ROOTING THE PRACTICE OF EVANGELICAL PROTESTANT CHURCH PLANTING WITHIN A TRINITARIAN THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK:
WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO CREATION, CONTEXT AND COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

The University of Manchester
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Rooting the practice of evangelical Protestant church planting within a Trinitarian theological framework: with particular reference to creation, context and community.

2018

The purpose of this portfolio and thesis is to demonstrate the importance of theological reflection upon church planting practice, and by so doing, to resource and equip church planters to think in creative new ways in order to become more effective in missional engagement in forming new communities of faith. This motivation and exploration lies at the heart of each component and individual chapter.

The portfolio is comprised of three self contained and coherent pieces of work: a literature review which advocates that theological reflection is a developing concern for church planting, a publishable article that reflects on the nature of the gospel that underpins missional practice, and a research project which aimed to discover how different church planting tribes were engaging in theological reflection, and what issues and lessons were still needing to be learned and further explored.

The thesis, building on the work of the portfolio, gives an extended Trinitarian theological reflection upon church planting practice in relation to the themes of creation, context and community. It has attempted to intentionally reflect upon the missional practice of church planting through Trinitarian perspectives, in order that it may be more robust, enriched and rooted in God’s own life and story. Trinitarian perspectives on church planting are at best embryonic, and the renewal of interest in the doctrine of the Trinity has stimulated me to write a Trinitarian missiology for church planting that offers fresh theological insights and practical missional applications. Through dialoguing extensively with the Trinitarian creation theology of Jürgen Moltmann, the Trinitarian contextual missiology of Lesslie Newbigin and Timothy Tennent, and the Trinitarian ecclesiology of Miroslav Volf, Leonardo Boff and Catherine Mowry LaCugna, I believe their collective contributions have much to offer church planting today.
DECLARATION

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INTRODUCTION TO THE PORTFOLIO AND THESIS

This work is comprised of two parts. Part One – the portfolio – is made up of three sections: a literature review, a publishable article and a research project. Part Two – the thesis - draws on aspects of Part One, but articulates a self-contained, coherent argument. The overarching theme of exploration in this work is to review, evaluate, and develop the theological foundations of church planting to inform better praxis. This study is set within the field of Practical theology, processed through the methodology of theological reflection, and uses the primary method of critical conversations to offer original insights in its field of study. This includes a Trinitarian framework for church planting that is, according to Anderson, the necessary basis for all dimensions of Practical theology.¹ Trinitarian theology therefore becomes the “thick descriptor”² of reflective praxis that is explored in the thesis in Part Two.

I concur with Dale Little in his analysis that,

Writings on church planting seem to give only introductory or tangential attention to elucidating a theological foundation for church planting. At best it seems church planting is viewed primarily from a sociological or anthropological perspective, and at worst it seems to have been confined to thorough pragmatic analysis. In either scenario, church planting has been subject to only cursory theological study.³

This work is therefore aimed at moving beyond a cursory theological study to articulating robust theological perspectives that contribute to church planting praxis primarily within the context of an evangelical Protestant tradition, and more specifically, within the context of planting Didsbury Community Church, a new Nazarene congregation. This work is essentially an elongated piece of theological reflection that

² This is a common phrase found in the discipline of Practical theology, used in different ways, but refers to the deeper exploration of a theme or issue through a particular lens.
³ Dale Little, Church Planting Theology: http://itheology.net/cptheol/ [accessed August 1, 2016].
has informed and shaped both my own theological development and missional praxis, bringing personal and professional transformation through a hermeneutical journey of personal reflection and discovery.

1) Practical Theology: The relation between theology and practice

Catherine Love is correct in saying, “Practical theology is a contested area, subject to a variety of interpretations.”\(^4\) Indeed, depending on the interpretation of the practical theologian, Practical theology can serve as the general field or framework of studies in which any particular discipline is examined, be the methodological approach to the study of any practice based investigation, or be described as a method of theological enquiry.\(^5\) Swinton and Mowat are correct when they state there is a common tendency to use the terms Practical theology, methodology, and method, interchangeably, acknowledging the lines between Practical theology definitions, methodology and method are often thin and blurry.\(^6\) As Ballard and Pritchard note, “Practical theology is problematic. The growing interest in the field has raised questions about its nature and purpose, its form and methodology.”\(^7\) However, despite these challenges, at the heart of this discipline, and central to the nature of Practical theology, is the relation between praxis and theology.

Howard W. Stone and James O. Duke writing in *How To Think Theologically* advocate that all approaches to theological study need to embrace both the reality of lived experience and contextual realities (experiential praxis) and divine revelation

(theology rooted in the Christian scripture and tradition).\textsuperscript{8} Theological study may begin with either as a starting point and each has its merits, but also its risks. Experiential praxis, what Stone and Duke call the anthropological starting point, “acknowledges that Christian faith develops within the concrete, specific setting of human life…but anthropologically orientated theologians must be on their guard lest their views become governed more by their personal, social or cultural milieu than by the distinctiveness of the Christian message.”\textsuperscript{9} Revelatory theology, beginning with divine revelation as its starting point however, “has the merit of acknowledging that God’s message alone determines the character and content of an authentically Christian faith…but theologians working from the sources of revelation need to avoid the very real danger of confusing God’s revelation itself with their own fallible grasp of it,” and “they also clearly must set forth how it relates to the lives of people in the world of today.”\textsuperscript{10} This gives rise to two modes of theological thinking that are reflected in the relation between theology and practice, both of which are legitimate and indeed necessary, and are indeed intertwined.

The first, \textit{Sequential thinking} is linear cognitive information processing: A leads to B, B leads to C, and so on. The approach is perhaps most evident in approaches to applied theology in which systematic thinking moves to apply lessons learned from theoretically (theologically) based arguments and analysis whose implications are appropriated to particular life contexts.\textsuperscript{11} The second mode, \textit{Parallel synthetic thinking} brings into relation many different strands that form an overall picture. The key task is

\textsuperscript{9} Stone and Duke, \textit{How To Think Theologically}, 61.
\textsuperscript{10} Stone and Duke, \textit{How To Think Theologically}, 61.
to synthesise and interrelate different ideas and voices into overall concepts.\textsuperscript{12} Crucially, it is not restricted to a strict linear process, but fosters critical dialogue and conversation between different sources, weaving together different strands to form newly fused ideas or concepts. James Woodward and Stephen Pattison in embracing correlational approaches affirm that Practical theology is essentially a discipline “where religious belief and practice meets contemporary experiences, questions and actions and conducts a dialogue that is mutually enriching, intellectually critical and practically transforming.”\textsuperscript{13} In particular such dialogical approaches “might be taken to imply a more mutual, dialogical process than the simple application of theological truths and conclusions in practice.”\textsuperscript{14} Practical theology therefore is not also only concerned to explore the propositional, rational and deductive truths of life, but needs to make room for human life experience.\textsuperscript{15} As Ray Anderson states,

> In the postmodern paradigm the relation of theory to practice is no longer linear but is interactive. Theory is no longer regarded as a set of mental constructs that can exist independently of their embodiment in the physical, psychological and social structures of life. Theory and practice inform and influence each other in a such a way that all practice includes theory, and theory can only be discerned through practice.\textsuperscript{16}

This approach to Practical theology is the belief that doctrine is informed, shaped and even dictated by practice while exploring the very nature of that practice in the first place, and placing it through a theologically hermeneutical reflective process, in dialogue with other disciplines, with the aim of transforming the practitioner and practice. That is to say, that in both terms of process and outcome it aims to make a

\textsuperscript{12} Stone and Duke, \textit{How To Think Theologically}, 64.
\textsuperscript{16} Anderson, \textit{The Shape of Practical Theology}, 21.
difference to people, understandings, and situations in the contemporary world. As Woodhead and Pattison further suggest in their understanding of Practical theology,

Sometimes practical theology starts with ideas and examines their implications for practice. Sometimes it starts with practice and looks at how this might affect ideas and concepts. This kind of process might be thought about as a kind of conversation between theory, theology, and practice. In this conversation, all the conversation patterns are changed by the interaction which occurs.

This PhD therefore follows the parallel, synthetic, dialogical approach that is characteristic of much, though not all, Practical theology. It aims to relate theology and practice as complementary companions on the journey of discovery, or to use a different analogy, to form a dynamic dance together, creating movement in which either one may take the lead at any point, but never without the other. In this study therefore, theology and practice are interrelated throughout, dialoguing together continually and progressively, implicitly and explicitly, through intentional and rational argument, and yet also through reflective practice in which insight, learning and wisdom are assimilated more by a process akin to osmosis where seeping in the experiential practice of birthing a new church planting community that ran alongside the formal theological enquiry undertaken at Cliff College.

2) Methodology: Theological Reflection

Practical theology utilizes a variety of methodologies and a wide range of accompanying methods. It is deeply imbedded within a hermeneutical and interpretative paradigm of theological reflection. Theological reflection therefore lies at the heart of Practical theology and is concerned with hermeneutical processes that include dialogue with Biblical theology, the Christian tradition, life experience and

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context to transform and develop a more effective practice. Essentially this is a methodological process, often concretised through the deployment of models or methods of theological reflection, most of which build on variations of the pastoral cycle, influenced by Pastoral and Liberation theology, that interrelate practice and theory through a theologically reflective hermeneutic. Don Browning calls this a theory-laden practice that rules out “the widely held assumption that theory is distinct from practice.” Indeed for Browning, a fundamental Practical theology moves from present theory-laden practice to a retrieval of normative theory-laden practice to the creation of more critically held theory-laden practices through taking seriously practical thinking, wisdom, experience and understanding that is at the heart of every theological enterprise. Similarly, Elaine Graham has become a leading advocate for what she calls, “the turn to practice” in which Practical theology moves away from the mere application of theology to context, to ensuring that context and experience both converse with theology from the start. Theology is practical, but practice is also theological.

Through this dynamic process of dialogue with, and reflection upon, practice, context, experience, and sources, the reconstruction of practice is taken seriously in the light of theological encounter with aspects of Christian theology and tradition. Likewise, Stone and Duke advocate that at the heart of theological reflection is

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22 Browning, A Fundamental Practical Theology, 7-12.
intentional dialogue and conversation with others.\textsuperscript{25} The process of theological thinking is a perpetual conversation with others that “allows for an appreciation of diversity, healthy debate, and creative tension.”\textsuperscript{26} The purpose of theological reflection as a methodology therefore is to “discover how a theological perspective may illuminate, interrogate, and suggest alternative ways of acting, in a process that also sheds new light on that theological perspective.”\textsuperscript{27} It is not that social, cultural, psychological, and anthropological reflections are unimportant, for the interdisciplinary nature of Practical theology recognises insights and contributions from other fields of study, but rather that a renewed understanding of God’s nature and engagement in the world becomes the primary raison d’etre of theological reflection. James D. Whitehead and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead describe this as a “process of bringing to bear in the practical decisions of ministry the resources of the Christian faith.”\textsuperscript{28} Theological reflection concerns itself primarily therefore with a \textit{theological} analysis of practical issues, problems, and dilemma’s raised by contextual missional practice whilst conversing with theological sources, voices and perspectives.

This study has a central objective from the outset, namely to offer theological reflections upon the specific missional practice of church planting arising from the experience of planting a new missional community, Didsbury Community Church, within the evangelical Protestant tradition. Further, in the thesis it uses the ‘thick descriptor’” of Trinitarian theology in relation to the themes of creation, context and community, and dialogues with selected conversation partners with the aim of offering practical insights into church planting practice, both to the broader tradition, and to my

\textsuperscript{25} Stone and Duke, \textit{How To Think Theologically}, 65.  
\textsuperscript{26} Stone and Duke, \textit{How To Think Theologically}, 6.  
\textsuperscript{27} Thomson, \textit{The SCM Studyguide on Theological Reflection}, 27.  
\textsuperscript{28} Whitehead and Whitehead, \textit{Method in Ministry}, ix.
own context. This study is rooted in God’s missional engagement with the world and offers practical suggestions for ways in which the missional practice of church planting can be developed more intentionally, critically and practically. This elongated piece of theological reflection, cultivated in the experience and context of planting a new church, aims to speak back into practice, insights that have been gleaned along the way, whilst noting unanswered questions of practice that need further reflection and exploration.

3) Method: Critical Conversations

There are numerous methods in which Practical theology and theological reflection may be formed and practiced. Indeed, the task of the Practical theologian is to select from among the many tools available in the toolkit, the specific tools that will effectively complete the task. In this work the primary method I have deployed is that of critical conversations. Over the last twenty years Stephen Pattison, building on the work of correlation theories and models of theological reflection, has been one of the key voices in advocating the method of critical conversations to be an essential tool for Practical theology and theological reflection. In responding to what he considered abstract theories of theological reflection on practice, Pattison suggests deploying the method of critical conversation as a fairly simple way of trying to understand the complex relationship between life situations, theological analysis and engagement with

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other ideas and theories. Pattison suggests that “people who wish to engage in creative theological reflection might see themselves as being engaged in a three-way conversation or dialogue between their own ideas, beliefs, feelings, and perceptions; the beliefs, assumptions, and perceptions provided by the Christian tradition; and the contemporary situation which is being considered.” Each participant in this three way conversation will have questions to ask of the others and each will need to get to know the others through constant dialogue and interaction with one another. Pattison suggests that it may be helpful to personify these conversations and imagine them as people who come together to converse.

I have developed and utilized the characteristics of critical conversation outlined by Stephen Pattison’s method of critical conversation to my own work, and building on his advocacy for this model, I will briefly note the merits of such an approach. Critical engagement with other voices allows the identification of diverse starting points and perspectives and considerable energy and effort may have to be extended to try and understand the relevance or importance of another participant’s contribution. This model recognises therefore that the dialogue itself changes, often leading to new conversations and discoveries that need to be explored further. This further ensures that the participants in a conversation are also transformed, both by what they learn and by the process itself, through conversing critically with other participants. Although participants may end up seeing themselves and others from new angles and in a different light, this does not necessarily mean however that participants will end up agreeing at every point. Critical conversations will therefore help identify both commonalities, that is places where voices agree and converge, but they will also

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33 Pattison, “Some Straw for the Bricks,” 139.
identify gaps and missing voices that will need to be brought into the conversation to provide insight into what may be missing. Such conversations can be conducted at many different levels from that of preliminary conversation, to focussed conversations around a single or a series of conversations, and may take place over different periods of time, from a single or occasional conversation, to a more long-term dialogue. The long-term dialogue provides the potential for more complex and sophisticated engagement. Finally, critical conversations are based on questions of theological enquiry, that is questions that emerge in, and from, real life context and experience. The theological questioning that arises from an engagement with practice motivates and drives the practitioner to converse with sources that can help bring wisdom, insight and understanding to the situation.34

However, the method of critical conversations is not without its potential problems. Conversations may open more questions than they answer, and this may not lead to the construction of adequate theological responses to everyday life situations. Indeed, there is a risk that the conversation may reveal more about one’s own views and opinions than contribute more positively to the wider theological discussion. There is an equal concern that conversational approaches may not sufficiently be critical or theological and if reduced to a remote topic, there is a danger its contribution may have limited validity and relevance. Further, conversations may intentionally or inadvertently exclude key voices that impoverish the dialogue and its outcomes: “Limiting the circle of conversation partners in advance, whether due to prejudice or ignorance, is always the theologian’s loss. That makes it the church’s loss as well.”35

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34 Pattison, “Some Straw for the Bricks,” 139-141.
35 Stone and Duke, How To Think Theologically, 5-6.
The method of critical conversations has therefore both its merits and drawbacks but is adopted as the primary method in this research because it provides a unifying approach to the diversity of components comprised in the portfolio and thesis, and critically underpins, strengthens and demonstrates the dialogical nature of Practical theology I have advocated for in my approach and methodology. However, in responding to the challenges outlined above, I have sought therefore to explicitly offer theological responses and insights to the key issues raised in this work. I have also attempted to converse critically throughout and to ensure that there is sufficient theological analysis and evaluation. Further, although I have chosen to reflect theologically on church planting practice, I have resisted writing a church planting theology per se and related church planting to broader theological themes in order that it may have a wider reach and contribution beyond its own field. Finally, I have attempted to conduct critical conversations with voices that are beyond my own circle of friends and sphere of influence, and in the thesis have chosen a number of conversation partners that are beyond my own evangelical Protestant theological tradition to help broaden my own missional theology.

In this study the method of critical conversations is therefore demonstrated throughout. In Part One- the Portfolio, the literature review in Chapter One gives a comprehensive synopsis of church planting material, particularly in the United Kingdom from 1990-2008. The review converses and critically engages with the key voices, themes, traditions and contributions to the field that emerged out of the resurgence of church planting initiatives in this period. In the publishable article in Chapter Two, I address the question raised by Walter Klaiber, “How evangel-like is evangelism?” In response, through a critical conversation with the Synoptic Gospels, I offer theological perspectives on the nature of the gospel and its implications for missional practice. In
Chapter Three, I explore, through a research project, the nature, role and practice of theological reflection in church planting. Through qualitative interviews I have engaged in conversations with missional practitioners from various church planting traditions beyond my own denomination. Through these in-depth conversations, I have critically reflected on the dialogue, synthesised particular themes and issues that require further examination, with the aim of making praxis more effective. Further, I outline how the process of theological reflection throughout this study has challenged and transformed my own thinking and practice.

In Part Two- the thesis chapters, I have drawn upon different dialogue partners that do not always share the same Trinitarian perspectives or models. These dialogue partners, chosen because of their theological and contextual diversity, offer significant contributions to a shared theme. The similarities and differences are noted, critique is made where appropriate, and an attempt to synthesise shared concerns are made in the chapters that have more than one dialogue partner. I have attempted to create a Trinitarian framework for church planting in relation to the themes of creation, context and community that brings an overarching unity, without minimalizing or trivialising genuine and important differences.

In Chapter Four therefore, Trinity and Creation sets out to describe the current interest in the doctrines of God the Creator, creativity and church planting. By building upon embryonic themes that are suggested in church planting literature, I dialogue with Jürgen Moltmann as a critical conversation partner drawing on his Trinitarian creation theology which I argue offers further fruitful insights for church planting. In Chapter Five, in Trinity and Context, I briefly describe the purpose and nature of contextualisation and its importance to church planting before outlining Trinitarian approaches to contextualisation that point us in helpful directions for the development
of theological approaches to contextualisation. I converse with the Trinitarian contextual missiologies of Lesslie Newbigin and Timothy Tennent and through synthesising their work, I advocate for a Trinitarian framework for contextualisation with theological and practical implications for church planting. In Chapter Six, in Trinity and Community, I note the renewed interest in Trinitarian ecclesiology before exploring how these perspectives are beginning to shape and inform church planting theology and practice. Through a critical conversation with, and synthesis of, the Trinitarian ecclesiologies of Miroslav Volf, Leonardo Boff, and Catherine Murray LaCugna, I extrapolate theological and missional implications for church planting.

The study concludes by summarising the key themes and issues that have been explored through these critical conversations. I suggest avenues for further research in the light of the limitations of the research, before concluding with a brief doxological reflection.

4) Theological Reflection on Practice

Joseph Bush advocates reflective practitioners must wrestle with competing ideas and diverse voices, both internally and externally, so they foster ongoing personal learning and growth. This process will help the practitioner “understand himself or herself more authentically as a person and as a professional engaged in ministry with others.”36 This opens the possibilities for the reframing of one’s own perspective and practice beyond the confines of an uncritically held assumption or dogmatically held rigid theory. Bush contends,

such reframing of one’s own perspective opens us up to new possibilities of understanding and of action when confronting problems that initially seem insurmountable...for we all carry assumptions, which serve both as models of the world and as guides to action. These assumptions can actually narrow our

perceptions and our options unless they are opened for further critical reflection.\textsuperscript{37}

Elaine Graham calls this “the theology of the heart,”\textsuperscript{38} and although she recognises that inserting oneself into the narrative of Practical theology may go against the grain of much prevailing academic convention in certain circles as too subjective, she is also correct in noting it is now unusual for scholars to leave themselves off the page in the trend towards the contextual, situated and embedded nature of scholarship.\textsuperscript{39} Killen and De Beer similarly argue that reflecting on practice is a “movement toward insight and explains how we come to new understandings in our lives. Therefore, whether we muse over events intuitively and unself-consciously, or ponder situations deliberately and intently, we come to insights that invite us to fresh ways of perceiving and acting. Our musings and ponderings bring us to the meanings of our lives.\textsuperscript{40} Agreeing with Bush, Graham, Killen and De Beer, this study is therefore shaped by my own values, experiences, interests, passions, beliefs, and commitments that have informed the research in this professional doctorate. It may therefore be helpful to briefly outline my own autobiographical engagement with church planting as a reflective practitioner as this is formative to this study.

My personal engagement with church planting began in 1993 when I joined a new church planting team in Houston, Renfrewshire. New to church planting, and inadequately prepared for the task, over the next several years, I began a more intentional reflection on church planting in general, and my own church planting experience in particular. These reflections were to alter my entire thinking about the

\textsuperscript{37} Bush, \textit{Practical Theology}, 56, 175.
\textsuperscript{38} Elaine Graham, Heather Walton and Frances Ward, \textit{Theological Reflections: Methods}, Chapter One.
\textsuperscript{39} Graham, “The state of the art,” 175.
\textsuperscript{40} Patricia O’Connell Killen and John De Beer, \textit{The Art of Theological Reflection}, 46.
nature, purpose and practice of this missional activity, and have emerged as key issues to which I have subsequently grappled with:

1) The need to ground church planting in the missional story of God.

2) The need to integrate praxis and theology more intentionally in real life and ministry settings, and in formal contexts of theological education.

3) The need to create a strategic framework in which the importance of recruitment, assessment, training, coaching, mentoring, resourcing and deployment of church planters/pioneers was recognised.

4) The need to think both strategically and organically in planting new work.

5) The need to dialogue and engage with other missional agencies, denominations, theologians and practitioners that are also journeying with theological and practical issues in relation to church planting.

6) The need to personally and intentionally engage further in theological reflection on church planting as a practitioner and theological teacher, student and researcher.

In 2008 I left that new church to establish a Centre for Evangelism and Church Development, Momentum UK\(^{41}\) in Didsbury, Manchester, which combined teaching missional theology at Nazarene Theological College\(^{42}\) and local church resourcing, training and consultancy. This opened further opportunities to engage with, and reflect upon, church planting, and coincided with my enrolment on the PhD in Missiology at

\(^{41}\) www.facebook.com/ForwardMomentumUK [accessed December 3, 2017].
\(^{42}\) www.nazarene.ac.uk [accessed December 3, 2017].
Cliff College,\textsuperscript{43} and the pioneering and development of a new church in Didsbury in the same year. Consequently, a new church was planted in 2008 under the Church of the Nazarene umbrella,\textsuperscript{44} by a small group of people that had a shared interest in working missionally in the local neighbourhood in which they lived, worked or studied. The church, formally known as Didsbury Community Church of the Nazarene,\textsuperscript{45} forms the immediate context in which this present study has been developed. Therefore, as a lecturer, trainer, practitioner, and doctoral student, my interaction between missional theology, church planting and theological reflection have been central to my ministry and reflected in this work throughout. Perhaps this is demonstrated most clearly in the thesis, where at the end of each chapter, an example of personal theological reflection upon specific personal experiences of church planting are noted. These personal reflections on practice are not case studies,\textsuperscript{46} nor congregational studies,\textsuperscript{47} but are essentially examples of theological reflection on practice.

5) The ecclesial context: Didsbury Community Church of the Nazarene

There are two ecclesial contexts which underpin the setting in which this study has developed and in which theological reflection takes place. Firstly, the denominational ecclesial context that forms the broader theological tradition is The Church of the Nazarene, a Protestant Wesleyan Arminian evangelical denomination

\textsuperscript{43}www.cliffcollege.ac.uk [accessed December 3, 2017].
\textsuperscript{44}www.nazarene.org [accessed December 3, 2017].
\textsuperscript{45}www.facebook.com/Didsburycommunitychurch [accessed December 3, 2017].
that emerged from the 19th century Holiness movement.\textsuperscript{48} I am an ordained minister in this denomination and a church member for over 30 years, and conducted my pastoral training at British Isles Nazarene College\textsuperscript{49} from 1988-1993, receiving my Batchelors and Masters in Theology. The denomination has embraced the traditional markers of evangelicalism outlined by Bebbington that transcend any particular era or context, namely conversionism, biblicism, crucicentrism and activism.\textsuperscript{50} Growing up in the Nazarene denomination in Belfast, I was shaped by an even more stringent form of conservative evangelicalism that was formative in my early ministerial career, but this has continually been challenged and refined by ongoing theological reflection on practice through church planting in Scotland and England, and a wider engagement with the Christian tradition through ongoing theological studies, some of which are reflected in this work.\textsuperscript{51}

The Church of the Nazarene is doctrinally grounded in the theology of Jacobus Arminius, John and Charles Wesley, and the influence of American evangelicalism that emerged out of Pentecostalism and the Holiness movement.\textsuperscript{52} Along with these doctrinal influences, a bounded ethical code, originally called ‘The Special Rules’ was adopted as embodied social practices of holiness that Nazarenes were covenanted to

\textsuperscript{48} www.nazarene.org [accessed December 3, 2017].
\textsuperscript{49} Now called Nazarene Theological College.
\textsuperscript{50} David W. Bebbington, \textit{Evangelicals in Modern Britain: A history from the 1730’s-1980’s} (London: Routledge, 1988).
\textsuperscript{51} The engagement with aspects of Roman Catholic and Orthodox voices in this thesis are an example of conversations beyond my own tradition, that even today are not always welcomed in some of my own circles.
However, as the denomination has become a more global movement, now present in 162 World areas with 2.5 million members,\textsuperscript{54} the church has modified some of its bounded set of behavioural practices over successive generations whilst retaining a broadly conservative evangelical approach to moral, ethical and social issues.\textsuperscript{55}

The Church of the Nazarene has in recent years tried to simply its vision and purpose by embracing three essential values that are aimed to express its identity: \textit{Christian} (part of the church Universal proclaiming the Lordship of Jesus Christ and affirming the historic Trinitarian creeds and beliefs of the Christian faith),\textsuperscript{56} \textit{Holiness} (living a Christlike life witnessing to the life of salvation and sanctification),\textsuperscript{57} and \textit{Missional} (a sent people, responding to the call of Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit to go into all the world, and participating with God in the building of the Church and the extension of His kingdom).\textsuperscript{58} These values are expressed in many diverse ways across the different nations and cultures of the world, but form the basis of what constitutes a Nazarene congregation. Further, the Nazarene church is congregational in its polity and governance, whilst embracing the office of Elder through ordination as the ministerial leader of the local church. Each local church has a large degree of autonomy in terms of how it formulates and contextualises its local ministry so long as

\textsuperscript{53} These Rules are now called the Covenant of Christian Conduct and are found within the Nazarene Church Manual. They relate to a range of ethical and social behavioural positions. See www.cpnaz.com/hp_wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/Covenant-of-Christian-Conduct-1.pdf [accessed November 22nd, 2017].
\textsuperscript{54} See http://nmi.nazarene.org/10149/story.html [accessed November 22nd, 2017].
\textsuperscript{55} For example, the early rules prohibiting social activities such as non-cultural dancing, attendance at the cinema, and Sunday trading have been repealed, whereas traditional Christian positions on marriage and same sex relations have recently been upheld and reaffirmed, as has the founding principle of abstinence from alcohol. Not every member will accept the official church view on a range of issues, but the overwhelming majority of Nazarenes globally adhere to the covenant.
\textsuperscript{56} http://nazarene.org/we-are-christian-people [accessed November 22nd, 2017].
\textsuperscript{57} http://nazarene.org/we-are-holiness-people [accessed November 22nd, 2017].
\textsuperscript{58} http://nazarene.org/we-are-missional-people [accessed November 22nd, 2017].
it embraces the doctrine, values and covenant of the movement, and is not inconsistent with the church manual.\textsuperscript{59}

The second, and more immediate ecclesial context from which this study emerges, is the planting of Didsbury Community Church of the Nazarene which has been briefly aforementioned. It is not possible to describe in depth the seven-year process of church planting development that ran alongside these studies, but there are several significant ecclesial contextual issues that have shaped and informed this piece of theological reflection, and in grappling with them, have in turn led to new questions, discoveries and insights into church planting practice.

It was critical that the church planting initiative was underpinned by robust theological convictions and reflections. As a small Nazarene core team intuitively rooted in an evangelical activism, it was important to take time to cultivate a theological framework that would inform our understanding of God’s own missional engagement of the world. In time, and greatly aided by the Trinitarian conversations in this thesis, a Trinitarian framework emerged as foundational to the new work. Our church mission statement has come to express this deepening conviction, to become “a Christian community that exists to glorify God, enable people to become followers of Jesus, and empowered by the Spirit to transform the world around us.”\textsuperscript{60} Unpacking these theological implications for practical engagement in the community continues to be both our conviction and challenge.

We determined that our ecclesiology would be defined by a deeper understanding of community. As Congregationalists we already inherited a polity that encouraged local community formation, gathering and mission, but the lack of

\textsuperscript{59} For more substantial details on these issues see the Nazarene Church Manual, http://nazarene.org/files/docs/Manual2013-17.pdf [accessed November 22nd, 2017].

\textsuperscript{60} https://didsburycommunitychurch.co.uk/?page_id=37 [accessed November 22nd, 2017].
theological reflection on ecclesiology as a whole, led us to encounter, and embrace aspects of social Trinitarianism and an embryonic Trinitarian ecclesiology. These interactions are explored in this thesis and led us to cultivate and shape the church more intentionally around an upward, inward and outward life patterned after our understanding of the Triune God that is worshipped, communal, and missional. As our vision states, “We aim to be a Christian community shaped and balanced by an UPWARD relationship with God, an INWARD relationship with each other, and an OUTWARD relationship with others.”

We determined that if we wanted to be a local community church, we needed to emerge organically from within the immediate context in which we lived and served. Didsbury, located in South Manchester is our immediate context, and is an expanding and desirable leafy suburban village, noted for its restaurants, bars, café culture, independent retailers, and community festivals. Chief interests include leisure, entertainment, sport, music, health and beauty, and the value of education and schooling are reflected in the high achieving local primary and secondary schools. This is an expanding community, increasingly diverse and multicultural, and attracts many families and singles looking for a lively but peaceful place to live. Our desire is to be a local church “in the community, from the community, with the community, and for the community.” These convictions emerged through practical processes of discernment, listening, conversation and community research. The Trinitarian reflections on

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61 It was only in 1988 that an Article of Faith concerning the Church was added to the denominational statement of faith. This illustrated the relatively neglected, and underdeveloped ecclesial understanding of the ‘church’ in The Church of the Nazarene.
62 https://didsburycommunitychurch.co.uk/?page_id=37 [accessed November 22nd, 2017].
64 https://www.facebook.com/pg/Didsburycommunitychurch/about/?ref=page_internal [accessed November 22nd, 2017].
contextualisation that are explored in the thesis reflect the desire to grow and develop organically from within the soil of our context.

As we began to engage the local community, we did not know at that time, that we would ultimately form a community of communities. This developed organically, and creatively, as we aligned people’s passions and gifts with the opportunities God opened for us in the Didsbury community. At the time of writing there are six communities that have emerged in the last several years and below is a brief description of each community containing basic factual and statistical information.

a) The Y-Zone (A youth community)

This community has targeted young people from Year 7 to Year 11 drawing mainly from the two local High Schools, Parrs Wood High (non-denominational) and Barlow High School (Roman Catholic). It is a recreational social space that provides an alternative to both the youth uniform organisations in the community and the teen afterschool clubs formed around specific interests, e.g. drama, music, dance etc. The Y-Zone offers the only teen activity that provides a place for teens from across the community to gather for a less structured programme in which food, conversations, and friendships are cultivated, with an opportunity for children, should they wish, to explore questions of faith in the “Q Room”. The community was pioneered in the Summer of 2010 with 10 teens attending and peaked in 2011 with 30 children attending. The current Y-Zone community has 5 leaders, 20 regular participants, meets weekly on a Thursday evening from 6.30-8.00 p.m. with a mix of boys and girls from diverse social backgrounds, 75% of whom have no church connection.

b) Broad Oak: A community in a predominantly Muslim school
This community initiated in 2010 is located in the local Broad Oak Primary School in East Didsbury which is 70% Muslim and 30% other faiths (including Jewish, Buddhist, Sikh, Christian and those that of no faith). This community is comprised of three components. First, an after-school art club meets weekly on Monday during term time from 3.30-4.30 p.m. and is led by 3 leaders (2 from the church and the school arts teacher). It has an average of 12 children, none of whom are from Christian families and they explore a variety of art projects that support the work of the school and explore various themes, including faith-based art projects and discussion around the meaning and interpretation of religious ideas. Second, the Experience series, an Anglican resource that interactively tells the stories behind the major Christian festivals is staged four times a year with 7 leaders working with 90 children over a 3-hour morning session, to tell the Christian story to classes allocated on a rotational basis determined by the school. Third, the Broad Oak Action team, led by the church, brings together children, parents and friends of the school, twice a year, to work on projects to develop the school and improve the facilities. The families of the children that come to the after-school club and the Experience events are invited to participate with 30-50 people joining the Broad Oak Action Team. In December 2017 we had our first Christmas service held in the primary school with 60 people attending a family Christingle service, with 20 guests from the school participating, including the Head Teacher.

c) Costa: A café community

The church formed a partnership with the local Didsbury Costa in 2011 whereby it organises and hosts events in the café to gather people in various ways, benefiting the business of the café, and the missional purposes of the church. There are three main strands to this work. Live@Costa provides a blend of acoustic music, some of
which is popular and some Christian, once a month on Sunday afternoons from 4.00-5.00 p.m. during regular open times. The music set has an interval where a thought for the day called *Tune into Life* offers a Christian perspective on a life or topical issue. Between 30 and 50 people attend, some of whom are from the church, some our invited guests, and some that are present in the café shop and stay for the music. *A Coffee With* provides an opportunity for people to meet six times a year, on Tuesday evenings from 7.30-9.00 p.m. to enjoy coffee and conversations with an invited guest or organisation that showcases their work, e.g. *A Coffee with Mind, A Coffee with Shelter, A Coffee with Save the Children* etc. The persons and organisations that are invited to come are often charities present in the local community and have purposes that we consider are kingdom orientated. These evenings bring between 20 and 40 people. *Café Church* runs every six weeks and uses the materials from café church network to gather all the contacts we have made in Costa, and from our other ministries, into a more specific Christian community that includes embryonic forms of worship, stories of faith, conversation, prayer and a Bible reflection around topical themes. These normatively take place on Sunday afternoons from 4.00-5.00 p.m. and have an average of 30 people present with 50% having no other church connection.

d) Families Together (A community for parents with children at school)

Didsbury has many young families and in 2012 a family ministry was established with the aim of bringing together families from across the community. *Families Together* began as a Summer ministry with weekly games and activities provided in the Didsbury Park by volunteers from across our communities during the month of August. Across that first month we had 30 families participate and we decided that we would run a *Families Together* event once every two months that would offer a place for families to
meet, socialise, make new friends and begin to get to know more about us. From 2012-2015 we did this by running a varied range of events (e.g. picnics, concerts, games, trails, trips, craft events, shows, walks) and these were held in various public spaces with some very large attendances (250 people came to a Summer picnic) and some smaller (30 people came for a family walk). There were some families that came to most events and many that came to a few.

It was decided in 2016 that this “events based” work should be more intentionally developed as a faith community. With the birth and development of Messy Church across the country, it was agreed that we would experiment transitioning Families Together to this new form of church, and for the last year we have run Messy Church monthly on a Saturday morning from 11.00 a.m.-1:00 p.m. This has seen an average of 60 people come from all generations, including 40 guests that are not connected to our church. Some families have some connection to another faith community (children that attend the local Anglican or Roman Catholic schools), but many are not churched families. The format of craft, games, celebration and lunch has worked well, and Messy Church has provided consistency and faith exploration in a way that Families Together did not. A Summer review in 2018 will determine the future direction and development.

e) Didsbury Toddler Time (A parent and toddler community)

_Didsbury Toddler Time_ (DTT) was planned in September 2013 and launched in 2014 to respond to the growing number of parents with toddlers in Didsbury, and to further support and develop existing relationships with families at Families Together/Messy Church. As with all our communities we identified a small starting team, commissioned initial research, secured a venue, located the necessary resources, developed training and awareness, and promoted in the community through
various social media platforms and local advertising. DTT was launched as a weekly community on Friday mornings, 10.00 a.m.-11.30 a.m. and runs in block sessions matching the Manchester Council dates for local schools. The format is simple: welcome and drink, free play, snack time, free play and circle time in which toddler songs are sung, a brief story is read or told, and a final prayer is sung or said.

From the beginning DTT was, and continues to be, popular with most weeks at maximum capacity (25 children plus one parent, guardian or childminder). The community has a weekly average attendance of 50 including volunteers. Several parents book places for their child/children for the term (an option we provide), but most drop in weekly. A steady core group (50%) remains for 12-18 months, with new faces every few weeks, but with children taking up government funded places from the age of 3, and parents returning to work, change and turnover is inevitable. In the last 18 months DTT has also seen a turnover of volunteers and team leaders for various reasons, meaning this is a community that has required constant recruitment for staff volunteers and for parents with toddlers. In the last few months (Jan-March 2018) the team have tried to develop more intentional relationships outside of DTT, introduced a prayer box for prayer requests, taught the basic stories of Jesus, provided resources for parents from Care for the Family, and encouraged more intentional connections with Messy Church in particular, and these initiatives are proving to be successful in developing life and faith beyond the group.

f) The Gathering: A community to explore creative worship and deeper spirituality

In 2015 The Gathering was launched as a public worship service aimed at providing a place to explore creative worship and foster a deeper spirituality for those that were already committed Christians and for those that were interested in learning
more about Christian faith. This is also a place where anyone from any of the other communities can connect for faith development and gather with other people beyond their own community. From the outset the worship was set within a café style environment, used multimedia, fostered participation and sharing, and explored creative stories, art, craft and responses in various ways, and shares communion weekly, and an Agape meal each month. It meets on Sunday from 10.30 a.m-12.00 noon, has an average of 40 people in it (mostly made up of the leadership team, volunteers that lead the various communities, and some participants from each community are usually present). Most components of worship take place around tables, with table hosts facilitating the various components of worship. It is intentionally communal, informal, and participatory, but is aimed to be an authentic place that declares and demonstrates Christian faith, connecting Scripture and prayer with the stories and experiences of people in the world in which they inhabit. Visitors describe The Gathering as an extended family or a creative Sunday worship service. For many this is their ‘Sunday’ church, a place to be refuelled for life and ministry, and a place to renew and deepen faith and discipleship. Many of the people that come, and stay, have been dechurched and find in this community an expression of church that relates, but many visitors that have come have not found our Sunday expression, or the intimacy and participation it creates, as appealing as we have done. This relatively new community is perhaps the one that raises the most questions and issues in our life at DCC.

As noted, Didsbury Community Church of the Nazarene is a community of communities. This is not a common model for our denomination and filling in the traditional denominational reporting forms and statistics as the lead Elder has not been easy and has not always been understood. Questions such as, What size is the church?
How many members are there? How many people are converted, baptised, sanctified and so on are not straightforward questions for us to answer. However, we do report annually to our denominational District Assembly, and in the last two years we have taken 30 people into “official membership” of the Church of the Nazarene comprised of people that wanted to make this faith community their own community and who are willing to embrace or accept the doctrinal and ethical positions of the denomination. Further, we contribute as required, 10% of our annual £27,000 tithes and offerings to denominational funds.\(^\text{65}\) We have baptised 13 people by profession of faith in the last five years and our attendance across the communities monthly sees us reach approximately 180 different people on average. Each of the communities above have been initiated by small teams that have responded to demographical and geographical contextual factors and needs in the Didsbury community. Didsbury Community Church is therefore “ONE community made up of SEVERAL smaller communities and you will find these communities meeting in cafes, restaurants, homes, schools, and in other places serving men, women, youth, children, families and students through a variety of different activities.”\(^\text{66}\)

This study is therefore a work of Practical theology that intentionally interrelates theology and practice throughout, processed through the methodology of theological reflection, and uses the method of critical conversations to offer original theological insights for church planting practice by progressing a Trinitarian theology that finds expression and embodiment within a particular ecclesial context. It is to this study that I now turn by conversing critically with key voices, traditions and themes that emerge

\(^\text{65}\) This was the 2017 income of Didsbury Community Church.
\(^\text{66}\) See https://didsburycommunitychurch.co.uk [accessed November 22nd, 2017].
from the Church Planting literature review which serves as Chapter One, and first part of the Portfolio.
Chapter One

Church Planting Literature Review: January 1990-July 2008

1) Introduction

The dates of this literature review are not arbitrary, as it is evident that many of the significant books on church planting emerge in the UK context around 1990. This development does not take place within a vacuum but emerges from a mosaic of strands which provide the context for the literature. This review therefore begins by giving an overview of important antecedents, before critically conversing with the literature chronologically. It concludes by drawing out key themes and issues that require further research and reflection.

2) Important 1980s antecedents

The following antecedents briefly note some of the influences upon the subsequent proliferation of church planting literature that emerges in the 1990s and 2000s. Although not an exhaustive list, these reflect in my evaluation, the essential contributory factors that inform and shape the church planting texts that subsequently develop.

a) The Church Growth Movement

The church growth movement has been highly influential upon UK church planting literature. It is difficult to trace precisely how this movement began to have a significant impact upon the UK church, but I have identified three contributing factors that are noteworthy. First, several leading British churchmen were greatly influenced

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67 Although the review is dated until 2008, I engage in this review with subsequent literature that has a direct bearing on several of the key texts evaluated in this chapter. Other texts are also examined throughout this study, particularly in the thesis work.
by church growth classes led by Peter Wagner, and this in turn began to have a significant impact upon the church. Second, the Bible Society promoted church growth principles throughout the country in workshops, seminars and conferences. Third, the formation of the British Church Growth Association and MARC Europe were important contributors to the influence of church growth upon the Christian church in the UK, not least through the publication of books and other forms of literature.

In my summation of reviewing the church planting literature from 1990 onwards, even those books which are critical of the church growth movement, nonetheless continue to engage with the ongoing influence of church growth thinking upon church planting. On reflecting on church planting from 1990-2010, Lings and Murray confirm that church growth theory was paramount in these decades, but its influence was now waning. Although I agree with this general trajectory, nonetheless aspects of church growth theory continue to be evident and endorsed in church planting literature. For example, the endorsement and deployment of the Homogenous Unit Principle (HUP) is advocated as a creation principle in the launch of Mission-shaped Church, is reaffirmed in Church for Every Context, and is demonstrated through the birthing of homogeneous subcultural churches in the Fresh Expressions of Church movement.

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68 Among those in attendance at Fuller Seminary were Philip Walker and Eddie Gibbs: Walker formerly of The British Church Growth Association and now director of Healthy Church UK. http://www.healthychurch.co.uk [accessed June 8, 2008]. Eddie Gibbs, I Believe in Church Growth (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1981); Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger, Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005).
70 Examples include: Monica Hill, ed. How to Plant Churches (London, MARC Europe, 1984); John Richardson, Ten Rural Churches (Eastbourne: Kingsway Publications MARC, 1988); Roger Forster, Ten New Churches (Bromley: MARC Europe, 1986).
71 George Lings and Stuart Murray, Church planting in the UK since 2000: Reviewing the first decade (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2012), 4.
74 See examples of homogenous forms of church at https://freshexpressions.org.uk/guide-me/examples-of-fresh-expressions [accessed December 14th, 2017].
Church growth theory continues to exert influence upon church planting practice and I critically converse with this at various junctures in this review and throughout this work.

b) DAWN (Challenge 2000)

The emergence of the DAWN Movement inspired by Jim Montgomery,75 called for saturation church planting across the nations with the aim of Discipling A Whole Nation (DAWN). This would be achieved by the DAWN 12-point strategy much of which reflected the theories and strategies of the church growth movement.76 In the UK, national consultations took place in 1992 (Birmingham) and in 1995 (Nottingham), and as a result, a target of planting around 20,000 new churches in the UK by the year 2000 was agreed.77 Many leading denominations including The Church of England, Methodist, Elim, Baptist, Salvation Army, Assemblies of God, and others, took the call very seriously.78 However, as we will explore in more detail later, the DAWN initiative floundered, as church planting ran into serious difficulties. This led to the suspension of church planting initiatives in some denominations, a critique of Montgomery’s pragmatic church planting methodologies and a serious concern at the lack of robust theological perspectives that undergirded the movement.

c) Spurgeon’s College and Oasis79

The Baptist Union, partly because of new interest in church planting, and a desire to see the reversal of the decline in UK Baptist churches, began to form networks of church planters for the 1990s. In partnership with Oasis, and through the notable

76 Montgomery, Dawn, 97-171.
78 Lings and Murray, Past, Present and Future, 5-13.
involvement of Steve Chalke in evangelism ministries, especially his Frontline teams, and Spurgeon’s College new diploma in church planting and evangelism in 1989, a new interest in church planting in Baptist circles was fostered. This would pave the way for emerging Baptist voices to contribute significantly to church planting theology and practice in subsequent years, most notably Stuart Murray, Stuart Christine and Juliet Kilpin.

d) The Apostolic Networks

Several new apostolic networks emerged in the 1970s as part of the new church restoration movement, including Vineyard, Ichthus, Harvestime, Pioneer, and Newfrontiers. These evangelical and charismatic networks were catalytic, and the pioneering of new churches was integral to their apostolic expression of mission and ministry. John Wimber, heavily steeped in church growth theory, upon leaving the Church Growth Institute at Fuller Seminary, went on to form the Vineyard movement in the United States. Encounters with Fuller missiologists Donald McGavran and Peter Wagner, missionaries and international students, gave Wimber credible evidence for combining evangelism with healing and prophecy. Through the influence of signs and wonders, the Toronto blessing, the Kansas City prophets, its music, and Wimber’s own personal influence, Vineyard churches were planted across the world, including many

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81 All three are contributors to church planting literature, especially Murray who has become a significant influence in the UK and beyond.
84 Wimber was asked to lead the Fuller Institute of Evangelism and Church Growth by Peter Wagner in 1975, http://www.vineyardchurches.org.uk/about/john-wimber/ [accessed June 15, 2016].
in the UK. *Ichthus* Christian Fellowship began in 1974 under the leadership of Roger Forster, and it began with the mandate to “evangelise London and the nations by planting churches of Christ-exalting, bible loving believers committed to the Lord Jesus, to His mission and to one another.” By 1982 the church planting movement had grown from 14 people to around 400, and two new congregations were planted. Further new congregations were established across London, Essex and Kent. *Harvestime*, led by Bryn Jones fostered a restoration church planting movement focusing on what he believed was God’s original plan for the church, namely the manifestation and exercise of the gifts of the Spirit, and the practice of the fivefold ministries of Ephesians 4. Consequently, several churches were planted throughout the UK, as well as other ministries in the United States, Zambia, Zimbabwe, South Africa, India, Sri Lanka, Norway, Germany, Switzerland and France. Large conferences developed, and thousands of people were commissioned globally with the message of restoration and renewal. *Pioneer* was founded by Gerald Coates in 1986 to establish and develop new churches across the UK and engage in global mission. It was an evangelical, charismatic and restorationist movement which contributed to innovative evangelism, and through it several new churches were developed. *Newfrontiers*, led by Terry Virgo was arguably the foremost influential apostolic network that contributed to church planting in the UK in the 1980s and beyond. It traces its embryonic beginning to the early days of the charismatic renewal movement in the UK in the late 1960s and early 1970s and became part of the restoration groups of churches. *Newfrontiers* embraced

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the pioneering of new churches, initially in the South East of England but quickly became an international church planting movement.\textsuperscript{89}

The Apostolic networks embraced church planting passionately as an expression of their charismatic evangelical conviction that God’s rule was breaking in through the ministry of the Spirit in new waves and establishing his kingdom in anticipation of the “last days” before Christ’s return. Shaped by a largely premillennial eschatological worldview, these movements were driven with a passion and urgency for preaching the gospel, the priority of evangelism, and the demonstration of the power of the Spirit as signs of God’s restorative kingdom.\textsuperscript{90}

e) Anglican Initiatives

In the 1980s a rise in new Anglican churches resulted in the first Anglican church planting conferences.\textsuperscript{91} Mary and Bob Hopkins and Holy Trinity Brompton led the way and Anglican church planting would move from the fringe to the centre of discussion in subsequent decades. The appointment of George Carey as Archbishop of Canterbury, and his personal endorsement of church planting, were significant factors that would lead to many Anglican initiatives and ultimately to the landmark \textit{Breaking New Ground}\textsuperscript{92} and \textit{Mission-Shaped Church}\textsuperscript{93} reports that would become significant contributions to church planting discussion in the UK, and birth Fresh Expressions of Church. The evangelical wing in the Anglican church has been the catalyst for church planting and their voice is prominent in the literature and in many current initiatives.

\textsuperscript{89} https://newfrontierstogether.org/about-us/our-history [accessed March 8th, 2017].

\textsuperscript{90} William K. Kay, \textit{Apostolic Networks in Britain: New Ways of being Church} (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007), 241-260.

\textsuperscript{91} In 1987 Bob and Mary Hopkins pioneered Anglican Church Planting Initiatives which led to several church planting conferences hosted by Sandy Millar at Holy Trinity Brompton (1987, 1988 and 1989, and thereafter every two years).

\textsuperscript{92} See page 53.

\textsuperscript{93} See page 67.
f) Decade of Evangelism

John Paul II was the first to call for a decade-long thrust in Christian mission in *Evangelisation 2000*, and the Decade of Evangelism was the Anglican response in the United Kingdom, tentatively supported by the Lambeth Conference (1988), but warmly endorsed by mainline evangelical denominations. Building upon previous missional reports the watershed call to usher in a Decade of Evangelism was published in the *Truth Shall Set You Free*. The Lambeth Conference helped to underline the intentional move away from an attitude of church maintenance, to one of church mission, throughout the Anglican Communion. This call would permeate church planting practice and literature in the 1990s, and many of the authors will refer to the importance of this initiative as an influence upon church planting in the UK. Unlike the DAWN initiative, the Decade of Evangelism, although equally rooted in a call for evangelisation, did not follow a particular methodological approach, nor adopt quantitative goals or statistical mechanisms for measuring church growth indicators. It rather cultivated a more generic approach to evangelism that enabled Roman Catholics and Protestants from many diverse traditions to participate in varied initiatives, of which church planting was one. Church planting is an important missional strategy, but not the only one, and retrospectively we can trace the emergence of several significant evangelistic ministries in the 1990s from this initiative.

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The importance of these 1980s antecedents cannot be overstated. Most of the church planting literature that is written from 1990 onwards emerges from this mosaic of strands, paving the way for a more theologically informed and reflective practice, as church planting moved into the new millennium.

3) A chronological approach

I have taken a chronological approach to the literature review. This helps present the material in a progressive timeline but also recognises that many of the books come out of a response to a previous work or reflect an ecclesial or missional developmental journey. I will focus on the primary texts, determined by their influence and impact on subsequent work, identify the significant voices and the major theological traditions reflected, and note the key contributions to the literature each work brings. As I converse with the literature I will also offer critical evaluation throughout, before bringing the review to a final summation.

a) Wagner: The advocate and the prototype

In 1990 Charles Peter Wagner wrote *Church Planting for a greater harvest* to make available the principles of church planting he had taught in his Fuller church planting classes.97 This became the classic church growth book on church planting as it advocated the importance of church planting as the key strategy that would produce the greatest harvest (growth) for the church. The book is unapologetic in advocating that church planting is critical to produce church growth: "Planting new churches is the most effective evangelistic methodology known under heaven."98 The basic premise of the book is simple: plant a church, reap a harvest. The influence of Wagner’s rationale

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98 Wagner, *Church Planting for a Greater Harvest*, 11.
and philosophy is evident in subsequent literature particularly as church planting became the key strategy to fulfil the evangelistic mandate of the DAWN and Decade of Evangelism initiatives, and the mantra is still significant in church planting movements such as Acts 29, where Timothy Keller drawing on Wagner, advocates the same basic principles, albeit with a greater awareness of the importance of contextual factors, “The continual planting of new congregations is the most crucial strategy for the growth of the body of Christ.”

The problem with this book however, and the ideology behind it, is that church planting can easily become an end in itself, rather than a consequential response to the gospel, and church growth becomes the primary motivation and goal. Further, I believe the absence of theological foundations in this work reflects the general criticism of church growth theory that it is tends to be more anthropologically centered than theologically centered, and the primary methodological emphasis is in danger of reducing mission to conversionism. Undoubtedly Wagner’s work drew attention to the importance of church planting as an effective missional strategy, and the book became a prototype for subsequent church planting books in both North America and in the United Kingdom, but its weaknesses on community formation, discipleship and sustainability are glaringly evident. It is not coincidental that the emphasis on discipleship movements, sustainability and spiritual formation are among the important issues that have led to the recent emphasis on church health that is a welcome corrective to church growth.

100 In Chapter Three, “Essentials for Planning,” Wagner devotes six pages to two spiritual aspects of planning that need to be developed for the church planting task, namely prayer and spiritual warfare, Church Planting for a Greater Harvest, 44-50. However, these preparatory aspects of discipleship are the only features of discipleship noted in the book and no consideration is given to life beyond the public launch of the church.
101 I have written several lecturers and seminars on this topic and this has been developed into a module at Nazarene Theological College entitled Growing Healthy Churches. For a useful introduction
b) Early Anglican contributions

In 1991 two church planting books were written from within the Anglican tradition as early contributions on the topic. *Church Planting: Our Future Hope* was written by Charlie Cleverly, a charismatic Anglican influenced by church growth theory, and the Ichthus movement. The book reflects a restoration theology and ecclesiology, offering default principles of church planting from the book of Acts. The book reflects the growing charismatic influence within Anglicanism, and its endorsement of church planting as a legitimate strategy for church growth. This work therefore acknowledges the importance of the Apostolic movements noted in the 1980s antecedents and raises a number of theological and biblical issues that need to be further reflected upon including pneumatology and mission, the relation between mission, kingdom and church, and the biblical basis for missional ecclesiology including the role of Acts within this. These are issues that I address below in more detail and return to at various points within this entire work.

*Planting New Churches*, forwarded by Bob Hopkins, and written by George Carey covers a variety of themes and argues that church planting needs to be recognised as a legitimate and key evangelistic strategy, and not just a fringe activity in Anglicanism. The book aims to highlight practical examples of church planting in

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104 The foreword is written by Roger Forster, leader of Ichthus.
105 Charismatic and Restoration churches tend to see Acts as the critical text in their Biblical ecclesiology. The eschatological promise in Joel 2 v 28-32 is fulfilled in Acts 2, and the arrival of the kingdom, Holy Spirit and last days are evidence of this. The church is born because of God’s inbreaking reign and is itself a fulfilment of God’s purposes for his covenant people. The book of Acts reflects the community that God is restoring and therefore Restoration churches must be rooted in this narrative.
different parishes to illustrate a range of possible church planting models, and the importance of church planting as an evangelistic strategy. Although most of the chapters present case studies, the last section, “Church Planting — the wider view,” addresses several issues pertinent to Anglican church planting: statistics, theological training, preparing to plant, rural church planting, and the origin and future of parish structures. The book is offered as a timely contribution to the Decade of Evangelism and has strong evangelical and church growth overtones but offers a brief theology of church planting as part of its contribution. However, this fails to root church planting in any robust theological framework. Indeed, his brief theological section is purely descriptive of how the parish system is a good historical example of incarnational ministry and inculturation and suggests that where existing parishes are failing to reflect this, new churches may be needed. His suggestions for the way ahead are pragmatic: to foster cooperation between bishops in starting new work, to keep new plants in existing boundaries where possible, to mobilise everyone in evangelism, and to foster ecumenical conversations when new churches are proposed. Carey provides no actual theological basis or rationale for any of these strategies, and despite what the section is called, it offers very little theological content at all. This is a significant weakness across much church planting material in the early years of this literature review, and although there is improvement in the latter years, I will advocate that much more needs to be done to develop theological foundations for this missional practice.

c) Theology of the kingdom of God and church planting.

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107 “Many of the stories and principles shared here can apply to any church that wants to be more effective in evangelism and growth.” Carey, Planting New Churches, 9. The book also includes an Appendix (A) on the DAWN movement, 229.
Undoubtedly the two most significant works that appeared in 1992 were *Planting Tomorrow’s Churches Today* by Martin Robinson and Stuart Christine,\(^{109}\) and *Radical Church Planting* by Roger Ellis and Roger Mitchell.\(^ {110}\)

*Planting Tomorrow’s Churches Today* is heavily influenced by the church growth movement, the planting of new churches, and the reversal of the decline in British church life.\(^ {111}\) The book is forwarded by Steve Chalke and Oasis (a partner at Spurgeon’s College) and alludes strongly to the DAWN Initiative (Challenge 2000). The book is arguably the first substantial work on church planting in the UK that addresses several important church planting issues in depth. Of significance is the call for church planting to be built on strong theological foundations. Sharing echoes of Shenk and Stutzman in *Creating Communities of the Kingdom*,\(^ {112}\) the book calls for church planting to be rooted in God and his mission to the world, with the kingdom of God paramount as the context in which church planting should be placed.\(^ {113}\)

The book argues that there is a need for missionary congregations to take seriously cultural and contextual factors so that replicating existing churches (cloning) does not occur. Indeed, this is the first church planting book in the UK which devotes a chapter to the importance of cross-cultural planting,\(^ {114}\) for “the task of spreading the gospel across cultural boundaries remains one of the greatest challenges currently facing the UK church.”\(^ {115}\) It also includes a historical perspective\(^ {116}\) which aims to root


\(^{111}\) This is particularly evident in “The Impetus of Church Growth” in Robinson and Christine, *Planting Tomorrow’s Churches*, Chapter Four.

\(^{112}\) Shenk and Stutzman in *Creating Communities of the Kingdom* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1988).


\(^{114}\) Robinson and Christine, *Planting Tomorrow’s Churches*, Chapter Eight, “Planting Across Cultural Boundaries.”

\(^{115}\) Robinson and Christine, *Planting Tomorrow’s Churches*, 181.

church planting within a historical framework from the early stages of the
Christianisation of pagan Europe, through to contemporary church planting
movements. As Robinson says, “Church planting has been both an issue and a
practical reality at other times in church history and this more ancient inheritance
inevitably influences all that we do today.”117

Unlike previous church planting works therefore, Robinson and Christine
attempt to place church planting within a wider context offering foundational biblical,
thological, and historical perspectives in addressing the ‘why?’ and ‘what?’ of church
planting. These foundations, although basic and helpful, are however, somewhat
preliminary to the main concern, to provide a handbook for practitioners in learning
‘how?’ to start new churches in order that mission expansion might take place and the
church might grow. Nonetheless, in recognising the potential of these foundational
themes for church planting, Stuart Murray in Church Planting: Laying Foundations118
will revisit and redevelop these themes somewhat more substantially. Further,
Robinson will acknowledge in his own subsequent church planting writing,119 that too
much church planting in the 1990s was driven by unrealistic church growth goals and
not enough consideration of sustaining churches beyond their birth.120

Radical Church Planting calls for church planting to be done “in the Jesus
way.”121 The Jesus way brings together “an embryonic leadership team with whom he
travelled…to whom he taught the principles of his kingdom on the job, and who were
effectively the first expression of his church.”122 This book is unique in that it primarily

117 Robinson and Christine, Planting Tomorrow’s Churches, 59.
119 This is particularly the case in Martin Robinson, Planting Mission-Shaped Churches Today (Oxford: Monarch, 2006).
120 Martin Robinson, Planting Mission-Shaped Churches, 21-29.
121 Ellis and Mitchell, Radical Church Planting, 1.
122 Ellis and Mitchell, Radical Church Planting, 2.
relates church planting to the radical life, teaching and ministry of Jesus, and the centrality of his message about the kingdom of God. Although there are church planting models and principles advocated from Biblical material other than Gospels, the authors argue that these are first expressed in the life and ministry of Jesus. Further, Ellis and Mitchell unlike most church planting writers, do not appeal to the Great Commission (Matthew 28:6-20) but to the Petrine confession (Matthew 16:13-20), as the primary basis for the mission of the church. They argue that Jesus’ words to Peter are definitive of what the church is (a community of faith formed by the confession of Jesus as Messiah), and what the church is for (unlocking the kingdom of God). They summarise their argument by commenting, “the church is…based on revelation and progressive discipleship, and...for displacing the powers of death and unlocking the kingdom of God.” The authors therefore examine various aspects of the kingdom of God demonstrated in the Jesus model, especially the themes of proclamation, the demonstration of the power of God, righteousness, justice and reconciliation. The Jesus model emphasises the three-fold balance of kingdom life and ministry (Words, Works and Wonders) as a pattern for the new communities of Jesus. The characteristics of the Jesus way, especially humility and servanthood, are to be embraced. The importance of spiritual warfare in church planting is a further important feature of this work. Accordingly, they outline practical ways to deal with personal and social satanic strongholds, and here the influence of John Wimber, Peter Wagner and the charismatic movement is notable.

123 Many church planting books treat the Great Commission as the basis for church planting. This is not without its own problems. As Stuart Murray notes, “Attempts to derive a biblical basis for church planting from the Great Commission are disadvantaged by the fact that there is no explicit mention of the church in this famous passage.” Stuart Murray, Laying Foundations (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1998), 55.
124 Ellis and Mitchell, Radical Church Planting, 3.
125 Ellis and Mitchell, Radical Church Planting, 3.
Ellis and Mitchell argue that church planting must have Jesus models and principles but do not need to have any fixed blueprint or model for what this might look like in any context today. It is interesting that in certain North American Protestant evangelical books on church planting, typified by Ed Stetzer, a leading protagonist of church planting, there is a tendency to advocate a particular Biblical model or blueprint for church planting based on specific Scriptural texts and again usually from the book of Acts. The different approaches to how the Biblical material is treated by different church planting writers, may reflect somewhat, the theological approach to Scripture that they take and the traditions they belong to. Observationally, I have noted that authors that come from conservative evangelical traditions tend to look more for Biblical blueprints for church planting, than those that do not come from conservative evangelical traditions. Perhaps this indicates a view of the place, role and inspiration of Scripture that underlies the use of Scripture in different church traditions.

A further critique that is appropriate to mention at this juncture, and illustrated in this work, is the way in which Biblical passages are frequently used by church planting writers. Most evangelical writers certainly want to appeal to Scripture for a legitimate basis for their planting principles and strategies, but frequently the texts that are selected are not exegeted within their immediate or literary context but extrapolated without any serious attempt at exegesis. At best therefore, much church planting literature appeals to particular biblical passages with a generic commentary, but at

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127 Conservative Evangelicalism is a term used in Britain to describe a theological movement found within Evangelical Protestant Christianity that particularly emphasises the inspiration of Scripture and the centrality of the atonement. Anglican examples include the Church Society, Reform, and Anglican Mission in England, and evangelical movements such as the Evangelical Alliance, Lausanne and the Keswick convention. For further information see Oliver R. Barclay, *Evangelicalism in Britain 1935-1995: A Personal Sketch* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1997).
128 For more on the use of Scripture in Church Planting see Stuart Murray, *Laying Foundations*, 62-86.
worst the literature uses the Bible as a series of indicative proof texts. Church planting that appeals to biblical foundations therefore needs to converse more widely and deeply with the texts upon which these foundations are claimed as authoritative.

Ellis and Mitchell however, do not make a convincing argument that planting churches is explicitly consequential as the primary strategy in the Jesus way of mission. This is problematic for three reasons. First, they base their argument solely on Jesus’ two citations of ‘church’ in the Matthean gospel (Matt. 16 v 18; 18 v 17) that they advocate are the prototype for subsequent church planting in the New Testament, and indeed the basis for planting churches today. Leaving aside the debate as to whether these words are authentically from the lips of Jesus himself, and if so, what they actually mean in the light of the subsequent Matthean tradition, ecclesiastical formation is not the primary concern of Jesus’ mission, and church planting per se is not advocated explicitly in the teaching of Christ in this or any other gospel passage. Second, and related, although there is legitimacy in advocating missional principles from Jesus and the gospel that may shape and inform church planting, to imply that the Epistles in themselves are not foundational (or are at least secondary) for missional ecclesiology and church planting is unconvincing given the story and theology of the early church that originates and is embodied there. Third, Ellis’ and Mitchell’s embracement of house

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129 Ellis and Mitchell in each section of their book appeal to Biblical foundations for their arguments and cite numerous passages of Scripture to demonstrate this. However, none are exegeted within the context from which they are taken, and many are cited without any comment at all. For a representative example of their use of Scripture see 13-27, 29-40. See also Carey, Planting New Churches, 27-28; David Stroud, Planting Churches: Changing Communities (Milton Keynes: Authentic Media, 2009), 218-223, 229, 241-246, 251-254; Peter Nodding, Local Church Planting (London: HarperCollins Publishers), 21-38; Ron Sylvia, Starting High Definition Churches (Ocala, FL: High Definition Resources, 2004), 36, 78, 101, 175.

130 Their primary argument is stated in Chapter One, “Upon this Rock,” 1-12.

churches and church multiplication movements that emerge from their understanding of mission in the Jesus way become the default for their understanding of the nature and purpose of church to the neglect of other ecclesial possibilities. Although there is a case to be made in their critique of unwieldy church organisation, hierarchical leadership, and an appeal for informality and simpler reproducible forms of church, there is little room (and perhaps legitimacy) for other models, forms and expressions of church. However, the three-fold emphasis of Ellis and Mitchell on the importance of exponential church growth, identifying and embracing spiritual warfare, and advocating simpler forms of church continue to be championed in church planting circles today as necessary missional concerns.132

This work should be acknowledged as a significant contribution to church planting because of its engagement with the gospels and the life of Jesus. Much church planting material since has little direct connection with the gospel narrative and Jesus himself, and this concern has prompted Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch among others, to advocate extensively for a rediscovery of the importance of Jesus for church planting and mission.133 My own exploration of the evangel in conversation with the Synoptic gospels in Chapter Two is motivated in part by a similar concern, and is an attempt to extrapolate biblical perspectives on the nature of the Gospel that has implications for missional theology and practice.

132 See for example, Jeff Christopherson, Mac Lake and Ed Stetzer, Kingdom first: Starting churches that shape movements (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2015); Neil Cole, Organic Church (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2005); Dave Ferguson and Jon Ferguson, Exponential: How to accomplish the Jesus Mission (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013); Alan Hirsch, Dave Ferguson and Tom Parks, On the verge: A journey into the apostolic future of the church (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013).

e) Breaking new ground

In 1994 *Breaking New Ground* a report commissioned by the House of Bishops of the General Synod of the Church of England was published. The main issue discussed was the relatively rare problem of dealing with non authorised cross boundary church plants.\(^{134}\) The issue was addressed in the light of the endorsement of church planting in Anglican churches and the potential for more cross boundary plants to occur without permission. The report deals with the nature of church plants, illustrates where and how they occur, and gives examples of current practice. The primary significance of the report is its official sanction to church planting as a supplementary strategy to traditional parish ministry.\(^{135}\) The report therefore outlines what is, and what is not authorized, with suggested practical guidelines. Also noteworthy is that for the first time, the Anglican church gave official recognition to the DAWN movement.\(^{136}\)

Later in the same year, George Lings' work *New Ground in Church Planting* was published.\(^{137}\) Lings acknowledges that *Breaking New Ground* could have gone further and did not satisfy everyone, but recognises the report was a watershed moment in endorsing church planting as an important activity in the Church of England. He suggests the new tide of church planting, and their different expressions, might take the Anglican church in an interesting and uncertain direction. Although this work addresses the Church of England and its planting initiatives, it serves as an example and forerunner of the types of ecclesial issues (theological, political, structural, geographical and practical) that national and inherited churches need to address in

\(^{134}\) That is churches that were planted by one parish into an adjacent parish without permission.


\(^{136}\) Montgomery, *Discipling A Whole Nation*, 52-53.

\(^{137}\) George Lings, *New ground in church planting: A personal commentary on Breaking New Ground, the report commissioned by the House of Bishops on Church planting* (Bramcote: Grove Books, 1994).
preserving much loved inherited theology and traditions, whilst giving permission to initiate and create new ones. This ‘mixed economy’ will become a key issue in subsequent developments in Anglican church planting and is evaluated more fully later in this review.

f) Practical toolkits to equip the planter

Three church planting works were published between 1994-1995 with the purpose of equipping church planters to plant many of the new churches that had been advocated through the DAWN initiative and the Decade of Evangelism. In 1994 Local Church Planting: A practical handbook was written by Peter Nodding as a Baptist contribution to the field. It unapologetically states that, “this is a practical book giving details of how to plant,” and therefore covers a range of issues for practitioners. It is the first major book to tackle objections to church planting. Nodding raises five potential church planting objections that need to be addressed. First, strategically it might be argued that filling existing church buildings is a higher priority. Second, church planting will harm relationships with other churches. Third, church planting is perhaps a temporary trend that will be short lived. Fourth, one local church is easier to resource and maintain than planting a new one. Fifth, it might not work. Nodding acknowledges and briefly attempts to address each of these concerns. He argues that church is about people and not filling buildings, that the size of the missional challenge means that everyone has a role to play, that church history attests to the longevity of church planting and is likely to remain a necessity among so many unchurched people,

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138 Nodding, Local Church Planting.
139 Nodding, Local Church Planting, 1.
140 Practical issues covered are: “What makes a good church plant and church plant leader?” “Who is going to join the team?” “Team preparation and tasks,” “The role of prayer,” “Deciding where to plant,” “The model of mother/daughter,” and “Ongoing growth issues.”
141 Nodding, Local Church Planting, 16-20.
investment in new churches reflects the need to reach people beyond existing churches and living in faith necessitates that sometimes risks have to be taken. These responses are not developed or substantiated but Stuart Murray will respond to similar criticisms more thoroughly in *Laying Foundations*. Both works however recognise that church planting is not without its critics and is not the only missional practice that the church should endorse. Criticisms and objections must be taken seriously, and due consideration given as to whether church planting is the only, or indeed always the right strategy, in participating in the Missio Dei.

In 1995 Martin Robinson and David Spriggs wrote *Church Planting: The Training Manual* specifically as a practical resource to start some of the thousands of churches needed to fulfill the Challenge 2000 initiative. The manual offers various models and strategies of planting churches and deals with a range of practical tasks and skills that are needed in birthing and developing a new congregation. Like other works Robinson has written, it is influenced significantly by church growth principles and strategies, particularly saturation church planting which he contests will be the primary method by which the goals and objectives of Challenge 2000 will be realised.

*Enabling church planting* written by Bob Hopkins and Richard White is the third practical toolkit written in the mid 1990s as a further Anglican contribution to church planting. Building on the work of *Breaking New Ground* it is designed to help local parishes through the processes of planting a new church. The principal aim is to provide planting teams, and their leaders, with resources to generate discussion, and to aid

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144 The practical training set out to prepare people in how to plant a church, to choose a model to start a new church, to think through issues of development and growth, and to deal with issues of quality and quantity.
parish decisions in support of the vision of church planting. The material is drawn from some of the previously held Anglican church planting day conferences and is a practical, experience-based guide for the church planting process.

The significance of these ‘how to plant?’ contributions lies in the evangelical fervor and motivation behind them and the shared concern among the authors to equip and resource missional practitioners in forming new communities of faith to fulfil the mandate of the Great Commission, and to respond to the faith initiatives of Challenge 2000 and the Decade of Evangelism. The books offer practical skills on an array of church planting tasks and are given credibility by the experienced and seasoned church planting practitioners that write them. Whilst it is important to acknowledge the intention and purpose of the writing, and the practical help that training manuals brought, they contribute inadvertently to the more general failure to reflect on the types of churches that are being planted. They are practical handbooks that fail to relate the practice of church planting to any theological concerns. The lack of a more explicit and robust theological and biblical reflection within church planting across the evangelical Protestant denominations and associated movements is a consistent absence in much of the literature in the 1980s and 1990s. However, by the mid to late 1990s in the light of many church planting efforts that were running into serious difficulty, a period of critical evaluation and reflection began to emerge. This period of reflection is evidenced in the next series of church planting books that are published in the UK context in the following years.

146 For example, Nodding states the importance of laying foundations for church planting but there are no biblical or theological foundations noted, 38-54. Similarly, the work by Martin Robinson and David Spriggs, and Bob Hopkins and Richard White do not interrelate church planting practice with theological concerns.
g) Reflecting upon church planting practice in the 1990s

In contrast to the publication of many ‘how to?’ books published in the early and mid-1990s, the publication of *Church Planting: Laying Foundations* by Stuart Murray was arguably the most significant and comprehensive book on church planting to be published in the 1990s. The book builds on themes noted in previous church planting books, but states clearly that, “this book is not a training manual,” and attempts to “lay some theological foundations for church planting, to invite church planters to think seriously about missiology and ecclesiology, to reflect on their assumptions and expectations, and to take care that they lay strong foundations for the churches they are planting.” Undoubtedly influenced by the current difficulties being experienced in church planting, including the inadequacies (and excesses) of the church growth movement, the book advocates and demonstrates the importance of theological reflection. Murray says, “Church planting offers considerable scope for theological reflection. And church planting will need the stimulus of theological debate and the protection of a theological framework if it is to reach its potential.” The book aims therefore to provide a solid platform from which to understand the place of church planting in the mission of God and to cause others to think seriously about their own theological assumptions and expectations. Rather than dismissing church planting because of present difficulties, he advocates for laying better foundations to enable it. Murray begins by listening and responding to the criticisms of church planting before

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153 The three objections that Murray examines are: 1) There are enough churches in Britain already. We should concentrate on improving existing churches rather than planting new churches. 2) Church planting weakens the mission and ministry of the churches by dividing their resources and minimising their impact. 3) Church planting has become an end in itself rather than a means to an end. It has
suggesting a theological framework in which church planting might find its basis.\textsuperscript{154} He argues against a theology of church planting per se but encourages theological reflection on the church planting task from three broad theological themes, Missio Dei, Incarnation and the Kingdom of God.

Murray argues that church planting must be related to the prior mission of God and needs to move from a church centred missiology to a concern for the whole world. The broader scope of Missio Dei therefore must not be reduced to evangelism or church planting only, but actively engage all of life. Responding to criticisms of the church growth movement and its preoccupation with methodology, Murray argues that spirituality must not be marginalized in the church planting task.\textsuperscript{155} Patterned after the Incarnation, Murray argues that the life and ministry of Jesus is the primary source for understanding the mission of the church. The announcement of the good news must be central to this mission and is demonstrated through the proclamation and presence of the Jesus community. This community, like Jesus, both engages the world and yet remains distinctive from it and will need to wrestle with these dual realities.\textsuperscript{156} Church planting must further be shaped and informed by an understanding of the kingdom of God which serves as the central theme of Jesus’ teaching and the integrating paradigm for the mission of the church. This will require therefore both an understanding of the relation between the church and the kingdom, and their difference. For Murray the church is a community, whereas the kingdom is an activity. This kingdom is advancing outwards and the church needs to be similarly oriented. The kingdom is broader than

\textsuperscript{154} Murray, Laying Foundations, 1-23.
\textsuperscript{155} Murray, Laying Foundations, 30.
\textsuperscript{156} Murray, Laying Foundations, 31-34.
the church, for God is at work outside the church as well as within it, and through it. The agenda of the kingdom should determine the ministry of the church.  

The three theological concepts of Missio Dei, Incarnation and Kingdom of God therefore provide theological foundations for church planting, but it is less clear throughout the book how they serve as his intended overall framework for church planting. Much of what Murray writes concerning the shape, ethos and nature of church planting in subsequent chapters is not explicitly rooted in the very theological foundations he has proposed as the basis for church planting practice. Although Murray does not suggest additional theological themes that could be mined for church planting, nor contributes any substantial development on the three theological themes chosen, his synthesis of various missional voices around three current missional theological themes, is an intentional effort to place church planting within the wider doctrine of God. Developing Murray’s theological foundations, and reevaluating Murray’s theological framework rooted in the Missio Dei, I have explored in my thesis how a developed Missio Trinitatis might provide a more robust, coherent and explicit theological framework for this missional practice.

Murray evaluates the New Testament practice of church planting, but rather than arguing for blueprints and models to determine current church planting practices, nor focusing only on the Gospels or Acts as the primary texts, he encourages planters to see the entire New Testament more widely as a resource for church planting, for it is the record of newly planted church communities. He cautions therefore against any quest for discovering the New Testament Church warning that such approaches do not

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157 Murray, Laying Foundations, 39-44.
158 For example, in discussing the Shape of the Church (126-155) and Ethos of the Church (156-180) the kingdom of God is virtually absent in both, and the Incarnation and Missio Dei are largely absent in the Ethos section. Considering these are the central chapters about ecclesiology it is somewhat surprising the theological themes do not more intentionally or explicitly inform these chapters.
take seriously enough the diversity of New Testament teaching and practice and tends
towards an unhelpful uniformity and inflexibility. In contrast, Murray emphasises the
importance of grasping the cultural context of both the Bible’s own world, and the world
we inhabit, and the church planting task is to find ways to bridge and interrelate these
worlds through engaging Jesus and the gospel.\textsuperscript{159}

Murray continues by noting historical examples of church planting and highlights
lessons we might be able to glean from previous church planting movements for today.
Although these historical lessons can inform current church planting, they should not
necessarily shape it.\textsuperscript{160} Critical to Murray is the need therefore to fully appreciate that
new missional communities must derive their shape and ethos from within the missional
context they find themselves in. Murray’s consistent concern is that church plants must
not be ‘church clones’ of already existing churches.\textsuperscript{161} Furthermore, church planting
allows, and necessitates, creative and culturally relevant exploration. Indeed, the
postmodern and post Christendom contexts mean that new types of churches are
needed for changing contexts, a lesson hard learned in the context of Challenge
2000.\textsuperscript{162} The contextual nature of church planting is a theme that will emerge even
more prominently in church planting theology and practice in subsequent years, and is
therefore one of the themes that I have addressed in Chapter Five, Trinity and Context,
as I have sought to create a contextual theology of church planting rooted in the Missio
Trinitatis.

Murray’s contribution in \textit{Church Planting: Laying Foundations} continues to have
a legacy of influence upon church planting literature and practice, not least by Murray’s

\textsuperscript{159} Murray, \textit{Laying Foundations}, 62-86.
\textsuperscript{160} Murray, \textit{Laying Foundations}, 87-108.
\textsuperscript{161} Murray, \textit{Laying Foundations}, 124-128.
\textsuperscript{162} Murray, \textit{Laying Foundations}, 134-138.
own continued engagement in writing, training and networking. His Anabaptist convictions are evident throughout the work and his criticisms of the Christendom church, its political arrangements and their legacy are not without legitimacy and are themes that he will voice passionately in other missional writing.\textsuperscript{163} His embracement of ‘exile’ theology and the call of the church therefore to be counter-cultural leads him to dismiss Christendom as a disastrous failure, but this critique in my view is unbalanced for it negates the important role of the church in the public square, government and civic society and their missional contributions.\textsuperscript{164} Murray’s significant contribution however, is to ask the critical questions that church planting must address in a postmodern and post-Christendom context, and to integrate church planting theology and practice in ways that challenge an evangelical activism that frequently fails to ask pertinent theological questions that shape and inform its practice.

In 2003 George Lings and Stuart Murray combined to write \textit{Church Planting: Past, Present and Future}. This booklet deserves fuller treatment as it has significant critical reflections upon church planting practice in the 1990s. In evaluating the successes and failures of church planting initiatives through Challenge 2000, the Decade of Evangelism and other church planting initiatives, Lings and Murray offer their assessment of the crucial issues that must be learned from the 1990s. They advocate that methodology must be preceded by ecclesiology and missiology. The failure to learn this in the 1990s ensured that “little energy was devoted to creative thinking about the kinds of churches being planted.”\textsuperscript{165} Although I concur with Murray and Lings that


\textsuperscript{164} For a more balanced perspective see Lesslie Newbigin, \textit{Church in a Pluralistic Society} (London: SPCK, 1989), particularly Chapter 18, “The Congregation as Hermeneutic of the Gospel,” 222-233. This issue is briefly addressed further in Chapter Five, Trinity and Context.

\textsuperscript{165} Lings and Murray, \textit{Past, Present and Future}, 16.
methodology should emerge from theological considerations, and that ecclesiology and
missiology are foundational doctrines from which to draw upon, I also believe it is critical
that the mutual relation between these doctrines is carefully examined, and suggest
their work does not make any substantial effort to do so.\textsuperscript{166} This will become a central
issue in subsequent church planting literature and conversations and is reflected in this
review and evaluated throughout this work.

Murray and Lings argue that local and translocal approaches to church planting
are needed.\textsuperscript{167} They advocate that there are advantages and disadvantages of both
locally led organic planting, and centrally developed planting strategies. Healthy church
planting will operate with a balanced approach in which strategic frameworks can
foster, and be shaped by, organic church planting. Michael Moynagh in \textit{Church for
Every Context}, published nearly a decade later, argues for both interdependent and
independent approaches to church planting,\textsuperscript{168} and in Chapter Six, Trinity and
Community, I also critique church planting ecclesiology that fails to recognise its
indebtedness and indeed dependency on a wider church catholicity. Similarly,
“denominational frameworks for church planting are needed”\textsuperscript{169} although it is not
altogether clear in this work what frameworks will be required. However they indicate
that denominational policies must be created to advocate for the importance and
legitimacy of church planting as a missional practice for the 21\textsuperscript{st} Century, galvanizing
the experience of existing church planting practitioners, developing support systems to

\textsuperscript{166} In discussing ecclesiology and missiology they simply note that there needs to be “an emphasis on
missional churches” (17) and in advocating the issues that need to be addressed for going forward in
church planting they conclude by noting the need to plant and transition churches into contextualised
missional congregations (27). There is a recognition of the need to embrace a missional ecclesiology
but no real indications of why that matters or what that might entail.
\textsuperscript{167} Lings and Murray, \textit{Past, Present and Future}, 17.
\textsuperscript{168} Michael Moynagh, \textit{Church for Every Context}, 21-23. I converse with Moynagh’s work more fully in
Chapter Five, Trinity and Context.
\textsuperscript{169} Lings and Murray, \textit{Past, Present and Future}, 18.
resource and sustain church planters, and fostering intentional theological reflection upon church planting practice.\textsuperscript{170} Throughout this work, Murray and Lings are concerned that “future planting strategies will need a more balanced rhythm of action and reflection.”\textsuperscript{171} Relating theology and practice will be critical if church planting is to have a solid foundation. Many of these issues will be reflected upon and reviewed in subsequent literature, and as noted in my Introduction, this approach is central to this entire piece of work.

