

THE ECCLESIAL REALITY OF FRESH EXPRESSIONS
“DOING CHURCH DIFFERENTLY”
IN THE LIVERPOOL DISTRICT OF THE METHODIST CHURCH

by

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ABSTRACT

In the light of the *Mission-Shaped Church* report (2004) and the foundation of the joint Anglican/Methodist Fresh Expressions Initiative (2005), churches were encouraged to seek 'fresh expressions of church for our changing culture, established primarily for the benefit of people who are not yet members of any church'. The ecclesial reality of four case studies of new forms of worshipping communities across Methodist Churches in the Liverpool District was examined and analysed in relation to the official statements of the Methodist Church and the Fresh Expressions Initiative, questioning the rhetoric of "church for the unchurched".

Operating at the interface of ethnography and ecclesiology, this thesis employed ethnographic and negotiated research methods in order to establish why, in an age of declining church attendance, people are choosing to join groups that are doing church differently. From the evidence, I draw out characteristics of hospitality, participation and flexibility indicative of a grassroots experience of church.

The thesis discovered, through detailed ethnographic research the ecclesial reality of these new Methodist groups, and presents previously unpublished evidence from grassroots participants. In listening to the voices of participants and their experience the research challenges the narrow understanding of a 'Mission-Shaped Church' and considers whether the ecclesial reality of the grassroots groups in this study bring a broader and more nuanced understanding of new ecclesial realities to the Methodist Church and the Fresh Expressions Initiative.

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INTRODUCTION

In the first decade of the twenty-first century in England both the Methodist Church and the Church of England witnessed an explosion of experiments of “doing church differently”.¹ At the same time a marked emphasis at national level on “mission-shaped churches” began to question the nature of church.² Forms of church which looked very different from “typical” worshipping congregations were encouraged at national and local levels in both churches, through the endorsement of church leaders, with the first report regarding Fresh Expressions being received at Methodist Conference in 2007.

Historically, a number of Methodist experiments in “doing church differently” were highlighted in John Vincent’s *Alternative Church* published in 1976, which introduced the term ‘para church’: ‘to denote groups and communities with explicit intentions which exist alongside the institutional churches.’³ The charismatic, church growth, and house church movements significantly changed the ecclesial landscape of the 1970s and 1980s. Following the Lambeth Conference of 1988 a Decade of Evangelism was announced with its emphasis on ‘making Christ known to

¹ See 1.3. The term “doing church differently” is the general phrase that I have chosen to use as an umbrella term to describe the phenomenon of so-called fresh expressions in a neutral way. In order to contrast this to existing churches I will use the term “typical” church to define Methodist congregations which operate according to the circuit, district and connexional structures set out in the *Constitution, Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church* (London: Methodist Publishing, 2015), pp. 512-538. This is not limited, of course, to the recent explosion of experiments which function alongside existing congregations and has a long historical precedent, which I will outline briefly in 1.2. I use the term experiments to indicate the novelty and possible provisional “pop-up” nature of such ventures.

² Archbishops’ Council, *Mission-Shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of Church in a Changing Context* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004).

³ John J Vincent, *Alternative Church* (Belfast: Belfast Christian Journals, 1976), p. 13.

the people of his world'.⁴ At this time a number of key ecclesial experiments or alternative worship communities within the Church of England were springing up and gaining publicity, attracting mostly younger congregations and using multi-media as an aid to worship, many of which had strong links to existing congregations and parishes.⁵ Many of these followed a traditional church planting model building on the work of *Breaking New Ground*, and adopted a planned and top-down model.⁶

The growing numbers of alternative forms of worship were the background to ecclesiological experimentation within both the Church of England and the Methodist Church, all the while running alongside, and in contrast to the so-called 'inherited church'.⁷ The *Mission-Shaped Church* report used the phrase 'fresh expressions of church' to refer to these experiments, and the term has now become common place.⁸ In 2005 the Fresh Expressions

⁴ Lambeth Conference 1988, Resolution 43: Decade of Evangelism. 'This Conference, recognising that evangelism is the primary task given to the Church, asks each province and diocese of the Anglican Communion, in co-operation with other Christians, to make the closing years of this millennium a "Decade of Evangelism" with a renewed and united emphasis on making Christ known to the people of his world.' Anglican Communion, *Lambeth Conference*, available at: <http://www.lambethconference.org/resolutions/1988/1988-43.cfm> (accessed: 08.01.14).

⁵ Examples include The Nine O'Clock Service (founded in 1986) which developed from alternative worship at St. Thomas' Crookes, Sheffield and became established at Pond's Forge in Sheffield city centre before being shut down by the Bishop of Sheffield in 1995, following the public scandal of its leader Chris Brain. See in particular Roland Howard, *The Rise and Fall of the Nine O'Clock Service: A Cult within the Church?* (London: Mowbray, 1996). 'Grace', an alternative worship service at St Mary's Ealing (founded 1993), is still meeting. One of its founder members Johnny Baker is now leading CMS pioneer training.

⁶ Church of England Board of Mission, *Breaking New Ground: Church Planting in the Church of England* (London: Church House Publishing, 1995).

⁷ The term "inherited church" is attributed in *Mission-Shaped Church* to Rowan Williams although in this case it is quoted from a forward to a document *Good News in Wales*, produced by The Evangelism Research Group of the Church in Wales' Board of Mission: 'We may discern signs of hope. These may be found particularly in the development of a mixed economy of church life... there are ways of being church alongside the inherited parochial pattern'. (*Mission-Shaped Church*, p. 26; quoting *Good News in Wales*, p. 3). Robert Warren introduces this terminology in *Being Human, Being Church* (London: Harper Collins, 1995), p. 20. 'The terms are related to the church as we know it, the *inherited* mode, and the church as it needs to be – and in places is becoming – namely the *emerging* church.'

⁸ The use of capitals follows the form used in other publications concerning fresh expressions of church and outlined by Steven Croft in 'Fresh expressions in a mixed

Initiative was formed to support and encourage such groups in creating church in their local context. It seemed that while all churches were encouraged to listen to their locality in order for a group to come into existence, the top-down, church planting model was still in evidence, expressing who should be part of the groups, how they should be financed, and also by strict definition of 'what was not a fresh expression of church'.⁹

My experience as Methodist Local Preacher in the Liverpool District led me to question how far the claim made for Fresh Expressions of Church related to reality at local church level. My suspicion was that the fresh expressions rhetoric not only did not reflect the reality at the grassroots, but was also disconnected from what was actually happening. It was this original suspicion that led to this research. The discrepancy seemed to lie initially with the composition of the group (the examples I knew were not "church for the unchurched",) nor did the leaders or facilitators come with a blueprint or plan for an intentional community informed by a mission agenda. This thesis therefore begins with the recognition of this disconnect between the lived reality and the institutional aspiration or directive, and seeks to discover how the ecclesial reality of experiments within a contemporary Methodist context, geographically located in the Liverpool District, compares with understandings of Fresh Expressions both in Methodism and within the wider ecumenical initiative.

economy Church', Steven Croft (ed.), *Mission-Shaped Questions: Defining Issues for Today's Church* (London: Church House Publishing, 2008), pp. 1-15 (p. 15): 'The capitalized term "Fresh Expressions" is used (infrequently) throughout this volume to refer to the national initiative and team, which is a joint Anglican and Methodist venture responsible to the Archbishops and to the Methodist Council. The lower-case term "fresh expressions of church" is used (frequently) to refer to the fresh expressions (i.e. specific practical examples) as described in this chapter. As these are now accepted and widely used term in Anglican and Methodist documents, we have avoided (and would encourage others to avoid) surrounding the phrase with inverted commas. We also tend to use the full term fresh expressions of church to make it clear we have in mind the desire and calling to create new Christian communities rather than simply fresh expressions of one or other aspect of Christ's Church.'

⁹ Fresh Expressions (2010) *What is a fresh expression of Church*, available at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PfF_-wbMr3M (accessed 22.05.16).

Part I situates the research and introduces the research question and methods. Chapter 1 sets out the historical backdrop to this phenomenon of fresh expressions and argues for the umbrella term “doing church differently”. Chapter 2 will introduce the research question and five research goals. Chapter 3 will demonstrate why qualitative research, employing ethnographic methods including aspects borrowed from feminist and negotiated research methods, was used in the study of the emerging ecclesial realities by means of four case studies in the Liverpool District of the Methodist Church. Ethnographic research methods were used both to arrive at an understanding of the phenomenon through participant observation but also to be able to hear the insider voices of those “doing church differently” through semi-structured interviews.

Part II provides the findings of the research. Each case study in Chapters 4-7 will be considered in three parts; Part A explaining the particular and negotiated research methods used to gather evidence, Part B providing a thick description of the community in question, and Part C evidencing the emerging ecclesial realities through reflections from observation and interviews of both leaders and participants.

Part III, the fruits of the research draws upon all four case studies in order to answer the research question. Chapter 8 looks specifically at why those who attend groups which “do church differently” choose to connect with these niche groups. Chapter 9 looks at all four case studies analysing the characteristics that have emerged from the research. Chapter 10 will look at the case studies in comparison with the “typical” Methodist Church and contemporary Methodist understandings and statements regarding fresh expressions. The ways in which these diverse groups relate to the current Methodist Church are considered. In Chapter 11 the case studies are situated in relation to national Fresh Expressions publications. Conclusions about the nature and role of these groups for the Methodist Church and Fresh Expressions are considered and suggestions for further work outlined (see Conclusions).

This thesis compares the rhetoric of the Fresh Expressions Initiative and the claim that examples are “church for the unchurched”,¹⁰ with four emerging ecclesial realities within Methodism so that the Methodist Church can learn from these examples of “doing church differently” in its understanding of this phenomenon.

¹⁰ “Church for the unchurched” is my terminology to summarise the rhetoric of the Fresh Expressions Initiative which throughout its guides for those setting up new experiments use the language of non-churched, de-churched, people well beyond the fringe, and people outside the church. The Fresh Expressions website states: ‘Fresh expressions are great for mission (but are not the only approach). Their leaders say that a third of people at their main meeting once went to church but had stopped; two fifths have very little church background. So three quarters are from outside the church!’ available at: <http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/guide/essential/whatare> (accessed 17.02.17). This has since been contradicted by further work produced by Claire Dalpra and John Vivian, *Who’s there? The Church Backgrounds of Attenders in Anglican Fresh Expressions of Church* (Sheffield: Church Army’s Research Unit, 2016), but the information on the Fresh Expressions website has not been corrected to reflect this research.

PART ONE

“DOING CHURCH DIFFERENTLY” IN THE METHODIST LIVERPOOL DISTRICT: TOWARDS THE RESEARCH PROJECT

CHAPTER ONE

THE RESEARCH CONTEXT: DOING CHURCH DIFFERENTLY

1.1 Introduction

I arrived at the doors of the Bread Church in Liverpool city centre one August morning in 2007 with two toddlers and a baby in a pushchair to discover Methodism “doing church differently” ahead of a placement there to discern my own role within ministry. I had grown up within large Methodist churches in the North-East of England during the 1970s and 1980s, becoming a local preacher in 1991 and preaching and leading worship in traditional chapels and churches in the North-West of England and Scotland for sixteen years. I was considering candidating for the ordained ministry, and was full of questions about the state of Methodism, the role of the denomination in the future, and what ministry would look like for me in particular. Methodist Conference 2014 received a report which brought to its attention the fact that during the ten years from 2003 to 2013 Methodism had lost a third of its members. A BBC report on this significant decline asked the question of Martyn Atkins, the then General Secretary of the Methodist Church, “Is British Methodism on the verge of extinction, or is there a glimmer of light amid all that gloom?”¹¹ In this interview Linda Woodhead claims that ‘if Methodism is going to survive, it has to carve out for itself a new role and position for itself in history’. Within the discovery of what it meant to ‘carve out a new role’, Methodism was involved in a partnership with the Church of England in the Fresh Expressions Initiative and also developing its own training for ‘pioneer ministry’. A placement at *Somewhere Else* – colloquially known as the ‘Bread Church’ – was the

¹¹ Conversation between Linda Woodhead and Martyn Atkins, *Sunday Programme*, BBC Radio 4 (24.08.14).

opportunity to observe and reflect upon this particular type of ministry within contemporary Methodism.¹² What I was to experience that morning – in the bread-making, Gospel telling, praying and sharing of food with a diverse group of people – was the beginning of a journey of discovery, learning, and unlearning, and re-defining for myself what it means to “do church differently”. As I baked and shared stories at *Somewhere Else* I began to question where this community sat within the phenomenon of ‘fresh expressions of church’ as published and promoted through the Fresh Expressions Initiative.

At *Somewhere Else* I found a group exploring and discovering what it meant to ‘be church’ within a bread-making community. This journey of discovery took place by listening to the voices of grassroots members. The particular context shaped the way the community expressed its faith and ecclesial reality. Within this group I had the privilege of witnessing people hearing the Gospel for the first time in a place where they felt accepted and welcomed. At the same time, I saw those with prior experience of church developing the confidence and freedom to explore a new way of sharing faith within a Methodist context with the accountability and structures of a connexional Church.¹³

¹² Pioneer Ministers within the Methodist Church are attached to projects under the Venture FX scheme, which is aimed primarily at adults between the ages of 18-40 and are usually based outside of conventional church settings. The definition of the way in which both lay and ordained pioneers work within Methodism is outlined below: ‘We believe that the good news of God’s love in Jesus is for all people, not just for those who are already part of the Church. However, the culture in which we live is changing so rapidly that sometimes it can feel as though there is an increasing gap between existing forms of church and the majority of people in the UK today, particularly those under 40, who don’t have any church connection. ... Rather than beginning with church, Venture FX pioneers begin with communities of people. As they explore what it means to be disciples of Jesus there, new and relevant form of Christian community are beginning to emerge. The Methodist Church in Britain, *Venture FX*, available at: <http://www.methodist.org.uk/venturefx> (accessed 25.09.14).

¹³ On this particular aspect of the life at *Somewhere Else*, see Christine Dutton, ‘For Fresh Expressions’, in Chris Rowland and John Vincent (eds.), *British Liberation Theology for Church and Nation* (Sheffield: Urban Theology Unit, 2013) pp. 76-85.

As I started my research the national data base of fresh expressions was moved to an archive at the Sheffield Centre.¹⁴ I was given permission by Bishop Graham Cray (then Archbishops' Missioner and leader of the Fresh Expressions Team) to access the archive. This returned five examples from the Liverpool District of the Methodist Church. I was aware that there were more examples, some of which were at an early stage so I decided to undertake a survey of Methodist churches within the Liverpool District to determine the scale of this phenomenon and to select some case studies that I could compare alongside my experience at *Somewhere Else* (see 3.6 for the rationale).

Although I started with a suspicion that the lived reality of Methodist fresh expressions did not always correlate with and match the official statements or aspirations of the Fresh Expressions Initiative, I wanted the research to be as open as possible; that, as the researcher I would discover what might emerge from the groups without presuming what I would find.¹⁵ I wanted to explore what the experiments in the Liverpool District were seeking to do, whether the aims of those leading matched the experience of those who were attending, and whether these disparate groups situated within Methodism held common themes or approaches which were informed by virtue of being attached to and part of the wider Methodist connexion.

But first, I need to provide some kind of historical overview to contextualise these experiments in “doing church differently”.

1.2 A brief historical overview

¹⁴ The Sheffield Centre is the national research and training centre for The Church Army. The Sheffield Centre and George Lings in particular have been responsible for the recording of stories of fresh expressions within the Church of England through the series 'Encounters on the Edge'.

¹⁵ This provides an alternative denominational perspective and approach to the 2015 Church of England report *From Anecdote to Evidence*, commissioned by the Spending Plans Task Group (which will be considered in Chapter 11).

Ecclesiology is a discipline that undertakes critical and constructive reflection on the Christian community as a distinct social body in the world and as a particular people in history. The community understands itself to be the “body of Christ,” the “temple of God”, and a living “sacrament” that, because of its union with Christ, reveals to the world something of God’s very nature and purpose. At the same time, the church is also and always an imperfect, social and historical institution; constantly subject to change; reflective of the cultures in which it is to be found; and created, organized, and maintained by particular human beings in specific times and places.¹⁶

Stone’s definition holds the tension of the church being an ideal and at the same time a historical institution constantly subject to change. This tension has been at the heart of the church since the gathering of the first disciples after the death and resurrection of Jesus in determining what the nature of the church might be in any given situation. This section shows how the impulse to change, has led to Christian communities “doing church differently” alongside or apart from the institutional church or indeed from inside it. At particular points in history, spiritual renewal, church reform or ecclesiastical evolution has informed and influenced these impulses. I will now consider a brief overview of the impulses which are particularly relevant to my research.

The impulses I consider are spiritual, reformatory, missionary and charitable. These are considered in chronological order although the impulses have often run through the history of the church concurrently.

The first impulse is that of the spiritual. Spiritual impulses are an important reason for numbers of individuals being called or inspired by God to “do church differently” often in a dramatic way through a way of life or distinct style of worship. One example of this is the monastic movement, those individuals, who are called to live a life in community, either in a closed order or as an associate member. The commitment to a rule of life and community living in the monastic tradition has also supported missionary and charitable activity through lives devoted to

¹⁶ Bryan P. Stone, *A Reader in Ecclesiology* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), p. 1.

service within the order. The monasteries, members of religious orders and their writings over centuries have provided resources alongside the institutional church, certainly within the Roman Catholic and Anglican traditions. This impulse as demonstrated in the commitment of those who join a religious order is currently being revisited in creative ways by the new monastics, some of whom would ally themselves to fresh expressions.¹⁷ This will be examined further, particularly in Chapter 5 (5.4.3).

Examples of “doing church differently” can also be derived from the impulse to worship differently with recent roots in the Pentecostal and charismatic movements. The prominence of the use of the gifts of the spirit in worship in particular has had a major influence upon Christianity in Britain, both in main denominations and in independent evangelical churches. This impulse has informed those within fresh expressions who have chosen to explore alternative worship, often using music as the reference point for defining the style. This will be seen particularly in Chapter 6.

The second impulse I would like to consider is the reformatory – the desire to ‘go back to basics’ and discern a Gospel form of church. The protestant reformers held a tension between, on the one hand, the positive desire of re-discovering the purity of the early church and a return to the essential characteristics of the way of life, teaching and mission held by the early followers of Jesus as described in scripture and, on the other hand, the rejection of the perceived negative developments of the Catholic Church. This notion of rejecting what has gone before in order to re-establish what was originally intended is, of course, fraught with difficulty, especially when cultural changes mean that replicating the early church is impossible. This is why to speak of impulses is helpful language – it is often not the desire to replicate exactly but rather to discern the emphases and ethos of the early

¹⁷ See particularly Graham Cray, Ian Mobsby and Aaron Kennedy (eds), *New Monasticism as Fresh Expressions of Church* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2011).

church. This is where the notion of grassroots arises – within the reformatory impulse is the conviction that the church lies with the people and not the organisation or establishment as shaped by its leaders, structures and bureaucracy. This hope, as history shows, is often short lived as organisational structures of their own form part of reformatory groups. This reasoning was particularly prevalent in the early fresh expressions publications, particularly *Mission-Shaped Questions*.¹⁸

The third impulse I want to consider is missionary. Churches all over the world have found the source and inspiration of missionary activities in the work and life of the early church, and this impulse often goes hand in hand with the reformatory impulse outlined above – in re-discovering the energy and dynamism of the early church is the responsibility to share the Good News often relying on Gospel commands. The journeys of St Paul are often seen as the beginning of missionary Christianity spreading through Europe and into Britain recognised by Augustine's mission in 597AD, though also evident during the fourth century and influenced by Irish Christianity through Columba. Christianity and the beginning of the Christian Church in Britain lived alongside many forms of pagan religions, surviving the Viking invasion of Lindisfarne in 871AD, and becoming a national religion during the medieval period. Following the reformation, both Roman Catholic and Protestant missionary societies were a key part of the life of churches throughout the movement known as the Great Awakening during the eighteenth and nineteenth century. John Wesley's mission to North America and his subsequent missionary activity throughout Britain and Ireland influenced the foundation of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) who were committed to the three founding principles of 'abolition of the slave trade, social reform at

¹⁸ For consideration of this phenomenon for Methodism, see particularly James D. G. Dunn, 'Is there evidence for fresh expressions of church in the New Testament?', in Steven Croft (ed.), *Mission-Shaped Questions*, pp. 54-65.

home and world evangelisation.¹⁹ This missionary impulse including the foundation of schools and hospitals continued into the twentieth century and is still present in mainstream British denominations.²⁰ The association between European missionaries, who often imposed a western value and culture system through historic periods of colonisation and imperialism can sound warning bells for those churches which are using the word 'mission' to encompass evangelism and outreach in their local communities. Since 1945, the decline in church membership and attendance in Britain has given a renewed impetus to mission in the UK particularly since the 2004 publication of *Mission-Shaped Church*.²¹

The fourth impulse is charitable. Charitable impulses have resulted in "doing church differently" based on responding to a particular social need. The Salvation Army, founded in 1865 by the former Methodist minister William Booth, is an important example of such an impulse. His desire to feed the poor was the driving force for what would in this case become a separate denomination, whose expression of faith and its emphasis became in some senses a brand, with uniforms, slogans, music, and at its heart distinct social outreach. It could be argued that the impulse for this emphasis is rooted in service and this impulse will be examined particularly in the work of *Knit and Natter* (see chapter 5).

All of these impulses, briefly outlined, and some of which overlap, are part of the on-going history of the church. Taking a long view allows us to see recurring impulses that have taken place from within or alongside the existing church of that particular time. Certainly the missionary impulse has been at the forefront of the fresh expressions movement with the emphasis on creating opportunities for the so-called "unchurched" to encounter faith. History will determine whether the

²⁰ Church Missionary Society, *CMS history and networks today*, available at: <http://www.cms-uk.org/default.aspx?Tabid=181> (accessed 15.07.14).

²¹ In 2013 the Methodist Home Missions department was renamed Mission in Britain.

groups which have sprung up encouraged by this initiative are able to be seen as a renewal of the church.

1.3 My terminology of “doing church differently” and “typical” church

As will be seen in the following section, there are several terms which are used to define new experiments in ecclesial practices.²² In attempting to maintain a neutral position throughout the thesis I have chosen two terms – that of “doing church differently” to define those experiments, and “typical” church to define what many would see as the normal expression of the Methodist Church, in terms of weekly worship, organisation and structure predominantly based in a physical building. I am aware both of these terms are open to challenge, and indeed both are subjective, but they do allow me to define and designate the case studies and other experiments from my own perspective. The Methodist Church itself uses a range of terminology for these experiments and my own terms seek to present a uniform description, separate from fresh expressions terminology.

1.4 A chronological perspective on common terminology used to designate “doing church differently”

In early fresh expressions publications, the work of defining the phenomenon was seen as important, both from within the initiative itself but also from outside observers, commentators and scholars. This thesis will use my own umbrella term of “doing church differently” to cover the nuances of the definitions below. However, some attention to the degree of variety of such expressions at this stage will highlight those who have been associated with the field and the terms themselves. In this section I consider the terminology that has been used to designate groups which have chosen to “do church differently”.

²² The journey *Ecclesial Practices* has an interest in publishing qualitative, ecclesiological studies from emerging and existing ecclesial communities as well as para-church organisations. *Ecclesial Practices, Journal of Ecclesiology and Ethnography* available at: <http://www.brill.com/products/journal/ecclesial-practices> (accessed 22.05.16).

Each term will be considered by highlighting the key writers, exponents and practitioners connected with these terms. First I will consider the terminology of fresh expressions and emerging church that are currently most prevalent in published material and church documentation and then several other terms which can be seen as either subsets of fresh expressions (Fresh Ways of Being Church) or previous historic descriptions which predate *Mission-Shaped Church* and the Fresh Expressions Initiative (Alternative church/ Para-Church, and New Ways of Being Church.)

1.4.1 Fresh expressions

A fresh expression of church is a form of church for our changing culture, established primarily for the benefit of people who are not yet members of any church.²³

The term fresh expressions of church generally encompasses two kinds of “doing church differently”: first, that of existing churches which are seeking to renew or reinvent the way they express how they are church, linked to an existing congregation, circuit or parish; and, secondly, intentional church plants either led by pioneer clergy or lay people seeking to discover what church might look like outside existing “typical” ecclesial structures.

The term fresh expression of church was first used in print in the Church of England’s *Mission-Shaped Church* Report in 2004. The working group for the report was chaired by Graham Cray (the then Bishop of Maidstone), and the first draft was written by George Lings, the Church Army director of research, whose series *Encounters on the Edge* has documented many of the experiments. The working group of eleven also included Graham Horsley (the then Secretary for Evangelism and Church Planting for the Methodist Church and the current Methodist Connexional Fresh Expressions Missioner).

²³ Fresh Expressions, *What is a fresh expression?*, available at: <http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/about/whatis> (accessed 06.03.17).

Chapter Four of *Mission-Shaped Church* gave examples of types of fresh expression which were already being modelled.²⁴ In the wake of the report, the Church of England and the Methodist Church set up the Fresh Expressions Initiative that produced literature and training. Initially the initiative held a data base of examples which were supplied by groups who had set up experiments. Many of these were seen as suggestions for ways in which existing churches could think about 'how to do' fresh expressions of church in order to reach those non-churched as well as a range of potential attendees including closed de-church, open de-churched, fringe and regular attenders.²⁵

The examples were then supported by the production of a DVD of stories and examples of working fresh expressions to stimulate discussion and suggestions for congregations considering mission-shaped ministry and church.²⁶

From a Church of England Perspective

Steven Croft

Steven Croft was invited to lead the Archbishop's Initiative in encouraging fresh expressions across the Church of England and the Methodist Church in 2004, following the *Mission-Shaped Church* report. His work and writing during his time leading the Initiative from 2004–

²⁴ Examples of the diversity of fresh expressions mentioned in *Mission-Shaped Church* include alternative worship communities, base ecclesial communities, café church, cell church, churches arising out of community initiatives, multiple and midweek congregations, network-focused churches, school-based and school-linked congregations and churches, seeker church, traditional church plants, traditional forms of church inspiring new interest (including new monastic communities) and youth congregations. *Mission-Shaped Church* p. 44.

²⁵ *Mission-Shaped Church* draw up this terminology based on the work by Philip Richter and Leslie Francis in *Gone but not Forgotten: Church Leaving and Returning* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1998).

²⁶ Norman Ivison, *Expressions: the dvd – 1: stories of church for changing culture* (London: Church House Publishing, 2008). Norman Ivison worked for the Fresh Expressions Initiative, developing their communications strategy and producing audio and video resources. He is currently associate minister at St. James', Clitheroe.

2008, is concerned with the role of fresh expressions within the church. His own work acknowledges the existing 'alternatives, antecedents and roots',²⁷ but his own work uses the term fresh expression. Appointed Bishop of Sheffield from 2008 until 2016 he supported various fresh expression initiatives within the diocese including the appointment of pioneer ministries. He has also been influential at a national level in the advocacy of the training pioneers and has contributed to *On the Edge: Exploring Ordained Pioneer Ministry in the Church of England*.²⁸

Graham Cray

Graham Cray was principal of Ridley Hall Theological College in Cambridge before moving to be Bishop of Maidstone in 2001. It was during his time as Bishop that he chaired the *Mission-Shaped Church* working group, his position lending importance and considerable credibility to the subsequent publication and endorsement of the report. He followed Steven Croft as Archbishop's Missioner and team leader of the Fresh Expressions Initiative in 2008. As well as publishing on fresh expressions, he was a consultant on the Anglican - Methodist working party on *Fresh Expressions in the Mission of the Church* (1.5.3).²⁹

John Hull

Hull was a lay theologian in the Church of England (though with experience of both the URC and Methodist Church), and a theological educator. Hull's critique *Mission-Shaped Church: A Theological Response* provided a counter-perspective to the original report. 'The purpose of my study is to encourage fresh expressions of church by placing them within a theological framework more adequate to the

²⁷ Louise Nelstrop and Martyn Percy (eds), *Evaluating Fresh Expressions: Explorations in Emerging Church, Responses to the Changing Face of Ecclesiology in the Church of England* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2008), p. 5.

²⁸ *On the Edge: Exploring Pioneer Ministry in the Church of England*, DVD, Fresh Expressions, 2008.

²⁹ Church of England, *Fresh Expressions in the Mission of the Church: Report of an Anglican-Methodist Working Party* (London: Church House Publishing, 2012).

needs of the church and Christian faith today'.³⁰ His conclusions that the working party was 'excessively church centred in their theology' and they would have been better either concentrating on a policy of resourcing local churches in their endeavours to create ways of "doing church differently" or to have developed a theology of mission of the church to the nation and the world. Hull's later *Towards the Prophetic Church: A Study of Christian Mission* tackles this challenge in greater depth, further clarifying the difference between a church-shaped mission and a mission-shaped church.³¹

Ian Mobsby

Ian Mobsby is an Associate Missioner of the Church of England Archbishop's Fresh Expressions team.³² He was a founder member of the Moot Community in the Diocese of London, one of the first fresh expressions to embrace and explore new monasticism. He has since contributed to the "Ancient Faith, Future Mission" series evaluating fresh expressions in the sacramental tradition (co-authored with Steven Croft) and particularly in relation to new monasticism (co-authored with Graham Cray).³³ This emphasis on rediscovering the monastic tradition for today is investigated in *The New Monastic Handbook*.³⁴ Mobsby's role as an ordained priest within the Church of England allowed the development of the Moot community as one of the first experiments

³⁰ John M. Hull, *Mission-Shaped Church: A Theological Response* (London: SCM, 2006) p. x.

³¹ John M. Hull, *Towards the Prophetic Church: A Study of Christian Mission* (London: SCM, 2014).

³² The research for Mobsby's MA dissertation using Moot as a case study was the basis of one of the first publications evaluating and assessing fresh expressions against classic marks of church. Ian Mobsby, *Emerging and Fresh Expressions of Church: How are They Authentically Church and Anglican?* (London: Moot Community Publishing, 2007).

³³ Graham Cray, Ian Mobsby and Aaron Kennedy (eds.), *New Monasticism as Fresh Expressions of Church* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2011).

³⁴ Ian Mobsby and Mark Berry, *A New Monastic Handbook: From Vision to Practice*, (London: Canterbury Press, 2014).

that sought to examine the role of fresh expressions and existing parish boundaries.³⁵

George Lings

George Lings has been instrumental in the development of the role of fresh expressions within the Church of England. As director of research at the Church Army, he was involved both in *Mission-Shaped Church* and in a previous report *Breaking New Ground: Church Planting in the Church of England*.³⁶ He contributed a chapter 'A History of Fresh Expressions and Church Planting in the Church of England' in David Goodhew's edited volume *Church Growth in Britain from 1980s to the Present*.³⁷ His doctoral thesis in 2008 considered 'The Church's calling and capacity to reproduce'.³⁸ Lings wrote up evidence from fresh expressions within the Church of England for the *From Anecdote to Evidence* report in 2013 and *The Day of Small Things* report in 2016.³⁹

John Walker

³⁵ This role of the parish in relation to fresh expressions was examined in Andrew Davison and Alison Milbank, *For the Parish: A Critique of Fresh Expressions* (London: SCM, 2010). Bishop Stephen Cottrell in his review for the Church Times claimed 'So, this book isn't against Fresh Expressions. It longs for them to be woven into the tapestry of parish life so that they are vibrant expressions of the Church we already are, and not just expressions of part of it' (*Church Times*, 26.11.10).

³⁶ Church of England, *Breaking New Ground: Church Planting in the Church of England* (London: Church House Publishing, 1994).

³⁷ Goodhew, David (ed.), *Church Growth in Britain 1980 to the Present* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012).

³⁸ George Lings, 'The Church's Calling and Capacity to Reproduce', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Manchester, 2008.

³⁹ George Lings, *Church Growth Research Project, Report on Strand 3b: An analysis of fresh expressions of Church and church plants begun in the period 1992-2012* (Church Growth Research Project, 2013) available at: http://www.churchgrowthresearch.org.uk/UserFiles/File/Reports/churchgrowthresearch_freshexpressions.pdf (accessed 26.02.17).

George Lings, *The Day of Small Things: An analysis of fresh expressions of church in 21 dioceses of the Church of England* (Church Army, 2016) available at: http://www.churcharmy.org.uk/Groups/244966/Church_Army/Church_Army/Our_work/Research/Fresh_expressions_of/Fresh_expressions_of.aspx (accessed 24.02.17).

Walker's 2014 volume *Testing Fresh Expressions* brought into dialogue the claims of the Fresh Expressions Initiative with his own mixed-methods study within the Diocese of Canterbury. Walker interviewed 43 participants across five fresh expressions particularly considering in his analysis whether fresh expressions are able to resist trends of decline in church attendance in comparison to growing parish models. In contrast to this research, Walker's example considered work among children and families.⁴⁰

Robert Warren

Warren, an Anglican priest, was vicar at St. Thomas Crookes in Sheffield, an Anglican/Baptist congregation known for charismatic alternative worship and church planting initiatives, including the Nine O'Clock Service. In *Being Human, Being Church* he argues that that the Church is the primary agent of mission, and is explicit in his explaining how a disconnect between 'inherited' church and contemporary culture has allowed the opening up of the 'emerging' church.⁴¹

From a Methodist Perspective

In 2007, the Methodist Church published *Changing Church for a Changing World: Fresh Ways of Being Church in a Methodist Context*.⁴² This sought to position Methodist ways of "doing church differently" and especially ones that had been endorsed with the 'fresh expressions' label within a historical and global Methodist context. In this volume, Martin Wellings argues that it could be claimed that "the Wesleys' Methodism was in itself

⁴⁰ John Walker, *Testing Fresh Expressions: Identity and Transformation* (Ashgate: Farnham, Surrey 2014).

⁴¹ Robert Warren, *Being Human, Being Church* (London, HarperCollins, 1995), p. 20.

⁴² *Changing Churches for a Changing World: Fresh Ways of Being Church in a Methodist Context* (London: The Methodist Church, 2007).

a ‘fresh expression’ of the life and mission of the Church.’⁴³ Alongside Wellings’ historical perspective there are a number of key writers within Methodism to note:

Martyn Atkins

Past president of the Methodist Church in 2007/8 and General Secretary of the Methodist Church from 2009-2015, Martyn Atkins endorses the term fresh expressions with an explanation and proviso in *Resourcing Renewal: Shaping churches for the emerging future*

If ‘fresh’ means having-values-and-themes-unlike-any-other-ecclesial-grouping-ever then we must be very wary indeed. ‘Fresh expressions’ are just that – new expressions of the continuity of themes and values of the Christian Church in a new context, rather than discontinuous with them at a profound level.

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Martyn Atkins’ chapter ‘What is the essence of the church?’ in *Mission-Shaped Questions*, one which from a Methodist perspective would be particularly relevant for this thesis, advocates ‘a preference for “bottom-up church of the people” rather than a top-down church of ecclesiastical hierarchy is almost instinctive in those who embrace a missiological essence of church’.⁴⁵ Atkins’ work and particularly his General Secretary’s report ‘A Discipleship Movement shaped for Mission’ have had a significant impact on Methodist emphasis, practice and decision-making over the last decade. The report was received by conference and has subsequently been adopted as an unofficial strap-line for the Methodist Church which is particularly visible in the Methodist Church phone app as the opening screen image and logo. Atkins taught and researched mission and evangelism while tutor and principal of Cliff College, and is currently superintendent minister of

⁴³ Martin Wellings, ‘An Historical Perspective’, in *Changing Churches for a Changing World*, (London: The Methodist Church, 2007), pp. 30-33 (p. 30).

⁴⁴ Martyn Atkins, *Resourcing Renewal* (Peterborough: Inspire, 2007), p. 61.

⁴⁵ Martyn Atkins, ‘What is the essence of the Church?’, in Steven Croft (ed.), *Mission-Shaped Questions: Defining Issues for Today’s Church* (London: Church House Publishing, 2008), pp. 16-28 (p. 24).

Methodist Central Hall, Westminster, and chair of the board of Fresh Expressions Ltd, the charity which develops and enables networking between fresh expressions. While he holds the role within Fresh Expressions, Atkins also uses the language of 'emerging' which will be considered below as he uses the term an "ever emerging church" indicating that the church should always be in process, adapting itself to its context historically and socially.⁴⁶

Joanne Cox

A Methodist Presbyterian and currently part of the Discipleship and Training Network for the Methodist Church, Cox wrote her 2012 DThM thesis 'Challenging Leadership: Mission-Shaped Presbyters in Methodist Fresh Expressions', while a presbyter in circuit ministry. Her thesis concentrated on presbyteral roles and leadership issues within Methodist Fresh Expressions, considering issues of sustainability alongside Atkins' emphasis on lay leadership highlighted in *A Discipleship Movement shaped for Mission*. Considering three different case studies, she offers alternative solutions to the tension of ordained presbyters in the Methodist Church stationed in fresh expressions including a new order of ordained ministry to cope with the demands of these groups 'on their way' to being ecclesial communities.⁴⁷ Although Cox's research questions were concerned with leadership, her ethnographic approach to the case studies and participant observation were similar to this research. Her wider lessons learnt from her research were that Methodist fresh expressions should 'embrace ordinary theology' and 're-discover a Methodist identity'. These themes of leadership and oversight of Methodist fresh expressions were also picked up by Langley Mackrell-Hey in his DThM in 2016 'An exploration of how fresh expressions are challenging the practice, discipline and ecclesiology of the Methodist Church, with specific reference to the

⁴⁶ Martyn Atkins, *Resourcing Renewal*, pp. 48-72.

⁴⁷ Joanne Cox, 'Challenging Leadership: Mission-Shaped Presbyters in Methodist Fresh Expressions', unpublished DThM thesis, Durham University, 2012, p. 231.

task of Presbyteral oversight'.⁴⁸ Both of these theses written during active ministry consider the ongoing challenges of ministry within a mixed economy of expressions of church.

Barbara Glasson

Barbara Glasson, the Methodist minister of *Somewhere Else* in Liverpool City Centre from 1999-2008, (see Chapter 4) in her writing uses the terminology of emerging church (see below), but *Somewhere Else* was used in the first DVD of examples of fresh expressions.⁴⁹ The Initiative in one sense 'claimed' *Somewhere Else* as a fresh expression. Glasson's work with *Somewhere Else* stressed the importance of listening to the context in which church may emerge, which is also championed by the Fresh Expressions initiative, although there is a tension between Glasson's bottom-up approach and the intentional church planting and growth strategies of *Mission-Shaped Church*.

Angela Shier-Jones

Angela Shier-Jones' work on fresh expressions and pioneer ministries was an early manual for those that wanted to explore a fresh expression of church set in a Methodist context.⁵⁰ It also examined the role of the pioneer and gave advice and support for those who wished to embark on this type of ministry. Shier-Jones was also a member of the Anglican-Methodist Working Party which wrote *Fresh Expressions in the Mission of the Church*.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Langley Mackrell-Hey, 'An exploration of how fresh expressions are challenging the practice, discipline and ecclesiology of the Methodist Church, with specific reference to the task of Presbyteral oversight', unpublished DThM thesis, Durham University, 2016.

⁴⁹ Especially Barbara Glasson, *Mixed-Up Blessing: A New Encounter with Being Church* (Peterborough: Inspire, 2006) and *I am Somewhere Else: Gospel Reflections from an Emerging Church* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2006).

⁵⁰ Angela Shier-Jones, *Pioneer Ministry and Fresh Expressions of Church* (London: SPCK, 2009).

⁵¹ Church of England, *Fresh Expressions in the Mission of the Church*.

Roger Walton

Roger Walton became President of the Methodist Church in July 2016. His work *The Reflective Disciple* considers the fluidity required of followers of Christ to move constantly between their place in the gathered church and their life in the world.⁵² A natural movement and the subsequent ability to be able to speak the language of the world they inhabit is, according to Walton, a necessary skill to be developed. But Walton is cautious of embracing fresh expressions wholeheartedly and warns of the dangers inherent in forms of church, which despite their energy and enthusiasm, can run the risk of being inward looking and fail to nurture and take discipleship outside the church seriously.

1.4.2 Emerging church

As the following quotation makes clear, the report *Mission-Shaped Church* also uses the term emerging church:

Emerging suggests an evolutionary, Spirit-led process, and the phrase is a helpful reminder that church needs to emerge from engagement with a context. However, the phrase may invite the existing church to play for time and wait and see what happens, rather than face the urgency of the mission task.⁵³

Those in the USA who are leading or writing in the field of contemporary ecclesiology frequently use the terminology of emerging church for new experiments predominantly outside the mainstream churches. In the UK, this term is often used in the initial stages of a group beginning to discover their own identity and ecclesiology. It may also possibly be used of groups who are seeking to disassociate themselves with the institutional label of fresh expressions of church, or indeed are outside of the mainstream denominations which partner or sponsor the Fresh Expressions Initiative. Key writers who use this term include:

⁵² Roger Walton, *The Reflective Disciple* (London: SCM, 2012).

⁵³ *Mission-Shaped Church*, p. 33.

Eddie Gibbs

Eddie Gibbs' work on church planting and church growth predates *Mission-Shaped Church* and the Fresh Expressions Initiative, but his writing has had an important influence in the development of the emerging church in the UK. *Church Next: Quantum Changes in Christian ministry* in 2001 tackles issues of declining church attendance, mission orientated churches, network churches and degrees of belonging and believing.⁵⁴ Ryan Bolger and Eddie Gibbs's *Emerging Churches, Creating Christian Communities in Post-modern Cultures* builds on Eddie Gibbs' church planting heritage. Bolger and Gibbs explore the intentionality in the creation of these new communities. This work, published in 2005, was written based on qualitative research in the UK and US over three years with a number of emerging churches, many of them run independently even though their founders or members had in the past been involved with mainstream denominations.⁵⁵ *Grace*, in London, was one of the case studies cited, and was then picked up again in the *Mission-Shaped Church* report, possibly because it is embedded in the life of St. Mary's Ealing. Its founder Johnny Baker who works for Church Missionary Society as its director of mission education now leads Pioneer Mission Leadership Training for the society.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Eddie Gibbs and Ian Coffey, *Church Next: Quantum Changes in Christian Ministry* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2001).

⁵⁵ A similar study was undertaken by Graeme Fancourt, a parish priest in Reading met with twenty-five church leaders in the UK and US for his research into the post-modern condition and the church. Fancourt is wary of a narrow definition of 'the emerging church' preferring to see it as a 'helpful banner' as he considers that the 'groups involved [do not] really have enough coherence to be labelled in a collective way. See Graeme Fancourt, *Brand New Church? The Church and the Postmodern Condition* (London: SPCK, 2013).

⁵⁶ Church Missionary Society *Jonny Baker: Director of Mission Education* available at: <http://www.cms-uk.org/Whoweare/CMSleaders/CMSleadersprofiles/TabId/206/ArtMid/4107/ArticleID/3150/Jonny-Baker-director-of-mission-education.aspx> (accessed 14.03.16).

Baker's work gives resources, ideas and an insight into those who have explored the alternative worship stream of fresh expressions. See especially Jonny Baker and Doug Gay. *Alternative Worship* (London: SPCK, 2003) and Jonny Baker, *Curating Worship* (London: SPCK, 2010). In addition, Doug Gay's perspective from within the

Michael Moynagh

Michael Moynagh currently works for the Fresh Expressions Initiative as their director of network development and consultant on theology and practice. In *emergingchurch.intro* he notes this type of church is targeted towards or appeals to two distinct groups which are also highlighted in *Mission-Shaped Church*:

Some new expressions of church cater for Christians who are disillusioned with church. But a growing number are geared toward people with no church background. They start not with an invitation, 'You come to us on our terms', but offer instead, 'We'll come to you. If you want, we'll help you to be church at a time that suits you, in a place that is convenient to you and in your style, not ours'.⁵⁷

Moynagh implies that there is a catalyst in the 'we' of either a pioneer or an existing Christian community who are able to facilitate the emergence. Since *emergingchurch.intro*, Moynagh has published two significant works related to emerging church and particularly those emerging from "typical" churches, whether they choose the label fresh expression or not. *Church for Every Context* offers a theological rationale focussing on mission and also examining in more depth the role of the pioneer in 'bringing contextual churches to birth'.⁵⁸ *Being Church, Doing Life* is a collection of stories of emerging churches and communities across the world, but often based or springing from "typical" congregations or Christian with a background in "typical" church.⁵⁹ Moynagh is also the author of *The Guide*, which is the online resource and has also produced seven three-minute guides which

Church of Scotland offers the five moves of auditing, retrieval, unbundling, supplementing and remixing for mapping the concept of emergence as he seeks to place this phenomenon within an ecumenical landscape. See Doug Gay, *Remixing the Church: Towards and Emerging Ecclesiology* (London: SCM, 2011).

⁵⁷ Michael Moynagh, *emergingchurch.intro* (Oxford: Monarch Books, 2004), p. 11.

⁵⁸ Michael Moynagh, *Church for Every Context* (London: SCM, 2012).

⁵⁹ Michael Moynagh, *Being Church, Doing Life* (Oxford: Monarch, 2014).

summarise the process of creating a fresh expression of church.⁶⁰ Moynagh's teaching post at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford re-enforces the way in which thinking and research in emerging church has become an integral part of theological and Anglican pre-ordination training in this institution.

1.4.3 Para church/Parallel church/Alternative church

Two Methodist authors have promoted the language of para church and parallel church:

John Vincent

Vincent's *Alternative Church* in 1976 asks the question 'What is happening in the seventies?', and defines the experiments he considers with the terminology of "para church":

I suggest that we use the term "para church" or "alternative church" to denote groups and communities with explicit intentions which exist *alongside* the institutional churches. [...] They are neither 'inside' the institutional churches nor 'outside' them, but rather exist in a wide variety of ways as 'churches alongside the churches'. Invariably, they have come together around some need or gap created by a failure of the institution they 'parallel' to be true to its fundamental purposes.⁶¹

Vincent, a Methodist minister in Sheffield, and founder of the Urban Theology Unit, began along with others to explore church in a shop front. Meeting together around simple meals, involvement in community projects and the formation of the Ashram Community follow some of the reformed and missionary impulses detailed above.⁶² Committed to the emergence of a contextual, urban, liberation theology which paid attention to the grass roots communities within the city, this group sought to find an expression of church which could speak to the reality

⁶⁰ Michael Moynagh, *Three Minute Guides: Essential Fresh Expressions* available at <http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/guide/essential> (accessed 28.02.17).

⁶¹ John J. Vincent, *Alternative Church*, p. 14.

⁶² Eurig Scandrett, Helen Tomlinson, John J. Vincent, *Journeying with Ashram: A Way of Life for the 21st Century* (Sheffield: Ashram Press, 2005).

of life in these communities and to find 'The Jesus Thing'.⁶³ Vincent's work in Methodism spanning fifty years is summarised in *Methodism Unbounding: Christ and Methodism for the Twenty-First Century*. Vincent recalls the emphasis that he suggested in *OK, Let's be Methodists* in 1984 that:

Wesley created a 'Church for the People', forming an alternative church within and alongside existing churches. We must be such a Church again.⁶⁴

The term parallel church is used to denote another group which exists alongside a "typical" congregation. There may be an overlap of members but the group will have the intention of creating a church which will be able to connect with those in a community with no previous experience of church or worship.

Tom Stuckey

Tom Stuckey, former chair of Southampton District of the Methodist Church and president of the Methodist Conference 2005/06, used the term parallel church in *Beyond the Box, Mission Challenges from John's Gospel*.⁶⁵ He claimed that parallel churches could replace many if not most of our traditional churches, for a time running concurrently, and that in time, the more contemporary form would become the established form. Ten years on from his presidential address he reflected on this claim in an address entitled "The Future of Methodism" at Emmanuel Church, Reddish. Stuckey referred to Vincent's *Methodism Unbound* ⁶⁶ and the importance of the small group, developing the small in parallel with the "typical":

The primary model for the future will be the small fellowships of believers meeting mostly off church premises. Their focus is the

⁶³ John J. Vincent, *The Jesus Thing* (London: Epworth Press, 1973).

⁶⁴ John J. Vincent, *Methodism Unbound: Christ and Methodism for the Twenty-First Century* (Bakewell: Church in the Market Place Publications, 2015).

⁶⁵ Tom Stuckey, *Beyond the Box, Mission Challenges from John's Gospel* (Peterborough: Inspire, 2005).

⁶⁶ Vincent, *Methodism Unbound*.

community. These 'little churches' (as I think of then) are 'fresh expressions' shaped for outsiders seeking salvation. They are the product of 'pioneering ministries'. Our secondary model is the traditional church based on buildings, re-shaped, opened up and user friendly with vibrant patterns of worship relevant for those attending.⁶⁷

Stuckey's vision of pioneer ministry is visible in the Methodist Venture FX pathway. This pathway is not an entry point for presbyteral ministry in the Methodist Church (as in the Church of England), but it is open to lay pioneers or previously ordained deacons or presbyters who have served in circuit appointments. There are only 13 venture FX pioneers across the connexion and this may explain why within Methodism very few groups have grown up completely outside "typical" churches.

1.4.4 New ways of being church

New ways of being church is more radical language. It considers that the word *ekklesia* has been wrongly interpreted to mean simply 'congregation', so that attendance has replaced discipleship, membership has replaced community, and internal functions have been prioritized over both evangelism and social involvement. Those using this phrase are suggesting that church should be an embodiment of the patterns and priorities of the New Testament, lived out in our mission context.⁶⁸

This phrase was used historically in liberation theology and in particular Leonardo Boff's understanding of the base ecclesial communities as re-inventing the church.⁶⁹ The emergence of the base ecclesial communities occurred at the grassroots, challenging the traditional hierarchies of the Roman Catholic Church, particularly in South America. Originally published in Portuguese in 1977, *Ecclesiogenesis: The Base Communities Reinvent the Church*, argued that these groups "constitute a leaven of renewal in the substance of the whole church –

⁶⁷ Tom Stuckey, "The Future of Methodism", available at: <http://www.tomstuckey.me.uk/documents/methfuture2.pdf> (accessed 22.05.16).

⁶⁸ *Mission-Shaped Church*, p. 33.

⁶⁹ Leonardo Boff, *Ecclesiogenesis: The Base Communities Reinvent the Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986).

not a global alternative for the totality of the church”.⁷⁰ The role of a catalyst in forming such a community in the way that pioneer ministry is viewed today was also true of the base ecclesial communities – while they arose from the grassroots there were members of religious orders who were instrumental in the creation and organisation of such groups. In the use of this term, it is implicit that this growth and experimentation of “doing church differently” comes from within the “typical” church.

“New ways of being church” is also an umbrella term used by small Christian communities in Britain to give an overarching theme to the expression of their organisation. They are a UK-based organisation with a steering group of lay and ordained people, many within the Church of England and the Methodist Church. They are a resourcing organisation offering publications, training through workshops and courses alongside advice and access to world-wide small Christian community networks.

This network, established in 1992, may embrace many names and expressions of groups:

A friend who researched the terminology used for the growth of these small groups or communities [across different continents] listed over 3000 different names or expressions. The list included titles such as small Christian community, small church community, basic ecclesial community and small faith community. Some words appear frequently: small, basic, church, community.⁷¹

Jeanne Hinton’s 1992 book *Communities* told the story and spirituality of twelve European Christian Communities, and was revisited by John Vincent in 2011.⁷² In 2002 and 2003 respectively, Hinton and Price published *Changing Churches: Building Bridges in Local Mission* and *Changing Communities: Church from the Grassroots*. Both publications

⁷⁰ Boff, *Ecclesiogenesis*, p. 33.

⁷¹ Jeanne Hinton and Peter B. Price, *Changing Communities: Church from the Grassroots* (London: CTBI, 2003).

⁷² John J. Vincent (ed.), *Christian Communities* (Sheffield: Ashram Press, 2011).

weave together examples of community experiments along with asking the underlying questions – What is church? What is church for? Who is church for? What is culture? and What is Gospel?

Association of Bridge Building Communities (ABBC) established in 2000 encourages grassroots community experiments including faith communities who are developing a mission plan.⁷³ This approach relying on the legacy of Boff was recognised in *Mission-Shaped Church* through the work of Bishop Peter Price and the story of John Summers' practice at Devonport using the work of Fr José Marins from Brazil. Adaptation rather than a slavish adoption of the Latin American model was paramount in Summers' way of working in Plymouth, and is promoted by ABBC.⁷⁴

1.4.5 Fresh ways of being church

"Fresh ways of being church" was a phrase used at Methodist Conference in 2007 to encourage all churches to examine the question, "what is church?" This was not to be restricted to the then 164 examples of Methodist fresh expressions which were registered with the fresh expressions directory, but to extend the thinking to all Methodist churches encouraging them to read the *Mission-Shaped Church* report widely and to reflect upon the challenges that it presented.

