

**Gin Church – a case study in sustainable church growth in the  
Beaminster Area Team.**

**Jo Neary**

**Sarum College**

**MA Dissertation in Theology, Ministry and Mission**

**May 2025**

## Abstract

The Church of England is declining. Decline provokes anxiety about fragile churches, stretched resources, declining clergy numbers and care of buildings. The Church of England Vision and Strategy response focuses heavily on new disciples and an increase in financial giving. Yet voices criticise this solely economic model of growth.

This investigation uses a mixed methods single case study of Gin Church, a rural fresh expression within a mixed ecology of church, to explore whether church growth can be sustainable and how a biblical framework might be used to identify and celebrate church growth.

The study begins with the Beaminster Team experience, considers alternative models of church growth in recent literature, reflects on a Kingdom parable-based framework from Matthew 13 and hears personal stories of growth from Gin Church. In conclusion sustainable church growth is defined more widely than people and money and an alternative narrative framework of measurement is suggested.

150 words

## Contents

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Chapter 1 – The soil of the Beaminster Team and the mixed ecology we inhabit .....</b>	<b>10</b>
1.1 <i>Mixed ecology .....</i>	<i>10</i>
1.2 <i>The Beaminster Team experiment.....</i>	<i>12</i>
1.3 <i>The efficacy of mixed ecology .....</i>	<i>15</i>
1.4 <i>A fragile church .....</i>	<i>18</i>
<b>Chapter 2 Gin Church and the wider narrative of Church growth.....</b>	<b>21</b>
2.1 <i>Something new .....</i>	<i>21</i>
2.2 <i>The recipe.....</i>	<i>22</i>
2.3 <i>A reflection on church growth literature.....</i>	<i>26</i>
2.4 <i>The fragile and declining church .....</i>	<i>28</i>
2.5 <i>Growth and money.....</i>	<i>30</i>
2.6 <i>The God who walks slowly .....</i>	<i>31</i>
2.7 <i>Being Interrupted .....</i>	<i>32</i>
2.8 <i>Rewilding the Church .....</i>	<i>33</i>
2.9 <i>The Once and Future Parish .....</i>	<i>34</i>
<b>Chapter 3 Methodology – providing the framework .....</b>	<b>36</b>
3.1 <i>A mixed method case study.....</i>	<i>36</i>
3.2 <i>A hermeneutic of suspicion .....</i>	<i>37</i>
3.3 <i>Shaping questions .....</i>	<i>37</i>
3.4 <i>Asking the questions .....</i>	<i>38</i>
3.5 <i>Telling a story I am part of .....</i>	<i>42</i>
3.6 <i>Being curious.....</i>	<i>43</i>
3.7 <i>Changed for good.....</i>	<i>44</i>
<b>Chapter 4 A biblical framework for church growth. ....</b>	<b>46</b>
4.1 <i>Finding a different lens.....</i>	<i>46</i>
4.2 <i>Parables of growth.....</i>	<i>46</i>
4.3 <i>A model of equality and inclusion .....</i>	<i>47</i>
4.4 <i>Expansion .....</i>	<i>47</i>

4.5 Sustainability.....	48
4.6 Transformation .....	48
4.7 An alternative framework.....	49
<b>Chapter 5 – The Kingdom of heaven is like Gin Church?.....</b>	<b>51</b>
5.1 “Easier to click a Zoom link than walk through a church door” (Alice) .....	51
5.2 Numbers.....	52
5.3 “Once a flood” (Eva).....	53
5.4 “Like minded women” (Della) .....	55
5.5 Come and make nests in its branches (Mt 13:32) – belonging and being welcome.....	56
5.6 “Too much Gin, not enough church?” (Charlotte) .....	58
5.7 “There’s more to do in serving the community” (Freya) .....	59
5.8 “I’m learning” (Freya).....	61
5.9 “Yeast that a woman took and mixed in .....until all of it was leavened” Mt 13:33 .....	62
5.10 “Their faith has grown” (Freya) .....	62
5.11 “I come away like I have had a foot spa” (Becky) .....	64
5.12 “I do miss Eucharist.” (Freya) .....	65
5.13 “But when it has grown” (Mt 13:32).....	65
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>67</b>
<b>Bibliography.....</b>	<b>71</b>

## **Gin Church – a case study in sustainable church growth in the Beaminster Area Team.**

### **Introduction**

“The Church of England growth agenda is based on plantation economics, growing the Church one lash at a time” (Turner, Sarum College, 2024).

It was a chance comment at the end of a seminar on *‘Reparations, Slavery and Contested Legacies’*, with Reverend Doctor Carlton Turner on Zoom in January 2024 which sparked something I couldn’t let go of. We were discussing dissertation topics and particularly my desire to write about rural church growth. Turner spoke into the church growth subject with a challenge about how we measure church growth. He suggested an economic model of church growth is an “imperialist expansion, British Empire view”. Instead, he suggested a model for church growth should be Kingdom based. He offered a view of church growth based on right relationships with each other and with God, a church growth view that is about the ‘lion lying down with the lamb’ (Turner, Sarum College, 2024).

Since 2012 I have been working as a Team Vicar in a multi parish rural team in West Dorset. My role has a pioneer focus creating a mixed ecology of church in our rural parishes. Through our focus on mission, we have naturally become open to the measurements of growth as we sought to tell God’s story and help people discover God and faith.

I believe that God grows God's church. God brings people to faith. I have long suspected that numbers are too limited and too threatening a measurement. Numbers can't describe engagement in discipleship, depth of faith, curiosity, the impact of faith, the way we work with our communities. A church community may not have grown, but it might be having a sizeable impact in the wider community. A church may grow but giving may not increase, because of the socio-economic context in which it grows. If you are only ever looking for increase in attendance and associated financial giving then when those metrics are not met, leaders and church communities are considered failures. This perception of failure can lead to stress, burnout, breakdown, disillusionment and fragility.

Growth is our desire in the Beaminster Team. But from the outset we were clear that growth was not defined solely by Sunday attendance. Our definition of growth was widening the offer of the Beaminster Team so that more people could discover something of God. This meant doing more things and doing different things. It meant listening to our communities and responding to need. It meant going to be with people rather than expecting them to come to us.

Certain phrases resonated for us. Firstly "seeing what God is doing and joining in" as suggested in the theology of *Missio Dei* underpinning Mission shaped Church (Mission Shaped Church, 2004, Chapter 5). Secondly, 'telling God's story' – the language of testimony and witness and participation in the Kingdom of God as exemplified in Eucharistic Prayer D in Common Worship (Archbishop's Council, 2000, p.194). Both concepts underpin our theology of church growth.

Adopting a hermeneutic of suspicion about an economic model of church growth frames this dissertation. Through a mixed methods single case study involving interviews, ethnographic and autoethnographic reflection, this dissertation explores a potential alternative model for sustainable church growth that counteracts the capitalist economic model.

I look to reject a solely numeric, economic growth model and search in current literature for alternative models of framing church growth. I seek to discern, through a case study on Gin Church, a rural fresh expression, whether there might be a more sustainable growth model for rural churches than just counting numbers. A reflection on Kingdom parables in Matthew 13 provides a tentative alternative framework to recognise and name growth. Through pastoral ethnography I hear the story of Gin Church and seek to discern how and what growth has taken place. Through description, narrative, and a “careful process of observation, interpretation and analysis” (Swinton and Mowat, 2006, p.170), I suggest a different way of evaluating growth through a Kingdom parable model of mustard seed and yeast.

Chapter 1 outlines the history of our experiment in Beaminster and defines both mixed ecology and fresh expressions. It explores how diversity enables sustainability through a “parity of esteem” (Olsworth-Peter, 2024). The fragile church motif is outlined and the suggestion made that growth may not end fragility.

Chapter 2 gives the history of Gin Church which is the subject of the case study. An overview is shared of some of the recent literature around church growth, focusing predominantly on authors who offer an alternative view of growth beyond a purely economic model.

Chapter 3 explores the methodology of this dissertation. There is discussion of the broad definition of case study, the use of ethnography and methodology of the qualitative research. I reflect on how I have been changed and encouraged by the process.

Chapter 4 provides a brief reflection on two Kingdom parables from Matthew 13 and sets out how they might provide a framework for identifying and celebrating church growth through the expansive growth of the mustard seed and the transformation of leaven.

Chapter 5 revels in the stories of Gin Church, searching for the 'golden threads' and applying inductive analysis to reveal the "stars in the sky" that are the "theological themes and enduring beliefs" revealed in the story of Gin Church (Moschella, 2023, p.203). The biblical lens of expansion and transformation are also used as a way of highlighting meaning in the stories.



Finally, the golden threads are woven into an alternative narrative of sustainable church growth that focuses on telling stories and recognising growth that is both numeric and sustainable, life-transforming and life giving.

## **Chapter 1 – The soil of the Beaminster Team and the mixed ecology we inhabit**

### **1.1 Mixed ecology**

Since 2012 the Beaminster Team has been engaged in an experiment. We committed to supporting and upholding traditional church activities whilst actively seeking to do new things. Some of these new things are church, perhaps described as fresh expressions. Other new things have a social justice element or are about meeting community needs or offering social activities. We are modelling a mixed ecology.

The current Church of England Vision and Strategy is to grow younger and more diverse, where mixed ecology is the norm and to become a church of missionary disciples (churchofengland.org, 2025). According to the Fresh Expressions website, the term mixed ecology is used to describe how traditional parishes co-exist with fresh expressions, church plants and pioneer ministries (freshexpressions.org.uk, 2025).

Olsworth-Peter supports this vision, suggesting that for the church to grow it needs a mixed ecology, where different expressions of Church and missional activity are both valued. He emphasises that “by maintaining their distinctness and living in active relationship, they can benefit the mutual growth of the missional and ecclesial kingdom of God” (2024, p.1).

Jeremiah points out that the language of mixed ecology is important. He suggests that mixed ecology requires diversity and conservation, where no one species is preferred. “A healthy

ecosystem is built not on competition and success, but by ensuring the survival of all living organisms through the critical enhancement of interdependency.” (Jeremiah, 2021) The ecology metaphor, if taken seriously, enables sustainable church growth where the weak and the successful are valued equally. This view of mixed ecology; different, yet dependent, is what we have sought to live out over the past thirteen years.

In the Beaminster Team mixed ecology means continuing with the traditional Sunday congregations alongside developing fresh expressions. We celebrate difference yet try to help all people feel part of the body of Christ. In this dissertation I use the term fresh expression to mean “new forms of church that emerge within contemporary culture and engage primarily with those who don’t ‘go to church’” (freshexpressions.org.uk, 2025). Fresh expression is synonymous for me with the term new ecclesial community used by Moynagh.

When we talk about new things, including fresh expressions, in the Beaminster team it is shorthand for “worshipping God outside the traditional Sunday service model”. It is a generous definition which can encompass many different things. Croft describes how early in the Fresh Expressions journey it was important to wrestle with a definition that helped pinpoint the missional intent of Fresh Expressions. The definition evolved to explore the idea of discipleship and maturity in faith being an integral part of a Fresh Expression. Croft reflects the “goal is to create a context and community where mature disciples are formed and flourish” (Nelstrop and Percy, ed, 2008, p.11). We shared a similar desire in the Beaminster Team to help people come to know God, to grow in faith and to be a disciple in the place where they felt comfortable connecting and worshipping God.