Lings and Murray note that training is essential but question the effectiveness of the training that was provided in the 1990s.\textsuperscript{172} They reflect on the two main approaches that were offered (in-house training and training in theological colleges) noting strengths and weaknesses of each.\textsuperscript{173} The former positively ensured that training occurred in an actual life setting and context but did not always offer robust theological reflection or expose trainees to alternative models or new ways of thinking. The latter may have offered an academic approach that fostered reflection and critique but was often detached from specific contexts and therefore less practiced based. Murray and Lings therefore suggest the necessity of combining these modes of training and forging partnerships may provide a helpful way forward. Training should combine theological reflection, contextual analysis and methodology and be supported by mentoring and diverse ways of learning and reflecting. In relation to theological reflection on church planting I will argue in Chapter Three, that there must be an appropriate, robust, and diverse approach to enabling church planting practitioners to do this well that will require formal and intuitive approaches to learning. But I also concur with Lings and

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\textsuperscript{170} Lings and Murray, \textit{Past, Present and Future}, 19.
\textsuperscript{171} Lings and Murray, \textit{Past, Present and Future}, 17.
\textsuperscript{172} Lings and Murray, \textit{Past, Present and Future}, 19.
\textsuperscript{173} Lings and Murray, \textit{Past, Present and Future}, 20.
\end{flushleft}
Murray that training must include practical skills in contextual analysis and methodologies, and recent developments in these areas in church planting training are to be welcomed.\textsuperscript{174}

Murray and Lings suggest that setting goals for church planting in British culture does not work, nor deeply motivates British Christians.\textsuperscript{175} They note their own personal dismay and incredulity at the extravagant and unrealistic goal setting of Challenge 2000 and present convincing data to demonstrate how amiss many of these goals were. In their concluding analysis they suggest such an approach looks increasingly “modernist in management style, with bureaucratic and utterly unrealistic assumptions about control of resources, predetermination of outcomes and continuity of the future. The goals did not, and in our culture could not, generate mechanisms for change.”\textsuperscript{176} However, Murray and Lings are not convincing in their claim that goal setting is antithetical to British culture, partly because they provide no evidence that this is the case, and secondly in this report itself, there are examples of churches reaching or surpassing their intended goals.\textsuperscript{177} Although Murray and Lings provide no evidence that goals do not deeply motivate British Christians and must surely be criticized for overstating the case, the importance of goal setting, particularly in relation to numerical growth as a measuring touchstone for ‘success’ remains a contentious issue.\textsuperscript{178}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{174} Three notable church planting training resources that cover these and other related areas are: \textit{Mission-Shaped Ministry}, see http://www.missionshapedministry.org, \textit{Forge} see http://formission.org.uk/trainings/forge, and \textit{Crucible}, see http://urbanexpression.org.uk/training-and-events/crucible-course [all accessed March 10, 2018].
\item \textsuperscript{175} Lings and Murray, \textit{Past, Present and Future}, 20.
\item \textsuperscript{176} Lings and Murray, \textit{Past, Present and Future}, 21.
\item \textsuperscript{177} Lings and Murray, \textit{Past, Present and Future}, 5-13.
\item \textsuperscript{178} The importance of numerical church growth, its strengths and weaknesses, are discussed in a helpful and balanced way in Paul E. Engle, \textit{Evaluating the Church Growth Movement}, 50-53, 57, 61, 63, 76, 78-79, 82, 84, 88-93.
\end{itemize}
Murray and Lings proceed by drawing attention to the importance of sustainability in church planting for “starting churches is not enough.” The evangelical fervor to plant churches focused primarily on initiation and much less on church planting development and accordingly issues of sustaining plants were “under-estimated, under-valued, and under-resourced.” Consequentially “pursuing maturity was difficult, discipling those from non-churched backgrounds was time consuming and pastoral needs multiplied.” Many of the issues that Lings and Murray note continue to be central to church planting, which continues to wrestle with, and respond to, many of the same critical issues of sustainability.

Finally, the authors advocate that church planting must embrace diverse forms of church for ever changing cultures. Responses to church planting in the 1990s showed that “the onus of change did not come from sharper mission-based theology, but from the experience of practitioners.” Perhaps this is an oversimplification and polarizes unfairly a dichotomy between missional thinking and missional practice. There is no doubt that Lings and Murray are somewhat correct in advocating that the emergence of new forms of church in the 1990s was partly a result of ecclesial disillusionment, experimentation and discovery that were rooted in actual church planting experience. Yet they hint that towards the end of the 1990s, and evidenced in the early 2000s, missional theology and practice are beginning to become more integrated resulting in ecclesial diversity that is borne out of the theological and practical priority of mission. This is embryonic and both missional theology and practice need to

179 Lings and Murray, Past, Present and Future, 21.
180 Lings and Murray, Past, Present and Future, 21.
181 Lings and Murray, Past, Present and Future, 21.
183 Lings and Murray, Past, Present and Future, 21.
become more conversant, in which they mutually inform and shape one another if robust church planting is to be formed. This will become crystalized in the landmark publication of *Mission-shaped Church* and its subsequent developments, and my own work has emerged through a desire to relate church planting theology and practice more intentionally and serves as a contribution to that ongoing dialogue.

In summary, Lings and Murray are confident that the lessons of the 1990s can be learned and if so, church planting can still be a catalyst for renewal and contribute to mission today in significant and lasting ways. The booklet itself serves as a critique of the church growth movement and warns denominations against setting unrealistic numerical targets and developing accompanying methodologies that offer quick and easy church planting successes. New churches for the 21st Century will need to be contextual and creative in a diverse and changing culture. Missiological and ecclesial diversity and creativity will be necessary to respond to changing times and cultures. The booklet’s call for deeper theological reflection upon church, context and creativity have therefore proved to be themes that I have endeavored to address within an extensive Trinitarian piece of theological reflection with the intentional aim of progressing these concerns.

h) Fresh Expressions – A new landmark

The publication of *Mission-Shaped Church (MSC)*\(^{184}\) in 2004 was another landmark year for Anglican church planting. The report, an update on *Breaking New Ground*, calls for the Church of England to embrace a new watershed of mission. It affirms the parish structure but calls for an ever increasing need to be creative, to let mission determine structures and to live with diversity in a rapidly changing society.\(^{185}\)

\(^{184}\) Graham Cray, *Mission-Shaped Church*.

The conclusion of the report affirms the importance of the parochial system but states that a variety of integrated missionary approaches are required. A ‘mixed economy’ of parish churches and new network churches is needed: 186 “Fresh Expressions embraces two realities: existing churches that are seeking to renew or redirect what they already have, and others who are intentionally sending out planting groups to discover what will emerge when the gospel is immersed in the mission context.” 187 The report therefore calls for church planting to engage with the contemporary cultural context of the UK, and for any such engagement to be informed by a process of careful theological reflection. The importance of contextual approaches to forming, not cloning churches, and the necessity of learning cross-cultural skills for today’s diverse context, are particularly highlighted as key concerns. 188

Although there is a strong focus on cultural relevancy, and the need for the church to lament and repent for its cultural distance with society, there is a recognition that new churches should nonetheless be transformational communities if they are to fulfill the mandate of authentic Christian community and discipleship. It is here that the report commends, but does not develop, five key values for the new missional churches: 189

1) A missionary church is focused on God the Trinity
2) It is incarnational
3) It is transformational
4) It makes disciples
5) It is relational

186 Cray, Mission-shaped Church, 125.
187 Cray, Mission-shaped Church, 34.
188 Cray, Mission-shaped Church, xii-xiii, 20-21, 90-91, 105-108.
189 Cray, Mission-shaped Church, 81-82.
Alongside these missional values, fresh expressions must also be distinguished by the four traditional marks of the church: the church is one, the church is holy, the church is catholic, and the church is apostolic.\(^{190}\) These new forms of church come into being through the methodologies of “double listening” and contextualization.\(^{191}\) The report recognises that new theological questions concerning the nature, ethos and practice of church will continue in this creative context of experimentation and further theological reflection will therefore be critical.\(^{192}\) The report has put church planting and fresh expressions at the heart of missiology in the Anglican community in a way that Breaking New Ground did not. It is no longer a supplementary strategy but a necessary one.\(^ {193}\)

The report however is not without its criticisms, nor its critics. There are several critiques that have been articulated but Mission-shaped Church: A Theological Response by John Hull,\(^ {194}\) and For the Parish: A Critique of Fresh Expressions\(^ {195}\) by Andrew Davison and Alison Milbank have been the most notable in the field. The significance of these two books for this literature review, lie in their theological critique of MSC upon which much church planting in the UK has subsequently been based, and lively theological debate enjoined.

Hull contends that the relation between church and mission are not clearly defined or related in MSC. He is concerned that MSC presents “the relation between

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\(^{190}\) Cray, Mission-Shaped Church, 96-99.
\(^{191}\) Double listening concerns an intentional process of paying careful attention to the faithfulness of the good news in Jesus and to emerging or changing contexts in which that good news is to be embodied. Contextualisation concerns the processes by which a new church is formed in its context. See 104-107.
\(^{192}\) Reflecting on this report a decade later, Lings and Murray note that theological reflection has developed substantially with fresh lessons learned for practice, Church Planting in the UK since 2000, 16-20. However, they advocate the need for continuing theological exploration and reflection.
\(^{193}\) The subsequent development of Fresh Expressions is addressed, and reflected upon, at various points in this portfolio and thesis.
\(^{195}\) Andrew Davison and Alison Milbank, For the Parish: A Critique of Fresh Expressions (London: SCM Press, 2010).
mission and church as that of essence to existence"\textsuperscript{196} but dismisses this because the church itself is not the actualization of mission. In his view it would be more accurate to speak of the church as an agent of the kingdom, for the goal of mission is the establishment of God’s rule in all creation.\textsuperscript{197} He acknowledges that MSC occasionally makes this claim but confusion abounds because the report is inconsistent in how it understands and expresses the ideas of church, mission and kingdom.\textsuperscript{198} For Hull these are not semantic points but underlie his essential critique of MSC, that despite its aims and objectives to advocate for a missional ecclesiology rooted in God’s cosmic purposes for all of creation, and the church being an agent and instrument of those purposes, in the end the church becomes central to its own mission. Hull highlights what he considers is the ecclesial centered nature of the report and laments the embracement of church growth theology and principles which makes the church a potential slave to the culture it seeks to reach by over-accommodating it, and by seeing the reproduction and growth of more churches as the primary way in which God’s purposes are achieved. He laments the lack of recognition that God is in fact working already in culture through the Holy Spirit whilst simultaneously calling the church to be a prophetic witness to culture. Further, he advocates that the church must reflect the kingdom by becoming an inclusive community in which all barriers are broken down. The creation of homogeneous church cultures that MSC sanctions, despite some misgivings, effectively leads to a form of apartheid, and to the exclusion of the poor who, according to the report are deemed to be better served by their own autonomous congregations.\textsuperscript{199} For Hull the report is preoccupied by Anglican dominated ecclesial

\textsuperscript{196} Hull, \textit{Mission-Shaped Church: A Theological Response}, 2.
\textsuperscript{197} Hull, \textit{Mission-Shaped Church: A Theological Response}, 3.
\textsuperscript{198} Hull, \textit{Mission-Shaped Church: A Theological Response}, 5.
\textsuperscript{199} Hull, \textit{Mission-Shaped Church: A Theological Response}, 10-16.
concerns and “the lineage of church planting encouraged the working party to become excessively church centred in their theology.”

He concludes, “We looked for a mission-shaped church but what we found was a church-shaped mission.”

Davison and Milbank offer a broader and more stinging criticism of MSC than Hull and frequently write in a dismissive tone about the content and authors of MSC. This is regrettable in my view, and their almost total rejection of MSC and of the people that were responsible for it, reads rather abrasive at times. In my view, the tone of the book, with an air of superiority and sharply edged critique, overshadows somewhat, several of the important contributions they make. Davison and Milbank note their main criticisms of MSC in the first half of the book before offering their own Anglican understanding of missional theology and reimagined practice through the inherited parish church model. Although welcoming the need for creative mission, and engaging with contemporary context, they contend that MSC is based on “a defective methodology, an inadequate theology, and accepts the very choice-led individualism from which Christianity should seek to liberate us. It is a capitulation to market values rather than a critique where it is most needed or a counter cultural vision of the kingdom.” Here they echo some of the concerns raised by Hull but develop their criticism in more depth drawing on a wide range of sources and perspectives. First and foremost, however their work is, “unapologetically a work of theology, which is the subject least valued in recent reallocation of resources and in the literature surrounding the Fresh Expressions developments.” Indeed, Davison and Milbank go further, “Mission-shaped Church is the least impressive theological publication from the Church

200 Hull, Mission-Shaped Church: A Theological Response, 34.
201 Hull, Mission-Shaped Church: A Theological Response, 36.
203 Davison and Milbank, For the Parish, x.
of England that either of us can remember…the definitive report of the decade, was written by a committee where academic theologians were so singularly ill represented.”

The theological critique of MSC that follows has several aspects. First, they critique MSC for failing to grasp the union of form and content as a philosophical and theological concept when it comes to understanding the nature of church. They contend that MSC advocates embracing new fresh forms of church while jettisoning inherited church practices that are essential in constituting the essence of Anglican churches. Such practices may be discarded, like exchanging old clothes for new ones, but risk embracing new ‘styles’ that may appear to be more popular or relevant for a season but run the danger of being a new fad that will soon become short lived. In discarding these inherited forms, Fresh expressions of Church are rewriting and reinventing the forms of life, embodied in Anglican community for centuries, by making them obsolete or optional.

Second, they criticise the soteriology and ecclesiology within MSC and are especially critical that the role of the church in it is reduced to an agent and instrument of God’s redemptive purposes and the report has failed to grasp the centrality of the church in, and for, God’s redemptive purposes. Indeed, the church in their view is part of the goal of salvation itself, constituted in Christ as the corporate body of Christ that manifests and demonstrates what it means to be the people of God. They note, “salvation is corporate and ‘Church-shaped’: it is membership of the Body, the bride, the new people.” Therefore, “the outworking of salvation in our own time is found,

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204 Davison and Milbank, For the Parish, 225.  
205 Davison and Milbank, For the Parish, 5.  
206 Davison and Milbank, For the Parish, 15-26.  
207 Davison and Milbank, For the Parish, 45.
first and foremost in the life of the Church.”208 For Davison and Milbank the lack of ecclesial soteriology in MSC, particularly its eschatological aspects, has important consequences for the shape and purpose of church that God is creating, “When salvation loses this ecclesial dimension, it is a very different thing. It is no longer so imperative for the Church to embody, here and now, the redeemed community it is destined eventually to be.”209

Third, as a consequence of not seeing the Church as mediating God’s grace to the world, MSC affirms that mission is the goal, and the Church is only for the sake of mission. While Davison and Milbank affirm mission as a priority, they are concerned that the church exists only for mission and ask why this should be the case, when in fact beyond the life of this world and the engagement of the church in it, the ultimate role of the church is to be a doxological community in which it glorifies God and enjoys him forever. Therefore, “there will come a time when the mission of the Church will be over: there will be no missionary work in the life to come. The goal of mission is the company of the redeemed, adorning the Lamb forever.”210

Fourth, they reject the legitimacy of homogenous congregations advocated in MSC because such churches foster segregation and fail to break down the dividing walls between people. As the reconciled people of God, the church exists to embody reconciliation to the world and in its own constitution. The ‘mixed economy’ that comprises inherited and fresh expressions of church living side by side is a far cry from the ‘mixed economy’ that should be reflected in each local ecclesial community. Although they note that the motivation for the use of the HUP might be noble, the church

208 Davison and Milbank, For the Parish, 48.
209 Davison and Milbank, For the Parish, 49.
210 Davison and Milbank, For the Parish, 54.
is most reflective of God’s purposes when it is diverse in its embodied heterogeneity.  

For Davison and Milbank the emphasis given to the monocultural churches and networks advocated in MSC therefore is a sociological priority above a theological one, a pandering to consumerist culture, and a failure to embrace the importance of place, space and community that is still paramount for many communities. Rejecting the idea in MSC that the distance of the church from culture should lead the church to ‘repent’ and move closer to it, Davison and Milbank propose the opposite: “We need communities that exemplify the character of the Church, strikingly themselves, in sharp contradistinction to the world, founded upon charity in an uncharacteristic world: a witness, a counter-cultural and a refuge.”

I share with Hull, Davison and Milbank, several critiques of MSC that need to be taken seriously. First, they are correct in my view, to note that MSC fails to provide a robust theological framework to underpin its missional ecclesiology. Although the theological material is more present and substantial than I believe the three authors give credence to, notwithstanding, it is less prominent and developed than contextual theology, methodology and storytelling. I recognise and concede however that this report was produced and made accessible to a wider church constituency and was therefore never intended to be a primary theological work. It aims to offer theological reflections upon current contextual realities and is not intended to be a theological treatise. The stinging theological criticisms of Hull, Milbank and Davison therefore need to be evaluated in view of these factors. Notwithstanding, the theological

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211 Davison and Milbank, For the Parish, 68.
212 Davison and Milbank, For the Parish, 75-86.
213 Davison and Milbank, For the Parish, 86.
214 I was able to ascertain this information in my recent conversations with Graham Cray as our visiting lecture at the Drysdale Lecture, https://nazarene.ac.uk/2018-drysdale-lecture/ [accessed April 16, 2018].
objections noted are not to be dismissed lightly and will form the basis for ongoing
dialogue and conversations that are reflected in subsequent literature and are
addressed in this work at various junctures.

Second, the report *is* ecclesial centred. This has some legitimate basis for it is a
follow up to the church report *Breaking New Ground* and has important ecclesiological
issues and concerns it needs to address. This is a report advocating new expressions
of *church* to a church audience, and aims to offer ecclesial theology, methodology,
stories and frameworks for what this might look like in the Church of England. Further,
the theological return to the importance of ecclesiology in the 20th Century is itself
helpful, and the report reflects this development. However, I agree with Hull that the
church centredness of the report is problematic because of its missional intentions to
relate church to mission and the kingdom. These three theological strands should be
interrelated; indeed, they must be, but the report tends to focus more prominently on
the importance of the church in mission. I also agree with Davison and Milbank,
somewhat paradoxically, that the eschatological and soteriological importance of the
church within God’s salvific mission purposes are not developed sufficiently. Hull
critiques the report for being too church centred and Davison and Milbank criticise it for
not being centred enough in God’s purposes for the church. The resolution of this issue
may be found by recognising the instrumental role of church in God’s mission, but that
mission itself must be placed within a wider creation narrative, and a missional
pneumatology that advocates more explicitly for the prevenient work of the Spirit in the
world. I contend for this argument in Chapter Four, Trinity and Creation as a key
concern. Further, the concern raised by Davison and Millbank that mission itself has
become the goal in *MSC* and needs to be balanced by the role and place of worship is
a significant insight, and in Chapter Six, Trinity and Community, I critique and develop
this more fully. However, Davison and Millbank do not acknowledge sufficiently that MSC consistently places the church within the Missio Dei, the agenda of the kingdom of God, and alludes to the role of the Triune God within creation and redemption. These themes are not sufficiently developed and the lack of pneumatological considerations is indeed a major weakness of the report. In Chapter Five, Trinity and Context, the pneumatological emphasis on contextualization missing in MSC and subsequent literature is explored as part of the economic model of the Trinity.

Third, the influence of the church growth movement and church growth theory is a concern that I share with Hull, Davison and Millbank. This is perhaps more implicit in the report than explicit but is noted in several salient features including concerns about cultural relevancy, church growth multiplication, the endorsement of McGavran’s HUP, and the deployment of social sciences to the detriment of theological considerations. Yet MSC also warns against cultural syncretism, places growth and multiplication in a creation perspective, calls for church health and not only growth, advocates for the transformation of culture, offers theological perspectives for a missionary church, and notes the controversy of, and objections to, the HUP. Hull, Davison and Milbank acknowledge these points, but conclude that despite the objections to some aspects of church growth theory, the report ultimately embraces and endorses it. In my own evaluation the report undoubtedly embraces key aspects of church growth theory whilst tempering some of its excesses, and overall MSC expresses, and represents in the main, an evangelical Anglican Protestant ecclesiological perspective.

i) A New DAWN?

In 2006 Martin Robinson’s *Planting Mission-Shaped Churches Today* was published aiming to “begin a conversation with church planters, all of us seeking to
learn from each other in a highly complex situation of mission in the Western world.”

The conversation according to Robinson, is to help church planters better understand the context they are attempting to plant in, to highlight some practical issues for church planters that require the right missional DNA, (the right genetic missional codes necessary for planting), and to think through how church planting relates to missional movements. Robinson, a keen leader and advocate of Challenge 2000, begins by reviewing that initiative, and draws for himself some of the lessons about church planting that can be learned. His main conclusion, echoing Lings and Murray, is that too much focus was placed on how churches were planted, and not enough attention was paid to the types of churches that were planted.

Robinson argues that these new types of churches need to become reproducing congregations but must also take seriously the need for community and spiritual formation. Indeed, Robinson is the first UK church planting writer to directly speak of the importance of spiritual formation for planters. Missional living is fostered through vibrant spirituality and Robinson gives practical suggestions for how to encourage this. As an advocate for Challenge 2000 and inspired by global church planting saturation movements across the world, Robinson argues there is a need to foster a church planting movement through developing simpler forms of church that can be multiplied in more easily reproducible ways.

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217 Challenge 2000 changed its name to Together in Mission and is now called Formission, http://formission.org.uk [accessed June 5, 2016].
219 The work of David Garrison in particular is important to Robinson. See David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements How God is Redeeming a Lost World* (Richmond, Va: WigTake Resources, 2004).
**Shaped Church**, and takes its title from the report, it does not address the concerns raised by its critics in any substantial way. The chapters refer to some of the background issues that MSC notes as significant, e.g. context, culture, discipleship, sustainability, creative and simpler forms of church, but there is not a deeper critique or analysis given to missional ecclesiology which is surprisingly underdeveloped given the British church planting context in which the book is set. The book offers insights into the processes and issues that leaders will face in the challenging context of mission today and addresses some of the complexities and practicalities of the church planting task but is broad in its coverage of many issues, without developing a more substantive analysis in any of them. Despite noting the problems of Challenge 2000 and the church growth theory that was deployed in this initiative, one is left wondering if Robinson is advocating a reformulated strategy of church planting saturation that will ultimately replicate the failures that beset DAWN.

**4) Concluding observations and comments**

In this chronological approach to the literature review I have conversed with the key texts demonstrating the influence of the 1980s antecedents which helped shape this body of literature. I have drawn out the significance of the key authors and identified their connections to others in the field noting their contributions and concerns, whilst offering my own critical evaluation in conversation with them. Further, I have highlighted issues and themes that have shaped and informed my own thinking and have led me to progress the conversation further in the writing of my portfolio and thesis. There are several overarching themes and issues therefore that have emerged from this literature review that have stimulated further theological reflection.
First, more recent church planting literature tends to engage with theological issues more explicitly, and theological reflection more intentionally, compared to earlier works. In my view this is a consequence of an intentional and retrospective critique on the lack of theological foundations that permeated much of the church planting literature from the 1980s through to the mid-1990s. Some of the reasons for this have been explored above, but the development of a deeper critical theological perspective arises out of the failure of many church planting initiatives across denominations in the 1990s and the deep soul searching that accompanied it, and the rediscovery of the Missio Dei as the foundational principle for all missional practice, including church planting. The influence and shadow of the church growth movement has cast its shadow over the entire field. Key theological questions however remain concerning the influence and role of church growth theory upon church planting initiatives. Is the church growth movement a friend or foe? What strengths and weaknesses have occurred in church planting because of this movement? Are homogenous churches inherently divisive or part of an overall ‘mixed economy’ that celebrates unity within diversity? Has church planting become a slave to cultural relevancy, capitulated to the consumerism of the market economy and embraced the insights of social science leading to a preoccupation with methodology, to the detriment of theological discernment? Is the church ecclesiocentric? The resultant missional conversation has attempted to address these issues and interrelate missional theology and practice more intentionally and explore ways in which the church can reengage with postmodern and post Christendom contexts and cultures. This conversation is rooted in a desire to foster a closer dialogue between theology and practice, and to place theological themes such as mission, church and kingdom at the heart of this missional practice. However, how do these theological concepts relate, and what other theological themes need to be mined to
develop a more robust missional ecclesiology that is not preoccupied by itself, but flows from the prior Missio Dei?

Second, although the literature reflects a measure of theological diversity in the theological traditions and positions of the authors, it is my observation that most of the published literature comes from within a broadly evangelical and Protestant perspective. In some ways this is not surprising as church planting has a close relation to evangelicalism, due to the priority given to evangelism, a missional pragmaticism, and the influence of church growth concerns or principles. It is equally clear that there are no major Roman Catholic, Reformed, High church, women, black, and ethnic minority authors in the literature review, and it is important to ask what theological or other factors underlie this. It is not until more recently, in the last decade or so, that church planting works begin to demonstrate a wider critical conversation with other theological traditions and engages with theological voices that are drawn from the wider catholicity of the church. This is evidenced more fully in my thesis where I dialogue with some of the more prominent church planting texts that have emerged in recent years, and indeed reflects my own concern to critically converse with missional dialogue partners that are not normative voices within my own evangelical Protestant tradition.

Third, traditional understandings and approaches to church planting have increasingly needed to reflect on how church planting relates to newer ecclesial missional approaches, such as organic church, emerging church, missional communities, new forms of church and fresh expressions of church. This is more than just a debate about semantics, but arises from critique that the term itself, and certain ecclesial presuppositions that have become associated with the term, may themselves need to give way to new language and new contextual methodologies as church planting moves from the fringe to the core of missional practice. Whereas the early
church planting literature, in the main, presupposes or assumes inherited understandings of church (of whatever tradition they represent), the later literature increasingly offers a deeper critical reflection on ecclesiology and its relation to missional theology, advocating a more experimental, diverse and less bounded form of ecclesiology.

Fourth, the literature review demonstrated that church planting had a complex relationship between organic and institutional components and developments. This was one of the key reflections outlined by Lings and Murray in their review of church planting in relation to training, theological reflection, support systems, denominational frameworks and leadership but was a shared concern among several of the books reviewed. In other words, both organic and institutional components come together in church planting, and this creates tension, and raises issues about their relation to one another. Such a tension has the possibility to create exciting new opportunities, but also the potential to lead to polarisation. In this tension between the organic and institutional, how are church planting issues, structures, identities, values, methods and processes going to be addressed in coherent, complementary and consistent ways?

Fifth, most church planting authors are keen to lay Biblical foundations for church planting. Even the non-theological books normatively state that church planting is a Biblical practice endorsed by Jesus in the Great Commission and practiced by the early church in Acts. There are different approaches however to the use and importance of the Biblical material in how it shapes and informs church planting. Most UK authors tend to look for Biblical precedents and principles (Mitchell, Ellis, Robinson, Cleverly, Christine and Murray), while some American authors may look more directly for patterns and models (Wagner and Stetzer). Furthermore, Restoration and charismatic traditions tend to focus on Acts as the normative foundation for a Biblical ecclesiology,
evangelicals likewise draw on Acts but also from the New Testament more generally, whereas Anabaptists prioritise the life and ministry of Jesus, the kingdom and gospel as foundational. Further, how are Biblical texts themselves exegeted and applied in ways that are consistent with their wider context and narrative and do not become misused as proof texts to validate church planting claims that upon more robust examination are simply not credible?

Having drawn together several key issues that emerge from this church planting literature review, I will converse more fully with a number of these issues within the rest of this portfolio and the final thesis. Of particular interest is to explore how theological issues relate, underpin and shape church planting practice, and equally how church planting practice itself shapes and informs its espoused theology. The ongoing dialogue between church planting theology and practice is the central concern of this work. In Chapter Two through a critical conversation with the Synoptic Gospels, I offer theological perspectives on the nature of the gospel and its implications for missional practice. In Chapter Three, I explore, through a research project, the nature, role and practice of theological reflection in church planting and what theological issues might be further explored to inform and shape church planting. It is to these remaining Portfolio components that I now turn.
Chapter Two

To the ends of the earth: theological reflections on the nature of the gospel from the Synoptic evangelists

1) Introduction

“How evangel-like is evangelism?”222 So asks Walter Klaiber in his book *Call and Response*, a work devoted to establishing biblical foundations for a theology of evangelism. Klaiber is not alone in raising key issues concerning the biblical understanding of the gospel and the practice of evangelism for mission today.223 Bryan Stone notes, “Those who think theologically rarely think about evangelism, and those who think about evangelism rarely take the discipline of theology very seriously.”224 With suspicion about the term ‘evangelism,’225 criticism at aspects of its practice and questions even over its validity,226 the growing diversity of evangelicalism and its various nuanced positions,227 and the ongoing challenge of relating the gospel to

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225 Stone calls this “the Dirty E-word” outlining why the term is much maligned, *Evangelism after Christendom*, 10.
pluralistic societies,\textsuperscript{228} it is vital that we continue to reflect theologically on the nature of the Christian evangel that shapes and defines evangelistic practice. There is no substitute for serious theological inquiry about evangelism as a practice\textsuperscript{229} and so this article is an attempt to contribute critically to these important conversations. In this article I have chosen to converse with the Synoptic evangelists to explore Marcan, Lucan and Matthean perspectives that help contribute to a theological understanding of the nature of the evangel.\textsuperscript{230} In conclusion I will briefly offer theological reflections on the nature of the gospel that have implications for the theology and practice of evangelism. Therefore, before I engage with the Synoptics it is important to briefly set the contexts from which their understanding of the evangel emerged.

\textbf{2) Contextual background to the term \textit{euangelion}}

The term \textit{euangelion} (good news) has a complex background.\textsuperscript{231} In this article I will therefore proceed by briefly examining four contexts that significantly contribute to how the Synoptic tradition is informed and shaped by an understanding of the evangel.

\textbf{a) The Old Testament Context}

The term ‘gospel’ was not a word first coined among Christians. On the contrary the concept was both significant in pagan and Jewish culture.\textsuperscript{232} In the Hebrew


\textsuperscript{229} Stone, \textit{Evangelism}, 19.

\textsuperscript{230} I have chosen this approach for two primary reasons. First, although the Synoptic Gospels are not the first New Testament scriptures to be written, they are the first to intentionally encapsulate the story of Jesus’ birth, life, death and resurrection that are foundational to understanding his significance. Second, scholarly exploration of the kerygma has largely sidelined the contribution of the Synoptics, focusing more prominently on Acts and the Pauline letters, and this article seeks therefore to partially readdress that balance.


Scripture the noun *besorah* is used to express the concept of a reward for bringing good news. It is not essentially a religious term and is used for example in Samuel and Kings (2 Sam. 4:10; 18: 20-22; 25, 27; 2 Kgs. 7:9). Likewise, the verb *basar* is used to mean the announcement or bringing of good news, usually in relation to military victory (1 Kgs. 1:42; 1 Sam. 4:17). The term however becomes important theologically in the prophetic writings as signifying the announcement of Yahweh’s universal victory over the world, the sending of his Messiah, and the promise of an anticipated new age of salvation which will usher in peace and righteousness. This good news is to be announced to the entire world through Yahweh’s prophetic messengers,

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns.’ (Isa. 52:7)

Consequently, the *mebasser* (messenger) becomes increasingly significant as the means by which this good news of God is announced to the world. The herald brings a living word of hope that not only announces the new eschatological order but also helps bring it about.234 Isaiah in particular (chapters 50-65) announces this new hope for God’s people and will serve as a crucial antecedent for the Synoptic writers in their narratives of the gospel about Jesus Christ. The explicit reference to Messiah indicates that the gospel receives its proper interpretation only in the light of the coming salvation promised in the prophetic word. Especially in Isaiah the Hebrew terms signifying good news concern the announcement of future salvation.235 The prophets therefore anticipated the reign of God: justice would come for the oppressed, the

233 All references throughout the Portfolio and Thesis are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.
234 Lane, NICNT Mark, 44.
235 Lane, NICNT Mark, 43.
wicked would be overthrown, and liberation would come. This good news was intended not only for the people of Israel but also for Gentiles, for “all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God” (Isa. 52:10; cf. Jer. 31:10). The closing sections of Zechariah therefore picture the rise of a theocratic kingdom where God will reign over all the nations (Zech. 14:1-21). Richard Hays says, “the Evangelists reread Israel’s scriptures in light of the coming of Christ, showing how the Scriptures prefigure and illuminate Jesus.” The foundation for understanding the revelation of the evangel in the Synoptics therefore lies in the Old Testament.

b) The Rabbinic Judaism Context

In various Jewish writings, which are not part of the canonical works, but which reflect a particular historical period (around 300 BCE to 70 CE), we discover references to the ultimate reign of God over his people. The precise expectations for God’s coming kingdom however are quite diverse. Some texts describe the restoration of Israel as a whole, or only of the faithful within Israel but other documents sharing some of the prophetic strands of the exilic and post exilic prophets reiterate hope for God’s reign over all the nations. Further, many historical scrolls found near the Dead Sea depict the emergence of a righteous branch and prince from the Davidic lineage, a Messiah who will restore the fortunes of Israel and become the agent of God’s redemption, and the instrument of universal divine blessing. Whereas Philo, Josephus and the

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239 T. Levi (Testament of Levi) 14:3-4; 18:3; T. Naph. (Testament of Naphtali) 8:3-4; T. Jud. (Testament of Judah) 24:6. All three references are part of the Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs.
240 See for example, 1QM, 4Q174, 4Q285, 4Q376.
Qumran community do not significantly add to the concept of *euangelion*\(^ {241} \) the same cannot be said of Targumic traditions, which highlight in particular the significance of the messenger of the good news. The herald takes on a more prominent role as the announcer of the anticipated ‘Day of the Lord’ promised to the people of God in the prophets. Indeed, the forerunner to the Messiah himself would herald the Messianic good news. The key feature of this tradition is of an ever-increasing heightened awareness that the imminent arrival of the Messianic good news is coming. The importance of this background is clearly seen in Synoptic account especially in the role of John the Baptist and his relation to Jesus.\(^ {242} \) The Synoptic writers attribute the term *euangelion* to Jesus (Mark 1:1, 14-15; 8: 35; 10: 29; 13: 10; 14: 9; 16: 15; Matt. 4: 23; 9: 35; 24: 14; 26: 13) and the words of Isaiah 61 are fulfilled in his own message and actions (Matt: 1 v 5; Luke, 7: 22; Luke 4: 18). The Synoptics drawing on the Rabbinic tradition portray John the Baptist as the forerunner, and Jesus as the divine messenger that brings in the era of God’s salvation.\(^ {243} \)

c) The Imperial Context

In the Imperial Greek-speaking world the verb *euangelizesthai* and nouns *euangelion* and *euangelos* occur in a variety of Roman settings, including the announcements of victory, births, weddings and oracular pronouncements.\(^ {244} \) In the Roman Empire the evangel was a retrospective reflection of a joyous or celebratory event. Whereas in the rabbinic prophetic world of a distinctive forward-looking eschatological perspective, the Graeco-Roman use is less pregnant with religious or


\(^{243}\) Lane, *NICNT*, 44.

\(^{244}\) Kittell and Friedrich, *TDNT*, 715-717.

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theological meaning.\textsuperscript{245} The declaration of “good news” corresponds rhetorically and stylistically within the secular usage of the Hellenistic world.\textsuperscript{246} The Priene inscription from 9 BC regarding the birth of Augustus therefore exemplifies the general use of \textit{euangelion} in the Imperial cult, “The birthday of the god was for the world the beginning of joyful messages \textit{[euangelion]} which have gone forth because of him.”\textsuperscript{247} I concur with Stuhlmacher that the roots of the evangel in the Synoptic tradition are less indebted to the Graeco-Roman world, but are primarily found in the distinctive mission and message of the primitive church and the Old Testament promises found in the messianic prophets.\textsuperscript{248} This primitive message, rooted in the OT Scriptures and embodied in Jesus the Messiah, has been referred to as the apostolic kerygma, and it is to this that we finally turn.

d) The Apostolic Kerygmatic Context

As traditionally understood by the Christian tradition \textit{kerygma} (proclamation) has become a theological term to refer to the post-resurrection, apostolic, church proclamation about the events of Jesus Christ in whom God had acted.\textsuperscript{249} No exploration of this theme can be complete without briefly describing the significance of the work undertaken by Charles Dodd\textsuperscript{250} and Rudolf Bultmann.\textsuperscript{251} By examining the

\textsuperscript{245} Adolf Harnack, \textit{Rede und Aufsatze I}, (Giessen: Topelmann, 1906), 24.
\textsuperscript{246} Guelich, \textit{WBC Mark}, 14.
fragments of primitive Christian tradition embedded in the Pauline epistles, and comparing these with the early apostolic speeches in Acts, Dodd arrived at a resultant kerygma, which consisted of a series of propositional truths presented in a relatively defined pattern or formula primarily concerning the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Dodd’s kerygma was widely received by a multitude of British and American scholars but not without its criticisms. Wilckens argues that many of the early speeches in Acts do not reveal any pattern of Jewish-Christian missionary preaching, whilst Glasson and Sweet question Dodd’s kerygmatic constitutive list, and Baird objects to defining the kerygma in terms of content rather than form. In contrast, Vorster accepts that the apostolic kerygma has both form and content constituted through the apostolic proclamation of the gospel, but warns against the genre of the gospel itself being defined exclusively in terms of the kerygma, for by so doing it imposes a construct upon it that limits the creative theologies of the evangelists themselves, and other forms that they utilized to shape and inform their story. In mainline Europe Dodd’s work was conspicuously absent. Here the discussion

Bartsch, trans. R. H. Fuller; Friedrich Schumann, “Can the Event of Jesus Christ be Demythologized?” in Kerygma and Myth.

252 Dodd argued that the content of the gospel, the kerygma, had six major propositional truths: 1) “The age of fulfillment has dawned.” 2) “This has taken place through the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus.” 3) “By virtue of the resurrection, Jesus has been exalted at the right hand of God.” 4) “The Holy Spirit in the church is the sign of Christ’s present power and glory.” 5) “The Messianic Age will shortly reach its consummation in the return of Christ.” 6) “An appeal for repentance, the offer of forgiveness and the promise of ‘salvation’.” Dodd, The Apostolic Preaching, 24.


255 T. F. Glasson, “The Kerygma: is our Version Correct?” The Hibbert Journal, Vol. 51 (1952-53): 129-32. Sweet wonders whether it may be better to speak of kerygmata to reflect essential components that Dodd may have overlooked, such as eschatological perspectives. However, the danger with the term implies that there may be different gospel cores which runs contrary to most scholarship on the kerygma. J. P. M. Sweet, “The Kerygma.” The Expository Times, Vol. 76, Issue 5 (1965): 143-147.

256 Baird, “What is the Kerygma?” 188.


258 William Baird, “What is the Kerygma?” 182.
concerning the kerygma was developed by Bultmann who insisted the kerygma was the ‘subjective’ existentialist experience of being caught up in the event of the gospel proclamation and not the ‘objective’ content of propositional truths that stands outside its encounter. Baird and Hurtado however criticise Bultmann for a reductionist kerygma that is constituted through existentialism and subjectivism, and dichotomises the ‘Jesus of faith’ from ‘the Jesus of history.’ In summation of these issues I concur with Sweet that these two positions are not mutually exclusive. The communication of God’s revelation demands words and doctrines, yet the form of this communication should not be absolutised. Since the revelation occurred within history in the story of Israel and the Incarnation of Christ, the gospel should not be de-historicised. However, the proclamation of the gospel is itself dynamic, contextual, experiential and a powerful event. It is perhaps for these reasons that the early apostolic kerygmatic tradition embraced both the dynamic activity of preaching (Bultmann) and the core content of that preaching (Dodd).

In more recent New Testament scholarship however, whilst not dismissing the contributions of Bultmann and Dodd, there is a growing recognition of a wider identifiable kerygmatic vocabulary that includes a family of associated words that provides the New Testament with a kerygmatic rhetoric with an extensive, often interlocking, network of terms used for proclamation that are weaved throughout the New Testament story to create an essentially kerygmatic story.

In *Prolegomena to a Theology of Paul* James Dunn notes that Paul demonstrates engagement with an already existing kerygmatic tradition by citing or echoing language, phrases, formulae that convincingly appear to have already been established in a wider Christian discourse.\(^{262}\) These include particularly the familiar kerygmatic statements which Paul regularly attaches to his references to God and Jesus most notably concerning his death and resurrection which follow a regular pattern (Rom. 4:24-25; 1 Cor. 15:3-4; 2 Cor. 5:15; 1 Thess. 4:14). Such texts provide central affirmations about Christ which are expressed in ‘credal’ type statements indicating that they belong to an apostolic kerygma that is assumed as part of the early church tradition.\(^{263}\) These form part of what Dunn calls, the ‘Jesus tradition’ and constitute the shared memory of the first congregations about what Jesus said and did and were passed on as part of the tradition.\(^{264}\) These traditions inform both the Pauline letters and the Synoptic Gospels and indicate some interdependence of tradition.\(^{265}\) Koester notes the danger of advocating for a shared kerygma in the early apostolic tradition that is too fixed and inflexible. Although Paul wants to emphasise that the gospel preached by him is the common gospel of the entire enterprise of the Christian mission, his proclamation can not be reduced to a fixed formulation based on the diverse contextual realities that arise in his missionary endeavours.\(^{266}\) The Synoptics too, though sharing the kerygmatic tradition are likewise shaped and informed by their


\(^{263}\) Dunn, “Prolegomena to a theology of Paul,” 419-421.

\(^{264}\) Dunn, “Prolegomena to a theology of Paul,” 422.


own contexts and audiences. Accordingly, Christiaan Beker suggests that the early apostolic tradition embraced a kerygmatic model of coherency within contingency. The model recognises that there is in Paul, and the early apostolic tradition, a stable doctrinal coherency which Paul himself refers to as ‘the truth of the gospel,’ (Gal. 2:5, 14) whilst not reducing this core content to a static formulation or unalterable structure of thought so that it fails to be adaptable to contextual settings in which the apostolic message is shared. Further, the relation between Paul, the primitive apostolic movement, and the Synoptic gospels in relation to the kerygma must be understood in a dynamic and mutually interconnected way. Paul not only receives the kerygmatic tradition first hand from the apostles and the early Jesus tradition itself, but becomes its chief protagonist in shaping and developing its theology and practice.

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273 For example, Koester notes that the Pauline use and understanding of the term ‘euangelion’ becomes definitive for the early church, “From the Kerygma-Gospel to written Gospels,” 361-362; Kok in comparing Marcan and Pauline theology notes the significant development of several aspects of Pauline kerygma including global and cosmic Christological developments, sacramental theology, and a developing eschatology, “Does Mark narrate the Pauline Kerygma of ‘Christ Crucified’?”, 146-152; Baird illustrates that Paul is the primary locus for understanding the Christian kerygma and is able to distinguish between its unchanging core and its multiform contextual applications, “What is the Kerygma?,” 186-187, 191.
not least through the revelation given to him in his personal encounter with the Risen Christ.\textsuperscript{274} In short, Paul is indebted to the kerygmatic tradition and the kerygmatic tradition is indebted to Paul.

As we turn to examine Synoptic perspectives on the evangel, the influence of these contextual factors therefore helps us understand, in part, the shaping of their stories. And although the Gospels of \textit{Mark}, \textit{Luke} and \textit{Matthew} will take their own shape, and be filled with their own theological content for their own contexts and audiences, nonetheless these four contextual antecedents serve as useful prolegomena for their understanding of the evangel. The following perspectives briefly focus on their foundational narratives within which the evangel is initially constituted before noting further salient features that are central to their understanding of the gospel, culminating in their passion narratives that are the climax of their story.

3) \textit{Marcan perspectives on the evangel}

The opening words of Mark’s gospel, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1) form a superscription which indicates the character of that which follows.\textsuperscript{275} Although some ancient authorities do not contain the phrase “the Son of God” and not all scholars accept this as a legitimate insertion,\textsuperscript{276} nonetheless there is authority for such an inscription in antiquity.\textsuperscript{277} Following Lane, Gundry, Marsh and Moyise and others, I believe that this is a correct theological reading of Mark’s gospel serving as a bracket with Mark 15:39\textsuperscript{278} and reflective of other

\textsuperscript{274} Acts 9: 1-19, 22; 1-22; Acts 26: 12-18; Gal. 1:12.
\textsuperscript{276} For arguments for and against see Robert H. Gundry, \textit{Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross} (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993), 32-34.
\textsuperscript{277} Lane, \textit{NICNT Mark}, 44.
\textsuperscript{278} Gundry, \textit{Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross}, 34, 39; Lane, \textit{NICNT Mark}, 42; Clive Marsh and Steve Moyise, \textit{Jesus and the Gospels} (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 24-25.
‘sonship’ passages in the Marcan narrative.\textsuperscript{279} The words further echo Genesis 1:1 “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” and Brower is correct to suggest the phrase may signal that the story Mark is about to tell is a new beginning of God’s good purposes.\textsuperscript{280} From the outset therefore Mark announces that the content of his gospel concerns Jesus, who is the Christ and Son of God and I agree therefore with Best and Gundry that Mark intends us to understand that Jesus is both the object and subject of the gospel.\textsuperscript{281} Everything else that follows from (Mk. 1:1) is an extrapolation of this theological truth and evidenced through the words and deeds of Jesus the Messiah. As Stein comments, “The opening verses in Mark provide parameters by which Mark intends his readers to interpret his work. Everything in this section is meant to describe the beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”\textsuperscript{282}

Mark’s instant reference to the prophet Isaiah (Mk. 1:2), and the opening presentation of John the Baptist (Mk. 1:4), immediately introduce us to God’s continuing redemptive story fulfilling the Old Testament Messianic expectations through Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{283} The divine plan of redemption in the fullness of time has now been disclosed,

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;
three the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
“Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.” (Mark, 1:2-3).

Accordingly, the beginning of the good news corresponds to the pattern laid down in Isaiah 40:3 and Malachi 3:1. Both Old Testament passages deal with the return of the

\textsuperscript{280} Kent Brower, \textit{Mark: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition} (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill, 2012), 45.
\textsuperscript{283} Brower, \textit{Mark}, 45.
divine glory to his people and the messenger who will prepare the way for this, but most scholars believe that the key to Mark’s presentation lies in the way ‘glory’ passages are juxtaposed with ‘suffering’ passages, indicating that the Divine Son will not take the role of a political Messianic conqueror but fulfil Isaiah’s Suffering Servant motif (Isa. 52:1–53:12). The way to glory will be through the way of the cross.

By announcing the arrival of John the Baptist, Mark leaves no doubt that the good news regarding the kingdom’s arrival has now happened in and through Jesus. The main thrust of this passage therefore highlights the significance of the gospel in relation to the historic purposes of God’s salvation. John summons the people that come to him in the Jordan wilderness to the “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mk. 1:4). Both the oracle and the call for response, stand in the long line of prophetic tradition, but the summons heightens the expectation that God’s final act is close at hand. The Baptist, portrayed as an Elijah type figure, “declares that God’s promised redemptive rule is near, the promised moment in time has come to fruition, and all are summoned to surrender in repentance and faith to God’s redemptive rule (Mk. 1:14-15).” There is no time to delay for the One who is close to hand will baptise with the Spirit and will bring God’s new life to his people (Mk. 1:8). Khobnya emphasises the positive nature of this message (new life) whilst Lane notes in contrast the judgement motifs in the narrative (summons to repentance) but I agree with Mauser that they are not mutually exclusive, and both are necessary elements to the

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284 Marsh and Moyise, Jesus and the Gospels, 20.
287 Hosea 13:3; Joel, 1:15; 2:13; Amos, 5:11-14, 18; 6:1; Zephaniah, 1:14; Malachi 3:3; 4:6.
288 Lane, NICNT Mark, 50.
289 Guelich, WBC Mark, 45-46.
291 Lane, NICNT Mark, 44.53.
evangel. God's good news delivers from sin and initiates new life in the redemption that Christ brings.

For Mark the theological significance of the wilderness habitat from which John conducts his ministry can not be overstated. Essential to the prophetic concern with repentance in Hosea, Amos and Isaiah is the concept of Israel's time in the wilderness as the failed period of sonship to God. But Mark draws attention to the possibility of a new call to sonship in the wilderness where the failures of the past can be identified and repented from, and a new way of obedience taken. God's new solidarity with his people is therefore demonstrated through Jesus' identification with them in baptism for repentance, and the affirmation of his sonship confirmed by the voice from the Father in heaven (Mk. 1:11). The obedient Son is driven by the Spirit to face Satan in the chaos and conflict of the wilderness (Mk 1:12-13), but just as Israel was guided by the Spirit of God in their journey (Isa. 63:11-14) so God is with him. However, where Israel failed in her discipleship, Jesus remains obedient to the Father, triumphing over Satan and thus providing a new beginning for all who will embrace God's rule. The good news of the coming Kingdom of God ensures that "the hopes, so long in abeyance, are being fulfilled and a new exodus and return from exile is underway...this is the beginning of the re-creation of the people of God."
The prologue shifts the focus away from the forerunner to the Messiah himself as Jesus steps into the limelight of his own public ministry and announces the good news of God,

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” (Mark. 1:14-15)

Following the pattern of John, Jesus publicly announces his evangel with a call to repentance, for the kingdom of God has come near. Although scholars have differed in their interpretation of this passage, some emphasising the present reality of God’s kingdom (the time is fulfilled), whist others focus on the futuristic kingdom (has come near), the two meanings complement each other and indicate the eschatological tension between the present and future reality of God’s reign. However, I concur with Edwards that the context of this passage demonstrates unambiguously that God is now acting redemptively in Jesus in a new and decisive way. A faithful response to the proclamation of the gospel is therefore imperative. As with John, this evangel calls for repentance and a radical call to discipleship. This is demonstrated immediately after the baptism and temptation stories, in the calling of the first disciples to “Come and follow” (Mk. 1:14-19), and abandon everything for the sake of Christ, joining him in his mission to rescue others. The calling of the disciples is significant in another regard, for the calling of the four fishermen indicates that the essential work of Jesus consists in forming a fellowship, and that only within fellowship is the call of Jesus heard and

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297 Brower, Mark, 64.
299 For a balanced argument on the issue see Gundry, Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross, 64-66.
300 George Raymond Beasley-Murray, Jesus and the kingdom of God (Grand Rapids, Mi: William B. Eerdmans, 1987).
302 Brower, Mark, 35.
obeyed. Jesus is therefore the initiator and centre of a new life-encompassing community but one which is patterned after the “holy One of God” (Mk. 1:24). Followers of Christ must align themselves with the new purposes of God, including the way of the cross, servanthood and humility, and the renouncing of one’s own entire life for the sake of the gospel. Jesus therefore calls for a new response of discipleship that requires a total transformation of values and ethos. The ethics of the new kingdom are expressed most fully in his critical central discipleship section (Chapters 8-10) and form the essential ethic of the kingdom and way of Christ. This is the way of the cross and those that journey with Jesus must also be willing to humble and deny themselves and suffer and die even as Jesus did (Mk. 8:34-38).

Mark’s account of Jesus’ death uses a variety of literary devices to interpret it: taunts spoken in mockery that are ironically true, allusions to scripture, the words of Jesus, and various accompanying phenomena. For Mark, Jesus is the miracle worker and eschatological prophet who will suffer and die and rise again as both Son of God and Son of Man. Jesus finds Jerusalem and the temple as barren as the fig-tree and announces their destruction (Chapters 11-13). His own death depicted in (Mk. 15:21-41) is portrayed as a judgment on the barrenness of Israel and the failure of the old religious establishment is explicit with cultic allusions weaved throughout (Mk. 15:29, 38) culminating in the tearing of the temple curtain from top to bottom. The death of Jesus was therefore the beginning of something new: “it is the ransom which created a new people, the means of establishing a new covenant, the event which signifies the

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303 Edwards, According to Mark, 51.
304 Edwards, According to Mark, 51.
destruction of the temple and the beginning of a new form of worship.\textsuperscript{306} Ironically therefore it is a Roman centurion (Gentile) that recognises that Jesus is the divine man (Mk. 15:33-38) and is the final voice and interpreter of the narrative. What replaces the empty sanctuary of the Jerusalem Temple as the holy place of God is a community of believers such as the centurion, whose true confession of Jesus as the Son of God comes from having comprehended his death on the cross.\textsuperscript{307} And yet the empty tomb and absent Jesus offer a mystery of new hope and new life. Assured by the Resurrection, the women join Jesus in the ongoing story with trembling, bewilderment and fear (Mk. 16:8), trusting in the Son of God who has gone before them.

4) Lucan perspectives on the evangel

The gospel of Luke explodes with the activity of the Spirit in the infancy narratives. Everyone or anything that remotely comes into connection with the Christ is touched by the Spirit of God,\textsuperscript{308} which is a sign that the Kingdom of God promised in the Old Testament, is now breaking in through Jesus.\textsuperscript{309} Like Mark, Luke particularly draws on the significance of the prophetic tradition, especially Isaiah (Chapters 40-66) for introducing his gospel.\textsuperscript{310} The songs of Mary (Lk. 1:46-55), Zechariah (Lk. 1:68-79), Simeon (Lk. 2:29-32) and Anna (Lk. 2:36-38) also celebrate the birth of the Christ and confirm to us that the One born is indeed the “consolation of Israel” (Lk. 2:25).\textsuperscript{311}


\textsuperscript{307} Raymond E. Brown \textit{The death of the Messiah: from Gethsemane to the grave} (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994), 453.

\textsuperscript{308} Lk. 1:15, 35, 41; 67; 2:25-27; 3:6, 22; Luke (and Acts) is full of references to the work of the Holy Spirit. There is no room in this article to explore this phenomenon but suffice to note that in the Gospel of Luke the frequent emphasis on the activity of the Spirit is confirmation that the age of the Spirit has come, and the kingdom of God breaks into history here and now.


Furthermore, the angelic messengers, both Gabriel and the heavenly host (Lk. 1:11-19, 26-38; 2:8-16) herald his coming as good news indeed:

“I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news.” (Luke, 1:19)

“Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.” (Luke, 2:10).

This announcement is “good news of great joy” (Lk. 2:10) to all who hear it, and the particular exclusive religion of Israel is now in Christ made available and applicable to humankind in general.312 As Neale comments, “Israel is neither privileged nor excluded, condemned nor saved; she simply loses her status as being alone among the chosen. As with all peoples, she must repent and humble herself before God.”313 Jesus the Messiah is therefore, “a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” (Lk. 2:32).

In following Mark, the role of the Baptist in Luke is to serve as the forerunner, preparing the way for Jesus as God’s prophetic messenger. Luke likewise draws on strands from the Old Testament composite use of Isaiah but with an additional phrase, “and all flesh shall see the salvation of God” (Lk. 3:6) emphasising the universal nature of the evangel. As in the Marcan narrative, John exhorts to repentance due to the arrival of Messiah and the kingly reign of God.314 The baptism and temptation stories of Jesus, building on the infancy narratives, leave us in no doubt as to Jesus’ real identity, for he is the Messiah, Son of God, the bearer of salvation to Israel and the world, and fulfiller


of the hopes of Israel.\textsuperscript{315} These stories are preparations however for the public inauguration of Jesus’ ministry in Nazareth. Luke’s keynote address serves as the prototype for the ministry of Jesus that will be demonstrated elsewhere:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.” (Luke, 4:16-19)

I concur with Green that the ministry of Jesus in Nazareth is of central importance to the gospel as a whole, and thus also to Luke-Acts. It defines to a significant extent the nature of Jesus’ ministry, establishing a critical narrative need for Jesus to perform in ways that grow out of and reflect this missionary program.\textsuperscript{316} The primary point of focus for the declaration of the good news is the citation from Isa. 61:1-2 though two departures from this text are interesting. First, Isa. 61:2b, “and the day of vengeance of our God” has been omitted from Luke 4:19 (perhaps to suppress what would have been taken as a negative aspect of Isaiah’s message),\textsuperscript{317} and second, language from Isa. 58:6, “to let the oppressed go free” has been added (Lk. 4:18) thus to draw special attention to the phrase “go free” as a central characteristic of Jesus’ ministry. Also omitted is the phrase “to bind up the broken hearted” (Isa. 61:1) but the reason for this is unclear.

The passage is clearly structured to emphasise that Jesus is the anointed Messiah (Lk. 4:18a) and fulfiller and proclaimer of God’s messianic promises (Lk. 4:18b-19). The double use of the word release draws attention to the importance of this

\textsuperscript{316} Green, \textit{NICNT Luke} 207.
\textsuperscript{317} The note of discarding of judgement is of considerable interest when paralleled by the Qumran text of 11Qmelchizedek where judgment is a key aspect of the inauguration of the epoch of salvation through the messianic role.
theme for Luke's understanding of the evangel. For Luke this includes release from sins and granting of forgiveness (Lk: 1:77; 3:3, 5:20, 21, 23, 24, 7:47, 48, 49; 11:4; 12:10; 17:3-4; 23:34), the release from social exclusion and restoration to the community, (Lk. 5:27-32; 7:36-50) and a release from the binding power of Satan (Lk. 13:10-17). The releasing nature of the evangel is not only physical but also signifies freedom from both diabolic and social restrictions.318 It is now widely recognised that Isaiah develops the Levitical themes (Lev. 25:1-4, 8-10) in Isaiah 58 and Isaiah 61 to describe the coming redemption from exile in the eschatological language of jubilary release.319 However, Abraham cautions against suggestions that Jesus’ evangel develops or is controlled by a theology of Jubilee.320 Yoder likewise suggests there is no need to posit Jesus’ demand here for the immediate implementation of jubilary legislation.321 Further, we do not need to follow Strobel in his suggestion that Jesus’ announcement occurred in a Jubilee year,322 for as Green establishes, not only does the specific legislation of Leviticus 25 lack any key role in the subsequent Lukan narrative, but the obstacles related to the chronological data on which Strobel’s thesis is based are formidable.323 However, Green and Nolland assert that the background to the declaration of Lk. 4:18-19 is undoubtedly shaped and informed by the idea of Jubilee particularly announcing the time of God’s gracious visitation, with Jesus himself as its anointed herald. Carroll’s contention that the jubilary theme is most evident by the repeated use of release (cf. Leviticus 25:10)324 further cements the argument in

318 Green, NICNT Luke, 211.
favour of relating Jesus’ declaration with Jubilee. Notwithstanding the differing views on whether Jesus is intentionally equating his own message with that of Jubilee, the central proclamation of Jesus is unmistakable. Agreeing with Carroll, Jesus,

...points us to an era of salvation in which social, economic, and cultic dimensions of communal life will all be radically reshaped. When the narrative of his public ministry shows him forgiving sin, debt cancellation, and releasing the sick from demonic oppression, readers will understand that Isaiah’s promise of an era of divine favour is being realised.\textsuperscript{325}

Luke’s evangel for the poor should not only be understood in subjective, spiritual, personal and economic terms, but in the holistic sense of all those who are, for any number of socio-religious reasons, relegated to positions outside the boundaries of God’s people.\textsuperscript{326} By directing his good news to those on the margins, Jesus indicates his refusal to recognise those socially determined boundaries, asserting instead that even ‘outsiders’ are the objects of divine grace. The reversals of social position celebrated in Mary’s hymn of praise now begins to be enacted. Everyone is invited to the heavenly banquet: the demonised, diseased, blind, Gentiles, women, widows and the poor. As Carroll concludes, “Here then, in a nutshell at the beginning of Luke’s gospel is a precis of Jesus’ public ministry as Messiah in Isaianic idiom. The rest of the story unfolds the ways in which Jesus preaches good news, proclaims new sight and forgiveness, and sends forth the oppressed in release.”\textsuperscript{327}

Accordingly, Jesus begins his Capernaum itinerary by declaring he must take this evangel to other cities and the subsequent words and works that follow are demonstrations of the good news proclaimed in Nazareth (Lk. 4:33). Indeed, the incidents in Capernaum that follow “all show Luke’s developing portrayal of Jesus as

\textsuperscript{326} Green, \textit{NICNT Luke}, 211.
the Regal prophet whose salvific activity fulfils the missionary program drafted in Lk. 4:18-19."\(^{328}\) Accordingly, the first disciples are called to join him in “fishing for people” (Lk. 5:1-11), and the sending of the twelve (Lk. 9:1-2), and the seventy (Lk. 10:1-2), follow the paradigmatic agenda announced in Luke 4.\(^{329}\) For Luke therefore, the evangel is intimately related to the inbreaking kingdom of God in Jesus’ ministry and, thus, to the presence of eschatological redemption for those marginalised to society at large (cf. Lk. 4:18-19, 43; 7:22, 8:1; 9:6; 16:16).\(^{330}\) By this Luke demonstrates the significance of Jesus’ coming as the redemptive intervention of God to all who are excluded, and these themes are weaved into his passion narrative.

Many interpreters have observed that Jesus dies the death of an ideal martyr in the gospel of Luke, obediently and willingly, facing the path that the Father places before him. This serves as a witness and testimony for all those that are experiencing persecution and even martyrdom for the sake of the gospel.\(^{331}\) Yet his innocence is confirmed by witnesses and he is acclaimed by the people (Lk. 23: 27). In the place of Mark’s description of the Godforsaken One who dies shrieking in pain, Luke depicts Jesus as calm, coherent, and in prayer to the end.\(^{332}\) Luke’s ideal for the Christian community, as reflected in his account of Jesus’ death, is a community devoted in prayer to God’s purposes (Lk. 23: 34, 36), living by the scriptures (Lk. 23:30, 46), embracing the Gentiles and outcasts (Lk. 23: 34, 43, 47), making a special place for

women (Lk. 23: 27-31), being acclaimed by the people (Lk. 23: 27), yet ready to die for
the sake of the gospel if necessary (Lk. 23: 44-46). Declarations of the salvific
significance of Jesus’ death are less prominent in Luke, however, one who follows
Jesus in a noble death, like the God-fearing thief beside Jesus, can expect to be with
him in paradise (Lk. 23: 42-43). For Luke the passion continues to demonstrate Jesus’
care for welcoming in others to the purposes of God. His resurrection account brings
peace and assurance to his followers, but the primary focus is twofold. First, the didactic
nature of the evangel is emphasised in the Emmaus story as Jesus “opened the
Scriptures” to Cleopas and the other disciple (Lk. 24: 32) and in his appearance to the
disciples he likewise “opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures” (Lk.
24: 36-48). The purpose in both incidents is that the disciples, both then and now,
understand clearly that God’s historical purposes for Israel are fulfilled through the
death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This message is not however the prerogative
of the Jews alone for “repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his
name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem” (Lk. 24: 47-48). Through the power of the
Holy Spirit (Lk. 24: 49) the gospel of Jesus must be shared to the ends of the earth so
that all peoples may participate in God’s new future and history.

5) Matthean perspectives on the evangel

Matthew, as with Mark and Luke, cites and alludes to the Old Testament, with
over sixty quotations drawn from the Old Testament, more than twice as many as any
other gospel. Matthew’s gospel has been influenced strongly by concerns of

contemporary Judaism. Stendahl draws parallels between Matthew’s gospel and the Dead Sea scrolls which include a concern to illustrate from scripture how the ancient prophesies were coming true in their own history. Further, he exemplifies how the Qumran community would change the actual wording of prophetic quotations to clarify its meaning, serving as an interpreter of the ancient tradition, and Mathew similarly reinterprets or reapplies some of the Old Testament scriptures to serve his purposes of demonstrating that the story of Jesus Christ is very much at one with God’s historical purposes. Matthew therefore commences his story by tracing Jesus’ genealogy back to Abraham to show the forward movement of God’s saving purpose that now culminate in Jesus. Khobnya is correct in her analysis that Matthew’s concern is to reveal that God is immanently present to his people through the promised Messiah but Marsh and Moyise note that despite Matthew’s very Jewish opening that his genealogy mentions three women by name (Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth), all of whom are Gentile or have Gentile connections. It seems that Matthew’s introduction (genealogy) and his conclusion (The Great Commission, Matt. 28:19-20) anticipate the admission of Gentiles into the people of God, and therefore I concur with Stanton that “Matthew’s

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gospel is both Jewish, anti-Jewish and pro-Gentile.”341 The good news of the kingdom of heaven342 is therefore universal and comprehensive.

Jesus, like John the Baptist, (Matt. 3:1) functions as a prophetic herald proclaiming the good news of God’s coming kingdom which calls for a response: “From that time Jesus began to proclaim, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near’ (Matt. 4:17). The call to repentance, as in Mark and Luke, not only echoes John’s message (Matt. 3:2) but is concerned to highlight the reality and presence of the kingdom of God through the words and deeds of Jesus.343 Once again in following Mark and Luke the demonstration of the evangel normatively includes a three-fold pattern (preaching the good news, teaching in the synagogue and healing the sick, with exorcism often linked as part of the third). The summary of the Galilean ministry (Matt. 4:23; cf. 9:35-38) is used in the same way as Mark and embodies the holistic nature of the evangel. In Jesus Christ, the kingly rule of God is manifested and through him God has come to save his people from their sins (Matt. 1:21). Hagner notes, “Matthew, like the other gospels, is an expansion of the kerygma concerning the fulfilment brought by Jesus, especially through his death and resurrection.”344

The didactic nature of Matthew’s evangel is one of the most striking features of his story. His gospel is dominated (and structured) by five lengthy discourses,345 just as the Psalms and the Torah are each divided into five books.346 Marsh and Moyise

342 “With but four exceptions, Matthew employs the phrase ‘the kingdom of heaven’ rather than the phrase ‘kingdom of God’ found elsewhere in the New Testament, including all other material from the Gospel tradition...Matthew, preferring a usage that would communicate better in the Pharisaic-type circles he was engaging, naturally preferred this synonymous expression.” Keener, Gospel of Matthew, 68. See also Charles Talbert, Matthew (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 175-176.
343 Hagner, WBC Matthew, lx.
344 Hagner, WBC Matthew, lvi.
345 Matthew 5-7 is the Sermon on the Mount; Chapter 10 is the mission discourse; Chapter 13 is a collection of parables; Chapter 18 offer ethical instructions for the community; Chapters 24-25 teach concerning the Parousia and the end times.
346 Marsh and Moyise, Jesus and the Gospels, 30.
believe Matthew’s purpose is Christological, by demonstrating that Jesus is the supreme rabbinic teacher, the One who teaches “with authority and not as their scribes,” (Matt. 7:29). Stanton contends that Matthew’s primary intention is to emphasise the continuing importance of the teaching of Jesus for his own audience. These are complementary perspectives that reflect Matthew’s Christological, didactic and contextual concerns which significantly shape and inform his evangel. Further, Dale Allison, in building upon the work of Benjamin Bacon, portrays Jesus as a new Moses, bringing a new law to God’s people. Thus, like Moses, Jesus delivers his great discourse from a mountain (Matt. 5:1, cf. Exo. 24:12-18) and specifically links his teaching with that of Moses (‘You have heard…But I say to you’ Mt. 5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43). Donaldson in contrast links the mountain setting with the Zion eschatology in which there was the expectation of a great gathering of Israel to the holy mountain of Yahweh where they would be constituted afresh as the people of God. Burton Mack and Ben Witherington have drawn attention to the ‘wisdom’ nature of Jesus’ teaching. Far from being the law giver, they believe that Matthew presents Jesus, drawing upon his sage like sayings, more akin to a wandering Cynic philosopher whose teachings focus on living a righteous and simple lifestyle. I agree with Jeff Scott Kennedy however that rigid categories must not be pressed here. Matthew paints a

347 Marsh and Moyise, Jesus and the Gospels, 30.
348 Stanton, The Gospels, 60
350 He also contrasts the similarities in their birth narratives, notably the ‘slaughter of the innocents’ (Matt. 2: 16-18; Exod. 1: 15-22). And when Jesus ascends the Mount of Transfiguration, his face shines, as did the face of Moses at Mount Sinai (Matt. 17:2; Exo: 34:29-35), Dale Allison, The New Moses: a Matthean typology (Eugene. OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013).

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compelling image of Jesus as a both atypical Jewish sage and as the one true Messianic teacher of God’s people.\textsuperscript{353}

The five discourses are interspersed with numerous narratives and also with shorter collections of the sayings of Jesus (Matt. 12:25-45; 16:21-28; 19:23-30; 21:28-22:14). The first discourse is itself preceded by the infancy narratives, the Baptist teaching is recorded with the temptation story (Chapters 3-4) and the passion narratives follow the fifth discourse.\textsuperscript{354} The gospel concludes with Christ sending his followers to “teach all nations” and to help them observe all that he has commanded them (Matt. 28:16-20). The teaching of Jesus therefore lies at the heart of its missionary proclamation.\textsuperscript{355} As Keener notes, “Matthew’s portrait of Jesus recognises Jesus’ role as the supreme teacher, for whose teachings his disciples must make more disciples.”\textsuperscript{356}

Further, Matthew’s evangel could well be described as the gospel of kingdom righteousness. Continually Matthew gives prominence to the demands of Jesus for standards of ethical behaviour which conform to the will of God.\textsuperscript{357} Indeed the noun \textit{dikaiosune} (righteousness) is not found in Mark and used only once in Luke (Lk. 1:75), but in Matthew it is used seven times (Matt. 3:15, Matt. 5:6, Matt. 5:10, Matt. 5:20, Matt. 6:1, Matt. 6:33, Matt. 21:32). This theme is particularly developed in the Sermon on the Mount through the strongly ethical nature of the Beatitudes where righteousness is mentioned twice (Matt. 5:6,10). The teaching moves to a call to exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees (Matt. 5:20) and to strive first for the

\textsuperscript{354} Stanton, \textit{The Gospels}, 60
\textsuperscript{355} Stanton, \textit{The Gospels}, 60
\textsuperscript{356} Keener, \textit{Gospel of Matthew}, 70.
\textsuperscript{357} Stanton, \textit{The Gospels}, 69
kingdom of God and his righteousness (Matt: 6:33a), where the righteousness demanded of the followers of Jesus is linked explicitly with God’s kingly rule. Followers of Jesus are called to a radical gospel ethic that will transform all of life and the Jesus sayings are “clearly intended to function as a manual for discipleship,” to teach the Matthean community “ethical and religious behaviour.”^358 They serve as an ecclesial and pastoral teaching guide to explain what it means to live consistently as a follower of Jesus.^359

Matthew’s gospel heightens the Christology of Mark, making it more explicit (cf. the Petrine confession contrast in Matt. 16:16 with Mk. 8:29) and the titles of Jesus in Mathew, particularly “Son of God”, “Son of Man” and “Lord” all stress openly the Messianic qualities of Jesus.\(^360\) However, Jesus’ reinterprets and dismantles the popular Messianic categories of his day. His Messiahship, and the kingdom it initiates, will not be established by rule, force or militarism, but by servanthood, humility and self-giving sacrifice.\(^361\) The way to glory is through the cross and resurrection. Matthew’s passion narrative follows Mark closely, only modifying the offering of wine (Matt. 27:34) adding that after the soldiers divided his garments “they sat down and kept watch over him” (Matt. 27:36) and reemphasising the Christological nuances as Jesus the Son of God (Matt. 27:40, 43) and King of Israel (Matt. 27:42). The cry of abandonment is spoken in Hebrew rather than Aramaic (Matt. 27:46) to relate to his audience demonstrating that Jesus the Messiah is the fulfilment of God’s promises to his people. Matthew’s major addition however to the account of Jesus’ death is the description of the opening of the tombs and the rising of the dead (Matt. 27:51–3) although there are

different interpretations concerning the origin, structure and the identity of the ‘holy ones’ who are raised.\textsuperscript{362} Matthew adds this apocalyptic interpretation of Jesus’ death to further demonstrate the fulfilment of scripture and to connect the hope of resurrection and the eschaton not just to Easter but to Jesus’ death.\textsuperscript{363} Just as the post-resurrection appearance narratives serve to validate important elements of the early church’s faith and practice, so Matthew “retrojects the hope of resurrection to the phenomena that accompany Jesus’ death.”\textsuperscript{364} Jesus’ death foreshadows the events of the end-time: the shaking of the earth (Matt 28:4), the splitting of the rocks, the opening of the tombs, and the raising of the dead. In anticipation of the coming of the kingdom of heaven therefore, the disciples are commissioned in the authority and accompanying presence of Jesus (Matt. 28:18, 20) to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19-20). The missional nature of the didactic evangel is evident, and Craig Keener seems justified therefore when he concludes: “Matthew’s message to his community is clear: regardless of the response of the Jewish religious leaders, you must evangelise the Gentiles.”\textsuperscript{365} Matthew emphasises the significance of Jesus’ death and resurrection as the fulfilment of God’s purposes in history, the confirmation of the Christian community’s mandate to preach the gospel to the Gentiles, and incorporate and teach those that embrace Christ and the gospel.

6) Theological Reflections on the Synoptic evangel

\textsuperscript{362} Brown summarises a variety of views in \textit{The Death of the Messiah}, 1139ff.
\textsuperscript{363} Brown, \textit{The Death of the Messiah}, 1130-1131.
\textsuperscript{365} Keener, \textit{Gospel of Matthew}, 687–8.
In answering Walter Klaiber’s question “How evangel-like is evangelism?” the Synoptic evangelists provide us with helpful insights and perspectives that contribute to a foundational understanding of the evangel. I have therefore extrapolated from their unique but shared story three theological reflections that contribute to current conversations concerning the nature of the gospel and its implications for the missional practice of evangelism.

First, the evangel is “good news about Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mk. 1:1). Having examined the Synoptic writings and the antecedents that shaped and informed their narratives, including the apostolic kerygmatic tradition of which they too have become a part, it is evident that they embrace propositional truths that are foundational to their understanding of the Christian gospel. Rooted in the early Jesus tradition, the Synoptics share core Christological convictions concerning his birth, life, death and resurrection, and his central message concerning the good news of how Israel’s God becomes king of the whole world.366 Their evangel is the fulfilment of the Old Testament hope and is therefore consistent with God’s work in redemption history. It is in, and through the person and ministry of Jesus, that God’s kingdom is powerfully breaking through to the world.367 Jesus becomes the essential content and proclamation of the gospel for he is uniquely the One in whom the redemptive purposes of God have been revealed. The evangel has therefore an essential kerygmatic core because God has acted decisively in and through Jesus Christ.

The core message of the gospel, as Bevans and Schroeder, note, is constant, even if the context changes \(^{368}\) and stands above every culture challenging its distortions, blind spots and sinfulness.\(^{369}\) Therefore, although the gospel must be incarnated contextually in each new setting, and find organic expression, it will always bear witness to the story of God in Jesus Christ.\(^{370}\) This kerygmatic gospel however must also be contingent if it is to respond to changing contexts and fresh challenges. The Synoptic stories themselves demonstrate particular nuances and themes that are of interest to each individual writer in responding to their own settings and engaging with their particular audiences.\(^{371}\) Whilst sharing a kerygmatic core they constructed their story in ways that were contextually appropriate for their message to be received and understood. Similarly, each and every context will shape and inform how this gospel is to be preached and practiced but must remain rooted in the shared theological convictions of the kerygmatic apostolic tradition.\(^{372}\) Further, against the backdrop of negative perceptions of evangelicalism\(^{373}\) we are reminded that the evangel is a message of liberating hope and must always remain the “good news about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” This is not to deny that the gospel challenges cultural norms.

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\(^{371}\) See pages 9, 10, 23, 27.


and calls people to repentance and counter-cultural witness, but is a reminder that the Synoptics proclaim joyfully an inclusive evangel which is good news for everyone: the poor, the sick, the marginalized, the outcast, the powerless, the excluded and the oppressed. The gospel finds its most natural home therefore in the places and people that seem furthest from God but are invited by him to participate in the new eschatological kingdom.

Second, the evangel offers wholeness to people, community and nations. The Synoptic evangelists contend that through relationship with Christ, believers are transformed as new-creation people in the world and become an expression of God’s righteousness and holiness before the world. Furthermore, while the good news of the kingdom importantly includes personal forgiveness, assurance of salvation, hope of the resurrection and future life with God, it also entails a ‘this-world moral imperative’ to live with kingdom integrity in all the social, economic, and political dimensions of human life. Kingdom living entails an active commitment to seek justice for others, to practice compassion, and to evidence a loving concern for the physical, familial, social and ecological needs of the world. Kingdom life leaves no space for privatised pietism void of a prophetic voice and witness in the world (Matt. 5:14-16; 7:21; Luke 9:23).

The evangelical tradition has had a complex history in relation to political, social, economic and environmental issues. At times evangelicalism has been the strong agent of social activism and social justice, but at other times it has been removed from or silent to social concerns. There are encouraging signs however that the

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evangelical church is again beginning to rediscover afresh the breadth of the gospel itself as good news for all creation. The good news of Jesus has indeed implications for all of life, and for all of creation, and those that are practitioners of the gospel must be agents of the kingdom, and reconcilers of all creation. As the worldwide evangelical Lausanne movement states,

We therefore should share [God’s] concern for justice and reconciliation throughout human society and for the liberation of men and women from every kind of oppression…we affirm that evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty. The message of salvation implies also a message of judgment upon every form of alienation, oppression and discrimination, and we should not be afraid to denounce evil and injustice wherever they exist.

The evangel therefore calls for repentance and a radical transformation of ethics and values. For those wishing to align themselves with the purposes of God there must be a commitment to the way of Christ. The prominence of the didactic nature of the kerygma in the Synoptics demonstrates the need for spiritual formation and through it a discipleship making movement that lives out the ethics and practices of the gospel community. This call to follow after the way of Jesus is essentially cruciform and includes the renunciation of one’s very life, and carries the prospects of persecution, suffering and even death. This gospel stands in stark contrast to the so called ‘Prosperity Gospel’ especially found within forms of Pentecostal evangelicalism in

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379 I have addressed this theme in Chapter Four.
381 The so-called “Prosperity Gospel.” In response to the phenomenal rise of prosperity teaching around the world at large and Africa in particular, the Lausanne Theology Working Group, drafted a statement to warn of the dangers posed by this distortion of the gospel, https://www.lausanne.org/content/a-statement-on-the-prosperity-gospel [accessed May 20, 2010].
South Korea, Afro-Caribbean communities and Black Churches and has correctly raised fears that certain forms of evangelicalism have distorted the nature of the gospel found within the Bible itself.\textsuperscript{382} Likewise, the gospel is not a commodity that should be branded, marketed and sold as ‘seeker-friendly’ or packaged as another product that consumers can buy and use when needed. As David Wells suggests,

\begin{quote}
We have turned to a God that we can use rather than to a God we must obey; He has become a God for us, for our satisfaction—not because we have learned to think of him in this way through Christ but because we have learned to think of him this way through the marketplace. In the marketplace, everything is for us, for our pleasure, for our satisfaction, and we have come to assume that it must be so in the church as well.\textsuperscript{383}
\end{quote}

Third, the Synoptic evangel reaches its climax in the death and resurrection of Christ. Although Mark, Luke and Matthew offer unique understandings of the passion that are consistent with their own particular theological themes, they share a common interest in constructing their evangel in the light of Jesus’ death. For the Synoptics the death of Jesus was the crucial event in which the rescuing purposes of God were finally enacted and fulfilled.\textsuperscript{384} The crucicentrism that has traditionally been central to all evangelical theology\textsuperscript{385} is being reenvisioned or reinterpreted in certain evangelical quarters with a more inclusive, holistic and incarnational focus for the new postmodern context.\textsuperscript{386}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{382} Diarmuid MacCulloch Protestantism: The Evangelical Explosion in the BBC The History of Christianity screened on BBC 4 from 5\textsuperscript{th} November 2009-10\textsuperscript{th} December 2009. It is in the fifth part of the series that MacCulloch traces the growth of Evangelical Protestantism across the globe and raises questions concerning the nature of the gospel in the light of evangelical expansionism.
\item \textsuperscript{383} David F. Wells, God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), 114.
\item \textsuperscript{384} Svetlana Khobnya, “The Good News of the Inaugurated Kingdom of God,” 7.
\item \textsuperscript{385} Along with conversionism, activism and biblicism, crucicentrism is one of the four quadrilateral of priorities that is the basis of Evangelicalism. David Bebbington, Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s (London: Routledge, 1996), 2-3.
\item \textsuperscript{386} A case in point is found in Stanley Grentz who reinterprets the redemptive death of Jesus primarily in terms of creating community. “Jesus died to purchase our redemption and bring us to God. These images come together in the metaphor of interpersonal relationships. Jesus died in order that we who were enemies to creation, to each other, and above all to God might enjoy reconciliation and fellowship- that is, ‘community.’” Stanley J. Grentz, “Salvation and God’s Program in Establishing Community,” Review and Expositor, Vol. 91, No. 4 (1994): 510. For Grentz the cross serves as a theological construct as a gathering motif serving as a reminder of the manner of life to which the Christian community is called. The cross in this sense serves as an incarnational and prophetic motif.
\end{itemize}
particular there is slowly a shift away from a focus on the cross as a substitutionary act of atonement to appease an offended Deity (or the cross as retributive justice) to an explanation of the cross as a vehicle of restorative justice.\textsuperscript{387} The Synoptic passion narratives may prove helpful contributions at this juncture for they nuance different perspectives that include soteriological forsakenness and judgement (Mark), incarnational inclusivity and exemplification (Luke), and apocalyptic and eschatological fulfilment (Matthew) as equally important salvific motifs for the people of God. Crucially their passion narratives continue to remind the church of its cruciform gospel, and the proclamation of the cross therefore must be central. At a time when evangelism has rightly been balanced by the emphasis on incarnational lifestyle, presence and witness,\textsuperscript{388} we must not forget that, “Fundamentally, a Gospel proclaims the good news concerning the saving activity of God. That saving activity of God manifests itself climactically in the Death and Resurrection of Jesus. It is the heart of the Christian Gospel.\textsuperscript{389}


\textsuperscript{388} Joe Aldrich, \textit{Lifestyle Evangelism: Learning to Open Your Life to Those Around You} (New York: Multnomah Books, 2006); Chilcote and Warner, \textit{The Study of Evangelism: Exploring a Missional Practice of the Church}; Pete Gilbert, \textit{Kiss And Tell - Evangelism As A Lifestyle} (Farnham: Crusade for World Revival, 2003); Brad J. Kallenberg, \textit{Live to Tell: Evangelism in a Postmodern Age} (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2002); Stone, \textit{Evangelism after Christendom}.

