

THE DISCOURSE OF 'BELONGING' AND BAPTIST CHURCH
MEMBERSHIP IN CONTEMPORARY BRITAIN: HISTORICAL,
THEOLOGICAL AND DEMOTIC ELEMENTS OF A POST-FOUNDATIONAL
THEOLOGICAL PROPOSAL

by

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ABSTRACT

During the late twentieth century Baptist church membership declined whilst church attendance increased. An investigation of these phenomena references Stanley Grenz's post-foundational theology and Anthony Giddens's sociological theory of structuration. An historical overview of Baptist church history reveals the continuities and discontinuities in the theology and practice of church membership.

Attention is focused on the covenantal discourse of professional theology from the early 1980s to date, on the denominational discourse informing a sample of 120 church membership materials, and on the relational discourse of twenty interviews with church members and attenders.

Interview data shows that membership discourses have two forms: formal and relational. The latter is found to reduce distinctions between members and non-members for which 'belonging' provides a validating framework reinforced by four features: experientially-validated subjectivity; post-denominationally conceived identity; de-structured relationality; and practical immediacy.

Scripture, church tradition and the contemporary context are the sources for Grenz's post-foundational theology and point to the trialectical tension between the covenantal, denominational and relational discourses of membership and belonging. A discursive theological methodology is proposed that is located within the congregation, rooted in a trialogue, requires deeper scriptural engagement, and is focussed on discussion of an additional *Core Value*: 'relational communities'.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Christian congregations and the missiological dimension

Establishing the disciplinary parameters for either missiology or congregational studies is a challenging exercise. For the purpose of this current work it will be helpful to provide a brief account of their respective development as primarily theological disciplines. Missiology and congregational studies have typically been located within the field of practical theology or of applied theology. Consequently practitioners within each of these disciplines have sought to acquire competence in the various social and human sciences. These are the competencies that enable them to describe and analyse to greater effect, the social and cultural systems that may be known in a variety of forms but, given the scope of this dissertation, described here as 'congregation', 'denomination', or 'Christian sub-culture'.

Missiology

Missiologist David Bosch (1991, pp.489-493, 1982) points to Schleiermacher's almost universal legacy to Protestant theology of a fourfold theological pattern within which missiology was described as a sub-discipline of practical theology. Roman Catholic theologians also located it there and Bosch (1982, p.18) states that 'According to Karl Rahner, practical theology is "the theological, normative science regarding the self-realization of the church in all its dimensions" (Rutti 1974:293). One of these dimensions is mission.' Bosch (1982, p.19) resisted the 'proposal to convert missiology into comparative theology (Exeler 1978:199-211), ecumenical studies, Third World theology or world Christianity' as well as its potential integration into other theological disciplines, as proposed by Mykelbust (1959). Instead, Bosch (1982, p.30) argued for missiology to be understood as a synoptic and catalytic discipline that stands alongside other theological and academic disciplines. A relationship clearly exists but it is one in which missiology is a critical dialogue partner that refuses to

accept a subservient role. This theme has its echoes in the work of Roman Catholic missiologists Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder who describe contemporary missiology as a 'prophetic dialogue (2004, pp.348-395).

Jonganeel (1997, p.10) concludes that 'most theological encyclopaedias have dealt with mission in the framework of practical theology'. Missiology, although a relatively recent theological discipline¹, has by now a reasonably well established practice of integrating other academic disciplines from among the humanities and social sciences, including anthropology (Hiebert, 1994, 2008; Tippet, 1987, pp.104-221), history (Bosch, 1991, pp.181-348; Tippet, 1987, pp.222-285), cultural studies (Newbigin, 1986, 1989), biblical studies (Wright, 2006; Bosch, 1987, pp.15-180), post-colonial studies (Sugirtharajah, 2005), and sociology (Montgomery, 1999).

Congregational Studies

Congregational studies, the more recent discipline of the two, shows similar tendencies, drawing on the related fields of ethnology, organisational studies, and voluntary studies, an observation made by American authors Ammerman, Carroll, Dudley, and McKinney (1998, pp.7-19). Each of these authors tends to underline the inter-disciplinary nature of congregational studies. The academic disciplines of ethnography, anthropology, sociology, organisational studies, and theology are each considered to offer appropriate and complementary methodological tools appropriate to the research task at hand. They locate congregational studies within the field of practical theology, which they understand as principally a descriptive task rooted in empirical approaches (Ammerman, Carroll, Dudley, and McKinney, 1998, pp.23-39). In contrast, Cameron *et al* (2005, p.8) argue that approaches to congregational studies within the UK have tended to favour 'interpretive accounts of cultural phenomena rather than objective scientific analysis'. UK scholars draw largely on the

¹ See Bosch (1982, pp.14-15), Beaver (1976, pp.78-82), and Scherer (1985, p.446) each of whom points to the fact that the 1860s were the decade in which Universities in America, Scotland, and Germany began to establish chairs of missiology, building on earlier sporadic efforts since the 1810s.

narrative treatment of the congregation pioneered by James Hopewell (1987) in *Congregation: Stories and Structures*.² Hopewell laid important foundations for the systematic study of congregations in the UK and elsewhere but it was the publication of two books in 2004 and 2005 that finally demonstrated the academic territory that congregational studies had gained in the UK context: *Congregational Studies in the UK: Christianity in a Post-Christian Context* (Guest, 2004) and *Studying Local Churches: a Handbook* (Cameron, 2005). Whilst writing for a UK readership, the authors of the first book acknowledge the disciplinary foundations laid by researchers of North American congregational identity and practice. In particular we may note *Handbook for Congregational Studies* (Carroll, 1986), *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook* (Ammerman *et al*, eds. 1998) and *Congregations in Transit: A Guide for Analyzing, Assessing, and Adapting in Changing Communities* (Dudley, 2002). Similarities of approach exist, despite what has been said earlier about differences of methodology. Ammerman, Carroll, Dudley, and McKinney (1998, p.9), for example, invite historians, sociologists, anthropologists, theologians, and ministers to engage in a 'systematic look at congregational life', and Cameron *et al* (2005, pp.19-26) outline four methodological approaches; namely anthropology, sociology, organisational studies, and practical theology.

The methodological differences that exist between North American and British approaches, whilst certainly a reflection of different funding priorities in the USA, are equally a reflection of the diverse range of research methodologies underlying practical theology, including empirical, political, ethical, psychological, sociological, pastoral, gender-oriented, and narrative-based approaches (Swinton and Mowat, 2006, p.3).

² For a fuller discussion of the historical development of congregational studies see the discussion in Cameron *et al* (2005, pp.5-9).

Missiology, Congregational Studies, and Practical Theology

That missiology and congregational studies, as missiological disciplines, draw equally significantly on disciplines and methodologies common across the humanities, should alert one to the likely close correspondence, though not an identical one, between the tasks of practical theology, the study of mission, and the study of the congregation.³

Swinton and Mowat argue persuasively for the missionary task of theology thus,

Practical theology is critical, theological reflection on the practices of the church as they interact with practices of the world, with a view to ensuring and enabling faithful participation in God's redemptive practices in, to, and for the world. (2006, p.25).

In an attempt to clarify the precise nature of the correspondence between theology and mission, Andrew Kirk (1997, p.50) argues that, 'All true theology is, by definition, missionary theology, for it has as its object the study of the ways of a God who is by nature missionary and a foundation text by and for missionaries.' With reference to the context, he states that theology is the 'reflective, intellectual process carried out by a community of faith whose concern is with God and his relationship to the entire universe.' (Kirk, 1997, p.8) Kirk privileges the community of faith within his comprehension of the *missio Dei*. For example, in his contribution to the World Council of Churches' *Consultation on Mission and Ecclesiology* in 2000, he argues that the church as a new community in Christ is a part of the Gospel message it is commissioned to proclaim (cited in Barrow (Ed.), 2000). Elsewhere, he is careful to explain that the church is not the only agent of mission by adopting a critical stance vis-à-vis the Church-centred missiology of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, even where the goal was the establishment of self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating churches (Kirk, 1999, p.33). In restating a view of the *missio Dei* he insists however that the Church is an essential component part of God's mission to the

³ A correspondence that may be noted in the earlier work of Henry Venn (1796-1873) and Rufus Anderson (1796-1880) who wrote of the self-supporting, self-governing and self-propagating church that would herald the euthanasia of mission. Later congregational mission studies rely to varying degrees upon these missiologists as well as the work of Max Warren who developed the insights of Venn and Rufus in his leadership of the Church Missionary Society from 1942 to 1962. For more on this see John Terry (2000).

world and, as the New Community, as the Body of Christ, gives the fullest range of meanings to the Kingdom of God. Kirk (1994, pp.1-16) offers an extended treatment of this theme in *Missio Dei: Missio Ecclesiae* where he describes the church participating in the self-revealing activity of the triune God.⁴

Kirk's ecclesiological assertion underlines our conviction that an investigation of contemporary expressions of Baptist church membership must necessarily include its missiological significance.⁵ Following Swinton and Mowett (2006, p.25), membership should be considered as one of those 'practices of the church... enabling faithful participation in God's redemptive practices.' I will therefore argue that the particular ways in which membership is practised will have a bearing on how effectively a local congregation is participating in God's redemptive practices.

The Baptist theologian James McClendon (1986) begins his study of systematic theology in three volumes⁶ by addressing the question, 'What is theology?' and insists that the answer, 'Just a *'logos of Theos'*, merely ideas and discourse about God,' is inadequate (1986, p.21). Instead, McClendon (1986, p.23) offers the following definition,

Theology [is] the discovery, understanding, and transformation of the convictions of a convictional community, including the discovery and critical revision of their relation to one another and to whatever else there is.

⁴ And compare with van Engen (1991) who develops a missionary ecclesiology with reference to the Kingdom of God and the relationships that exist between the local congregation, the universal church and worldwide mission.

⁵ An emphasis that is echoed in other authors, notably the work of Darrell Guder (1998) who develops the Gospel and Culture agenda in North America, taking up the insights of British missiologist, Lesslie Newbigin, and applies it to an understanding of the missionary nature of the church.

⁶ McClendon's three volume work offers an Anabaptist treatment of theology in three movements, *Systematic Theology: Ethics* (McClendon, 1986), *Systematic Theology: Doctrine* (McClendon, 1994), and *Systematic Theology: Witness* (McClendon, 2000). The ordering is significant for McClendon. He believed that ethics was the necessary starting point for a systematic theology, underlining the way of life that characterises Christian community, belief, and witness.

The convictions described by McClendon, in the sense that he frames them with reference to a 'way of life', can only ever be embodied convictions, to be lived out in the church community. In order to convince others of the veracity of one's convictions, the practices of the congregation, including membership, are likely to be the best demonstration of the plausibility of the Gospel-centred convictions it proclaims. His view compares favourably with that of Duncan Maclaren (2004) who argues that contemporary secular Europeans will only be convinced of the plausibility of the Christian faith if they are able to see it lived in a local Christian community. Nigel Wright (2008pp.79-101) argues in similar vein that the practice of Christian discipleship, as a chief characteristic of Baptist spirituality, emphasises the primacy of the congregation.

Kirk (1999, p.207) further underlines the centrality of the congregation in mission by insisting upon the necessity of its universality as the only way of demonstrating reconciled relationship 'across every conceivable divide, the healing of the wounds caused by hate, deception, selfishness and brutality.'

These insights reflect the significant ecclesiological innovations that missiologists have insisted upon following the work of Johannes Hoekendijk, a former Secretary for Evangelism of the World Council of Churches, as well as the statement *Ad Gentes* of the Second Vatican Council. Hoekendijk (1967, p.338) argued that Christian existence, whether corporate or individual, is a missionary existence whilst *Ad Gentes* (1965, Section 2) states boldly that 'The pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature, since it is from the mission of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit that she draws her origin, in accordance with the decree of God the Father.'

More recent evangelical missiological reflection includes that of the Lausanne Theology Working Group preparing consultation material for the 2010 Lausanne III Congress. Their second consultation addressed the theme 'The Whole Church' and states that

To define the church as 'apostolic' is another way of saying that the church is missional by definition. It cannot be otherwise and be

church. Mission is not something we add to our concept of church, but is intrinsic to it. (*The Whole Church*, 2009, p.8, para D.2).

Open-ended and bounded congregational practice

This dissertation argues that congregational practice and identity are open-ended projects. Equally important is the insight that the missionary nature of Christian congregations requires that they take their contemporary social and cultural context with utmost seriousness.⁷ A church that is missionary by nature will respond instinctively to the novel and unprecedented in its particular context. Wider social and cultural developments will continually pose challenges to established congregational practices. For this reason it is argued that theologically shaped congregational projects, including church membership, will remain open-ended.⁸ This conclusion parallels a point argued persuasively by Delanty (2003, pp.186-196) in his discussion of discursively constituted communities. In his view communities persist because they have retained the capacity to communicate ways of belonging rather than because they have managed to define symbolic boundaries ever more closely. For Delanty the vitality of any community relies upon its capacity for imagining and producing meaning, a capacity that is generated reflexively by the discursive activity of its members. He concludes that 'community is more likely to be expressed in an active search to achieve belonging than in preserving boundaries.' (Delanty, 2003, p.189)⁹

Because this dissertation advances the thesis that Churches are, by their nature, open-ended then, consequently, it will avoid premature closure by listening carefully to the ongoing, open-ended, demotic discourse that attributes new meanings and

⁷ A point argued persuasively by Newbiggin (1989) in his attempt to understand the nature of the Gospel in a pluralistic society. Newbiggin went on to become instrumental in establishing the 'Gospel and Culture Network' that attempted to understand the nature and task of mission in the contemporary British context. See Newbiggin (1993, pp.255-257; 1992, pp.1-3).

⁸ For a fuller discussion see pp.78,82,187-188 where the open-ended nature of covenant is also discussed.

⁹ Delanty's conclusions have several points of overlap with the use that Dave Andrews makes of the work of anthropologist, Paul Hiebert, in his discussion of bounded-set and open-set Christianity. See Andrews (1999, pp.75-96) for a fuller discussion.

possibilities to church membership practice and theology. Historical, sociological, and theological perspectives are each considered in the course of this investigation of Baptist membership practice and theology. Each is an essential component of a theoretically unified treatment, developed in the final chapter of this dissertation and centred on the congregation as a site for the production of theological meaning.

1.2 Studying Baptist congregations

Towards the end of 1999 an internal Baptist Union research report compared the decrease in membership of Churches belonging to the Union during the preceding decade with a reported increase in adherence (Jackson, 1999).¹⁰ The reporting of this research in the *Baptist Times* (2nd December 1999, p.1) resulted in a brief flurry of letters, the first of which contributed to the impetus beginning to grow around a conviction that the Baptist Union should establish a 'Membership Roundtable' (Misselbrook, 25th January 1999, *personal communication*; see also Jackson, 22nd January 1999, *personal email to David Coffey et al*).¹¹

The investigation pursued in this dissertation is stimulated by the apparent anomaly of decreasing church membership simultaneous with increasing church attendance. Baptists normally attach great importance to church membership. The significance of its apparent decline in the face of increasing attendance statistics is underlined by the response of the then Head of the Ministry Department, the Revd Malcolm Goodspeed (13th November 1999, *personal email*) to a first draft of Jackson's (1999) *Baptist Times* article. Goodspeed suggests that the 'confessional' basis for Baptist membership is very different from denominations that have a more inclusive understanding of

¹⁰ The report showed that between 1989 and 1998 regular attendance had increased from an estimated 162,000 to 167,500. Over the same period, church membership had decreased from 161,400 to 144,900. Compare with Brierley (1999, p.12.3, Table 12.2.3).

¹¹ The first meeting of the Roundtable was convened by the Revd Derek Allen, Head of the Department for Research and Training in Mission, on the 27th June 2000. Attending were the Revds. Rob Warner, Ruth Gouldbourne, Darrell Jackson, Myra Blyth, Vivienne Lasseter, Simon Perry, and Mr Peter Price. The Roundtable was joined at later points by the Revds.

membership, stating that ‘there can be no... real understanding of our mind-set by inclusive groups – at least in my experience.’ Whilst Goodspeed almost certainly understates this point, his comments are representative of many Baptists who view membership in a local congregation as one of the hallmarks of Baptist congregationalism.¹² However, he also senses the need for ‘deeper understandings of belonging [that] enable a clearer base for counting people ‘in’ and ‘out’.’¹³ This dissertation takes up the search for deeper understandings of belonging, recognising that church membership and church attendance can be readily enumerated whilst the meaning-making that is related to belonging is not easily measured. For this rather obvious reason, the research methodology adopted in the formulation of this thesis draws upon interpretive qualitative research methods commonly used by social scientists.¹⁴ These methods permit a more nuanced investigation of the implicit and explicit meanings that social agents attribute to their social practices.

Goodspeed’s references to ‘our mindset’ and ‘deeper understandings of belonging’ anticipate a discussion about the *meaning* that members and regular attenders attribute to membership and belonging. More importantly his references point to the *meaning-making* that they engage in with regards to the theology and practice of membership and belonging. This reflexive activity on the part of church members and

Simon Jones, Jenny Few, Revd Dr. Derek Tidball, Dr Stuart Murray-Williams, Mr Peter Clark, Mrs Janet Ruddick, and Miss Hilary Bradshaw.

¹² At the first meeting of the Membership Roundtable, Derek Allen initiated an early phase of discussion and debate by asking, ‘Is our commitment to being ‘congregational... a non-negotiable?’ No roundtable member offered a negative response. See the *Aide Memoire* of this Roundtable (The Baptist Union of Great Britain, 2000b).

¹³ See also Rob Warner’s contribution to the Membership Roundtable where he suggested that the yearning to belong is a basic human instinct. See Jackson (2000, p.2).

¹⁴ See especially below at pp.167-170. For more on this see Giddens (1984, pp.284-310) who tends to favour cultural, anthropological, and ethnographic approaches that seek explanatory objectives and have practical implications for those whose activities are being investigated. Impoverished descriptions of the knowledgeable ability of human agents are avoided and sophisticated accounts of motivation are favoured.

attenders will be returned to below.¹⁵ In drawing attention to the meaning-making of church members there is an implicit assumption that they are capable of deriving deeper understandings of membership and belonging. Of course, they may frequently demonstrate uncritical or unexamined attitudes towards inherited meanings of Baptist membership practice. Despite this, this work advances the claim that when they are encouraged to do so (and occasionally when they are not), church members and attenders talk about congregational activity in a reflexive manner which can be said to deepen existing understandings of membership and belonging.¹⁶ If congregational activity is reflexive, as is argued by this dissertation, it implies that church members and attenders have a capacity for meaningful attention to such matters, even if not in the formal, systematic style that we normally expect of theological reflection.

This assumption helps to explain observations made during twenty five years in membership of nine different Baptist churches. Twenty three of those years have been spent by the author as a Baptist minister serving in a variety of settings including a local pastorate, a local Association, the Baptist Union of Great Britain, an ecumenical appointment with the Conference of Europe Churches, and a theological college. Direct contact has been possible with several hundred churches during this period. Observing these congregations (whether in membership or acting in consultation with them) leads me to suggest that most members and attenders possess only a cursory

¹⁵ At this point it will be sufficient to note, according to Giddens, that at its most elementary level, 'social reflexivity refers to the fact that we have constantly to think about, or reflect upon, the circumstances in which we live our lives.' (2006, p.123).

¹⁶ Reflexivity, as used in the social sciences, was initially described by the sociologist William Thomas (1928) who theorised that when people define situations to be true, they became true for them. Sociologist Robert Merton (1948, pp.193-210) observed the manner in which a prediction, once made, tended to result in modified action or behaviour that influenced the outcome, changing it from what might otherwise have happened and labelled this the self-fulfilling prophecy. Reflexivity appears in the work of Anthony Giddens (1990) as a solution to the problem of structure and agency, particularly in his structuration theory. In this particular context he uses the term to describe the interchange between sociological research and human behaviour (Giddens, 2006, p94) and argues that with increased self-awareness and reflection (of which social scientific research is a component part), modern social systems develop the capacity for a form of reflexivity that contributes to the constitution of the social system itself. Indeed, Giddens suggests that the activities of social scientists are inescapably reflexive in the modern social system. (Giddens, 1987, p.70).

knowledge of Baptist historical or theological literature, pay scant regard to the constitutional documents of their congregations, and without further prompts, rarely describe their belonging to a congregation with anything more than reference to a discourse of 'family' or 'the body of Christ'.¹⁷ However, a majority of them appear to hold deeply personal convictions relating to membership and belonging. On occasions these unsystematic, informal, theological convictions may be in conflict with those of theologically trained Baptist ministers and, given the congregational governance of local Baptist congregations, this can be problematic.¹⁸ The reasons for this frequently simultaneous lack of attentiveness to Baptist history, apathy towards church constitutions, and firmly expressed personal convictions, help to drive the current research.¹⁹

1.3 Sources for the discourses of membership and of belonging in the contemporary Baptist congregation²⁰

When personal convictions about membership or belonging are expressed firmly and vocally, a number of questions may be prompted about the origin of such convictions.

¹⁷ Sean Winter (2007, p.9) and Ellis (1999, pp.5-8) discuss Bible reading among Baptists and imply that private interpretations tend to undermine the public reading and exegesis of Scripture during Sunday worship. This may help to explain the fact that one form of biblical discourse describing Church membership is used in preference to others. It does not, of course, explain the reasons underlying the choice of any one particular discourse. Ellis also hints at anecdotal evidence suggesting that in some congregations, most notably those influenced by Charismatic renewal, little scripture is read publicly (Ellis, 1999, p.7).

¹⁸ Where a significant proportion of the congregation comes from, for example, a Christian Brethren background it is not unknown for that fact to manifest itself in lower commitment to institutional aspects of the local church, including formal membership. See Colwell (2009, p.11).

¹⁹ A similar point is made by Beasley-Murray (1992, p.6) when he concedes that people typically are attracted to a particular Baptist church by its worship, teaching, or provisions for the family. For many of them the Baptist way of being the church is either secondary or irrelevant.