Moynagh defines new ecclesial communities or fresh expressions as ones that are: missional, contextual, formational and ecclesial (2017, Introduction). Moynagh's framework is useful to distinguish between our activities that are new ecclesial communities, rather than community events, social gatherings or social action.

## **1.2 The Beaminster Team experiment**

The Beaminster Team is a team of rural churches in West Dorset, set inland from Bridport. Our largest community is Beaminster, a town by royal charter. It has a population of about 3000. According to the Church Urban Fund, Beaminster ranks "4804 out of 12239, where 1 is the most deprived parish. This means the parish is relatively deprived compared with other parishes in the country" (CUF, 2005). The total population of the team is around 7000 people. The team also contains fifteen villages, with 14 church buildings and one chapel on the estate at Mapperton. There are twelve PCCs, four Church of England primary schools, a secondary school, a special school and three preschools. Business is primarily retail, agriculture and tourism.

The Beaminster Team was formed in 1982, bringing together parishes that already worked in relationship with each other, with other stand-alone parishes, into a wider group. Forty years ago, there were up to six stipendiary posts associated with the team including three team vicars and curates alongside the Team Rector. The stipendiary allocation in 2025 is for two full time posts, although we currently function at just 1.5 full time equivalent.

The resignation of the Team Vicar in 2010 prompted a rethink led by the newly appointed Team Rector. Through prayer and discernment of a new vision and following discussion with the Bishop and Archdeacon it was decided to employ a pioneer priest as Team Vicar. The advert defined the role as high mission, low administration, allocating fifty percent of the time to pioneer ministry. The Pioneer Priest/Team Vicar was licensed April 2012. Through this appointment the team made a commitment to mixed ecology, maintaining the old and introducing new expressions of church.

We began with prayer, introducing a weekly “Café Prayer”, a time of prayer focusing exclusively on doing new things in the team. Everyone was welcome to come. Usually there were around a dozen of us. We spent time in silence listening to God, praying together and then reflecting on what we thought God was saying to us. We prayed like this for a year before setting up any new projects. This commitment to listening God originates not just in biblical teaching, Philippians 4:6 for example, but also in joining in God’s mission. Mission Shaped Church discusses the Trinitarian nature of mission, the essence in which the church is to be a missionary community and the invitation to join in with what God is doing. “In bringing the Kingdom, God is on the move and the Church is always catching up with him. We join his mission. We should not invite him to join ours” (Mission Shaped Church, 2004, p.86). To join in with God we needed to listen to and seek God in prayer.

We also prioritised teaching. We focused preaching on discipleship and set up training courses and small groups to explore fresh expressions. We encouraged people to share their story of faith, and this culminated in a vocations day asking the question “What are we

called to do?”. This vocation day enabled several people to train as lay worship leaders, lay pastoral assistants, join teams to plant fresh expressions and encouraged one vocation to ordained ministry.

In the history of our mixed ecology journey there have been different experiences of fresh expressions. They have been creative and focused on a particular group of people– like Messy Church or our church after school club, which were primarily expressions of church for families. They have been discussion based with a group of people with something in common – like Gin Church. They have used new technology like Gin Church or our online prayer community, or our YouTube worshipping community. Moynagh suggests that “ecclesial multiplication is fundamental to the church’s life.” (2017, Introduction). Creating new ecclesial communities in the Beaminster Team has helped more people discover God and take steps on the paths of discipleship. By doing new things new people have come. Sustainability comes through diversification.

A definition of maturity for our fresh expressions is recognising where they have become sacramental, where people are baptised, or share communion like in our 10.15@Salway Ash congregation. Our new ecclesial communities are formational, led by new and different people, not just clergy or licensed lay ministers. They are contextual, embedded in a place or a network. They can be for a season or can be sustained over many years. The heart of each fresh expressions is worship, prayer, discovering and exploring faith and discipleship. We have taken seriously their ecclesial identity (Moynagh, 2017, Introduction).

The fresh expressions become “‘insider communities’, emerging within contexts rather than expecting new believers to attend church outside the setting.” (Moynagh, 2017, Introduction). We value them as church, not as a training place for development into real church. Yet it isn’t always easy developing this “parity of esteem where different expressions of church value and affirm one another” (Oslworth-Peter, 2024, p.48). This is particularly challenging when we consider money and resources. Most of our regular giving comes from traditional Sunday congregations. We have struggled to transform new disciples into regular financial donors. The challenge is whether new ecclesial communities are sustainable if they aren’t self-funding.

Our commitment to both tradition and new things means we now have connections in our communities and other groups that didn’t exist before. We have a variety of new ecclesial communities where new people come to worship and know God. We have a healthy programme of pastoral and social justice initiatives that respond to the social and pastoral needs of our rural area. These include summer activities for children, a uniform swap, a foodbank, a bereavement café, a community café drop in. We continue, just, to maintain worship across fourteen different church buildings, offering around twenty-six Eucharists, one Morning Prayer, one Tea church and two Evensongs per month, not to mention four collective worships per week in school term and a weekly midweek Eucharist.

### **1.3 The efficacy of mixed ecology**

Davison and Milbank seek to critique fresh expressions as a drain away from the local parish, but this has not been our experience. They suggest that the mixed economy [sic], diminishes

the parish offer by increasing segregation and diluting the 'mixed communities' common in parish churches. (2013, Mixed economy). Our local experience has been the opposite.

Committing ourselves to the process of listening to both God and our local communities, hearing what people are needing or seeking, responding to God's activity in our communities has re-energised us for mission.

Davison and Milbank seek a revitalisation of the parish as the antithesis of fresh expressions.

"Recovering a positive approach to our parish churches as a resource and a witness to God, allows us to use them strategically as agents for mission" (2013, Our need for a local place).

For the Beaminster Team we have recovered a positive approach to our parish churches by seeking to do things differently alongside the tradition that we uphold. One supports the other. There is no binary opposite for us.

Companion planting or dual cropping enables crops to be planted together to grow better.

Growing beans and peas together deliver significant advantages. The peas quickly cover the ground, suppressing weed development. The beans act as a scaffold for the peas (CLA,2024).

We have found in the Beaminster Team that traditional church and fresh expressions of church can support each other, energise each other, resource each other and ultimately provide more growth.

Using Olsworth-Peter's description of mixed ecology our intention was very much in the "allotment" sphere of mixed ecology. Allotments have different plants growing alongside



each other but with their own location or row. We intended to plant new forms of church because the established congregations weren't reaching everyone. "These new forms of church or mission initiatives will exist in their own right with no expectation of people coming to church 'on a Sunday'" (2024, p.27). This summed up our vision. We were clear it was God's mission to the locality. It wasn't solely about numeric growth; it was about holistic growth. Growth in all forms.

For some congregation members the joy of stepping out into mission through joining the Messy Church team, running an after-school club or offering hospitality through a café drop in has energised their faith and deepened their discipleship. For some congregation members they have chosen to continue to focus their time and energy on keeping the traditional parish activities going. Some have stretched to accommodate the mixed ecology in their own time and volunteering, being fully involved in both traditional and new forms of church life.

Yet in some ways all that activity might be considered a failure. Despite the hundreds of people per week who connect with our church communities, we still feel fragile in terms of money, volunteers, stewardship of the buildings, and governance. We are fragile according to Lawson's thesis. (2022).

## 1.4 A fragile church

Lawson first presented the hypothesis of the fragile rural church in 2018 after conducting research with clergy in multi parish rural dioceses (Lawson, 2022, p.18). She identified marks of the fragile rural church which included anxiety about reducing congregations, lack of lay leaders, few children and young people, the relentless pressure to keep things going and the concern about buildings. This hypothesis was critiqued by those who felt it merely represented clergy fear, not lay concerns. (Mynors, 2019; Wilson, 2019 in Lawson, 2022, p. 18). Yet subsequent research confirmed that both laity and clergy shared the fragility concerns (Lawson, 2022, p.19).

Committing to a mixed ecology of church may have unwittingly created a consumer model where people attend events but don't serve. For example, new disciples at Messy Church don't equate to a fully staffed PCC or an increased parish share. There can be new growth across the team and still a feeling of fragility. I don't think that mixed ecology creates fragility, as Milbank and Davison suggest (2013). Instead, we realise that creating new disciples doesn't guarantee that their vocation will be to preserve the traditional church. Enabling people to discover faith through new ecclesial communities equips people to serve and love God where they are – in their families, schools, workplaces, communities, in the world. We express our faith within community, but our communities of faith and worship might not be in the church building on a Sunday. Thus, growth doesn't necessarily equal an end to fragility.

I think our thirteen-year experiment has been a success. We recognise fragility in some traditional congregations, but we are not disheartened. We value traditional church and our fresh expressions as equal partners, celebrating the “parity of esteem” that Olsworth-Peter describes (2024, p.49). We seek creative ways to resource activities in our villages and parishes and work in partnership, listening to God and our communities. This pattern of creating new things largely follows the structure outlined by Moynagh, “Time and again we saw founders of new ecclesial communities being led by the Spirit to listen to their contexts, find simple ways to love and serve people, build community with them, provide opportunities for people to explore following Jesus, encourage tastes of church among those coming to faith and then occasionally ‘do it again’” (2017, A serving first journey). This is what we do and continue to do through our commitment to the mixed ecology.

We are honest about the cost of our activities and invite people to contribute, looking for ways to “to ensure the burden of upkeep of a historic building does not fall completely on the often small community whose parish church it forms” (Davidson and Milbank, 2013, Our need for a local place). We encourage communities to support their church building through fundraising and volunteering. We invite people to take on new responsibilities around governance and leadership. But the heart of our experiment is the vision to provide opportunities for all people to worship God, to grow in relationship with God, to know they are loved and to live out lives of faith wherever they are. The funding is important, but it is not the primary focus. The future of the church in the Beaminster Team is not solely about preserving buildings or the parish, it is about loving God and loving our neighbours as ourselves.

In this chapter I have shared the history of our mixed ecology experiment and defined Fresh Expressions. I have suggested diversity enables sustainability, if all expressions of church are equally valued and nurtured. I have explored that growth may not end fragility. The next chapter outlines the origins and history of one of our fresh expressions, Gin Church. Gin Church forms the subject of the case study exploring sustainable church growth. The chapter also gives some insight into the current church growth agenda in the Church of England.

## **Chapter 2 Gin Church and the wider narrative of Church growth.**

### **2.1 Something new**

Gin Church was first conceived in Lent 2019 as part of an outreach project called “Lent in a Bag”. We offered a bag of goodies to all the parents at our Messy Church, after school club and community café. In the bag were some ideas for a creative Lent and an invitation to events. I notice it wasn’t called Gin Church then. That name was created by the first group of people who came. The aim was to be a place of discussion for those who liked the Archers, might be open to a spiritual discussion and enjoyed a gin and tonic. We met in person at the Vicarage, six people came, we drank gin, we didn’t talk about the Archers and we ended up discussing Matthew 25 about sheep and goats. This was because one of the people who turned up had spent all day trying to coax a sheep out of a pond and her throw away comment about the stupidity of sheep took us to the bible passage.