\textsuperscript{389} Hagner, \textit{WBC Matthew}, Ivii.
Chapter Three

To explore the nature, role and practice of theological reflection across a spectrum of Church Planting traditions in the UK

1) Introduction

John Swinton and Harriet Mowat note that the use of interviews is a common method used in qualitative research\textsuperscript{390} and attempts to discover insight on issues that shed light on a piece of research that can not easily be obtained by other means. As Holland and Ramazanoglu state, “Qualitative interviewing constitutes a learning process.”\textsuperscript{391} This explains why interviews are among the most common methods of data collection and can be used to explore the views, experiences, beliefs and motivations of individual participants. They have the potential to “create deep and rich insights into the meanings that people place on particular forms of experience…and in order to access these experiences, it is necessary to engage in forms of deep conversation that will elicit this knowledge.”\textsuperscript{392} Boyce and Neale agree that in-depth interviews can be defined as a qualitative research technique which involves “conducting intensive individual interviews with a small number of respondents to explore their perspectives on a particular idea, program or situation.”\textsuperscript{393} The qualitative research interview seeks to describe and interpret the meanings of central themes in the life world of the subjects. The main task in interviewing is therefore to understand

\textsuperscript{390} Swinton and Mowat, Practical Theology and Qualitative Research (London: SCM Press, 2006), 60-63.

\textsuperscript{391} Janet Holland and Caroline Ramazanoglu, “Coming to conclusions: power and interpretation in researching young women’s sexuality’, in Mary Maynard and June Purvis (eds.) Researching Women’s Lives from a Feminist Perspective (London: Taylor & Francis), 135.

\textsuperscript{392} Swinton and Mowat, Practical Theology and Qualitative Research, 60.

the meaning of what the interviewees say and particularly useful for getting the story behind a participant’s experience.\footnote{Steinar Kvale, InterViews: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing (London: Sage Publications Ltd, 1996).}

There is a strong correlation between interviews and conversations, but they are not synonymous. As noted in the Introduction to the Portfolio, Stephen Pattison advocates that conversations enable participants to mutually exchange views whereby all parties journey to seeing themselves and others from new angles and in a different light. A conversation “is normally mutual, informal and has no fixed expectations attached to it.”\footnote{Swinton and Mowat, Practical Theology and Qualitative Research, 61.} However, interviews more typically have a set goal, are more formal, and the interviewer has an agenda that is intentionally seeking to solicit important information and insight concerning a particular topic without imposing that agenda of the interviewee.\footnote{Swinton and Mowat, Practical Theology and Qualitative Research, 61-62.} The researcher is in “a position of power and is an expert in the technicalities of the research process; she knows what is expected of her in her ‘professional role’ as a researcher and she has particular expectations about what the outcome of the research might be.”\footnote{Swinton and Mowat, Practical Theology and Qualitative Research, 62.} However, the interviewee has less power, for he is dependent on the interviewee “to represent him accurately, to record and interpret his words faithfully and to produce a report which, whether he likes it or not, in some sense resonates with their experience.”\footnote{Swinton and Mowat, Practical Theology and Qualitative Research, 63.} The use of the interviews in qualitative research is risky, and can be “received, treasured and accepted or abused, manipulated and implicitly discarded.”\footnote{Swinton and Mowat, Practical Theology and Qualitative Research, 63.} Therefore it is essential that the use of interviews as a method for reflexivity is aware of these power dynamics and makes every reasonable effort to create a process and method that is transparent, consensual,
and deploys robust steps throughout. As Hammersley cautions, reflexivity is called for in the researcher, who must recognize themselves both as part of the research process and the power relations that permeate the research encounter of the qualitative interview. However, when the appropriate safeguards are made and a robust process and method are established, the interview can prove to be an indispensable tool that gains rich and deep insights into the nature of situations and the forms of practice that are performed within them.

In this research project therefore, I have conducted qualitative interviews as a method of critical conversation to ascertain the nature, purpose and role of theological reflection within church planting, broadly within the Protestant evangelical tradition. The scope and detail of this information was not available in any published work at the time of research, and as this study is an elongated piece of theological reflection on church planting, the interview method was chosen to ascertain this information. The aims, processes, steps and methods deployed in conducting this qualitative research are outlined below to robustly address the safeguards that are aforementioned, and to provide the overarching framework in which the interviews were conducted. The second part of the chapter is a critical evaluation of key themes and issues that emerged from synthesising the conversations and provide a basis for offering theological reflections that may prove useful in shaping and informing reflective praxis in church planting. However, it is important at the outset to note briefly some of the limitations of this research project and to suggest ways in which subsequent research could improve and develop this work.

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401 Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 63-64.
402 See Appendix Three.
403 See Appendix Two.
2) Limitations of the research

Having completed the qualitative research project, upon reflection there are a number of ways in which the research project could have been improved, but two issues in particular are highlighted as perhaps the most obvious and significant. First, the diversity of those interviewed needed to be more reflective of church planting practice across a wider spectrum. The lack of women, ethnic minorities and non-evangelicals that have participated in the conversations is under-representative of church planting in the UK as a whole. There are several mitigating factors that contributed to this of which three are particularly noteworthy. First, most church planting that was being conducted at the time of the research was predominantly led by evangelicals. Second, although increasing numbers of church plants are led by women within some Christian traditions, in many denominations, as clearly represented in the interviews, men continue to dominate national leadership roles within denominations, missional agencies and parachurch organisations. Third, despite the best efforts to find leadership representatives from ethnic minority churches to participate in the interviews, only one from the Redeemed Church of God, Modupe Afolabi, agreed to participate. However, this lack of diversity would need to be addressed if the research project is to be revisited or developed.

Second, the questionnaire that was developed, though focussed, progressive in its questioning and tested in the pilot project, did not sufficiently ascertain more directly from the conversations what theological content, themes or issues were currently impacting church planting conversations and practice. This was not altogether absent

404 See “Investigating ‘lay-lay’ led fresh expressions of Church.”
405 As leader of the UK National Church Planting Forum I know first-hand through our engagement with over 70 denominations, missional agencies and parachurch organisations, that the majority of national or denominational leadership roles that are responsible for church planting in the UK are led by men.
and the transcripts record that some of this information materialised organically through natural occurrence in conversation, or emerged in Question 9: “What are some of the insights you have personally gained into the practice of church planting by your own theological reflections in the last 10 years?” and in Question 10: “What are some of the issues in church planting, which you think, need further theological investigation or reflection?” However, current theological themes and their implications could have been explored more fully and directly and help reveal further what theological foundations were present within existing practice both for the individual interviewee and their tradition.

3) Aims of the research

The purpose of the research through my conversations with the interviewees was fivefold:

1. To highlight current perspectives about the nature, role and practice of theological reflection in church planting across a spectrum of UK traditions.

2. To identify through conversing with key voices and traditions, past and present perspectives on the place and importance of theological reflection in church planting.

3. To identify and correlate key themes or issues that emerged in the conversations by their similarity or dissimilarity and their significance for theological reflection and church planting.

4. To consider how theological reflection might be more purposively explored in church planting circles with the aim of interrelating theology and praxis more
intentionally and effectively and identify ways in which this was already being practised and could be developed further.

5. To explore the possibility of fostering ongoing conversations between the interviewees that might further stimulate theological reflection on church planting and to become a participator in those conversations if and where possible.

The rationale for this project, and these five specific purposes began to emerge through conducting the literature review presented in Chapter One in which theological reflection was identified as a key concern for church planting practice. With much church planting devoid of robust theological foundations in the 1980s and 1990s, and the embryonic emergence of a more intentional engagement with theological reflection developing in the late 1990s and early 2000s, I wanted to explore the nature, role and practice of theological reflection as it currently stood across a spectrum of church planting traditions in the UK. In responding to the difficulties experienced in church planting through the DAWN and Decade of Evangelism initiatives, I wanted to ascertain if theological reflection on church planting was becoming more embedded in the practice, and if so how and why. Further, I wanted to converse with several of the key authors reviewed in my literature review that had begun to highlight this concern and to discover from them what could be learned about theological reflection in their own traditions and personal experience. By so doing this would enable me to correlate different perspectives that could prove informative and helpful to various church planting traditions with the aim of cultivating deeper theological reflection across traditions thereby shaping a more effective missional practice. It would also enable me to improve and develop my own thinking and practice of theological reflection in relation
to my own church planting practice and its interconnection with my theological studies through this doctoral programme.

The reader will inevitably find that the qualitative research and in-depth interviews conducted here may both throw light on a range of other issues and raise a host of new questions. Therefore, the work presented here does not claim to be the final authority on the matter, but a significant contribution to the overall narrative that is multi-voiced and multi-faceted. As Swinton and Mowat remind us,

The qualitative researcher does not seek to solve the problem or 'crack the case.' She is very much aware that neither is possible. The evidence can tell many stories, and all of them contain various degrees of truth. Her story is just part of a wide variety of evidence that will be offered to the 'court' as it seeks to discern what is truthful and what is not. The researcher’s task is to tell her story about the situation as well and as accurately as she can; to create her evidence convincingly and to bring evidence to the 'judge' who will read her report and pronounce the final verdict.406

4) Methodology

There are many different methods of doing theological reflection,407 and various styles of qualitative research,408 but the demarcation between the various methods used within the fields is often thin and blurred. I concur with Flick, Denzin and Lincoln, Swinton and Mowat and Thompson, Pattison and Thompson, that multiple methods and integrative methodology is an important aspect of the process of validating qualitative research.409 This serves to add vigour, breadth, diversity, richness and depth to enquiry. As Swinton and Mowat note,

406 John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, Practical Theology and Qualitative Research, 30.
409 Uwe Flick, An Introduction to Qualitative Research (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998); Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln, Handbook of Qualitative Research; Swinton and Mowat, Practical Theology and Qualitative Research; Judith Thompson with Stephen Pattison and Ross Thompson, SCM Studyguide to Theological Reflection.
the most effective way that practical theologians can use qualitative research methods is by developing an eclectic and multi-method approach which seeks to take the best of what is available within the accepted models of qualitative research but is not necessarily bound by one model.410

The methodology for this work is interdisciplinary. It brings together aspects of Practical theology, missional theology, theological reflection and qualitative research. Although the work is created through an inter-disciplinary framework, it is focused more narrowly on one aspect of research: the nature, role and practice of theological reflection on church planting across a spectrum of UK church planting traditions. It is also correlative as it brings together sources (written and human) into dialectical conversation with insights drawn from sources of knowledge within various disciplines and does so in a way that respects and gives an equal voice to each conversation, discipline and partner.411 In summary, this research has an integrative and interdisciplinary methodology that correlates the sources of personal story, written literature, and in-depth formal interview, with the aim of transforming church planting through a more critical understanding of the nature, role and practice of theological reflection on that missiological practice.

5) Method

These methodologies have shaped the framework, processes and direction of this research and provide the general background to this project. However, a method was required to ascertain the information that I required. As previously outlined, the idea of conducting in-depth interviews from across UK church planting traditions to

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410 Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 50.
explore theological reflection in church planting emerged from the literature review. The use of carefully conducted and controlled interviews is a well-recognised method of qualitative research\textsuperscript{412} and demonstrable in several model case studies.\textsuperscript{413} The following processes were therefore adopted to ensure that the interviews I would conduct were robust and appropriate for this work.

a) Framing and organising the questions

The questions for the interview were formed by reflection upon the church planting literature reviewed, and in dialogue with friends and practitioners in the field of church planting and theological reflection. The aim was to create no more than ten questions that built one upon the other, like stepping stones, beginning with introductory questions about the participant and their connection to, and understanding of church planting and theological reflection. This was followed by asking their own views on the nature, purpose and practice of theological reflection on church planting in their own tradition and experience. The questions were brief and focussed, but left room for genuine conversation. The final form of the questionnaire\textsuperscript{414} was revised and agreed in dialogue with social researchers.\textsuperscript{415}

b) Choosing the Interviewees

\textsuperscript{412} For interview methods see Helen Cameron, Deborah Bhatti, Catherine Duce, James Sweeney and Clare Watkins, \textit{Talking about God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology} (London: SCM Press, 2010), Chapters 7 and 8; Andrea Fontana and James Frey, “The Interview: from structured questions to negotiated text.” In a \textit{Handbook of Qualitative Research} (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2000), 645-72.

\textsuperscript{413} The five Case Studies presented in Part 2 in Swinton and Mowat, \textit{Practical Theology and Qualitative Research}, 101-227, were particularly invaluable in guiding the way this research is presented.

\textsuperscript{414} See Appendix One.

\textsuperscript{415} Particularly helpful were colleagues from Nazarene Theological College, skilled and experienced in conducting qualitative research methods.
The selection of the participants was carefully considered. Four criteria were important. First, they were to be people that had a track record connected to church planting ministries as practitioners, researchers or authors and were normatively leaders within their church planting denominations. Second, different church planting traditions were to be represented through the people interviewed. Having been involved in church planting circles myself I had a sense of the types of church planting traditions I wanted to include, but the work by George Lings and Stuart Murray on the “Five Tribes”\footnote{The Five Church Planting Tribes refers to the conversations Stuart Murray and George Lings have conducted with different church planting traditions in exploring what features, attitudes, focus or descriptors were salient to each. See Appendix Two.} of which I was a participant, helped me identify the types of traditions I would seek to consider. This was further reinforced by Michael Moynagh’s grouping of what he calls “four tributaries” of contextual new churches.\footnote{Moynagh, Church for Every Context (London: SCM Press, 2012), x-xvi.} As I noted in the conclusion of the literature review, it was also important, where possible, to include traditions that were actively engaged in church planting, but not represented in the literature and a number of participants fulfilled this criterion. Third, it was important that the person interviewed from each tradition was a recognised key voice within that tradition. The participant was not asked to speak officially for, or on behalf of their tradition, but they did need to be voices that people within their circle, and indeed outside their circle, would recognise as legitimate and relatively authoritative.\footnote{The people interviewed in each tradition were the appointed leader responsible for church planting or a recognised member of the leadership team in their movement (past or present) or were nominated to respond by the current leadership as an appropriate person to conduct this interview.} Fourth, since the interviews required openness and mutual trust, and were going to be recorded and transcribed, I decided that it would be beneficial (where possible) to solicit people for interview who had a prior connection or personal relationship with the interviewer. I also had invited participants to name others they thought important to interview for this work.
and it was reassuring to hear most people identify the same names, all of which were invited to participate. Sadly, not all could be interviewed as hoped.\(^{419}\) However, the sample of in-depth interviews eventually conducted fulfils the criteria I have set out above, notwithstanding some of the limitations noted earlier.

I am indebted therefore to Modupe Afolabi (Executive Administrator of the Redeemed Christian Church of God in the United Kingdom), Tim Aho (Christian Ministry Fellowship International, Church Planting Coordinator for Fellowship of Churches of Christ in GB and Ireland, and leader of a Simple Church Plant, \textit{thethirdspace}), Colin Baron (New Frontiers, National Leader, trainer and local planting practitioner), Graham Cray (former Bishop of the Church of England, Missioner for the Archbishops of Canterbury and York and leader of the Fresh Expressions Initiative), Gary Gibbs (Director of REACH, the evangelism and church planting department at Elim Pentecostal Church), Andrew Grinnell (former leader of 614 Squadron for the Salvation Army, urban missioner and Leeds Churches Together), Bob and Mary Hopkins (Anglican Church Planting Initiatives, part of the national Fresh Expressions of Church team, Church Mission Society, Order of Mission and the network of St. Thomas’s Churches in Sheffield), Stephen Lindridge (Methodist Connexional Missioner for Fresh Expressions), George Lings (Director of Research at the Church Army), Derek Purnell (Urban Ministry Consultant with Urban Presence, teacher and trainer in urban ministry and core team member of an urban missional community in Newton Heath, Manchester), Martin Robinson (Principal of Formission College, leader in the

\(^{419}\) I approached 16 people for interview with 13 willing, and able, to conduct the interview. One did not reply to the request, one was unavailable due to sabbatical leave, and one unavailable due to a writing commitment for a forthcoming book publication.
Fellowship of the Church of Christ), Andrew Vertigan (Salvation Army Missioner) and 
Stuart Murray Williams (Crucible, Anabaptist network and Urban Expression).\textsuperscript{420}

c) Establishing steps for the interview process

The following process was formed to create a robust, coherent, and transparent 
method of interviewing and recording data. Using guidelines for interviewing in 
qualitative research,\textsuperscript{421} the following steps were followed carefully:

\begin{itemize}
\item[i)] A list of people for potential interview was drawn up.
\item[ii)] These people were contacted requesting an interview, stating the purpose and 
nature of the interview and what was expected. Upon a positive response, 
arrangements were made for phone or face-to-face interviews.\textsuperscript{422}
\item[iii)] Two pilot interviews were conducted to test both the process and the questions.
\item[iv)] Appropriate modifications were made to the questions as deemed necessary in 
the light of the pilot interviews.
\item[v)] Confirmations were made for the formal interviews and the finalised questionnaire 
was sent to each person in advance of the interview.
\item[vi)] The interviews were conducted on an agreed date and time. They were recorded 
on a sophisticated dictaphone and included a clear explanation of the nature and 
purpose of the interview seeking oral consent for the recording to take place.
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{420} The amended transcripts of the interviewees are found in Appendix 3.
\textsuperscript{421} Guidelines for forming questions were influenced by examples given in Helen Cameron, \textit{Talking about God}, in her Appendix, see notes 3, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11.
\textsuperscript{422} Nine interviews were conducted by phone and four by face to face. The conditions were the same 
for all interviews, the same questions asked, and an opportunity for each person to amend their 
transcript if they did not convey what they had intended. This helped to ensure that the two different 
formats of interview did not prejudice the outcomes or disadvantage any participant.
vii) The interview stepped through the ten questions with supplementary questions added where necessary and appropriate. All ten questions were answered in every case.

eviii) Before the conclusion of the interview each person was informed that they would receive a transcript of the interview to which they could add any significant points they thought had been missed or misunderstood. They were also asked if they were content to have their transcript submitted as a formal piece of research and have their transcript sent around the other interviewees. From the outset I had hoped this project would stimulate ongoing critical conversations among the practitioners interviewed. All expressed their interest and gave their consent and I have continued to dialogue with most of the conversation partners in various ways and times throughout this study.

ix) The recorded interviews were then passed on to an independent transcriber for transcribing. This decision was made to help the researcher (me) with the workload, but also to ensure that the transcript was written independently and initially as non-interpreted data.

x) The researcher (me) received the transcripts and went through each transcript meticulously against the original recording, checking line by line to ensure that the transcript was accurate. It served as a double check on the accuracy of the transcript.

\footnote{I am indebted to Paige Stines for her diligent work in transcribing the interviews.}
xi) The transcripts were sent to the interviewees and upon receipt of the transcript they either sent a note to say they were satisfied with it and it was finalised, or resubmitted the transcript as amended. When the latter occurred, a written note was sent back to the interviewee (with their amended transcript) acknowledging the changes. These were not corrections because the transcript was in error, but because the person interviewed wanted to clarify, or more fully explain, a certain phrase or nuance. The original recordings and transcripts were archived.

xii) The researcher (me) then began the process of correlating and interpreting the data for submission in this work, which is presented below.

6) What are they saying about theological reflection on church planting?424

The purpose of the research was to explore the nature, role and practice of theological reflection in church planting traditions within the UK. Therefore, I have grouped my observations and reflective comments in three distinct sections. First, the nature of theological reflection, second the role of theological reflection and third the practice of theological reflection all of which are related specifically to church planting and the various traditions they represented. Before moving on to these three areas, there are a number of introductory observations that emerged from the conversations that are noteworthy.

a) The importance of terminology: a mixed economy?

As I reviewed and critically evaluated the audio recordings and the transcripts, the use and understanding of particular terminology was significant. It was clear from even the first initial evaluation that some terms in the questionnaire were ‘loaded’ for

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some of the participants with substantial connotations or content, and for others, some of the very same terms were unfamiliar, even if the essential concept behind them was not. This was especially evident in two usages. First, in the use of the term ‘theological reflection’ and second, in regard to the term ‘church planting.’

As noted above, not all the interviewees were familiar or comfortable with the term theological reflection, with some preferring a different term, such as “contemplative” reflection, or “Biblical reflection.” Some of the interviewees used more informal ideas to express “conversational” and “dialogical” approaches to talking about God. And yet for most the term was familiar and used normatively in the interview (Aho, Cray, Grinnell, Hopkins, Lindridge, Lings, Purnell, Robinson and Williams). Indeed, in these instances theological reflection was both a discipline and practice that had been developed intentionally and they were conversant with its origin in pastoral and practical theology. The spectrum of familiarity with the term theological reflection therefore largely mirrored, I would suggest, the spectrum of engagement with formal academic theological training. In other words, those that had engaged in formal academic theological training, tended on the whole, to be more familiar with theological reflection as an academic discipline (Aho, Cray, Hopkins, Lings, Murray, Robinson and Williams). Those that had engaged less with formal academic theological training, tended to be less informed on the discipline, history and practice, and it was less native to them (Afolabi, Baron, Gibbs, Vertigan). Some indicated that although it was not native to them, they were beginning to engage with it more formally through recent

425 Afolabi, 367.
426 Baron, 376.
427 Aho, 371-372; Gibbs, 396; Grinnell, 403; Lindridge, 419-420; Derek Purnell, 435; Robinson, 441, 443; Vertigan, 445-446; Stuart Murray Williams, 455-456, 458.
studies or engagement with others (Grinnell, Lindridge, Purnell).\textsuperscript{428} Although the term was not familiar to everyone, it was evident that all of the participants offered significant theological reflection on practice. For some theological reflection was more intuitively grasped than discovered through more formal academic models of theological reflection,\textsuperscript{429} but for others the reflective cycles used in pastoral and practical theology were advocated as helpful tools alongside more informal models.\textsuperscript{430}

The term ‘church planting’ was accepted by all, but it was embraced with qualifications, mainly by those that represented traditions that had deliberately moved to a wider umbrella term, such as Fresh Expressions of Church (FEOC),\textsuperscript{431} or was supplemented with other terminology, such as simple church, emerging church, or missional community.\textsuperscript{432} This reflected recent changes within the traditions themselves, but all embraced church planting as a concept and process that was very much part and parcel of the intentional means by which a new contextual community was formed. Whereas it was true that those that advocated a wider umbrella term could marry the language of church planting with other terms almost interchangeably, without too much difficulty (Aho, Cray, Lings, Lindridge, Grinnell, Purnell, Vertigan),\textsuperscript{433} it was clear that the traditional language of church planting was used exclusively by Afolabi and Baron,\textsuperscript{434} and preferred by Gibbs, Hopkins, and Robinson.\textsuperscript{435} Murray noted that there

\textsuperscript{428} The transcripts speak for themselves on these issues as the interviewees were asked several questions about theological reflection as a discipline and practice. Their replies self-disclose and acknowledge their familiarity or unfamiliarity with the term and how they had encountered or experienced the practice.
\textsuperscript{429} Aho, 370-371; Cray, 387, 389; Hopkins, 408; Lings, 430; Robinson, 440-441; Williams, 456-457.
\textsuperscript{430} Gibbs, 396, 398, Hopkins, 413; Purnell, 434; Williams, 457.
\textsuperscript{431} Cray, 385, 388, 391; Hopkins, 408; Lindridge 417-418, 422-433; Lings, 426, 428-429, Robinson, 440-441; Vertigan, 444.
\textsuperscript{432} Aho, 372, 373; Grinnell, 401; Purnell, 433; Williams, 454.
\textsuperscript{433} Most of these interviewees are associated or networked with FEOC, and therefore interchange church planting and fresh expressions terminology, as the movement itself does.
\textsuperscript{434} Their transcript exclusively talks about church planting.
\textsuperscript{435} Although they acknowledge and refer to other terms in passing, their own use is consistently church planting.
was further reflection needed on the terms ‘church planting’ and ‘fresh expressions of church’ and their relation to one another.\textsuperscript{436} It seemed that the use of language followed the terminology that was most familiar or nuanced or developing within each tribe. The basic concept however of embracing both traditional and new models of church, whatever they are called, was largely shared across the spectrum. Ecclesial experimentation as a missional response to changes within the context was deemed a significant issue by most of the interviewees, and robust theological reflection on engagement with culture and context was a primary theme for several of the interviewees.\textsuperscript{437} As Williams notes,

I think one of the things I’ve been concerned about for the last 15 years or more, has been the temptation for church planters simply to be pragmatists and not to think in sufficient depth about the mission context, the changing culture, and some of the theological and missiological issues that this raises…All church planters need to be theologically articulate and concerned to reflect on their context and their practice.\textsuperscript{438}

The Redeemed Christian Church of God did not raise the need for ecclesiastical reconfigurations or experimentation but indicated a greater concern for how churches can grow across different cultures,\textsuperscript{439} perhaps reflecting their own ecclesial challenges as a primarily monoculture church in a multicultural context. These examples demonstrate that the use of terms is rarely neutral but are contextually shaped and informed by the church tradition and culture in which they are employed. Defining and explaining terms is important if people are not to talk at crossed purposes or develop unhelpful assumptions about what others mean.

\textsuperscript{436} Williams, 457-458.
\textsuperscript{437} Aho, 373; Baron, 376-377; Cray 386-387, 390-391; Hopkins, 406, 408-409, 411, 413-414; Lings, 426, 430-431; Purnell, 433-434; Robinson, 442.
\textsuperscript{438} Williams, 452.
\textsuperscript{439} Afolabi, 367.
b) The interconnectedness of the participants: tribes but not tribal

A second overall observation that emerged clearly from the transcripts was the interconnectedness between the participants in a number of ways.\textsuperscript{440} This was particularly clear in those that had connection with each other through FEOC (Lings, Hopkins, Cray and Lindridge, and more laterally Vertigan). Williams was a close associate of not only the FEOC tribe, but with others that had been influenced by his work, or associated with his missional agency Urban Expression, or his engagement through the Anabaptist network (Lings, Grinnell, Hopkins, and Aho). Martin Robinson was cited by Tim Aho as being influential in his own thinking. Gibbs also notes Robinson’s influence upon a new recruit to his own department in church planting, and also acknowledges Cray’s influential thinking and teaching. Cray speaks about his long-term friendship with his Anglican colleagues, Lings and Bob and Mary Hopkins. He also commends the work of Graham Horsley,\textsuperscript{441} who is likewise commended by Lindridge, who incidentally commends Cray. Vertigan notes his new connections with Murray, Hopkins and Robinson, and his personal associations with Grinnell through the Salvation Army. Considering these interviews were conducted independently, it is evident that there are personal and professional connections among many of the missional practitioners interviewed, especially in the mosaic of FEOC, and interdenominational family connections. Only Alforai and Baron were absent in noting theological reflection with others outside their own tradition, and it is interesting that Baron represents a FIEC tradition, and Alfoai a homogenous Nigerian denomination. It seems both these independent conservative evangelical tribes conduct reflection

\textsuperscript{440} The interviewees self-disclose their relationships, partnerships, associations and work with one another and I have drawn together these connections from the transcripts in this section.

\textsuperscript{441} Graham Horsley (Methodist Church Planting Missioner) agreed to be one of the interviewees but was unable to be interviewed due to a change of role.
primarily in their own circles, whereas most others engage intentionally with other ecclesial traditions.

It was also evident from the transcripts that there was a strong cross fertilisation of theology, dialogue, writing and consultancy that had taken place between many of those participating in the interviews. For example, Murray and Lings have written together and shared several projects together, e.g. The Five Tribes conversations, and Hopkins, Cray, and Lings had connected through Anglican Church Planting Initiatives and Fresh Expressions of Church. Robinson and Aho share the same denominational connections, as do Vertigan and Grinnell. FEOC brings several of the interviewees into connection with one another, and the relational networking across tribes and traditions is significant in cross fertilising reflection on practice as is evident in the transcripts from virtually all the participants. In short, the tribes may therefore have their own centres, or leaders or recognised voices, but they were not in the main isolated tribes and this undoubtedly has been a great enhancement to shared theological reflection, mutual learning and ecumenical partnerships. It is important to note that there was respect and appreciation by the interviewees for other reflective practitioners in this field. Although there may be church planting tribes, the tribes in this field were in fact, not very tribal.

c) The necessity of the task: A willingness to learn and discover

A third observation that straddles the participants was their passion to both endorse the importance of reflecting on church planting practice (recognising that this is an important task), but to also advocate the importance of personal and corporate processes of learning and development. In each interview, whether it is stated explicitly (and it usually was) or implied implicitly, ongoing theological reflection upon the church planting task by church planters themselves is vital if substantial insights and
transformational practice is to occur. There are five key issues that emerged in connection with this that require specific comment.

First, there was recognition that if there was no serious theological reflection upon church planting practice, outdated or contextually irrelevant models, or cloned models and practices would only be reproduced and the new discoveries necessary for a post-modern and post Christendom context would not be found.\textsuperscript{442} The recurrent theme of the need to take reflection seriously in order to learn and be equipped for the mission task was a predominant one. Second, there was a recognition that all Christian expressions of Christian ministry and practice arise out of existing theological foundations or from within existing theological frameworks. Praxis is therefore always rooted in prior understandings and assumptions of Scripture, faith, doctrine, culture, tradition and so forth. Theological reflection therefore provides the process and tools by which practitioners can discover their own blind spots and teach them to see new ways of thinking, being and doing. As Aho states,

\begin{quote}
A church planter is so part of their own context and culture they don't realise context and culture has actually impacted and influences the way they strategise, the way they measure, the way they implement their strategy...Both Christian culture and secular culture has more impact than [the planter] can ever imagine, because they are in the middle of it, and they don't see it.\textsuperscript{443}
\end{quote}

Bob Hopkins concurs, “theological reflection...protects us from becoming culturally trapped in a Christendom that actually is just reinforcing its own cultural myopia. Theological reflection should be the thing that helps us escape from that...it breaks you out of your cultural blindness.”\textsuperscript{444} Third, theological reflection can be a corrective to unhelpful pragmatism and activism. A few of the interviewees noted the danger of being

\textsuperscript{442} Aho, 370; Baron, 382-383; Cray, 387-389; Gibbs, 396, 398-399; Hopkins, 407, 410, 414; Lindridge, 417-421; Lings, 429-430; Purnell, 434; Robinson, 440, 443; Williams, 455, 459.

\textsuperscript{443} Aho, 373.

\textsuperscript{444} Hopkins, 408-409.
driven by how-to mentalities which are uninformed by, or connected to, why-to questions.\textsuperscript{445} As Lings notes,

There is an opportunity and necessity to see greater clarity on the ‘why’ rather than the ‘how’ questions…the \textit{why} is more important than the \textit{how} questions. That’s become something of greater significance in the last period of time [the last ten years] in reflecting.\textsuperscript{446}

There is a concern that unreflective action may lead to inappropriate or bad forms of practice. Therefore, the need to learn reflective practice is vital to the church planting task, especially where activism or pragmatism was the predominant church culture for some traditions. Reflecting this tradition Grinnell says,

My experience is that after two or three years [of planting], those who haven’t reflected theologically on their practice often end up either creating things that are not necessarily going anywhere very fast. So, I think theological reflection is just so crucial to help people understand what they are doing, and at times, correct what they are doing!\textsuperscript{447}

Fourthly, the participants saw the necessity for theological reflection to be integrated into the ongoing journey of learning and spiritual formation that all Christians should be engaged with: The terms, “continual reflection,”\textsuperscript{448} “a shared learning process,”\textsuperscript{449} “a way of life,”\textsuperscript{450} and an “ongoing lifestyle of reflection”\textsuperscript{451} were among the key terms used to emphasise the importance of church planters engaging in the much wider task of Christian formation and ministry. Finally, each practitioner could identify and articulate discoveries for themselves or their traditions because of personal theological reflection. Although not always received with universal acceptance and approval, and indeed sometimes met with hostility, the interviewees discussed the personal and

\textsuperscript{445} Baron, 480; Gibbs, 397, 397; Grinnell, 403; Lings, 430-431; Robinson, 440; Vertigan, 446; 448; Williams, 454-455.
\textsuperscript{446} Lings, 430.
\textsuperscript{447} Grinnell, 400.
\textsuperscript{448} Afolabi, 366.
\textsuperscript{449} Cray, 390.
\textsuperscript{450} Purnell, 436.
\textsuperscript{451} Williams, 453.
transformational changes that reflecting on church planting had brought them. Engagement in the church planting task itself was the catalyst for embarking on a journey of personal discovery and theological reflection. Hopkins says, “Church planting forces you to do theological reflection, even when you have not been trained in the skills of theological reflection…I don't think you can do church planting without being pushed to make theological reflection.” Lindridge has observed that theological reflection takes place best when churches are themselves planted at the “cutting edge of church planting ministry.” Lings makes a similar point to Hopkins and Lindridge that church planting is in itself “an inherently reflective process.” He notes, “So I think it might even be true that when you put the two words together, ‘church’ and ‘plant,’ you are inherently committed, or should be, to a reflective process.”

7) The nature of theological reflection in church planting

The comments above already relate to the nature and role of theological reflection on church planting but there are several other points that need to be stated more specifically. The interviewees agreed that the nature of theological reflection was an engagement of one’s life and experience, with the truth about God revealed in Scripture, tradition (history) and experience (praxis). Theological reflection is “to take your practice and bring it into conversation with theology,” and is essentially the task of “relating experience to the twin streams of biblical revelation and historical insights in a three-way dialogue.” It is therefore a “discerning process (or processes) of the

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452 Hopkins, 407.
453 Lindridge, 418.
454 Lings, 428.
455 Lings, 428.
456 Grinnell, 400.
457 Hopkins, 407.
relation between theology and the human factor (being) in a designated task."\(^{458}\) It is “how you understand God, how you understand yourself in relation to God…it is about our participation with God in the life of faith."\(^{459}\) Although the interviewees shared a broad agreement that the nature of theological reflection in church planting was concerned with engaging experience and practice with God’s self-revelation, a number of issues require more critical examination.

First, the sources of theological reflection mentioned by the participants echoed the theological traditions, or personal experiences of the participants. The importance of Scripture came to the fore as a key source of theological reflection. Indeed, for some of the more conservative evangelicals it is the foundation for all reflection from which everything else is determined.\(^{460}\) The role of the Scriptures is clearly important to the others too, but it is complemented by the importance of contextual analysis and engagement with the Christian tradition, even if it remains the primary source.\(^{461}\) As Cray says concerning the nature of theological reflection in relation to the sources it draws upon, “The more I reflect on it the more I think the practice of theological reflection is a triple listening: you are listening to the living tradition of the church, to scripture as its authoritative layer, and you are listening prayerfully to a context to see what God is doing there ahead of you.”\(^{462}\) Cray and others embrace a theological reading, not only of the sacred text, but the theological reading of context and culture. Williams however notes that a theological reading of culture has not always been evident: “I think there has been quite a bit of writing and reflection around Fresh Expressions, some of which would have significant theological reflection, but quite a lot

\(^{458}\) Afolabi, 366.  
\(^{459}\) Robinson, 438.  
\(^{460}\) Baron 377-378; Baron that says Biblical reflection is at the heart of theological reflection, 377.  
\(^{461}\) Aho, 371; Cray, 385-386; Grinnell, 401-402; Purnell, 434; Williams, 454.  
\(^{462}\) Cray, 386-387.
of it has been methodological or more culture reflection than theological reflection.”

Nonetheless, with the other interviewees in the FEOC movement, he endorses the need to discern God at work in the sources of the Christian Scriptures, tradition and culture. This has major implications for an understanding of Christian revelation and how and where that is located.

Second, there is an emphasis from several of the participants on the important role of the Spirit in theological reflection, especially among those influenced by the Pentecostal/Charismatic tradition. The Holy Spirit is key in giving insight, revelation and discernment to the theologically reflective task. The nature of theological reflection is spiritual and not just academic, skills based and acquired through techniques. It is about sensing the leading and direction of the Spirit through discernment processes and intuitive insight. This does not mean that the Spirit is absent in those that have used the pastoral cycles of See, Act and Reflect, but the emphasis on the Spirit in some traditions clearly has a strong bearing on the nature and role of theological reflection and how that is worked out in practice.

Third, the spirituality of the planter is addressed explicitly by Aho and Robinson as an important issue in theological reflection. Although there are several sources of theological reflection, they are not divorced from the person going about the task. Theological reflection is therefore rooted in the life and character of the reflector, and by those that support and sustain him/her, such as coaches, guides, and mentors. Robinson concludes,

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463 Williams, 356.
464 Afolabi, 367-388 (for Afolabi the Spirit is the primary source for theological refection); Baron, 383; Cray, 391; Gibbs, 394-395; Lindridge, 418.
465 Afolabi, 367-368; Cray, 319, 321-323; Gibbs, 328; Lings, 364.
466 Aho, 304-305; Gibbs, 386, 388-89; Hopkins, 408; Purnell 436; Williams, 454-455.
467 Aho, “If a church planter isn’t paying attention to their own spiritual being, how they’re hearing God, then they’re not going to be taking a lot of effort to be doing a lot of theological reflection either,” 369.
468 Robinson, 440.
I also think that you can’t do theological reflection well, unless it’s also accompanied by spiritual formation...I don’t think theological reflection is primarily an academic exercise, which is just thinking through puzzling questions, it’s more to do with how our faith shapes our character, and how our character then changes the way in which we believe and act. So, I think action, belief, and spiritual formation should be in a constant piece of interaction.\footnote{Robinson, 439.}

Fourth, as a direct extrapolation of the points above, there are different methodologies in how church plants are initiated, in what they look like, and what they are intended to be and do, based on an understanding of the Scripture and the Holy Spirit. It is beyond the scope of this PhD to deal with this here, but there are several critical questions and issues that need to be explored and examined further in how the divine and human interaction plays itself out in the reflective process and praxis of the church planting task. If at one end of the spectrum there is a complete dependence on the Bible and the Spirit as the primary sources which define the nature of theological reflection, where is the role and validity, if any, of the hermeneutical processes, analysis of culture, engagement with social sciences and inter-disciplinary learning? If at the other end of the spectrum however, there is a primary dependence on cultural analysis and methodology using social science tools alone, then where is the voice of God found? The middle ground found in some interviews, indicate the need for divine and human agency to be involved in the church planting task, but the distinctiveness (or perhaps more accurately the emphasis) lies in different places for different practitioners and perhaps traditions. I think that it is fair to deduce from the interviews that some placed a very strong emphasis on the importance of culture and contextual analysis whilst others said little about this due to their emphasis on the Bible and the work of the Spirit. Clearly the need to dialogue on the nature of theological reflection as both a spiritual and a human task, and indeed church planting itself as both a Spirit-led, and
humanly initiated task, albeit in cooperation, is an issue that needs to be considered further. Perhaps Aho and Robinson point in helpful directions by framing the issue in terms of spirituality and character, which they indicate are not divorced from context and competency.

Finally, several theological themes are identified that are currently informing church planting, particularly Missio Dei, Christology, Incarnation, ecclesiology, and the kingdom of God, and a deeper exploration of other foundational theological themes is advocated by some of the participants including Trinity, eschatology, shalom, soteriology, sacrament, and further explorations in ecclesiology. There is an agreement that there are many theological themes that can be further mined to inform and shape church planting thinking and practice and it is critical that these explorations continue to take place. If the nature of theological reflection is to engage the practitioner in understanding the nature and purposes of God, then ongoing revelatory encounter and engagement of God himself becomes a central pursuit which shapes and informs our understanding of God’s mission to the world and our participation in it.

8) The role of theological reflection

470 Baron, 377-380, 384; Cray, 326-328; Gibbs, 393-394; Lindridge, 419; Lings, 431-432; Hopkins, 410, 415; Robinson, 439, 43; Vertigan, 446; Williams 452.
471 Aho 371; Robinson, 444; Williams, 460.
472 Williams, 460.
473 Grinnell, 404; Williams, 459.
474 Robinson, 439; Williams, 460.
475 Hopkins, 416; Lindridge, 425; Robinson, 444.
476 Every interviewee noted different questions about ecclesiology that should be explored. These can be summarised into three categories. First, issues to do with an actual understanding of what church is. Second, issues to do with church shape, values and ethos. Third, issues to do with structure, function, resources and mechanics. Ecclesial issues dominated, and since this was primarily about church planting it may not be surprising. However, perhaps it also indicates the need to integrate ecclesiology within a wider theological framework and move beyond ecclesiology as a starting point for each issue. This is a concern that is raised in the literature review and is addressed in Chapter Four, Trinity and Creation.
If the nature of theological reflection is essentially its essence and heart, then the role of theological reflection is essentially its purpose and direction. In this chapter we have already addressed some of the purposes of theological reflection, but these need to be explored further.

The role of theological reflection in church planting is to enable planters to be “more effective in terms of our church planting practices,”\textsuperscript{477} and to resource “practitioners to work from where they are to some of the biblical and theological perspectives that will be helpful to them to better interpret the situation [they find themselves in].”\textsuperscript{478} This requires a reflective process that challenges our own cultural blindness and bias,\textsuperscript{479} in order that we can “establish churches that are authentically and recognizably Christian, that are clearly appropriate, incarnational and contextual.”\textsuperscript{480} Practically it also helps us to “think through why things worked, and why they did not work.”\textsuperscript{481} Using perichoretic imagery, Lings sums up that the essential role and purpose of theological reflection, “is sustaining the connection, or the dance,\textsuperscript{482} between theory and practice whereby one of those two partners may lead at any one point. But the essence of the dance is the continued and evolving relationship between the two.”\textsuperscript{483} The role of theological reflection is therefore to hold together reflective practice in multi-faceted contexts. It takes practitioners to new horizons in thinking and new creative ways of acting. This is evident in the interviews in two main ways.

First, different things were learned in different traditions because of theological reflection. The role of theological reflection is not to make everyone think the same, or

\begin{small}
\begin{footnotes}
\item[477] Gibbs, 394.
\item[478] Williams, 453.
\item[479] Hopkins, 407.
\item[480] Cray, 385.
\item[481] Baron, 376.
\item[482] See page 143, footnote 483.
\item[483] Lings, 427.
\end{footnotes}
\end{small}
provide the same solutions to each of the traditions, but to help them organically make progress in thinking and practice within the church culture and tradition they find themselves in. So, although there are several purposes that theological reflection might serve (exemplified in the statements from the interviews above), its outworking in particular traditions is diverse. This is of course because different traditions have different histories, cultures and starting points. So, for example in Pentecostal//Holiness traditions such as the Salvation Army (Vertigan and Grinnell), New Frontiers (Baron), Elim (Gibbs) and The Redeemed Church of God (Afolabi), the interviewees spoke about how theological reflection helped them with a more intentional reflection on church planting practice and provided a means to ask deeper questions about the nature of the church and its mission. In traditions where reflection is perhaps more developed, such as in the Anglican and Methodist circles, theological reflection had helped them to find a way to hold on to inherited church and yet embrace fresh expressions of church in a way that was consistent with the marks, ethos and values of their traditions (Cray, Hopkins, Lindridge and Lings). In the Church of God with its focus on renewal, sacramental and missional ecclesiology, theological reflection has helped it embrace simple church expressions as consistent with its own culture and tradition (Aho and Robinson). These examples illustrate that theological reflection enabled the participants to address key issues pertinent to their own tradition. It is important to remember and respect that the nature and role of theological reflection and its outworking will look, and be applied, differently in different traditions. Therefore, fixed and formalised ways of doing theological reflection may have to be balanced by more diverse forms that understand and respect church diversity, not just within the overall Christian tradition, but in local churches too.
Second, some of the tribes in response to missional concerns, have developed intentional reflective processes and tools for helping churches to theologically reflect on context and culture, alongside Scripture, tradition and one’s own life experience. The FEOC movement in particular has contributed significantly to how new churches are formed organically and incarnationally through advocating its process of “double listening”\textsuperscript{484} or “triple listening.”\textsuperscript{485} It is also evident that within the evangelical/charismatic denominations such as New Frontiers, Elim, Salvation Army and Church of God, that intentional processes of theological reflection on church planting practice are developing alongside the intuitive approaches, often through the influence of FEOC.\textsuperscript{486}

As new contextual models of church are being developed across all the tribes, discernment is being advocated as the first step of mission, and theological reflection will play a key role in this. It will provide the tools to ask the hard questions, and potentially help create new forms of church that are different than the forms that already exist. For different denominations, in different ways, this is hugely challenging, especially those traditions that have a more bounded ecclesiology, but the purpose and direction of genuine theological reflection on church planting practice, will always lead to transformation.

9) The practice of theological reflection

Although there were differences in how the term was understood, one clear picture that emerged from across the spectrum was the diversity of ways in which theological reflection was practised. There is no time in this piece of work to critique

\textsuperscript{484} Cray 385; Lings, 427-428, 450.  
\textsuperscript{485} Cray 386.  
\textsuperscript{486} Aho, 372; Baron, 377, 381-86; Gibbs, 394-395; Grinnell, 403-404; Robinson, 441-443; Vertigan, 444, 450.
and analyse these multi forms, but rather correlate the different practices under groupings and offer some insights into observations that were made.

First, a few of the participants use formal models, methods and processes of theological reflection that had been learned either at Theological or Bible College, or as part of ministry or spiritual formation.\textsuperscript{487} Theological reflection was also taught or fostered through the development of modules, or training courses to help planters be equipped and resourced for ministry. Williams developed resources first at Spurgeon’s College\textsuperscript{488} and subsequently in the Crucible course.\textsuperscript{489} Bob and Mary Hopkins have developed the use of the traditional pastoral cycle for church planting training.\textsuperscript{490} First Steps has been developed by the Salvation Army,\textsuperscript{491} and Formission College has developed resources in its courses of study.\textsuperscript{492} The development of FEOC has led to the creation of Mission-Shaped Ministry,\textsuperscript{493} and this is run in centres across the country.

Second, the place of dialogue and conversation among practitioners, formal and informal was evident in this study. For some practitioners and traditions, this was the primary practice of reflection,\textsuperscript{494} but even among traditions that embraced formal methods, conversations play a key role.\textsuperscript{495} Conversations take place in different ways, some are attached to conferences and training sessions,\textsuperscript{496} others are convened to discuss particular issues formally (such as at Synod or Conference),\textsuperscript{497} or informally (at

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[487]{Aho, 370-371; Cray, 389-390; Hopkins 408-409; Lings, 430; Purnell, 434; Robinson, 438, 442; Williams 454; 459.}
\footnotetext[488]{Williams, 454-455, 457.}
\footnotetext[489]{Grinnell, 401, 403; Williams, 456, 458.}
\footnotetext[490]{Hopkins, 408-409.}
\footnotetext[491]{Vertigan, 446.}
\footnotetext[492]{Robinson, 438, 442.}
\footnotetext[493]{Cray, 386; Lindridge, 422; Lings, 460.}
\footnotetext[494]{Aho, 373; Baron 380; Grinnell 392, 395; Lindridge, 419; Purnell, 436; Robinson, 440; Vertigan, 444, 348-449; Williams, 456-457.}
\footnotetext[495]{Cray, 388; Lings, 461.}
\footnotetext[496]{Baron, 380; Cray, 318; Lindridge, 385; Lings, 430; Cray, 458; Hopkins, 409; Lindridge, 412, 417-418.}
\footnotetext[497]{Cray, 390; Lindridge, 425.}
\end{footnotes}
team leaders days and so on), and some are casual, i.e. practitioners meeting together over a drink or meal to chat about practice and issues. Newer forms of conversation are being explored through the creation of online communities, but engaging in meaningful talk was the goal. An array of conversations was therefore evidenced within and across traditions.

Third, engagement with written literature was another form of reflective practice for many of the participants. Several mentioned directly written works and authors that they had found helpful for their own reflection and learning. In addition, the writing and publishing of church planting stories in booklet forms (such as Encounters on the Edge), or online (such as the stories on the Fresh Expressions website), give an opportunity to reflect on nearly 200 church planting stories. These stories are designed, not only to give an embodiment of what something looks like, but also to shape the culture they speak in to. Indeed, it was refreshing to learn that stories of success and failure were also told to enable further theological reflection, to inform better practice and to foster accountability.

Fourth, many of the interviewees noted the importance of sustaining church planters and church planting through the deployment of mentors, coaches, spiritual leaders, and spiritual directors. Mentors are key in helping to navigate the challenges of church planting. Coaches provide support and guidance to help planters improve their practice. Spiritual directors are important for helping planters maintain their own spiritual well-being.

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498 Aho, 372; Hopkins, 410; Williams, 548-459.
499 Baron, 381-382; Lindridge, 419.
500 Williams, 456.
501 Aho commends Ballard and Pritchard, Practical Theology in Action, 303, Robinson, Planting Mission-Shaped Churches, 303, the work of Stuart Murray Williams,304; Cray commends Lesslie Newbigin, Mission-Shaped Church report, 319, Michael Moynagh, Church For Every Context, 320, the writings of Alan Roxburgh and Alan Hirsch, 324; Grinnell commends Walter Bruggeman, Prophetic Imagination, 337; Hopkins commends Mike Breen, Building a Disciplining Culture, 345, the work of Alan Roxburgh, 343, Mission-Shaped Church, 343, the work of Stuart Murray Williams, 344-345, George Lings, Encounters on the Edge, 344, the work of Dave Male and Jonny Baker, 346; George Lings commends Monica Hill, How to Plant Churches, 359, Mission-Shaped Church, 359, the work of Vincent Donovan, 361, Encounters On the Edge, 363, the Mission-Shaped series, 363, the works of Roland Allan, 364; Robinson commends the works of Steven Croft, 374, and Lesslie Newbigin, 376; Vertigan commends the works of Bob Hopkins, Martin Robinson, and Stuart Murray Williams, 378.
502 Hopkins, 411; Lings, 430.
503 Cray, 388.
directors, and accompaniers. There were not watertight distinctions between the various roles, and some traditions are only beginning to take steps in this direction, but Robinson’s three-fold roles to support planters are helpful: supporting church planters in the skills of the task (coaching), in developing practices that develop the personhood and spiritual formation of character (mentoring), and helping practitioners locate their story in the story of God and find meaning and direction (spiritual direction). If these accompaniers are indeed critical, then how they are selected, trained and deployed are significant issues that need further exploration.

Fifth, along with the development of accompaniers the forming of peer learning communities, both embodied and virtual (and usually a combination of both), is a growing practice among church planters and traditions. There is much experimentation going on across the traditions that are exploring ways of bringing church planting practitioners together for reflection, support, coaching and learning in small communities. There is a move away from seminars and training conferences (though not universally) to relational based groups that share practice and sometimes a rule of life (particularly in new monastic mission orders). These learning communities tended to be within the traditions they emerged from, but ecumenical learning communities are not only possible, but necessary, if tribes are to continue to learn from one another. Some missional agencies and networks are perhaps well placed to develop such communities given their composition across different traditions, e.g. Urban Expression, and the developing partnerships that comprise FEOC is an

504 Aho, 372-373; Baron, 380-381; Cray, 389, 391; Gibbs, 397; Grinnell,403; Hopkins, 414; Lindridge, 422-424; Purnell, 437; Robinson, 442-446; Vertigan, 447-450; Williams, 458.
505 Robinson, 442-443.
506 Aho, 372; Baron, 380-381; Cray, 393; Gibbs, 399-400; Hopkins, 396-397; Purnell, 436; Vertigan, 452; Williams, 456-458.
507 See footnote 496.
508 Cray, 391; Hopkins, 409; Lindridge, 418, 423-424.
exciting development for cross fertilisation in theological reflection. The overwhelming concern that emerges from the interviewees is that theological reflection should be practised within community and never in isolation.

The practice of theological reflection is therefore diverse. Clearly church planters have availed themselves of reflective tools and processes whether formal, informal, intuitive, academic, casual or a blend of various approaches. As noted in the interviews, people learn in different ways, and there is a need to provide a variety of ways in which people can practice reflection that is both robust and fruitful. Practitioners must flourish in reflection and not be stifled by its mode or method.

In concluding this section there are three final brief observations that need to be made about the practice of theological reflection. First, the reflection must be robust whatever its model. A number of interviewees commented that the question asking whether or not theological reflection in church planting circles was robust was an important question. Although church planters will want to encourage a variety of ways in which practitioners can reflect on church planting, there is a need to ensure that it does not lack quality or depth. As reflective practitioners, church planters will need to adopt practices that lead to a deeper level of theological enquiry than just casual ‘chit-chat.’ Safeguards must be put into place that ensure the process offered is not only taken seriously but delivers what it purposes. Second, the church planter, the church planting task and model of church itself will have a bearing on the practice of theological reflection. Tim Aho’s observation in relation to how reflection might take place in simple church is helpful here. If the ethos and nature of this movement is based upon creating more simple modes and structures, then a highly complex form of

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509 Gibbs, 396; Murray 454.
510 Aho, 373-374.
theological reflection for the planters or church community in that tradition seems inappropriate. There is a sense therefore that the practice of theological reflection should at least be consistent with the ethos, values and practice of each church tradition. And yet I have also noted that the cross fertilisation of ideas on theological reflection among traditions benefits, shapes and challenges others. Perhaps these are areas for further exploration and may lead ultimately for the need to hold various models in creative tension. Third, there is a need to teach theological reflective practices in church planting circles and traditions. Like all training, there is a need to equip people with, not only the theory about the nature and role of theological reflection, but also to help church planting practitioners find effective ways to practice it. Further reflection on this needs to be given, and new tools need to be developed that can assist practitioners flourish in the practice of theological reflection.

10) Conclusion

The critical evaluations of the conversations conducted with the interviewees has already noted several implications in how theological reflection is informing, and could further inform, church planting and practice. However, in conclusion I want to correlate briefly three themes that have emerged from this research that demonstrate how this project has shaped and informed my own reflective praxis demonstrated in this PhD work.

First, the critical conversations with the interviewees has helped me expand, deepen and develop my own understanding of the nature, role and practice of theological reflection, through engaging with different church traditions and individual missional practitioners. This has further cemented in my own thinking the necessity of laying theological foundations for church planting, and to reflect intentionally on
theological themes that might continue to be explored as beneficial to church planting practitioners. The conversations indicated several themes that were informing church planting at the time of the research project, e.g. Missio Dei, Christology, Incarnation, ecclesiology, kingdom of God, and suggested further areas that could be explored, e.g. Trinity, eschatology, shalom, soteriology, sacrament, and further ecclesiological thinking. As I moved from the portfolio work to the thesis work, I wanted to continue to explore theological themes that might prove to beneficial to church planting and this gave rise to the Trinitarian perspectives that are found in Chapters Four, Five and Six in the thesis. Similarly, it was in conversing with others, including people not in my own denominational tradition, that proved indispensable in broadening the horizons of my own theological thinking. It was through my critical conversations with Moltmann, Volf, Boff, LaCugna, Newbigin and Tennent in my thesis that opened up new discoveries and possibilities for church planting reflective praxis.

Second, and related, the critical conversations solidified the necessity to relate theology and practice more intentionally in which either could be the starting point to instigate the dialogue, and to embrace both linear and synthetic parallel thinking. For example, in Chapter Two the starting point was more theological (an understanding of the evangel) and linear (textual analysis moving to practice), whereas here in Chapter Three it has emerged more from reflecting on my own church planting experiences (and the experiences of other church planting practitioners) and correlating these in a systematic and thematic way. The portfolio and thesis embrace theological and experiential, linear and synthetic starting points but always in mutual relation. The primary concern therefore was to ensure that creative theological reflective praxis was at the heart of this work. This also gave rise to the idea of ending each chapter in the thesis with a reflection upon practice from the theological themes that I had outlined.
This would help integrate my own theological thinking and experiential practice that were formed in dialogue with one another in a specific and real-life context. Shaped by how the interviewees in my critical conversations demonstrated how theological reflection was shaping their practice, so I likewise determined that I might be able to demonstrate how my own theological reflections on the Trinity were informing and shaping my own church planting practice and vice-versa.

Third, the conversation partners demonstrated both an openness to learn and acknowledged with indebtedness how theological reflection had broadened their horizons, transformed their practice, and developed their character and competencies. Positive transformation was the intended outcome of intentional theological reflection and often occurred through unexpected pivotal moments of discovery. As noted at the outset of this chapter, personal reflexivity admits freely one’s own blind spots and biases, assumptions and prejudices, but wrestles with them to develop clearer understanding and more effective practice. Although perhaps not always evident to the reader, the transformative nature of theological reflection has been critical to my own thinking and practice throughout this work, particularly conversing with others that were not deemed core to my own theological tradition, especially the Reformed and Roman Catholic conversation partners noted in the thesis. Furthermore, and consequentially, it has been through theological reflection with key conversation partners, biblical theology, voices from the church tradition and personal experience that I have been challenged and confronted by my own blind spots and assumptions. There are many instances where this has happened over the course of this study, but three examples are noted to suffice the point. First, whilst reflecting on the doctrines of God the Creator and creation, I developed a broader missiological perspective than the more narrower evangelicalism that has been so prominent and primary in my own church tradition.
Second, by reflecting on the nature of the Trinity as a creative and inclusive community that overflows and indwells in all of creation, I have found myself experimenting with new forms of church that are not easily definable or quantifiable within my own denominational ecclesiology, and have a less bounded set of criteria to defining belonging that is in my view less restrictive and more generous than the Covenant of Christian Character espoused as normative for membership in the Nazarene church manual. Third, being from an activist evangelical tradition, I have come to embrace the place and necessity of rest, renewal, retreat and spiritual formation as indispensable sources for the missional practitioner in ways I had never discovered prior to this study. These and countless more examples serve to highlight the essential point: that the transformation of the practitioner and his practice have transpired in the journey of discovery through this piece of elongated theological reflection, which will continue as a lifelong purist and spiritual endeavour.

Finally, I am indebted to those that have given their time so freely to enable me to examine this topic and conduct this qualitative research. I hope the aims set out at the beginning have been fulfilled. This is a qualitative piece of research to highlight current perspectives on the nature, role and practice of theological reflection in church planting across a spectrum of UK traditions. It identified through key voices and traditions, diverse views on the practice of theological reflection. It identified and correlated key themes or issues that emerged in the conversations by their similarity or dissimilarity and considered how theological reflection might be more intentionally explored in church planting circles with the aim of transforming the world and making praxis more effective, including my own personal transformation.

This chapter bridges the portfolio work with the thesis. In Chapter One, the literature review highlighted the need for church planting to engage more thoroughly,
intentionally and reflectively with theological issues, and to be placed within a coherent theological framework. In Chapter Two, the publishable article addressed the question raised by Walter Klaiber, “How evangel-like is evangelism?” In response, through a critical conversation with the Synoptic Gospels, I offered theological perspectives on the nature of the gospel and its implications for missional practice. In this chapter, through exploring the nature, role and practice of theological reflection, I have further explored and identified the necessity for robust theological reflection within church planting practice. The consistent theme of the portfolio therefore has been to relate church planting theology and praxis more intentionally through critical conversations, and as I turn to part 2, the thesis chapters outlined in the Introduction, I will explore church planting through a Trinitarian framework particularly focusing on the themes of creation, context and community, relating those theological reflections to the missional practice of church planting .
Chapter Four
Trinity and Creation

1) Introduction

In this chapter, I will briefly note the current interest in the doctrine of God and creativity before evidencing that creativity is an important theme within church planting literature and practice, exemplified through Fresh Expressions of Church (FEOC). I will argue that although there is a strong focus on creativity in church planting practice, it does not sufficiently draw upon a wider understanding of Trinity and creation that could enhance its theological development. Second, by building upon embryonic themes that are suggested in the literature, I will dialogue with Jürgen Moltmann as a critical conversation partner drawing on his Trinitarian creation theology which I argue offers further fruitful insights for church planting and develops a wider and deeper theological framework for this missional practice. In the light of Moltmann’s Trinitarian creation theology, I will conclude with theological reflections on my own church planting practice through Didsbury Community Church, exploring how these theological themes are shaping and informing missional practice in our new community.

2) God, creativity and church planting

Over the last twenty years there has been renewed interest in a theology of creativity that has centred on God’s creative nature, the creativity of people reflecting God’s likeness, and creative gifts given by the Holy Spirit for the use of mission and ministry.511 These perspectives are largely pneumatological, expressed in the creativity

of the Holy Spirit as the source, initiator, agent, gift and sustainer of innovation.\textsuperscript{512} In co-working and co-creating with God’s Spirit, creativity is unleashed in an array of expressions, particularly through worship, imagination, beauty, nature and art.\textsuperscript{513} Similarly, creativity is a theme frequently located within church planting literature and other related writings\textsuperscript{514} and in this chapter I have chosen to exemplify this through FEOC literature.

As defined by the Fresh Expressions initiative, “A fresh expressions of church is a form of church for the changing culture, established primarily for the benefit of people who are not members of any church.”\textsuperscript{515} They come into being “through principles of listening, loving service, incarnational mission and making disciples and will have the potential to become a mature expression of church shaped by the gospel and the enduring marks of the church for its cultural context.”\textsuperscript{516} The mixed-economy model of FEOC advocates for fresh expressions and inherited forms of church, to exist alongside each other, within the same denomination, in relationships of mutual respect and


\textsuperscript{516} \textit{Fresh Expressions in the Mission of the Church}, 2.
support.\textsuperscript{517} In addition to the five foundational values that shape and inform FEOC: missional, incarnational, transformational, disciple making, and relational,\textsuperscript{518} creativity is a value that underpins the forming and development of the newly planted fresh expressions.\textsuperscript{519} Graham Cray, formerly the Archbishops’ Missioner says,

> What convinces me that fresh expressions is, in part at least, a movement of the Holy Spirit, is the extraordinary flourishing of creativity that we’ve seen in it. People, quite traditional Christians, are imagining church in ways they could never have imagined it before. It’s as though the Holy Spirit has freed our imaginations and if the purpose is that we want culturally appropriate deeply authentic Christian communities to engage with those that the Church is not engaging with at all, I think that's an occasion where the Holy Spirit blesses creativity.\textsuperscript{520}

Cray appeals for a release of the imagination and the discovery and use of creative gifts as the basis for forming relationships and building community. He notes that while creativity is often present and fostered in the initial processes of forming a new community, it can easily be lost, or neglected, in the developing stages of forming a community. He advocates, therefore, that creativity should continue to be nurtured and developed within ongoing discipleship and worship processes.\textsuperscript{521}

*Mission-Shaped Church (MSC)* reports that creating new forms of church is a necessary process if church cloning is to be avoided. Replicating existing forms of church without contextual engagement will not suffice. Drawing on an analogy from creation *MSC* states, “The science of genetics helps us understand a difference between creative reproduction and cloning. When the genes of an individual are combined in offspring with new genes from an external source, the result is a genetically

\textsuperscript{519} Principles of Fresh Expressions of Church, https://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/guide/about/principles [accessed 30 May 2016].
\textsuperscript{520} The role of creativity in Fresh Expressions of Church, https://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/news/grahamcray-creativity [accessed 30 May 2016].
unique creation in the next generation and not a copy. So, it is with church planting." 522

The report further draws on creation planting metaphors for the process of forming new congregations, with analogies of sowing, seeding, diversity, rootedness, nourishment, reproduction, grafting, and transplanting. 523 These organic metaphors are used broadly and generically and are not especially related to the doctrines of God the Creator and creation. Indeed, the absence of theological refection on God the Creator and creation is noteworthy throughout. Although there is a brief recognition that a theology of a missionary church must engage with creation, this is never developed and has only a passing reference. 524 The report outlines diverse examples of fresh expressions of church and the creativity of so many different expressions is briefly linked to the diversity of the Spirit 525 and creation. 526 The prominent argument throughout MSC however, is that creativity and diversity are necessary to respond to changing contextual factors, the need for ecclesial diversification and cultural relevance. The theological foundations for diversity and creativity are the least developed aspects of the report.

In Mission-shaped Questions creativity and creation theology are not directly addressed as one of the theological topics that need to be examined for a deeper thinking about mission and fresh expressions of church. In addressing theological questions inspired by MSC, 527 creation themes are also therefore largely absent in this work. Indeed, only two of the essays, those presented by John Drane and Alison Morgan, briefly touch upon creativity and creation.

522 Graham Cray, Mission-Shaped Church, 20-21.
523 Graham Cray, Mission-Shaped Church, 30-31, 93-93.
524 Graham Cray, Mission-Shaped Church, 85.
525 Graham Cray, Mission-Shaped Church, 80.
526 Graham Cray, Mission-Shaped Church, 86.
Drane in addressing the question, “What does maturity in the emerging church look like?” examines the deficiencies of basing our understanding of the nature of maturity on nostalgia and reliance on the past, meaning that we need to embrace new centers of maturity that are rooted in imagination, creativity, and have an “eschatological, future oriented core.” Such creativity, advocates Drane, “is the one capacity that depends neither on background nor education, but is an intrinsic quality of being human. Creative imagination is not limited by class or social circumstance…but by virtue of being made in the divine image.” The centre of creativity and imagination is therefore rooted in God’s expression of himself in the Imago Dei as co-creators with God.

Morgan in asking “What does the gift of the Spirit mean for the shape of the Church?” briefly examines Genesis 1: 1-2 and advocates that the world to which the Spirit of God gives birth is a model of extraordinary diversity that bears witness to God. And yet the Spirit not only brings diversity, but she brings life, sustains life and renews it. Rooted in the work of the Spirit in creation the missional implication is clear, “A church that is diverse and being renewed is a mission-shaped church, a Church that is going somewhere, a Church that is genuinely an eschatological community, a kingdom community open not just to its current members but to those outside.” Above all else therefore, “we need to allow our life and mission to be shaped by a God of life-breathing diversity.” Creativity for Morgan is rooted therefore in the lifegiving and sustaining work of the Spirit in creation, and in the community of Christ.

528 Steve Croft, ed. Mission-Shaped Questions, 93.
529 Steve Croft, ed. Mission-Shaped Questions, 93.
530 Steve Croft, ed. Mission-Shaped Questions, 149.
531 Steve Croft, ed. Mission-Shaped Questions, 149.
532 Steve Croft, ed. Mission-Shaped Questions, 149.
Drane and Morgan note the importance of creativity as rooted in the doctrine of the Creator and creation and give it a theological significance. For Drane the importance of creativity as a reflection of the Imago Dei is a fruitful contribution that requires deeper exploration in FEOC, as is Morgan’s pneumatological focus in which creation and creativity are located in the unity and diversity of the Spirit. Both Drane and Morgan also raise, but do not develop in these articles, eschatological horizons in which creativity and creation should shape and inform missional ecclesiology. Overall, with the exception of the contributions noted above, Mission-shaped Questions does not directly develop a theology of God, creation and creativity that in any substantial way shapes and informs fresh expressions of church although it had the potential for doing so. For example, in Hull’s essay “Mission-shaped and kingdom focused?” in discussing the broader horizons in which mission should be placed, he speaks about God’s transcendence and immanence without any reference to God and creation from which these doctrines emerge.533 Similarly, Warner in addressing “How does a mixed economy Church connect with contemporary spirituality?” raises a number of themes that are rooted in an understanding of God and creation including creativity, relationships, divine revelation and human experience, healing and wholeness, beauty and imagination but offers no theological foundation from which these themes derive.534

In God-shaped mission, Alan Smith critiques various aspects of MSC including in his view, an undue emphasis given to the ecclesial centeredness of mission. In response he offers a theological corrective to this by placing the mission of the church within the doctrine of creation in which relationality is central.535 Smith criticises MSC for failing to give due balance to the creation motifs of the being and action of God, and

533 Steve Croft, ed. Mission-Shaped Questions, 114-132
consequently it focuses primarily on God’s redemptive work to the detriment of God’s immanent relational being from which mission flows. He says, “The report develops a theology of mission by concentrating not on the ‘being’ of God as Trinity, but on the ‘action ‘of God in creation and redemption.” Smith therefore contends that in order to be a mission shaped church it must first become a worshipping God-centred community, for it is only as she is remade in the image and likeness of God that she can reach out to others. Smith is intentionally reacting to what he considers is the overemphasis on the prominence given to the Missio Dei in MSC and the missional activism that derives from this. There is validity in this criticism and the subsequent development of writing concerning spirituality and mission in FEOC after MSC, not least an engagement with non-evangelical spirituality, is a necessary and helpful corrective. However, although Smith does not juxtagpose worship and mission, he does not sufficiently relate them or demonstrate how being may also be missional. Smith implies that mission is subsequent to, or flows out from worship, but worship itself can also be a powerful and prophetic witness and an awakening to God’s good news story. Further, missional being, living out who we are in the world as part of our worship, also testifies to God’s salvific purposes in the world. Whilst drawing attention to MSC’s preoccupation of mission in the divine economy and advocating for a more balance position through an equal emphasis on divine transcendence and worship, Smith fails to sufficiently integrate worship and mission in his appeal to God and creation.

536 Smith, God-shaped Mission, 52
537 Smith, God-shaped Mission, 54.
*Church for Every Context* by Michael Moynagh is the most comprehensive FEOC work to date that aims to establish biblical, historical, theological, and practical foundations for forming what Moynagh calls “new contextual churches.”539 Moynagh’s extensive work contains seven theological chapters that are formulated as a theological rationale for new contextual churches, but the Creator God, creation and creativity are not prominent themes in this work, although there are a number of creation perspectives presented across the book which offer embryonic insightful comment that require further development. Through engaging with complexity theory Moynagh offers a theological reflection on God’s engagement with creation. God is both the one that “passes the power of fertile self-organisation to creation while remaining closely engaged through the Spirit.”540 God is therefore active in all levels of complexity in the universe, the quantum level and at the human level in relationships with men and women. As Moynagh states, “God acts on each piece of the created order to sustain the emergent process integral to creation and the regular patterns described by ‘laws of nature.’”541 He advocates that God respects the constitution, organisation, traits and limitations of his various aspects of creation but has created room for genuine engagement with his creation. The implication is that God has therefore made room for both change and novelty, and enough freedom for innovation without losing boundaries that protect the world from disorganisation and total chaos. For Moynagh, creation is an act of divine self-giving in which God leaves “traces of himself in creation, not least humanity”542 whist retaining his utter separateness. Moynagh does not elaborate at this juncture what this means or how it occurs, but in addressing the importance of the

539 Michael Moynagh, *Church for Every Context*, ix.
540 Michael Moynagh, *Church for Every Context*, 53.
541 Michael Moynagh, *Church for Every Context*, 54.
542 Michael Moynagh, *Church for Every Context*, 128.
church as communion-in-mission, he draws attention to the Imago Dei that is shared by men and women, arguing this serves as the basis of a community that mirrors the social nature of the Trinitarian life. In their Godlikeness male and female serve together in his appointed mission to take responsibility for the care of the creation.\textsuperscript{543} Further, in appealing to the legitimacy of the mixed economy of churches, Moynagh appeals to the diversity revealed in the Imago Dei which itself mirrors the unity and diversity of the Triune God.\textsuperscript{544} Finally, Moynagh notes that the Missio Dei has the world and creation in view, but acknowledges that the concept of “sending” needs complemented by theologies of creation, salvation and kingdom.\textsuperscript{545} Although Moynagh himself does not develop a creation theology he nonetheless provides creation perspectives on a range of issues that he argues underpins their theological legitimacy. His brief focus on the Trinitarian nature of God reflecting transcendence and immanence in relation to the world, unity and diversity, the Imago Dei as the basis for relationship, self-giving and creativity, bring together different creation themes in the FEOC literature and offer fruitful ground for further development.

These examples highlight the importance of creativity within the FEOC movement but demonstrate that the literature is largely without any substantial theological comment or foundation. Creativity itself is therefore frequently not located within the wider framework of a doctrine of God’s creation. There are however emerging embryonic theological perspectives that are exploring ways in which the doctrines of God the Creator and creation can shape and inform the missional practice of church planting. This chapter therefore builds on some of the emerging themes noted in the FEOC literature and through a critical conversation with Jürgen Moltmann and his

\textsuperscript{543} Michael Moynagh, \textit{Church for Every Context}, 142-3.
\textsuperscript{544} Michael Moynagh, \textit{Church for Every Context}, 436-437.
\textsuperscript{545} Michael Moynagh, \textit{Church for Every Context}, 129.
Trinitarian theology of creation, I will develop and supplement these themes before drawing out their implications for the missional practice of church planting.

3) The Trinitarian creator God and creation: A dialogue with Jürgen Moltmann

Although several writers have made significant contributions to the doctrines of the Creator and creation through a Trinitarian hermeneutic, it is the contribution of Jürgen Moltmann that is given consideration in this chapter. There are three reasons why I have chosen Moltmann as the primary conversation partner. First, at the heart of Moltmann’s theological agenda is the concern to interrelate missional theology and practice through taking seriously the contexts of human experience and engaging these with theological sources. Either can be the starting point for Moltmann but both are indispensable for developing an integrated reflective missional praxis. I find in Moltmann’s missional theology therefore, an approach that resonates to the methodology that is deployed at the heart of this work. Second, and related, Moltmann himself primarily uses the method of critical conversations to explore his own theological convictions. He draws from these conversations points of agreement, and departure, and frequently synthesises what he considers the best contributions to advance his own arguments. This method also resonates with my own approach in this thesis. Third, Moltmann has proved to be a useful conversation partner for several

missional writers exploring various theological themes on church planting and it is to those conversations that I add my own.547

A word of caution concerning Moltmann’s methodology however must be sounded before exploring Moltmann’s Trinitarian doctrine for creation. Moltmann acknowledges that he is less interested in precise integrated theological methodology in preference for exploring ideas that do not always systematise or resolve. Moltmann notes in *Experiences in Theology*: “Up to now these questions about method have not greatly interested me, because I wanted to get to know the real content of theology…I was not concerned to collect up correct theological notions, because I was too much preoccupied with the perception of new perspectives and unfamiliar aspects.”548 Moltmann therefore acknowledges that his theological work has been to offer contributions to various theology themes rather than create an overall integrated system.549 In my evaluation, this is both Moltmann’s greatest strength and weakness. He is freely expressive in his creative theological questioning and expansive thinking, demonstrating innovative insights and courage to both embrace and challenge theological traditions, but equally departs from them when he believes it is necessary to do so. And yet for his interpreters it has therefore become notoriously difficult to reconcile the disparities and apparent contradictions in Moltmann’s own thinking, and to integrate and resolve the many diverse perspectives that his various positions suggest. In assessing Moltmann’s work on Trinity and Creation therefore, I have attempted to critically offer insights into Moltmann’s overarching themes and consistent

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salient features, and extrapolate their implications for missional theology and practice, without being able to resolve all the disparities.

In *God in Creation* Moltmann is concerned to address the ecological crisis caused by the modern industrial nations in their consumption, domination and exploitation of the creation. For creation to be liberated, Moltmann suggests guiding ideas for developing an ecological doctrine of creation. Among these principles, however, there are three overarching and interrelated creation themes that are at the heart of Moltmann’s creation theology:

a) Creation and the Trinity
b) Creation and Eschatology
c) Creation and Pneumatology

In this chapter, I will briefly explore and critique his contribution to these three themes and will extrapolate particular aspects that I believe offer fruitful insight for the theology and practice of church planting.

a) Creation and the Trinity

Moltmann argues that the Triune Creator creates the world *ex nihilo* as an act of creative love that flows from the intra-Trinitarian relations of the Father, Son and Spirit. However, Moltmann goes one step further and writes, “The economic Trinity not only reveals the immanent Trinity; it has a retroactive effect on it.” By seeking to avoid a dualism between God and his world, and a distinction between the immanent and

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economic Trinity, Moltmann frequently moves freely from the economic Trinity to the immanent Trinity thus making events in the history of salvation events in the history of God.\textsuperscript{554} The Triune God participates in the creation and creation participates in him,\textsuperscript{555} and through the eschatological event of the cross, the crucified God embraces the suffering of the world in order that it may be healed.

This approach has led to criticisms that Moltmann collapses the economic and immanent Trinity into each other and therefore makes the history of God dependent and contingent upon the history of the world. Indeed, Moltmann suggests that “the idea of the world is inherent in the nature of God himself from eternity”\textsuperscript{556} and asks, “Does God really not need those whom in the suffering of his love he loves unendingly?”\textsuperscript{557} God and the world, together in their shared history, await their final consummation in the eschatological fulfillment of God’s redemptive purposes for creation. As Moltmann boldly asserts, “…even God himself will only become free when our souls are free.”\textsuperscript{558} The consequence of Moltmann’s approach appears to endorse both a divine necessity for the existence of creation and a failure to distinguish between the immanent and economic Trinity.

Moltmann is not unaware of the criticisms and is adamant that God’s presence in creation, and its presence in God, has not compromised God’s freedom: “Wherever and whatever God creates is without any preconditions. There is no eternal necessity which occasions his creativity, and no inner compulsion which could determine it.”\textsuperscript{559} Moltmann tries to resolve the apparent contradiction by contesting that creation is not

\textsuperscript{556} Moltmann, \textit{Trinity and the Kingdom}, 106.  
\textsuperscript{557} Moltmann, \textit{God in Creation}, 82; \textit{Trinity and the Kingdom}, 53.  
\textsuperscript{558} Moltmann, \textit{Trinity and the Kingdom}, 39.  
\textsuperscript{559} Moltmann, \textit{God in Creation}, 74.
an act of divine necessity but an act of God’s own sovereign free choice of love which is consistent with the essential nature of the Trinity. He insists that it is out of divine love, not divine necessity, that God therefore makes room and space within himself (zimsum)\textsuperscript{560} to create relational community other than himself. Embracing a distinction between God’s immanence or transcendence contradicts God’s creation of, and participation in, the world, therefore Moltmann prefers to speak of God’s engagement with creation as an immanent-transcendence.\textsuperscript{561} And yet Moltmann is similarly not unaware of the dangers of his position and therefore attempts to make some room for a legitimate distinction through his eschatological thinking: “When everything is ‘in God’ and ‘God is all in all,’ then the economic Trinity is raised into and transcended in the immanent Trinity.”\textsuperscript{562} But Moltmann does not explain why, nor how, this will happen nor qualifies what he means by the economic Trinity being raised into immanent Trinity. Is God only provisionally transcendent now and his sovereignty not complete until the final consummation? Moltmann affirms that Jesus will become Lord at the end,\textsuperscript{563} but how can God save creation now, if he will only become Lord in the end?\textsuperscript{564}

Moltmann further fails to articulate convincingly in my view why God “withdraws himself from himself in order to make creation possible.”\textsuperscript{565} How and why does the immanent Trinity withdraw himself from himself to create a space that he subsequently fills? In contrast to Barth’s position that it is from God’s transcendence that creation is


\textsuperscript{562} Moltmann, \textit{Trinity and the Kingdom}, 161.

\textsuperscript{563} Moltmann, \textit{The Coming of God}, 335.


\textsuperscript{565} Moltmann, \textit{God in Creation}, 88.
brought into existence through his overflowing love and generosity.\textsuperscript{566} Moltmann insists that God has “emptied himself of his all-plenishing omnipotence, and as Creator took upon himself the form of a servant.”\textsuperscript{567} Despite his intentions to avoid a dualism in which God and the world are so separated, God’s necessary kenosis in contracting himself to make room for creation to exist, seems inadvertently to suggest that creation may have a divine necessity. Even if this decision is made by God’s free choice of love as Moltmann is concerned to emphasise,\textsuperscript{568} it is nonetheless difficult to see how in Moltmann’s understanding this free choice is not in fact inherently necessary. In Alan Torrance’s view, Moltmann ties God’s being too closely to the creation and progress of human history and in so doing, compromises the transcendence and sovereignty of the triune God over creation. Torrance charges Moltmann with “immanentising the Trinitarian life and consequently escalating the human being’s place and role in creation and its own redemption.”\textsuperscript{569} By not distinguishing clearly enough the immanent and economic Trinity, or at least by not nuancing more carefully the ways in which they are defined and related, although Moltmann in my view does not collapse entirely the immanent Trinity into the economic Trinity, nor advocates that God by necessity is contingent upon his creation, he nonetheless fails to adequately resolve these issues. Despite Moltmann’s own protestations that God has not made himself dependent on his world, Moltmann’s God could be understood as not being able to exist without his relation to the world.\textsuperscript{570}


\textsuperscript{567} Jürgen Moltmann, \textit{God in Creation}, 88.


\textsuperscript{569} Alan J. Torrance, \textit{Persons in Community: An Essay on Trinitarian Description and Human Participation} (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 310-313.

\textsuperscript{570} This is the argument against Moltmann that Paul D. Molar makes in “The Function of the Trinity in Moltmann’s ecological doctrine of Creation.” \textit{Theological Studies}, 51 (1990): 673-697.
However, the converse side and strength of Moltmann’s approach is to advocate vehemently that the Trinity is intrinsically rooted in his own creation work, and the Christian narrative of Scripture and the development of Christian tradition attest to this history.\textsuperscript{571} Moltmann’s Trinitarian creation theology particularly emphasises the Christological and pneumatological aspects of creation.\textsuperscript{572} For him, Christ is the basis for the existence of the whole creation and everything has its foundation in him.\textsuperscript{573} The Spirit is also Creator, the indwelling presence of God that makes his home in the world. He enters the sufferings of his creatures and experiences their annihilations but is their hope and the power for the new creation.\textsuperscript{574} For Moltmann, therefore, “the Christian doctrine of creation takes its impress from the revelation of Christ and the experience of the Spirit.”\textsuperscript{575} This Trinitarian basis of creation leads Moltmann to several interrelated issues that are foundational to his understanding of the Creator God, but two are primary: perichoresis and relationality.