The 2007 Methodist Conference directed the Methodist Council (the decision-making body which meets between conferences) to bring annual reports to the Conference from 2008 to 2013 detailing progress made in encouraging the priority of developing fresh ways of being church. This was to include detailed guidance on how this could be further encouraged including any necessary changes to Standing

⁷³ Building Effective Community Ventures, *About ABBC*, available at http://www.serving-communities.org.uk/public/about_abbc.php (accessed 14.03.16).

⁷⁴ *Mission-Shaped Church*, pp. 47-49.

Orders. In October 2007, the Methodist Council approved the constitution of a Fresh Ways Working Group to oversee the development of the 2007 resolutions and to produce the annual reports to Conference.⁷⁵

This terminology has tended to be used in official Methodist documentation and reports to Conference on behalf of the Fresh Ways Working Group. The group was chaired by Stephen Lindridge, the connexional Missioner for Fresh Expressions from 2009-2015. Ian Bell who is responsible for co-ordinating the Venture FX pioneers within the Methodist Church was also part of this group.

1.4.6 Emergent church

Emergent community is a term which has been highlighted in *The Hospitality of God*, a descriptive study by Mary Gray-Reeves, Bishop of El Camino Real in California, Gerard Mpango, Bishop of Western Tanganyika in Tanzania and Michael Perham, Bishop of Gloucester, primarily looking at worship in Anglican fresh expressions of church. The study considered examples in the UK and the USA. They chose the term 'emergent' which they saw as synonymous with the English term 'fresh expressions' as they 'focussed principally on Anglican and sacramental emerging churches, in contrast to the 'subtly different concept' of the 'emerging' church of Anglican evangelicalism. A key emphasis of emergent churches they observe is that of hospitality:

Laying stress on God's desire to be welcoming, hospitable, inclusive, inviting. For ourselves, wherever we went we encountered something of that unconditional hospitality, reflected in the communities and especially in their leaders, giving of themselves generously to us.⁷⁶

Although this would seem a very narrow defining terminology, I include it in this section as one of the case studies they consider especially

⁷⁵ Paper presented at the Methodist Conference, 2007, 54.

⁷⁶ Mary Gray-Reeves and Michael Perham, *The Hospitality of God: Emerging Worship for a Missional Church* (London: SPCK, 2011), p. 8.

relating to notions of belonging, behaving, believing is that of St Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco, whose priest Sara Miles has written of the importance of some of the hallmarks of “doing church differently” within a “typical” or, as Gray-Reeves and Perham call it, a ‘pre-emergent church’.⁷⁷

1.4.7 Which terminology is currently dominant within the Methodist Church

I see Fresh Ways of Working as an umbrella term within Methodism to embrace more than “doing church differently”. It encompasses the work of pioneer ministries, presents a wider agenda about staffing, the re-organisation of circuits and districts, and the use of buildings for mission. The term fresh expressions has continued to be used and recognised more widely within local churches. Membership in Methodist churches is registered along with attendance during the month of October (known as the October Count) and then submitted by ministers to the connexion. Attendance at fresh expressions became an additional category of the October Count in 2009 with the statistics presented at Methodist Conference 2010. The October Count requires ministers to consider whether any group, organisation or worship initiative within the church can be categorised as a fresh expression of church so the language has continued to remain alive and prominent.

1.4.8 Conclusions on terminology

As can be seen by the way in which the authors above use the terminology, none of the phrases necessarily exclude others and there are definitely overlapping categories. The categories themselves are fluid and over the duration of this research (2008-2017) the terms have been more or less prevalent, or fashionable. Certainly terms such as para-church or new ways of being church have had a particular historic place in recent Church history, and terms such as fresh ways of being

⁷⁷ Gray-Reeves and Perham, *The Hospitality of God*, pp. 69-78. See also Sara Miles, *Take this Bread* (New York: Ballantine, 2007).

church was organisational language for a reporting group within the Methodist Church. Within the research, my umbrella term of “doing Church differently” encompasses the notion of an emerging and emergent church while working within the framework of the Methodist Church which has bought into the fresh expressions language through their support of the initiative with the Church of England and other ecumenical partners and supporters. By using a more neutral term I hope to avoid pre-judging what is to be discovered through the research.

1.5 Methodist Church statements and understanding of fresh expressions.

The Methodist Church’s official statements on Fresh Expressions are available as a document *Vision of FX in The Methodist Church* on the Methodist Church website and through two publications – *Changing Church for a Changing World: Fresh Ways of Being Church in a Methodist Context* and the joint report of the Anglican-Methodist working party *Fresh Expressions in the Mission of the Church*.⁷⁸

In addition to this, the Methodist Church affirms its place within the Fresh Expressions national initiative on the Methodist Church website with links to the relevant pages on the Fresh Expressions website.⁷⁹ I will consider briefly the three documents and the different ways in which they approach the subject.

⁷⁸ *Vision of FX in The Methodist Church* available at: <http://methodist.org.uk/downloads/pubs-lm-fx-060610.pdf> (accessed 17.02.17). *Changing Churches for a Changing World: Fresh Ways of Being Church in a Methodist Context* (London: The Methodist Church, 2007). Church of England, *Fresh Expressions in the Mission of the Church: Report of an Anglican-Methodist Working Party* (London: Church House Publishing, 2012).

⁷⁹ The Methodist Church in Britain, *Fresh Expressions*, available at: <http://methodist.org.uk/mission/fresh-expressions> (accessed 17.02.17). Fresh Expressions, available at: <http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/home> (accessed 06.03.17). Fresh Expressions, available at: <http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/guide> (accessed 06.03.17).

1.5.1 Vision of FX in The Methodist Church

This short statement, although official, is presented in a popular, newsletter format. It considers the role of the connexion, the district, the circuit and individuals in supporting local fresh expressions. The purpose of the paper and the role of fresh expressions as understood by the Methodist Church is to:

Encourage people at every junction in the Methodist Church to press on with a renewed vision about who God is calling you to reach. How might that happen? And what might be the vehicle by which you help others to grow as world-transforming disciples of Jesus Christ? This is the whole point of fresh expressions (FX) of church.⁸⁰

This document states that a missional imperative to ‘help others grow as world-transforming disciples’ is ‘the whole point’ of fresh expressions for Methodists. In the paper this imperative is underpinned by research which points to an ever increasing number of people in the UK unconnected to any church, and the need, therefore, for any fresh expression to complement “typical” churches which the paper refers to as established rather than inherited.⁸¹ It also calls for the church to commit to and support this venture with ‘regular prayer, clear vision, dedicated resources’, claiming that this ‘stepping out in faith emulates good theological practice and historical experience of pioneering mission’.

In 2004, the Methodist Conference, as part of their priorities for Methodist Church, agreed to encourage fresh ways of being Church and recognised that a key element of this way of being was to ‘nurture a culture in the Church which is people-centred and flexible.’ In 2008 as part of the redefining and grouping of circuits, the conference encouraged circuits to work with their context rather than follow a

⁸⁰ Available at: <http://methodist.org.uk/downloads/pubs-lm-fx-060610.pdf> (accessed 02.08.16).

⁸¹ *Vision of FX* references Jacinta Ashworth & Ian Farthing’s report for Tearfund, *Church Going in the UK* (April 2007).

‘connexional blueprint’ and argued that the historic Methodist precedent was that ‘John Wesley emphasised that spiritual effectiveness had priority over outward patterns of ecclesiastical organisation’.⁸²

Districts, circuits and churches were encouraged to consider ways of adopting fresh expressions as a priority, co-ordinating provision, ensuring that grants were available for such new initiatives, and recognising fresh expressions as part of synods and circuit meetings. In this paper, there are reference to fresh expressions which are ‘outside’ an existing congregation and also encouraging local churches to see how they might begin one in their local context. A mixed economy of forms of church is visible in this document.

1.5.2 *Changing Church for a Changing World: Fresh Ways of Being Church in a Methodist Context*

This book was published in the wake of *Mission-Shaped Church* to encourage Methodists that this way of working and thinking was not solely Anglican. Significantly, Steven Croft was chosen to provide the foreword.

The Methodist people are no strangers to the idea of a changing church. Methodism was born from a passionate desire to see the gospel of Jesus Christ connect again with ordinary people in these islands and, indeed, all over the world. From the days of the Wesleys onwards that has meant God bringing to birth in every generation and culture fresh ways of being church.⁸³

Steven Croft’s foreword echoes much of the reflections, essays and stories in this volume, which can be seen as a Methodist companion to *Mission-Shaped Church*, using examples of “doing Church differently” that in some cases pre-date the Fresh Expressions Initiative. The choice of stories themselves indicate that this is a continuation of such experiments, of congregations, ministers and lay people exploring

⁸² *Vision of FX in The Methodist Church* available at: <http://methodist.org.uk/downloads/pubs-lm-fx-060610.pdf>, p. 2 (accessed 17.02.17).

⁸³ *Changing Church*, p. 3.

ways of sharing faith in their own geographical and social contexts. In this volume, Martyn Atkins claims “that the Christian Church is primarily ‘mission-shaped’ is one of the key theological rediscoveries of our times”. Atkins draws on the *Missio Dei* claiming that “it is largely this understanding of church that is outlined in mission-shaped literature and which undergirds the energy and challenge of fresh expressions of church.”⁸⁴ Alongside Atkins claim of the ‘rediscovery’ of mission-shaped thinking is Martin Wellings’ short essay giving a historical retrospective. Wellings affirms that:

For the best part of two thousand years a blend of Spirit-led creativity, evangelistic necessity, cultural pressure and sheer restlessness has encouraged or compelled Christians to seek new ways of proclaiming and embodying the Good News of Jesus Christ.⁸⁵

In particular for Methodist people, Wellings asserts that the Wesley’s Methodism was in itself a fresh expression of the life and mission of the church. This ongoing risk-taking ministry and mission led to the rise of primitive Methodism, William and Catherine Booth leaving and creating the Salvation Army, the growth in Sunday schools, and the building of central halls from the 1880s, used in the 1930s for cinema style services. Wellings also pays attention to many associational groups, offering midweek opportunities often for single sexes. In conclusion, his reminder that ‘John Wesley was famously a borrower and adapter of other peoples’ projects’ is an encouragement to all “doing church differently” to be generous in telling our stories and learning from each other’s experience so that we might share best practice.

1.5.3 *Fresh Expressions in the Mission of the Church*

This joint Anglican-Methodist working party report published in 2012 outlined ten theological questions arising from fresh expressions, many around the nature of these groups as churches or as part of an

⁸⁴ *Changing Church*, p. 26.

⁸⁵ *Changing Church*, p. 30.

historical pattern of renewal movements. They also considered the implication of fresh expressions for the deployment of authorized ministers and finance and areas of accountability (both theological and practical) that may arise in relation to fresh expressions.⁸⁶ The report used the four components of the Methodist quadrilateral, experience, scripture, tradition and reason, before drawing their thinking together with a chapter 'Towards a Mission-Shaped Ecclesiology' and provides conclusions and recommendations for both denominations. The main premise of their conclusions is based upon an integrated understanding of fresh expressions and their place within a 'mixed economy'.

The ecclesial dynamics of fresh expressions, when properly orientated towards the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, will show signs of developing intensivity and connectivity.⁸⁷

In particular, the importance of what Glasson refers to as benchmarks are emphasised:

An orientation to the ministry of word and sacrament is not something that can be added subsequently to a fresh expression at some unspecified point in its development ... such an orientation will ensure that the dynamics at work in fresh expressions are truly ecclesial. Thus the ministry of word and sacrament, which binds the Church to God's gracious initiative, is foundational and integral to the development of fresh expressions. A fresh expression may not yet be at a stage where the community is ready to celebrate the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist, but preparation for that eventuality should be the intention and aim from the outset.⁸⁸

This statement is in accordance with the intentionality highlighted on the Fresh Expressions website and would fit broadly with those fresh expressions which are following a church planting model, and are led by a minister who is able to administer the sacraments. Here we return to the definitions: how far do these statements apply to fresh

⁸⁶ *Fresh Expressions in the Mission of the Church* 1.3., pp. 4-5.

⁸⁷ *Fresh Expressions in the Mission of the Church* 6.1.7., p. 155.

⁸⁸ *Fresh Expressions in the Mission of the Church* 6.2.3., p. 156.

expressions which are emerging and finding their way, which in their early stages see themselves as associational groups, experiments or are simply trying new ways of community and church outreach and engagement? This report seems to place limits and restrictions upon even the planning stage, arising from a place within the “typical” church which appears to want to control the validity of any fresh expression.

Within the second element of connectivity, the report then emphasises the role a fresh expression would hold within their denomination, through ordained and authorized ministers and through ecumenical relationships. The concern that this might engender a ‘clergy dominated’ control of fresh expressions is recognised within the report.⁸⁹

The conclusions of the report recognise in addition to the points made above that fresh expressions, as part of a mixed economy, have a legitimate place in the mission strategy of the Church of England and the Methodist Church, and that the teaching of the Church of England and the Methodist Church concerning the nature of the Church itself provides the necessary theological and ecclesiastical framework for the development of fresh expressions.⁹⁰

The report therefore is clear about what is a church, and that any fresh expressions who would wish to claim this status would need to conform to the guidelines laid down in the report. Simply a ‘church for the people involved’ would ‘sell the short the Gospel and fail those whom it is intended to benefit’. However, there is a recognition that some Christian communities which may lack some of the elements do have

⁸⁹ ‘It would be incorrect to regard the norms of Anglican or Methodist tradition as imposing unnecessarily restrictive rules that inhibit mission to contemporary people. That ecclesial dynamic of connectivity is intended to ensure that every Christian community at each stage of its development is gathered round what is recognizably the same ministry of word and sacrament. Thus the ecclesial dynamic of connectivity safeguards the ecclesial dynamic of intensivity.’ *Fresh Expressions in the Mission of the Church* 6.3.10., p. 163.

⁹⁰ *Fresh Expressions in the Mission of the Church* 7.3., p. 179.

an 'ecclesial status'. It is this ecclesial reality that I am seeking to discover within the research.

1.6 How does the Liverpool District endorse “doing church differently”

Although there have been individual case study stories included in the publications above (1.5), I felt that there was a place for a comparative study, on a local scale, of the ways in which an area, in this case the Liverpool District of the Methodist Church, has supported and encouraged examples of “doing Church differently”. Such a study would allow me to consider whether these examples reflect the more general characteristics outlined by the published work in this field. The Liverpool District, with the help of a district mission enabler, circuit mission enablers, local ministers and lay leadership, encouraged local churches to promote a mixed economy of worship styles and fresh expressions of church. This appeared to contain both district examples of fresh expressions of church which followed the guidelines of intensivity and connectivity, principally through the appointment of an ordained minister, but also some much more grassroots, lay-led, experimental and exploratory examples which would not have complied with the guidelines of the Anglican/Methodist report, but were still claimed by the Fresh Expressions website.

An interview with Jim Booth, the chair of the Liverpool District in 2010 before I embarked upon the fieldwork, gave me an overview of his position and the encouragement the district gave to examples of “doing church differently”.⁹¹ This included the work at *Somewhere Else* but also across the district, including the sharing and showcasing of groups at synod and district training days. The Liverpool District

⁹¹ Appendix 1.1.

website also now has stories and videos of fresh expressions (their chosen terminology).⁹²

1.7 Conclusion

The current endorsement of fresh expressions is strong and clear, although it sits in a very diverse landscape (1.4) and is expressed in different ways within Methodism (1.5.1–1.5.3). The dominant understanding of fresh expressions, and the rhetoric associated with it, is what requires investigation in relation to the realities on the ground. In the next chapter, I clarify how I decided to conduct research that engaged with local ecclesial realities in the Liverpool District in relation to the fresh expressions movement with Methodism and nationally to study how far they were “church for the unchurched”, examining the rhetoric suggested by the Fresh Expressions Initiative in order to make churches more mission-shaped.

⁹² The Liverpool District of the Methodist Church, available at: <http://www.liverpoolmethodistdistrict.org.uk/Fresh-Expressions.html> (accessed 22.05.16).

CHAPTER TWO

WHAT DOES “DOING CHURCH DIFFERENTLY” ACTUALLY LOOK LIKE AND WHAT DOES IT MEAN?: THE RESEARCH QUESTION AND GOALS

2.1 Introduction

In the light of the historic impulses for “doing church differently” (1.2) and terminology associated with contemporary examples within the Methodist Church (1.4), this chapter will examine the key Research Question arising from this context and outline the research goals. Methodism is often known for examining any issue in the light of the Methodist quadrilateral – experience, scripture, tradition and reason.⁹³ The importance of the role of experience within Methodism, and giving due attention to it, was significant in establishing the research question, which came out of examining my own experience of examples of “doing church differently” alongside the published material in the early days of the Fresh Expressions Initiative. There seemed to be some discrepancy between the examples I was experiencing and those I was reading about, between the rhetoric and the reality. A longing to experience, discover and understand the lived reality of examples of “doing Church differently” and look at them alongside each other was the driving force for the research. This guided the development of the key Research Question.

2.2 The research question

The initial discrepancy for me between the aspiration on the Fresh Expressions website that fresh expressions are “church for the unchurched” (see Introduction), and a hunch based on experience of

⁹³ See Barrie Tabraham, *The Making of Methodism* (London: Epworth, 1995), pp. 15-21.

visiting and also leading examples of groups that were “doing Church differently”, prior to the research, was that this was not the case. My own observation, both as a participant and leader, was that the reality of the composition of any group that I attended or led had alongside the “unchurched” a number of people who had a previous or current alternative experience of church.⁹⁴ Some continued to attend “typical” Methodist Churches or other denominations or had had previous connections with churches. This observation led to two critical issues: first, is it that groups do not meet the criteria stated by fresh expressions, and secondly could it be that the criteria themselves are unrealistic and do not reflect the practice or lived reality of the groups attempting to “do church differently”? In order to clarify the first question a video clip on YouTube attempted to answer the questions from “typical” churches asking of their associated groups “Is this a fresh expression of church?”⁹⁵ In groups I had attended people were discovering scripture, faith, friendship and purpose in their lives. These people at this time in these groups were not simply fulfilling a whim or fashionable direction of the “typical” Church. They were engaging with a particular context which met the needs of a specific group of individuals allowing them to discover the Christian faith within a broad understanding of Church and worship. The focus of the Research Question emerged:

How does the ecclesial realities of those “doing church differently” compare with understandings of Fresh Expressions within Methodism and nationally?

⁹⁴ *Mission-Shaped Church* divided the population into categories in order to review the mission task in England, making the case that targeting ‘returners’ was no longer an option as ‘we are becoming a nation of non-churched people’. *Mission-Shaped Church* p. 40. The crude terminology which I have grouped under the term “unchurched” (see introduction footnote 11) does not take into account the complexity of relationship which any individual might have with a worshipping community, i.e. through attendance at and involvement in associational groups (such as uniform organisations) or through outside agencies which meet on church premises.

⁹⁵ Fresh Expressions (2010) *What is a fresh expression of Church*, available at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PfF_-wbMr3M (accessed 22.05.16).

I chose to limit the field geographically to the Liverpool District of the Methodist Church (3.2.1) in order to situate the lived reality in a manageable and realistic research context, with which I was already familiar. So the final Research Question became:

How do the ecclesial realities of those Methodists “doing church differently” in the Liverpool District compare with understandings of fresh expressions in the Methodist Church and nationally?

To establish the lived ecclesial reality of the groups I would need to gain on-the-ground experience of a number of groups in the Liverpool District, establish what it was they were doing and then relate these realities both to Methodism and to Fresh Expressions nationally. I identified five Research Goals, the first three are internal to the groups to be investigated, working with those leading and attending the groups and paying attention to (a) their own explanation and understanding of why they were involved (Research Goal 1), (b) the nature and characteristics of the group (Research Goal 2) and (c) their own understanding of how the group might be church for them (Research Goal 3).

Because of the wider context in which this research is conducted, two further goals seek to orientate the realities on the ground in the Liverpool District to the Methodist Church (Research Goal 4), and the Fresh Expressions Initiative (Research Goal 5). In this way the research will provide something of a snapshot of what is happening and an assessment of it in terms of current national discussion in the churches which support the Initiative, predominantly the Church of England.

2.3 Research Goal 1: To understand why people are connecting with groups which are “doing church differently”

Many examples of groups “doing church differently” have a particular slant or approach which may make them attractive to those who are

actively seeking a point of contact with a church. These can sometimes offer a narrow or niche focus, style or approach or method in which worship, prayer or bible study is situated. I wanted to establish whether it was simply the content or format of the group which was the reason why those attending had made the initial connection and continued to attend or whether there were attractions which were enabled by these forms of “doing church differently”. This first Research Goal was instrumental in the choice of choosing ethnographic research methods (3.2). This Research Goal also involved understanding who was attending the different groups and presenting the composition of the groups, including where possible if any individuals had previous church connections, or were members another church as well as the group “doing church differently” at the time of the research.

The October Count (see 1.5) allows churches to record attendance at fresh expressions which took part under the auspices of a ‘traditional’ Methodist church to record their official membership, their Sunday morning and evening attendance, and also to officially record the numbers meeting at fresh expressions of church associated with “typical” churches. However, the understanding of belonging and believing, introduced by Grace Davies has continued with various permutations throughout literature seeking to understand “doing church differently” so direct correlations with connexional membership statistics must be treated with caution.⁹⁶ One of the prominent features of this research was to create a space for those within the groups to tell their story – the story of how they came to make an initial connection to the group and also to how being part of the group had affected their life, the routine of their week, and their priorities in terms of their use of time.

⁹⁶ Grace Davies, *Religion in Britain since 1945* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), pp. 93-116; see also Richard Thomas, *Counting People In: Changing the Way We Think about Membership and the Church* (London: SPCK, 2003), and Alan Billings, *Lost Church: Why We Must Find It Again* (London: SPCK, 2013).

2.4 Research Goal 2: To discern what are the chief characteristics of groups “doing church differently”

After establishing why people were choosing these groups, I wanted to discern whether these reasons were attributable to characteristics which were particular to individual groups. If, as is encouraged by the Fresh Expressions Initiative, examples of “doing Church differently” emerge from pioneers or “typical” Churches listening to their own specific contexts, then I wanted to determine whether disparate examples could demonstrate common hallmarks. Through observation and interview I wanted to determine which emphases emerged as important to those leading and attending the groups (chapters 4-7). I wanted to establish whether there were common themes or emphases which transcended individual groups.

2.5 Research Goal 3: To investigate how the groups who are “doing church differently” understand themselves as ecclesial realities

The Fresh Expressions Initiative expects groups to demonstrate the classic marks of Church.⁹⁷ I had the suspicion that within this expectation was a contradiction, for this assumption requires knowledge of “typical” Church and “typical” ecclesiology which would not initially pertain to those attending a “church for the unchurched”. It may of course be understood, if the pioneer or the leadership group responsible were (a) from a “typical” Church background, and (b) saw these marks as ones which were necessary to plant in an example of a group “doing church differently”. So this research goal, was to investigate whether those who were within these groups could articulate the importance of the group for them, and analyse whether this expressed elements of the nature of Church. I was aware that achieving this goal would take careful questioning and might need to take different forms for different groups. It was also important to establish whether those involved in the groups had multiple connections

⁹⁷ Fresh Expressions, *Are Fresh Expressions Proper Church?* available at: <http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/guide/about/proper> (accessed 19.04.16).

with other churches, as this would allow me to establish whether this group was functioning as an additional, supplementary, resourcing, or associational group for existing worshippers or church attenders from other “typical” churches or whether it was the case that for attendees this was their only connection with church. The Initiative also expects groups to be intentional, aspiring to become a sustainable form of church, this implies and encourages an independence from the “typical” church, whether that is a local congregation or parish, or a group which has its inception in a circuit or diocesan. This research goal would help establish whether this was the reality for the case studies.

2.6 Research Goal 4: To analyse the way in which the groups “doing church differently” relate to the “typical” Methodist Church

After having considered the voices within these groups seeking to “do church differently” and having listened to and discerned their emerging emphases, it was important to be able to situate them within a wider understanding of Church. So this research goal was to assess whether evidence which the research was seeking to identify resonated with the direction of travel within contemporary Methodism. I wanted to assess Research Goal 4 at the end of the field work, rather than constantly be dealing with comparisons and therefore have the “typical” church set the agenda of either the research or the interpretation of the findings. This would allow the reality of the research question to be placed alongside the aspirations of the Methodist Church and would allow me to hear and consider the voices from the case studies offering their own perspectives and understanding of their experience within a connexional framework that might challenge or confirm official Methodist statements (Chapter 10).

2.7 Research Goal 5: To situate these groups who are “doing church differently” situated within the world of Fresh Expressions

The final research goal was to use and interpret detailed and descriptive studies of individual groups, and the evidence produced from 2.3, 2.4 and 2.5 in order to situate them within the wider landscape of the ecumenical Fresh Expressions Initiative. This goal would hopefully establish whether

an in-depth study into specific Methodist examples of “doing church differently” enabled perspectives or approaches which offered a particular characteristic, flavour or emphasis that might challenge or confirm current Fresh Expressions thinking and research (Chapter 11).⁹⁸

Having established the five research goals, I now need to explain in Chapter 3 the relevant methods and approaches that I adopted in seeking to fulfil these goals and so discover what “doing church differently” actually looks like and what it means as a lived ecclesial reality in the Liverpool District of the Methodist Church, particularly in relation to current understanding of fresh expressions of church in the Methodist Church and the language of the Fresh Expressions Initiatives’ understanding that these groups are “church for the unchurched”.

⁹⁸ Such considered studies of lived, local churches are noted as important in Steven Croft’s final essay chapter in *Mission-Shaped Questions* in order for the church to recognise that rather than an idealised picture of the church, we hold a sense of the Church in relation to time. Nicholas Healey’s call for ecclesiology to return to a ‘theodramatic horizon’ which move away from a reliance on idealised perspective ‘provides the church with a framework within which it can develop self-critical responses to the various challenges and opportunities of the present ecclesiological context.’ Nicholas Healey, *Church, World and Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge University Press, SPCK, 2002), p. 154.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS AND APPROACHES

3.1 Introduction

Part A will outline the methodological frameworks which I used during the research to listen to, explore and record the stories of examples of “doing church differently”. I will consider how the role of ethnography, has influenced the choice of the research methods used within the case studies. I will explain the common research methods which I proposed for the case studies. During the research itself, additional approaches and methods were introduced and these will be addressed and considered in more detail within the case study chapters (Part Two). Research Goals 4 and 5 were approached by using the evidence gathered using ethnographic research alongside the published documentation of the Methodist Church and the Fresh Expressions Initiative in order to determine how far the data gathered in the research related to the understandings of both organisations.

Part B will first argue for a case study approach. I will then present the results of the District survey into examples of “doing Church differently” which I conducted in 2009/10 alongside the official returns to the Methodist Church for that year. In the light of the survey results I will present the rationale for selecting four particular case studies and the proposal for the use of selected research methods.

Part C of this chapter will consider my own position in relation to the research and the case studies.

PART A: Methodological Approaches

3.2 Ecclesiology and ethnography

This research finds itself at the grassroots of ecclesiology, at the public place of encounter with the reality of a lived out church. To some groups within “typical” church the judgement as to whether fresh expressions are even worthy of consideration within a historical dimension has been the commentary of Martyn Percy in ‘Old tricks for new dogs’.⁹⁹ But in outlining the phenomenon in Chapter 1 and setting out Research Goals 1-3 in Chapter 2, I believe that ethnography provides a robust and careful framework which will allow me to examine the current place of groups “doing Church differently” within the Liverpool District of the Methodist Church. The overriding choice of this approach was the ability was to become a participant observer within such groups and use the understanding of my role as an insider to gain insights and understanding along with the experiences and voices of others to be able to describe, consider and assess these groups within contemporary Methodism and the wider fresh expressions landscape.¹⁰⁰ Scott Thumma’s advocacy of the role of the insider who has the advantage over the outside observer ‘to read between the lines’ is qualified by the caution not to take things for granted.¹⁰¹ I already held the role of the insider by virtue of being a member and local preacher within the Methodist Church, as well as having spent time on placement at *Somewhere Else*. I considered myself implicated in the life of the groups “doing church differently” and as such, needed to note my complicity in the research, as Pelias

⁹⁹ Martyn Percy, ‘Old tricks for new dogs? A critique of fresh expressions’, in Louise Nelstrop and Martyn Percy (eds), *Evaluating Fresh Expressions: Explorations in Emerging Church* (London: Canterbury Press, 2008), pp. 27-39.

¹⁰⁰ John J. Vincent, *Christ in the City*, pp. 34-35.

¹⁰¹ Scott L. Thumma, ‘Methods for Congregational Study’, in Nancy Ammerman, Jackson W. Carroll, Carl S. Dudley and William McKinney (eds), *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), pp. 196-239 (p. 199).

suggests.¹⁰² In order to balance the insider role Thumma suggests enhancing any study with the observations of new members. This approach seemed particularly appropriate for research which would in part consider those who were potentially new to “doing church differently”, to Methodism and to church. An ethnographic approach would allow me to hear the voices of those who are experiencing the joys and struggles of “doing church differently” at the grassroots, participants and leaders alike.¹⁰³ At the beginning of the research I encountered the Ecclesiology and Ethnography Network, an international group of researchers and church practitioners founded in 2007 by Pete Ward and Chris Scharen who were using ethnographic methodology and research methods in order to understand and interpret the lived reality of many different ecclesial contexts and examples.¹⁰⁴ The flexibility and adaptability of ethnographic methods would enable sensitivity and context to shape the writing as I negotiated the research.

3.2.1 ‘Looking at’ and ‘living in’

John Swinton introduces into the consideration of the role of the researcher as an insider the concept of ‘living in’ as a Christian ethnographer.¹⁰⁵ ‘Anyone can look at the Church’, he argues, ‘but there is a difference between *looking at* and *living in*. Christian

¹⁰² Ronald J. Pelias, ‘Writing into Position: Strategies for Composition and Evaluation’, in Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (eds), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2011), pp. 659-668.

¹⁰³ Interviews and Participant Observation are highlighted as methods in ethnographic studies see Alex Stewart, *The Ethnographer’s Method* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998), p. 28.

¹⁰⁴ Details of the network for Ecclesiology and Ethnography are available at <http://www.ecclesiologyandethnography.com/about/> (accessed 24.05.16). Collaborative publications from the network include Pete Ward (ed.), *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2012) and Christian B. Scharen (ed.), *Explorations in Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2012).

¹⁰⁵ John Swinton, “‘Where is Your Church?’ Moving toward a Hospitable and Sanctified Ethnography”, in Pete Ward (ed.), *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, pp. 71-92.

ethnographers cannot but engage in both practices ...such modes of looking – looking at and living in – may complement one another, but they are not the same, nor are they inevitably or necessarily equal.¹⁰⁶ In this research as a Christian ethnographer and insider, adopting the role of a participant observer within an ethnographic approach would require living in. To use Swinton's metaphor, I had already, by my participation and leadership, taken part ownership of several houses "doing church differently".¹⁰⁷ This ethnographic approach would require me to flat share with other groups "doing church differently". I might already know some of the house rules, I would have to be prepared to share in the washing up (literally in the case of *Somewhere Else*), but I would always be aware that this was a temporary arrangement and I would be moving on. This self-awareness and reflexivity would be what would help me keep 'looking at' and 'living in' in tension if not necessarily in balance (see 3.8). Accepting the dynamic role of sometimes being the guest and sometimes the host, in relation to the research, the groups and my own understanding of "doing church differently", would help me receive hospitality and offer it during the ethnographic encounters required by the research methods. I decided to adopt the following ethnographic research methods, as is explained below. As I had already reflected on my experience at *Somewhere Else* prior to the research, I approached the ethnographic research methods with some previous insider knowledge.

3.2.2 Participant observation

'The ethnographer's inquiring experience' and the use of participant observation was at the heart of this research. During my time at *Somewhere Else* on placement, I had begun to adopt this enquiring experience. I was working alongside others, baking bread, listening to their own reflections on the importance of "doing Church differently" in

¹⁰⁶ John Swinton, "Where is Your Church?", p. 91.

¹⁰⁷ I had been involved in the setting up of *Church Mice* at Heswall Methodist Church and was already part of the community at *Somewhere Else* as a result of my placement.

their lives. The nature of participant observation particularly that which is conducted over an extended period of time is that the methods which would need to be adopted would be wider than simply observation. I was invited to the Church Council meetings and was able to observe the organisational structures of this group. I had already begun to develop the multi-tasking skills required to observe and participate especially when an activity such as bread-making does not allow for easy note taking during the session. The advantage of *Somewhere Else* was I was beginning to see that the bread-making could give me, as the observer, a focus which required me not to talk, and therefore enabled careful listening in a natural way. I was therefore aware of this potential opportunity for further examples.

3.2.3 Interviewing

I intended to adopt research methods which would allow the collection of a breadth of data, principally interviewing with semi-structured format. This included the adoption of interview methods used in congregational and feminist studies which were pertinent to collecting evidence through listening to previously unheard voices.¹⁰⁸

Interviewing was to be open-ended with the aim of listening to the participants and to what emerged from the conversations. I would endeavour to listen to the way church in their context is understood and articulated, discovering their own experience and journey that would cause people to discover and join examples of “doing church differently”. This approach would require listening skills but also draw on the ability to discern the ‘ecclesiological shorthand’ used by the

¹⁰⁸ See Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods* (Oxford: OUP, 2008), pp. 238-239; Robert G. Burgess, *In the Field: An Introduction to Field Research* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 101-122; Helen Cameron *et al.*, *Studying Local Churches: A Handbook* (London: SCM, 2005), pp. 30-31; Martyn Denscombe, *Ground Rules for Good Research, A 10 Point Guide for Social Researchers* (Oxford: OUP, 2003), p. 75; David Hall and Irene Hall, *Practical Social Research: Project Work in the Community* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), pp. 157-159; and Ann Oakley, ‘Interviewing women: a contradiction in terms’, in Helen Roberts (ed.), *Doing Feminist Research* (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 30-61.

participants.¹⁰⁹ This shorthand is used by some participants who have no previous experience of church and therefore their evidence which is presented from them is naturally in a 'mother tongue' without reference to formal ecclesial language.¹¹⁰

Tina Miller in her consideration of accounts of women interviewed for her research into accounts of motherhood talks of the 'multi-layered' voice, the interviews which comprise those aspects of the public, private and personal.¹¹¹ When asking participants to share their experiences of the group they were part of, it became apparent that the public, private and personal were inextricably intertwined. As I had been observing the groups for at least six months and in the case of *Somewhere Else*, had known some members of the community for three years the formal interview was not a one-off experience with an unknown researcher. In some cases the evidence collected in a recorded interview had already been shared in informal conversations and was repeated again. This was simply getting it on the record.¹¹²

Janet Finch in her article 'It's Great to Have Someone to Talk to' writes of the way she is startled at the readiness and enthusiasm of

¹⁰⁹ David Bailey outlined the notion of youth workers using 'theological shorthand' in the absence of formal theological language in 'Relationships as Communicative Action in Youth Ministry Practice and Trinitarian Theology' (unpublished paper delivered to 'Doctrine and the Practice of the Church' symposium on ecclesiology and ethnography, 12.09.13, St John's College, Durham).

¹¹⁰ Geoff Astley, 'Giving Voice to the Ordinary: Theological Listening and the Mother Tongue', in Natalie K. Watson and Stephen Burns (eds), *Exchanges of Grace: Essays in Honour of Ann Loades* (London: SCM, 2008), pp. 202-212.

¹¹¹ Tina Miller 'Shifting Layers of Professional, Lay and Personal Narratives: Longitudinal Childbirth Research', in Jane Ribbens and Rosalind Edwards (eds), *Feminist Dilemmas in Qualitative Research: Public Knowledge and Private Lives* (Sage: London, 2006), pp. 58-71.

¹¹² This is particularly the case for Steve Allen at *Somewhere Else*. His own personal story is witness the transformative effect being part of a community like *Somewhere Else* can have. His story is recorded in Ian Hu's article 'All Equal but Different', *Magnet*, 91 (Autumn 2010), 14-16.

interviewees to talk to a female researcher.¹¹³ I wanted to employ this feminist reading of using shared experience as a researcher to deepen interviewer-interviewee relationships. I could use some of Finch's conclusions directly for the women in *Knit and Natter*. At *Somewhere Else* a knowledge of the process and pattern of the bread-making day including the way prayers are led, and in some cases a shared history of previous experience (see interview with David Roger in Appendix 4.3), meant that at the point of interviewing an understanding was present which allowed the interviewees, both male and female to open up and share freely.¹¹⁴ Interviewing in pairs and small groups enabled this conversational approach.

3.2.4 Thick description

Both participant observation and interviewing in order to hear and record the voices and views of others in respect of the research goals 1-3 would feed into the ability to make use of 'thick description' as advocated and borrowed from Gilbert Royall by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz. Geertz argues that:

Ethnography is thick description. What the ethnographer is ...faced with ...is a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit, and which he must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render.¹¹⁵

This involved ethnographic research methods and in writing up this description:

...he turns it from a passing event, which exists only in its own moment of occurrence, into an account, which exists in its inscriptions and can be reconsulted.¹¹⁶

¹¹³ Janet Finch, "'It's great to Have Someone to Talk to': Ethics and Politics of Interviewing Women', in Martyn Hammersley (ed.), *Social Research: Philosophy, Politics and Practice* (London: Sage, 1993), pp. 166-180.

¹¹⁵ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 3-32, (p. 7).

¹¹⁶ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, p. 12.

Use of thick description and other ethnographic research methods have been combined with congregational studies amongst some researchers at the interface of ethnography and ecclesiology in order to discover a deeper reality and understanding of the nature of Church and those within it.¹¹⁷ This approach has also been used to examine the experience of those with varying affiliations to the “typical” church.¹¹⁸

3.3 Negotiated methods

As I approached the co-ordinators and leaders of the case studies for permission to conduct the research, it became apparent that they wanted to engage in the way in which the research would take place. I embraced this willingness to be involved and as I was going to be a participant observer for up to a year, in the interest of building trust and good relationships, I wanted both the leaders and participants to have a stake in the research. Therefore the way in which the research was planned and took place, was negotiated. The end result of the negotiation was different in each case (4.3.1, 5.2.1, 6.3.1 and 7.2.1) but the experience of the conversations I was having concurrently with the leaders of the groups informed my own stance. David and Irene Hall’s work on negotiated methods in working with organisations was particularly helpful, as this approach does take time, but to my mind was productive in terms of the number of people who were willing to be interviewed, especially in case studies 1 and 2.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ Ecclesiology and Ethnography Network details available at <http://www.ecclesiologyandethnography.com/> (accessed 22.05.16).

¹¹⁸ Pete Ward and Sarah Dunlop used visual ethnography methods in their research with young people at the Roman Catholic Cathedral of St. Mary and St. Boniface in Plymouth. See ‘Practical Theology and the Ordinary: Visual Research among Migrant Polish Catholic Young People’, *Practical Theology*, 4.3 (2011), 295-313.

¹¹⁹ David Hall and Irene Hall, *Practical Social Research: Project Work in the Community* (London: Macmillan, 1996), pp. 56-94.

PART B: Research Methods

3.4 The rationale for a case study approach

This research emerged out of a context with which I was familiar, namely the practice and reflection of the community at *Somewhere Else*, but in order to examine wider practice across the District it would be necessary to look at other examples.

I wanted to discover the lived ecclesial reality of the groups through participant observation of four case studies studied concurrently alongside evidence collected through reflected experience of those taking part, both as leaders and participants. Daniel Schipani argues that the case study method and approach is suitable for learning from 'a concrete slice of reality and human experience' and can serve the purpose of critically and constructively reflecting on ecclesial practice. Including background, description, analysis and evaluation, using a case study approach allows the researcher to present a case in depth.¹²⁰ Northcott makes the suggestion that the use of case studies in seminars as a form of collaborative learning can permit the unveiling of presuppositions and assumptions in ministry and ecclesial practice.¹²¹

3.5 Survey results

From 2005 the national Fresh Expression Initiative set up an on-line directory whereby those who were involved in setting up fresh expressions

¹²⁰ Daniel S. Schipani, 'Case Study Method', in Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (ed.), *Companion to Practical Theology* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), pp. 91-101 (p. 92).

¹²¹ Michael Northcott, 'The Case Study Method in Theological Education', in David Willows and John Swinton, (eds), *Spiritual Dimensions of Pastoral Care* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2000), pp. 59-65. During my research, I was able to present the individual case studies for peer review to a seminar group for feedback and ongoing reflection.

of church could register their groups. This directory was self-selecting and self-referential as groups could choose from a range of categories, based on the examples given in *Mission-Shaped Church*. As the organisation developed and the numbers of congregations with examples of “doing Church differently” increased the directory was taken off line. I was given authorisation by Bishop Graham Cray and George Lings at the Sheffield Centre to access the information off-line in March 2010. Before the directory was taken off-line there were five examples from the Liverpool District registered – *Somewhere Else* (as it was used as an example on the first Fresh Expression DVD), two youth examples in the Southport Circuit and two childrens’ work examples in the Wirral Circuit which I had registered myself.

Informal conversations across the Wirral Circuit, and Liverpool District led me to believe that there were more local examples. In order to build up a picture of the scale of examples of “doing church differently” I then compiled my own survey of all Methodist Churches in the Liverpool District. I contacted the superintendents of the circuits asking if they could give me details of fresh expressions or other worship initiatives which had started in their circuits between 2005 and 2010.

For each circuit in the district I had first an e-mail exchange with the superintendent, with a questionnaire for each example (Appendix 3.1). This was followed by a telephone conversation or visit with each circuit. This gave a 100% return and out of the 112 churches, 58 fresh expressions of church were returned (Appendix 3.2). Churches were also requested to indicate the frequency of meeting, whether the group met on a Sunday or midweek, if they felt it appropriate to label their fresh expression with a category from *Mission-Shaped Church* report, the leadership of the group, and whether they were able to say who attended the group in relation to previous church attendance or connection. As mentioned in 1.5 the first time that Methodist churches were required to submit details of the numbers of those attending fresh expressions, was

the October Count of 2009 and returned as a report to Conference in 2010 (Appendix 3.3).

All those which I chose as case studies from my own survey were returned in the October Count with the exception of *Knit and Natter* at Hope Farm Church. It may be that it was a very new group and its identity as a way of “doing Church differently” was yet to be agreed or established.

3.6 Rationale for case study selection

After a year of compiling the survey and visiting churches across the District, I selected three other case studies for the following reasons:

3.6.1 Geographical and practical considerations

Case studies were selected from four different circuits from across the district. When I contacted the Warrington Circuit in November 2009 to conduct the District survey, I was invited to meet the circuit staff at a staff meeting where they would complete the questionnaires. This enabled me in a practical way to collate a large amount of information at one time. The Warrington Circuit returned a third of examples of fresh expressions of church from the Liverpool District.¹²² This level of return was a key factor in selecting *New Song Café* as a case study from the Warrington Circuit. *Somewhere Else* is based in the Liverpool City Centre Circuit, *Knit and Natter* in the Wirral Circuit and *Café Church @Oomoo* in the Liverpool South Circuit. There are national examples of “doing church differently” in rural settings but the case studies I chose were in urban and suburban areas reflecting the Liverpool District.¹²³

3.6.2 Range of examples

¹²² Appendix 3.3.

¹²³ Alan Smith, *God-Shaped Mission: Theological and Practical Perspectives from the Rural Church* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2008), pp. 65-73.

I continued attending bread-making at *Somewhere Else* in Liverpool City Centre and added three more case studies.

Knit and Natter at Hope Farm Methodist Church in Ellesmere Port were initially a small group in the foyer of the church knitting for the local street pastors, women's refuge, premature baby unit and an orphanage in South Africa. The fieldwork followed and I observed and recorded their growth from 2009-2011.

Eleven out of the fifty-eight district returns were for café churches. The two examples which I chose to consider were: *Café Church @Ooomoo* based in South Liverpool, stemming from a ministry to students and a desire to offer alternative worship to those who stayed on in Liverpool after graduation, and *New Song Café*, a group meeting in a Methodist Church in Warrington based around contemporary Christian music. *New Song Cafe* was also chosen because it was an example of a circuit fresh expression which met on a regular basis, and attracted people from across circuit and district boundaries, as well as from other denominations.

3.6.3 Leadership

Somewhere Else and *New Song Café* are led by presbyters, *Knit and Natter* is led by lay volunteers, and *Café Church @Ooomoo* is led by a rota of lay volunteers with input from one paid lay employee.

The question of leadership is key to the sustainability of fresh expressions. Is a presbyter or paid employee required to run a fresh expression? If fresh expressions are run by volunteers are they more or less likely to be sustainable in the long run? With itinerancy still the norm for Methodist presbyters, if fresh expressions are built on building relationships with those with no previous connection with church is this hindered by itinerancy of presbyters? Would different models of leadership influence the answer to the research question?

3.6.4 Ethical considerations

In accordance with my ethical review, it was agreed that the case studies that I observed and the members I interviewed would be adults over 18. Twenty-two out of fifty-eight examples in my survey were of children or youth congregations so this ruled out over a third of the groups.¹²⁴ The age profile in the case studies therefore reflects compliance with the ethical review. The survey highlights that many fresh expressions are targeted or attract ‘niche’ congregations – either in terms of interest or of age profile.

3.6.5 Day and frequency of meeting

As I studied the four case studies concurrently, principally over two academic years 2009/2010 and 2010/2011, the days and times which they met were crucial to being able to observe them alongside each other and to organise interviews within the sessions, which suited most of the groups. Practically I was able to achieve this with *Somewhere Else* (two weekday sessions during the day), *Knit and Natter* (one weekly weekday session), *Café Church @Oomoo* (meeting one evening monthly which increased to fortnightly during the observation period) and *New Song Café* (meeting monthly on a Sunday evening). This enabled me to observe and attend the case studies while leading worship as a Local Preacher on a Sunday morning. *Somewhere Else* did have Sunday worship on a monthly basis, whereas the other three were more closely associated with “typical” congregations which had weekly Sunday morning worship.

3.7 Selected research methods for research goals 1-3

Both the ethnographic and feminist approach gave a steer towards methodologies which would favour participant observation with an emphasis on listening to the voices from the grassroots of the selected case studies. To this end I considered the use of the following research methods as starting points, detailed attention to appropriate methods will be addressed in individual case study chapters.

¹²⁴ Recent Church Army research included examples of fresh expressions including under 18: see Claire Dalpra and John Vivian, *Who's there?*

3.7.1 Documentation

Written histories or accounts will be particularly useful: Barbara Glasson's two written accounts of the community at *Somewhere Else* and its 'emergence' can be compared to the minuted account of the church council, and similarities or differences sought. It will be useful to examine whether or not there are other written accounts for the other case studies in comparison.¹²⁵ *Somewhere Else* were used to having collective storytelling events, and members are also accustomed to reflective practice, external feedback, informal debriefing and systematic autocritique.

3.7.2 Questionnaires

I had not intended to use questionnaires as part of the field work for significant reasons of inclusion informed by participants at *Somewhere Else* (4.3.4). I had to review this decision for *New Song Café*, when there were no self-selecting participants who wished to follow up the offer of an interview (6.3.3 and 6.3.4). I composed a simple anonymous questionnaire which would be quick to fill in during the evening and used this for both *New Song Café* and *Café Church @Oomoo* (Figure 6.3 and Figure 7.1). In both of these questionnaires I allowed space for an open-ended question which offered the possibility for the voices and opinions of participants to share their experience of the groups.¹²⁶

3.7.3 Semi-structured interviews

As the number of members of groups "doing church differently" is usually smaller than "typical" congregations, the case of a sampled section may be too restrictive, and I hoped to interview a larger percentage of the congregation than is usual in congregational studies.

¹²⁵ Cameron *et al.*, *Studying Local Churches*, p. 28.

¹²⁶ The placing of an open-ended question at the end of the questionnaire was to replicate the opportunity to establish the perspective of the participant which I sought to do in each of the interviews for the other case studies. See Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, p. 463.

Open-ended questions allowed issues and themes to emerge out of the interviews, which shaped further questions and conversation, giving breadth to the field work. In case studies 1,2 and 4 the relationships I had begun to develop and also my background in pastoral listening necessarily shaped the interviews. As the interviews went on, in order to make the interviewees more relaxed, I sometimes moved away from the planned questions and brought in shared experiences as a starting point. Taking their experience seriously helped with their ownership of the research.

3.8 Selected research methods for research goals 4 and 5

Drawing on the data produced from the four cases by the research methods outlined for Research Goals 1-3 in 3.6 above, I will correlate this evidence with the reports and other publications produced by the Methodist Church for Research Goal 4 and by the Church of England and Fresh Expressions Initiative for Research Goal 5. This literary research will rely on published material but also web-based sources.¹²⁷

Part C: Self-reflexivity and the Research Question

3.9 How my own position has influenced the research question?

As a Methodist involved in “doing church differently” I was aware of my own desire to encourage and support the groups in the explorations in their ecclesial practice. At the same time, I wanted to bring a critical approach to what I was to discover. In one sense the divide between

¹²⁷ See 1.5 for Methodist official statements and Church of England, *From Anecdote to Evidence: Results from the Church Growth Research Programme 2011-2013*, available at:

<http://www.churchgrowthresearch.org.uk/UserFiles/File/Reports/FromAnecdoteToEvidence1.0.pdf> (accessed 22.05.16), and Dalpra and Vivian, *Who's There?*

insider/outsider approaches became blurred in the relatively small worship and group settings of the chosen case studies. Constantly aware of the need to see the whole picture of the group, I would physically have to sit with the group, either bread making, knitting, singing, or involved in conversation. As well as observing the group dynamics and developing relationships and the factual operational nature of the group I was going to be an active participant. From the first meetings of the case studies people naturally shared their own experiences and I recognised that I would need to pay attention to all voices and not necessarily only those exercising leadership within the group. This would allow me to establish the reasons why people were connecting with and continuing to attend the groups selected for case study.

From early on in the observation period, it would become apparent that any approach to the research, the encounters and the conversations were going to have to be flexible. Since the groups through their very nature were often fluid, I could not make assumptions about the number of people present, or who would be there from week to week. The nature of *Somewhere Else*, in particular, was unpredictable, and indeed this unpredictability was heralded as a characteristic to be embraced – as a sign of the need to open to a God of surprises. The dilemma of researching communities which are unpredictable meant that a flexible approach needed to be adopted early on in order for this to influence positively the research.

My own position as an insider to the research encompasses four key areas.

3.9.1 Geographical situation

I have lived in the Liverpool District since 2001 and have an understanding of the geographical location and boundaries of the Liverpool District. The District itself includes the city of Liverpool, and stretches to Southport to the north, across the Mersey to the Wirral to the South and across to Warrington to the east. The Liverpool District is divided into ten circuits,

and I was able to take the geographical differences across the circuit into account when making the choice of case studies.

3.9.2 Methodist structures

In order to complete the initial survey (Appendix 3.2) and then request permission from the church council responsible for the groups involved in the case studies, I could draw on my experience and knowledge of Methodist structures. As I had an understanding of ministerial staffing and structures within the district, I was able quickly to use those structures which were already in place to gain information available. I was able to approach ministers and church council secretaries of potential case studies and request that the research have a place on the agenda so that it could be considered and given permission from the church council in accordance with the requirements of the ethical review. I had an understanding of ordained and lay leadership, the organisation of churches, and an understanding and experience of the worshipping life of many “typical” Methodist congregations across the district as a worshipper or worship leader. Those associated with the Methodist church are usually (and sometimes unhelpfully) divided into members and friends. Members of the Methodist Church have been through a preparation course and are confirmed and received into membership of a local Methodist church. They receive a membership ticket annually to remind them of the calling of the Methodist church to worship, learning and caring, service and evangelism. Financial giving from individual churches to the circuit for ministerial provision is based upon the number of members. ‘Friends’ are usually those recorded on the community roll as those who may attend worship or other activities but are not yet members of the church.

3.9.3 “Doing church differently” in the context of the Liverpool District of the Methodist Church

The ecclesiology of the Methodist Church lived out in congregational life is the backdrop to this research. These examples of “doing church differently” are the outworkings of current emphases on fresh expressions of church which have been taken up, explored and developed in four

different contexts within the same denomination and region. As I already had some knowledge of and involvement in alternative worship and experiments in “doing church differently”, particularly with families and young children, I had an interest not just in seeing the case studies as an academic exercise but also through observation and interview in learning from others and the experience and wisdom they had gained on their ecclesiological journeying.