Inviting parents to other events beyond the fresh expression or outreach event they were attending was a result of asking them how we could further support them in their Christian journey. The feedback I got was they wanted to discuss questions about faith and stories in the bible without their children. This desire related to two of the identifying features of ecclesial communities framed by Moynagh, that Gin Church is contextual, meeting the needs of people where they are and formational, helping people in their discipleship journey. (Moynagh, 2017, Introduction). Thus, an informal chatting space was the aim of the first invitation.

Gin Church was also a response to a picture in my mind I repeatedly received when praying for mission opportunities in the team. It was an image of people gathered around the table in my kitchen on a Thursday evening talking. Lings in his book, *Seven Sacred Spaces*, describes the Refectory in the monastery as the heart of the community. Ling suggests that future expressions of church might place the refectory at the heart of who they are: gathering at the table, sharing stories, building community, offering hospitality, sharing scripture (Lings, 2020, pp.104-112). Even though Gin Church is virtual it has the feel of a group of people gathered around table. Eventually I decided to be faithful to the image in my mind through prayer, perhaps recognising God's mission. Gin Church was born.

The second meeting of Gin Church was in November 2019 and was not a success. Just three people came of which two were on the organising team. Yet the idea just wouldn't go away. It took until 2020 for it to really get off the ground. In the four-week lockdown in November 2020 we began Gin Church in its third version, this time online for just the duration of the four-week lockdown. Perseverance paid off. People came, people had fun, the structure was born.

## **2.2 The recipe**

To create Gin Church, I followed the tried and tested method used in the Beaminster Team from the beginning of our missional and fresh expression journey. Pray about what God is doing and listen, pray through any new idea, find a team, try it for a fixed period. We had prayed it through for years, I had a partner to do the work alongside me, our ordinand who

was in training at Sarum college, we set a four-week trial period and off we went. We invited people who had been interested before and issued a general invitation on Facebook.

At the height of Covid our Beaminster Team social media became the heart of our communication ([www.facebook.com/BeaminsterTeam](http://www.facebook.com/BeaminsterTeam)). We posted twice a day every day, with reflections, pictures, prayer, discussion, chat. Posts regularly reached hundreds of views. This vibrant interactive space was the place to invite people to Gin Church.

Gin Church has a structure. The opening part is based on the spiritual practice of the Examen. This is our gathering focus. It enables every person to speak which helps the group dynamics and prevents the discussion being dominated by louder people. I was inspired to choose the Examen because it is a daily part of my spiritual practice and I hoped that by sharing the examen it might become “a way of sharing ourselves with the group” (Linn, 1995, p.35). Each person is invited to share the highs and lows of the week that has just gone. This is an invitation not an expectation. We also clarify that participants decide how personal they want to be. They can share something frivolous or deep, that is their choice. Generally, this structure works well. Everyone gets a chance to speak and to centre themselves in the week that has gone before. It also reflects the spiritual value of recognising God at work in the everydayness of life.

The second section is word. We share a passage of scripture together, reading it out loud from a shared screen of the text. I send out the text the day before so people are prepared

and can read ahead if they want. We have used many different organising features for our bible study. We have studied parables, a whole Gospel, books of the New and Old Testament. We have used Lent books and Advent reflections. And we most regularly tend to look at the Gospel from the lectionary, studying it in advance of the Sunday. This means that if Gin Church members come to Sunday congregations, they have already encountered the Gospel which makes it more accessible. It also gives this overworked rural minister a place to explore the Gospel in a community of faith before writing a sermon on a Saturday.

We explore scripture by asking questions and dialoguing with it and with each other. Our first question is always, what has stirred you or disturbed you in the passage today. We then discuss, reflect, ask questions and attempt to relate the themes to our own lives.

The third section of Gin Church is prayer. We bring to the whole group people and situations that we want to offer in prayer. We share our needs and intentions out loud and then I hold them all in prayer together. This is often a very profound and still time together. I have long been struck by the power of silence on Zoom. Suddenly the boxes of people are still. The silence gathers us and protects us.

After the four-week lockdown in November 2020 we asked those who were attending whether they would like to carry on. There was a resounding yes and so Gin Church in its current form was born. We meet weekly on Zoom for an hour on a Thursday evening in term time only. We sometimes meet in person socially or to do fundraising with funds split



between charities and the church. A number now attend worship more regularly on a Sunday.

Since November 2020 we have had twenty different members. We have been to the ordinations of two of our founder members. Part of their vocational journey was in Gin Church and they are now priests in the Church of England. Two of our Gin Church members chose to be baptised. One other Gin Church member was baptised having attended Sunday congregations and then joined Gin Church to meet other younger people. All three subsequently went on to be confirmed with Gin sisters in attendance and supporting. One of our Gin sisters has had a baby, one of our Gin sisters has got married, one has got divorced, and sadly one of our Gin sisters died. Our Gin Church community have supported each other through these life events as well as illness, house moves, family challenges, new jobs, career changes, menopause and the everyday ups and downs of life. We have raised over £2000 for charity and the church.

Gin Church feels like church growth to me. There is numeric growth: new baptisms and confirmations, new people worshipping and growth in community. The numbers only tell part of the story. In the next part of the chapter I look briefly at current writing about alternative models of church growth and seek to find where Gin Church might fit.

### **2.3 A reflection on church growth literature**

Looking at the Church of England website when searching about Church growth takes us first to research conducted ten years ago, *From Anecdote to Evidence* (Church of England, 2014).

The research looks at growth across three dimensions: growth in depth of holiness and discipleship, growth in numbers and growth in impact and justice. (*Anecdote to Evidence*, 2014, p5) These three dimensions: discipleship, numbers and impact give a wider measure of growth than purely numbers.

The report suggests that there are some factors that seem to encourage church growth. These include intentionality around discipleship, good leadership, self-reflection, a clear mission and involvement of lay people (*Anecdote to Evidence*, 2014, p.8). It is also noted that multiple churches grouped together under a single leader are more likely to decline and that “Churches are more likely to grow when there is one leader for one community.” (*Anecdote to Evidence*, 2014, p8). Gin Church is unlike other churches in the Beaminster team in that it has one leader and meets weekly. Parishes on the team rota don’t all meet every week and are likely to have a different leader every Sunday.

The executive summary suggests that there is no one conclusive model for church growth, and that context is everything. Professor David Voas suggests “Growth is a product of good leadership (lay and ordained) working with a willing set of churchgoers in a favourable environment” (*Anecdote to Evidence*, 2014, p.7). It is a particularly vague conclusion, but it

gives space to suggest that a Kingdom model of church growth would be as valid as a numeric model of growth, given that context is important.

The Vision and Strategy of the Church of England puts growth as a target of current church life. The vision for the Church of England is rooted firmly in the person of Christ and in mission. There are clear and bold outcomes, including numeric targets around growth, for example ten thousand new Christian communities by 2030 (Church of England.org, Vision and Strategy, 2024). This clear expectation of numeric growth can feel very overwhelming for church communities and leaders.

Many voices critique the managerialism and secular business speak on which the vision and strategy is founded. Davison and Milbank (2013) argue against secular management strategies employed in the Church of England Vision and Strategy. Percy (2023) heavily critiques the leadership of the church and its growth agenda. He suggests managerialism and leadership is “shaped by outdated capitalist and corporate management rhetoric” (Percy, 2023, p.465). Aisthorpe (2020, pp. 156-179) and Aldous (2022, pp. 43-66) argue that pace of change is problematic and doesn’t give enough time for sustainable growth to occur.

Bishop Francis-Dehqani (2024) argues that to constantly seek growth risks missing the creativity of fragility. Barrett and Harley (2020, pp.63-73) critique church growth for its power and exploitation. Turner (Sarum, 2024) echoes this exploitative nature of church growth and the dominant economic narrative likening it to plantation economics. Jeremiah (2021)

cautions against aggressive church growth and potential exploitation, citing “culturally insensitive mission practices of the past” (Jeremiah, 2021.) Resisting the Vision and Strategy of church growth can take us to slow mission, rewilding, Save the Parish and Kingdom theology. All very different alternatives.

## **2.4 The fragile and declining church**

The growth agenda is a response to decline. Simon Jenkins writing in the Guardian about the care of church buildings suggests “The Church of England is out of its depth. It is pretending that it can turn the tide of decline with evangelism and so refill churches with people.” (Jenkins, The Guardian, 2024). Church statistics tell a sorry tale. The 2022 Statistics for Mission report (Eames, 2023) say that the Worshipping community, those who attend church ‘regularly’, once a month or more, has declined from 1.1 million in 2019 to 984,000 in 2022. This translates to just 1.7% of the population of England (Eames, 2023, p.7). The census data from 2021 confirms a national picture of declining faith, “For the first time in a census of England and Wales, less than half of the population (46.2%, 27.5 million people) described themselves as “Christian”, a 13.1 percentage point decrease from 59.3% (33.3 million) in 2011” (ONS, 2022, p1)

There is a decline in faith and in church attendance. The demographic of rural church congregations is also aging. 35.6 % of the worshipping community is over 70 years old (Eames, 2023, p7). About 18% of the population in England and Wales is over 65 (Our aging population, 2023). If our church congregations were to reflect wider society we would

expect to see more younger people. Thus, an aging church population may be cause for concern, particularly when coupled with a declining church congregation. Lawson cites this as one of the marks of the fragile church (Lawson, 2023, Conclusion)

Decline can make us feel fragile, connecting into Lawson's Fragile church motif (Lawson, 2018, 2023). Talking to congregations locally some fear that within the next five or ten years they will all be gone. They are concerned who will keep the church building in good repair and who will continue to attend worship and maintain tradition once they have gone to glory. Arising from this panic about who will keep the church going is a sense of scarcity. Very quickly this fear becomes the default thinking for congregations. It dominates discussions and PCC agendas. We forget that God gives abundantly, that Jesus came for us to have life in all its fullness, (John 10:10) and we become preoccupied about clinging on to what is left.

Olsworth-Peter, writing about the need for both traditional and new expressions of church to recognise and affirm each other suggests it is difficult to develop a "parity of esteem" in a "narrative of scarcity (whether of money, roles or appointments), and it can quickly feel like the survival of the fittest" (Olsworth-Peter, 2024, p48). As resurrection people we need to develop a better resilience about decline, closure and death. Decline is not necessarily failure.

Bishop Francis-Deqhani suggests that decline might bring opportunity. She comments "The language of Vision and Strategy risks ignoring the reality of frailty, brokenness, sin – all of

which can of course be redeemed, but it risks missing the blessings in that which is small and vulnerable and marginal.” (Francis-Deqhani, 2024) She pondered in her plenary lecture at The Church Times Festival of Preaching whether it is the call of the church to be successful in the world’s terms, or instead to “be intentional in our faithfulness and prayerful in the present moment.” (Francis-Deqhani, 2024). She goes on to reference the remnant of the Christian church in Iran who continue to exist, despite being tiny in number and persecuted.

Church decline might be an opportunity where something new can happen. “What if we have things to learn during a season in which we’re smaller, more marginal and less influential?” Francis-Deqhani asks. (2024) Barrett and Harley also challenge the view that small is failure, suggesting that continued focus on growth deludes us and tempts us into believing we have the “power of the provider” (Barrett and Harley, 2020, p.69). Decline might be an opportunity, not a failure.