Moltmann describes God’s presence in creation as God’s Shekinah,\textsuperscript{576} and deploys the idea of perichoresis\textsuperscript{577} to describe the basis of God’s mutual relationship with creation. By applying perichoresis to the God-world relationship, Moltmann however is in danger of embracing pantheism or an unbiblical form of panentheism that once again makes creation a necessity for God.\textsuperscript{578} Whereas the Christian tradition has

\textsuperscript{571} Moltmann, \textit{God in Creation}, 98.
\textsuperscript{572} Moltmann, \textit{God in Creation}, 94-104.
\textsuperscript{573} Moltmann, \textit{God in Creation}, 94-96.
\textsuperscript{574} Moltmann, \textit{God in Creation}, 96-97.
\textsuperscript{575} Moltmann, \textit{God in Creation}, 97.
\textsuperscript{576} For Moltmann’s use of Shekinah see \textit{Science and Wisdom}, 59-65, 122-127; \textit{God in Creation}, 96-97, 150, 154; \textit{The Spirit of Life}, 11-12, 47-56, 61-62.
\textsuperscript{578} For arguments for and against see Kevin Vanhoozer, \textit{Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion and Authorship} (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2010), 139-174; Stanley Grentz,
used the idea of perichoresis to refer to the divine Persons of the immanent Trinity, the application of the concept to God’s relationship to the world also asks the question: Has God’s perichoretic relationship with the world not become a divine necessity? Yet Moltmann rejects this notion for through the kenosis of the Spirit in creation, and the incarnation of Christ, God has invited the world to participate in him through the mutual indwelling of love as the basis of what it means to be in perichoretic relation to God. For Moltmann the Trinity is not a closed circle – a life sufficient unto itself. Rather it is an open and inviting communion, desiring to share itself with its creation.579 In sum, Trinitarian fellowship for Moltmann is a creative and passionate community of self-giving love, in which the divine persons donate themselves boundlessly to one another and to the whole of creation.580

Moltmann likewise explicitly rejects pantheism581 but embraces the universality of God’s dwelling, not only with his people, but his presence in the whole of life and the universal created order. God has not only left an imprint of himself on the world but has left himself in the world.582 The dwelling of God is therefore not limited to, or restricted by, the ecclesial community, because “God is all in all.”583 This favourite Moltmannian Scripture encapsulates his own understanding of the doctrine of creation, affirms perichoresis, and drives his eschatological vision for the completion of creation. The world is therefore God’s ‘oikos’ and the Creator offers his generous hospitality so that all may dwell in him: “If the creative God himself dwells in his creation, then he is making


579 Moltmann, Trinity and the kingdom, 57-59.
581 Moltmann, God in Creation, 102-103.
582 Moltmann, God in Creation, 57.
583 1 Corinthians 15:28.
it his home, ‘on earth as it is in heaven.” All created beings then find in nearness to him the inexhaustible wellspring of their life, and for their part find home and rest in God.”

For Moltmann, the missional implications of this for the church are significant. The community of Christ must reflect the Creator God in sharing the ministry of hospitality with those that find themselves without a home or family or place to belong. This welcoming of strangers is a work of the Spirit in which, “a new community for rich and poor, the educated and uneducated comes into being, for the Spirit of God is no respecter of social distinctions; it puts an end to them.” For Moltmann, human hospitality (giving the other the goods and space for life) is the other side of God’s goodness extended to all of God’s creation. God excludes no one from life; neither may we.

To be an oikos community, the church needs to build relational “hospitality and conversation and forms of interaction in which the typical ‘us versus them’ mentality is broken down by shared fellowship.” In short, Christian communities should be communities of hospitality where “the competitive struggle which turns people into lonely individuals is ended, and the social chill of a heartless world vanishes.” This reflects the hospitable Triune Creator God.

Further, the Triune Creator God is first and foremost a relational being and “his action in creation, especially among humans, is also primarily relational.” Moltmann is critical of those who describe the unity of the Trinity in metaphysical terms of divine substance of the one divine subject above relationality. For Moltmann, “The unity of

584 Moltmann, God in Creation, 5. For oikos see God in Creation, xii, xiii, 5.
588 Moltmann, Experiences in Theology, 331.
589 Lett, Jürgen Moltmann’s theology, 38.
590 Moltmann, Sun of Righteousness, 153; Trinity and the Kingdom, 95, 149-150.
the three Persons lies in their fellowship, not in the identity of a single subject.”591 Karkkainen is correct in saying, “Moltmann represents a radical social Trinitarianism that begins with three persons and works from that toward unity rather than vice versa.”592 In rejecting Barth and Rahner’s593 insistence on the prior unity of God through the divine essence, Moltmann argues that it is through the perichoretic union of the divine Persons that they “constitute a single, unique and complete unity by themselves.”594 Indeed, whereas for most theologians the Trinity is a form of monotheism, for Moltmann the Trinity is opposed to monotheism.595 His emphasis on the three divine Persons constituting the Trinity through their relationality is in danger of suggesting a form of tritheism, and Moltmann not unaware of the danger of his position, therefore paradoxically grounds the unifying fellowship of the trinitarian life in the ontological unity of the Son and Spirit with the Father from whom they proceed.596 Moltmann wants to hold both positions in tension and therefore suggests that by understanding the complementary models of the social, economic and immanent trinity, that trinitarian unity is found within the constitution of the Father, the perichoresis of the divine Persons, and the eschatological glorification of God when God’s immanence is revealed. This does not adequately resolve the issue or deal adequately with the contradictory implications in which Moltmann resists vehemently any hierarchical monarchianism in church or society as non-Trinitarian, whilst embracing the inner-trinitarian monarch of the Father.597

591 Trinity and Kingdom, 95
595 Moltmann, Trinity and Kingdom, 130-131.
596 Moltmann, Trinity and the Kingdom, 177.
The relational Trinitarian community therefore makes the whole of the created order intrinsically interrelated. As persons created in the likeness of the Creator, humans are uniquely given the capacity to develop intimate and meaningful friendships with God and one another. At the heart of God’s engagement with creation is a desire for community, friendship and relationship. As Joy MacDougal writes, “God’s eternal purpose in creating humankind is to establish a relationship to one another that can receive and respond freely to the Triune gift of love. Accordingly, Moltmann construes the Imago Dei as the human being’s creative capacity to become such a counterpart. Creativity is therefore given primarily for forming, nurturing, and developing relationships. These relationships are centered in Christ, pneumatologically created, kingdom-shaped, and eschatologically oriented. As reflectors of God’s likeness, human relations share in a mutual concern for one another and the world. Similarly, the church fosters a community of relational participation. It must therefore resist hierarchical structures of power and control. God does not dominate creation but freely binds himself to it, therefore humankind, made in his image, likewise must not dominate and exploit creation, but serve it, and one other, in humility.

b) Creation and Eschatology

The Trinitarian nature of creation is further developed in Moltmann through his eschatological perspectives. Eschatology has often been considered exclusively as the

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600 Moltmann, “Perichoresis,” 123; God’s life in the Trinity, 33-43.
601 Moltmann, “Perichoresis,” 126.
602 “For Moltmann, God acts not so much on or over creation, but in creation." Lett, “Jürgen Moltmann’s theology,” 33.
603 Moltmann, God in Creation, 23-32.
doctrine of the last things surrounding and following the end of time but for Moltmann, eschatology is not an appendage to theology or creation but the very starting point: “From first to last, and not merely in the epilogue, Christianity is eschatological, is hope, forward looking and forward moving, and therefore revolutionizing and transforming the present.” Moltmann advocates therefore for an eschatological and soteriological understanding of creation that concerns itself with God’s continuous engagement with, and in creation, and the establishment of his kingdom that is presently manifested but moving towards its ultimate culmination and fulfillment. Moltmann’s eschatological orientation of creation is developed most fully in *The Coming of God* and in it he examines personal, historical, cosmic and divine aspects of eschatology.

The concern of personal eschatology relates to the future destiny of human beings, and here Moltmann rejects the immorality of the soul for the raising of the body and the life everlasting. Rooted in Christ’s death and resurrection, and following its pattern, the God who creates and redeems human beings, and has embraced their sufferings in the Trinitarian eschatological event of the cross, and has tabernacled with them in their suffering through the Spirit, can be trusted to raise human beings in the totality of their humanness: “the human being lives wholly, the whole human being dies, God will wholly raise the human being.” Rejecting intermediary positions between death and resurrection, Moltmann affirms life continues through death, and

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605 Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 16.


following Christ, “believers will see their deaths too as part of the process in which this whole mortal creation will be transfigured and be born again to become the kingdom of glory.” 611 This raises the question for Moltmann whether death is the consequence of sin or life’s natural end? Moltmann advocates that death is a natural end of life that reflects the temporality and fragility of the creation that is itself moving in an eschatological process from its initial creation, through its ongoing creation, to its consummation in which death is no more. 612 The death of humans is not a punishment from God nor a consequence for sin but part of the mortal fabric of life that gives way in order that the fulness of the new creation may manifest the liberty of the children of God. 613

Whilst embracing Moltmann’s optimism of hope there are two key issues that I believe need to be examined more closely. First, there is throughout Moltmann’s eschatology, a relatively underdeveloped and understated doctrine of personal sin as Moltmann departs from the Western forensic model of salvation that focuses on the forgiveness of sins for a more Eastern approach that focuses on salvation in broader categories of deification and a gradual process of transfiguration and glorification into the new creation. 614 Moltmann certainly acknowledges the reality of sin but primarily focuses on the cosmic and structural nature of sin, and institutional forms of injustice, 615 to the detriment of any personal culpability or responsibility for one’s own alienation from God. Sin appears more as a cosmic force against life rather than a personal or systemic distortion of trinitarian fellowship. The undeveloped nature of personal sin contributes significantly to the sense of utopianism that plagues

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611 Moltmann, The Coming of God, 77.  
613 Moltmann, The Coming of God, 92.  
Moltmann’s theological project. Second, in his embracing of God’s unconditional solidarity and abiding presence with his covenant people, through perichoresis and the Shekinah dwelling, whilst Moltmann passionately embraces God’s dwelling and identification with his suffering creation, he fails to give due consideration to Israel’s disobedience and sin, and God’s collective and personal punishment in response. His focus on God’s loving covenant relationship is laudable, but Moltmann overlooks the sacrificial system that sustains it, and God’s judgments for breaking it. Similarly, Moltmann’s New Testament exegesis draws primarily on the manifestations of compassion, justice and mercy in the incarnational life, death and resurrection of Christ, and a wholehearted embracement of Pauline cosmic eschatological perspectives of universal reconciliation. However, conspicuously absent is the Messianic call for repentance, parabolic teachings that warn of impending judgment for those that reject Christ, the warnings given to God’s people for disobedience across the New Testament letters, and Pauline perspectives that deal extensively with sin, repentance, forgiveness. His reversing of the Pauline perspective that “the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 3:23) in favour of the “wages of death is sin” is a creative reinterpretation, but in making sin the consequence of death it is in danger of undermining the universality of sin as a cosmic, corporate and personal power and its devastating consequences for creation, the community and humankind. As McDougal notes in relation to Moltmann’s hamartiology, “Missing is an in-depth analysis of the debilitating effects of sin upon human beings’ relationship or the remedy for these effects.”

Moltmann’s Trinitarian creation eschatology likewise takes seriously the reality of history as it moves from its original creation, through its continued creation, to its final

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616 In his article “Whatever Happened to the Doctrine of Sin? Theology Today 50, no. 2 (1993): 169-78, David Kelsey offers one of the few critical discussions of the doctrine of sin in Moltmann’s theology.
creation. Creation is open to God’s continuous interaction through the Resurrection of Christ and the Spirit’s work in establishing the kingdom of God as he moves history to its consummation.\textsuperscript{618} Moltmann discusses at length various eschatological histories particularly millennial positions as illustrated through biblical, religious, political and ecclesial perspective.\textsuperscript{619} Moltmann provides selected examples from ancient and modern history, that in his view, categorises various eschatological approaches, positions and ideologies. However, this leads Moltmann to his primary position that all forms of historical millenarianism ultimately provide an invalid interpretation of God’s engagement of the world and its future, for they build upon theories that are used to legitimise political, ecclesial or religious abuses.\textsuperscript{620} Rather, it is the embracement of a Christian eschatological millenarianism that must be pursued, for history anticipates the cosmic reign of Christ, initiated in the death and resurrection of Jesus, and thus provides the transitory arrangement for when history itself transitions into the final eschatological reign of Christ.\textsuperscript{621} Such a Christocentric eschatological view of history embraces the reality of suffering in this world (cross) but also experiences now the hope (resurrection) that anticipates its freedom (consummation). The end of history will culminate in the Last Judgement of Christ, which is not a condemnation of humankind, but the joyful announcement of universal salvation for all of creation which was won in Christ’s death and resurrection. Exploring biblical and theological interpretations of the end of history, particularly annihilation, double predestination, and universalism, Moltmann insists the Last Judgment concerns the reconciliation of all things.\textsuperscript{622}

\textsuperscript{618} Moltmann, \textit{God in Creation}, 206-214; \textit{The Coming of God}, 250-254.
\textsuperscript{619} Moltmann, \textit{The Coming of God}, 147-191.
\textsuperscript{620} Moltmann, \textit{The Coming of God}, 192.
\textsuperscript{621} Moltmann, \textit{The Coming of God}, 192-195; 233-234.
\textsuperscript{622} Moltmann, \textit{The Coming of God}, 255.
Moltmann’s analysis of historical millennialism is not without its problems, not least that he does not deploy any historical critical method. His characterisation of different millennial approaches is frequently loose and at times unclear, and his historical ‘case studies’ are not always convincing or at best are oversimplifications and selective of complex historical realities. Moltmann’s examples imply a real sense of definitive action by God in history, but are these merely personal and human historical perspectives, or are they in themselves definitive of God’s actions in the world in moving it forward its future? In short, who determines and knows the historic acts of God that are part of his ongoing engagement with the world? Is Moltmann himself not in danger of creating his own sense of historical millennialism that he vehemently warns against? Finally, Moltmann’s universalism is not without its own problems. Moltmann himself recognises that the biblical witness does not unequivocally embrace the unreserved universalism he advocates. He concedes that there are many biblical examples where Scripture would seem to contradict a universalist approach, but in the end, he can not theologically reconcile God’s universal love for, and reconciliation of, his creation through the Trinitarian event of the cross, with any other theological position.

However, in so doing Moltmann leaves unresolved issues that are particularly problematic for his theological scheme. In his insistence that God has made his choice positively for humankind in the death and resurrection of Christ, effecting its collective participation in the new creation, does he not deny the very freedom of love he contests is central to the Trinitarian relations and their relation to the world? Further, in advocating for a biblical underpinning for his theological positions, how are we to assess and interpret Moltmann’s biblical hermeneutic when he freely omits or excludes

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624 The Coming of God, 240-255.
biblical material that runs contrary to his scheme? Lastly, in his appeal to Christocentric theology what Christological images, titles, narratives and perspectives are omitted or are less prominent because they do not easily fit with his Christological hermeneutic? It has already been noted that Moltmann’s engagement with Christological themes are utilized for his eschatological perspectives that advocate for universal salvation and the cosmic consummation of creation, but he neglects Christological perspectives that portray Christ through any motif of punishment and judgment. This is consistent with his general omission of Gospel Christological perspectives that are similarly suggestive. Likewise, his Messianic Christology focuses on the humanity of Jesus and his identification with suffering, but his Christology ‘from above’ including divine titles and descriptors such as the ‘eternal Word’ and ‘Son’ are given less prominence as they do not easily support his kenotic perspectives.

The end of history transitions into cosmic eschatology which transitions the temporal creation into the new creation of an eternal deified world. This is essentially the creation of the new heaven and the new earth which represents the cosmic redemption of all things. This new creation is the consummation of the existing world and therefore Moltmann rejects any concept of the annihilation of the present created order. This cosmic recreation will include the transfiguration of the world and humankind into the deification of the Imago Dei. God will be in all, and all will be in God, and therefore everything that has been created will be perfected and given an


\[628\] Moltmann, *The Coming of God*, 267-274.

even greater glory than the original creation. The images of the new heaven and earth illustrate this cosmic redemption for Moltmann: The city (people) with gardens (nature) will be one in God, the twelve tribes (Israel) and many nations (peoples of the earth) will be one covenanted people, and to his whole creation he offers the fullness of his dwelling (Shekinah holiness and glory) and the Shalom of his blessing (the Sabbath rest). As Moltmann summarises, “The new creation is defined through a new divine presence within it. The Creator no longer remains over against his creation. He dwells in it and finds in it his rest. This makes of the new creation a sacramental world. It is interpenetrated by divine presence and participates in the inexhaustible fulness of God’s life.”

Moltmann’s vision for the new heaven and cosmic reconciliation flows naturally from his universalism that is present from the outset of his work. However, what is striking, and somewhat surprising is the lack of any detailed Christological focus, and indeed what role Jesus plays in the end of history. Having appealed to a Trinitarian basis for his creation theology, his cosmic theology is largely devoid of Christological and pneumatological perspectives. Indeed, because the economic Trinity is absorbed into the immanent Trinity, the place and purpose of the Father, Son and Spirit appear to be a passive one beyond the end of history. Although Moltmann advocates that the economic roles of the Trinity are completed, it is not at all clear how the eternal Trinitarian community that brought the world into creation ex nihilo, correspond or relate to the redeemed creation at the end of history.

633 Douglas B. Farrow “In The End,” particularly draws attention to the absence of Jesus in Moltmann’s cosmic eschatology. “Jesus is there in the end, stepping forth from his hiddenness, but he is never really embraced, his place is never clearly indicated, 453; “it is not just Jesus who never quite returns but the Father as well.” 442.
Cosmic eschatology gives way to divine eschatology and this in itself ends with the doxological cry ‘soli Deo Gloria.’ Here Moltmann asks the question ‘If God is the coming one, when does he come wholly to himself?’ In an eschatology which interrelates God and the world so closely, Moltmann argues that God can therefore only come to himself when he has taken his whole creation out of its alienation and gathered it into himself. Drawing out the implications, Geiko Muller-Fahrenholz says concerning Moltmann’s divine eschatology: “Hence God is not unconcerned about what becomes of creation. Only the new creation of all things also brings the Creator to his completion and eternal rest.”\(^{634}\) And only through the perichoresis of Trinitarian Persons with one another, and with the world,\(^{635}\) will the “interplay of all blessing, and praising, singing, dancing and rejoicing creatures”\(^{636}\) be conjoined with “the laughter of the universe as God’s delight.”\(^{637}\) This again raises the question that has plagued much of Moltmann’s theological career: Is God’s self-actualisation and glorification contingent upon creation? Will God only become God when creation too finds its own self-actualization in him?

From this critical examination of several of Moltmann’s eschatological perspectives, three particular themes emerged that I believe could be fruitful for developing church planting theology and practice. First, Moltmann places creation in a threefold continuous, eschatological framework which he calls creation originalis-creation-continua-creatio nova.\(^{638}\) Creation is the whole process of divine creative activity, not just its start. God has created, is creating and will be creating, and the


potential and possibilities are endless because God is endless. In responding to Cray’s concern that fresh expressions of church need to sustain and develop creativity beyond the initial phases of church planting, Moltmann’s doctrine of creation provides a theological basis for cultivating creativity across the entire life cycle of a new church at each stage and development as it remains open, flexible, and changeable in responding to the Holy Spirit as she breaks in. Second, the “crown of the new creation” is the Sabbath, the feast of creation.⁶³⁹ Tim Chester, in analysing Moltmann’s eschatology, says, “the Sabbath points forward to the eschatological blessing and rest of creation in the fulfillment of God’s purposes for creation.”⁶⁴⁰ Moltmann advocates that the whole work of creation was performed for the sake of the Sabbath⁶⁴¹ and that “God rests “from his works” on the Sabbath, but in so doing he at the same time rests “in face of his works,”⁶⁴² to enjoy, experience and dwell with his creation. Likewise, he enables creation to rest so that it can experience his intimacy, Shalom and peace⁶⁴³ and celebrate the glory and wonder of God in worship and praise.⁶⁴⁴ By ceasing from participation in working activity (doing), humans can enjoy resting in God (being), so that the meaning of life is not reduced to work and busy activity.⁶⁴⁵ As Moltmann says,

The completion of activity is rest, and the completion of doing is simple existence. Creation is God’s work, but the Sabbath is God’s present existence. His works express God’s will, but the Sabbath manifests his Being. In his works God goes out of himself, but in the Sabbath of creation he comes to himself...Because the Sabbath of creation is God’s Sabbath, and because in His rest his eternal glory becomes present, every human Sabbath becomes a ‘dream of completion’.⁶⁴⁶

⁶³⁹ This is most fully developed in God in Creation, 276-296.
⁶⁴⁰ Tim Chester, Mission and the coming of God, 17.
⁶⁴¹ Moltmann, God in Creation, 277.
⁶⁴² Moltmann, God in Creation, 279.
⁶⁴³ French, “Returning to Creation,” 81-83.
⁶⁴⁴ Moltmann, God in Creation, 21.
⁶⁴⁵ Moltmann, God in Creation, 277.
⁶⁴⁶ Moltmann, God in Creation, 280.
In his creation perspectives, Smith noted that the relationship between missional activity and missional being was not sufficiently developed within MSC although the development of spirituality and mission has subsequently become an important consideration within FEOC literature. Moltmann’s focus on Sabbath therefore offers a helpful and insightful contribution to this conversation and provides a Trinitarian theological foundation that embraces creative activity and creative rest. Third, the coming of the kingdom gives an eschatological hope for creation. It is in *Theology of Hope* that Moltmann first sets out his Trinitarian eschatology and its implications for creation and history, and the theme of hope has remained a consistent theme throughout his works. For Moltmann, eschatology *is* the doctrine of Christian hope, and is rooted in the death and Resurrection of Jesus. In embracing suffering, pain, evil, and nothingness, Jesus enters into all that alienates the creation from the Creator, even to the depths of the grave and hell. The crucifixion becomes a Trinitarian event in the history of God, and through it, God stands with creation in all its Godforsakenness. The Christian faith is therefore grounded in an unshakable promise that God has come to lovingly redeem, heal and restore a broken world and enters into it to do so. This divine act involves suffering, but by “entering into the

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651 Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology*, 305.

Godforsakeness of sin and death (which is nothingness), God overcomes and makes it part of his eternal life.” Bauckham summarises Moltmann’s essential point: “God does not offer hope for the world simply by contracting its negativity. Rather, his love embraces the world in all its negativity, suffers the contradiction and overcomes it.” Further, Moltmann’s theology of hope involves personal, historical, ecclesial, cosmic and divine dimensions, but it does not bypass human suffering and arrive at the eschaton triumphantly. God participates in creation’s suffering but is moving it to a new beginning, to a perichoretic relationship with himself, “in which every wrong is redressed and suffering of every kind is undone, and all is transfigured by the unrestricted presence of God into a community of mutual justification and eternal joy.” Moltmann’s eschatological perspective on hope provides the eschatological horizons that Drane and Morgan signpost in Mission-shaped Questions and aligns the church presently to its emerging future through the life giving work of the Spirit.

c) Creation and pneumatology

We have already noted the significance Moltmann gives to the role of the Spirit in his Trinitarian doctrine of creation. God’s dwelling in creation is always pneumatic. Indeed, everything that is, exists and lives is through the unceasing inflow of the energies and potentialities of the Spirit. He is the fountain of life that creates the perichoretic relationships within creation for “nothing in the world exists, lives and moves of itself.” Therefore, the mutual relationships within the Trinity, creation, and

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653 Moltmann, God in Creation, 91.
655 Althouse, 31.
656 Farrow, “In The End,” 439.
church are only possible because of the relationality and cohesion of the Spirit. As the inner life of God is relational, communal and loving, then so too is God’s relationship to the world, revealed in the activity of the Spirit who “renews, energises and reconciles, enabling all creation to realise its eschatological goal of a new creation.” For Moltmann, “existence, life and the warp and weft of interrelationships subsist in the Spirit: In him we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28).” And yet the Spirit is not merged into creation, but must remain distinct from creation. The Spirit is the eternal transcendent God, who, although immanent and present, is never reduced to creation.

In his key pneumatological work *The Spirit of Life* Moltmann reinforces these perspectives advocating for a holistic pneumatology in which the Holy Spirit is the origin and source and purpose for all that lives. As Muller-Fahrenholz comments: “Moltmann is concerned to make a universal confession of God who calls everything into existence so that it delights in this life and in so doing delights in God.” This universal affirmation of the Spirit repeats much of what God in Creation has already said about the Spirit, but Moltmann expands in this work what ‘life in the Spirit’ means, by offering his own *ordo salutis* of liberation, justification, rebirth, sanctification, and power. These dimensions of Christian experience however, are not primarily expressions of personal faith or piety but rather address what it means to live in the presence and power of the Spirit for the sake of the world. As with his Trinitarian eschatology the orientation of his pneumatology is cosmic and universal.

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663 Muller-Fahrenholz, *The Kingdom and the Power*, 183.
God’s Spirit is a power for liberation for “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Cor. 3:17). The Spirit of life is working in human history moving it towards the future orientation of the kingdom of God bringing liberation to all of life including its political, ethical and social aspects. In addressing his understanding of justification, Moltmann acknowledges that the Protestant doctrine about the justification of sinners is not without merit and that divine mercy for sinners is demonstrated in the cross, but the dominant narrative of justification primarily relates to “the liberation of the oppressed from the suffering of oppression.” God extends his justice of compassion to the whole human race for he carries “the world’s history of suffering and humanity’s history of injustice too.” The Spirit works therefore to challenge all forms of sin and injustice, and in the Last Judgment all injustices will be finally eradicated with victims’ rights restored, and perpetrators actions condemned although their conversion is secured in God’s salvific purposes for all of creation.

Moltmann further advocates that the Spirit brings rebirth which is not primarily about personal conversion and regeneration, but the embracing of the eschatological hope of the new life brought about by the pneumatological work of the Spirit in Christ’s death and resurrection. Thus, “a coherent process issues from the rebirth of Christ from death through the Spirit by way of the rebirth of mortal human beings through the Spirit, to the universal rebirth of the cosmos through the Spirit.” Rebirth, as in all aspects of Moltmann’s ordo salutis, is teleologically and cosmologically oriented, but does not exclude a personal or subjective element which is evidenced through baptism. Drawing

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on John Wesley’s doctrine of sanctification, and Albert Schweitzer’s philosophical ‘reverence for life’, sanctification is a life of sacred and passionate love.\textsuperscript{670} Again Moltmann looks beyond the piety of Christian personal experience to a holistic spirituality including the renunciation of violence and the search for the harmonies and accords of life.\textsuperscript{671} The charismatic power of the Holy Spirit is therefore given to the church as a gift of grace, a forestate of the eschatological future, and an unction to proclaim and demonstrate the sacred life of love. These gift graces are never the possession of the church but remain endowments of the Spirit given to the church to fulfill the ministry of Christ in the world.\textsuperscript{672}

However, Moltmann’s primary focus on the universal immanence of the Spirit is in danger of dissolving the Spirit into a panentheism that does not sufficiently differentiate between the Spirit’s work in creation, the church and believers. This is particularly problematic in his work \textit{God in creation} where he speaks of the Spirit in many broad categories: the creative Spirit, the cosmic Spirit, the Spirit of life, holistic Spirit, suffering Spirit, the Spirit of the universe, the divine Spirit, the Spirit of human self-transcendence and self-organisation, and the Spirit that is the unifying principle of creation.\textsuperscript{673} Moltmann concedes that there needs to be a differentiation of the work of the Spirit in his various roles\textsuperscript{674} but he does not clearly differentiate what they are and how they relate.\textsuperscript{675} Although Moltmann does not completely diffuse the personality and

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{670} Moltmann, \textit{The Spirit of Life}, 163ff.
\item \textsuperscript{671} Moltmann, \textit{The Spirit of Life}, 172ff.
\item \textsuperscript{672} Moltmann, \textit{The Spirit of Life}, 297.
\item \textsuperscript{673} Moltmann, \textit{God and Creation}, 9-17, 98-104, 262-268.
\item \textsuperscript{674} Moltmann, \textit{God and Creation}, 12-13, 15.
\item \textsuperscript{675} Indeed, this is one of the key criticisms made against Moltmann in his dialogue with Pentecostals. See Andrew Lord, “The Pentecostal-Moltmann dialogue: implications for mission.” \textit{Journal of Pentecostal theology} Vol. 11 (2003): 271-287.
\end{itemize}
work of the Spirit in the world, his language is at times ambivalent and sometimes
unhelpful and confusing.\footnote{For example, Moltmann gets into difficulties with his attempt at a conceptual definition of the Spirit as a “streaming personhood” flowing throughout history, \textit{Spirit of Life}, 285. The phrase is never qualified or explained, and one is left wondering what Moltmann means.}

The universalizing tendency of Moltmann to equate the Spirit indwelling in all of
creation leads to further concerns as to whether he has sufficiently given appropriate
consideration for the work of the Spirit in the Christian community and life of the
believer. Although Moltmann attempts to outline an ordo salutis for the believer and the
church that addresses some of these concerns, his work on the Spirit’s liberation,
justification, rebirth, sanctification, and charismatic power are oriented towards the
eschatological kingdom of God and the universal salvation of creation. In my reading
of Moltmann I believe however that he does not adequately give due consideration to
the work of the Spirit in the life of the believer and the Christian community. They are
not absent but are certainly secondary in preference for Moltmann’s consistent concern
to emphasise the Missio Dei in the broadest eschatological realities. However, these
do not need to be competing positions if we affirm that the Holy Spirit is involved in both
the birthing and sustaining life of the Christian community, and in inaugurating and
continuing to make present the eschatological kingdom in all of creation. The Spirit is
the source of both realities and is at work relating them to one another.

Positively, Moltmann draws out several pneumatological aspects in his
Trinitarian doctrine of creation which I believe are insightful for church planting and
provide stronger theological foundations for some of the embryonic themes that have
already been exemplified, as well as suggesting new perspectives. The Spirit is “the
principle of creativity and evolution that opens up new possibilities for creation”\footnote{Lett, \textit{Jürgen Moltmann’s theology}, 37.} from

\footnote{For example, Moltmann gets into difficulties with his attempt at a conceptual definition of the Spirit as a “streaming personhood” flowing throughout history, \textit{Spirit of Life}, 285. The phrase is never qualified or explained, and one is left wondering what Moltmann means.}
the beginning to the end. Likewise, made in the Imago Dei the Spirit releases the
creative gifts of humankind, endowing them with life and filing the whole church
community and each person with it with creative participation.

The Spirit is also the holistic Spirit bringing mutuality and difference in the
created order. At every level he “creates harmony in the interactions, mutual
perichoresis, and therefore a life of cooperation and community.” And yet
simultaneously, the Spirit is “the principle of individualization which differentiates
particular ‘working sketches’ of matter and life on various levels.” This means the
Creator Spirit enables both diversity and unity within the created order carefully
weaving an interrelated fabric in which each individual component is part of the
whole. The Spirit therefore “indwells both every individual creature and the
community of creation” creating their particularity and commonality in mutual
complementarity.

Further, the Holy Spirit is revealed as the eschatological Spirit that is both the
power of the resurrection and the promise of the new creation. While “eschatology
might provide the goal of God’s creation, pneumatology provides the means.”
The Spirit is therefore poured out on all flesh and as a co-sufferer with creation, waits
patiently for its forthcoming liberation, whilst keeping hope alive through his wordless
and inexpressible sighs. Through him the community of believers is therefore led in
solidarity with all other created beings to share in their suffering, living out the ethics of

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678 Oden, “An Emerging Pneumatology,” 278.
680 Moltmann, God in Creation, 100.
681 Moltmann, God in Creation, 100.
682 Moltmann, God in Creation, 100.
683 Moltmann, God in Creation, 101.
684 Moltmann, God in Creation, 100.
685 Moltmann, God in Creation, 67.
686 Lett, Jürgen Moltmann’s theology, 37.
687 Moltmann, God in Creation, 69.
Jesus in the world by challenging oppressive political, social and economic systems.\textsuperscript{688}

For Moltmann the church is therefore a “consoling community of hope”\textsuperscript{689} and “understands itself as the church out of the cross, and the church in solidarity with men and women living in the shadow of the cross.”\textsuperscript{690} Empowered by the Spirit, the church takes the form of a servant, and her life is necessarily cruciform.\textsuperscript{691}

Finally, the Spirit “embraces all of life, in every sphere, and in every direction.”\textsuperscript{692} The mission of the Spirit is the mission of Christ, which is the redemption and liberation of the whole world, for “the operations of God’s life-giving and life-affirming Spirit are universal and can be recognised in everything which ministers to life and resists its destruction.”\textsuperscript{693} This means that the more we participate with the Spirit in a reverence for life, the more we find ourselves rooted in the world, “as active participants, embodying and exhibiting, the life-giving, freeing aspects of the Spirit in all circumstances.”\textsuperscript{694} The Church in the power of the Spirit is graced and led therefore to transform the world so that it may share in the “messianic festiveness of all life.”\textsuperscript{695}

4) Theological reflections for the missional practice of church planting

Moltmann is a rich source for missional thinking and practice, and his contributions to an understanding of God the Creator and creation are innovative and stimulating. In critical conversation with Moltmann, there are a number of contributions that emerge from my dialogue with him that offer insightful theological perspectives for the missional practice of church planting.

\textsuperscript{688} Moltmann calls this Christopraxis, and it is also referred to as Moltmann’s political theology; Richard Bauckham, “Moltmann’s Messianic Christology,” 519-532.
\textsuperscript{689} Moltmann, “The Blessing of Hope,” 154.
\textsuperscript{690} Moltmann, \textit{The Church}, 86.
\textsuperscript{691} Moltmann, \textit{The Church}, 93.
\textsuperscript{692} Oden, “An Emerging Pneumatology,” 267.
\textsuperscript{693} Moltmann, \textit{Spirit of Life}, xi.
\textsuperscript{694} Oden, “An Emerging Pneumatology,” 271.
\textsuperscript{695} Moltmann, \textit{Church in the Power of the Spirit}, 270.
Rooting church planting within a Trinitarian doctrine of creation provides it with a deeper theological foundation and rationale. Although the theological themes of the Incarnation, Kingdom of God, and Missio Dei have come to prominence in church planting theology and practice over the last twenty years, Moltmann takes us further by advocating that these themes ought to be placed more fully within a Trinitarian doctrine of creation. God’s missional incarnational kingdom points ultimately to the reality of the new creation, where ‘God will be all in all,’ and creation will bask in the glory and worship of God. This is not to falsely separate creation and mission, for these are inextricably linked in the history of God, but with Moltmann, it is important to affirm that doxology, not missiology, is the culminating goal of God’s purposes for his creation. Invited to participate in perichoretic relationship with the Triune God, new communities are formed by the Creator, in the Creator and for the Creator; out of the overflow of love, they share the good news of the Creator so that others may also share in God’s life. The enjoyment and worship of God are therefore the goal of creation and the heartbeat of the new community and must be present from the outset of the process in some meaningful way. Whilst much church planting literature focuses on the Missio Dei, there is a less prominence given to worship and doxology. Worship and mission are however woven together in Moltmann’s Trinitarian doctrine of creation and they find their relation in God’s overall purposes for creation.696

Church planting must likewise be framed within an eschatological perspective. Through Christ’s death and resurrection and the giving of the Spirit, creation anticipates the coming of God and the new creation. The eschatological completion of creation works retroactively, and therefore determines the present reality of the church. Newly

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696 This issue is addressed more fully in Chapter Six, Trinity and Community.
planted congregations can therefore serve as signposts to the Kingdom by embodying a present reverence and concern for all of life, and by modelling future hope to a suffering creation that longs for liberation and freedom. Forming genuine communities of hope in the light of God’s eschatological vision, ensures that the anticipation of the future shapes and informs the nature, ethos, values and practices of newly planted communities from the start. Although contextualisation is essential for understanding the particularities of places and peoples in which new churches are to be incarnationally formed, the horizons of the future must also shape and inform what new contextual communities must embody, embrace, and aspire to be now. The eschatological vision of hope and the new creation can help safeguard church planting approaches that are absorbed, or preoccupied, by contextual realities and cultural relevance.

Moltmann advocates that the whole process of creation, from beginning to end, is the locus of God’s creativity and therefore remains open to God for further development and divine possibilities. Moltmann’s concept of originalis-creation-continua-nova also proves insightful for it necessitates an ongoing response to the Spirit’s creativity and opens up continual new innovations. Further, all persons are created in the Imago Dei giving them the capacity to initiate, nurture and develop relationships and reflect God’s relationality. Unless mission is relational it becomes functional, performative and dutiful. In many of the how-to church planting books and training courses, there is adequate comment on issues such as strategy, processes, principles, policies, models, and practicalities, but comparatively little on initiating, nurturing and developing relationships. If, as Moltmann suggests, the Imago Dei is centrally concerned with creative relationality, then exploring imaginative ways to cultivate friendships is crucial.
Moltmann’s assertion that God has come into the world to set up his home in which all people may find their dwelling place, reminds church planters that the scope of God’s mission is cosmic, and not ecclesiocentric. Indeed, Moltmann’s new creation missional paradigm calls for a reassessment of Christian perspectives that encourage a certain type of triumphalism that is inappropriate in a pluralist world. As the Creator enters his own creation through kenosis (self-emptying) and zimsum (self-restriction), so the church enters into the created order with humility in order to discover the Creator God is already at work there. This is not to imply a dichotomy between the Spirit’s presence in creation and the Spirit’s presence in the church. Rather it is to warn against a truncated and reductionist understanding of the mystery of the Spirit in creation and an appreciation of the universal and active presence of the Spirit that requires an inductive approach to mission. Through his understanding of God’s Shekinah in all creation, Moltmann points to God’s engagement with creation beyond the walls and confines of church. The task of the planter is not so much to bring God to those that do not have God, but to discern what God is already saying to his creation. God is speaking to his church, and to his creation, simultaneously by the same Spirit. Moltmann raises one further perspective regarding God’s ‘oikos’ in creation. The generous love of God in offering hospitality to all of his creation leads, through the Spirit, to an ‘oikos’ Christian community that reflects the hospitable nature of the Triune Creator. Alongside churches becoming communities of hope, Moltmann advocates that churches are formed to become communities of hospitality. His descriptions of church as primarily communities of friendship, hope and hospitality model positively the nature of the Triune Creator and provide rich and warm metaphors that might replace, or at least complement, church planting terminology. What difference to church planters and church planting might there be if the missional practice in which they were engaged
was to create such communities? The rediscovery of hospitality as a missional practice is beginning to shape and inform church planting theology and this is a welcome development that serves as a corrective to ecclesial models that are orientated around church growth ideology or are overly ecclesiocentric.\(^{697}\)

Moltmann finds in his understanding of God in creation both a place for the community of creation and for individualisation for the particularities of creation. He makes room for each and every unique part that is distinguishable from the others, and yet ensures the whole of creation remains a single carefully woven interrelated fabric. There are a number of possible implications of this for church planting, not least the need to foster healthy ecumenism across church planting tribes and denominations without losing the distinctives of particular traditions and the need to foster congregational independence and interdependence when new churches are formed. Moltmann’s creation scheme, however, may also provide a useful source for exploring the thorny issue of planting homogeneous and heterogeneous churches. His Trinitarian creation theology helps validate both the place of the particular and the universal as fundamental to the creative design of the Spirit. And yet, Moltmann moves cautiously and ultimately places a greater emphasis on the community of creation with all its particular expressions of diversity woven into the whole. His focus on the fulfillment of the new creation as God in all, and all in God, warns against any endorsement of the homogeneous being the ultimate and normative reality. In church planting organisations, denominations and initiatives that focus on forming new congregations


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to reach particular subcultures and monocultures, there must continue to be careful reflection on the legitimacy of this approach and the development of complementary heterogenous expressions within it. There is also a need to advocate for planting multicultural churches, which are in themselves an embodiment of the kingdom now and a foretaste of its culmination in the new creation. Moltmann’s Trinitarian doctrine of creation is a useful place to foster dialogue on these issues and may prove to be invaluable for missiologists, in general, and church planters, in particular.

Moltmann’s Trinitarian theology of creation culminates with the importance of Sabbath for creation. The Sabbath is the climax of creation and it provides a foretaste of the eschatological kingdom, where creation ultimately rests and dwells in God. The Sabbath is the crowning moment of creation as it moves creation from activity to stillness, from busyness to restfulness, from fragmentation to Shalom, and from mission to worship. For Moltmann, Sabbath is not only about observing a day of rest but is symbolic of a much wider rhythm of life and spirituality that fosters being in, and with, God as the heart of Divine-human relationship. Church planters, for the most part, are intrinsically motivated, hardworking and self-starters but there is a danger that the phenomenal effort required in church planting can leave church planters exhausted and somewhat neglectful of the practices of Christian spirituality. Church planters, and those that are responsible for them, need to guard against patterns that foster activity, production and work to the detriment of spiritual formation. Planters must learn to balance work with rest and renewal, develop healthy spiritual rhythms of life, and enjoy

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698 Having led *Innovision*, a church planting Assessment centre for planters for several years, I can speak about this with a high degree of confidence as these are three of twelve characteristics that are part of the assessment process.

699 Having had the privilege of facilitating and leading several church planting retreats, I know from my personal interaction with church planters that this is a crucial issue to address. The more activist the tradition, the more acute the problem seems to be.
the beauty and glory of God. Likewise, newly planted churches need to develop from
the outset healthy rhythms of life that give space and time for recovery, renewal and
Sabbath rest as a church planting community.700

5) Didsbury Community Church: A personal theological reflection

As I write this personal theological reflection on planting Didsbury Community
Church (DCC), I particularly want to reflect on the work of DCC in the light of three of
Molmann’s Trinitarian creation themes: creativity, relationality and hospitality.

Creativity has been, and still remains, a key value of DCC. The church was
formed by exploring creative ways that it might engage with the community it was
birthed to serve. The church planting team spent much time reflecting, praying and
discerning imaginative ways it might relate contextually. Rather than taking 'off the
shelf' pre-packaged ideas and cloning models of church from elsewhere, DCC
developed missional communities by exploring innovative missional opportunities,
passions, needs, and interests. The result has been the birthing of innovative café,
music, sports, toddler, craft, family, youth and children’s ministries in many diverse
expressions of mission, discipleship and worship. Innovative thinkers from across the
church regularly gather together to generate creative ideas for the various DCC
communities, and there are regular places across the church for people to suggest their
own innovative ideas for ministry. Creative arts, crafts, media, communication and play
are at the heart of much of this invention, and we constantly look for ways to explore
new ideas and ministry innovation in everything we do. As with Moltmann, we have
discovered that creativity has not only been present in the birth of the church but has

700 This is another important strand within New Monasticism that is has an increasing significance in
church planting. See Ian Mobsby, God Unknown: The Trinity in contemporary spirituality and mission
been necessary for its ongoing development and the church is always anticipating what a creative future might entail. This has not been without its challenges. On reflection, it is evident that many of the most creative people at DCC have gradually become fatigued in their creativity and innovation and we have not always been good at giving them, or indeed the church, sufficient opportunity for rest and renewal. In reflecting upon Moltmann’s Sabbath perspectives, we need to learn how to better balance work and activity with rest and recovery. We need to create healthier spiritual rhythms in the lives of individuals and in the life of the church. If we are to take DCC forward into the future, these issues need to be reflected upon more intentionally. Recent church discussions about exploring church retreats and creating an annual Sabbath rest period for the entire church and its members are steps in the right direction but a better rhythm that balances ‘being’ and ‘doing’ is needed.

Further, upon reflection, there was a season, when our shared corporate gathering began to emerge, that a focus on creative worship dominated the church plant. The motivation to excel in creativity to enable a rich and existential experience of God through multiforms of worship and the engagement of the senses was commendable. There was, however, a growing concern that ever-increasing amounts of our limited time were being poured into creative forms of worship at the expense of both missional engagement outside the plant and addressing emerging pastoral issues. This has led to a simpler, though not simplistic form of worship, which has not lost creativity but is no longer dominated by it. This reflects the fact that DCC was at times guilty of a preoccupation with creativity for its own sake. Further, creativity was primarily orientated towards expressions of innovation in the church, for the church, and through the church to the community, but again upon reflection, not enough consideration has been given to creative engagement outside the church, or in creative partnerships with
the wider community. These have been neglected areas that are beginning to be addressed, so that we move from an ecclesiocentric missional paradigm to a wider community-in-creation paradigm. The embryonic initiatives in this direction are encouraging and exciting.

Relationality has been at the heart of DCC from its inception and this has been expressed in a number of ways. The church is centred in three relational movements which have been at the core of every newly birthed missional community of DCC. As noted in Chapter Six, Trinity and Community, each DCC community is constituted by Upward (worship), Inward (fellowship) and Outward (mission) relationships. Likewise, each community is formed through an intentional relational process of contact, nurture and develop. This is not a mechanical and formulaic production line, but a sociological recognition that friendships have a starting point, a nurturing dimension, and the potential to develop into more meaningful and deeper friendships. At DCC we intentionally ask ourselves frequently, where and how we are forming genuine friendships with other people, inside and outside the church through the relational process outlined above. The ethos of our communities is shaped by three relational characteristics which we collectively embrace and model as carefully as we can: first we aim to love people, second, we aim to accept people, and third, we aim to value people. Understandably this is not always easy. There are many times when we could, and should, have demonstrated this more effectively. And yet, the witness and testimony of people that have encountered DCC, is that they have, for the most part, felt loved, accepted and valued. People and relationships do tend to matter more to us than anything else, and at least in this respect we aim to embrace a perichoretic understanding of relationships with God, and with one another. We agree with Moltmann in principle, that the creation of relationships is the central expression of the
Imago Dei. This does not mean that we do not have broken or damaged relationships that require grace, forgiveness and reconciliation, nor have we been exempt from the pain and trauma of people leaving the community. In our busyness we have not always given enough time and space for relationship development, and many struggle with building genuine relationships outside of the confines of Christian community to the wider world and immediate community. Moltmann inspires us to view relationships in a much broader cosmic perspective, and we are currently exploring new ways in which we can cultivate friendship beyond the walls of the church more intentionally and effectively. It is critical that the church makes room for the creation of relationships beyond its own locus.

Hospitality is a third feature of Moltmann’s Trinitarian doctrine of creation that has much to teach DCC about God’s engagement with his world. Given the priority of creating relationships that DCC has largely embraced from the outset, hospitality and welcome have always been present in the life of this church. Many of the people at DCC open their homes generously to others, and our monthly Agape feast is a very tangible picture of God’s hospitality for the embracing of God’s people. At this meal we frequently remind ourselves about the importance of sharing our commodities, food and possessions as acts of hospitality that mirror God’s welcoming of us. We regularly highlight how the Agape feast is a foretaste of the eschatological banquet in the kingdom of God. And yet, Moltmann challenges us to extend our hospitality to those outside of the church community, so that our Agape meal might become a place for those that may not have a family or a place to call home. The hospitality of the eschatological kingdom according to Moltmann, provides a welcoming place for all, particularly the suffering, the broken, the marginalised, the poor, the dispossessed, the homeless and those that find themselves as strangers in a new land. Our hospitality at
DCC is generous and loving, but it is primarily for those that already belong to the household of faith. Much more needs to be done to find ways to extend our hospitality beyond the community of the church, and to become a host in more meaningful and intentional ways. It might also mean that we need to be more discerning and receptive to the welcome and hospitality that other community groups offer, groups in whom the Spirit may also be setting up the ‘oikos’ of God. For it is in the welcoming of others, and their welcoming of us, that stories of life may be mutually told, the joys and struggles of life mutually shared, and the hope of the new creation be mutually embraced.

6) Conclusion

In this chapter, I briefly noted the current interest in the doctrine of God and creativity before evidencing that creativity is an important theme within church planting literature and practice, exemplified through Fresh Expressions of Church (FEOC). I argued that although there is a strong focus on creativity in church planting practice, it does not sufficiently draw upon a wider understanding of Trinity and creation that could enhance its theological development. By building upon embryonic themes that are suggested in the literature, I dialogued with Jürgen Moltmann as a critical conversation partner drawing on his Trinitarian creation theology which I argue offers further fruitful insights for church planting and develops a wider and deeper theological framework for this missional practice. In the light of Moltmann’s Trinitarian creation theology, I concluded with personal theological reflections on my own church planting practice through Didsbury Community Church, exploring how these theological themes are shaping and informing missional practice in our new community. Church planting is a missional practice that is rooted in God’s mission for all of creation but is always embodied within particular contexts. In Chapter Five therefore, I will examine how
Trinitarian perspectives shape and inform contextual approaches to planting new churches.
Chapter Five

Trinity and Context

1) Introduction

In Chapter Four, I explored how the renewed interest in Trinitarian perspectives on creation can help shape and inform the missional practice of church planting. In this chapter, I will argue that Trinitarian perspectives on context can significantly contribute to how new communities should be birthed within their particular settings. I will begin this chapter by briefly describing the purpose and nature of contextualisation and its importance to church planting through critical engagement with Eddie Gibbs and Bryan Bolger, Michael Moynagh, Alan Hirsch and Michael Frost. I will proceed to outline recent developments in Trinitarian approaches to contextualisation that point us in helpful directions for the development of theological approaches to contextualisation, before critically engaging with the Trinitarian contextual missiologies of Lesslie Newbigin and Timothy Tennent. By synthesising their work, I will advocate for a Trinitarian framework for contextualisation with theological and practical implications for church planting. Finally, I will conclude with personal theological reflections on how Trinitarian contextual perspectives have shaped and informed my own church planting practice through Didsbury Community Church.

2) Contextualisation and church planting

Contextualisation is not a new idea, even if the term, methodologies and models have only come to prominence in missional theology since the latter half of the twentieth century.701 Contextualisation stresses the importance of “formulating, presenting, and

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701 The term first appeared in mission literature in 1972 in relation to models of Theological Education and in the same year it was used in discussions of the World Council of Churches. The term was
practicing Christian faith in such a way that it is relevant to the cultural context of the
target group in terms of conceptualisation, expression, and application; yet maintaining
theological coherence, biblical integrity and theoretical consistency.”

This framework accepts that the “historic deposit of the gospel is unchanging, but contextualising
acknowledges the need to translate the message into forms that are meaningful and
applicable to peoples in their separate cultural settings.” The message of the
kingdom of God is universal and transcends all cultures, but it must become embodied
in the lives and experience of particular people and communities if it is to be
comprehended. As Rene Padilla says,

To contextualise the gospel is so to translate it that the Lordship of Jesus Christ
is not an abstract principle of a mere doctrine, but the determining factor of life
in all its dimensions and the basic criterion in relation to which all the cultural
values that form the very abundance of human life are evaluated. Without
contextualisation the gospel will become tangential or even entirely irrelevant.

This translational view of contextualisation, with its foundation of transmitting the
unchanging gospel into a cultural setting, has been widely embraced by evangelical
Protestants but is not without its critics. Kirsteen Kim, Volker Kuster, and Gerrit Neven
note a series of potential weaknesses if contextualisation as translation is interpreted
too narrowly. Contextualisation that is insufficiently informed and shaped by local
theologies is in danger of imposing bounded theological constructs, concepts, and

introduced to the International Congress on World Evangelisation in Lausanne in 1974 and became
more widely known through the Trinity Consultation on Theology and Mission in 1976.

702 Enoch Wan, “Critiquing the Method of the Traditional Western Theology and Calling for Sino

703 Timothy Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-First Century*
(Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2010), 347.


Company, 1985), 93.

706 Andrew James Prince, “Contextualisation of the Gospel: Towards an evangelical approach in the
light of Scripture and the church Fathers.” (Unpublished doctoral thesis, Australian Catholic University,
2015), 43-49.
practices that are derivative of the worldview or theological presuppositions of those that are communicating the message of the gospel. This may in turn lead to an engagement in reflective contextual hermeneutics whereby contexts themselves are insufficiently discerned for the revelation and presence of God. Consequentially, there is a significant danger that inherited cultural norms and expressions are imposed upon receptive communities as a form of neo-colonialism. Further, contextualisation that fails sufficiently to engage in global conversations can become isolated and uninformed by the wisdom gained in both comparative and contrasting contexts. Contextualisation according to Nicholls is therefore not only the cultural penetration of the gospel in specific forms that translate to the context, but also speaks into the wider and deeper issues of worldview, values and socio-political structures that form actual behaviours and norms.

The aim of contextualisation is not only therefore to translate the gospel in ways that relate to context but forge new realities from the intersection of the gospel with contextual realities. Hiebert for example therefore advocates for a model of critical contextualisation that guards against the ethnocentrism and cultural foreignness that non-contextualisation creates and prevents newly founded churches from lapsing into relativism and syncretism when extreme forms of contextualisation are uncritically adopted. Hiebert's model offers four steps that the church can take to incarnate the gospel in its new cultural context. These are: (1) exegesis of the host culture, (2) exegesis of, and commitment to, the authoritative scripture, (3) corporate theological

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reflection on the challenges brought to existing lifestyles, traditions and customs in the light of their new biblical understandings, (4) the need to explore if newly contextualised rituals and symbols may need to be created or applied in new ways that are indigenous to, and decided by, the host community. The model is not without its weaknesses however, particularly in the linear way that Hiebert sets out the four steps of contextualisation. In reality, this model should not be envisaged and practised as a rigid sequence of steps, but rather as an ongoing conversation that involves the interrelation of the different components at various moments through a cyclical hermeneutical process. Further, the model could be strengthened by adding a fifth step, namely that of global dialogue, whereby conversations with others in the Christian community would help safeguard the syncretism that Hiebert seeks to avoid. Nonetheless, the model takes the revelation and translation of Scripture seriously, and advocates that corporate theological dialogue is crucial if syncretism is to be avoided.

Given the nature and purpose of contextualisation the importance of contextualisation for church planting can not be overstated. As the breadth of material on contextualisation in church planting literature is extensive, I have chosen therefore to exemplify the importance of contextual approaches through the representative contributions of Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger (Emerging Church),

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Michael Moynagh (Fresh Expressions/New Contextual Churches), and Alan Hirsch and Michael Frost (evangelical Protestant).  

In *Emerging Churches: Creating a Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures*, Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger “share a common vision to see culturally engaged churches emerge throughout the West as well as in other parts of the world influenced by Western culture” and “represents a determined attempt to identify the key practices of this disparate movement.” In a time of immense cultural change however, “the church’s ignorance of the wider culture becomes problematic” and “no longer relates to the surrounding culture, hence its increasing marginalisation and perceived irrelevance.” This has profound implications for the church and provides the rationale and impetus for contextual approaches that require an understanding of these paradigms and significant theological reflection.

Through missional, incarnational and contextual approaches emerging churches are missional communities arising from within postmodern culture, consisting of followers of Jesus who are seeking to be faithful in their time and place. These churches have many diverse expressions, the terminology that describes them varies, they penetrate across traditional denominational lines but are not easily labelled. Through their research Gibbs and Bolger have “identified patterns most prevalent in

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712 I will not be examining and critiquing their ecclesial movements or broader ecclesiology but limiting myself with how their contextual approaches are shaping and informing new forms of church.
714 Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Church*, 29. John Drane commends the work of Gibbs and Bolger for “giving a good overview, though with a tendency to impose a homogeneity on the emerging Church that goes beyond the evidence,” and offering a “more reliable guide, as it is based on ethnographic study of specific local manifestations of emerging church.” Stephen Croft (ed.), *Mission-Shaped Questions: Defining issues for today’s Church* (London: House Church Publishing, 2008), 205-206.
churches that take culture, specifically postmodern culture, seriously. Common to these innovative churches are nine missional practices, three core and six more derivative of the others. These practices emerge from different roots but take seriously the triangulation of gospel, church and culture. These rediscovered practices are expressed therefore in forms that engage with contemporary culture and utilise postmodern ideology, forms and practices. Gibbs and Bolger exemplify through engagement with emerging church leaders and practitioners, how each of the nine practices emerge therefore from an incarnational engagement with the wider culture: “Recognising that people bring their world to God, emerging churches are strongly tied to local culture. These churches do not use cultural expressions because they are trendy but because they are rooted in people’s lives.”

Whilst seeking to positively embrace the postmodern culture and ensure the church is at home in it, the question arises as to whether the quest for cultural relevancy has been at the expense of its counter-cultural aspirations. It is critical that churches are shaped and informed by their cultural surroundings and this by necessity includes the use of language, symbols and forms that are not alien to it. The goal of contextualisation is therefore to create local indigenous expressions of gospel-centered communities. However, how far should cultural immersion penetrate? Ed Stezter comments, “In contextualization the heart of the gospel must be kept as it is encoded

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719 Gibbs and Bolger, Emerging Church, 43
720 Emerging churches, (1) Identify with the life of Jesus, (2) Transform the secular realm, (3) Live highly communal lives. Because of these three activities they (4) Welcome the stranger, (5) Serve with generosity, (6) Participate as producers, (7) Create as created beings, (8) Lead as a body, and (9) Take part in spiritual activities. Gibbs and Bolger, Emerging Church, 45.
721 Drane is insightful in asking a key question of all Emerging Churches, “What have you emerged from?” recognising that these new churches emerge from different roots. Croft, Mission-Shaped Questions, 91.
722 Gibbs and Bolger, Emerging Church, 75.
723 The list of fifty leaders and their stories are found in Emerging Church, 239-328.
724 Gibbs and Bolger, Emerging Church, 77.
in forms that are understood by the people…this is an ongoing process of embodying the gospel in an ever-changing world. Here cultures are seen as both good and evil, not simply as neutral vehicles for understanding the world.” Accordingly the dangers of obscurantism and syncretism need to be avoided as the church engages with culture. Obscurantism occurs when a person confuses the gospel with some idea or expression external to the gospel whilst syncretism is the opposite error, it is the mixing of Christianity with something else. Paul Hiebert’s model of critical contextualization may therefore serve as a constructive balance between maintaining the gospel as an eternal, transcultural reality, but always shaped and informed within the context of a particular human culture.

In *Church for Every Context*, Michael Moynagh shares the basic premise laid out in *Mission-Shaped church (MSC)* that in response to changing contexts, new forms of church are needed today. He notes the importance of contextual theology as part of his overall theological rationale and gives three reasons why contextualisation is important: (1) Contextualisation is part of life, (2) God’s revelation involves contextualisation, and (3) Contextualisation serves the kingdom. These brief sections advocate for why the church needs to accommodate to context and they contain social, cultural, biblical and theological analogies which are insightful but are not substantially developed, and the theological perspectives do not always directly engage with the contextual issues he raises. For example, in the discussion regarding “Contextualisation is part of life” Moynagh offers no theological perspective but

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726 Ed Stetzer, What is Contextualization?
727 Moynagh, *Church for Every Context*, 151.
728 Moynagh, *Church for Every Context*, 151.
advocates the cultural analysis of Bernard Lonergan.\textsuperscript{729} As with \textit{MSC}, however, Moynagh is concerned not to embrace contextualisation without limits. He considers therefore two boundaries which serve to limit the extent to which a church can be shaped by its context: the gospel core and an ecclesial core. Moynagh warns against reducing the gospel core to a set of theological propositions about Jesus, arguing that life with Jesus himself is more central.\textsuperscript{730} Further, Moynagh observes that “fundamentals about Jesus and his church can be viewed differently in different contexts,” therefore, “just as relatives may have different perceptions of their family, churches vary in their understandings of Jesus and his family.”\textsuperscript{731} Although I concur that Jesus himself is the heart of the gospel, and recognise the diversity of local theologies, Moynagh implies that the gospel is without propositions.\textsuperscript{732} If so, there is a danger that the gospel is relativized to our own experience and interpretation of Jesus. Moynagh considers an alternative possibility, whether an ecclesial core might serve as a legitimate boundary in safeguarding the church from contextual excesses. He correctly notes the limitations of specifying any particular church culture serve as the definitive core since local churches will inevitably vary across the cultures they inhabit. Yet his advocacy for an indigenous local approach through which the church searches for practices that best mediate grace in their context, seems to imply there is no ecclesial minimum either, and that local theologies are the only guiding principle. Moynagh however argues that the four interlocking circles that form his own reflective model\textsuperscript{733} should serve as the necessary safeguard, but this in itself suggests an

\textsuperscript{729} Moynagh, \textit{Church for Every Context}, 153.
\textsuperscript{730} Moynagh, \textit{Church for Every Context}, 156.
\textsuperscript{731} Moynagh, \textit{Church for Every Context}, 157.
\textsuperscript{732} I address some of these issues in the Publishable Article in Chapter Two.
\textsuperscript{733} The Church is constituted by four marks: Up (Worship), In (Fellowship), Out (Mission) and Of (Catholicity), Moynagh, \textit{Church for Every Context}, 104-114. See Chapter Six for a more detailed overview and critique of Moynagh's model.
ecclesial minimum. The safeguard given by the four interconnected relational movements of the church, can further be complemented by different models of contextual theology which also qualify and limit each other. Moynagh therefore draws upon Bevan’s six models of contextualisation advocating they correspond to the six methodological processes he outlines for the planting of new contextual churches. Moynagh’s Christological interpretation of the models is certainly more convincing than the somewhat contrived application of each of Bevan’s models to the different stages of his methodology for starting and developing new contextual churches. Bevan’s models are not to be understood as following any prescribed linear sequence but always work interrelationally, nor are all six models required for any particular methodological approach to context. Further, Moynagh’s six stage linear approach is further unconvincing as each of the models could equally be allocated to different stages than he suggests. Why for example is the transcendental model which focuses on the inner experiences of discovering God and oneself, aligned with the last methodological stage of church pioneer reproduction rather than any of the other stages which presumably are equally informed by experience?

Moynagh advocates that all contextual missiology should be shaped and informed by theological considerations and conversations. Although he roots new contextual churches in the Missio Dei and notes the importance of contextual theology as part of his overall theological rationale, he does not construct and develop a robust contextual theology of his own and theological perspectives are frequently secondary to methodological issues. Indeed, the latter is the predominant focus of the book. As with Gibbs and Bolger, a theological reading of context needs to be further developed.

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734 Moynagh, Church for Every Context, 162-165.
735 Moynagh, Church for Every Context, 152-167.
Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch in *The Shaping of Things to Come* advocate a contextual missional theology that is rooted in what they call the “Incarnational Approach.” Following the pattern of Christ, the church must be embodied and immersed in the culture but not consumed by it. Their adoption of Hiebert’s critical contextualisation model enables them to affirm that “the core of the gospel is valid for all cultures and times,” and that it “must be clothed in time-specific cultural forms in order for it to be communicated and understood.” Pursuing a Christological-Incarnational model of contextualisation, they are concerned that the church is “reflecting local flavours, spices, and textures and developing an ambience and a communal spirit that is sensitive and hospitable to local culture” but “is careful not to abandon the truth of the gospel nor to water down its implications.” New churches must therefore contextualise its language, worship, symbols, rituals, and communal life in such ways as to be sensitive to and impactful in a particular cultural context, but always remember the church is a “missions movement in a hostile and unreceptive empire...[where] we are exiles, in a sense, from a world that mocks our symbols and disregards our God.”

Frost and Hirsch present a Christological contextual missional theology that is rooted in an incarnational theology. Jesus serves as the model for contextualisation,

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demonstrating what it means to be the embodiment of God within a particular human culture, whilst remaining distinct and uncorrupted by living in the world. Undoubtedly, Frost and Hirsch offer insightful theological perspectives, but their prominent incarnational approach mitigates against a wider Christology which remains underdeveloped in their work. The incarnational focus also tends to underplay, and at times negates, the work of the Father and Spirit in relation to the mission of the church. This is particularly evident in their contextual missional theology which has little to say about either and consequentially leads them to advocate the formation of incarnational contextual churches that lack wider Christological, pneumatological and Trinitarian shaping. I concur with Craig Ott, Stephen Strauss and Timothy Tennent therefore that “it is important that an evangelical theology of religion is both Christocentric and Trinitarian.”

Contextual theology is a prominent concern for the missional practice of church planting. Indeed, Lings and Murray in Church Planting in the UK Since 2000 reflect on a decade of church planting stating that, “church planting, fresh expressions and the emerging church are making a significant contribution- not only by offsetting closures but by encouraging contextual and creative engagement with a challenging culture.” This has been exemplified in this chapter through the work of Gibbs and Bolger, Moynagh, and Frost and Hirsch. Theological reflection on contextualisation remains critical, and the recent development of Trinitarian contextual theology is one notable example of this.

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746 Their Christology is dominated by the Incarnation, and issues such as the atonement, resurrection, ascension and return of Christ are underdeveloped in comparison.
748 George Lings and Stuart Murray, Church Planting in the UK Since 2000 (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2003), 15.
3) Trinitarian contextual theology

In *Trends in missional ecclesiology* Niemandt identifies emerging global trends that are shaping contemporary missiology, and central is the rediscovery that mission is participation in the life of the Trinity. Mission begins in the heart of the Triune God and the love that binds together the Holy Trinity overflows to all humanity and creation. God’s purpose in Christ through the Spirit is therefore to renew the whole of creation and becomes a dynamic process whereby “we are invited to participate in the Trinity on His mission to the world.” Mission must therefore move from being church-centric to becoming theocentric. As a consequence of the new Missio Trinitatis emphasis, and a rediscovery of the importance of pneumatology, mission is “finding out where the Holy Spirit is at work and joining in.” Discernment is therefore critical and is the first step of mission and through it the missional church is created, empowered and sustained by the Spirit for its very life and existence. It is therefore critical to recognise the Spirit as the acting subject at work in the lives of local congregations.

Ecclesiology therefore follows mission for as Christopher Wright notes, “the church’s mission flows from the identity of God and his Christ.” As the church participates in God’s mission it is likewise shaped and formed from within the setting that it is incarnated in. In this sense, therefore the church emerges out of the context as people respond to the message of the gospel. As Hirsch says, “We do not know

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752 Kirsteen Kim, *Joining in with the Spirit: Connecting world Church and local mission* (London: Epworth, 2009), 1.
what church will look like until we get there.” This is a missional-incarnational ecclesiology whereby the gospel is fundamentally missionary in nature, universal in scope and translatable into a particular context. As Leonard Sweet states, “the church does not pass through time and context in hermetically sealed containers but rather like yeast that takes new form and changes every culture.” According to Hirsch, this missional-incarnational ecclesiology decentres the church from a self-centred life and makes the church sensitive towards outsiders and strangers and seeks to shape itself in relation to the culture in which it is located or to which it is called.

Trinitarian contextual missiology therefore is rooted in an understanding of the economic model of the Trinity in which the Father, Son and Spirit work within creation, human history and particular cultures and contexts, to redeem the world and reconcile all things to God through the particularities of context. Stephen Bevans, in analysing contextual missional models from around the world, concludes that the contemporary concern for contextualisation is to engage its methods, processes and models within a Trinitarian framework,

Contemporary understandings of God as Trinity speak of God as a dynamic, relational community of persons, whose very nature is to be present and active in the world, calling it and persuading it toward the fullness of relationship that Christian tradition calls salvation…Christian faith in God as Trinity opens up a vista of God’s “marks” in the world’s events, in people’s experience and cultures, in the natural world. Christian theologians need to do theology contextually because God is present and acts contextually.

This brief overview of Trinitarian contextual theology illustrates why, and how, Trinitarian perspectives must inform missional contextual theology. Although church planting demonstrates a developing contextual methodology, and an emerging theological rationale, through conversing with the Trinitarian contextual theologies of Lesslie Newbigin and Timothy Tennent, I seek to develop a Trinitarian framework that can further shape and inform the practice of church planting.

4) Trinitarian contextual theologies: A dialogue with Lesslie Newbigin and Timothy Tennent.

Lesslie Newbigin and Timothy Tennent come from different theological traditions, contexts and generations. Lesslie Newbigin, rooted in the Reformed tradition, spent many years in India as a missionary and bishop before returning to Birmingham (UK), where he became Moderator of the United Reformed Church. He is widely regarded as one of the most influential missional theologians to engage the Western church. Timothy Tennent, ordained in the United Methodist Church, has pastored churches in Georgia and preached regularly in churches throughout New England. Rooted in the Wesleyan tradition, he is president of Asbury Theological Seminary. His primary interests lie in global missiology, post-Christendom thinking, and theological education. They both however firmly root their contextual missiology in the economic model of the Trinity constructing their missional theology around the roles of the Father, Son and Spirit within salvation history, from which they offer principles for contextual missional practice. Addressing post-Christendom issues, Newbigin and Tennent advocate that only a Trinitarian missiology can provide the necessary framework for how the church can engage with culture.

a) The Trinitarian contextual missional theology of Lesslie Newbigin
Newbigin developed his Trinitarian framework in response to the changing missional contexts of Western civilisation in which he argues that “a fresh articulation of the missionary task in terms of a pluralistic, polytheistic, pagan society of our time, may require us to acknowledge the necessity of a Trinitarian starting point.” He advocated that in such a rapidly changing world “the Trinity remains the only authority by which we proclaim the gospel to the world.” It would not be until his final revision of *The Open Secret* that Newbigin’s most concise and systematic treatment of Trinitarian missiology would be published. The work affirms that the mission of the church in response to God’s prior act of mission concerns three key dimensions: proclaiming the kingdom of the Father (faith in action), sharing in the life of the Son (love in action), and bearing the witness of the Spirit (hope in action). In critiquing this work Tennent notes,

> The *Open Secret* was based on lecture notes from Selly Oak and never attempted anything more than the broad outline of a Trinitarian theology of mission. Furthermore, Newbigin never really worked out the particulars of the Father’s role in mission, and there were many current missiological problems that were not related in any way to the Trinity.

There is legitimacy in Tennent’s critique, particularly that his Trinitarian framework is underdeveloped in relation to the work of the Father, and likewise Newbigin does not consistently or explicitly relate his missional understanding of the gospel, church and culture to Trinitarian perspectives. For example, after outlining his Trinitarian framework

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765 Tennent, *Invitation*, 68.
in *The Open Secret* his subsequent chapters including world history, God’s justice, church growth, and the gospel among the nations do not demonstrate explicitly their connection to the prior Trinitarian pattern, Further the pneumatological perspectives in particular in these chapters are less evident though they are often assumed by inference to God’s working and presence in the world. The retelling of the story of Peter and Cornelius is perhaps the exception where Newbigin draws attention to the converting work of the Spirit but perhaps surprisingly, in the light of the Spirit’s working in the lives of Gentiles, references to the Spirit are virtually absent in his subsequent treatment of the gospel and world religions where we might expect to see this as a prominent theme. Nonetheless, Newbigin’s Trinitarianism is always foundational for his missional ecclesiology. Drawing on the significance of the Johannine commission “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (John 20:21) as the basis of his missional theology, the Trinitarian sending (the Father sending the Son, and Son breathing the Spirit), not only reveals the Missio Dei, but constitutes the sending of the church into the world after the incarnational pattern of Christ through the Spirit. As Michael Goheen says concerning Newbigin’s Trinitarian missionary ecclesiology,

The Father sends the Son to make known the kingdom of God in the power of the Spirit. The Son sends the Spirit to continue his work of renewal. The Son also sends the church to continue his mission in the power of the same Spirit. This sending defines not one task of the church, but its very nature and being. We are a people sent to witness to the good news of the kingdom.

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In other words, whenever and wherever Newbigin speaks of God’s missionary acts in
and through the ecclesial community, it must always be understood in relation to the
Trinity. *The Open Secret* is not written to formulate an in-depth systematic Trinitarian
missiology but serves to place the core of Newbigin’s theological perspectives within a
Trinitarian framework from which they ultimately derive their basis.\(^{773}\)

Newbigin therefore states that the Father is the “creator, upholder and
consummator of all that is,”\(^{774}\) and the history of nations and peoples must be set within
the larger framework of God’s reign over all things. This kingdom rule of God is central
to the Biblical story, and is most clearly announced, manifested and brought near to us
in Jesus Christ. Although this kingdom is cosmic and universal, the rule of God is
manifested in specific stories of particular people, in particular places, through
particular events that are captured in the unfolding drama of salvation as recorded in
the Scripture, and in the continuing history of the world.\(^{775}\) The relating of God’s cosmic
purposes to specific contexts is at the heart of Newbigin’s Trinitarian contextual
missional theology:

> The scandal of particularity is at the centre of the question of missions. To be
more precise, it is the problem of relating God’s universality to his particular
deeds and words. God is over all and in all; not a sparrow falls to the ground
without his will. Yet the Bible talks of God’s acting and speaking in particular
times and places. How are these related?\(^{776}\)

For Newbigin, God’s universality and particularity require one another, and central to
this mutual relationship is the doctrine of election. The doctrine of election affirms that
God’s universal purposes are mediated through a continuous series of particular

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\(^{773}\) I have developed this approach by placing Newbigin’s major contextual themes within this Trinitarian
framework.


choices, people, events, and contexts in order that all are beneficiaries of God’s covenantal love. The two great contextual challenges that Newbigin believed the church faced was the post Christendom and pluralistic culture of the West.

Concerned with the increasing marginalisation of the church in Western culture, Newbigin turned his attention more intentionally to evaluate the Christendom legacy, its demise, and the challenges it brings to the church. The central criticism he levelled against the Christendom arrangement is that the church “became ‘the religious department of European society,’ rather than a people among other people elected and appointed for a mission to its surrounding society.” As the church became allied with established powers and principalities, it lost therefore its prophetic-critical stance towards society accepting a role as the “protected and well-decorated chaplaincy in the camp of the dominant power.” However, despite these significant failures, Newbigin believed the church was right in taking responsibility for the cultural, social and political life of early medieval Europe and asks whether the alternative of churches living indefinitely as persecuted minorities would have been a better arrangement. Newbigin believed that the church should not attempt to establish a new Christendom but advocated for the Christianisation of society as a worthy aspiration and an outworking of the gospel in confronting and transforming secular culture. Stuart Murray criticises Newbigin for never managing to liberate himself fully from the

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theological presuppositions that created Western Christendom, but Jürgen Schuster in contrast, remarks that Newbigin never became a Christendom theologian, due to his awareness of the eschatological and provisional character of Christian involvement in the public sphere. Further, it is noteworthy that Newbigin came to the conclusion that it was a mistake to speak about a Christianised society and completely avoided using the phrase in his later years. In summation I agree with the sentiment of Goheen, “Perhaps we may say that, according to Newbigin, the task of the church is to witness to the Lordship of Christ over all life, yet without falling into the Christendom trap.”

The second contextual challenge that occupied Newbigin’s thinking was pluralism which he considered an ideological threat to the gospel and the church. In response to the plurality of cultures, and the relativism that emerged from the Enlightenment, Newbigin laboured to articulate a gospel that was universally true as revealed in the person and work of Christ. This gospel is received through faith by those that seek after God and must never be imposed, as in Christendom, through any form of coercion or imperialism. For Newbigin this raises the vexed question as to how God’s unique and decisive revelation in Christ relates to other faiths and religions. In addressing this issue Newbigin affirms that the Father is working through Christ and the Spirit in all of creation, and therefore we “shall expect, look for, and welcome all the signs of the grace of God at work in the lives of those who do not know

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784 Stuart Murray, Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2004), 102-103.
787 Goheen, “As the Father has sent me,” 197.
790 Newbigin, Gospel in a Pluralistic Society, 171.
Jesus as Lord.” Consequentially, Christians should “cooperate with people of all faiths and ideologies in all projects which are in line with the Christian’s understanding of God’s purposes in history.” However, through mutual dialogue and engagement “we shall discover the places where our ways must separate,” hence the “essential contribution of Christians to the dialogue will simply be telling the story of Jesus.” In evaluating the approaches to a pluralistic culture represented by John Hick (pluralistic), Hendrik Kraemer (exclusivist), and Karl Rahner (inclusivist), Newbigin proposes what I would classify as a modified exclusivist-inclusivist position. He affirms the uniqueness and decisiveness of what God has done in Jesus Christ and rejects non-Christian religious as vehicles of salvation (exclusivist) but recognises the work of God’s saving grace beyond the church that does not deny the possibility of salvation to non-Christians (inclusivist). Newbigin attempted to steer a course that held together the uniqueness of Christ and the work of the prevenient Spirit in the world, but by embracing exclusivist and inclusivist perspectives however he does not easily resolve the seemingly contradictory positions he advocates. For example, he advocates God’s salvation in Christ applies universally as he draws each person to himself and that the Scriptures attest to these universal overtones. Alternatively, he equally acknowledges that numerous other Scriptures speak of judgment and the possibility of divine rejection. Newbigin states therefore that it is “essential to hold firmly together both the universalist perspective of the Bible and the clear teaching about judgement” concluding that it is not possible to speculate about the ultimate salvation of other people. Newbigin may

791 Newbigin, Gospel in a Pluralistic Society, 180.
792 Newbigin, Gospel in a Pluralistic Society, 181.
793 Newbigin, Gospel in a Pluralistic Society, 181.
794 Newbigin, Gospel in a Pluralistic Society, 181.
795 Newbigin, Gospel in a Pluralistic Society, 181.
796 Newbigin, Gospel in a Pluralistic Society, 182-183.
797 Newbigin, Open Secret, 88.
798 Newbigin, Open Secret, 88.
therefore be regarded as a friend, and a foe, to both exclusivists and inclusivists refusing to be placed in overly restrictive theological positions that in his view do not warrant them. Ultimately, he would rather live with uncertainty and paradox than choose dogmatically between categories that he considers are not mutually exclusive. Although this approach runs the risk of embracing contradictory positions and failing to resolve adequately important theological issues, I agree with Newbigin that “we must refuse to engage in speculation about the ultimate salvation of other people” nor “take upon ourselves the judgement which is God’s sole prerogative.”

I also concur with Jayakiran Sebastian that whatever the ambiguities are in Newbigin’s approach to a pluralistic culture, the contextual challenges Newbigin discerned, and especially the questions that he raised regarding the interrelationship between the gospel and culture in a Western context, continue to be important issues the church needs to wrestle with.

In response to these contextual challenges, Newbigin declares that the church must become “the hermeneutic of the gospel” embodying and interpreting the gospel to the world. This is the demonstration of love in action that continues through the church as a movement launched into the life of the world to bear in its own life God’s gift of peace for the life of the world. As Newbigin states,

the church exists as sign and witness. It is entrusted to the church, not as one among a variety of options for the private cultivation of the religious life, but as the publicly revealed truth for which Jesus Christ bore witness before Pontius Pilate, the rock of reality against which all other claims to truth have to be tested.

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In order for the church to be the hermeneutic of the gospel it is essential therefore that the church engages culture in the great arenas of public life including religion, education, economics, politics, and science. Further, as the church enters constructive and meaningful inter-faith dialogue, so too this love in action is to be demonstrated among Christian denominations for Christian unity and a genuine ecumenism that is a powerful witness to the world. As she engages in mission to a pluralistic society, prophetically yet humbly, the gospel as public truth is heard, seen and embodied. Although Newbigin consistently advocates a missiology that is fundamentally rooted within, and not alongside public life, he recognises the church needs to live and demonstrate a positive model of counter-cultural living for “the most important contribution which the church can make to a new social order is to be itself a new social order.”

Newbigin’s strong cultural critique however has not been without its critics. Elaine Graham and Heather Walton remark that Lesslie Newbigin’s position on gospel and culture "might more adequately be described as the ‘Gospel Against Our Culture’ movement." Likewise, Stephen Bevans in his models of contextual theology identifies Newbigin as one of the notable examples of the Counter-Cultural model in which the gospel has primarily a critical function in relation to culture. Sander Griffioen similarly asks whether Newbigin has adequately embraced the positive nature of God’s work in

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I believe the critiques offered by Graham, and Walton, Murray, Bevans and Griffioen reflect Newbigin’s suspicion of culture and the threats to the gospel that pluralism posits. Newbigin’s missional ecclesiology undoubtedly advocates a witness that challenges culture and at times speaks prophetically against it, but these criticisms do not recognise that an implicit understanding of creation and humanity’s role in its development underlies so much of Newbigin’s writing that he cannot be read as one who entertains only a deep suspicion of culture. For Newbigin, the Christian community is properly counter-cultural only to the extent that it is engaged in culture; conversely, the church is properly engaged in culture only to the extent that it is counter-cultural. Newbigin therefore seeks to hold a balance between cultural engagement and counter cultural witness whilst seeking to avoid the twin dangers of irrelevance and syncretism. As Newbigin himself outlines, “the church must communicate in the idiom of that culture both the divine good that sustains it and the divine purpose that judges it and summons it to be what it is not yet.” For Michael Moynagh this is not without its unresolved difficulties for he suggests Newbigin ultimately develops a missional ecclesiology that on the one hand advocates for the evangelising congregation to be contextually engaged as a communal witness in work, leisure, political and other spheres of life, but gathers in forms and patterns that are contextually at a distance from them. Moynagh believes Newbigin fails to integrate a missional ecclesiology that sufficiently considered the implications of the forms of ecclesial gathering that are needed for the new contextual world in which they found themselves. Goheen is

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809 Sander Griffioen, Newbigin’s Philosophy of Culture (Kampen: Kok, 1996), 11.
812 Newbigin, Open Secret, 150.
813 Moynagh, Church for Every Context, 138
814 Moynagh, Church for Every Context, 139.
correct to note however that Newbigin was not unaware of the fundamental consequences for the structures of the church that is turned outwards to the world, to which it must serve and witness.\textsuperscript{815} Indeed, Newbigin asks whether “the traditional forms of ministry which have been inherited from the ‘Christendom’ period are fully compatible with the faith that the Church is called to be a missionary community.” Newbigin implies that the church must create new and flexible structures in response to changing contexts but I believe Moynagh is correct to challenge whether Newbigin’s primary focus on the antithetical side of the cultural task has detrimentally undermined his concern for contextual engagement, thereby insufficiently grasping the implications for ecclesial formation. Newbigin recognises that the church will need ecclesial reformation to respond to the changing Western missional contexts, but he has not sufficiently grasped the implications of this for developing a missional ecclesiology that is shaped by the unchanging gospel and the contexts in which it is embodied. With his death in 1998 Newbigin was not given the opportunity to see the emergence and development of a movement of new contextual churches that Moynagh advocates for and so his critique of Newbigin, though not incorrect, retrospectively benefits from the hindsight that Newbigin himself was not afforded.

Rob Hughes is correct to say that the pneumatological focus of Newbigin’s Trinitarian theology of mission has often been overlooked.\textsuperscript{817} As with his Trinitarian and Christological theological perspectives, Newbigin’s pneumatology needs to be constructed through engaging with his various perspectives expressed in his numerous

\textsuperscript{815} Goheen, “As the Father has sent me” 373.
works. However, in *The Open Secret*, Newbigin draws together several of his pneumatological themes of which the missional work of the Holy Spirit is predominant. Newbigin states,

The active agent of mission is a power that rules, guides, and goes before the church: the free, sovereign, living power of the Spirit of God. Mission is not just something that the church does; it is something that is done by the Spirit, who is himself the witness, who changes both the world and the church, who always goes before the church in its missionary journey.  

The Spirit therefore speaks to the church and the world through bearing witness to the truth of Jesus. In Peter’s encounter with Cornelius, Newbigin reminds us that the Spirit is at work to convert both Cornelius (world/unbeliever) and Peter (church) for each needed new revelation and understanding. The Spirit therefore brings renewal and change to the church both from within, and from its encounters with others on the outside. The Spirit therefore precedes the church in her missionary journey and is poured out on the community of Christ to equip and empower her to be the witness of Jesus throughout the earth. The church’s witness is therefore secondary and derivative, “insofar as it follows obediently where the Spirit leads.”