3.9.4 Being an insider

As an insider, not only as a member of the Methodist Church, but as a Local Preacher and a ministerial candidate in 2010/11 when some of the evidence was collected, I was aware of my own role and influence in the collection of material especially in interviews. It was important to collect experiences and opinions from those involved in the groups without the interviewees feeling that it was a question and answer session in which I held the answers. This was minimised by the decision to interview in small groups or in pairs where possible so that a more natural conversation took place which was framed or guided by the interview questions. All participants signed a consent form to take part in the interviews. This needed explanation for some of the interviewees especially those at *Knit and Natter*, who were naturally hesitant about what might be required of them if they signed, whether they were going to be contacted by the university or whether their details were going to be passed on to call centres who might want to sell them something. I spent a lot of time reassuring them that the consent form was to protect them and their stories. Sometimes I needed to read the information sheet and consent form aloud, and this experience raised the question of the nature of interviewing those who struggled with reading and writing.

3.10 Conclusion

Employing insights and perspectives from ethnography and feminist research to inform the research methods chosen for the case studies, each case study required a more detailed and reasoned choice of method

which was negotiated and tailored to the context of the individual group. This choice was informed by both practical and pastoral issues raised by the co-ordinators and participants of the groups chosen. The approaches and ideals outlined in this chapter needed to be adapted in practice and chapter 4-7 will include a section on research methods to illustrate how this was done.

So, I proceed to Part Two to discover the ecclesial realities on the ground in the four selected case studies before investigating in Part Three what the results of the research have to say to the Methodist Church and the Fresh Expressions Initiative and to the claim that fresh expressions are “church for the unchurched”.

PART TWO

FOUR CASE STUDIES: THE RESEARCH PROJECT

CHAPTER FOUR

CASE STUDY 1: *SOMEWHERE ELSE*, LIVERPOOL CITY CENTRE METHODIST CHURCH

4.1 Introduction to chapters in part two

Each of the case studies will have a dedicated chapter. Within each chapter, Part A will briefly introduce the case study, outline the history of the group and explain any singular aspects of participant observation for the case study and the choice of additional research methods appropriate and applicable for each group. Part B will provide a detailed thick description collated during participant observation (see 3.2). Part C will present data provided through the research methods in respect of research goals 1-3.

Interpretation of the data and correlation with other research will be employed in engaging with Research Goals 4 and 5 in Part Three of the thesis.

Part A: *Somewhere Else* Background and Research Methods

4.2 Introduction to *Somewhere Else*

As I noted in 1.1, my first visit to *Somewhere Else* was in the summer of 2007, prior to starting a placement. This section and initial introduction to *Somewhere Else* will consider the Methodist history, background and context which allowed *Somewhere Else* to emerge.

4.2.1 History of *Somewhere Else*

Liverpool's Methodist Central Hall was sold in 1995, and subsequently the Revd Barbara Glasson was stationed to a city centre appointment without a church community or building in 1999. Methodist congregations can (upon the closure of a society) ring fence some of

the money from the sale of buildings solely for mission purposes.¹²⁸ This foresight on the part of the church council which made the decision to close Central Hall allowed the possibility of *Somewhere Else*, colloquially known as ‘The Bread Church’ to emerge. *Somewhere Else*, is the Methodist church in Liverpool city centre which meets twice a week in rented rooms above an independent bookshop on Bold Street, a busy shopping street to bake bread and share scripture and prayer together. The story of the emergence of *Somewhere Else* is recorded on the first Fresh Expressions DVD, and in Barbara Glasson’s first two books, *Mixed-up Blessing: A New Encounter with being church* and *I am Somewhere Else: Gospel Reflections from an Emerging Church*.¹²⁹ Glasson remained with the community until August 2009 when she was replaced by Revd Ian Hu.

Somewhere Else has a minister, a church council and operates within the structures and organisation of the Methodist Church. However, it “does church differently” and its ecclesial status is not as easily recognised as in “typical” Methodist churches. It does not have weekly Sunday worship as it meets during the week and the majority of those present at bread-making are not members of the Methodist Church. *Somewhere Else* – through its publicity generated by the Fresh Expressions Initiative’s DVD, and the subsequent updates which have been published on the Fresh Expressions website – is known within Methodism and beyond as one of the first fresh expressions of church.¹³⁰ It has continued to evolve and change in terms of the way its bread-making focus has adapted, and included other community groups. It has worshipped and re-evaluated its Methodist worship alongside the involvement of both Storm and Quest (two LGBT communities) who use the premises at *Somewhere Else*, and are part

¹²⁸ Appendix 1.1.

¹²⁹ Glasson, *Mixed-Up Blessing* and *I am Somewhere Else*.

¹³⁰ Ivison, *Expressions: the dvd – 1: stories of church for changing culture*.

of the wider worshipping community and have representatives who attend *Somewhere Else* church council meetings.

4.3 Research methods for *Somewhere Else*

As I began participant observation it became clear that the context influenced in quite specific ways which research methods which would be sensitive and appropriate to this group and which due to practical or ethical considerations were not suitable. For *Somewhere Else*, as for the other case studies, the additional research methods were discussed and negotiated beforehand.

4.3.1 Negotiated methods

The use of a time line, questionnaire and interviews were discussed with the church council as well as with the facilitators and the Revd Ian Hu. I was sensitive to the need for the research to reflect the group accurately, yet not disturb the atmosphere and the rhythm of the bread-making sessions. To this end, it was decided to be fairly flexible, especially when it came to the period of interviewing, and to assess when I arrived whether it would be appropriate to conduct the interviews that day. This would require me to determine and if necessary consult as to whether the group could function well if one of the bread-makers or facilitators left the kitchen for a while to be interviewed.

4.3.2 Participant observation

Following my initial vocational placement in 2007/8, I had continued to attend *Somewhere Else*. This meant that I had built up relationships within the community by attending regular bread-making and other events (art and creative writing workshops and a baptism) for a year prior to beginning the research and for two years of involvement prior to formal observation. This time 'living in' afforded me conversations with the Revd Barbara Glasson prior to the appointment of her successor (3.2.1). In June 2010 I obtained permission from the church council in accordance with the requirements of ethical review to become an

official participant observer from Autumn 2010 to Spring 2011. During this period I observed and participated in one bread-making session a week, and conducted interviews with nine participants, both regular bread-makers and visitors.

In this case study, I had to be very aware of self-reflexivity within the role of the participant observer. This case study was the one out of the four I had been part of before the period of participant observation. I agreed with the church council that while I was there as a participant observer I would not facilitate baking. This allowed me to focus on the research, maintain more distance and observe both facilitators and bread-makers. In some ways participation in this case study was literally hands-on and practical, and I had to be able to multi-task. I was required to make my own bread, help someone next to me, listen to the stories and problems of others, and answer questions people may have about the bread-making process or the story of the church. I made notes immediately following the session in a research diary. At the end of the bread-making session, there is a closed briefing session for all facilitators where statistical information for the day along with any issues or difficulties raised are recorded. The church council granted me access to the notes of the meetings, which allowed me to see what issues had been raised from one week to the next.

4.3.3 Time line

With *Somewhere Else* I used the tool of a time line as a method to enable the group to reflect on its history and identity.¹³¹ Whilst waiting for permission to begin interviewing individuals, but with the authorisation of the church council, it was agreed that I should spend the summer of 2009 compiling and encouraging those in the community, past and present, to engage with their memories and to record events. Using a time line was a research method which enabled

¹³¹ Helen Cameron *et al.*, *Studying Local Churches*, p. 34.

me to form a historical picture which drew on the reflections of all the community, alongside Glasson's published accounts.¹³²

The church council were also keen for me to create the time line as a piece of bridging work before Glasson moved to her new post at Touchstone in Bradford and Hu took up his appointment. Shier-Jones notes that when a pioneer minister chooses to leave or move onto a new post, especially if they have been instrumental in the formation of a Church, this can bring with it a sense of anxiety for members.¹³³ The identity of the *Somewhere Else* had been shaped by Glasson, both through her vision for the group and her own style of leadership.

I created the time line made of A3 sheets of paper, and stuck it up on the walls of the prayer room. Each sheet of paper had the year written on the top and I followed the ten years of *Somewhere Else*, including the time before Barbara Glasson had a church building and bread-making took place in one of her friend's kitchen. As more information was gathered, the timeline covered all the walls of the prayer room and then spread along the corridor towards the kitchen. I went through all the minutes of the church council identifying key moments and events in the life of the community and recorded these on the time line (see 3.6.5). This included the names of people who had been instrumental in the group. Frequently people spend a short time at *Somewhere Else* before moving on. This applies to the JVC (Jesuit Volunteer Council) students who stay for nine months, but also to the homeless who have very transient lifestyles, or who die prematurely. As bread-making takes place during the week, it also attracts those who are out of work, who may attend for a while before getting places on college courses or in employment. Some bread-makers with learning difficulties who attend

¹³² The use of a time line was also used by pioneer Ric Stott in the installation 'Soul of Sheffield' allowing participants to reflect on the importance of the city in their lives. Ric Stott, 'I Ask for Wonder: Soul of Sheffield', images available at: <https://iaskforwonder.com/2012/07/20/soul-of-Sheffield-images/> (accessed 24.05.16).

¹³³ Recognising the need to be able to 'Enable and Exit' as a pioneer is addressed in Angela Shier-Jones, *Pioneer Ministry and Fresh Expressions of Church* (London: SPCK, 2010), pp. 64-67.

may have a new carer assigned to them, or a different care package which does not allow them to attend any more. Just as these people move on, so others take their place. There are supporters who attend other churches and come when they can, and there are often students on placement from theological colleges, or those who are discerning their vocation within the church. Those researching new ways of being church or visiting from other local churches in order to experience what it might mean to think of being church in a different way are also often present. Recording of these names on the time line meant that people could remember events because of the people who had been there at the time, and thus add them to the time line, giving a fuller picture of both the people and the activity of *Somewhere Else*. The time line remained until October of 2009 and Ian Hu had taken up his post.

4.3.4 Questionnaire

I considered the use of a questionnaire in order to establish quantitative data (age and gender of participants, how long participants had been attending *Somewhere Else* and whether they had had any previous church connection). I also considered whether qualitative data especially concerning research goal 1 as to why they were choosing to connect with this form of “doing church differently” could be obtained through a questionnaire. From my own insider experience I decided not to conduct a questionnaire at *Somewhere Else* for the following reasons:

4.3.4.1 Practical considerations

The nature of bread-making means that the table is set with ingredients, bowls and measuring jugs for most of the morning. Once the table is cleared then the table is set for lunch. It would be difficult to ask someone to write or complete a questionnaire during the bread-making session itself and because often people have been there for three hours by the end of the session, once those present have collected their bread they are ready to leave.

4.3.2.2 Transient congregation

It would be difficult to draw conclusions from a questionnaire on any one bread-making day as it is very difficult to predict numbers or who will turn up on any day. A transient population would lead to possible unrepresentative conclusions from which it would be difficult to draw robust conclusions. It is the case that in most of the bread-making sessions there is someone who is there for the first time. The group make an effort to make sure that the atmosphere is one which is welcoming, relaxed and unthreatening. I felt that paperwork asking people about the reasons they chose to come might in this context be seen as rather intrusive and out of step with the ethos of the group.

4.3.2.3 Literacy

Within worship at *Somewhere Else*, Bible stories are always read aloud, there is no printed material on a bread-making session because in every meeting illiteracy is a reality – this may be due to a learning disability or a lack of schooling. Assumptions about the ability of individuals to be able to read and write have led to some members of *Somewhere Else* feeling excluded from “typical” congregations in the past. Avoiding a questionnaire meant participants could share their opinions verbally without embarrassment about their own lack of reading or writing skills.

4.3.2.4 Ethical issues around possible exclusion

In compliance with ethical review I agreed that vulnerable adults and those under 18 would not be included in the research. I did not wish to create an environment where the open and welcome atmosphere of inclusion at *Somewhere Else* was affected by selecting those who would fill in a questionnaire. This also gives weight to the suggestion that the results of a potential questionnaire would not reflect the statistical information able to be gathered by *Somewhere Else* where vulnerable adults are not counted as a separate statistic.

4.3.5 Documentation

Information that would have been gathered by a questionnaire in a more traditional study was gathered by documentation held by the church. *Somewhere Else* is a community which has been meticulously committed to recording attendance and statistics during bread-making sessions. Its facilitator de-briefings have recorded the stories of the community, both in terms of its joys and its challenges. These records along with detailed minutes of church council meetings, allowed me to access evidence regarding the nature of this changing community. When the flour is weighed out, the name of the bread-maker and how many loaves they are making is recorded on a printed form by one of the facilitators or the minister. There is also the opportunity for the minister to record here whether the person attending is a visitor, here for the first time, whether there are children present, or young people under 25, and whether there are those with learning disabilities attending with a carer. The recording of this information is carried out in an unobtrusive and non-threatening way, e.g. surnames or other details do not have to be given or recorded. These statistics are kept for Methodist purposes, but also as a way of determining how much flour is used, and for accountability purposes for funding bodies.

4.3.6 Semi-structured interviews

The main method of collecting evidence was adopted through semi-structured interviews with bread-makers who were willing to be involved in the research. On the days the interviews took place, I personally asked those bread-makers present (who fulfilled the ethical review requirements) if they would be prepared to take part in a conversation about *Somewhere Else* either individually or as a small group. I asked about what it meant to them to be part of *Somewhere Else*, and was able to establish their own experience of church prior to attending *Somewhere Else*. The practicalities of interviewing turned out to be more difficult than I had anticipated or planned. There were several weeks when I turned up hoping to conduct interviews during the course of the bread-making session which did not happen. During my observation and research time, the community were filmed by an

independent film maker from London for about six consecutive weeks. Her work also involved obtaining written consent from the bread-makers, so I decided to wait until the filming was finished. On the two dates I interviewed, the group of bread-makers was smaller – around fifteen. This meant that the room was not as busy and there were opportunities when the bread was in the ovens where one facilitator could leave the room for five minutes to be interviewed without disruption to the bread-making process. Glasson refers to lulls in the bread-making process in her writing, and I used these natural pauses to conduct the interviews.¹³⁴ I was keen to interview during the session if possible as I thought this would allow those being interviewed to refer to that specific morning session situating their reflections and opinions within a particular context. My interview with the minister Ian Hu was scheduled at a later date, after a bread-making session was completed to minimise interruptions.

As is evident in the transcripts there are differences in the questions asked. In some interviews, I allowed the direction of the interview to be shaped or led by the interviewee. I had already spent some time with each of the interviewees (with the exception of Wendy Arthur and Dorothy Harrison in Appendix 4.6 who were visitors), and so had some prior knowledge of their experience and background. As such, I drew upon shared experiences to draw them into conversation in the hope they would be able to speak confidently about a focussed area of life at *Somewhere Else*.¹³⁵ I was aware of ensuring that the interview situation was encouraging and supportive. Interviewing in pairs for three of the interviews was part of this approach – a conversational approach rather than a one-to-one interview enabled a more natural conversation. (3.2.3). Some of the interviewees had been attending over a number of years, and I was able to ask the question about the changes they had observed. One interview (Appendix 4.4) was conducted on the street

¹³⁴ Glasson, *Mixed-Up Blessing*, p. 41.

¹³⁵ This was areas of leadership for Interview with David Rogers (Appendix 4.3), or facilitation with Matty Smith (Appendix 4.1) or confidence issues with Jen Pearson (Appendix 4.4).

outside while the interviewees had a cigarette break. This shows the flexibility and negotiation that I as a researcher needed to undertake in order to hear a range of voices.

Part B: *Somewhere Else*: Thick Description

4.4 Thick description of *Somewhere Else*

'This is not a drop in centre, this is a church!' is a phrase I have often heard used at *Somewhere Else*. In practice, church at *Somewhere Else* comprises the bread-making sessions which take place every Tuesday and Thursday and on occasional Friday evenings. At the time of the research there was also a time of reflection on occasional Sundays, but this tended to be a time for the core facilitators and minister, rather than the regular bread-makers. The entrance on Bold Street is a door next to an independent bookshop, alongside a number of restaurants and small shops. In order to have access, there is a door entry system where anyone arriving has to choose between four identical buttons, one with a small sticker labelled *Somewhere Else*, *Methodist Church* beside the buzzer. Once someone inside has seen you through the camera and spoken to you, verifying that you are here to make bread, access is permitted into the building. The rooms rented at *Somewhere Else* on the second floor which can be accessed by a lift, include the main kitchen, the prayer room (which is often referred to as the cloud room as it has clouds painted on the wall), the office and the middle room (which is mainly used for storage). There is a narrow corridor linking the kitchen and the prayer room.

Those who arrive at *Somewhere Else* have usually heard through word of mouth, or read Glasson's writings, or have come along with someone who has been before. Although the atmosphere is relaxed, there are rules, if you want to make bread you have to arrive between 10.30 and 11a.m. If you arrive earlier then you will be asked to come back at 10.30 to allow the facilitators to set up for the day, if you arrive after 11a.m, then you will be made welcome, you can stay and watch,

you can take part in prayers, but bread-making will have to wait for another day. A code of conduct is visible on the wall of the kitchen. The code of conduct signals negotiated ways of working which are reviewed frequently by the facilitators and the wider community at church council or on away days. Between 10.30 and 11a.m. hands are washed, and aprons given out, flour is weighed and then the measuring, stirring and mixing begins. In the kitchen area, several tables are pushed together to make one large area where people can talk and listen, share skills and help those next to them as the yeast, honey and warm water begin to ferment, and the oil and flour and salt are rubbed together.

On any one day, the diverse group of people who gather to bake bread make up the church on that day. There is an expectation that whoever comes to join bread-making on a Tuesday or Thursday comes to engage with the community, by baking bread themselves or alongside someone else. Carers and their clients are encouraged to work together, facilitators will help newcomers but never take over someone else's baking. As a result everyone is part of the creative baking process, experiencing the sensation of physically handling the ingredients and kneading the dough. This part of the day in which everyone is engaged on the same task brings a levelling of all who gather that day. Regardless of age, gender, learning ability or prior knowledge or experience of church, the common task of making bread facilitates the conversation and allows everyone a high degree of involvement. The process is active and interactive. Even someone who is very quiet or has no speech will need to communicate in order to collect ingredients or to have their bread baked. The conversation is usually engaging and busy, and people share how welcome they feel. The bread-making itself takes around one and a half to two hours, and once the bread has proven twice, knocked back and shaped into tins or rolls and is baking in the oven, there is time to reflect, study and pray together.

Bible reflection and prayers last for around thirty minutes between bread-making and lunch, and are led by the minister or a facilitator. This is a natural break in the bread-making process and, when numbers allow, those who wish to attend prayers use a smaller, quieter room. The person leading prayers will extend a welcome and introduce the time of reflection, reminding everyone that this is a time of sharing and listening. These ground rules and ways of working are repeated each bread-making session as newcomers or visitors are often present. There is then a period of silence before the passage of scripture is heard. Experiences and reflections upon the passage are then invited before candles are lit representing prayers of thanksgiving or intercession. The Lord's Prayer is said at the end of the prayer time and concludes this act of worship. Then everyone moves back into the kitchen, where the aroma of the baked and cooling bread fills the room as grace is said and a simple lunch of soup, bread, cheese and fruit is shared. Those gathered at lunch may be a larger number than have been present during the morning. The *Big Issue* sellers leave their pitch outside for a while, those working in the city appear in their lunch hour, and the diverse group of people of all ages, nationalities, and many church backgrounds and none eat around the table together. Once washing up and clearing away is complete, the baked and cooling bread is brought out. Everyone has made two loaves, one to take home and one to give away. This physical act of giving away bread is fundamental to the ethos and way in which the work and life of *Somewhere Else* is shared further.

Part C: *Somewhere Else*: evidence and data

4.5 Evidence from research methods in respect of research goals 1-3

In this section evidence from documentation, participant observation and semi-structured interviews will be used to answer the research goals allowing the voices of those within *Somewhere Else* to draw on their experience to begin to define this group as an ecclesial reality.

4.5.1 Composition of *Somewhere Else*

4.5.1.1 Membership and attendance at *Somewhere Else*

According to the statistics for mission, the number of members at *Somewhere Else* in 2010 was 29 and the average weekly attendance was 67 and in 2011 membership was 30 and average weekly attendance 57.¹³⁶ The statistics for attendance broken into categories by the church council at *Somewhere Else* are shown below:

Table 4.1

Statistics for attendance at *Somewhere Else* Sept. 2010 – Aug 2011

Total Attendance	Under 16s	16-25	1st Time at SE	Male	Female
1897	67	345	346	1169	728

Table 4.2

Statistics for attendance at *Somewhere Else* Sept. 2011 – Aug 2012

Total Attendance	Under 16s	16-25	1 st Time at SE	Facilitators	Male	Female	Number at Prayers
3186	66	472	479	651	1738	1448	791

4.5.1.2 Age profile at *Somewhere Else*

The proportion of attendance of under 25s is higher at *Somewhere Else* than in other Methodist churches in the district. During 2010-2011, out of 1,897 people attending bread-making over the year, 345 were in the 18-25 age category and 67 were under 16s. We can assume that most of the 67 under 16s attended during the school holidays. 18% of those making bread were in 18-25 age group and those were people

¹³⁶ The Methodist Church in Britain, *Statistics for Mission*, available at: <http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/stats-18-liverpool-5year-1011-0312.pdf> (accessed 22.05.16).

attending weekday sessions. From informal conversations, it is apparent that the young people attending *Somewhere Else* in this age group are divided into two groups, those who are there in a work capacity as carers (which I consider separately below) and those who are either attending college on a part-time basis or are currently unemployed. The status of those seeking work has an impact on their attendance at *Somewhere Else*. They may have to attend compulsory meetings at the job centre, attend courses or interviews. Sometimes they may come along to *Somewhere Else* and then have to leave early or arrive late, so there can be a transient nature to their attendance even within one session.

4.5.1.3 Gender profile at *Somewhere Else*

From 2010 to 2012 there were more men attending bread-making than women. The statistics for mission for the Methodist Church do not break down attendance by gender but it is my perception from preaching across the district that there are usually more women than men in “typical” congregations. There has been a shift in attendance according to gender as noted by David Rogers, the first administrator at *Somewhere Else*:

The other thing that struck me about all that time was the number of men who came. We started off being all women and I was the sole man when I first started (in 2002) but a couple of years into my work here Barbara was often the only woman. So it was quite an unusual thing for a church for it to be all the men coming and the women not appearing.¹³⁷

4.5.1.4 Transient nature of those who attend *Somewhere Else*

During 2009-10 a number of bread-makers at *Somewhere Else* were either living on the streets or in temporary hostel accommodation such as the YMCA. Although some have kept contact with *Somewhere Else*, the nature of their life means that being at a certain place at a certain time is difficult. Sequencing events chronologically was challenging for

¹³⁷ Appendix 4.3.

this group – and this became particularly apparent in regard to the time line. Although some students attended *Somewhere Else*, this was not a significant group in terms of numbers. Some had made contact during Friday evening baking sessions which take place once a month and are primarily for groups who would like to experience *Somewhere Else* but are unable to make a mid-week session during the day.

4.5.1.5. Carers

In Glasson's description of a typical bread-making morning at *Somewhere Else*, she tells of Morris coming with his care assistant Bob.¹³⁸ This is not an unusual situation for bread-making at *Somewhere Else*, but the way it has developed raises complex issues for attendance. *Somewhere Else* is a church which has a significant number of bread-makers with learning disabilities or mental health issues, some of whom attend with carers (either family members or from an agency), and some who come as part of a group. Ethical review eliminated interviewing those with learning disabilities as part of the research and as the agency staff supporting them are in paid employment when they are in attendance at *Somewhere Else* I chose not to interview them separately as their client may well have felt excluded or tried to join in the conversation. I note this because while in accordance with ethical review, it does mean that the evidence collected in interviews can be seen to filter out this significant section of the *Somewhere Else* community.

Agreeing to bring a client to bread-making means that the carer needs to be prepared to engage in the bread-making process, not just to work with their client, but to work with a diverse group and be ready to cope with the demands that a diverse group can have upon their client. Some carers have connections with local churches and accompany their clients to prayers as well. For some carers, this is their first contact with a church and they comment on how welcome they and their clients are made to feel. Often those with learning disabilities

¹³⁸ Glasson, *Mixed-Up Blessing*, p. 38.

make bread for their families and communities. There has been a link with the L'Arche community in the past. Claire Dalpra's study of fresh expressions for adults with learning disabilities, while concentrating on two congregations which were specifically for those with learning disabilities highlighted the multi-sensory nature of worship, symbols and the constant need for engagement and activity within church.¹³⁹ These elements which are present in bread-making allow carers and those with disabilities alike to share in an activity together and are key aspects of the work at *Somewhere Else* which is not reflected in the interviews for this research.

4.5.1.6 Ecclesiastical tourism

As can be seen from the statistics (outlined in Table 4.1 and 4.2), during 2010-12 there were a significant number of people who visited *Somewhere Else* for the first time. These can be individuals invited by someone who has been before, groups from local churches, ministerial students, and others visitors some from abroad who have heard about the work of the bread church and want to experience it for themselves. For some it is out of curiosity, and some groups are looking for inspiration in terms of their own church's future direction. Some are visiting as part of an organised course such as *Mission-Shaped Ministry* where visiting and reflecting on existing fresh expressions is recommended.

4.5.2 Research goal 1: To understand why people are connecting with *Somewhere Else*

The following reasons were given by participants as to why they had originally come to *Somewhere Else*, and why they continued to attend and be part of the life of this ecclesial reality.

4.5.2.1. A place of acceptance

¹³⁹ Claire Dalpra, *Hidden Treasures: Churches for Adults with a Learning Disability*, Encounters on the Edge 44 (Sheffield: Church Army, 2009).

The theme of being accepted was one which, with varying emphases, was echoed in each of the interviews:

We explain it by being who we are and how we are with them. The big thing that everyone found, and that meant so much to them was total acceptance as they were.¹⁴⁰

It made me realise that everyone accepts me the way that I am, respects me that way that I am and I don't need to pretend to be someone else.¹⁴¹

That is one thing I can say about this church: no-one is judgemental, everyone is accepted, it is more like a family than a community. I didn't speak to anyone for the first two years and now they can't shut me up!¹⁴²

I would say I am greatly accepted here, just like everyone else. My personality and me as a person has grown from being part of this community.¹⁴³

None of the interviewees above expressed within their interviews that they had not felt accepted in any other church environment in the past, although this was sometimes referred to during prayer time by members of the community. Regular bread-makers ensure that everyone is given attention, especially those who are new or seem particularly vulnerable or anxious on any one day. As the bread-making session takes place over several hours there is the opportunity to make time to listen to the experience and stories of others. One of the interviews which took place was with Connie Majole, a woman who had come to a facilitator course through faiths4change and Asylumlink Merseyside.¹⁴⁴ Connie expressed that in her interview: 'There is time to talk. There is time for everything.'¹⁴⁵ She then went on to share that

¹⁴⁰ Appendix 4.3.

¹⁴¹ Appendix 4.5.

¹⁴² Appendix 4.4.

¹⁴³ Appendix 4.1.

¹⁴⁴ See Faiths4Change available at: <http://www.faiths4change.org.uk/> (accessed 22.05.16) and Asylum Link Merseyside available at: <http://www.asylumlink.org.uk/> (accessed 22.05.16).

¹⁴⁵ Appendix 4.2.

throughout her asylum application process she constantly had to be defined by her asylum status. Taking part the bread-making course at faiths4change and becoming a facilitator at *Somewhere Else* allowed her to meet new people, become relaxed and experience some 'me time'.¹⁴⁶

David Rogers who had come to work at *Somewhere Else* talks about an openness which he saw as a two-way process between those who attended and newcomers: 'It is important that we are open and open to being changed by the people who come., Not just being open to what we give them but being open to receive...'¹⁴⁷

4.5.2.1 A sense of purpose

Connie also reflected on how being able to interact and take part had given her a sense of purpose. Connie belonged to the Roman Catholic Church but had found in *Somewhere Else* a place where her skills could be used in helping others. The facilitator role allowed her lay leadership skills to flourish: 'I was isolated at home but I love working with people.'¹⁴⁸

Dorothy also considered how she would share the bread she was baking: 'I am always thinking, "Who is going to get this loaf of bread?"...I gave to someone on the train going home once because they had smelt it...'

4.5.3 Research Goal 2: To discern what are the chief characteristics of *Somewhere Else*

I have grouped responses from the semi-structured interviews and my participant observation to evidence four characteristics at *Somewhere Else*: hospitality, participation, a place to learn and grow, and flexibility.

¹⁴⁶ Appendix 4.2.

¹⁴⁷ Appendix 4.3.

¹⁴⁸ Appendix 4.2.

4.5.3.1. Hospitality

‘People are welcomed, there are no expectations placed on anyone, they can ‘be’, no matter where their spirituality is, everyone is accepted.’¹⁴⁹ Hospitality and the offering of physical space, the opportunity to bake, and the participation in prayer and bible study time is instrumental to life at *Somewhere Else*. A phrase which is one of the hallmarks of the community at *Somewhere Else* is that of ‘outrageous hospitality’. The language of outrageous does suggest that it is over the top, a ‘more than welcome’, a feast rather than a making do. This emphasis on hospitality is evident and repeated from the prayers among the facilitators and ministers ahead of the bread-making but also throughout the morning, to the invitation into prayers and the sharing of a common meal.

Somewhere Else is a place where there is a very diverse group of people in terms of their ecclesial background and understanding of church. Participants at *Somewhere Else* recognised that hospitality was offered in different ways; they appreciated a ‘safe space’, a shared meal, the ability to share in prayer and the response to a conscious effort on the part of the leaders to make sure that newcomers and visitors are as integral to the day’s gathering as anyone else. In one interview the welcome offered at *Somewhere Else* was emphasised as particularly crucial as there were a number of those attending bread-making who were seeking asylum whose applications were being processed, and their experience of being accepted was not their common experience:

There was a time when I thought when I am sorted I just have to go where nobody knows me and be me. As much as I ran from home, this asylum label still stigmatises you. Everywhere you are you have to say who you are, what your asylum status is.¹⁵⁰

A sense of welcome as a newcomer had led several people to the point of taking on responsibility as facilitators and playing an active part in the life of *Somewhere Else*.

¹⁴⁹ Appendix 4.7.

¹⁵⁰ Appendix 4.2.

4.5.3.2 Participation

Those in leadership at *Somewhere Else* are focussed on ensuring that all in the group are able to participate in every area of its life: in prayer time, in the shaping of the community and in decision making for the future. This is enabled through the bread-making sessions themselves, monthly Sunday worship, other services around the District, or in vision days. The leaders are also alert to those who attend who might become facilitators with appropriate training.

Participation in the case of *Somewhere Else* mainly takes the form of a shared practical focussed experience. This emphasis which is fostered and encouraged by the leaders has resonances with some 'niche' fresh expressions.¹⁵¹ In the case of *Somewhere Else* the activity of bread-making is not simply an end in itself, but a vehicle which allows Christian community to form. It is both an outward expression of care in that bread is baked and given away, meeting a practical need both for those who eat the bread they baked themselves and also as they give their second loaf to a friend or stranger. Through this shared practical experience, conversation is made possible, and engagement with scripture and prayer is opened up and developed. *Somewhere Else* allows people to explore faith with others who have a church background and a mature faith, as they bake alongside each other. Participation at *Somewhere Else* can also take the form of shared working together, for example those who are less able or agile might share the physical task of kneading.

The differentiation of new and more experienced in the church is less marked when both are engaged on a common task. Equal status amongst those taking part is fostered, especially as bread-making takes place around a table and no-one is 'standing at the front' or has a privileged

¹⁵¹ Such as Tubestation at Polzeath available at: <http://www.tubestation.org/church/> (accessed 22.05.16). This fresh expression of church which reaches out to the surfing community at Polzeath in Cornwall is used as an illustration in David Goodhew, Andrew Roberts and Michael Volland, *Fresh!: An Introduction to Fresh Expressions of Church and Pioneer Ministry* (London: SCM, 2012), p. 113.

voice. The minister and facilitators bake bread alongside the bread-makers, often squeezing in to wherever space is left around the table, thus placing themselves physically where they can listen to anyone in the group. The timing and rhythm of the baking, which cannot be rushed, form the framework around which participation takes place. The baking and the bread are the focus allowing conversation, questions, and life experience to be shared in depth alongside the physical task.

4.5.3.3 A place to learn and grow

Most participants come to bake bread, meaning there is the option to work alongside someone else, or to help with washing up or setting the table for lunch. A level of engagement in the baking process is graduated allowing increased involvement over a period of time as those who attend feel more confident. The move into another physical space for prayers and bible study is by invitation from the kitchen so there are a number of transition and threshold points for those who might want to engage or participate in bread making and then take a step into exploring faith. It is possible that this can happen over a short space of time, and even within a participant's first session. As the bread-making process lasts for two hours before the time of prayer, there has already been a considerable length of time where everyone has had the opportunity to share something of their lives and experiences together. When it is time to pray and read the Bible, the scripture can be read in the light of the morning's shared experience and conversation. This echoes the pattern of the base ecclesial communities which are mentioned as one of the examples of fresh expressions in *Mission-Shaped Church*.¹⁵² Although the baking was important, in the interviews one person referred to the ability to talk and participate in relation to a previous experience of Church:

It moves away from the way I have worshipped traditionally in churches largely where you sit in rows and face the front. You come in [to *Somewhere Else*] and you probably don't know anybody but you come out knowing nearly everybody because you have a chance to speak ... when there is a reading from the Bible,

¹⁵² See also John Summers, *A Fresh Start* (Kew: New Ways of Being Church, 2003).

and we are asked to say what it means to us ... it is interesting to see the different ways people see the same reading.¹⁵³

4.5.3.4 Flexibility

Although *Somewhere Else* was the longest established case study examined, its nature means that it has to remain flexible; and to some extent its financial costs and vulnerability have meant that flexibility has remained high on the agenda for the ministers and for the church council. The rented premises allow a degree of flexibility and whether the current venue is the most suitable continues to be reflected upon. The minister Ian Hu expressed these concerns in his interview:

There are serious concerns right now about the adequacy of the space here. So things are constantly evolving here and changing and we need to constantly be able to address that. There is never an opportunity to be complacent here because the ministry and community here is very fluid.¹⁵⁴

This awareness is heightened by the fact that this is not a self-sustaining and self-financing church. The church is supported financially through the District, through connexional grants and through gifts from other individuals. Grant applications for the work are often in progress, and at the time of the research the church employed an administrator, who worked along the minister in making such applications. Flexibility at *Somewhere Else* is considered at two levels by the leaders – that of day-to-day flexibility in the very fluid and transient nature of those who attend (4.5.1.4) and the willingness to take risks in longer term planning and shaping of the group and other possible partnerships.¹⁵⁵ The leadership are aware that the former shapes the latter, and as such those that are heavily involved with bread-making sessions, including volunteers and placement students, who may not necessarily be members of the church, attend church council meetings. A turnover in leadership and facilitators

¹⁵³ Appendix 4.6.

¹⁵⁴ Appendix 4.7.

¹⁵⁵ During the field work there was input from a URC minister stationed to Liverpool City Centre. An away day held on 21.04.11 at the Quaker Meeting House invited representatives of other city centre churches to be part of the conversations.

can happen much more quickly than in “typical” Methodist congregations. This is partly due to the transient nature of those who attend, but changes in facilitators mean that the minister and church council always need to encourage those who have leadership potential in order that bread-making sessions can take place. Leadership at *Somewhere Else* requires a great deal of flexibility on behalf of the minister or co-ordinator who require the skill and ability to challenge inappropriate language or behaviour that may be damaging to others. The nature of those who attend means that within a flexible approach there are firm guidelines which need to be adhered to and applied consistently to keep a safer space, and with a rapidly changing leadership these guidelines have to be emphasised and reinforced regularly.¹⁵⁶

One of the key things about flexibility at *Somewhere Else* is the ability to be able to cope with a new experience. For some this is the physical act of making bread, coming to take part in a new activity and being willing to have a go: ‘it was a new skill for me to learn.’¹⁵⁷ For some it is the experience of mixing with new people, some very different to themselves. A comment from someone who had been at *Somewhere Else* over a period of years reflects on the changes that had taken place between ministers, and shows that change had not happened as quickly as might have been expected:

Since Barbara Glasson moved, maybe two, two and a half years ago the church has changed. Different people coming in, different facilitators, ... we were in limbo, for about 18 months when we knew Barbara was leaving, we didn’t take the bull by the horns.¹⁵⁸

This comment shows how even such an example of “doing church differently” can have the sense of waiting ‘til the new minister comes’ before new enterprise is undertaken. This may have been due to the uncertainty of whether the funding to replace Glasson was available and

¹⁵⁶ During my period of observation those who arrived intoxicated or using violent or abusive language or behaviour were asked to leave and return another day.

¹⁵⁷ Appendix 4.1.

¹⁵⁸ Appendix 4.4.

thus this vulnerability concerning the future of *Somewhere Else* may have been a reason for this state of 'limbo'.

4.5.4 Research Goal 3: To investigate how *Somewhere Else* understand themselves as an ecclesial reality

This section is concerned with the evidence first from some of Glasson's reflections documenting the early years at *Somewhere Else* and secondly from the evidence gathered in the interviews with participants.

4.5.4.1 Leaders' perspectives

Glasson comments:

Of course the danger is to become so wrapped up in the 'wonderful day-to-day incarnate reality of the community' that the understanding of church is so radically altered. It can seem as if "bread church" is normal and other churches are bizarre.¹⁵⁹

From Barbara Glasson's first two books, *Mixed-up Blessing: A New Encounter with Being Church* and *I am Somewhere Else: Gospel Reflections from an Emerging Church*, I have extracted her understanding of the emerging ecclesial reality of *Somewhere Else*.¹⁶⁰ Although she acknowledges that *Somewhere Else* is in a process of becoming a church, 'making Christian communities is not something that can be rushed'. She does not claim it is a church without any problems and she still questions what is required of her in this role as a minister in the Methodist Church.¹⁶¹ She does not swallow the myth that everything that is new is necessarily good, always reminding herself to measure what is happening at *Somewhere Else* and testing what is authentic and how it is accountable. This is not a strategically planned and executed church plant but rather *Somewhere Else*

¹⁵⁹ Glasson, *Mixed-Up Blessing*, p. 100.

¹⁶⁰ Glasson, *Mixed-Up Blessing* and *I am Somewhere Else*.

¹⁶¹ Glasson, *Mixed-Up Blessing*, p. 21.

emerged because Glasson paid attention to the context of the city. The experience of a year spent walking and reading the city meant for Glasson a re-reading of flows in terms of the day, the seasons and the church year. This observation time was a period in which she was waiting to see what would emerge:

For me those early months were about observing, watching and waiting. It was very challenging. It would have been much easier to plant a church, start a community project or even preach in the streets. Now five years on from those early wanderings, I see that they were the most important part of the whole process. I had no option but to let the city speak its own story. If I wanted to get to understand and love this place there was no other way than to listen to it speaking to me.¹⁶²

Understanding the context is one which is emphasised in fresh expressions, but this can just as easily be applied to a Messy Church that has the same format but may be 'tweaked' to adapt to a particular context.¹⁶³ Glasson's understanding of the context of the city and what that might mean for a Methodist church in that place was not a matter of having a model which could be adapted but that the context fundamentally shapes the church. To this extent not only the initial formation of the church is based on its context, but each time a group gathers to make bread and worship together, they form the church, which means that, as the group is rarely the same, the context and experience of those present is constantly changing: We never know who will arrive but the thinking is that 'whoever arrives is whoever God sends'.¹⁶⁴

In *Mixed-Up Blessing*, she asks key questions to define whether *Somewhere Else* is a church:

¹⁶² Glasson, *Mixed-up Blessing*, p. 14.

¹⁶³ Lucy Moore's *Messy Church: Fresh Ideas for Building a Christ-centred Community* (Abingdon: BRF, 2011) gives inherited churches a format in which to create flexible worship for families has been adopted and used in many denominations seeking to 'reinvent' church in an accessible way for families which want to come to worship together rather than a model which sees children and adults 'taught' separately through a sermon in main worship and Bible teaching in a Sunday School setting.

¹⁶⁴ Glasson, *Mixed-Up Blessing*, p. 38.

Is this a praying community that holds fast to the Scriptures and celebrates the sacraments? [...] Is this a community that looks to traditional wisdom for its accountability? [...] Is this a community in which we can see the fruits of the Spirit?¹⁶⁵

Being aware of these questions means that even in the early stages of this form of “doing church differently”, in Glasson’s mind there are certain benchmarks against which the community can be measured or challenged. This does not mean that it is static or that once it has met the criteria, it can stop reflecting upon its changing nature, but that being part of a connexional church, in a denominational structure, brings with it certain traditions which historically shape the nature of the church. For Glasson, these benchmarks are essential and I would suggest that this is partly because she brings with it her own responsibility as a presbyter within the Methodist Church. To have an ordained minister who has previously worked in circuit structures (as both Glasson and Hu have done), “doing church differently” brings a wider understanding of where *Somewhere Else* is placed both within Methodism and alongside other denominations within the city.

Being able to answer yes to her key questions is a way in which Glasson holds onto what she believes is essential to the ecclesiology of the Methodist Church and appears as an anchor in a community which is both small, new and transitional. Being part of a sacramental, praying community, which provides space for the scriptures to shape and teach the direction of the community, where experience and tradition are valued and heard mean that while the personalities that make up *Somewhere Else* may change weekly, means that this form of “doing church differently” has to be flexible and adaptable but is rooted in a wider understanding of what it means to be church.

In his interview Hu used the image of the watering hole for *Somewhere Else*, i.e. a resourcing church where people are free to come and go as and when they need to. Glasson also uses this image, recognising that

¹⁶⁵ Glasson, *Mixed-Up Blessing*, pp. 60-61.

there are times when people need to come to Somewhere Else without needing to commit regularly to being there. This can make a church like Somewhere Else very vulnerable as it depends on volunteer facilitators, and when they themselves lead chaotic and unpredictable lives, it can be difficult for them to take on responsibility. Chair of District Jim Booth holds prayer and worship at the heart of defining Somewhere Else as an ecclesial reality:

So, it is a mission community, if you want to use that jargon. It's a worshipping community again if you want to use that jargon because at its heart is prayer and it is actually genuinely a community which is seeking to understand the place of God in the lives of people. So, to me it has every mark of what church is and is profoundly Methodist.¹⁶⁶

4.5.4.2 Participants' perspectives

For those who have had prior experience of church life, the way of working at *Somewhere Else* is radically different and often presents a challenge to those who arrive. This is sometimes because the chaotic lifestyles, or diversity of opinions of the bread-makers can be at odds with the ordered and structured way in which much Methodist worship and church business is conducted. This can bring a freshness to a different experience of church. What is crucial is that reflection time is built into prayers so that in considering and sharing the experiences of that morning's bread-making in the light of the scripture readings there may be the shared space to air what has challenged those present.

The interview with Anthony Houghton took place on his second visit to *Somewhere Else*; he had no previous experience of being in a church and yet was able to reflect upon his ability to take part and be involved. The process of taking part in bread-making meant that when it came to prayers, he felt part of the community and had no hesitation in joining in:

¹⁶⁶ Appendix 1.1.

It is great to learn new skills. In terms of taking part in prayers that first time I felt I could take part. [...] I felt comfortable.¹⁶⁷

The ongoing challenge *Somewhere Else* as an emerging church is also to see how it incorporates the views and personalities of those who come, even and especially if theirs are the voices which are traditionally unheard in “typical” church.

4.6 Conclusion

Somewhere Else became the Methodist church in Liverpool city centre by virtue of the nature of the closure of the Central Hall and the stationing of Glasson to the city centre appointment. The community that began to gather around the bread-making became the church in that place. A planting model was not part of her strategy but her faithfulness to being open to the flows of the city and to listening to others alongside the reading of scripture and prayer informed the emergence of the community. The characteristics of the group and the reasons why people found their way to this form of “doing church differently” developed organically around the process of baking and eating together.

The evidence from the fieldwork showed that hospitality, welcome, the opportunity to participate and learn in a small, flexible environment encouraged and attracted people to *Somewhere Else* and these elements in turn were the significant characteristics of the group. Glasson was able to articulate the ecclesial reality of the group through identifying the benchmarks, but her appointment to the city centre was instrumental in *Somewhere Else* becoming Liverpool’s city centre Methodist church.

¹⁶⁷ Appendix 4.1.

CHAPTER FIVE
CASE STUDY 2: *KNIT AND NATTER*,
HOPE FARM METHODIST CHURCH, ELLESMERE PORT¹⁶⁸

Part A: *Knit and Natter* Background and Research Methods

5.1 Introduction to *Knit and Natter*

The history of this case study will briefly situate *Knit and Natter* and Hope Farm Methodist Church. I will then explain the research methods employed and offer a thick description of *Knit and Natter*. I will then present the data for research goals 1-3.

5.1.1 History of *Knit and Natter*

In the Autumn of 2008, Christine Crowder and three other women began a weekly knitting group at Hope Farm Methodist Church, situated in the middle of a housing estate on the outskirts of Ellesmere Port. The encounter which led to the forming of *Knit and Natter* happened at *Somewhere Else*. At a bread-making session, Christine Crowder, a member at Hope Farm Methodist Church met Anna Briggs, a member of the Iona Community. Anna had been involved in setting up three knitting groups in South Liverpool where principally women share in prayer shawl ministry, an individual and communal spiritual practice whereby shawls are prayerfully knitted and crocheted and then donated to those in need or in

¹⁶⁸ Reflections on the emerging ecclesial reality of this group were published as a journal article: Christine Dutton, 'Unpicking Knit and Natter: Researching an Emerging Christian Community', *Ecclesial Practices*, 1.1 (2014), 31-50.

periods of transition in their lives.¹⁶⁹ In an article on the Fresh Expressions website, Christine records the beginning of the *Knit and Natter* group:

My 89-year-old friend Dorothy was terminally ill with cancer when she received a knee blanket from a church craft group in New Zealand just before she died. I thought of that precious blanket a few weeks later when I visited Somewhere Else, the 'bread church' on Bold Street, Liverpool. I sat next to Anna Briggs from the Iona Community ... she had a Knit and Natter bag on her knee; we got talking about what she did and that sowed the seed. Our Minister then met her too and we went on to have a get-together for interested parties at church. I searched the internet for copyright-free patterns and a couple of months later, in September 2008, we opened our doors for the first time to *Knit and Natter* in the reception area next to the Church.¹⁷⁰

The group has been used as an illustration for the *Mission-Shaped Ministry* course in the Liverpool District and documented on the Fresh Expressions website. They knitted and crocheted prayer shawls for the bereaved and those in hospital, blankets for the local women's refuge, children's clothes for an orphanage in Swaziland and hats for shoebox appeals. They prayed for those who would receive the finished items and for concerns at home and abroad. By 2010 when I began my participant observation and interviews with the group, they had sixty members, all women, most of retirement age from the local area. Hope Farm Methodist Church, which opened in 1969, is the only church on the housing estate, which is situated on the edge of Ellesmere Port with 8,000 homes, a community centre, medical centre, three primary schools and a secondary school. The church is situated on one of the main roads and bus routes through the estate. From 2008 to 2011,

¹⁶⁹ Prayer shawls have begun to be part of some churches' outreach and of the activity of women's groups in the wake of Janet Bristow and Victoria Galo's work. Bristow and Galo, graduates of the Women's Leadership Institute at the Hartford Seminary, Hartford, Connecticut, developed in 1998, as a result of a course in applied Feminist Spirituality, a combined spiritual practice and prayerful ministry whereby shawls are knitted or crocheted to be given away to provide comfort in times of illness or grief, or to celebrate a new birth or a new stage in life. Prayers and blessings are said throughout the knitting of the shawl, and then, often, shawls are dedicated before being sent or passed on. Prayer Shawl Ministry available at: <http://www.shawlministry.com/> (accessed 21.07.15). Anna Bristow's record of her experience with such groups in Liverpool can be found in 'Shawl ministry', *Coracle*, 44.4 (Summer 2010), 7-8.

¹⁷⁰ Fresh Expressions, *Knit and Natter* available at: <http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/stories/knitandnatter> (accessed 22.05.16).

Hope Farm Methodist Church developed its community relations with the creation of a family and childrens' worker in 2008. Nicola Langton-Miller was appointed and subsequently developed 'The Hope Journey', a programme which brings each primary schools into the church for a series of workshops.¹⁷¹ This has had the benefit of making links between the pupils, teachers and accompanying parents and the church, and involved the congregation including members of *Knit and Natter*.

During the time of the research, Revd Christine Jones had pastoral responsibility for Hope Farm Methodist Church along with Trinity and Little Sutton Methodist Churches in Ellesmere Port. In September 2011 Deacon Judith Ireland was stationed in Ellesmere Port. In September 2010, the Methodist Churches in and around Ellesmere Port renamed themselves as 'The Methodist Church in Ellesmere Port', with a common website and joint initiatives. The crossover between congregations was evident at *Knit and Natter*, which is also attended by members of Trinity Methodist Church, Ellesmere Port.

5.2 Research methods for *Knit and Natter*

Working with an all women group (5.4.1.3) meant that using the interviewing approach outlined in 3.2.3, in which a conversational approach was adopted was particularly appropriate. I used this approach both in informal and formal interviews, and for the duration of the participant observation.

5.2.1 Negotiated methods

I decided to interview those who co-ordinated the group first. Together we negotiated the methods which we believed would produce the highest response.¹⁷² The co-ordinators felt that interviewing individuals in a separate room may be intimidating. As "nattering" is such an

¹⁷¹ Details available at: <http://thehopejourney.btck.co.uk/> (accessed 21.06.16).

¹⁷² David Hall and Irene Hall, *Practical Social Research: Project Work in the Community* (London: Macmillan, 1996).

integral part of the meetings I decided alongside the co-ordinators that working with the natural conversations within the group would be the best place to gather evidence. This was the beginning of the adoption of negotiated research methods. In working just with women there was a sense of trust and confidence in a common experience which led to an openness which is evident in the interviews.

5.2.2 Participant observation

I was a participant observer at *Knit and Natter* for three months from October to December 2010. This allowed me to attend the group on a weekly basis over the year, observing and noting changes and developments. Permission from Hope Farm Methodist Church Council to conduct the research was granted in June 2010. This was received prior to observation of the group so that both members of the group itself and the wider church were aware of and had approved the research taking place.

During the first three months of the fieldwork I spent time listening, knitting and note taking. During this time, I became an insider, I sat in a different place each week around the group and got to know regular knitters and newcomers. This informal time was crucial in listening and building relationships prior to interviewing. I decided that note-taking and recording offered the opportunity of being able to communicate while the women were engaged in their knitting or crochet. The graphs which illustrate any previous connection with church (in section 3.3) were compiled from information given by the women in informal conversation or during the formal interviews.

5.2.3 Questionnaire

Using a questionnaire with this group would have been cumbersome for similar reasons to those outlined at *Somewhere Else* (4.3.3). Increasing a sense of belonging and reducing isolation was an aim of

the groups' co-ordinators and I did not want to introduce a method which might work counter to this aim.

5.2.4 Interviews

I conducted most interviews from January to June 2011. The information sheet was read and consent forms were signed prior to interviews taking place. Some of the women had little confidence in their reading abilities and were suspicious of signing forms. This wariness and confusion of the ethical review process was somewhat of a surprise. I was also required to explain the length of time the research would take, as one member of the group kept asking me each week: 'Have you not finished your essay yet?'

Although the research goals shaped the questions that I would like to have asked, it was clear as soon as the women started talking that they often had opinions and thoughts about the group, and they had other information and insights they wanted to share. I was sensitive to the way in which Chris Crowder and the other co-ordinators were protective of the women who were attending the group.

I had a loose framework for semi-structured interviews, beginning with a conversational approach asking the women to talk about what they were knitting. In *Knit and Natter*, the conversations often begin by talking about wool, patterns and the donated goods that people have brought along, before members share stories of life and faith. It was this natural pattern of conversation I replicated in the interviews and this then naturally opened a conversation between the women, with them sharing experiences about the group and their own personal reasons for connecting with *Knit and Natter*. Once this had happened with the first interview, I decided consciously to adopt this approach for subsequent interviews. I often allowed the conversation to take its own path, gently bringing it back to the questions within the research goals when it seemed appropriate. I did not want any of the women to feel

that the conversation was a question and answer session but rather a safe space where their own stories and opinions were heard.

Using these conversational interviews did return some evidence about how individuals within the group regarded *Knit and Natter* as a church.¹⁷³ The research method of gentle, open questioning revealed a characteristic which displays similarities found in other research projects – that of having the space to talk. As the women grew in confidence during the course of the interview, they often appeared to forget that they were being recorded and often went off at a tangent. I rarely interrupted, and through the recording of everyday language and situations, nearly all the women in the final stage of the interview expressed the links and connections they perceived the group to have with Hope Farm Methodist Church. In longer interviews where the women spoke first of their knitting, then of their lives, their views on the group and church in general were on the whole positive and affirming.