## **2.5 Growth and money.**

The question I ponder time and time again is why church growth is defined in shorthand as “bums on seats and money in the plate.” It suggests church growth is less about faith and more about money. When church finances are linked to the number of people who attend, as in the case of Church of England parish share, then growth becomes automatically linked to money. Money is connected in two ways to growth and parish share. Firstly, the parish share feels more burdensome if the church declines. Costs continue to rise and the cost is

borne by fewer people. Hence the fragility around resources and the potential panic it induces. A theology of scarcity rather than abundance.

Secondly, if a church does grow and records a greater number of people in their congregation, then the share also increases, because share is linked in part to the number of people we record attending church. Thus, growth becomes both the solution and a penalty. Grow and you can split the bill between more people. Grow and the bill will get larger. Percy suggests that finances and especially concern around parish share, or quota as he describes, is a cause of friction and concern. It can feel like a tax or a punishment, “collected in a manner almost medieval in character” (Percy, 2023, p.455).

The other connection between growth and finance is the money to fund development in the Church of England, currently known as Strategic Mission and Ministry Investment (SMMI). Any monetary investment is subject to growth targets, which are short term and potentially hard to meet. Aldous explores this conundrum, of “urgency and speed” (Aldous, 2022, p46) arguing that it is problematic that funding requires church growth in smaller and smaller timeframes. (Aldous, 2022, p49).

## **2.6 The God who walks slowly**

Aldous reflects on Koyama’s writing on time, on God’s time being different to our own time, on the walking pace “where we walk, we see, we feel, smell and hear so many interesting things”. (Koyama in Aldous, 2022, p60). Aldous explores growth focused on depth,

storytelling, lives being changed, hospitality and service. (2022, pp.30-60) This place of slowness, of community, of storytelling, of measuring joy, of seeing growth at a walking pace and reflecting truly on the work God is doing is so attractive and is much of what I think Gin Church is about.

I am instinctively attracted to a slower pace of church growth, focusing on depth of discipleship, lives being changed, telling the story of people. It feels a more sustainable way of living and leading. This diversity of measurements, not merely economic, sits with the contextual view of growth outlined in *From Anecdote to Evidence*.

## **2.7 Being Interrupted**

In *Being Interrupted*, Harley and Barrett reflect on traditional economies of church that shape the Church of England. They explore three temptations that a giving out church might demonstrate, the power of the provider, the power of performance and the power of the possessor. They critique these traditional economies, suggesting that “these dominant economies both set up and reinforce power-laden divisions(..)that mimic the power dynamics of empire and colonialism” (Barrett and Harley, 2020, p72). This is a powerful argument that resonates with Carlton Turner’s observation of the church growth model being linked to a plantation model of economics.

Their alternative is for churches to look towards a third economy, which they call “being interrupted”. Here the church models the language of gift, to “stand alongside others in



prophetic and life-generating tension” (Barrett and Harley, 2020, p129). The third economy produces a church that is neither “anxious about its survival” or overflowing in “self-satisfied abundance”. “Instead, it rejoices in its radical insufficiency.” (Barrett and Harley, 2020, p130). Again, I find this hugely attractive as a model, particularly as the model challenges power, racism and areas of exclusion within the church. It also critiques the concept of church growth being predominantly about self-replication, just to keep the same show on the road.

In this model perhaps the church loosens its hold on replicating as the primary driver for strategy and activity. In this model we might abandon church growth altogether because there is something more holy to be concerned with, working with our communities and empowering a radical agenda for change and justice.

## **2.8 Rewilding the Church**

Rewilding the Church takes the metaphor of rewilding nature and applies it to church. Growth is still at the heart of what church is about, but it is less about growth being strategic and managed and more about an abandonment to the creativity of God. Aisthope explores what a commitment to *being* rather than *doing* might look and feel like, suggesting we might want to focus on “who does God want us to be?” (Aisthorpe, 2020, p166) The thought of a church setting itself a “to be” list is again attractive. He suggests that relationship with Christ is a model for Christian life that we should root into. We should abandon ideas of “saving the church” and reject mission as the sole focus of our church life, because it keeps us focused

on a mistaken conversation “about saving our story called church” (Roxborough in Aisthorpe, 2020, p46).

Aisthorpe reinforces relationship and vocation and being and doing less, rejecting the economic model of church growth. “Our calling is not to be attenders or consumers, but to be accomplices of Jesus, partners with God. The church will be renewed because we are renewed and the Church is us” (Aisthorpe, 2020, p.49). Aisthorpe doesn’t completely reject the idea of growth, but instead focuses on our growth, our flourishing as Christians and the impact we have in the world because of who we are in Christ. This sits alongside the discipleship idea in Lawson(2022) and Foster(2016) and the priorities of Gin Church where developing faith and confidence in who we are in Christ is one of the primary drivers for the community existing.

## **2.9 The Once and Future Parish**

Milbank also considers church growth but with the agenda of embracing the parish as the primary form of pastoral care, teaching and growth and rejecting both managerialism and mixed ecology. Milbank holds a nostalgic and romantic view of the role of the parish as taken up by the Save the Parish movement. (Milbank, 2023)

Milbank is passionate about active vibrant parishes being at the heart of mission and growth and she dots her narrative with little stories of success. She has a yearning to go back to the “richly successful Anglicanism of the first half of the twentieth century” (Milbank, 2023,

p.127). I share her desire to reject economic models of church growth, and celebrate the parish system, but I suggest that sustainable church growth will come through mixed ecology, not solely the parish.

This chapter gives the history of Gin Church which is the subject of the case study. An overview is shared of some of the recent literature around church growth, focusing predominantly on authors who offer an alternative view of growth beyond a purely economic model. They suggest growth might be slower, more organic, linked to justice and focused on faith, discipleship and our identity in Christ rather than just numbers.

Chapter three looks at the methodology used in this case study of Gin Church.

## **Chapter 3 Methodology – providing the framework**

### **3.1 A mixed method case study**

Case study methodology allowed me to explore Gin Church in depth with open questions and storytelling, through thick description of the history of the community and through qualitative research carried out with six Gin Church participants. The case study methodology gave space for the opportunity to discover ideas and stories that would enlighten my investigation on sustainable church growth, whilst recognising that “the intervention being evaluated has no single clear set of outcomes.” (Yin, 2017, p.18).

Case study methodology permits space for a “constructivist view” of church growth at Gin Church rather than a positivist paradigm. (Given, 2008, p592). I sense there is more than one story to tell about church growth. In the case study I offer thick description of the history of Gin Church and its place within the mixed ecology of the Beaminster Team. Mowat reminds us that “without locating the story within the wider context, it cannot even be partially understood.” (Mowat, 2022, p385). This background of the mixed ecology of the Beaminster Team in Chapter 1 and the history of Gin Church in Chapter 2 attempt to locate Gin Church in the wider context of the team and more broadly in fresh expressions and mixed ecology.

I conducted qualitative research based on interview questions discerning the stories of ‘the how and why’ of being part of Gin Church. I reflected on my own part in the story of Gin Church using autoethnographic reflection. I used inductive or bottom-up analysis to see what emerged from the data collected, organising the themes as I discovered them (Aldous,

2019, p.97) These themes or “golden threads” (Aldous, 2024, in supervision conversation) alongside a biblical framework based on two Kingdom parables helped me organise the data and tell the story.

### **3.2 A hermeneutic of suspicion**

Goodhew suggests that “seeking numeric growth is intrinsic to being faithful to Christ.” (Goodhew(ed), 2015, p.6). I agree that numeric growth is part of the story, but only part. To be limited to only observing numbers suggests a narrow view of Kingdom economics that is resonant with only seeing worth in attendance. Looking for wider aspects of flourishing is much more attractive. Thus, as I came to shape my case study of Gin Church, I already knew that I had a suspicion about a purely numeric or economic measure of church growth. I was looking to discover more than numbers. I also knew, before I started to shape the case study and begin ethnographic research, that there were stories of growth to be shared.

### **3.3 Shaping questions**

Knowing that growth would be evident in Gin Church helped me frame my questions around ‘how’ and ‘why’ have we seen church growth, rather than ‘if’ and ‘how much’. The how and why questions led me towards a methodology of case study as I sought to review a “contemporary set of events”, the Gin Church community. (Yin, 2017, p.130) I could have directed my case study towards other fresh expressions in the team, but Gin Church is the one I have the most direct contact with and the one which, I suspected had some interesting data and stories to offer.

A literature review of church growth writing, from both a positive and critical view of numeric growth helped shape my questions. My primary guide for conducting ethnographic research was *Ethnography as Pastoral Practice* by Mary Clark Moschella(2023). My primary research question was seeking to discovering a more sustainable and expansive model of church growth than the economic model. In the questionnaire my questions were.

- How did you become part of the Gin Church community?
- What do you think Gin Church does?
- How is Gin Church useful to you?
- Why do you attend Gin Church or why do you no longer attend Gin Church?
- How has Gin Church changed your faith?
- How does Gin Church relate to the churches in the Beaminster Area Team?

### **3.4 Asking the questions**

To reflect on Gin Church as a case study for sustainable church growth I conducted interviews with six members of Gin Church. The interviewees were chosen to reflect a spectrum of age, previous church experience and level of participation in Gin Church. Some had been part of Gin Church since the beginning, others more recently joined. The interviews were conducted during January 2025. Five of the six interviews were conducted in person, one on Zoom. The interviewees received the questions in advance. Some had clearly prepared for the interviews as if it was a job interview (Neary, 2025, Reflection

journal), taking their role as participants in research very seriously. Some had made notes for their answers. Others treated the process much more as a chat. All had read the ethics guidance sheet and agreed to their contributions being written about in this dissertation.

As I look back in my journal, I was clearly nervous about conducting these interviews. I was concerned about whether the things I suspected about Gin Church would truly be revealed. There were nerves amongst the participants too. One was concerned over the audio recording being made; another was worried about whether she would give the “right” answers. (Neary, 2025). This nervousness perhaps revealed how important the process of interviewing was to all of us.

On reflection perhaps the use of questions made the situation too formal. Moschella reflects, “In ethnographic listening, we strive to create a safe place for honest reflection in which new connections can be forged”. (2023, p.170). It felt safe because we knew each other. Yet if a recording device was triggering, or questions in advance produced a script of answers, would the process become self-defeating, smothering the answers and silencing the story. The data collected and analysed in Chapter 5 will ultimately decide if honest reflection was achieved.

“In ethnographic listening, we strive to make room for all kinds of stories – stories that comfort and affirm and stories that challenge or disturb us” (Moschella, 2023, p.171). I hoped the interview process made enough room for stories to be told. This was a question I

pondered in my journal at the time. Yet as I reflect on writing a couple of months later, I can see that stories were told and truths revealed, and the context was safe enough for honest reflection and new connections to be forged.

Once the interviews were recorded, I made notes in my journal about the experience and the feelings each interview created in me. I was able to “puzzle over stories and allow them to work on you a bit” (Moschella, 2023, p.190). I was surprised about the emotional reactions the interviews created in both me and the participants. There were often tears from both of us. There was laughter. There was honesty and checking that it was okay to be honest. The conversation always wandered away from the questions too. Every participant described something about faith and what God was doing in their lives. I was privileged to share intensely personal reflections as part of the listening process. So many of the stories that were shared aren’t reflected in this research because they aren’t necessarily answers to the questions I asked. Yet they are stories that now shape how I pastorally relate to those women as part of Gin Church and will possibly shape the future of our Gin Church community.

The interviews were recorded and then transcribed through Microsoft Word. These rough and ready transcripts were then edited by me for corrections. I reread my journal entries. I prayed about the process. I discussed my feelings with my spiritual director. I spent time being immersed in the data, resisting the temptation to analyse too quickly. Moschella advises students to “immerse yourself in it all.” (Moschella, 2023, p194). I tried to do this and not rush on.



The stories people told stuck in my mind. Analysis was undertaken through the transcripts by highlighting answers to each question and cutting and pasting them into a table. I also looked for themes in the data by searching key words.

Key words included the words from the case study title, “sustainable, church, growth” along with key words that came up frequently in interviews, eg “learning, faith, safe, nice, trust, family”. The key phrases were placed in a table and then quotes were used as headings to structure the data and stories.

I have tried to anonymise any recognisable situations. Through the process of conducting the interviews, listening to the recordings, amending the transcripts for accuracy, carrying out word searches, cutting and pasting phrases into the table I became very familiar with the transcripts and the key threads that emerged for me. Spending time with the data was like spending time with the people themselves. It became like an extended Gin Church session.

My supervisor advised me to look for the golden threads. Moschella suggests that thematic analysis is finding the “stars in the sky” (Moschella, 2023, p.203). As headings for the research, I have used either quotes from the Kingdom parables in Matthew 13 or quotes from the Gin sisters themselves.

### **3.5 Telling a story I am part of**

Listening to the research about Gin Church is about telling a story. A story that I am part of. This poses a challenge. As Mowat suggests, “The qualitative interviewer is listening to the story rather than telling it” (Mowat, 2022, p382). Much as I am keen to present a positive story about Gin Church, through choosing to interview participants, I am also helping, as a participant observer, to create the truth that each respondent brings through their interview. I am aware that collecting the stories of Gin Church may reveal a story that is different to the one I think needs to be told. As Mason reminds us, taking qualitative research seriously means recognising that “active reflexivity” is key, recognising that the researcher is never neutral or objective. (Mason, 2002, p7)

My insider status meant it was necessary to set clear boundaries around sensitive information revealed in interviews. Interviews were anonymised and pseudonyms used for each participant. Data was collected and transcribed only by me and seen only by me, my supervisor and marker. Ethics permission was sought from Sarum College and each participant completed a consent form.

There are positives to an insider status. I already had “high trust” relationships with those being interviewed and good access to potential interviewees. (Given, 2008, p.433) But I recognised that I would have ongoing contact with my interviewees as their vicar at Gin Church and beyond. I checked with each interviewee to see if they had any concerns about

this. This intimacy of relationship might have also meant that people were keen to avoid anything too critical or personal. I reassured them that they could say anything, good or bad.

“Qualitative research should produce explanations or arguments, rather than claiming to offer mere descriptions.” (Mason, 2002, p7). Through the process of interviewing, transcribing, key word searches, putting key phrases into tables, reflecting on stories and valuing and examining feelings and finally using themes and biblical reflection to shape the data, I was looking to produce something that wasn’t just about what Gin Church is and does, but sought to make connections to sustainable church growth in a wider context.

### **3.6 Being curious**

Wigg- Stevenson reflects that autoethnography is important as a tool to map how the theologian is involved in the field of research. Being so intimately involved in Gin Church shaped the study and the questions posed. The responses from the interviews framed what I was able to see. (Wigg-Stevenson, 2014, p.11). There was caution as I interviewed Gin Church people. I hoped it would be easy to understand each other. Yet the “mutual knowledge” we shared about Gin Church might have meant that familiarities “risks allowing exactly the peculiarities of one’s own culture to slip out of sight.” (Wadel, 2014, p.27 in Felter, 2022, p379) Remaining curious and open minded was my attempt to mitigate the familiarity.

It was important that I didn't approach the interviews, or the findings revealed in them as telling me something I already knew. I needed to be prepared for what might seem different and what might be challenging for me. I considered, but discounted, whether using an outsider to help me analyse the data revealed in the questionnaires might help me see things that I miss. I did choose to share with an outsider any of the responses that provoked a personal response in me. I kept a field journal and used my spiritual director to discuss emotional or difficult reactions to the process or data

### **3.7 Changed for good**

Whilst conducting the research interviews I happened to have a spiritual direction session. I was asked what was making my soul sing currently, 'the joy of hearing the stories of Gin Church' was my reply. This process brought me much joy, hearing what God has been doing in my Gin sisters and our community. Even if the process didn't reveal anything new, I had already realised that there was joy to be found in appreciating the community and God's activity within us.

Each participant talked about what next for Gin Church, even though that wasn't one of the questions. It was clear that each woman had an idea, a thought, a possibility that should be shared more widely. Moschella suggests "Empowered participants are likely to become more creative and committed partners in the shared faith and praxis of the congregation" (Moschella, 2023, p.191). By listening to a group of women during qualitative research for my MA, the actual benefit is not just a dissertation but recognising what these empowered

women have the potential to contribute to the life of Gin Church, the wider community of faith in the Beaminster Team and the Kingdom of God. In the musical *Wicked*, Elphaba and Glinda, two unlikely friends, realise that through listening to each other and through their friendship they are changed. “I have been changed for good” they sing (Schwartz, Greydog Music, 2003). Through the process of listening to the Gin sisters, I have been changed for good.

In this chapter I describe the methodology of case study and the qualitative research I undertook. The purpose of the case study and the ethnographic enquiry was to discover how Gin Church is sustainable church growth. I wanted to consider growth as more than just numbers. I sought to reveal what growth meant for the Gin sisters. I looked for the why and how of church growth in this fresh expression community. I did this by asking questions, and by listening to their stories, by searching through the data for key words and by reflecting on the data with the biblical guidance of the parable of the mustard seed and leaven. I looked for the threads of gold, the moments of clarity, the stories that revealed something about growth in its widest holistic definition.

This chapter has summarised my choice of methodology as I sought to create a case study about Gin Church. The next chapter outlines a biblical framework for growth which became one of the lenses through which I viewed the data.

## **Chapter 4 A biblical framework for church growth.**

### **4.1 Finding a different lens**

If I seek to critique and reject an economic model of church growth, what model might I use instead? Turner suggests a Kingdom model, focusing on relationships rather than numbers. He alludes to Isaiah 11:16 – where the wolf (or lion is his rephrase), lies down with the lamb. Yet it wasn't prophecy I turned to, instead the parables of the Kingdom.

### **4.2 Parables of growth**

Matthew Chapter 13 contain parables which provide metaphors about growth that move us away from economics. In these parables we might find a framework for evaluating whether church growth is happening and is sustainable. I am focusing my attention on the parable of the mustard seed and the yeast, Matthew 13:31-33. These parables relate strongly to the rural context in which I minister.

Parables are stories that offer something of the mystery of God. Jesus uses stories to teach, to illustrate, perhaps to condemn, but also to entice curiosity. We can't always nail down their definitions. Thus, they become images, invitations for our own imagination. Talbert suggests a "performative purpose of parables that shatter the old world and point towards something new" (Talbert, 2010, p.120). There is a performative purpose for Jesus here in the first century, talking about the Kingdom of God, but perhaps also a performative purpose for us in creating an alternative view on church growth in the twenty first century.

Uytanlet suggests parables give an open invitation to consider yourself in the story, where the story is less about personal condemnation or shame, but more about loving confrontation and being invited to participate in mystery (Uytanlet, 2017, p.60). The parables of the mustard seed and yeast invite the possibility of telling the stories of growth, welcome, hospitality and transformation rather than merely just recording a set of attendance figures.

#### **4.3 A model of equality and inclusion**

The parable of the mustard seed and yeast are a pair. One man plants a seed, one woman mixes the yeast. The pairing of male and female and the generosity of welcome “hint at the inclusivity of God’s Kingdom” (Howes, 2019, p.357). No one is excluded in this model of growth. This inclusivity of measuring subverts the economic model which focuses solely on output.

#### **4.4 Expansion**

The parable of the mustard seed describes something small, a seed, that goes on to grow beyond the physical possibilities of their small beginning. The Kingdom of heaven or the Kingdom of God is described like the small thing that grows. Powell suggests that *‘basilea’*, translated as Kingdom might be better understood as reign or rule, something that is an action rather than a concrete place (Powell, 2023, p.14). Uytamet interprets this as a growing recognition of God’s kingship (Uytamet, 2017, p.62). Talbert recognises this growth as “God’s

eschatological triumph in the whole of creation”, reminding us of the eternal and wide impact of growth and our invitation to be part of it (Talbert, 2010, p.120). Recognising God’s rule, God’s values, God’s activity in the world might be a better way of pointing out church growth. It is less about numbers, more about the expansion of the Kingdom.

#### **4.5 Sustainability**

The parables of the mustard seed and the yeast can be seen as metaphors for sustainability as well as telling us something about the nature of the Kingdom of God. The growth of the seed and the raising of the leaven produces something that then goes on to sustain and multiply something else.

The mustard seed grows into a tree that provides a place, and food, for the birds. The tree is messy, bush like, overgrown. It is not the vastly tall cedar of Lebanon, nor the ancient oak of Mamre. This a weed that is put to work. Accommodation is important, there is a home here. The provision tells us something about the Kingdom, “the point is that the kingdom of God provides shelter to all those included under its shadow” (Howes, 2019, p.360). The mustard tree was well known in the ancient world for its healing properties. Thus, the Kingdom might be about hospitality, shelter, accommodation, food and healing (Howes, 2019, p.362).

#### **4.6 Transformation**

The yeast transforms the flour into bread, to feed others (Howes, 2018, p.365). There is purpose and outcome in the transformation. The sizes are incongruous: “tiny beginning and



a sizeable ending” (Talbert, 2010, p.122). The smallest seed, the greatest shrub, three measures of flour is about 60 pounds of flour, enough to feed 100 people. The Kingdom appears to be defined as an abundance of food, generous hospitality, more than we need. This helps us counteract the fragility concerns that dominate church growth narrative. If we have confidence in the abundance of God’s Kingdom, we might feel more confident about how the church reflects the Kingdom and recognise the growth, even when we feel small.

Growth can’t go on for ever. From an ecological perspective constant economic growth is in danger of destroying the planet. Tönsing hints at a double meaning in the parable, both growth and contamination, which critiques a growth at any price economic Kingdom dominance. With the double meaning exposed, the parables then give “inspiration during an ecological crisis.” (Tönsing, 2023, p.71). The leaven becomes the small-scale changes in ecological renewal; the mustard seeds are small acts of resistance having a big impact. (Tönsing, 2023, p.72). Using the parables as an alternative tool to evaluate growth is subversive, challenging the dominant national Church and Diocesan economic narrative.

#### **4.7 An alternative framework**

I am drawn to these parables because they suggest an organic model of growth where growth is less well defined but named when it is seen. The life of seeds and yeast and baking and feeding and sustaining and welcoming are not concrete ways of measuring or defining growth yet seem more exciting and possible than economic models. They also seem kinder,

more realistic and recognise a cycle of growth and decline. The birds will nest then fledge, the bread is eaten, the cycle starts again.