Further, the Spirit is God’s eschatological gift of hope to the church and to the world. The gift of the Spirit is the foretaste of the messianic feast, the guarantor of the fullness of God’s kingdom to come, and the sign that the last days have already come. The eschatological Spirit therefore holds out the promise “of the liberation of the

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whole of creation from the domination of false powers.”825 This liberation is announced in the prophetic voice and action of the church as she speaks out for social, economic, and political justice. God’s justice is something which is not secondary, or marginal to the gospel and the central task of evangelism but is central to God’s inbreaking kingdom of hope.826 Thus it is through the actions of the local Christian community that justice is advocated in specific contexts827 as the church shares in the Spirit’s mission to challenge and unmask the powers of evil828 and testify to the reign of God in Christ.829 The church embodies the life of hope as an anticipation of the coming kingdom and joins with the Spirit in announcing justice and liberation, even as she is being transformed herself.

Hughes is correct when he says “Newbigin’s writing of the Spirit’s centrality in mission flows out of his Trinitarian theology of mission and his understanding of the Missio Dei…and places the church in a secondary role as an attentive servant.”830 If the church is to truly serve as the hermeneutic of the gospel to the post-Christian and pluralistic contexts, then its structures and activities need to be oriented in a way which not only welcome the Spirit’s presence, but which allow the Spirit to lead, directing the church in the mission for which it exists.831 In rapidly changing contexts this will require a strong exercise in discernment, but if the mission is truly God’s, and if this mission is to be led and conducted by Spirit, then it is critical for the church to align itself in the

826 Newbigin, Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 137-138.
828 Newbigin, Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 127.
829 Newbigin, Gospel in a Pluralist Society, 234.
posture of the attentive servant so that it can truly serve the Spirit’s purposes\textsuperscript{832} and rediscover “the truth that Church life is life in the Spirit.”\textsuperscript{833}

b) The Trinitarian contextual missional theology of Timothy Tennent

In 2010 Timothy Tennent published his Trinitarian missiology in \textit{Invitation to World Missions}. Tennent sets out to write a contextual global missional theology in response to seven megatrends that are shaping twenty-first century global mission.\textsuperscript{834} Ed Smither is correct to note that Tennent consistently interacts with the work of Majority World theologians and missiologists in not only helping him construct his arguments, but in setting the theological agenda.\textsuperscript{835} Similarly, Keith Clements applauds Tennent for seeking to respond to the challenges faced by the global south, and the potential significance of cross-fertilisation for theology and missional practice.\textsuperscript{836} The collective force of these global shifts for Tennent therefore means that we need to do more than “tweak our existing missiological paradigms, training programs, and methodological assumptions but require us to reconceptualise both the global church and the mission field.”\textsuperscript{837} This requires intentional theological reflection within a Trinitarian framework\textsuperscript{838} as a counterbalance and corrective to the overreliance upon anthropological and sociological approaches to missiology which tend towards

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\textsuperscript{832} Newbigin, \textit{Open Secret}, 187.
\textsuperscript{837} Tennent, \textit{Invitation}, 50.
\textsuperscript{838} Tennent, \textit{Invitation}, 64.
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anthropocentric worldviews. Tennent laments that missiology as a modern discipline has been dominated by the social sciences. He does not deny the useful insights that they bring, but “first and foremost, the controlling categories of missions must be theological, not sociological.” Tennent somewhat juxtaposes theological and anthropological approaches and consequentially fails to adequately interrelate different ways in which the knowledge of God may be revealed and received. Tennent might better be served by advocating for a contextual missional methodology that could correlate rather than dichotomise both disciplines. His theological hermeneutic however, serves as a corrective to an over dependency on anthropological insights that may have at times contributed to unhelpful distortions of missional theology and ecclesiology.

Tennent describes his indebtedness to Newbigin and develops the Trinitarian framework set out in *The Open Secret*. In my critical conversations with both Newbigin and Tennent, I believe Tennent develops Newbigin in two key ways. First, the locus of his Trinitarian theology is more global than Newbigin’s primary concern for Western culture. Second, he interacts with current missiological developments and contextual challenges that have become more prominent since Newbigin’s death in 1998. Tennent summarises his own Trinitarian framework as follows: The sending Father, The Incarnate Son, and the Empowering Spirit.

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841 Tennent, *Invitation*, 60.
842 Tennent is particularly critical of the church growth movement, “The missiology they offered was overly driven by pragmatic, sociological principles, rather than a positive theological vision of God’s work.” Tennent, *Invitation*, 58.
844 Tennent, *Invitation*, 160. As with Newbigin I have drawn from Tennent’s other publications in order to further construct and develop his contextual missiology using the framework outlined in *Invitation to World Missions*. 

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Tennent affirms that God the Father is the source and initiator of missions. Following Christopher Wright and Ferris McDaniel, Tennent notes the sending nature of God revealed in the Biblical narrative. Tennent states, “Rooting mission in the missio dei and in God the Father as source and initiator of mission enables us to see missions within the framework of the grand narrative of God’s work and not just from the perspective of the sent church.” The Father’s unfolding drama of God’s redemptive plan is not only revealed in Scripture, but is also revealed in human history. God embraces human culture through the Incarnation and this is evidence that “God’s grand narrative intertwines with all the particularities of human narratives.” Therefore, “the forming of contextual strategies could not be accredited without this high view of history and culture.” This includes the essential raw materials that are necessary to form a sustainable way of life: language, symbols, communication, relationality, domestication, and work. God is the author of human culture and is intimately involved in his world, yet sin has distorted the good gifts God has given and its consequences can be evidenced in every culture. As a result, the creation itself groans and awaits liberation from its bondage. God’s ultimate purpose of liberation is therefore to, “draw entire peoples and cultures and indeed the entire cosmos into communion with His divine life.” The motivation for mission, then, stems from this loving heart of God that desires relationship with His creatures. As a

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845 Tennent, *Invitation*, 75.
850 Tennent, *Invitation*, 78.
covenantal holy community, she must reflect the character and message she proclaims, for “the reality of God was thus intertwined with the ethical life of the fellowship of believers.” We are called therefore, to a corporate life of holiness, and “into the very rhythms of faith and practice which re-orient us to the Triune God.” This is missional holiness.

Having criticised Newbigin for having an underdeveloped role of the Father in mission it is somewhat ironic that Tennent’s perspectives on the Father are not more substantially developed. Perhaps more curious, and problematic, is that he places the Biblical perspectives of his missional theology, and an evangelical theology of religions under the ‘role of the God the Father.’ In regard to the former Tennent adopts Wright’s missional hermeneutic for understanding and interpreting the Bible. However, although the Old Testament texts refer to ‘God’ and can retrospectively be understood to be the work of the Father from a Trinitarian perspective, Newbigin’s New Testament exegesis draws out explicitly the significance of Jesus and the Spirit in the commissioning gospel texts he has surveyed. In completing his survey he notes, “the mission of the church is clearly set within a Trinitarian framework.” It is all the more surprising therefore that Tennent concludes emphatically by saying, “Taken collectively, the commissions demonstrate the Father’s initiative in mission.”

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858 See page 218.
859 Tennent, Invitation, Chapter Four (Old Testament), Chapter Five (New Testament) and Chapter Seven (Different models of approaching culture).
860 Tennent, Invitation, 124.
861 Tennent, Invitation, 130-156.
862 Tennent, Invitation, 156.
863 Tennent, Invitation, 156.

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one hand Tennent argues that the Biblical witness attests to the particular role of the Father in initiating and sourcing mission, whilst at the same time advocating the Spirit and the Son are equal participators in the same. It is further unconvincing that Tennent includes his eschatological perspectives under the role of the Father whilst drawing heavily upon Christological and pneumatological viewpoints. Similarly, in Chapter Seven his “Evangelical Theology of Religions” forms a segment of the ‘role of God the Father’ but Tennent advocates that Christian approaches to culture must always be placed within a Trinitarian missiology. Indeed, the chapter proceeds without further linking the entire discussion to the Father and Tennent’s conclusions do not offer any theological perspectives at all. It is not that Tennent’s Trinitarian theology fails in itself, but more that the framework in which he has placed the roles of the Father, Son and Spirit are somewhat contrived and self-defeating.

The Incarnation is the moment of God’s embodiment in the world, the final and definitive evidence that God himself intersects with human history to accomplish his redemptive plan. Tennent argues that the Incarnation is no generic incarnation: “the incarnation is not just that God became a man but became a particular man.” Jesus entered a particular context, at a particular time, among a particular people group. As Tennent says,

Jesus learned and spoke the languages of His time, and He fully entered into all the particulates of the Jewish culture in which He grew up...The Incarnation is not only a revelation of God to humanity but also a revelation of humanity to humanity. In Jesus Christ we are learning what it means to be fully human.

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864 These perspectives outlined in Chapter Six are ironically entitled A Trinitarian, “New Creation” Theology of Culture, Invitation, 159.
865 Tennent, Invitation, 194.
866 Tennent, Invitation, 226.
868 Tennent, Invitation, 160.
Tennent argues that Christian mission happens in particular, real-time, historical and cultural settings. The church represents countless re-enactments of the Incarnation on a small scale. He passionately calls therefore for a new generation of missionaries to enter the history and narrative of new people groups in tangible form with the Incarnation as the ultimate example of the ability of the gospel to be articulated, received, appropriated and reproduced into a specific context. Accordingly, “this act of divine translation in the Incarnation provides the theological foundation for our commitment to the infinite translatability of the gospel in all the real and specific historical contexts and narratives that make up the world.”

This requires careful listening and discerning skills and explains why Tennent, although seeing the value in using the term contextualisation, prefers to speak of translatability as the means by which the faithful transmission of the gospel occurs across contexts. In incarnational translatability, we are reminded that we must always be faithful to both the apostolic message and the particular context, and that the sender and the recipient are aware of their own cultural bias and preconceptions.

As others come to share in the experience of the liberating good news of the gospel and become equal participators in the kingdom of God, so the whole Body is continually renewed, deepened and shaped by the local theologies that take root in new contexts. Christians in every culture must learn to articulate the gospel in their own way using their own thought forms. Wherever the gospel is incarnated in a new

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869 Tennent, *Invitation*, 84.
872 Tennent, *Invitation*, 348-349. See also Tennent in “Remembering our Heritage,” Part Two.
873 Translation highlights the importance of the sender and the source, whereas contextualisation tends to focus primarily, or even exclusively, on the target. Tennent, *Invitation*, 352-353.
876 Tennent, *Invitation*, 84.
context, people still receive it in ways that catch the church by surprise and challenge its preconceived ideas and theology.\textsuperscript{876} By being rooted in a specific context, as the God-man, Jesus is also able to offer a critique of his culture by speaking into it prophetically and calling it back to God-centred ways when it had been hijacked by self-centred human traditions. Every culture, and the church itself, is tainted by sin and manifests examples of human alienation from God and antagonism toward the divine rule. Although there have been many failures to realise this hope to which we are called, Tennent argues that “the church remains the most ethically, racially, and culturally diverse movement on earth, and missions should still be the greatest force for reconciliation.”\textsuperscript{877}

In evaluating Tennent’s incarnational implications for contextual missional practice there are two issues in particular that need to be addressed. First, whilst Tennent advocates for the Incarnation to be the foundational basis of contextual mission whereby the church is rooted in local communities enabling genuine social transformation to take place as part of the incarnational ministry of Jesus, he does not address how this may happen other than offer a Word (proclamation) and Flesh (presence) paradigm model of living. Indeed, much of Tennent’s Trinitarian contextual theology lacks practical application and methodology. Although \textit{Invitation to World Missions} is a corrective to methodological approaches that are rooted in social sciences, and Tennent frequently summarises various missional models, he fails to demonstrate adequately how his theological convictions are embodied in actual missional practice. Perhaps this is most acutely seen in his incarnational theology, that in my view is theologically robust and biblically grounded but lacks specific application.

\textsuperscript{876} Tennent, \textit{Invitation}, 89.  
\textsuperscript{877} Tennent, \textit{Invitation}, 88.
throughout. An example in point is his appeal for collaborative and mutually serving partnerships between the global south and global north in tackling missional issues and problems that are indigenous to each, and the necessity to ensure they are mutually enabling and do not foster dependency.\textsuperscript{878} but Tennent does not offer any concretised resolutions to the issues he raises. Second, he is correct to note that one of the salient features of global culture today is its globalisation, vast people movements through diaspora, migration, urbanisation and technological revolutions and the fluidity and complexity this brings to global mission.\textsuperscript{879} However, he does not address how incarnational approaches that are primarily rooted in approaches to particular contexts can be complemented by more fluid models of contextualisation that in themselves need to be more flexible, dynamic and transcend single localities. What does incarnational mission look like in a transient global culture that is always in a state of flux? These are not easy questions to answer but having raised these issues as important contextual realities that must be addressed, Tennent’s incarnational approaches have not sufficiently engaged in responding to these global challenges.

Tennent finally draws attention to his pneumatological perspectives which are substantially shorter than his work on the Father and the Son. \textit{In Invitation to World Missions} he devotes only thirty pages to the development of the theme. In this briefest of chapters Tennent focuses on the role of the Holy Spirit in the life and witness of the early church as recorded in Acts.\textsuperscript{880} Through a short survey of selected texts he advocates that the Holy Spirit empowers the church for global mission, endues the church with God’s authority, and extends the inbreaking of the New Creation through

\textsuperscript{878} Tennent, \textit{Invitation}, 379ff.  
\textsuperscript{879} Tennent, \textit{Invitation}, 42-46, Megatrend Six.  
\textsuperscript{880} Tennent, \textit{Invitation}, 411-414.
powerful manifestations of signs and wonders and the holiness of life.\textsuperscript{881} These issues are somewhat repetitive of what he has already said in his Biblical perspectives and are not substantiated biblically or theologically. Rather, Tennent devotes more attention to discussing whether Acts itself is a descriptive history or prescriptive model for the church today,\textsuperscript{882} suggesting these questions are best addressed by conducting a historical overview of the development of pneumatology on the West, including the emergence of Pentecostalism and the rise of the Majority World church, and how these “have influenced the church’s understanding of the Holy Spirit and its interpretation of Acts.”\textsuperscript{883} The historical survey is likewise very short, and rather superficial, and concludes without demonstrating any in-depth historical or theological analysis, that the “traditional Western understanding of pneumatology is adequate in its treatment of the Spirit’s place in the Trinity and soteriology, but is often silent about many of the key elements present in the book of Acts.”\textsuperscript{884} However, as this thesis has argued elsewhere, the Western church has been criticised for an impoverished view of the Trinity, and consequentially pneumatology, precisely because the Western understanding of the Trinity was rooted almost exclusively in the Augustinian economic model.\textsuperscript{885} Tennent curiously, and somewhat contradictorily, notes that the Western church had neglected the work of the Spirit\textsuperscript{886} and therefore welcomes the rise of the Pentecostal movement which has “served to reawaken the normative aspect of the Holy Spirit’s activity in the church and in our witness to the world.”\textsuperscript{887} This has led to the rediscovery of the importance of God’s charismatic gifts for ecclesial mission to the world. Tennent does

\textsuperscript{881} Tennent, \textit{Invitation}, 412-413.
\textsuperscript{882} Tennent, \textit{Invitation}, 414-419.
\textsuperscript{883} Tennent, \textit{Invitation}, 415.
\textsuperscript{884} Tennent, \textit{Invitation}, 419.
\textsuperscript{885} See Chapter Six, \textit{Trinity and Community}.
\textsuperscript{886} Tennent, \textit{Invitation}, 416-417.
\textsuperscript{887} Tennent, \textit{Invitation}, 431.
not answer directly whether Acts is descriptive or prescriptive, but the inference seems clearly to be an affirmation of both. Tennent therefore recognises the contribution that Pentecostal and Major World churches bring to missiology by taking supernatural and spiritual realities seriously. This in itself serves as corrective to many Western missiological approaches that have neglected or excluded these realities.

Tennent’s central concern is therefore to highlight the significance of the empowering work of the Spirit for the church in mobilising and equipping her for mission.\(^{888}\) By drawing together various other strands we further note that the Spirit is the one that enables the church to continue the ministry of Jesus in proclaiming the gospel in word and deed in the midst of contextual challenges.\(^{889}\) These challenges are not always neutral but may represent spiritual powers of resistance or hostility at work in opposing the gospel. The inbreaking of the new creation means that it will challenge powers and authorities, both spiritual and human, and that the church, as the custodian of the gospel and signpost to the kingdom, will need to be equipped and strengthened in her mission.\(^{890}\) The new creation (the redemption of all things) is ushered into life now as the eschatological Spirit gives birth to new life, which includes the creation of the church, the rebirth of humanity, and the healing of the created order. All of life is lived in the light of the new creation: “the Holy Spirit, as the great catechist, teaches us and empowers us to live the life of the future in the present.”\(^{891}\) Tennent’s wholehearted embrace of the Wesleyan emphasis on the “optimism of grace”\(^{892}\) leads him to advocate strongly the present realisation of the future kingdom, without embracing an

\(^{889}\) Tennent, *Invitation*, 96.
\(^{890}\) Tennent, *Invitation*, 413.
\(^{891}\) Tennent, *Invitation*, 97.
\(^{892}\) Tennent, “Remembering our Heritage,” Part Two.
over-realised eschatology. Tennent argues that our primary cultural identity is rooted in the new creation and must be embodied in transformational, incarnational communities. Tennent advocates for a contextual theology therefore that advocates the Spirit is the one who goes before all human agencies in mission to prepare the way for the gospel of Christ. It is this prevenient grace that enables each person to respond to the gospel, and calls all of creation into relationship with the Triune God. Tennent’s pneumatological perspectives are wide ranging but tend to be rather generic across his writings. The many different perspectives provide the potential for cultivating a more robust perspective that could further shape and inform his contextual theology, but they are not fully utilised. For example, Tennent insightfully notes the didactic role of the Spirit in mission which is critical to the church in times of uncertainty, persecution and in entering cultures that are unreached by the gospel, but this is not developed in any substantial way. This is somewhat representative of Tennent’s Trinitarian framework as a whole in which his unique and insightful perspectives tend to be overshadowed by his descriptive summation of other scholarly perspectives.

5) Towards a synthesis of Newbigin and Tennent: Theological implications for the missional practice of church planting

In the previous section, I outlined the Trinitarian contextual missional theology of both of my conversation partners. Although each address particular concerns and issues they nonetheless share a number of themes that prove insightful for the missional practice of church planting. In this section, I will therefore present a synthesis

894 Tennent, Invitation, 187.
895 Tennent, Invitation, 189.
897 Tennent, Invitation, 98.
that demonstrates a convergence for their understanding of missional contextualisation.

Newbigin and Tennent advocate that mission is always a participatory response to the mission of the Trinity. Mission is derived from, and rooted in, God’s salvific work through the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and the church is called to participate in his mission to the world. Church planters do not therefore bring God to missional contexts, but rather God calls, sends and leads church planters to peoples and places where he is already present. As illustrated by the story of Peter and Cornelius, God creates places and moments of encounter whereby the gospel and culture intersect (Newbigin). Both Tennent and Newbigin therefore speak of God preceding the church by his Spirit, in preparing the way for the gospel. This prevenient grace is God’s light and voice to peoples and places, bearing witness to Christ. When church planters enter each and every context, they discover that God is already at work. God forms and embraces cultural diversity (Tennent) but the gospel challenges its distortions because of human sinfulness (Newbigin). Therefore, Newbigin and Tennent advocate that there is not only a need to engage in contextual analysis and community research, using the tools and insights made available through the social sciences, but it is imperative that a theological reading of context takes place. Discernment is the first act of mission\(^{898}\) from which contextual models, methodologies, processes and practices are formed to engage the gospel with the ever-changing paradigms of culture. Essentially, church planters need to learn processes of theological reflection in order that church planting is rooted in discerning what God is saying to the context, in the context, and from within the context.

There is therefore no effective mission without incarnational contextualisation and translatability. The Incarnation demonstrates that mission is proclaimed, embodied and witnessed within specific life settings, whether that is in the public square (Newbigin) or in diverse global communities (Tennent). Newbigin and Tennent are committed to the fundamental principle that mission is earthed and cultivated within particular contexts, with particular places and people that are identifiable and definable. The gospel must relate, communicate, and translate clearly to its recipients and be stripped of preconditioned cultural packaging (Tennent) that is neither core to its essential message, nor necessary for those that receive it (Newbigin). Church planting must therefore be contextually informed and engage with a whole of life concern and tear down the false barriers of the sacred and secular divide.\textsuperscript{899} As a sign, instrument and foretaste of the kingdom new churches must become custodians of the gospel (Newbigin). Although the church does not always fulfil its calling to be the holy people of God (Tennent), she is nonetheless God’s mysterious chosen instrument to proclaim and demonstrate the kingdom of God (Newbigin). In a postmodern, post Christian, pluralistic and secular context, church planting must be self-aware of its posture and learn to approach contextual mission with humility (Newbigin) acknowledging its own blind spots, failures and prejudices (Tennent). The church plant must be open to her own ongoing conversion, even as it seeks to bring transformation (Newbigin). As a marginalised community in a pluralist world church planting must further rediscover confidence in the uniqueness of Christ, the truth claims of the gospel, and the power and equipping of the Spirit (Newbigin). Newbigin and Tennent agree that although the

\textsuperscript{899} The whole life discipleship advocated by The London Institute for Contemporary Christianity has been a welcome development in recent years. http://www.licc.org.uk/imagine-church [accessed August 8, 2016].
church must be embodied within particular contexts, she must demonstrate a counter-cultural (Newbigin) missional holiness (Tennent) that speaks prophetically to a culture tarnished by sin. As God’s covenantal holy community in the world (Tennent), the church is an alternative community that demonstrates love in action (Newbigin). Consequently, the church must bear witness to Christ and reflect the character of God and the message it proclaims. Tennent and Newbigin advocate that a missional ecclesiology holds in balance, and perhaps in tension, the importance of contextual immersion and contextual critique. Unless both aspects are embraced equally, missional practice, including church planting, will be in danger of drifting into forms of syncretism or become disengaged from culture and become distortions of the gospel and Christian community.

Ecumenism and dialogue are crucial to the missional task. For Newbigin, love in action includes fostering honest dialogue between different denominations, traditions and missional organisations. In the face of an ever-increasing secular society and the demise of the Christendom church, it is vital to build genuine and mutually supportive partnerships to further the effectiveness and fruitfulness of mission. Similarly, the church needs to engage in interfaith dialogue as it seeks to foster cooperative, constructive, and positive interaction between people of different religious traditions at both the individual and institutional levels. As stakeholders, many people of other faiths share with Christians a concern for the wellbeing of their communities. Inter-faith dialogue that acknowledges genuine differences of opinion can further provide church planters with a vital resource for understanding the many religious and cultural issues within local contexts and open up opportunities for developing partnerships that work for the benefit of the whole community. Such dialogue often involves promoting understanding between different religions or beliefs to increase acceptance of others
but provides a missional opportunity to explore worldviews and exchange stories that are central to faith. Likewise, for Tennent, global missional conversations are critical to the missional task. In an ever-increasingly globalised world, the mission of the church must be reconceptualised as a mutually dependent global partnership. Learning from missional practice in diverse global cultures and contexts can only serve to enrich and equip the church in every location. Church planting therefore needs to engage in building new local, national and global conversations and partnerships.\textsuperscript{900} In particular, the practice of church planting in other cultures and contexts from across the globe can help shape and inform missional practice in each and every context.\textsuperscript{901} The mutual sharing of global church planting stories and the creating of church planting forums that bring church planting tribes together can provide opportunities for learning, edification, encouragement, and a corrective or balance to one’s own blind spots and narrow focus.\textsuperscript{902}

Finally, Tennant and Newbigin highlight the need for a more prominent pneumatological emphasis in missiology, reflecting a renewal of interest in the work of the Holy Spirit in the Missio Dei that has often been neglected and made secondary to Christological perspectives.\textsuperscript{903} For Newbigin, the Spirit is the giver of grace, power and discernment, and the one that goes before the church in preparing the way for the

\textsuperscript{900} Fresh Expressions of Church, and the Lausanne movement, both noted in this chapter, are good examples of this.
\textsuperscript{901} Exponential is a conference that provides a platform for this. https://exponential.org [accessed August 8, 2016].
\textsuperscript{902} The UK National Church Planting Forum was established in 2012 for this purpose. http://formission.org.uk/list/church-planting-forum-discuss-issues-exchange-ideas [accessed August 8, 2016].
gospel. He is the bringer of hope, the eschatological gift to the church and world, and the guarantor of the fullness of God’s kingdom to come. Tennent shares these perspectives with Newbigin, developing more fully the role of prevenient grace, and the new creation. Church planting needs a more fully robust and developed pneumatology that draws out missional implications for contextual theology and missional practice. By redressing this imbalance, church planting contextual theology could, and must, be shaped more intentionally by Trinitarian perspectives if the Missio Dei is to be more fully understood and its implications for church planting developed.

6) Didsbury Community Church: A personal theological reflection

As a missional practitioner that has pioneered the planting of Didsbury Community Church (DCC), I conclude this chapter by briefly reflecting on two contextual themes that emerged from the critical conversations with Newbigin and Tennent that have been shaped and informed the work of DCC, namely that of discernment and inter faith dialogue.

Discernment has been crucial in the planting of DCC, including determining our core group, mission, shape, ethos, values, missional practices, the choosing of a leadership team, and how to respond to a series of crises, problems and opportunities. It is the role of discernment in forming the first missional community, however, that is the main focus here. The small church planting team, formed by a shared interest and engagement in the Didsbury community, was initially unsure of exactly where, when, and how to start. As we set out to engage the context we inhabited, we were driven by a shared conviction in the Missio Dei, a passion for church planting, and a fair degree of pragmatism and experimentation. This process was organic and relational, and certainly in the initial stages was not overtly strategic. We discovered in the process of
planting that we were often caught by surprise at ‘gospel intersections’ that emerged organically and we tried to respond to them as best as we could. Even in those initial stages, however, it was clear that our discernment was always collective, rooted in prayer, in conversation with one another, representatives from the community, and friends, and engagement with Biblical theology. We were engaged in an approach that now seems similar to the one advocated by Moynagh, but at the time was based on our instinct and intuition. This raised key questions we would discuss much later in the church plant: What role has intuition in processes of discernment? How can objective (formal models) and subjective (intuitive) processes of discernment be developed that are mutually beneficial? Are different discernment processes required for each unique context that is entered? As we regularly talked together, explored our SHAPE for ministry, prayer walked around the community, and built relationships with people that welcomed us, or were curious as to why we were present in the community, we deduced over a six-month period that God had given us the capacity, passion, skill, opportunities, and resources to engage with young people in the community. Didsbury has one of the largest secondary schools in the country, and two of our children were teens in this school. The larger churches in the community identified that there was only a small Christian presence in the school, and that there was an urgent need to connect with the youth of our community. Two members of our team had enrolled in youth placement courses at Nazarene Theological College and were given permission to explore community youth work with us. And so, a monthly youth community was formed

904 The ‘360 degrees listening’ in Michael Moynagh, *Church for Every Context*, 253
905 These questions helped to shape and inform the research that was conducted and evaluated in Chapter Three.
906 The SHAPE Course helps people to discover their Spiritual gifts, Heart passions, Abilities and talents, Personality and Experiences in life useful for ministry. http://store.pastors.com/collections/shape [accessed August 8, 2016].
that connected with early youth, as our two children were young teens, and were keen to bring their friends to a youth social evening. Over the next several months the Y-Zone met, and created a safe environment to minister to teens, and in partnership with the local churches and Nazarene Theological College, we slowly established a youth community based on forming relationships in a relaxed and non-structured environment. With several uniform youth organisations in the community offering a structured programme for youth, the Y-Zone was soon populated by young teens looking for an alternative.

Reflecting back several years later, these decisions emerged through much contextual analysis and community research, but were also rooted in discerning what God was saying to us about our particular community engagement. Our discernment came through an organic process, coupled with some strategic awareness, and often as a result of missional experimentation. Discernment is the first step of contextualised mission, but we have discovered that it is not an exact science. It requires conversation and listening, research and investigation, experimentation, strategic planning and pragmatic intuition, theological reflection, and making room for vulnerability, doubt, fear, and failure. We have come to learn that the process of discerning is best practiced in community, bathed in prayer, open and responsive to unexpected surprises, not all of which are welcome. An alignment with a need in the community, people willing to partner with us, and a few children that were gifted networkers, ensued several key components came together to form a vibrant community that continues to thrive today.

We never envisaged we would be working in a multi-faith context when we planted DCC, nor find ourselves engaging in inter-faith dialogue. The involvement with

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907 We did not have the language then, but we did have intuition to tell us that finding out about the community in as many ways as possible would be critical, if we wanted to immerse ourselves in the culture.
the children, parents and staff in the predominantly Muslim Broad Oak Primary
School\textsuperscript{908} was a complete surprise to us and emerged from a prayer walk that landed
us unexpectedly at an unknown primary school. As we stood at the gates we somehow
intuitively sensed that this school might provide an opportunity for mutual service and
support. Through subsequent researching and investigation, we discovered that this
was a large multi-faith school and the primary choice of Muslim families living in
Didsbury and surrounding communities. None of us had any previous experience of
engaging with Islam or participating in inter-faith dialogue. We were excited at the
missional opportunity to share the gospel, but we were initially unprepared for the
ensuing dialogue that would take place and did not appreciate the contextual and
cultural issues that we would soon have to engage with.

Having initiated good relationships with the school through supporting them in
practical acts of service as community volunteers, we were invited as representatives
of the Christian community to class sessions with the children and their teachers. In
those class sessions, we were asked to share the essential tenets of the Christian faith,
and to address questions and issues that the staff and children wanted to raise. We
assumed they would want to hear about the gospel, and aspects of Christian faith, but
it soon became apparent that the questioning would focus on issues that were of
interest to the host community: What is the role of the family in society? What did we
think about cultural dress codes? What prayer rituals do we embrace, and why? What
food customs do we have? How is the Bible similar and different to the Koran? What
are the differences between Christianity and Islam? Why do Western movies depict
Muslims as terrorists? These were not the questions we had anticipated, nor prepared

\textsuperscript{908} For Broad Oak Primary School, http://www.broadoak.manchester.sch.uk [accessed August 8,
2016].
for. We had answers to questions that were not being asked, and we realised that we would have to learn to listen well and ask different questions to discover the worldview and values of another faith.

A series of class conversations were subsequently held over the next several months, and it was not long before we were in much deeper conversations, informal and formal, with the staff, parents and the senior school management team about many diverse faith issues. We had been given the opportunity to play a significant part in the life of the school but recognised that we had a steep learning curve ahead of us. New missional opportunities led to new questions we needed to reflect upon: What posture should we take in the school that would foster open and honest dialogue, and yet enable us to remain true to the gospel and ourselves? Where and how could we address our ignorance of Islam, and identify our own blind spots or preconceived ideas of Muslims? How could we discover and respond to some of the hidden fears, suspicions and preconceptions that some of the Muslim families had about us? How could we integrate in our thinking and practice, our own missional calling to be a sign, instrument and foretaste of God’s kingdom, with the vision of the school to be a multi-faith community? Was Jesus speaking to us from within the Muslim community in any way? These questions remain regularly before us and, through partnerships with the wider church and global Christian organisations, we are learning what it means to engage effectively in a multi-faith missional context.

At Broad Oak we have participated in the Missio Dei and experienced the prevenient grace of God going before us. We seek to embody the good news and make every effort to conduct ourselves in an appropriate tone and manner. This has led us

909 We regularly receive advice, training, guidance and support from the Manchester for the Study of Christianity and Islam located in Didsbury at the Nazarene Theological College, http://www.mcsci.org.uk [accessed February 16, 2015].
to incarnational and kenotic approaches to ministry in the school, where our posture must reflect an attitude of working alongside the Muslim community, and not above it. We need to demonstrate that we have come to learn, as well as to teach, and we aim to find ways to translate the gospel into language, symbols, images and concepts that are more rooted in Muslim faith and culture. Our after-school craft club, Create, explores Muslim festivals, rituals, traditions and customs, and expresses them in art and craft, and through them we look for ways to identify commonalities with Christian faith, but also points of departure that provide opportunities for fruitful discussion and faith sharing. Through Create we are therefore beginning to find ways to embrace shared stories, meaningful conversations, and express our understanding of faith in creative and respectful ways. This has led to our own transformation and a recognition that continual discernment and dialogue are critical if we are to be embraced and remain effective for the longer term.

7) Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that Trinitarian perspectives on context can significantly contribute to how new communities should be birthed within their particular settings. I began by describing the purpose and nature of contextualisation and its importance to church planting through critical engagement with Eddie Gibbs and Bryan Bolger, Michael Moynagh, Alan Hirsch and Michael Frost. I briefly outlined recent developments in Trinitarian approaches to contextualisation that point us in helpful directions for the development of theological approaches to contextualisation, before critically engaging with the Trinitarian contextual missiologies of Lesslie Newbigin and Timothy Tennent. By synthesising their work, I advocated for a Trinitarian framework for contextualisation with theological and practical implications for church planting.
Finally, I concluded with personal theological reflections on how Trinitarian contextual perspectives have shaped and informed my own church planting practice through Didsbury Community Church. Church planting is a missional practice that is rooted in God’s mission for all of creation, but is embodied within particular contexts, through the Spirit, to declare the good news of the kingdom. The formation of a community that reflects the Trinity in the world is therefore part of God’s witness to the world, and so it is to Trinitarian missional ecclesiology that we now turn to conclude this thesis.
Chapter Six
Trinity and Community

1) Introduction

In Chapter Five, I examined how Trinitarian perspectives on context can enhance the preparation, formation and development of new churches. In this chapter, I will evaluate how the recent resurgence in Trinitarian ecclesiology can shape and inform our understanding of community, and its implications for church planting. This chapter is not advocating that there is a specific Trinitarian ecclesiology for church planting. However, as church planting grapples with questions about what defines and constitutes a church, the Trinitarian perspectives outlined in this chapter provide a useful ecclesiastical minimum for constituting and legitimising the church of church planting.

In this chapter, I will briefly note the renewed interest in Trinitarian ecclesiology before exemplifying through the contributions of Martyn Atkins, Michael Moynagh and Ian Mobsby how these perspectives are beginning to inform church planting. In evaluating their work, I further engage in critical conversations with Miroslav Volf, Leonardo Boff and Catherine Mowry LaCugna to extrapolate from their Trinitarian ecclesiology theological implications on the nature of the church that can help build upon, and develop, the embryonic models outlined in this chapter. Finally, I will conclude with personal theological reflections on how these ecclesial Trinitarian perspectives have shaped and informed my own church planting practice through Didsbury Community Church.

2) A renewed interest in Trinitarian ecclesiology

Gijsbert vad den Brink notes,
The recent worldwide revival of interest among Christian theologians in the doctrine of the Trinity has had important consequences for other parts of theology...it does not come as a surprise, therefore, that the implications of the doctrine for ecclesiology should also become the subject of intense reflection and debate in recent years.910

Stephen Holmes agrees, “A pattern in the late twentieth-century Trinitarianism is a pressing interest in the usefulness of the doctrine of the Trinity in discussing the church.”911 Miroslav Volf likewise comments, “Today, the thesis that ecclesial communion should correspond to Trinitarian communion enjoys the status of an almost self-evident proposition.”912 Since the rediscovery of the doctrine of the Trinity in contemporary theology, Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians have intentionally related the doctrine of the Trinity to ecclesiology, drawing the latter from the concept of the Imago Trinitatis.913

Social Trinitarians likewise employ the use of social analogies of the Trinity as the basis for constructing models of ecclesiology, society and human personhood in ways that have implications for all of life. Although they have various, and at points contradictory positions, they nonetheless fall within a theological scheme that extrapolates from the doctrine of the Trinity a social reading and construct. It is important to note, however, that although several non-social Trinitarian theologians are hostile to, or critical of, social Trinitarianism, they nonetheless are equally convinced that an emphasis on the nature of the church as a relational community is indeed correctly derived from an understanding of the Triune nature of the relational God.

Stanley Grenz calls this the “Triumph of Relationality.” In *Holy Trinity*, however, Stephen Holmes warns a note of caution as he contrasts the differing Trinitarian ecclesiologies of Miroslav Volf (Congregationalist) and John Zizioulas (Episcopalian) by observing, “the claim that the doctrine of the Trinity is generative for ecclesiology and ethics is in danger of being cast into doubt if such wildly divergent implications can be drawn from the same doctrine.” Holmes is a self-confessed unapologetic critic of social Trinitarianism and argues for a return to what he advocates is a more classical Trinitarian position. Sexton and Noble in responding to Holmes suggest that he is too dependent on the Western Augustinian model, has overlooked relationality as an important feature in Augustine’s Trinitarian thinking, has not fully appreciated the relationality advocated in the Eastern Fathers and not fully represented the views of contemporary Trinitarian Eastern thinkers accurately. In this chapter I will not engage with this historical debate in detail for my purpose is not primarily historical but being persuaded by Grentz, Sexton and Noble that a social trinitarianism is a valid construct, I will critically converse with theologians that embrace a social ecclesial Trinitarianism and explore their theological implications for church planting.

3) Trinitarian missional ecclesiology and church planting

Although there have been several significant contributions to Trinitarian missional ecclesiology, only a small number of church planting works have emerged that embryonically suggest a model of Trinitarian missional ecclesiology. In *Mission*-

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917 David Bosch in *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll: N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991) traces the key historical developments of the 20th century that have led to the missional renewal of Roman Catholic and Protestant ecclesiology, 368-393.
*Shaped Questions*, Martyn Atkins asks “What is essence of the Church?” in grappling with a mixed economy approach in Fresh Expressions of Church (FEOC) in which inherited and new forms of church are both asking ecclesial questions of themselves, and one another. Atkins argues that the essence of the church derives from the nature and purposes of God in which he can “legitimately be understood as supreme missionary and evangelist.” Atkins provides a brief biblical overview of God works in the economy of salvation through the sending of the Incarnate Son and Holy Spirit concluding, “what lies at the heart of the church- its essence- is a missionary Triune God who calls into being a people with whom to share God’s nature and purpose.” Atkins clearly advocates that the essence of the church is rooted in the Missio Dei and explicitly asserts, “I want to present a case for the view that the essence of the church lies in its derived nature and, more particularly, its identity as the chosen partner of the Holy Spirit, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in God’s mission.” Atkins can be commended for correctly drawing attention to the missional nature of the church following the Missio Dei and expressed in the economic model of the Trinity. The church is indeed mission shaped and is called to participate in the missional purposes of the Trinitarian community. However, Atkins is in danger of reducing the Trinity, and consequently the church shaped in its image, to only economic and missional purposes for his contours do not look beyond the missional activity of the Trinity. However, if the economic model of the Trinity is complemented by social and immanent models, then the essence of the church would not be reduced to mission and evangelism, but equally include for example fellowship, teaching, discipleship, worship, pastoral care, and prayer. In

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summation, through focussing exclusively on the economic model of the Trinity and by
drawing attention to the missional nature of God which is subsequently reflected in the
missional essence of the church, Atkins loses vital aspects of God’s Trinitarian nature
that are equally essential and constitutive for understanding the essential nature of the
Christian community.

Michael Moynagh in *Church for Every Context*\(^{922}\) is concerned to address
ecclesial issues that have arisen in response to *Mission-Shaped Church*\(^{923}\) (*MSC*)
including the relationship between the church and the kingdom\(^{924}\) and seeking to root
the mission of the church in the Missio Dei\(^{925}\) through contextual methodologies.\(^{926}\)
Further, he deals with the thorny issue of culture-specific churches, supporting their
legitimacy and necessity\(^{927}\) but in so doing argues that new contextual churches must
be faithful to the tradition of the church and recapitulate the Jesus who founded the
tradition.\(^{928}\) These chapters succeed in addressing comprehensively ecclesial,
contextual and theological issues but largely lack any significant Trinitarian
ecclesiology, with the exception of his perspectives on the nature of the church.

Drawing from *MSC*, Moynagh affirms that the essential nature of the church is
consituted by four relational movements as shown below:

- **UP:** relationships through participating in the life of the Trinity.
- **IN:** relationships through fellowship with the gathering.
- **OUT:** relationships in love for, and service of the world.
- **OF:** relationships, as part of the whole body, through connections with the
  wider church.\(^{929}\)

\(^{924}\) Moynagh, *Church for Every Context*, 99-104.
\(^{925}\) Moynagh, *Church for Every Context*, 120-134.
\(^{926}\) Moynagh, *Church for Every Context*, 151-166.
\(^{927}\) Moynagh, *Church for Every Context*, 169-180.
\(^{928}\) Moynagh, *Church for Every Context*, 181-193.
\(^{929}\) Moynagh, *Church for Every Context*, 107.
Unlike *MSC*, Moynagh underpins each relational movement within a Trinitarian framework. He argues that it is through the perichoretic relations of the Trinity that the church participates in these four movements of love. Moynagh proceeds to map healthy practices for churches onto these four movements of love as follows:

**UP:** word, sacraments, and prayer in the Godward relationships.

**IN:** regular meetings and some form of church discipline in the gathering’s relationships

**OUT:** care for those in need and evangelism in relationship in the world

**OF:** relationships, as part of the whole body, through connections with the wider church.

Moynagh’s theological work is a development of *MSC* and addresses several important ecclesiological issues from a theological perspective. However, despite these improvements, he too offers only an embryonic Trinitarian framework. As shown above, Moynagh refers only to the upward movement of the church as a Trinitarian/God-ward relationship proceeding to describe the church’s outward relationship with the world, the inward relationship with other believers, and the catholicity of the church in non-Trinitarian terms. The Trinitarian framework that he claims underpins each of the four relational movements is insufficiently developed in a Trinitarian manner, with only the upward movement explicitly shaped by “Godward relationships.” Moynagh does not therefore develop the four relational ecclesial movements in a Trinitarian framework nor demonstrate how each flow from the doctrine of the Trinity.

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930 Moynagh, *Church for Every Context*, 108.
931 Moynagh, *Church for Every Context*, 108.
932 I have mapped his healthy practices against the Up, In, Out, and Of movements he describes on page 107 for greater clarity.
The most developed work on Trinitarian ecclesiology in church planting literature is arguably *God Unknown: The Trinity in contemporary spirituality and mission*. In this work Mobsby attempts to reflect on the spiritual implications of the Trinity, and in particular the theology of the Cappadocians, for ecclesial formation. For such a claim Mobsby surprisingly engages the Cappadocians in the briefest of sections drawing on three ideas that he considers are central to their Trinitarian thinking: perichoresis, kenosis, and theosis, although it is perichoresis that receives predominant attention. Mobsby, influenced by Miroslav Volf, draws upon the Eastern church’s idea of perichoresis “as a dynamic dance in which the different persons of the Trinity lead at different stages in salvation history,” but unlike the Cappadocians, does not clearly interrelate the dynamic perichoretic work of the Trinity in each aspect of their divine engagement with creation and redemption. Rather he follows a linear salvific economic model that reads dangerously close to a form of modalism: “The Creator led the perichoretic dance of God from creation to the coming of the Redeemer. During his ministry the Redeemer led the dance with participation from the Sustainer and the Creator. Finally, the Sustainer leads from Christ’s ascension until the Redeemer comes again.” It is also concerning that Mobsby inexplicably ascribes to the Father of Creation the term ‘God’ but does not apply the term to the Son or the Spirit. This may reflect a belief in the eternal generation of the Son and Spirit from the

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936 There are only two pages that deal with the Cappadocians (24-26) and in these there is only engagement with one Cappadocian source.
939 See page 144, footnote 482.
940 Mobsby, *The Trinity*, 27.
941 Mobsby, *The Trinity*, 49. This is repeated in the work, 58, 69.
Father, but if so, this is in danger of establishing a monarchianism or subordinationism that Mobsby himself is keen to avoid in his advocacy for an egalitarian ecclesiology.\footnote{Mobsby, \textit{The Trinity}, 73-74, 76, 86.}

The positive contribution of Mobsby's work is his attempt to extrapolate from the concept of Trinitarian perichoresis an ecclesiology for the Emerging Church and Fresh Expressions of Church. In so doing, Mobsby boldly suggests that God has led the Emerging church to a Trinitarian ecclesiology whose values model perichoresis\footnote{Mobsby, \textit{The Trinity}, 75. However, in using Volf to justify this possibility, Mobsby fails to acknowledge that Volf advocates for a Free Church ecclesiology derivative from the Trinity that has similarities but significant differences with his own perspective.} and they are therefore better placed to serve today's spiritual seekers\footnote{Mobsby, \textit{The Trinity}, 94-106.} than what Mobsby classifies as non-Trinitarian fundamentalist churches. Mobsby is critical of such churches whom he never identifies but appear to include by inference mainly evangelical and charismatic churches that offer a more conservative evangelical theology\footnote{Mobsby, \textit{The Trinity} See xii-xiii, 42-43, 90-91,109-110,118.} as opposed to the more open, eclectic liberal and inclusive theology that in his view better reflects the Trinitarian nature. This is matter of perspective but Mobsby's frequent criticism of these churches without constructive arguments, is at times expressed in harsh and dismissive tone, and contrary to the values he espouses for his own community. In Mobsby's own model of church expressed in \textit{Moot}, there are many positives to embrace that I believe are consistent with a Trinitarian reading including flat leadership, collaborative decision making, a rhythm and balance of life, a mystical and sacramental understanding of worship and community, holistic spirituality, and the intuitive and experimental embracing of the transcendent in creation.\footnote{Mobsby, \textit{The Trinity}, Chapter Five, Models and Lessons from the Emerging Church.} This monastic ancient:future church of contemplative spirituality rooted in deep and authentic relationships, includes participation in the mission of God, though despite the book's
subtitle, is much less prominent in comparison to the focus on contemplative spirituality. Indeed, “Mission as Participation in God” is the shortest chapter of the book and is the least developed Trinitarian perspective throughout this work. Further, Mobsby suggests his model reflects a balanced concern for worship, community and mission each coming from a Trinitarian perspective, and is similar to the upward, inward, and outward model noted in MSC and Church for Every Context, although Mobsby frames these movements in a much more intentional and developed Trinitarianism. Mobsby’s work constantly appeals to its Trinitarian foundations, and advocates that the spiritual practices outlined in the work flow from this Trinitarian basis, but at times the Trinitarian theology is conspicuously absent in demonstrating this. For example, Mobsby outlines five critical features for the development of ecclesial community that he says are derivative of the Trinity but in his discussion of these there are no evident Trinitarian perspectives. Nonetheless, Mobsby has placed his ecclesiology within an overall Trinitarian framework as he reflects on what types of churches need to be planted and constituted in a postmodern and post Christian world. His work has coincided with trajectories that my own study has taken, and there are commonalities which indicate shared, but independent thinking. I have found Mobsby therefore a companion on the journey and a useful conversation partner on the way.

In summary, the engagement with Atkins, Moynagh, and Mobsby highlight that Trinitarian missional ecclesiology is a developing concern within church planting literature, but equally reveals the need to develop further a more coherent and robust Trinitarian understanding of the nature of the church. To build upon these foundations, I have chosen therefore to converse with the Trinitarian ecclesiologies of Miroslav Volf,

947 Mobsby, The Trinity, Chapter Nine, “Mission as Participation in God.”
948 Mobsby, The Trinity, 162.
Leonardo Boff, and Catherine Mowry LaCugna to inform and develop my own understanding of Trinitarian ecclesiology as the basis for planting Didsbury Community Church.

4) Trinitarian ecclesiology: A dialogue with Miroslav Volf, Leonardo Boff and Catherine LaCugna

Although my conversation partners are shaped by different contexts, interests and methods, their contributions represent critical engagement with ecclesiological models that have emerged in the Eastern and Western Christian traditions. Volf, a Croatian Baptist, offers a Free Church Trinitarian ecclesiology, advocating that models of community are necessary in a postmodern age of individuality and a corrective to institutional and hierarchical models evidenced in Western and Eastern ecclesiology. His method is partly historical, but more correlational and dialogical, as he intentionally seeks to foster ecumenical discussion. Boff, a Roman Catholic liberationist, is a social and political activist-driven theologian that advocates for radical social change with the liberation of the poor and marginalized peoples as the key locus of mission. His method is a demonstration of theological reflection on practice. His themes are topical and speak into specific Latin American contexts and advocate vehemently for communal ecclesiology that foster collective responsibility and participation. LaCugna, a Roman Catholic feminist is concerned with finding creative ways to move beyond the classical language and models of the economic and immanent Trinity that she believes has falsely separated Trinitarian life and practice. Her method is historical, systematic, thematic and grounded in the practice of worship, mission and ministry. Despite their contextual and theological differences, they share a common concern to explore the benefits of the Eastern tradition, with its emphasis on a relational ontology, with
practical application to church and society and these have proved formative for my own ecclesial explorations.

a) The church as the image of the Trinity (Miroslav Volf)

Miroslav Volf, in *After Our Likeness*, sets out to critique the Roman Catholic ecclesiology represented by Cardinal Ratzinger and the Eastern Orthodox ecclesiology represented by John Zizioulas to advocate for a Free Church ecclesiology. Volf is criticized by Gavin D’Costa for caricaturing the positions of Ratzinger and Zizioulas, particularly the former, and for not always recognising their unique departures from their own traditions. He further believes that Volf does not give due consideration to the theological development within Ratzinger’s ecclesiology particularly regarding his own criticism of unitarian-authoritarian models which have led him to encourage greater collegiality and local synod authority. A similar protest is made by Ralph Del Colle who suggests that Volf has not taken seriously Ratzinger’s own concerns to emphasise the ontological constitution of the Trinity is always relational. In response to these criticisms, however, it must be noted that Volf has exhaustively read Ratzinger and Zizioulas over a long period of time and is aware of their developments. Further, Volf claims that his own criticisms of Ratzinger’s Roman Catholic ecclesiology are shared by the growing voices of liberation theology in which the centrality and hierarchy of the Catholic church are being challenged from within. Volf’s concern over Ratzinger’s

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and Zizioulas's ecclesiology is “precisely because their understandings of the Trinity are irredeemably hierarchical.”

Ratzinger therefore, according to Volf, is typical of Western Trinitarianism, starting with the ontological priority of the unity of God in the divine essence. Consequentially, for Roman Catholicism, the relationship between the universal and local church analogically mirrors the relationship between substance first, and persons second. The local church therefore is constituted only as she exists from, and towards, the already existing one universal church. As Volf states,

Although Ratzinger considers the one substance of God and the three divine persons equiprimal, he takes the dominance of unity at his point of departure. Because he located this unity at the level of substance, the one substance of God must take precedence over the nonaccidentally conceived persons. The relationship between the universal and local church is then determined in analogy to the relationship between substance and person in God, just as the relationship between local churches is also determined in analogy to the relations between the divine persons.

Volf in contrast, commends Zizioulas for his relational ontology within his Trinitarian understanding of God. God is a community of Persons and this is the basis for the constitution of the church. However, Volf rightly locates the patterning enjoyed by Zizioulas’s retention of hierarchy due to the monarchy of the Father who constitutes the Son and the Spirit, and in turn constitutes the church through the headship of Christ, and the charism of the Spirit. This in turn determines the pattern of the ecclesial community through the episcopal office of the bishop who is representative of the headship of Christ and constituted by the Spirit,

Accordingly, one encounters in the relation between bishop and congregation the same asymmetrical structure of communality that according to Zizioulas also attaches to innertrinitarian relationships and to the relationship between Christ

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956 Volf, After Our Likeness, 201.
957 Volf, After Our Likeness, 214.
and the church; the one (God the Father, Christ, bishop) constitutes the many, but the many are conditioned by the one.\footnote{Volf, After Our Likeness, 112, 215.}

Volf in responding to Ratzinger and Zizioulas argues therefore for egalitarian relationships within the Trinity such that no subordination or hierarchy are possible.\footnote{Volf, “The Trinity is our Social Programme,” 407.}

Volf however, is not without his own ambiguities, for although he argues for a relational ontology of equals, he acknowledges “the Son and Spirit are constituted by the Father. The Father is the source from which the Son and Spirit receive their divinity.”\footnote{Volf, After Our Likeness, 217.} Volf suggests that there is a conceptual and substantive distinction between the constitution of the persons and their relations.\footnote{Volf, After Our Likeness, 216.}

At the constitutional level he proposes that the hypostatic divinity is generated through the Father and therefore grounds the distinction among the persons, but simultaneously in this processional movement they are constituted in their innertrinitarian community as relations.\footnote{Volf, After Our Likeness, 216-217.}

Costa argues that this position is essentially undifferentiated from Zizioulas, and that allegedly put forward by Ratzinger where substance replaces the Eastern ‘Father’. In short, “Volf’s constituting taxonomy replicates unitary priority, linear sequence and hierarchical ordering.”\footnote{Gavin D’Costa, “On Trinitarian Ecclesiologies,”11.}

I concur with Costa that Volf does not resolve this problem easily, nor clearly, but there are two responses that I believe advocate for his position and serve as a response to Costa. First, Volf’s criticism of Zizioulas is less concerned about his understanding of the constitution of the Trinity, for in his opinion Zizioulas correctly advocates consistently for a Trinitarian relational ontology: God’s being is communion.\footnote{John D. Zizioulas, Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985).} Rather, his criticism of Zizioulas pertains to his failure to develop consequentially a communal
Trinitarian ecclesiology by focusing on the prior constituting role of the Father to the detriment of their essential nature of relations.\textsuperscript{965} Second, in regards to Ratzinger he vehemently and consistently argues that Ratzinger’s Trinitarian relationality is always secondary to the constitution of the Trinity through the one substance which ultimately determines his ecclesiology.\textsuperscript{966}

Volf states that the problem with the episcopal views of Ratzinger and Zizioulas lies in the preeminent position they give to the ordained office which is created and sustained by the idea of the headship of Christ and his relation to the members. The bishop therefore “represents Christ to the congregation and simultaneously embodies in himself the whole congregation.”\textsuperscript{967} Volf rejects the theological basis of this model as he believes this constitutes the church as a single subject dependent on the hierarchical office and role of the bishop, which mediates the salvific grace of Christ to the congregation, and the institutional office becomes the dominant location of confession to God on behalf of the community, and from God to the community. If follows therefore that “the life and structure of the church can not be episcopocentric” for the church is “not a monocentric-bipolar community, but rather fundamentally a polycentric community”\textsuperscript{968} in which all the members of a church are stewards of God’s manifold grace and have something to contribute in worship and in the life of the church.\textsuperscript{969} And yet Volf also contests for “the preeminent significance of officeholders, who have an indispensable role in the church”\textsuperscript{970} and through the Spirit are given a “particular type of charismata”\textsuperscript{971} for the office. Accordingly, “the church lives through the participation

\textsuperscript{965} This is the central argument of Zizioulas main argument outlined in After Our Likeness, Chapter Two.
\textsuperscript{966} This is the central critique of Ratzinger outlined in After Our Likeness, Chapter One.
\textsuperscript{967} Volf, After Our Likeness, 224.
\textsuperscript{968} Volf, After Our Likeness, 224.
\textsuperscript{969} Volf, After Our Likeness, 226.
\textsuperscript{970} Volf, After Our Likeness, 226-227.
\textsuperscript{971} Volf, After Our Likeness, 246.
of its members, that is the laity and the office holders, and is constituted through them by the Holy Spirit. ⁹⁷² There remain tensions however, if not contradictions in Volf’s ecclesiology, for despite his protestations against any hierarchical levels of ministry in the community, his language of “preeminence” pertaining to the role of officeholders is decidedly unhelpful and contrary to his own assertions of equality. How can truly egalitarian communities be constituted through some that are “preeminent” and have a “special” charism? Similarly, how does the language and role of the ordination of office holders not also mitigate against the egalitarian priesthood of all believers? Volf has consistently advocated for an egalitarian ecclesiology that is rooted in the mutuality and equality of the Trinitarian community criticising his conversation partners for hierarchical ecclesiologies that are in different ways distortions of the Trinitarian relations but is in danger of falling into the same trap that he has set to avoid.

In his critique of Ratzinger’s and Zizioulas’s Trinitarian ecclesiology, Volf therefore suggests a different Trinitarian pattern that embraces both the divine essence of unity, and the unity of the divine Persons in mutually dependent non-hierarchical relationships, in which the former is constituted by the latter. In appealing to Moltmann,⁹⁷³ Volf advocates that the perichoresis of the Triune relations therefore models the importance of relationality as the basis for Christian community for, “like the divine persons, so also ecclesial persons cannot live in isolation from one another… and affirm their own ecclesial personhood in mutual giving and receiving.”⁹⁷⁴ Although the relations of the ecclesial and trinitarian persons correspond, there are important distinctions between the two. The unity of the Trinity is constituted through the perfect

⁹⁷² Volf, After Our Likeness, 222.
⁹⁷⁴ Volf, After Our Likeness, 206.
perichoretic union of the Father, Son and Spirit, but the constitution of the church is formed through participation in the eschatological Spirit as a sign of hope in anticipation of God’s universal reign in the kingdom of God, and the covenantal commitment of confession shared by the community through personal voluntary assent. It is through this covenantal confession that “the church lives as the church and manifests itself externally as church.” For Volf, this is not to suggest that each person constitutes himself or herself into a member of the church or is saved by their own faith, but “rather, through their common pluriform confessing, all the members together are constituted into the church by the Holy Spirit, even if the various members, commensurate with their individual charismata, participate in this process in different ways.”

The constitution of the church understood primarily as members drawn together by the Spirit, in the name of Christ through personal faith, has not been without criticism. Jeremy Thomson believes that Volf’s emphasis on each member constituting the church and finding their place within it tends to portray an individualism that is frequently the hallmark of evangelical Free Churches. He believes Volf’s Free Church ecclesiology therefore gives little place to the communal activity which is essential to its life, such as hospitality and sharing economic resources or mutual admonition and discipline. Likewise, although Volf’s work allows significance to the universal distribution of the charismata to the whole community, Lawrence Porter has observed

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976 Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 149.
977 Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 150.
978 Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 151-152.
that Volf gives more prominence to the work of the Spirit within the individual than the community.\footnote{Lawrence B. Porter, "Church as the Image of the Trinity by Miroslav Volf." \textit{The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review}, Volume 63, no. 2 (1999): 326-330.} Michael Jinkins gets to the heart of these criticisms by asking,

Is the church a religious society made up of likeminded individuals? If so, our association with one another as community of faith is dependent on our likemindedness. The church then becomes a voluntary association of persons each of whom reflects, as an individual image of God, the insularity of monistic deity. Is the church a collection of persons who feel similarly about God, or who possess similar religious affections and experiences?\footnote{Michael Jinkins, "Mutuality and difference: trinity, creation and the theological ground of the church’s unity." \textit{Scottish Journal of Theology}, Vol. 56, no. 2 (2003): 148–171.}

In response to these criticisms it is important to acknowledge however, that one of the motivational purposes for Volf in writing his Free Church Trinitarian ecclesiology is to counter the incipient individualism found within Western culture: “A critique of ecclesial individualism and a proposal of an alternative that avoids a retreat into old-style hierarchical holism are at the very centre of my interest here.”\footnote{Volf, \textit{After Our Likeness}, 3. This is noted in the Introduction to the American edition.} Indeed, in the light of the individual consumer culture mentality in modern society, and a postmodern tendency towards individualism, which is also deeply inherent in his own tradition, Volf is deeply convinced of the need to bring the Free Church tradition “into closer relation with more communion centered ecclesiologies…by using the doctrine of the Trinity as a model or mirror for ecclesiology.”\footnote{Gijsbert vad den Brink, “Trinitarian Ecclesiology and the Search for Unity,” 315-316.} Volf therefore consistently maintains that the relation between Christ and the individual believer is mediated through and by the church, particularly expressed in the sacraments.\footnote{Volf, \textit{After Our Likeness}, 153-154, 163-166.} In evaluating these various perspectives, I believe that in advocating for a Free Church ecclesiology, Volf is both concerned to espouse the essential freedom of the believer and the personalised nature of faith, whilst recognising the need to address the individualism rampant in
many forms of Protestant evangelicalism with a wider understanding of catholicity and mutuality. Positively he retains the individual subjectively of the person thereby safeguarding personal responsibility and the volitional character of faith. However, the criticisms of Thomson, Porter and Jinkins have some validity even if they are somewhat overstated. Although Volf undoubtedly recognises the importance of the communal nature and identity of the church and laments the individualism that is rampant in Western society, he nonetheless is in danger of advocating a form of community collectivism in which the primary constitutive factor remains the personal faith of each individual believer. I share Nicholas Jesson’s concern that Volf’s emphasis on the church as basically a believers’ church aggravates the very individualism that he seems concerned to address, and it is questionable whether his subsequent Trinitarian approach has sufficiently countered the individualistic tendency which is inherent in his Free Church starting point.986

Likewise, and related, Volf is criticised for his Free Church understanding of catholicity by his insistence that the universal church is constituted through the many individual and autonomous congregations that gather in the name of Christ.987 Indeed, each local church is constituted by the presence of Christ through the Spirit, and “has the whole Christ along with all means of salvation and is for that reason not part of the church, but rather is a whole church and is in this sense catholic.”988 Volf further recognises that there is a broader catholicity that comprises the entire people of God eschatologically in the coming of the Kingdom and this anticipation shapes the historical

987 Volf, After Our Likeness, 270-276.
988 Volf, After Our Likeness, 271.
church that is present in the world today.\textsuperscript{989} This means “that there is no church that is not catholic, and that recognition of the ecclesiality of a community simultaneously implies recognition of its catholicity.”\textsuperscript{990} Every church is charged therefore with maintaining and deepening its relations to other churches and should lead to a free networking with those churches. Local churches should remain ‘open’ to other local churches, just as each believer must be open towards the other.\textsuperscript{991} Volf’s understanding of catholicity in my evaluation is however not without its own difficulties. Is it conceivable, theologically and practically, that each local church possesses all that it needs to be a fully constitutive catholic and charismatic community? This is not to imply that Christ through the Spirit is not fully present, but questions whether each and every local church fully constitutes the Body of Christ that Volf implies. Do not all churches, regardless of size not always require some degree of mutual interdependence with others in giving and receiving?\textsuperscript{992} Further, since Volf advocates that the church, locally and universally, is constituted through the cognitive confession of faith doctrinally and personally,\textsuperscript{993} what place, if any, will Volf give to spiritual sojourners, those who do not have the capacity to make cognitive decisions, and other categories of people in the community of Christ? Does this view not also exclude a variety of contemporary notions, including that of liberation theology, which finds the church in the locus of the poor and the oppressed, or any understanding of the church in anonymous Christianity? Is Christ, and faith in him, therefore authenticated by a bounded ecclesial orthodoxy and orthopraxis that are determined by the members? At the heart of these

\textsuperscript{989} “This eschatological perspective enables us to make the ecumenically significant distinction between that which one can call the (eschatological) maximum and the (historical) minimum of catholicity.” Volf, \textit{After Our Likeness}, 267.

\textsuperscript{990} Volf, \textit{After Our Likeness}, 269.

\textsuperscript{991} Volf, \textit{After Our Likeness}, 281

\textsuperscript{992} This is exactly the significance of Moynagh’s “OF” relational movement noted earlier in the chapter. Churches must be interdependent to reflect the Trinitarian relations.

\textsuperscript{993} Volf, \textit{After Our Likeness}, 148-151.
questions lies the central questions of what it means to be an inclusive ecclesial community and how open it is, not only to other congregations, but to itself, and the world.

Volf claims his Trinitarian ecclesial model is rooted in equality, mutual love and service, is structurally flexible and open, and is made up of members that through personal faith and commitment devote themselves to Christ and one another in the power of the Spirit. This ecclesial model of church as community is characterised by confessional faith, covenantal unity, charismatic diversity, mutual participation, responsibility and interdependence. But above all else it is patterned after the perichoretic Trinitarian community of love. As Volf contends,

[the church] is a people whose social vision and social practices image the Triune God’s coming down in self-emptying passion in order to take human beings into the perfect cycle of exchanges in which they give themselves to each other and receive themselves back ever anew in love.

b) Holy Trinity: perfect community (Leonardo Boff)

*Trinity and Society* and *Holy Trinity: Perfect Community* set out Boff’s essential thesis concerning Trinitarian theology, ecclesiology and its implications for society. Boff rejects the Western Trinitarian model that he believes constitutes the Trinity through the ontology of substance and is derived from the monarchy of the Father. Anne Hunt is correct in identifying that Boff finds the concept of the monarchy particularly problematic, “because the notions of divine monotheism and paternalism, based on the monarchy of the Father, have effectively functioned to legitimate the

996 Volf, “The Trinity is our Social Programme,” 418-419.
999 Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 16-18, 44ff, 77ff, 93, 232ff.
For Boff therefore, the Trinity is constituted relationally by the three Persons mutually indwelling one another in perfect communion. As Boff states: “God is Three in a communion of love, and this eternal communion of love makes Three one God.” Brian Doyle and David Cunningham are concerned that Boff pushes the relationality of the Trinity to the absolute boundaries by focusing on the individuality of the three divine subjects. Their critique of Boff’s ‘tritheistic’ tendencies is rooted in what they consider to be Boff’s inappropriate emphasis on the distinction of the Three Persons within the Trinity which tends to individualise them and consequentially limits an acknowledgment of the true oneness and unity of God. In response to these criticisms however, it must be acknowledged that Boff is conscious that his emphasis on the Threeness of God should not lead to a misunderstanding of tritheism. Boff concedes that if the modern use of the term ‘person’ is commonly understood as an independent self-existent subject and is therefore applied to the Three Persons of the Trinity, it can lead automatically in a tritheistic direction. However, in his engagement with classical Cappadocian Eastern Trinitarian theology, Boff vehemently argues that the constitution of the divine Being was always understood to be relational, and that any understanding of persons as self-existent individuals is an erroneous view of personhood. A ‘person’ is thus a node of relationships facing all directions existing in, and from, other people. As Boff states,

When we say that Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are three divine Persons, most Christians understand the word person in its normal meaning: an individual who has intelligence, will and feelings, and who can say “I.” In God there would

1001 Leonardo Boff, Trinity and Society, 145.
1003 Boff notes that with modalism and subordinationism, tritheism is one of the erroneous ways of understanding the Trinity. Holy Trinity: Perfect Community, 33-35.
be then three intelligences, three wills, three consciences. If that was all said,
and if we failed to add that the Three are always related, we would fall inevitably
into the error of tritheism, meaning we would indeed be speaking of three
different gods.\textsuperscript{1004}

In light of this, the critiques of Doyle and Cunningham would seem to be misdirected.
A more promising response is offered by Gresham who believes Boff in fact shows “a
more balanced perspective than other proponents of the social model and admits that
there is only one consciousness in God, but nonetheless interpersonal relations.”\textsuperscript{1005}

Boff’s reflections on the Trinitarian communion of distinct but coequal divine
persons like Volf draws heavily upon the concept of perichoresis as the way to
understand the oneness within the Triune community.\textsuperscript{1006} The Trinity is therefore a
mystery of inclusion and participation, and in the creative and redemptive work of God,
the Spirit and Son are sent from the Father so that all of creation may participate in the
Trinitarian communion.\textsuperscript{1007} Boff reiterates that, just as God exists in a relationship of
equality, mutuality and reciprocity, so the Trinity therefore serves as a pattern for the
church and society,

\begin{quote}
Since God is a perichoretic community of divine persons, then sovereignty is to
be understood not in terms of power over the other but as communion
coexistence with others in fellowship and koinonia… it is a community that is to
be a sign and sacrament of the Trinity…based on relationships of equality,
participation, inclusion and communion.\textsuperscript{1008}
\end{quote}

The implication for the church is inescapable: “The domination model is replaced by
the communion model: The Trinity understood as a communion of Persons lays the
foundations for a society of brothers and sisters, in which dialogue and consensus are

\textsuperscript{1004} Leonardo Boff, \textit{Holy Trinity: Perfect Community}, 51.
\textsuperscript{1006} Boff, \textit{Holy Trinity: Perfect Community}, 3.
\textsuperscript{1007} Anne Hunt, \textit{What are they saying about the Trinity}, 11
\textsuperscript{1008} Hunt, \textit{What are they saying about the Trinity?}, 12.
Boff is therefore a critic of church ecclesiology that perpetuates or embodies uniformity, ecclesial power and hierarchy, and excludes women, the poor and the marginalised. Accordingly, he advocates for the importance of Base Ecclesial Communities (BEC) as new forms of church that intentionally embody egalitarian community and challenge the authoritarian structure of the Roman Catholic church. The BEC is a model of church that reflects the egalitarian nature of the Trinitarian community for “the entire community, in virtue of faith and baptism, is constituted as a priestly community.” This community meets as equals and gathers to worship, pray, support one another, deepen faith, share liturgy and the sacraments, learn from one another, and exercise freely the charismatic giftings of the Spirit that are given liberally to all members of the community.

The BEC essentially challenges unhealthy forms of hierarchical structure, power, governance, ministry and leadership. Although Boff welcomes the relational and participative ecclesiology represented in Vatican II, he laments the incipient

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1009 Boff, Trinity and Society, 120.
1010 Hunt, What are they saying about the Trinity? 13.
1011 Hunt, What are they saying about the Trinity? 13.
1013 This is most evident in Leonardo Boff, Ecclesiogenesis: The base communities reinvent the church (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1987).
1014 Boff, Ecclesiogenesis, 72.
1015 Boff, Church: Charism and Power, 8-11.
1016 Boff, Ecclesiogenesis, Chapter Three.
1017 Boff, Holy Trinity: Perfect Community, xiii.
authoritarian structures that are prevalent in much Roman Catholic ecclesiology. The fundamental problem for Boff is that structures so easily impose themselves on the community they are meant to serve\textsuperscript{1018} and these need to be resisted and the church liberated from all forms of ecclesial domination. In the BEC there is “a new distribution of power in the community; it is much more participatory and avoids all centralization and dominion.”\textsuperscript{1019} In this process of reform and reinvention, diversity emerges, and each community discovers its own special identity and preferred structure. This Spirit-driven movement moves the church away from juridical understandings of church authority and leads the people to conceptualise the church “from the foundations up rather than from the steeple down.”\textsuperscript{1020} The community is essentially declericalised as the emphasis switches to the whole people of God. The result is not a global alternative for the entire church but a leaven of renewal that demands the flexibility of a broad egalitarian participation of all: “the Trinitarian vision produces a vision of a church that is more communion than hierarchy, more service than power, more circular than pyramidal, more loving embrace than bending the knee before authority.”\textsuperscript{1021}

The BEC community is missionally oriented as it is filled with divine love: love from God, love to God, love to one another, and love that flows outwards into the world in what Boff calls the “new evangelization.”\textsuperscript{1022} This is primarily the forming of new communities of faith (ecclesiogenesis) organised by laity, led by men and women, and started by the poor for the poor, “as an active community, meeting to celebrate faith and life, and organise witness in society as service and liberation.”\textsuperscript{1023} The new

\textsuperscript{1018} Boff, \textit{Church: Charism and Power}, 48.
\textsuperscript{1019} Boff, \textit{Church: Charism and Power}, 9.
\textsuperscript{1020} Boff, \textit{Ecclesiogenesis}, 116.
\textsuperscript{1021} Boff, \textit{Trinity and Society}, 154.
\textsuperscript{1023} Boff, \textit{When theology listens to the poor}, 139.
evangelisation is a grass roots movement, socially and politically engaged, and concerned to hear “the voice of the victims.” Boff’s reflections on the Trinitarian communion of distinct but coequal divine Persons necessarily produces a critical attitude to distortions of personhood in society as well as in the church. The implications of this are articulated well by Hunt when she notes,

Given the dehumanising and depersonalising situation of the multitudes of the poor in Latin America, the trinitarian concept of person is a particularly critical one in Boff’s liberation trinitarian theology. Similarly, the categories of communion and of relationships, as realised in the divine life, emerge as powerful categories for a critique of the prevailing individualism and social disintegration within the culture, and as critical concepts by which the liberating power of trinitarian faith is reclaimed.

Boff argues therefore that the divine communion is a perfect model for society: “the Trinity can be seen as a model for any just, egalitarian social organisation.” This evangelisation will inaugurate a new way of being church that is “involved in the fate of society, in solidarity with the poorest and committed to major changes in society for the benefit of the oppressed.”

The ecclesial perspectives outlined above are not without their own challenges and three issues in particular merit critical comment. First, although the egalitarian nature of the ecclesial community for Boff is of paramount importance, he nonetheless legitimises the validity of what he describes as the “socially-inevitable hierarchical roles, including that of the Pope.” Although he lambasts the religious elite for being complicit with the political elite in perpetuating the suffering of the poor, and calls for

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1025 Hunt, What are they saying about the Trinity? 10-11.
1026 Boff, Holy Trinity: Perfect Community, 11.
1028 Boff, Ecclesiogenesis, 133 ff.
the declericalism of the church, it is not always clear how Boff theologically and institutionally reconciles the relation between an egalitarian nonhierarchical community with a church that has some hierarchical inevitability. What ecclesial structures does he deem necessary and appropriate in a church that is constituted globally, nationally, regionally and locally? Likewise, how does Boff understand and interrelate the catholicity, particularity, and new forms of church theologically, confessionally, institutionally and practically in his Trinitarian ecclesial church model? Even if there is a theological imperative to ensure that mutuality and equality are at the centre of all ecclesial life, is the egalitarian vision, no matter how well founded, not an idealistic utopianism that is ultimately undeliverable in the broken and fragmented realities of human life, church life and society?

Second, in relation to the transformation of society it is not clear from Boff what an ideal society modelled on the Trinity would look like. Boff notes that society is constituted by three dominant forces: economic power, political power and cultural power. Boff faults both capitalist and socialist societies that fail to reflect Trinitarian community in society and beckons us “towards social forms in which all relations between persons and institutions are valued, in an egalitarian way, one of kinship and respect for differences. Only thus will oppression be overcome and life and freedom triumph.” This deconstructionism however never makes way for a concretised reconstruction of society in Boff’s Trinitarian theology. Again, the utopian dream is advocated but what does the Trinitarian basis of society actually consist of and look like? Perhaps the warning sounded by Randall E. Otto that the doctrine of perichoresis so deployed by social Trinitarian theologians can “sublimate all things into the hoped-
for communal God, though requiring eschatological verification. Perichoresis is here emasculated of its essential basis and is wrongly employed.”

Third, since Boff’s ecclesial model primary reflects his social Trinitarianism, what implications for ecclesiology, and indeed his theology as a whole, emerge through the lack of theological engagement with the immanent model of the Trinity, particularly in relation to transcendence and worship? Although these are not absent in Boff’s work, they often appear as an appendage and are not given sufficient theological significance. Likewise, in his protestations against monarchianism and the rejection or muting of concepts concerning God’s headship, lordship, paternalism and absolute authority has his desire to demonstrate that God is an inclusive, equal and self-effacing community inadvertently lost or downplayed attributes of God that complement or indeed challenge the social and communal model he advocates?

As a liberation theologian, Leonardo Boff maintains an interest in social ethics, political liberation and the formation of egalitarian communities of faith. Therefore, “the doctrine of the Trinity understood in light of the social analogy provides a heavenly paradigm for a vision of a liberated society on earth.” For Boff, the oppressed and marginalised are only liberated if they are free and equal participators in a communal society where there is a genuine sense of social belonging and hope for the future, a future that is grounded in the Triune God, a community of equals.

c) God for us: The Trinity and the Christian life (Catherine Mowry LaCugna)

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1034 Boff’s two main Trinitarian works *Trinity and Society* and *Holy Trinity: Perfect Community* are examples in point.
Catherine LaCugna’s overarching thesis in *God For Us* is “a practical doctrine that shapes the Christian life.” LaCugna sets out initially to trace the historical development of the doctrine of the Trinity, concluding that much of present Trinitarian discourse is beset “by a misguided division between talk about God ad intra and ad extra, between theology proper and soteriology,” or to use her preferred terminology theologia (God) and oikonomia (for us). LaCugna argues that the pre-Nicene church era focussed on the oikonomia, but in response to the Arian controversy, the focus shifted in the post-Nicaea era to reflect more on God’s nature, leading to a separation between theologia and oikonomia. Theologia tended to focus on the nature of God and oikonomia tended to be linked with the action of God, particularly in the humanity of Christ. At the heart of LaCugna’s reworking of Trinitarian theology is therefore the attempt to reunite these ideas. Consequentially, LaCugna moves to dispense with the traditional concepts of the economic and immanent Trinity arguing that these terms are bound inextricably to the framework that operates with a gap between oikonomia and theologia. This means not only abandoning the misleading terms but clarifying carefully the meaning of oikonomia and theologia: Oikonomia is not the Trinity ad extra but the comprehensive plan of God reaching from creation to consummation, in which God and all creatures are destined to exist together in the mystery of love and communion. Similarly, theologia is not the Trinity in se, but the mystery of God. Therefore for LaCugna, “There is neither an economic nor an

1040 LaCugna, *God For Us*, 70.
1041 LaCugna, *God For Us*, 70.
1042 Grenz, *Rediscovering the Trinity*, 150.
1043 LaCugna, *God For Us*, 223.
immanent Trinity: there is only the oikonomia that is the concrete realization of the mystery of theologia in time, space, history and personality.”

LaCugna’s reconceptualisation of the Trinity is innovative and imaginative, but it has not been without its critics who express reservations about what appears to be “LaCugna’s reduction of trinitarian theology to a merely economic plane.” Weinandy believes that LaCugna’s focus on the Trinitarian acts of creation and redemption revealed in the oikonomia has efficiently removed any distinction between God and creation thereby reducing “God to the oikonomia itself so that we no longer live with God in his wholly otherness.” Colin Gunton concurs appraising LaCugna’s conceptualisation of the Trinity as a polemic against the doctrine of the immanent Trinity and wonders whether her approach finally escapes the pantheism which results from any attempt to bring God and the world too close. Likewise, Molnar in his attempt to reassert the doctrine of the immanent Trinity as a corrective to contemporary social Trinitarian models critiques LaCugna’s scheme,

Unwilling and unable to distinguish God in se from God acting ad extra invites pantheism and dualism. God is no longer the subject acting towards us and for us from within history but becomes little more than our experiences of love and communion. Clearly, the expression ‘God’s life with us’ depicts an apotheosis unless it first refers to God in himself.

He further asserts that by making no distinction between the immanent and economic Trinity, and by effectively collapsing the former into the latter, LaCugna is in danger of

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1044 LaCugna, *God For Us*, 223.
compromising the freedom of God because by divine necessity he is inextricably united to his creation.\(^{1049}\)

In response however to these criticisms, Elizabeth Groppe rejects concerns that LaCugna limits her theology to the economic Trinity and denies the necessity of an immanent or ontological Trinity.\(^{1050}\) Further she rejects any idea therefore that the immanent trinity is collapsed in to the economic Trinity.\(^{1051}\) The reasons for her rebuttal of these criticisms is precisely because she understands that the whole purpose of LaCugna’s theological scheme is to embrace oikonomia and theologia, economy and ontology, creation, redemption and mystery, thus refusing to separate them or dissolve one into the other, but integrating them in a Trinitarian scheme. Whilst LaCugna undoubtedly focuses on oikonomia as the starting point (for we only know God through his revelation to us in the divine economy and not by speculation of the unknown), she is clear that this is the action of the eternal God in Christ through the Spirit.\(^{1052}\) Marmion concurs and likewise attests that LaCugna’s essential point is that God’s inner being is revealed to us in his overflowing into salvation history.\(^{1053}\) Marmion and Groppe in addition note that LaCugna’s understanding of perichoresis between the Persons of the Trinity and our invitation to participate in the divine life, presupposes the distinction between God and his creatures, and this in turns addresses pantheistic concerns and rebuffs the compromising of God’s freedom.\(^{1054}\) Further, Molnar, perhaps LaCugna’s

\(^{1049}\) Molnar, “Toward a Contemporary Doctrine,” 314-316.
\(^{1050}\) Groppe, “Catherine Mowry LaCugna’s Contribution,” 741.
\(^{1051}\) Groppe, “Catherine Mowry LaCugna’s Contribution,” 742.
\(^{1052}\) Groppe, “Catherine Mowry LaCugna’s Contribution”, 743-44.
\(^{1054}\) Marmion, “Trinity and Salvation.” 126-128.
fiercest critique on her lack of engagement with the immanent Trinity, reluctantly concedes, but then dismisses, LaCugna’s own endorsement of God’s aseity.1055

In my analysis of the various readings and critiques on LaCugna’s reconceptualisation of the Trinity in terms of oikonomia and theologia, and in my own reading of her work, there are two key observations I would make. First, I agree that LaCugna undoubtedly gives precedence to God’s salvific actions as the basis for how we understand the Trinitarian nature of God. She consistently asserts that God is revealed to us by his actions and any speculation about the inner workings of God are therefore highly speculative. Further, by embracing the terms oikonomia and theologia in favour of economic and immanent Trinity, she linguistically ensures that the economic language is clearly retained throughout her work whereas the relegation of immanent language in favour of theologia has the consequence of appearing to further elevate the economic model to the detriment of the immanent model. Second, LaCugna does not however negate the ontological nature of the Trinity, nor limits God to his historical acts, or makes him dependent on creation. The responses noted above by Groppe and Marmion to these criticisms are in my evaluation legitimate and accurate, but I believe they need to be supplemented further by LaCugna’s own explicit differentiation between God and creation. As LaCugna explains, “God belongs to the sphere of infinite relatedness, infinite capacity for relationship, infinite actuality of relationship, both to past, present and future reality.”1056 In contrast, human relations are limited by our embodiment and our historical, cultural and linguistic conditions.1057

In God alone “is there full correspondence between personhood and being, between

1056 LaCugna, God For Us, 292.
1057 LaCugna, God For Us, 292.
hypostasis and ousia.” Further, LaCugna asserts unequivocally that God is not compelled by any necessity to create the world and that his divine freedom is absolute:

To be sure, the reason for creation does not lie in the creature, or in some claim the creature has on God. It would make no sense to say that God ‘needs’ the world in order to be God…. the reason for creation lies entirely in the unfathomable mystery of God, who is self-originating and self-communicating love. While the world is the gracious result of divine freedom, God’s freedom means necessarily being who and what God is.”

In *God For Us*, LaCugna not only laments the loss of the relation between the economic and immanent trinity, but with Volf and Boff, the priority of ontology over relations in understanding the essential nature of the Trinity. Likewise, she draws on the notion of perichoresis to explain the interpersonal communion of the Trinity and our participation in God and its ecclesial and social implications. For LaCugna, the doctrine of the Trinity serves as a perennial critique against relationships and structures, both ecclesial and political, that maintain anything less than full community of persons in love and freedom. This perichoretic movement of love shared in community does not swallow up the individual, nor obscure uniqueness and difference, and does not take away individual freedom by assimilating it into a collective will, but “provides a place in which everyone is accepted as an ineffable, unique and unrepeatable image of God, irrespective of how the dignity of a person might otherwise be determined.” LaCugna’s most notable contribution of deploying perichoresis however is in relation to praise and worship. Received into the community of God through the Spirit, the church as a doxological community is caught up in the mystery of the Eternal God (theologia) through her salvation in Christ (oikonomia). Therefore “moved by the extravagance of God’s love, by the abundance of God’s good gifts in

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1058 LaCugna, *God For Us*, 303.
1060 LaCugna, *God For Us*, 272.
1061 LaCugna, *God For Us*, 299.
creation and in human community, the heart of delight or wonder expresses itself in an outpouring of praise."1062 This is expressed in times of exultation but also in times of barrenness, suffering or loss, therefore “lamentation should not be overlooked as a powerful instance of doxology.”1063 Nor should doxology be reduced to an act of public worship alone, but should be cultivated as a habitude of life, for “everything that promotes fullness of humanity, that builds up relationships based on charity and compassion, glorifies God.”1064 Therefore true doxology is participation in the very life of God for the sake of the world, for “though we are forbidden to see the face of God, we are invited to enter into saving act, to accompany God in history, to see and hear the wonderful works of God.”1065 This orthopraxis, patterned after God in Christ, should mean active embodiment in the world as a sacramental community and include, among other things, the ministry of mercy and healing, the liberation for all who are oppressed, the dismantling of powerful and abusive hierarchies, the sacrificial sharing with others, and welcoming the stranger.1066 As LaCugna advocates, “The power and glory of God’s reign are not vested in those who already have social, sexual, political, or religious power, nor riches and entitlements, but in the faith of the haemorrhaging woman and of the man born blind.”1067

LaCugna’s contributions are significant as she innovatively reconstructs the doctrine of the Trinity. Through deploying the concepts of oikonomia and theologia she advocates that the starting point for any knowledge of God is in the revelation of God in the economy and that our appropriation of these truths is experienced through our

1062 LaCugna, God For Us, 335.
1063 LaCugna, God For Us, 339.
1064 LaCugna, God For Us, 343.
1065 LaCugna and McDonnell, “Returning from ‘The far Country,” 198-199
1066 LaCugna, God For Us, 384-388.
1067 LaCugna, God For Us, 387.
union with God, and one another, in the perichoretic relations of the Trinity. This perichoretic union lifts the church into the praise and glory of God through doxology, forms an interdependent and inclusive family through community, and sends Christians into the world to share and live the gospel through acts of compassionate service. Her critics have charged her with ultimately collapsing the immanent Trinity into the economic Trinity, and by so doing has therefore compromised God’s freedom by making God dependent on his creation. These criticisms however do not give justice to LaCugna’s Trinitarian scheme which seeks through the relation of oikonomia and theologia to hold together the ontological being and salvific acts of God. These are evidently demonstrated in her understanding of creation which clearly distinguishes God the Creator and humankind as his creatures, her employment of perichoresis as mutual relation with God in which the divine and human ontological natures are differentiated, and the centrality of worship to God from His creation.

Nonetheless, there are improvements in LaCugna’s Trinitarian approach which I believe could further solidify her work. First, the doxological orientation of her work could be substantially developed through exploring more fully the ideas of mystery and contemplation. LaCugna speaks frequently about mystery as a descriptor for both theologia and oikonomia, but the concept of mystery itself is less developed. Similarly, the place and role of contemplation as an aspect of mystery is virtually absent in her work. In exploring these themes more intentionally and thoroughly, LaCugna could both enhance the spiritual practices of the church community and enrich a greater understanding and experience of the immanent Trinity. Second, LaCugna does not concretise sufficiently the communal and missional implications of her ecclesiology in advocating specific practices that flow out from or demonstrate her Trinitarian perspectives. This is not to say that there are none, but they are rather generic such as
advocating for an inclusive community or a more just society. If the very purpose of her work is to advocate for a more practical doctrine of the Trinity, then why are there not more developed examples that embodies what this looks like in the church and in mission? Third, LaCugna does not sufficiently engage with Biblical perspectives throughout her work. Throughout the body of her work, LaCugna adequately demonstrates a solid grasp of Eastern and Western church traditions, engages in critical conversations with persons and perspectives from those traditions, and grounds the appropriation of God’s work in creation and redemption in Christian experience, but the Scriptures, in comparison, remain an underdeveloped resource for her theological development. Sadly, her untimely death has meant that she is unable to answer her critics more fully, nor build upon the innovative theology that she outlined in God for us, but her influence and contributions have continued to shape and inform theological discussion as this work attests.

5) Towards a synthesis of Volf, Boff and LaCugna: Theological implications for the missional practice of church planting

In the previous section, I outlined the Trinitarian ecclesiology of each of my conversation partners. In this section, through a synthesis of their Trinitarian ecclesioologies, I suggest there is convergence on five critical issues that I believe are foundational in addressing the essential constitution of any new community that deems to be recognised and validated as a genuine Christian community.

First, churches that are formed, regardless of their style and distinctiveness, must find their essential nature rooted in becoming a loving and relational community. Volf argues that the church reflects the likeness of the Holy Trinity, meaning that she is essentially a community of interrelated persons patterned after the Trinity. God’s essential nature is not constituted first and foremost by metaphysical categories of
substance but through the perfect love shared between the community of Father, Son
and Holy Spirit. The church, indwelt by God and lifted into the community of the Trinity,
is likewise constituted as a community of love. Volf is cautious not to press the analogy
of the Church in the image of God too far but concludes that the church is nothing if
she is not a community of mutually loving persons in love with God and one another.
Boff develops this concept of community further than Volf by focussing more fully on
the distinctiveness of the Trinitarian Persons as coeternal, coequal and coexistent. The
oneness and unity of the Trinity, however, are found in their mutual love, surrender and
self-giving to one another. So, it is with the church, a community of distinct but equal
persons that are characterised by mutual service, generosity, sacrifice, hospitality and
encouragement. LaCugna, embracing the nature of the relational Trinity as oikonomia
and theologia, advocates with Volf and Boff that the church shares a life of mutual
communion that is created in the image of the Trinitarian God. The Father, Son and
Spirit are revealed within salvation history, particularly in the acts of creation and
redemption, and in them we see the eternal communion of God, which brings the
church to birth, making her a community that bears witness to all of creation. The life
of the Trinity, therefore, shapes the life of the church in forming a self-giving community
of love, faith and hope. In agreement with Volf and Boff, LaCugna advocates that the
community of God (the church) is essentially a reflection of the God community (the
Trinity) and that relationality is at the core of both the Trinity and what it means to be a
church community.

Second, the newly established community is oriented upwards to God through
perichoresis. Volf, Boff and LaCugna all employ the Eastern idea of perichoresis to
describe the mutual abiding of the persons in the Trinity, and the incorporation of the
Christian church within the divine community. Of the three, Volf uses perichoresis more
reservedly, emphasising that perichoretic union is rooted in the dynamic work of the
Spirit that brings the persons of the Trinity into mutual relation, and the church into
relation with God. We do not indwell one another, and so the term must be attributed
only to God’s downward movement, that raises us upward together in Christ, through
the Spirit. Boff makes every effort to stress the importance of the perichoretic movement
of God as a model for the church and for society. Believers are brought into communion
with God to participate in the divine life. This upward relationship with God enables the
church to truly encounter and experience the Creator-Redeemer, fills the church with
vision and inspiration for being a model of transformation in society, and preserves the
church in communion so that members of the church enjoy loving, and being loved.
LaCugna likewise embraces the perichoretic theme of mutual abiding to unite theologia
(mystery) and oikonomia (salvation) in the community of the church. The church shares
in redemption by experiencing God in history, and this in turn leads the church into
celebration, praise and thanksgiving. Soteriology leads to doxology as the church is
captured in the experience of God’s eternal glory. This is not only an eschatological
hope, but an anticipation that cultivates a present habitus of worship that is expressed
in public worship, sacramental living and presence, and a life oriented towards God in
all things. Yet the church experiences the brokenness and fragility of life, which itself is
offered to the Trinity in lament as an important part of doxology and worship. Stories of
pain and suffering, setback and defeat, failure and disappointment, as well as
celebratory joy, constitute the people of God in worship. LaCugna, in a much fuller and
richer way, agrees with Volf and Boff that the Christian community is a worshipping
community, lifted into God, through the perichoretic union with the Trinity.

Third, the church community must be oriented inwards through koinonia. The
double nature of perichoresis (God in us and us in God) means, consequently, that the
church ought to be a loving community in which believers share their life together in mutual loving fellowship. This is fostered most effectively in egalitarian forms of church ecclesiology, which seek to empower all the people of God for life and mission, and aim to remove the barriers of discrimination, power, authority and control that stifle life and human flourishing. They advocate for a model of ecclesiology that best serves and fosters mutuality, participation and inclusiveness, Volf through a Free Church ecclesiology, Boff through the Base Ecclesial Communities, and LaCugna more generically in Roman Catholic communities that embrace liberationist agendas. They each advocate non-hierarchical church structures in principle but recognise that the outworking of this is a challenge, never perfect, and the community can be a poor reflection of what God intends it to be. They each retain the place of clergy and laity, yet the charismatic nature of fellowship, gifted and graced by the Spirit, opens the participatory nature of all the people of God and serves as a sign and witness to what the church is becoming in Christ, to the glory of God. The conversation partners also share a belief in the importance of the sacraments as a means by which community is shared, initiated in baptism and sustained through communion. Likewise, they also agree that koinonia is not just internal to each local church but is expressed in the catholicity of the whole even though they understand and express this differently. However, they share a common premise: If the whole Body of Christ is in perichoretic communion with God, and God with His people, then there exists a deep fellowship beyond the confines of any single localised community. There is no room or place for self-existent autonomous Christians or churches. Churches must therefore engage wherever possible in ecumenical partnerships, dialogue, worship, fellowship and mission. This will embody practically the pursuit for unity, extend the hand of friendship to others that are not normatively part of the same church tradition, and serve as a
witness to the world, that despite its differences, the Christian community shares a common faith and purpose.

Fourth, the conversation partners also recognise the importance of unity and diversity within the koinonia that corresponds to a Trinitarian pattern of unity and diversity. It is in the interrelationship of unity and diversity, and not in uniformity nor division, that koinonia is truly formed. Volf emphasises that each unique person finds her place, her ministry, and her gifts in relation to, and with others, who share equally the fellowship and unity of the Spirit. Complementarity and interdependency are the marks of a Trinitarian-shaped Christian community. Boff and LaCugna concur but develop the nature of egalitarian koinonia with a strong emphasis on empowering the powerless, welcoming with hospitality those that are excluded or marginalised from fellowship, and the creation of an inclusive community for all, regardless of social and economic status, gender, race and creed. This kind of koinonia is fostered by openness and embrace, dialogue, participation and mutual service.

Fifth, ecclesial communities must be oriented outwards to the world through service and mission. God’s love, overflowing from the Triune community towards creation, shapes a church that proclaims the good news, and embodies it in practical action in the world. Volf’s missional perspectives in After Our Likeness is undoubtedly minimal but influenced by Eastern missional ecclesiology emphasises the presence of the church in the world as a sign and witness to the gospel, and through Western evangelical Free Church missiology advocates for the proclamation of the gospel. In contrast the missional nature of the church is Boff’s predominant concern and he advocates that the church must seek the total transformation of society. The church community is engaged in evangelisation which, for Boff, includes proclamation, compassion, social justice, political engagement, listening to the marginalised and
forgotten voices, and the dismantling of oppressive systems and structures. As a feminist liberationist, LaCugna shares many of Boff’s convictions, but more firmly locates the mission of the church in her overarching understanding of oikonomia, whereby God works to save the world in the acts of creation and redemption. The church is a sacramental community which passionately participates in God’s salvific redeeming of the world, embodying holiness, compassion, justice and mercy through faithful Christian witness.

In this synthesis of Volf, Boff and LaCugna I have argued that their foundations for ecclesiology are intentionally rooted in, and extracted from, their understanding of the Triune God. The church for each is a community that is patterned after the God-community and it is oriented in three simultaneous and reciprocal relational movements: worship (through perichoresis), community (through koinonia), and mission (through diakonia). However else a church may be constituted and whatever model of ecclesiology is advocated or preferred, these three relational movements encapsulate the essential nature of the church, and establish in my view, the ecclesiastical minimum necessary to be so. If the intention of church planting is to plant a ‘church’, then its evidence of being so constituted, is the formation of a perichoretic-(upward)-koinonia-(inward)-diakonia-(outward)-community patterned after the Trinity. As a missional practitioner responsible for the birthing and forming of Didsbury Community Church, I will therefore conclude this chapter with personal theological reflections on how we have been shaped and informed by reflecting on the Trinitarian nature of our community in the light of the engagements and conversations presented in this chapter.

6) Didsbury Community Church: A personal theological reflection
As I conclude this chapter, I do so by reflecting on how I have tried to foster an intentional Trinitarian missional ecclesiology at *Didsbury Community Church* (DCC), rooting our theology and practice in an intentional upward-inward-outward-community model. The following four reflections have been formed in the dialogue between theology and practice over the last several years.

a) The church as a community

DCC is rooted in an understanding that the essential nature of church is community. With Volf, Boff and LaCugna, first and foremost, we wanted to emphasise that our primary concern was to create a “community of God patterned after the God-Community.” If God is essentially a relational community of loving persons, this would become our primary and defining characteristic. As outlined in the Introduction to the Portfolio and Thesis, DCC is itself a community comprised of smaller communities. These missional communities have their own independence and diversity but are held together by two foundational principles. First, they are each intentionally shaped in Upward, Inward and Outward directions, and second, interdependence is fostered by the cross-fertilisation of people, ideas, resources and ministry. We are therefore a networked community, a mutually interpenetrative community and our communities gather together in a newly created intergenerational community festival every six weeks, to help foster a wider sense of catholicity, partnership and belonging. This was developed four years into the plant when we reflected that our missional communities needed to intentionally engage each other for mutual enrichment and development.

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1068 This is a phrase that we use frequently in closed teaching sessions at DCC.
Although evaluations indicate that most people feel a strong sense of community, a number of issues require ongoing reflection and attention. First, creating an intergenerational gathering to bring the missional communities together is not only very hard work, and notoriously difficult, it is evident that 60% of all the people in the missional communities do not come to the shared celebration, whereas 80% attend their own community regularly. How do we successfully foster missional communities shaped around particularity, and simultaneously, foster a wider catholicity across the cluster of communities, and indeed with the wider body of Christ in the community? Second, how do people that do not relate to one of our missional communities find a community to belong to? Since much investment has been devoted to forming communities around specific interests, hobbies or networks, there remains a concern that some people that connect with us may not easily have a place to call home. Do we continuously form new communities that address new interests and serve new people, which requires resources beyond our capacity at present, and by so doing are we paradoxically in danger of creating consumer groups or exclusive communities, and not a more fully integrated community? How do we balance the twin priorities of forming missional communities and fostering a wider sense of community? Third, what does official leadership and membership look like in a community church that fosters an egalitarian spirit and governance? Despite the best efforts to form non-hierarchical structures and inverted pyramided governance, and an attempt to build coequal teams and a flat leadership, there remains a gap between what we aspire to be, and what we actually are. We are convinced that an egalitarian model is aspirationally positive but

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1069 We use review and health checking processes for ongoing evaluation and feedback.
1070 The difficulties are partly logistically, but primarily how to create a gathering that crosses the very diverse missional communities we have. We constantly reflect on what the points of commonality and interest might be but are committed to finding ways the whole community can come together.
somewhat idealist in a world that is tainted by sin and frequently structured in systems that have a hierarchical form. We also recognise the legitimacy of leadership, and some necessity for people to find a tangible expression of belonging and taking ownership of the responsibilities of their community. But creating a community of equals with some official form of ‘membership’ is not easy, especially in a sponsoring denomination that advocates for its members a bounded set of beliefs and a covenant of ethics. All of this reminds us that the issue of leadership and membership within an egalitarian community remains a thorny and complex issue, and further Trinitarian ecclesial reflection is necessary to address these important and practical issues. What can we learn for example from the different but complementary Trinitarian models that might help inform our ecclesial thinking and practice? If the egalitarian model derives from a social trinitarianism focusing on non-hierarchical forms of community, what do we learn from the economic model of the Trinity whilst embracing perichoresis, holds a temporal and relational ‘subordinationism’ in which the Spirit draws attention to the Son and the Son surrender’s his life to the will of the Father? If a genuine egalitarian community is the telos for the church and shapes the direction of travel, is it inevitable that living in the present world requires some hierarchical patterns to restrain sin and deal with the realities of human experience?

b) Upward community (perichoresis)

DCC aims to cultivate the upward life of worship in various ways, but the creation of *Encounter* is selected for personal reflection. *Encounter*, is a space to explore and express worship in a café format around the principles of “Coffee, Conversation and

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Connections with faith and the real world." It has been intentionally formed and shaped by café culture and style to foster as much participation, inclusion, hospitality and engagement as possible. The primary locus of learning, questioning, interaction, and engagement with one another, takes place at the tables in the café. The table is the place where scripture is discussed, communion is shared, the voices and opinions of all are expressed, prayer is expressed and eating takes place. In *Encounter* we foster a time of shared storytelling which intentionally gives room and space for people, should they desire, to be able to share the joys or struggles of life. Doxology (including lament) is a common feature of our worship as we encourage people to share stories of victory and faith, as well as failure and brokenness in a safe and relaxed environment. This dichotomy was experienced recently when we celebrated an amazing series of answered prayers while mourning the tragic death of a young child. This aspect of *Encounter* has been influenced by the Trinitarian ecclesiology of LaCugna, particularly her work on doxology and lament. Evaluations and feedback are generally positive about *Encounter*, but two issues have been raised that DCC is currently seeking to reflect upon and address. First, the intimate and participatory style of *Encounter* is not easy or comfortable for everyone. Several visitors have indicated that coming into this environment is intimidating and the pressure to participate and engage is unescapable. Second, some people indicate that the storytelling part of *Encounter* has the potential to overshare, and expose too much vulnerability, as it is an uncensored time. These opinions are contrary to those who welcome the openness and honesty of real life stories, and express gratitude that there

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1072 Taken from the DCC Mission Statement.
1073 This is not just café style but takes place in a college café in Didsbury.
1074 This was particularly the case for visitors that did not know the style or format prior to arrival and some have expressed this view to me as the Team Leader.
is an opportunity for all to participate and have a voice. These reflections have led us to ask two important questions about what we do in *Encounter*. How can a worshipping community truly express its life together in an intimate, loving and embracing community, whilst providing the space and safety some people may need? How do we make room for the genuine expression of lament without personalised stories of trauma or heartbreak becoming a hindrance or barrier to others? It is important that we continue to reflect together on what insights can be gleaned from further theological reflection, and from other disciplines that may help us understand group dynamics and interaction.\(^{1075}\)

c) Inward Community (koinonia)

From the outset of forming DCC, the desire to form loving relationships as the essence of community has been central to our ethos and practice, and this is fostered through meaningful fellowship across the church as we worship, witness and work together in a variety of ways. This creates a sense of ‘extended family’ which is a frequent descriptor noted by DCC members and visitors.\(^ {1076}\) However, the closeness of our fellowship has meant that some feel they are not able to access easily the existing network of relationships that have been made at DCC. Although we recognise there are many complex factors that determine this, it is critical that we address, to the best of our ability, a way to deepen existing relationships whilst remaining genuinely inclusive. With such a small and tightknit community, it is important that we intentionally find ways to assimilate others into existing relational networks, so that others can

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\(^{1076}\) Church review 2016.
belong, if they so choose, as easily and quickly as possible. This means that we are currently reviewing, for example, our small groups, as to whether it is time to recreate new groups, mixing friendships and relationships, changing venues and leaders in order that there may be a new configuration of people connections. This is just one example of where we need to ensure that our closeness is not the same as cliquishness, and embracing does not inadvertently lead to exclusion, a lesson we are learning from Boff, LaCugna and Volf. DCC is therefore reflecting on another set of key questions: When does the intimacy that is created through intentional attempts to build koinonia become too introspective or self-serving and ignore others who may equally desire or need inclusion? When does intimacy exclude or endanger another, and when does space become an excuse to avoid the necessity of koinonia? How are appropriate messages of both the need for intimacy and space taught and embodied within an egalitarian community rooted in koinonia? We are discovering that the language of community is prevalent among us, that its concept is warmly embraced, but practising it well is much more complicated. Community formation is a multi-faceted complex reality.

d) Outward Community (mission through diakonia)
As a new church plant, DCC was born because of missional engagement in the community and continues to explore and develop missional communities across a range of demographical and geographic contexts. Since the formation of DCC in 2010, initially as one small community, it has multiplied several new missional communities across South Manchester. There is much to celebrate about these communities, particularly because each community connects well with unchurched and de-churched people and has evidenced people coming to faith for the first time or in a significantly
new way. The missional communities engage in mission beyond themselves, such as serving local schools in acts of compassionate service, visiting retirement or nursing homes to care for the elderly, supporting hospice children in the local community, or, to look further afield, supporting child sponsorship in Uganda, among other evangelistic events, projects and initiatives. DCC has an open-hearted love for the community and missional engagement is undoubtedly a priority for the church. In the last few years, however, we have reflected upon three key challenges to our church planting missional thinking and practice, and these issues, and the questions they raise, have come to the fore by engaging with liberationist theologians such as Catherine LaCugna and Leonardo Boff that have a broader view of mission than DCC. First, although DCC has established several missional communities, there is no community that specifically engages on any regular basis with those that are marginalised: the poor, the homeless and refugees, the vulnerable, the excluded, and many others for whom the kingdom has come to liberate socially, economically, politically and materially. In part this is due to our location, and the nature of a leafy suburb and predominant middle-class community. And yet, there are pockets of real deprivation and need in Didsbury, and on its borders are several communities that are listed in the most deprived areas in Manchester. Second, it is evident that we are not politically active in, or through, DCC. We have reflected that we do not tend to address political issues, join in with lobbying, engage in community hustings, meet our local councillors or MP, or interact with local political issues intentionally. Neither do we draw much attention to the

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1077 For the Didsbury community see http://www.livingedge.co.uk/out-about/places/didsbury_the_manchester_suburb_growing_in_confidence_1_3561192 [accessed July 26, 2016].
1078 As a school chaplain and governor, I was very aware of many families that struggled economically and socially and whose problems remained hidden behind closed doors.
importance of national politics and their implications within our communities. Although there needs to be a sensitivity about these issues and a recognition of political diversity among Christians in the church, in truth we are not actively engaged in any political issues and concerns of our community. Third, with several charity shops on our local High Street, advocating many important causes to which we should align ourselves, we have relatively limited contact and involvement in supporting and encouraging those that are working to deal with injustices, fair trade, human trafficking, poverty, homelessness, mental illness and a host of other important issues.

These three missional reflections have the same root concern. Our outward life, particularly expressed through our missional communities has ministered successfully to particular types of people that are representative of a large section of our community. The orientation of ministry, however, has been more church centred than kingdom or creation centred, and has not embodied sufficiently a missional concern for the whole of life, nor adequately concerned itself with mission as liberation and justice. Among the questions now facing DCC are: How does a suburban middle-class church engage appropriately in mission to the poor? What values, assumptions, or positioning of DCC need revisited or changed? What partnerships with other local groups, charities and agencies need to be established to enable DCC to engage in God’s concern for all of life beyond its own walls? If the forming of missional communities continues to be a key priority of DCC, in the light of these reflections, then exploring where the next community is located, who it serves, and how it is constituted, become important considerations.

1080 MIND, Shelter, Save the Children, Oxfam, Dignity, Barnardo’s, Cancer Research, and Sue Ryder all work to alleviate suffering in one form or another and bring hope and comfort to people in need. 1081 This concern was raised of church planting in Chapter Four.
7) Conclusion

In this chapter, I briefly noted the renewed interest in Trinitarian ecclesiology before exemplifying through the contributions of Martyn Atkins, Michael Moynagh and Ian Mobsby how these perspectives are beginning to inform church planting. In evaluating their work, I further engaged in critical conversations with Miroslav Volf, Leonardo Boff and Catherine Mowry LaCugna to extrapolate from their Trinitarian ecclesiology theological implications on the nature of the church that can help build upon, and develop, the embryonic models outlined in this chapter. Finally, I have concluded with personal theological reflections on how these ecclesial Trinitarian reflections have shaped and informed my own church planting practice through Didsbury Community Church. This work has now reached its summative conclusion. As I draw the portfolio and thesis to a conclusion, I will review the essential arguments made throughout this work, noting its significance, before suggesting avenues for further research. Therefore, it is to the conclusion that I finally turn.
Overall Conclusion

1) A summative overview

This PhD research offers original insights in its field of study, by relating Trinitarian theology to church planting, in ways that are innovative and progressive. This work represents one of, if not, the first explicit Trinitarian theology of church planting, particularly within the evangelical Protestant tradition with specific reference to creation, context and community. This research is therefore a work of Practical theology that follows a parallel, synthetic, and dialogical approach interrelating theology and practice as complementary companions on the journey of discovery. Through the methodology of theological reflection this work demonstrates a central objective from the outset, namely to offer theological reflections upon the specific missional practice of church planting arising from the experience of planting a new missional community, Didsbury Community Church. This elongated piece of theological reflection has informed and shaped my own theological development and missional praxis, bringing personal and professional transformation through a hermeneutical journey of personal reflection and discovery. This study further deploys the method of critical conversations utilizing and developing the work of Stephen Pattison through which it has dialogued with various sources and voices in order to ascertain diverse theological perspectives that contribute to cultivating a church planting missional theology and practice that is robust and effective.

In Chapter One, the church planting literature review gave a comprehensive synopsis of church planting material, particularly in the United Kingdom from 1990-2008. The review converses and critically engages with the key voices, themes, traditions and contributions to the field that emerged out of the resurgence of church planting initiatives in this period. As church planting has moved towards integrating...
theory and practice, there is a growing conviction that church planting requires a much
deepen engagement with theology, and the need for continuing theological reflection
on its practice. Although the literature reflected a measure of theological diversity in the
theological traditions and positions of the authors, it noted that most of the published
literature comes from within a broadly evangelical Protestant perspective and therefore
greater diversity of voices and traditions are needed. The later literature increasingly
offers a deeper critical reflection on ecclesiology and its relation to missional theology,
advocating a more experimental, diverse and less bounded form of ecclesiology and
called for further reflection on ecclesial issues including how organic and institutional
components come together in church planting. Finally, whilst church planting writers
frequently appeal to Biblical foundations for church planting practice, greater care is
required in how Biblical texts are exegeted and applied in ways that are consistent with
their wider context and narrative and do not become misused as proof texts to validate
church planting claims that upon more robust examination are simply not credible.

In Chapter Two, I addressed the question raised by Walter Klaiber, “How
evangel-like is evangelism?” In response, through a critical conversation with the
Synoptic Gospels, I offer theological perspectives on the nature of the gospel and its
implications for missional practice. The evangel is “good news about Jesus Christ, the
Son of God” (Mk. 1:1). Whilst sharing a kerygmatic core of key propositional truths
concerning Jesus Christ, they constructed their story in ways that were contextually
appropriate for their audience and communities. Every context will shape and inform
how the gospel is to be preached and practiced but must remain rooted in the shared
theological convictions of the kerygmatic apostolic tradition. Further, against the
backdrop of negative perceptions of evangelicalism we are reminded that the evangel
is a message of liberating hope that offers the possibility of new life and wholeness to
people, community and nations. The good news of Jesus has implications for all of life, and for all of creation, and those that are practitioners of the gospel must indeed be agents of the kingdom, and reconcilers of all creation. The evangel therefore calls for repentance and a radical transformation of ethics and values that reflect the cruciform way of Jesus. Such a gospel stands in stark contrast to Prosperity and consumeristic ideologies that distort its essential nature. For the Synoptics the death of Jesus though interpreted in different but complementary ways remains the heart of the Christian Gospel.

In Chapter Three, I explored, through conversing with missional practitioners the nature, role and practice of theological reflection across a spectrum of church planting traditions in the United Kingdom. Theological reflection is critical in relating church planting to the Christian understanding of God and ensuring that missional practice is engaged in a continuous process of conversation with Scripture, the faith community, and the context in which it takes place, and remains open to fresh insights and arguments. The processes and models by which this takes place may vary, but they must be intentional, robust and deep. New tools must be developed to assist practitioners flourish in the practice of theological reflection as normative and practical. However, the qualitative research project further helped me expand, deepen and develop my own understanding of the nature, role and practice of theological reflection, through engaging with different church traditions and individual missional practitioners. This cemented in my own thinking the necessity of laying theological foundations for church planting, and to reflect intentionally on theological themes that might continue to be explored as beneficial to church planting practitioners. Similarly, it was in conversing with others, including people not in my own denominational tradition, that proved indispensable in broadening the horizons of my own theological thinking.
Shaped by how the interviewees in my critical conversations demonstrated how theological reflection was shaping their practice, so I likewise determined that I would be able to demonstrate how my own theological reflections on the Trinity were informing and shaping my own church planting practice and vice-versa.

In Chapter Four through conversing with Jürgen Moltmann, I argued that Trinitarian perspectives on creation provide church planting with a deeper theological foundation and rationale. Invited to participate in a perichoretic relationship with the Triune God, new communities are formed by the Creator, in the Creator and for the Creator. The enjoyment and worship of God are therefore the telos of creation and the heartbeat of the new community and must be present from the outset of the process in some meaningful way. Similarly, eschatological perspectives shape and inform new churches to serve as signposts to the kingdom of God, to embody a reverence and concern for all of life, and through presence and proclamation to offer hope to a suffering and fragmented world. Although contextualisation is essential for understanding the particularities of places and peoples in which new churches are to be incarnationally formed, the horizons of the future must also shape and inform what new contextual communities must embody, embrace, and aspire to be. Moltmann’s concept of originalis-creation-continua-nova also proves insightful for it necessitates an ongoing response to the Spirit’s creativity and opens up continual new innovations. Further, all persons are created in the Imago Dei giving them the capacity to initiate, nurture and develop relationships and reflect God’s relationality. If, as Moltmann suggests, the Imago Dei is centrally concerned with creative relationality, then exploring imaginative ways to cultivate friendships is crucial. As God has humbled himself to dwell in his creation, setting up an oikos for all, his hospitality reminds church planters that God’s mission is cosmic in scope, and not ecclesiocentric. This leads them to
explore God’s presence and work in all the world, and to form new communities of hope and hospitality that reflect the Triune Creator. Moltmann further embraces unity and diversity, demonstrating a legitimacy for planting homogeneous and heterogeneous churches. However, the presence of God in everything, warns against the monoform as the ultimate and normative reality. Multi-cultural church planting is a witness to God’s embracement of all cultures and serves as a corrective to exclusively homogenised approaches. Moltmann’s Trinitarian theology of creation culminates with the importance of Sabbath for creation. The Sabbath is the climax of creation and it provides a foretaste of the eschatological kingdom, where creation ultimately rests and dwells in God. The significance of Sabbath for creation can help church planters foster healthier spiritual rhythms of worship, rest, renewal, and recovery for themselves and their church plants. Through theological reflection on my own missional practice in planting Didsbury Community Church, I explored how the creation themes of creativity, relationality and hospitality has shaped, challenged and changed our missional practice, and has raised questions that require further exploration.

In Chapter Five of the thesis, through dialoguing with Lesslie Newbigin and Timothy Tennent, I argued that Trinitarian missional contextual theology provided fruitful insights for church planting missional theology and practice. Church planting is always a participatory response to the mission of the Trinity who is at work in each and every context. When church planters enter particular contexts, they discover that God is already present and at work through his prevenient grace. Church planting must avail itself of contextual analysis, using the tools and insights made available through the social sciences, but it is imperative that a theological reading of context takes place. Discernment is the first act of mission from which contextual models, methodologies, processes and practices are formed to engage the gospel with culture. It must therefore
be earthed and cultivated within specific contexts through incarnational approaches that engage with a whole life concern but is self-aware of its own posture in doing so. As a sign, instrument and foretaste of the kingdom new churches must equally demonstrate a counter-cultural missional holiness that speaks prophetically to a culture tarnished by sin. As a marginalised community in a pluralist world church planting must rediscover confidence in the uniqueness of Christ, the truth claims of the gospel, and the power and equipping of the Spirit. Further, church planting needs to engage in local, national and global conversations and partnerships, so that best contextual practices can be shared. Inter-faith conversations can also provide church planters with opportunities to grow, develop and learn, and sharpen contextual questioning and practice. In particular, the experience of church planting in other global contexts can help shape and inform missional practice in each and every context by challenging preconceptions, prejudices and blind spots. Finally, church planting contextual theology needs to have a more robust and developed pneumatology in redressing the dominance of Christological-Incarnational models, exploring ways in which the Spirit engages culture, and the church in mission. As I reflected on my own missional practice at Didsbury Community Church, I explored how the contextual themes of discernment and inter-faith dialogue has challenged and changed our missional practice, leading to a new posture and new practices. As we seek to transform the world around us, so we too are being transformed in that process.

In Chapter Six of the thesis, through conversing with Miroslav Volf, Leonardo Boff, and Catherine Mowry LaCugna, I examined how the recent resurgence in Trinitarian ecclesiology can shape and inform our understanding of community, and its implications for church planting. The community of God (the church) is essentially a reflection of the God community (the Trinity) and loving relationality is at the core of
both the Trinity and what it means to be a church community. The church is oriented in three simultaneous and reciprocal relational movements: worship (through perichoresis), community (through koinonia), and mission (through diakonia). Although these marks offer all churches a Trinitarian model of ecclesiology, they are particularly helpful in enabling church planters a framework from which to explore new forms of church, and for their sponsoring denominations and missional agencies in identifying an ecclesiastical minimum, that may determine when a church has legitimately been formed. Through reflecting theologically on my own missional practice in planting Didsbury Community Church, I explored how the inward, upward and outward relational movements of the Trinity, has impacted our thinking and practice. As we have intentionally shaped the church around these three dimensions of community, we have cultivated a community that is oriented in worship, fellowship and mission, but identified areas of weakness that require further reflection and response. We are exploring how to interrelate our missional communities more effectively, examining ways in which to foster an egalitarian community that has a role and place for leadership and membership, and seeks to balance the need for intimacy and space. In mission we are challenged to explore a more intentional engagement with the marginalised, local and national politics, and building community partnerships that reflect kingdom values.

This portfolio and thesis show a number of integrating themes that have been essential to the entirety of this work. First, the importance of theological reflection upon practice has been demonstrated throughout and is at the heart of each component and individual chapter. Second, this theological reflection has in turn, shaped and changed the missional practice of church planting in and through Didsbury Community Church. This work has been no theoretical exercise, but has challenged, shaped and modified church planting practice, and stimulated new questions for exploration and
examination, many of which are still being explored. Third, this work has attempted to intentionally integrate church planting practice with core theological themes and issues, rather than formulate a theology of church planting per se. It is my conviction that church planting as a missional practice is legitimatized, enriched and more robust, when it is interrelated to the core Christian doctrines of the faith, with Trinitarian theology being the catalyst for this particular thesis. And finally, this work has been shaped and informed by engagement with critical conversation partners along the way. These partners have been located in literature and electronic sources, informal and formal conversations, and engagement with living documents in the field of study I have explored. The portfolio and thesis have emerged therefore from continuous dialogue with a wide range of sources and cross fertilization between different aspects of the portfolio and thesis have been evident throughout.

2) Avenues for further research

Although these contributions bring new insights to church planting theology and practice, they do not exhaust it. Indeed, as this work evidences, there are many areas that require further research and reflection. This work has further demonstrated that many unanswered questions noted throughout continue to merit fresh investigation and exploration. In reflecting upon the content of this portfolio and thesis, there are many areas that need to be developed, but the following four avenues for further research are advocated as personal concerns.

First, there is a need to develop further the theological foundations for church planting. This should certainly include exploring ways in which Trinitarian theology can further engage with themes and issues pertinent to church planting but recognises in particular that Christological and pneumatological perspectives continue to need
development. The development of Christological perspectives for church planting might, I suggest, include underdeveloped areas such as the atonement, resurrection, and ascension, which should serve alongside the predominant models of Missional-Incarnational theology. Likewise, more prominence needs to be given to the nature and ministry of the Spirit in missiology and church planting, and might include areas such as holiness, spirituality, and spiritual guidance, warfare, and formation.

Second, there is a need to find other dialogue partners, and mine global theologies for resources and insights that might shape and inform the missional practice of church planting. What do feminist, womanist, black, Asian, or Sub-Saharan theologies and voices have to teach us? This will certainly need to include non-Western and female voices, which continue to be poorly represented in church planting literature, and in positions of leadership, nationally and internationally. It will also need to include emerging younger scholars, and dialogue partners from the past, hidden in the long history of a church that has pioneered over many centuries and across multiple contexts. The critical point is to identify diverse dialogue partners in age, gender, race, culture, context, theological tradition, who can enlarge our thinking and sharpen our practice.

Third, there is continued need to examine not only the language of church planting, but the use of the analogies and imagery that lie behind them. This is not to jettison the current terminology, but to continually reflect on the symbols and metaphors we use, understanding that our language is not neutral. In this thesis for example, I have suggested that speaking about new communities of hope or hospitality, may convey and embody church planting, in ways that are more helpful and receptive to a postmodern and post Christian context. What other images, metaphors, analogies or symbols can be used to convey the missional task of church planting, that is
theologically rooted in the message of the gospel, but translatable to specific cultures and contexts?

Fourth, there needs to be further exploration in how missiology and doxology relate together in church planting, perhaps in missiology as a whole. In this thesis, particularly in reflecting upon the theology of Moltmann and LaCugna, worship and mission are inextricably linked as expressions of one another. With so much emphasis in church planting being placed on the missional conversation, what role and purpose does doxology and worship have in forming new missional churches?

3) Doxology is the final word

This work has constructed a Trinitarian framework that has organised, structured and shaped Trinitarian perspectives, and related them to three particular themes that were of mutual interest to Trinitarian theology and church planting: creation, community and context. As a missional practitioner, responsible for planting and developing a new church, this portfolio and thesis are rooted in my own experience of grappling with theological and practical issues, and demonstrate throughout, a constant interaction between my own theological reflection and missional experiences. As the work has been formed and reformed, so too I hope, that my own thinking and competencies have formed and reformed as I have taken this journey.

I have also been acutely aware, however, that exploring the implications of a Trinitarian framework for church planting missional practice through theological studies, has occasionally reduced the Trinity to a theological doctrine to comprehend, more than a mystery to behold and a community to enjoy. And so, doxology becomes the final word of this thesis, for it reminds us of who God is and what He has done for us.\footnote{Catherine Murray LaCugna and Killian McDonnell, “Returning from ‘The Far Country’ Thesis for a Contemporary Trinitarian Theology.” \textit{Scottish Journal of Theology}, Vol. 41, 2, (1988), 193.}
and that “doxology is the context for all of theology.” And so I conclude by joining with the saints from all the ages, in expressing worship and glory to the Triune God in the words of the Gloria Patri,

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost.

As it was in the beginning, and now, and always, and to the ages of ages.

Amen.

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APPENDIX ONE

Theological reflection and Church Planting Questionnaire

Question 1: What is your name and your current ministry role or assignment?

Question 2: What has been/is your connection to church planting ministries?

Question 3: Do you think it is necessary for church planting/church planters to engage in theological reflection? Why?

Question 4: How would you describe the nature and purpose of theological reflection?

Question 5: How would you respond to the criticism that church planting is a practice that lacks robust theological reflection?

Question 6: Can you give examples where you have seen or experienced theological reflection work effectively in Church Planting circles?

Question 7: Does theological reflection on church planting take place within your own theological tradition? If so, how is that done?

Question 8: What are some of the ways in which church planters could more effectively practise theological reflection?

Question 9: What are some of the insights you have personally gained into the practice of church planting by your own theological reflections in the last 10 years?

Question 10: What are some of the issues in church planting, which you think, need further theological investigation or reflection?

Rev. Trevor Hutton
June 2012
APPENDIX TWO

5 Tribes of UK Church Planters
[2nd public version January 2008]

This table aims to be sympathetic to all the tribes. The writers are most interested in fruitful dialogue between them. The mission before us will need all our contributions. It is not the last word on the subject and boundaries between groups are often porous, with groups bridging them (Lings and Murray)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attitude to or focus on:</th>
<th>Evangelical Pragmatists</th>
<th>Revivalist Believers</th>
<th>Alternative Emerging</th>
<th>Mission-shaped Church Initiators</th>
<th>Post-Christendom Explorers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>Conversion, church growth, social transformation</td>
<td>Saving souls hastens the end; hope for revival, church growth</td>
<td>Authentic church, cultural relevance, spiritual recovery</td>
<td>Let mission shape all expressions. Create not franchise</td>
<td>Creative and holistic expressions of mission/church on the margins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture &amp; World</td>
<td>Aim for relevance, avoid compromise</td>
<td>Conflict between the powers, avoid accommodation</td>
<td>Reject dualism, affirm/attune to emerging culture</td>
<td>Double listening to God through word and world</td>
<td>Seeking contextual and counter-cultural engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exile Motif</td>
<td>Acknowledged for pragmatic reasons, but the world was never our home</td>
<td>Repudiated as unbelief, prayer for revival</td>
<td>Accepted and applied to world and church</td>
<td>Accepted, applied to church as marginalised</td>
<td>Welcomed as an opportunity for repentance and renewal</td>
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<tr>
<td>Inherited Church</td>
<td>Critical – lacking energy, strategy and courage</td>
<td>Critical – lacking spirituality, vision and faith</td>
<td>Critical – locked into modernism and controlling</td>
<td>Affirming – mixed economy valued and pursued</td>
<td>Affirming but also suspicious of the Christendom legacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church History</td>
<td>New Testament and Reformation</td>
<td>Mainly interested in times of growth/revival</td>
<td>Eclectic – drawing on many resources</td>
<td>Interest in reworking the 4 classic marks of the church</td>
<td>Interest in various dissenting traditions, notably Anabaptism</td>
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<td><strong>Charismatic/Pentecostal</strong></td>
<td><strong>Generous Orthodoxy</strong></td>
<td><strong>Orthodoxy sought and welcomed in all traditions</strong></td>
<td><strong>Orthodox but some critique of evangelicalism</strong></td>
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<th><strong>Hermeneutics</strong></th>
<th><strong>Concern for plain meaning and application focus</strong></th>
<th><strong>Inspired Word and Rhema</strong></th>
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<th><strong>Communal/missional approach, open to fresh interpretations</strong></th>
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<td><strong>Jesus</strong></td>
<td>Personal saviour, substitutionary death, risen Lord</td>
<td>Personal saviour, healer, deliverer, coming King</td>
<td>Incarnate Christ, focus on Jesus not Christianity</td>
<td>The whole Jesus event sets missional and ecclesial patterns</td>
<td>Kingdom-oriented, contextually Jesus-centred</td>
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</table>

| **Paradigmatic texts (in Matthew)** | **Mt 4:18-20; Mt 13:47-48; Mt 28:19-20** | **Mt 16:18-19; Mt 9:35-38; Mt 10:6-8** | **Mt 11:28-30; Mt 13:31-33; Mt 13:52** | **Mt 9:16-17; Mt 13:3-8; Mt 22:8-10** | **Mt 9:9-11; Mt 11:4-6; Mt 25:31-40** |

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<th><strong>Holistic mission, suspicion towards evangelism</strong></th>
<th><strong>5 Marks of Mission. Hermeneutic: priority of community</strong></th>
<th><strong>Holistic mission, including evangelism but antipathy to past institutional forms.</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Mission Focus</strong></td>
<td><strong>The lost – undifferentiated</strong></td>
<td><strong>The lost – undifferentiated</strong></td>
<td><strong>Seek Kingdom more than Church</strong></td>
<td><strong>Emphasize non-churched</strong></td>
<td><strong>Emphasize kingdom and non-churched</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Mission Fruit</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Mainly de-churched. Past CP have proven track record</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Other faiths</strong></td>
<td><strong>Exclusivist but moderate and some engagement</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Often inclusivist, open to partnership but still missional</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Managerial and strategic, generally male-dominated</td>
<td>Inspirational and charismatic, male with female</td>
<td>Anti-authoritarian, consensual, gender equality</td>
<td>Innovative, team-oriented, men and women</td>
<td>Contextual, team-oriented, creative, men and women</td>
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<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>Bounded: activist, mission-oriented, functional</td>
<td>Bounded, activist, many meetings, mission-oriented</td>
<td>Centred, few formal meetings, friendship, food</td>
<td>Mainly centred, mission-oriented, welcoming</td>
<td>Centred, mission-oriented, food and friendship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Members</td>
<td>Predominantly white, middle-class</td>
<td>Mixed ethnicity and class</td>
<td>Very largely white, middle-class</td>
<td>White, middle-class except community development, fresh expressions</td>
<td>White, middle-class except inner-city church plants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectations</td>
<td>Discovering and honing effective growth strategies</td>
<td>Revival and significant growth</td>
<td>Uninterested in numbers, concern for authenticity</td>
<td>Discovering fresh ways to impact the non-churched</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>Relevants</td>
<td>Revisionist</td>
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<td>Reconstructionist</td>
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5 tribes: A way to identify distinctives, in order to offer understanding across the diversity (George Lings and Stuart Murray, with their teams: 2006-2008).

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APPENDIX 3

Transcripts of Interviews (in alphabetical order)

Interviews were held with the following

Modupe Afolabi: Executive Administrator of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, Central Office in the United Kingdom.


Colin Baron: New Frontiers, National Leader and trainer and local planting practitioner.


Gary Gibbs: Director of REACH (evangelism and church planting department at Elim Pentecostal Church).

Andrew Grinnell (former leader of 614 Squadron for the Salvation Army, and urban Missioner and Leeds Churches Together).

Bob and Mary Hopkins: Anglican Church Planting Initiatives, part of the national Fresh Expressions team, Church Mission Society, Order of Mission and the network of St. Thomas’s Churches in Sheffield.

Stephen Lindridge: Connexional Missioner for Fresh Expressions (Methodist)

George Lings: Director of Research at the Church Army.

Derek Purnell: Urban Ministry Consultant with Urban Presence, teacher and trainer in Urban ministry and core team member of an urban missional community in Newton Heath, Manchester.

Martin Robinson: Principal of Springdale College and Chief Executive Officer of Together In Mission, leader in the Fellowship of the Church of Christ.

Andrew Vertigan: Salvation Army Missioner

Stuart Murray Williams: Anabaptist network and Urban Expression.
INTERVIEW ONE

Modupe Afolabi: Executive Administrator of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, Central Office in the United Kingdom

Question 1: What is your name and your current ministry role or assignment?

My name is Modupe Afolabi and my current role is the Executive Administrator of the Redeemed Christian Church of God, Central Office in the United Kingdom.

Question 2: What has been/is your connection to church planting ministries?

One of the core cardinal visions of the Redeemed Christian Church of God is Church Planting. In furtherance of the commitment of the RCCG to global evangelisation, the mission is committed to church planting by establishment of a church within 5 minutes driving distance of a church in the developed nations and 5 minutes walking distance of a church in developing nations. As the Executive Administrator of RCCG, I have been actively involved in the implementation of the church planting mandate of the mission for almost a decade now.

Question 3: Do you think it is necessary for church planting/church planters to engage in theological reflection? Why?

Theological reflection is essential in the life of a Christian and as such a church planter should be engaged in continual theological reflection. Theological reflection provides the opportunity for a church planter to learn from his/her activities when he or she has the opportunity to think about them, analyse them, and draw conclusions about their meaning.

Question 4: How would you describe the nature and purpose of theological reflection?

The nature of Theological reflection is to bring about a review of an experience in relation to a desired initiative. Experience can include one’s own or another’s – present or past – individual or collective.

The purpose is oftentimes contemplative and a discerning process (or processes) of the relation between theology and the human factor (being) in a designated task.

Question 5: How would you respond to the criticism that church planting is a practice that lacks robust theological reflection?

I am personally of the opinion that Church planting does not lack robust theological reflection from the experiential perspective. To make an assertion that Church Planting lacks robust theological reflection is too broad a generalisation. I am of the opinion that theological reflection is carried out by most ministers, missionaries and church planters but not necessarily within the context of academic nomenclature.
Question 6: Can you give examples where you have seen or experienced theological reflection work effectively in Church Planting circles?

At various times, I have observed that some parish pastors within my church tradition oftentimes refrain from their church planting commitments and activities for a while to evaluate their experience, processes, successes and challenges. Oftentimes seeking reassurance from the Holy Spirit through prayer and discernment, they are led to change certain aspects of their processes and practice, which were a product of theological reflection.

Question 7: Does theological reflection on church planting take place within your own theological tradition? If so, how is that done?

Yes, as noted above, Church Planters are encouraged to take time off church planting by attending seminars on church planting to provide opportunities for reflective practice and discern the mind of the Holy Spirit about their commitment. Also, some of the planters/practitioners make use of contemplative approaches and models.

Question 8: What are some of the ways in which church planters could more effectively practise theological reflection?

I think there are three that come to mind that are essential. These are:

First, Contemplative Practice.
Second, Spiritual Direction (through a Spiritual Director)
Third, Training

Question 9: What are some of the insights you have personally gained into the practice of church planting by your own theological reflections in the last 10 years?

Three things come to mind: First, theological reflection provides an opportunity for informed decisions. Second, theological reflection creates a clear sense of commitment and direction. Third, theological reflection creates an opportunity to discern and listen to the Holy Spirit.

Question 10: What are some of the issues in church planting, which you think, need further theological investigation or reflection?

The issue that comes to mind for me is how Church Growth can best occur in a cross-cultural context.

Rev. Trevor Hutton
September 2012
INTERVIEW TWO


Question 1: What is your name and your current ministry role or assignment?

My name is Rev. Dr. Timothy Charles Aho. I’m involved in church planting a network of Simple churches in the West Midlands and I work with a mission organization called Christian Ministry Fellowship International and in the UK am part of the denomination Fellowship of Churches of Christ in GB and Ireland, and I’m planting in Shirley, Solihull, in the West Midlands.

Question 2: What has been/is your connection to church planting ministries?

My connection with church planting actually started pretty early in my Christian experience when I taught conversational English in Japan as part of a church planting effort there back in ’81 and ’82. And then just prior to coming to England for about 12-18 months we were part of a new church plant more attending and observing the leadership team and some of the things they were experiencing in planting the church in ’92 and ’93. Then we moved to England in ’94 with not a lot of personal experience in planting church, but certainly a desire to plant church. That was our commission to be involved in planting churches with the Fellowship and our original agreement was to work with the Fellowship, having a network, a family or couple with whom we would work to jointly plant a church. That never happened so we had to get on our own and feel our way along the way. We ended up, after identifying an area in Cranmore Estate to work in and working in that area for some time there, was a new build area just outside of Shirley and we were joined by colleagues to plant what became a more traditional Sunday morning focus church plant in 2002. We finished our role in that in 2006, and then after a furlough State side, we began working on planting a simple church network as our vision from 2007 and have been in the process of trialling and piloting and experiencing what might be a simple church in those several years. So also writing up a Doctorate of Ministry Dissertation called Planting a Simple Church Network in the West Midlands of England, which I completed last year and we’ve been part of our team here which has been involved in church planting since ’94 and also part of the church planting task group of the Fellowship of Churches of Christ since 2004.

Question 3: Do you think it is necessary for church planting/church planters to engage in theological reflection? Why?

Yes, is the answer to that question.

It is absolutely necessary for church planting teams and church planters to engage in theological reflection. I think it is absolutely necessary because reflecting on what you’re trying, in terms of practical implementation, compared to one that actually works, given the context both locally and culturally, that needs to come together (and it doesn’t often do that because often there is no time for reflection because you’re so stuck into
it). What one is experimentally and practically implementing needs to be reflected upon with regard to the local and cultural context.

**Question 4: How would you describe the nature and purpose of theological reflection?**

I think at the most basic, this idea of ‘praxis’ is where you act and reflect, is really important to where you’re (it’s this kind of constant cycle) doing something but you don’t just carry on to the next thing without having some sort of process where you reflect on what you’ve done. But I probably would refer to a book that I used in my Dissertation by Paul Ballard and John Pritchard (*Practical Theology in Action: Christian Thinking in the Service of Church and Society*) about theological reflection where they described it as a four-stage process of pastoral cycle of experience, exploration, reflection and action.

Well, I wouldn’t say that I’m very good at this necessarily; it’s about a very specific, planned, intentional, deliberate process whereby you are thinking about what you’ve done theologically in order to understand what is happening in the spiritual realm (if you will), what is happening on the ground and evaluating it as to whether it’s appropriate and then feeding that into what you do next.

**Question 5: How would you respond to the criticism that church planting is a practice that lacks robust theological reflection?**

I think it’s generally true though I think there are more deliberate attempts now at doing theological reflection. I think it has been the case certainly for the last 15, 20 years that there hasn’t been a lot of thought, because maybe more so in the American contexts, it’s been all about replicating a style or a model of church which everybody hopes will become a mega church one day. That’s changed a lot in the last 5 – 10 years because there’s been a lot of theological reflection on it, but the general criticism for an individual or for a team in church planting, is that there isn’t a lot of theological reflection because they’re either not trained for it or because they’re so caught up in their own circumstances, and maybe even their own vision, that they don’t have the capacity to see from outside what they’re doing. And there isn’t any kind of intentionality in getting away from that.

I think the same thing is kind of applied to the spirituality of church planters. I think the literature demonstrates that in the 90s, 90s, and early part of the first decade of this millennia that there wasn’t a lot of attention paid to the spirituality of a church planter. It’s only in the last few years where there’s been a bit more. I think, actually, Martin Robinson’s book on church planting in 2006 (*Planting Mission-Shaped Churches Today*) was one of the first books to even have a chapter on the spirituality of a church planter. And I think that’s been something missing because that also then relates to the whole idea of theological reflection. If a church planter isn’t paying attention to their own spiritual being, how they’re hearing God, then they’re not going to be taking a lot of effort to be doing a lot of theological reflection either.

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Question 6: Can you give examples where you have seen or experienced theological reflection work effectively in Church Planting circles?

I think there’s been some level of theological reflection in church planting circles in terms of our own Church Planting Task Group of the Fellowship of the Churches of Christ. I think we spent some time thinking about that. I don’t know that it’s been as deliberate in terms of saying “okay we’re church planters, let’s do theological reflection on what’s been happening in church planting.” But while it hasn’t been deliberate, I think there’s been a low level of it.

There’s also been a couple of “think tanks” that Martin Robinson has been a part of, whether it is Springdale College or Together in Mission. There’ve been several sorts of meetings he’s been involved in, for instance, one thing that one of our colleagues did in conjunction with Together in Mission in 2002 or 2003, was to do a review of all the church planting training programs in the UK and presented a paper of his research and that was helpful to see because nobody knew from a more macro view, what was happening.

And certainly there wasn’t a lot of assessment of church planters happening, in a formal sense. It was all about getting people on the ground planting, but there wasn’t much in there about theological reflection that we could see. So, the actual process of getting that research together contributed at least a lower level of theological reflection. Certainly our culture effects church planting, and understanding of church.

Probably for me, where most of my theological reflection has happened was because of starting my DMin degree at Fuller Seminary in 2003, and the on-going classes enabled me to do theological reflection, though it wasn’t church planting focused as such, in terms of church planters coming together to do theological reflection.

If there has been theological reflection, on my part, over the years it’s probably been because of the fact that I’ve been fairly self-aware, for the need to be self-aware from early on, because of my upbringing and going to Bible college, going to seminary and taking classes that helped me think about who I was, part of that spiritual formation. But part of that is theological reflection too, maybe not in a defined process sense but you’re doing theological reflection when you think about who you are, your identity in Christ, thinking about the nature of the Trinity and the Fatherhood of God, and Presence of the Holy Spirit, and place of Jesus, those sorts of things and you can’t help it. The identity, I think this comes from a basic leadership principle; you can’t produce what you aren’t. That is, you’re going to reproduce who you are. So, if you haven’t thought about, theologically, who you are, you’re not going to be aware of the kind of people, or disciples, or churches that you’re going to be making.

I just want to add to that, I think, the writing of folks like Stuart Murray Williams, Martin Robinson, and others of that kind of ilk, from some of the discussions that they’ve had at a high level of denominational gatherings, is that they’ve done some reflection together about church planting and the nature of church planting in the UK. So there’s been some theological reflection at that level, which has been very helpful and has been shaping to the importance of theological reflection at a more base level, and I don’t mean base as a sort of pejorative term, I mean base in terms of the actual church
planters, or church planting teams on the ground. They’re doing more theological reflection as a result of some of that thinking on a more scholarly level, by people who have been practitioners, or coaching and mentoring church planters.

**Question 7:** You have already said a little bit about theological reflection in your own tradition in response to earlier questions but is there anything else you’d like to add to the question: Does theological reflection on church planting take place within your own theological tradition? If so, how is that done?

I’m certain there’s probably some theological thinking taking place though I don’t know how deliberate or intentional, or how defined the process is. I mean, when I was doing my dissertation my advisor suggested I do some stuff on theological reflection. I mean, I’d done it but I didn’t actually demonstrate it within the paper. But it was theological reflection that caused us to shift from doing the form of church, which was focused on a Sunday morning, planning a worship service, to the simple church approach. So I tried to demonstrate that in my paper. I’m not sure my advisor was happy with the way I did that, or he thought I’d come to different conclusions about what would happen if I’d done that properly from his point of view, I don’t know. But I reached my conclusions based on my theological reflection, so I hold to that. If theological reflection is happening it’s happening more at a kind of seminary level, where people are sort of trained in it more to do with general pastoral ministry, I think, rather than church planting.

Is this happening in church planting? I think it’s happening more at the level of, okay, in terms of fellowship here, it’s happening sort of in an ad hoc basis in the Church Planting Task Group of the Fellowship of Churches of Christ so we’re talking in terms of church plants, we’re talking about ethnicity and so on. In the U.S. I think it’s happening in terms of more the assessment centres that are taking place, there’s some there, it begins at a very low level I think. Where it’s probably happening the most would be in the coaching, and mentoring systems that are being put in place where coaches are helping with skills and mentors are helping with the spirituality, if you will, of the person of the church planter and there may be some help there. But, I don’t think, I’m getting the sense from what you’re trying to research here that there are models, or specific processes in our tradition where theological reflection takes place in a deliberate intentional fashion.

I think where this is happening, and this sort of answers question 8, is in more peer groups and in the coaching and mentoring processes that people undertake. So, one example of this would be when church planters in a given area get together on a regular basis just to talk about what’s happening in their church plants. Theological reflection happens as part of those processes in a low level fashion because people are reflecting on culture, they’re talking about post-modern, post-Christendom context, they’re talking about what’s happening in their own region or their own locality and about why’d this thing go so badly or why did this go so well and thinking through that theologically, together, so I think in the peer groups, that’s happening.

I think also it’s happening when different groups of church planters, or church planting teams are gathering together to share experience, and they begin reflecting on those experiences together and I’m thinking about such things as the Growing Shoots (http://www.growingshoots.co.uk), which is the kind of independent evangelical
churches group, with gathering people together to talk about church planting and kind of raising the profile of it as people get together in those kinds of ongoing gatherings to talk about their experiences. But, I don’t think there’s anything where there’s a more formal kind of process, I don’t see that happening, within our tradition in a very intentional fashion, apart from maybe seminary situations.

In your theological tradition, would it be fair to say therefore that theological reflection takes place experientially, reflectively through conversation, through dialogue, through intuition and would those be the main expressions, rather than any formal, intentional models?

Yes.

Is that a fair summary?

Yeah. And I would say, also in peer groups, and like-minded groups, coaching and mentoring relationships.

Question 8: What are some of the ways in which church planters could more effectively practise theological reflection?

Part of the response has something to do with what you consider a church planter, and what you consider as church. So you almost have to go back a few steps. If church is a Sunday morning group where you’re gathering an initial crowd and then turning them into church with a hundred or a couple hundred people as your aim, you’ve got one view of church and an associated view of what a church planter is. If you’re talking about church as a gathering of 4, or 5, or 6 people meeting because they love Jesus and are committed to their local area and doing something missionally and are engaged in missional work within their community, then the person who has brought that group together is a church planter. But what’s the nature of theological reflection required? What’s required in one is much more simple than the other one which has more complex systems. And I think that’s an important thing to note.

One way to think about theological reflection for the simpler forms is you get people doing something with the minimum amount of training, just enough to do it, and then once they’ve done it, then you have a conversation with them and they’re reflecting theologically as well as other ways upon what they’ve experienced, which then feeds into their next experience. So, in that sense theological experience is an ongoing, low level, simple process that one is being coached and mentored in as an ongoing life practice, in their discipleship. If you’re talking about something much more complex where the systems are more complex and the leadership requires more complexity, and failures and success at least appear to have a larger ripple effect in a community, then I think the process of theological reflection required needs to be much more deliberate and intentional and require some training, or additional training in.

It’s almost like, without putting words in your mouth, the model of church and the process of church planting, might speak heavily into the model and process of theological reflection that’s required. Is that a fair comment on what you are saying?
Yeah. Yeah.

So perhaps in a simple church model where structures are simpler and more organic and in simpler forms, perhaps an appropriate model of theological reflection, needs to reflect some form of simplicity itself, would that be a fair summary of the point you are making?

Absolutely. And in some ways the moment you introduce a formal model of theological reflection you introduce complexity into the system. That make sense?

Question 9: What are some of the insights you have personally gained into the practice of church planting by your own theological reflections in the last 10 years?

Two things. The big one, is that culture, both Christian and secular has more impact and influence on strategies, measurements, implementation, vision, and goals than any church planter can ascertain when in the middle of a church plant.

So, what does that mean? I mean can you tease that out for me a little more?

A church planter is so part of their own context and culture they don't realize context and culture has actually impacted and influenced the way they strategize, the way they measure, the way they implement their strategy, the way they put their vision together, the way they articulate their goals. Both Christian culture and secular culture has more impact than they can ever imagine, because they're in the middle of it, and they don't see it. I think this is one of those things where, being from another culture helps a lot, thinking missionally helps a lot, and life experience helps a lot.

The second insight is that the insights we've gained directly contributed to our change of strategy. Our change of strategy from planting a church, which was focused on a Sunday morning worship service, but reflecting on that, reflecting on culture and on post-modern culture, reflecting on the nature of discipleship and church and scripture, directly contributed to our change of strategy where we're focusing on discipling where disciples become church and focusing on simple church rather than complex systems. And that's what my dissertation is about, really.

Question 10: What are some of the issues in church planting, which you think, need further theological investigation or reflection?

I didn't have as much time to think on this one as I would have liked, but the first thing that came to mind was the role, or the place, of discipleship, I think, particularly for church planters, the focus is so much about a church and the form of church and the model of church comes first before the local context, and culture, before, making disciples. And I've come around to the fact that actually the focus needs to be on making disciples. That's an important issue.

I think, secondary to that, is this idea of obedience-based discipleship – for lack of a better term – rather than knowledge based discipleship, or 'insight-based discipleship';
(see my DMin dissertation for an explanation of these). I think from my writing, one of the things I observed from my advisor was when I talked about obedience to Jesus, he started thinking hierarchical structures and he started thinking about inappropriate hierarchical structures about power and authority in a way that has been abused in the church but I was trying to talk about if you’re hearing the voice of Jesus, and he asks you to do something, if you’re a disciple you’re going to lovingly obey because you want to please him. So it’s not about Jesus putting you under his thumb, it’s actually about learning to trust him, and lovingly obey and I think maybe a bit more investigation into the whole idea of power and structure of authority and disciplining might be useful to reflect on.

Rev. Trevor Hutton
July 2012
INTERVIEW THREE

Colin Baron: New Frontiers, National Leader and trainer and local planting practitioner.

Question 1: What is your name and your current ministry role or assignment?

Colin Baron. Okay, I am a church planter, heading up a multi-site church plant in Manchester just having launched our third Sunday site. I have been in Manchester for 20 years (apart from two in America). I planted a few churches in my first stint and am doing a few more now. I have been on the New Frontiers International team and am heavily involved in church planting, just helping church planters in leadership ministries.

Question 2: What has been/is your connection to church planting ministries?
From what you have been saying your church planting connections go back many years?

Yes, um, nearly 25 years!

And in terms of those 25 years, just to draw things out a little, you have clearly been a practitioner. Are there other roles you have found yourself in?

Yes, I have planted several churches as the lead guy going in to make it happen, I have been in the front room of a number of guys who wanted to make it happen. I have been in the front room of guys who wanted to make church planting happen on their first night, and helped them week by week till they have gathered a few to make it happen. I have done some coaching, set up training courses, and stimulated church planting initiatives in different parts of the world.

And in terms of your work with New Frontiers, are you freelance or do you have an official role with them?

It varies. Over the last few years there has been a team which I have not been on recently so I have been basically freelance but actually I am just taking up more initiative in terms of the movement and reenergizing church planting training and initiatives. Historically I ran the training so I’ve gone in and out basically in terms of the organisation at least in “official capacity” if I can use that term.

Question 3: Do you think it is necessary for church planting/church planters to engage in theological reflection? Why?

I think it is a massive necessary thing! I think as we have chatted about before, a lot of church planters are incredibly practitioner orientated and as you know getting the first few people is such a hard grind that in a sense you are just grateful to see something grow. I help train leaders and so many leaders whether they are church planters or are in established churches are looking for an “off the peg” answer to how to get the first 10, 20, 200, 1000 and so I feel like if people can’t think conceptually and think biblically, then actually once they hit a barrier or problem or a different people group or whatever
(even in the same nation) they get stuck! So I am really keen that people think, and that is most of what I do. I don’t give many ABC’s. I try and help people think, so I feel it is massive!

**Question 4: How would you describe the nature and purpose of theological reflection?**

Let’s give a bit of an example. I think a lot of church planters sort of base their first thoughts on Acts 2 and so if you even look at the way they do their vision statements it’s all based around Acts 2 which is very community orientated, very “church” if I can use that term or people of God oriented, or community of God oriented. I feel like one of the reflections I have made for years now, and keep thinking of addressing, is going back to Mark 1 and therefore the Kingdom, Jesus coming and preaching the kingdom and building a community. And so just as an example of a reflection, if you start in the wrong place or only one place biblically, then actually you can miss and have an over emphasis on either the kingdom or working amongst the people or the community of God that you are building as the church.

Like in any denomination, even in a 30-year-old movement (e.g. New Frontiers) it can get stuck in certain ways, one generation forming a pattern and so just looking at worked 20 years ago, or 15 years ago, when there was a lot of people moving church. There was an established pattern of church planting that tended to be a movement around of the people of God and so therefore you could, like I experienced in Manchester, get 50 to 100 people quite quickly, but you can’t do that now so easily. So even the way that things are done, I feel like if you don’t look at concepts, don’t look at the theology, don’t look at the biblical principles, then actually you can think that what worked 15 years ago will work. You can’t really understand why but actually there were some social dynamics in the mix, and cultural dynamics that actually made it work. It wasn’t only a Biblical model per se but people thought it was. So therefore in both those scores, in those two examples, the need for Biblical reflection, theological reflection, I think is massive, just to be able to think through why things worked, and why they did not work. And I think you can only do that in reflection.

I notice that you use the term Biblical reflection a lot and draw on the Bible so is it important to you I reflection to see how you think the Bible speaks into situations?

Yeah, absolutely! So an example. I preached on Sunday how King David formed his first community and you know there are some interesting principles in there. A guy who was scared but there are lots of promises there, and different types of people who joined him. Biblically there are far more examples of how to build a community, how to gather your first people, than just one or two chapters in the New Testament. So that is for one thing, and just a whole Biblical narrative of God’s redemption for the earth. And I think also I reflect on the question, “What is success?” For example in a Muslim country when you can get 2, 3, 4, 5 people or where we are in the East of Manchester with a dechurched people (as you know), where it is hard work, a generation of unemployed, no aspiration which really affects the gospel, and so if you don’t have a theological and biblical underpinning of what you are trying to do, then actually you can feel like you are a failure, when in fact you could be a massive success cause how we
view success in the UK may be different than what we see for example in the 10:40 window. But actually there are some of those cultures in the UK! But if it is done without reflection, without looking at the whole sweep of the narrative of the Bible then actually we get a whole lot of disappointed people…and we don’t reach the people we should be reaching!

**Question 5: How would you respond to the criticism that church planting is a practice that lacks robust theological reflection?**

I think any project in the church, whether it is working with the poor, whether it is Crusade evangelism (a trite word...mass evangelism), so whatever it is tends to be done by “zealots” (laughs), tends to be done by “get goers” and therefore in that sense, in the main, they are not the reflective type of people. So you could argue that, highlighting church planting as lacking theological reflection, I don't think takes the bigger picture for me. I think there is more reflection than people think but again a standard church leader in an established church could have the same problem, of taking a product of the shelf and having no reflection in it, but takes it because it is working in America or part of the UK or Europe, or Africa or something like that, so they think it will work here, like Cell church and stuff like that, so I am not sure I totally buy the fact! I think it’s true but I don’t think it is just limited to church planting.

**Question 6: Does theological reflection on church planting take place within your own theological tradition? If so, how is that done?**

The movement is very theological from its roots. So in its training and teaching it has always had a high priority from Terry Virgo that started it right through. So in one sense it is renowned for its consistent Bible teaching and theological nuance. So in that sense there is a lot of reflection on certain parts of church. And therefore church planting gets a bit of “hit and miss” on that! So there will be reflection on what is a called out company, which tends to be a bit generic across the board. I think probably where some of the reflection isn’t is in some of the joined up bits, like church and kingdom, the poor but even that has more now going on. So I think because we don’t have a church planting department per se it tends to be “who is the practitioner and what is their theological acumen?”

**So in the main. Are you happy with the amount of theological reflection that goes on with the practitioners there in the movement (New Frontiers)?**

Yeah, I think I am. I think it is interesting that the average age of church planter has gone up and up (probably late 30’s) which actually reflects a more mature group of guys, often guys that have pastored churches, so in that sense there would be a lot more reflection. For me, I am going the other way and have a load of young guys but even then one has got a Masters in church history, and these are 20 year olds and they are bright boys! So I’m being a bit vague (laughs) but because it is a theological astute movement that does have implications for its church planters, they are reasonably robust biblically. I think the bigger issue is trying to contextualise that and also to try and get the concepts behind that when it comes to practice. Don’t know if that makes
sense? What I am trying to say is that I think there is a lot of reflection there. I am not sure it is always targeted! That’s what I’m waffling on about!

**Would you say it is intentional?**

It is definitely intentional but sometimes not targeted which are two different things.

**So by targeted, what do you mean? Could you clarify that for me a little more?**

Well you can do some intentional reflection about, for example, Simple Church and what that means, say for the gathered community. Stuff like that would go on all the time because it is central to who we are. But what I have just talked about in the joining up stuff, of kingdom etc…so by targeted I mean outside of that, looking a little bit around the corners.

**Question 7: Can you give examples where you have seen or experienced theological reflection work effectively in Church Planting circles?**

I don’t think I have really in one sense cause everything is kinda single focussed when you go somewhere. So I went to hear an America guy a couple of months ago from Chicago, and he was really helpful and I read a couple of his books just of the bat, especially about multiplication, and Jesus calling of the disciples, and the Great Commission and what was all that about and just the whole thing of just being more radical and of multiplying and getting people out quicker and low cost and for me that was a theological reflection though it was very practical thing that made me go back to what I’ve been studying. But it is one bit of a whole so I don’t think I have been enough into anybody’s movement even though I have touched a lot of movements over the years and had conversations with different church streams, organisations and denominations connecting with senior guys in terms of what they are doing. But it tends not to be over a long enough period of time to answer that question as you or they tend to have a need or an issue or a focus that you or they are wanting to talk about so it’s not holistic. So I don’t think I have.

**Do you think this would be a good thing or…?**

Well, I am a practitioner but I feel I love concepts. I love to know why and I love people to know why. But I don’t like just sitting down and endlessly debating so I just don’t have the time or the energy for that. We’re just setting up a new programme ourselves in Manchester and it is interesting because I have a guy who is helping me to put the theological background to it all and already debating with him how much our vision and the multiple church plants drives that and how much a block of theological truth drives it! So I think there is a little bit of “nice tension” there.

**Are there other things you haven’t said that you’d like to note or say or share?**

Over the last three of four years there has been a very high emphasis on mentoring and coaching and the guy that has led that is a very bright guy, he’s quite detailed and he wants people to think. So there has been quite a bit of emphasis on that on a one-to-one basis. Over years we have done conferences and church plant “boot camp"
weekends and it tends to get mixed in with our 4-year theological training in Biblical studies that is progressive and did a bit into that. The big argument, which I guess every theological college has as the same challenge, is that the practitioner wants more practice weaved in. So going back, I think it is the targeted reflection because a lot of it is done generally and in a broader sweep as opposed to church planters trying to talk it all through.

Having said that we are starting to. After Christmas a whole network of church planting training communities right across the nation will be set up, which will be video linked and the whole point of that is to have a subject which will be presented in and then unpacked locally and that will be everything from culture to contextualisation to some theology. So we are actually setting that up after Christmas as a pilot.

Can I ask you a bit more about that? Why did this come about? Why were they set up?

25 years ago I was planting one of the first New Frontiers churches to be planted in terms of an organisation. There were a few before that but I mean something we corporately did. And then there was a whole wave of people that wanted to church plant so we used to do this “big day event” where 300 people would turn up and we’d do some biblical teaching and theological teaching then in the afternoon we’d say “there are ten places to go to!” So that was what we did for a few years and that got us a number of the bat. Maybe something like 50 church plants.

After that, it got that people did not want to travel to big conferences unless there were the big speakers (as you know people are too busy these days), so then it became more coaching orientated and I think also what happened then was that it got almost driven that way, became almost elitist (but that not the right word), you had to be almost more “mature”. So when I started I was 21/22 when I first started church, 25 on my first church plant, 30 on my second, and then just rolled them out. I had a 25-year-old ring me up a few days ago and said I am thinking of getting trained when would be a good time? I said, you know (laughs) you are probably at your peak time now, so get on and do it…go! Young couple, no kids, good couple but it is that thinking, almost, I need to be around a bit and yet…! And so it’s when I think of things like Simple church and the whole fluidity that comes with some of that, I think I have done a lot of reflection on that, and I think we start in quite simple ways. That’s how I do it.

So what I have been thinking and looking at is how we engage a whole load of younger guys in church planting initiatives and how we train more fluidly so it’s like we almost have Simple church and simple training across the board. So I have 10-15 guys that I have here, some students from the Uni so we are just trying to roll that out. We are saying to the guys, let’s get people that want to church plant, want to be a team, gather them once a month, have some food, and let’s beam down some teaching that’s interactive through some clever technology (simple but clever) and then you have a framework to unpack locally so you have the best of both worlds.

So do these people live close geographically?
Yes, absolutely! In fact, I remember being in your office about a year ago and there was something that sparked me as we met a guy there that used to meet in a pub with a number of guys, do you remember that? I thought actually I do that with a number of students and we could roll that out, and have 100 or 200 people meeting of the bat across the country, and because, say 20 of them as a group love that environment and it’s a safer environment, we could reengage a whole lot of people. So that was my goal, it was to get communities going but we need to do it in a way that is relational, has some coaching, got some debate, got some reflection, and got the more catalytic guys gathering people in their own areas but giving them a bit of a framework to do it. And also I want my guys to be part of something much bigger, as there’s something about that size which I am absolutely in to even though I am a massive church planter with 2’s and 3’s. There is something about people feeling they are part of something bigger in landscape.

So this will be a national initiative? Will it happen across the country?

Oh yeah. We gathered 15 catalytic guys about 3 or 4 weeks ago for 24 hours and taught them about it and we are gonna do a bit of a pilot run to make sure the technology works for us in November and hopefully roll it out after Christmas. We had a guy over from The Hague, only an hour’s time difference away from here, good English, asking if he could do it where he is. Just means we can get some speakers from around the world, depending on time differences, and do it so people can text questions in as it is going which is about a half hour of a three-hour morning and there will be food and that, and we can actually do them in pubs, literally have 3 or 4 around a commuter screen and discuss it around a table. So we are trying to think organically and structurally and use the best of clever technology simply.

Question 8: What are some of the ways in which church planters could more effectively practise theological reflection?

Perhaps you have answered this question already particularly in the light of what you have been saying about the learning communities, but is there anything else that you want to add?

I just genuinely feel we have to help people to think critically and theologically. I was with some guys a few weeks ago and I was just going through some critical analysis of our last 30 years in terms of church planting (New Frontiers) and some people just didn’t like it. They feel like, “Ah, are we doing anything right?” but for me it is part of the process of learning. I remember when I came to Manchester someone said to me, cause I had done two churches, and one of them I thought, “I’m not gonna do that again” (laughs) and someone said to me, “So you know what you’re not gonna do, do you know what you are gonna do?” I thought at least it’s a good start cause I’ve done some critique of the loneliness, just the whole thing of what we’ve been doing. I’m not gonna do that way again if I can help it! I just feel almost if people are just taught to think and ask questions and not just to read books then I think we are half way there in my opinion. So they can try and unpack it. You can be through a whole year of study and still not have theological reflection. You’ve just heard a whole lot of words. So trying to help church planters be able to assess, to critique, to look at the Scriptures, and the whole of the Scriptures, and to find theology and practice right through, as I said about
the illustration earlier, from Genesis through to Revelation, I think will help as opposed to honing in on three of four chapters which I think a lot of people have perhaps done.

Question 9: What are some of the insights you have personally gained into the practice of church planting by your own theological reflections in the last 10 years?

I mean perseverance which is what they say when you go to a church planting conference! But the reality is there. I’m 55 and you know these last 5 years in the East side of the city has been lonely, it has been hard work, and I’ve had some good success before and have started with minimal things. Everything I have reflected on that I said I wouldn’t do I have done in terms of being under resourced, it was a hard area but God opened up an opportunity and it seemed the right thing so I had to go through the door. So one thing I have learned is that you can do all the reflection in the world, get all the best practice in the world but the reality is all the ducks don’t row up and you’ve still just got to grind it through! I said to our guys now that we are just about at the tipping point having about 100/120 adults so that is probably first thing.

I think the second thing is that I do love multiple church planters! The camaraderie, which is why I love doing these communities, is massive. Loneliness is a killer. It also breeds insularity in churches, they tend to do everything, so the whole church implodes a little bit in terms of the leader just getting tired and they need to delegate, and raise leaders and it needs energy and lonely, tried church planters tend to...actually I talked to one guy the other day. He preaches mostly and said it was easier to preach than get someone else to do it cause he has a small group of people, so I love it when we can get a team of guys. I have a team of guys now in Manchester and we’ve got 4 or 5 multi sties going and it’s just lovely to see them working together. So that’s the second thing.

You said some times “this is the way we used to do it” or the “way it was done”. Can I ask in your view are people planting churches in the same way, or the same types of churches, or are there changes there you’ve seen?

Interesting in New Frontiers I think we’ve got a little bit stuck, cause we’re actually one of the premier groups, in terms of the amount of churches we are planting, we are still doing pretty well, but I think the next move is gonna be in the poorer more difficult parts of the nation, there is no doubt about that from a UK perspective, cause the big cities have some big churches in them and numbers of them, but things will have to change, is changing, and as a movement I feel we are trying to feel our way through, not wanting to go down the Messy church route or dechurched routes for example and therefore there can be a bit of a counter swing to say “well we’ve done it this way!” So I think there is a way through that where faithful growth can occur, big churches can come out of messy environments, so there is a need to try and amalgamate these things. So I think and feel like that’s the work, that’s the change that needs to go on. It is a little polarised, not in our movement but across the board, those that are wanting to go for growth and big church, and the extreme ends of the kinda dechurched, the kinds of house church, the guys who feel like we don’t want to go congregational any more. And I feel like if we don’t get the two together, which is what my refection is and I am really passionate about, so that actually we can have loads of people being successful in actually getting a community together, regardless of how big it is, but actually a faith
element and a spiritual element that the kingdom does grow so that in the poor area we can get some big kicking churches.

In terms of New Frontiers do you think there has always been one way of doing a model of church or is that not accurate and do you think in the future New Frontiers might develop different models of how it plants churches based on these new changes you have been talking about?

Basically I think there have been two phases broadly in our movement. First it started in the house church renewal so Terry Virgo started going around Sussex with one or two guys who wanted to start in their homes just a prayer house as part of the Charismatic renewal, so that’s basically how the first network of church plants happened. They were effectively House churches. And I think it is true to say that all those that started like this have all now warehouses that they have bought in the Sussex area, you know a 1000 people a couple of them, so it started there, and pretty organically actually! Then with the Bible weeks and just the whole faith to build a big community we started to buy buildings, rent buildings, even though we still had that House church tag which is kinda interesting.

I think then the next wave of people, which is where I came in, through the transition; I got converted in a House church basically from a Methodist church in my teens. So then I think the model was really: gather your first 50, rent a building, and do a big launch. Grow! So if you look at one or two of the church planting documents or manuals it is about how do you get your first 10 people, then how do you get this and that…Bang, Bang, Bang, then how do you do your launch? So it was quite American in that sense.

When I came to Manchester we broke a bit of that model by just starting in people’s homes. We were just more, or people that looked at us said we were much more Cell church or now say we are more Simple Church, because we start in Vodka bars or in all sorts of places. But the goal for me was always to grow into a kind of building. I think because most of the new guys have been converted or been disciple in a church that is more established (meets in a school or has got its own building now), I think there is a journey for some of them to make to reassess how do we gather in the poorer, difficult, racially mixed areas and people from different religious backgrounds as well. I think that sort of reflection, and I often speak on it now, on what our are goals or objectives and what is success like here? So I think that is an open conversation at this point in time and I think not enough people have gone back to the roots and those that have tend to want to be dechurched cause that was a spontaneous renewal and had the life of the Spirit there.

Question 10: What are some of the issues in church planting, which you think, need further theological investigation or reflection?

Well I think that we need to ask, “When is a church a church?” This always is an interesting question and as I say you go into some very hard areas (or say the 10:40 window) and you take a different view than you would in Manchester! You can’t have a culturally defined view of church I don’t think. I think you need to have a Biblically defined view, as somewhere there needs to be some consistency there. And I think
short/long term communities needs to be thought through. So I am nervous about communities that start and two years later celebrate the fact that they have stopped but on the other hand (tendency in our movement) that everything has to be there forever! But it is because there is a high view of church, the Bride of Christ, a called out community, so how could you dare sort of think of a couple of years. I think some reflection on that might be useful.

Lifecycles?

Yeah. I think if you go to either end of the spectrum either can pacify you. At one end it is too elitist and at the other end I think it doesn't have a high regard for the people of God and the shepherding of the people of God and the called out community. So I feel it's a big issue and actually it's a big issue for us as a movement.

And before we conclude I noted that you also mentioned a number of times the question of “what is success?” Is that an important conversation for your movement?

It’s certainly a conversation I have and am interested in. I have had reasonable success and even now from what we are doing it might be described as a measure of success but what I do feel is that I am drawn, passionate for 20 year olds, (I'm not ageist cause we got a 67-year-old with me launching stuff) but I do feel whether it is a 20-year-old, or an older guy, if your definition of success is wrong, then you just stifle initiative, you basically make the bar far too high. Maturity in my opinion partly comes through actually getting your hands dirty, works of service, and lots of the guys that are running big churches now or movements started in their 20’s, and if success is what you are in, which is a church of 200 and you are 22, then you haven’t a hope cause at that point you’re not preaching, or whatever. So the bar is too high. So I am really keen to mobilise the people of God so that 1000’s can get on the road and just get started. And the second thing is to get some consistency internationally (theological consistency) in terms of when is a church a church, for I think that will actually help. So on these scores I am personally motivated and am trying to motivate others.

Rev. Trevor Hutton
August 2012
INTERVIEW FOUR


Question 1: What is your name and your current ministry role or assignment?

I am Bishop Graham Cray. I’m a Bishop of the Church of England. I’m the Missioner for the Archbishops of Canterbury and York and leader of the Fresh Expressions Initiative, which at the moment involves the Church of England, the Methodist Church of England, Ireland, and Wales, the United Reformed Church of England, Ireland, and Wales, the Congregational Federation, and as of about now, the Church of Scotland, and partners including the Church Mission Society, the Church Army, Anglican Church Planting Initiative, and the 24/7 prayer movement.

The other relevant information is that, for the Church of England, I chair the panel that interviews potential ordained pioneer ministers to see if they’re really pioneers and as well I chaired the working party that wrote the report Mission Shaped Church. I also chair Soul Survivor.

Question 2: What has been/is your connection to church planting ministries?

So my connection to church planting ministries has been a long-term relationship with those who have done it. I did encourage a group called Warehouse, now called Visions, to plant what became an alternative worship congregation when I was Vicar of St. Michael’s in York, but I’ve always been interested in the relationship between gospel and culture and therefore the shape of the church. I therefore have been an encourager of those who church plant and those who reflect upon church planting.

I’ve got a long-term relationship with George Lings at the Church Army (Sheffield Centre) who was record keeping about this even while he was a Vicar in Kent, and with Bob and Mary Hopkins of the Anglican Church Planting Initiatives. I’ve spoken at various network conferences including some of the Church of England day conferences on church planting based at Holy Trinity Brompton that began years ago, so am a long term encourager and supporter of those who do it.

Question 3: Do you think it is necessary for church planting/church planters to engage in theological reflection? Why?

Church planting is an engagement between the gospel and culture for the planting of a new Christian community. It is therefore an exercise in theological reflection; it’s either theological reflection done consciously and well, or unconsciously and badly, and I guess there is the option of consciously and badly! If we were in the context where to plant a church was simply to put a copy of something we already have in somewhere else, where there isn’t one, it might not need a great deal of reflection, though I still think it would require some. However, in the context of the massive changes of culture and the church where models of church are shaped around Christendom and modernity and now that we’re in a different stage of modernity (or Post-modernity) it requires
serious reflection about the relationship between gospel and culture. In the Church of England all priests are trained in theological reflection, at least that’s the intention, I was the Principal of Ridley Hall, Cambridge for 9 years and we were certainly doing that, and required to do that. Church planters require it in a more acute form but I think we’ll come to that further down the questions.

Perhaps you could explanation to us the way in which you use the ‘church planting’ and ‘Fresh Expressions’ of church and secondly to ask if theological reflection was intentional from the beginning in the Fresh Expressions movement?

Yeah, I will come to the second one later if that’s fine?

But the first one, there’s a certain element of complexity about this! As far as we were concerned when we wrote Mission Shaped Church, we were coining a new synonym for church planting. Now you’ll find the definition for church planting in Mission Shaped Church, and Fresh Expressions of church was a way to convey the variety of new models that were beginning to appear in the Church of England. When we listed these under a dozen headings to give some sort of spectrum, we included, if you, like traditional church planting as a Fresh Expression of church. My main answer that I’m going to give you as supplementary therefore is that Fresh Expressions of church is the bigger hanger under which previous understandings of church planting are included.

My qualification of that is that as the national team has developed in methodology, which clearly involves theological reflection, we have recommended processes about the creation of a ‘fresh expression of a church’, or a ‘church plant’ Clearly we can’t police the way that the words are used, but a Fresh Expression is something that comes to being through that process, whereas some models of church planting have a standard model which they reproduce, I call that cloning. When I’m talking about Fresh Expressions, I’m including church planting but at some conferences about church planting I have to make that clear, because there’s often a sort of ‘cross purposes’ conversation going on.

Question 4: How would you describe the nature and purpose of theological reflection?

The purpose of theological reflection within the context of the enquiry you’re making, because obviously there are answers for the exercise of pastoral ministry and all sorts of others as well, the purpose is that we establish churches that are authentically and recognizable Christian, that are clearly appropriate, incarnational and contextual. And which also eschatologically have an element and the anticipation of the future of that whole. I’m very happy with the classic statement that I think we originally got from Lesslie Newbiggin, that church is to be a sign, an instrument, or an agent and a foretaste, hence the point of anticipation of the future, of the kingdom, and therefore I want to encourage church planters, those who establish Fresh Expressions to have that in mind.

In Mission Shaped Church we talked about double listening, which we took from John Stott and I think Karl Barth did something as well, in talking about listening to God and listening to the context. The more I reflect on it the more I think practice of theological
reflection is a triple listening: you are listening to the living tradition of the church with scripture as its authoritative layer, and you are listening prayerfully to a context to see what God is doing there ahead of you, and you are in the business of prayerfully being attentive to God to come up, if you like, with the solution. But I need to qualify that a little as well. I believe the core practice we’re talking about is actually discernment, and discernment I think involves more than, if you like, tradition, context, and prayer. I think it involves character. I think who you are affects what you might or might not hear, or your capacity to hear certain things, or see certain things. I think it also involves what I call ‘Christian worldview’, that is you will have ordered the tradition in a certain way so that you have a Christian faith that makes sense and that will shape (for good or ill), your practice, in terms of what you envision to plant or establish.

The other element to add is where I think there is a distinction between previous models of church planting, is that in our view, this is a process where what is to be planted unfolds step by step, or stage by stage, then unfolds like a flag, rather than a process that leads to the sort of architectural ‘blue print’ for which you sort of gather the materials and the resources and go and do it.

I mean there are sort of classic cycles from liberation theology and so on that help and having been a Principal of a theological college and taught pastoral theology, I’m assuming these lurk in the background, but I’m trying to apply it directly to church planting because that’s the focus of this.

**Question 5: How would you respond to the criticism that church planting is a practice that lacks robust theological reflection?**

I will make a direct reply, but I want to start with a slightly more tangential one, that I would like to know a bit about the worldview and the theological assumptions of those who raise the question or criticism, because if it’s more of an academy based question, I think it’s based on a modernist assumption, an Enlightenment assumption, that the first thing you do is to work out what is right, and the second thing is you go and do it. That’s not how learning through practice involved! And you can theologically lecture, including on the practice of theological reflection, a room full of people for as long as you like but their learning is going to come through the doing, and the reflecting on the doing. So for me if it’s saying church planters have been taught enough theology and do they ask doctrinal questions while doing it, that’s one thing but I am suspicious about some of the assumptions and criticism that may lie for some behind this question.

I am clear that if people are not taught to reflect theologically in the context of praxis, then that weakens for the kingdom and the faith what they do. And I suspect that, and I can only speak for the Church of England and church planting here, our people on the whole are well trained theologically, but not necessarily well trained in the seminaries for this. We are much more alert, explicitly alert to it now and for those engaged in planting, our pioneers, we have been building up the quality of learning, and I think the theological section and the stuff on reflection in Mission Shaped Church is an evidence of that. I think over the last 6 years or so, it’s been moving forward rapidly, culminating so far, in my colleague Michael Moynagh’s book *Church For Every Context*, that was published a couple weeks ago, in which you’ve got 500 pages of theological reflection, on the task!
My main view is, early church planters may well have been instinctive in their reflections and it’s essential that we don’t train ‘instinctiveness’ out of church planters, but we equip them to reflect on their experience. I think to do that they need the company of other practitioners and I am increasingly sure that theological reflection is a corporate practice, within the team that’s planting, and a corporate practice between planters and pioneers with a bit of theological facilitation, so that we build up a body of knowledge that we learn from. That way the ones whose calling we’re recognizing now, can equip others much better than we did even 10 years ago. I think it was only when it became quite clear that we were in a different context, did the issue of theological reflection become much more critical; this isn’t Christendom anymore! I think once it is clear, that more of the same just means less of the same, at that point you switch your theological questioning on much more consciously.

Question 6: Can you give examples where you have seen or experienced theological reflection work effectively in Church Planting circles?

One thing I can obviously commend to you is that are 150 written up stories on the website, all of which, will give you clues to what theological reflection took place.

When I was a Vicar at St. Michael’s at York, a group of young adults, initially came to the conviction that God had more for them, and for our church, but didn’t know where it was, I accompanied them on what effectively proved to be about a 2-year journey, sometimes what felt like theological reflection and sometimes on what felt like the blind alley! They gradually came to the conclusion that they were called into the raving and dance culture, and one key moment in relation to that was to talk with them about what an incarnational ministry in that dance culture might need. The primary problem being that only 1 and a half of them went clubbing. She went clubbing because she loved it and he went clubbing because he loved her! She’s now an ordained primary minister in the Church of England, and they had to recognize that if they were called into this world, they were called to be at home in this world, but not home in any way the gospel would contradict, but it would become a primary culture ethos for them.

Therefore, we discussed how if that truly happened properly that they would become more and more uncomfortable with the way we worshiped in our main services and that their continuation with us would be on the basis of loyalty relationships and underlying values, not the practices of church beyond the fact that there will be scripture and sacraments and so on and so on. They did that remarkably well. But the other bit of theological reflection was that they were to learn how to do this from within the context. Once they’d gotten discernment for where they were supposed to be they had to commit themselves into the context and I became their conversation partner as they learned along the way, and through that came a healthy alternative worship station, an extraordinary ministry, whereby it was helpful that a couple of them were post-doctoral computer researchers because they started to produce the whole digital visual accompaniment to it to a quality where they were asked to provide the visuals for local raves! A principle that emerged out of what they were doing was that they would not produce one sequence for a rave that they couldn’t use in their services and those sequences they had for the services must be able to be used for the rave. That for me was evidence of a really quite significant contextual theological reflection, where the
call to enter that world and make it theirs in imitation as it were, of that dimension of the incarnation of Christ, was the beginning. And I’ve walked alongside of a variety of people doing a variety of similar things but I am mainly a teacher, an advocate, an accompanier, rather than practitioner.

If I can reflect more generally on Fresh Expressions then I’d say the cycle that we call the Fresh Expressions journey (which we teach in the MSC Ministry Course), is effectively a process for theological reflection. So if we assume that those who come to the practice of planting a Fresh Expression clearly come with some Christian convictions, and some Christian theology then we say that the journey is a key tool of discernment. There is a listening to God, there is a discerning of the activity of God and the joining in with those activities as well, which is not only the starting point, but also the underlying principle of the whole thing. And then there is a desire to embody the gospel through service, and the business of the formation of community coming before public events of worship and so on, because as a theological conviction the church is a community of disciples, not an event to go to once a week or once a month. The exploration of discipleship and faith within that community and the emergence of the culturally appropriate form of church, hopefully with the DNA that it could reproduce itself according to the same principles is key. That is a piece of missional theological reflection.

Now, how it’s taught, how well it’s taught, and the tricky bits in the transition from one to another are all vital. We regard it as a training tool because we know life isn’t as simple as that. We can quote plenty of stories of good planting that didn’t happen in that order, but because much of this training is more and more available, people are beginning to engage in this particular journey now. The illustration that I usually give is that you might love to play improvised jazz piano, but you just might have to learn your scales first, and there was a time that you were learning to drive (unless it was on an automatic) and you wondered if you would ever coordinate four limbs at the same time. Both of these need to be embodying of the practice. Before you start this can be a helpful tool but if you have already started instinctively and you are going to be a practitioner who is reflective, attending to God, attending to tradition, with a vision of what church might be (but are not sure you know in a context what church might look like) then this tool for theological reflection for the practitioner might help. That’s why it has been developed.

Question 7: Does theological reflection on church planting take place within your own theological tradition? If so, how is that done?

As far as how is it done in my tradition: as an Anglican Bishop, we were kind of the first ones to be a part of Fresh Expressions. The Methodists were with us almost immediately, but we were picking up on the reports of which they had contributed (Graham Horsley helped us write it), with a sense in which, there was a lot of Anglican history leading up to Mission-shaped Church. So when the Methodist church came on board with it, they were starting a bit from cold, but they have since raced past us I think. Obviously when the Church of England has now three times at the level of its Synod adopted the language of this ‘mixed economy’ policy, (the last time being at Synod just a couple of weeks ago), and with the publication of Fresh Expressions and the Mission of the Church, which basically says, this does fit within the ecclesiology of
the Church of England, or the Methodist Church now, lots of us knew that but the formal statement that says “this is not an alien, this is not a cuckoo in the nest”, was important.

So part of the work (it’s central to what I do), is to be an advocate (Stephen Lindridge does the same in the Methodist Church, and Linda Rainer in the United Reform Church) and we do more of helping people to see that ‘theologically’ this is appropriate to their tradition. It is permission giving and means therefore that it is actually essential in the Church of England for the recruitment of Pioneer ministers. We have, in the last 6 years recommended 136 in training as ordained Pioneer ministers. We revised the selection criteria about 18 months ago (I can send this to you). The criteria deliberately set out under the same headings that all priests of the Church of England have to match, and the very last bullet point under the last heading, which is Quality of Mind, talks about the need to be a reflective practitioner. There’s stuff in there about understanding the tension between relevance and syncretism about relating the gospel to different contexts, there’s various things in there that clearly relate to this piece of research. The candidates go through 3 interviews with experienced practitioners, one under our vocational heading, one under our pastoral heading, and one under our educational heading, and for the educational interview they have to report on a piece of contextual theological reading of a context and have to describe somewhere they know, describe how they’ve thought about it theologically, and what they have seen as a possible starting place for of missional engagement.

They have to, in the vocational interview, report on what they have learned from the practice of pioneering; we require them to bring a portfolio that demonstrates they’re already, in some ways, an innovator. They might not have planted a church yet, but if they’re not the sort of person who thinks that way you wonder if they have the capacity.

We are quite searching in our enquiry. They have to pass all 3 interviews, and then the panel meets and we agree what we recommend to the Bishop, and we might recommend someone for training, and pick up certain issues that must be engaged with during their training. Our standard guidelines, it varies from case to case, is that this must be action reflection training, and they must be in supervised in practice rather than just in several years of academia.

Question 8: What are some of the ways in which church planters could more effectively practise theological reflection?

Clearly we need to check that people have developed the sort of set of personal skills and qualities that are involved in this, and although my denomination no longer treats initial training as the evidence that no one will need to teach you anything for the rest of your ministry, our finances are heavily invested in the pre-ordinate training and fairly heavily in the first post, where we try and take people up to a master’s level. That’s not a guarantee that people can actually do it, so I think various forms of supervision and accompaniment are necessary.

I think what I call ‘mission accompaniment’ is a sort of a combination between consultancy and spiritual direction almost, given discernment lies at the heart of the task. So I think we need more resources to help people reflect, once they’ve got through the early years, to continue to grow in their learning to reflect on what they’re doing.
The sorts of practice in say, the youth work field, where experienced youth workers will supervise trainees, may well be a sort of, at least semi-professional practice, we should be developing. That’s on a one to one mentoring accompaniment resource, but I’m very convinced about the importance of various forms of learning network and learning community.

In Liverpool Diocese for instance, all the pioneer ministers meet in small groups that are facilitated so that there is a shared learning process going on. I’m more and more sure that theological reflection is best as a community exercise and not just as the heroic lone pioneer exercise. That’s in a sense a resource answer to how it might be more effectively practiced. It’s interesting to me that in the Church of England, the Church Mission Society, the Church Army, and various others, there are the beginnings of New Monastic communities where a rule of life, meeting together and shared learning and so on is actually part of the basic rhythm of discipleship they are committing to. And particularly if you look at the church attendance figures for England (the ones that Tearfund brought out in 2007), 44% of everybody over 16 in England were “never churched”, so the sort of long term incarnational planting we’re going to have to do that reaches beyond the dechurched, I think requires great risks of isolation and community relationships that really are sustaining. I may be straying beyond theological reflection but as a Bishop my questions are, “How does formation continue?” “How do people continue to grow as disciples?” How does accountability work when people are doing an incarnational ministry, deeply amongst people with no Christian history?” So I think there’s a whole set of issues around life and mission orders and things like that.

**Question 9: What are some of the insights you have personally gained into the practice of church planting by your own theological reflections in the last 10 years?**

The huge penny that dropped for us, when we wrote *Mission-shaped Church*, (one of those sort of God moments), was what we called ‘dying to live.’ We realised that incarnational ministry is not just a shallow relevance to context, but is a costly entering into the world of those we are seeking to reach to the full extent that you can with Christian integrity in which the planter pays the cultural price so that the church might flourish. I think it’s written in 1 Corinthians 9, that the grain of wheat falling into the ground and dying otherwise it remains alone that deeply impacted us, and like other references to the cross and the gospel, it becomes a pattern for discipleship and we applied that to the church planting practice. I think we’ve added something to the body of knowledge there.

But the second thing is about missional imagination. I find quite a lot of Alan Roxburgh’s stuff helpful. He talks about ‘the key’ being the presence of the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit being the foretaste of the future. In any community where the Spirit is present it is possible for the dreams and visions and the understanding of how a church is a foretaste of the future to come into being, but the question to ask is not, “Does a particular congregation have missional imagination, but is the Holy Spirit present there?”
And that significantly changes the task and the practice of leadership for those pastors and vicars who are leading churches and wishing to plant, particularly if they know they need to plant something that doesn’t look the same as what they’ve got already. Therefore, the day of the great pioneer leader who goes and gets the vision and tells it to everybody else (I think that’s always been theologically suspect) is basically over. You might get a key that opens up others participation, or you might learn from God through facilitating others but there’s something about the corporate community and the presence of the Spirit and missional imagination that is crucial. So something about incarnation and the cross holding together, something about missional imagination and the Holy Spirit. Those are two of the ones that get me up in the morning and drive me!

I’m very interested in Hirsch’s recent book on apostolic ministry. There’s something about identifying the ones that can open doors and cross the boundaries and open them up for others, that is a conviction that is tied into a bigger conviction. I’ve been part of the charismatic renewal sense 1966, and I’m now quite convinced that the gift of Pentecost, the gift of the Spirit to the whole church, is essentially a cross cultural gift but the years of Christendom have blinded us to that. Then, you will receive the power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth, i.e. from a Jerusalem centric Jew, to Gentile Rome. The Joel prophecy in Acts 2 is what Peter uses to explain the significance of the pouring out of that gift that Jesus has promised, is precisely about missional imagination for cross cultural activity from generation to generation activity, and for all sorts of pioneering. This pioneering business, although I think is a distinctive calling of certain people and not all, is of the nature of the church. Therefore, imaginative planting, which is reaching people we are not reaching in the UK, for the Church of England, is embraced in the ‘mixed economy.’ We advocate this: “Do your traditional ministry really well, but plant the new and the fresh to reach those you aren’t reaching.” We want that to be the default setting in the parish. That comes out of the theological conviction of the cross-cultural pioneering nature of the gift of the Spirit.

I think the sort of twin things around the Spirit, missional imagination and the cross-cultural gift, and the Incarnation and Cross being tied together, are significant theological foundations for the practice of church planting. I’m a mission theologian, not a front line practitioner, so this is the sort of stuff you get, but they shape expectation, they shape practice, and they shape reflection.

Question 10: What are some of the issues in church planting, which you think, need further theological investigation or reflection?

There are two issues, which press on us as we lead the Fresh Expressions initiative. One is concerning young adults. “What is it about this particular cohort of 20s and 30s that makes church or for that matter commitment so difficult?” As chair of Soul Survivor, I’m not convinced that this is endemic cultural change, I think it’s a cohort in society, which the churches across the nation, with the exception of a few very big churches, significantly fail to engage with. So we have this ongoing question: “Why do the principles that seem right and teach not equip the church to win significant numbers of 20s and 30s in the average church, rather than the big city centre gathered ones?”
But more particularly, the separation of church from life issue. Church ‘gathered’ very properly becomes sort of an equipper for individuals for church ‘scattered’. But the impact of a living Christian community on the work place or the leisure centre is often left to individuals, so we are very interested indeed about being church in the school, or church in the office space etc. We think we need to be open to the fact that many active Christians might belong to two churches. We might belong to one that functions where they work, and one that is much more related to family and neighbourhood, and that could very well become the norm. Like church in the school for instance. I don’t mean it’s a good place to fish from, I mean how are we a community that seeks the good of the school in light of the kingdom in every dimension and whose ministry is integral and holistic and is certainly also wanting to win people to Jesus in the school, amongst the whole extended family of the school, be it cleaners or parents, or teachers or students or whatever. That really is seeking to be that sort of sign instrument and foretaste community for the school and the rest of the school.

Are you talking about schools generally, or Christian schools?

I’m talking about schools generally. I mean clearly, the large numbers of church schools give you a starter for one but there are, I think between Youth for Christ and Scripture Union, 140 secondary school workers in different centres in the UK. Very often school’s workers have built a significant relationships of trust with head teachers and communities and so on, and it’s recognising that they are there not just to proselytise. The same applies to the work place.

I think the issue is not just better theological reflection on how to plant the sort of churches we’ve got to, it’s realizing that Christianity communally expressed, with the key marks of the church, needs to be visible and impacting all the major dimensions of people’s life and that the home based churches of the New Testament where the place of the family, the place of the neighbourhood, the place of craft activity, or extended family and a whole load of things were done together. That meant that the church meeting in a home wasn’t just a home group, it was the church impacting all the dimensions of life. We have a real bee in our bonnet on this and we will seek to continue to look at this.

Rev. Trevor Hutton
June 2012
INTERVIEW FIVE

Gary Gibbs: Director of REACH (evangelism and church planting department at Elim Pentecostal Church).

Question 1: What is your name and your current ministry role or assignment?

I am Gary Gibbs, and I’m the Director of Reach, which is name that Elim gives to their evangelism and church planting department.

And how long have you been in that role?

About 5 years now. I do this for about 70% of my time, the other 30% of my time, I spend on the faculty at Regents Theological College doing two things; running the School of Ministry (which is a one-year vocational course, which tends to attract more mature people), and I also teach two modules to the undergrads on evangelism and apologetics, level 5.

Question 2: What has been/is your connection to church planting ministries?

Two things really. I’ve only been with the Elim about 6 years now, but before that I was part of a new church network called Salt and Light (South Manchester Christian Fellowship in Manchester is part of that), if you know that, it used to be Sale Baptist Church. I was based in Derby then and had different incarnations doing different things but one of them was planting a church on a reasonably working class estate in Derby in the mid 1990s. So that is my only experience directly of leading a church plant, although I am part of the church plant officially now. The truth of the matter is, I’m hardly ever there because I’m travelling all the time at weekends. So I don’t lead that, and I’m just a member.

But then on the national level, as I say, my connection to church planting ministries has been the director of Reach, including church planting, which means that I oversee the developments of church planting within the movement. John Glass, who is the General Superintendent of the denomination, a couple of years ago, put out to all the church leaders in the denomination something he called The Big Centenary Ask (TBCA), where he asked every church leadership team to consider planting something new on the lead up to our centenary, which is 2015. And he described it as: planting a daughter church, or do something using multi campus, or they could plant a Fresh Expression of church. But the actual outworking of TBCA practically landed in my department.

At the same time John was launching that, I was finishing up my Masters and my Master’s thesis was on Fresh Expressions of church, and what that had to offer to Elim going forward, and Fresh Expressions is probably the area of church planting that Elim would least understand in terms of who they are as a movement, so there’s been a quite big education job that I’ve been doing on that in the last couple of years.
Question 3: Do you think it is necessary for church planting/church planters to engage in theological reflection? Why?

I mean the obvious answer is “Yes”, they should!

I suppose the question after that, as we’ve already mentioned, is what is our understanding of theological reflection? I had an interesting ten minutes this morning when I came in the office with the guy who is my PA, Tom; he works with me 2 days a week. He’s leading a church in a small market town called Ledbury. It was planted about 5 years ago, but he took it over and lead it for about 18 months and it’s almost like a church plant, it’s quite small, they get about 20, 25, people there. I was talking to him, I said, “What do you understand by theological reflection?” He’s a sharp guy, and he finished his degree in Applied Theology here just over a year ago, and he couldn’t remember being formally taught anything about theological reflection while he was at college, so that was interesting.

And at the same time, the pastor of the church plant that I belong to was in the room, a woman called Trudy from Northern Ireland, and she’s doing her Doctorate as well as leading this church plant in this little village, and again I said to her, “Have you done any reading at all on theological reflection?” She hadn’t.

So in terms of formal approach to theological reflection, neither of those two had any clue really. And I have to say, that I, myself, when I saw this phone interview was coming up, I did a little Google search and realized that personally I’ve done very little, if any reading, on formalized theological reflection.

Although, I think it happens intuitively, both for evangelicals, and probably even more so for Pentecostals! Certainly historically that’s been the case. You know you have to talk to God about what you’re doing, and have some dynamic on going conversation with him as to why what we just did worked or didn’t work or how we could do it better or where do we go from here. So, I think there is a learning and growing dynamic to theological reflection at an informal level, both in terms of learning and growing internally ourselves but also learning so we can grow the church. Both of these are important issues.

Question 4: How would you describe the nature and purpose of theological reflection?

I think for me personally, the way it’s tended to work is the cycle of Action, Reflection, and Response. By nature, I’m an activist, I’m an evangelist, it’s my gifting and calling, so I think my approach in ministry and in leadership has tended to be, obviously some planning for what we’re going to do, then we do whatever it is we’re doing in terms of missional activity, then spend some time afterwards, usually in team I guess, more than individually, reflecting on what we did and what happened, good or bad or indifferent. And then from out of that reflection, responding, going forwards to tweak it, change it, adjust it, dump it, you know do something very different, but I think that cycle is probably the way I’ve done it intuitively. Action, Reflection, and Response. The reason being is so we can discern how the Holy Spirit is leading us and then be more effective in terms of our church planting practices.
Question 5: How would you respond to the criticism that church planting is a practice that lacks robust theological reflection?

I think my perspective on Elim is that our approach to church planting didn’t change substantially from the days of George Jeffreys up until almost the end of the 20th century (I don’t know how much you would know about Jeffery’s’ approach to church planting?) but typically it was move into a town, set up a tent, and start preaching the gospel. This would have been in the 1920’s in particular, and looking at research done by Neil Hudson (I think you know him), there would be a substantial healing miracle or miracles take place that would be difficult to deny especially in that time and culture, so lots and lots of people would come to see what was going on. Jeffery’s would often stay there for a month, or six weeks, and then he would move on, leave behind a whole bunch of converts that would parachute in a follow up pastor and “hey presto” you had a church! And that was highly successful through the 20s and 30s. I think in 1921 there were 15 Elim churches, mainly in Ireland, but by 937, I think there were over 250 Elim churches and many of those have been planted through that methodology by Jeffreys.

And then we had this schism thing in 1940 when Jeffreys took his ball home and left. And other guys came through, but with the same practice for church planting really, but what I’ve discerned is this gradual drop off in the effectiveness of church planting through the 20th century. But we didn’t have any other options of how to do it.

In the 1990s the guy who was then the Director of Evangelism, who was a tent revivalist type evangelist, a guy called Paul Epton, (he’s on the Wirral these days, leading the largest church on the Wirral), was still very committed to this approach. So, Elim held two large-scale church planting tent missions, one in Wolverhampton and one in Liverpool that produced almost nothing in terms of tangible church. I think there was a small church that started in Wolverhampton but folded after a couple of years and nothing resulted in Liverpool. And I think it was at that time that the Elim hierarchy and leadership started to think that this did not work, but they didn’t have any other options and so as a movement we got a bit stuck, until more recent years. In terms of pioneer church planting I suppose there would always be some stronger Antioch type resource church that would plant something now and again, but it wasn’t great to be honest. So the thoughts about incarnational church planting, Fresh Expression’s and all that type of thing is something very new within Elim.

I suppose for me personally, I would be happy to listen to criticism from people who were doing something, you know. I think it’s that whole thing, “I like the way we’re doing it better than the way you’re not doing it at all!” So I think if we’ve got church planting practitioners who also are engaging in robust theological reflection, I think there is a fair point there. Because I do think, given that church planters tend to be pragmatic activists and not contemplatives, there is something to this question that rings mostly true, but there is a lack of theological reflection on what we’re doing, generally. Plus, the fact that I think most church planters, certainly within Elim these days, would be bi-vocational, so they’re trying to put food on the table for their kids, they’re trying to plant a church, they’re trying to keep a job down, and so to have any spare oxygen in their system to sit down and think, “Why am I doing this?” or “Am I doing it the best way?” or “How can I do it better” I think it’s a luxury for some of these guys on the
ground. So maybe a lot of that robust theological reflection needs to happen in a different place, you know from national leadership, you and me really (laughs), should be doing that on behalf of the people in the field, those on the ground and trying to help them.

**Question 6: Can you give examples where you have seen or experienced theological reflection work effectively in Church Planting circles?**

Not in any formal sense, I don't think.

What I'm most aware of it at the moment in the movement is where we're just getting into the whole approach of learning communities, particularly linking in with the St. Thomas guys in Sheffield. So we've just had a missional communities' taster day with those guys last week. So what we're looking to do out of the department is set up a number of learning communities within Elim, to explore missional communities and take that forward. So I think that approach where they take time aside every six months for a few days to come together and really think about what they're doing, get some input, set fresh goals, and then go for it for six months and then come back again. I think that will put some more flesh on the bones of formal theological reflection for those who have been trying to be a more missional.

But apart from that within our movement, I don't think there's been anything particularly done on this up until this point.

**Question 7: Does theological reflection on church planting take place within your own theological tradition? If so, how is that done?**

I think what I've tried to do particularly out of my thesis on Fresh Expressions, is that we've been taking a tour around some of the national leaders of our country gathering ministers together, and talking about it, it's been called The Summit Day, and we've done about 5 of these around the UK. And we've been dealing in the mornings with effective discipleship, and in the afternoon with effective mission. So in the afternoons I've been taking that session and talking about church planting and fresh approaches to church planting but that's been (I wouldn't know if you'd call that theological reflection) obviously something I've theologically reflected on and then "blurbed" to pastors in front of me, saying, "you know, here's what I'm discovering, here's some thoughts about how we do this in the context of this big centenary ask." You know trying to help them think through what they might be able to do at their present situation. So some of that's been going on, from me to them. But at present I think the theological reflection that happens with individual leaders tends to be more by accident, rather than on purpose.

**So from what you have said before, would it be fair to say that a lot of the reflection takes place on the ground, intuitively, or perhaps Spirit-led, and then reflecting upon that?**

Yes, I'd say so. Seems to be that way.
Question 8: What are some of the ways in which church planters could more effectively practise theological reflection?

We’ve just taken on, within my department, a part time church planting facilitator, who used to work with Martin Robinson, a guy called Tony Sands, he’s a Brit, but he’s lived most of his life in Australia, and we’ve taken him on to facilitate the whole Big Cinerary Ask thing and he’s at such an age that he understands the more sort of incarnational approaches to church planting but still has a foot back in the sort of attractional but engaged approaches as well. I think we need “both and” not just “either or” with our lot.

Rather than I suppose one of the things we’ll need to do going forward, is to try and help church planters to meet together. I think probably theological reflection happens far better in a small group rather than sitting in individuals contemplating our naval or just talking to God (it’s a good thing to talk to God!), but probably that mind of Christ thing that has a potential to happen when we’re together and bouncing things off together. I guess that’s why learning communities really appeal to me. So I think that might be a place for theological reflection.

Those three questions you’ll remember from the Lake District when we were there together at a church planting conference: What is? What could be? What will be? To ask ourselves those questions coming out of a dynamic relationship with God, as we believe in a God who speaks, who will give us an impression of things. I think that some very simple ways forward for individual church planting teams is to ask themselves those questions every six months, sounds like a good time, you can ask them too often I think.

But to also get a bunch of church planters together in a room with some sort of mutual accountability or with a coach would be a good way forward as well.

Question 9: What are some of the insights you have personally gained into the practice of church planting by your own theological reflections in the last 10 years?

I think I would agree with Graham Cray that the “attractional” model is fast losing ground in the UK. I know Graham talks about that as well. I think it’s still got some energy in it, but I think it’s fast going these days. I think when we planted, this would be more than ten years ago, but when my wife and I planted in Derby, that would have been 1995, so it’s more like 17, 18 years ago now, I think we moved onto the estate where we wanted to plant, but not very many other people did. So we started with about 20 people, (we took a bunch of people from our existing mother church), and we ended up after a couple of years with about 60, some of that was conversion growth, some of that was transfer growth, but then we got the cell church books, because we had about 7 of these congregations around the city (a rather large church), and we poured it all back into one central celebration with cells, cause we just felt like this was going to take too long to do with the way we were going. But that was much more, I guess, apart from my wife and myself, far more an attractional model than an incarnational model over all. So I think I’ve been through that, I think I’m still very struck on the idea of incarnational church planting, you know, if the word is going to become flesh, then we have to dwell among them, just seems obvious to me.

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But something a bit more recently.

I've met this guy called Peter Farmer, he’s an interesting guy, I met him just 2 weeks ago; he's been based in Nottingham for the past 12 years, but just moved down to east London. He’s doing a project he calls Pioneering church planting, but he means something very specific by it. I know he’s done stuff with some Eden guys in Manchester, (I know Matt Wilson got blown away by it apparently). So what he’s been doing, he and his team would go into an area and be looking for the person of Peace, we know about that, but his point would be that with incarnational church planting, what we’ve tended to do within our movements and our networks is we have actually become the person of peace. In other words, we move some people onto an estate, or into a town and you know, we’re not really looking for the person of peace, the church planter becomes the person of peace incarnationally. Farmer is saying that is going to take you forever if you’re going to try and re-evangelize the nation, and he’s pointed out that this is not what Jesus told us to do. Rather he told us to go and find the person of peace and so they have a methodology of trying to do that, find this person who’s not even saved.

There’s a guy called David, I think he probably came out of the church planting movement in China or that sort of places, some guy who’s actually doing this, and they get this person of Peace to bring people together in their front room or function room and conduct bible studies, even though the person of peace is not necessarily saved yet, and then they start these simple churches all over the place, a network of simple churches. It’s early days and still very experimental, but it did get me thinking the other day. And if you don’t find the person of Peace you wipe the dust of your feet and go somewhere else. It’s very hard nosed in that sense! It’s a very particular thing that he’s doing, it’s got some political aspect to it as well. He is really after the poor, and the marginalized, and the underclass, you know rather than the middle classes, very strong on that as well.

So now I’ve got these three different models going on in my mind cause I think some of our Elim churches within the next 5 years could ever plant an attractional model, they just wouldn’t be able to get their heads around anything else. Some of them are buying into the Fresh Expression stuff, slowly but surely and so some of that will come on board more and more. A lot of them are going Messy church and Café church. But this Pioneering thing, if you had the right person who was an absolute “crazy person” (laughs) might be an interesting way to go. I’m sure there’s room for all three approaches.

So different models and different methods for differing persons?

Yeah, absolutely!

Question 10: What are some of the issues in church planting, which you think, need further theological investigation or reflection?

First of all, ministerial formation in theological college is important. I think the Anglicans are probably way ahead of us on this you know through the work that Graham’s done
and others. I think Regents, Elim’s college, as you know, I think we are still ending up producing “pastor teachers”; we don’t have at the moment a church planting module available in the applied theology degree course, which to me, sounds crazy. Part of the problem is I know that if it’s going to happen the only person who can do that is me, and I’m doing 30% and I’m already over committed, so in fact this summer one of my tasks is to try and coalesce the two evangelism and apologetics modules that I teach for the 1st and 2nd years into one so it will give me a bit more space to teach a 2nd year or 3rd year church planting module, and to try and do that, but even then that wouldn’t be enough.

There is some interesting stuff going on about how theological college faculties need to go missional so everything passes through the lens of God’s missional agenda in everything we teach.

I think another issue would be the use of money, you know within the denomination, how much are we willing to facilitate church planting financially. That would be an issue going forwards. And probably the place of buildings in terms of mission and church planting because we’ve got a lot of buildings in the wrong places around the country because most of them were taken on in the 30s and these days their location is all wrong for mission or the mission we want to do. And yet they’re not worth very much if you try and sell them so there’s some issues going forward on that I think.

Rev. Trevor Hutton
June 2012
INTERVIEW SIX

Andrew Grinnell (former leader of 614 Squadron for the Salvation Army, and urban missioner and Leeds Churches Together).

**Question 1: What is your name and your current ministry role or assignment?**

My name is Andrew Grinnell, I have two main roles, one is I am part of a Christian community on an estate in East Leeds and the second is I work with Leeds churches together in mission, looking at inequality in Leeds and imagining, and helping the church to respond to that.

**Question 2: What has been/is your connection to church planting ministries?**

My first connection with church planting at all was in 1994 where I got involved in a church planting team in southwest London, I was planting for the Salvation Army, a new congregation there. And then over a period of years I started to help the Salvation Army plant churches themselves in some of the more deprived neighbourhoods around the UK. That helped set up a kind of movement within the Salvation Army when I was doing that, and at the same time I got involved a bit wider than Salvation Army with people such as Stuart Murray and Urban Expression where I was involved as a trustee for a number of years. So I’ve done that. As a response to being involved in those kinds of movements I’ve also been involved in doing a bit of training around church planting, did the Crucible course, and did some training through the Salvation Army’s ministerial training colleges.

**Question 3: Do you think it is necessary for church planting/church planters to engage in theological reflection? Why?**

I think the answer is yes, I think partly as a safeguard to themselves because in my experience in working with numerous church planters, particularly team leaders, they have lots of ideas about what they want to do and they’re quite happy to just go into places and get on with doing their ideas, and are often very activist by their nature. My experience is that after 2, or 3 years in, those who haven’t reflected theologically on their practice often end up either creating things that are not necessarily going anywhere very fast or they themselves aren’t going anywhere very fast. So I think theological reflection is just so crucial to help people understand what they are doing, and at times, correct what they are doing!

**Question 4: How would you describe the nature and purpose of theological reflection?**

I think what theological reflection does is to take your practice and bring it into conversation with theology whether that be biblical kind of studies, or whether that be the tradition of the church itself. I think it enables a conversation; a dialogue to occur that means that the new thing, the new plan isn’t just ploughing on its furrow alone but actually it’s using the resources that are available to help it become everything it needs
to become. So I think for me, it’s something about the dialogue that it creates between the tradition of the church and the scripture itself.

**Question 5: How would you respond to the criticism that church planting is a practice that lacks robust theological reflection?**

I think my first response would be, “who is asking that question?” So, sometimes I think that criticism has been offered by people who have wanted to say church planting is a bad thing; their invested interest doesn’t want new churches to be created. But, some other times, people who are more closely linked in church planting, who are more positive towards it, maybe even church planters themselves, if they’re offering that criticism, then I think there is validity in the criticism there.

**So as someone who has been engaged in church planting and takes theological studies seriously as well, would you think it’s a fair criticism that there’s not robust theological thinking in church planting?**

I think it’s less of a criticism now than it was in the 90s. I think in the DAWN era when we were going to plant a million churches in five minutes I think there was this kind of pragmatic, evangelical agenda which was church planting seems like the best idea so let’s just go and do it. And I think actually some of the failure of that movement meant that church planting needs to be more theologically integrated. Now, there’s a whole spectrum to that and I’m sure some of the responses you’ll get from different people will show some people think actually there’s no theological reflection necessary to those others that actually think it’s paramount. I think it’s my oxygen in what I’m trying to do hopefully, without a shadow of a doubt. So I think it’s difficult to give a generalized answer, I think we were better than we were. I think it’s fascinating to see church planting in the tradition of the Baptist or, you know, I think that’s kind of the sense that we are trying to mine the tradition a little bit more, we are trying to find out who has done this before not just 5 minutes ago, but 50 years ago, 500 years ago. I think there is more of that. I think the other movement that has helped, is the emerging church movement, using that term broadly as well, in that some of the way I perceive its developed in the UK has not been from activist missionaries but people that are in that same church saying it must be different than what it was, have been looking theologically around and those kind of things. I think that’s granted dialogue between different groups of people that are saying church planting is important, or church planting isn’t important but we’ve got something we can offer to it. I think maybe 20 years ago it was a very narrow agenda set by very few people, whereas now the agenda is broad and you can have really wild and wonderful people seeking to plant churches together which would not happen 20 years ago and these people are comfortable talking to one another.

**Question 6: Can you give examples where you have seen or experienced theological reflection work effectively in Church Planting circles?**

I think where I’ve seen it done best is where you gather people who are church planters and bring them into dialogue with a theologian. So when I worked for the Salvation Army, we’d gather. I remember one time gathering all the team leaders together and bringing a theologian in and then expressing their issues and him helping them to work
those things through. So I've seen it happen well there. In my own context, in Leeds, I think it works best when we bring in people from outside to help us with that process, to help us ask awkward questions and be a “go to” person. I remember early on we were wrestling with what we should become…you know those kinds of things, and what can we learn from the past 2000 years of church history about that, and talking to somebody about that and him asking what was motivating us and asking what our imagination was about it. So I think the academy and professional theologians have a role to play in helping us but it is about providing environments where this has and can happen. I think it's been great. The other thing that has been positive is actually seeing how many of the guys that were planting churches in the Salvation Army, how many of them were just avid readers, and you know, reading stuff that they were trying to then practice, or letting their practice integrate what they were reading. They weren’t kind of reading froth, they were reading deeply theological material.

So there have been conversations and dialogue and interaction with people and resources that have helped stimulate reflection in some of the circles you've been involved in, and that’s what’s worked best, you think?

I think that is what’s worked best, yeah, very much taking people where they’re at and that kind of place rather than say “here’s a course!” I mean things like Crucible are great but they’re mainly about skills and about practice rather than necessarily starting with theological reflection, although that’s certainly in there.

Question 7: Does theological reflection on church planting take place within your own theological tradition? If so, how is that done?

I don’t know what I would describe it as being, obviously I’m Salvation Army background and our theological tradition is quite light. I think it is quite pragmatic. And I think when I was working with the Salvation Army; you wouldn't naturally go to theological lines to prove a practice. You would go to lines of precedent, or what seemed to be working. And I think you could make a case for the history of the Salvation Army, which is, in some ways a church planting movement if you go back, (we're only 150 years old) and consistently the place of theological reflection hasn’t been elevated enough in order to critique our practice.

Do you think because there is a strong emphasis on activism and doing that theological reflection has suffered? Or do you think it just wasn't on the radar? Why do you think in that tradition that theological reflection has kind of been so absent or not so obvious?

I think it isn’t about the activist, I think it’s something about the pragmatist; it’s a very pragmatic tradition, which is just to do what works. And the theological reflection about what works should have come into it, and what we mean by something working! So I think it is about some kind of organizational psyche, which is “let’s get something done”. In Canada they used to have the strut line “Just do something” and it was like, well “do what?” So that’s my main kind of traditional background, but I'm a magpie. So I've studied at a Catholic Jesuit college doing my MA, I hung out with a whole load of Charismatic’s, which influence me probably in the 90s, and still has some influence, and I am now at Kings in London. So there’s a variety of traditions and obviously I hung
out with a load of Anabaptists, so there’s a variety of traditions at play, and I don’t actually see myself at one given theological tradition.

**Question 8: What are some of the ways in which church planters could more effectively practise theological reflection?**

I think somehow a space has to be created for theological reflection to happen. If you’re engaged in planting a church, which is a 24/7 activity, you or somebody else has to create spaces whereby you kind of say “hang on a minute, I’m going to get out of that.” Because theological reflection is a habit, you’ve got to get into the habit. I think one of the ways is when somebody’s planting a church, when it starts you get alongside those people and say “let’s get x, y, and z in place right at the start which will enable that to happen.” So I think there’s something about creating the intentional spaces which are both personal spaces, but sometimes more corporate spaces, like the space I talked about where different leaders come together. I think that’s really important, and I think it’s also really important, which is part of that, to have theological mentors, people that are journeying with team leaders and church plant leaders and church planters in general, who are available by phone, or who you connect with and spend time with, and they ask you questions. I think for me, one of mine, who I’m now studying with, was just like I knew I needed him regularly, cause you don’t have time to go on a course at that moment but you need somebody who will theologically mentor you. And so at Christmas for example, I didn’t know what choice to make on an ethical issue, so I’d go to him and he creates frameworks by which, he didn’t make the decision for me, but he created a framework by which I could then make a clearer decision about a very practical issue. So I think the academy is great, but how can we build real meaningful relationships whereby people who are skilled in theological research and understanding, can engage and how can we build meaningful relationships with those who are out there in order to help. And I think it will mean that there is better theology coming out of the academy as well because it’ll be more rooted in reality.

**Question 9: What are some of the insights you have personally gained into the practice of church planting by your own theological reflections in the last 10 years?**

One would be my imagination about what I’m doing has changed, and my imagination of the world has changed. I remember reading Prophetic Imagination by Bruggeman and it opened up my eyes to really see what we’re doing. Some concepts like shalom and the jubilee for the particular context that I’m living in, enabled me to look at the world completely differently and what we were doing. So I think imagination is one. I think mining into certain lost themes from the Christian Tradition, like hospitality has been really key for us. And it changed what we thought we were doing when we went there, because church planting is normally about gathering people together and then being a part of the club, which is difficult when you’ve got a very transient community, lots of people seeking asylum etc. But we realized we were called to be a community of hospitality which welcomes people sees them restored, hangs out with them, but then sees them sent on. This is our ministry and there’s actually a validity, so you don’t mourn the fact that somebody’s got to go, because you’re like, “oh we came for that person, and you know, when they were here we responded to them in the way we believe Christ called us to.” This is a deeply theological task.
Question 10: What are some of the issues in church planting, which you think, need further theological investigation or reflection?

I think there’s something around when you’re planting a church, your relationship with power structures that exist within a given place that you’re involved in. Whether they are your relationship with the police, and the council or whatever, or whether it be the last, the lost, and the least, in your neighbourhood. I think there’s something around power and church planting that needs to be worked through… There’s a whole shed load of things I’m going to think of when I walk out that door!!

Rev. Trevor Hutton
June 2012
INTERVIEW SEVEN

Bob and Mary Hopkins: Anglican Church Planting Initiatives, part of the national Fresh Expressions team, Church Mission Society, Order of Mission and the network of St. Thomas’s Churches in Sheffield.

There are a couple of overall general points that have come quite strongly to mind as we have gone through the questions and I don’t know if we take them at the beginning. In one sense they are overall, but if you prefer we will take your questions in order and raise those at the end.

No, that is absolutely fine. Why don’t we begin there then?

In the way that the questions are framed and focused, there’s a sense in which it seems as though church planting is just a recent local phenomenon, where it seems to me that church planting is a worldwide phenomenon for about 300 years, and actually it’s been the main place of theological reflection in the worldwide church; whether you take Vincent Donovan or Liberation theology etc. etc., most of the main advances in theological reflection seem to have come from the pioneer frontiers of mission engagement where church planting has been the main activity. So I just feel the whole thing is set as though church planting has a rather poor relation with theological reflection. Actually I would want to argue it’s been the prime locus of theological reflection that’s brought important new insights.

And related to that would be the second point really, that I would turn the whole thing the other way around and say that a lot of what’s been considered as theological reflection has been done in the ivory towers of academic institutions and that over hundreds of years it has tended to recycle the same things and has been suffering from the fact that we’ve been culturally trapped in Christendom. Church planting is actually the main thing that’s got us at theological reflection and out of that cycle.

And I think, linked to that, would be a key to understanding 3 different processes of learning which we may have shared with you when you came over here (to Sheffield), but they’ve been foundational for us and since theological reflection is part of learning, I think understanding the three distinctive processes of formal learning, which is academic learning, socialization learning, and non-formal or apprenticeship learning are three main processes that are really important and seeing theological reflection as part of that.

Doing new things and engaging with new contexts should be the primary locus of creative theological reflection. I would want to make a case right at the outset that I think changes some of the tone of quite a few of the questions.

In terms of what you were saying about the first point, in terms of a worldwide perspective and contribution to theological reflection on church planting, I was just wondering where you think that has been expressed? Do you mean mission frontiers on the ground, or are you talking about movements like Lausanne or World Council of
Churches where there has been theological dialogue? Where do you think this has been manifested in regards to church planting?

I think it is both (local and movement) and when we come to the UK I think that what you have just said and analysed is helpful because there are those informal networks that are reflecting and generating a lot of important insights from theological reflection on practice in the UK, but equally worldwide. As I say, I think planting Base Ecclesial Communities in Latin America produced one of the most fertile movements of theological reflection and actually helped us to get a better understanding of what theological reflection was and how it worked best, and that was a movement and a network. But on the other hand something like Lausanne shows the importance of having various hubs of networks where some of the best insights can come together and be reflected on. So I think it’s both.

Has the Lausanne congress had particular discussion or seminary papers on church planting as part of its streams?

I’m pretty sure in South Africa, the most recent one did have a stream. I only know that because a friend of ours in the network was a delegate there and I’m pretty sure, from what she said, there was such a stream. I know in the papers that Lausanne has written, one of the things we’ll come on to in terms of maybe the last question, one of the key issues in church planting would relate to the whole wider area around what now really can be narrowly defined as the homogeneous unit principle but it has a whole broader use. I mean the best paper I’m aware on that was produced by Lausanne when they brought together theologians from all around the world to reflect on the homogeneous unit and church planting.

I am familiar with the Lausanne movement as a whole and as you say it is important to note that theological reflection in relation to church planting has taken place in wider circles for some considerable period of time.

And I think one of the important things is I would say church planting in the UK has been the primary thing that has connected us to the worldwide theological reflection on mission and church planting. And we see that not just in the UK; when we go to Scandinavia, it’s the same. It is those that are engaged in church planting that recognize the importance of folks from Scandinavia going into the mission field and connecting to all sorts of theological reflection on frontier mission and planting over the last couple of hundred years and bringing that back to Scandinavia. It’s one of the only things that is producing change to a largely stuck Christendom model of church.

Thanks for those introductory comments, which I think are helpful. So then for the record let’s go back to question one. So, Who are you? (both laugh loudly)

**Question 1: What is your name and your current ministry role or assignment?**

So if you haven’t got it I am Bob, and with my wife Mary, our current ministry role is varied. We don’t have a single focus. We lead a small team called Anglican Church Planting Initiatives, we’re part of the national Fresh Expressions team, we are part of
CMS Britain and Europe team, we are also a part of the Order of Mission and the network of St. Thomas’s Churches here in Sheffield.

**Question 2: What has been/is your connection to church planting ministries?**

What’s been our connection in church planting flows very much from that, because obviously we lead our own small team that is entirely focused on church planting through the Anglican Church Planting Initiative and Fresh Expressions. I would see both as purely a way of describing contextual church planting and a movement to encourage that. Particularly though, to put it in terms of activities, we deal with church leadership, we deal with vision sharing, we deal with consultation, and we deal with training for church planting.

**Question 3: Do you think it is necessary for church planting/church planters to engage in theological reflection? Why?**

Yes, and in fact this is one of the reasons where I would almost put it the other way around. Church planting forces you to do theological reflection, even when you have not been trained in the skills of theological reflection. So in some ways I think, getting towards some of your later questions, that’s one of the areas for development, more self-conscious skills in theological reflection. But actually I don’t think you can do church planting without being pushed to make theological reflection. Because as I said in the beginning, the place where creative theological reflection happens (rather than just recycling) is when you’re in a new context and you are out of your previous experience, and have to therefore do a dialogue between what you are experiencing and what you bring from Biblical, historical and theological understandings. So “yes” is the answer.

I would say the answer to “why?” is that it should be the foundation of any and all ministry, so it’s not a focused answer; it’s the discipline of all ministry. All discipleship is about learning, and we are all disciples. We never stop being, and the whole of ministry is about discipleship. So it’s about learning and theological reflection is the process of *how* we learn. And as I say those pioneering new things need an interaction of where they are, what they’re discovering, with biblical and historical truth and theological reflection is what enables that. I think they can’t avoid doing it. They may be rather inept at it and just be developing intuitive processes if they haven’t been well versed in the skills and understandings of the process, but they’re still going to be doing it.

**Question 4: How would you describe the nature and purpose of theological reflection?**

I guess there’s a sense each of these questions is building on or developing from the previous one, so I would see the nature of theological reflection as a cycle where one is relating experience to the twin streams of biblical revelation and historical insights and a three-way dialogue with one’s experience. That has been variously described in the world mission movement, and talked about as the learning circle in the UK sometimes called the pastoral cycle, or being a reflective practitioner; there are a number of cycles that been described. I would critique most of those in that most of them, the actual language that’s used in them, is very individualistic. In other words, I
observe, I reflect, I act, whereas actually the most important element of theological reflection is when it’s opened up to be a corporate exercise. I think whilst that may be implicit in some of the literature on theological reflection, certainly in some of the simple frameworks that are offered, it’s not explicit. So personally, I would want to put forward the learning circle version that is used in the Order of Mission, which is based on Mark 3 “Repent and believe” and unpacks that as Observe, Reflect, and Discuss, and the Discuss element is the key that ensures that deeper insights are gained. The “Repent” side is about changing your mind and putting your new mind into action, and the “Believe” side of the cycle is about Plan, Account, and Connect. And again, the Account, introduces the corporate element rather than just Observe, Plan, and Act.

And I think without accountability theological reflection is very theoretical and doesn’t achieve one of its main purposes. So it’s purpose is that we grow in understanding, we grow in skills and competencies, and we grow in character, that we become more like Christ. And those all involve change, and change doesn’t happen without accountability.

And another purpose of theological reflection, going back to my first point, is to protect us from becoming culturally trapped in a Christendom that actually is just reinforcing its own cultural myopia, and so theological reflection should be the thing that helps us escape from that.

Can you explain a little bit more about the Order of Mission?

The Order of Mission is one of the many new monastic movements that God’s raising up that came out of St. Thomas of Sheffield. I think it is probably fair to say that Mike Breen, Mary and I had the initial thoughts on it, and we were then part of about 15 people that were the original founding group, but it is now over 400 people worldwide. What I’m referring to in terms of its learning circle and its path of theological reflection is part of its rule of life. Our rule of life is called Life Shapes and first in that foundation of faith is the learning circle, and so if you wanted to know more you could refer to the book Forming and Discipleship Culture, or something slightly different than that.

Was the book that you were talking about by Mike Breen, Building a Disciplining Culture?

Yeah you got it!

Question 5: How would you respond to the criticism that church planting is a practice that lacks robust theological reflection?

I think I’ve already said I would turn that completely on its head and I would say that the most important theological reflections have come out of the church planting movement worldwide and that the UK situation has played a very significant part in that. It may not have been as strong, but that’s because it’s younger perhaps, and so it’s achievements may not be as great as the worldwide church planting movement. But I would say church planting has been the main place where creative theological reflection has produced the greatest benefits over the last couple hundreds of years,
and it has been in church planting around the world, and in UK, that has played a very significant part in that.

In what ways is the UK connection to the global movement in church planting evidenced? Are we talking about written sources? Are we talking about delegates at conferences? Are we talking about key thinkers? Where is that connection being made between UK church planting and the worldwide church planting movement?

Some of that what I will say in question 5 and 6 will answer part of that.

When you say the written, I think the volume of literature, both academic and popular would show that, I think so much of the literature that has been advancing our understandings in theology, have come from the church planting movement or it’s very close cousins in the UK. I mean, there’s loads of popular literature on it, and its part of a movement wider, so you’ve got people like Alan Roxburgh in Canada and loads of people in the States, and lots of other people, and a whole dialogue that’s been going on now for the last 20 years between those that have written popularly in the UK and more widely, where I think church planting has been the arrow head of a wider movement.

So engagement in mission has been the primary area in which the most important theological reflection has happened, but I would see church planting as the sharpest point of that because engagement in mission is good and it opens one to all sorts of vital theological reflection, as I said, my foundational point precisely, because it breaks you out of all your cultural blindness that has made you assume stuff about your theology which you can just go on reinforcing your own understandings, unless you get into a missionary context. But church planting does it the most effectively because you not only have to address the missiological questions but you have to relate those to ecclesiological questions, and the most creative and important insights come when you hold those two things together.

And of course there is the Mission Shaped Church report and responses and the work of your friend Stuart Murray in church planting and his work on Christendom. To me that is an entirely perfect illustration of what I am saying, that having started church planting as a practitioner in London and gone to Surgeons to academically reflect on his church planting experience to train church planters, then his work on Christendom comes out of that. Starting with the coal face of church planting to beginning to reflect upon what that says in ecclesiology and missiology and to then recognise just how much in our Western theology we are just recycling and confirming our own very culturally conditioned cultural understanding of mission and church. And the challenge to that then comes because of Stuart’s church planting reflection as the sharpest end of his own missional engagement.

Back to some other specifics then. We’ve got a shelf with loads of papers and PhD’s that have been written by people that have all been a part of church planting reflection. Because we’re Anglican Church Planting Initiatives, probably over half of them are by Anglicans but we’ve got lots that have been written by non-Anglicans because we’ve always felt the church planting movement was one of the best movements that
connected across the denominations and so there are loads of people that have done
MA's and PhD's on issues of mission church planting and leadership, so that's one
evidence I would say of the literature, and that's academic.

But equally the popular stuff, I mean interestingly Stuart Murray's I would say is one of
the areas that bridges between the popular and the academic, similarly Alan Roxburgh.
I mean I think one shouldn't underestimate George Lings (who I believe you have
spoken to) but I would say that's a perfect example of how things work internationally
as well as particular hubs and networks such as Lausanne. I think we see the same in
the UK, the movements, Stuart Murray and Urban Expression etc for example, and
Spurgeon's for a while (less so now) as places that connected networks of church
planting practitioners and ourselves at ACPI for the Anglicans. And our whole aim was
to be learning from one another and to be theologically reflecting on the extraordinary
adventure we are all on. But George in the last 15 years in the Sheffield Centre was
doing this. There has not been the same sort of academically accredited work, however
much of it is! The 50 or so productions of Encounters on the Edge, I would say is one
of the very best examples contributing a massive value of reflection within the church
planting movement in the UK. Leaders have come together and an institution like the
Church Army has put massive funds to have a unit with half a dozen people who are
researching the insights that have been learned and theologically reflecting on them,
and then feeding that back out through the network. So I would say that's an extremely
important example, and again whilst it's Anglican in its content, its reflections have gone
far wider, and he's explored planters from other denominations and none. So, I think
it's resourced the whole stream.

I think that this probably answers question 5. I think it needs to be taken in my general
point that, would I not only say it is a complete empty critique but it misses the point
completely! The most important and robust theological reflection has been precisely
happening in the church planting movement.

**Question 6: Can you give examples where you have seen or experienced
theological reflection work effectively in Church Planting circles?**

At one level there's too many to answer that and that's where it would take ages,
because the whole last 55 years of journey has been learning lessons through
theological reflection, so at one level the answer is read all the MA's and PhD's and all
the popular literature, but I mean just to take one example: the whole question of "What
is church?"

That question was first raised at what was then London Bible College at a 3-day
symposium there on church planting. And that question again was raised in the DAWN
movement, which had its weaknesses, for which it has paid the price, and is therefore
now just a memory, but it's great strength was that it dared to ask the question at its
international conferences, "What is church?" And to say, that actually, our historic focus
of how we've understood church has been all about how we order church and how we
understand and recognize its leaders, and how it should properly administer its public
gatherings, and has had little or nothing to do with its actual essential nature, that frees
it to be adaptable and culturally and contextually effective. And so I would say the
church planting movement, the biggest contribution has been, and again, all the writing
now of Rowan Williams on what is church, is just massively radical, but was impossible without him having been confronted by church planting in the Monmouth Diocese and so that’s just to take one example.

This is not where church planting has begun an important dialogue in theological reflection, but it’s taken it to a whole new level trying to hold “both and” approaches to church, and further understand the difference between Greek thinking and Hebrew thinking and how one has to hold together opposite intentions, and I mean, the whole ‘mixed economy’ language of church language has come out of that basic foundational understanding of biblical theology. But one could go on.

I think again the discussion of the homogeneous unit principle (HUP) which some would say is a church growth insight, is a complete misunderstanding. To my mind it was Donald McGavran examining a church planting movement in south India that led him to that, so it was entirely an insight out of church planting, and most of the critiques of the HUP have, I think, completely missed the point, because they got stuck in a prejudicial view of American church growth, rather than going back to the roots of the understanding in a church planting movement that was basically looking at contextually appropriate mission and church planting, so actually that’s jumping to question 10 (some of the issues where we need further reflection). I think that’s one of the areas we need further reflection to liberate the understandings of homogeneous expressions of planting church from the difficulties that the church growth movement have created, so that it can’t be seen in its proper light, and there again I’d go back to the Lausanne occasional paper on church planting and the homogeneous unit principle as one of the best discussions of that. Although, I think it misses one of 4 key theologies, so if you wanted my thoughts on that you’d have to read the chapter in my book that I wrote with Mike Breen on clusters, where I have a whole chapter on the homogeneous unit, so there’s that.

Question 7: Does theological reflection on church planting take place within your own theological tradition? If so, how is that done?

I think I have shown already that it does. In the field primarily, that’s where it happens best, so it’s practitioners reflecting, interacting and writing on their experience. It secondly happens in research teams, and that’s where I’ve already referred to key centres like the Sheffield Centre, George Lings and his team, Stuart Murray, and his team, and the Urban Expression lot. I think our own ACPI team and some of the books and articles, and web resources that we’ve produced would be another one. I think now more recently the centres for pioneer learning; are you familiar with Dave Male? And you, presumably, also know Johnny Baker, and the pioneer network emerging in Oxford, and so I would say those are all examples of where it is happening. When it’s a new movement it will primarily be a coal face and a networking of practitioners on the ground, but now one is seeing that maturing and it relates to the world thing, such as places like Lausanne, where we’re getting the primary place of theological reflection by the practitioners and their networking. And the importance of what they’re finding is being recognized by the wider church, and so resources are being given to set up hubs, but they are specializing in taking this further, both gathering the theological reflection that’s happening on the front line of mission, but then having more time to reflect on that in a wider context, which I think is brilliant. I think that should be the process of how
it happens, and I think the evidence in the UK is really encouraging, that those things aren’t happening because there’s a grand control centre that’s saying “this is how it should happen.” Rather, it’s the Holy Spirit that’s guiding all sorts of situations and individuals, and we can now see that it is emerging.

Question 8: What are some of the ways in which church planters could more effectively practise theological reflection?

Almost this flows naturally from the previous question and why you have presumably ordered these this way.

I think we could learn from what I’ve just observed as the pattern that’s been happening over the last 35 years, and intentionally help it to happen better and I think that the formalized thing in terms of some of the hubs, the Sheffield Centre, pioneer learning, Stuart Murray Williams etc. I think those are working really well.

I think the networking of practitioners is where things could be improved. One sees, steps for that and in some ways that’s the distinctive between Oxford and Cambridge, historic centres of UK academia, I think those are obviously different from George, in that George’s are purely a research based team whereas Johnny and Dave are doing research, but they are seeking to do it through networking and becoming a networking centre, which is different from George. His is a specialist team of researchers, reflectors, whereas Johnny and Dave are seeking to be a focus for practitioner reflection. And so one isn’t better than the other but I think again, that shows the maturing of the movement that we are now getting both those happening.

I think the thing I would add, and we’ve only come across this in the last 8 years. I don’t know if you’re familiar with European Church Planting Network (ECPN), which was initiated by a group in the States called Leadership Networks who sponsored learning communities for church planting movements in Europe. And so it’s not conferences or gatherings, it’s a very formalised process based on Wild Works. Lead Academy, are you familiar with them? They are rolling out learning communities, which are based on the same Wild Works model that ECPN has developed over the last 8 years. And I think in terms of your question, I think the learning community is the missing piece. There are now learning communities multiplying very fast, it’s becoming a preferred way of learning for practitioners who are increasingly disillusioned with conferences, where they go and sit and listen to experts, and very little changes, and basically a learning community is a corporate coaching model. So back to my foundational point that we need to discover the 3 learning processes, learning communities are a pattern of non-formal learning, and when you get practitioners together in a non-formal context, I think it’s one of the most effective processes of theological reflection. I think that’s the area where I would say, it’s great what Dave now does every year, getting practitioners together for a couple of days, but the basic content is a mixture of presentations, conference style presentations, which are excellent, and then group discussions. What it lacks is a structure for actually leading to action and accountability. Learning communities have intentionally modelled themselves after a coaching model, where at the end of the gathering you all present your plan for the next 6 months to 2 years, and the next gathering starts with what have you learned from implementing those plans, and how far did you get? So it’s far more related to accountability, it’s not just sharing
theoretical insights, it’s actually much more tied to accountability and practice. That would be my primary answer.

I think the secondary answer would be there are loads of MA’s and PhD’s and we’ve got loads of them sitting gathering dust on a shelf here. I’ve not had time to read them all, to my mind one of the really important areas of theological reflection would be somehow getting dialogue between all those deposits of insight, and lots of people do them and they’ve got their MA or PhD and that’s great, and they’ve got their piece of paper but I think there’s a weakness that we’re not joining up the dots in having any process of intentionally mining across all those. But that is a key area I would want to see better interconnectedness across the academic reflection that’s been going on.

And the other way I think more effective theological reflection could happen goes back to my general point of the 3 processes of learning. I think in the church in the West we have basically lost Jesus’ model of apprenticeship, therefore it’s not just having events where once a year or twice a year we gather people together for an event. That can produce some helpful theological reflection, but I think the most fertile ground is in apprenticeship relationships, and mentorship’s, so I think exploring how that could become much more central in our practice would produce a much richer vein of theological reflection.

**Question 9: What are some of the insights you have personally gained into the practice of church planting by your own theological reflections in the last 10 years?**

As I say, we have written books, and we have developed a whole training course because basically our theological reflection led us to recognize that our own ordination training within the Church of England basically lacked everything that we needed to be church planters (laughs), so there was hardly a thing there apart from extending a bit of biblical understanding. But in terms of the essential elements, it didn’t really equip us with how to theologially reflect, let alone the insights that have been gathered from theological reflection.

So it’s the big picture things: the whole difference between package and process, the nature of the church which is far more complex and flexible than the literature suggests, and most of our convictions that almost become creeds and assumed, and therefore the whole area of “what is church?”

I think the vital role of understanding culture. 20 something years ago we did a course with *Youth with a Mission* (YWAM) and it included 6 weeks in Israel, and we had a week teaching on culture and amongst all who were there, Jews, Palestinians, white westerners, all interacting together, that’s probably the single most important time of theological reflection in my life! So, I think the whole question of culture is an area where I think needs further work. I don’t know if you are familiar with a book criticising Fresh Expressions, *For the Parish: A critique of Fresh Expressions*. I mean in my mind that is just, for people who are professors at university to write with seemingly total lack of understanding of anthropological and sociological understandings of culture, and is just shocking. And so I think to myself, they’ve been stuck in inherited church, and I suppose if they were doing church planting they couldn’t stay in that position! So I think as a
whole, and personally, that theological reflection needs to gain more and more humility in regard to our own cultural captivity and reminds me of the need to constantly be open to my own short sightedness in regard to culture which is a primary engagement in mission.

So diversity, the importance of vision and call, would be another thing and recovering the reformation insight of Luther, about every Christian being a disciple and discipleship meaning you’ve got a whole life calling, to follow Jesus, where again, Christendom has made us believe a calling is something for special people for the priests, or monks, so I think liberating the whole sense of calling is the starting point for the whole body.

Team and insights about team. Most of the things we’ve learned about team, (and this causes sadness) is that many of the insights and reflections about team has been done by non-theologians in the world, rather than by Christians in the church.

The nature of leadership within the church, that’s been very narrow, but church planting has led us to explore much more widely our reflection on the nature of leadership.

Oh I guess the insight that if you start with church you won’t necessarily get disciples, but if you start with disciples you’re bound to get church, so I think that whole area, and the danger of church being tied up in a Sunday event in a special building and all that stuff.

And lastly, big picture, I suppose the importance of moving from Christology to missiology to ecclesiology. And there is an order within theology.

There’s a few things!

**Question 10: What are some of the issues in church planting, which you think, need further theological investigation or reflection?**

This again flows out of the previous questions.

I think the whole area of discipleship, and again this is where the literature is beginning to focus a lot, but again I think whilst mainstream churches are beginning to recognize that, I question whether they’d recognize it as sharply as they do if the church planting movement hadn’t realized that you can start a new church in a community centre and do stuff, but you haven’t necessarily made disciples. So it’s pushed us to ask deeper questions about discipleship.

How do we get stability and apostolic engagement and movement, where there’s constant change? So that tension I think, is an important area that I think more needs to be looked at.

I think the whole financial resourcing of pioneering is another key area to look at that we need more reflection on, where again, we are probably shackled by our Christendom assumptions of how you finance and resource leadership and ministry. So we need further to be broken out of that, and again that’s just another example of
where church planting is raising the questions for theological reflection that inherited church is never going to answer.

I think the whole area (obviously in different denominations this will be different) but the whole area of sacraments, and pioneering in church planting, I think that is a key area, and is again where church planting is pushing the question where without church planting they wouldn’t be asked nearly as strongly, if at all.

I think the whole recognition and ordering of ministry and leadership, again, key areas where most front line church planting has evaded those questions and has discovered a degree of freedom by avoiding formalization but that we’re getting to the point where some of these questions have got to be addressed. If we’d addressed them earlier I think the church planting movement in most denominations would have been shut down and wouldn’t have happened so I think it’s been vital that in a sense those questions have been put on a shelf until we got to a place where it can now be evaded.

So another big picture thing key to theological reflection is “What is church planting saying to the rest of the church?”

And again, “How does apprenticeship become the norm of church life?”

Redeeming the homogeneous unit understandings from the church growth distortions, and more intentional understanding of skills for theological reflection.

And going back to what I was saying about expanding the commonly referenced learning circles that I think miss the corporate and the accountability dimensions.

So there are just a few things where further reflection can take place.

**Rev. Trevor Hutton**

**July 2012**
INTERVIEW EIGHT

Stephen Lindridge: Connexional Missioner for Fresh Expressions (Methodist)

Question 1: What is your name and your current ministry role or assignment?

My name is Stephen Lindridge. I am the Connexional Missioner for Fresh Expressions and my partner in crime is Graham Cray, who is the Archbishops Missioner, and we’re both the recognized leaders of our denominations for Fresh Expressions and seconded to the Fresh Expressions team.

And so you’re the Connexion Missioner for the Methodist church?

It’s changed a little bit from the previous role. There was phase one, in which the Connexional Missioner was also seen as a member of the Methodist Connexional team. Under the second phase there were some policy changes, and they decided it was difficult to be members of two teams, the Methodist Connexional team and the Fresh Expressions team and so a decision was made to designate me as a member of the Fresh Expressions team. So I’m employed by the Methodist Council, but seconded to the Fresh Expressions team. But the leadership of the Methodist church has given me a very open door, and I’m very welcome when I need to go and do whatever, and knock on doors of people that I feel I need to see.

So I stand in a curious place really, that I have technically the role of an external partner to the Methodist church but I’m very well imbedded, and in many ways treated as an internal partner to the Methodist church. That can be confusing at times, but on the whole it works really well.

Question 2: What has been/is your connection to church planting ministries?

First, what has been! I was a circuit minister for ten years and during those ten years I attended as many church planting conferences as I could get to. I always had a missional heart and we did various things in the life of the circuit that I was part of, which is now known as the Bede circuit in Newcastle. I started ministry in 1994, and did 10 years in the same, with Elaine, my wife, a presbyter, we job shared for 8 of those years, during which we planted a church called Mind the Gap. This was before the ‘Fresh Expressions’ term was around, and it was a culmination of the circuit review about mission asking how do we reach those that we don’t engage with at all, which was the ages 20’s, 30’s and 40’s. So we planted that, and then as the Fresh Expressions term started to be used, people came and said that was a ‘Fresh Expression of Church’, because we were trying to reach the 20’s – 40’s in ways that weren’t familiar with the rest of the life and pattern of the church, and the intention had always been to create indigenous leadership over a longer period of time to then keep reaching out to those who would never darken the doors of a church on Sunday.

I then became the Evangelism Enabler for the Newcastle District and then worked with quite a number of circuits and local churches in what they could do to start to engage with this thing called ‘Fresh Expressions’. And so we set up something called The Roof
Project in the Stanley circuit, it was one of the significant things, but also we set up several pub churches, and café churches, with a range of different folk in different places in the Newcastle district that were trying to reach out and engage people that would, again, never darken the doors on a Sunday, but have spiritual interest and wanted to connect with that. So that’s kind of the beginning of connections with church planting.

I also networked quite a bit with quite a number of more classical forms of church planting, George (Lings) uses various terms to describe these, e.g. the strawberry runner plant, of where you take more or less the same thing and do it somewhere else, in order to reach a new people group that currently won’t come to your existing parish or church. The networking with those guys was much more about the classical form of church planting.

Currently, I am the Connexional Missioner for Fresh Expressions, which is a huge broad umbrella term, under which many different things fit, including different spiritual streams and traditions, and forms of practice. So currently my connection is quite huge with varied forms of church planting. Most Fresh Expressions when they begin, have the intention of connecting with a group of people to sow the seeds of the gospel, raise them to faith and then start a church, or carry on the whole thing of being a church in this new context and culture, and in a sense that is church planting. But it’s not the traditional form where you take a certain model and style of worship, or the ways of meeting and then go and plant it somewhere else.

*Fresh Expressions* is much more. It is about meeting you where you’re at, listening to your culture and context and engage with you with the gospel in relevant ways. So that’s much more where we’re at now and what we’re doing. Very little is about “this is the formal style of our worship and therefore we will go and do that in a pub!” That’s not the case with fresh expressions. Most of the time it’s, “we’ll go and meet people and we’ll talk about where they’re at and what they’re engaged with and start the conversation from there!”

The intention is long-term, so you help them with discipleship and form something that then might look like the four relationships of church that we’re looking for (around the one, holy catholic and apostolic marks if you like), and that’s what we’re looking for in the long term. So that’s my current context, but as I said under that umbrella you’ve got, Anglo-Catholic, Catholic, Charismatic, Evangelical, kind of everything in between. Basically all the colours of spirituality including New Monastic, which sort of shows itself in various ways. So the role and the ecumenical nature of this means that my current connection is huge and varied.

**Question 3: Do you think it is necessary for church planting/church planters to engage in theological reflection? Why?**

If I can just go back to the broad spectrum for a moment. If I could just give you some brief stats for the Methodist church to describe where we are. There were 1800 records that showed some sign of association with or designation to, Fresh Expressions of church, of which 1600 met monthly or more. The reason for monthly or more is interesting, because we say if we’re going to try and build community the bare minimum
is monthly. That sort of the time frame gives the opportunity to see people face to face, and when we count other stats and research, that’s also what we were also looking at. The bare minimum of what they counted was monthly. But, when you look at where people meet, most of it, 73% is actually based on a modal model, it’s on church premises, and only 27% is off church premises.

The reason I’m doing this is to then say to you, that those that I call the “cutting edge”, (the cutting edge for some congregations is to actually do it on their church premises but do it in a different way) but what I’m really talking about is those that have asked, “How do we go meet people that would never darken the doors of a church?” (have a much more sense of a prophetic edge of how to do church) are often some of the most reflective thinkers that I’ve ever come across!

Do you know about Venture FX? 2 or 3 years ago, when Fresh Expressions was just beginning its second phase, a chap called Graham Horsley, who was our secretary, basically said we’re still not reaching the 20’s and 30’s and that was the major missing generation. There was a report published and recommended we employ 20 people to be pioneers to go and engage this generation in different ways and learn how they do that and learn what ways work and what ways don’t work. That was the project called Venture FX. We actually, because of funding issues, have only employed 13 people, and we’ve only got 13 projects across the districts, across the Methodist connexion (two in Scotland, one in Wales, the rest are in England), but these pioneers that I’m talking about, what I call “the cutting edge folk” are thinking harder and being much more reflective about all they do and why they do what they do. They are doing what I would also call “cutting edge theological reflection”. They try and become as relevant as they can to the context to which they are in, and then ask questions like, “What does that mean for discipleship?” “What does that mean for the nature of the church?” “What are the ways that you form and prosper church for the Kingdom?”

At the other end of the spectrum is the more modal kind of stuff that’s going on, for largely, perhaps two constituents, which is Café church and Messy church, Messy church being the largest. I would say that many of our folk are just beginning to learn confidence in doing something different, and actually seeing a good connection with people who would never have darkened their doors before. So that’s their learning curve and that’s their particular kind of thing that’s occupying them. I don’t find at the moment, many, (these are just ordinary Methodist folk) doing deep theological reflection, or much in the way of theological reflection. So at one end of the spectrum you’ve got an intensity of theological reflection, at the other end of the spectrum, you’re not finding that to the same degree. So that’s just a little measure of what I see happening.

I do think theological reflection is important because I think our folk at the more familiar end have got to learn. I think, and again this is context, I think for many of our folk they’re only learning what it is to really be a disciple of Jesus himself or herself, and that’s a learning curve. They kind of then have got to find a place to say “how do I help these new folk that we’re connecting with, and how do I help them to journey in discipleship as well?”
So I do think it’s necessary but I think what you’ve got needs to fit on different ends of a spectrum, ask what’s realistic to expect. I think it needs a rise in confidence and to grow. At both ends of the spectrum there is a need to reflect on God’s engagement with us, God meeting these people in Messy church, Café church, and doing something amazing that we’ve never seen for 30, 40 years, which is actually a major transformation for the local church, and it’s exciting them beyond anything that they’ve ever done before. So for them that’s the edge of their spectrum. We need to ask is that the depth of theological reflection that you’re actually looking for?

It’s all relative I think is the answer, and that’s my caveat to answering question three (laughs). So yes, it’s important, and why is it important, because it helps people move on the next stage of the journey, is the simple answer, but where that journey is and where that journey is going depends on where they’re starting.

**Question 4: How would you describe the nature and purpose of theological reflection?**

I think ‘purpose’ is easy; that’s simply about growing in discipleship and in growing in discipleship you live more of the Christ like life, and hope to see more of the kingdom come, which is the name of the game.

The nature of it? Quite a variety really. For me, it could be as varied as walking a regular track, for a 10, 15-minute bit of the day, just as I have a chat with God. Or it could be times of solitude and retreat, or it could be a simple flat on your face and ten minutes of prayer, or it could be to get out there and go and cut the grass type of thing, you know, and while you cut the grass chew over with God the various angst, or questions of the day. The nature of it could come out in many different ways really, and all of those at the moment are for the individual, but I would also add corporate as well. So at times discussion over a pint, at times being in conference and debating, negotiating and asking “is this what God really wants?” kind of thing; times of corporate prayer in midst of the regular or irregular patterns of the church.

**Question 5: How would you respond to the criticism that church planting is a practice that lacks robust theological reflection?**

This is a very subjective response really for me, because based on what I think I remember. If you were going back in time to the early 90s, I would have thought it was all about the church growth stuff. You go into a school and you take your band and you do your worship thing and you do exactly what you did in the existing church; and there hadn’t been a great deal of theological reflection around what was going on, what was the nature of the community and the school, it wasn’t kind of “how was that going to change things?” I think it was a case of “we’ve heard this has worked well in other places, so let’s do it?” So I think in a timeline, in the early 90s there probably wasn’t a lot of deep theological reflection about the whole thing, it was a much more pragmatic kind of let’s go and do it.

But I think over the 90s and over the Decade of Evangelism, people did start to think a lot more about it, started doing their studies and saw there was a massive decline in the life of the mainline denominations, and asked, “What’s going on?” And not just from
those doing church planting, but those that were some colleagues of senior years who did ministry all their life, and just thought that the way they always had to do it was the only way and did not see the potential end of the mainline denomination in their lifetime, and they never looked for that. So I think there was quite a significant degree of ignorance, is what I’m trying to say, and that wasn’t just in the church planting realm; many were thinking an awful lot about theology, academic theology, but weren’t thinking a lot about practical discipleship. That then broke the bubble around the late 90s and early 2000s and people started to try new things, and part of that was very good, practical, theological reflection (which was basically praying and seeing what God wanted, and then trying and engaging and listening to the community).

But I think it’s changed quite significantly, but I don’t think we’re there yet. I don’t think most of the training within academic theological education is there yet (it’s beginning to catch up, or it has been trying to do that for the last 5 years). So I think where we are now is a very different place; I also think that you’ve got far more different streams and approaches to theological reflection and that is having quite a profound affect as well.

There’s inevitably still going to be those who just think they can carry on regardless, but the majority I think are genuinely trying to be walking in the footsteps of the Holy Spirit, to come alongside what God is really doing; who are genuinely good, reflective folk, about what’s happening and why it’s happening and what can be done about it.

**Question 6: Can you give examples where you have seen or experienced theological reflection work effectively in Church Planting circles?**

The *Venture FX* guys set up a “rule of life”, and they include me into that. So we receive a text every day (they lead that), and we all commit to pray for one another and pray actually until you’ve done the things in the text. They meet together on a monthly basis. Again, kind of in the midst of that, they’ll just do the business of the day, but they spend some time thinking through particular issues that have to do with church planting and what they’re part of.

There are a number of other networks that kind of do this in a way, sort of pioneering streams across the Church of England as well, and a number of Methodists are kind of linked into it.

I also know that a lot of the people who have floundered in all of this have a regular thing of getting away for 24 hours and kind of “chew the curd” on what’s happening. And there is twitter and facebook and several kind of web pages there and through those, basically, issues are launched, questions are posed, and an open kind of debate around the whole thing, which I think is a form of theological reflection.

On the whole, good practice is going on there, because it really does inform. And a number of these folk have then been able to go on their way with what’s in the summary of their discussion and debate, and then that’s been pulled into sort of various things; you know Bertie Ling’s “Letters From Home”, kind of thing is going on, so that gets into the wider kind of broad thought and discussion. So those are particularly good things.
I’ve had a coach for a long time, and we talk on a monthly basis about particular issues of which I would say every other one has sort of to do with theological reflection. And we’re encouraging more and more of that, a coach or mentor role in helping. And I know the Mission Ministry Course, which has been such a key part in all of this, has as part of it principles of doing good theological reflection even as they go away with their notes after their sessions. They go and kind of work it through as a team, pray it through in whatever exercise group they’re formed in, and again that’s very useful.

**Question 7: Does theological reflection on church planting take place within your own theological tradition? If so, how is that done? Is theological reflection mainly taking place through Methodist Fresh Expressions or are there other ways in which theological reflection is done within Methodist circles?**

I mean Methodism is a broad church so there’s quite a range of extreme spiritualities, and this is by no means the charismatic evangelical wing of the church that’s just doing Fresh Expressions because the contemplative and those that are drifting more of a catholic spirituality are also engaged in Fresh Expressions in different ways and the new monastic kind of approach is a strong sign of that.

There are various structures in Methodism, so all on probation, ministers under 5 years of ministry all have disciplines to follow (some followed better than others), and that all helps to aid various forms of reflection.

There is a change within the way in which we do learning and development. *Fruitful Field* has been a massive issue at the Methodist conference the moment but there’s going to be a greater emphasis upon the whole lifelong learning and not just the lifelong learning for the presbyters and deacons, but everyone in lay ministry as well basically. I think there’s also into that DNA is the whole thing of the class meeting, which a bit of our folk still don’t go anywhere near, but it’s there in our DNA of what actually is in the Methodist church; a fundamental tool to kind of help people engage in theological reflection, and that makes a practical difference in their lives. So there is a range of different things from grass roots to structural stuff that is actually helping.

I’m wondering if in the Methodist church because there is the official connection now to be part of the Fresh Expressions movement, whether there is or is there not another church planting department or anything like that?

Graham Horsley used to be the Evangelism and Church Planting Officer and when Fresh Expressions emerged Graham and a couple others went to see the Archbishop and asked if we could join in with this, and the Methodist hierarchy also said yes. That began as an initiative that was outside of the new partnership today. Graham still carried on holding the brief of church planting, but increasingly the Fresh Expressions started to become a more fruitful field of territory. That’s not to say there aren’t other things, which we recognize, that many more familiar forms of church planting can go on. I think we’ve learned a great deal over a period of time about traditional forms of church planting, and it can work, and it does work in certain contexts, and it will work for a certain kind of person, and spiritual interest, and demographic, but it will only reach a certain kind of person and a certain demographic. Therefore, if we’re seriously going to engage in the spiritual need of all the people around us, or as many people as possible around, then we need to have new models. So that’s probably a fairer
perspective of where the Methodist church is now. We know what we need to do is a
thousand and one different varieties (which is the vision and values of Fresh
Expressions) and so the whole thing is that there are multiple forms of church. We have
now Joan Cox who basically filled part of Graham’s role and she is called the
Evangelism and Contemporary Context of Culture Officer, which is not the same as
church planting but it is about the contemporary culture we go engage with and share
the good news; it’s part of her brief and role. There is Jenny Ellis who heads up
spirituality and discipleship, and a guy called Ed whose leading the team that networks
with the Evangelism Enablers and does various bits, but the church planting doesn’t
seem to be in the title for anyone any more.

So it’s not to say that we’re closed to it, it’s just to say that we’ve nuanced it a lot clearer
and we engage in more relevant ways. And I don’t think that there are many that are
beginning to do the clone church plant (the strawberry runner type), that we did in the
90s without actually doing some serious theological reflection about the context which
they’re going into and who they’re are going to try and reach, and what they’re going to
establish there, so I think that’s where we are as the Methodist church.

Would you still use the term “Church planters” or has “Pioneer” replaced this
term?

Language is a funny thing and we’re finding all the time that there are some people out
there within the Methodist church that don’t use the ‘Fresh Expression’ language for
whatever reason, they’ve either misunderstood it, or they don’t like it, or they just don’t
think it does the job. But the reality is what they’re doing totally fits with Fresh
Expressions and creating church for those who are completely un-churched. But
whatever it is, they just don’t like the language and don’t use it, and I think it’s a similar
thing with church planting. There’s quite a number of people who don’t use the term
‘church planting’ any more because for them, in their understanding, they had an idea
of just ‘cloning’ what we did in position A and then did in position B. So they don’t use
it anymore because they’re not trying to do that anymore, they are not trying to do the
clone thing.

There are others out there that just seem like the word ‘mission’ is a huge broad term
and would say church planting is a huge broad term, that’s what we’re doing, we’re
church planting in all these ways. But we’re using the language of Fresh Expressions
because we’re trying to nuance the wider picture to say we’re not going to do something
that we’ve always done before, and we are going to go and see what the needs are
and try and create the culture of discipleship in a community of faith in a new context
and being relevant to that context.

And then there are others that would, if they were having this conversation, say that
church planting was a thing of the early 90s, that that’s what we used to do and there’s
only a few churches, perhaps some Anglican or newer, more New Wine type churches
that have grown and would go and copy that format, perhaps too the Black majority
churches in London would kind of talk on those terms as well again because it’s out of
the place of success and fruitfulness that they carry on doing the same thing in another
place because they believe it works, and they probably see that it works. So context is
everything I think for those that then use the word in a nuanced way or a certainly very definitive way.

Pioneer is kind of again, a broad term. There are some people that would use ‘pioneer’ as in the truest sense of the word; they’re going into territory that previously hasn’t been engaged with and then they’re creating new forms of church within communities and with completely new ways. There are others that would use the broader sense of the word ‘pioneer’, in traditional church in an inherited context, where a church doesn’t do any life of worship, that doesn’t do any form of mission but a leader or new Christian minister takes that church on a journey into those new areas and starts to engage people on their doorstep, or in their buildings and actually become a pioneer because they’re pioneering something that hasn’t been done before for at least 4 decades.

**Question 8: What are some of the ways in which church planters could more effectively practise theological reflection?**

My single thing that I would say, if they haven’t got any form of coaching that they actually get some form of coaching, however infrequent, because it is one of the most useful tools. We are trying to sharpen our people’s thoughts (whether it’s pragmatics or even how to fill in a form), we are really trying to help people learn that theological reflection is a significant part of ministry, but some kind of coaching or mentoring is key.

**Question 9: What are some of the insights you have personally gained into the practice of church planting by your own theological reflections in the last 10 years?**

That’s a great question! Very simply, Acts 2: v 42-47, and therefore my profound reflection is why would God want to put his little ones in an unsafe structure. I’m not talking about a building here, I’m talking about (when you look into that chapter, and that passage, v 42 – 47) that there was a natural thing that the early church did, and there were key components to that and there was the right environment in which God could plant his new little ones of faith to grow and be discipled. And I think one of the most profound lessons I learned in the 90s was why would God plant his little ones in an unsafe structure that only had one or two elements of the core things necessary to help them grow in discipleship. So if we haven’t got the right environment, why would God give us new little ones? But at the end of the day it is God that gives the faith and gives new life and so actually that’s kind of the key thing. If we get the church to be the church, cultivate the right environment in which it can grow good discipleship and help it be about the kingdom purpose, that’s is key. Making disciples is absolutely key. If the church is not making disciples, then it’s not being church.

**Question 10: What are some of the issues in church planting, which you think, need further theological investigation or reflection?**

I think where we’re at the moment; there’s been an awful lot of talk about the whole pathway to discipleship and kind of what does that look like, how does that work for somebody who comes to Messy church and they’ve come with their kids, or their kids have come with their spiritual interest kind of thing…how do you help them go further? There are various answers. But helping develop relevant discipleship where there’s
been contact. How do you move from good connection into genuine community, and what’s the right thing to do there?

The other side of that coin is then the whole thing that relates to the sacraments, of which all this is connected, to be honest. At the moment most of the Methodist Anglican churches have very clear governance structures and there was a report that came to the Methodist Conference and the Synod called, *Fresh Expressions in the Mission Of The Church* and the recommendations at the end of that, was still incredibly churchy to be honest, and was all about ways to ‘authorize ministry.’ And I know, again, language can be a problem, it can be nuanced in various ways, but authority still lies at the centre, and it says to the edge or the community you’ve got to look right before we’ll recognize who you are, kind of thing. It’s all about good order, over the whole dynamic of holy risk and faith.

So I think theological reflection into what was Jesus really thinking about, you know, in terms of how to grow and build a kingdom, and the churches place or part in all of that. And actually what does leadership look like, and how do we recognize and authorize it? Is recognizing and authorizing it absolutely imperative to doing good church planting, that’s the nuance question I think.

*Rev. Trevor Hutton*

*June 2012*
George Lings: Director of Research at the Church Army.

Question 1: What is your name and your current ministry role or assignment?

My name is George Lings and I am the director of research at the Church Army.

And how long have you been in that role George?

I’ve been in that role since 1997.

Is it possible to ask you briefly, what you were doing before that, and what led you into your current role?

Before then I was a Church of England vicar for 12 years, and a Church of England curate for 10 years. Before I trained, I worked for the Bank of England. My ending up in this role (my understanding now) is that back in 1984 I began to experience a vocation to be interested in church planting. At the time I thought it might be to do it, but God had other plans; it was actually to watch other people do it and try to learn from that.

Question 2: What has been/is your connection to church planting ministries?

Well let’s begin in 1984, that’s when I first became interested in the subject, I see that now as a call. I think it probably was occasioned by reading the first English book on the subject, edited by Monica Hill called *How to Plant Churches*. The next stage was in 1987 where I found myself asked by others to begin, or to develop a database of Anglican church plants that I and a few others had been beginning to gather. That then grew as the ‘hobby of a vicar’ for a number of years.

In 1992 I had a sabbatical where I studied church plants. In particular, in Anglican terms, I looked at ones, which had crossed Parish boundaries, which was, then thought to be a rather dangerous thing to do. I wrote that up, and that then became a significant contributing document to a Church of England report called *Breaking New Ground*, which I served on from 92 – 94.

In 1997 I left local church ministry and became a full time researcher with Church Army in this area, and our research then contributed to the 2004 report, *Mission Shaped Church*, and I was one of the writers of that report and sense that we’ve been seeing through that agenda in the Church of England and continuing to note how the creativity of God runs ahead of the plans of human beings.

In terms of language of ‘church planting’ and ‘fresh expression of church’, I wonder if you see them as synonymous or I is it correct that you see ‘fresh expressions’ as a wider umbrella that includes church planting. I just wanted to clarify this directly at the beginning of the interview as the other questions are
about ‘church planting’. What is the relationship you see between ‘church planting’ and ‘fresh expression of church?’

Well, if you’re familiar with Venn diagrams, I see them as overlapping circles or maybe not circles (could be some other shape), but they’re overlapping. What they have in common is that something is brought to birth that previously did not exist. Where church plants may not be as fresh as they might usefully be (even if something new has been brought to birth) is where it is in danger of being a ‘clone’ of existing church and therefore rather than being called a ‘fresh expression’, it might in fact be an ‘old expression’ of church!

Equally there are some other things that sort of nestle under the other area, which is not included in the overlap between the two; there are some things that call themselves ‘fresh expressions of church’, which are really more the re-invention of existing churches. Now where that is a very significant development, like changing from being congregation based to cell based, we can see some legitimacy in saying that it is indeed a ‘fresh’ expression.

But ideally the two disciplines overlap and every genuine ‘fresh expression’ has also been planted; that is to say that’s an analogy for something new that has begun that previously did not exist before, and grows up to be itself I (using horticultural language if you like), in the ‘garden’ of the church, (you know, international, or church militant, or whatever language you want to use).

So, in many cases where there are really healthy ‘fresh expressions’ they will have been ‘planted’ and the best ‘church plants’ will also be contextual and in that sense deserve the adjective ‘fresh’.

**Question 3: Do you think it is necessary for church planting/church planters to engage in theological reflection? Why?**

I do think it’s very necessary. However, that’s not the same as saying it’s always followed and your question 5 will probably touch on that.

A further supplementary of why is it necessary. That would be related to my understanding of the process of inculturation, which I would differentiate from contextualization in the sense that contextualization sometimes is limited to dealing only with how the gospel translates and essentially seen as a one-way process where the unchanging gospel puts on a fresh set of clothes to look culturally relevant in another context. My understanding of inculturation is both broader in that it encompasses both gospel and church, and also it is a two-way process.

Though there is something which is core, essential, heart, (all different metaphors) for what is eternally true about gospel and church, nevertheless, sometimes by the encounter with a different culture, some bits of that actually get revealed which weren’t immediately apparent to the people, the Christians who entered that culture. I suppose a classic example in the literature is seen in the work of Vincent Donovan.
Another reason why I think theological reflection is necessary is related to it, but in the sense it's part of the unpacking of how that happens, and therefore *Mission Shaped Church* was trying to explore in its concept and discipline of double listening, and double listening has a relationship to theological reflection. Why that is necessary is that, unless the theological reflection takes place there is a danger on the one hand that by a planting team engaging with cultural context, either gospel, or church or both, might unhelpfully enter the process we call syncretism. The other opposite danger is that by failing to engage in such a process, though they themselves believe they remain faithful, contextually, they are entirely irrelevant.

Perhaps if there is a third reason why theological reflection is necessary it would be related to classic self-thinking and the people then who then further develop that to say actually self-discipline is necessary, where the forth self is theologising.

Perhaps behind all that, I suggest, over the last 20 years, at least, a shift from a kind of exclusive “how to” mentality, which was kind of programmatic and almost the consequence of some older cruder forms of *church growth* thinking, where this is just how you do it, there’s something that draws partly on the upsides, (and they’re not all upsides), of post–modernity and taking context more seriously where a process of discerning and discovering is essential that is more reflective than merely putting a bold process into action.

**Question 4: How would you describe the nature and purpose of theological reflection?**

Perhaps I’d answer that by a cascade of images. One of the purposes of theological reflection is sustaining the connection, or the dance, between theory and practice whereby one of those two partners may lead at any one point. But the essence of the dance is the continued and evolving relationship between the two. Another way to put that, which is probably more conceptual than an image, is how a tradition is maintained while at the same time evolving and remaining faithful. I think another way to put that would be to talk about ‘connections’ and it’s a way to explore the connections between the contextual and the perennial. Or another image would be, it’s like standing back far enough to get a clearer picture.

**Question 5: How would you respond to the criticism that church planting is a practice that lacks robust theological reflection?**

In one way, question five can be read in at least two ways. How I’m presently seeing that is you could read the question as, “Do church planters, as practitioners, lack theological reflection?” but the other way you could read it is, “Is the discipline of church planting inherently one that lacks robust theological reflection?”

**Do you have any responses to both the questions you have raised here?**

Yes, that's fine. I'll respond to both.
So, ironically, reflecting on church planting practitioners, I think it is often true, and there are certain signs by which one can often detect this. One is a term, probably coined by Stuart Murray, that he would call cloning, the tendency of some forms of church planting, particularly those who are heavily branded, is more likely to clone. And the similarity of what is sent to that which sent it, irrespective of context, is a sign of that lack of reflection which in turn is a lack of seeing the need for contextualization which itself is a reflective practice.

Now the other sign I think of that is when various forms of either fresh expression or church plants merely copy the shapes by which something is done, but don’t understand the values. In relation to evangelism an example might be where people say “Oh yes, we do Alpha but we don’t do the meal.” I’m fairly sure they have not understood Alpha. Another example would be a Messy Church where people may say they do crafts for children, but they’ve not understood the value in Messy Church that it’s actually all age, and it’s about creativity, and that might or might not lead to craft! So there is a tendency, because people are anxious and want to do something, to pick up the shapes, but not do the values. The same I think is true with cell church. People have said, “We’re doing the four W’s”, but that’s the shape, and not the values. So those would all be examples in practice that planters and the creators of fresh expressions do sometimes have the tendency to fail to reflect.

I myself don’t think, picking out the second question, that church planting is inherently unreflective. In a way, even the very term ‘church planting’ should give indications of this, because one of the things that happens, because it is church planting, those who are reflectors know, it is not inherently true that there is only one form of church; and as soon as you make that statement you are into a process of reflection, because you are trying to distinguish between what is the core, essence, heart, unchangeable parts of what it is to be church, and which parts are merely past contextual variables and can change again. And that’s an inherently reflective process.

Also, the word ‘plant’ suggests some relationship with a particular context, a particular garden that has a certain soil, a certain kind of rainfall and because there is a context, that in itself provokes a need to understand that context and engage with it. So I think it might even be true that when you put the two words together, ‘church’ and ‘plant’, you are inherently committed, or should be, to a reflective process.

**Question 6: Can you give examples where you have seen or experienced theological reflection work effectively in Church Planting circles?**

I think there’s some sort of bias probably in my answer because I primarily work as a theoretician, and therefore this is likely to happen in my world, and with the people with whom I work.

So for example in 2003, within the Church Army’s training college we had a discussion, and debate and meeting, about the possible relationships and overlaps between theological reflection and double listening, (and I think I’ve sent you a paper which records some of those thoughts and examples).
Another example would be the writing of *A Mission Shaped Church* in 2004 where Graham Cray and myself were the principal contributors to its 5th chapter on the theology behind *Mission Shaped Church*, which is a fair example of seeking to reflect, (not that everybody since has found it entirely satisfactory), but the reflection is probably an ongoing process.

I think another example where I see it happening in practice would be in the *Mission Shaped Ministry Course*, a year long course offered by the Fresh Expressions team which is now being used by a couple of thousand people around the country, and clearly that is about helping them to reflect upon “What is mission?” and “How do you apply it?” and “What is church?” and “How is that to be grown?”

A different kind of theological reflection is again, (related to a paper which I sent to you), on what Stuart Murray and I call “The 5 tribes” and how a number of different loose groupings might be offered taxonomy of 5 different ‘ways’ that groups of people interested in planting and fresh expressions actually do their theological reflection. That is a reflection on how people reflect differently.

At the level of practitioners, I would see it operating by some of the individual stories that I’ve gone and visited and then written up in the series of stories that we call *Encounters On the Edge*, which have been published quarterly since 1999. And I would say in the vast majority of those stories part of the lesson going on there is how people are creatively engaging with context, and so demonstrating both the necessity and benefits of theological reflection.

**Question 7: Does theological reflection on church planting take place within your own theological tradition? If so, how is that done?**

Some of it is quite deliberate. So it now would be customary in Anglican theological training and that would be true of Church Army too, to use such things as the ‘pastoral cycle’, which is one way in which to shape how theological reflection occurs.

I think also I see, within Anglicanism some people are primarily *doers* who then may or may not think, others are primarily thinkers who then do so there is variety about that.

Within our tradition too, I think there has always been a tendency for people to write. I mean Anglicanism tends towards more academic than solely practitioner and an example, recently, since 2004 would be the spate of different books following the sort of ‘Mission shaped’ strap line, e.g. Mission Shaped Spirituality, Mission Shaped in Rural, Mission Shaped in Cathedrals and so on. So that would be a tendency.

I guess, also, Anglicans reflect through a tendency to have conferences, and that would be a mixture of formal input, speakers and seminars, but also informally, in the bar and in conversations. So, I think there’s something in the Anglican tradition that understands there is a tendency to reflect on practice and a tendency to accept that the understanding of the tradition itself evolves, and the art and the debate is whether that evolution is principled, is being faithful to the tradition, yet at the same time allowing space for creativity. I guess the role of Archbishop Rowan and his advocacy of Fresh
Expressions, as part of the mixed-economy of the Church of England would be an example of that continued evolution.

**Question 8: What are some of the ways in which church planters could more effectively practise theological reflection?**

There are a number of ways in which church planters could more effectively practice theological reflection, and the following come to mind.

Firstly, that church planters could be more aware of the importance of double listening.

Secondly there should be some re-reading and re-applying of the works of Roland Allan.

The third thing that people could do is to have a menu from which they could consciously choose from in regards to Bevan’s models of contextualization, so that different people could choose different ways of approaching culture and context. And engagement with these three ways, that is double listening, the works of Roland Allen, and the use and reflection of Bevan’s models of contextualization would be ways in which church planters could more effectively practice theological reflection.

**Question 9: What are some of the insights you have personally gained into the practice of church planting by your own theological reflections in the last 10 years?**

There are a number, in distilling out things that I have seen exhibiting on the ground, with repeating patterns, and seeing different ways of thinking and behaving, the following points have kind of distilled out of my engagement with those things:

First of all, I would say that there is an opportunity and necessity to see greater clarity on the “why” rather than the “how” questions, and that would be the first thing that I would note; the why is more important than the how questions. That’s become something of greater significance in the last period of time in reflecting.

The second thing is that the best planting is more of an art than of a science.

The third thing is that church planting is always a matter of discernment and that discernment is served by planning and not the other way around.

The fourth thing is that there is always a relationship between church and mission. And both are absolutely essential. Take the famous analogy of “What’s the relationship between the chicken and the egg, and what came first?” It’s an impossible question to answer in one sense. What’s important is that if either you remove the chicken or the egg, you’ve got a fundamental problem, therefore what’s really important is to recognize the importance of church and mission and their relationship together.

The next thing is to recognise that there two principal theological roots for best theological reflection, and therefore church planting practice, which are the Trinity and Christology. From the Trinity we derive an understanding of interpersonhood and the
interpersonal foundation of relationships and community are critical. From Christology we derive from Jesus of Nazareth, the God-man, the Christological foundation of both continuity and discontinuity when it comes to embracing change. And this is demonstrated in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Another thing that stands out is that the practices of church planting are shaped by the processes and therefore the processes for establishing fresh expressions of church and church plants are important and they begin by modelling community and in that community lead to a sense of discernment of mission in that context. And in that context as people encounter Christ then evolving worship will serve that context so there is a kind of process there of forming and modelling community, leading to discernment of mission and out of that evolving worship.

Behind these perceptions of church planting and expressions there is a lot of use of horticultural and mechanic models and language of church planting and what that espouses. And therefore church planting needs some new language and some new images that are relational; new churches are born, maybe not planted, and the idea of embracing values and dynamics of the human life cycle may be more helpful language and images and some work could be done on that.

**Question 10: What are some of the issues in church planting, which you think, need further theological investigation or reflection?**

First I think it is important to articulate an ecclesiology, which is not defined by its public ministries (perhaps this takes place and is more important in mainline denominations), but we need to find a way to articulate ecclesiology that isn’t just defined by what it does, and that maybe takes us back to important discoveries of ecclesiology from the early days of the church.

Secondly we need to continue to reflect on “What is the gospel for post Christendom people?”

The third thing is we need to explore more is the legitimacy and sustainability of small church units and the recovery of Christianity as a domestic religion.

Fourthly we need to develop and examine a relational understanding of what is church maturity.

And finally there needs to be more work done on the differences between ‘sodal’ and ‘modal’ church, and what sustains and sets back these realities and models. What is important here is how sodal and modal church interact both missionally and ecclesiologically, and how they are sustained and mutually informed. I think more work would need to be done on these issues.

That’s just a few that came to mind.

**Rev. Trevor Hutton**

**June 2012**
Derek Purnell: Urban Ministry Consultant with Urban Presence, teacher and trainer in Urban ministry and core team member of an urban missional community in Newton Heath, Manchester.

Question 1: What is your name and your current ministry role or assignment?

My name is Derek Purnell and my day job is an urban ministries consultant, which ranges from informing people in urban ministry to doing a little bit of theological education, several modules at the Nazarene Theological College for example. I'm also a team member of a Missional Community in an inner city area.

Question 2: What has been/is your connection to church planting ministries?

My initial involvement in church planting was that I actually came to faith in a church plant when I was 11; it must have been 49 years ago. Basically I came to faith and grew in faith as a Christian in a church plant in an outer estate in Birmingham.

My more recent connection was while I was re-envisioning my ministry and doing my degree in theological education (I trained as a missionary in the 70s then pastored a church for a number of years before going back to college). On a placement I went to the States and the question I was asking myself was, “What happens to the church that won’t or can’t be renewed?” I went to a lecture by Dr. Thomas Wolf who was delivering in Chicago, (he’s from East L.A.) and I was struggling with this question, and the conclusion I came to was that it must be planted, or replanted. I saw a church renewed and I thought, “That’s what I should be doing!”

The following year I went back to the States went to L.A. where I looked at urban church planting within that context. On my return and finishing my degree, I looked at what we were doing as far as local church was concerned, and decided that we couldn’t move the church forward fast enough to relate to the local community without doing it serious damage so I felt what was needed in that context, was a church plant. And things lined up so that I got involved with Urban Expression, and urban church planting agency. Initially through my daughter going to London as part of one of their teams and then through my involvement as a trustee in Urban Expression and these two things came together when our daughter moved back to Manchester while we were considering church planting on our estate.

Is that part of your current practice now?

Yes, I would say we describe ourselves as a missional community because there’s only 4 of us, and we would like to see more members and to have the capacity to move towards church planting, but at this time I think it’s honest to say that we’re a missional community.

Question 3: Do you think it is necessary for church planting/church planters to engage in theological reflection? Why?
I would say it’s essential for anybody in Christian ministry to do theological reflection. I think it’s vital for somebody whose doing church planting because if they don’t do theological reflection, then they may make the assumption that the model of church that they are used to is obviously the model that should be done in whatever given context, and I think that’s a faulty reason. I would say, for me, theological reflection needs to go very closely in hand with reflection on the context. I think that is essential otherwise you end up with, perhaps, inappropriate models of church for that particular context.

Question 4: How would you describe the nature and purpose of theological reflection?

For me, I suppose I wandered into it not knowing what it was, in the sense that I was faced with a situation in an urban context where we saw the church grow and yet we weren’t reaching the lowest echelon of society (which is a terrible way of describing what some people call “underclass”). I saw our church grow with ‘working class done good’, like me and we were effective in reaching working class people (99% were working class people and 99% lived within a mile of the church). However, I saw all the people we were missing out on, and I started to say, “What is it that we’re doing that excludes these people?” or “What is ineffective that we’re doing?” And I came back to college basically to write a dissertation on ‘an alternative approach to urban ministry’, which is basically me doing theological reflection. So, I did the degree in theology purely so I could write that dissertation, and I wouldn’t show that to anybody now, because that really was me asking questions and then discovering new questions that really needed to be asked about theology and context.

Question 5: How would you respond to the criticism that church planting is a practice that lacks robust theological reflection?

I think it definitely has been, because there have been groups of people that have decided to do church planting and basically they got a number of them to make a critical mass to move into a community, which could be arguably seen as colonization and then to replicate what they’d come from whether or not that was appropriate within the context. For me, that all has the appearance of either none, or very little theological reflection. The fact is that we should be looking at particularly if they are young people, which in some of these contexts they have been, is “What is church and what are we trying to do in terms of mission within this particular context?” So, yes, though in more recent years there has been a lot more talk about it, but sometimes when I’ve been to things that have supposedly been theological reflection they’ve actually been reviewing what we do, rather than using theology and scripture to challenge and inform what we are doing.

Question 6: Can you give examples where you have seen or experienced theological reflection work effectively in Church Planting circles?

Within Urban Expression I didn’t see much of it, though there may have been some going on within church plants, so I don’t want to be too critical on that. For us, there was little or none! So, what we did within our team was to make sure we got somebody to come from outside to be a facilitator for us, (this weekend we’ve got one), and we
have one at least once a year. And we’ve been working on our mission statement, which came out of working with a guy in Chester, (he’s a former Baptist minister and lives in a rural situation which is a context which is very different than ours), but he challenged us on stuff and out of that came us working on our mission statement, which we feel we are very clear in. But bringing it to the place, (we got a friend from Kendal, again outside our context, who understands what we’re doing), to help us actually facilitate that and from that to look at what we will be doing with that mission is key. Now, that all looks fairly practical, but all the time we are returning to the biblical mandate that we feel we have, the process of discipleship within the context that we have, biblical antecedents, and how theologically sound we would be in taking certain actions. So all that would be interwoven in that. So for us it is essential, to keep us sane and to feel that we’re on track.

Question 7: Does theological reflection on church planting take place within your own theological tradition? If so, how is that done?

My theological tradition (my background) is that I grew up in this church plant, which was an independent evangelical church, but the influence was very strongly from a Brethren background; the three elders that planted the church were from that background. I would say within that I probably held an Anabaptist theological perspective, not a traditional background in what people think of as an Anabaptist. I also worked with the City Mission, a leader in my home church started the Birmingham City Mission, and I worked with Manchester City Mission, that was very much doing ministry within an urban context. So, I would say that the theological tradition I have is Brethren/Anabaptist/strongly mission-orientated and I would say a later influence would have been liberation theology but from a more evangelical hermeneutic.

In your experience with all those backgrounds, was theological reflection something that was done at all or well or in those traditions?

I think from my early years the Brethren perspective of theological reflection would be, “Is there a biblical mandate for doing this or that?” and “Is what we’re doing fulfilling the great commission?” So in that sense there was always that perspective of it. There was also the evangelical aspects of righteousness and justice that was strongly there and while we didn’t have a great deal of church history levelled at us, the activities of the Salvation Army, the City Mission movement in particular, and also the evangelical reformist which wanted to see reform within society, was heavily involved, and would bring thought to what we were doing.

And in the Anabaptist tradition you said a little bit of reflection with urban expression perhaps as an expression of that?

Yeah.
My sort of understanding of Anabaptist theology came from my studies at college when I was looking at the Anabaptists and thought, “Good grief, this is what I believe.” So I didn’t come at it from a traditional perspective, it was more a theological one. And the influences there were the prophetic nature of the church to not be in bed with the State and the other aspect was the aspect of community, which quite often in urban communities we need to know what community is. My reflection on churches within
those communities is actually the community knew more about community than the church did. So I was very keen to find out what that was, and again the justice issues.

**So how would you say theological reflection was actually done in the different theological backgrounds you have experienced? Was it intuitive, conversational, or formal? How would you describe how it was done?**

Intuitively and conversationally, definitely. I remember from my early years, from becoming a Christian, my school teacher was a guy who led me to the Lord, and I would see him on the stairs in school (this is senior school), and he would say to me “What have you read today?” This was also discipleship. I would tell him what I read and he would say, “What does that mean?” I would answer that question, and he would say, “So what are you going to do then?” So even from the age of 11 or 12 I was subject to that kind of discipleship and theological reflection, which I would say, was typical of the class meetings that came from the Wesleyan background and was evident in the early City Missions in the 1800s. In other words, it was discipleship in the sense of “What are you reading? What are you doing?” “How should you live?” So it was always something that was at the back of your mind, and you knew that if you took an action you would be challenged on it, or complimented for it.

**So, it was very much relational and conversational?**

Yes.

**Question 8: What are some of the ways in which church planters could more effectively practise theological reflection?**

I think theological reflection on what you’re doing should be almost a way of life. It should be part and parcel of your devotions, what are you engaging with in the community, what and who you are working with, and also then going and looking for answers to the issues you’re facing. I think there is a place for people to come in to specifically facilitate you in your ministry in that way. I also think there is a place for bringing church planters together and having a more formal approach that probably starts off through informal conversations. And, I don’t know that this is happening very much, if it’s happening, I don’t hear about it. I know my daughter has been involved in church planting for a number of years, 6 years in London and another 8 in Manchester, and she just loves that, that’s breath to her and she particularly likes that. I can survive without those times, but I think I would need it as much as her in reality but she really feeds on it.

**Question 9: What are some of the insights you have personally gained into the practice of church planting by your own theological reflections in the last 10 years?**

I don’t know whether it’s answers so much as questions!

The questions for me would be around issues of how we do church within a particular context, which is the biggest one for me.
The next one is how we are resourced within that, in the sense whether our resourcing come from a body of believers, a denomination or whatever, or from somewhere else? What is a healthy model? What is a biblical model of that resourcing?

And then probably I would look at the sustaining of spirituality within that context, that sort of not burning out, staying sane, and equally importantly continuing your walk with God without feeling like you’re giving up.

Those are the ones for me, the big areas, after them come myriads of other things. And all the other things that come in engagement with the context, like poverty and justice and honesty with people and loads of bits and pieces around that.

**Question 10: What are some of the issues in church planting, which you think, need further theological investigation or reflection?**

One really comes to mind: people should start to reflect on what they’re going to do, before they start. I had several years before we started to engage in our community that I’d lived in for 30 years. So people might think that we’re a bit slow. I mean I was pastoring a church during that period as well, but I had a gap between pastoring a church within that community and actually starting to church plant. And I would say that period I had at theological college, looking at what we did and also being in attendance at another church helped me. I think, what I could have done with was some more critical thinking and outside reflection as well, you know the mentoring or whatever you would call it, that would have helped us on our way and perhaps helped us be more confident about it.

I also feel that people need to ask the question, “What are the personal resources that we need in terms of team members, and everything, before we even start?” and not to start before we’ve got that together. I think we could run the risk of trying to get everything in place so we’re not doing anything, but I would say we need a period of time where that is done, even if it’s in 3 months, it needs to be done, or 6 months, or whatever, but that sort of stuff needs to be done.

**Rev. Trevor Hutton**
**June 2012**
Question 1: What is your name and your current ministry role or assignment?

My name is Martin Robinson and my current job title is Principal of Springdale College and Chief Executive Officer of Together In Mission. Springdale College prepares people for leadership roles particularly in the area of church planting and Together In Mission is an agency that tries to encourage church planting amongst denominations, networks and agencies, and also local churches.

Question 2: What has been/is your connection to church planting ministries?

All my life I’ve been involved in church planting in the sense that my father was a church planter, and my first church was a replant into an inner city situation. My second church was a new plant from the position of both those ministries I’ve also been involved in sending church planting teams. So, I’ve had a lot of practical experience with church planting.

As far as the denomination is concerned, I’ve been on the committee, or task group, and been involved in church planting for the last 30 years. So I’ve had a denominational responsibility for overseeing church planting. And then I was a founder member of the DAWN Initiative with Challenge 2000, on the board, and am now currently leading the successive body to Challenge 2000, which is Together In Mission. And then finally I’ve written at least 3 books on the subject.

Could you just tell us a little bit more about what you’re currently doing, perhaps about the college and Together In Mission?

Let’s start with Together In Mission. Together In Mission, which is a successive body to Challenge 2000, tried to transition that organization away from the idea of saturation church planting towards something that asked deeper questions, like, “how we give attention to what we’re planting?” and not just to ask “how many are we planting?” And when we went to the denominations we said, “we noticed that you are not doing much planting now”, and asked, “What is stopping you from planting?” and “What are some of the major obstacles?” As we did that we had a slightly more sophisticated debate around what we should be planting and what’s stopping you planting. It became obvious that the greatest need for most of the denominations was actually to see leaders prepared and trained, because the seminaries were not really designed to produce church planters, for the most part. So we actually put in place some training processes which over time led to a cooperation with the Springdale College, so in effect, we took over Springdale College, and populated it with our courses, which were designed to get missional leaders and church planting leaders into the denominations. So we now do that through a disperse campus and through a mixture of both part time
courses, for those already in leadership, and courses which have a strong placement piece for those who are coming into leadership.

Question 3: Do you think it is necessary for church planting/church planters to engage in theological reflection? Why?

I absolutely do think it’s important!

Now, you could have a debate about the level of theological reflection that’s necessary, but I think whenever you ask the question, “What are we planting?” which is a different question than just the mechanics of planting, as soon as you ask that question you’re asking a theological question, i.e. it is an ecclesiological question, “What is the church?” and “What’s the nature of the church?” And as soon as you say that this church is going to try and preach the gospel, you’ve also asked another significant theological question, “What is the gospel?” “What is it we’re going to try and communicate?” And then the combination of doing those two things produces a third question which is, “How do we contextualize both the gospel message and the vehicle, i.e. the church?” and “What’s that going to look like in this particular setting?” And usually the answer to that involves a further piece of reflection around an incarnational model of ministry, because contextualization usually requires some reflection around incarnation. So you’ve got a piece of soteriology around the message of salvation, you’ve got a piece of incarnational theology, you’ve got a piece of ecclesiology, and you’ve got a piece of reflection in practical ministry around contextualization, at the very least.

Question 4: How would you describe the nature and purpose of theological reflection?

From my perspective, theological reflection is all about how you understand God, how you understand yourself in relation to God, how you understand the call of God, the claim that God has on our lives. In other words, it is about our participation with God in the life of faith. And theological reflection is all about those areas.

So from my perspective when we simply ask the question, “I seem to have encountered God, what has happened to me?” that is a piece of theological reflection. When we ask questions like, “How am I going to communicate with this being, this God?” “How do I pray to God?” “How do I hear God and understand what God is wanting me to do?” I mean from my perspective; these are all pieces of theological reflection. People might not call them that, but that’s actually what they are. And so the nature and purpose of theological reflection is to help our understanding of the faith and to deepen it so that our relationship with God, our understanding of God is deepened, our understanding of the faith, our ability to put the faith into some kind of practical action is deepened.

Question 5: How would you respond to the criticism that church planting is a practice that lacks robust theological reflection?

Well one does hear that criticism from time to time, and there is always this tendency for church planters to be activists, and activists don’t always spend a lot of time in reflection. So that wouldn’t be terribly surprising really. And the opposite criticism is also heard, that those who do theological reflection, don’t actually ever do anything. It
doesn’t take a genius to see that these two modes of being belong together, so theological reflectors need activists to prompt them into action, and activists need theological reflectors to help them do what they do a little more intelligently. So yes, there is a dichotomy, but we undoubtedly need each other.

Do you think that theological reflection is more on the agenda for church planting because of things like DAWN, or other things you’ve been involved in, that theological reflection has come more to the fore or do you think we’re a long way from robust theological reflection?

I think it has come more to the fore, because I think people have realized that the kind of ‘cookie cutter’ approach to church planting that we began with, which often was the reproduction of models that already failed, that that wasn’t really going to cut it any more and so I think at quite an early stage in the game people started asking the question, “What exactly are we planting here?” So I would say that the very difficulty of the task has caused people to reflect more.

Now, are they thinking adequately? Absolutely not! And one of the difficulties that many of us in theological education face is those people who say, “oh never mind all the theory, just tell me what to do, or tell me what works!” But the problem with that is that it’s never as simple as that. Because actually the whole point is that what works in one situation, won’t necessarily work in another, and actually, we’re called to a more significant degree of reflection, to ask deeper questions than just to ask, “what works?” That’s part of the process; we do have to discover what works, through missional experiment. And that does require a process of theological reflection. Now, having said all that, I also think that you can’t do theological reflection well, unless it’s also accompanied by spiritual formation.

Could you explain more about the connection between theological connection and spiritual formation?

I don’t think theological reflection is primarily an academic exercise, which is just thinking through puzzling questions, it’s more to do with how our faith shapes our character, and how our character then changes the way in which we believe and act. So I think action, belief, and spiritual formation should be in a constant piece of interaction.

Question 6: Can you give examples where you have seen or experienced theological reflection work effectively in Church Planting circles?

Well, I certainly think I’ve seen it in ecumenical circles, particularly groups working for evangelisation, which have had to ask some pretty penetrating questions about things like the failure of the Decade of Evangelism and the failure of the DAWN 2000 goals. I saw those guys which had representatives from their mission’s departments of most denominations, I saw them reflecting quite significantly on church planting, from a theological perspective. And I think what I’ve seen that do is drive quite different strategies into denominational activity. So for an example, Fresh Expressions, I think would be an outcome of theological reflection. Certainly for me in my denominational life, the committee, or the task group I’m on, have thought long and hard about all kinds
of theological questions relating to church planting, especially as it relates to the preparation of people for planting, the kinds of people we’re looking for, so on and so forth, what kinds of things make a team function well, and you know, it’s partly a question of how we use resource well, as we’ve only got so much resource we can’t waste it.

For interview purpose could you tell us the denomination you’re involved in, and a little bit about it in relation to church planting?

I am in the Fellowship of the Church of Christ, which came originally from an older denomination, going back to about 1842, that had a kind of crisis when we divided in 1980, the larger group joining the United Reformed Church and the small group of evangelical charismatics, deciding to re-found, and part of that re-founding was the recognition that we had no future apart from church planting. So it became a small group of churches with a very high level of commitment to church planting. And actually that has been our salvation in the sense that, today we have twice the number of churches we started with in 1980, but even that’s misleading because 9 of the original churches actually closed, so more than half of the churches are new church plants. And most of the current leadership resources, recruits for ministry, enterprise, imagination, so on and so on, come from the new churches or larger churches. The older existing inherited churches tend to be much smaller. So, it’s a movement that’s experienced a lot of resuscitation almost, rebirth through a church planting strategy.

When you were reflecting a little bit there on the DAWN Initiative and also the Decade of Evangelism, and said that the people you were involved with spent a lot of time thinking that through theologically, and that lead to different directions, what was the nature of that theological reflection? How did they do that?

I suppose there were two forms really. First of all, there were individuals within that grouping, the ecumenical grouping, who had gone away and done a lot of work themselves. Sometimes that work would take the form of written documents, sometimes it took the form of books, articles, you know. So there had been some formal work done around that by people as individuals, and then they tended to bring those reflections to the table as conversation, and so the ecumenical interaction tended to be conversational. But if you look at the outworking of that conversation then you see it drove them into further theological reflection.

So for example, the whole Fresh Expressions thing, did come out of a fairly major piece of theological reflection on why the Decade of Evangelism had failed, and you know, when you look at the papers, particularly those that Steven Croft wrote, around things like leadership, quite early on in the Fresh Expressions experiment, you realize that there’s quite a sophisticated level of reflection that kicked that movement off.

So, inevitably there are lots of ingredients in all of that because you’re always dealing with the symbiotic relationship between the stimulus that you get from conversations, the reading that you do, and the need for more formal reflection in your own tradition.
Question 7: Does theological reflection on church planting take place within your own theological tradition? If so, how is that done?

It does take place and it takes place both informally and formally. So informally, in the church planting task group, we're always asking questions like, “What's legitimate, what's illegitimate?” “What can be part of our tradition, what can't be part of our tradition?” What would constitute a church plant, what wouldn't constitute as a church plant?” So, these questions are always being asked in a sort of ongoing debate, so that's kind of the informal bit.

The formal bit is that when church planters, ministers, and sometimes independent congregations that want to join with us, when they come to join us, then there is a formal piece of theological reflection that is needed to come through, which is provided by the college.

What does that look like? Is that a document?

It's a course that we ask people to go through in order to be a part of the group of churches. It can be offered in a variety of ways, for example, it's offered differently to ministers who want to be accredited with us, there's actually a formal qualification that they have to take to be part of the group. Because basically, we're bringing people in from all kinds of traditions, especially African traditions, and some of the Ethiopian guys who came out of the Orthodox Coptic Church and then came into some fairly wild Pentecostal movements. When they come across us they don't know quite what to make of us, and we have to explain. We explain why we do things this particular way, and what the significance of this and that is, and the missiological significance, and what missional potential there is in terms of the audience they're hoping to reach. So it's actually quite a sophisticated piece (and hopefully practical), but taking people who haven't had a terribly formal theological education, and trying to give them a framework, a simple but profound framework through which they will be able to operate, and by which the group of churches can remain a united group.

Question 8: What are some of the ways in which church planters could more effectively practise theological reflection?

Well, I think there are three things that ought to be present as processes for church planters; coaching relationships, mentoring relationships, and spiritual direction. And I would tend to build theological reflection into all of those processes, because the value of doing it that way, is you're integrating theological reflection into things that the church planters would find useful. And you're able to see application flowing from those pieces of theological reflection.

Why would you say these three processes?

I think coaching asks the question, of planters, “How's the task going?” You ought not to ask that question unless you can also resource them a little bit if it's not actually going so well. Whether it's going well, or it's not going well, you can see quite quickly that there's a piece of theological reflection attached to that, so asking, “What's causing that?” or “What's God up to that is meaning this is going well, or what is God not up to
that is meaning this isn’t going so well?” So you can build theological reflection into that very practical question.

The second question, the mentoring question, essentially is “how are you going?” So, “How’s your personal health, in terms of different dimensions of you as a person?” and again there is theological reflection attached to that.

And the third spiritual direction question is “How are you going with God specifically, and what’s God saying to you specifically?” “How, and what are you making of that?”

So there are different kinds of theological questions attached to all those processes but I think it’s a good thing. I would always integrate theological reflection into practice processes, because that’s what makes most sense to a church planter.

Question 9: What are some of the insights you have personally gained into the practice of church planting by your own theological reflections in the last 10 years?

I think the first thing is, I absolutely underestimated how difficult church planting was, and realize looking back that we’ve wasted a lot of time because we were singularly unequipped and under resourced for the task. So I think if I learned anything at all I’d want to gather resource, people resource, primarily, prior to engaging a church plant.

The second lesson I think is that undoubtedly we tried to plant things which were models that had already failed, and in particular, in the early days, we never paid attention to the questions, “What actually is the church?” or “What’s the DNA, the heart of this group of people that actually causes it to so manifest the gospel that there is something fundamentally attractive about this group?” I suspect when we first started church planting all we were thinking about was the forms of church, i.e. we need a public worship service, we need to have these various forms of existing, you know, if we put these forms in place we’ll have a church. We actually discovered that isn’t what happens, you have to build a community of people and let the community of people determine the form, so the forms need to flow from the people. You don’t necessarily get a community by sticking some forms in place. So there’s a whole load of lessons around that.

Question 10: What are some of the issues in church planting, which you think, need further theological investigation or reflection?

I haven’t really given that one a lot of thought. If I was advising somebody who was going on to plant today, I think probably the area we still find difficult is to think contextually about what is God doing in a neighbourhood? So, I know we’ve got the theory about the people of peace, see what the Spirit’s doing, creative prayer walking and all of that kind of stuff. But actually, I don’t know that we’ve got some of these as ideas as more concepts, but whether they’re really well worked, or well understood, I somehow doubt. I still think that we’re much more comfortable with establishing a bit of an enclave and inviting people into that, as compared with a much more radical investigation as to what God is up to in the community and really understanding the narratives of the people of the community we’re trying to get to. We’re much more
comfortable with our own narratives, but I’m not sure that we’ve yet discovered the skills to think theologically about other people’s narratives.

In terms of the last part of that, in theological material that has been looked at, are there theological themes that you feel are significant theologically, but have been little developed?

Interesting you should mention about this because I think there are underdeveloped themes.

The first thing I think is that our ecclesiology is inadequate, because we tend to come from that Protestant view that sees the church purely as an instrument to an end, we don’t see it as immensely significant in and of itself. So you know, when Newbiggin talks about the church being a foretaste I have a feeling we just skip over that, yeah that sounds good, but let’s get onto the real issues, but actually those are real issues!

So for example, for me, the dramatic enactment of the Lord’s Supper, the Eucharist, as a kind of retelling of the narrative, as present reality, those kinds of things I think are incredibly important. The whole sacramental life of the church, I think we have just as Protestants not really grappled with properly at all, so I think there’s a huge piece of ecclesiology to do and I would argue that our ecclesiology would be better done if our theology was not just Missio Dei but Missio Dei in the context of Trinity.

So I think the whole notion of community, as derived from notions of the Trinity is very important especially as a protest or a kind of counter culture to our society which is so radically individualistic that we don’t even see it. We don’t even see the filter sometimes and realize how we are reinterpreting the faith through an individualistic filter worldview, which has actually got nothing to do with the gospel, so there’s a whole load of stuff there.

And I think that actually does come on to a piece of doctrine because we have tended to use quite limited forms of the atonement, and we’ve got to have more sophisticated ways of speaking about the death of Jesus and its significance, than highly individualistic stuff that you often hear, which is really just drawing on one or two of the theories of atonement, whereas there’s quite a large number of theories of atonement from which we need to draw.

So I think there’s plenty of stuff we haven’t looked at!!

Rev. Trevor Hutton
June 2012
INTERVIEW TWELVE

Andrew Vertigan: Salvation Army Missioner

Question 1: What is your name and your current ministry role or assignment?

My name is Andrew Vertigan. I’m a Salvation Army Officer; therefore, I’m a Major, apparently, which I have to keep reminding myself (laughs). And for 22 years I’ve been a minister for Salvation Army. For the last 19 years, I have been the church plant lead at Wetherby, which is in West Yorkshire and have been responsible for a number of plants within that context. I have a wider brief now as well which is really heading up church planting and new initiatives for the Salvation Army, which has been one of the great things of recent months.

Is there a title for that role yet?

I am now officially known as the Mission Partner: Planting.

Question 2: What has been/is your connection to church planting ministries?

I mean it’s really interesting because when I thought God called me to church planting 20 something years ago, within the salvation army context, there was no recent historical background of planting so you had to look elsewhere, and I started making connections with other traditions. I met guys like Bob Hopkins, Martin Robinson, Stuart Murray Williams, people I think you’ve interviewed! Those were the people I started to connect with. Then other traditions were offering planting courses and I started to connect with some local practitioners who started to shape a lot of my thinking. It’s really interesting for me because what I do is go to any planting things I can find, wherever, and I’m always the one Salvationist and they all go “Oh, Salvation Army, what’s going on here?” So I’ve had quite a broad canvas. Nearly all outside of the Salvation Army, until recent years, when we’ve started to look at this quite seriously.

So to clarify, there are two key roles currently; there is the local planting you’ve been involved in, and this national role. So what is the national role and how do the two relate and connect with church planting?

What’s been great has just been putting some of the practical experiences into place and making connections with local ministers, so that’s really important. Nationally what happens now is I am sent to many groups where planting is being discussed across different traditions, and at some level I can put some Salvation Army prospective in, but also am able to learn from others, for example, through pioneer gatherings, fresh expressions, different things now. I’m going into these arenas in a sense being sent by the Salvation Army and to represent them. Got a great mate called Andrew Grinnell who’s been doing this for a number of years as well and we’ve got good connections with and through the Salvation Army.

Question 3: Do you think it is necessary for church planting/church planters to engage in theological reflection? Why?
I'm going to answer that very honestly with both a “yes” and a “no”. I'm going to base that on my tradition, and what we are about. I know my personal experiences too, and how I've learned through that. And when you came to speak at our First Steps in planting, you really got into the people who were listening, talking about theological reflection based on your own personal experiences. Stuart Murray Williams, a number of years ago, said the problem with planters is that they tend to have a shallow theology. I disagreed with him implicitly at that point, because by influence we all are steeped in theology, and I don’t think that’s true. However, the Salvation Army historically will go into a community and just do stuff, we are practitioners. We are naturally going to serve. We are not good at letting our hands be empty, sitting back, and thinking, “why?” And as I understand theological reflection, that's primarily what it is. “Why am I doing this?” “What am I about?” “What is its purpose?” and all those deep theological questions.

So I’m probably going to be really honest here and say in the first ten years of planting I did very little theological reflection because I was so busy doing church and being church, that I didn’t really consider what it meant to be church! But probably through getting into quite a bit of a mess around doctrine and morality, and all this stuff going on and asking, “Where do we stand?” and “What’s this about?” Stepping back from that I made a conscious decision to start programming into my diary days out. Sounds really pious of me to be honest, days out with God, to hear, to reflect, to consider. So I think it came out of pain and adversity.

As for the denomination, we were making a mess of planting over the last 20 years. We had a plan: there were about 17 newly planted Salvation Army Corps from about 1992 to about 2002, but many were in a mess and panicking. There was nothing. I think you speak about rootedness, but there was no rootedness in these new communities, they were “fly bys”, they could have just been blown away by the wind, so there was no depth to them. And so I started a little bit of study, a little bit of conversation, and my best learning way is to sit with people who know a little bit more, and to push me and to challenge me, and to critique me, and that is where I really started to do theological reflection, which I think is what you call it. I would probably call it contemplation and all those sort of things. And intrinsically, I now believe there is a real need to have deep theology or a deep understanding of how God works to be any good at working within a local context.

You’ve come to this conclusion through your journey and in your own movement, is it quite an important thing now?

I’d probably go to say, one of the things we’re talking to the Salvation Army about is, when we’re profiling our leaders for planting we’re going to really get into them and to where they are, where they stand, where they sit, understand the whole theology of Who God is, how his church works, all those big questions, because we can’t afford to be doing the same things that were being done before cause we were making too many mistakes. My own personal commitment is to do some serious study that I’ve not done for a lot of years to try to understand this further.

Question 4: How would you describe the nature and purpose of theological reflection?
I mean, I’ve been a Christian a lot of years, and I find it interesting that the more you get to understand God, the more you realize you don’t understand! And what happens when the new converts start coming to faith and challenging who you are and what you believe and if you haven’t got that rootedness, that depth of belief and understanding, at the same time as having that flexibility to understand and be challenged, I think you’re stuffed. – that’s my sort of language! (laughs).

So for me, if I’ve got this at all, to theologically reflect is to take a step back from what you would be doing to try and seek out what God is showing you about himself in that. Understand what that means for you through internal process. I am a deep thinker, I think, interestingly, I do think a lot, and when God raises the questions or lays in front of you something that you’ve never thought about you’ve got to step back and say “okay God, what are you teaching me in this?” “What does the word of God say?” You know, we’re a biblically based movement; we’re a holiness movement. “What does this mean for us?” “Where do we sit on this?” “What’s the doctrine teaching about this?” And I think it’s really interesting because there are 11 key doctrines in the Salvation Army, and so in planting within the last 20 years I have been really challenged and to theologically reflect as to whether we have got this right? And if we haven’t, why not? And what is that about? This can only come through genuinely taking time out to think about that. So I hope that answers, what I think it to be.

And that for me this is best answered and best addressed, ironically not on my own. My mind is too active to reflect positively, if that makes sense. I can sit with someone and we can bounce together and reflect together, I need someone to voice it, to express it. To say, “well hang on Andrew, have you thought about?” or “no Andrew, why do you think that?” When I’m on my own doing that, that’s not necessarily a helpful thing for me. So, I’ve got a life coach in place, who’s not a Christian, who helps me theologically reflect, from a very, very secular setting, but he asks the right questions. And then I’ve got another guy who’s my spiritual mentor and so together, coming from different strands, it helps me to better understand what I’m thinking.

**Question 5: How would you respond to the criticism that church planting is a practice that lacks robust theological reflection?**

I think I’d answer that categorically and very quickly…of the Salvation Army it is a very true criticism and a very fair one.

**Could I ask you, briefly, why do you think that is true for the Salvation Army?**

Because we’re not naturally very good at theologically thinking. We historically have been about empowering our younger 17 -25 year olds, that’s our history, right back; to just get on with it, and go into new communities. William Booth teaches this sort of thing: you know, an 18-year-old gets saved, here’s five pound go and start something, and they go and do it and the key word is they do it. We’ve not spiritually mapped, we’ve not discerned, we’ve not done a great deal of that. And I’m perhaps being very harsh and critical, it’s done out of love, what I believe the movement stands for and I have to give them true respect that they have enabled some of us to do that, when many others haven’t, but I think it is fair to say that we’ve had shallow theology. And I’m probably one of the few who get away with saying that out of all the church plants
in the UK Salvation Army, cause they say “well hang on he’s done it!” I think I have to say that myself. So, yes it is true, I’ve also heard it said that because of this therefore you run the risk of heresy and going against what the bible teaches, and I think that’s a fair criticism too. However, I think I’ve got a caveat to that, I think someone like yourself or myself has the right to criticize it, I struggle when the denomination does it and hasn’t actually lived and experienced what that means.

Question 6: Can you give examples where you have seen or experienced theological reflection work effectively in Church Planting circles?

I think it would probably be unfair to say I haven’t seen it within my own tradition, because I have. People such as Andrew Grinnell are instrumental in thinking through how this works, I think that’s why we get on really well, to be fair to him. I mean there are others as well who’ve helped with that but it’s been more isolated circumstances than the majority experience.

I think an interesting thing happened, I’ll try to keep it to my own tradition at this time. About 10 – 15 years ago we started this whole new expression, fresh expression, or whatever else you want to call it, called NEO’s and 614’s in the Salvation Army and they were taking very much the theology of the incarnation and go into a community and be “incarnate” Jesus. Myself and Andrew would have this battle between, what I called The Paint the Wall For Jesus Brigade and The True Evangelists the two types of missioners. Because, I would argue that it was never enough to paint a wall unless they knew you were doing it for Jesus (the argument would be “No, we’re just going to be.”) And so, I sort of look at this question and I think to myself, that really was a theological tension that was starting to take place between those who would think about proclamation or presence and the growing idea of being incarnational and awareness of the Missio Dei, joining with God’s work in the community. And so we had this sort of tension, this sort of rub, within our own tradition rather than being both, there was separateness there. And I think the more I’ve reflected on it there can not be separateness, they’re intrinsically linked, to come back to your view about the doctrine of Trinitatis you shared with us at First Steps, and the inter-connectedness of all that in how Father, Son and Spirit are all working there in Mission. So I think it would be fair to say, from my tradition, that was some of the theological reflection that was taking place as we’ve looked at, okay these incarnation guys, these NEO’s, these 614’s and saying “it’s taking them a long while to see any transformation going on”, but the guys who were doing more the traditional model of evangelism, well they seemed to be getting some wins here! How does that sit together? And does it? What can we learn from one another? So we’ve started to work through that.

And then I look outside the tradition and find, oh, surprise, surprise exactly the same thing is going on across the other denominations. There are those saying “you’ve got to go and be Jesus”, then there’s the other guys saying, “but it is not enough to be alone!” So I think that for me has been one of the biggest theological reflections I’ve witnessed and seen, and as we’ve gone on and looked at planting in other traditions we’ve been interested to see how they’ve worked that through and addressed the question. So from 1990-2000 I would have sat in the whole traditional evangelism mission, I’m going to do this and be Jesus and make that clear, and that was my theology and shaped who I was, but having met with others now, and having talked to
others I truly can see the importance of *being* and *doing*, intrinsically linked together. So there’s definitely been a change in thinking there, and I think that’s been a change in thinking within our tradition now.

The challenge with that is, since church planting fits within the traditions of the denomination is that the prophetic edge that should shape the centre is less apparent than the centre shaping the edge. And there’s a whole theological conversation to be had there, and is being had there! Don’t know that I’ve answered the question, enough or you want to push on.

**Question 7:** You have just been talking about that but is there anything else you would like to add to the question: Does theological reflection on church planting take place within your own theological tradition? If so, how is that done?

It is happening, but it’s not an organized, deliberate policy. You know, we have a Salvation Army planting policy, this is how we plant church, but there’s no Salvation Army theological planning policy. So that infers, quite by nature, we’re focussing on *doing* this work. But I think there is theological reflection taking place because I think some of us, including myself, are really making this a massive agenda item for us. We cannot plant churches until we’ve truly considered what that means. So we’re now asking the question when we look at the research work done for a new plant, “have you reflected upon this?” “Do you understand what it means to be a spiritual Christian leader in today’s society?” “Do you understand the context of mission and culture?” So all of those questions key to theological reflection and planting are now being put into our policy that says, “have you done this before you act?” So therefore, clearly, we are starting to make this an agenda item for the Salvation Army. I think we’re catching up. I don’t think we’ve got there yet. I just came back after a day last week where we pulled together a regional group of planters. It was all about theological reflection, to be honest. It was addressing questions like, “what is God doing?” “What are we seeing?” “What are we doing?” “What are the challenges we’re facing as a movement?” You know, it was interesting but why are we surprised? People in different parts of the country are experiencing the same type of challenge for God, the same wrestles with faith within their context, and that’s surely got to be teaching us something.

So in terms of what I’m hearing you say Andrew, the kind of formal, intentional, organised approaches have not quite taken place. But along the way there have been peer groups coming together, conversations taking place, questions being asked and some dialogue taking place within the movement, of a more informal sense?

Yeah, I think you’ve probably nailed it there. But I think it’s a really good stepping stone to where we believe we have to go, which is probably what you’ve just raised. So within the next year, for example, there’s going to be a deliberate policy, the Salvation Army will have someone in place that will drive this forward. So when we’re talking about planting and mission, this is the guy we need to speak to, he will help shape this (yet to be officially appointed or recognized), but there will be structures that will be put in place for peer mentoring or in our case, divisional structure. So the 18 divisions will have someone they can contact to work with to help support planters within this.
Because more and more what we’re hearing is that the planters feel misunderstood within their main tradition, and that there are very few people who can truly get into them in regards to what they’re wrestling with.

**Question 8: What are some of the ways in which church planters could more effectively practise theological reflection?**

I’ve got one straight away, I say, “Show me your diary”. And I say to them “where are you going to take time out with God?” And do you know, I did it recently and the shock for me was, I think of 45 people in the room, there were 3 that were doing it. That was at one level, heart rending, cause I’m thinking you guys have got to address this. So I think that’s a very practical way. There’s one: diary it, cause you aren’t going to do it unless you put it in your diary.

Second, I do believe in the role of spiritual mentors. And in a sense journeying with these people, a bit like we’ve (you and I) have done over the past couple of years really, we’ve come together, we know where we’re at, we’ve had some conversations. They can do the same. A bit of that coaching, I think that’s important. I think there are enough courses around, there’s enough study around that you can intentionally buy into that which shapes you. It’s one of the reasons why I’m taking some study up in September is cause I know that every so often I’m going to have to sit down and do this stuff, it’s going to force me to do it. I think there’s a couple of ways of practically going about it.

Where is it at in theological reflection in terms of ministry within the Salvation Army, and in terms of if it’s formal training? Is theological reflection something that’s on the agenda at the training college? Is there still tension between practitioners and theologians or in terms of those who are training formally in the college in London for example, where is it at there in terms of this whole issue?

I mean that’s a great question for us, because the whole training is really being questioned about the What, the How, the Where, and the present. I think it would be fair to say that we have suddenly recognized in the last X number of years, that we’ve got to lift the expectations and standards of our training in college, but then we more intentionally tailor it to specific individual needs, but at this point there is no planting training in the two-year course.

**Is there a module or a course on theological reflection?**

There is no, well, what we’re talking about today, specifically, no, there isn’t. There are clearly biblical studies, Old Testament studies, all those theological components but if you talk about theological reflection or meditation or contemplation, however you call it, I’m not aware of anything specifically. You are given a lot of “holy space”, and that’s a sort of bounce word that we use in a lot...your “holy space”. And that’s okay if you’ve been around ministry for a while, cause you almost instinctively know what that’s about, but when you’re training people for ministry, what is “holy space?” But here you haven’t yet faced the reality of planting in a real life context and not faced the mess of it! One of the reasons I suspect you are becoming more convinced of the need for this, and one of the reasons I certainly have is because I’ve made so many mistakes and made
such a mess by trying to make it happen, that actually I’m suddenly realizing, we need to get this right. So I think that question in training for us is a massive one, but then there’s a bit of a paradox here between the need for understanding and that whole desire to just do it. And there is a real struggle there, and I think that needs to work itself out in our models and our understanding of training, in our understanding of how it works on the ground. You know because to transform a community is going to have to take reflection, but I’ve only properly realized that through all the mistakes I have made.

**Question 9: What are some of the insights you have personally gained into the practice of church planting by your own theological reflections in the last 10 years?**

I’m almost embarrassed to answer it, honest, my first will be, God is at work in our world. I mean that’s an outrageous thing for a minister to say and to recognize that, why didn’t I get that before? God is the Creator God, but I think I’ve only really realized it within the last six years. Now, why on earth is that? I’ve had a conversion experience, I’m passionate about Jesus, and passionate about community, and understand a little bit of God, but really it is only actually, to be fair, those incarnational guys who are really starting to challenge my thinking, I suddenly thought: God *is* God!

I was in Germany speaking recently where I just kept saying above all other things, “God is God. Do you realize God is God?” Now, I’ve gone through training college, two years, I’ve got X years in ministry, so why didn’t I understand that before? Now I’m not going to beat myself up about it, but it is an interesting one because when you go back to your previous question about training, empowering and equipping people for ministry, you would think that the framework is there, that the canvas is painted, that you’re going to go out understanding that God is God. But I didn’t or if I did, I didn’t comprehend it in the way, the planting experience has shaped me to understand that. So that’s got to be one of my biggest ones.

I’m Low Church, let’s be very frank here. I’m sort of charismatic and chilled out, but interesting the place of worship and liturgy in that whole experience of God being God and the quiet contemplation is what I really truly best need to hear from God. Now that goes right against who I am, and maybe that’s why God does it that way. And that’s been one of my other things I’m learning, the experiences of quiet contemplation where God can commune with me and I can commune with him, which is a theology in itself, isn’t it? God in the quiet place, God in the stillness.

That and unpacking the Missio Dei, were my two biggest probable learning curves.

**Question 10: What are some of the issues in church planting, which you think, need further theological investigation or reflection?**

For us again, we’re having this massive challenge about discipleship in the Salvation Army, growing radical alive, vibrant disciples for Jesus, and planting that in context. How does that happen and what sort of time frame? It’s all linked into discipleship I think for us, and linked to the issue of growing and raising up leaders. I’m totally convinced that someone needs to be sitting down and doing some serious unpacking.
of that. If I look at our own situation, we’ve been open nineteen years as a church and it’s in the last 5 years we’ve actually sent in quite a lot of full time ministers and suddenly leadership is really raising up. Why has it taken us so long? Was it the way we planted? We’re traditionally pioneers so does that work well for this task? Should we have gone in from the beginning with teams?

We’ve got some evidence that suggests that two or three places where we’ve done teams of 8-10, they’re getting quicker growth, but they’re interestingly not quite getting discipleship as well because though they’ve got more leaders at the start, people did not have to step up to the mark as quickly! So I think discipleship is one massive one that we certainly face. I think I’m hearing that is an issue across the other traditions as well, growing up leadership. I certainly think how you raise up and equip people for ministry is a big, big question!

Rev. Trevor Hutton
July 2012
INTERVIEW THIRTEEN

Stuart Murray Williams: Anabaptist network and Urban Expression.

Question 1: What is your name and your current ministry role or assignment?

My name is Stuart Murray Williams and I work as a freelance trainer consultant under the auspices of the Anabaptist network. I’m also one of the national coordinators for Urban Expression.

Question 2: What has been/is your connection to church planting ministries?

I found myself somewhat accidentally and surprisingly caught up in church planting in the late 1970s in East London and spent 12 years from 1977 – 1989 as a church planter and church leader in Tower Hamlets, East London. I then taught at Spurgeon’s College from 1992 – 2000, running a degree level church planting and evangelism course. In 1997 with others I founded Urban Expression and so I’ve been involved with that for the last 15 years. Beyond that it’s been more informal but quite a lot of training and consultancy in a variety of denominations and nations around the area of church planting, and also some writing on the subject.

Where’s the focus of your work now in connecting with church planting?

I guess two things: the regular connection is through Urban Expression, providing coordination and a measure of consultancy, and secondly beyond that quite a lot of training and consultancy in a variety of settings for different church planting networks.

Question 3: Do you think it is necessary for church planting/church planters to engage in theological reflection? Why?

You probably know me well enough to know I do think so!

In terms of the reasons, I think one of the things I’ve been concerned about for the last 15 years or more, has been the temptation for church planters simply to be pragmatists and not to think in sufficient depth about the mission context, the changing culture, and some of the theological and missiological issues that that raises. In part I think it’s suggesting that all church planters need to be theologically articulate and concerned to reflect on their context and their practice.

I think having worked with a lot of practitioners my concern has been that if they don’t do that then pragmatism won’t sustain them for very long, maybe a year or two, but once they begin to get beyond the initial energy and enthusiasm, many run out of steam if they don’t have the theological tools to reflect on what they’re doing, why they’re doing it, and how they’re doing it, and its implications.
I think also the lack of theological reflection can lead to narrowing of vision and opportunity, things are very much set within the kind of established boundaries that people haven’t thought through in creative ways. I guess in part, I’m saying that I think all church planters operate out of a theological framework, but often it’s fairly limited. It’s not explicitly acknowledged, and it’s not developed.

**In terms of your own life and practice, were you equipped with these tools, or were they picked up along the way?**

Oh, very much along the way. As I mentioned earlier, I sort of fell into church planting, and found myself in a church planting situation. We didn’t even use the language of church planting in those days. I read nothing about church planting, so it was very much working intuitively and as a young practitioner. I think probably the theological reflection came best of all within that context, and looking around for resources to help me reflect on what I was doing and why I was doing it. And then in a more structured way at Spurgeon’s College, needing to train others and present theological foundations of church planting. Then I needed to work on it myself and reflect much more widely, or more deeply, and I guess I developed some of the tools I’ve used since then.

**Question 4: How would you describe the nature and purpose of theological reflection?**

I think the approach that I’ve found most helpful is variously described as the learning cycle, or hermeneutical cycle, or whatever, and essentially, it’s moving from a particular situation to an analysis of the key components, to some reflection on the situation and those components from the perspective of bible and church tradition, through to proposed action in the light of that and then round the circle again to reflection on what emerges out of that action. There’s plenty of written material around that, the models vary a bit from person to person. I think at Spurgeon’s we used four or five different versions of those, some which were more complex than others. But I prefer generally a fairly straightforward model, which moves from context to text, back to context again. I’m conscious of the contribution the liberation theologians have made to that, it seems to have become pretty much mainstream within theological education.

So I think I’m looking at theological reflection primarily as a way of helping practitioners to work from where they are to some of the biblical and theological perspectives that will be helpful to them to better interpret the situation and to decide how to act in light of the interpretation, and then to develop an ongoing lifestyle of reflection. So it isn’t a one off thing, it’s a repeating thing, which hopefully builds from one level to another, really.

**Question 5: How would you respond to the criticism that church planting is a practice that lacks robust theological reflection?**

I think it’s less true now than it used to be, and I’m glad about that. I think the word robust is appropriate, so I think there has always been some measure of theological reflection, even if people aren’t fully conscious of what they’re doing or haven’t got a clear model for doing that. But I think just the very nature of church planting raises all
sorts of questions about “What is church?” “What is the gospel?” “What is the mission of God?” “How do you participate in it?” and so on. So I think the vast majority of practitioners are engaged in some level of informal, maybe intuitive, theological reflection, but no, it often hasn’t been robust, and people haven’t often had the tools to engage with that. So I think there has been significant progress, through the 1990s when church planting was much higher on the agenda with the beginnings of an attempt to redevelop that. I think since 2000 we have a much greater emphasis on creativity and in Fresh Expressions, and Emerging Church, there’s been a much greater level of theological reflection. At times you begin to wonder whether reflection has replaced action rather than enhancing it. But I think overall there’s been significant progress.

I think also the question of what kind of theological reflection is going on is important. It seems there’s been quite a lot of reflection on ecclesiology and a certain amount on missiology. But I think that perhaps there hasn’t been as much on some other theological areas, and in particular understandings of soteriology and what the gospel looks like in contemporary culture. There tends to be shying away from some of those issues.

Where do you think theological reflection is less well done, or less intentionally done? Do you think that happens primarily in denominations that are very activist? Is that where the concern is for you?

I think one of the factors in the early 90s was the goal setting that took place, and the huge sense of pressure to plant churches very quickly in order to head towards those very ambitious goals. I don’t think we left space or room for the area of reflection; there wasn’t the energy for it, and there wasn’t the time for it. So I think really very much across the different denominations at that time there was very little robust theological reflection.

It seems to me that it really began to kick in during the late 1990s when a number of denominations began to recognize that there was a problem there, and pulled back from rapid church planting to a more reflective approach. So a classic example, the Assemblies of God, which was very activist in the early 1990s and was planting a lot of churches, suddenly stopped around 1997, and they said that before they did any more church planting they needed to work out what was being planted and why, and they engaged in really a quite significant process of theological and missiological reflection, which dramatically slowed down the amount of church planting they were doing. I think “activism” was sparked by the sense of rush for the year 2000!

I think probably in more conservative circles (I’m thinking of groups like the FIEC) perhaps, there often isn’t the perceived need for much theological reflection (and New Frontiers might be another example), because there is a very clear sense of already knowing what church is, and already knowing what the gospel is, and knowing what to do with it. Here it’s more about methodology and strategy than it is about rethinking some of the missional issues. My feeling is it’s probably in those areas where theological reflection hasn’t flourished. At the other end of the spectrum you’ve got some of the Emerging churches which are highly creative and very interested in theological reflection but often at the expense of not doing very much.
Question 6: Can you give examples where you have seen or experienced theological reflection work effectively in Church Planting circles?

I think one area was with students at Spurgeon’s College. One of the requirements for students in church planting situations, on the course, was to complete a monthly theological reflection form. There were 5 or 6 questions which invited them to reflect on what they were doing, why they were doing it, what were the theological, missiological and pastorally issues that they were encountering, and this was a written form they needed to complete monthly. And that fed into weekly theological reflection sessions with a small group of practitioners. I would say that those generally were very effective in helping people to think theologically. A number of the more activist students struggled with those forms, initially not sure what it was they were meant to be doing. A number of them started off simply by listing their activities, rather than engaging in any significant reflection, but over a period of three years the ‘penny dropped’ and they developed some skills in theological reflection. I remember a conversation I had with one of them a couple years after he’d graduated. He encountered a really difficult situation in his context and he got in touch with me and said, “Now I understand why you made us do these wretched forms! I really didn’t like them at the time but the practice has really helped me in this situation to step back and understand what it going on.” So I think that’s actually a very good experience.

I think more recently within Urban Expression, through team leader meetings and one to one conversations with team leaders and team members, and through the regular coordinators meetings quite a bit of theological reflection has been going on. I’ve been quite impressed with the way people have engaged with those sorts of issues. So that’s been less formal, there hasn’t been any written instruction of that kind, but that’s been really helpful.

More recently we’ve had one or two Internet conversations where team leaders have been invited to reflect together with one of the coordinators about issues they’ve been encountering, so I think there’s been a variety of good practice, I’ve encountered.

You say there’s a spectrum of ways in which theological reflection is taking place. Is conversation a strong part of what you’ve been describing?

Certainly in the Urban Expression framework, yes.

I guess the reflection process I was talking about at Spurgeon’s was set in a more academic framework. The reflection forms were a success in terms of the academic requirements of the course, and they were required. So that wasn’t just conversation, that was written reports, which needed to be done where required, so that changes the dynamics a little bit.

Whereas with Urban Expression it’s much more of a conversation, and peer level reflections, that kind of thing.

A couple of other examples would be the Crucible course we have had over the years, and in each weekend there is a session of peer coaching where we’ve got people together in small groups and given them 45 minutes to an hour to reflect together on
issues that they’ve encountered as pioneers. This is not about an expert telling you what to do, but practitioners listening to one another, learning together and then trying to draw on theological reflection for that.

Another very good example from some years ago, when I was living in Oxford, the Diocese of Oxford (this will be in the very early 2000s), developed an initiative called the Cutting Edge, which was kind of a pre-Fresh Expressions thing, where the Diocese funded, and supported, and accompanied 6 or 7 initiatives that we would now regard as Fresh Expressions. The process put together those practitioners to help them reflect theologically. Residential events once or twice a year were held with an ‘accompanier’ with each of the projects, whose task was not just to give pastoral support but also to help them think theologically. That was a very well managed and very well run initiative.

Other planters have noted that in your own work (in fact have stated even in these interviews) that you have consistently emphasised the importance of theological reflection in church planting practice. Do you know of other written sources where theological reflection has been written about in church planting circles?

I don’t think I can point you to any more sources than you know already. I thought the Literature Review you did a few years ago was pretty comprehensive in terms of what’s out there.

I’m interested that there really hasn’t been a lot of writing on church planting, generally, in England over the last few years. On Tuesday we had the rather inaptly named Urban Expression Global Summit where we met together with people from the US, Sweden, and Holland who are involved in Urban Expression, and one of the questions we asked each other was, “In your context has there been very much written on church planting recently?” And the answer, certainly in the US, was nothing very much, and in Sweden, nothing at all. But in Holland, yes, there had been two or three things written recently, unfortunately they’re in Dutch, so not very accessible to us, but certainly one book, written by a guy called Stephan Pass who I met a few times, who is an academic as well as a practitioner, and highly recommended by our colleague in the Netherlands, would I think be a significant contribution to theological reflection in church planting. However, I can’t access it because I don’t know the language.

Why do you think that is? Is it because a lot of the reflection takes place in other ways rather than in written format?

Well, I’m not sure.

I think one of the factors is the way in which the whole Fresh Expressions initiative has functioned, as a bit of a ‘juggernaut’ over the past 6 or 7 years, so people have even pulled away from the language of ‘church planting’, and now it’s now all about emerging church or fresh expressions. I think there has been quite a bit of writing and reflection around Fresh Expressions, some of which would have significant theological reflection, but quite a lot of it has been methodological or more culture reflection than theological reflection. So it seems to me that actually people haven’t been writing very much about church planting in the last few years. I think within Fresh Expressions there has been some theological reflection, which overlaps with church planting. Are you aware that
Michael Moynagh is producing a massive new book? So that may begin to fill the gap a bit and will probably be the most comprehensive work to date on reflecting theologically on Fresh Expressions. I guess the question is “Where is the borderline between Fresh Expressions and church planting?” I’m fully aware that many FEOC were never intended to be church plants, but there are overlapping dimensions and so I think some of that will be helpful.

**Question 7: Does theological reflection on church planting take place within your own theological tradition? If so, how is that done?** I know you’ve already said some about question 7, is there anything else you’d like to say about that question?

Not much I don’t think.

I came across a journal article, or a paper, back in the early 90s I guess, from within the US Anabaptist tradition that probably was the first serious attempt of theological reflection on church planting that I’d come across. I mean it wasn’t long, but it applied aspects of the Anabaptist tradition to church planting in a way that I found stimulating and helpful, not only because of my own Anabaptist leadings, but because it was a more theological approach that was criticising pragmatism. That probably was one of the factors, looking back, that encouraged me to pursue that, and perhaps led to writing stuff on the subject. And that was really to do with, I suppose, the nature of church and gospel and to what extent church planting (in the US context anyway), was ignoring those questions and was just simply operating pragmatically.

**Question 8: What are some of the ways in which church planters could more effectively practise theological reflection?**

I guess there are some things we’re trying to do within Urban Expression and Crucible that point towards what I’m looking for, so the coaching sessions through Crucible I think work fairly well, and I think they provide an opportunity for people to come out of their context and to meet with other practitioners. That has been very helpful.

One of the things we’re doing for the first time this year at Crucible is introducing a short teaching session on theological reflection. I think we sort of assumed over the past few years that if you get practitioners together and give them some basic guidelines they’d be able to do it. So I think we want this year to be a little bit more didactic about it, give people a few more tools, defining what we’re looking for before setting them off to do that. That’s one thing I wanted to be a little more explicit about, to explain the dynamics of theological reflection and what it’s purposes are.

I think having somebody who is in the role of an Accompanier, whether that’s formal or informal can be very helpful, so there is somebody who walks alongside the practitioner, and asks good questions, helps to draw them out and engages in the theological questioning. It’s the sort of role we are hoping our coordinators will play.

Another tool that we’ve been using over the last 3 or 4 years with Urban Expressions is something that we ‘nicked’ from Andrew Grinnell, and is called “A story so far.” It is a
tool to enable individuals and teams to reflect on what they’ve been doing and why they’ve been doing it and so on, which we’ve begun to use in interviewing with teams. So I think there’s a bit more structured opportunity for reflection and making sure that there are people that can walk alongside practitioners.

**Question 9: What are some of the insights you have personally gained into the practice of church planting by your own theological reflections in the last 10 years?**

Probably one of the gains in the last ten years has been a much greater sensitivity to the cultural context and the willingness to ask questions about what it means to participate in mission where I am (i.e. a given context), and in the light of that, how church might be shaped. So I think we have moved away from church shaping mission, to mission shaping church, which we’re now very familiar through *Mission Shaped Church* and other publications. I think that’s something which was already part of my thinking in the late 90s and I’ve really been encouraged to see that developing and I think that’s helped me to continue that journey and to find many others also thinking in similar ways. So I think insight into theology and ecclesiology have been important.

I think also asking, for me, more fundamental questions, like, “What actually is the gospel?” and “What does discipleship look like in a church and in a culture?” So moving away from church related theological reflection to issues of soteriology and discipleship have certainly been quite important and have come out of theological reflection on practice.

You perhaps recall the theological filters I used in *Laying Foundations*, namely Missio Dei, the Incarnation, and the Kingdom of God and I continue to find those helpful. I know there are other filters that should be used as well, but I think I’ve continued to find those particularly helpful and just sort of pushing further into what is Missio Dei and how does it affect what we do, and what are the dimensions of incarnational ministry, and how do we understand the Kingdom of God.

Perhaps the theological term that I would now use, at least alongside the Kingdom of God, would be *Shalom*. I guess that’s partly from my Anabaptist tradition that asks what the relationship is between the all-encompassing vision of Shalom and much smaller practice of planting churches.

So I think for me in many ways theological reflection has helped me to set church planting in a broader context. I certainly have been worried when I hear people talking about *a theology of church planting*. It seems to me that church planting is a practice that relates to big theological themes, but we don’t do the theology of church planting any more than we do a theology of mowing the lawn!! What we mean is how do the different practices relate to our core values and our theological convictions. And so I think theological reflection has probably strengthened my conviction about that.

**Question 10: What are some of the issues in church planting, which you think, need further theological investigation or reflection?**
I agree with you, through our previous conversations, that areas like the Trinity, Atonement and Soteriology where generally there hasn’t been a lot of connection between those areas of theological reflection and church planting need to be examined. I think that is also true of eschatology. What is the role of church planting in light of eschatological convictions?

I think exploring further the relationship between church planting and church pruning, is important. So how do denominations think about the deployment of resources in their priorities and not just pragmatically, but theologically. It seems to me that some of those conversations are now taking place pragmatically but I would like to see more of a theological perspective.

I think some of George’s (Lings) PhD work on the marks of the church, and models of the church in church planting are very fruitful and I would like to see those becoming more widely available. I hope he’s going to write it up in a more popular and accessible form. He’s certainly been talking about doing that, and I think he’s definitely on to something quite significant there, particularly where he talks about reproduction, as potentially one of the core marks of the church. So I think there’s some interesting areas there to explore.

Rev. Trevor Hutton
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