In the *Knit and Natter* group the women were keen to be interviewed, echoing Finch's experience (3.2.3). Even though some may have raised initial concerns about whether they had anything to say, once the interview began they overcame their initial shyness or reticence and almost continued as if I was not there recording their conversations. On occasion they would take it upon themselves to involve others in the interview or ask them direct questions.¹⁷⁴ When this happened I did not intervene but let the conversation take its natural shape – it signalled to me that the women were very comfortable with the research and also were exercising some

¹⁷³ It is important to note that my research came after the group had been used as an example of a fresh expression of church on the Fresh Expressions website, so it would be fair to say that the group had already been exposed to these questions and had possibly read the article which Christine Crowder had shared with the group. There is also a designated notice board in the church hall which gives further information on the charities the group is knitting for and published articles concerning the group are also posted.

¹⁷⁴ In appendix 5.7, Janet Parker took on the role of interviewer as she asks Margaret Swan next to her "What about you Marg, what have you done?".

ownership of it. Before I started the formal interviewing, I tended to sit in a different seat each week listening to them sharing stories of their families, concerns for others who were ill or bereaved, as well as offering tips and suggestions for knitting, so I had already an insight into the women's lives. This enabled me, in the same way as some of the *Somewhere Else* interviews, to draw on my prior knowledge and experience when interviewing (4.3.6).

In some of the recorded interviews this sense of wanting to talk and share, naturally continued even within a more formal environment. This gave me confidence that the women were relaxed enough in the interview situation to share their opinions freely and honestly. Aware that part of the attraction of being part of this group was to find a listening ear, I needed to be aware of my own role when I began to listen to the women. By setting up a group of three or four women with a series of loosely formed questions as a framework, a space was created where attentive listening could take place, by myself as researcher, but also by others involved in the interview. I was aware that the longer I was with the group and the relationships with the women developed, the nature of what they shared in the interviews might change. During the time of the research in 2010/11, I was candidating for the Methodist ministry. I did not hide this from the group, nor did I publicise it. Some of the members who attended Sunday worship at Hope Farm Methodist Church knew me as a Local Preacher. I chose to complete the interviewing with group members before I began ministerial training so that the change in my role would not influence what was shared.

Part B: *Knit and Natter*: Thick Description

5.3 Thick description of *Knit and Natter*

Knit and Natter meets for an hour and a half on a Tuesday afternoon in the hall of Hope Farm Methodist Church, Ellesmere Port. Although the group officially starts at 1.30 pm, people in fact arrive from about 1 pm.

When I first visited the group in 2009 to conduct the initial survey (3.5) the group were meeting in the foyer area. The foyer opened out into the worship area and had the advantage of glass doors looking onto one of the main roads through the Hope Farm estate, meaning the group was open and visible. By Autumn 2010 the size of the group necessitated a move into the hall. There is an entry buzzer to get into the hall (this is for security and safeguarding reasons as the building is used by a pre-school group on the same day as *Knit and Natter*). This may reduce easy physical access but increases the sense of a need of a welcome as there is personal contact as someone comes to open the door. This forms a natural first point of conversation and invitation into the hall, and a natural place for initial pastoral conversations to occur between those who are regular members and those who may be attending for the first time.

The co-ordinators set up a table in the centre of the room to receive knitted and crocheted items, and upon it is placed the prayer shawl that was sent to Dorothy,¹⁷⁵ a cross and a box for donations to pay for posting garments and blankets to Nepal, Swaziland, and South Africa. The chairs are arranged in a square, usually large enough to accommodate all the knitters without the group breaking up into smaller cliques or friendship groups, although most people sit in similar places each week.¹⁷⁶ The whole of the gathering is of an informal nature with completed goods being placed on the table and individuals knitting, crocheting, sewing up knitted squares, winding wool, and chatting. For the last fifteen minutes there is a time of prayer and reflection. Chris Crowder frequently leads this time of devotion, and it always includes intercessions for world situations and for individuals known to group

¹⁷⁵ See 5.1.1.

¹⁷⁶ On a Tuesday morning a toddler group meets in the morning, followed by Tots' Praise (worship for pre-schoolers and their parents or carers) in the worship area. There are members of *Knit and Natter* who volunteer at the toddler group and Tots' Praise, so they often stay and have lunch together before setting up for Knit and Natter. The hall has already been set up for the toddler group in the morning so holding *Knit and Natter* in the hall involves very practical considerations such as the arrangement of chairs.

members. During the knitting session, a clip board is circulated to allow members to add prayer concerns should they choose. After the meeting the names of those mentioned in the prayers are given to the person responsible for worship on Sunday morning so that they can be included in the intercessions at the morning service. As the group has grown, notices which were previously given out verbally are now printed. The group is run and organised solely by volunteers from the church. Chris Crowder, Jenny Shafer, Marjorie Hall and Audrey David were the founding members and they were all active in the leadership and co-ordination during 2010/11, with Chris Crowder taking responsibility for the devotional time and also for the distribution of the knitted items. Membership of the Methodist Church in the UK has annual membership cards, and *Knit and Natter* has adopted a similar pattern. Each week there is a register which is signed so that those who attend can be recorded and the frequency they attend can be measured. The membership card for *Knit and Natter*, which also can be used to obtain discount at the wool stall in Ellesmere Port market, has the biblical quote:

When Lord did we ever see you naked and clothe you? I tell you that when you did this for one of the least important of my family you did it for me.¹⁷⁷

This serves as a reminder for members of the connection between faith and the practical, embodied action of knitting. Some members also have *Knit and Natter* knitting bags which identify them as part of the group as they walk to and from the church across the Hope Farm estate.

Part C: *Knit and Natter*: Evidence and Data

5.4 Evidence from participant observation in respect of the research goals 1-3

¹⁷⁷ Matthew 25:37-40.

In this section evidence from participant observation and semi-structured interviews will be used to answer the research goals allowing the voices of those within *Knit and Natter* to draw on their experience to begin to define this group as an ecclesial reality.

5.4.1 Composition of *Knit and Natter*

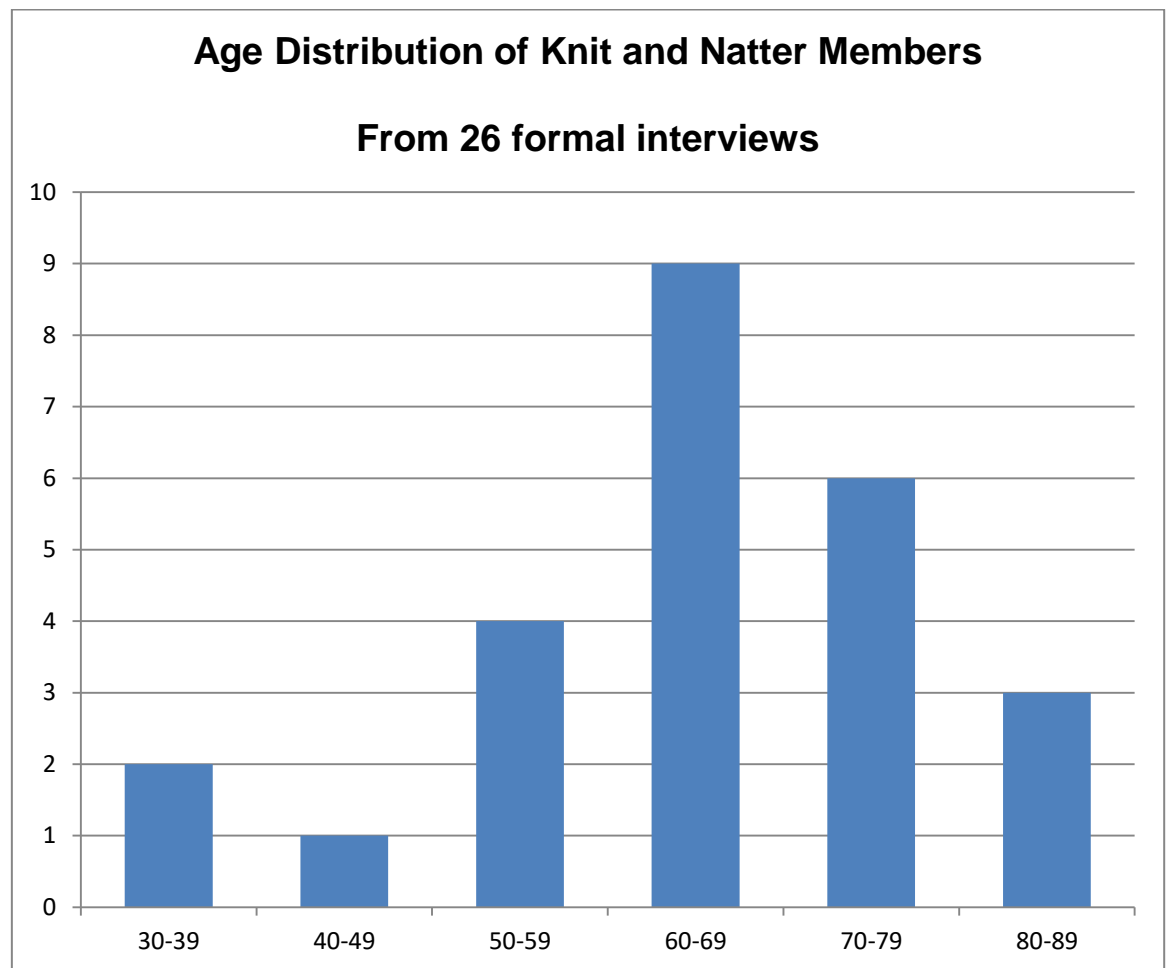
5.4.1.1 Membership and attendance at *Knit and Natter*

There was a book of attendance at *Knit and Natter* which contained the contact details of those who were part of the group. It was this which enabled me to establish that there were 60 women who were part of the group.

5.4.1.2. Age profile at *Knit and Natter*

I asked those who had taken part in the recorded semi-structured interviews to indicate their ages in a ten year bracket. The evidence this provided was that two out of twenty-five were under the age of thirty-nine. These two women attended the group before collecting their children from school. One currently attended Hope Farm Methodist and the other had had a contact with Trinity Methodist as a teenager. Seventy-two percent of those interviews were over sixty. Some participants still had major caring responsibilities for partners, parents or grandchildren but were not in paid employment, thus allowing them to be flexible enough to make a midweek, day time meeting.

Table 5.1 *Knit and Natter* Age Distribution



5.4.1.3 Gender profile at *Knit and Natter*

While I attended this group, there were only women present. The group did not advertise itself as a women-only group, and it was the case when I visited *Loving Hands* in Lymm, during the initial survey there was one man who attended that group on a regular basis.¹⁷⁸ This provides a contrast to the evidence provided from *Somewhere Else*,

¹⁷⁸ *Loving Hands* based at Lymm Methodist Church. There are two articles on the Fresh Expressions website which cite *Knit and Natter* as the inspiration for *Loving Hands*, which went on to develop their group in three locations: the Methodist Church, a local retirement home, and a local coffee shop. In 2010 they had over a hundred people knitting for need, including some who were remotely knitting in their own homes. Fresh Expressions, *Loving Hands* available at: <http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/stories/lovinghands/apr10> (accessed 27.07.15).

where men were obviously comfortable in learning to bake bread even though this may have been a new skill for them.

The minister at Hope Farm, Christine Jones, recognised that the group only attracted women and was aware that men were also looking for company and a sense of purpose:

‘In the town we have this project called Men in Sheds which is bursting at the seams and have just had to move to new premises so to find something for the men would be really significant.’¹⁷⁹

5.4.1.4 Previous church connection

In the initial survey of 112 Methodist churches returning 48 examples of “doing church differently”, all those responsible for returning the data stated that their membership of these groups consisted of both existing members of the church and those with no previous church affiliation (3.5). The reality of *Knit and Natter* is that its composition is mixed, and alongside those who have this group as their first experience of church there are those who have been lifelong members of the church and in particular the Methodist Church. As I conducted the interviews in small groups the mix of women varied depending on where they were sitting, so that within the recordings there are groups which include those with a strong church connection and those for whom *Knit and Natter* is their first or only church connection. Within the interviews there was evidence of themes which emerged from these women about their understanding of the group:

I really feel as if I have got in the middle of a community (through coming to *Knit and Natter* and the tapestry group at Trinity, Ellesmere Port) ... It has just opened new doors for me.¹⁸⁰

Although *Knit and Natter* is co-ordinated by four members of Hope Farm Methodist Church, where the group is held, and attended by approximately ten other members from the Methodist churches in

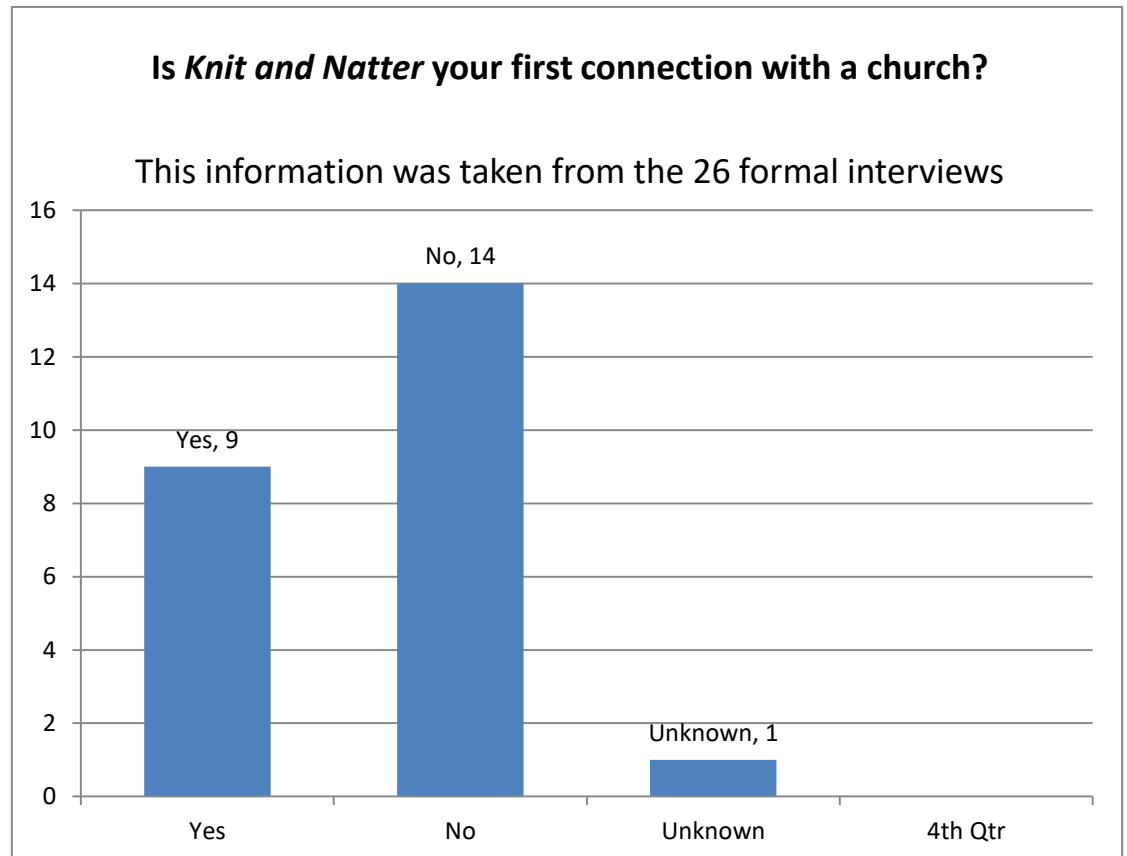
¹⁷⁹ Appendix 5.13.

¹⁸⁰ Appendix 5.1.

Ellesmere Port, Chris Crowder had a good knowledge of how connected the women were with “typical” Methodist churches in the town. She knew the members of the Church, those who attended worship in other denominations, and those who attended fringe activities such as coffee mornings or church fairs. As a founder member, she was in a position to have seen women without a church background join the group and take part in the knitting for others and the prayer and devotional time within the meetings. Twenty-one percent of women in the group when asked informally how they had come to make contact with the group said they had found out about it from outside the church. When it came to the recorded interviews, the number with no previous connection rose to forty-one percent. I believe that this is a more accurate account as the answer can be evidenced or deduced from the evidence provided. From my weekly observations, which could now be based in part on the evidence from the interviews, at least half of those attending each week do not have a church connection outside of *Knit and Natter*. This challenged the assumption, which I had made (possibly distorted by the emphasis on the missing generations stance in *Mission-Shaped Church* and in particular the VentureFX Initiative, which is focussed on pioneering new ways of being church for 18-35s), that a women’s group, the majority of whose members are of retirement age and attend a knitting group might have or have had a church connection.

Table 5.2

Bar Chart showing previous church connection of *Knit and Natter* members



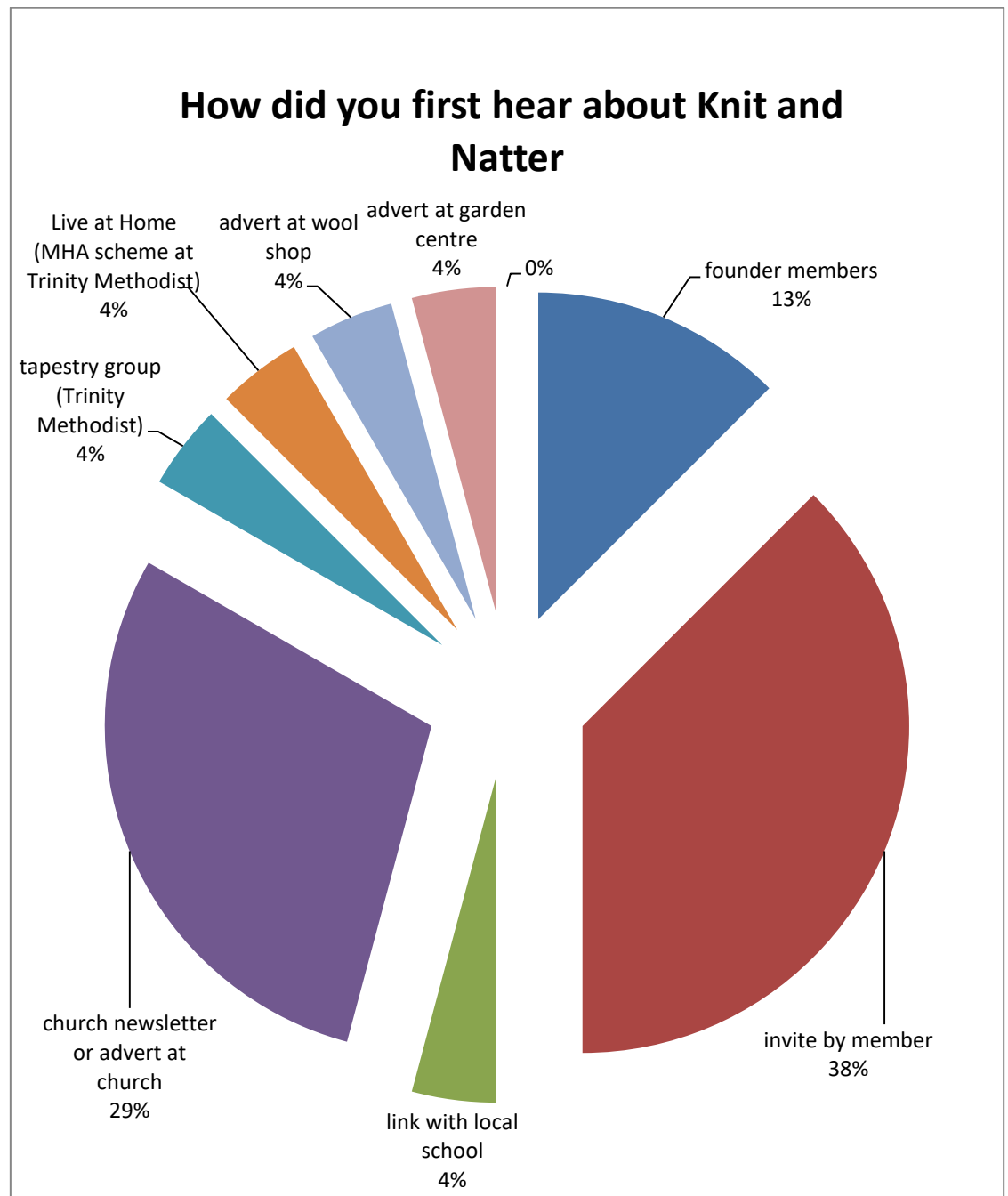
5.4.2 Research goal 1: To understand why people are connecting with *Knit and Natter*

During participant observation, I was able to gather information informally and anonymously on 16th November 2010. In addressing research goal 1 I sought to establish what had drawn people to this way of “doing church differently” as opposed to Sunday worship or a midweek service, I was curious as to how the women in *Knit and Natter* had made their initial connection. This data is shown in Table 5.3. This shows that two women out of twenty-five had seen an advertisement either in the garden centre or at the wool shop, and nine out of twenty-five had responded to a personal invitation to come along.

This information was not detailed enough to establish whether the women I asked informally had a previous or existing church connection, but it would be fair to assume that the as well as the founder members – those who had seen a notice in a church newsletter and those involved in the Methodist Homes for the Aged ‘Live at Home’ scheme and the tapestry group at Trinity Methodist – already had links with a church.

Table 5.3

How had *Knit and Natter* members found out about the group?



Within the formal interviews while attempting to find evidence for research goal 1 I tried to elicit what it was about this particular expression of church which had attracted the women and why they had kept this connection. In asking about how they first heard about the group, this led on naturally to them offering information voluntarily

about the reason they had come initially and what they found of value within the group. Below are the main reasons they offered:

5.4.2.1 Looking for a place to belong

The benefits of belonging to a community and a decreased sense of isolation were for some attendees the result of becoming part of the group. In the interviews it was clear that the women without a church background were looking for somewhere to gather for company, somewhere where they were comfortable exploring prayer and faith, somewhere where they could find support and advice, somewhere they could meet someone with pastoral responsibility for them, but that they were not necessarily looking for this from a traditional church format. There was a sense of a need to have an attachment to a community on their own terms. They wanted a group where the emphasis was expressed through activity and involvement. When asked about church they did not want to come and sit still and listen but they wanted to be engaged on a task. Those who could no longer knit or did not want to could still take part:

I don't knit but I come for the company. Margaret brought me first, I sit and join in and I wind wool and I do different things. If there is any jobs to be done then I'll do it.¹⁸¹

Some of the women have shared how being part of this group has been a place where they have found support, comfort and friendship. Listening space is created between the women themselves within one-to-one situations and the small groups which naturally form around the wider circle. Mutual encouragement gives the women confidence and strength to become more involved in the work of the group.¹⁸² There still exists a particular need from group members to seek out pastoral care from Chris Crowder, as the main co-ordinator in particular. One of the ladies who had been bereaved, spoke about finding in Jenny

¹⁸¹ Appendix 5.4.

¹⁸² This is also mirrored in the account of the God's Power Knitting Group, in Rusape, Zimbabwe. The work of this group is documented in Margaret Wheatley and Deborah Frieze, *Walk Out, Walk On: A Learning Journey into Communities Daring to Live the Future Now* (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler, 2001).

Schafer, one of the co-ordinating team a 'safe space' to be sad on her first visit, this was said in the context of her having known Jenny as her child's teacher. This is particularly noticeable in terms of a fresh expression which attracts those from a relatively restricted geographical location. The frequency with which the women meet during the week, in other activities (Quaker tapestry group, art group, shopping, on the bus, on the street) strengthens the relationships as they meet and share their lives and experiences outside of *Knit and Natter*.

It was a bit nerve wracking, cos I didn't know anybody, or what to do, or what to expect. But I met Chris, I phoned her up before I came ... because she was so friendly on the phone ... I came along ... and I've been coming ever since.¹⁸³

The co-ordinators made the decision not to promote and publicly advertise *Knit and Natter* once the group reached sixty members. Newcomers still arrived through personal invitation or word of mouth, but the decision was linked to the concern about being able to offer a genuine sense of community and connection if the group grew any larger.

Many of those who have come to *Knit and Natter* and have made it a regular part of their week attribute this to the welcome and sense of belonging that they have experienced. Some of the women at *Knit and Natter* were honest about reservations about coming to a new group and expressed that being welcomed was key to belonging: 'It was a huge step to come here by myself at the time, but everybody was so friendly and I was made so welcome that I've come every week since.'¹⁸⁴ One participant stressed that she thought the welcome was irrespective of belief, church affiliation, or religious practice. Her perception was that everyone was treated equally and that what mattered was not an existing degree of ecclesial affiliation but being part of *Knit and Natter*.

¹⁸³ Appendix 5.8.

¹⁸⁴ Appendix 5.1.

Nobody cares really whether you go to church or not. You are equally welcome, you are equally part of it. I think it is lovely.’¹⁸⁵

Although in some of the interviews the word welcome was used, many of the women at *Knit and Natter* used the notion of friendship and friendly especially when referring to their initial connection with the group. ‘There has to be a way in and I think this is a good way in for anybody.’¹⁸⁶

Changes in work patterns, family responsibilities and daily routines have released the time for the women to make wider connections in their community. Joining *Knit and Natter* in these transitional periods had been instrumental for the women in terms of connecting with others. This has also allowed friendships to form between women who had lived alongside each other for years, yet due to work and family commitments had not had the time to develop relationships. At the same time this brought a return to knitting, often allowing them to reconnect with a skill which they had learnt in childhood or at school. Coming back to a skill made the initial step into church easier as there was already a common interest which had brought the women together.

5.4.2.2 Therapeutic knitting

‘It is so therapeutic – knitting.’¹⁸⁷

There was evidence in some of the interviews of women who had been advised to come to the group in order to help ease physical symptoms arising from rheumatoid arthritis or multiple sclerosis, Pam shared that ‘my doctor said to keep on knitting’.¹⁸⁸ In her research for the Stitchlinks/Cardiff University Study, Betsan Corkhill looked specifically at the therapeutic benefits of knitting.¹⁸⁹ The repetitive movement was seen to aid pain but

¹⁸⁵ Appendix 5.1.

¹⁸⁶ Appendix 5.2.

¹⁸⁷ Appendix 5.4.

¹⁸⁸ Appendix 5.5.

¹⁸⁹ Betsan Corkhill, *Knit for Health and Wellness: How to Knit a Flexible Mind and More* (Bath: Flatbear Publishing, 2014).

also be self-soothing and helpful when people are stressed or traumatised.¹⁹⁰ She considers both ‘quiet knitting’ – that of knitting alone or at home, and ‘knitting together’ – the joining with others in a group to knit.

Knitting in groups has become acceptable, and it is no longer solely a private hobby. Many have found that there is companionship to be found in knitting together.¹⁹¹

Both of these can offer the relief of physical symptoms but knitting in groups can allow the ability for the anxious knitter to develop confidence and become involved in deeper conversations.

I’m a carer for my husband. I was going through a really bad patch suffering from anxiety and depression. My therapist said, “What do you like doing? You really need to get away for a few hours, an hour here and there.” I said I really liked knitting and crocheting, things like that. And she said surely there must be a group. So I said I didn’t know of any. So I asked in the Healthy Living centre in Ellesmere Port.¹⁹²

Bereavement was mentioned in a number of the interviews. In “typical” churches a funeral can be a catalyst for a connection or re-connection with a worshipping community and this was also the case for *Knit and Natter*. Barbara shares in the quote below not just the company and support she has received but also the role of the repetitive action which knitting blankets had offered her. Barbara knitted in long strips which she would work on during the week and bring along to the group so the therapeutic benefit continued at home.

I lost my husband very suddenly ... my sister-in-law ... invited me and ... we’ve been more or less every week since ... I just love it, it’s good, it’s something for me to focus on a Tuesday afternoon, lovely company. I’m still doing blankets, pieces, that is all the brain would click into at the time, I can do all sorts, I can do fairisle, cable in the past, but this suits me because I can pick it up and put it down.¹⁹³

¹⁹⁰ Corkhill, *Knit for Health and Wellness*, p. 33.

¹⁹¹ These issues are addressed in Joanne Turney, *The Culture of Knitting* (New York: Berg, 2009) pp. 42-72 and pp. 135-171.

¹⁹² Appendix 5.1.

¹⁹³ Appendix 5.7.

Barbara's experience echoes the work of Peggy Rosenthal whose research witnesses to women using knitting to cope with and reflect on their grief as well as choosing groups to enable those who were bereaved to overcome their isolation. 'Knitting became my vehicle for this reconnection with life. It became a way of sitting with people and just *being* with them.'¹⁹⁴ Rosenthal also explores how it is both the therapeutic need to work on something repetitive and simple which requires no thought, and then the need to attempt a more difficult pattern which might require the help of others as a way of learning to ask for help.

5.4.2.3 Looking for a place to share their skills

Most participants already had some experience of knitting but for many this was the first time they had had the opportunity to engage in shared practical experience. They found that this gave a sense of purpose to their skill. Participation in the group gave permission to fulfil the dual purpose of the knitter being able to relax and engage in a creative activity while producing a piece which is valued and appreciated:

And you don't feel guilty either ... because you are doing it for a good purpose [...] you feel as if you are doing something which is worthy.¹⁹⁵

Knitting is not an activity which can be rushed so anyone who is willing to spend time at home dedicating themselves to providing clothing or blankets for others has made a commitment to serving others in a practical way. Many of the women in *Knit and Natter* have exercised caring roles for the majority of their lives, and now find that their knitting which was part of this role is no longer required or wanted, and they are delighted that their skills are used and appreciated.

¹⁹⁴ Peggy Rosenthal, *Knit One, Purl a Prayer: A Spirituality of Knitting* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2011), p. 82.

¹⁹⁵ Appendix 5.4.

5.4.3 Research goal 2: To discern what are the chief characteristics of *Knit and Natter*

I have grouped responses from the semi-structured interviews and my participant observation to evidence three main characteristics at *Knit and Natter*: a practical expression of faith, the use of a niche interest as a starting point for Christian engagement, and a place to listen and be listened to.

5.4.3.1 Practical expression of faith

Knit and Natter has had an intentional emphasis on participation from the beginning and in this way it mirrors the work at *Somewhere Else*. The success of the group can be measured in a real way by the tonnes of knitted garments which have been produced by those who participate in *Knit and Natter*. The leaders stumbled upon a group of women who were keen to be part of a group which had participation and involvement at its heart. One of the main differences between this group and *Somewhere Else* is that the knitting continues even when the group is not meeting, so there is still a level of participation which can be continued alone at home as well as within the weekly meeting: 'I try to come, not because I feel I must come, but just because I just like coming. And I enjoy having my knitting to do at home as well.'¹⁹⁶

The encouragement of the leaders to embrace those who knit at home but are unable to attend the group is another marker of the way in which the group was prepared to open itself up to the wider community. The use of the knitting bags with the *Knit and Natter* logo, the publicity through a national secular magazine, the co-ordination with the local knitting shop are increased evidence of this intention to increase participation and involvement. The outworking of Christian faith, conveyed by the leaders has caught the imagination of those who attend *Knit and Natter*. Although not exclusive in any way to Methodism, a strong social characteristic of meeting need has drawn those people into church with a passion for

¹⁹⁶ Appendix 5.1.

engaging in a gentle form of social action and this has been captured and encouraged by the leaders. Women come to serve their local communities as well as those in other parts of the world.

I was doing hats and scarves with winter coming on and they give those to the homeless people of Chester, which I like knowing it is all round about and then you can relate to it can't you?¹⁹⁷

There is a strong link with the Chester Street Pastors. *Knit and Natter* at the time of the participant observation were the only group supplying the pastors with knitted hats, scarves and gloves for the homeless. An interview with Trevor Beckett who co-ordinates the Street Pastor scheme talked of the importance of gifting garments which have been produced in love.

... what the folk here are doing is helping us extend God's Kingdom in what might seem a small way, but at a particular time in someone's life, it can actually be a big way as well.¹⁹⁸

5.4.3.2 Use of a niche interest as a starting point for Christian engagement

Knitting in groups has become acceptable, and it is no longer solely a private hobby. Many have found that there is companionship to be found in knitting together.¹⁹⁹

Over the course of the twentieth century knitwear the purpose of knitting has shifted. Knitting garments is no longer an economic necessity. In fact it was more expensive in monetary and time terms to knit garments, but there has been an increased interest in handcrafts. The understanding of knitting an item as an expression of caring has increased, e.g. preparing for a birth, or knitting for babies and toddlers. Many of the women who attended *Knit and Natter* had retired and had extra leisure time. They were looking to combine this interest with the ability to meet the need of others and express care for them. The co-

¹⁹⁷ Appendix 5.3.

¹⁹⁸ Appendix 5.9.

¹⁹⁹ Turney, *The Culture of Knitting*, pp. 42-72 and pp. 135-171.

ordinators used this practical outworking of faith as the starting point for gathering the group together around a local interest and desire to meet a very real need.²⁰⁰ *Knit and Natter* was nominated group of the month in the national knitting magazine *Simply Knitting* and the article itself attracted some new members as have adverts in local knitting shops and on the market stall.

The co-ordinating group remained open to how this group could use the physical participation of knitting and crocheting and allow it to lead into a time of reflection and prayer. The devotional time is integral to the knitting group and happens naturally towards the end of the session, but in the interview with two of the women from the initial co-ordinating group this was not the intention but emerged naturally with the initial group:

MH [W]e were quite uncomfortable about it to start with. We were going to go into church, Christine [Jones – the minister at Hope Farm Methodist Church] said, we'll give them the opportunity when it has finished to go into church and say a prayer or go home.

JS It was going to be an optional extra, tagged on at the end.

MH And people were knitting and chatting so much [on the first meeting of the group] and Chris [Jones] was sat there and she said, and she said, "Would you mind if we did the prayers now because we are all busy and we are all knitting," so she got on with it and from then on it's just natural. It was just natural after that but that first week we did wonder.²⁰¹

As the group has grown and new members have joined, the women have embraced the invitation from the leaders to pray for those who will receive the garments and blankets, but also to develop the prayer time to include intercessions for friends, families and world concerns.

²⁰⁰ Pete Ward explains the notion of the changing dynamics of networks as opposed to gathering in *Liquid Church* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002), pp. 40-48. Preceding *Mission-Shaped Church*, Ward explores the notion of physical hubs of interest and networks of communication as a way of connecting individuals in a series of flows. This is particularly interesting in *Knit and Natter* where there are women who knit for the group through existing and developing relationships who do not attend the physical gathering.

²⁰¹ Appendix 5.2.

In this way knitting as the embodiment of the group is embraced and woven through the devotion. The lack of separation between the activity and prayer symbolises the way these women express their faith. One of the women shared informally that she used her knitting at home to create a time for personal prayer. Part of the work of *Knit and Natter* from the outset has been the adoption of a prayer shawl ministry and the associated meditative, attentive and prayerful practice through the action of knitting. This is a combined spiritual practice and prayerful ministry whereby shawls are knitted or crocheted to be given away to provide comfort in times of illness or grief, or to celebrate a new birth or a new stage in life. Prayers and blessings are said throughout the knitting of the shawl, and then, often, shawls are dedicated before being sent or passed on.²⁰² The praying involved in prayer shawl ministry can have two different expressions— first, shawls can be knitted with an individual in mind (for example, someone who is recovering from an operation at home, or has just had a new baby), or, secondly, they are produced as a more general way of adopting meditation within an individual's prayer life while the shawl is knitted and put aside ready for an immediate need – for example a natural disaster or community tragedy.²⁰³ Susan Jorgensen and Susan Izard wove stories of those who have knitted and received shawls in their book *Knitting into the Mystery*. This guide combined practical knitting instructions, reflections on the process of knitting and also prayers to use during knitting as well as when dedicating shawls.²⁰⁴ Whether the knitting has a specific intercessory focus or not, the attention to the individual stitches are accompanied by vocal or silent prayer enabling

²⁰³ Prayer shawls can also be sent after tragic events e.g. following the news of twelve shootings in Cumbria available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/mobile/10270948> (accessed 09.03.17) one of the Liverpool *Knit and Natter* groups sent twelve prayer shawls via the police to families of the deceased.

²⁰⁴ Susan S. Jorgensen, and Susan S. Izard, *Knitting into the Mystery: A Guide to the Shawl-Knitting Ministry* (Harrisburg; London; New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2003).

the knitter to achieve a slower pace over a period of time. Joanne Turney situates this slower action of knitting in context:

Knitting, in recent years... offers is 'time out', an alternative to mass consumerism and a means of slowing down the pace of life and absorbing oneself in a tactile occupation, connecting the self with the object under construction.²⁰⁵

Liturgy has always provided this rhythm within the life of worshipping communities. A notable recent trend within the Fresh Expressions movement, both in its prominence and writing, has been the highlighting of new monasticism trends.²⁰⁶ This return to a simple way of living, an awareness of the natural world around us, and a slowing of pace are also to be echoed in the resurgence of knitting. Many of the women interviewed talked about the relaxation and calm frame of mind which knitting brings.

Bernadette Murphy dedicates a whole chapter of *Zen and the Art of Knitting* to knitting as a meditative practice.²⁰⁷ She likens the rhythm of knitting to those of saying the rosary. She also examines the practice of knitting prayer shawls and intercessory prayer, and the use of the trinity stitch for personal meditation.

5.4.3.3 A place to listen and be listened to

Implied in the name of the group is the assumption that talking and sharing is an integral part of being and belonging to this community. Many answers included the importance of being able to talk with others.

Everybody talks to you....you feel like you want to come to have a natter, otherwise you don't see anybody.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁵ Turney, *The Culture of Knitting*, p. 104.

²⁰⁶ See Graham Cray, Ian Mobsby and Aaron Kennedy (eds), *New Monasticism as Fresh Expression of Church* (London: Canterbury Press, 2010).

²⁰⁷ Bernadette Murphy, *Zen and the Art of Knitting: Exploring the Links between Knitting, Spirituality, and Creativity* (Avon, MA: Adams Media, 2002), pp. 85-109.

²⁰⁸ Appendix 5.3.

Being able to talk and find a listening ear were integral to a sense of belonging and a desire for company as explored below. The women also felt that their suggestions for the shape of the group and ideas for where the knitting might be donated were listened to and acted upon.

CC [...] we do listen to what they suggest, and implement it. When they suggest different charities, I get in touch with those charities, like I have been in touch with Claire House.

MH The amount of places that we are giving to is growing all the time.²⁰⁹

The willingness of the co-ordinators to embrace these suggestions is evidence of the flexibility that the group had in adapting its giving and widening the circle of those who received garments from *Knit and Natter*. This, in turn gave the participants a sense of involvement and ownership in the group.

5.4.4 Research goal 3: To investigate how *Knit and Natter* understand themselves as an ecclesial reality

This section is concerned with the evidence first from the minister and co-ordinators and secondly from the evidence gathered in the interviews with participants as they describe the way in which *Knit and Natter* works alongside the Methodist church and the elements which they consider as intrinsic to the group itself.

5.4.4.1 Leaders' perspectives

Once or twice a year, Revd Christine Jones, who had pastoral oversight of Hope Farm Methodist church, encouraged them to lead a Sunday service. In 2010, the group led the shoebox service where the knitted goods and completed shoeboxes to be donated to Eastern Europe were dedicated.²¹⁰ In 2012, the group led the service on Homelessness Sunday, referring in the act of worship to their knitted

²⁰⁹ Appendix 5.2.

²¹⁰ This service in which the shoeboxes prepared for the charity Samaritans' Purse were collected and dedicated took place at Hope Farm Methodist Church on 21.11.10.

work for the Chester Street pastors and for the homeless who attend *Somewhere Else*. Ian Hu, the Methodist minister at *Somewhere Else* was invited to preach at this service which was planned by Christine Crowder and led by members of *Knit and Natter*. In 2010 the shoebox service had been an additional service on a Sunday afternoon whereas the Homelessness service took the place of 10.30a.m. worship. Although in the interview in Appendix 5.11, two of the co-ordinating members felt there had been little cross over between *Knit and Natter* and Sunday congregations, this move to take this slot gives the signal of the significant position of this group within the wider church community, both in terms of the confidence of the group to request this service and the affirmation that this wish has been granted.²¹¹

Those *Knit and Natter* members who are members of the Methodist Church, and especially the co-ordinating team, are sensitive to the fact that those who join the group or have no previous experience of church might find it difficult to attend a traditional church service on their own. They believe that forming a community where people feel welcome and where people can find 'safer space' in developing relationships, can become a sacred space where they can develop a prayer life, reflect on their knitting and giving as Christian service, and find pastoral care and understanding.

Not everyone wants to come to church but they will come to this so they can still participate in the prayer part of it.²¹²

Out of the twenty-six women who took part in the formal interviews, nine were members of Hope Farm Methodist Church and five were members at Trinity Methodist, Ellesmere Port. One woman had a previous association with the Church of England. This group displays characteristics of being a parallel congregation, as there are references to and invitations to worship at the Methodist churches in Ellesmere

²¹¹ '[The service is] on 29th January at 10.30 in the morning because we have asked to go mainstream this year.' Appendix 5.12.

²¹² Appendix 5.2.

Port, and the co-ordinators were aware of offering the opportunity for any of the women to make a step into “typical” church. However, the format of the relaxed *Knit and Natter* group which had a high level of participation and involvement by the women was a contrast to the more formal Sunday worship.

In an interview with two of the co-ordinators there was still the sense of ‘doing the group’ for others, in other words facilitating a group where others could come and experience part of being church, although one of the interviewees reflected that because members of *Knit and Natter* knew the prayers which were offered on a Tuesday were also offered on a Sunday, the link between *Knit and Natter* and the Sunday congregation was established and understood.

Knit and Natter has been referred to as a fresh expression of church on the Fresh Expressions website.²¹³ This label has been adopted by the leadership within the group and particularly by Chris Crowder. In her interview for the website Chris explicitly refers to *Knit and Natter* as church:

Our meetings end with short devotions which, initially, we were rather nervous about, but how wrong we were! ... Although the majority of our members are not regular churchgoers, they readily ask for prayer and acknowledge answers to those prayers ... *Knit and Natter* isn't just a knitting club making clothes for charity – it is a fresh expression of church which works on many different levels, giving people a purpose in life and sending God's love around the world. There is no doubt at all that many of our members see *Knit and Natter* as their church, they recognise the fact that we are meeting together in community and God is there.²¹⁴

When I interviewed Chris Crowder about the Sunday worship, asking her if she felt that *Knit and Natter* was a link for members to the worshipping community, her answer showed how relationships and

²¹³ Fresh Expressions, *Knit and Natter* available at: <http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/stories/knitandnatter> (accessed 22.05.16).

²¹⁴ Fresh Expressions, *Knit and Natter* available at: <http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/stories/knitandnatter> (accessed 22.05.16).

welcome were such an important part of *Knit and Natter* and this was a mark of what church should be. She reaffirmed her belief that *Knit and Natter* functioned as a church for those who attended.

I think this is their church, the more I think about it. There is so much warmth here. People know one another, they know what their problems are. In a way a conventional church service is a little bit cold compared to this. This is how church should be. I wasn't convinced to begin with because I am very conventional. And yet I feel God is here,[...] Here there is so much warmth and companionship. We love one another.²¹⁵

This also shows the importance of the characteristic of involvement and participation in Chris's understanding of 'how church should be'. She believed that the format of *Knit and Natter* enabled a sharing of experience that was key to building relationships which was at the heart of loving one another, and this was, for her, the beginning and heart of this group. This was also a church with porous boundaries, able to advertise in garden centres, in the market, and in a national knitting publication.

I think it is a good opportunity for us to make contact with other people. And if some of them move into the main body of the church, fine and if they don't I still feel we have the contact with them. And that's important. There has to be a way in and I think this is a good way in for anybody. I think if you asked them, they might regard it as their church, but they would feel that they do have a connection with the church.²¹⁶

When I asked Marjorie, one of the founder members about the how the group related to Hope Farm Methodist Church, her response indicated this commitment of the group to this expression of practical giving:

I think they represent an awful lot of the outreach of this church. Even though they don't come on a Sunday, the biggest part of the outreach is from this group.²¹⁷

5.4.4.2 Participants' perspectives

²¹⁵ Appendix 5.12.

²¹⁶ Appendix 5.2.

²¹⁷ Appendix 5.2.

The participants' understanding of how the group fitted with "typical" church fell into two categories, first that of understanding how the group was part of a wider understanding of church, and secondly how engagement with Knit and Natter can lead to greater involvement with "typical" church and worship.

A wider understanding of Church

One woman in *Knit and Natter* spoke of an awareness of a global perspective to their knitting – knowing that their knitting connected them with other communities around the world.

It feels part of something bigger because the things that people make here are going off into the wider world to be appreciated. So you are not just part of something local, you are part of something world-wide really. I think, for me anyway that re-enforces your faith. I think it is lovely to be part of something global, that people can appreciate.²¹⁸

Another interviewee had a well understanding of different levels of engagement beyond the group itself, including neighbours and strangers who had donated knitting or wool to the group.²¹⁹

An accidental stepping stone

There was evidence that becoming part of *Knit and Natter* allowed some of the women to take further steps in their exploration of faith and belief. This did not happen only within the group but also meant that through the relationships they had built they had begun to develop the

²¹⁸ Appendix 5.8.

²¹⁹ 'I have a friend down in hospital and when I went to see her, she has MS like me, and I said my doctor said to keep on knitting. Oh she said, I hadn't thought about that, but now she is knitting for us here and her mum and I got the lady in the next bed knitting as well. It's all by word of mouth. I was at the doctor's one day I met a lady, and we got talking about about knitting. She said I've got some wool at home, I went one Sunday morning after church and picked up a bag of wool. That's right out of the blue. It's like a stone in the water, you know. I think it is a good group. Not just religious ways but friendly ways – it gets people talking.' Appendix 5.5.

confidence to attend other events and worship at other services both at Hope Farm Methodist and at Trinity Methodist in Ellesmere Port.

... when we have our (Shoebox dedication) service in November, the amount of girls [who] don't come as a rule, ... will come into church for that. ... The door is there and the wedge is in the door for them ... the church is there if you need it. So, I think it is a brilliant group, I really do.²²⁰

This group was neither intentionally formed to become a church in its own right, or to act as a step into "typical" churches or congregations. In many "typical" churches which have sought to plant fresh expressions from within, the individual parts have stayed separate and have individual identities.²²¹ National fresh expressions material is clear that groups are not stepping stones to inherited church. The interviews conducted in *Knit and Natter* were contradictory in this area. Some of the women I interviewed without a previous church connection were interested in making that step into a deeper fellowship or church commitment and indeed had done so. The quote below, however, was from someone with an existing connection to the church who did not regularly attend Sunday worship:

I don't want to go to church but I want to be in with them. I hope to go back to church someday.²²²

Beryl whose only connection with the church is with this group, also observed:

If you want to come and not be religious about it you are as welcome as someone who goes to church every week, which I think is really very good.²²³

This quote implies that the participant is aware that there is also the additional option or opportunity of attending "typical" church. It does not imply that she understands that it is not a choice of one or the other, but the two groups can co-exist with movement and overlap between the two. The understanding expressed by this interviewee is that to

²²⁰ Appendix 5.5.

²²¹ Messy Church would be an example of this.

²²² Appendix 5.1.

²²³ Appendix 5.1.

belong to *Knit and Natter* is enough. This evidence fits with the broader statement of the Fresh Expressions Initiative that the purpose of fresh expressions is not to 'get people into' traditional church. However, the fact that services are advertised, and that the group takes responsibility for leading occasional Sunday worship would suggest that the co-ordinators are prepared to offer this as a potential 'stepping stone' should anyone wish to take that step, which does happen as the quote below indicates:

A friend of mine goes to the church, down the Port, I think she told me about it. ... And, now I'm going to the church now myself on a Monday and Friday. So, Monday and Friday at the other church, Trinity. And here today so that makes three days now, which is better isn't it. Otherwise you are just roaming around.²²⁴

I interviewed the lady (who identified herself in the 70-79 age group) who made this comment the day after she had taken communion for the first time. This highlighted the way in which entering the knitting group had been a safe way into exploring a church connection and experience.

DA I was very surprised with myself going to the communion. One week a month.

RW Yes, we went yesterday.

DA I let her go on her own the first time, didn't I, let you go on your own. The next time it came around, I thought, I might as well go in myself. It was good, I enjoyed it, it was very interesting ... half an hour in the Trinity and then go into the church for half an hour, twenty minutes. Take the communion, listen to what is said, it helps you know ...

RW Yes, it does. It is good.²²⁵

This account of the woman sending her friend to 'go and see what communion was like and report back' is evidence of apprehension of what "typical" church might involve.²²⁶

²²⁴ Appendix 5.3.

²²⁵ Appendix 5.3.

5.5 Conclusion

This case study was the one which provided a significant amount of evidence through informal conversations and formal interviews. Participants were happy to take part and to share their experiences. They gave evidence as to why they were joining, and the characteristics they valued within the group. It was evident that *Knit and Natter* had made a difference to those who were attending. For some it was an additional way of being in touch with the outreach of the church, through their knitting but also through the ability to do this work as a group so that there was a sense of community around the giving. This was particularly evident when there was correspondence back from the orphanage in Swaziland, who would put in requests so that the women felt their knitting was tailored to a specific need or child. For some there was a sense of being needed but also that this brought a tangible benefit for those receiving the garment – a sense of being useful and valued. For some there was a real sense that the group had diminished a sense of isolation – that the women had a need to come together, that the knitting had provided a focus for this support and encouragement and had been the catalyst for caring for each other and developing relationships. When it came to expressing their opinions about the role of the group in relation to the wider church, there was a diverse range of responses. This reflected the complexity of levels of association with “typical” church and also showed a level of understanding of different forms of church and worship.

One significant event which took place after the period of participant observation was the decision to baptise one of its members during a *Knit and Natter* session. This service took place in the worship area so everyone moved from the hall for this session and Deacon Judith Ireland conducted the service. This decision seemed to signal a departure for the group, from the sharing of prayers on a clip board

²²⁶ Appendix 5.3.

passed around while the women were knitting, to the sacrament of baptism in a printed liturgy in a different room in the building. Although in the five years following the research there has not been another baptism, Judith confirmed in a telephone conversation that the number of people involved in leading prayer and devotion during the weekly sessions has increased.

CHAPTER SIX

CASE STUDY 3: *NEW SONG CAFÉ*, BOLD STREET METHODIST MISSION, WARRINGTON

6.1 Introduction to café church

Café church was highlighted as one of the possible examples of fresh expressions of church in *Mission-Shaped Church*.²²⁷ In 2004, when the report was published, it claimed that 'this expression of church is not yet common'. The report stressed that café church 'is primarily about creating a sense of community' and implies that this community may well explore or be the base for other forms of alternative worship, cell or seeker church. The format of café church was suggested therefore as the vehicle through which to explore church rather than being itself the church. Coffee houses have always had a tradition of being places of debate and conversation. The earliest recorded coffee house in England opened in London in the early 1650s in a shed in the church yard of St. Michael's parish church. Theology students often attended coffee houses following worship and one of the virtues of the coffee house was that although groups of friends may have gone together, it was also perfectly acceptable to attend alone and begin a conversation with a stranger. John Wesley had a rather more cautious approach to both the drinking of hot liquors which he feared may produce anxiety and also considered tea, in particular, as an expense which the poor could ill afford. He produced a tract to this effect. On 30 August 1759 he noted in his journal his disapproval of conversation following worship

I reminded them ... that it was a bad custom to gather into knots just after sermon and turn a place of worship into a coffee-house. I therefore desired that none would talk under that roof, but go quietly and silently away.²²⁸

²²⁷ *Mission-Shaped Church*, pp. 50-52.

²²⁸ *The Journal of John Wesley* available at: <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-journal-of-john-wesley-vol-4/the-eleventh-part-section-two/> (accessed 22.05.16).

In his later life Wesley changed his opinion entirely, advocating tea drinking as a cure-all. Even from as early as 1750s tea had overtaken coffee in popularity, but culturally tea drinking was then considered, only as Wesley had suggested, for those who could afford it, and was often drunk at home. In Methodist circles gathering and drinking tea, corresponded with the rise of the temperance movements and the notion of providing an alternative to visiting public houses for those recent converts to Christianity. Although through the proliferation in the high street of multi-national chains such as Starbucks, coffee drinking is often portrayed as a very recent cultural phenomenon, the rise of the coffee-bar within particularly youth culture has its roots in recent history in the post-war era.²²⁹ The proliferation of coffee shops on most high streets have given rise to café churches, which in the mission language of going to where people out, suggests we look for where people are gathering and seek to build church there.

The increase in coffee shops in Britain has grown enormously since 2004, and café church has become one of the most recognisable forms of fresh expressions of church with a range of examples taking place in church worship areas, church halls, church coffee shops, commercial coffee shops or disused shops which have been rented by churches and turned into cafes.²³⁰ Fresh Expressions recognised this growth and produced a diagram (Figure 6.2) which demonstrates possibilities for venues when considering café church.²³¹

²²⁹ Markman Ellis, *The Coffee House* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2004) gives an overview of the development of coffee drinking and coffee houses from the seventeenth century to the beginning of the twenty-first century.