²⁰ Throughout this thesis, the term 'discourse' is used 'to refer to ways of talking or thinking about a particular subject that are united by common assumptions.' (Giddens, 2006, p.117) This insight is heavily reliant upon the work of the philosopher Michel Foucault who used it as shorthand for 'discursive formation' in his analysis of its relationship to power and knowledge,

It is possible that they are a response to theological and/or historical literary sources. It is also possible to imagine them emerging from a reasonable familiarity with congregational membership and constitutional documents. What seems more likely, however, is that they have been informed by the contemporary British evangelical context.²¹ The respective degree to which each of these three sources (literary, constitutional and contextual) is drawn upon is likely to give rise to its own distinctive discourse of church membership and belonging. Each source will be considered in turn, anticipating that there will be both continuities and discontinuities between the consequent discourses.

Sources of discourse are emphasised in this thesis because it is precisely the question of where discourses of membership and belonging have *originated* that is otherwise ignored in the debate about what shape a more authentically or appropriate Baptist theology and practice of membership should be. It might appear sensible to assume that the best ways of influencing the debate are either by writing better theological justifications for membership, engaging in careful historical research dealing with former membership practices and theologies, or by paying attention to providing more appropriately written model constitutions for churches to amend and adopt. It will be seen that these were approaches favoured by the Baptist Union during the period immediately following the mid twentieth century.²²

In contrast, this dissertation argues that proper attention to the congregational demotic discourse, elicited through congregational interviews, suggests the need for an assessment of the impact of its contextual source. Careful attention to each of the three sources is likely to yield a more nuanced version of the manner in which the

particularly in his work *L'Archéologie du Savoir* (1969) published in English as *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972).

²¹ Wright (2002, pp.10-12) for example, claims that Baptists are inherently evangelicals (though he carefully distinguishes this from the capitalised description 'Evangelical' in contrast with the description 'Liberal'). Colwell (2009, p.11) supports Wright's claim with reference to the influence of the Brethren and Restorationist forms of Christianity upon the traditional baptistic practice of a regular Church Meeting.

theology and practice of church membership and belonging develops. Indeed, it appears that the *demotic discourse* is in danger of being ignored in the search for an authentic articulation of a Baptist theology and practice of church membership alongside the *historical-theological discourse* and the *constitutional discourse*. This dissertation argues that each of the three discourses, and the sources out of which they arise, requires equal attention. The three forms of discourse may at times overlap, while at other times they vary considerably, yet a basic conviction informs this thesis, namely that the historical-theological, constitutional, and demotic together form an essential continuity that are necessary to a deeper understanding of a Baptist practice and understanding of church membership and belonging.

In considering these discourses in relationship to one another, particularly as each bears upon Baptist congregations, it is possible to describe them as forming a trialectic of discourses. This describes something of the dynamic nature of their relationship, at times complementary and in continuity, at other times competing and in discontinuity. Equally, it is advancing the claim that the local congregation is located at the centre of the trialectic of discourses.

The contemporary Baptist congregation is the focus of this dissertation because it is here that the intersection of the three discourses has the most obvious impact and where the stimulus of newer possibilities for membership and belonging is most keenly felt. It follows that the congregation is also likely to be the main site from which will emerge the theological meaning that shapes future practice and understandings of church membership and belonging.²³ The congregational location for the three discourses gives to them their fullest possible meaning and, by locating them here, the nature of their trialectical relationship becomes clearer. Consequently the resulting

²² See especially below at pp.97-101 and the immediate discussion that follows.

²³ Of course, it need hardly be stated that the theological reflection of Baptist theologians upon their *experiences* of membership and belonging within a congregation is a highly suggestive stimulus to any new insight that they are likely to generate. A parallel may be found in the trinitarian theology of Paul Fiddes (2000b) which emerges from theological reflection on a personal experience of tragedy and suffering.

discursive dynamic will be of value to this thesis in helping to outline the contours of a proposal for a post-foundational theology of membership.

1.4 An emerging thesis

The conviction that the contemporary Baptist congregation is framed by a trialectic of discourses grows out of an initial reflection on relevant Baptist historical and theological literature, an analysis of a representative sample of church membership and constitutional documents, and informal conversations and interviews with Baptist individuals.²⁴

The trialectic of discourses is here defined in a way that makes reference to both source and discourse. More could doubtless be claimed for each of the three sources but a focus to each is offered that highlights the dominant emphasis within each discourse and which seeks to work within the necessary constraints of space. The discourses are thus described in the following way:

*A historical-theological source, within which a discourse of **covenant** has become more predominant in recent years;*

*A constitutional source within which the discourse of **denomination** is predominant;*

*A demotic source, within which the discourse of **relationality** is predominant.*

This dissertation sets out to prove that a more adequate theology and practice of church membership requires the transition from experiencing these three discourses as a trialectical tension to engaging in the creative possibilities suggested by a dialogue of the discourses. This implies that the primary requirement is less a revisionist theology of membership developed within the confines of only one source; namely a historical-theological source of which this current work might be considered an example. It will be argued instead that a post-foundational theology of membership

²⁴ Many of whom claimed, with what came to be a predictable frequency, that neither they nor the church they attended or pastored were 'typically Baptist'.

offers the possibility of increased mutual comprehension between the three discourses precisely because post-foundational theologies are coherentist theologies.²⁵ Post-foundational theologies assume that the discursive activity of three such discourses is a creative or constructive activity. Establishing the contours of the necessary conversation within the context of the Baptist Union of Great Britain is the goal of this dissertation and is the hoped-for product of its central thesis.

Anthony Giddens and Stanley Grenz as discussion partners

The thesis emerging out of the initial reflection has been shaped with ongoing reference to the work of noted sociologist and theorist of structuration, Anthony Giddens,²⁶ as well as that of post-foundational Baptist theologian, Stanley Grenz.²⁷ Their value for this research lies in their being sensitised to time-space continuities and discontinuities in the study of contemporary social systems. For Grenz this means close attention to the task of theology within a believing community which he locates in the time-space continuity of tradition and cultural context. Giddens is concerned to understand the inter-relationship of social agency and social structure (each of which is a characteristic of a church congregation) and does so with reference to the historical and geographical existence of other congregations. Their respective insights elevate the importance of the historical context within which congregations have developed mutually validating ecclesial practices and ecclesial theologies and which, in turn, has resulted in the modern denomination, of which the Baptist Union is an example. Their work provides a theoretical framework within which the thesis is

²⁵ See below at pp.162-167.

²⁶ For discussions of 'structuration' as an organising theorem, see its treatment in Anthony Giddens *Studies in Social and Political Theory* (1977), *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure, and Contradiction in Social Analysis* (1979), and *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (1984). See also Tucker (1998, pp.65-92).

²⁷ See especially *Theology for the Community of God* (2000), *Created for Community: Connecting Christian Belief with Christian Living* (1996), *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Grenz and Franke, 2001). This text is a collaboration between Grenz and John Franke, a member of the Presbyterian Church of the USA. See also *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (2001), a

explored and each is considered important to the final missiological and theological conclusions reached in this work.

Giddens' attention to the study of social systems located in time and space is valuable for the description and analysis of a local congregation. The interpretive purpose of this dissertation is to analyse the meanings that individual churchgoers or 'social actors' attribute to complex levels of membership and belonging. Giddens gives equal attention to the institutional aspects of social systems as well as to the individual social actors (or agents) within those social systems, enabling him to arrive at a potentially more useful and integrated analysis of complex social systems.²⁸

His own contribution to more properly understanding the relation of structure and agency within a social system is to be found in his theoretical work on 'structuration'. Giddens wishes to pay proper attention to acting humans who consciously monitor complex levels of social organisation. He believes that the analogies drawn with natural science by functionalists means that their theoretical perspective cannot account for 'purposive, reflexively monitored action.' (Giddens, 1977, p.12). The complexity of institutional social systems problematises unitary or reductionist solutions. His approach attempts to allow for the action of reflexive actors (or church members and attenders) upon the social system to which they belong.

Grenz is helpful for he also discusses time and space and the manner in which these provide contextual and historical sources for a post-foundational theology, and a central theme throughout his work has been that of the believing community. The manner in which he consistently privileged the local congregation can be seen in

work in which Grenz began to more fully develop the insights of *beyond Foundationalism* into a comprehensive and coherent post-foundational theology.

²⁸ He does this in a critical conversation with functionalist and structuralist analyses of social systems. For a fuller treatment of functionalism and structuralism, see Haralambos and Holborn (2008, pp.8-11,856-866), Giddens (2006, pp.20-22,102-124), and the discussion in Tucker (1999, pp.56-57,79) where he refers to Giddens' critique that functionalism fails singularly to understand the creative and interpretive element of human action. As Tucker (1999, p.57) puts it, reflexivity is 'a defining aspect of the human experience which gives social science its unique interpretive character.'

Beyond Foundationalism (2001, pp.203-238) where he describes community as theology's integrating motif. His earlier work sets the direction for later developments and in *Revisioning Evangelical Theology* (1993) he proposes a centre for evangelical theology rooted in a vision of the reign of God and the community of Christ. In *Theology for the Community of God* (1994) he emphasises God's establishment of community as the central purpose of creation.

Within the framework of the local congregation, Grenz argues in *Created for Community* (1996, pp.17-27) and *Who Needs Theology?* (Grenz and Olson, 1996, pp.12-21) that the central question is 'not 'Will we be theologians?' but 'Will we be good theologians?'. He defines theology as 'any reflection on the ultimate questions of life that point toward God' (Grenz, 1996b, p.13).²⁹ Here he also begins to delineate the contours of his later work with reference to the biblical message, the church's theological heritage, and the needs of people in their context. This is more fully developed in *Beyond Foundationalism* (2001) where he offers a post-foundational theology emerging from three sources: scripture, tradition, and culture. His first and only volume of post-foundational systematic theology, *The Social God and the Relational Self* (2001), extends the methodology developed in *Beyond Foundationalism* to a discussion of trinitarian and anthropological theology. He offers a way of understanding the self in the postmodern context, a context in which typically the loss of the self is coupled with the quest for relationality in community.

Grenz's understanding of the believing community, his discussion of the relational self, his development of the matrix of Scripture-tradition-culture, and his willingness to view the individual believer as a theologian, mean that his work is highly relevant to this dissertation.

²⁹ Grenz (1996b, pp.12-35) was careful, however, to distinguish between Christian theology, which he characterised as *Credo ut intelligam* ('Faith seeking understanding'), and 'worldviewish theology' which unbelievers and believers alike are both capable of engaging in. He also distinguished between different forms of Christian theology (from folk theology to academic theology), underlining the fact that some forms of theology are more valuable than others.

The thesis presented and defended here arises from social scientific field research as much as it emerges from reflection on the theological and historical work of others. This implies that an adequate defence will lie in a careful presentation and interpretation of congregational research data as much as it will lie in a critical synthesis of appropriate literature resources. The manner in which the thesis was developed and the way that it will be presented and defended throughout the six chapters that follow, is outlined immediately below.

1.5 An outline of Chapters Two to Seven

Chapter two reviews the historical Baptist context and identifies several developments that relate to membership practice and theology; covenantal, confessional, connexional, voluntarist or societal, denominational, and a number of contemporary developments. Discontinuities are differentiated but continuities are also highlighted carefully, especially where they re-emerge at a later point. Detailed attention is given to those developments that are considered most relevant to a discussion of contemporary membership and belonging; covenantal, denominational, and what is tentatively characterised as post-denominational.

Chapter three considers the importance of covenantal discourse to contemporary membership theology and practice by tracing the most recent developments in this form of discourse. Particular attention is paid to Baptist authors who have written since the early 1980s.

Chapter four investigates denominational discourse following a theoretical discussion of denomination. Its use within the Baptist Union is examined with reference to publications including Council reports and the *Baptist Times*. Its use within the local congregation is illustrated with a representative sample of 120 sets of membership materials given to individuals considering membership of a Baptist congregation. Finally, previously unpublished statistical data is presented to support claims made in this chapter.

Chapter five presents interview data obtained from twenty people in four different Baptist congregations. Covenantal and denominational discourses appear, but the interview data demonstrates a preference for describing membership with a primarily relational discourse in which the distinctions between members and non-members are reduced. Theoretical analysis of the interview data suggests four emergent themes which are taken up in chapter six.

Chapter six describes four lines of analysis emerging from the interview data, identified here as a demotic discourse (or, after Grenz, as 'lay' theology) that is characterised by; experientially-validated subjectivity, post-denominationally conceived identity, de-structured relationality, and practical immediacy.

Chapter seven describes a triadic post-foundational theology of membership and belonging that assumes a trialectical tension between covenantal discourse, denominational discourse, and relational discourse. The conviction that this trialectical tension must shape the contemporary Baptist discussion of membership and belonging is central to the thesis advanced here. Equally important is the conviction that the congregation is both a source and an integrating motif of a post-foundational theology of membership and belonging. The chapter concludes that the basis for this theology is located in the creative possibilities generated by the trialectical tension and its content is best defined by a triologue of lay, ministerial and professional theologies that focuses on a discussion of 'relational communities' as an additional *Core Value*. Finally, the implications of our findings and conclusions for related discussions and for future academic study are outlined.

PART ONE: HISTORICAL MEMBERSHIP DISCOURSE

Chapter 2: Discourses of membership and belonging in historical perspective

2.1 The importance of a historical perspective to contemporary practice

Grenz and Giddens discuss history within the theological and sociological disciplines respectively. Grenz's post-foundational theology emerges out of three sources, one of which is history. History provides a hermeneutical trajectory through which Scripture is read; '...in its contemporary manifestation, Christianity is to a significant degree the product of the historical circumstances and forces that have shaped it. It is, in short, a tradition.' (Grenz and Franke, 2001, p.94)

Grenz and Franke highlight the importance of proper interpretation of Scripture but urge careful attention to the tradition-laden context in which it is interpreted. 'Tradition provides the hermeneutical trajectory through which theological construction that is truly Christian emerges.' (*Ibid*, p.113). They establish continuity between the Scriptural text and Christian tradition in their pneumatology. God's Spirit who superintended the selection of the canonical Scripture is the same Spirit who continues to sustain and inspire Christian communities. (*Ibid*, pp.116-120)

Giddens locates all social systems within history and underlines the importance of history as a methodological concern for social science research as well as for developing satisfactory social theories (Giddens, 1985, pp.355-368). Giddens has been criticised for too readily pressing historical discontinuities. Meštrović (1998, p.16), for example, considers Giddens to show a 'complete disdain for tradition' which too readily assumes 'that modernity represents a dramatic discontinuity with pre-modern or traditional modes of relations.' Anderson and Kasperson (2000, p.7), in contrast, believe Giddens offers 'a more nuanced account of the continuities and discontinuities in social theory.' They (*Ibid*, p.7) summarise Giddens in the following way to support their contention;

The myth of the great divide between the... chaotic prehistory of sociology and the subject in its modern 'scientific' form... involves a lack of sensitivity to the work of the classics and an undue degree of confidence in the scientific credentials of 'our' social thought.

Giddens intends to integrate historical and sociological analysis and thus to address what he feels is a false duality between 'narrative' accounts of history versus the alternative 'new' histories. He addresses this duality in the following way;

Historians who specialize in particular types of textual materials, languages or periods, are not freed from involvement with the concepts of, and the dilemmas inherent in, social theory. But, equally, social scientists whose concerns are the most abstract and general theories about social life are not freed from the hermeneutic demands of the interpretation of texts and other cultural objects. (Giddens, 1985, p.358)

A denomination might be judged by Giddens as institutional because it has an existence that stretches backwards in time (and potentially forwards) and which extends across several social spaces. Giddens (1984, p.xxxi) claims that such 'social systems have structural properties in the sense that relationships are stabilized across time and space.' Repeated social activities may be coordinated in time and space and their analysis involves 'studying the contextual features of locales through which actors move in their daily paths.' (*Ibid*, p.286) Giddens argues that geography and history are of equal importance to satisfactory sociological analysis. In advancing the claim that social scientists must interpret texts and artefacts and historians must face the dilemmas of social theory, Giddens declares his conviction that, 'there are no methodological distinctions between history and social science,... all social laws are historical.' (cited in Tucker, 1998, p.59)

The historical investigation contained in this dissertation demonstrates the origin and development of the discourses of membership and belonging that are of most relevance to contemporary Baptist congregations. Each of these sets of discourse, whether covenantal, societal, connexional, denominational, or relational, serves the interests of those advancing the theological innovations underpinning these various discourses. Theology is contextual but it is frequently an 'interested' activity and the

historical discussion attempts to explain why certain discourses of membership and belonging were preferred over others.

2.2 The earliest Baptist discourses of membership and belonging

2.2.1 John Smyth and Thomas Helwys and their use of covenant

Thomas Helwys' *The Mystery of Iniquity*, (1612, p.xxiv), with its eloquent plea for religious liberty, was written for presentation to James I. Its hand-written 'Inscription' on the fly-leaf contains the following lines, 'The king is a mortall man, & not God therefore hath no power over ye immortall soules of his Subiects, to make lawes and ordinances for them, and to set spirituall lords over them.'

Helwys (c.1556-1616) was a wealthy patron of the small, gathered congregation meeting at Gainsborough, probably led by John Smyth (c.1570-1612) from 1606. What Helwys wrote is consistent with the practice of the congregation to which he belonged. It had rejected the authority of the king over their 'immortal souls' and any authority the king had to set 'spiritual lords', whether bishops or presbyters, over them. In this sense they understood themselves to be a 'free people' among whom the appointment of spiritual leadership was the shared responsibility of the gathered congregation, not that of the king.¹

Smyth (Whitley, 1915, Vol 1, p.270) himself appears to have claimed that his views owed much to the 'auncient brethren of the seperation', generally acknowledged to include the Separatist leaders Robert Browne, Henry Barrow, and others.² Barrie White (1996 p.17) considered the formative influence of the Separatists' attention to covenanting together as highly significant for General and Particular Baptists.

¹ Lee (2003, p.139) notes the final break with Episcopalian ecclesiology. 'Successionism had been ruled out because authority was passed through the act of covenanting, not through history or tradition.' Grenz (2002, p.56) wrote that the early Baptists believed '...that the will of Christ for his Church is to be discerned by the entire company guided by their leaders, a revolutionary understanding in a day when kings and synods decided the will of God.'

² See Lee (*Ibid*, pp.136-137) for further details about this claim and its implications for Smyth's developing theology and practice.

Separatism had rejected the national covenant of the Church of England and replaced it with a local covenant as the basis of its ecclesiology. Separatists distinguished between the outward, or local, covenant made by a group of faithful followers of Christ and the eternal covenant established between God and humanity through Christ. Though distinct, these two were inextricably linked. In Smyth's *Principles and Inferences*, written in 1607, he wrote,

The outward part of the true forme of the true visible church is a vowe, promise, oath, or covenant betwixt God and the Saints... This covenant has 2 parts, 1. respecting God and the faithful. 2. respecting the faithful mutually... The first part of the covenant respecting God is either from God to the faithful, or from the faithful to God... The second part of the covenant respecting the faithful mutually conteyneth all the duties of love whatsoever. (Whitley, 1915, Vol 1, p.254).

It is possible to read this text such that, if the 'true form of the true church' is the vow, or covenant, then the signatories to the vow were, in the act of signing, bringing a local church into being. Hence, their signing not only had functional value, by signalling their right to govern the church of Christ, but also ontological value; by it they were establishing the church of Christ.³ This defining action of 'high' congregationalism uniquely privileged the members of the congregation.⁴ The typical seventeenth and early eighteenth century Baptist congregation was responsible for accepting others into membership of its ranks, might direct the minister to a particular text for the following Sunday's sermon,⁵ and met frequently to express its collective mind over

³ As Maclear (1957, p.105) succinctly says, 'Thus the covenant answered the need for some instrument which could bring into existence an artificial society to replace the larger natural community now rejected as a legitimate basis for ecclesiastical organisation.'

⁴ Compare with Haymes, *et al* (2008, p.51) where a similar view is expressed.

⁵ See the Maze Pond minute book, where the Members' Meeting of 19th December 1753 approved the use of hymns after the sermon. Only as late as 1787 was the Minister given the necessary approval by the members to read Scripture, 'at such a point in the service as he should choose.' (Maze Pond Members Meeting, 19th March 1787). On this compare with Christopher Hill (2003, p.19, 23) who notes that until 1641 'All clergymen... were subject to the authority of bishops; and bishops appointed by the Crown very rarely forgot their maker.... governments went far to determine what was said in most pulpits.... For example, in 1620 James I instructed preachers in London 'to inveigh... against the insolency of our women, and their wearing of broad-brimmed hats and other undesirable garments.'

matters of church governance and discipline.⁶

After Smyth and Helwys left for exile in the Netherlands in either 1607 or 1608, Smyth rejected infant baptism and, writing against paedobaptist Separatists, argued that the true form of the church was to be found in the covenant of baptism, a response to the eternal covenant (Lee, 2003, p.153). In *The Character of the Beast* he writes, 'The true forme of the church is a covenant betwixt God and the Faithful made in baptisme...' (Whitley, 1915, Vol 2, p.645). This development is sufficiently significant for historians such as Lee (2003, p.153) to characterise this as marking a movement from Smyth's Separatist stage to a Baptist stage; a movement in which Smyth came to see the covenant relationship as an 'interpretation of the sacrament' of baptism.⁷

Helwys returned to England in 1611/12 and helped to establish the first General Baptist churches in England.⁸ Smyth's Separatist and Baptist theologies of covenant each found their resonance in different congregations within the early English Baptist (and Independent) congregations. R.C. Walton (1946 pp.84-85) pointed to the tension that would continue to exist between these two alternative accounts of the true form of the church. The tradition represented by Smyth and (later) Hanserd Knollys (1599-1691) argued that faith, repentance, public testimony and baptism were constitutive of the church. In contrast, 'the tradition of Jessey, Hardcastle and Bunyan offered faith, repentance, public testimony and the church covenant' (*Ibid*, p.85).

⁶ English Baptists enforced discipline rigidly within their covenant communities and did so in the face of the economic abuse that was a constant temptation for ecclesiastical authorities and those who benefited from it. Hill (2003, p.307) indicates that punishment for excommunication from the Established Church of England during the early seventeenth century meant that 'The excommunicated person could not buy or sell, could not be employed, could not sue or give evidence in the courts (and so could not recover debts), could not give bail, make a will or receive a legacy, or serve as administrator or guardian. No one was supposed to eat with an excommunicate, or to receive him into his house.' The point was not lost on Helwys (1612, facsimile ed. 1935, p.20) who wrote that 'the power of this excommunication is of another especial use of profit in that by the power thereof are brought in all duties, tithes and court fees.'

⁷ On this see Himbury (1962, p.28), Coggins (1984, pp.251ff) and the contrasting view of White (1984, pp.347ff).

Each tradition had an ongoing appeal to early Baptist congregations. Frequently, whether through the act of covenanting together, or of entering the covenant through baptism, the early Baptist congregations urged their members to walk together in the ways of the Lord, expressing their sense of mutual accountability for the souls of all those benefitting from membership in the covenant community. Smyth (Whitley, 1915, Vol. 1, p.254) considered this a 'duty of love', reflecting a deep relational concern. He describes the duties of church membership, emphasising the qualities of penitence, Christian fruitfulness, and the practices of obedience to Scripture, admonition and excommunication.⁹ Throughout his work, even where he is discussing church discipline, the theme of mutual love is never absent; '...the strong are to beare the infirmities of the weake: and That we are to support one another through loue.' (Whitley, 1915, Vol. 2, p.747).

2.2.2 Porton Baptist Church, 1555, 'A People walking together...'

In 1655 Edward Bundy baptised nine adults in the vicinity of Broughton, Hampshire.¹⁰ They declared their intention to 'walk together' in the new Baptist church that was formed the same day and inscribed either their name or 'mark' in the newly opened church record book.¹¹ This act of incorporation had no legal status. It contains no

⁸ Barrie White (1996, p.9) notes that a 'younger group, the Particular or Calvinistic Baptists... arose among the underground Independent congregations of London in the 1630s.' Smyth died in the Netherlands in 1612 (White, 1996, p.21).

⁹ See Whitley (1915, Vol. 2, p.744) where Smyth, by this time a Mennonite, writes that 'The outward church visible, consistes of penitent persons onely, and of such as beleeuing in Christ, bring forth frutes worthie amendment of lyfe.' Compare this with his earlier Separatist work, 'The cheef care of every member must be to watch over his brother... admonishing the unruly...' (Whitley, 1915, Vol 1, p.261).

¹⁰ The Church Book in the Angus Library, Regent's Park College, is catalogued as the *Broughton Church Book*. During the course of this research the author was able to correctly identify the Broughton Church Book as the missing Church Book for Porton Baptist Church, located some ten miles from Broughton. The story of the missing Porton Church Book is told in Huckle and Moore (2000, p.5). Transcripts of the missing book, taken in 1906, match precisely the opening text of the alleged Broughton Church Book, and the foundation date for Broughton of 1651, recorded in the Baptist Union Annual Directory, does not accord with the Church Book which offers a date of 1655.

¹¹ The statement is in a poor condition, but can be read as follows:

appeal to historic councils or creeds. Its simplicity is highly suggestive. The first Particular Baptist church in England was founded by 1638¹² in London by former members of a paedobaptist Separatist church of 1616. In an *aide memoire*, William Kiffin, who became a member of the church in 1638, described the foundation of the 1616 church; ‘they covenanted together to walk in all Gods Ways...’ (Brackney, 1998a, p.30). Membership of the church to which Kiffin belonged carried with it the responsibility for making theological decisions through ‘mutual consent’ and ‘mutual desire and agreement’ (*Ibid*, p.30).

The church book of Maze Pond Baptist Church, London, records the declaration in 1694 of six individuals to ‘walk together’ as a church of Jesus Christ. A further eighteen individuals witnessed this declaration and all twenty-four signatures are inscribed in the Church Book.¹³ Existing records from the seventeenth century are consistent in their descriptions of the way in which a Baptist church of this period was established. Individual believers discussed, prayed, and recorded their resolution to

‘Broughton [...] Amesbury, Stowford, Chalk, also Porton and ye parts adjacent, mett together as a church of Jesus Christ and his beloved rule, accordingly declared their resolutions for ye future through Christ wch strengtheneth them soo to walke as becomes ye Saints according to ye Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, in all obedience of his commands & in love toward each other as brothers & sisters ptakers of ye same Grace through Jesus Christ our Lord. The same day were baptized by our brother Edward Bundy, nine disciples whose names follow...’
Broughton Church Book 1655, Unpublished MS Angus Library, Oxford (Incorrectly catalogued). Huckle and Moore contain several lines of text preceding our transcription, indicating the date of the 3rd April 1655.

¹² The precise date is elusive. The Particular (or Calvinistic) Baptists emerged as a separate group from among the Independent Puritan congregations such as that founded in 1616 and led by Jacob, Lathrop, and Jessey successively. White (1996, p.9) records simply that ‘the Particular Baptists arose among the underground Independent congregations of London in the 1630s.’

¹³ On the 9th February 1694, the Church Book records,

‘We doe Covenant and agree to give up ourselves to the Lord and to each other. According to the Will of God to walk together in al the Ordinances and wayes of the Lord as a church of Jesus Christ in obedience to him; owning all the aforesaid Articles of Faith. And accordingly we doe declare ourselves a Church of Christ I witness whereof we subscribe our names.’ Maze Pond Baptist Church, (1694) *Church Book*. Unpublished MS, Oxford, Angus Library.

establish themselves as a church and then indicated their assent by signing the covenant.¹⁴

At this point in history their church books were largely private records. The simplicity of the Broughton document and the illiteracy of some of those who played a role in forming the church¹⁵ suggests, against the backdrop of religious clericalism, that seventeenth century Baptists believed the governance of the true Church of Christ belonged to those who had mutually resolved to meet as his church, irrespective of education, social or ecclesiastical status. Signing, combined with the early practice of reading covenants regularly to one another,¹⁶ was probably understood as embodying an empowering theological innovation.¹⁷ The responsibility for guaranteeing the covenant between God and his people, and that which bound his people together in the divine commonwealth, was entrusted to all the people of God, not simply to ecclesiastical or political elites.¹⁸ Equally importantly they took responsibility for a sacred vow that bound them to a particular theological and moral vision of the Christian community, or commonwealth.¹⁹

¹⁴ Many also refer to celebrating the ordinances of baptism or Lord's Supper either immediately or during the following week. We may infer from such inclusions that their developing ecclesiology displays more than 'mere voluntarism'. They met in obedience to the commands of Christ to celebrate His ordinances and, in order to do so, therefore had to establish themselves as a Church.

¹⁵ Indicated by their use of 'X' as their mark when signing the document.

¹⁶ 'After solemn fasting and prayer the Church unanimously agreed to maintain and keep up our Church state [...] to renew our Covenant with ye Lord and one another to walk together according to our first Covenant.' (Maze Pond Baptist Church, *Church Book*, Unpublished MS Angus Library, Oxford, entry for 17th January 1695.)

¹⁷ See Fiddes (1999b, p.74), where he writes that covenant-making 'also gave a sense of empowerment, for people in a covenant relationship with God under the direct rule of Christ were thereby liberated from ecclesiastical authority...'

¹⁸ On this see also Fiddes (2000a, pp.32-34) who emphasises the participation in God that covenant making involves.

¹⁹ 'That the church of Christ has power delegated to themselves of announcing the word, administering the sacraments, appointing ministers, disclaiming them, and also excommunicating; but the last appeal is to the brethren or body of the church.' Smyth (1609) outlines this understanding in article XIII of his *Short Confession of Faith in XX articles*, cited in Lumpkin (1969, p.101).

For this reason Hill (1995 pp.271-284) argues that covenant-making provided a shield against immersion in the prevailing socio-religious environment and a validating and pastoral framework for cohesion in the believing community.²⁰ Wrightson is probably more correct in arguing that these developments contributed to the entry of 'the people' onto the religious stage accompanied by a growing awareness of national political events whereby '...the Protestant Reformation... swept up an expanded proportion of the population into the currents of religious debate.' (Wrightson, 1982, p.225).²¹

2.3 Eighteenth century discursive innovations: Maze Pond engrossment of the Members' Meetings minutes

Gilbert (1976 pp.145-62) described Nonconformity at the outset of the eighteenth century as a movement, lacking organisation, local and spontaneous, evangelistic, and without clergy-laity distinctions. However, towards the end of the century innovations were being introduced widely. In 1778 the minister of the Salisbury church established a Church Book to keep a record of all the church transactions including members' subscriptions, financial gifts to the poor, names and numbers of members, the purchase of candles, bread, and wine, plus the cost of repairs to the building (Huckle, 2000, p.12).

In 1779 the members of Maze Pond Baptist Church, London, began to carefully compile an engrossed *Record of Minutes* accompanied by explanatory marginal references. The engrossed minutes, dating from 1742 through to 1850, are described

²⁰ The Jacob-Lathrop-Jessey congregation, established in 1616, permitted attendance at the parish church as long as assent was not given to 'mere human tradition'. For more see Haykin (1996, p.27) and Tolmie (1977, pp.7-27) who describes them as Puritan latitudinarians. The Particular Baptists that practised open membership and who emerged from the Jacob-Lathrop-Jessey tradition were influenced by their practice. However, White (1972, pp.331; 1996, pp.10-11) argues that the 'open' membership practice of these congregations was always in a minority, a fact frequently obscured by the attention given these congregations, and those associated with John Bunyan, due to their particular historical prominence.

²¹ See also Tolmie (1997, pp.7-27) who underscores the semi-separatists' refusal to apply social and religious censure to the parochial churches.

as ‘cases’, or examples, whereby church members might be assisted to arrive at decisions in future church meetings.²² Throughout, the discourse reflects formal business and legal language.²³ This stands in something of a contrast with the period up until 1700 when the greater majority of issues dealt with at church meetings relate to membership admission and dismissal, disciplinary procedures, and matters of Sunday service. On the 21st February 1743, the church meeting notes for the first time what are described in the margins as ‘articles of agreement’ (*Maze Pond Church Book*, 21st February 1743). There is a move away from the congregation convening immediately after Sunday morning service to consider discipline and worship matters, to a monthly pattern of church meetings where the focus gradually moves towards matters financial, legal, and constitutional. In the 1780s the church accounts are mentioned for the first time. On the 19th November 1787 there is the first mention of a committee being established. The first mention of a resolution being seconded is in 1796 (*Ibid*, 12th December 1796). A church members’ list is first printed in 1851.

In reviewing the period 1690 to 1850, the church has moved from being a non hymn-singing, closed table, closed membership church to a hymn-singing, open-table church that commends a member to a Wesleyan church. It was a church that rigidly excommunicated members for failure to attend communion, yet it moves to being a church that discusses whether it is still pastorally wise to excommunicate people who have been absent at communion for six months. It moves from a church that understands its primary responsibility at church meetings to be the spiritual purity of its members, to a church that is beginning to realise the responsibility of significant freehold property assets and the legal and financial efficiency of its charitable and religious societies. It illustrates the necessary development of a members’ list in

²² *Maze Pond Church Books 1691-1907*, unpublished MSS, Angus Library, Regent’s Park College, Oxford. The engrossed minutes are to be found attached to the frontispiece of the *Church Book* commencing 1744.

²³ So, we read of ‘resolutions taken’ (1742 onwards), ‘ballots’ and ‘voting’ (1738), a list of ‘members present’ being maintained (1755), ‘Memorandums’ (1779), ‘Rules and Orders’ (1790).

something of a contrast with the early covenants signed by smaller groups of people in close social relationships with each other.

Collectively, these point in some very significant directions. Maze Pond as a metropolitan congregation is not necessarily typical of the many rural churches that were still in the majority during this historical period.²⁴ However, it does reveal a trend that emerges elsewhere, albeit at a later period, of Baptist churches in which membership and the attendant duties at church meetings take on new nuances not present during the formative period of Baptist life.²⁵ With larger memberships came the need for corresponding organisation and efficiency.

During this period, Baptist congregations show evidence in their church meetings of adapting readily to the new disciplines required for the efficient ordering of their meetings. Gregory Wills (1997, pp.131,134) offers evidence from the USA that Baptist churches of the late nineteenth century adopted 'efficiency' as a watchword for church meetings in contrast to 'purity'. The former Baptist vision of a 'pure' church was replaced by a vision of the 'efficient' church. Outlining the evidence from British Baptist churches, David Bebbington concludes that whilst they were more susceptible to anti-democratic pressures from religious elites, nevertheless the 'religious democratisation' thesis first advanced by Nathan Hatch (and extended by Wills) can generally be seen among British Baptists: 'It is plain that there was a tendency for Baptists to be affected by the same process.' (Bebbington, 2002b, p.279). He stresses the importance of London and its shaping influence in imparting 'deference, efficiency, and order' to

²⁴ See, for example Brown (1986, p.10) where the typical Baptist church of the early 18th century is characterised as having only 50 members, rural, insular, and not particularly wealthy. However, in London, Whitley (1931, p.196) could write that 'in 1715 the Presbyterians were a real factor in national life... by 1792 the balance of power had greatly altered' (in favour of the Baptists).

²⁵ For example, Helwys' 1611 *A Declaration of Faith of English People* (Full text in Lumpkin, 1969, p.121) insisted that a church should never '...consist off such a multitude as cannot have particular knowledge one off another.' In contrast, by 1911 the church at King's Road, Reading had thirty funds or societies that were making a financial return to the annual church meeting. *The Manual of the Church Meeting in Kings Road Baptist Chapel, Reading, containing the accounts of the various Societies up to December 21st 1911*, unpublished MS, Angus Library, Regent's Park College, Oxford.

Baptist church life. Underwood's account (1947, pp.146-147) of Joseph Gurney (1744-1815), a deacon at Maze Pond, recounts his appointment as a short-hand writer in the law courts at the Old Bailey. Doubtless his legal and drafting skills are reflected in the Maze Pond church books, particularly the engrossments, with their similarity to the manner in which English case-law evolves.

2.3.1 *The rise of the Religious and Charitable Voluntary Societies*

By the close of the eighteenth century, the number of religious and other charitable societies was increasing apace.

The decades which spanned the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw the rise of an astonishing number of new societies. The medical, religious, moral and educational charities formed between 1780 and 1800 more than trebled the number which commenced their work during the previous twenty years, while those founded between the turn of the century and 1820 rose to almost twice the number of the preceding two decades. (Brown, 1986, pp.136,7)

The Baptist congregation at Maze Pond reflected this growing civic involvement in educational and charitable activities. In 1778, it founded a Sympathetick Society (*Maze Pond Church Book*, 16th February 1778), and by 1857 Maze Pond was running a Sunday and infant school, the Christian Instruction Society, the Benevolent Society, a Tract Society, its Auxiliary Missionary Society, a Maternal Society, and the Dorcas Society and was supporting a wide range of other religious and charitable societies.

At first the voluntary societies established by Baptists tended to reflect self-interest allied with a concern for mutual support and joint activity at regional or national levels. For example, societies were established to support ministers in various ways, including the Ministerial Society (1714), the Particular Baptist Fund (1717), and the General Baptist Fund (1726). There then followed educational societies that undertook the proper education of ministers, including the London Baptist Education Society (1752, revived 1804), the Bristol Education Society (1770), and the Northern Education Society (1804). The Baptist Missionary Society was founded in 1792. Four years later the creation of the Home Missionary Society (1796) recognised the

challenge of establishing new congregations in parts of the country where the Baptist presence was weak or non-existent.

Maze Pond's first educational initiative in the 1840s, opening its doors to seventy-six children in 1846, was followed by the Maze Pond Christian Instruction Society in 1848. In 1776, John Sutcliffe's circular letter to the Northamptonshire churches (cited in Elwyn, 1997, p.5) extolled the virtues of the 'prevailing practice of establishing' Sunday schools. His concerns were for the proper education of children, elevated morals, increased literacy, and attendance at Sunday worship; all intended to 'render them more useful members of society at large.' The attitudes that underlay such a statement are similarly revealed in the dissenting conviction that acquiring knowledge was useful and served a useful justification for their involvement in scientific and educational societies. This search for excellence was recognised and appreciated more widely than among the dissenting congregations themselves. O'Malley writes that,

...the virtues radical dissenters espoused to promote social reform and individual improvement – 'sobriety, obedience, industry, thrift, benevolence and compassion' – were almost universally sought by middle-class parents by 1770. (2003, p.6)

With the introduction of compulsory elementary education in 1880 the middle-class dominated Baptist churches demonstrated 'a tendency to rely less upon mission within the community and more upon the provision of Sunday schools... devoted entirely to developing Christian knowledge and commitment' (Rimington, 1998, p.395). Religious voluntary societies offered the most efficient means of delivering such a provision but, at a more philosophical level, the burgeoning of religious and charitable voluntary societies had a parallel in the growing emphasis upon ecclesiastical voluntarism that had begun to emerge in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

2.3.2 John Locke and the discourse of voluntarism

In 1839 J. A. Angus wrote his famous essay *The Voluntary System* in which he describes the church as a voluntary society unfettered by the state (Angus, 1839).²⁶ He relied upon the political and theological philosophy of John Locke (1632-1704), especially his understanding of the social contract.²⁷ Locke emphasised an egalitarian society in which individuals freely contracted together to build legislature, executive, and judiciary. Locke deals with the nature and function of the church in freely contracted societies. In *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689), Locke championed non-compulsion in matters of religious conformity, rejected episcopal and presbyterial oversight, rejected the use of force as an instrument of excommunication, stressed the autonomy of the local congregation, and discussed the proper admission and demission of members (Sigmund, 2005 pp.125-167). He writes,

A church then I take to be a voluntary (free) society of men, joining themselves together of their own accord, in order to the public worshipping of God, in such a manner as they judge acceptable to him and effectual to the salvation of their souls. (Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, 1689. Cited in Sigmund, 2005, p.132).²⁸

The influence of Locke on Angus is to be seen in the latter's preference for the language of 'voluntarism' over that of covenant.²⁹ Angus twice quotes from a 1759

²⁶ See also his *The Christian Churches*, 1862, in which these themes are developed further. Also note that although he begins this work with the words 'Man is a social being. His instincts seek...companionship...' (Angus, 1862, p.1), Angus does not really develop this in personal or relational terms. He appears to prefer the language of companionship discovered in a common voluntary cause.

²⁷ I am grateful to Professor John Briggs for this insight. Personal conversation, August 2003.

²⁸ See the full text of his 1685 'A Letter concerning Toleration' in Sigmund (2005, pp.125-167)

²⁹ William Brackney (1997, p.33-49) considers Locke to be the philosopher who brought clarity to the voluntaristic vision, particularly in the USA, although he notes that Locke is himself drawing upon nearly 80 years of developing nonconformist churchmanship. Although he appears not to offer much direct evidence of Locke's influence upon British Baptists of the 18th and 19th centuries, he assumes this to be the case. Angus' arguments in support of the voluntary principle include an extended 'Note T' (*Ibid*, pp.257-9) in which he refers with approval to the total of over one million pounds raised by 44 dissenting religious charities in 1837.

edition of Locke's *A Letter on Toleration*.³⁰ He makes a further reference when discussing the improved toleration that characterised the 1830s.³¹ Locke's theological description of the church is echoed by other Baptists. In his circular letter to the Northamptonshire Churches of 1777, John Ryland Sr. wrote (cited in Elwyn, 1997, p.7) that the Church can be defined '...in the free and mutual consent of believing persons to walk together before God. A Church is a voluntary society ...we freely give ourselves to God.'

In the following year, 1778, Richard Hopper's circular letter addressed the duties of membership thus,

...the Lord Jesus Christ has given us allowances and commands to associate together, to incorporate ourselves into regular societies, to carry on all the parts of public worship and discipline, to choose our pastors and deacons, to receive in new members...(cited in Elwyn, 1997, p.8).

It is certainly justified to read Hopper's letter as a re-casting of the vision and responsibilities of the early, covenanted Baptist congregations. The differences may be seen in the preferred usage of the discourse of voluntarism, or 'societalism', that popularised the language of 'associate', 'incorporate', and 'societies'.³²

³⁰ Firstly on the title-page of Chapter V (Angus, 1839, p. 142) and, secondly, on the title-page of Chapter VI (*Ibid*, p.178).

³¹ Though not without qualifications. Angus (1839, p.125) notes that although the established church was no longer burning heretics, it had still to abjure economic, moral, and intellectual 'penalties and prerogatives' that were designed to pressure and persuade dissenters into conforming.

³² Though it is important to note Broadway's contention that 'voluntarist' was intended by these Baptists to signify 'non-coercive' rather than 'non-collective' or 'individualist'. He writes that 'voluntaryism should not be assumed to mean individualism'. For this see Broadway (2005, p.73) and the section following where he offers three historical Baptist claims to support this contention that the internalisation of eighteenth and nineteenth century liberal political thought 'replaced understandings of humanity and society derived from the scriptures and Christian tradition.' (*Ibid*, p.82). Additionally, see Fiddes (2003, pp.40-45) for a helpful discussion of the relationship of covenant to the voluntary society where he writes that 'from a covenantal perspective, it is thus positively misleading to call a local church a "voluntary society".' (*Ibid*, p.42).

The appeal of Locke's philosophy to the Dissenters is understandable; a consequence of the mixed motivations of ecclesiological self-interest and Christian virtue.³³

2.4 Late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century denominational developments

In June 1811, Joseph Ivimey's *Baptist Magazine* article 'Union Essential to Prosperity' pressed for a more permanent vehicle of joint expression by Particular Baptist churches. Subsequently, a meeting was held at 8am on Thursday the 25th June 1812, in the vestry of Carter Lane Baptist Church, Tooley Street, Southwark, to consider proposals for an annual General Association of the Particular Baptist Churches.³⁴

The June 1812 meeting adopted nine resolutions, one proposing an Assembly the following June, another stating 'that a more general Union of the Particular (or Calvinistic) Baptist churches in the United Kingdom is very desirable' (Price, 1928-9, p.57). One year later, in 1813, forty-five ministers met for the first annual Assembly. At that meeting twelve resolutions were adopted, the first began, 'That this Society of ministers and churches be designated 'The General Union of Baptist ministers and churches'...' (Payne, 1958, p.24). In the resolutions the language of 'Society' and 'Union' is used interchangeably with the use of 'Union' seeming to reflect a growing desire for something of greater durability; more extensive than the existing regional Association meetings. There is a hint of the covenantal language of Smyth and Helwys in resolution three which states that the purpose of the Union includes the

³³ However, in Britain the appeal to good and evil in Locke's discussion of social contract would not prove to be as durable as Bentham's utilitarianism. Locke's political appeal was to have its greatest impact in the colonies of North America as they searched for political independence. Subsequently the voluntaristic spirit would come to characterise much of North American denominationalism. For a fuller discussion see Sigmund (2005, pp.xxiv-xxxix, especially pp. xxiv-xxv).

³⁴ The Western Baptist Association had also declared its colours with a speech from its Association meetings re-printed in the January 1812 edition of *The Baptist Magazine*, 'UNION, UNION, yes Union of the most extensive, firm, and durable nature.' (Cited in Price, 1928-9, p.54). See Payne (1958, pp.15-27) for a fuller account of the meeting and the immediate events surrounding the occasion.

'excitement of brotherly love'.³⁵ From the outset, the 1813 Assembly stressed that the Union would have no authority, synodal or presbyteral, over the local churches.³⁶

A growing sense of denominational identity also emerged from the connexional life of the General Baptists, the experience of the other Calvinistic movements, the inter-evangelical religious societies, and the Methodist movement (Price, 1928-9, pp.54,5).³⁷

Rinaldi's history of the New Connexion of General Baptists records the presence of periodicals, connexional funds, a training academy for ministers, and a missionary society, from as early as the late eighteenth century onwards (Rinaldi, 1996, pp.79-84). In these he sees evidence of a gradual movement away from the New Connexion understanding itself as a revival movement and towards it developing a denominational identity. He argues that the New Connexion's churches were as much independent as they were connexional and that this contributed to their eventually being able to view themselves as 'Baptist' before they were 'General' (*Ibid*, p.274). This was significant for it would eventually facilitate their union with the Particular Baptists who, from the late eighteenth century onwards, would be significantly influenced by Andrew Fuller's exposition of moderate Calvinism.

By 1832 it was apparent that the momentum of a new constitution for the Union was required. The Calvinistic sentiments of the 1813 constitution were deleted, facilitating greatly the co-operation between the General and Particular Baptists.³⁸ From the

³⁵ With the possible exception of the formation of the Baptist Missionary Society in 1792, this was the earliest occasion on which Particular Baptists had formally resolved, in language usually reserved for the membership of a local church, to live and serve in some level of covenant relationship within the fellowship of a national union of churches.

³⁶ This was perhaps somewhat overly cautious as by 1817 entries in the minute book record the cessation of the annual Assemblies. W.T. Whitley noted that, 'It had no practical aim, no permanent officers, no inspiring leader.' Cited in Hardy (1925, p.217).

³⁷ Briggs (2005, p.3) also notes that 'from the early years some need for structures was seen to exist. In the seventeenth century provision was made... for the convoking of General Councils or Assemblies.'

³⁸ The inclusion in the 1832 Constitution of the phrase, 'churches who agree in the sentiments usually denominated evangelical' provided the bridge between Particular and General Baptists.

1850s onwards, the full union of the New Connexion with the Particular Baptists was urged by Baptists on both sides.³⁹ On the 25th June 1891 the final assembly of the General Baptist Association voted to amalgamate with the Baptist Union.⁴⁰ The introduction of the Declaration of Principle made possible the amalgamation and a new national Baptist Union, composed of General and Particular Baptists, came into being.

2.4.1 The architect of denomination: John Howard Shakespeare

Yeo writes about the declining numbers attending the Free Church congregations of late nineteenth-century Reading in the following way,

The central fact which religious and many other organisations should have faced during the period 1890 to 1914 in Reading was that twentieth-century development was not going to be the fulfillment of local and voluntarist aspirations. (1976, p.321).

J.H. Shakespeare served as General Secretary of the Baptist Union from 1898 to 1924 and seems to have sensed instinctively the social shifts that Yeo described some eight decades later. Shakespeare entered office in the year in which the Baptist Union announced its Twentieth Century Fund with an accompanying appeal for £250,000 (Payne, 1958, pp.157,8). Within one year Shakespeare had taken the financially troubled *Freeman* into Union ownership, installed his brother as sub-editor in 1901, and harnessed the promotion of the Twentieth Century Fund with the editorial policy of the new paper, *The Baptist Times and Freeman*.⁴¹ On the 23rd August 1901, Shakespeare, as the newspaper's editor, wrote that the Twentieth Century Fund was helping to develop '...the Denominational Idea. The Fund may be said to have caused

³⁹ Including William Underwood and John Clifford. For a fuller discussion of this see Rinaldi (1996, pp.239-261).

⁴⁰ Rinaldi (1996, p.261) records the occasion of the final meeting of the Midland Conference of the New Connexion on the 29th September 1891 and states, 'With the closing of that meeting the New Connexion ceased to exist.'

⁴¹ By this point Shakespeare himself was directly supervising editorial content and policy. See Shepherd (2001, pp.31-33). See also Payne (1958, pp.159-165).

the Denomination to embody itself.' (*The Baptist Times and Freeman*, 23 August 1901, p.568).

In 1903 he presided over the opening of Baptist Church House, completed at a cost of £50,000.⁴² It was central to addressing the challenge of the twentieth century and many Baptists felt that they had finally become a denomination able to take its part in national and political public life. Shepherd assesses the importance of Baptist Church House thus,

The Denomination had seemed to many to be lagging behind its Wesleyan and Congregationalist counterparts in terms of denominational organization, but with the dawning of the new century, its star too had appeared on the global stage. (Shepherd, 1998, p247).

By 1912 Shakespeare had secured the Assembly's approval to raise capital of £250,000 for the Sustentation Fund. It was intended to pay subsidies for inadequate ministerial stipends. Shakespeare's opponents were quick to draw attention to his centralising tendencies and voiced the fear that his policies would inevitably lead to an identification of the denomination solely with the Baptist Union.⁴³ Until its eventual demise in 1910, the editorial policy of the independently controlled *The Baptist* resisted the impetus towards denominationalism and in 1905 it campaigned for an alternative national body (*The Baptist*, 21st December 1905, p.437).

Despite sustained opposition, as a result of Shakespeare's skilled negotiation and personal energy, many other denominational initiatives were introduced.⁴⁴ His 1904

⁴² For details see Payne (1958, pp158-159) and Randall (2005, p.25) who notes that although the Twentieth Century Fund had allocated £34,000, the final cost of Baptist Church House was £50,000.

⁴³ A similar controversy centred on the new Constitution adopted in 1904 that transferred some powers from the more widely representative annual Assembly to the Council of the Union. For a fuller discussion of the issues and the main controversies see Payne (1959, pp.160-163), also Shepherd (2001, pp.35-38).

⁴⁴ Ironically, denominational funds pre-existed Shakespeare, including the Augmentation of Pastors' Incomes Fund (established 1877), the Annuity Fund (1876), and the Church Extension Fund (1892). As early as 1887 the Baptist Union had assumed major responsibilities for ministerial settlement (Payne, 1959, pp149-150). Denominational recognition of ministers stands in stark contrast to Helwys, who in 1611, wrote, 'That the Officers of everie Church or

constitution remains, with some revisions, the basis of the present Baptist Union. Writing of this period, Peter Shepherd (1998, pp.432,3) concludes that denomination was no longer 'simply an umbrella term by which churches which practised believers' baptism and congregational church government identified themselves as such.'

Instead it was developing institutional forms, that served to strengthen the impression of a '...national organization: a body that could be seen, and could act, at that level.' (*Ibid*, p.433).

Shakespeare believed that a denominational structure was essential for effective political and ecclesiastical participation. The few remaining challenges still facing Nonconformists during the opening years of the new century were met head-on with the expediency of new political alliances.⁴⁵ Baptists and other Nonconformists would experience a measure of political influence with the rise to power of the Liberal Party at the 1906 General Election,⁴⁶ and Shakespeare would become a confidant of Lloyd George.⁴⁷ Gilbert (1976, pp.145-62) summarises the Baptist Union of this period as centralised, organised, national, regulated, pastoral, containing significant clergy-laity distinctions, and driven by the desire for respectability.

However, a crisis, unseen by Shakespeare, shook the Union in 1907. For the first time in many years, the membership of the Union declined numerically, a trend that has continued largely unbroken to the present day, a phenomenon experienced by the other Nonconformist churches.⁴⁸ Payne (1958, pp.171,4) speculated that the churches

congregacion are tied by Office onely to that particuler congregacion whereoff thay are chosen.' (Helwys, 1611, Article 22).

⁴⁵ For example, the Education Act 1902 was of deep concern for many Nonconformists, some of whom chose imprisonment rather than pay taxes that supported exclusively Anglican Schools.

⁴⁶ A victory welcomed by *The Baptist Times* in January 1906, for which see Shepherd (1998, p.348). Seventeen Baptists were elected as Members of Parliament.

⁴⁷ Although once in power the Liberal Government did not offer as many concessions as Baptists and other Nonconformists might have hoped for. See Randall (2005, p.88).

⁴⁸ Membership in 1906 reached a peak of 431,245. In 1907 there only 426,386 members recorded. See Currie, *et al* (1977, p163) and the figure extracted from Currie *et al* that is

had become distant from the working industrial classes. Shepherd's closer observation and description of the contemporary heart-searching this occasioned evokes the pathos of Shakespeare urging greater attention to denominational efficiencies, a point noted by *The Baptist* as it lamented his emphasis upon 'organisation' as the solution to an alleged spiritual malaise.⁴⁹

In large part this was the inevitable logic of his style of pragmatic leadership. However, it is difficult to imagine what alternatives there were. The early covenantal model had been an expression of resistance to the prevailing socio-political climate. The more recent societal model had offered modes of participation in the socio-political arena but they were rapidly proving unwieldy and burdensome as a means to this particular end.⁵⁰ Shakespeare's genius was to build a denominational structure that would serve the needs and aspirations of Baptist congregations as effectively as any of the conceivable alternatives for much of the remainder of the twentieth century.

2.4.2 Crafting the denomination: Ernest A. Payne

Ernest A. Payne, General Secretary from 1951 to 1967, displayed a deep concern for the theological renewal of the Union.⁵¹ Under his careful direction, matters ecclesial and ecumenical were brought to the foreground of national Baptist life and through his

printed below at p.45. See also Payne (1958, pp.170-171) and below at p.112 for the Baptist Union membership returns projected up to 2010.

⁴⁹ See Shepherd (2001, pp.62-4). The desire for efficient agency at the congregational level may also be seen in the production by J.R. Wood and Samuel Chick (1910), at the request of the Union's Publications Committee, of *A Manual of the Order and Administration of a Church*.

⁵⁰ In 1910, Albert Swift would comment, 'The tendency for some years has been to form a new and independent society for every fresh bit of work needing to be done. This is gone so far that many chapels are all but buried beneath their accumulated societies.' Cited in Yeo (1976, p.164).

⁵¹ In retirement, Payne acknowledged J.H. Shakespeare as a formative influence. For this, see West (1983, p.200).

personal writings and those of others he encouraged, much was written about Baptist ministry, the church, baptism, and membership.⁵²

He was not content, however, to follow others slavishly, frequently advancing or championing positions that ran counter to both earlier and prevailing ecclesiologies.⁵³ For example, Payne welcomed *The Gathered Community* in which Walton took issue with Angus' definition of the Church as a voluntary society. Contra Angus, Walton (1946, p.117) argued that the church is 'called into existence and its life is maintained, not by the decision of men, but by the will of God.'

In similar vein *The Doctrine of the Ministry* report states,

It is not being in the church that brings a person into Christ; rather it is being in Christ that implies that a person is in the church. A believer does not join the church as if it were a voluntary association of individuals. He recognises that being in a new relationship with Christ he is thereby in the community of all who share this relationship, he is in the church. (Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland, 1961, p.10).⁵⁴

Payne perceived trends in earlier Baptist life that had been overlooked in the nineteenth and twentieth century and he was concerned for a higher churchmanship than was common at the time.⁵⁵ His *Fellowship of Believers* was a response to the earlier book by Arthur Dakin, *The Baptist View of the Church and Ministry* (1944), in which Dakin advanced staunchly congregationalist views (Randall, 2005, pp.217-220). According to West (1983, p.60), Payne took a contrary position arguing that 'current

⁵² See, for example, Payne's works which include *The Fellowship of Believers* (1952) and *The Free Church Tradition in the Life of England* (1944). He encouraged others to write: Alec Gilmore was encouraged to edit *Christian Baptism* (1955) and *The Pattern of the Church* (1963). Payne co-operated with Walton on *The Gathered Community* (1946) and encouraged the production of Baptist Union reports during his time as General Secretary including *The Meaning and Practice of Ordination among Baptists* (1957) and *The Doctrine of the Ministry* (1961).

⁵³ Demonstrated in his membership of 'Focus', a group of younger Baptist Union Council members which was often critical of official policy. See West (1983, p.49).

⁵⁴ Although a Baptist Union report, and therefore published anonymously, the principal authors were L.G. Champion, J.O. Barrett and W.M.S. West. For this see Hayden and Haymes (1997, p.6).

⁵⁵ I consider Payne to be an accurate judge of the so-called 'high churchman-ship' of the seventeenth and eighteenth century Baptists. For this, see my discussion above, p.24.

Baptist practices and difficulties were the product of the individualism of the 19th century and of a reaction against the Oxford movement.’

Payne’s biographer, Morris West, presents a leader with a concern for denominational renewal in the face of such individualism. He argues (West, 1983, p.81) that Payne believed the Baptist Union was a means of greater efficiency and organisation. Payne consequently urged the denomination to develop a functional ecclesiology that presented the Union as a visible manifestation of the fellowship already existing between interdependent churches (West, 1983, pp.89,123.)

In *Fellowship of Believers*, Payne (1952) lamented laxity of membership practice. He noted the absence from worship of many on the membership rolls, the absence from membership of many baptised believers, and the closed membership churches whose membership rolls reflected little of the reality of their effective life and witness. Payne (1952, p.105) feared the weakening of the sense of responsibility formerly attached to church membership and expressed the hope that a process of re-articulating Christian ethics and doctrine in the 1950s might ‘...result in a renewal of the life of the Church Meeting...’ and deliver ‘...a clearer conception of Christian belief... adhered to by church members.’

During his period of office he worked hard to ensure that practical programmes were established to support the Christian and denominational education of members (West, 1983, pp.100,125). Payne encouraged the production of a small eight-page booklet by the Baptist Union, *Baptist Church Rules suggested by the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland* (1960). They contain a list of ‘The Responsibilities of a Church Member’⁵⁶ and a suggested *pro forma* for the constitution of a Baptist congregation. The use of the word ‘Rules’ in the title implies they were regarded as having a regulatory function within the local congregation.

⁵⁶ See Neil (1973, p.23) who notes that the preface was originally compiled by Stephen Winward for use with his Cavendish Road congregation. Winward collaborated with Payne on the production of a minister’s service book, *Orders and Prayers for Church Worship* (1960).

Baptist Church Rules reflect Payne's desire for a form of Christian ethics and church discipline more appropriate to the twentieth century. Winward's list of 'Responsibilities' emphasised personal discipleship and devotion although seven out of the list of ten stressed the church member's obligations to the corporate life of the church, including attendance at worship, participation and governance, mutual commitments, and financial responsibilities.

It may be speculated that Payne's endeavour to establish a proper basis for church membership was a response to the practice whereby membership had become little more than a 'subscription' within congregations influenced by the voluntary societies.⁵⁷ Against this prevailing understanding of the church, Payne's endeavours resulted in the widespread incorporation of *Baptist Church Rules* into the membership materials that many Baptist congregations have been giving to aspiring church members since the 1960s.⁵⁸ It is difficult to know whether Payne was responding to a concern from the churches or offering genuine leadership in this matter. Regardless, with the publication of guidelines for membership, draft church constitutions, and the writing of new Baptist theologies, especially on ecclesiology,⁵⁹ an increased standardisation of denominational practice, though frequently elusive, would become an essential component in facilitating a more coherent Baptist contribution to ecumenical dialogue and engagement.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Yeo notes that the Baptist chapel at Earley had seat rents in August 1910, but when the 'somewhat delicate nature of sittings was...dealt with by the pastor' that year, the Stewards were exhorted to exercise 'a little gumption, judgement and good taste in not excluding people by ownership of seats.' The empty, but paid for seats, in this chapel demonstrate that subscribed membership did not mean regular attendance (Yeo, 1976, p.79). Subscriptions were also the means by which all Gentlemen's Clubs and Voluntary Societies were supported.

⁵⁸ For further discussion of this, see below at Chapter 4.3 where a representative sample of church membership materials from Baptist churches in the United Kingdom is analysed.

⁵⁹ To which end the Union's Carey Kingsgate Press provided admirable service. Typical of the period is Child's *The Lord's Supper* in which he acknowledges the 'help I have received from Rev. Dr. E.A. Payne.' See Child (1961, p.5).

⁶⁰ Hence the importance of the book *Baptists and Unity*, authored by Leonard Champion (1962) in which ecclesiology is given a central focus.

2.4.3 The contextual rationale for a denominational identity

Yeo (1976, pp.2-4) records the active recruitment of religious organisations in Britain during the 1890s. In this period they enjoyed a level of active participation by the largest number of people they had ever seen. This growth from the 1850s to the 1920s reflected society's ideal view of itself, and helped to resource its moral, educational and spiritual improvement. The significance of Free Church competition should not be underestimated in understanding this period of growth and expansion for all the major Free Churches. Their destinies prove to have been closely intertwined during this period (and subsequently).

Currie, Gilbert and Horsley (1977) in *Churches and Churchgoers*, describe and analyse the patterns of numerical growth and decline for the major Free Churches from 1770 onwards. Their data demonstrates that the trends in growth and decline for each of these Free Churches have followed almost identical trajectories since the 1890s. This is illustrated clearly in *Figure 1*, showing membership patterns for the Methodist, Baptist and Congregational churches in Great Britain from 1900 to 1970.

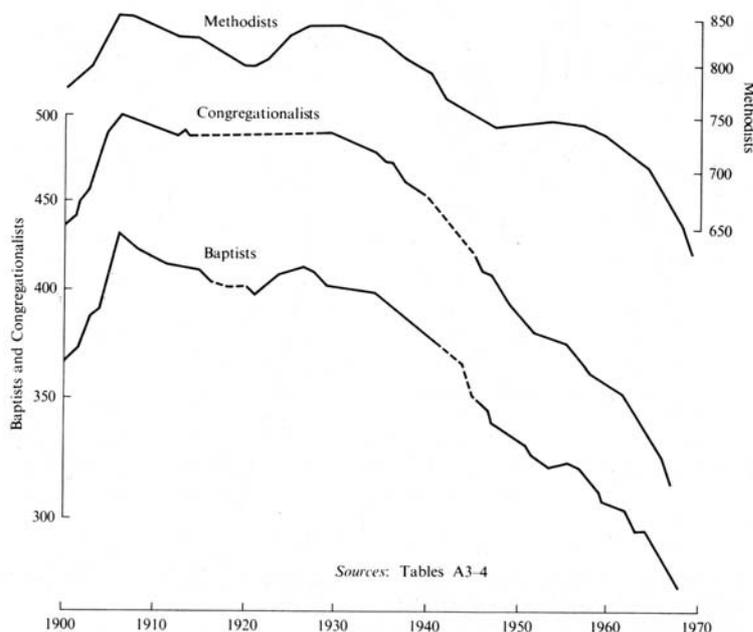


Fig. 1 : Membership of the Baptist, Congregationalist, and Methodist Churches in Great Britain at Annual Intervals, 1900-1970 (hundred thousands: semi-log).

[Source: Currie, Gilbert, Horsley, (1977), p.34.]

According to Bebbington (1989, pp.101-111) each of the major Free Churches was recruiting from the same social class of urban peoples. The rapid erection of church buildings in close proximity to potential worshippers and members must have seemed obvious. Taking up the competitive challenge in urban centres required denominational strategies and funds. The Twentieth Century Fund can be seen as one centralised and denominational response to the strategic necessity of maintaining a Baptist presence in the urban setting among classes of people who might not always be immediately able to sustain their own building programmes or pay their own minister.⁶¹

Awareness of other Free Churches certainly provoked denominational competitiveness but for some Baptists it also increased the possibility of inter-denominational co-operation. The Evangelical Alliance, founded in 1846, provided an opportunity for evangelical co-operation. Although pan-nonconformist and pan-evangelical co-operation predates the founding of the Alliance, Baptists involved discovered a way of remaining distinctively Baptist whilst at the same time engaging with the wider Church. For other Baptists, involvement with the Free Church movement, emerging in the 1890s, afforded similar opportunities.⁶² During the early twentieth century, Shakespeare had agitated for the formation of a Federal Council of Evangelical Free Churches (FCEFC).⁶³ When the Baptist Union took the decision in 1918 to join the FCEFC, it could no longer be dismissed by critics as merely a voluntary society servicing the joint endeavours of Baptist churches. Joining the FCEFC signalled a shift of self-understanding; the Union could now represent and act

⁶¹ For a fuller discussion see Yeo (1976, p.169).

⁶² For discussion of this see, for example, Randall (2005, p.6) and throughout his book.

⁶³ The Council first met in 1919. The Baptist Union Assembly took the decision to join in April 1918. For a fuller discussion see Shepherd (2001, pp.103-110).

on behalf of the collective interests of Baptist churches.⁶⁴ Shakespeare was a committed ecumenist,⁶⁵ who felt himself in later years to have become 'at heart an Episcopalian' (Randall, 2005, p.126). Others were less enthusiastic and the decision to join the FCEFC did not go unopposed. The former Baptist Union Missioner, Revd F.C. Spurr, wrote in a 1925 *Baptist Times* column (1925, p.639) that the 'growth of Free Church unity' had 'weakened the bonds of denominational loyalty,' and he urged greater attention to 'the specific Baptist witness.'

Payne entered office in 1951 during the post-war Macmillan era. International bodies for political and economic co-operation were emerging, including the International Monetary Fund (arising out of the Bretton Woods Agreement of 1944), the United Nations (1945), the World Health Organisation (1948), the Council of Europe (1949), and the European Coal and Steel Community (1951), out of which the European Economic Community (EEC) was to emerge.⁶⁶ Mirroring this secular organizational naissance was the creation of the World Council of Churches (1948) and the Conference of European Churches (1959).

He was involved from the outset in the formation of the World Council of Churches,⁶⁷ was Vice-Chairman of its Central Committee from 1961 to 1975, and a Praesidium member from 1968 to 1975. He was as ecumenically committed as was Shakespeare though he was somewhat more cautious about too readily sacrificing his

⁶⁴ Ernest Payne took the view that in joining the Federal Council of the Evangelical Free Churches, the Baptist Union began to act denominationally (Payne, 1959, pp.11-12). Shepherd even suggests that in doing so the Union could be considered as one 'Church' among the other Free Churches (2001, p.106-107).

⁶⁵ Shakespeare served as President of the National Council of Free Churches from 1916, and Moderator of the Federal Council of the Evangelical Free Churches from 1919-1921.

⁶⁶ Later becoming the European Community (EC), then the European Union (following the signing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992).

⁶⁷ Having been requested by Hugh Martin and M.E. Aubrey to attend the 1947 Faith and Order continuation committee, Payne found himself a member of what was intended to become the Faith and Order Commission of the emerging World Council of Churches. See West (1983, pp.67-8)

nonconformist identity.⁶⁸ However, what each General Secretary seems to have understood was that effective ecumenical engagement needed to be *representative* engagement. This necessitated developing a theological rationale and identity that stressed the ecclesial and representative nature of the Baptist Union in ecumenical dialogues.

Critics of ecumenism, including Royle (1987, p.377), often advance the thesis that ecumenical co-operation is principally a consequence of church decline. It may be more accurate to see the establishment of the World Council of Churches in 1948 as a readiness on the part of the Churches to take a determined and principled stand alongside the other international institutions. Brown (2001, p.188) concedes that the churches in the ten year period 1945 to 1956 were experiencing unprecedented growth; 'In short, from 1945 to 1956, British organised Christianity experienced the most rapid rates of growth since statistics started to be collected in the nineteenth century.'⁶⁹ In Britain, the British Council of Churches had already been established in 1942. In 1955 the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity was inaugurated. In 1959 the first Assembly of the Conference of European Churches gathered at Nyborg Strand in Denmark. The Baptist Union was a founding member of the World Council of Churches, the Conference of European Churches, the British Council of Churches, as well as the Week of Prayer of Christian Unity. The three year 'Baptist Advance' programme of the Baptist Union for 1949 to 1951 reflected the determination of this period to transcend the horrors of the previous two World Wars. These efforts may

⁶⁸ He appears to have found little difficulty in articulating this within ecumenical circles, a fact Morris West notes from a comment to Payne's daughter, Anne, who heard her father described thus, 'Ah, that man, he's a militant nonconformist'. See West (1983, p.153) and the title of Payne's Moderator's Address to the Annual Congress of the Free Church Federal Council on Thursday the 18th March, 1958, *Free Churchmen Unrepentant and Repentant* in which he dismissed any suggestion that the Free Churches had 'largely served their divine purpose' (1958, p.3).

⁶⁹ Although this might not be true of the Methodists, Baptists and Congregationalists (see above at p.45) the total Protestant and Catholic growth rates for the period 1945 to 1956 were in fact impressive. For this see Currie *et al* (1977, pp.29, 30) who record the growth for the 'Major Protestants' and Catholics between 1940 and 1960, arguing that this increased from 8,463,000 to 9,680,000.

appear naïve and idealistic but there is little doubt that they are far from being evidence of dispirited denominations throwing in the towel together. Davie (2000, p.22) is surely right to advance the view that ‘the building of a greater European identity and the growth of ecumenical endeavour are part and parcel of the same process.’

2.5 Mid to late-twentieth century denominational fragmentation

Between 1962 and 1965 the Second Vatican Council contributed to a thaw in Protestant – Roman Catholic relationships. Baptists remained sceptical about closer relationships with Rome but increasing numbers of ordinary Baptist church members were asking genuine and theologically uncomplicated questions about the differences between the various churches and denominations. The increasingly ecumenical atmosphere meant that Union leaders were either disinclined to discourage such co-operation or, in some instances, were positively encouraging it. Ecumenical engagement began to overcome the barriers of prejudice that had frequently sustained denominational loyalty. It became conceivable that ordinary church members might switch their affiliation from one denomination to another (and, in some instances, back again).⁷⁰

2.5.1 Charismatic renewal and denominational identity

By the mid 1960s charismatic renewal dramatically accelerated ecumenical engagement of yet another kind, not concerned principally with questions of organic unity between the churches. Cardinal Suenens (1978, p.94) captured the movement’s

⁷⁰ This carried its own forms of external engagement and internal reflection. Cross (2000, p.417) notes that some Baptist leaders saw a move away from closed membership as a step towards co-operation or federation with other Free churches.

sentiments when he wrote that 'Ecumenism is not primarily a matter of negotiation between the churches but a movement of deep inner Christian renewal.'⁷¹

In *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, Bebbington (1989, p.248) judges the charismatic movement to have been a Christian version of the counter-culture of the 1960s, a religious counterpart to modernism. He characterises the 1960s as a decade in which 'The traditional, the institutional, the bureaucratic were rejected for the sake of individual self-expression and idealised community.' (1989, p.233).⁷² Brown (2001, p.176) adds that, 'the institutional structures of cultural traditionalism started to crumble.' It was a decade of rebellion.⁷³ Allied to this was a perception of affluence, as a consequence of which consumption in Britain began to outpace production.⁷⁴

Charismatic renewal offered a liberating experience of the Holy Spirit. As Michael Harper (1965, p.84), the leader of the influential Fountain Trust, described it in 1965, 'The climate of opinion was against such a movement until the sixties.' In Britain it is generally believed that what had been fringe concerns during the 1960s became pervasive during the 1970s. Bebbington (1989, p.232) notes, for example, that 'the attitudes of the counter-culture rapidly infiltrat[ed] the social mainstream.' Charismatic renewal found receptive church leaders and members in each of the traditional denominations, including the Baptist Union.⁷⁵

⁷¹ Michael Harper (1980) believed that the reason for this was the movement's pre-1975 preference for bearing testimony to charismatic experience rather than propagating the teaching of charismatic doctrine.

⁷² Callum Brown (2001, p.176) notes, for instance, the songs of the early 1960s containing frequent references to, 'you', 'love' 'happiness'. A similar trend can be seen in new Christian songbooks of the period, *Youth Praise* for example, published in 1966.

⁷³ Throughout the 1950s and 60s the growing pressure for social equality resulted in the Race Relations Acts of 1965, 1968, and 1972, the Sex Discrimination Act of 1975, and various educational reforms including the creation of the Open University in 1971. For more see Hill (1985, p.303) and Brown (2001, p.174).

⁷⁴ Compare Hill (1985, p.293) and Bebbington (1989, p233).

⁷⁵ McBain (1997, p.24) believed that the Union's leadership was probably more aware of the charismatic movement than any other denomination.

During the early 1960s Payne envisaged a theological renewal of the tradition. In drafting the Council Report for its November 1956 meeting in Bristol, Payne wrote that 'Our greatest safeguards are a constant waiting upon God, close fellowship with his people... of our own tradition...' (cited in West, 1983, p.107). His hopes for the 1961 Denominational Conference, held at Swanwick from the 23rd to 26th May, were well expressed in his description of the Anglican Church as 'robust' and 'holy'. Seven main topics emerged from the Conference, foremost of which was the need for a sustained theological treatment of interdependency within the Union. Additionally, attention was to be given to the production of educational resources for church members (West, 1983, pp.122-125). Payne's vision was principally concerned with how the Union might take the lead in renewing the Baptist tradition. However, the vision of charismatic Baptist leaders was a spiritual renewal of the denomination by renewed local churches. This difference of emphasis was not without its consequences and it continues to play a central role in discussions of local and national expressions of Baptist ecclesiology.

Nevertheless, the attention that Union leaders gave to the matter is reflected in the Union establishing a Theological Conversations Fund in 1966 with a private donation of £277.⁷⁶ The Fund sustained theological discussions relating to charismatic renewal and its impact on the Union, being wound up in 1980 when its budget had grown to £691. No minutes were kept of the discussions. The significance of this issue can be seen in the fact that the 1968 Annual Report refers to 'renewal' in two key paragraphs and carries on its front cover the images of the cross, a dove, and flames. The allusions to Pentecost were obviously intended.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ David Lovegrove (finance manager BUGB 1962-2007). Personal conversation with the author, Didcot, Oxon., 30th July 2007. See also Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland, (1967, p.45).

⁷⁷ See in the opening paragraph of the conclusion, for example, 'The word 'renewal' is very much in the air these days.' (*Ibid*, p39).

The subsequent Baptist Union report *Charismatic Renewal – a Baptist view* (1980) was unable to arrive at a coherent explanation of the renewal experience when drawing on the testimony of Baptists who were active in the charismatic movement.⁷⁸ The report offered descriptions of charismatic phenomenon as well as theological assessments, but offered no assessment of their impact upon the churches of the Baptist Union nor of its likely impact on the policy and strategy of the Union as a whole. Strangely, the authors overlooked its likely consequence for denominational life.

By 1995, Nigel Scotland could confidently assert, 'It is estimated that the life and worship of 50 per cent of Baptist Churches are influenced by renewal in the Holy Spirit.' (1995, p.10). If one interprets 'influence by renewal' in a very broad sense this is doubtless true and was seen most obviously in liturgy and hymnody.⁷⁹ Bebbington (1989, p.245) concurs, judging the Baptist churches out of all the Free Churches to have been most dramatically affected by charismatic renewal.⁸⁰ American historian, H. Leon McBeth (1987, p.520), states that the impact of charismatic renewal on the Union's churches could not be minimized with one (un-named) Association reporting that two thirds of its churches were affected. Derek Allan's Baptist Union report, *Planted to Grow* (1994), surveyed fifty-five newly established congregations. Of these, eighteen described their style of worship as charismatic and a further twenty-nine as 'relaxed'. Allan confesses that there is often some blurring of these categories when one probes the responses more carefully. Brierley (1991, p.164, Table 62 and p.168, Table 63) reports that the number of Baptist churches describing themselves as

⁷⁸ Intriguingly the Report's authors also noted that they had found no evidence for an enlivened experience of the Church Meeting. See Fiddes (1980, p.5).

⁷⁹ Nigel Wright (1994, p.10) suggested '...that very few British Baptist churches have remained untouched by the movement.'

⁸⁰ Bebbington (1989, p.245) also notes that the increasingly common practice of adding the leadership position of elder alongside those of deacon and pastor can also be dated to this period.

'charismatic' had increased by 13% between 1979 and 1989, with almost 25% describing themselves in this way in 1989.

Bebbington (1989, pp. 244,5) argued that the charismatic movement was anti-denominational and McBeth (1987, p.520) notes that it often loosened or severed ties with the Union.⁸¹ Worrall, on the other hand, believed that charismatic renewal was neutral regarding the denomination, 'help[ing] to break down denominational barriers,' rather than being anti-denominational (1988, p.290). It is possible to find evidence of charismatic renewal leading to a deepened sense of attachment to one's existing Christian tradition.⁸² This was certainly what conservative evangelical critics regarded as the heresy of Roman Catholic charismatic renewal.⁸³ Within the Baptist Union, the *Mainstream* membership contained significant numbers of charismatics, among whom Douglas McBain was a leading figure (Randall, 2005, pp.440-443).

Hocken (1986, p.139,141) suggests that the fact that the conservative evangelical Baptist Revival Fellowship contained Baptist ministers and others who were enthusiastic about charismatic renewal probably lent credence to the perception amongst the Baptist Union's leaders that renewal itself was essentially anti-denominational.⁸⁴ However, McBain (1997, p.24) considers Payne to have been aware and respectful of the Pentecostals as a result of his involvement with WCC staff such

⁸¹ Though Bebbington tends to conflate Restorationism with Renewalism as does McBeth, a tendency that Andrew Walker (1998, pp.38-42, 47) takes care to avoid in his history of Restorationism in the UK.

⁸² Despite Michael Harper's lament over the obsession of too many charismatics with charismatic renewal rather than the renewal of their own church or denomination. See Harper (1980, p.3).

⁸³ In practice this tended to deflect the implicit charismatic critique of the institutional Church that Walter Hollenweger saw as a characteristic of authentic charismatic renewal. See Hollenweger (1976, pp.9-12).

⁸⁴ A point perhaps underscored by the critique in a Baptist Revival Fellowship booklet which claimed, 'Judged by *secular* standards, Baptist church life is haphazard; judged by New Testament standards it could well be said to be over-centralized.' (Bamber *et al*, 1964, p.35)

as Lesslie Newbigin.⁸⁵ Payne would also have been familiar with the Pentecostal David du Plessis as a consequence of the latter's engagement with the WCC from 1952 onwards.⁸⁶

It is probably true that charismatic renewal *per se* was not anti-denominational but rather it remained largely neutral regarding the denomination. However, some former Baptist ministers and church members felt their denominational ties weakened to the point that they left the Baptist Union and joined other streams and networks. Randall concludes that 'the signs were that for many Baptists the future was going to be less denominationally bound than the past.'⁸⁷

2.5.2 Restorationism and denominational identity

Restorationism grew out of the charismatic movement and the Open Brethren and emphasised the recovery of the apostolic ministries (established charismatically rather than by hierarchical succession), the rejection of denominations and the spiritual submission of members to leaders in authority.⁸⁸

Whilst Renewalism tended to contribute to an organic form of unofficial ecumenism and attempted to revive existing denominational structures, Restorationism, emerging in approximately 1976, rejected this type of reformism. Walker states that Restorationism was 'motivated by the desire to go beyond denominations' (1998, p.173). Restorationism condemned denominations as a perversion of the Church and alleged that they were compromised by non-Christian members. Randall (2005, p.436) notes that the 'idea of a "denominational ceiling" beyond which further development

⁸⁵ Newbigin, a former WCC Secretary for Mission and Evangelism, was receptive to the Pentecostal contribution to missiology, taking it as one of three Christian traditions dealt with in his book, *Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (1953).

⁸⁶ du Plessis was invited to the Willingen meeting of the International Missionary Council in 1952 and joined the Evanstown Assembly of the WCC in 1954 as a staff member. See Harper (1965, pp.54-57).

⁸⁷ See Randall (2005, p.327). More generally for this period see Randall (Ibid, pp.324-328). Compare with McBain (1997).

⁸⁸ A practice that came to be referred to as 'heavy shepherding' by its critics.

was impossible in historic denominations, was a favourite Restorationist concept.’ Some Baptists seemed to have been persuaded of this and Walker (1998, p.111) adds that ‘sections of Baptist and Pentecostal denominations were keen to come under their “covering”.’⁸⁹

2.5.3 Late twentieth century evangelicalism and denominational identity

Writing in 1997, Nigel Wright observed that

...within the last thirty years there have been immense changes within evangelicalism. On the one hand, these years have seen rapid decline in Keswick-style sanctification teaching, in dispensationalism, anti-Catholicism and separatism and, on the other, marked increase in theological breadth, ecumenical commitment, the involvement of women in leadership, social awareness and political action. (1997, p.99).

Founded in 1846, the Evangelical Alliance entered a dynamic period during the 1980s and individual membership grew from 900 in the early 1980s to 56,000 by the mid 1990s. The Alliance was confident that it represented 1.1 million evangelicals across the denominations by the late 1990s (Hilborn and Randall, 2001, pp.283-288). In 1999 there were 769 Union churches in membership of the Alliance, representing 35% of all Union churches (Jackson, 1999). Recruitment was especially rapid in 1986 and 1987, years in which the Alliance was given extra profile at Spring Harvest. Baptists and Anglicans were consistently the two largest denominational groups attending Spring Harvest, each making up 30% of the annual attendances of 70,000 to 80,000 (McBain, 1997, p.135; Randall, 2005, pp.443,507; Wright, 1994, p.11). Baptist church leaders and members struggled to understand the nuances of denominational distinctions against the sense of ‘oneness in the Spirit’ experienced at Spring Harvest and similar gatherings.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ See Tidball (1987, p.30) who argues that the strength of conservative evangelicalism among Baptists was frequently underestimated. He added that ‘although currently somewhat eclipsed by Restorationism, ...it will remain a vital force when the initial exuberance of Restorationism has diminished.’

⁹⁰ Writing in his blog, Baptist Union Council member, Neil Brighton (2009, p.1) wrote that ‘As I write this, and when I’m taking part in debates at council, I’m aware that for many people in

One consequence of this expansion was an increased breadth of evangelicalism within the Alliance's membership (Bebbington, 1989, p.267).⁹¹ Grenz and Franke (2001, p.179), borrowing terminology from Anthony Cohen's *Self-Consciousness: an alternative Anthropology of Identity* (1994), described evangelical theology as a 'mosaic of local theologies, aggregated but not integrated.'⁹²

Adding to the complexity was a small group of post-evangelicals including Dave Tomlinson who captured the mood of this movement in *The Post-Evangelical* (1995). Tomlinson had founded Holy Joe's in 1990, a pub-based Christian group for 'disillusioned Christians and church misfits';⁹³ individuals who had felt the need, in many instances, to move beyond their previous experience of evangelicalism and charismatic renewal. In a follow-on volume, two contributions were penned by Baptists.⁹⁴ Although the two Baptist contributors assessed the general drift of post-evangelicalism slightly differently, it was impossible to ignore the fact that Baptists were yet again impacted by developments within, or at the margins of, the evangelical mainstream. Tomlinson's discourse captured a mood rather than laying out a theological position yet it was clearly articulating a post-denominational vision.⁹⁵ The

my own church all this would seem utterly irrelevant. What the Baptist Union says or does appears to make no difference to our local church at all. And while there is some collective consciousness that being a Baptist Church connects us to other Baptist Churches in Britain, who are also members of the BUGB, the idea of local association seems even more remote.'

⁹¹ Derek Tidball (1994, p.21) clearly found the division of evangelicalism into twelve or fourteen 'tribes' to have become wholly inadequate for describing the complexity of contemporary evangelicalism. A direct reflection of the complexity was reported by Brierley (1999, pp.8,18) when counting the increase from ninety-seven denominations in the UK in 1977 to just under two hundred and fifty by 1998.

⁹² Compare with the diversity reported by Bebbington (1989, pp.263, 269).

⁹³ Also see Tomlinson, <http://www.davetomlinson.co.uk/about/>, viewed 12th July, 2007. Tomlinson was eventually ordained in the Church of England, becoming curate, then priest, of St. Luke's, London.

⁹⁴ See Cray *et al* (1997). The Baptist contributors were the Revds. Nick Mercer and Nigel Wright. By the time of publication, Mercer had become an Anglo-Catholic priest.

⁹⁵ Tomlinson assumes that post-evangelicals will feel spiritually at home in a wide range of church traditions and denominations. Which denomination is to be preferred is little more than a matter of personal choice and a reflection of one's spiritual journey. For example, see Tomlinson (1995, pp.45-46). See Cray's reflections in response to Tomlinson, in Cray, *et al* (1997, p.7-8). Also see Mercer in Cray *et al* (1997, pp.60-61).

institutional church sustained another critique and its attempts to evangelise were viewed with suspicion by post-evangelicals as little more than membership recruitment drives.⁹⁶

Popular, or demotic, Baptist theology tends to demonstrate characteristic evangelical assumptions.⁹⁷ In retirement, E.A. Payne is reported to have been bewildered by what he saw as a 'lurch to the right' within the Union,⁹⁸ prompted in part by the response to Michael Taylor's contribution to the Baptist Assembly in 1971 that provoked a theological storm resulting in the resignation from membership of forty-six churches.⁹⁹ The growing influence of evangelicals within the Baptist Union in the face of inexorable decline in its membership are considered by Royle (1987, pp.337,8) and Bruce (2003, pp.56,7) to be typical. They argue that when a movement begins to lose its social significance it is usually the more conservative members whose numbers remain buoyant. The nominally committed are no longer convinced that the benefits (construed socially) outweigh the costs of involvement.

⁹⁶ Maggi Dawn, a member of Holy Joe's, reflects these sentiments in her contribution to Cray *et al* (1997, p.49).

⁹⁷ For a fuller discussion of evangelicalism's self-understanding see Bebbington (1989, pp.5-17), McGrath (1996, p.22), and David Wells in Noll (1994, pp.391ff). Wells' analysis describes three phases of evangelicalism: confessional, transconfessional, and charismatic. None of these prioritises the church or a denomination. Indeed, in the latter two, Wells describes evangelicals who belong 'somewhere within the entrepreneurial and organisational life of [a] righteous empire.' (*Ibid*, p.391)

⁹⁸ See McBain (1997, p.62) and Randall (2005, p.382). Payne's apparent failure of comprehension is intriguing given Bebbington's later judgement (1989, p.228) that the Baptist Union lay adjacent to the Brethren on an inter-War fundamentalist-liberal continuum. See also Briggs (2005, p.21) who argues that 'significant numbers of our members have a Brethren background.'

⁹⁹ Taylor was the then Principal of the Northern Theological College and a Baptist minister. He was invited to contribute a paper on the theme 'The incarnate presence; how much of a man was Jesus Christ?' in which he said 'I think I must stop short of saying categorically: Jesus is God, and I understand the New Testament probably stops short of it as well.' At the 1972 Baptist Assembly, a resolution disassociating it from any Christology not recognising Christ's full deity was approved by 'several thousand delegates' (Beasley-Murray, 2002, p.159) with only 46 voting against and 72 abstentions. For a fuller discussion see Beasley-Murray (2002, pp.145-165) and compare Beasley-Murray's account with Randall (2005, pp.366-382).

2.6 Interim conclusions

Covenant was the primary theological discourse informing the earliest of Baptist ecclesiologies.¹⁰⁰ Christians of other traditions all used a version of the scriptural discourse of covenant and for Baptists to have used any other form of discourse would have seemed an innovation too far. Grenz and Franke remind their readers that Christian ‘communal identity is bound up with a set of literary texts that together form canonical scripture’ (2001, p.57). Their argument that scripture provides the ‘norming norm’ for theology is seen in the way that the early Baptist communities framed their writings and confessions with reference to scriptural passages.¹⁰¹ Grenz and Franke argue (*Ibid*, p85) that this is more than a mere appropriation of biblical texts to support particular practices or theologies, ‘theological engagement involves a dialogue between the text and theological construction.’ By doing so, they make room for the theological construction that can be seen within the baptistic tradition from the seventeenth century onwards.

Where earlier covenantal communities had emphasised relationship and ‘walking together’ in their smaller gatherings, by the mid-eighteenth century increasingly larger congregations were contributing to the development of ‘civil society’. Locke’s formulations regarding the Christian congregation and the public role of the Christian religion inspired many Nonconformists. Charitable social involvement by congregations provided an obvious avenue for their public mission. The proliferation of voluntary societies was both an expression of, and a contributory factor to, a more

¹⁰⁰ Although we have noted the close relationship that exists between the respective acts of covenant-making and baptism (see above at p.25). In addition we may note that Belton (1966, p.96) describes how the Particular Baptists understood membership as a recognition of a covenant already made between God and the individual whilst their *London Confession* of 1644 indicated that baptism was also a pre-requisite for membership. There is sufficient consensus to suggest that each of these acts can be understood to contribute to the theological moment in which a local church is established and entered. Both lie in very close proximity in the process of Christian initiation into the church.

¹⁰¹ In *A Declaration of Faith of English People Remaining at Amsterdam in Holland, 1611* (Lumpkin, 1969, pp.114-123), Helwys uses 102 scriptural references to inform his twenty-seven articles. Lumpkin (*Ibid*, p.115) considers it ‘rightly judged the first English Baptist Confession.’

highly developed voluntaristic self-understanding on the part of Baptist churches. The need for greater efficiency in the management of voluntary societies, and the increasingly important social positions being taken by Baptists, influenced church governance and the organisation of membership.

Simultaneous with these developments was a nascent denominationalism, seen in the connexionalism of the General Baptists. It also emerged in the desire of Particular Baptists for closer union, particularly in the 1812 and 1813 meetings establishing the General Union of Baptist ministers and churches. The completion of Baptist Church House in 1903 provided an efficient base from which to direct the affairs of British Baptist churches.¹⁰² The radical distinctions between members and non-members, characteristic of an earlier era, would gradually become less important. The sanctions of excommunication and removal from membership were exercised with decreasing frequency and membership need no longer imply weekly church attendance. Ernest Payne's encouraging of the Union's theologians to develop a theological underpinning to church membership and regular attendance at worship and the church meeting illustrate this point.

In the period of the post-war rebuilding programmes of the 1950s and 1960s, congregational renewal emerged through a broad range of ecclesial options. Charismatic renewal, pan-evangelical movements, and ecumenical involvement all tended to accelerate the levels of denominational switching that were never absent in earlier periods, but which came to characterise the 1970s and onwards. Baptists were becoming increasingly vocal in their rejection of traditional denominational identities and loyalties by the 1980s. Many of those attending Baptist congregations had their Christian origins in non-Baptist denominations and their 'post-denominational' outlook

¹⁰² Giddens (1990, pp.55-63) might describe this development as one of the 'institutional dimensions of modernity' concerned with administrative supervision.

is likely to continue shaping popular understandings of membership and belonging into the future.¹⁰³

Grenz and Franke (*Ibid*, p.86) caution every generation of theologians that their 'constructions are always partial, incomplete, and subject to revision' and that 'the purpose of our theological construction is to return us to the texts, acknowledging that the final authority in the church is not our theologizing about the texts but the Spirit speaking through them.' This appears to have been a guiding principle for many leaders and theologians across the history of Baptist life and witness in Britain and can be seen in the diversity of theological construction that has shaped the practice of church membership. Giddens (1984, p.24) would describe both a local congregation and the Baptist Union as 'social systems' and point to the way that 'the day-to-day activity of social actors [in that social system] draws upon and reproduces structural features of wider social systems.' The essential 'time-space' continuity¹⁰⁴ that he would insist has characterised the collective experience of British Baptists nevertheless shows evidence of the influence of wider social systems. These are located contextually and historically and increase the likelihood that theological construction regarding membership practice has been an ongoing reflexive activity. Grenz and Franke locate its development within the Christian tradition, describing it as tracing a 'hermeneutical trajectory' that continues to serve as a point of reference for contemporary theological dialogue in the present context (2001, pp.93-129, esp. pp.120-29). For them (*Ibid*, p.118), 'tradition is viewed... as a living, dynamic concept in which development and growth occur.'

¹⁰³ See Briggs (2005, p.1) who notes the way that post-denominational assumptions ease the constant movement of Protestants 'from one denomination to another' although he also agrees that 'a certain mobility between traditions... has always existed.' (*Ibid*, p.2).

¹⁰⁴ See above for a discussion of Giddens' use of the categories 'time and space' (pp.20-21).

**PART TWO: CONTEMPORARY MEMBERSHIP
DISCOURSE**

Introducing Part Two

Following a discussion of the historical development of membership and belonging in Baptist churches this dissertation must now turn to addressing three contemporary discourses of membership and belonging. To do so represents an attempt to illustrate the three sources out of which theological discourse emerges. Firstly, the covenantal discourse of Baptist historians and theologians; secondly, the denominational discourse of the church constitutional documents; and, thirdly, the relational discourse of the contemporary context. These discourses are the three that are considered to be of most direct relevance and immediate concern to a local Baptist congregation, its members and those who belong to it.¹

It is essential to carefully understand the origin and utility of each of these three discourses and, in particular, the creative tension (described in this present work as a trialectic of discourses) that is generated by their alternate accounts of membership and belonging. Careful understanding is a prerequisite to arriving at a more comprehensive account of the manner in which Baptist congregations may be enabled by professional theologians and Union leaders to make a more fruitful contribution to the discursive activity out of which theologies and practices of membership and belonging may emerge.²

¹ This conviction grows out of initial reflection on the potential or actual availability of theological resources to the members and leaders of a Baptist congregation. Theological literature is, of course, available for purchase, library or personal loan, or can be downloaded from the internet. We assume from the response to a request that churches supply copies of their membership materials and packs that *at least* 40% of churches have such material available to members. Much of this material is of an apologetic nature, offering reasons why membership is beneficial. Little of the material supplied offered sustained theological reflection on the concept of church membership (see below at pp.243-259). Our convictions about relational discourse in the contemporary context are largely derived from interview data and triangulated with quantitative data from the Baptist Union's 1994 *Joined Up Thinking: Membership* pack.

² It is clear from our interview data that Baptist congregations are already engaged in discursive construction of new practices of membership and belonging (see below at pp.129-143).

To describe these discourses as providing alternate accounts is not intended to obscure their continuities. Rather, it is an attempt to lay bare their distinctive contributions to the discursive activity; to isolate that which is particular in terms of nuance, emphasis, and vocabulary.

Recent *Covenant discourse* has been of growing significance since the publication of *Bound To Love* (Fiddes, 1985). It emerges out of a theological re-appropriation of historical covenantal resources from the earliest Baptist traditions of the seventeenth century onwards. It has a special appeal because it is among the earliest forms of theological discourse that can be considered to have informed Baptist self-identity. It is a form of discourse that is primarily located in published theological literature and Baptist Union reports.

Denominational discourse is significant because the activities of General Secretaries such as Shakespeare and Payne have helped to shape the Baptist Union that exists today. Their endeavours towards collective and theologically standardised patterns of Baptist life have left the imprint of collective Baptist life upon that of the local Baptist congregation and the imprint is frequently perceived as denominationally shaped.³ It is noticeable that discussion of the nature of the Baptist Union frequently assumes its primarily 'denominational' identity and character and church members and leaders are prone to refer to the offices of the Baptist Union in Didcot as 'Headquarters'. Denominations were attacked in the 1980s and 1990s by restorationist leaders as a corruption of the true church. Baptists influenced by these leaders or by charismatic renewal are somewhat more likely to harbour anti-denominational feelings, frequently informed by post-modern suspicion of the institution.⁴ This is a concern for congregations with sizeable numbers of members who previously belonged to

³ This should be taken to imply nothing more than the reliance of some churches upon the Home Mission Fund, the adoption of standardised trust documents supplied by the Baptist Union Corporation, the presence of common forms and patterns of constitution and liturgy, and the widespread use by congregations of the Baptist Union logo on their websites and church stationary, for example.

⁴ See, for example, Murray (2004b, pp.260-274).

charismatic churches. Denominational discourse is to be found in the constitutional documents of the greater majority of local congregations, is not uncommon in the *Baptist Times*, and is present in the allusions to denomination found in a variety of Baptist Union sources (see below at pp.97-101).

Relational discourse can be found in the early Baptist covenants, where the mutualist concept of 'walking together' is the most obvious example of this particular discourse. In something of a contrast, contemporary forms of relational discourse tend to be primarily individualist. These may be contrasted with impersonal forms of Baptist membership, especially its documents and constitutions, where covenant-making is assumed to be little more than 'just signing on the dotted line.' The relational discourse is important for this dissertation because it is the dominant form of contemporary Baptist demotic discourse (see below at pp.152-155).

In order to gain a clearer understanding of these three forms of discourse in the contemporary Baptist congregation, three lines of enquiry are pursued. In chapter three a survey of covenantal discourse since the early 1980s is undertaken. Chapter four investigates denominational discourse in a sample of church membership documents solicited from three hundred congregations. Finally, in chapter five, a series of in-depth interviews with church members and regular attenders provide an opportunity to describe the contours of relational discourse with greater clarity.

The intention behind this dissertation is to move towards a post-foundational theological integration of these discourses. Grenz and Franke (2001, p.204) 'maintain that theology... finds its integration through the concept of *community*. Community forms the theme that integrates the various strands of theological reflection into a single web or mosaic.' This is important because they aim to integrate theological insights from Scripture, Christian tradition and contemporary culture. The current task is equally complicated because each of the three discourses identified here, covenantal, denominational and relational, stands in a complex relationship with Scripture, Christian (Baptist) tradition and contemporary culture.

The development of covenantal discourse from the 1980s is a revisioning of Baptist theology with explicit reference to the covenantal theology of the earliest Baptist traditions. Most of its proponents use the biblical texts to argue for open and inclusive covenantal practices, including church membership.⁵ This reflects a concern for a Baptist theology and practice that takes the missional challenges of the contemporary British context with the utmost seriousness. Denominational discourse tends to have been a response to the particular context of mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century modernity. As such it represented a self-conscious development of earlier theological impulses within the Baptist tradition that attempted to respond appropriately in Christian mission to the perceived challenges of the cultural context. The primary source for the denominational discourse of this period appears to have been the wider social and religious context. Several of its most enduring forms (The Baptist Assembly, the Baptist Union Council, the superintendency and other forms of trans-local ministry, and the *Declaration of Principle*) would all await the work of Fiddes and others to provide a theological framework making reference to the theological sources of Scripture and the Baptist tradition.⁶ Finally, the relational discourse of our interviewees is largely a reflection of the wider contemporary religious and social context (see above at pp.49-58, and below at pp.155-159). It is inattentive to, or dismissive of, Baptist tradition as a source of theology, even though it instinctively finds appealing the relational elements that are a feature of covenantal discourse. However, its use of Scripture as a source of theology is limited and attempts to

⁵ This is most evident in *Bound For Glory?* (Clarke, 2002) in which Ellis argues for the priority of the Noahic covenant with the whole of creation (*Ibid*, pp.20-33), Sparkes highlights the shadow side of exclusive or ‘closed’ covenants (*Ibid*, pp.59-72), and Carter develops the view that covenant partners are only ultimately revealed in the *eschaton* and that establishing boundary markers prior to that event is theologically premature (*Ibid*, pp.34-44).

⁶ See below at pp.73-75 for the contribution of Fiddes to the 1994 report *Nature of Assembly and the Council of the Baptist Union of Great Britain* as well as *Forms of Ministry Among Baptists* (1994) in which he discusses the theological nature of the list of accredited ministers serving the churches of the Baptist Union. In 1996 Kidd’s *Something to Declare* provided a covenantal rationale for the *Declaration of Principle*.

rationalise relational membership practice through the use of a limited range of disembedded biblical texts (see below at pp.148-149).

That each of these discourses is of relevance to the current discussion is a useful reminder of the need to overcome the dualities of social structure and social agency that Giddens was careful to avoid and which he believed was a classical sociological problem (Giddens, 1985, pp.5-34).⁷ The structural elements of contemporary Baptist life would include Baptist Union guidelines, the requirements of charity law, the institutions of the Baptist Union,⁸ Baptist ministers' manuals and hymnbooks, the *Declaration of Principle* and what is deemed the 'normal' or 'acceptable way of going about things' for a local congregation of the Baptist Union. More could be added, but the fundamental point is that structural elements might normally be expected to constrain diversity of congregational practice and encourage conformity with regard to standard practices, much as the standardised denominational practices were expected to achieve greater uniformity throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Giddens, however, confers individual and collective agency with the capacity to act knowledgeably upon the social systems of which it is a constituent part (Giddens, 1985, pp.14-16). Tucker adds that for Giddens, agency is,

...identified with reasoning and knowledge... [and] involves social learning, and applying such knowledge in particular contexts. Agency includes the capacity to act otherwise because people are "concept-bearing" creatures who can imagine different courses of action. (Tucker, 1998, p.80).

This can be applied equally to Baptist theologians as to church members. Each has a capacity to imagine courses of action running counter to the direction suggested by apparent Baptist Union, or local church, structural constraints. Such reflexive activity can be seen in the way in which categories of 'associate membership' or 'friends' of

⁷ Compare with Haralambos and Holborn (2008, pp.888-890) who point to Giddens' tendency to underestimate the insuperable constraints posed by some structural elements.

⁸ These include Baptist House, the Baptist Union Council, the Baptist Colleges, the *Baptist Times*, the Home Mission Fund, the Regional Associations, the Baptist Union Corporation, and the Baptist Superannuation Scheme. The list is illustrative and far from exhaustive.

'Anytown Baptist Church' have been included within the constitution of Baptist churches with a 'closed' membership trust document. In effect this reflects knowledgeable social actors ameliorating the impact of structural constraints.

Denominational discourse points towards structural constraints. Relational discourse emerges from the rationalising of social action by knowledgeable actors. Covenantal discourse is the reflexive activity of Baptist theologians with a keen awareness of the importance of time-space continuities. If Giddens is right that social structure is both constraining *and* enabling (Tucker, 1998, p.76) and is acted upon by social agents, then we can expect the discussion to move to a focus upon the social system of the local congregation where the dualities of structure and agency must be overcome in the attempt to move towards a more adequate theology and practice of membership throughout the Baptist Union.

Chapter 3: The covenantal discourse of contemporary Baptist membership and belonging

3.1 The twentieth century discourse of covenant before the 1970s

Baptist historians and theologians have not consistently emphasised the dominant role that the concept of covenant played in the ecclesiology of Smyth, Helwys and the early Baptist congregations. Joseph Ivimey's references to covenant are mostly limited to its use by churches other than Baptists.⁹ W.T. Whitley (1931 p.24) draws attention to Smyth's use of covenant in 1607. A.C. Underwood (1947 p.34) refers to the importance of covenant in the Gainsborough congregation and the early theology of Smyth. Robert Walton (1946 pp.81,82) describes the manner in which such a covenant would have been enacted. However, a decade later attention had switched to issues of church order and governance, and ambiguity regarding the value of covenant emerged, reflected in, for example, Henry Cook's *What Baptists Stand For*, reprinted in 1953. Cook (1953, pp.48,49) commends the covenantal theology of the pioneer congregationalist, Robert Browne, yet uses the discourse of the voluntary society to bracket his quotation from Browne.¹⁰

E.A. Payne (1952, p.37) implied that the rite of baptism had, since the days of Smyth, often taken the place of the local covenant. This view had been expressed in 1912 by Wheeler Robinson in the first version, or edition, of *Baptist Principles*¹¹ and may explain why he only devotes two pages to a discussion of covenant in a work that appears to equate Baptist principles solely with the practice of baptism by immersion

⁹ For example, he mentions it with reference to the false covenants of the Presbyterians and the Church of England and with reference to the Scottish Covenanters (Ivimey, 1814).

¹⁰ Hopeful of a spiritual renewal against the backdrop of national austerity and post-war reconstruction, Cook had produced 50,000 copies of a covenant for distribution to the Union's churches in 1947 following discussion at Baptist Council on 12th & 13th March 1946 (Randall, 2005, pp.239-240).

¹¹ The earliest version was included in C.E. Shipley's *The Baptists of Yorkshire* (1912).

(1966, 4th Ed., pp.62-63). In a similar fashion, Gilmore's *The Pattern of the Church: A Baptist View* (1963) refers to 'baptism' on forty pages yet only mentions 'covenant' twice. In Morris West's *Baptist Principles* (1960) three of the four sections refer to membership of a Baptist church. These are 'The Church', 'Baptism and Entry to the Church', and 'Baptist Church Members'. In none of these sections does West make reference to covenant.¹²

The theme of covenant is largely absent from the Baptist Union report *The Doctrine of the Church* (1948).¹³ The only reference is a statement that the church, as the 'New Israel', is based upon the new covenant (1948, p.2). The *Report of the Commission of the Associations* (West, 1964) makes no reference to covenant as a theological basis for associating. Understandably, the report's authors state that the historical origins of the various Associations are to be located in the variety of Baptist confessions from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (*Ibid*, pp.7-10). In something of a contrast, the basis of the Union is clearly stated to be its *Declaration of Principle* (*Ibid*, pp.16-17).¹⁴

Payne, Gilmore, West, and others during the mid-twentieth century appear to have privileged baptism over covenant.¹⁵ It may be that Payne's emphasis upon high churchmanship and a consequent desire for greater communion, fellowship and unity with the other Churches in England, inclined him towards avoiding a theological

¹² During this period the WCC was giving energy to a series of discussions that was initiated in 1927, gathered pace in the 1960s and 1970s and which resulted in the release of *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* in 1982. Baptists had an obvious reason to reflect more carefully on their own practice. R.E.O. White (1962) advanced the view that baptism was principally an act of the church, and thus an act of incorporation into Christ and His Body, the Church. Others who pursued this theme included Paul Clifford (1954), Beasley-Murray (1966), Stephen Winward (1969), and Morris West (1975, 3rd Ed.).

¹³ The report quotes the covenant discourse of 'walking together' but only does this where it is discussing the content of the Baptist Confession of 1677 and where the point is to demonstrate that the gathering of the local congregation is primarily an expression of the will of God.

¹⁴ A view that authors in the late twentieth century would go on to emphasise with greater clarity. See below at pp.74-75.

¹⁵ A point noted by Finamore (2002, p.84, fn.5) who recognises that although the value of covenant is increasingly accepted, 'leading Baptists have not always granted it the same significance.' He goes on to discuss Payne's oversight of covenant.

discourse that had historically moved Puritan and Separatist congregations into increasingly deeper separation from the established Church in England. Gilmore ends with a robust plea for church union that mirrors Payne's significant ecumenical commitment and participation.¹⁶ The World Council of Churches' Faith and Order Commission's *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* report sought to identify points of agreement relating to a common practice of baptism.¹⁷ It is perhaps natural that Payne and others should underplay the theological discourse of church covenant in favour of that of baptism at a time of hoped-for convergence between the Christian traditions.¹⁸ The theological exploration of baptism offered a substantially larger number of points of contact with the baptismal practices and theologies of the other Christian traditions than would an emphasis on covenant.

Nonetheless, the omission is all the more intriguing given careful attempts during the mid twentieth century to codify the formal responsibilities of church members. Publications of this type include, for example, *Church Membership: suggestions for visitors to candidates* by John Barrett (1953), *Thoughts on Church Membership* by Irene Morris (1953), Paul Clifford's *The Christian Life: A Book about Baptism and Church Membership* (1954), Stephen Winward's *Baptist Church Rules* (1960) and Morris West's *Baptist Principles* (1960). In *Baptists and Christian Initiation* Payne (1975) deals with faith, baptism, reception into membership, and communion. Nowhere does he mention covenant or covenant signing. The laying on of hands at baptism is offered as a historical precedent, clearly important to him as a historian. All the more strange that he should omit any reference to covenant.

¹⁶ Payne served as vice-chairman of the World Council of Church's Central Committee from 1954-1961. See above at pp.46-47.

¹⁷ *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* was published by the Faith and Order Commission at its plenary meeting in Lima, Peru, in 1982 as Faith and Order paper No.111, otherwise known as the 'Lima Text'.

¹⁸ Cross (2000, p.244) notes that 'it is true that the Baptist discussion of baptism has become one in which only a relatively small number of writers and Baptist churches have been involved, and the context for the overwhelming majority of them has been ecumenical in one form or another.'

A notable exception in this regard appears to be Payne's (1977, pp.1-2) later presidential address to the Baptist Assembly in Nottingham, *Ways known and to be made known*, published after his formal responsibility for the administration of the Baptist Union had ceased. The title of his address was a reference to the covenant of the congregation that had gathered in Scrooby, near Nottingham, from 1606. He describes them covenanting to walk together in 'ways known and to be made known' (1977, p.2).

3.2 Leonard Champion's vision for theological renewal of the Union

The 1970s were a decade of self-reflection for the Baptist Union. In 1969 the *Ministry Tomorrow* report submitted to the Baptist Union Council by its Commission on the Ministry spoke of confronting a crisis. Section two is scattered with words such as 'isolated', 'struggling', 'ineffective', 'maintenance-focussed', 'impoverishment', 'frustration', 'depressed', and refers to the declining quality of ministry supply. The report relied on statistical, demographic, and economic projections, and concluded that the future would require a congregation of at least three hundred to sustain a minister. Additionally, it suggested that the likely number of full-time ministers would be a maximum of four hundred.

In 1973 the BUGB report *Working Together* invoked the *Declaration of Principle* as a motivation to co-operation in mission and ministry in situations struggling to afford pastoral care. There is no discourse of covenant in the rather slim theological section of the report which is otherwise a mainly pragmatic report prepared by the Strategy Committee of the Baptist Council, presented through the Ministry Main Committee to the March 1993 Council meeting.

In 1979 the *Signs of Hope* report was received by the Assembly and Council of the Baptist Union.¹⁹ Fiddes characterises this report as 'heavy on statistical analysis but

¹⁹ For a fuller discussion see Randall (2005, p.414) who describes Douglas McBain's Assembly intervention and request for an examination of the 'reasons for... numerical and

almost totally devoid of any... serious theological work.' (Fiddes, 2000, p.8). The follow-on report, *A Call to Commitment* (1980), urged the Baptist Union to greater efforts in worship and prayer, evangelism, discipleship, service, and leadership. Subsequently, Alistair Campbell was commissioned by the Union to write *God Gives Growth* (1981), a weekly prayer guide for use by Baptists in England and Wales.

Hinting at the debate and turmoil of the 1970s, Stanley Browne's Presidential address *With Christ into the '80s* (1980, p.1) began with a reference to the critical challenge of change facing Baptist Christians. He says, 'Humanly speaking the Church has never known a more critical moment in its history: apart from God, there is no help.' (*Ibid*, p.1).

In a response to the pessimism of the 1970s, Paul Beasley-Murray, then minister of Altrincham Baptist Church, co-wrote *Turning the Tide* with Alan Wilkinson (1981). This was one of the first attempts to apply Church Growth principles to a sample of British churches.²⁰ They surveyed 330 Baptist churches and established what they felt were principles that, if properly and carefully implemented, should lead to growth in other Baptist churches.²¹

At a time when the Union appeared to be characterised by pragmatism and activism, it was challenged by Leonard Champion in 1979 to work towards the theological renewal of the vitality of the Union of Baptist churches.²² At the annual meeting of the Baptist Historical Society, Champion (1980, p.206) urged 'a clearer, more coherent and more widely accepted theology than prevails among us at present.'

spiritual decline.' This resulted eventually in the *Signs of Hope* report, the work of a group chaired by John H.Y. Briggs.

²⁰ Church growth theory was initially developed by Donald McGavran, a former missionary who became a Professor of Church Growth at Fuller Seminary. His book *Understanding Church Growth* (1970) proved controversial and was heavily criticised within the mission community for being overly pragmatic and prescriptive. See Towns, *et al* (2004, pp.7-28).

²¹ Randall (2005, pp.430-432) describes the enthusiastic response of some Baptist leaders to Church Growth methods as well as those who feared it was doing little more than meeting consumer demand whilst elevating managerial techniques above traditional pastoral practices.

²² For further details see Fiddes *et al* (2000b, pp.6-9) and Randall (2005, p.464).

The initial response to this challenge arrived as *Call to Mind* (1981) written by Keith Clements, Richard Kidd, Paul Fiddes, Roger Hayden, and Brian Haymes. Brian Haymes (1981, p.67) wrote, doubtless alluding to the activism of *A Call to Commitment*, that 'We must shift our thinking away from our over-active, self-assertion, to the God who makes covenant in Christ.' Writing against the background of authoritarian leadership in restorationist and charismatic circles, the group of five authors developed a conviction that the theological theme of covenant was an important corrective to such tendencies.

Consequently they went on to write *Bound to Love* (1985) which looked at the covenantal basis for Baptist life and mission. Fiddes had already concluded that the loss of 'covenant' as an organising concept was responsible in large measure for those situations where authority had become problematic. He wrote in the introduction (1985, p.5) that he and his co-authors were seeking to recover 'the image of the 'covenant'... which used to play such a luminous part within the Baptist tradition... which today, alas, is barely appreciated in its depth and richness, if at all.' Writing fifteen years later, Fiddes clearly felt that their work was far from widely received.

If these essays were read they prompted little discussion. Theological reflection, it seems to us, was not the way forward for most Baptists who were growing increasingly pragmatic as the denominational decline in numbers continued (Fiddes *et al*, 2000a, p.9).

However, the theme of covenant proved to be slightly more enduring than Fiddes predicted. He was able to exert theological influence through his membership of Baptist Union committees, most obviously through his chairmanship of the Doctrine and Worship Committee from 1992 until 1995. In that period he oversaw the production of *The Nature of the Assembly and the Council of the Baptist Union of Great Britain* (1994a), *Forms of Ministry among Baptists: Towards an Understanding of Spiritual Leadership* (1994b), and *Believing and Being Baptized: Baptism, so-called re-baptism, and children in the church* (1996). In this way he was instrumental in working to apply covenantal understandings to areas of Baptist life such as mission,

the list of accredited ministries, the Declaration of Principle, and trans-local expressions of Baptist life.²³

The collective contribution of the original five authors, later to be joined by Michael Quicke, Principal of Spurgeon's College, bore further fruit in *Something to Declare* (1996) and *On the Way of Trust* (1997), both written as contributions to the process of denominational reform underway from the mid 1990s onwards. Fiddes's application of covenantal theology runs like a scarlet thread through these reports. In *The Nature of Assembly* (1994a) Fiddes's Doctrine and Worship Committee developed the argument that,

'covenant', 'fellowship' (*koinonia*) and 'body' could be especially helpful in seeking to understand the theological basis of union between Christian churches in general and Baptist churches in particular.²⁴

The report recognises that Baptist congregations have historically been bound together in covenant, an initiative involving God's gift as well as human obedience (Fiddes, 1994a, pp.6-7). These realities present in the local congregation are a 'key' to the nature of the whole church. Regional and national Baptist assemblies are thus also responsible for discerning the mind of Christ and should be recognised as covenant gatherings (*Ibid*, p.10). They are considered ecclesial because they involve covenant, fellowship, and body, as well as offering evidence of at least three marks of 'ecclesiality'. They offer local churches a voice in corporate assembly decisions, require the local churches to trust decisions made by the assemblies, and involve the local churches in appointing to the office of *episkope* (or spiritual oversight) individuals who serve the regional or national assemblies (*Ibid*, pp.12-14). Whilst the report is careful to avoid equating covenant with confession, it quotes the London 1644 Confession where all congregations 'are to walk by the same rule, counsel, and help

²³ Typical of these were the Baptist Union itself, the Baptist Council, the Baptist Assembly, the European Baptist Federation and the Baptist World Alliance.

²⁴ Fiddes (1994, p.4). See also Randall (2005, p.486). The *Nature of Assembly* draws on the insights developed in *Call to Mind and Bound to Love*.

of one another, in the common faith' (*Ibid*, p.8). However, and this is a crucial insight, it states that *The Declaration of Principle* should be understood as the written form of the relational bond that binds the Union in covenant, enabling it to walk together in covenant. (*Ibid*, p16). The report reached the conclusion that the Baptist Assembly and the Baptist Council 'provide two ways of embodying covenant and finding the mind of Christ...' (*Ibid*, p.19). With *Nature of Assembly* Fiddes achieved much of what Morris West (1963, p.49) had called for in seeking greater theological clarity concerning the status of Baptist Associations and the Baptist Union.

The Forms of Ministry among Baptists (1994b) report discussed spiritual leadership in the context of accredited Baptist ministers who have 'willingly entered into a mutual commitment (or covenant) with the wider fellowship of churches.' (Fiddes, 1994b, p.9). Ordination is an act on behalf of all the churches that are in covenant relationship (*Ibid*, p.43) and accreditation is,

a form of covenant making and a solemn moment of mutual commitment between candidate and the whole community of churches, in which each promises to 'walk together' and 'watch over' the other. (*Ibid*, p.49)

The Declaration of Principle is then invoked as the basis for living and walking in fellowship together (*Ibid*, p.50).

A task group to consider questions relating to Baptist superintendency was established in 1994, with Brian Haymes as moderator.²⁵ It presented *Transforming Superintendency* to the Council in November 1996 and included five pages of theological discussion. The language of *The Nature of Assembly* is echoed; 'Each congregation is truly the church as it exhibits the features of covenant, fellowship, and body (Haymes, 1996, p.11).²⁶ The discussion of covenant is used to underpin the

²⁵ Randall (2005, pp.481-2) summarises the long list of recommendations made by this report, at the heart of which was a reflection of the concern that Superintendents should be free to exercise the pastoral care of ministers.

²⁶ Compare this with *The Nature of Assembly* (Fiddes, 1994, p.4) where Fiddes's use of covenant discourse is central to his theological justification for the Baptist Assembly.

missional nature of superintendency such that 'the invitation of the covenant is to share the life and mission of God' (*Ibid*, p.10).

The report *Believing and Being Baptised* (1996) examined the case of people attending Baptist congregations who had undergone a form of baptism in another Christian tradition. Particular references are made to some Baptist churches that had entered local or regional ecumenical covenants on the basis of an understanding of common baptism (Ellis, 1996, p.8).²⁷ In *Believers' Baptism* (1999) Fiddes argues that believing children are already members of the body of Christ. However they may not yet be members of the local congregation because they are not yet in covenant relationship with the other members. He adds (Fiddes, 1999, p.13) that,

...in our tradition this means that they do not yet have a vote in church meeting. But they have voices to which we need to listen as we think about the meaning of the life and mission of the church.

Fiddes is surely correct to emphasise the expression of 'walking together' in relationship despite the absence of formal covenanting.

Each of these reports carries a contemporary exposition and application of covenantal theology which, despite their undoubted theological sophistication, failed to convince the wide audience that Champion had possibly imagined. Writing in response to Brian Haymes' *A Question of Identity* (1986), Alistair Campbell (1987, p.7) argued that 'The question of Baptist identity does not greatly bother... most people in the churches.' He suggested that the question was being put by the centre to the fringes, by the leaders to the led, by those with most to lose from the lack of interest.

In 1990, Derek Tidball's presidential address to the Baptist Assembly *The People of the Future* makes no reference to covenant and the Union's own AIM material,

²⁷ Consideration was given in the 1970s to 'covenanting together' with other denominations. The Union rejected such proposals but a small group (including David Tennant, Michael Taylor, Michael Ball, and Paul Rowntree Clifford) responded with a statement 'We want to Covenant' in 1978 (Randall, 2005, pp.386-388). Covenant was adopted as the basis for ecumenical relationships by the '1980 Group' under the Chairmanship of Roger Nunn, which in 1981 published 500 copies of a pack 'Baptists and the Covenant' (Randall, 2005, p.444).

produced by David Coffey, especially *AIM3 Discipleship* (1991) made no reference to covenant in the sections on either 'church' or 'discipleship'.

From the hostility of Campbell's response, to the indifference of Union leaders, and the polite apathy noted by Fiddes, it may be stated that covenant as a key to Baptist identity had still some way to go before its widespread adoption by Christians who belonged to local Baptist congregations. Perhaps recognising this fact, the four College principals undertook a new initiative in 1999 in an attempt to broaden the engagement and participation of a wider circle of Baptists who were thinking and engaging theologically.

3.3 Baptists Doing Theology in Context

From the 20th-24th August 1999, forty-five Baptist pastors and church leaders gathered at Regent's Park College, Oxford for a theological consultation that created space for them to share the theological work they were doing in the context of their pastoral practice. The success of the event spurred similar gatherings in 2001 (Northern College, Manchester), 2003 (Regent's Park College), and 2007 (Scottish Baptist College, Glasgow). Following the Oxford consultation several participants established 'an informal and open grouping ...given an identity under the name 'Baptists doing Theology in Context – A Continuing Consultation'.²⁸

Fiddes's contribution to the 1999 consultation was entitled *Theology and a Baptist Way of Community* (Fiddes, 2000a, pp.19-38). Covenant was a central theme in his paper and he emphasised (*Ibid*, p.23) the 'experience of being part of a Baptist community of worship and mission rather than making a list of Baptist Principles.' The importance of the covenant theme for Baptists engaged in contextual theology is to be seen in the production of *Bound for Glory* (2002) following papers presented at the 2001 consultation in Manchester. The title is a direct reference to *Bound to Love* and

²⁸ Compare Fiddes *et al* (2000a, p.v) with the fuller discussion in the same work of the Baptists Doing Theology in Context initiative, especially pp.6-18.

reflects the work of the continuing consultation group.²⁹ Their contributions took covenant as the organising theme for an understanding of God's Trinitarian life, his relationship to creation, the visible boundaries of God's active presence in community, God's ultimate cosmological purposes, inclusivity, and ecclesiology.³⁰ Finamore (2002, p.84, n.5) argues that the growing acceptance of the covenantal basis for Baptist ecclesiology is a direct consequence of Paul Fiddes's contributions to *Bound to Love*, the publication of *Bound for Glory*, and initiatives such as *Covenant 21*.³¹ Fiddes (2000a, p.32) underscores his conviction concerning this vital, though occasionally absent, theological theme for Baptists in the following way,

'We do have a theological theme that was of central importance for several centuries, and is gradually being recovered in our day. I mean the idea of covenant... which took particular form in our own church life.... [and which] stands at the beginning of our story.'

Paul Martin's contribution to the 1999 consultation *The Child and the Church*³² drew on *Believing and Being Baptised* in its attempt to address the distinction made by covenant ecclesiology between members and non-members (Martin, 2000, p.48). In the attempt to find a more integrated place within the local congregation for children, Martin suggests that the active disciples in any given context provide a covenantal 'centre of gravity' for the body rather than constituting its outline (Ibid, p.56). This emphasis on an open and inclusive understanding of covenant is a characteristic that Martin shares with the authors of *Bound to Love* and *Bound to Glory*.

Sean Winter presented a paper at the 1999 consultation and has been present at the consultations that followed. His annual Whitley Lecture in 2007, *More Light and Truth? Biblical Interpretation in Covenantal Perspective*, acknowledges the influence of

²⁹ Members of this group were Anthony Clarke, Marcus Bull, Stephen Finamore, Tim Carter, Robert Ellis, Vivienne, Lassetter, and Graham Sparkes.

³⁰ Compare with Haymes *et al* (2008, p.47).

³¹ In similar fashion, Stephen Holmes' editorial for *Theology in Context* claims that *Reflections on the Water*, edited by Fiddes, had a significant influence upon those contributing to the 1999 Baptists Doing Theology in Context consultation. See Holmes (2000, p.3).

³² Published as Martin, P., (2000), 'Towards a Baptist Ecclesiology Inclusive of Children' in Holmes, S. (Ed), *Theology in Context*, 1, Winter, pp.47-59.

Fiddes upon his developing understanding of covenantal hermeneutic in the field of biblical interpretation (Winter, 2007, p.16).

3.4 The impetus of the denominational reforms in the 1990s

The joint induction in 1991 of David Coffey as General Secretary and Keith Jones as Deputy General Secretary of the Baptist Union added impetus to the search for imaginative and effective ways of being Baptist in the late twentieth century. They implemented a series of Listening Days in 1991 and 1995 to allow congregations to contribute to the decision-making processes of the Baptist Union's Council and Assembly. An early outcome of the 1991 Listening Days was the report *A Ten Year Plan Towards 2000*. This included the proposal for the creation of a Doctrine and Worship Committee as a contribution towards developing a distinctive Baptist identity. The objectives of this section of the report included an examination of 'whether the basis for a clearer identity should be the formulation of a well defined covenant or confession of faith.' (A Ten Year Plan, 1992, p.6)

Although David Coffey's presidential address to the Baptist Assembly in 1986 made no reference to covenant, within the early years of his becoming General Secretary there is evidence that he was more committed to the theological value of covenant. A popular treatment of core Baptist themes was published in 1993 as a pack of ten leaflets collectively titled *Baptist Basics*.³³ The series included contributions on 'Church Membership' by Coffey and 'The Church Meeting' in which John Weaver references covenant. Coffey offered seven reasons for becoming a church member, the first being that 'It signifies a covenant relationship with God' and the second that 'it symbolises a covenant relationship with God's people locally.' Smyth's emphasis on 'walking together' is referred to by Coffey (1993b, p.2).

In 1994 Coffey referred back to the 1991 Listening Days as the point at which a proper theological examination of these issues was requested (Fiddes, 1994a, p.2). Following

the 1995 Listening days a Denominational Consultation was initiated by Coffey. Held in September 1996, a published summary of responses to the consultation highlighted a concern for covenant relationship on behalf of four Associations, three churches, and one individual (Coffey and Jones, 1996, pp.6-7). In November 1997, Tony Peck, convenor of the Denominational Consultation Reference Group, reported to Council that its interim statement reaffirmed a Baptist way of being the church, of which the first recommendation was based on a covenant rooted in trust (Randall, 2005, p.517). By 2004 Coffey was increasingly enthusiastic about the value of covenantal theology for understanding the life and structures of the Union. In *Translocal Ministry* (Murray *et al*, 2004, p.iv) Coffey's foreword notes that 'in the past decade a series of commitments have been symbolised by various titles...' He includes *Covenant 21* among the four titles he lists.

Something to Declare (1996) addressed criticisms of the Denominational Consultation proposals regarding covenant as a suitable basis for the Union. It is an exposition of the Baptist Union's *Declaration of Principle* by the four Baptist college principals. They assert that covenant is more than a vertical relationship and that confession was the context for the covenant rather than its content. They considered *The Declaration of Principle* to be an adequate covenantal basis for the Union with Jesus at the centre of a broad covenant of Baptists, adding that 'the text is secondary to the relationship' (Kidd, 1996, p.16). Writing in the *Baptist Times*, Nigel Wright pressed their exposition, arguing that the boundaries of broad diversity

if true to the Declaration, had to be within the boundaries of commitment to the deity of Christ, the Trinity, the absolute authority of Christ, scriptural authority, the doctrine of baptism, and conversion. (Randall, 2005, pp.498-499).³⁴

³³ The first *Baptist Basics* series of leaflets had originally been published in 1982.

³⁴ Although Wright (2005, p.252) also recognised the open-ended and future-oriented nature of covenanting, 'To be true to the tradition is to be oriented toward the future and to be aware of a pilgrimage in which we will both learn new ways and adapt old ways to the new circumstances in which we live.'

Further hesitations regarding the use of covenantal language to describe relationships between Baptist churches were raised in the report *Relating and Resourcing: The Report of the Task Group on Associating* that was presented to Council in 1998 (Wright, 1998, p.4). A new quality of relationships was urged against the backdrop of a growing post-denominational identity (*Ibid*, p.5) and the task group anticipated a millennial renewal of the commitment to Union. In 'Recommendation 6' (*Ibid*, p.14) the report calls, despite its hesitations about covenantal language, for preparation towards a covenant timed to coincide with the new millennium.

A renewal of covenant to mark the millennium had actually been proposed by Roger Hayden several years earlier at the November 1995 Council.³⁵ He went on to convene the Covenant Task group, meeting five times, that presented its *Report of the Covenant Task Group*, to Council in 1999.³⁶ The report affirmed the Declaration of Principle as the covenantal basis for the Union of churches (Hayden, 1999, p.36). It suggested that the new beginnings in association adopted after the Denominational Consultation provided a satisfactory and compelling rationale for the churches to covenant together. An 'Act of covenanting' was prepared (including a commitment to the Five Core Values) that included materials for a covenant service to be used in local congregations, associations, and at the 2001 Assembly. Biblical and theological explorations were included in the report (*Ibid*, pp34-36) with the authors claiming that the 'double-sidedness of covenant has entered deeply into Baptist thought.' (*Ibid*, p.35). In the section dealing with the relationship between confession and covenant, the report states that 'The covenant was essentially relational' (*Ibid*, p.36), echoing the emphases of *Something to Declare*. After receiving the report of the Covenant Task Group in 2000, the Baptist Union published *Covenant 21* (2000) intended for use by all

³⁵ See *Report of the Covenant Task Group* (Hayden, 1999, p.25). Compare with Randall (2005, p.502). Writing in *Bound to Love*, Roger Hayden (1985, p.24) had re-affirmed the centrality of covenant before going on to lament its partial displacement, especially during the 1970s and 80s, by neo-pentecostal and charismatic renewal movements in Britain.

its churches as a way to covenant together during New Year services in 2001. This Union-wide attempt to popularise covenant ecclesiology prompted Fiddes and his co-authors to write,

It is in the last couple of years that the theme of covenant has once again stirred the Baptist interest and imagination, so that the turn of the century is being marked by a 'Millennium Covenant' (Fiddes et al, 2000b, p.9).

However, Fiddes's obvious joy on this occasion may not have been reciprocated by Hayden. He felt that there had been a subtle shift in the use of covenantal discourse and recorded this in a submission to the Baptist Union's Roundtable on Membership: 'under pressure from a post-modern view of society, some Baptists are moving away from an exclusive to an inclusive view of covenant.'³⁷ He refers specifically to authors writing in *Something to Declare* (1996) and *Bound for Glory* (2002).³⁸ In part these developments reflected a desire to seek a greater diversity of ways of belonging to a local Baptist congregation also evident in Christopher Ellis (1996), Paul Martin (2000), Steve Finamore (2002), and Nigel Wright (2002).

For some contributors to the Membership Roundtable, a search for greater diversity of belonging to a Baptist congregation was also an important part of the process. A contemporary and sustained treatment of the themes of membership and how one may belong to a Baptist congregation had been long overdue. In the *Joined Up Thinking: Membership* pack, the notion of covenant membership was explored with reference to four dimensions of membership in the attempt to emphasise the priority of love (Blyth, 2004, section 2, pp.5-6). It may be true, as one critic has pointed out, that the Membership Roundtable group failed to address the contextual issues with a

³⁶ An amended version of the report was received at the March 2000 council to allow for the substitution of the Apostles' Creed for the Nicene Creed. Also included was a new Scriptural Affirmation that catered to churches that might scruple over reciting a historic creed.

³⁷ Letter to Peter Clarke, 25th June 2002. See also Hayden (2004, p.12).

³⁸ Doubtless he could have also pointed to authors including Paul Fiddes (1999a), the response of the Children's Working Group to *Believing and being Baptised* (1996), Paul Martin (2000), Tim Carter (2002), Rob Ellis (2002) and the report of the *Membership* findings prepared by

sufficiently robust theological response.³⁹ However, the authors of *Membership* clearly took the view that the theological work was necessarily to be done in local congregations and included four study sheets for this purpose.

Published by the Baptist Union in 2004, *Translocal Ministry* does not make extensive reference to earlier covenantal reflections on the life and mission of the churches together in the Union. However, at least one of the contributors, John Weaver (2004, pp.44-54) adopts covenant and *missio Dei* as key theological themes in his discussion. He writes that 'at the heart of renewing relationships is covenant, and at the heart of all our reforms, whatever shape they take, is the calling to be a missionary church committed to the *missio Dei*.' (*Ibid*, p.54). Weaver cites Paul Fiddes's development of the notion of covenant fellowship (p.49), as well as of *episkope* in the context of covenant fellowship (*Ibid*, pp.52, 54).

3.5 Covenantal discourse in Baptist liturgy

In *Gathering: A Theology and Spirituality of Worship in Free Church Tradition*, Christopher Ellis (2004, pp.90-91) pointed to the significance of *Covenant 21* to a wider appreciation of the value of covenant within the Union and echoed Fiddes's use of 'covenant, fellowship, and body' when making reference to the covenant nature of Baptist church life being an 'expression of the *koinonia* of the Holy Spirit' (Ellis, 2004, p.242).⁴⁰ The lack of wide appreciation that Ellis implies was absent prior to *Covenant 21* may be evidenced from a selection of manuals for the conduct of public worship from the twentieth century. Bonner's manual for ministers, *Services for Public Worship* (1900), makes no reference to covenant at any point. *The Call to Worship: A Book of*

Ruth Gouldbourne for the Baptists Doing Theology in Context consultation in 2003 and later published in the *Membership* pack.

³⁹ This author sat on the Roundtable for three years. Contextual, historical, practical, and legal factors tended to dominate the discussion. The lack of a theological articulation was expressed most strongly during the Roundtable discussions by the Revd Dr. Roger Hayden.

⁴⁰ Ellis joined the four college principals hosting the Baptists Doing Theology in Context consultation on his appointment as principal of Bristol Baptist College in 2000.

Services was first published in 1930 and in the 1956 4th edition its author, D.T. Patterson, claimed that he (1956, p.xi) had received 'many useful suggestions from E.A. Payne'. Despite this there is no reference to covenant, no order of service for welcoming new members, and the order of service for the Communion service uses the language of 'testament' in preference to 'covenant'. In *Order and Prayers for Church Worship* (Payne and Winward, 1960) covenant is only mentioned with reference to the possible signing of the church covenant by new members. The later *Praise God* (Gilmore, Smalley, Walker, 1980) has a smaller selection of resources for the conduct of public worship and makes no reference to covenant at all.

In *Patterns and Prayers for Christian Worship* (1991) the reception of a new church member is accompanied by the following liturgy;

We are now to receive [name] into the membership of [name] Baptist Church. We enter into a covenant with them to share with each other in building up the Church to the glory of God, working alongside one another in his service in the world, and encouraging one another in the love of God (1991, p104).

No form of a covenant is offered, and the only other reference to covenant is to be found in the celebration of the Lord's Supper where the reference is to the wine as representative of the 'blood of the Covenant' (*Ibid*, p.79).

Gathering for Worship: Patterns and Prayers for the Community of Disciples (Blyth and Ellis, 2005) was published by the Baptist Union for the centenary anniversary of the Baptist World Alliance held in Birmingham. A keen sensitivity to covenantal theology is demonstrated in their discussion of the Lord's Supper (2005, pp.12-13), in the reception into membership of an individual (*Ibid*, pp.74-83) and in an innovative section titled 'Covenanting Together' (*Ibid*, pp.94-116). The latter section was an introduction not seen in the previous ministers' service book published in 1991, *Patterns and Prayers*, and featured an abridged version of the covenant used in *Covenant 21* as well as a covenant to be used on the establishing of a new Baptist congregation. The latter makes reference to *Five Core Values* (*Ibid*, p.110) and makes a direct reference to early Baptist covenants in the following form:

We come this day to covenant with you
and with our companions in discipleship
to watch over each other in love
and to walk together
in ways known and still to be made known. (Ellis and Blyth, 2005, p.108).

Equally importantly, the congregation is envisaged as having a considerable role in the act of covenant making. Elsewhere, Ellis applied covenantal theology to the sermon suggesting that the act of preaching diminishes the value of covenantal ecclesiology where the 'congregation appears as a crowd rather than a covenanted community' (Ellis, 2004, p.147).⁴¹

3.6 Covenantal discourse online: Baptist blogs and websites

Andy Goodliff's blog is a fairly reliable guide to other bloggers who identify themselves as Baptist. He lists forty-one Baptist bloggers (http://andygoodliff.typepad.com/my_weblog/2007/03/az_of_uk_baptis.html). Of these, eight mentioned 'covenant' from the period of their beginning their blog up until early 2009. Stephen Holmes cautioned against the adoption of confessions in the attempt to clarify common understandings, favouring instead the adoption of a covenant.⁴² Simon Jones's blog carried fourteen posts relating to covenant, including one describing the signing of a covenant during Café Church at which they '...ended by signing a covenant, committing ourselves to being family to one another, helping each other walk in newness of life (the words came from *Gathering for Worship*).' Other posts emphasised the value of covenant in sustaining community and faith, with several developing the discussion of the place of

⁴¹ Certainly not the case in earlier Baptists congregations, including Maze Pond, where the church meeting played a significant role in determining the content of Sunday worship, sometimes including the choice of sermon topic. For example, the Maze Pond church meeting minutes record on the 19th December 1785 that the pastor was asked to read Scripture at the start of worship. On the 23rd April 1753 the church meeting approved the singing of hymns after the sermon.

⁴² Holmes (2009), 'Yet more on being confessional' at <http://shoredfragments.wordpress.com>, posted 10th February 2009. Viewed 28th March 2009.

children within a covenant community. One explored the use of 'Covenant' as a replacement for 'Union'.⁴³

An internet search of UK Baptist websites revealed eight examples of covenants that were clearly felt to be sufficiently significant for inclusion on the public website of the church.⁴⁴ Boulton Lane Baptist Church had drafted its own covenant around the pattern of *Five Core Values*. The version posted by Wycliffe Baptist Church had been written by the youth of the church as a youth covenant, drafted in highly contemporary language. The websites of Woodstock Road and Trinity, Dundee, featured covenants that were more reminiscent of the language of the list of responsibilities found in Winward's *Baptist Church Rules*.⁴⁵ The members of Westbury-on-Trym renew their covenant, drafted in 1947, at an annual service close to the date of the church anniversary. The website of Alders' Brook Baptist Church featured a sermon that the minister had preached during March 2009 about the potential of covenant.⁴⁶

3.7 'A more widely accepted theology?' Some preliminary conclusions

The discussion of covenantal theology, and its application to the contemporary practice of church membership, has been primarily championed by a relatively small, though influential, number of Baptist theologians and denominational leaders with an interest in Baptist theological identity. Their influence has arguably been felt most keenly in the variety of reports and publications prepared for the Baptist Union Council

⁴³ Jones (2007), 'Café thoughts on baptism as relocation' at <http://bromleyboy.blogspot.com>, posted 19th June, 2007. Viewed 28th March 2009.

⁴⁴ These were the Baptist churches at Westbury-on-Trym www.westburybaptist.org.uk/covenant.htm, Blackmore (Essex) www.blackmorebaptist.com/ourcovenantfor2007.htm, Llanishen www.llanishenbaptist.org.uk/6dd11d60.htm, Woodstock Road (Oxford) www.wrbc.org.uk/beliefs/covenant.aspx, Wycliffe (Reading) www.wycliffe-church.org.uk/interact/forum.html?func=view&catid=9&id=807, Trinity (Dundee) www.tbcdundee.org.uk/CovenantDoc.html, Rushmere www.rushmerebaptist.org.uk/downloads/church_membership.pdf, and Boulton Lane www.hsbaptists.org.uk/Sermons/Mar0109.pdf. All viewed 28th March 2009.

⁴⁵ See above at p.43 and below at p.96 for a fuller discussion of the importance of this document to the membership documents of the churches of the Baptist Union.

during the 1990s, through the Baptists Doing Theology in Context consultations and its related publications, and in the production of new worship resources. Most notable have been the widely used *Covenant 21* materials and *Gathering for Worship*.

The relational value of covenanting was apparent for some Baptists involved in charismatic renewal. At a meeting held at Ansdell Baptist Church in July 1981, a number of ministers influenced by the charismatic movement adopted a covenant relationship as the basis for their pastoral care of one another (Randall, 2005, p.435). Writing from a similar background, Douglas McBain's *Fire over the Waters* urges deeper associating through covenant, against a lamentable loss of denominational identity (McBain, 1999, pp.5,11). Rob Warner's covenantal and relational contributions to the Baptist Union's membership roundtable reflected his experience of being involved in charismatic renewal.⁴⁷ Beasley-Murray's revision of *Radical Believers* for the Baptist Union in 2006 is significant for its development of covenantal theology; 'First and foremost church membership is about covenant relationships.' (Beasley-Murray, 2006, p.65)⁴⁸

However, these achievements must be put into context. At the outset of the 1980s, Champion's assessment that theological activity in Baptist circles was in a depressingly parlous state was possibly a little exaggerated, yet his call for a more coherent and widely accepted theology seems, nevertheless, to have been timely. Certainly there was a lack of adequate attention to covenantal theology. In 1979, Morris West's presidential address to the Baptist Assembly, *For what we have received... A communication to Baptists*, highlighted several issues of contemporary relevance for Baptists. He included believers' baptism and ecumenism yet made no

⁴⁶ www.aldersbrookbaptist.org.uk/sermonnotes.htm. Viewed 28th March 2009.

⁴⁷ See also, Warner (2001, p.17), where he writes about committed relationships in terms of the post-modern preference for projects over organisations, relationships over institutions, and short-term enthusiasms over lifelong commitment, and adds that 'Covenant means a commitment to keep on loving one another.'

reference to covenant (1979, p.6). Stanley Browne's 1980 presidential address *With Christ into the 80s: Baptist Christians Face the Challenge of Change* has a section dealing with Baptist heritage where ecumenism, the Scriptures, Christ, prayer, repentance, and church members are discussed (1980, pp.4-9). Browne also fails to mention covenant. It is probably true that Clements, Fiddes, Kidd, Haymes, and Hayden felt that they had a lot of ground to make up if theological renewal was to make a Union-wide impact.

Fiddes's pessimistic conclusions about how widely their work was received during the 1980s have already been noted above.⁴⁹ However, his assessment of the progress made during the 1990s was rather more optimistic.⁵⁰ Yet, despite his optimism, when one reads the letters from *Baptist Times* readers dealing with membership, baptism, and communion during the 1990s, very few indeed refer to concepts of covenant.⁵¹ The annual Whitley Lectures hold an important place for Baptist theologians. Each Whitley Lecturer is invited to contribute what is felt to be an important theological perspective for contemporary Baptist theology. Ruth Gouldbourne's 1997-8 Lecture *Reinventing the Wheel: Women and Ministry in English Baptist Life* discusses the involvement of women in the governance of the early Separatist and Anabaptist congregations. Gouldbourne doesn't consider what difference it made to the involvement of women that these congregations were primarily covenantal. In 1999, Keith Jones' Whitley Lecture *A Shared Meal and a Common Table: Some Reflections*

⁴⁸ He also offers covenants for the small group, local church, and the Baptist Union. His covenant is framed with reference to affirmation, availability, prayer, openness, sensitivity, honesty, confidentiality and accountability See Beasley-Murray (2006, pp.73-75).

⁴⁹ See above at p.66 where Fiddes judges the theological work that he and his four co-authors to have contributed towards renewal of the Union was received to less acclaim than was the more pragmatic work of others.

⁵⁰ See above at p.71 and p.75. Fiddes talks of the gradual acceptance of covenant theology and of a stirring of the Baptist imagination following its publication of *Covenant 21*.

⁵¹ Between the 10th March and 23rd June 1994, the *Baptist Times* carried a total of eighteen articles and letters discussing the question of whether children should be able to receive communion. The only (brief) mention of covenant theology was made by Anne Dunkley (1994, p.13), then the convenor of the Baptist Union's Children's Working Group, who referred to children and the covenant community.

on the Lord's Supper and Baptists made no reference to covenant, focussing instead on the sacramental nature of the meal. Indeed, by the mid 2000s Jones was consistent in his use of the discourse of convictional community over that of covenantal community, although the former does not exclude the latter, perhaps offering it a particular nuance.⁵²

In the 1990-2000 Whitley Lecture, Anne Dunkley's *Seen and Heard: Reflections on Children and Baptist Tradition* referred to the place of Jewish children in the Old Testament covenants (Dunkley, 1999, pp.8-9) and made historical reference to John Smyth's views of children and the covenant (*Ibid*, p.19). Her own discussion of children in the church community does not deal, however, with the ways that the shape of the community might be formed by covenantal theology.

Neither Steve Finamore (Finamore, 2000) nor Stephen Holmes (Holmes, 2003) made reference to covenant in their Whitley Lectures.⁵³

Andrew Rollinson (*Liberating Ecclesiology: Setting the church free to live out its missionary nature*) and Sean Winter (*More Light and Truth: Biblical Interpretation in Covenantal Perspective*), Whitley lecturers in 2005 and 2007 respectively, are notable for their use of covenantal theology. Rollinson advanced a thoroughly covenantal

⁵² For this he is reliant on James McClendon. See Jones (2007, pp.7-24), especially p.20 where he discusses 'porous worship' at the heart of which there is a 'core of covenanted believers'. Jones also explains that covenantal is 'The classic... phrase of the Particular Baptists and revived...by Paul Fiddes *et al*,... speaking about how individuals are bound together in a covenant with Christ and with each other. The covenant might be based around an act (Baptism) and have certain specific requirements to which people should subscribe. [including] terms of membership/duties of membership /attendance at meetings, etc.' whilst convictional 'is a more recent term arising... out of the renewed interest in the gathering/ pneumatic/ believers churches [by] McClendon (who perhaps developed the phrase), [John H.] Yoder and narrative theology.... the accent is on discerning virtues and practices (McIntyre) which a particular community adopts and lives by, so it is less propositional and more experiential. Naturally, when used in gathering/baptistic settings there can be overlap - a covenanted community might also be convictional, but convictional communities will these days no doubt be more intentional... in their approach than the classic covenanted communities.' (Jones, 14th April 2009, personal email)

⁵³ Holmes' *Tradition and Renewal in Baptist Life* (2003) identifies several streams of renewal that have influence Baptist tradition. Among these he counts charismatic, retreat, Celtic, and ecumenical forms of renewal. He does not discuss the influence of a renewed attention to covenantal theology.

ecclesiology yet still felt it necessary to concede that most Baptists remained voluntaristic in their ecclesiology rather than covenantal, largely because of the widespread preference for ecclesiological discourse centred on “Christian family’ and ‘Body of Christ’ images (2005, p.20). Winter concludes that diversity of biblical interpretation, and areas of convergence, are best held together within relationships of trust which are sustained in covenant relationship (2007, pp.37,8).

On the 13th March 1999, the Baptist Union hosted a ‘National Baptist Leaders’ Day’ at Wembley Arena for over two thousand church leaders. In the foreword to the Programme, the current Baptist Union President, Douglas McBain, spoke of ‘Core Values’, being a ‘gospel people’, and the ‘Listening Days’ (1999, p.i). The programme outlined the direction that the future might take, including the renewal of the local church, a commitment to *Five Core Values*, a commitment to renewing relationships and clustering, the quality care of ministers and churches, and partnership in mission (*Ibid*, 1999, pp.3-5). The central act of worship was a liturgical dance, accompanied by a PowerPoint sequence, which re-emphasised the baptismal moment and its related promises. None of the supporting materials and none of the presentations on the day made reference to the notion of covenanting, even to the development of the *Covenant 21* materials.

Five Core Values (1998) was published by the Baptist Union after a Denominational Consultation task group had been requested to draw up a statement of ‘Core Values’ reflecting the concerns of the consultation for the poor, marginalised and discriminated against (Blyth, 1998, p.4). Blyth’s contribution to *Translocal Ministry* in 2004 suggests that *Five Core Values* can be understood covenantally, and Blyth and Ellis incorporated them into their covenant for a new congregation (2005, pp.107-110). The lack of reference to covenant in *Five Core Values* is intriguing given their later use within a covenantal liturgy. Possibly the covenantal value of *Five Core Values* was not fully recognised at the outset. It is possible to argue that *Five Core Values* stands in a

close relationship to covenantal forms of ‘walking together’ and ‘watching over one another’. In this sense they reflect the convictional emphasis of Jones.⁵⁴

It is difficult to comment with precision on the use of covenantal theology in the Baptist demotic discourse of membership and belonging. The *Baptist Times* letters pages seem to indicate that it is not widespread, the majority of contemporary Baptist blogs fail to mention covenant, and only a tiny fraction of Baptist church websites carry a copy of their covenant document. For Baptists without formal theological education the language of covenant is likely to sound archaic, even unfathomable. It is the contention of this thesis that covenantal theology is not used widely in the Baptist demotic discourse. Of course, the absence of more extensive evidence need not be taken as indicative of a groundswell of popular disaffection for covenant discourse. It simply urges a more careful search for the forms of demotic discourse being used for membership and belonging.

David Coffey retired as the General Secretary of the Baptist Union in July 2006. He delivered the 2006 Beasley-Murray Lecture with the title *A Missionary Union – past, present and future perspectives*. In that lecture he singled out *Five Core Values* as having made a significant contribution to the life and witness of the Baptist Union. He makes no claims to a rediscovery of covenantal theology having had a similar impact, and covenant is not prominent in his lecture, despite it having been a central concern of Baptist theologians during the latter half of his period in office. Coffey questions whether covenant *per se* is to be seen as the ‘big idea’, feeling it may be more appropriate to see it as having provided the theological rationale necessary for implementing the wider reforms, including the adoption of *Five Core Values*, the reforms of the Association and Council, and the reform of the Baptist Superintendency (personal conversation, 8th August 2006). His omission seems illustrative of the fact

⁵⁴ See above at p.89, especially fn.52. This allows us to see covenant-making as the commitment to walking together, the *Declaration of Principle* as the basis for walking together, and *Five Core Values* as the outcome (or fruit) of walking together. See below at p.184.

that covenantal theology has still some way to go before it can claim to command widespread acceptance.

Chapter Four: The denominational discourse of contemporary Baptist membership and belonging

4.1 'Denomination' in sociological discourse

Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923) worked closely with Max Weber to develop an organisational typology that related the social organisation of the church to its religious belief and practice, published in 1931 as *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*. He described three ideal types: Church, Sect, and Mysticism. Of these the medieval Catholic Church represented the ideal Church type, the aggressive sects of the Cromwellian period represented the Sect type, and seventeenth and eighteenth century Lutheranism represented the Mysticism type.¹

The seventeenth and eighteenth century Baptists intrigued Troeltsch because they rejected the exclusivism of both the Church-type and the Sect-type. As voluntary groups they maintained a church-like relation to society, contributing to its moral tone. He wrote (1931, p.708) that 'Today it is more accurate to speak of Baptist Free Churches than of Baptist 'Sects'.' The Baptists were 'Church' rather than 'Sect' because Troeltsch recognised in them a combination of both churchly and sectarian tendencies that he did not distinguish conceptually as a special type but which he analyzed under the rubrics of neo-Calvinism, sects turned middle class, and ascetic Protestantism (Steeman, 1975, p.195).² Steeman argues that these ideal types were only used by Troeltsch to describe certain historical periods and that it is important to

¹ For a fuller discussion see Steeman (1975, pp.181-204). See also Roberts (1997, pp.704-705). Compare with Niebuhr (1929) who summarises Troeltsch and Weber's view of the Church type as inclusivist, universalist, socially obligated, and composed as a natural social group (largely of family and nation) into which individuals are born. In comparison the Sect type was exclusivist, ethically formed, and a voluntary association which individuals choose to join.

² Troeltsch considered the Methodists, Moravians, and Quakers to have followed the trajectory of the Baptists (1931, pp.723-724, 978, footnote 497).

recognise that Christianity is finding new forms of social organization (*Ibid*, pp.202-203).³

H. Richard Niebuhr relied on Troeltsch in his 1929 work, *Social Sources of Denominationalism*. Niebuhr argued that the frontier development of American churches, where sectarian groups flourished among the socially marginalised people, was key to understanding the social cause of denominationalism in the USA. Many eventually sought social acceptance and left behind sectarian for denominational forms of the Church-type.⁴ Niebuhr could talk of the denominational renewal of the Church-type but also believed that to a large extent the new denominations had failed to overcome a mentality of caste.⁵ He wrote (1929, p.25) that the denominations 'are emblems, therefore, of the victory of the world over the church, of the secularization of Christianity, of the church's sanction of that divisiveness which the church's gospel condemns.'

Following Troeltsch, Steve Bruce (1996, p.4) advanced the view that denomination was the classic religious form of the twentieth century. In contrast, Richey (1977, p.13) argued that 'The denomination... is a nineteenth-century artefact. To live with it and to understand it in the twentieth century requires confronting it as a legacy of the nineteenth century.' He continues by pointing to crucial twentieth century developments in the denomination including bureaucratisation and the making of necessary adjustments to enable institutionalized ecumenical cooperation. Richey's

³ This criticism may apply to Underwood's rather enthusiastic preference of 'sect-type' when discussing Troeltsch. