and the impact that this tension may have on leaders as they find themselves trying to balance both. The data sample has confirmed all these factors are live issues and that, given the increasing fragility of churches, they may have a multiplying effect so that the 'stretch' incumbents feel is very significant.

Throughout the dissertation I have argued that developing a shared identity is important. I have done this on the basis of my own experience, and the contribution of organisational theory; I have also argued this because of the fragility of the individual churches and the urgent need to work together more closely to mitigate some of this fragility. In addition, I have also used Elford's three tasks of leadership (managing the present, nurturing identity and creating the future) to argue that without a shared identity it is impossible to create a future for an MCB.

I am mindful that I have a detailed but small sample data set (six benefices) and that this does not prove conclusively that a shared identity in an MCB is vital. Only one MCB had a fully developed shared identity and two others had either values or a specific jointly funded mission activity that helped to create a shared identity. Nevertheless, evidence from the survey suggests that in these MCBs there was stronger intentional work and commitment towards collaborative mission. Whilst noting this, it is also important to acknowledge the commitment to mission witnessed to by all incumbents in their desire their MCBs to be 'missional partnerships'.

Having listened to the voices of incumbents and noted the tensions between autonomy and a shared identity in the MCBs, I then considered what theological resources there may be for developing a shared identity and what the key features of

this shared identity might be. In doing this, it was essential to be responsive to the voice of the incumbents and to first consider the existing strong carriers of identity and the way in which they reinforce autonomy and, only after this, to then consider how these could be reimagined to build a shared identity. In this context, I have shown how 'parish' and 'place' can be reimagined and expanded. I then proceeded to illustrate why a 'communal calling' and a shared commitment to mission would also be key features of a shared identity.

In order to confirm if these are indeed key features of a shared identity it would be important to carry out further ethnographic work to establish the impact of these in a number of MCBs as they did this identity work. The opportunity for this kind of research may well increase as dioceses and MCBs work in collaboration with programmes such as 'Thrive' (CPAS) which aims to develop strategic leadership capacity in individual clergy and MCB ministry teams.

Having argued for the vital importance of identity work, I have also had to consider the increasing sense of intersectionality in this task. In a growing number of dioceses, deaneries are increasingly being understood as a vehicle through which a diocesan vision can be implemented, and this expectation will naturally affect the priorities expressed in the shared identity of MCBs. In this context, it is also important to note the role of the diocese and national church in supporting incumbents as they, together with PCCs and Councils, manage significant numbers of ancient buildings and the impact they have as 'carriers of identity'.

Whilst this work has significance for existing large rural benefices, it also has significance for wider pastoral reorganisations currently taking place in many dioceses in

the Church of England. The move toward larger MCBs may have begun in rural areas but it is now becoming widespread. Over the last three years significant reorganisation, involving parishes being placed in large groups, has taken place in Sheffield Diocese with the development of Oversight and Focal Ministers, in the Leicester Diocese in 'The Minster Scheme', in Truro Diocese's 'Plan for Change and Renewal' and in Liverpool Diocese's 'Transforming Wigan' Initiative.

Whether it is working in a large rural MCB, or in a Minster Team or as part of a Deanery Mission Action Partnership, leading larger groups demands the learning of new and different leadership skills and the undertaking of different tasks. The witness of this dissertation is that identity formation is a vital part of this work.

Glossary

FTE	Full time equivalent
MCB	Multi-Church Benefice
MCBs	Multi-Church Benefices
MAT	Multi-Academy Trust
MATs	Multi-Academy Trusts
PCC	Parochial Church Council
PCCs	Parochial Church Councils
SAP	Strategy as Practice
WCC	World Council of Churches

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Leadership courses and consultancies currently being used in the Dioceses involved in this research

The Grove Consultancy: [Online] www.thegrove.com

Lead Academy: [Online] <https://Leadacademy.net>

Thrive: [Online] www.cpas.org.uk

Appendix 1: Data Summary

This appendix includes data about the six benefices which could readily be collated in table form. It has been used to inform the discussion in Chapter 3.

The incumbent from D2.B4 provided a partially filled response and did not provide a contact for a lay representative. Nevertheless, the information provided was significant and so was included rather than seeking another MCB. Where data might indicate the source, it has been redacted.

Table 1: Data about the six benefices

N.B: To protect anonymity the exact number of churches in each MCB has been redacted.

Data	Date benefice established	A larger church as a resource for others	Number of Festival or closed churches	Tradition	Ministry team
D1.B1	c.2003	Yes	0	75% Central 25% Liberal Catholic	Rector Associate Priest SSM Retired Priest x2 Administrator – 4 hours
D1. B2	2007	No	1	72% Central 28% Liberal Catholic	Rector Retired Priest Youth Worker – 20 hours Administrator - 4 hours
D2.B3	c.2003	No	None but includes 2 Chapels of Ease	All Central/ Liberal Catholic	Rector Associate Priest Stipendiary Curate Trained Lay people Administrator – 4 hours
D2.B4	Not provided	Yes	1 closed and 3 could be considered as Festival Churches	92% Central 4% Con Evang 4% Liberal Catholic	Team Rector 3 Stipendiary Ass Priests 4 Retired active Priests Other retired priests with PTO 2 Stipendiary Curates 1 Youth Worker 4 Lay people leading worship
D3.B5	2012 when two previous benefices amalgamated	Yes	1 and 1 Festival Church	All Central	Team Rector Retired Priest x2 Stipendiary Curate Trained Worship leaders x 4
D3.B6	2010 but under same incumbent from 2007	Yes	2	All Central	Team Rector Stipendiary Associate Priest Pioneer Priest (0.5) Retired Priest x2 Curate (SSM) LLM x2 Trained Worship leaders x 4 Administrator – 15 hours

Table 2: Proportion of churches in each benefice considered by incumbent to meet all 6 features of fragile church (Lawson 2023)