²³⁰ George Lings of the Church Army visited examples of Café Church from across the spectrum of Figure 6.2 for his explorations documented in George Lings, *Café Church 1 - Caffeine, Croissants and Christ?*, Encounters on the Edge 33 (Sheffield: Church Army, 2007), and *Café Church 2 - Double Jesus with Cream and Sugar?*, Encounters on the Edge 34 (Sheffield: Church Army, 2007).

²³¹ Fresh Expressions, *Café Church: Examples* available at: <http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/guide/examples/cafe> (accessed 22.05.16).

As can be seen in Table 6.1, by 2010 across the Methodist connexion, café church accounted for a fifth of all registered fresh expressions of church, and this statistic was replicated within the Liverpool District.

It is two of these which I will examine in chapters 6 and 7.

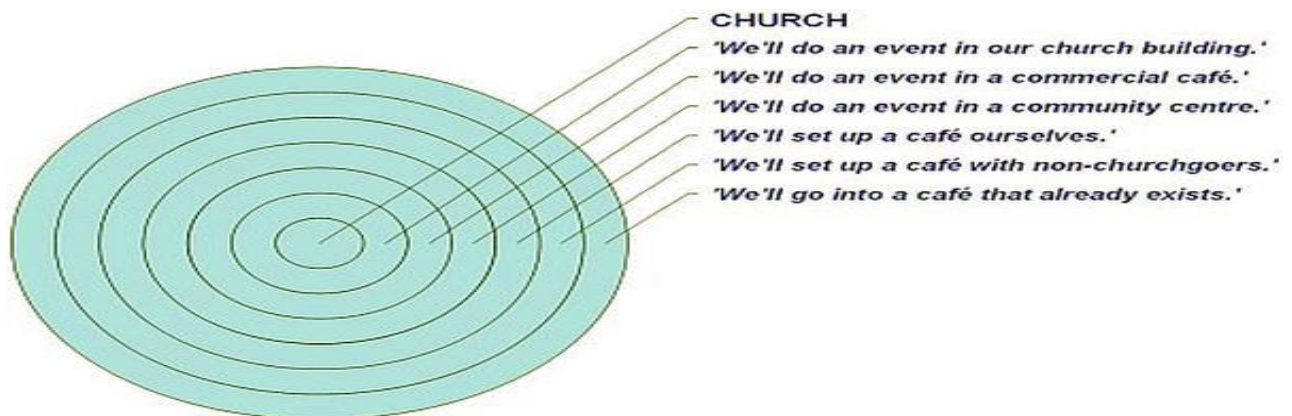
Table 6.1

Regular fresh expressions 2010

	District name	Total FX	Messy church	Cafe church	Cell church	3rd place	Other FX
1	Synod Cymru	0	0	0	0	0	0
2	Wales Synod	30	8	5	5	4	8
5	Birmingham District	28	8	3	6	2	9
6	Bolton and Rochdale District	12	5	2	2	0	3
7	Bristol District	40	17	9	2	5	7
9	Cumbria District	11	2	5	0	0	4
10	Channel Islands District	3	2	0	0	1	0
11	Chester and Stoke-on-Trent District	28	8	6	1	1	12
12	Cornwall District	28	8	8	1	0	11
13	Darlington District	39	7	6	9	3	14
14	East Anglia District	47	12	14	3	1	17
15	Isle of Man District	2	0	0	1	1	0
16	Leeds District	21	7	2	1	8	3
17	Lincoln and Grimsby District	27	4	10	2	3	8
18	Liverpool District	26	7	5	0	4	10
19	Manchester and Stockport District	35	6	3	3	2	21
20	Newcastle upon Tyne District	33	8	7	6	5	7
21	Lancashire District	29	4	8	2	3	12
22	Nottingham and Derby District	47	15	8	5	5	14
23	Northampton District	53	19	9	6	4	15
24	Plymouth and Exeter District	51	16	8	7	7	13
25	Sheffield District	37	8	12	2	0	15
26	Southampton District	57	15	10	5	4	23
27	West Yorkshire District	28	6	3	12	1	6
28	Wolverhampton and Shrewsbury District	49	12	8	6	9	14
29	York and Hull District	48	11	12	8	2	15
31	Scotland District	5	2	0	0	0	3
32	Shetland District	5	1	1	0	3	0
34	Bedfordshire, Essex and Hertfordshire District	39	14	13	2	2	8
35	London District	37	12	9	1	4	11
36	South East District	46	12	11	3	6	14
	Connexion	941	256	197	101	90	297

Figure 6.2

Options for establishing a café church as suggested by the Fresh Expressions Initiative²³²



The Fresh Expressions website which shares stories, lessons and experiences from fresh expressions of church, suggests the location of a café church is dependent on the missional focus of the local church and who they are intending to reach. Those who are more familiar with church may be happier attending a café church in a church building, whereas those with no previous church connection may be more comfortable attending café church in a commercial setting which is their natural habitat.

In this chapter I will consider the first example of two café churches in this thesis – *New Song Café*, which is hosted and situated in Bold Street Methodist Mission in Warrington. In Chapter 7, I will consider *Café Church @Oomoo* initiated by the congregation at Elm Hall Drive, Liverpool who situated their café church in a commercial café. This provides two case studies from either end of the spectrum of the diagram in Figure 6.2.

²³² Fresh Expressions, available at: <https://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/guide/examples/cafe> (accessed 11.05.16).

PART A: *NEW SONG CAFÉ* BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH METHODS

6.2 Introduction to *New Song Café*

Before I consider the history, research methods and develop a thick description of *New Song Café*, it is important to note that since the time of the research, the community and direction of this group has changed significantly. There is some debate within Fresh Expressions that the challenge posed by assessing and judging groups too soon in their ecclesial development journey is that these might inaccurately determine or shape the outcome of the group. This can occur due to groups either being defined or self-defining while still being in a state of emergence. It may also lead to false expectations based on novelty or experiment which might change naturally as the group grows, changes, flourishes, or ceases to exist. These findings are based on my research findings during nine months of participant observation and questionnaires completed in April 2011. I believe that based on the evidence, these were an accurate reflection of *New Song Café* from September 2010 to May 2011. The group was already at that time at the beginnings of discussions and explorations of the notion of what is now known as *New Song Network*, which in 2014 became the newest Church in British Methodism.²³³ The impact of further developments will be considered in Chapter Ten as *New Song Café* has been cited as an example by the Methodist Church in its examination of Fresh Ways of Being Church. *New Song Café* had also been highlighted nationally on the Fresh Expressions website, and its minister Jackie Bellfield has

²³³ Fresh Expressions, *New Song Network Church Commissioning*, available at: <http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/news/newsongcommissioning> (accessed 23.05.16).

given a number of interviews and her story of *New Song Network* forms a chapter in *Methodism Abounding*.²³⁴

6.2.1 History of *New Song Café*

New Song Café was set up in January 2009 under the leadership of the Revd Jackie Bellfield, a circuit minister stationed at Bold Street Methodist Mission and Latchford Methodist Church with the additional role of being Fresh Expressions Missioner for the Warrington Circuit.

Although it was *New Song Café*'s initial intention to set up in a Costa Coffee shop, circumstances changed at the last minute and caused it to meet in the church hall.²³⁵ The reason for churches which are interested in setting up a café church exploring Costa Coffee shops is that there is an existing link with Costa through the Café Church Network. This is an organisation which provides training, support and material for churches wishing to begin a Café Church and is cited as a resource by *Share the Guide*.

We equip churches to run café churches in high street coffee stores (primarily Costa Coffee stores). We train, resource and support you to create an opportunity for people in your community to explore issues from a faith perspective, in a relaxed, comfortable café environment. It is an opportunity for churches to engage with their communities and connect with people who would not go to church.²³⁶

Bold Street Methodist Mission is located in the centre of Warrington. Warrington has a population of 190,000. Many of its traditional heavy industries have disappeared but it has maintained its prosperity by attracting high-tech companies to new business parks. Warrington was a designated New Town area, and significant new housing, business

²³⁴ Jackie Bellfield, 'The New Song Network', in John J. Vincent (ed.), *Methodist Abounding: Theology and Mission for the Twenty-First Century* (Bakewell: Church in the Market Place Publications, 2016), pp. 68-72.

²³⁵ It has subsequently provided the momentum to reconfigure the worship area within Bold Street Mission and it has moved downstairs into that space.

²³⁶ Café Church Network, advertising material available at: <http://www.cafechurch.net/files/documents/flyer%20a6%20publicity.pdf> (accessed 22.05.16).

and retail development is still taking place. It is a significant commuter town for Liverpool and Manchester.

In 2010 Bold Street Mission, where *New Song Café* takes place, was one of 16 churches in the newly re-configured Sankey Valley Circuit through a merger of the former Warrington and Widnes Circuits. This re-organisation had included the appointments of paid lay workers working alongside ministers with the aim of making a fresh impact on unexplored areas of community ministry and developing fresh expressions of worship and mission.²³⁷

From the preaching plan for the Sankey Valley Circuit for the quarter March – May 2011, *New Song Café* was clearly marked as a circuit service and may explain how many of those in my research who attended *New Song Café* in March 2011 described themselves as having their main place of at another Methodist Church in the circuit. Michael Moynagh uses *New Song Café* as an example of dual church involvement and deploys the term ‘second expression of church’ for those who attend such events as supplementary attendance.²³⁸

What makes *New Song Café* different from the other examples is that from its initial meeting, it has had to adapt to being a different entity from that which was envisaged. Whereas the other case studies have had the time to emerge at a slow pace which has gradually allowed the weeks and months to shape and determine the worship and relationships within the communities, *New Song Café* had to make a

²³⁷ Revd Loraine Mellor, then superintendent minister of the Warrington Circuit spoke at the national Fresh Expressions *Shaping the Landscape Conference* on 06.05.11: ‘So we had a lot of different things going on, what we would call, under the wider understanding of fresh expressions, both worship and church and alongside that we decided that when the opportunity came to replace a presbyter - what we should we do, what sort of person to we need to help the circuit to develop and grow – we wrote a specific job description ... we looked at having a probationer presbyter with responsibility for fresh expressions and some pastoral responsibility so that from the very offset that person would be rooted in a community, in a church, but would also be able to support and encourage other work in fresh expressions across the circuit and God was good and that is what we got.’ Fresh Expressions, *Changing the Landscape: Making the mixed economy work*, available at: <http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/changingthelandscape> (accessed 22.05.16).

²³⁸ Michael Moynagh, *Being Church Doing Life*, p. 69.

decision to become something different even before its first meeting. The intention of Jackie and the leadership team was to get a small group of people together before setting up a café church within Costa Coffee. Bold Street Mission has a small coffee shop on the ground floor which could accommodate forty people. Yet, as Jackie and the team were planning, it was evident that many more than forty people were interested in coming so from their first meeting in January 2009, they made the decision to move *New Song Café* to the first floor hall. The initial plan was for coffee, cake and contemporary worship music. Even in the first few months, it was evident that much larger numbers (between sixty-five and 120 were attending each monthly *New Song Café*) and this necessitated a re-think of the purpose of the group and the way it would run.

6.3 Research methods for *New Song Café*

The research methods for this case study needed to be adapted during the fieldwork from the initial hope that I would conduct a number of in depth interviews to a simple questionnaire that could be completed quickly during the evening. An open-ended final question allowed the opinions and experiences of those attending to be expressed.

6.3.1 Negotiated methods

For this case study the approach which I had to adopt as a researcher was different due to the larger nature of the group and its service format. During the time I was observing *New Song Café* the numbers attending were regularly between sixty and eighty. The nature of the evening dictates that the time spent in song takes around an hour and a half of the two hour session. The worship itself is much more directed and focussed in contrast to the sessions at both *Somewhere Else* and *Knit and Natter*. At first, I thought the natural time to collect information was in the twenty minute coffee break, but after a couple of months of observation I concluded that this was not immediately conducive to interviewing. Those attending were from different geographical areas so used the coffee time to catch up with others and people tended to

move around the room. This made for a busy and noisy atmosphere so interviewing within the room, while it would not have been obtrusive, would have been difficult to record effectively. Those agreeing to be interviewed in the break would have had to forgo this important conversational time and this meant that the research would have counteracted the atmosphere of connection and relationship building. I raised this concern with Jackie Bellfield in an interview and she felt able to identify a number of people whom she considered might be useful to interview.²³⁹ No-one followed up an open invitation from Jackie to be involved in an interview so I then considered the use of a questionnaire that could be completed quickly but would hopefully give me an insight into *New Song Café*. The response to the questionnaire was good and there were a range of comments offered.

6.3.2 Participant observation

I participated in and observed *New Song Café* from October 2010 to May 2011 taking notes during the evening. Most people sat and sang or listened to the music around the tables. This gave me the opportunity to write fairly unobtrusively while either the singing was taking place, or while Jackie or one of the other leaders were talking. Printed notices on the tables eliminated the need to document the content of the service.

6.3.3 Semi-structured interviews

My interview with Jackie Bellfield took place at the beginning of February 2011. As noted above, my initial thought was at *New Song Café* in March 2011 to give everyone the opportunity of a face-to-face interview or an e-mail exchange about *New Song Café*. I placed

²³⁹ Jackie Bellfield: 'As far as the group leading it you could sit and talk to Simon for example because he has been the longest, apart from Amanda and Jane who do the drinks, they would be the longest serving people. Amanda would be good because she would share that her journey during the last year has been hard but the one thing that has remained static has been *New Song Café*, she might talk a bit about why that has been important to her. That's at least two things that you could do. If you wanted a more in depth discussion with somebody, I could give you two or three people who would sit with you for a longer period.' Appendix 6.1.

invitations with return slips on the tables so it was easy to fill one in, and by the door I placed a box for returns. There were sixty-three at the service in March with one response from a couple who did not reply to a follow-up e-mail. I was inevitably disappointed in the subsequent response, and in retrospect I could have been more proactive about approaching people to be interviewed. I wanted, however, people to offer freely of their time and to want to have some ownership and shaping of the research. I therefore decided not to follow up Jackie's suggestions of interviewing those involved in leading and planning *New Song Café* as on the evening itself they were rehearsing and planning ahead of a two hour service and I made the judgement that this did not leave enough time for interviews.

It was much easier to interview during the sessions in the smaller groups of *Somewhere Else* and *Knit and Natter*. This may also have been because both of those groups were meeting weekly and so I had built up deeper relationships with the participants. The interviews for chapters 4 and 5 had taken place over several weeks (again the advantage of meeting weekly, and so if anyone was absent or wary they could always wait for a subsequent week). Due to time constraints and the monthly meeting this was not possible at *New Song Café* and emphasizes research findings for this chapter being a 'snap shot' in a restricted time frame of the development of *New Song Café*.

6.3.4 Questionnaire

The lack of response to the invitation to be interviewed led me to ask some questions about the nature of finding information. I was concurrently interviewing the leadership team for *Café Church @Oomoo* and Rachel Fox suggested that a questionnaire rather than interviews during café church would work better (7.2.1, 7.2.3, 7.2.4).²⁴⁰ Her comments were helpful in the production of the questionnaire for *New Song Café*. She suggested that answers should be very quick to fill in because people were there to talk and be with their friends and

²⁴⁰ Appendix 7.3.

they wanted something which could be done in a couple of minutes at the table where they were sitting. The advantage of this was that it did not affect the atmosphere or require additional time, and responses could be anonymous so that participants could be honest in their replies.

My own observations left me unsure about how many of those who were attending *New Song Café* were “unchurched”. If many attended other churches as their main place of worship, maybe they did not see the need have a conversation about *New Song Café*. I decided to go ahead the next month with the questionnaire to determine the age and gender profile of the congregation, as well as whether this was their only place of worship and if not where they worshipped on a more regular basis. In addition I asked them how they would describe *New Song Café* to anyone who had not been before. I did not stipulate whether this was someone with a church background or not (Table 6.3). I received 47 returns out of 64 present on the evening. I distributed the questionnaires on the tables so that people could fill in the questionnaires when they arrived, during the coffee break or during the worship itself. As I did not distribute the questionnaires specifically to the worship band this might account for 6 or 8 of the non-returns.

Table 6.3

Questionnaire conducted at *New Song Café* – March 2011

This short questionnaire is to help me with my research at the Urban Theology Unit in Sheffield. Please circle the answer that applies to you and add in any other details you feel able to. You do not have to take part if you do not wish to, and this questionnaire is anonymous. Please ask if you any questions.

Thanks

Christine Dutton

1. I am male female
2. I am aged under 20 20-29 30-39 40-49 50-59 60-69
70-79 80-89 90+
3. *New Song Café* is my main place of worship Yes
No
- 3b. If answer to questions 3 is No:
I also worship at _____
4. I have also attended Disciple at Latchford Methodist
Church Yes No
5. Could you describe *New Song Café* in a few words to
someone who hasn't been here before?

Part B: *New Song Café*: Thick Description

6.4 Thick description of *New Song Café*

I attended *New Song Café* at the beginning of 2010 before selecting it as a case study and was an observer at each monthly service after obtaining ethical review in October 2010.

The name *New Song Café* is the name of a website in which song-writers and composers introduce their newest hymns and worship songs. They explain through video clips the background to the song, the inspiration for the lyrics and then often give a practical demonstration of musical techniques and styles. This is done with the help of a presenter or interviewer. This emphasis on music and singing has developed as the dominant style of *New Song Café* which takes place at 7pm on the fourth Sunday of the month and is co-ordinated by three small groups of people who take responsibility for different parts of the evening. First, there is a group of people who come to arrange and set up the room with tables, chairs and arrange the music area. Everything needs to be set up afresh each month, but the arrangement is fairly simple and well organised. All the furniture needed is stored in the hall and people help clear away their own chairs at the end of the service. Secondly, there is a group on a rota basis who are responsible for refreshments and washing-up. Thirdly, the largest group is the group responsible for the planning of worship and the music on the evening.

In 2010/11, the Revd Jackie Bellfield took responsibility for choosing a theme, and the worship band negotiated the choice of songs by e-mail. These are advertised on the *New Song Café* Facebook group in the week leading up to the meeting with YouTube links so that people can listen to the songs in advance if they wish.²⁴¹ The post is available after the event too, so that people can follow up songs or listen again to new material. My observation is that there is a very relaxed atmosphere in the leadership and co-ordination of the service, although Jackie often makes the link between the songs, gives out notices, there are others who talk for a short while or bring prayer concerns. The band is made up of five or six musicians. Those leading *New Song Café* arrive during the afternoon and others gather between 6.30pm and 7pm. The

²⁴¹ *New Song Café*, Facebook events page available at: <https://www.facebook.com/events/285875388416939/> (accessed 11.05.16).

service takes place in a large hall on the second floor of Bold Street Methodist Mission. There are tables for 6 or 8 people can sit but all the chairs are facing forward as there is a large screen as a focus. There are also two large advertising posters with the *New Song Café* logo, one placed in the entrance foyer on the ground floor and the other to the side of the main screen.

Signs are clearly visible from outside directing people to the hall. At the back of the hall near the kitchen are several large tables with home-made cakes. Tea and coffee are served all evening but those who are responsible for refreshments can take part in the service easily. The local Christian bookshop also run a stall at the back of the hall. Information for the evening is set out on the tables includes a list of songs which will be sung during the evening. There is also advertising for *New Song Café* events, or events in local Methodist churches, in the circuit and ecumenical events in Warrington. The style of the evening is informal and relaxed but has in a sense a fairly traditional format. The beginning of the evening is always a welcome for those who are coming for the first time – newcomers are encouraged to make themselves known, and then there is usually an informal survey of where people have come from. It was clear that there were many people who were travelling to *New Song Café* from Runcorn, Helsby and Frodsham, as well as from Liverpool and the Wirral – distances of up to thirty miles. The information of where people came from on the evening when I did a closer survey is included below.

Part C: *New Song Café*: evidence and data

6.5 Evidence from research methods in respect of research goals 1-3.

Due to the size of the gathering when I was there as a participant observer, and that the main part of the evening we were focussed on singing together, my initial assessment of the composition of the group was not as reliable as in *Somewhere Else* or at *Knit and Natter*, where I could gather information informally during the sessions. I therefore have

used in the following section the evidence from the questionnaire to clarify and support my own observations.

6.5.1 Composition of *New Song Café*

As with the other case studies, I was interested to establish who it was who was connecting with these forms of fresh expressions of church. To do this I asked those completing the questionnaire to give their gender and age within a 10-year bracket.

6.5.1.1 Gender profile at *New Song Café*

My observation was that within the leading worship group there was an equal distribution of male and female. During my time of observation there were generally more women present at each of the evenings. There were some tables where it seemed that groups of women had come and travelled together and there were mixed tables which appeared to be members of the same “typical” church congregation. There were hospitality teams responsible for making tea, serving cakes and washing up. These were made up of men and women. The questionnaire reflected this observation with 36 returns from women and 11 from men.

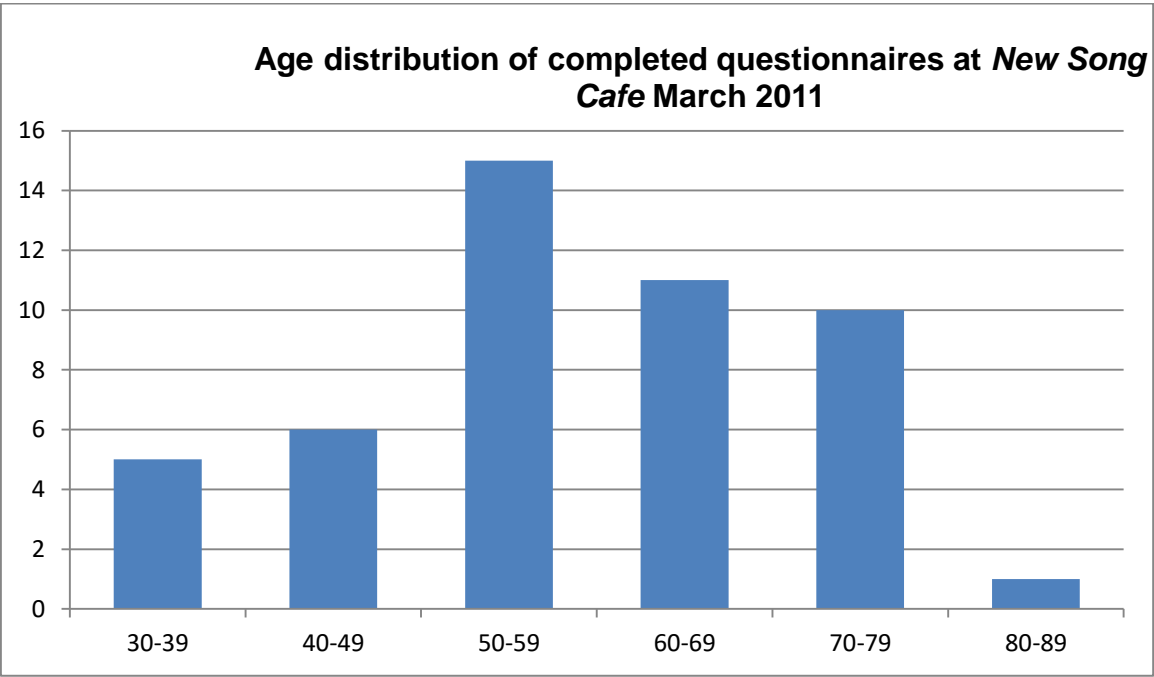
6.5.1.2 Age profile at *New Song Café*

At the time of the research the age profile of the group was mainly of those in their 40s and above. There was only one person under 18 on the night I distributed the questionnaires although there were occasions when there were younger parents who brought babies. When I attended *New Song Café* after the formal period of observation I noticed there were a few children and teenagers present. This was before the group introduced *New Song Kids* as part of the developing *New Song Network*. However, Figure 6.4 below shows the age distribution of those who completed the questionnaire in March 2011 and shows the largest groups attending were those in the fifty to eighty

age bracket. This would reflect from my own experience the current picture within “typical” Methodist Churches.

Figure 6.4

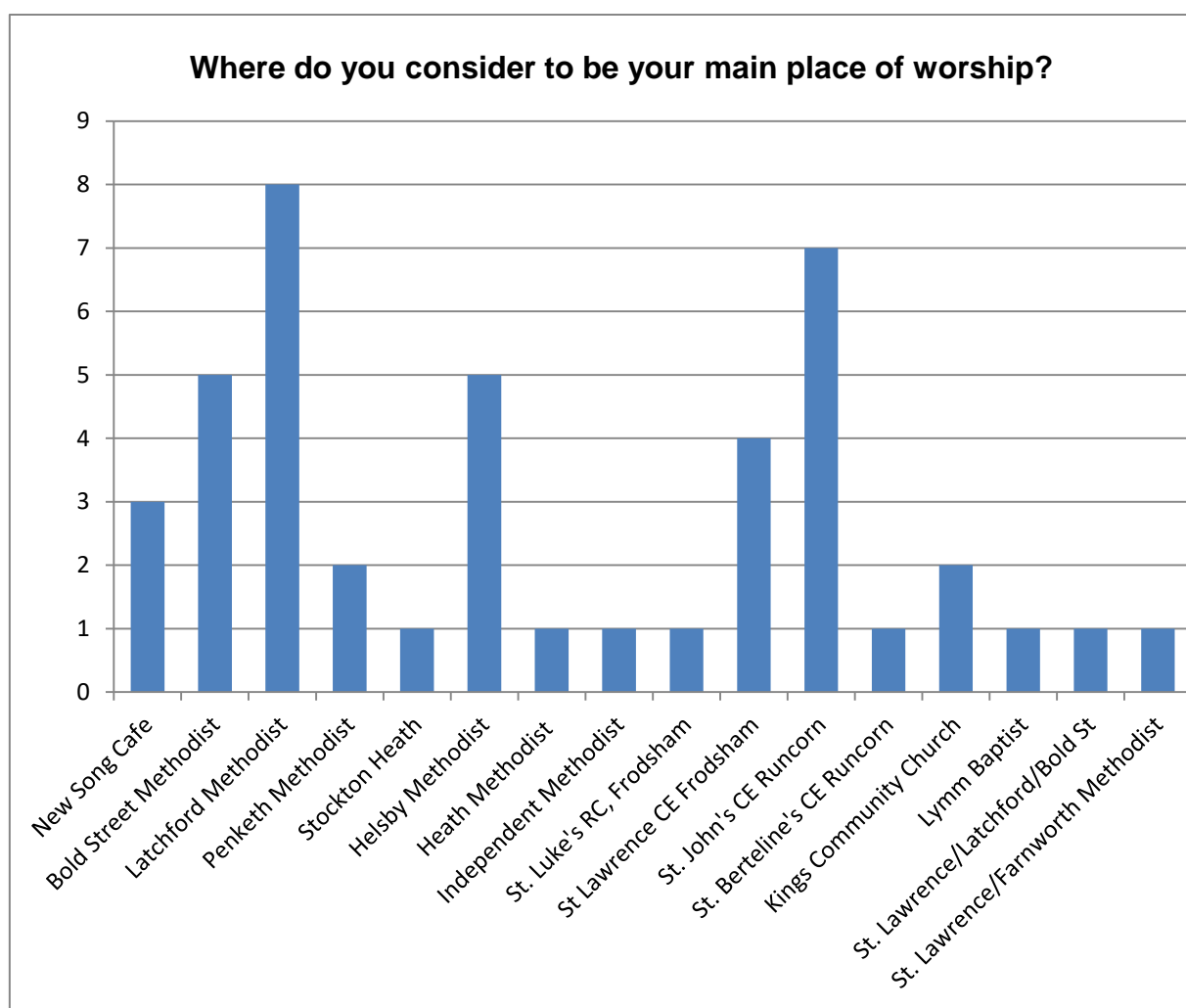
New Song Café Age Distribution March 2011



Forty-four of the forty-seven replies to the questionnaire stated that their main place of worship was at another church. The results are shown below in Figure 6.5.

Figure 6.5

Replies to the question: “Where do you worship if you do not consider *New Song Café* as your main place of worship?”



6.5.1.3 Current church connection

In *Knit and Natter* the question that I asked what about whether the group was the first connection with a Church community, but *New Song Café* had such a distinct and clear worship focus that it was apparent from the participant observation that those attending the monthly café were comfortable singing hymns. This suggested that many of them had previous or current experience of singing hymns together and informal

conversations led me to believe that many of the group were already regular members of other churches. This was not “church for the unchurched”. The questionnaire helped to confirm this. Three respondents said they considered *New Song Café* to be their main place of worship and they did not suggest they worshipped elsewhere. Twenty-two others worshipped at other Methodist churches, one worshipped at a Roman Catholic Church, thirteen at Anglican Churches and seven others at other non-conformist Churches. This evidence certainly shows that two years on from the first *New Song Café*, the majority of those who responded were attending *New Song Café* as supplementary to a main act of worship in another local church. This made discovering answers to research goal 1 important.

6.5.2 Research goal 1: Why are people connecting with *New Song Café*?

In the light of the evidence in Figure 6.6 showing that ninety-four percent of those who were attending *New Song Café* in March 2011 attended other churches as their main place of worship I was interested in why they were also attending *New Song Café*.²⁴² The monthly frequency of *New Song Café* is partly what enables participants to worship in other churches. I gave them the opportunity to describe *New Song Café* to someone who had not been before to ascertain which aspects they thought would encourage someone to connect with the group. Through observation I noticed that people often came with friends or family, so I was interested to listen to the language that participants may use in inviting others to come to *New Song Café*.

6.5.2.1 A place of learning and resourcing

Jackie Bellfield talks about *New Song Cafe* as a service where people come to be refreshed and sustained for service and leadership in their

²⁴² Michael Moynagh uses the example of *New Song Café* to illustrate those who belong to more than one expression of church. Michael Moynagh, *Being Church, Doing Life*, pp. 67-69.

own churches. This is reflected in some of the questionnaires and demonstrates that *New Song Café* fulfils such a need among regular worshippers in “typical” churches. Responses to the questionnaires suggested that they came to this as it offered an alternative worship environment or supplemented their regular worship, or as a place to learn new hymns.²⁴³ In informal conversations, people used *New Song Café* as a way to have access to, and learn new music resources which they were able to use in their own devotions or in corporate worship. Some of the comments below also give testament to Jackie’s skill at introducing and teaching new material.

Friendly, spiritual, prayerful, stimulating, opens up new territory in song worship. Jackie is an inspiration to us all.²⁴⁴

New Song Café had also been able to create a space where people felt at ease and thus enabled to be relaxed enough to learn unfamiliar or new material.

Fun, fellowship, mix of quiet reflective songs and some which are very upbeat – informal, comfortable and welcoming.²⁴⁵

At the time of the research there was an awareness on the part of the leadership that one of the purposes of the group was to enable those attending to worship in a relaxed atmosphere, to learn new material which in some cases was resourcing other worship services within the circuit and beyond. One of the band refers to people coming to *New Song Café* as a ‘top up’.²⁴⁶ To this extent the participation in *New Song Café* was not an end in itself, but also rippled out into other Christian communities.

²⁴³ Appendix 6.3.

²⁴⁴ Appendix 6.3.

²⁴⁵ Appendix 6.3.

²⁴⁶ The Liverpool District of the Methodist Church, available at: <http://www.liverpoolmethodistdistrict.org.uk/Fresh-Expressions.html> (accessed 22.05.16).

6.5.2.2 A friendly place where it is easy to invite others

There is a strong emphasis on a warm friendly environment. This is clear not only from the conversation which is evident as soon as you enter the room at *New Song Café*, but also in the way that people mix very naturally in the break. It is this friendly atmosphere mentioned in the questionnaires as a ‘selling point’ to someone who hadn’t been to *New Song Café*. It is a hallmark of this way of “doing Church differently” which has made a big impression on those who attend.

New songs, fellowship and cake in a friendly environment.²⁴⁷

What is interesting about concepts of welcome and acceptance at *New Song Café* is the use of language. In forty-two questionnaire responses when asked if they could describe *New Song Café* to someone who had not been before, ‘friendly’ appeared nine times, ‘welcoming’ four times, ‘accepting’ once, ‘non-threatening’ once and the word ‘fellowship’ twelve times. Those who used the word ‘fellowship’, used it in the sense of community and being together, but it is “typical” church language and reflects the composition of the group.

Jackie’s role as Fresh Expressions Missioner for the circuit is part of her role as a Methodist presbyter. She offers in an articulated way the openness of Methodism and is clear that one of the objectives of *New Song Café* is that people can feel comfortable in a church environment. The way she is able to achieve this in a fairly traditional church format is due not only to a concerted effort and repeated emphasis on the part of her and the rest of the team, but also due to her very warm, relaxed and genuine approach. This is also noted and commented upon in the response to the participants’ questionnaires:

A place to worship in a safe context.²⁴⁸

²⁴⁷ Appendix 6.3.

²⁴⁸ Appendix 6.3.

Accepting, welcoming, totally, unthreatening, totally fellowship.²⁴⁹

It is evident in the comments that people of different ages and backgrounds shared that they had found in *New Song Cafe* a place of safety and acceptance.

6.5.2.3 A place to worship without leading

In its early stages during 2010-11 *New Song Café* appeared to be meeting many different needs in one congregation. In addition to weekly worship in another Methodist Church or denomination, there was an apparent need for many participants to come to a different event. For some, this was an opportunity to be led in worship whereas in their “typical” church they may have weekly responsibility for some aspect of the worshipping service.

A chance to worship God without working the computer. It's appreciated!²⁵⁰

For those involved in leading worship, finding a place to worship without the responsibility of leading is important. For lay people who may take an active part in their own church worship week by week, either in music, technology, stewarding or worship leading, finding an opportunity to worship without leading can be difficult. The comment above is witness to the freedom of being able to worship without responsibility for the leadership of others.

6.5.3 Research goal 2: To discern what are the chief characteristics of *New Song Café*?

The evidence drawn from participant observation, the interview with Jackie Bellfield and the response to the questionnaire revealed two principal

²⁴⁹ Appendix 6.3.

²⁵⁰ Appendix 6.3.

characteristics, that of a focussed style of worship and the importance in this case study of food, namely cake.

6.5.3.1 Focussed style of worship

New Song Café had a focus on contemporary worship songs. Although there was a theme for the evening, often following the Church year and lectionary, music and singing was at the centre of the gathering. It was this characteristic that drew many from a distance to the group. Some people were coming with the desire to come to a particular act of worship with a specific focus. This narrow niche form of worship might also appear in fresh expressions which have a contemplative form such as Contemplative Fire,²⁵¹ or a highly sacramental and technological form such as Transcendence,²⁵² or an art based form such as Sanctus 1.²⁵³ *New Song Café* in a sense does not offer such a radical alternative but the numbers attending and the ecumenical nature of the meeting did emphasise the need for such a gathering. It also appeared to form a transitional and bridging place for people to experience and sing new material that they might not have access to, whether through instruments or technology on a weekly basis in their local churches.

A chance to meet new friends and learn new songs in a very warm and welcoming environment, headed by a great minister.²⁵⁴

Café style worship, with modern songs, and singing that you can join in with.²⁵⁵

The second comment above was made by someone who considered Bold Street Mission as their main place of worship. One aspect which is

²⁵¹ Available at: <http://www.contemplativefire.org/> (accessed 07.11.16).

²⁵² Sue Wallace, 'Alternative Worship and the Story of Visions in York', in Steven Croft and Ian Mobsby (eds), *Fresh Expressions in the Sacramental Tradition* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2009).

²⁵³ Available at: <http://www.sanctus1.co.uk/> (accessed 07.11.16).

²⁵⁴ Appendix 6.3.

²⁵⁵ Appendix 6.3.

often highlighted by those who are attending church services for the first time is the anxiety about ‘getting things right’ – knowing when to sit or stand, which hymn books or service books to use and where to find the place. Fresh Expressions recognise this anxiety and emphasise the importance of creating a low threshold to their events, in whatever context they may be. This can be on a physical entry level, but for those attending *New Song Café*, the atmosphere that the leadership team work hard to create is obviously appreciated and valued by those attending. For some people who attend the ability to sit for the evening and listen rather than an obligation to join in and sing, especially if they are unfamiliar or unknown songs, can be an easy way in. For some, the opportunity to have company and meet others is more important and music is the focus or vehicle in which this happens at *New Song Café* (6.5.2).

6.5.3.2 Ministry of cake

Many examples of fresh expressions meet around food or a meal. This is an element which was evident in all the case studies but was particularly singled out at *New Song Café*:

Great, nice to go and meet other people, have a chat, listen to good music (singing) and enjoying a cuppa with homemade cakes.²⁵⁶

Fellowship and laughs with friends and cake.²⁵⁷

The time, care and baking of cakes undertaken in advance of the evening showed how those on the catering teams wanted to show hospitality to those attending. Like those women who were knitting at home between *Knit and Natter* sessions, this preparation involved many others before the gathering and anyone was welcome to bake in advance and bring along cakes. The leaders of *New Song Café* have

²⁵⁶ Appendix 6.3.

²⁵⁷ Appendix 6.3.

also pioneered and co-ordinated the opportunity for those attending the monthly café worship to serve hot drinks at the crematorium on days such as Mother's Day, Christmas Eve and Easter Day. This extends this hospitality and ministry of cake out into the community. Jackie Bellfield initiated this through her links with council staff at the crematorium and the offer of a hot drink and cake opens up the opportunity for pastoral conversations with those who are bereaved.

6.5.4 Research goal 3: To investigate how *New Song Café* understand themselves as an ecclesial reality

This section which draws evidence mostly from the interview with Jackie Bellfield gives a leader's perspective on the aspirations but also on her reflections as the group has developed. There was no evidence from the participants' questionnaires which pertained directly to this research goal. I believe this was due to the number of those who responded at the time of the field work who belonged to "typical" congregations. The function of *New Song Café* for them at this time was one of additional resourcing, support and worship which complimented their existing church affiliation. The use of a questionnaire as opposed to interviewing did not allow me to explore this further in the same way as at *Somewhere Else* or *Knit and Natter*.

Even as early as February 2010, Jackie was able to reflect on the need for *New Song Café* to be able to react and change and allow circumstances to shape and alter the direction or proposed direction of this way of "doing Church differently". In her role as fresh expressions enabler for the circuit, she was versed in the fresh expressions language of listening to God and to the local context. Her flexibility and encouragement along with the leadership team have allowed *New Song Café* to develop and grow. The evenings that I observed at *New Song Café* followed a standard pattern, but there was enough flexibility to include and welcome leadership from others, incorporate guest speakers, or on one evening include Holy Communion.

Flexibility was needed from the leadership was to assess and adapt *New Song Café* continually, as it grew and the profile of those attending changed. In the months following my research, the leadership group continued to meet and in the Autumn of 2010, began to plan *New Song Network*, a number of associated meetings and events which would take place in between the monthly café worship. These included early morning services suitable for all ages, a number of Bible study and home groups, as well as community action projects which also had an interdenominational appeal across Warrington. It would be fair to say that these events emerged as the numbers at the monthly café service grew, and it also allowed deeper relationships to form within smaller groups. During the time of the research were meeting on the first floor of Bold Street Methodist Church, Warrington, in a large hall with a lift for access. Since the research has taken place they have refurbished the worship area downstairs so that access to worship is easier. Jackie Bellfield refers in her interview to the work of CASAI (Churches Action with Survivors with Abuse Issues) and those from that group who attend *New Song Cafe*. Easy access and a low entry threshold are particularly important for members of this organisation which has also had connections with *Somewhere Else* and is a project in the Liverpool District of the Methodist Church, with offices at Bold Street in Warrington.²⁵⁸ Another way in which the leadership team at *New Song Café* have encouraged deeper involvement in the wider community is by adding community events in addition to their monthly worship. These provide both a way of engaging further with social action in the community for those who are already involved with the worship of *New Song Café*, but also another low threshold for anyone who might like to invite someone to a conservation or

²⁵⁸ For women and men who seek contact with CASAI, the importance of an easily accessible space which they can enter and leave without attracting attention is crucial. This may involve a heightened awareness on the part of leaders and co-ordinators who work with such groups to be aware of and be able to adapt to those whose anxiety issues have caused them to avoid involvement with church events and worship in the past.

gardening project, or a walking group.²⁵⁹ This is an example of a fresh expression which is able and willing to work in both a traditional and “typical” context and a pioneering context – this is an outworking of the *New Song Network*, which has been part of the intentional planning and thinking and strategy which has accompanied the growth of *New Song Café*.

Jackie Bellfield was instrumental in the thinking and planning of this multi-layered approach and has spoken at Methodist Conference about these developments as a model for flexibility and the possibilities for growth within fresh expressions.

But even within what seems a structured approach, all of this has come from an emerging process of listening rather than a planting model:

I wasn't sure if *New Song Café* would be a church, I was not really sure what would happen with it, and I am glad, because it is not about what I want from it, and I have seen something emerge where we are at the point of saying what is this going to be and how are we going to develop this? What is happening now is that *New Song Café* is starting to show some of the hallmarks of church. Rather than me saying this is going to be church, within itself some of the hallmarks of church are starting to bubble away. ... Some of them are for example social justice, and interest in the social environment, so going to the crematorium on Christmas Eve to give out free drinks, 15 people turned up to help all of whom who were part of *New Song Café*. ... Some folks coming from a nearby wealthy middle class village saying:

“You have got people sleeping outside.”

“Yes, we have.”

“We've never seen that before. What can we do?”²⁶⁰

Mike Millikan, a member of the worship band expands on this development:

²⁵⁹ This approach echoes both the work of John Vincent's *Journey: Explorations into Discipleship* (Sheffield: Ashram Press, 2003) and Kathy Galloway's *Starting Where We Are: The Story of a Neighbourhood Centre* (Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 1998), both community action starting points offering those who may want to engage in a locally based project with the opportunity of exploring this piece of work in a faith framework.

²⁶⁰ Appendix 6.2.

It started as the café and then we recognised that some people were coming exclusively to this, some people were coming as a top up to their regular church, but some were coming as their only experience of church they were having was *New Song*. In response we decided we needed to do more, to introduce more teaching, it was our responsibility for those people who were seeing *New Song* as a Church in its own right.²⁶¹

6.6 Conclusion

In 2009 when I undertook the initial survey of churches in the Liverpool District, I was keen to include a case study from the Warrington Circuit as they had a high return of fresh expressions and had also made the commitment to appoint Jackie Bellfield as a part-time fresh expressions enabler. The growth of *New Song Café* into *New Song Network* is one of the significant developments in Methodist fresh expressions, and was highlighted as such when Jackie was invited to speak at Methodist conference in 2014, signalling the way in which *New Song Network* had become the newest church in Methodism. This endorsement brought a higher profile to ways of “doing church differently”, but affirmed their role within the connexion alongside “typical” congregations. I believe this is due to many factors, including a good leadership team comprised of an ordained minister and lay volunteers. Whilst rooted in Methodism it has been open to those of other denominations and has used contacts throughout a number of local churches to draw on support and resources. At the time of the fieldwork, it certainly was not anywhere near a “church for the unchurched”. As time has gone on, it has responded to feedback and listened to those who have made suggestions about new departures and areas of growth, thus drawing in those without previous church connections. It has also kept strong links with “typical” churches and church connections, and has run parallel to them, and has been successful in creating an atmosphere and format where people felt

²⁶¹ <http://www.liverpoolmethodistdistrict.org.uk/Fresh-Expressions.html> (accessed 04.08.16).

comfortable inviting friends and family without a church background to worship, while still offering a depth of engagement for those who were familiar with church. Its development into a church in its own right will be examined in 10.10.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CASE STUDY 4: *CAFÉ CHURCH @OOMOO*, ELM HALL DRIVE METHODIST CHURCH, SOUTH LIVERPOOL

Part A: *Café Church @Oomoo* Background and Research Methods

7.1 Introduction to *Café Church @Oomoo*

In the initial survey of churches in the district, café church was returned as one of the ways of “doing Church differently” being explored by Elm Hall Drive Methodist Church, alongside some new experiments with children, young people and families. Four members of the church made contact with the Café Church Network in advance of setting up the group. In order to understand the context in which the leadership group were exploring this way of being church, I will briefly outline the pre-history and history of “doing Church differently” at Elm Hall Drive Methodist Church leading to *Café Church @Oomoo*.

7.1.1 History of *Café Church @Oomoo*

A Methodist society at Elm Hall Drive on the outskirts of Liverpool was established in 1904 as outreach from the Trinity Grove Street Church to the expanding community.²⁶² The congregation grew and the church building was eventually opened in 1928. Modification to the entrance took place in the mid 1990s to provide a more accessible entrance to church and rooms for the many users of the building. The church is situated on Elm Hall Drive in Allerton in a residential area with a mix of local residents and professionals who have moved into the area. The Sunday congregation is made up of a combination of both groups, as

²⁶² Elm Hall Drive Methodist Church, available at: <http://www.ehdchurch.co.uk/#/our-history/4540225629> (accessed 13.05.16).

well as a number of students from the University of Liverpool and Liverpool Hope University both of which have halls of residence close to the church. The building has multiple users during the week including a nursery.

A Junior Church, called the Light Factory, has around fifty members from babies to age eighteen meeting in five sections. There are also two youth groups which meet in the evening. The church has a strong link with local schools who distribute advertising material for church events. The church is also one of the bases for Methodist chaplaincy to Liverpool's universities, and Mike Prescott, a lay worker was appointed early in 2010 with responsibility for the oversight of youth and student work.

There are a number of worship services at Elm Hall Drive Methodist Church. The Sunday morning congregation is made up of between eighty and 180 people of a range of ages. The spread of ages is even except for a significant gap in the 20-35 age range. There are some students (ages 18-22) who are present in worship on a Sunday morning but they tend to be those who are involved in leading worship in the music group. The first part of the service is always all-age and often led by a lay person from the Junior Church team before the children and leaders leave after the second hymn. In addition to the weekly Sunday service, there is a monthly rota of other services. On the first Sunday evening in the month, a bible study takes place. At four o'clock on the second Sunday a family service called Toast takes place. (Toast started in 2008 and has made connections with families who were attending Parent and Toddler groups at Elm Hall Drive and with those who attended Elm Hall Drive in the past but have had a break and have returned to church with their children.) On the third Sunday evening in the month the Gospel choir meets to rehearse. The fourth Sunday evening in the month is a circuit service which takes place at different churches around the circuit. The leadership team are

aware of the range of these different services and seek to create overlaps between people who attend different events.

The origins of *Café Church @Oomoo* can be traced through a series of alternative worship services, student congregations and 'outposts' strongly linked to Elm Hall Drive over the past twenty years. In the 1990s a church plant called 'The Upper Room' was established in a pub in Liverpool City Centre by members from Elm Hall Drive Methodist Church. Running parallel to the worship at The Upper Room was also an alternative worship service called the 'Awe Service' run by members of Methsoc at the University, which later developed into 'The Eight O'Clock service'. After the Upper Room folded and those involved in the planning of the Eight O'Clock service were unable to continue on a Sunday evening due to family commitments, there were a number of people who had begun to worship at Elm Hall Drive as students and had continued to attend an alternative worship service as they stayed in Liverpool for work after graduation. The target congregation for *Café Church @ Costa* which began in October 2009 was initially those who had attended the 'The Eight O'Clock service' who were now in their thirties and the new student cohort for whom there was not an alternative worship service at Elm Hall Drive.

With the intention of reaching out to the student population, the planning group decided to use an environment which was already familiar to students and decided to run a year's trial of café church based at Costa Coffee on Allerton Road. This is a busy road near to the church, where there is plenty of passing trade. Café church took place in the evening after the store had closed, and as staff had to be employed there was a recommended minimum amount to spent per evening. Staff hours also meant there was little flexibility over possible changes to the day and time of the café church meeting. This café church congregation met at Costa Coffee on Allerton Road once a month for ten months and it was during this time that I visited the group while conducting the initial survey. Prior to meeting at Costa Coffee on

Allerton Road, Rachel Fox had made a presentation to the church council at Elm Hall Drive when the group was considering café church taking place within the church building and were applying for the finance to buy a coffee machine to which the church council had agreed. After four members of the planning group attended the Café Church Network's training day they decided that to hold café church outside the church premises would be more suitable and the funding was not required. After meeting for a year at Costa Coffee the group wanted to look at changing the start time and the day, and Costa Coffee was not able to be flexible so the group began to consider using an independent coffee shop. Two of the planning group were already meeting once a week with friends at Oomoo café, which is independent, and closer to the university residences. Mindful of the situation at Costa Coffee they began an exploratory conversation with the owner who worshipped at another local church and was open to Elm Hall Drive using of Oomoo for café church.

7.2 Research methods for *Café Church @Oomoo*

7.2.1 Negotiated methods

I had attended two café church services while the group were meeting in Costa Coffee on Allerton Road while I was compiling the survey and selecting the case studies. I then observed this group monthly after their move to Oomoo from September to December 2010. I attended and took notes during the leadership team's planning meeting in January 2011 and conducted interviews with three out of four of the leadership team on 27th January 2011. The group started meeting fortnightly in January 2011 and I continued to observe the group during February and March and conducted the questionnaire in April 2011.

During the negotiated interviews with leaders, we discussed the best way to gather information from the group. This was the approach that I had taken with *Knit and Natter* (see 5.2.2). The leaders at *Knit and Natter* had a clear idea of how the group worked and how they wished

the research to be conducted so as to blend in with the atmosphere and structure of the group.

When I negotiated the research methods with three leaders of *Café Church @Oomoo*, there had only been four meetings at Oomoo and although they suggested ways of conducting the research, their opinions were inevitably much more tentative. They felt that interviewing may not produce a completely honest and accurate picture as most of those attending at that stage were either part of, or connected to someone on the leadership team. They felt that interviewing a small group in another area of the café may make others feel excluded or uncomfortable. They also felt that people were too busy to arrange a time other than *Café Church @Oomoo*, so suggested either just before or after *Café Church @Oomoo* might be more appropriate. As conversations with the leaders developed it was apparent to me that due to the small numbers of those involved, interviewing was not going to be able to take place in an unobtrusive fashion as had been possible at *Knit and Natter*. All three of the leadership team welcomed Rachel Fox's suggestion of an anonymous questionnaire. She felt that the format was something that the group were used to as they would often begin the evening with a quiz in paper format so this would be unthreatening and likely to produce a higher response. As the numbers attending were in single figures on the evening I used the questionnaire, it turned out to be an appropriate research method given the context.

7.2.2 Participant observation

Even before I negotiated the research methods with the members of the leadership team, I wondered how interviewing with this group was going to be either practical or appropriate. It, at least was going to be somewhat obtrusive in a small group. I was influenced by the disappointment I had received in the lack of response at *New Song Café* and recognised that I needed to rely more heavily on my own participant observation in this case study than in the previous three. This was the model that Gray-Reeves and Perham adopted during their

research for *The Hospitality of God*, as they visited fourteen emergent churches,²⁶³ worshipping alongside these communities and drawing their conclusions based on their observation and participation in worship and conversations held with the leaders and other participants on the evening in an informal manner. Although they acknowledged that what they saw could only be a snapshot of a community, they were aware that they had to rely on their own experience to understand and draw conclusions. In the same way, with such a small group (on the evening I conducted the questionnaire there were eight people present), I was aware of having to balance the role of participant observer quite carefully. In a larger gathering such as *New Song Café*, it was possible to take notes during the service. This was not as easy at *Café Church @Oomoo*. On several occasions, when there were fewer than ten people present, we would sit on sofas around one low table. It was often the case that only one person would talk at a time, rather than several conversations going on at any one time. Apart from the ice-breaker quiz where there might be two teams competing against each other, the presentation of the theme for the evening and the following discussion took place as one group. Although it would have been possible to have not made a contribution to the discussion, this would have seemed strange, so on each occasion I did become involved in the conversation on the theme. Being part of the conversation did allow me to build relationships with the leadership and thus gain an insight into the reasons why they had been initially motivated to begin the group.

7.2.3 Interviews

After reflecting on the interviews regarding research methods with the leadership team and observing *Café Church @Oomoo* in March 2011, I made the final decision that interviewing was not going to be appropriate. The opinions and hopes of the leadership team which were recorded in

²⁶³ Gray-Reeves and Perham explored this in their research methods for *The Hospitality of God*: 'In each of our visits the method was to share in worship, and to be, as far as possible, worshippers, rather than observers, very rarely writing anything down during the worship but participating fully' (p. 6).

the interviews and the conversation at the planning meeting mirrored much of the voices provided on the Fresh Expressions website, in that in this early stage in particular it is the views of the leadership team which influence and shape the group. Reading Jackie Bellfield's interview, *Café Church @Oomoo* would seem to be at the stage that Jackie had initially hoped for ahead of *New Song Café*, that is, a small core group which would establish a new way of working before others could be invited to join.²⁶⁴ The difficulty with the evidence for this case study was that the numbers attending at the early stages during participant observation were not conducive to either interviewing the single figure numbers of attendees who were not part of the planning group. The other difficulty was that occasions where there were maybe four or five attending who were not in the planning group present, it was their first time of attending, and it did not feel appropriate to question them without giving them the opportunity to reflect upon their experience. Some of those attending were overseas students who had come through contact with Mike in his role as a university chaplain and had limited English.