This chapter has used two Kingdom parables as a potential framework for identifying church growth. They offer an alternative to the more concrete output measurements of the economic model. I argue that the Kingdom parables give a messier yet kinder framework with which to evaluate growth.

In the next chapter, as I explore the stories of Gin Church, I use the parables of the mustard seed and yeast to reflect on the growth we see. I look for expansion, for evidence of small becoming larger, for glimmers of hospitality, refuge, welcome, accommodation. I recognise the yeast leavening the flour and search for evidence of transformation in the lives of families, communities and churches. I look for creative, inclusive, subversive and transforming stories of growth that sustain the wider life of the Beaminster Team.

## **Chapter 5 – The Kingdom of heaven is like Gin Church?**

This chapter reflects on the voices of the women from Gin Church who participated in the interviews. The headings for each theme are either golden threads revealed in the stories they shared or come from the biblical framework in Chapter 4. Throughout these interviews I am reflecting on what aspects of sustainable church growth are revealed through looking at Gin Church.

### **5.1 “Easier to click a Zoom link than walk through a church door” (Alice)**

Of the six women interviewed, three responded to a social media invitation to come to Gin Church when it first started, and three were personally invited following conversations with me about how to explore or deepen faith. Only two of the interviewees knew each other before coming to Gin Church, the rest met as part of the Gin Church community. I knew all the Gin Church members through school, church and community connections.

When discerning why people came to Gin Church, the absence of regular Sunday church attendance was mentioned. Freya reflects that “because I wasn’t attending church there was a gap”. Della said, “I wanted to come because my attendance at church was sporadic”. Alice mentioned how shift work meant regular Sunday attendance wasn’t always possible. For her, Thursday evening “It fits around kind of, umm, work quite nicely.” She also reflected that it was “Easier to click a Zoom link than walk through a church door, even if you aren’t sure what is on the other side. You can click out quicker on Zoom. In person church can be a bit overwhelming in small communities, where you can’t go unnoticed. But on zoom you can

mute yourself, just listen, choose to participate or not.” Personal invitation and accessibility seem key to Gin Church.

## 5.2 Numbers

Of the six people interviewed only Charlotte and Alice regularly came to church on a Sunday when they joined Gin Church. Those two have continued with regular Sunday attendance, and Della has joined them monthly at the 8am BCP communion service. The other three attend formal church worship less regularly, but when they do go, they are keen to go alongside other Gin Church attenders. Eva reflected having attended the crib service with her wider family at Christmas 2024, “And you know, when we went to church on Christmas Eve, it was so lovely. We were sat there and there was like one after another (*Gin Church attenders*) came in and everyone had a big hug and it was, it was just really nice.”

Every year we offer our Mission Statistics to the church. We count the number of people who come to church on a Sunday. This measurement is part of the economic model of church growth. Gin Church has had a small impact on Sunday attendance, encouraging one person from our sample of six to attend more regularly. The three members of our Gin Church sample who attend on Sundays are counted in the worshipping community of the parish church.

Yet, we don’t count Gin Church on a Thursday evening in our mission statistics because it is an online community. The church hasn’t yet developed a successful way of counting online

communities. If we want mission statistics to tell the full picture of growth in our mixed ecology of church we need to be better at counting everything, not just Sundays. Yet because counting equals money, as we discussed in Chapter 2 (2.5), we are cautious of counting Gin Church because of the potential impact on parish share. We would end up with the parish church paying more because of a regular online community. This does nothing for “parity of esteem” (Olsworth-Peter, 2024, p.49). A more sustainable model of church growth needs a more inclusive way of counting.

The data also shows the importance of relationships in church growth. It is easier to come if you are invited and know someone already there. The relationships then become a reason to stay. It is also possible that the accessibility of the online space removes the barrier that a building might create.

### **5.3 “Once a flood” (Eva)**

Matthew 13:32 offers a vision of hospitality and welcome in the Kingdom of God, the birds of the air come and make nests in the branches of the mustard tree. The messy weedlike mustard bush doesn’t look like the most welcoming of homes. It is interesting to reflect who of the Gin Church attenders already felt comfortable at church and had some experience of faith, and who might see Gin Church as their first experience of being welcome in the Kingdom of God.

Only Della and Charlotte went regularly to church in their childhood. Two others had some exposure to church in childhood, Alice attending sporadically with a grandparent and Eva “attending Sunday School once a flood”. This wonderful phrase I take to mean ‘very occasionally’ – a rare event, like a flood. Becky and Freya had no experience of church as children. Becky encountered the Church of England through moving to West Dorset and preparing to get married and Freya was baptised and confirmed as a teenager following the arrival of a younger sibling and then attended church occasionally with a grandparent.

Alice, Becky and Della have been baptised and confirmed as adults as part of the Beaminster Area Team, two of them whilst they have been Gin Church members. The support and love around those who have made this affirmation of faith as part of the Gin Church community is tangible and hugely humbling to see. Alice, reflecting on her confirmation in Salisbury Cathedral surrounded by Gin sisters describes,” And I think it's because we want to support each other's faith journeys, don't we?”. Della reflects, “I wouldn't have been baptised if I hadn't come to Gin Church. It just wouldn't have happened.”

Gin Church growth is not transfer growth. We are not stealing birds from another mustard tree; (Matthew 13:32) we are inviting them to make nests here for the first time. 50% of the respondents attend Gin Church alongside regular Sunday church services. The other 50% consider Gin Church their sole church. And they do consider Gin Church to be church.

Becky remarks “I do see ourselves as a very little church in my head. Like a little church in our own little village. Yeah, it's my church”. Eva says “And it's I think it's great because we're because it's rural and you know it's a good way of getting people into church without having to physically get into church. I do think it's church. And I think it's proper church. A more relaxed version of church”. Or as Freya suggests “What you've created is a church without walls. Community without borders or boundaries and I'm in that community and I'm miles away.”

Of the six people interviewed two have been baptised and confirmed as part of their attendance at Gin Church. This means 33% of this church community are new Christians. Add in the third person that was baptised and confirmed just before joining Gin Church and we have half of the sample who have come to faith in recent years. Here is growth. Growth in faith, growth in attendance, growth in belonging.

#### **5.4 “Like minded women” (Della)**

Gin Church is a community of “like minded women” as Della described the group. Our desire to explore faith brings us together, but there is a recognition that we might not have met each other in our everyday lives. Eva reflects, “and more than the Bible side of it is that I've met a really nice group of women as well that perhaps I wouldn't have met otherwise.” Freya comments that the diversity within the group “opens my eyes up to what's going on around in our locality that I wouldn't know.” Becky describes how Gin Church brings a wider

group of people together who probably wouldn't know each other in their community, "it's so interesting. All walks of life in the same community".

Half the participants reflect on the single gender of the group. No-one wants it to be exclusively female, but they recognise that because it is only women in Gin Church it becomes a different community and probably a higher trust environment than if it were mixed. Alice states, "and there's something powerful about it's not just exclusively for women, but there's something nice about being comfortable around women and feeling empowered by other women." Della reflects that although we never set out of it to be a single gender, that the dynamics would change if the group became mixed. "I think that we talk about menopause and female issues without realising we're talking about it. Yeah, and I think that would terrify men."

### **5.5 Come and make nests in its branches (Mt 13:32) – belonging and being welcome.**

Of the six people interviewed, only two live in the same place. Three live in towns, the rest in the countryside across Dorset. Three work full time, others work part time or in voluntary capacities. The age range of the sample is thirties to fifties. Some are married or in long term partnerships, others are single. Some are same sex attracted. Some have children. Children range in age from toddler to adult. There is some ethnic diversity within Gin Church but there is greater economic and educational diversity. Some are educated to degree or postgraduate level. Some own houses. Some have children in private education. It appears that the things Gin sisters have in common: faith, gender and an openness to diversity builds



the community even though the members themselves come from a variety of geographical locations, age, experiences, education and socio-economic backgrounds. Gin Church is inclusive.

Anecdotally the community aspect of Gin Church seems to sustain even if regular attendance drops off. Some of the wider Gin Church community rarely appear on a Thursday night. This is for a number of reasons: work, family circumstances, other commitments, or just because they don't want to come. Yet it is rare for anyone to leave the WhatsApp group, continuing to participate in discussions, social events, fundraising, prayer requests and funny comments even if they don't come and study scripture together weekly. Perhaps the most sustainable part of Gin Church is the community we have created and belonging is important.

It isn't always clear where the boundaries of Gin Church membership exist. It isn't a bounded set, as Hiebert defines. There is no orthodoxy or orthopraxy or "homogeny in group belief" in Gin Church (Aldous, 2022, p121). The boundaries are porous. New people come, others drift in and out. Not everyone is certain what they believe.

Becky describes "I like to explore faith, I am still on the fence about what I believe." If Gin Church is a centred set, "the inverse of a bounded set" ([theintegralmissionary.com](http://theintegralmissionary.com), 2018), where the "objects become members of the set by relating to the centre" (Aldous, 2022, p.122) then we might ponder what the centre of Gin Church is. I want it to be God, but I

suspect it is faith. If you search through the data table for the interviews, the word God appears 9 times. If you search for the word faith, it appears 42 times. I would suggest that the centre of Gin Church is faith, and that faith can be expressed and understood in many ways. Belonging is important, the homogeneity of belief is less important.

### **5.6 “Too much Gin, not enough church?” (Charlotte)**

It is noticeable that the social side, the enjoyment or expectation of fun was part of the attraction of coming to Gin Church. “I felt it would be a nice way to meet people after my maternity leave” reported Becky. Della said, “I wasn’t apprehensive (*about joining*), I was curious.” Charlotte said, “But I think it was just interesting in terms of a community of faith and something slightly different.” Eva suggested “I liked, I like I like your company. You’re very easy company. You’re easy to be around and talk to.”

The gin is a draw, even though we rarely drink gin. The first time we ever met as Gin Church it was in person, and we shared a drink together. It was something that people felt familiar doing, sharing a drink and chat with friends. If we are expecting to invite people to join a church event, a small group, a service, perhaps we need to think about whether the actual event is attractive to them.

If the community part of Gin Church is its greatest strength, does it mean that we have just created another social group, and perhaps this isn’t church growth at all? Charlotte is concerned about this. She recognises that Christianity is at the heart of what we do at Gin

Church, but that we need to live out our faith too. Possibly a “bit too much Gin and not enough Church” she wonders, but “we just still have such fun time.” She concludes that Gin Church is “about deepening that understanding and exploring that faith more and also understanding what you can do for your community and what you can do to support other people as well.”

Returning to the parable framework, the Kingdom of heaven is likened to a tree where birds make nests. Hospitality and welcome are priority. It is about grace, being accepted. Watkins and Shepherd explore a Messy Church community and reveal the idea of ecclesial grace, a concept of “stretched church”, where people are included through grace into an “organic notion of communion” even if they cannot yet declare a personal faith. “Such an ecclesiology is not concerned so much with church boundaries and identifying ‘proper church’, but is more inclined to name ecclesial grace wherever it is found, and work to deepen its relationship with the central fullness of grace in the Body of Christ, where it finds its true home and fulfilment” (Watkins, Shepherd, 2014, p107). Belonging is important, belief grows and then what you do in the world because of that growing faith comes last.