Data	Percentage meeting criteria	Further comment from incumbent/Lay Rep
D1.B1	62%	Context: A growing detachment from church via the secular
D1.B2	15% or 100%	Incumbent: 85% of our parishes work well together and support the children’s work as a Benefice which stops each church falling into the ‘Fragile church’. Independently, they would all be fragile if their willingness to work together wasn’t there. Lay Rep: Financial pressure is a constant, particularly an ever-increasing Parish Share. Lack of church wardens and other officers is another common concern.
D2.B3	100%	Sometimes all of them. None would have a usual Sunday attendance figure of 12 or less, but occasional congregations may fall under this number, and that can lead to a sense of fragility. The other factors are all apparent in all [*] communities, but we are not weighed down by this, there is a lot of activity and hope and growth.
D2.B4	90%	We are situated in an affluent and attractive rural area. We are now experiencing social changes being brought about by second homes; people buying homes but not buying-into the community; willing to attend things but not be involved; expecting to be here for 10 years before moving on into their ‘elderly retirement’ home and not wanting to ‘put down roots’. Some of our ‘village schools’ have transformed, in my time, into ‘schools in villages’ – and so the social interaction between school and community has changed significantly, because parents/families don’t live in the village – and so don’t come to village events/activities because it’s not their community. I could go on.
D3.B5	62%	The other [*] churches are only not [included] because they have a congregation larger than 12. [And so only meet 5/6 of the criteria].
D3.B6	38%	For [*] of our churches, even though they identify with most of these statements, it drives them on to try new initiatives rather than thwarts their ability to do this, recognising they need to do at least some things differently in order to try to halt decline, or to grow.

Table 3: Estimate of the age make-up of people attending Sunday Worship across each benefice

Data	0-11	12-18	19-24	25-34	35-44	45-64	65-75	80+
D1.B1	5%	5%	0%	5%	5%	5%	70%	10%
D1.B2	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	15%	70%	15%
D2.B3	2%	2%	0%	10%	5%	25%	41%	15%
D2.B4	Not Provided	Not Provided	Not Provided	Not Provided	Not Provided	Not Provided	Not Provided	Not Provided
D3.B5	1.5%	2%	0.75%	3%	2.25%	25%	54.5%	11%
D3.B6	1%	4%	1%	0%	5%	25%	40%	24%

These figures indicate considerable further fragility, although it must be born in mind that in rural communities the population tends to be older than in urban areas. The attendance of children and young people is not in line with national 2022 Church of England Mission Statistics (November 2023) where attendance for 0 – 11 was 12.7% and attendance of 12-18 was 5%.

Table 4: Service Pattern offered across the benefices

Data	Churches offering weekly Sunday worship	Churches offering at least 2 acts of worship per month	Churches offering 1 act of worship per month	Festival Churches/ 6 acts of worship per year	Online worship
D1.B1	8	-	-	-	Monthly
D1.B2	2	The way our rota is set up it doesn't fit into your categories. Each Parish has 1.5 services a month. 4 churches have an 08.30 a month then we have a 1 in 7 10am rota that moves the Parish communion each week.			No
D2.B3	0	5	2	0	
D2.B4	Not Provided	Not Provided	Not Provided	Not Provided	Not Provided
D3.B5	2	5	1	0	Morning Prayer M-Th
D3.B6	1	14	1	0	No

Incumbents were also asked to consider the sustainability of the pattern of worship they offered. The responses were as follows:

Likely to be sustainable for 3 years x4.

Likely to decline over the next three years x1.

One further comment:

Recent attempts to recruit new clergy have proven difficult and this has not helped with the provision of regular services within the benefice. We have too few clergy to provide a regular service for congregations within the Team. Why do we struggle to keep churches going when closures would not produce economic benefit but would allow a more rational and productive use of clergy time? I can walk in 30 minutes to each of three churches within my benefice; useful in medieval times but no longer necessary. (Lay D3. B6)

Table 5: Occasional Offices across the Benefices

Data	Baptisms	Weddings/Blessings	Funerals
D1.B1	20	20	40
D1. B2	5	4	25
D2.B3	15	25	15
D2.B4	Not Provided	Not Provided	Not Provided
D3.B5	25	15	35
D3.B6	18	30	65

Table 6: Perceptions of the Benefice (Incumbent and Lay Rep)

Participants were offered the choice of 5 congregational perceptions of the MCB identity:

Data	a) It is a way of sharing clergy.	b) It is a way of keeping our church going.	c) We are beginning to work together more closely but it is sometimes hard work.	d) It is a missional partnership which enables us to work together to serve the area.	e) It is a mission partnership, and we make prayerful decisions about the focus of work. We put this work above the needs of our individual churches.
D1.B1		Incumbent's assessment of current reality	Incumbent's perception of laity view	Incumbent's wish	Incumbent's wish
		Lay Rep's perception of laity view	Lay Rep's assessment of current reality		Lay Rep's wish
Lay Rep's additional comment: The sharp reductions in ordained clergy in the last twelve months has forced this issue to the fore. It is still early days and there are those who enthusiastically embrace the benefice concept and those who see it as a reason for not attending services not in their own parish.					
D1.B2		Incumbent's perception of laity view		Incumbent's assessment of current reality	Incumbent's wish
		Lay Rep's perception of laity view	Lay Rep's assessment of current reality	Lay Rep's wish	
D2.B3			Incumbent's perception of laity view together with some opting for d)	Incumbent's assessment of current reality and also wish.	
		Lay Rep's perception of Laity view	Lay Rep's assessment of current reality -- a combination of C and D but not including "hard work"	Lay's Rep's wish	
<p>Incumbent additional comment: For me, the local church and village community is very important. It is where we are most incarnational and it is our best opportunity for connection. So, whilst the ministry of the Benefice is key, I wouldn't put it above the individual church communities.</p> <p>Lay Rep's additional comment: D as I think the needs of the individual parishes, in the sense of identity with each community being different, remain important.</p>					
D2.B4	Incumbent's perception of laity view	Incumbent's perception of laity view			Incumbent's wish

	Incumbents additional comment: To answer your question, you need to understand the genesis of our benefice. [Further detail redacted] My wish would be 'e' but we are far off that.				
D3.B5	Incumbent's perception of laity view		Incumbent's assessment of current reality	Incumbent's wish	
	Lay Rep's perception of laity view		Lay Rep's wish	Lay Rep's assessment of current reality	
D3.B6	Incumbent's perception of laity view	Incumbent's perception of laity view	Incumbent's assessment of current reality	Incumbent's wish	
	Lay Rep's perception of laity view		Lay Rep's assessment of current		Lay Rep's wish
	Lay rep additional comment: My recent experience at the lay level indicates a reluctance of some individual churches to sacrifice any measure of autonomy.				

Table 7: The benefice/Our benefice

Data Set	Incumbent's view of how regular church goers would describe benefice	Incumbent's view of how ministry team would describe benefice	Lay Rep's view of how regular church goers would describe benefice	Lay Rep's view of how ministry team would describe benefice
D1.B1	The benefice	Our benefice	The benefice	Our benefice
D1.B2	The benefice	The benefice	Neither - Refer to name	Neither - Refer to name
D2.B3	The benefice	The benefice	The benefice	Our benefice
D2.B4	Neither	Probably 'The Benefice' – we are such a large benefice with parishes that have no real connection. Clergy think in terms of their Group of Parishes first, and 'The Benefice' afterwards.		
D3.B5	The benefice	Our benefice	The benefice	The benefice
D3. B6	The benefice	The benefice	The benefice	Our benefice

Table 8: Details of MCB strapline, vision statement and action plan and its use

Data Set	Strapline	Vision or Identity Statement	Mission Action Plan	Way that Action Plan is used
D1.B1	Not yet	Not yet	No	
	Benefice Profile Provided			
D1.B2	Yes	No	No	
	There was a very out of date on from about 2012 when I got here that nobody had really bought in to. We did try to do some preliminary work last year to get this going but the busyness of a large parish with a very small ministry team and tired volunteers we haven't taken this further yet.			
D2.B3	Yes	No	No	
	<p>There are definitely shared values (that we could probably articulate better), and we share in the Diocesan Vision and Deanery Strategic Plan</p> <p>We have a sense of shared values, alongside the broad strapline, which seems to work. I would describe our focus as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - valuing the local presence - serving our communities - celebrating our buildings as worship, prayer and community spaces - enabling all to grow in faith. <p>I have been reluctant to spend lots of time agreeing wording for another statement, when the Diocesan and Deanery ones are good.</p> <p>I do think (and it's on our next joint PCC agenda) that we could maybe spend more time articulating the above though and seeing how all we do fits in with this.</p>			
D2.B4	Yes	No	No	
	This has been overtaken by the Deanery Strategic Planning exercise which is currently underway. Reason for no MCB Vision: Lack of buy-in from laity; some parishes having a very strong and individual sense of mission and purpose in their place/parish(es); reluctance to be outward looking and working together; fears about church closures and reallocation of resource.			
D3.B5	No	No	No	
	People really don't identify with the benefice. The individual parishes are where most peoples' focus is.			
D3.B6	Yes	Yes	Yes	<p>Helps agree priorities for benefice</p> <p>Helps PCCs see the bigger picture</p> <p>Regularly referred to in Worship</p> <p>Regularly referred to in Benefice Team and Council</p> <p>Regularly referred to in PCC meetings</p>
	<p>Much detail provided but redacted here to preserve anonymity.</p> <p>An updated version of this is a project for the future and may be developed as part of the re-shaping of benefice structures with a view to establishing a Joint Council, which should commence in 2024, and a future programme of teaching and discussion so it is more widely owned and understood. It's quite a challenge across so many tiny churches.</p>			

Table 9: One thing that makes it hard to work together and one thing that makes it easy to work together.

Data Set	Incumbent's hard to work together	Incumbent's easy to work together	Lay Rep's hard to work together	Lay Rep's easy to work together
D1.B1	Geography	The willingness of the people to help/engage	Time restraints – busy rural lives e.g. farming, caring etc	Our faith in God and our love for our communities
D1.B2	The value that is still place on own Parish/Community	Getting to know and understand each other's communities better	85% work well together- individual personalities	A very positive collaborative relationship between church wardens
D2.B3	Time – it takes longer to do things together, and everyone is very stretched	Good relationships	The geography of the Benefice and distances between churches. Two of our communities are quite isolated	Our relationships between the communities, be that familial or friends
D2.B4	No real buy-in from parishes	The clergy like each other and get on together and see 'the Benefice' as a framework in which we support each other as clergy.		
D3.B5	Concern about the future of the church buildings.	The benefice administrator	Distance and differing needs	The Team Rector
D3.B6	The large total number of churches across which ministry resources are stretch, compounded by the small populations that each serves.	More clergy would enable us to deepen relationships within and across parish boundaries ...	The mentality that regards any change to the status quo as a threat	A common desire to spread the Gospel of Christ.

Table 10: Benefice Worship

Data	Does benefice worship take place?	Frequency	Format	All churches in MCB represented?	Proportion of overall regular attendees at individual churches attending benefice services	Explanation of attendance level
D1.B1	Yes	5 th Sunday	CW HC	No	Fewer than 25%	Geography/weather
D1.B2	Yes	Weekly	CW HC	No	Between 25 and 50%	<p>Incumbent: People have got better about moving round for worship since a reduced clergy team meant we had to reduce the service rota. There are still a core number that rarely move around.</p> <p>Lay: A stubbornness to attend only the home church. There is a caucus of worshippers who travel gladly around the benefice, but it represents only a small proportion of overall members</p>
D2.B3	Yes	5 th Sunday and key festivals (Not Christmas and Easter)	Varies on context	No but most	Between 25 and 50%	It will vary a lot on the service and the context – the season, the service and the weather! Some people still only attend in their village, some don't travel at night.
D2.B4	Not Provided	Not Provided	Not Provided	Not Provided	Not Provided	Not Provided
D3.B5	Yes	5 th Sunday and Palm Sunday	Eucharist	Yes	Fewer than 25%	A large proportion of people just attend services in their parish church.
D3.B6	Yes	5 th Sunday	CW HC		Between 25 and 50%	<p>Incumbent: Some will not travel outside their parish as a matter of principle. E.g. fearing it jeopardises the future or not use cars to get there, car parking is limited or of getting stuck if parking in a field.</p> <p>Lay rep: Some regard this as a Sunday off unless their church is hosting the service. We should make the service</p>

						somehow different from our parochial services. Perhaps we should specify a particular topic and have a service that will address perhaps a controversial topic with a sermon and prayers addressing the same.
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Table 11: How Church Buildings are viewed.

Participants were offered the choice of 3 views on the significance of church buildings in the MCB.

Data	Church buildings are a focal point for ministry and mission, and we must endeavour to keep all of them open at all costs	Church buildings are a focal point for ministry and mission, but we have too many to sustain and must make decisions soon about which buildings to keep open.	Church buildings are a constant drain on our limited resources and so limit mission and potential growth in other areas. We should seek to close a good number of rural churches
D1.B1	Incumbent's view		
	Lay – no choice made	Lay – no choice made	Lay – no choice made
	Incumbent's additional comment: The buildings truly are a vision and a hope for these rural churches.		
D1.B2		Incumbent's view	
		Lay Rep's view	
D2.B3	Incumbent's view		
	Lay Rep's view		
	Incumbent's additional comment: I wouldn't actually agree with the statement above but it is the closest to what I feel), I would say: Church buildings are a focal point for ministry and mission but we need to consider sustainability in the long term, and keep an open mind as to the best way to serve our local communities. Lay Rep's additional comment: Each of our churches is integral to its own community, even if actual congregations are small. I would say most people in each would not want to see the church close. The history they hold is a very important part of the whole.		
D2.B4		Incumbent's view	
	Incumbent's additional comment: It's difficult to have sensible business-like thoughts about ancient church buildings because the Diocesan approach is that 'we don't want to close any church buildings because they become our liability'. I have tried to have a serious conversation with the hierarchy – but until something breaks down, there is no incentive to address the looming problem. I have even filled in CBC forms about the closure of three churches and submitted them some years ago to the diocese – no response whatsoever. It's in the 'too difficult to handle' box.		
D3.B5	Incumbent's view		
		Lay Rep's view	
	Incumbent's additional comment: Our church buildings are one of the focuses of community in our villages. They vary in how accommodating the building is to community use, some have been modified to improve community use. When there is a good village hall it is difficult to justify significant modification to the church for community use as the community already has adequate		

	<p>facilities.</p> <p>Most people have an association with their parish church and if a church was closed few would attend worship elsewhere. We see this in the small number of people who attend worship from the village whose church was shut in the 1990's and the few people who attend benefice services or who travel to attend worship elsewhere.</p>		
D3.B6		Incumbent's view	
		Lay Rep's view	
	<p>Incumbent: Several may be good candidates for festival church status, but this doesn't solve the major challenges of paying parish share, finding officers, etc. There is very limited scope for re-ordering with a view for more community use without setting the church up in competition with village halls, only 4 churches serve villages with no village hall.</p> <p>Closing churches is not the real answer, instead we need a radically different model for funding, maintaining and overseeing the maintenance of these buildings. It needs urgent and concerted action from the church nationally in dialogue with government, bodies, tourism and others who currently benefit from the existence of this major element of our historic, architectural assets without contributing any meaningful level of finance to them, while also safeguarding the principal of these being places of worship, not museums, frozen in time and divorced from their ancient purposes as both sacred places and places for the benefit and use of the whole local population.</p> <p>Lay Rep : Church buildings are a focal point for ministry and mission but we have too many to sustain. We need an agreed plan to close rural churches where a surfeit exists. Now is the time to do this , not 'soon'.</p>		

Table 12: Governance

At present none of the Benefices are working towards the establishment of a Joint Council.

Data	Each church has PCC	Team Council responsible for Benefice activity only	Further comment and particularly about option of forming a Joint Council.
D1.B1	Yes	Yes	Not considering JC because "there is historic allegiance to their own church".
	Yes	Yes	There is one example of this being set up in [the diocese]. I would like to see how that progresses and what the learning points are. I can see positives but I can also see that all members would need to adopt the same principles of generous giving, lay worship, stream lined bank accounts etc and each of these would need a great deal of consideration, time for reflection and prayer.
D1.B2	Yes	No	We have quarterly Church Warden meetings. We did try Quarterly CW and joint PCC meeting followed by individual PCC meetings but there wasn't enough buy in to make it work effectively. [...]Some PCC members came to joint PCC meetings and they would then hold their own PCC on a different night thus increasing meetings rather than decreasing.
	Yes	No	Current structure is historic (what we are used to) and financial (and there is a reluctance to share financial resources with other parishes.

			Would like to work towards JC “because it makes practical sense – particularly in the light of the difficulty in filling PCC posts.”
D2.B3	Yes	No	<p>We have for many years had a Churchwardens and clergy benefice meeting, which makes many of the decisions for mission and ministry and sharing ideas and wisdom. In the last year , we are trialling a new pattern which includes 2 joint PCC meetings a year (all five PCCs together) where we focus on Benefice wide themes – mission, ministry etc and then interim ‘local PCC meetings’ which focus on buildings, finance and local events.</p> <p>At the moment I think the very different identities of the churches and parishes across the Benefice would make one joint council a difficult proposition to fulfil, but as we progress without current joint meetings it’s something that may become more of a possibility.</p>
D2.B4	Yes	Yes	There is no real buy-in to ‘The Team’ by lay people; so, this is the line of least resistance. In time, as we find there are fewer officers/PCC members we may need, of necessity to move in this direction.
D3.B5	Yes	Yes	<p>People are concerned to protect their church building and so want to retain control.</p> <p>There are not natural ties with the other churches. No looking at JC as volunteers are prepared to support their local church but not take on wider responsibility. The alternative would be to employ an administrator which proves unaffordable.</p> <p>A reluctance to change and preference for local ownership. There are not natural ties with the other churches, all of which are come distance away. Volunteers are prepared to support their local church but not take on wider responsibility. The alternative would be to employ an administrator which proves unaffordable.</p>
D3.B6	Yes	Yes	<p>Would like to work toward Joint Council model.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Current Team Council does not have corporate body status whereas a Joint Council would and can offer more protection to those in involved in the administration of central finances and contract, and greater transparency and accountability between a central body and individual PCCs. 2. It would replace the Team Council as the central strategic and administrative point and the process of exploring and shaping the scheme would, I hope, help to encourage wider participation in the central body. 3. Depending on which functions are delegated to a Joint Council, it can relieve PCCs of some administrative burdens, and less duplication of effort.
	Yes	Yes	It is perceived to work and an innate reluctance to change in case of finding something worse.

Table 13: Mission activities – individual church and benefice-wide

C= Clergy led. L= Lay led. J= Jointly led by clergy and lay

Data	Individual church mission activities	Benefice Wide mission activities
D1.B1	Work with schools (weekly - J) Lunch Club (Quarterly - J) All have annual events – e.g. flower shows	Nil
D1.B2	Toddlers (weekly L) Work with schools (weekly J) Work with care homes (weekly C) Lunch club (at least monthly L) Alpha (J)	Work with schools (weekly J)
D2.B3	Work with schools (weekly J)	We run a number of Warm bases (4 across the benefice). Although they are parish based, they are all available for the whole benefice and seen as our collective offer.
D2.B4	Youth Group (weekly J) Work with care homes (weekly/monthly) J Eco work (monthly/quarterly) J Messy Church Forest Church Café Church	
D3.B5	Work with schools (monthly C) Lunch club (weekly L)	Work with schools (monthly L) Work with care homes (monthly J)
D3.B6	Work with schools (weekly - L) Eco Work (at least monthly – L)	Youth group (at least monthly L) Work with schools (weekly C) Work with care homes (monthly L) Eco Work (at least monthly L) Alpha (C) FEx Men’s Lunch (3pa C) Men’s breakfast (Quarterly L)

Table 14: Training and support for Incumbents

Data	What specific training have you had for running a large benefice?	Do you network with others leading large benefices?	What other support mechanisms do you have that specifically help you in the leadership of a large benefice?
D1.B1	Curacy and previous experience elsewhere in a lay capacity	Yes	We work here as a team, clergy and laity
D1.B2	Was part of a large benefice in curacy	Only in Chapter	I have found a mentor who led a large benefice for 10+ years who is extremely supportive
D2.B3	I have enjoyed lots of leadership training which I have been able to use within this context, but I am not sure if I have had much	Yes – all the Deanery is rural multi-parish and the Diocese is good at making connections too.	

	specifically focussed training.		
D2.B4	None	Occasionally	-
D3.B5	None that I can remember	Via Deanery Chapter	-
D3.B6	CPAS Thrive programme as part of a previous appointment (further details redacted)	The Deanery Chapter and occasionally further afield through my personal networks	There is very little available across the board specifically aimed at leadership in large benefices. Some CPAS webinars are relevant. Regular sessions with a reflective practice group and one to one meetings with a work mentor/coach provide a safe space but this is not unique or specifically tailored to leading a large benefice.

Table 15: Training and support for Lay Representatives

Data	What specific training or experience have you had to support you in lay leadership of a large benefice?	Do you network with others leading large benefices?	What other support mechanisms do you have that specifically help you in the leadership of a large benefice?
D1.B1	Safeguarding, lay worship training, many many meetings at our diocese.	Not formally.	My husband, the PCC, the cricket club, the Benefice Team.
D1.B2	Churchwarden role	No	Diocesan meetings
D2.B3	Support from our clergy team, others in similar roles locally, Churchwarden courses. Diocesan support for individual teams.	Not in any regular of formal sense.	-
D2.B4	Not Provided	Not Provided	Not Provided
D3.B5	Church warden training events are provided on a regular basis by the Ads.	Yes, through my role as PSO and Church warden	Team Council and Diocesan resources at Church House.
D3.B6	None	We meet from time to time and discuss mutual problems. I am unsure this could be described as networking	None

Table 16: Priorities identified for future Lay Training

Data	Incumbent	Lay Representative
D1.B1	Discipleship Leading worship	Discipleship Deeper understanding of Christian belief
D1.B2	Discipleship Leading worship	Leading worship Deeper understanding of Christian belief
D2.B3	Leading worship Governance	Leading worship Governance
D2.B4	Not Provided	Not Provided
D3.B5	Lay Pastoral Assistant Training	Leading worship Deeper understanding of Christian belief
D3.B6	Leading worship Deeper understanding of Christian belief	Deeper understanding of Christian belief Discipleship

Table 17: The Treasure of your benefice

	Incumbent	Lay Representative
D1.B1	The people	The people and their love of God
D1.B2	There is a real energy by a core group to serve God in our communities and not 'Parish' tied. This is really encouraging.	Worshipping together as part of a wider community
D2.B3	The diverse communities we are called to love.	Living together as friends and neighbours and our wonderful church buildings.
D2.B4	Not Provided	Not Provided
D3.B5	Our growing work with schools.	Like-minded people working together to keep our rural churches open for the benefit of the local community.

Table 18: The one thing that would most support your work in the MCB

	Incumbent	Lay Representative
D1.B1	We are looking forward to bringing the benefice to its full potential, there is huge talent here waiting to be tapped.	(Redacted)
D1.B2	Better central support from the Diocese, for governance, policies and human resources support as we have become employers with a diminishing staff team so support with Employment law/contracts/ maternity pay.	We need to attract more young parents into a deeper involvement without churches; most cite the pressures of already balancing too many conflicting interests.
D2.B3	Simplified governance structures. It would also be great if there was a church maintenance project that we could sign up to and pay for. So that a central team could keep the buildings in good shape and we could focus on maximising our missional potential	Having a second churchwarden to work alongside.

	(with the buildings and the communities).	
D2.B4		
D3.B5	It would be really useful to have training for clergy and parish administrators about how parish administrators could work. I don't know of any parish administrator who has had specific training in parish administration and I don't know of clergy who have had similar training. I'm certain that administrators and clergy could work much better together if we had the opportunity of some training. Just getting together and sharing what we do and how would be very useful. Such meetings might even lead to devising a course in parish administration?!	The reduction in administrative burdens.
D3.B6	Able, motivated and mature Christians to step into gaps, in any and every aspect of church life and mission who are averse to going beyond comfort zones.	The statement and proven commitment by senior church leaders that they were willing to rationalize the structure of rural parishes. This involves giving them the attention they deserve with clergy and appropriate funding to take them into the 21 st century.

Appendix 2: Incumbent Questionnaire

Benefice:	
Role Title:	
Length of time in post:	
Diocese:	

Preliminaries

I confirm that I have read and noted the SCTEI policy on Research Ethics and am willing to sign the participant consent form and attach this. Y/N

Section 1: The benefice and how it functions

Q1. How long has the benefice been established in its current form?

Q2. What is the official name of the benefice?

Q3. How many open churches are there in the benefice?

Q4. Does the benefice have one or more churches which is/are larger and can act as a resource for the rest of the benefice? Y/N

Q5. Are any of the churches now deemed to be Festival Churches? Y/N If so, - how many?

Q6. Are there any churches within the benefice boundaries that are now closed and no longer used for worship and therefore not included in Q2? Y/N How many?

Q7. How many churches in the benefice would broadly identify as being within each of the following traditions?

Conservative Evangelical

Open Evangelical

Charismatic

Central

Liberal Catholic

Traditionalist Catholic

Q8. In 2023 Lawson did further work on 'Fragile Churches' and found that there were now six markers which defined the fragility of a church. These were:

- Financial pressure on the church and congregational anxiety about dwindling resources.
- An actual or feared inability to replace churchwardens and other officers or volunteers.
- The relentless nature of keeping going, that saps energy and thwarts new initiatives.
- A lack of critical mass of children and volunteers to work with them.
- Congregations of a dozen or less people, with an increasing age profile.
- The demands of maintaining historic buildings

Q8a. Are there any churches in the benefice which would meet all these criteria? Y/N. If so, how many?

Q8b. Any further comment about the context of any fragile churches in the benefice?

Q9. Does the benefice employ any of the following support roles?

Admin staff Y/N Approximate hours per week

Youth worker Y/N Approximate hours per week

Cleaner Y/N Approximate hours per week

ANO Please specify post and approximate hours per week.

Q10a. In your opinion, which of the following statements would most accurately describe the way in which most of the laity in the congregations of the benefice view the benefice? (Please highlight):

- a. It is a way of sharing clergy.
- b. It is a way of keeping our church going.
- c. We are beginning to work together more closely but it is sometimes hard work.
- d. It is a missional partnership which enables us to work together to serve the area.
- e. It is a mission partnership, and we make prayerful decisions about the focus of work. We put this work above the needs of our individual churches.

10b. Which of the above views is closest to your own assessment of the current reality of the benefice?

10c. Which of the above views is closest to your wish for the benefice?

10d. Any further comment?

Q11. Which of the two following terms would most regular church congregation members use to describe the benefice?

‘The benefice’

‘Our benefice’

Q12. Which of the two following terms would the majority the ministry team use to describe the benefice?

‘The benefice’

‘Our benefice’

Q13a. Which statement most accurately describes the way in which governance takes place across the benefice? (Please highlight.)

Each church has its own PPC.

There is a Team Council with responsibility for Benefice activity only.

PPCs remain entirely responsible for their own church property, rights, liabilities, and functions.

We have taken advantage or are in the process of taking advantage of recent changes in Church Representation Rules to establish a Joint Council which will transfer all properties, rights, liabilities, and functions of individual PCCs to a Joint Council and it will do everything.

We have taken advantage or are in the process of taking advantage of recent changes in Church Representation Rules to establish a Joint Council and will transfer certain property, rights, liabilities, and functions - as specified in the scheme - of the individual PCCs to the joint council.

Q13b. What is the main reason for the governance structure you have?

Q13c. If all the churches have PPCs, what is your practice as incumbent on attending meetings?

Q13d. If the benefice does not have a Joint Council, is this something that you would like to work towards? Y/N Why? Why not?

Q14. Does the benefice have a 'strapline' to describe itself? If so, please add it here.

Q15a. Does the benefice have a more detailed and agreed vision/ identity/action plan document which helps to define the purpose of the benefice? Y/N. If yes, please could you attach this when replying or include it here.

Q15b. Please describe briefly how this vision/identity/action plan came into being and over what period.

Q15c. Was the vision/identity/action plan influenced by diocesan or deanery priorities? Y/N. If yes, in what way?

Q15d. Was there a specific theology or ecclesiology which influenced the vision? (E.g., Theology of Place, Eco-theology, Mixed Ecology, Save the Parish etc).

Q.15e. If you do not have a more detailed vision/identity/action plan for the benefice, what are the reasons for this?

Q16a. If the benefice has a more detailed vision/identity/action plan how is this used? Please highlight all that are applicable from the following:
(*'Regularly' means at least 3 times per year)

The vision/identity/plan helps us to agree priorities in the benefice.

The vision/identity/plan helps PPCs to see a bigger picture.

It is regularly* referred to in worship in our churches.

It is regularly* referred to in benefice team or council meetings.

It is regularly* referred to in individual church PCC meetings.

We review it annually in a benefice team or council meeting.

We review it annually in all the individual church PPCs.

We do not refer to it in worship in our churches.

We do not refer to it in benefice team or council business meetings.

We do not refer to it in individual church PCC meetings.

Q16b. Please share any key examples of the kind of issues the vision/identity/action plan has helped you to address (e.g., deployment of clergy, governance, use of buildings, mission activities).

Q17. What would you say is the one thing that makes it hardest to work together as a benefice?

Q18. What would you say is the one thing that makes it easy to work together as a benefice?

Section 2: Worship across the benefice

2a. Pattern of acts of worship

Q1. How many of the churches offer at least one act of worship every Sunday?

Q2. How many of the churches (not including those above) offer at least two acts of Sunday worship per month?

Q3. How many of the churches (not including those above) offer one act of Sunday worship per month?

Q4. How many of the churches (not including those above) offer 6 or more acts of Sunday worship over the year?

Q5. Do you offer access to weekly online worship in the benefice?

2b. Forms of worship offered across the benefice.

Q1. What forms of worship are offered across the churches in the Benefice?

BCP matins - none/weekly/at least monthly/quarterly

BCP evensong - none/weekly/at least monthly/quarterly

BCP Holy Communion – none/weekly/at least monthly/quarterly

CW Morning Prayer - none/weekly/at least monthly/quarterly

CW Evening Prayer - none/weekly/at least monthly/quarterly

CW Holy Communion - none/weekly/at least monthly/quarterly

All age worship/informal family worship -none/ weekly/ at least monthly/quarterly

Breakfast church – none/weekly/ at least monthly/quarterly

Café church – none/weekly/ at least monthly/quarterly

Forest/Eco church – none/ weekly/ at least monthly/quarterly

Reflective/contemplative – none/weekly/at least monthly

Other – please specify.

Are there any churches which only offer BCP services? Y/N How Many?

Q2. Roughly, what is the age profile of people attending Sunday worship across the benefice?

0-11yrs	12-18 yrs	19-24 yrs	25-34yrs	35-44yrs	45-64 yrs	65-79 yrs	80+yrs
%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%

2c. Benefice worship

Q1. Do you ever worship together as a whole benefice? Y/N

- Q2. If so, how often does this take place?
- Q3. What is the usual format of benefice services?
- Q4. Are all the churches in the benefice usually represented at joint acts of worship? Y/N
- Q5. Roughly, what proportion of overall regular attendees at individual churches in the benefice will attend benefice services?
- Less than 25%
 - Between 25% and 50%
 - More than 50%
 - More than 75%
- Q6. What might explain this attendance level?

2d. Pastoral Services

- Q1. Roughly how many funerals take place each year across the benefice?
- Q2. Roughly, how many baptisms take place each year across the benefice?
- Q3. Roughly, how many weddings/ blessings take place each year across the benefice?

2e. Those who lead worship in the benefice

- Q1. Besides yourself, how many of the following do you have in the team leading worship regularly in the benefice?

Stipendiary Associate Priest

Associate Priest (SSM)

Retired Priest

Stipendiary Curate

Curate (SSM)

Pioneer Minister

Youth Worker

LLM

Focal Minister

Trained Lay people (e.g., short diocese/benefice course) regularly leading whole services.

Lay people regularly leading whole services

Q2. Which of the following statements would best describe the sustainability of this worship leadership pattern?

Very sustainable for the next 5 years

Likely to be sustainable for 3 years.

Likely to decline over the next 3 years.

Likely to decline over next year.

Very vulnerable to decline at any point.

Section 3: Church buildings and their use in the benefice

Q1a. How many of the church buildings have Grade 1 listed status?

Q1b. How many of the church buildings have Grade 2 listed status?

Q2. Are any of the church buildings used for specific wider community use? Please select options:

Community shop

Community foodbank

Community café

Community lunch club

Regular venue for concerts

Other regular community booking: Please add details.

Q3. Do you currently use any other venues in the area for worship in preference to the church buildings? Y/N

If so, which?

Local school

Pub

Homes

Other – please specify.

Q4a. Which of the following statements most accurately describes your current view of the church buildings in your benefice (please highlight):

Church buildings are a focal point for ministry and mission, and we must endeavour to keep all of them open at all costs.

Church buildings are a focal point for ministry and mission, but we have too many to sustain and must make decisions soon about which buildings to keep open.

Church buildings are a constant drain on our limited resources and so limit mission and potential growth in other areas. We should seek to close a good number of rural churches.

Q4b. Any further comment?

Section 4: Mission in the benefice more broadly (i.e., beyond worship)

Q1. Please highlight which of the following activities are offered and run by individual churches in benefice?

Toddlers – weekly/monthly/quarterly	Lay led/Clergy led/Joint
Youth group – weekly/monthly/quarterly	Lay led/Clergy led/Joint
Work with schools - weekly/monthly/quarterly.	Lay led/Clergy led/Joint
Work with care homes- weekly/monthly/quarterly	Lay led/Clergy led/Joint
Eco work - weekly/ at least monthly/quarterly	Lay led/Clergy led/Joint
Lunch club - – weekly/ at least monthly/quarterly	Lay led/Clergy led/Joint
Warm base – weekly/ at least monthly/quarterly	Lay led/Clergy led/Joint
Alpha or similar course	Lay led/Clergy led/Joint

Fresh Expression (i.e., a form of church established primarily for the benefit of people who are not yet members of any church) - weekly/monthly/quarterly. Lay led/Clergy led/Joint.

ANO - please briefly describe.

Q2. Please highlight which of the following are offered by **the benefice as a whole** and is run by people from across the benefice working together?

Toddlers – weekly/monthly/quarterly Lay led/Clergy led/Joint

Youth group – weekly/monthly/quarterly Lay led/Clergy led/Joint

Work with schools - weekly/monthly/quarterly Lay led/Clergy led/Joint

Work with care homes- weekly/monthly/quarterly. Lay led/Clergy led/Joint

Eco work - weekly/ at least monthly/quarterly Lay led/Clergy led/Joint

Lunch club - – weekly/ at least monthly/quarterly Lay led/Clergy led/Joint

Warm base – weekly/ at least monthly/quarterly Lay led/Clergy led/Joint

Alpha or similar course Lay led/Clergy led/Joint

Fresh Expression (i.e., a form of church established primarily for the benefit of people who are not yet members of any church) - weekly/monthly/quarterly Lay led/Clergy led/Joint

ANO - please briefly describe.

Q3. It maybe that your benefice chooses to partner with other agencies or churches of other denominations in missional priorities in the local area, rather than doing things alone. If so, which other community partnerships do you have?

Q4. In your opinion, are there any of the above missional activities which would be better run and resourced at deanery or diocesan level. If so, what?

Section 5: Your training and support

Q1. What specific training have you had for running a large benefice?

Q2. Do you network with others leading large benefices?

Q3. What other support mechanisms do you have that specifically help you in the leadership of a large benefice?

Section 6: Training for Laity

Q1. Which of the following would be your main priorities for lay training order to support collaborative ministry in the next two years? Please select two.

Discipleship

Faith sharing

Leading worship

Governance

Deeper understanding of Christian belief

Other - please specify:

Section 7: Final Questions

Q1. What for you is the 'treasure' of your benefice?

Q2. What, for you, is the one thing that, if it happened, would support your leadership of a large rural multi church benefice the most?

Q3. Is there anything else you would like to add:

Thank you so much for your time in completing this survey. Please email the completed survey, together with the signed participant consent form and any vision/purpose statement/action plan if not included in the survey text to: Sharon Roberts (Email Redacted).

Appendix 3: Lay Representative Questionnaire
(A lay person in a significant role in the benefice but not a member of the ministry team)

Benefice:	
Role Title:	
Length of time in post:	
Diocese:	

Please note that, as well as answering the questions below, incumbents have been asked to provide information about the history of the benefice, service patterns, those involved in leading worship and mission opportunities. This questionnaire is therefore shorter than the incumbents' questionnaire as it is not necessary to provide the same information again.

Preliminaries

I confirm that I have read and noted the SCTEI policy on Research Ethics and am willing to sign the participant consent form and attach this. Y/N

Section 1: The benefice and how it functions

Q1a. In your opinion, which of the following statements would most accurately describe the way in which most of the laity in the congregations of the benefice view the benefice?

Please highlight.

- a. It is a way of sharing clergy.
- b. It is a way of keeping our church going.
- c. We are beginning to work together more closely but it is sometimes hard work.
- d. It is a missional partnership which enables us to work together to serve the area.
- e. It is a mission partnership, and we make prayerful decisions about the focus of work. We put this work above the needs of our individual churches.

1b. Which of the above views is closest to your own assessment of the current reality of the benefice?

1c. Which of the above views is closest to your wish for the benefice?

1d. Any further comment?

Q2. Which of the two following terms would most regular church congregation members use to describe the benefice?

‘The benefice’

‘Our benefice’

Q3. Which of the two following terms would the majority the ministry team use to describe the benefice?

‘The benefice’

‘Our benefice’

Q4a. Which statement most accurately describes the way in which governance takes place across the benefice.

Each church has its own PPC.

There is a Team Council with responsibility for Benefice activity only. PPCs remain entirely responsible for their own church property, rights, liabilities, and functions.

We have taken advantage or are in the process of taking advantage of recent changes in Church Representation Rules to establish a Joint Council which will transfer all properties, rights’ liabilities, and functions of individual PCCs to a Joint Council and it will do everything.

We have taken advantage or are in the process of taking advantage of recent changes in Church Representation Rules to establish a Joint Council and will transfer certain property, rights liabilities, and functions - as specified in the scheme - of the individual PCCs to the Joint Council.

Q4b. What is the main reason for the governance structure you have?

Q4c. If the benefice does not have a Joint Council, is this something that you would like to work towards? Y/N? Why? Why not?

Q5. Does the benefice have a 'strapline' to describe itself? If so, please add it here.

Q6a. Does the benefice have a more detailed and agreed vision/identity/action plan document which helps to define the identity and purpose of the benefice? Y/N. If so, please could you attach this when replying or include it here.

Q6b. Please describe briefly how this vision/identity/action plan came into being and over what period.

Q6c. Was the vision/identity/action plan influenced by Diocesan or Deanery priorities? Y/N. If yes, in what way?

Q6d. If you do not have a more detailed vision/identity/action plan for the benefice, what are the reasons for this?

Q7. If the benefice has a more detailed vision/identity/action plan, how is this used? Please highlight all that are applicable from the following:
(*'Regularly' means at least 3 times per year)

The vision/identity/plan helps us to agree priorities in the benefice.

The vision/identity/plan helps PPCs to see a bigger picture.

It is regularly* referred to in worship in our churches.

It is regularly* referred to in Benefice Team or Council meetings.

It is regularly* referred to in individual church PCC meetings.

We review it annually in a Benefice Team or Council meeting.

We review it annually in all the individual church PPCs.

We do not refer to it in worship in our churches.

We do not refer to it in Benefice Team or Council business meetings.

We do not refer to it in individual church PCC meetings.

Q7b. Please share any key examples of the kind of issues the vision/identity/action plan has helped you to address (e.g., deployment of clergy, governance, use of buildings, mission activities).

Q8. In 2023 Lawson did further work on 'Fragile Churches' and found that there were now six markers which defined the fragility of a church. These were:

- Financial pressure on the church and congregational anxiety about dwindling resources.
- An actual or feared inability to replace churchwardens and other officers or volunteers.
- The relentless nature of keeping going, that saps energy and thwarts new initiatives.
- A lack of critical mass of children and volunteers to work with them.
- Congregations of a dozen or less people, with an increasing age profile.
- The demands of maintaining historic buildings.

Q8a. Are there any churches in the benefice which would meet all these criteria? Y/N. If so, how many?

Q8b Any further comment about the context of any fragile churches in the benefice?

Q9a. What would you say is the one thing that makes it hardest to work together as a benefice?

Q9b. What would you say is the one thing that makes it easy to work together as a benefice?

Q10a. Which of the following statements would best describe the sustainability of the current pattern of services of worship in churches across benefice?

Very sustainable for the next 5 years

Likely to be sustainable for 3 years.

Likely to decline over the next 3 years.

Likely to decline over next year.

Very vulnerable to decline at any point.

Q10b. Any further comment:

Q11a. If you hold regular benefice services, roughly what proportion of regular attendees at individual churches will attend a benefice service?

Less than 25%

Between 25% and 50%

More than 50%

More than 75%

Q11b. What might explain this attendance level?

Q12. Which of the following statements most accurately describes your current view of the church buildings in your benefice:

Church buildings are a focal point for ministry and mission, and we must endeavour to keep all of them open at all costs.

Church buildings are a focal point for ministry and mission, but we have too many to sustain and must make decisions soon about which buildings to keep open.

Church buildings are a constant drain on our limited resources and so limit mission and potential growth in other areas. We should seek to close a good number of rural churches.

Q12b. Any further comment:

Section 2: Mission in the benefice more broadly (i.e., beyond worship)

Q1. Please highlight which of the following are offered by **the benefice as a whole** and is run by people from **across the benefice working together?**

Toddlers – weekly/monthly/quarterly.

Youth group – weekly/monthly/quarterly.

Work with schools - weekly/monthly/quarterly.

Work with care homes- weekly/monthly/quarterly.

Eco work - weekly/ at least monthly/quarterly.

Lunch club - – weekly/ at least monthly/quarterly Lay led/Clergy led/Joint

Warm base – weekly/ at least monthly/quarterly Lay led/Clergy led/Joint

Fresh Expression (i.e., a form of church established primarily for the benefit of people who are not yet members of any church) - weekly/monthly/quarterly.

ANO- please briefly describe.

Q2. It maybe that your benefice chooses to partner with other agencies or churches of other denominations in missional priorities in the local area, rather than doing things alone. If so, which other community partnerships do you have?

Q3. In your opinion, are there any of the above missional activities which would be better run and resourced at Diocesan or Deanery Level. If so, what?

Section 3: Your training and support

Q1. What specific training or experience have you had to support you in lay leadership of a large benefice?

Q2. Do you network with others leading large benefices?

Q3. What other support mechanisms do you have that specifically help you in the leadership of a large benefice?

Section 4: Training for Laity

Q1. Which of the following would be your main priorities for lay training order to support collaborative ministry in the next two years? Please select two.

Discipleship

Faith sharing

Leading worship

Governance

Deeper understanding of Christian belief

Other - please specify:

Section 5: Final Questions

Q1. What for you is the 'treasure' of your benefice?

Q2. What, for you, is the one thing that, if it happened, would support your involvement in the leadership of a large rural multi church benefice the most?

Q3. Is there anything else you would like to add:

Thank you so much for your time in completing this survey. Please email the completed survey, together with the signed participant consent form and any vision/purpose statement/action plan if not included in the survey text to:

Sharon Roberts [Email Redacted]