I was in the process of developing a questionnaire for *New Song Cafe* for March 2011 and decided to use a similar questionnaire for *Café Church @Oomoo* in April.

7.2.4 Questionnaire

I distributed the questionnaire (Figure 7.1) at the beginning of the evening meeting of *Café Church @ Oomoo* on April 5 2011. There were eight people present.

²⁶⁴ Appendix 6.2.

Figure 7.1

Questionnaire Conducted at *Café Church @Oomoo* – April 2011

This short questionnaire is to help me with my research at the Urban Theology Unit in Sheffield. Please circle the answer that applies to you and add in any other details you feel able to. You do not have to take part if you do not wish to, and this questionnaire is anonymous. Please ask if you any questions.

Thanks

Christine Dutton

1. I am male female
2. I am aged under 20 20-29 30-39 40-49 50-59 60-69 70-79
80-89 90+
2. *Café Church @Oomoo* is my main place of worship Yes No
- 3b. If answer to questions 3 is No:
I also worship at _____
3. Could you describe *Café Church @Oomoo* in a few words to someone who hasn't been here before?

Part B: *Café Church @Oomoo*: Thick Description

7.3 Thick description of *Café Church @Oomoo*

The church website advertised *Café Church @Oomoo* in this way:

We are a pretty relaxed, informal group of 18-30's (ish...) who enjoy a good coffee and the chance to get our heads round what it means to be a Christian in the hubbub of everyday life.²⁶⁵

Café Church @Oomoo has met monthly from October 2010 and from the beginning of February 2011 began to meet fortnightly. *Oomoo* was

²⁶⁵ <http://www.ehdchurch.co.uk/#/cafe-church/4540236617> (accessed 11.03.13). This link is no longer available as a new form of café church linked to Elm Hall Drive Methodist Church has replaced *Café Church @Oomoo* and details of the new café church are available at <http://www.ehdchurch.co.uk/#/cafe-church/4584406081> (accessed 21.06.16).

an independent café situated on Smithdown Road in South Liverpool. This group is run and organised by three volunteers from the church and one paid lay worker. There was also a fifth member of the planning team, who worked weekend shifts as a nurse, so was looking for a mid-week place to worship. She was responsible for the rotas for leading the sessions and co-ordinating with outside speakers for occasional events. The four members of the leadership team work in pairs so the evening is always led by two people. Mike Prescott, the lay worker and university chaplain, has the organisation of *Café Church @Oomoo* as part of his job description. The then minister, Alan Fretwell, was present at the first meeting in Oomoo in September 2010, but was not part of the leadership team.

Those leading arrive from 7pm and others gather between 7pm and 7.30pm. The large café space has informal seating including sofas and coffee tables. The information for the evening is set out on the tables, including a quiz as a discussion starter, usually with multiple choice answers. This allows people to engage with the topic that is to be the focus of the evening in an informal way; it is an ice-breaker for those who do not know each other, as the questions are always factual. After about ten minutes the theme for the evening is introduced, often by way of a short video clip projected onto a screen from a lap-top. After the presentation of the theme then the rest of the hour is spent in small group discussion with a final quiet reflection and prayer. The evenings I observed included an advent theme of preparation, one around community and one around sharing faith. On two occasions Korean, French or American students attended. This informal atmosphere and small group discussions enable the international students to engage in a deeper and longer conversation than may be possible after a Sunday morning service, and also there is an ability for those who do not have English as their first language to ask for clarification or repetition of phrases or ideas.

Although the group made the decision to move to Oomoo, there were no notes from meetings where this had been decided. There was not a record of who had been to any meeting or indeed the numbers involved. This informal oral culture became clear when I attended the planning meeting of the leadership team on January 2011. They were able to articulate verbally the people they were hoping to reach: (a) those who already had a connection with Elm Hall Drive and (b) those students who had made contact with the Methodist Church through Mike Prescott in his chaplaincy role. There is also a third category: some sixth formers who had previously been part of youth groups at Elm Hall Drive.²⁶⁶ The leadership team identified individuals in the first and third categories to be approached individually. These were people who had had a previous link at Elm Hall Drive and now ceased to attend worship, and those who had more recently made contact become involved with Toast, the monthly family worship. Darren Edwards in *Chav Christianity: Exploring What it Looks Like to be a Working-Class Christian* challenges the way in which community and relationality in terms of Christian mission might work in a coffee shop context.²⁶⁷ He is sceptical about the types of relationship that might occur in a Starbucks or Costa Coffee (which is interesting considering the role of Costa Coffee in association with the Café Church Network) stating his preference for an independent local café or a local pub where relationships can be built up in a more intimate rather than a branded or corporate environment. This would apply to the move from Costa to Oomoo – some of the parents who attended Toast were already meeting there in a group with their pre-school children and had built up a relationship with the owner. He had connections with another local church but was happy to negotiate and accommodate café church. The leadership group had to make several decisions about practical arrangements which, although flexible, were reactive rather than strategic. At Costa when the group initially formed, the timing of café church was

²⁶⁶ Appendix 7.3.

²⁶⁷ Darren Edwards, *Chav Christianity: Exploring What It Looks Like to Be a Working-Class Christian* (London: New Generation Publishing, 2013).

dependent on paid staff and their working hours. Although there was not a charge for the rent or the staffing at Costa Coffee, there was an expectation of a minimum spend which was not able to be met with a smaller group. The move to Oomoo with a more flexible arrangement meant that the group could continue to meet in a space outside the church, and the café was also able to accommodate the use of the premises which changed from monthly to fortnightly fairly easily. There was another change during the period of observation at Oomoo – in the first few months of meeting in Autumn 2010, the staff were present throughout the evening, but as time progressed, the reality of the evening was that people bought their refreshments when they arrived and then were engaged in the conversation and activities of the evening. The café staff made the decision to clear up once they had served refreshments at the beginning of the evening and then handed the keys to the group to lock up.

Section C: *Café Church @Oomoo*: Evidence and Data

7.4 Evidence from the negotiated research methods in respect of the research goals

7.4.1 Composition of *Café Church @Oomoo*

7.4.1.1 Gender distribution at *Café Church @Oomoo*

The gender balance of the leadership team is one male and four female. The balance of attendance at each *Café Church @Oomoo* in April 2011 was roughly equal: 8 attended – 5 women and 3 men.

7.4.1.2 Age distribution at *Café Church @Oomoo*

In April 2011, the age distribution returned in the questionnaire was as follows:

- 3 aged between 18-20
- 2 aged between 20-29
- 2 aged between 30-39
- 1 aged between 40-49

During the fieldwork, the group included some sixth formers, some students and some adults aged 20-50. In contrast to *New Song Café*, the age profile was much younger, and there was no-one of retirement age who attended. On the two occasions I attended the previous year when the group had met in Costa Coffee, including an evening where there had been a discussion ahead of the General Election and a Christian Aid themed evening, these were supported by a wider range of ages from Elm Hall Drive Methodist Church.

7.4.1.3 Current church connections

Out of the eight who attended, four people at *Café Church @Oomoo* considered it their main place of worship, three did not consider it as their main place of worship and one felt that both Elm Hall Drive and *Café Church @Oomoo* were their main places of worship.

Interestingly, of those who answered that *Café Church @Oomoo* was their main place of worship, two mentioned that they also worshipped at Elm Hall Drive, one mentioning the Toast service in particular. Of those who did not consider *Café Church @Oomoo* as their main place of worship, one worshipped at Dovedale Baptist Church, and one at the parish church of St. Matthew and St. James in Mossley Hill. One participant did not consider *Café Church @Oomoo* their main place of worship and completed the phrase I also worship at _____ with the word “church”. Although there was a sense that the group wanted to create a space in which they could invite those who were “unchurched”, my observation of the first year of this group was that it mainly attracted those who had already had existing contacts through Elm Hall Drive.²⁶⁸

²⁶⁸ This was particularly evident in the planning meeting when without a list or register of attendees (such as are held at *Somewhere Else* or *Knit and Natter*) the leadership group were able to name all those who had attended. This may also be due to the relatively small numbers which the group attracted.

7.4.2 Research Goal 1: To understand why people are connecting with *Café Church @Oomoo*

7.4.2.1 Opportunity to worship mid-week

The nature of Sunday is changing. This is not a new concept and one with which churches have been wrestling with before laws on Sunday Trading changed. The Fresh Expressions Initiative have also accepted and encouraged that week day worship is appropriate for those who have work, leisure or family commitments on a Sunday. The person responsible for organising the leadership rota of worship at *Café Church @Oomoo* is a nurse who works shifts at weekends, so although she came to Liverpool as a student and had connections with a Sunday congregation, is now only able to worship during the week. *Café Church @Oomoo* was her church community and not an additional activity to Sunday worship.

7.4.2.2 Café church for the over-churched

An interview with Alison Hulse, one of the leaders of *Café Church @Oomoo*, introduced the notion of church for the over-churched.²⁶⁹ Out of the core leadership of five people, two worked for the Methodist church, one was also involved in leading Toast as a volunteer, one was the daughter of a Methodist minister and involved in youth work at Elm Hall Drive, and one was only involved in leading *Café Church @Oomoo*. Therefore 80% of the leadership team were involved in preparing and leading worship elsewhere in the church on a weekly or

²⁶⁹ 'We also wanted to plant a church for the over-churched. Many churches run on the fuel of programs. Sunday school, Sunday morning worship, Sunday night church, Wednesday night suppers, choir practice, youth groups, VBS, Christian Karate, etc. All of that wears me out. What happens when churches operate under that kind of structure is that everyone, especially the staff, gets tired and they lose sight of the mission of the church that Jesus gave the church, to be a window of grace to the community that the church is in. Grace is a place that is intentionally low on programs. There are just a few things that we do: Sunday morning worship service, Community groups during the school year, discipleship classes in eight to ten week blocks, youth group and random events (we brought U2 to the Tryon Theater this past Spring). Thus, Grace is a church for the over-churched' Scott Steward, A Church for the Un-Churched, De-Churched, and Over-Churched, available at: <http://thestewartblog.wordpress.com/2009/06/29/a-church-for-the-un-churched-de-churched-and-over-churched/> (accessed 06.03.17).

monthly basis. They were looking for the alternative worship where they were able to be resourced and encouraged. As they are frequently leading and facilitating complex worship or busy family and youth services, the worship they were looking for was one of a more reflective and conversational basis. The leaders expressed informally that they were looking for something less directional. They were experienced worship leaders and small group facilitators so knew and had access to material to resource *Café Church @Oomoo*, thus reducing their workload.

7.4.2.3 Participation

One of the younger members of the planning group at *Café Church @Oomoo* shared in her interview about the importance of participating. She was able to compare this to her experience of Sunday worship:

I really like the discussions and things like that. I've always been into discussions and debates and things like that, so it's nice to hear other people's views and be able to express my own. Actually be able to talk about it, obviously on a Sunday morning in a service you are listening. What I like about café church is being able to talk and being able to talk to other people and get that discussion going. Even if you are in a group and you have all come from the Methodist Church you still have lots of different views, so it is really interesting for me, in terms of being able to talk and express my views and learn more of other peoples' views and things like that.²⁷⁰

This quote expresses the importance of participation but also gives an awareness that this form of group might supplement or complement a Sunday service allowing this form to be a parallel church which would not replace but would run alongside a "typical" church service.

7.4.3 Research Goal 2: To discern what are the chief characteristics of *Café Church @Oomoo*

7.4.3.1 Offering an informal alternative

²⁷⁰ Appendix 7.4.

The evidence regarding characteristics from *Café Church @Oomoo* was similar to the response at *New Song Café*. The answers in the questionnaire asking members to describe the group produced language such as “informal” (3/8), “relaxed” (3/8), “low key” (1/8), “chilled” (2/8).

In *Café Church @Oomoo* the leaders had connections to “typical” church at Elm Hall Drive. They were aware of offering a way of “doing church differently” in which a higher level of participation was intended as an attraction to being part of this group. This group was one in which dissatisfaction with the current level of participation within “typical” worship was aired. They believed that the discussion within *Café Church @Oomoo* provided greater participation than was achievable during worship at Elm Hall Drive.

7.4.3.2 Group planning

The creation of and format of *Café Church @Oomoo* has created a support structure for those attempting to do something different, a natural and safe place to suggest new ideas, and also to review and assess through regular planning meetings the direction of *Café Church*. It is not solely led in one particular style or by one members of the leadership team but in a collaborative and shared way. Although the group has links with ministerial staff, calling upon them to lead occasional evenings, it does not rely solely on a stipendiary minister to plan and lead worship, therefore ensuring its sustainability in financially vulnerable times.

7.4.3.3. Meeting outside the church building

Angela Shier-Jones in *Pioneer Ministry and Fresh Expressions of Church*, defines fresh expressions of church as,

Church in the sense of Christian community aware of the presence of God, seeking to follow the way of Christ and open

to the transforming power of the Holy Spirit wherever it happens to be in the world.²⁷¹

Shier-Jones continues by arguing that for members of fresh expressions of church, instead of finding sanctuary in a place of retreat (a designated church building) they are able to find or found sanctuary in the everyday spaces and places of life. She claims that it is the pioneer's calling to help people in their attempts to create this sanctuary, whether it is in the workspace or the gym. This sense of developing spirituality in ordinary places did not transfer easily to this case study, especially as the group were meeting outside the café opening times and those attending were mostly already connected with the church. The aspiration to engage with those outside church premises was articulated, but the reality was that at the time of the participant observation, this was largely a "typical" church group meeting off site.

7.4.3.4 "Pop-up" church

Some of the planning group had been involved in a number of previous historic experiments (7.1.1). I had the sense that they saw each one as part of the natural need for this congregation continually to try out new ways of "doing church differently". They were comfortable with this "pop-up" church approach and I did not witness any conversation about long term sustainability or any strategic plan about their direction of travel. The leadership group were very relaxed about their organisation, planning from month to month, and adapting quickly based on feedback at the end of the session or in conversations between meetings.

7.4.4 Research Goal 3: To investigate how *Café Church @Oomoo* understand themselves ecclesiologically

In this section the evidence provided by the participants is presented with caution as it originates from such a small sample. This is presented as the

²⁷¹ Shier-Jones, *Pioneer Ministry and Fresh Expressions of Church*, p. 7.

early stage in the life of a few friends rooted in a “typical” church trying out an experiment in “doing church differently”.

I did not have any way of establishing whether the returned questionnaires were from either a participant or a member of the leadership team. One participant described *Café Church @Oomoo* as ‘friendly discussion’. Those who did consider *Café Church @Oomoo* as their main place of worship described it as ‘low church’, ‘discussion based worship’, ‘a community of people learning what it means to do life together with Christ and each other’, and ‘a chilled discussion based ‘non-church’ like group, looking at Christian life in a fun, informal way’.

My observation was that the reasons given in 7.4.2 for attending *Café Church @Oomoo* shared by the leaders may have expressed their hopes for the future of the group rather than the ecclesial reality, e.g. in the interview with Mike Prescott:

I don’t personally believe that somebody who becomes a Christian automatically suspends their personal tastes and suddenly will like what we do at Elm Hall Drive on a Sunday morning. What we do at Elm Hall Drive on a Sunday morning is very different to what we do at café church, however I personally believe that what we do at café church can be enough for people. It can be a community of believers who are encouraging each other, learning together, growing together, supporting each other. My priority is not bring people from café church to Elm Hall Drive it is getting people to café church, that’s my priority.²⁷²

The reality was that this model, informed by the needs of the leadership team, worked for them at this time in their lives and relationships. They were struggling with what they considered the restrictive “typical” church worship they experienced at Elm Hall Drive and were looking for an alternative experimental way of sharing faith. Because the core of this small group were either leading childrens’ or youth ministry at Elm Hall Drive or working on a Sunday, they were not regularly taking part in the whole of morning worship. They were seeking a way of engaging

²⁷² Appendix 7.2.

with each other, supporting each other, in a participative style and found that a café church format met this need. The ecclesial reality of this group was that it functioned in a very similar way to many house groups which exist alongside “typical” congregations.

7.5 Conclusion

Case Study four, was the one which produced relatively little evidence in comparison with the other three. This group ceased to meet in 2013. This was due to work commitments on behalf of the leadership team and Mike Prescott leaving his post at Elm Hall Drive to work at the cathedral. This shows both the fragility and vulnerability of such parallel groups, and in one sense repeats the temporary nature of the previous experiments at Elm Hall Drive. In initiating the experiment of café church, first at Costa Coffee and then at Oomoo, Elm Hall experimented with a potential missional opportunity. They sought to discover what church might look like if they were to leave the church building and create or affirm a Christian community in a setting which is culturally familiar to a targeted community of students and young parents. What they found was that this approach brought its own practical challenges, and that simply being in a third space did not on its own bring in others who might have been speculatively interested in finding out more about Christianity or church.

A new minister Caroline Ainger was appointed in 2013, and café church now takes place weekly at a church owned coffee shop in Aigburth, meaning it has taken on a circuit dimension rather like *New Song Café* in the early stages of its existence. The Methodist Church in Aigburth sold its building and moved into a shop front premises, so that its weekday café church and its Sunday services now take place in the same location.

7.6 Conclusion to part two

Having considered each case study, I now proceed to analyse these local ecclesial realities, and discuss the relation between the realities I

have uncovered and current understandings dominant within Methodism and the Fresh Expressions Initiative. In so doing all the research goals will be addressed: Chapter 8 (RG1), Chapter 9 (RG2), Chapter 10 (RG3 and RG4) and Chapter 11 (RG5) as I compare the official Methodist statement and Fresh Expression rhetoric with the ecclesial realities of the case studies.

PART THREE

THE ECCLESIAL REALITY OF FRESH EXPRESSIONS:

THE FRUITS OF THE RESEARCH

CHAPTER EIGHT

WHY “DOING CHURCH DIFFERENTLY”?

8.1 Introduction

This first research goal was initially to establish whether these groups were in reality “church for the un-churched”. I established that this was not solely the case early in participant observation in each case study. Then I developed a more curious and open-ended interest in why these particular groups, which do not appear to have the external, recognisable, physical appearance of most “typical” Methodist churches, were attracting participants. In order to examine why people were connecting with these groups, the following sections (8.2 – 8.5) will take the case studies one by one and look at the common reasons why people were attracted to these forms of “doing church differently”. Then I will compare the studies (8.6) before drawing out why these groups were attracting newcomers with and without previous church connections (8.7).

8.2 Analysis of why people are connecting with *Somewhere Else*

A sense of the novel, of something different, was always palpable at *Somewhere Else*. It was rare that I would attend and know everyone present, and so there was a real sense of beginning again in every session. As a researcher, I found the unpredictability of the group both exciting and challenging, but it did mean that research goal 1 ‘Why are people connecting with this group?’ rather than ‘Why have people connected with this group?’ was appropriate.

During the period of observation, there were those from other countries, especially those seeking asylum, for whom the connection with *Somewhere Else* was part of a wider new beginning and for whom the radical hospitality offered was key to the group. The task of bread-making together sometimes replaced the need for language, or became a place to

learn English over a period of time. A sense of a fresh start for people at difficult places in their lives was also a hallmark of some of those connecting with *Somewhere Else* (3.2.3). This is powerfully echoed in the interview with Steve Allen, whose life had been turned around by his connection with church after his experience of living on the streets; it is a powerful testimony which he often shared with newcomers and during the prayer time.²⁷³

What also was striking in one of the interviews was the way in which a newcomer to bread-making, prayer, faith and church could see all these elements as naturally connected, and feel at ease.²⁷⁴ *Somewhere Else* produced two different responses about why people were connecting with the group. The first was a personal response about being accepted, and the second was about participation in an activity that offered a sense of purpose and direction.

8.2.1 A place of acceptance

This was one of the strongest reasons why people came to *Somewhere Else*. It was a very mixed group of people, and in some senses, the high proportion of those who were vulnerable, through disability, mental illness, asylum status, homelessness, and grief defined the composition of the group. The high level of participation and involvement required meant that there needed to be a sensitivity to the needs of others. The focus was the bread and this allowed everyone to be accepted first and foremost as a bread-maker on that day, and thus the division between insider and outsider was much harder to distinguish at *Somewhere Else*. Being accepted was important for those with a previous church connection, for those visiting, but also for those who had never had any contact with a church community. It was my observation that the welcome was strongly bound up with involvement and engagement on a common task, as below,

²⁷³ Appendix 4.4.

²⁷⁴ Appendix 4.1.

along with sense of equality as those of differing experience and skill gathered around the table.

8.2.2 A sense of purpose in a practical task

The physical task of making bread in itself formed the community. People needed to work together, to ask for help, to rely on each other, in order that the bread could be made and baked safely. There was a strong sense of purpose, of a task to be completed, leading to two finished loaves which would leave with the bread-maker at the end of the session. Often people came with a sense of who they might share their extra loaf with, particularly if there was someone in need; so those concerns were fed into the prayer time, creating a sense of inter-connectedness between the bread-maker, the praying community, and the wider world. This sense of purpose was also enhanced by the fact that being part of *Somewhere Else* took up the majority of the day. A day's bread-making became part of a rhythm of the week for those taking part.

8.3 Analysis of why people are connecting with *Knit and Natter*

This group provided the largest sample of interviews. The reasons why the women had connected and continued to come to *Knit and Natter* were common across the interviews, and encompassed both the desire and need to be with others, along with a sense of belonging and purpose. The knitting itself allowed participants to connect with the weekly meeting as well as ongoing involvement at home.

8.3.1 Looking for a place to belong

This was a common reason for people connecting with *Knit and Natter*. Out of the four case studies, this group was the only one composed of people who lived in a close geographical area. A sense of isolation before joining the group was mentioned in the interviews and it was striking how many new relationships had grown up as part of being part of the group. The fact that being part of such a group was recommended by a doctor and the healthy living centre gives a sense of how important for good

physical and mental health, being part of such a group is considered in the wider community. The guidelines from the Chester and Wirral NHS partnership identified five steps to good mental wellbeing: connect, be active, take notice, learn, give.²⁷⁵ These elements were all able to be achieved by participating in a group such as *Knit and Natter*. Participants experienced for themselves the benefits of being part of this community. The interviews showed that relationships are no longer necessarily naturally formed between near neighbours, especially when people are out at work, or commuting a distance to work: e.g. two women met at *Knit and Natter* and discovered by chance that they lived in the same street. There was no evidence that the women who joined *Knit and Natter* searching for community and company were specifically looking for this from a faith community. The journey into prayer and faith came as a result of being in the group (5.4.4 and 9.3). In the case of *Knit and Natter*, the sense of belonging was strongly linked to the women's sense of identity and role. This was expressed by the women who shared the way in which they had joined the group at places of transition in their lives, often after retirement, following a bereavement, or when they were not needed to care for children or parents any longer (5.4.2.1). This gap had left the women with both time and the absence of company; and *Knit and Natter* had given them a new sense of purpose and belonging. This transference of care from those known to the women personally to those unknown or distant recipients of the garments was not problematic for them (5.4.2.3). Belonging to the church was an additional factor to having joined *Knit and Natter* rather than a primary objective for connecting with the group.

I've got an interest because I've always been a Methodist. I don't really want to go to church but I want to be in with them. Do you know what I mean? I just like the people, but I'm not sure about the church.²⁷⁶

This comment was made by a woman who was a member of one of the Methodist Churches in Ellesmere Port. This comment stresses and

²⁷⁵ Cheshire and Wirral Partnership NHS, *Keeping Well*, available at: <http://www.cwp.nhs.uk/supporting-you/health-work-and-well-being/keep-well> (accessed 23.05.16).

²⁷⁶ Appendix 5.1.

reinforces Chris Crowder's assertion that relationships and friendship are key and important parts of church life that those attending the group found in *Knit and Natter*.

8.3.2 Therapeutic knitting

A sense of wellbeing, calm and relaxation combined with the benefit of sharing their skills in order that others might benefit all formed important reasons why the women had joined this group (5.4.2.2). Other knitting groups existed in the area, but this one with its focus on knitting for need had been an important reason for those who had joined. Although informally some of the women talked of other knitting they were currently working on, any garments, shawls or blankets knitted during the sessions were donations for the projects so there was always a common sense of purpose, of giving away, of being mindful of those who were going to receive the items. As relationships with the South African orphanage developed then the orphanage would send measurements and the women would 'knit to order' for specific children, thus cementing a sense of community between the group and the orphanage.

8.4 Analysis of why people are connecting with *New Song Café*

During the participant observation period, the main gathering of the emerging New Song Network was the monthly *New Song Café*. The nature of a monthly meeting and the distance that people travelled to attend New Song Café meant they spent a lot of time chatting before the singing began. The questionnaires proved effective in collecting data, especially the evidence which supported the hunch that this group was certainly not a church for 'the unchurched'. At the time of the research, 44 out of 47 respondents to the questionnaire considered *New Song Café* attendance supplementary to their 'typical' church, although anecdotal evidence and the development of the *New Song Network* would suggest that in the intervening period this pattern has changed to include others without a church background.

8.4.1 A place of resourcing

For the period of the research a place of resourcing and equipping those in local churches was an accidental outcome of the way in which *New Song Café* emerged. This also suggests that people were looking for an alternative to their “typical” church but not one that would replace their regular place of worship. Instead, they took advantage of being in a relaxed, informal environment to learn and become familiar with new music and worship songs which they could introduce back in their own churches. As several local churches had between five and seven of their members attending *New Song Café*, this would suggest that there was enough of a critical mass to introduce new material with confidence.

8.4.2 A place to worship without leading

Through informal conversations, it was evident that some of those that attended held positions of responsibility in their home churches, where they were involved in leading worship and stewarding. They appreciated ‘being led’ so that they could worship while not having to concentrate on the mechanics of working the computer. On the occasions I have revisited *New Song Café* since the research, I have noticed it is also a monthly opportunity for other clergy to meet and attend worship together, when not leading worship on a Sunday evening.²⁷⁷

8.4.3 A friendly place where it is easy to invite others

Responses in the questionnaire suggested that everyone could think of a positive way to encourage someone else to come along to *New Song Café*. This was also evident in the way that it was unusual for individuals to come on their own, people would often share lifts and

²⁷⁷ This would add weight to the argument that “doing church differently” can become a place for the over-churched as mentioned by Alison Hulse in Appendix 7.5.

bring others along. Bringing others was encouraged and in her interview on the district website, Jackie Bellfield talks naturally and enthusiastically about growth.²⁷⁸ There was at the time of the research and continues to be an articulated expectation that this is an event to which participants can bring others along, and this desire and enthusiasm of sharing faith is one which is part of the experience of this group.

8.5 Analysis of why people are connecting with *Café Church @Oomoo*

As noted in 7.4.1, there were on average ten people attending *Café Church @Oomoo* bi-monthly from January to April 2011. Between four and six of these were involved in leadership in the group, so this analysis is based on a much smaller sample and relies on participant observation and informal conversations rather than the comments returned in the questionnaire.

8.5.1 Opportunity to worship mid-week

One participant at *Café Church @Oomoo* frequently worked Sundays in her current job and was therefore looking for a worship service which enabled her to attend on a weekday evening. Some other experiments in the district which were returned in the survey were also attempts by churches to find ways of meeting midweek. Although statistics show that Sunday congregations have been declining, I have been unable to find any research which has looked at this in the light of changing work patterns reflecting weekend working. An opportunity to meet midweek was also welcomed by those who had responsibility for sharing in the leadership of worship on Sunday – in this group this was articulated in conjunction with comments in the section below (8.5.2).

8.5.2 Café church for the over-churched

²⁷⁸ Available at <http://www.liverpoolmethodistdistrict.org.uk/Fresh-Expressions.html> (accessed 17.01.17).

Alison Hulse's phrase 'over churchd'²⁷⁹ is one which in some aspects has a resonance with the person whose response to the questionnaire at *New Song Café*, stated that they appreciated the opportunity to worship without leading (8.4.2). However, those that were 'over-churchd' had the tendency in the café atmosphere away from the "typical" church to express their frustrations with church life, organisation and structures. This led them to use the language and insider knowledge of "typical" church. A potential difficulty of a group "doing church differently" which is dominated by those who attend "typical" church is that their intention to encourage or attract those without a previous church connection might be affected by this negative discourse. This was not evident in any of the other case studies and I wonder whether this is because numerically the ratio of those who were in the core leadership dominated the occasional newcomer.

8.5.3 Finding a place to discuss and challenge

Although the leadership group at *Café Church @Oomoo* were all involved in "typical" worship as members of a congregation or in leadership, there was a dissatisfaction that the format of Sunday worship was not attractive to 'people who would not normally walk through the doors on a Sunday morning'.²⁸⁰ The style of one person leading from the front was incompatible with the questioning and challenging place of conversation which they wished to create through a café church format. As the questionnaires showed that members were also connected with a "typical" church, *Café Church @Oomoo* provided them with an informal event where they could participate in a discussion, and question and learn together in addition to a "typical" church service.

8.6 Comparison of why people are connecting with the case studies

This section will examine how the main reasons for connecting with ways of "doing church differently" compared across the case studies first from the perspective of those attending the groups, secondly the aspirations

²⁷⁹ Appendix 7.5.

²⁸⁰ Appendix 7.2.

and plans of those leading the groups, and then to examine how far there was a correlation or discrepancy between the two?

8.6.1 Comparison of participants' perspectives

8.6.1.1 Hospitality

The participants in the research overwhelmingly responded that their group offered hospitality, acceptance and welcome. The sense of welcome, whether this was in advance of attending the group, through personal invitation or contact with the leader or co-ordinator, had made the participants want to come and be part of the group. The fear of attending had been removed and this was particularly evident in those who attended the group on their own. The welcome led to a sense of belonging. Participants referred to the language of belonging, and not the traditional language of membership.²⁸¹ In some instances these comments were made in the very early days of exposure to scripture or prayer.²⁸² The sense of belonging to a Christian community had made an impression upon some of those attending before they had begun to articulate belief.

Those interviewed at *Somewhere Else* or at *Knit and Natter*, who were encountering prayer and the Bible for the first time, were comfortable enough to share their own thoughts and experiences as part of the research, thus providing me with the evidence that these groups had offered them the opportunity to explore these aspects of faith in a safe environment.

8.6.1.2 Participation

Involvement and participation in the activity of the groups was a reason which was highlighted, emphasised and valued amongst those who attended across all of the case studies. The ability to share in a common task was essential in terms of the functioning of the group and their ability

²⁸¹ Richard Thomas, *Counting People In: Changing the Way We Think about Membership and the Church* (London: SPCK, 2003).

²⁸² Appendix 4.1.

to attract new people. Many people came because of the opportunity to take part in community activity with others, whether this was bread-making alongside others at *Somewhere Else*, participation in knitting for a common need at *Knit and Natter*, joining in singing and conversation at *New Song Café*, or sharing in discussion at *Café Church @Oomoo*.

Gray-Reeves and Perham noted in their observation of emergent church communities the growing importance of involvement in worship, including the acceptance of those who are at different stages of a journey of faith and of differing theological opinions: 'There is a deep sense of participation; very rarely does anyone seem detached.'²⁸³ In these case studies, participation was expressed in terms of a shared practical expression of faith, especially in the case of baking and knitting, but also in terms of having a voice in the shaping and direction of the group and a voice in the shared leading and planning of worship. For others the baking and talking are integrated, and the slow rhythm of the day enables conversation to take place. Those attending share their positive experiences of being involved and having the opportunity to talk to others: 'It is so relaxing because you are talking to different people'²⁸⁴ and 'there is always time to talk.'²⁸⁵

Participation and sharing in the different elements of the day allow close relationships to develop: 'We make the bread, we eat it, we share, we talk all the way through, we become neighbours to each other [...].'²⁸⁶ This participation has a wider influence as the second loaf which is baked is given away, allowing others to share in the breaking and eating of bread. This could be a friend or stranger. Some of the bakers come with an idea of who might appreciate a loaf and are thinking of them as they bake, similar to the knitting of a prayer shawl at *Knit and Natter* where the recipient is known. Some of the bakers will take their loaf out with them

²⁸³ Gray-Reeves and Perham, *The Hospitality of God*, p. 18.

²⁸⁴ Appendix 4.2.

²⁸⁵ Appendix 4.2.

²⁸⁶ Appendix 4.3.

into the city on their way home, and share it with a stranger on the street or on the bus, where the physical gift of bread can be the starting point for a conversation about faith and church.

8.6.2 Comparison of leaders' perspectives

8.6.2.1 Hospitality

All of the leaders, whether ordained or lay, placed a high emphasis on welcome. All of the case studies stressed the necessity of a personal welcome and invitation. This is not held solely as the responsibility of the leaders, but is the role of everyone. One common aspect of the leaders' perspective on welcome and hospitality was the sensitive and continual reflection which accompanied listening to the stories and experiences of those who were attending the respective groups. For all of the groups the leaders were able to refer to those for whom attending a "typical" form of church in the past had been problematic and often this had been linked to an experience of feeling unaccepted or unwelcome. In *Somewhere Else*, people had shared with leaders that this exclusion had stemmed from illiteracy, disability, ethnicity or sexual orientation. In *Knit and Natter*, *New Song Café* and *Café Church @Oomoo*, the opportunity to talk, share and listen as an integral part of the event enabled those attending to share with the leaders the importance of the welcome they had received, and as such, the leaders were more aware of making this a priority for new participants.

8.6.3 Correlation or discrepancy between participants and leaders in respect of research goal 1.

The views of the participants and the leaders were very similar: those participating found a place of welcome and acceptance, or company and companionship that was important to them. A sense of being valued and having a sense of purpose encouraged regular attendance (particularly at *Knit and Natter* and *New Song Café*) and also encouraged people to bring along their friends and recommend it to others. Creating this environment was intentional on the part of the leaders but I observed that the practice

and experience of welcoming became integral to the culture and the ethos of the groups themselves.

8.7 Conclusion

Why “doing church differently”?

Research goal 1 (2.3) introduced the issue of why people were choosing to connect with these groups. One of the purposes of research goal 1 was to explore in a rigorous way whether the claim by the fresh expressions initiative that these groups were “church for the unchurched” was valid. As had been evidenced in Chapters 3-7, the composition of these groups included those with previous and current church connections. If it were a simple correlation that these groups were not really true fresh expressions of church the reality of those attending could be disregarded.²⁸⁷ But as *Somewhere Else*, *Knit and Natter* and *New Song Café* had all been either used as examples or models either on the Fresh Expressions DVD or website, then this would suggest that the initiative was either unaware of the reality of the composition of the groups they feted or were aware of the mixed composition but still were keen to promote a missional agenda of “church for the unchurched” and therefore did not reflect this in their aspirational, intentional and promotional statements.²⁸⁸

Instead, there are a significant number of those attending all the case studies who have a prior or parallel church affiliation, so I am able to conclude that these groups are not simply for the “unchurched”. Neither was there evidence that the leaders had set these groups up with the specific intention of only reaching the “unchurched”. All the groups hold a mixed composition, especially *Somewhere Else* and *Knit and Natter*, where there was a mix of (a) those who had no previous church connection and (b) those who had a historic church affiliation and (c) those

²⁸⁷ As was the case in the *From Anecdote to Evidence* report.

²⁸⁸ Dalpra and Vivian, *Who's there?*

who currently worshipped at other churches (Methodist and other) and simultaneously attended one of the groups. So, the reason why people are choosing to engage with these groups is more complex than seeking an introduction to the Christian faith.

I would suggest that the motivation of creating ways of “doing church differently” has changed over the last ten years. Just prior to *Mission-Shaped Church*, a sense of no longer belonging in a “typical” church was the catalyst for some in establishing and experimenting with “doing church differently”. There was a desire among pioneers to create a Christian community which was able to cope and adapt to a rapidly changing cultural and digital age and where those of a similar generation could feel at home. Where there was a disconnect in being able to associate with cultural references, particularly music, then the sense of belonging can be seen to be diminished and therefore the journey to belief prevented.²⁸⁹

At the heart of these case studies, all those leading and co-ordinating held a desire for everyone to know God and to find God within shared community life. This hallmark of Methodist Armenian theology is manifest in these examples of “doing church differently”, which is expressed in practice, as in “typical” Methodist life, such as the baptism service in the *Methodist Service Book*,²⁹⁰ and the open table at communion services. This offer of Christ’s love for all, demonstrated in welcome and hospitality has become such an embedded part of Methodist church life that for those within the Church this seems such a natural part of our expression of faith that it is almost common place and not worth mentioning. But for those who are experiencing this form of acceptance either in society or the church for the first time, the research shows that this emphasis on welcome for all and the importance that ‘belonging before believing’ has taken within recent Methodist history has been a significant entry point for those without a current church affiliation.

²⁸⁹ In this way groups have demonstrated the notion of belonging, behaving and believing explored in Phyllis Tickle’s *The Great Emergence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008).

²⁹⁰ *The Methodist Worship Book* (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 1999), pp. 60-113.

Many of those participating expressed a desire to find companionship and company within these groups “doing church differently”, or having received such a warm welcome, have felt confident inviting others. Often within churches there has been effort and energy expounded on advertising events in the hope of attracting others to worship and wider church activity. The evidence from the case studies, particularly *Somewhere Else*, *Knit and Natter* and *New Song Café*, is that the response to attend, participate and become involved has been largely in response to a personal invitation, thus the relational emphasis of the group is determined from the first contact. Why “doing church differently” then? In these groups people have found, discovered or rediscovered that all are valued, they have a part to play in sharing together, learning together, and helping others. Through this and alongside this, they are discovering prayer and song which articulate the Christian faith. At *Somewhere Else*, *Café Church @Oomoo*, and at Discipleship Bible studies as part of the *New Song Network*, they are able to discover the scriptures. Combined with a sense of creating a new sense of belonging, the challenge in Methodism has been precipitated by an increasing sense of decline. In Methodism, the membership has declined by a third in ten years and many churches who are responding to these statistics for mission are exploring ways of “doing church differently”, are tasked with introducing the Christian faith to those without a regular experience of a church community or contact with others who attend church. The importance of creating a low threshold is crucial for these experiments. By creating informal and welcoming atmosphere which provided space for listening and developing relationships, those connected with the church could invite their friends with confidence leading to the mixed composition of the groups.

CHAPTER NINE

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF “DOING CHURCH DIFFERENTLY”

9.1 Introduction

This chapter will seek to understand the importance of the characteristics which emerged in these case studies (9.2 – 9.5), before considering a comparison between participants and leaders’ perspectives (9.6), then summarising the common characteristics of hospitality, participation and flexibility (9.7). It will determine whether these characteristics are part of new small groups in general (9.8), before drawing conclusions (9.9).

9.2 Analysis of characteristics at *Somewhere Else*

This section will address the characteristics of radical hospitality (4.5.3.1, participation (4.5.3.2), a place to learn and grow (4.5.3.3), and flexibility (4.5.3.4) identified during the fieldwork.

9.2.1 Extravagant hospitality

Extravagant hospitality (4.5.3.1) was expressed through the act of eating together at *Somewhere Else*. This common and simple meal, of soup and bread, offered to all who gathered that day, was a time when the pace slowed down and people were able to have conversation together. The sharing of food continued the act of weighing out of ingredients together and helping each other with the practical aspects of bread-making. The hospitality was not owned by those in authority and offered to the guests, but a place where all were expected and learned to offer to each other (4.5.3.2). Extravagant hospitality was language used at *Somewhere Else* before the publication of Robert Schnase’s book *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, which has been used in initial and continuing

ministerial development within Methodism.²⁹¹ Schnase's five practices are those of radical hospitality, passionate worship, intentional faith development, risk-taking mission and service, and extravagant generosity. The radical hospitality suggested by Schnase focusses on taking welcome seriously within "typical" churches including practical aspects of physical access. I will consider this suggestion in 9.4 when I look at *New Song Café*, but the hospitality offered at *Somewhere Else* as well as extravagant is realistic, the accommodation is basic but welcoming, the food is simple, good but not lavish. At *Somewhere Else*, the hospitality relies on the way in which each bread-maker that day takes seriously the task of working together with respect, understanding and acceptance of the learning, limitations and experience of those attending, and on behalf and in the name of the church takes on a common responsibility and offers that extravagant welcome.

9.2.2 Participation

This characteristic was at the heart of life at *Somewhere Else*. Participation in a common task allowed everyone to develop relationships and a sense of purpose. The emphasis on a church which is relational is a hallmark of fresh expressions. Working together erodes a sense of church as a collection of individuals who do not know anything about the lives of those they worship alongside. The practical vehicle of bread-making at *Somewhere Else* breaks down barriers and builds trust.

9.2.3 A place to learn and grow

Learning to make bread and to leave *Somewhere Else* with a sense of confidence and achievement was essential for everyone, irrespective of ability or background. Participants learnt to work with others, to bake alongside those of different nationalities, languages, abilities and previous church experience. The process of bread-making allowed participants to learn to work together generously and graciously. Taking on a facilitator role allowed some the

²⁹¹ Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007).

possibility to grow into leadership taking on responsibility for the bread-making process and the care of others.

9.2.4 Flexibility

Being adaptable and flexible was a necessary skill at *Somewhere Else*. Although there was a strict rhythm and set pattern for both the bread-making and prayers which offered a stable routine, the combination of bread-makers and group dynamics meant that any day was never straightforward or predictable. There was always the possibility for the unexpected to occur. This brought energy, excitement and a real sense of “doing church differently” but it could also be challenging and exhausting (4.5.3.4).

9.3 Analysis of characteristics at *Knit and Natter*

This section will address the characteristics of a practical expression of faith (5.4.3.1), the use of a niche interest as a starting point for Christian Community (5.4.3.2), and the creation of a place to listen and to be listened to (5.4.3.3) which were identified through the evidence produced during the fieldwork at *Knit and Natter*.

9.3.1 A practical expression of faith

This chief characteristic in *Knit and Natter* was embedded from the outset as the founders sought to express their faith through meeting a practical need. This started out as a local witness and outreach, and developed donating to and connecting with local, national and international recipients (5.1.1 and 5.3). The responsibility for placing an emphasis on practical caring for others in need has been which has been integral to Methodism from its early days:

John Wesley mandated that his followers engage in works of mercy, defined in the second of his ‘General Rules’ in the most expansive way possible – ‘do good.’ [...] Methodist women sought out people in need – the poor, the hungry, the destitute and the neglected. They visited prisons, established orphanages and schools, and practiced their servant-orientated faith in their

own particular contexts, thereby extending the ministry of Methodism into the communities they served.²⁹²

The *Knit and Natter* group demonstrate strong resonances with Paul Wesley Chilcote's research into the way early Methodist women lived out their faith through practical service as a way of demonstrating and expressing Christian love.

9.3.2 Use of niche interest as a starting point for Christian community

This characteristic is the one which the co-ordinators found to be most surprising and was not intentional, but emerged as the minister (and subsequently the co-ordinators) made the decision to lead prayers within the group from the first session. This spur of the moment decision became a natural place for newcomers to learn of the prayer concerns of others. This devotional slot within the meeting incorporated reflections on current affairs, preparation for occasional services, and opened up the possibility to invite members of *Knit and Natter* to other events and services within the circuit. This approach is not unusual, not necessarily new (and is a particular characteristic of Venture FX pioneers), but the surprising rather than intentional direction of *Knit and Natter* has caused the co-ordinators to re-think and consider what it is they have started and how they might respond.

9.3.3 A place to listen and to be listened to

Knit and Natter (8.3.1) was a place where people were looking for a community to belong to, and central to this was the opportunity to get together with others to talk. When the traditional places for women to talk, such as the school gates and the workplace, were no longer part of their everyday life, there was the very real sense of something missing in their lives. Age UK, through campaigns and organisations such as 'Bright Life', prioritise their funding in attempts to encourage community developments which reduce social isolation in the over 50s, exactly the majority age profile within *Knit and Natter*. Churches have provided this opportunity for relationships and social

²⁹² Paul Wesley Chilcote (ed.), *Early Methodist Spirituality: Selected Women's Writings* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007), p. 32.

interaction, and increasingly within aging churches this has become one of the priorities, with those in predominantly retirement areas seeking to pursue mission and outreach ventures targeted at older and retired people. Janet Eldred's doctoral research investigated the lives of older churchgoing women, particularly seeking to hear their experience of community, connection and caring. One of her participants summed up this need for care:

I think what a number of older people lack is a feeling that there's anybody who cares about them ... They need God's caring demonstrating through human beings who really care.²⁹³

Listening is how many of the women knew that they were valued, welcomed and cared about. As Astley says:

Listening is a mark of respect; listening is a deeply pastoral, affirming act; listening tells people that they matter.²⁹⁴

Knit and Natter managed to create an informal space in which mutual respect meant that there was the opportunity to talk and be listened to. This listening was fostered through the pastoral community between the women as they sat around week by week, and also as they sought out care and attention from the co-ordinators.

RW: Chris [Crowder] is great, you can talk to her about anything.

DA: She's lovely. How do they find these people... they just seem to find that one special person.²⁹⁵

I believe that this way of working for the group, their natural ability to want to talk was what enabled me to collect so much information from the women in the semi-structured interviews (Appendices 5.1 – 5.12).

²⁹³ Janet Eldred, *Like Spring without Flowers: Why Older Women and Churches Need Each Other* (Derby: MHA Care Group, 2006), p. 81.

²⁹⁴ Jeff Astley, *Ordinary Theology: Looking, Listening and Learning in Theology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002).

²⁹⁵ Appendix 5.3.

9.4 Analysis of characteristics at *New Song Café*

This section will address the characteristics of a focussed style of worship (6.5.3.1) and the 'Ministry of Cake' (6.5.3.2) identified during the fieldwork.

9.4.1 Focussed style of worship

Worship at *New Song Café*, has a predictable format expressed in its name. This is a café in which the format of worship consists of learning and singing contemporary and new worship songs. One of the gifts but also perceived difficulties in current contemporary Methodist worship is that the organisation of circuits into larger units and multiple churches covered by a single minister means that for the majority of Methodist congregations, even though the format might stay roughly the same from week to week, there is a high probability of inconsistency. "Typical" congregations are used to this pattern and with the exception those large city centre or central halls, congregations are used to a different preacher each week, with ministers often leading communion services once a month, but it does mean that unpredictability can deter members of the congregation from inviting new people. The worship at *New Song Café* is consistently well prepared and passionate and there is a continuity in terms of leadership.²⁹⁶ New music and songs are introduced well and gradually, YouTube links are posted on Facebook giving a sense of anticipation, the opportunity to listen to new or unfamiliar tunes ahead of attending. It is this 'formula' or 'format' which works for *New Song Café*.

This characteristic of focussed worship in a clear format leads me to understand how Jackie Bellfield now has examples of how this is working in other parts of the country. Although her enthusiasm and passion is critical to *New Song Café*, when she spoke at the Navigating Change Conference in November of 2015, she was sharing a vision of

²⁹⁶ Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007).

encouraging leadership within the group which could assume responsibility when she took up another appointment.²⁹⁷

9.4.2 Ministry of cake

‘Ministry of cake’, a phrase which Jackie Bellfield has used at *New Song Café*, is one that symbolises the desire of those involved to put time, effort and love into the preparation for the evenings at Bold Street. There will be those responsible in the kitchen, but I have observed others bringing plates and cake tins filled with home baking to share at *New Song Café*. This care and attention is part of their expression of creating a warm and inviting atmosphere where people will want to bring their friends, where something as simple as cake is the starting point, and where just talking over tea and cake is the first step to sharing faith and discovering church. *New Song Café* seems to have encapsulated Schase’s observations of churches which embrace radical hospitality:

Churches practicing radical hospitality offer a surprising and unexpected quality of depth and authenticity in their caring for the stranger. Newcomers intuitively sense that.²⁹⁸

Hospitality and its explicit articulation as part of God’s extravagant and unconditional love for all people is echoed through the worship at *New Song Café*, and also reinforced through the other activities which are now part of the network, including the community action group and the hot drinks ministry at the crematorium. *New Song Network* seems to have recaptured and reimagined some of the Wesleyan principles highlighted by Schnase:

John Wesley and the early Methodists practiced hospitality so radical in their day that many traditional church leaders found their activities offensive. He preached ... and invited [thousands] into community and nurtured in them a strong sense of

²⁹⁷ Navigating Change Conference, Swan Bank Methodist Church on 21.11.15.

²⁹⁸ Schase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, p. 21.

belonging as he organised societies and classes for mutual accountability, support and care. Wesley taught of God's prevenient grace: the preceding, preparing grace that draws people to God.²⁹⁹

9.5 Analysis of characteristics at *Café Church @Oomoo*

This section will address the characteristics of intentionally offering an informal alternative (7.4.3.1) and the choice to meet outside a church building (7.4.3.2), identified during the fieldwork.

9.5.1 Offering an informal alternative

The leaders at *Café Church @Oomoo* had a more targeted sector of those they hoped to reach than any of the other examples. Following their training with the Café Church Network, they had imbibed to some extent the rhetoric of creating a “church for the unchurched” in terms of seeking to attract those who were not regular worshippers. They hoped to connect with either those people who were ‘on the fringe’ of Elm Hall Drive, or those who had begun to attend other ways of “doing church differently” for families. The leaders were able to observe an aging Sunday congregation at Elm Hall Drive but areas of growth among young families during the week. Their aim in creating *Café Church @Oomoo* was to offer an alternative, which would act as a next step for those who had begun to make connections.

9.5.2 Meeting outside the church building

The leaders sought to follow a culturally appropriate place to establish this form of “doing church differently” and creating low threshold hospitality was behind their choice to meet at Oomoo. The difficulty which arose was that there were mixed messages in the location. If parents were already comfortable attending events in the church building, then meeting at Oomoo seemed unnecessary. The logistical problems which were created around staffing, timing and cost could

²⁹⁹ Schase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, p. 14.

have been eliminated by creating a more informal setting in rooms in the church.

9.6 Comparison of characteristics between case studies

This section will look at key characteristics as perceived and valued first by participants then by the leaders or co-ordinators. The recurring characteristics and themes of participation, hospitality and flexibility were dominant across the case studies.

9.6.1 Comparison of participants' perspectives

The characteristic which was valued across the case studies was that of participation. It would be possible for some of those who attend *Somewhere Else* to bake at home, and was certainly possible for everyone at *Knit and Natter* to continue knitting or crocheting at home. The shared activity was the vehicle through which people were able to talk of faith or ask questions about faith. The importance for this characteristic across the case studies emphasised the need and desire for human and social interaction with others. This active participation was an essential characteristic for those attending. Although *New Song Café* and *Café Church @Oomoo* did not have a physical outcome to a practical shared experience in the way a loaf of bread or garment was evidence of the participation of those who attended *Somewhere Else* and *Knit and Natter*, it was my observation that everyone who attended participated in the singing or discussion. What this may also demonstrate is that these case studies attract those with an interest in being involved and active within groups.³⁰⁰ If this is the case across all fresh expressions it raises a question about those who are less able or confident in groups that place

³⁰⁰ This aspect of fresh expressions attracting certain psychological types is examined in L. J. Francis, J. Clymo, and M. Robbins, 'Fresh Expressions: Reaching those psychological types conventional forms of church find it hard to reach?', *Practical Theology*, 7.4 (2014), 252-267.

emphasis on action and participation, and may well argue in favour of these examples being limited ecclesial expressions, and therefore playing only one part in a broader mixed economy of church. Taking part in the activity led to taking part in the more formal part of worship, as can be seen in the interview Anthony Houghton (4.5.4.2). In his second visit to *Somewhere Else*, he felt '[he] could take part in the prayer time'.³⁰¹ In *Knit and Natter*, there is the opportunity to write on the prayer list, allowing those who may not be confident at speaking to participate. This emphasis on participation and a relational Christian community shows through this research that this is attractive to both those with and without a previous church connection.

9.6.2 Comparison of leaders' perspectives

The leaders valued the ability through listening to participants to respond and adapt. All of the case studies showed the ability to be responsive to the changing nature of the group. *Knit and Natter* and *New Song Café* have changed where they meet within existing church premises. *Café Church @Oomoo* changed venue to an independent coffee shop in a different geographical location. *Somewhere Else* is constantly reviewing their role and purpose through regular self-reflexivity at church councils and away days.

I am wary of over characterising the flexibility of these groups as *Knit and Natter* and *New Song Café* are attached to existing church congregations with their own responsibility for physical buildings, but they are able within that framework to sit lightly and consider change and development in a way which is not as easy within a "typical" church, or indeed with any group that has existed for some time.

³⁰¹ Appendix 4.1.

Before the establishment of the groups the leaders and co-ordinators explained how they had listened to where God was asking them to re-evaluate and re-imagine the church. They then listened to the needs of the contexts and people around them, as is espoused by Fresh Expressions, although it is important to remember that *Somewhere Else* predates the Initiative.