### **5.7 “There’s more to do in serving the community” (Freya)**

Freya reflects how she benefits from Gin Church but how she also feels a need to do more because of her learning. “There’s more to do in serving the community than we already do. So I’m learning. I don’t think I’m giving out.” Freya continues to reflect on the gifts and skills

that Gin Church might have to offer the wider community, asking how we might serve more.

“We're a group of exceptional women with a huge array of skills and knowledge.”

For these two members of Gin Church, it appears that their faith has made an impact on their lives in terms of desire to serve others. They suggest this as a critique of Gin Church, reflecting that we have become too inward looking. Yet their own growth in faith is what takes them to the acts of service they desire to be part of. Perhaps this is both valid critique and evidence of growth in their own discipleship. It could even be the beginning of the next cycle of Gin Church, in response to the “gift” of Gin Church, the Gin sisters generously respond in serving others. “This dynamic of giving, receiving, and gratefully giving in return echoes God’s generous relationship with humanity” (Aldous and Moynagh, 2021, p.209).

The Saltley Trust carried out research with churchgoers in the West Midlands in 2014 to discover what helped their discipleship grow. The research identified four paths of discipleship which were: Group activity, individual experience, public engagement and church worship. (Foster, 2016, p9). At first glance Gin Church is firmly part of the group activity path, studying and discussing scripture as part of a group. Yet I would also argue that Gin Church is also church worship, coming together weekly to the same community, with a “liturgy” of highs and lows, bible study and prayer, and the option for some of also attending on a Sunday.

In the same report there was a question about what made a church feel most fully alive. The most popular answers were about serving others in the community and drawing closer to each other in fellowship. (Foster, 2016, p16) The Gin Church community cares greatly about each other. Eva says, “it brought me into another group of people who I really love.” They serve each other in myriad ways. And over the last couple of years, encouraged by the leadership of Gin sisters, not at my instigation, they have begun to turn towards serving the wider community too. Thus, perhaps if the community of Gin Church is the most important thing, then that still contributes to people’s journey of discipleship and ultimately to sustainable church growth. And this growth is then expressed in a desire to serve others outside the Gin Church community.

### **5.8 “I’m learning” (Freya)**

Learning is a clear part of the Gin Church experience. Becky enjoys the chance to reflect on Scripture and apply the learning to their own life. “We do a lot of reflection, and this is my favourite part.” Alice says that it is a safe place to explore and be curious about scripture and faith, “to ask questions that you probably you couldn't ask at the end of a sermon.” When asked further about what made the community safe, she responded “the level of confidentiality that exists here that wouldn’t in a church.”

Becky also mentions the trust she recognises in the community, “And we've got this kind of like circle of trust, isn't it? Well, I hope we have.” This builds her confidence that Gin Church is a safe space where she can off-load and ask questions. There is reference here to the

deliberate decision we made when beginning Gin Church that we would only share what we felt comfortable with and that what was shared in Gin Church stays in Gin Church. There have been occasions where this trust has been broken but it has been quickly renegotiated and discussed if there has been a problem.

### **5.9 “Yeast that a woman took and mixed in .....until all of it was leavened” Mt 13:33**

Eva describes Gin Church as a place that “teaches us”, giving us a better understanding of bible stories. Della suggests that Gin Church helps us to, “look at what we are reading in the Bible and applying it to our lives now and really exploring that”. Freya takes this personal learning journey very seriously, taking time each week to prepare the passage before the Thursday meeting. “I engage with the passage, work through it. Yeah. Look at the books. Even Google Maps and artwork. Yeah, I do like the artwork side as well. And I never would have done any of that if I'd just heard a passage in church.” This increased level of engagement means the passage stays with her during the week, it is both “prep and afterthought”.

Gin Church feels like leaven for the women. This leaven affects their own lives but also has a wider impact.

### **5.10 “Their faith has grown” (Freya)**

The wider impact of this learning is interesting. Freya conducts her own Gin Church with her family before the Thursday session. Being part of Gin Church “gives me tools to reflect on Scripture” We sit down on Thursday teatime with my family, read the passage at the beginning of the meal and then discuss it with the family. She reflects how Gin Church, “Let me pick up the Bible, study the Bible, dig deep in scripture. My family's benefited as we discussed the passage and questions. Their faith has grown.” This connects into the expansive idea of the mustard seed growth and to the leaven that changes the nature of the flour.

Becky and Della describe how they talk to their partners about the bible passages discussed at Gin Church, even with partners who don't share their faith. Eva describes how members of the family ask what she is talking about in Gin Church. Becky and Alice both describe how the tools they gain at Gin Church transfer into their professional lives.

One is equipped better to teach RE and to enable the children to be curious and ask questions of bible passages in school. The other recalls that her growing faith and confidence in spiritual matters through Gin Church and Sunday church has helped her professional work around end-of-life care. “It's made me acutely aware, more aware of, of how important faith is, even in the darkest times. But even in other times it's made me more aware of exploring that and being confident to explore that with patients.”

Becky suggests, it just goes to show “that anybody can access our Gin Church kind of like set up. Yeah. Well, hopefully it could be mimicked by anybody in any way, couldn't it?” Perhaps this is testimony to the sustainability of Gin Church. It equips members with tools for future spiritual growth both personally and in their family and wider community.

#### **5.11 “I come away like I have had a foot spa” (Becky)**

Reflecting on the impact of Gin Church there is a personal benefit of Gin Church, a transformation. It deepens biblical knowledge, provides a safe space to be curious about bible and faith and there is clear value in the safe and caring community that is created. There is a personal impact on members of the Gin Church community, “Gin Church is nourishing for the soul” says Della. Gin Church makes me feel more positive about myself and about life says Becky “I come away like I have had a foot spa”. The language used is interesting. No mention of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but clear acknowledgment of being changed.

Yet the growth of personal knowledge or contentment or well-being is only one part of the impact. The other is equipping people to get to know each other better and build relationships, to know the wider community better, to think more widely about different viewpoints and to gain tools that bring an impact to the wider community, both in families and beyond. Faith has an impact in relationships, in family life, in professional capacities and in the wider community. It becomes a faith that starts to leaven the whole measure of flour. This isn't just growth in an individual's life, it is growth in the wider community.



### **5.12 “I do miss Eucharist.” (Freya)**

Della describes Gin Church itself as communion “It's that communion, it's that sense of communion together, whilst we have quite different lives. So I feel it's that communion, coming together that sharing of like minds, I think.” Communion is described as unity for her. She also attends monthly 8am BCP communion.

Freya describes communion as the thing that is missing for her at Gin Church. “I do miss Eucharist.” She is emotional as she recalls how she used to come to church on a Sunday and how Eucharist was like “a reset button”. She acknowledges that she has found it hard to settle into a new physical church community having moved away. She describes how Gin Church is “the highlight of the week”. She also recognises that not receiving communion “is a loss and you think well that is the only downside of Gin Church. But it's one thing that's missing for me.”

Charlotte also acknowledges the absence of communion, “There's something that well for me personally that that I gain by being in church and coming to the altar. It's just not quite the same online, but that doesn't make any less of an experience.”

### **5.13 “But when it has grown” (Mt 13:32)**

There is also recognition that despite us having a membership of fifteen on the WhatsApp group, often Gin Church is only a small number online each week. Della recounts “How can we expand a bit more? It would be good because then 'cause at the moment if a handful don't come, then we're down to just a few and we can be very low in numbers.” Growth matters to Gin Church. She ponders whether meeting in person might help the group to grow? “I think meeting face to face would be great more regularly. You know, even if it's once every couple of months or something to meet.” Freya shares this hope, “But, I mean, you know, if we were to meet even four times a year, we could have our own Eucharist.” This desire to meet more regularly in person and the desire to share communion might also be signs of sustainable growth.

Through exploring the stories gathered in the qualitative research, by reflecting on these stories using the golden threads and the framework discerned from the Kingdom parables we have told the story of Gin Church and explored sustainable church growth. We recognise growth and expansion in personal faith, the importance of hospitality, welcome and belonging. We also discover how faith becomes a leaven for the women, helping them share faith with families and in the workplace, transforming lives. We sense the beginning of ecclesial maturity in the desire for communion and the desire to serve others outside the Gin Church community. There is new life here: new relationships, new faith, new connections, new opportunities. There is missional curiosity, wondering about how Gin Church might grow. I would suggest that Gin Church is sustainable church growth.

## **Conclusion**

A conversation with Carlton Turner and his provocative statement about the economic model of church growth being an exploitative agenda, likening it to plantation slavery, inspired this research to explore an alternative model of church growth evaluation, based on two Kingdom parables from Matthew 13 and centred in a case study of Gin Church.

The Church of England's own Vision and Strategy sets measurable, numeric church growth at the heart of its agenda. My research has reacted against an economic model of church growth suggesting church growth is more complex than this capitalist framework implies.

Research questions helped frame the structure of my work. I asked if we reject a solely economic model, what might we offer as an alternative framework to recognise and evaluate church growth? I wanted to know what learning might come from exploring the story of Gin Church. These research questions helped me decide on a mixed methodology case study, using ethnographic and qualitative methods to tell the story of Gin Church and biblical reflection to suggest an alternative framework.

The literature review revealed voices who critiqued the economic and capitalist model of growth. I was not a lone voice in my concern and suspicion of the economic model. Some critiques of the economic model were very attractive, particularly those that focused on diversity and inclusion, a slower pace of growth and on God's agency rather than our own.

Other models were less attractive because they did not value the mixed ecology framework which our Beaminster experience suggests is integral to church growth.

The Gin Church stories revealed how this Fresh Expression provided a place of relationship, hospitality and inclusion. There was growth in faith that built personal confidence and enabled the women to have an impact in the world. Growth didn't always result in membership, giving or responsibility in a parish church. The stories didn't often describe God, using the word faith instead. But there was clearly growth in relationships, in curiosity and confidence about reading scripture, and in being open to exploring how faith might impact day to day lives. Discipleship was evident alongside ecclesial maturity and missional instinct. The expansive hospitable and messy growth of the mustard seed and the transforming growth of leaven was seen. Gin sisters reported feeling welcome, building relationships, deepening faith and acquiring tools to enable faith in others. Faith in turn encouraged them to serve outside the Gin Church community.

Of the sample of six women, only three would count in Mission statistics as attending on a Sunday. Yet all the women were able to attest to how faith had impacted their life. Growth also prompted the women to ask questions, describe the value of Eucharist, desire to see their Gin Church community grow, expand their reach beyond the centred set of Gin Church. They wanted to both reach out and invite others in. It is this missional desire that helps contribute to the sustainability of church growth.

Gin Church demonstrates sustainable growth. It grows on its own as a centred set but also as part of the wider mixed ecology of the Beaminster team. The mixed ecology contributes to sustainable growth through diversity. There is numeric growth, people with no previous church background attend this worshipping community. There has been growth in the depth of faith and an increase in confidence and curiosity. The Gin sisters' faith in turn impacts families, communities and workplaces making the growth sustainable. This growth also impacts me as the Gin Church convener, encouraging me that even in the depressing landscape of church decline and fragility there are still stories of growth and evidence of life transforming faith. God is at work. If I take the stories of Gin sisters seriously there is the possibility of change within the wider Beaminster team as they seek to live out their calling and vocations to serve others.

There are areas which could be a focus of further research. Three ideas spring from the mixed ecology context. Why doesn't church growth in a mixed ecology equate to a significant increase in income? Does an expansive idea of growth in a mixed ecology lead to the overstretching of resources? Do mixed ecologies sustain if the growth is predominantly centred in the fresh expressions and traditional church declines? Another area is around alternative methods of measuring and recognising Gods' growth in the church. How can we gather and tell stories of growth effectively to sit alongside our annual mission statistics? It would be useful to develop a model that is easy to use and captures something of the wider story of church growth. Finally, I am curious about the language the Gin sisters use. Is 'faith' a synonym for 'God'?

This dissertation acknowledges the need and desire for church growth. It seeks to recognise church growth without the punitive and discouraging framework of economic measures. Through the story of the mixed ecology, through analysis of the stories of Gin Church and by looking for the expansive hospitable growth of the mustard seed and the transforming growth of leaven in the women's accounts, I offer an alternative framework of celebrating growth. We can't exclude economic measuring entirely, but by telling stories focusing on expansion and transformation we might go some way to defeating the narrative of scarcity and fragility and offer glimmers of hope amidst a narrative of decline. I look for a "parity of esteem" (Olsworth-Peter, 2024) in how different ways of being church are valued and for a "parity of esteem" in how growth is measured. The economic measurement tells one story; a Kingdom framework narrative tells another one.

Alongside this alternative Kingdom framework of sustainable growth, we hold the understanding the small isn't necessarily a failure and death is not to be feared. We believe in a God of resurrection, of new life, of new beginnings. The only sustainable church growth we can hope to achieve is the growth that God brings. We are merely gardeners in his allotment. We plant the seeds. We knead in the leaven. And we watch for the glimpses of God's transformation and expansion.

Word count 16330

## Bibliography

Aisthorpe, S., 2020. *Rewilding the Church*. Edinburgh: St Andrew Press.

Aldous, B. 2019, diagram based on the work of LeCompt and Schensul 2013 Analysis and Interpretation of Ethnographic data: A Mixed Methods Approach. Plymouth: AltaMira Press

Aldous, B., 2022. *The God who walks slowly*. London: SCM Press.

Aldous, B.J. and Moynagh, M. (2021) 'Learning from "Fresh Expressions of Church" and the "Loving-First Cycle" through a Case Study from Cape Town', *Mission Studies*, 38(2), pp. 189–212. doi:10.1163/15733831-12341790.

Avis, P.D.L. (2024) 'Ecclesiology of the Local -- Supporting the Parish', *Ecclesiology*, 20(3), pp. 251–255. doi:10.1163/17455316-20030003.

Barrett, A., Harley, R., 2020. *Being interrupted* London: SCM Press.

Centre for Ageing Better, 2023. Our Ageing Population | The State of Ageing 2023-24  
<https://ageing-better.org.uk/our-ageing-population-state-ageing-2023-4> (accessed 10.10.24)

Cousland, J.R.C. (2023) 'Do "the Birds of Heaven" in the Parable of the Mustard Seed Represent Gentiles?', *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 85(1), pp. 53–74. Available at:  
<https://adminserver.sarum.ac.uk:2355/linkprocessor/plink?id=47c14933-0c60-3f99-bc06-ca69778a52d2> (Accessed: 21 April 2025).

Curtis, M., Sri, E., 2010. *The Gospel of Matthew*. Baker Publishing Group. VLE Books

Davison, A., Milbank, A., 2013. *For the Parish - A Critique of Fresh Expressions*. London, SCM Press, Common Award HUB.

Eames, K., 2023. *Statistics for Mission* <[www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2023-11/statisticsformission2022.pdf](http://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2023-11/statisticsformission2022.pdf)>

Felter, K. D., 2022. Chapter 36 Fieldwork and the Person of the Theologian in Ward, P., Tveit, K., (eds) 2022. *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Theology and Qualitative Research*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell.

Foster, S., 2016. *What Helps Disciples Grow*. St Peter's Saltley Trust Pdf  
<https://www.saltleytrust.org.uk/whdg/>. [Accessed 28.1.25]

Foulger, W., 2023. *Present in Every Place?* London: SCM Press

Francis-Deqhani, G., 2024. *Encouraging the Weary with a Word*. [online]  
<<https://www.savetheparish.com/2024/10/03/bishop-of-chelmsford-challenges-the-churchs-vision-and-strategy/#address>> [accessed 01/25]

Giselbrecht, R., 2016. 'Ethnographic Theology: An Inquiry into the Production of Theological Knowledge', *Ecclesial Practices*, 3(2), pp. 251–253. doi:10.1163/22144471-00302008-01.

Given, L.M., (ed) 2008. *The Sage Encyclopaedia of Qualitative Research Methods Volumes 1 and 2* London: Sage (pdf)

Goodhew, D., (ed) 2015. *Towards a theology of Church Growth*. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate

Hackney, R., 2023, Revised 2025, [online] .<https://www.cla.org.uk/news/the-rewards-of-dual-cropping/> (Accessed 18 June 2024)

Howes, L., 2019. *The Q Parables of the Mustard Seed and Leaven: Half-Baked and Garden-Variety Metaphors?*, *Neotestamentica*, 53(2), pp. 339–374. [online]



<<https://adminserver.sarum.ac.uk:2355/linkprocessor/plink?id=b0ad86bc-395f-37ed-8648-73a26d7156bc>> (Accessed: 7 April 2025).

Jeremiah, A 2021, 'Mixed-ecology church: why definitions matter' *The Church Times* .

<<https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2021/23-july/comment/opinion/mixed-ecology-church-why-definitions-matter>> (Accessed 21.5.25)

Jenkins, S., 2024. *The Church of England is panicking about declining congregations* [online]

<<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/oct/24/church-of-england-declining-congregations-councils>. (Accessed 10.1.25)

Kaufman, T S., 2022. Chapter 12 Practicing Reflexivity: Become aware of one's default mode and developing and epistemic advantage in Ward,P,, Tveiteried, K., (eds) 2022. *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Theology and Qualitative Research*. Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell.

Lawson, S. A. (2018). Identifying stressors among rural Church of England clergy with responsibility for three or more churches. *Rural Theology*, 16(2), 101–111.

doi:10.1080/14704994.2018.1519917 (Accessed 20.5.24)

Lawson, S.A., 2022. *Discipleship: The Experience in the Fragile Rural Church in England*. Rural Theology 2022 Vol. 20, No 1. 18-27

Lawson, S.A (2023). Revising the Marks of the Fragile Rural Church. *Rural Theology*, 21(1), 40–51. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14704994.2023.2179002> (Accessed 20.5.25)

Lings, G., 2020. *Seven Sacred Spaces*. Abingdon: BRF.

Linn,D., Linn, S F., Linn M., 1995. *Sleeping with Bread*. Mahwah: Paulist Press.

Mason, J., 2002. *Qualitative Researching*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Milbank, A., 2023. *The Once and Future Parish*. London, SCM Press.

Millbank, A., 2023 *Management and Mission: The Church of England is not a machine*[online] <<https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2023/27-october/features/features/management-and-mission-the-church-of-england-is-not-a-machine>> (Accessed 19.1.25)

Moschella. MC., 2023. *Ethnography as Pastoral Practice, An introduction*. 2nd edition. London: SCM Press

Mowat, H., 2022. Chapter 37 Interviews and Observation in Ward,P, Tveiteried, K., (eds) 2022. *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Theology and Qualitative Research*. Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell.

Moynagh, M., 2017. *Church in Life*. London: SCM Press. Common Awards HUB

Olsworth-Peter, E., 2024 . *Mixed Ecology: Inhabiting and integrated church*. London: SPCK

ONS. 2022. *Religion, England and Wales:Census 2021*

[online]<<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/bulletins/religionenglandandwales/census2021>> (accessed 9.2.25)

Percy, M. (2024) 'Leadership in the Church of England at a Time of Crisis: Toward a Deconstruction of Normativity', *Anglican Theological Review*, 106(4), pp. 453–475. doi:10.1177/00033286241292768.

Powell, M A., 2023. *Matthew: An Interpretation Bible Commentary*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press. [online] VLE Books.

Schwartz, S., 2003. *For Good*. Greydog Music .

Swinton, J., Moffat, H., 2006. *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*. London: SCM Press VLE Books

Talbert, C H., 2010. *Matthew (Paideia: Commentaries on New Testament)*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Publishing Group. [online] VLE Books.

Tönsing, G., 2023. 'Growth as the Greatest Good? A New Look at The Parables of the Mustard Seed and the Leaven', *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 175, pp. 56–72. [online] <<https://adminserver.sarum.ac.uk:2355/linkprocessor/plink?id=1a32a2f5-3fdb-3b24-8515-f8dc0990ae70>> (Accessed: 7 April 2025).

Tönsing, G. (2022) 'Growth or Contamination?: The Parables of the Mustard Seed and the Leaven and the Hidden Transcript', *Neotestamentica*, 56(1), pp. 165–187. Available at: <https://adminserver.sarum.ac.uk:2355/linkprocessor/plink?id=6dd8f8ab-a6ec-36ca-bad6-ca11645292cb> (Accessed: 21 April 2025).

Uytanlet, S L., 2017. *Matthew: A Pastoral and Contextual Commentary*. Langham Creative Projects. [online] VLE Books.

Watkins, C. and Shepherd, B. (2014) 'The challenge of "fresh expressions" to ecclesiology: reflections from the practice of Messy Church', *Ecclesial Practices*, 1(1), pp. 92–110. Available at: <https://adminserver.sarum.ac.uk:2355/linkprocessor/plink?id=b93cfd47-bf82-3dd1-af92-085e68b9ea20> (Accessed: 21 May 2025).

Virgen, A M. and Scharen, C.,(eds) 2024. *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics*. London: T and T Clarke.

Wainwright, E M., 2017. *Matthew: the basileia of the heavens is near at hand : an introduction and study guide*. London: Bloomsbury. [online] VLE Books

Ward, P and Tveit, K (eds) 2022 *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Theology and Qualitative Research*. Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell.

2014. *From Anecdote to Evidence* [online]

<[https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2019-](https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2019-06/from_anecdote_to_evidence_-_the_report.pdf)

06/from\_anecdote\_to\_evidence\_-\_the\_report.pdf> (Accessed 17.1.25)

2024 Vision and Strategy on Church of England website [online]

<<https://www.churchofengland.org/about/vision-and-strategy>> (Accessed 4.4.25)

<<https://theintegralmissionary.com/2018/centered-sets-vs-bounded-sets-40-years-later/>>

(Accessed March 2025)

<<https://gi.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/insights/AreaProfiles/Town/beamminster>> (Accessed March

2025)

<<https://cuf.org.uk/shinealight>> (Accessed March 2025)

<https://freshexpressions.org.uk/> Accessed 9.4.25

2004 Mission Shaped Church Church House Publishing

<https://researchmethodscommunity.sagepub.com/blog/case-study-methodology> (Accessed

10.4.25)

<https://www.facebook.com/BeamminsterTeam> (accessed 21.4.25)

bibliography 932