As participants' experience of being accepted and welcomed is fed back to the leaders so the continual offering of welcome and hospitality becomes integral to the ongoing journey of the group. Listening to those who attend is part of discerning the future direction of the group. The groups are aware that enabling a collaborative approach to flexibility is an ongoing process.

9.7 What are the common characteristics of “doing Church differently”?

In this chapter, we can see the way in which the first two research goals are producing similar and overlapping responses. The reason why people are attracted to and joining these ways of “doing church differently” in turn influence and emphasise the characteristics which may have drawn them in the first place.

Hospitality

I have outlined how welcome, a sense of belonging and engagement on a common task are at the heart of these groups, and not only shape the identity of singular events and meetings but also give an identity to the group itself. Hospitality and welcome are certainly not exclusive to groups who are “doing church differently” (10.10), but the frequency and conviction with which these characteristics were expressed in the interviews and questionnaires were significant.

Participation

In the four case studies, leaders were all committed to enabling and encouraging participation in the groups they led. At *Somewhere Else* and *Knit and Natter*, the participation encompassed those working at individual projects in a shared space and with a common purpose, without needing to join in with or express faith explicitly.³⁰² An important hallmark of all the groups was that there was a conscious effort to work towards an equality of participation between the leaders and those attending. The use of the title facilitator at *Somewhere Else* made this explicit, but this role was evident within the leadership of the other examples. The way in which the *Somewhere Else* community was constantly looking for bread-makers to take on the role of facilitator was evidence of this continual desire (and need) to be aware of the sustainability of the group in terms of participative leadership from within. *Knit and Natter* and the other opportunities in *New Song Network* offer ongoing participation between meetings in the form of knitting at home for the *Knit and Natter* group. There is opportunity for study and service in the community for those who attend *New Song Café*. The fact that this offers participation which is not necessarily accompanied by physical attendance at the weekly or monthly meeting has loose parallels with those new monastic communities which operate with a dispersed membership and with other “typical” churches.

Flexibility

Within a habitual structure, the groups sat lightly to rigid structures and were able to adapt, either on the day or from week to week. The leaders used their listening skills to shape the direction of the group and this in turn increased involvement and ownership on the part of the participants (9.3.3). The balance between a predictable format and a flexible way of being and working seemed to appeal to both the leaders and participants alike.

³⁰² Although this may happen more subtly as they share corporately in times of prayer.

9.8 Are these characteristics distinctive of new small groups in general?

Hospitality

The groups were certainly able to extend a personal welcome and to develop relationships not simply because of their size but because of the nature of the activity and gathering. However, a small group does afford a level of engagement which is not always possible in a larger ecclesial gathering. This is why particularly large churches, often have a structural organisation of house groups, cell groups or class meetings where members can gather and share in ways in which corporate worship in a large gathering may not offer. This is demonstrated in the creation of the smaller Bible study groups organised by *New Song Café*, which recognised the importance not simply of providing teaching for those who might be exploring faith, but as a way of developing relationships, and deepening friendship and welcome in a way not easily provided by a large monthly gathering, however relaxed and welcoming the environment was.

Participation

The ability to participate, to speak and to listen is enhanced in small groups. Faith sharing as mentioned above is facilitated through being in an environment of trust and confidence. This was negotiated and repeated with ground rules at *Somewhere Else* (4.4), but engendered by the ethos of encouragement by the leaders in the other case studies. The nature of active participation, particularly in worship, is not wholly dependent upon the size of the ecclesial gathering, e.g. sharing in liturgy or singing as participation in large cathedral worship, historic Methodist camp meetings, or festival worship at Greenbelt. But, the more active, highly practical considerations of bread-making for example are restricted to safe and manageable numbers, thus necessarily limiting the size of the group.

Flexibility

Are new groups, by their very nature, able to be more flexible? Martin Saarinen in *The Life Cycle of a Congregation* argues that in the birth and

infancy stage of congregational life, when energy is high and as yet organisational structures are fluid, the ability for congregations to be flexible is naturally higher than more established or mature congregations.³⁰³ This may be because the relationships in newer congregations or groups such as the case studies in this thesis are also in their infancy, and hierarchies of power or decision making are still open to challenge and change.

An ongoing question for the groups is whether they self-consciously choose to make such flexibility an intentional continued characteristic of their identity, work and worship. It was my observation that in these newly formed groups, those participating were able to offer suggestions and ideas. This added to the newcomers' sense of being valued members of the group. This happened in what may seem small ways, but they were significant and included suggested recipients for knitted garments from some of the women at *Knit and Natter*, and the collection of donations for homeless projects at *New Song Café*.³⁰⁴

A relaxed and flexible approach requires a larger critical mass of those potentially attending to make the sessions viable, otherwise if the group is too small its fragility and vulnerability of the leaders, faced with unavoidable circumstances, can prevent the group meeting. It is crucial in newly formed fresh expressions that a level of commitment is established if the group is going to be able to run and function. Where a presbyter is involved in the group such as *Somewhere Else* or *New Song Café* there is a guarantee that the group will go ahead under their leadership or that they will find a replacement if they are absent. Sometimes groups would like to convey an atmosphere that participants can 'drop in if they feel like it', but if the reality is that the leaders or co-ordinators plan and organise an event which is poorly attended this can affect the self-esteem and morale of those leading.

³⁰³ Martin F. Saarinen, *The Life Cycle of a Congregation* (Washington, DC: The Alban Institute, 1994).

³⁰⁴ Appendices 5.2 and 6.2

A wider consideration of these characteristics highlighted in the case studies alongside “typical” Methodist churches will be examined in 10.8.

9.9 Conclusion

All four case studies display hospitality, participation and flexibility as common characteristics, but there are two additional similarities which enable the main characteristics to form and develop – that of a habitual structure within a niche interest.

The regular group meetings in all four case studies follow a clear format, the routine of bread-making (4.4), the rhythm of the knitting session (5.3), the format of café worship at New Song and at Café Church @Oomoo (6.4 and 7.3). This clear, regular and predictable format offer a secure and safe space for hospitality and participation to take place. The format itself allows flexibility which is not intimidating but relaxed.

All four case studies attract those with like-minded interests as a starting point to explore and discover faith, and as such can be seen as niche groups.³⁰⁵ In the past these types of groups (Bright Hour, Wesley Guild, Mothers’ Union, choirs, walking groups, film nights) may have existed as parallel groups within and alongside mainstream church congregations, often run by both church members and seen as valuable opportunities for outreach. Then, as today, these groups may have offered a different emphasis, one in which the characteristics of welcome, deepening relationships and a higher participation were more evident than in “typical” church. Historically these groups did not exist in isolation but rather complemented Sunday worship. These parallel or associational groups did not seek to be church in their own right, as they appealed only to certain groups of people.

³⁰⁵ Martyn Percy, ‘Old tricks for new dogs? A critique of fresh expressions’, in Louise Nelstrop and Martyn Percy (eds), *Evaluating Fresh Expressions: Explorations in Emerging Church* (London: Canterbury Press, 2008), pp. 27-39 (p. 27), and Martyn Percy, *Shaping the Church: The Promise of Implicit Theology*, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 67-79 (p. 67).

The ecclesial realities of the case studies will now be examined in Chapter 10 as I consider these groups within contemporary British Methodism.

CHAPTER TEN

THE FOUR CASE STUDIES AND THE METHODIST CHURCH

10.1 Introduction

Having considered why people are attending these ways of “doing church differently” (Chapter 8) and which characteristics are evident and common within these groups (Chapter 9), I explored how hospitality and participation on a common task within a flexible but structured format shape not only events and meetings but also give an identity to the group itself. This chapter will explore how the experience of participants and the aspirations of the leaders collectively or individually, in response to research goals 1–3, can be used in order to understand how the ecclesial reality of these groups relate to official statements of contemporary Methodism, especially regarding the claim that fresh expressions are meant to be “church for the unchurched” (1.5). It will also consider Martyn Atkin’s conference report *A Discipleship Movement Shaped for Mission*.³⁰⁶

The official statements of the Methodist Church in relation to fresh expressions (1.5) – leaving aside for the moment those of the Fresh Expressions Initiative which I will consider in Chapter 11 – make assumptions about fresh expressions as churches in their own right. This in itself is problematic as there are a wide range of examples, as illustrated by the case studies, some of which are not making this assumption or claim for themselves. This research was not an exercise in establishing whether the groups matched the expectations of the Methodist Church, or whether the groups were complying with the *Fresh Expressions in the Mission of the Church* report. As will be seen in what follows, the research shows that the understanding of the

³⁰⁶ Martyn Atkins, ‘General Secretary’s Report: Contemporary Methodism: a discipleship movement shaped for mission’ (paper presented at the Methodist Conference, 2011).

groups, even within themselves, and between leaders and participants, reveal different perspectives and complex layers of understanding. All of the groups were in places of change, and a unified fixed idea of who they were or a plan for the future was not evident. The energy and resources of the fresh expressions movement within Methodism has encouraged churches to take risks in outreach and mission, looking to explore in different ways, or to re-assess existing ways of being and doing church. The following sections will consider each of the case studies and their own voices and evidence of their identity. For those without a “typical” church background or connection, this was their only experience of a church group, so they were unable to make their own comparisons, whereas comparisons were made much more freely by those in leadership roles.

While examining the ecclesial reality of these groups, I wonder whether this exploratory stage adopted by the groups rejecting the clear strategy or plan is a distinctive part of Methodist identity. The Methodist Church began as a movement, and has as recently as conference 2011, reclaimed this language and adopted the definition of itself as ‘A Discipleship Movement Shaped for Mission’. It is important to have the courage to look at these case studies and see that (with the exception of *Café Church @Oomoo*), while they have all been recognised in national training material as fresh expressions, they do not all uphold or comply with official frameworks or statements. This may be because we are only seeing a snapshot of a period of ongoing change in the life of the church. Experimentation in such a transitional phase is natural and can be encouraged and supported without being feared or so excessively controlled or defined that it is extinguished.

10.2 The ecclesial reality of *Somewhere Else*

Methodist Holy Communion includes the narrative of the Last Supper – this act of remembering, the formative beginning of the church, is integral to our faith, our understanding and our gathering. At *Somewhere Else* telling the story of how the bread-making community

began forms the beginning of prayers. There were frequently people attending for the first time, so that in every gathering was the re-telling of 'how we got here' and 'what it is that shapes us' and 'why the meeting of different people each time forms the church that we are today'. The church on the ground and the people it connects with on a daily basis are not always mindful of the role and position they are carving out for themselves in history. *Somewhere Else* is a Methodist Church, with a Methodist minister stationed to the circuit and responsible for it. Because it does not look like a "typical" church, it has to work hard to articulate the benchmarks of Glasson's 'praying community that holds fast to the Scriptures and celebrates the sacraments' (4.5.4.1).³⁰⁷ But for all the novelty it is to the appreciation of the tradition that Glasson sees emerging through the *Somewhere Else* community:

Maybe most amazingly, for me anyway, is the discovery that the *Somewhere Else* community holds fast to much of what the Methodist tradition has valued. We are a small itinerant community. We believe that the word of God is in the hands of ordinary people. We hold the two strands of scriptural holiness and social action side by side. And most crucially, we are people who experience God's prevenient grace in the ordinary wonderful day-to-day incarnate reality of our community.³⁰⁸

This ecclesial assessment by Glasson enables *Somewhere Else* to understand their place within the Methodist connexion. These important aspects and expressions of Methodist ecclesial realities are understood and examined reflectively during church councils. I did not witness the language of scriptural holiness, social action, and prevenient grace articulated during bread-making, though the ecclesial reality is that the community lives out these benchmarks through its own expression. Many of the participants who have not had a church background are in the formative stage of discovering Christian community in the physical gathering together and the teaching of Jesus through the Bible study. The challenge for a church like *Somewhere Else*, without the hymns

³⁰⁷ Glasson, *Mixed-Up Blessing*, p. 60.

³⁰⁸ Glasson *Mixed-Up Blessing*, pp. 122-123.

and liturgy of the Methodist Church during its bread-making sessions, is to continue to be able to ‘tell this story’ within a wider Methodist context. This is currently possible with a Methodist minister as a representative person along with the small numbers of the church council. As *Somewhere Else* continues to baptise and make new members of the Methodist Church, then this articulation of their place within the wider connexion and the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church is affirmed and strengthened.

10.3 The ecclesial reality of *Knit and Natter*

This group was rooted within a “typical” Methodist Church. It was a source of significant outreach, both in terms of the knitted goods and also the way it made contact with women in the local community who joined in the way those initial four women were living out their own social action through the giving of their time, energy, resources and making links with groups in need. As the group met on Methodist premises, and its co-ordinators and several of its members were also worshippers in local Methodist churches, then those who did not attend “typical” church could see they were an integral and linked part of the wider worshipping community. The participants who attended the shoe box dedication service, or the women who had begun to attend midweek communion services at Trinity were demonstrating their understanding of a wider Church in which *Knit and Natter* formed an important part, but did not stand alone as a Church in its own right (5.4.4.2). There were also within this group people with many varying church connections. One of the women regarded herself as a ‘friend’ of the church (3.9.2).³⁰⁹ Historically friends of the church were involved in many associated activities, but may not have regularly attended Sunday worship.

There was a noticeable difference in how Chris Crowder, the other co-ordinators and the participants saw, envisaged and experienced the

³⁰⁹ Appendix 5.4.

identity of the group in terms of its ecclesial status. First of all, there was a discrepancy amongst the co-ordinating group. Chris Crowder expressed that ‘this is their church’, indicating in her interview that she sensed a very different atmosphere between the *Knit and Natter* group and Sunday worship. This atmosphere and emphasis on church as a place where relationships between people were of paramount importance was reflected in her implied criticism of “typical” church:

I think this is their church, the more I think about it. There is so much warmth here. People know one another, they know what their problems are. In a way a conventional church service is a little bit cold compared to this. This is how church should be. I wasn’t convinced to begin with because I am very conventional. And yet I feel God is here, and he isn’t always there on a Sunday. It is always a bit what is she wearing today, still. Here there is so much warmth and companionship. We love one another.³¹⁰

Although Chris’ comments are not rooted in the ecclesiology of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church clearly stated as essential in Fresh Expressions material, it is significant that it was these comments which are picked up and highlighted by the Fresh Expressions website in regard to *Knit and Natter*.³¹¹ It is not, however, as shown by the research, the only understanding of the group ‘as church’ and needs to be recognised as one voice among many if I am to reflect accurately the lived reality of the group. Some of the other co-ordinators definitely interpreted the role of *Knit and Natter* as important *outreach* work and they could see that it formed a *bridge* between the community and church life as *Knit and Natter* allowed the “typical” church to make relationships in the community.³¹²

³¹⁰ Appendix 5.12.

³¹¹ Chris Crowder: ‘Knit and Natter isn’t just a knitting club making clothes for charity - it is a fresh expression of church which works on many different levels, giving people a purpose in life and sending God’s love around the world. There is no doubt at all that many of our members see Knit and Natter as their church, they recognise the fact that we are meeting together in community and God is there.’ Fresh Expressions, 25.10.10 available at: <https://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/stories/knitandnatter> (accessed 28.02.17).

³¹² Marjorie Hall was clear about the opinions which had been shared with her: ‘A couple of people have said to me, I don’t come to church, I don’t want to come to church, but I’m happy to contribute or do anything. And they do contribute, and the two I am thinking of in particular contribute an awful lot and come to a lot of things, they’ll come to coffee

For others prayer was beginning to become a natural and integral part of weekly sessions:

MS I am not a regular church goer but I enjoy the prayers when I am here in the group.

JP We haven't got you that far, have we, love?³¹³

There is implied in Janet's reply that there was another step to be taken into a regular worshipping community.

Sometimes a short reflection or Bible story became part of the devotions. The baptism within the *Knit and Natter* session was a new departure but as Doreen shared, taking communion happened within a "typical" church setting, thus affirming the stepping stone role of *Knit and Natter* (5.4.4.2).³¹⁴ With the introduction of new members each week the relational dynamics were always changing, although I noted that it is not difficult for traditions to establish themselves quickly. In the interview with the co-ordinators they were already expressing the way in which the group had changed with the growth in numbers. There was almost a sense of regret, in that they were victims of their own success and the atmosphere they had initially created or facilitated had changed as the group has grown.³¹⁵ *Knit and Natter* display some of the essential elements as stated in *Fresh Expressions in the Mission of the Church*. I would argue from my observation that they are 'a community of people who ... live out their discipleship in the world' and 'a community that regularly assembles for Christian worship and is then sent out into the world to engage in mission and service'.³¹⁶ I resist the statement that they 'sell short the Gospel' but

mornings, anything. But they say quite categorically, I don't come to church, and I don't want to come to church.' Appendix 5.2.

³¹³ Appendix 5.7.

³¹⁴ Appendix 5.3.

³¹⁵ Appendix 5.2.

³¹⁶ *Fresh Expressions in the Mission of the Church: Report of an Anglican-Methodist Working Party*, 7.3.5., p. 181.

would see that they form a part of a wider understanding of the Methodist Church of which they are part.³¹⁷

10.4 The ecclesial reality of *New Song Café*

The leaders at *New Song Café* at the time of the research were finding their way and negotiating, as they went along, the dynamics of the evening and the needs of those attending (6.5.4). There were only three people who stated at the time that this was their main place of worship, compared to forty-four who were worshipping at other local churches (6.5.1.3).³¹⁸ This dual attendance began to change as *New Song Network* grew after the field work was complete. Different aspects of learning, teaching, childrens' work, community action and outreach were added to the monthly café worship and others began to attend who did not have a current or previous church connection. This provides good reason, I believe, not to try to categorise or label ways of "doing church differently" too early in their explorations. *New Song Café* was not a church plant, but the ways in which it grew organically and unexpectedly required the leadership team to assess and ultimately abandon their own initial intentional plans. As the network developed and there were many more activities, events and levels of association even within this way of "doing church differently", *New Song Network* began working with the circuit, district and connexion to become a Methodist Church in its own right which took place on June 22nd 2014. There was the option for people to join *New Song Network* with dual membership, that is to hold membership in another recognised denomination and concurrently to hold membership

³¹⁷ *Fresh Expressions in the Mission of the Church: Report of an Anglican-Methodist Working Party*, 7.3.6., p. 181.

³¹⁸ Michael Moynagh refers to *New Song Café* as an example of dual church attendance in *Being Church, Doing Life*. On the Fresh Expressions website Moynagh writes of a 'blended church experience'. He argues that 'belonging to more than one expression of church will often make sense' and that 'it should be positively welcomed'. His argument which is borne out by this research is contradicted by the Fresh Expressions statement 'The aim is not to provide a stepping stone into existing church, but to form new churches in their own right', available at: <https://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/guide/about/whatis> (accessed 28.02.17).

of *New Song Network*. In 2015 the recorded membership of *New Song Network* was 40, and a pastoral roll of 220. There had been seven members since 2014, two of whom were new members of the Methodist Church and five were transfers from other congregations. The statistics for Mission do not indicate dual membership so it is not possible to see how many of the members of *New Song Network* also belong to other congregations.³¹⁹ From its first meeting, *New Song Café* has always intentional worship at its centre. It has included on Bible teaching in the monthly café and supplementary Bible studies. There have been evenings when communion is celebrated, and the group is involved in social action in the local community and through fundraising for national and international charities. As these elements have developed over time the decision to become a Methodist Church in its own right has allowed *New Song Network* a voice and vote in the circuit meeting. This has given *New Song Network* the same rights and autonomy within the Methodist structures as a “typical” church. This places *New Song Network* alongside *Somewhere Else* in terms of its governance and its ministerial oversight.

10.5 The ecclesial reality of *Café Church @Oomoo*

Café Church @Oomoo stopped meeting in 2012 because the leadership was depleted as one member went travelling for a year and Mike Prescott began a new job at Liverpool Cathedral. *Café Church @Oomoo* therefore became one of the temporary “pop-up” groups in a historic line of alternative worship experiments out of Elm Hall Drive (7.1.1). This group, despite Mike Prescott’s statement ‘what we do at Café Church is enough for people’,³²⁰ did not sustain the level of staffing or commitment from the small leadership team to continue on a long term basis. Ways of “doing church differently” with a frequent turnover such as students or pre-school children depend on

³¹⁹ The Methodist Church in Britain, *Statistics for Mission*, available at: <http://methodist.org.uk/media/2268151/stats-2015-mem-18.pdf> (accessed 06.08.2016).

³²⁰ Appendix 7.2.

consistency from a leadership team to allow continuity from one academic year to the next. For the students, which *Café Church @Oomoo* were trying to reach, this experiment would always be a transient place, and this may well have been a factor in its short life span. Another example of café church established elsewhere in the circuit demonstrates the ongoing commitment of the wider church community to continue exploring outreach opportunities in different ways (7.5). *Café Church @Oomoo* provided for its time, a supportive and creative discussion forum for those who were mostly involved in leadership in the Church. In meeting in a public space rather than a home, they continued to be open to others joining them, which happened occasionally. During the field work period, this “pop-up” experiment complemented “typical” Sunday worship at Elm Hall Drive and other forms of ways “doing church differently” which took place on the church premises. The lived reality of the group was that it was a place away from the responsibility of leading groups in church which was helpful and enabled conversation in a safer space. This group was to all extents and purposes a small group, a class meeting or a house group. It was not a closed group, but it did regularly have the same number and cohort of attendees who, despite the original intentional planning, all worshipped or had current connections with a church, therefore completely dispelling the rhetoric that this case study was “church for the unchurched”.

It may have been more honest for the group to have discerned what would have worked for them and then personally invited others to join them. Their strategy of adopting meeting in a public space with more missional potential failed to understand that meeting on church premises was not an automatic barrier to those with whom they had already begun to make connections and build relationships.

10.6 Do the case studies show any common ecclesial understandings of “doing church differently”?

Steven Croft in *Mission-Shaped Questions* suggested that the future of a changing church required distilled, descriptive, discerning or defining, devolved and developmental ecclesiology.³²¹ He writes of terrain that is still unexplored. In a small way, the years spent with these four case studies and the subsequent writing of this thesis provides detailed descriptive ecclesiology. The ways in which the reality and practice of these groups demonstrate the ways in which at the beginning of twenty-first century the characteristics which are important to those connecting with groups which are “doing church differently” may well be more to do with belonging rather than believing. As we have seen in chapters 8 and 9, belonging is linked with hospitality, and its expression and reception in welcome and acceptance, and also in participation, playing an active role within a group which gives purpose and worth to those involved.

10.6.1 Hospitality

The language of acceptance and welcome was used by participants in response to the hospitality they received in the groups they attended. They had in a simple way found a place to belong, share and explore faith. No participant in the interviews used the terminology of fresh expression of church. All of the case studies showed that leaders and participants were able to accommodate those of differing stages on the faith journey and that the lived experience of being and growing together was what was important. The evidence showed that friendship, belonging and companionship were key motivations in both the reasons for joining, the characteristics of the groups and, also, what the attendees understood the function of the church to be.

The way in which the research has highlighted the desire and need for people to deepen friendship and share within Christian communities was striking. Although Glasson acknowledged the need for a watering

³²¹ Steven Croft, ‘Mapping Ecclesiology for a Mixed Economy’, in Steven Croft (ed.), *Mission-shaped Questions*, pp. 186-198 (p. 198).

hole where people can return when they need to, the participants in all of the case studies recorded their appreciation and in some cases need for the companionship they found. There was no evidence that participants wanted to drop in and out of the groups remaining anonymous, in the way that cathedral worship is sometimes argued as attractive. I would suggest, that it would have been impossible to have attended any of the case studies without interaction with others. In addition to *Somewhere Else*, all the groups in differing ways met people's relational needs, if only for a season.

10.6.2 Participation

Somewhere Else and *Knit and Natter* offer participation through the ability to share in a common practical activity with a concrete outcome, and this has been an attraction to those who may have found attending a group which met to sing, pray or talk about the Bible together either intimidating, unattractive or unproductive. The way in which worship at *Somewhere Else* has developed has followed the pattern of base communities in which shared participation is an integral part of establishing and cementing community and creating an environment in which scripture is read and interpreted (1.4.4). This sharing and increased participation means that there is also the opportunity to learn more about the lives of others, especially where a group may not be determined geographically or have the same community points of reference.

Participation in the study of the Bible similar to a model used in base ecclesial communities was evident at *Somewhere Else*. Jim Booth, former Chair of the Liverpool District shared his thoughts about the way in which those at *Somewhere Else* were learning to read the Bible in a way he felt had been lost in traditional church and which he felt could be rediscovered in "typical" congregations.³²²

³²² 'It was [the story of] the good Samaritan. Then we got into a whole conversation, [...] telling that story in the context of life in Liverpool now. So we got into a conversation about mugging, coping with violence, what it meant to be abused - a woman who felt unsafe walking the streets. And that meant that the story of the Good

It is interesting that *New Song Café* began with worship, and has developed the opportunities for their members to offer service in practical ways. This model offers similarities with “typical” models of church and now as a Church in its own right is beginning to offer itself levels and degrees of association. It would be difficult to argue that *Cafe Church @Oomoo* was in its content offering anything different in terms of participation from many house groups operating alongside “typical” congregations but that its physical location in a third space was able to offer the opportunity to share and participate without attending an “typical” congregation first.

10.7 The complexity of ecclesial realities

These two areas of emphasis, hospitality and participation, do not in themselves lead to common understandings of the ecclesial realities of the groups. This ecclesial status of the individual case studies will be considered in more depth in 10.10 but for each one, the understanding of their ecclesial reality was different. *Somewhere Else*, which was a recognised Church at the time of the research, reinforced this at prayers and through its organisation and accountability, and through the role of a presbyter stationed at the church. *Knit and Natter* had multiple layers of understanding within the group. *New Song Café* was in a place of transition and growth and was forming for the research period, a supplementary worship service for the majority of participants. *Café Church @Oomoo* also held multiple understandings of itself and its role, although many of these were tentative and they did not have a clear

Samaritan lived in a way that often it cannot live because it is not related to the lives that people live, [...] I think what *Somewhere Else* should be able to do is to feed back into traditional church because I think actually that the stories that are being told and have been freed from within people at *Somewhere Else* are actually the experiences of us all. But actually traditional church blocks and prevents too often people from genuinely feeling that their story can have any relation to this story which is the Bible. [...] the truth is everyone's story ties into and links into [...] the stories the Bible tells, and the other way around the Bible stories link into the stories of our lives, it is just somehow that match, that marrying of the two doesn't happen often in traditional church.' Appendix 4.1.

intentional strategy or plan for their future. These multiple and complex understandings lead me to conclude that the ecclesial realities even within the groups themselves are varied, emerging and changeable. But, for all that, the emphases of hospitality and participation can be seen to be held in common. These were the common emphases that people saw as important in the life of the church.

10.8 Research goal 4: To analyse the way in which the groups “doing church differently” relate to the “typical” Methodist Church

“Typical” Methodist Churches and Methodist examples of “doing church differently” are bound together ‘in connexion’. No group or church within Methodism acts independently, as each is situated within a circuit, district and connexional structure. A congregational approach cannot apply to any Methodist Church which holds its ministers and buildings in common. Pioneers in the Methodist Church cannot enter ordained ministry through a pioneer pathway as in the Anglican Church, although there are a small number of presbyters who hold pioneer posts. In a real sense, therefore, any group “doing church differently” relates to the “typical” church and depends upon the Methodist Church for its very being, aside from any financial or ministerial support it might receive.

10.8.1 Comparisons between “typical” church and these examples of “doing church differently”

10.8.1.1 Hospitality: an emphasis on welcome and acceptance

“Typical” Methodist congregations have door stewards whose role it is to welcome people on their arrival and especially to note if there are any visitors or newcomers. This is common practice for any size of congregation. Rather than people appointed to this role within the case studies, it was the responsibility of everyone attending to make sure that all were welcomed and included and anyone who was new was shown the ropes, especially at *Somewhere Else* or *Knit and Natter*.

This was made easier for all of the case studies as during the time of the research, they were all small enough to meet in one room. At *New Song Café* people often brought along their friends and sitting around a table meant a larger number was arranged in smaller units of six to eight people.

Issues of accessibility are also a key part of discussions and practice at all “typical” Methodist Churches: more flexible seating arrangements have allowed for wheelchairs, mobility scooters and prams within worship areas and services; ramps, lifts, disabled toilets and changing facilities have been made a priority within existing congregations, raising the awareness of a lower threshold which was often not the case in the past. Because *New Song Café* and *Knit and Natter* meet on Methodist Church premises, these issues are one and the same.

Welcome is often expressed in hospitality offered in shared food and drink and many “typical” Methodist congregations offer a time to meet over refreshments at the end of a service. It is my experience that this is common practice in most congregations in order to allow a more informal time for people to share together. It is also becoming more common for “typical” congregations to host café style worship services where refreshments are served during the worship as people share and talk around tables. These services are now often included on the preaching plan and advertised as such, whether they replace or supplement traditional Sunday worship.

An emphasis on welcome, acceptance and particularly hospitality are integral parts of Methodist life, both in “typical” churches and in the case studies. This stems from a historic understanding that ‘all are welcome’, which is found in Wesley’s Armenian theology, demonstrated at an open table at communion, in the role of lay leadership in the church, and in its democratic conferring and decision making. Hence, it appears, on this basis, that those “doing church differently” are exemplifying typical Methodist traits. These

groups with small, human-scale activities mirror early Methodist structures which are still part of “typical” churches. The early Methodists were placed into classes, which they attended alongside worship in the parish church during Wesley’s time and then alongside the Methodist societies which formed after Wesley’s death. Attendance at class meetings provided this closer form of companionship and accountability. In these groups lay people learnt to pray and study the Bible. This was supplemented by the attendance at ‘bands’ – groups of three or four, self-selecting, single sex groups who met to pray and support each other.³²³ Historically within Methodism being part of small groups was an essential part of membership and belonging to the society. Class meetings and meeting in bands, were all expected in addition to Sunday worship. Associational groups and social groups were also part of church life thus building relationships and supporting one another came alongside and out of worshipping together. So, an emphasis in which is rediscovered or re-emphasised in these case studies is neither particularly new or surprising in Methodist circles. Roger Walton, president of the Methodist conference 2016-17, has stressed the importance of developing relationships in small groups as an encouragement and strategy for deepening individual and common discipleship (1.4.1). His work defines the calling of the church in three overlapping areas: a call to be a Kingdom community, a missionary community, and a nurturing community that grows reflective disciples.³²⁴

Walton suggests that churches require joined up approaches through “typical” worship and sermons, community outreach programmes and ‘boundary-crossing, risk-taking adventurous initiatives’ which encourage ‘courageous openness’.³²⁵ Maybe it is this ‘courageous openness’ in

³²³ John Lawson, 'The People called Methodists - 2. Our Discipline', in Rupert Davies and Gordon Rupp (eds), *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain*, 4 vols (London: Epworth Press, 1965), I: 183-209.

³²⁴ Roger Walton, *The Reflective Disciple*, p. 154.

³²⁵ Roger Walton, *The Reflective Disciple*, p. 143.

which “typical” churches are taking part, in supporting and encouraging ways of “doing church differently” on their premises and in their name which is supporting pioneering work. For example, Glasson was set aside from a “typical” circuit role in order to discern a place for the Methodist Church in Liverpool City Centre out of which *Somewhere Else* emerged. Hu is now leading *Somewhere Else* alongside a circuit superintendency, demonstrating that “typical” churches and case studies can learn from each other in developing and encouraging a relational importance in being church.

10.8.1.2 Participation

Sunday worship in Methodist Churches is arranged by the Preaching Plan – a quarterly publication which records all worship services in the circuit and appoints a minister or local preacher for each service. Within services there is congregational participation in hymn singing, liturgy and when communion is celebrated. Readings are often led by lay members and psalms read responsively. Some churches also have worship leaders, who are trained at circuit level but are appointed by an individual church council. Worship leaders can work alongside ministers and local preachers leading prayers and some may also play a role in leading music. Although the local practice the general pattern remains that most main Sunday morning worship is led from the front by one individual, plus a small number of others in Bible reading, with the majority of vocal participation by congregational members through hymn singing, which accounts for around one third of the worship time. Worship which favours multiple voices rather than a single voice is a developing pattern within contemporary Methodism. Although the role of local preachers has always been a significant part of leading worship in Methodism, the introduction of worship leaders in 1990s meant that local congregations were able to have increased weekly involvement in the planning and participation in worship.

There are other occasions within “typical” congregations where sharing and participation in mid-week worship is higher. Prayer meetings,

house groups, Bible studies, midweek worship, youth and children's worship are frequently led by lay members of the church where all may have a voice and share. Historically attendance at these events would have been in addition to Sunday worship, although it is my perception that this is changing, especially in relation to midweek worship, as transport and work patterns have impacted on Sunday attendance; and some choose to attend midweek services which due to smaller numbers may offer more opportunity for them to share thoughts, reflections or prayers as part of the worship.

Physical participation and activity in groups such as *Somewhere Else* and *Knit and Natter* were much more explicit, but the trend towards increasing participation is evident in many areas of worship in "typical" church. "Typical" churches have provided historically and current offer and encourage participation in areas of outreach, pastoral care and childrens' work.

10.8.2 To what extent are the groups sustainable and what is the nature of their dependence on the "typical" Methodist church?

10.8.2.1 Dependence

The case studies display a level of dependence on "typical" church. In some cases and especially in the case of *Somewhere Else* and *New Song Café*, the leaders and those attending would see this as a good thing. The presbyters who lead *Somewhere Else* and *New Song Café* have trained within and are stationed by the Methodist Church. Their involvement in these ways of "doing church differently" is part of their work in the circuit, district and connexion. Although this may be the focus of their ministry at this time, the itinerant Methodist ministry means that it is likely that in the future they will be stationed elsewhere. This awareness brings a sense that in order for the church in these examples to continue, they need to be aware of the inter-dependency of their churches in the wider Methodist connexion.

The difference between the two examples is stark, however, and shows why each case study must be taken on its own merits and generalisations do not apply, even within one denomination in the same District. *Somewhere Else* has a share of a presbyter, a part-time administrator, rented premises and overheads directly related to the bread-making (e.g., energy costs, flour and other ingredients, equipment). Donations which are suggested are in order to cover the cost of bread-making, but most of those who come to baking during the week are unwaged. One of the roles of the administrator is to apply for grant funding for bread-making, although the work of *Somewhere Else* is supported in part by the District and the connexion and by donations from other Methodist churches.

The relationship with the rest of the District hasn't always been that straightforward – it would have to be said. In some places there has been a degree of jealousy. In some senses *Somewhere Else* has often been appreciated beyond the bounds of the District than within the District, I think that would be my perception. But increasingly I think that is beginning to shift. I think there is now a recognition [...] that actually *Somewhere Else* has some very, very important things to say to the rest of this District, and to the wider connexion about what church is, what church can be and what church should be.³²⁶

Somewhere Else has not met the Fresh Expressions hope or expectation that all groups should become self-sustaining, nor is this possibility likely. It belongs to a wider question of whether the Methodist Church wishes to support a presence within Liverpool City Centre in this form and whether this is financially viable in the long term.

New Song Café has a much larger membership who are able to support its work financially. The leadership team are creative in their encouragement of giving, and those attending *New Song Café* have enabled the funding of the re-configuration of the worship space at Bold Street.

Somewhere Else and now *New Song Network* act as churches in their own right and pay a circuit assessment to cover the minister's stipend. At the early stage of the group, *New Song Café* was dependent on the

³²⁶ Appendix 1.1.

“typical” congregation at Bold Street, Warrington. Jackie’s stipend would have been paid by the circuit, which had committed to supporting her as a Fresh Expressions co-ordinator, and Bold Street and Latchford Methodist churches, where Jackie also served would have contributed to that within the amount they paid to the circuit. As members of both these churches attended *New Song Café*, this could have been seen as an integral rather than extra part of Jackie’s work.

Knit and Natter did not make a financial contribution to the church for rent or heating as Hope Farm church council considered the group as integral to church life. The group was therefore financially dependent on the “typical” church but I do not think it would have introduced prayer as integral to the meetings, had it not met on church premises.

Café Church @Oomoo had an advisory minimum spend in the café in return for the use of the space. This was to cover the staff wages and use of the premises. On the leadership team there was input from Alison Hulse, who worked for the Methodist District, and Mike Prescott who was employed by the congregation at Elm Hall Drive, and their ability to use resources provided by the wider Methodist Church is evidence of an invisible dependence of this group on the “typical” church.

10.8.2.2 Sustainability

None of the case studies are completely self-sustaining and all depend on “typical” church in one way or another, as we have seen. A congregation like *Somewhere Else*, largely comprised of the marginalised and homeless, the unemployed and those with learning disabilities, does not bring in sufficient income to afford a minister, the rent or flour to make bread. As Glasson recognises: ‘As some congregations face the future without a minister, this small group of bread-makers demands a great deal of individual attention’.³²⁷

³²⁷ Glasson, *Mixed-Up Blessing*, pp. 44-45.

Sustainability is only relevant if one believes that the group which is set up is to be a permanent fixture. The “pop-up” nature of *Café Church @Oomoo* shows that this not always necessary. If such groups are kept in close relationship with a “typical” church rather than seen as a miracle cure to church decline then there an opportunity to learn from another. It may also be that circumstances, styles or preferences or a desire for a different form of worship or learning might lead to the accidental stepping stones discovered at *Knit and Natter*.

10.9 How far do the case studies reflect the ecclesial expectations of the official documents of the Methodist Church?

In Chapter 2, I outlined how I wanted the research initially to speak for itself. I wanted to discover the ecclesial realities of these groups before considering the research question: ‘How do the ecclesial realities of those Methodists “doing Church differently” in the Liverpool District compare with understandings of Fresh Expressions in the Methodist Church and nationally?’

An ethnographic approach has revealed the composition, the reasons and motivations for those attending, the characteristics they consider important for their groups, and then, finally, how they understand the groups to which they belong. However, within a connexional church it is important to understand that none of these groups ever stands alone. Therefore it is necessary to consider them alongside the official Methodist position and statements. The purpose of doing this is to see whether the official position of the Methodist Church matches the reality of the groups? The following section is not to claim that any of the groups which at the time of the research do not meet the eight essential criteria of a ‘church in the true sense of the term’ are not valid, or important. It is simply to question whether the Church in its definition of these groups, either through their classification within the Statistics for Mission or on the Fresh Expressions website, is claiming a status for them which is not accurate, or does not reflect what the members of the groups themselves understand.

Are the case studies able to be discernible as particularly Methodist? As yet, there has not been a piece of work within Methodism akin to Mobsby's '*Emerging and Fresh Expressions of Church: How Are They Authentically Church and Anglican?*' and this research does not simply judge whether or not they are 'authentically Church and Methodist', but engages with the official documents in this section in order to determine their ecclesial status in relation to the "typical" church while listening carefully to what the groups themselves said.

10.9.1 Vision of FX in The Methodist Church

This official statement (1.5.1) recognises a diversity of ways in which the Methodist people might reach out to others with renewed vision. The statement refers to church, circuit and district forms of fresh expressions. To this end, the case studies reflect the encouragement for Methodists to engage with the initiative. *Knit and Natter* and *Café Church @Oomoo* are rooted in individual churches and congregations with a specific geographical location and focus. *New Song Café* and later *New Song Network* were part of a wider circuit vision, drawing those from a number of local Methodist cognregations as well as embracing an ecumenical dimension. *Somewhere Else* has been supported by the Liverpool District.

The statement refers to 'nurturing a culture which is people-centred and flexible', which reflects all of the case studies through their listening approach, their emphasis on welcome and their encouragement of wide participation.

Where the case studies diverge from the statement is in the answer to the question – 'And what might be the vehicle by which you help others to grow as world-transforming disciples of Jesus Christ? This is the whole point of fresh expressions (FX) of Church.' The language of this claim was not to be found in the interview material, either from the

leaders, who did not give any evidence that this was specific aim, or from any of the participants who did not suggest that discipleship was a term with which they were familiar.

I believe this is because inherent to the ecclesial reality of these groups is the fact that they have started at a different point. They have rejected a top-down church planting model which imposes an agenda of mission or discipleship, along with the associated language, but have worked instead with who was present that day (those with and without a previous church background). The leaders have learnt to be alongside the participants, to listen to their questions, and share with them in prayer (*Knit and Natter*), in Bible study, prayer and sacrament (*Somewhere Else*), in song and prayer (*New Song Café*, developing into the celebration of the sacraments and the introduction of Bible study as *New Song Network* emerged) and in prayer and discussion (*Café Church @Oomoo*). This organic grassroots approach allows the groups to attend carefully to the context they are working in and the participants themselves. *Vision of FX in The Methodist Church* does not give any indication of how we might assess how people grow into world-transforming disciples of Jesus Christ, and why fresh expressions rather than any “typical” church which faithfully proclaims the gospel and celebrates the sacraments might not complement each other on the journey of discovering Christian community and generating costly discipleship.

10.9.2 Changing Church for a Changing World: Fresh Ways of being Church in a Methodist Context

Changing Church for a Changing World (1.5.2) offers a broad spectrum of theological and ecclesial perspectives as might be expected from a denomination which makes its decisions by conferring in a democratic way. The case studies echo the approach of Martin Wellings, whose historical retrospective suggests that the forming of Methodism itself, and subsequent experiments which have responded to local contexts and have frequently run parallel to other forms of worship (1.5.2).

Wellings' honesty that 'change is essential and inevitable, but it is seldom easy' rings true for all aspects of "typical church" as well as the experience of those "doing church differently".

The conclusion to *Changing Church for a Changing World* in 2007 states that 'it is too soon for conclusions' and that this is the beginning of a journey whose end will be in the future. The document ends with an article by Tom Stuckey who suggests immediate tasks so that Methodism might not miss its 'Kairos moment; a brief window of opportunity, possibly only five years at most, in which to turn the Church around'. His suggestions for ways in which this may happen are all focussed around leadership and structures. No-one in the case studies suggested that these examples would 'turn the church around'. To my mind, these huge, unrealistic claims are a rhetoric which the case studies do not own. The leaders in the case studies continue to be faithful in their attempts to share God's love, to offer welcome and reach out into their communities. They witness to God's love in small but important ways. They do not claim to be more than they are. They do not claim to reverse declining or aging Sunday congregations. They offer parallel and alternative opportunities to discover and explore faith in open and non-judgemental environments. But when this publication is taken as a whole it demonstrates the breadth of Methodist expressions of both "typical" and ways of "doing church differently". This is a great strength and the case studies demonstrate that a one-size-fits-all approach which begins with an agenda that it will become "church for the unchurched" so that decline will be reversed was not the ecclesial reality of the case studies examined.

10.9.3 *Fresh Expressions in the Mission of the Church*

It is important to note that this document which produces the clearest guidelines about fresh expressions of church is a joint Anglican/Methodist publication (1.5.3). The Church of England has now departed from joint research and produced its own findings which have

led to the *From Anecdote to Evidence* report (11.4.1) and *Seeing the Bigger Picture* (including the research *Who's There?* 11.4.2).

Fresh Expressions in the Mission of the Church (1.5.3) states the essential elements of the Church which are part of the *Mission-Shaped Ministry* course for those planning fresh expressions.

A church is:

1. A community of people who are called by God to be committed disciples of Jesus Christ and to live out their discipleship in the world;
2. A community that regularly assembles for Christian worship and is then sent out into the world to engage in mission and service;
3. A community in which the Gospel is proclaimed in ways that are appropriate to the lives of its members;
4. A community in which the Scriptures are regularly preached and taught;
5. A community in which baptism is conferred in appropriate circumstances as a rite of initiation into the Church;
6. A community that celebrates the Lord's Supper;
7. A community where pastoral responsibility and presidency at the Lord's Supper is exercised by the appropriate authorized ministry;
8. A community that is united to others through: mutual commitment; spiritual communion; structures of governance, oversight and communion; and an authorized ministry in common.

A Christian community that lacks some or all of these essential ecclesial elements is not a church, though this does not necessarily mean that it has no ecclesial status. It would be incorrect to describe such a community as 'a form of church for our changing culture' or as 'church for the people involved'. This would be to replace an objective definition with a subjective definition that sells short the Gospel and thus fails those whom it is intended to benefit.³²⁸

³²⁸ *Fresh Expressions in the Mission of the Church: Report of an Anglican-Methodist Working Party*, 7.3.6., p. 181.

These eight essential elements could only apply to planned and planted churches and not to experimental emerging ecclesial communities. As experimentation has always been a hallmark of Methodist development and practice on the ground, it seems important that instead of an inflexible, institutionalised, controlling framework there is some grace in acknowledging ecclesial realities in their infancy which have responded to innovation from people within the “typical” Methodist church.

10.9.4 A Discipleship Movement Shaped for Mission

Martyn Atkins’ general secretary’s report of 2011 *Contemporary Methodism: a discipleship movement shaped for mission* sought to ‘set an emphasis on the Methodist church as a discipleship movement shaped for mission’.³²⁹ This research has spanned a timeframe in which the ‘destination of travel’ has been accepted by the Conference and a working group established to consider a ‘fluid mixed economy’.³³⁰ Prior to 2011, the most current expression of Methodist ecclesiology was defined by the 1999 Conference report *Called to Love and Praise*.³³¹

The case studies are evidence of ecclesial realities within the Methodist Church, endorsed and supported by it. They all fit within existing congregations, circuit and district structures and as such are an integral part of the landscape not only of the cross-denominational fresh expressions movement but of the wider movement of the Methodist Church. This is because Methodism, through conference is constantly

³²⁹ The Methodist Church in Britain, *Conference Reports 2011*, available at: <http://methodist.org.uk/conference/conference-reports/2011-reports> (accessed 22.11.16).

³³⁰ The Methodist Church in Britain, *Conference Reports 2011*, available at: <http://methodist.org.uk/conference/conference-reports/2011-reports> (accessed 22.11.16).

³³¹ The Methodist Church in Britain, *Conference Report 1999: Called to Love and Praise* available at: <http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-called-to-love-and-praise-1999.pdf> (accessed 06.03.17).

able to change and be redefined and as such the evidence from the case studies can offer an insight into the direction of the ongoing lived reality of the Church's life.

The field work did not produce evidence that the groups used the language of discipleship, or whether they had mission as their primary aim, but these issues could be equally applied to many "typical" congregations. Some "typical" churches struggle to identify what mission is and how they should engage in it. The church has nevertheless aligned mission with fresh expressions of church, and have continually stressed a "church for the unchurched" agenda in suggesting that creating a form of "doing church differently" will be the only way to attract those who currently find most "typical" Methodist worship at odds with contemporary culture. The ecclesial reality of the case studies show something much more simple with ordinary members and "typical" churchgoers getting on with what they do best - getting alongside others with a common aim and purpose. For *Somewhere Else* and *Knit and Natter* this was rooted in social action, for *New Song Café* it was rooted in contemporary song, and for *Café Church @Oomoo* in discussion of how they might live out their faith in their lives.

10.10 What is the ecclesial status of these ways of "doing Church differently"?

In order to be able to address the first part of the research question and be able to assess the way in which realities of those Methodists "doing church differently" in the Liverpool District compare with understandings of Fresh Expressions in the Methodist Church, it is important at this juncture to take a stance on the ecclesial status of the groups. Although *Somewhere Else*, *Knit and Natter* and *New Song Café* have all been recognised as fresh expressions of church on the Fresh Expressions website, I will demonstrate that their ecclesial status is more nuanced.

Somewhere Else is a Methodist Church in its own right. It has a Methodist minister stationed to it, is governed by a church council, and therefore fulfils all of the criteria outlined in 10.8.3. of *Fresh Expressions in the Mission of the Church*. It is represented at the circuit meeting. The church is composed of those who are members of the Methodist Church, and bread-making is attended by others who have ecumenical links, some of whom have previously worshipped in other churches and some for whom this is their only or first experience of church.

Knit and Natter is an associational group, which runs parallel to the Methodist churches in Ellesmere Port. It is run by volunteers and its composition is made up of those who are members of the Methodist churches in Ellesmere Port (principally Hope Farm, which hosts the group, and Trinity in the town centre), those who have an association with the church but who are not members ('they call us friends')³³², and those for whom this is their only or first experience of church. As a group they pray together, share in occasional "typical" services and as part of their prayer time may have a short devotional or reflection. They invite those who attend to worship and services at the local Methodist churches and encourage a deeper involvement in the wider community life of the church. Some of the women have taken up this invitation leading me to conclude that this group has the potential to be a 'stepping stone' to "typical" church, which is contrary to Fresh Expressions rhetoric.³³³

New Song Café is an example of how groups which start in experimentation can emerge into full forms of church which fulfil the criteria set out in 10.5.3. of *Fresh Expressions in the Mission of the Church*. It began as a group formed from existing members of the Warrington circuit, and gathered around it those attending adjacent

³³² Appendix 5.4.

³³³ Fresh Expressions, 'The aim is not to provide a stepping stone into existing church, but to form new churches in their own right', available at: <https://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/guide/about/whatis> (accessed 28.02.17).

Methodist circuits and attracted those of other denominations who were looking for a contemporary music-based service. At the time of the research it was an additional service on the circuit plan, but soon developed other groups associated with the monthly worship service, including provision for children, community outreach projects and small Bible study groups. A presbyter stationed in the circuit with responsibility for the group allowed the group to celebrate communion as part of worship and also lead Bible studies. While the leadership team was made up of other lay people, Jackie was an advocate for the group at circuit level until the possibility to make the step to becoming a Methodist church in its own right. This move may suggest that *New Song Network* was prepared to revive and shape the church from within, using the frameworks which already exist. It also warns against making assumptions or labelling groups too early in their existence. It was five years from meeting as an additional service to becoming a church in its own right, with a separate identity from the “typical” Methodist church where its worship was taking place. This is the only such example in Methodism.

Café Church @Oomoo functioned as a house group of Elm Hall Drive, meeting in an independent coffee shop rather than the homes of members. Meeting in a public space allowed the event to be advertised in the church, not least among parents whose children attended groups at the church and also students at the university. The reality was that during the observation period most of those who attended were the planning group and close friends of theirs, most of whom had an existing link with Elm Hall Drive. The experimental, “pop-up”, fragile nature of the group meant that it met for two years in this format and has now been replaced by another form of café church within the circuit, which meets at a Methodist church that has sold its building and meets in a converted shop front. So the aim of using the café church format, although not meeting in Oomoo any longer, has “popped up” in another guise.

10.11 What have the case studies to say to the Methodist Church?

All the case studies offer wisdom and experience derived from their risk-taking experimentation, and the importance of this for the Methodist Church is shown below. David Clark argues that ‘Methodism needs to reshape its mission strategy around the task of building communities transformed by the gift of communal holiness’.³³⁴ The purpose of the Methodist Church in partnering with the Fresh Expressions Initiative was, I believe, to encourage local congregations to try out contextual ways of gathering people to worship and explore faith. This is consistent with its historical pattern. The case studies show that rather than adopt the intentional, church planting model of creating a “church for the unchurched” the groups have drawn from their Methodist way of being to demonstrate a bottom-up approach.

I believe the ethnographic approach, which has listened to both leaders and participants, gives evidence for a deeper understanding of ecclesial realities. Those attending groups articulated primarily their own experience of the group, without reference to the language of mission or discipleship. Indeed in none of the case studies did any of the participants refer to Fresh Expressions. Leaders and participants did not measure themselves by meeting criteria set down by the “typical” church or church structures but simply got on with it, discovering week by week what it meant to become a community which was making small steps in growing in faith. Whether in Bible study at *Somewhere Else*, prayer at *Knit and Natter* or learning new songs at *New Song Café*, these groups reinforced the values of grass roots Methodism. They have moved away from an intentional top-down approach, towards an unapologetic grass roots approach to “doing church differently” where skills and voices are released to begin shaping the future of the church.

Somewhere Else has in its simplicity in bread-making a model which has begun to be explored in other contexts – *House of Bread* in

³³⁴ David Clark, *Re-shaping the Mission of Methodism: A Diaconal Church Approach* (Bakewell: Church in the Market Place Publications, 2010).

Stafford, *Knead and Feed* in Ellesmere Port, and weekly bread-making at Wesley Methodist Chester.

The lessons for the Methodist Church from this research are that these groups are allowing people from all manner of existing church backgrounds and none to explore faith and Christian community life together. They are far more complex than a narrow definition of fresh expressions as “church for the unchurched”, and their particular context and nuance feed into the rich diverse tapestry of Methodist life in Britain at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

I suggest that the following six elements derived from the research provide the Methodist Church with importance guidance for “doing church differently”:

1. That these forms of ‘doing church differently’ are part of a mixed economy rooted within local churches and circuits.

It is important to recognise that, although Methodism has a number of Venture FX projects led by pioneers, which are important part of exploring imaginative work outside of the church building in contemporary culture, most experimentation in “doing church differently” is linked to and resourced from within existing congregations and circuits. This should be seen as encouraging and energising. It should be seen as a priority for lay and clergy alike to spend time listening to those who are sharing in these forms of “doing church differently” in order to learn which characteristics are particular to their own context and to foster them.

2. They are dependent initially on leaders with a particular charism or vision.

This was evident in terms of an individual, either an ordained person in the case of Barbara Glasson or Jackie Bellfield, or a lay person in the case of Chris Crowder. The passion and vision behind their own drive to be faithful to their vision, in all cases drawing others around them, led to forms of “doing church differently” which were vibrant and

growing. The commitment and faithfulness of these leaders to the group, listening and adapting to the emerging challenges and directions they took was essential. Glasson, Hu, Bellfield and Crowder invested time and energy into this listening, and as such were instrumental in accompanying these groups in their emergence rather than rigidly sticking to a pre-formed agenda. The fluid nature of the leadership for *Café Church @Oomoo* was ultimately what proved difficult to sustain the group.

3. The articulation of a Methodism within “doing church differently” is expressly visible where a Methodist presbyter is leading the group. It would fair to conclude that the two case studies with significant input from a Methodist presbyter – that of *Somewhere Else* and *New Song Café* – were open and articulate about their Methodist heritage and sense of belonging. Glasson, Hu and Bellfield embodied connexionalism in their ministry, along with reinforcing the position of both groups within the Methodist structures.

4. They demonstrate that hospitality (incorporating welcome, acceptance, belonging) and participation are key elements in attracting and in the development of those attending forms of “doing church differently”.

Attracted by the characteristics of hospitality and participation, leaders and participants were engaged in discovering their part in an evolving ecclesial reality. The case study evidence shows that although the language of discipleship and mission are used as the rationale for supporting fresh expressions in official Methodist Church documentation, for those joining and attending the case studies, irrespective of previous connection with church, neither of these terms appeared in the interviews.

5. They are dependent on the “typical” church.

Somewhere Else, *Knit and Natter* and *New Song Network*, the three case studies which are still meeting five years on from the field work,

are all still dependent on the “typical” church. This is in terms of ministerial support and oversight, the use of Methodist premises, and access to grants from the district or connexion. *Knit and Natter*, as an associational group of Hope Farm Methodist Church, can be embraced as an activity of the wider church and therefore supported and subsidised by the worshipping congregation as part of the church’s understanding of outreach in the community. The group did not pay rent, but donations sustained the knitting itself and so the church supported the group through the offer of the building and associated costs. *New Song Café* was able to draw on its larger numbers and generous giving of those who attended to support Bold Street in the reconfiguring of its worship space to accommodate the growing numbers. This was a financial way of ‘paying back’ and supporting the circuit who had released Jackie part-time to invest her time and ministry into the development of *New Song Café* and *New Song Network*. *Somewhere Else* is much more fragile, and the rental of the building and costs of bread-making have made the role of a paid administrator to source grant funding essential. The long term question for *Somewhere Else* is whether its unique nature and composition is of sufficient prophetic worth to the Methodist Church to continue supporting it financially when those who attend are unsalaried and unable to cover the costs. Over the last ten years the ministerial input has been reduced and Ian Hu now has oversight of *Somewhere Else* alongside other roles in the district.

6. They all embrace the value of experience.

This research alone is an indication that all the case studies were open to sharing their own experiences of the groups. The interviews show that part of being valued and accepted was the leaders and others in the group affirmed their own experience. I believe there was an honesty about their responses which demonstrated that having no previous church connection was not a barrier to sharing their own experience with others or me as a researcher. In terms of the Methodist quadrilateral, it would be fair to say that experience was heavily

weighted in their understanding of what it meant to belong to an ecclesial group. Some of them may discover tradition or scripture from the experience of being together. The lesson for the Methodist church in working with those making connections with ways of “doing church differently” is that they listen to the places and opportunities of sharing the Bible and the Methodist tradition and this was most evident in *Somewhere Else* and *New Song Network*, where there was oversight by a presbyter.

Within Methodism, much of its corporate life, its theology and practice have been developed in retrospect taking account of the experience of the individuals which have made up its small groups and churches. John Wesley himself did not envisage Methodism as a separate church, but following his death, the movement itself, through its conferring made decisions to form and structure an organisation. Yet John Vincent’s *Methodism Unbound: Christ and Methodism for the twenty-first century*, argues that ‘it was this phenomenon of personal experience, or better personal experience, which demanded a theology: What we have felt and seen, with confidence we tell.’³³⁵ This goes beyond Steven Croft’s suggestion in *Mission-shaped Questions* that we need a developmental ecclesiology.

If we are to take experience seriously, and to what those in the case studies have indeed ‘felt and seen’ of the embodied reality of the church, then this gives evidence of their confidence in the movement of which they have become a part. What is clear from the evidence and the common characteristics is that they are substantially based on the experience of both the participants and leaders reflecting on their own practice and from listening to each other. Experience has been privileged in these groups and has influenced the direction and shape of the groups. In the case of *Somewhere Else*, the experience was tested and reflected upon in the light of scripture and tradition, and this

³³⁵ John J. Vincent, *Methodism Unbound*, p. 47.

was articulated and written about in Glasson's work. It may be that a period of time allowed this to happen, and it is to be hoped that if the other case studies are to grow in depth and understanding of themselves as ecclesial communities, whether as parallel churches or as *New Song Café* has done, a church in their own right, that they undertake a process of reflection upon their role within the Methodist Church and hold their experience within a movement which was 'raised up to spread scriptural holiness' and as such must hold the gospel at the heart of its being.

10.12 Conclusion

This chapter recognises the complex levels and layers of ecclesial reality within current Methodism.

Somewhere Else is a Methodist church in its own right, with a minister stationed by conference and a church council structure in line with "typical" Methodist churches, but meeting predominantly midweek with a combination of those who have links with other congregations and those for whom this 'bread church' is their first contact with any church.

Knit and Natter continued to be an associational group, with elements of a parallel congregation. The reasons for joining the group were complex but responding to hospitality and participating in responding to practical need were prioritised over worship in the interviews with participants. The emphasis was on a group which was relational, mirroring Methodist class meetings. This was an example of a way of "doing Church differently" which needed to exist in a mixed economy of ecclesial realities, in this case other "typical" Methodist congregations in Ellesmere Port.

New Song Café was an example which at the outset was principally a parallel congregation made up of existing church members both Methodist and other mainstream denominations. Its development into *New Song Network* attracting those without a church background increased its composition and profile. A presbyter stationed to the

circuit allowed this group to keep a worship focus including baptism and the celebration of communion, which aided its move into a Methodist Church in its own right.

Café Church @Oomoo began with the aspirations of following an intentional model suggested by the Café Church Network, with the hope of reaching and targeting those outside of “typical” church. The ecclesial reality was in fact different, and what emerged was a form of house group. This met off the church premises and was a safe space for those who were already heavily committed to church life and leadership, it did not have the critical mass or paid personnel to sustain the group, which stopped meeting due to changes in the circumstances of the volunteer co-ordinators.

The examples relied heavily on both financial support and staff from the Methodist church. *Somewhere Else* and *New Song Café* were able to continue and develop as they had the commitment of the connexion through presbyters. *Knit and Natter* was sustainable due to the commitment of lay volunteers and the ability of the “typical” church to provide a physical meeting place. All of the groups in their practice demonstrated elements of the published documents, but there was no evidence that they were followed to the letter or were dominant in the planning or thinking of the leaders.

This attention paid to emerging groups and their ecclesial practice and reality is in tension with a much more prescriptive and implied agenda suggested by the Fresh Expressions Initiative as will now be explored in chapter 11.

CHAPTER 11

THE ECCLESIAL REALITIES OF THE CASE STUDIES IN THE LIGHT OF THE ASPIRATIONS OF THE FRESH EXPRESSIONS INITIATIVE

11.1 Introduction

This chapter will examine the ecclesial realities of the case studies in relation to the official statements of the Fresh Expressions Initiative. I will show that the reality of the groups that I studied on the ground do not adhere to the rhetoric of a “church for the unchurched” or necessarily follow an explicit discipleship or mission agenda. I will argue that their reality and the way they have been encouraged to explore ways of “doing church differently” in their context demonstrates an alternative grassroots approach in contrast to a top-down prescriptive way of exploring fresh expressions of church.

11.2 Significance of the analysis of the research goals 1, 2, 3 for the Fresh Expressions Initiative

This section will consider research goals 1, 2 and 3 in turn and the originality and significance of the findings as they provide evidence of complex ecclesial realities.

11.2.1 Research goal 1: To understand why people are connecting with groups which are “doing Church differently”

The lesson from the research is that those connecting with these groups were either specifically looking for a place to belong and a community (5.4.2.1) or that the welcome and the acceptance they found on attending was instrumental in them becoming active participants (4.5.2.1) and also in inviting others (6.5.2.2). In contrast to the reasons given by the Fresh Expressions Initiative for starting a fresh expression,

the groups and leaders did not articulate the language of mission.³³⁶ They were attempting to form alternative or new ways of “doing church differently”, remaining open to the ways in which the groups may evolve and develop within existing church structures. Key to their ability to offer a welcome was an interest in the stories and voices of those attending whatever their previous experience of church. A commitment to listening to participants’ experience was given a higher priority than following an intentional or fixed explicit mission agenda. This involved a shift away from the responsibility of leading and shaping a fresh expression lying solely in the hands of one leader, or even a small group. It meant continually establishing and articulating together a negotiated and flexible approach to “doing church differently”.

11.2.2 Research goal 2: To discern what are the chief characteristics of groups “doing church differently”

One of the lessons which stands out for me for fresh expressions is that people were coming to these groups expecting to participate and wanting to be part of a group that made a difference. This was particularly true of *Somewhere Else*, *Knit and Natter* and *New Song Café*. This is a different model to the highly intensive input and preparation required by some other fresh expressions in relation to worship.³³⁷ This desire to participate, rather than receive or consume, challenges the notion that fresh expressions are simply about providing an alternative church option and selling more attractive models under the guise of a ‘church for our culture’. Ward suggests that ‘we should treat as suspect the way that some Christian organisations have embraced the marketplace uncritically’.³³⁸ Participants in the case studies demonstrated that they did not want to consume a pre-

³³⁶ Michael Moynagh, *Five Reasons to Start a Fresh Expression of Church*, available at: <http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/guide/essential/fivereasons> (accessed 5.12.16).

³³⁷ This may include cathedral-based worship such as Transcendence in York which requires sound and lighting effects or the practicalities of organising the craft and food for Messy Church.

³³⁸ Pete Ward, *Selling Worship: How What We Sing Has Changed the Church* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2005), p. 181.

packaged act of worship, even at *New Song Café*, but be involved in a community in which their contribution was integral to the work of the group.

An increase in active and physical participation which goes beyond the actual gathering was also important. Those at *Somewhere Else* gave away their second loaf (4.4). *Knit and Natter* members continued to knit during the week, and collected yarn or completed garments from others who did not physically attend the group (5.4.4.2). *New Song Café* encouraged participants to search and listen to the songs for the following week shared on their Facebook page (6.4). This shared participation indicated a shift in responsibility. Allowing all in the group to participate and be involved in shared planning stands in contrast to the argument that fresh expressions can run the risk of attracting a single charismatic leader who is tempted to control the direction of the group.

In terms of the characteristic of flexibility, these groups did mirror the aspiration of the Fresh Expressions Initiative which highlights listening to the context as one of the essential skills for establishing a fresh expression of church. In the case studies I observed, the development of the groups is not planned or necessarily neat but was in response to emerging grassroots groups that were comfortable making suggestions, and it was the deepening relationships, dialogue and conversation between the participants and leaders that has influenced the shaping of the group. In this way, it goes some way to support fresh expressions suggestion of shared leadership.³³⁹

Jackie Bellfield demonstrates how the ability to be able to understand multiple levels of association and desire to connect is key to the development and growth of such a way of “doing Church differently”. During the fieldwork most of those who responded to the questionnaire were regularly worshipping at a “typical” church. By 2015 the hot drinks ministry at the crematorium was attracting those without a connection

³³⁹ Fresh Expressions, available at: <http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/guide/sustaining/shared> (accessed 06.03.17).

to either *New Song Network* or other churches who wanted to participate and share in this aspect of *New Song Network's* ministry.³⁴⁰

11.2.3 Research goal 3: To investigate how the groups who are “doing church differently” understand themselves as an ecclesial reality

As demonstrated in Chapter 1, defining and naming fresh expressions, in order to be able to categorise or justify their place within the church was prevalent at the beginning of the Initiative, in the wake of *Mission-Shaped Church*. Recent reports and statistics from the Church of England, particularly *From Anecdote to Evidence* stress the importance of the Initiative in terms of numerical growth of both fresh expressions of church and the numbers of people they attract. Until the Church Army research project of November 2016, there had not been a significant survey of whether this numerical growth included those who were current worshippers within existing parishes.³⁴¹

Paying attention to those with previous or existing church connections is crucial to the ecclesial understanding of those attending any group “doing church differently”. This can be either as part of the wider structures of the denominational church, such as recognising *Somewhere Else* as Liverpool City Centre’s Methodist Church. *Knit and Natter* as an associational group linked to a “typical” congregation had a mixed composition which built relationships within the community through participatory service, leading to members attending services in a “typical” church, where they have experienced a wider understanding of ecclesial reality. This places the reality of *Knit and Natter* at odds with the statement of the Fresh Expressions Initiative:

The aim is not to provide a stepping stone into existing church, but to form new churches in their own right. The flow is from the congregation to people outside – not inward, but outward.³⁴²

³⁴⁰ Jackie Bellfield, ‘The New Song Network’ in Vincent, *Methodism Abounding*, pp. 68-72.

³⁴¹ Dalpra and Vivian, *Who’s There?*

³⁴² Fresh Expressions, available at: <http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/guide/about/whatis> (accessed 13.02.17).

It could be argued that this stepping stone was an accidental by-product of the group and not the aim, however the continuous invitation to “typical” church worship and events would suggest that this was a natural part of the leaders’ understanding of wanting to share and offer opportunities which existed elsewhere in the church and circuit (5.4.4.2 and 10.3).

New Song Café was the closest to the aspiration of the Fresh Expressions Initiative in terms of the success of becoming a church in its own right. But even claiming this group as one which has met the criteria of the Fresh Expressions Initiative is not straightforward, as the reality showed that despite a missional intention the group started with and contains those who belong to and are active in existing churches in contrast to the following quote:

Fresh expressions is a new mindset, not a new model of church to be copied. It is a mindset that starts not with church, but with people who don't belong to church.³⁴³

Somewhere Else and *New Song Network* relied on ordained and lay leaders as catalysts who over time have drawn around them some of those for whom this was their first experience of church, but this has begun within and from the very centre and heart of the Methodist Church. The composition of all the groups at the end of the fieldwork was mixed in terms of those new to church and those with existing or previous connections, so their understanding of the group was very much as part of a mixed economy.

Having considered briefly the three research goals in relation to the Fresh Expressions Initiative I will now explore in more detail the expectations of the Initiative and assess how far the groups reflect this reality.

³⁴³ Fresh Expressions, available at: <http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/guide/about/whatis> (accessed 13.02.17).

11.3 Rhetoric and reality: How far do the case studies reflect the ecclesial expectations of statements, documents and reports of the Fresh Expressions Initiative?

In 2015, Michael Moynagh produced seven official summary guides for the the Fresh Expressions Initiative to be used in *Mission-Shaped Intro* and *Mission-Shaped Ministry* courses as well as for those wanting to know more or set up fresh expressions (1.4.2). They are based on the following statement:

Fresh expressions of church are missional, contextual, formational and ecclesial. In other words, they:
serve those outside the church;
listen to people and enter their context;
make discipleship a priority: journeying with people to Jesus;
form church - they are not bridges to an existing church, but an expression of church for others in the midst of their lives.³⁴⁴

What is not explicit from Moynagh's definition is whether this classification is essential and non-negotiable or desirable and aspirational. Indeed, the guides themselves can appear contradictory, displaying both an intentional and more ad hoc aspirational approach. In 'Starting to make disciples – guide 4' the examples range from planning intentional weekends away for young people, a pin board for prayers in English classes, and a Sunday morning community breakfast where 'if asked, people talked about their faith'.³⁴⁵

In this section I examine key statements alongside the ecclesial realities which I have explored and considered in the research. The evidence from the case studies demonstrate that the ecclesial realities are complex and there are some overlapping reasons for joining and identifiable common characteristics. Classification into the missional, contextual, formational and ecclesial categories suggested by Moynagh is not simple.

³⁴⁴ Michael Moynagh, *What are Fresh Expressions of Church*, available at: <https://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/sites/default/files/three-minuteguide1-whatarefreshexpressionsofchurch.pdf> (accessed 06.12.16).

³⁴⁵ Michael Moynagh, *How to Start Making Disciples*, available at: <http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/sites/default/files/three-minuteguide4-howtostartmakingdisciples.pdf> (accessed 06.12.16).

Considering the extent to which the ecclesial reality of the case studies reflect the statements, documents and reports of the Fresh Expressions Initiative is also complex. I believe this is because these groups have placed contextualisation at the beginning of their exploration. It is their individual context which has shaped the group, as part of the listening process. In the sub sections below I consider the four elements of Moynagh's definition of Fresh Expressions and compare them with evidence illustrating the reality of the case studies. These four elements state that fresh expressions should be: 'missional – serving those outside the church', 'contextual – listen to people and enter their context', 'formational – make discipleship a priority, journey with people to Jesus' and 'ecclesial – form church – they are not bridges to an existing church, but an expression of church for others in the midst of their lives'.³⁴⁶

11.3.1 'Missional – serving those outside the church'

It is important to note at the beginning of this section that none of the groups studied intentionally set out to 'serve those outside the church'.³⁴⁷ This is because these groups had an approach which was much more organic and exploratory in style.

Somewhere Else reflects in its composition a mix of both those with prior church connections and no church connection. The artificial division between us and them implied in existing Christians serving those outside the church is not part of the ethos of this group which has equality of experience at its centre. *Somewhere Else* subvert this 'serving' as it is the whole group who through their activity take part in 'serving' the wider community. The bread that is baked and given away

³⁴⁶ Michael Moynagh, *What are Fresh Expressions of Church*, available at: <https://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/sites/default/files/three-minuteguide1-whatarefreshexpressionsofchurch.pdf> (accessed 13.02.17).

³⁴⁷ Michael Moynagh, *What are Fresh Expressions of Church*, available at: <https://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/sites/default/files/three-minuteguide1-whatarefreshexpressionsofchurch.pdf> (accessed 13.02.17).

is a way in which all are part of the way in which faith is shared in a physical and practical way.

Knit and Natter also mirror the example above of *Somewhere Else*. *Knit and Natter* began with knitting for need specifically within their own local church and context. They were seeking to provide a service for those outside the church, in the spirit of the charitable impulse described in 1.2. There was an interest from those within and outside the church to join in this service for others. The by-product of *Knit and Natter* was the formation of a gathered community with a common focus, but the intention was not to serve those outside the church by creating a 'knitting church'.

New Song Café again shows how a complex make-up of the group cannot fit into the Fresh Expressions Initiative narrowly defined classification. Despite the feting of *New Song Café* on the Fresh Expressions website, the gathering itself 'serves' those within and outside the church, though the majority of those who attended during the fieldwork were inside mainstream churches. The development of the group was further evidence of outreach from the worship service into practical ways of serving the community through gardening projects and the hot drinks ministry at the crematorium. In these outreach projects, there was an intention to 'serve those outside the church' but in this serving, others who were not looking for a worship focussed event were drawn in, thus diminishing the notion of them and us implied by Moynagh's definition.

Café Church @Oomoo in reality was only formed of those with an existing church connection or faith, although they had hopes of forming a community which would be able to reach out to the student community. This group also had no specific outreach element or wider connection to the community like the other three case studies so cannot be said to be 'missional' in Moynagh's definition of 'serving those outside the church' either in the gathering of the group itself or

any outworkings despite the fact this was the only group which was explicit in defining a 'target' congregation outside of existing worshippers in "typical" church.

'Serving those outside the church' implies that a fresh expression has to have a pre-conceived idea of the way in which they would like to 'serve' those outside the church. All of the case studies have emerged into their own ecclesial realities without a pre-determined missional strategy, preferring to allow the developing context, composition and ethos of the group to shape its future rather than a planned missional strategy.

11.3.2 'Contextual - listen to people and enter their context'

This is the element where all four case studies closely mirror the suggested way of working of the Fresh Expressions Initiative. As previously outlined in Chapter 1, this way of working is not new or fresh in itself but has been a characteristic of Methodism since its beginnings. The impetus and the emphasis of the Fresh Expressions Initiative and the Methodist Church's role within the Initiative has encouraged districts, circuits and churches to revisit the thinking of "doing Church differently", offering space within agendas at conference, synods and circuit meetings to pay attention to this 'direction of travel'.³⁴⁸

Somewhere Else was formed through Glasson listening to the context of the city. Her ministry and the beginnings of the Bread Church most closely mirror the Missio Dei theology underpinning Martyn Atkins' advocacy in fresh expressions of 'seeing what God is doing and joining in'. Her close attention to the flows and patterns of the city over a year prior to moving into the premises on Bold Street, married with listening

³⁴⁸ Martyn Atkins, 'Contemporary Methodism: a discipleship movement shaped for mission', p. 4.

to the call of God to pay attention to the role of bread-making in the forming of community shaped the idea which led to *Somewhere Else*. She did not begin to 'serve' the homeless, or survivors of abuse, or those with learning disabilities. Rather, it was those with such vulnerabilities who began to attend, who taught her how to read the scriptures anew and helped her to see church differently.

Knit and Natter responded initially to an outreach opportunity from within the church. Moynagh's 'context' is aligned to the first category of 'missional' so would assume the context is outside the church. This was not the context in which *Knit and Natter* began, however, those that joined *Knit and Natter* without a church background helped the coordinators shape the ongoing work, so listening was a key element both of the ongoing pastoral relationships and the development of the group.

New Song Café had the initial intention, as *Café Church @Oomoo* did, to form a community which would meet outside the church building where others might explore Christianity. The reality of revisiting the format within the church building itself involved listening to the contexts of those who were attending and shaping the worship around their requests and needs. Listening to the context of a changing group, including those without a faith background, shaped the way *New Song Network* developed other aspects of ministry and service.

The reality of *Café Church @Oomoo* was that during the time I observed the group, there were only those who had an existing church connection with Elm Hall Drive. On one occasion a number of foreign students with previous church connections attended the group, but I did not have any evidence that the group had attracted anyone outside "typical" church. However, they did make the decision to meet outside of the church building and thus made a positive and intentional move into a context which was familiar for the students they were hoping to attract. This way of experimenting is encouraged by the Fresh

Expressions Initiative – ‘Experiment like mad! Don’t be shy about trying something to see if it works’³⁴⁹ – *Café Church @Oomoo* is an example of an experiment which didn’t last, but is part of a historic pattern of such examples at Elm Hall Drive (7.4.3.4).

Out of four case studies, *Somewhere Else* is the closest to Moynagh’s definition of contextual. This is perhaps inevitable as Glasson was beginning from scratch and could therefore truly gather others around her in an original format. The other examples were already working closely with or inside “typical” churches so ‘entering their context’ is a misnomer as the leaders were already in that context themselves. This conflict is where the Fresh Expressions Initiative provides “typical” church members with definitions and plans encouraging them to avoid attractional models of ‘come to us’ but the reality of case studies is that while they are dependent on “typical” church for resourcing these experiments, the tendency to gravitate to what they know is inevitable. It could also be argued that this in itself is contextual. *Knit and Natter* are evidence of a group rooted within “typical” church which having embraced the initiative of an outreach project have attracted others, some from previous church backgrounds and others without a church background into a place where prayer and faith can be explored without a planned strategy or agenda.

11.3.3 ‘Formational – make discipleship a priority, journey with people to Jesus’

In Moynagh’s guide a model shown for creating fresh expressions is demonstrated in six linear steps

1. Listening
2. Loving and serving
3. Building community
4. Exploring discipleship
5. Church taking shape

³⁴⁹ Michael Moynagh, *Fresh Expressions Three Minutes Guides, No.3. How to Start a Fresh Expression of Church*, available at: <http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/guide/essential> (accessed 19.09.16).

6. Doing it again³⁵⁰

This pattern suggests that relationship building was at the beginning of the process of a church taking shape. However, the reality is much more complex. Such a structure, even a fluid one, implies a formula can be applied.

In the case studies the reality shaped the way the group developed. For example, the decision to pray together on the first meeting of *Knit and Natter* placed the group firmly within a wider church community from day one. Even though there were those who attended the first meeting from outside the church, the faith of the co-ordinators was explicit.

Before *Somewhere Else* rented its current premises, when Glasson was making bread with friends in her home, the rhythm of praying and studying the scriptures was at the heart of the bread-making. Church was being shaped while they continued to listen, turning upside down this linear approach.

There is something unapologetic about both of these groups, who are unashamed about sharing their faith in this public way. In being upfront about their faith from the start, their faith was transparent and there was no sense of a hidden agenda. There was no obligation to stay and be part of the prayer time at *Somewhere Else* or *Knit and Natter*, but it was not regarded as unusual or strange, or indeed inaccessible, even by those who had no previous church connection.³⁵¹

New Song Café followed step 4 of Moynagh's model which was to begin enquirers' groups, which were called Discipleship. These

³⁵⁰ Michael Moynagh, *Fresh Expressions Three Minutes Guides, No.4. How to Start Making Disciples*, available at: <http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/sites/default/files/three-minuteguide4-howtostartmakingdisciples.pdf> (accessed 06.12.16).

³⁵¹ Appendix 4.1.

teaching sessions which were led by Jackie Bellfield were a way for anyone to explore the Bible in more detail in between the monthly café sessions. These had begun early in the history of the group, emphasising the importance of offering this level of engagement in addition to attending *New Song Café*, but the offer of the Bible study groups was in response to those who were wanting to meet more frequently and find out more, rather than an initial pre-planned strategy. *New Song Café* were already singing contemporary hymns and songs, praying and celebrating communion, so the Bible study groups were running parallel to this way of worshipping rather than following Moynagh's linear model. Within *New Song Café*, the phrase 'church was taking shape' could be argued was happening from the first meeting, and developed as a contemporary Methodist worship service attracted a wider ecumenical congregation who then began to invite friends and family without a church connection.

11.3.4 'Ecclesial – form church – they are not bridges to an existing church, but an expression of church for others in the midst of their lives.'

The evidence from my research is that the case studies have found their own way to express their identity as parallel church communities. For *Knit and Natter* and *Café Church @Oomoo* they exist alongside "typical" churches, offering welcome, discussion and alternative worship in the case of *Café Church @Oomoo*, and friendship, support, an opportunity to pray and to offer a practical service through knitting for need in the case of *Knit and Natter*. For *Somewhere Else*, their story predates both *Mission-Shaped Church* and the Fresh Expressions Initiative, but it does show how innovative projects and ministry models rooted and supported by Methodism have the potential to grow, develop and become a church in its own right. *New Song Café* is also a demonstration of this growth, the newest church in Methodism, with its own levels of engagement and associational groups is an example of how the encouragement and releasing of

potential on the part of both ordained and lay leaders within the church can bring challenge and change.

All of the groups had individuals within them with fluid and flexible relationships and commitment to existing churches. This happened naturally, and was not the case for all participants, but the reality of this cannot be dismissed or ignored.

The danger of defining any fresh expressions as ecclesial is that it does not reflect the wide range of examples, nor the stage at which they might be in their growth or development. This is why an ethnographic approach can aid the understanding of these groups at any one particular time. It can give an in-depth snapshot, and is an approach which Steven Croft recognises, in that he encourages 'systematic use of the human sciences, particularly social anthropology, as tools to listen more deeply to local communities and discover what is actually happening and tests this against the rhetoric and espoused values of these communities'.³⁵²

Croft entitles the section in which he outlines this approach 'Developmental ecclesiology: contrasting the actual with the ideal'. This strategic approach may be appropriate for "typical" congregations but the difficulty with a strictly comparative study with an 'ideal' is what I have resisted in this thesis. To explore fledgling groups who are finding their way and discovering their identity, emphases and characteristics will naturally tend towards a more descriptive ecclesiology. If these groups were to have been compared to an 'ideal church', I believe that would have undermined the opinion and experience of the participants in the study, leading to an imbalance of power implying that the 'ideal' for the group was that which was determined by the institutional church or the Fresh Expressions Initiative. A tension at the heart of fresh expressions, is the desire or need of the institutional Church to define

³⁵² *Mission-Shaped Questions*, p. 197.

fresh expressions according to the nature of “typical” church and an explicit mission agenda versus the reality of fluid ecclesial realities that refuse to be shaped but grow organically. However, working with the lived reality of the groups these case studies fell into two groups in terms of how they were either classified or viewed as ecclesial realities by the leaders and by the participants, either as Methodist Churches in their own right or secondly as associational models or parallel churches alongside “typical” congregations. Paul Butler, Bishop of Southwell and Nottingham, gives an honest example of how these live together, encouraging a pioneering approach to ministry and mission in and from “typical” churches as well as developing fresh expressions.³⁵³

This research shows how the ecclesial reality of the case studies showed that there was a fluidity between ways of “doing church differently” and “typical” church. All of the leaders were involved in leading and participating in worship in “typical” congregations, either in Sunday worship or in family and childrens’ worship in the case of *Café Church @Oomoo*.³⁵⁴ This involvement in multiple congregations and groups by the leaders meant that they were able to offer invitations to other Methodist services and events. This invitational approach meant that there was evidence of a crossover between the groups “doing Church differently” and attending “typical” church challenging Moynagh’s statement that fresh expressions are not ‘bridges’. This crossover happened organically in *Knit and Natter*, and those attending *Somewhere Else* had the opportunity to lead worship in other “typical” Methodist churches in the district where they could share their experiences and tell their story, thus informing the wider connexional church.

³⁵³ Paul Butler, *Mission strategy and New Ways of Being Church*, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dtGqGUEJkvQ> (accessed 15.05.16).

³⁵⁴ At the time of the research Revd. Ian Hu was superintendent of the Liverpool North Central Circuit, Revd. Jackie Bellfield was minister at Bold Street Methodist and Latchford Methodist Churches in Warrington, Christine Crowder was worshipping at Hope Farm Methodist Church and Alison Hulse, Mike and Rachel Fox were worshipping at Elm Hall Drive.

A contradiction in Moynagh's argument is that he recognises the role of the "typical" church and encourages fresh expressions to:

Connect with the wider church. Christians are baptised into the whole body, and discipleship involves learning from and contributing to it. Connecting up can include: shared learning, missional, social and worship events with your parent church; attending a Christian festival or conference; downloading online Christian resources; 'blending church' by worshipping in your fresh expression and, periodically, in the church you came from; getting involved with a Christian project overseas.³⁵⁵

It is only in these 2015 guides that I have found the language of a parent church for fresh expressions, and the concept of blending church whereby folk worship both in a fresh expression and in the church 'you came from'. Not only does this recognise the complexity of composition in my examples of "doing church differently" but now that the initial claim of "church for the unchurched" is contradicted within the Fresh Expressions own material. Some individuals interviewed in the research were already engaged in this blending or dual attendance as a natural way of working. I would argue that, for those who have found their way to faith and church within fresh expressions, to suggest to them that they 'periodically worshipped in the church they came from' would not make sense. The guides therefore would imply they are written not for those unchurched who the Initiative claims to reach but for those who have migrated from a "typical" church. This is not to dispute that a recognition of a wider tradition is important, all four of the case studies were able to demonstrate this connection, but that the advice available in the guides should apply sensitively to a mixed readership if they take the reality of fresh expressions seriously.

³⁵⁵ Michael Moynagh, *Three Minute Guides: Essential Fresh Expressions, no.5. How to Grow Mature Disciples*, available at: <http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/guide/essential/maturedisciples/> (accessed 10.03.17).

11.4 Research goal 5: How are these groups “doing church differently” situated within national Fresh Expressions?

The leaders of the groups were aware of the terminology of fresh expressions of Church. Barbara Glasson during her time at *Somewhere Else* took part in the first DVD produced by the Fresh Expressions Initiative.³⁵⁶ The current minister Ian Hu wrote an update for the Fresh Expressions website.³⁵⁷ *Knit and Natter* has been part of a district event showcasing fresh expressions and has also been part of the Fresh Expressions website. *New Song Café* has had several posts on the website, including some interviews with Jackie Bellfield. Jackie has a circuit remit for encouraging fresh expressions and is also part of the Fresh Ways of Working group for the connexional Methodist Church. The small leadership team at *Café Church @Oomoo* had undertaken Café Church Network training and one of the leadership team worked for the Methodist Church as a training officer. In the ways outlined above all of the case studies had participated in the outworking of the Fresh Expressions Initiative. They may have been uncomfortable with the label of fresh expressions and may not have subscribed to all the criteria outlined on the Fresh Expressions website, but the leaders believed that they were providing an expression of church which was particular, contextual, engaged with scripture, prayer, and tradition and was able to attract people who did not attend another church or service. Having established that the groups are recognised by the Initiative, I will explore how this research in “doing Church differently” adds a distinctive and original voice to the fresh expressions landscape. While recognising that this research comes from a particular Methodist context as examined in relation to Research Goal 4 in Chapter 10, I will now situate the research in relation to the Church of England’s current work on fresh expressions as expressed first by *From Anecdote to Evidence* report and secondly by the Church Army’s Research Unit’s report *Who’s There?*.

³⁵⁶ Ivison, *Expressions: the dvd – 1: stories of church for changing culture*.

³⁵⁷ Fresh Expressions, *Somewhere Else – update March 2011*, available at: <http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/stories/somewhereelse/update> (accessed 10.03.17).

11.4.1 How does the evidence provided by the case studies relate to the Church of England's *From Anecdote to Evidence* report?

Ten years after *Mission-Shaped Church*, the Church of England commissioned research that led to a report entitled *From Anecdote to Evidence*. The main reason for the Church of England commissioning this was to analyse alongside other areas of church life 'the impact of fresh expressions on church growth'.³⁵⁸ The anecdotal element referred to stories recorded on the Fresh Expressions website and from the Church Army's *Encounters on the Edge* series.

The report highlighted the difference in approach that I took in my own research, beginning with open-ended questions to discover the emerging emphases and possible ecclesial issues which arose from each of the case studies without predetermined outcomes. In contrast, the research in *From Anecdote to Evidence* was commissioned with a clear agenda, encompassing aims that are wide-ranging, from the very practical, 'to ensure funds are spent effectively' to a wider mission agenda which is already clearly assumed 'to find practical evidence to support mission'. *From Anecdote to Evidence* admits that there is 'no simple recipe' for growth and 'no simple solutions' to decline, and the fact that growth in fresh expressions is studied in an additional in-depth report indicates that the Church of England's interest and stake in the findings of the research. The Church of England believes that research into fresh expressions is worthy of significant attention in order:

- To find practical evidence to support mission
- To understand better the identity and context of the Church of England in the 21st Century
- To bring clarity to issues around church growth
- To identify what is effective and why
- To identify what is not effective and why
- To support and share good practice
- Because an understanding of how to effectively share the Good News of the Kingdom is important

³⁵⁸ *From Anecdote to Evidence*, p. 6.

Because church attendance is declining in the Church of England
To inform good stewardship and ensure that funds are spend
effectively
To identify areas where further research is needed³⁵⁹

The research goals above seem not only very wide-ranging, general and insufficiently focussed, but also seem leading in that the first goal 'to find practical evidence to support mission' assumes what the research will find.

The evidence element recorded some findings from the Church Growth Research Programme 2011-2013. A criticism offered by Mark Hart highlighted that the distinction between the anecdotal (taken from the Fresh Expressions website) and the evidence was hard to distinguish, meaning that it was too easy to take anecdotal claims in the documents as if they were supplied by research evidence.³⁶⁰

Alongside this 'summary' report, a detailed report concerning specified criteria for Anglican fresh expressions of Church was laid out in 2.3 of the report.³⁶¹ The Church Army has been prominent in terms of the publication

³⁵⁹ *From Anecdote to Evidence*, p. 5.

³⁶⁰ 'Cleric says report on church growth belies the research' *Church Times* 17 April 2015.

³⁶¹ 'What is an Anglican fresh expression of Church? (fxC)'

Ten parameters

1. Was something Christian and communal brought to 'birth' that was new and further, rather than an existing group modified?
2. Has the starting group tried to engage with non-churchgoers? There was intention to create a fresh expression of Church, not begin an outreach project from an existing church. The aim was for the Christians to change, to fit a culture and context, not make the local/indigenous people change, to fit into an existing church context.
3. Does the resultant community meet at least once a month? In cases of monthly meetings further questions about how to deepen community, build commitment and increase discipleship follow.
4. Does it have a name that helps to give it an identity? An active search, not yet yielding a name, is allowed.
5. Is there intention to be Church? This could be from the start, or by discovery on the way. This admits the embryonic fxD (fx of developing community) and cases of fxE (fx of evangelism) and even some fxW (fx of worship). The key is that they are not seen as a bridge back to 'real church'.
6. Is it Anglican, or an Anglican partner in an Ecumenical project? 'Anglican' here means the bishop welcomes it as part of the diocesan family, not whether it only uses centrally authorised worship texts, or has a legal territory such as a parish.
7. There is some form of leadership recognised within, and also without.⁵
8. At least the majority of members (who are part of the public gathering) see it as their major expression of being church.

of case study examples, following *Mission-Shaped Church*, and the parameters were established by George Lings and Claire Dalpra of the Church Army Research Unit. The ten parameters are much more prescriptive than those on the Fresh Expressions website and I could not find these detailed additional criteria applied to Anglican fresh expressions on the Fresh Expressions website.³⁶²

The report states that in order for an Anglican fresh expression of Church to meet the criteria, 'At least the majority (who are part of the public gathering) see it as **their major expression** of being church'. When the results were collated and returned to the Church Army Research Unit, 53.9% of all alleged fresh expressions were excluded from the research on the grounds that they were not regarded as fresh expressions according to this criterion.³⁶³ This appears to show evidence of a difficulty on the part of the dioceses in responding to what was required. I note the interesting observation in Appendix Five, where the leader had taken the criteria for selection to the 'Wednesday Praise Service' group for self-reflection and this fact had led to the group being included in the

9. There is aspiration for the four creedal 'marks' of church, or ecclesial relationships: 'up/holy, in/one, out/apostolic, of/catholic'. We question validity in an absence of 'mission/out'. (Our Church Army team see the two dominical sacraments as a given consequence of the life of a missional community which follows Jesus, but not the sole or even best measure of being church.)

10. There is intent to become 'three self' (self-financing, self-governing and self-reproducing). These factors need contextualisation, but are some marks of advancing maturity. They are not to be interpreted as indicators of congregationalist independency, or breakaway tendencies.

Church Growth Research Project Report on Strand 3b An analysis of fresh expressions of Church and church plants begun in the period 1992-2012 available at:
http://www.churchgrowthresearch.org.uk/UserFiles/File/Reports/churchgrowthresearch_freshexpressions.pdf 2.3., p. 10 (accessed 06.03.17).

³⁶² Fresh Expressions, *What is a fresh expression*, available at:
<http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/about/whatis> (accessed 17.03.15).

³⁶³ It is clear from the table that the single largest category for exclusion was that a particular example simply was something else and had in effect been mislabelled as a FxC. In all dioceses, this was the most common occurrence at 62% of cases but this happened for a variety of reasons [...]
http://www.churchgrowthresearch.org.uk/UserFiles/File/Reports/churchgrowthresearch_freshexpressions.pdf, p.81.

research.³⁶⁴ This group was considered as a marginal case, but the scale of the cases excluded undermined the research and its value. If the criteria provided were either misunderstood or too complicated, or unfamiliar to church leaders it does not seem surprising that the diocese were unable to provide the level of information required by the Research Unit.

The biggest weakness we are aware of concerns the capturing of 'truth'. In nearly all cases we have only one data source, the nominated leader of the fxC. Often we speak to more than one person if there is a difficult process of deciding whether something is to be included. However, in clear cases of inclusion, we usually speak to only to one leader and have no way of testing the accuracy of their perceptions. This could be addressed in future qualitative study.³⁶⁵

The great weaknesses of this report is that without significant evidence it could have an effect on the direction of travel of a denomination in terms of resources and emphasis. This was addressed to some extent in the subsequent *Who's There* report, but if over half of the cases were rejected because the majority of those attending had an existing or previous church connection, then this suggests that the reality (rather than those who met the rhetoric, aspirations or parameters of the research project) in the Church of England would echo the examples of "doing church differently" in this thesis.

11.4.2 How does the evidence provided by the case studies relate to the Church of England's *Who's there?* report?

The Church Army survey by Claire Dalpra and John Vivian *Who's there? The Church Backgrounds of Attenders in Anglican Fresh Expressions of Church?* went some way to look in a more detailed way at the current or previous church affiliation, introducing new categories for attendees and

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http://www.churchgrowthresearch.org.uk/UserFiles/File/Reports/churchgrowthresearch_freshexpressions.pdf, p.132.

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http://www.churchgrowthresearch.org.uk/UserFiles/File/Reports/churchgrowthresearch_freshexpressions.pdf, p.19.

participants.³⁶⁶ The information was gathered by questionnaire and still relied heavily on the collection of data by the leaders of the fresh expressions concerned. Only twenty examples out of sixty-six were conducted by the research team, and there was no opportunity on the closed questionnaire to offer additional information. In summary of those attending the 66 examples there were 18% of non-churched and 8% of those who had grown up in fresh expressions (children from 5-10 who might attend a messy church for example). 74% of those attending the Anglican fresh expressions selected had a current or previous church connection, thus disproving categorically the claim, aspirations and official statements of the fresh expressions initiative that these fresh expressions primarily 'serve those outside the church'. Dalpra and Vivian's findings mirror and support my suspicion of the Fresh Expressions rhetoric of "church for the unchurched" and support the need for further deep qualitative and ethnographic research in this area. The data collected for the *Who's There* report was five years after my fieldwork and has not provided evidence of a shift towards Anglican fresh expressions predominantly made up of those who are non-churched in this intervening period.

11.5 Do the case studies provide a distinctive Methodist voice to the ongoing developing role of Fresh Expressions?

When I started my fieldwork in 2009 at *Somewhere Else*, Barbara Glasson was in her tenth year of ministry in the city centre of Liverpool, but the other three case studies were only just beginning. They changed weekly or monthly, as they listened and responded to what people found helpful. None of them suggested that their group was the answer to declining numbers in "typical" Methodist churches in the same way that had possibly been suggested by *From Anecdote to Evidence* within the Church of England. The Methodist Church was a

³⁶⁶ The categories selected illustrate the complexity of the ecclesial realities. The ones Dalpra and Vivian use are simple non-churched, complex non-churched, simple de-churched, complex de-churched, churchied, and grown up in FxC. *Who's There?* p. 46.

partner in the Fresh Expressions Initiative from the beginning but as Joanne Cox has written, ecumenical partners can seem invisible in the ecclesiological discussions.³⁶⁷ While the membership of the Methodist Church numerically is in decline, it is essential that its creative ways of “doing church differently” of an experimental nature are valued. The open and hospitable nature of the case studies mirror the “typical” Methodist church where all are welcome to receive and experience the prevenient grace of God.

11.6 Conclusion

One of the strengths and originality of this research is that throughout the fieldwork for this thesis the reality has been gathered both from the nominated leader of the group but also through extensive and lengthy participant observation and interviews. The fluid nature of such groups means that within my research there are those who had only been attending for a very short while or were visiting, so their ability to reflect on the group came from a limited experience.³⁶⁸ The strength of being able to use my own observation time alongside the opinions of those interviewed is that I was able to place their comments within a context that I knew and understood.

This highlights the difference between my research and the official Anglican reports. I have worked to a depth of understanding to explore what it means for the people involved in my case studies to be part of an ecclesial community. For many of those without experience or knowledge of church to be presented with criteria which set their group against language which is unrecognisable could be seen as threatening or confusing. Notably, the example in Appendix 5 of the fresh expressions report where the some of the group objected to being

³⁶⁷ Appendix 4.1 and Appendix 4.6.

³⁶⁸ Appendix 4.1.

called 'non-churchgoers', reveals the pastoral and ecclesial insensitivity of the research design.³⁶⁹

In contrast this research provides qualitative evidence of the lived experience of those "doing Church differently". It shows how building community and relationships in which people are welcomed and accepted are of primary importance in being part of the groups. It shows how active participation is a key part of these ways of "doing Church differently". These examples are not simply alternative worship experiments to be consumed, but in the case of *Somewhere Else* and *Knit and Natter* examples where physical participation is an integral part of the worship, outreach and mission of the group. *New Song Café* is an unusual example of the way in which a group has developed alongside a "typical" church, but has also grown and diversified to the extent that it mirrors the complex layers of association which might be seen in a larger "typical" church. It has then taken the step rather than to break away, to recognise its part and heritage within Methodism to the extent that it has taken on the structure and bureaucracy of a "typical" Methodist church. This would be an example it would be good to revisit after a period of time, to assess whether this step has freed up access to wider resources, training and support or whether the structures have prevented the creativity and ideas of the group developing further. *Café Church @Oomoo* is I imagine typical of many "typical" church experiments which happen continually in parish and circuit churches, trial ways of working or worshipping which last for a season, or while energy and resources allow before folding, and allowing in season another experiment to take its place. Whether labelling or recording fresh expressions gives an inflated sense of status to these experiments is not possible to record. Only a long-term view and assessment of the Methodist statistics for mission would allow

³⁶⁹ George Lings, *Church Growth Research Project, Report on Strand 3b: An analysis of fresh expressions of Church and church plants begun in the period 1992-2012* (Church Growth Research Project, 2013) available at: http://www.churchgrowthresearch.org.uk/UserFiles/File/Reports/churchgrowthresearch_freshexpressions.pdf (accessed 26.02.17) p. 132.

a quantitative analysis of the number of groups which continue to meet, although this would not give enough detail to establish the reasons why groups have ceased to meet.³⁷⁰

³⁷⁰ Such a research project into fresh expressions in Methodism is currently underway at connexional level. A telephone conversation with the researcher in February 2017 revealed that there were still questions of definitions and self-selection of fresh expressions in the Statistics for Mission returns that needed to be explored ahead of data collection.

CONCLUSION

WHAT IS THE ECCLESIAL REALITY OF METHODISTS “DOING CHURCH DIFFERENTLY” IN THE LIVERPOOL DISTRICT?

The lives, experiences and voices of those who took part in the research have caused me to reflect deeply about the evolving patterns related to the ecclesial practices of “doing church differently” in the contemporary British Methodist Church in seeking to answer the core research question.

This research evidences the experience of the lived reality of the case studies within contemporary Methodism. The Methodist Church has experienced significant decline in its membership over the last ten years. Yet it has continued to bring to its annual conference reports and resolutions over the role of fresh expressions and a ‘sense of direction’ towards an outward-looking church which sees community engagement and the exploration of missional activity and evangelism as a key part of its outreach and future shape.

This in itself is nothing new in Methodism, and Wesley’s own evangelism and that which he encouraged in others, as well as the subsequent outworking in terms of social mission, were hallmarks of the early people called Methodists.³⁷¹ In the last ten years, the choice of the Methodist Church to become a partner in the Fresh Expressions Initiative and the decision to invest in the Venture FX programme has been seen as a commitment to strengthen support for those have sought to try experiments in “doing church differently”. Within the Methodist church, ongoing debates about ‘maintenance vs mission’

³⁷¹ Philip R. Meadows, ‘The Journey of Evangelism’, in William J. Abraham and James E. Kirby (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies* (Oxford: OUP, 2009), pp. 413-430, and Dana L. Robert and Douglas D. Tzan, ‘Traditions and Transitions in Mission Thought’, in William J. Abraham and James E. Kirby (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies* (Oxford: OUP, 2009), pp. 431-448.

continue, these conversations concern both financial and staffing issues as well as commitment to growth and development. As can be seen by the case studies, I suspect that a mixed economy of local examples of “doing church differently” such as *Knit and Natter*, temporary “pop-up” experiments of small groups such as *Café Church @Oomoo* and recognised new churches (such as *Somewhere Else* and *New Song Network*) are part of this changing landscape. Parallel experiments such as these are likely to last alongside “typical” Methodist congregations through what may be a longer transitional period than was envisaged either by Tom Stuckey in 2005 or Martyn Atkins in 2008.

Somewhere Else was a recognised Methodist Church when I began my field work *New Song Café*, then in its infancy, has gone through steps to become a Methodist Church following the first couple of years when the research was completed which showed a group composed mainly of those from other churches seeking resourcing, nourishing and learning. *Knit and Natter* continues to be an associational group alongside the Methodist Churches in Ellesmere Port and *Café Church @Oomoo* have ceased to meet but a new form of café church elsewhere in the circuit has taken its place, in the historic line of “pop-up church” experiments in the Liverpool South Circuit.

I believe the evidence and research for this thesis does not offer a solution to declining “typical” church attendance, nor a catch-all answer to every difficulty or problem with “typical” church, but a tentative song of hope for the current Methodist context. It provides evidence that for a time and a season, at the beginning of the twenty-first century there are experiments in “doing church differently” which have transformed individual lives and communities, in small but significant ways. A further question for the Methodist Church is whether these groups are replicable or particular *sui generis* examples of “doing Church differently” *sui generis*?

The most important conclusions from the research which I draw are:

1. The complex and fluid composition of all the case studies provide evidence that the ecclesial reality of these experiments is not that they are “church for the unchurched”, but provide opportunities for those inside as well as those new to church to worship, learn, grow and serve together. All of the case studies included those who experienced and attended multiple ecclesial realities – both “typical” church and a form of “doing church differently” concurrently.
2. All the case studies in “doing church differently” relied on a local catalyst whose vision and focussed leadership was based on truly listening to the context rather than imposing a ready-made agenda or strategy.
3. All the case studies in “doing church differently” continued to rely on the “typical” church, either both financially in terms of use of buildings, or of staffing in terms of ordained presbyters. This dependence could be seen to be mutually beneficial in a wider understanding of church.
4. The case studies provided evidence that these groups did provide either the confidence to attend a different form of worship or church group other than the case study, thus forming a stepping stone (or dual attendance) to “typical” church.
5. All the case studies engendered a sense of belonging, acceptance, and welcome reflecting Wesley’s emphasis on prevenient grace.
6. That active participation in the ecclesial reality was important for leaders and participants and their experience was valued and built upon in the shaping and development of the groups.
7. These flexible, responsive, small scale participative human grouping form for our time, current models for parallel churches.

In times of transition and cultural change, God continually raises up his people to explore and experiment in order to share the love of God and the message of the gospel with all. Expressions of this can and do run in parallel with existing church structures as has been noted historically and is particularly pertinent to the understanding of the people called Methodists. Each example drew and attracted people irrespective of

their church background to a place where they might discover Christian community, a place to pray, a place to discover the scriptures, the Body of Christ.

This piece of original, ethnographic research which listened to leaders and participants in niche and interest areas provides an additional understanding of current ecclesial realities alongside the Methodist quantitative Statistics for Mission information. It also rises to the challenge of providing an in depth qualitative alongside the Church of England's *Who's There?* report, providing stories and voices to strengthen the argument that the ways in which church is expressed and understood is complex and nuanced.

From the conclusions above there is much, therefore to be learned from the case studies about the benefits of "doing church differently". However, they do provide a challenge to the Fresh Expressions Initiative for, whatever their merits, and despite being used as illustrations on the national website (with the exception of *Café Church @Oomoo*) the ecclesial realities observed and studied did not manifest the rhetoric that fresh expressions principally 'serve those outside the church' or are "church for the unchurched". They are outreach of, and adjunct to, "typical" church rather than self-sustaining churches for those with no previous church background. In other words, the fresh expressions rhetoric is found wanting, on the basis of these case studies. Perhaps as has been shown, this has something to do with the connexional and participative patterns of Methodism. Whatever the case, these groups demonstrate that the fresh expressions phenomenon is multi-faceted and, in practice, not restricted nor constrained by the official statements. My original hunch is confirmed: there is a discrepancy between the official rhetoric and the local ecclesial realities of "doing church differently" in the Liverpool Methodist District. This suggests that more in-depth research is required into the fresh expression phenomenon in all its variety, and that the Fresh Expressions Initiative needs to be more careful and nuanced in its understanding and articulation of Fresh Expressions of Church.

Similarly, Methodism can learn to encourage, support and celebrate the various ways in which Methodists are “doing church differently” whilst not having to subscribe to all the rhetoric – and associated imposed criteria or parameters – that come with fresh expressions. Examples of “doing church differently” are more interestingly and organically related to “typical” church than is normally acknowledged, at least on the basis of this research. The Methodist Church needs to have the confidence, inspired by its history, to resist the Fresh Expressions rhetoric and be guided and shaped by the experience of the ecclesial realities in its midst.

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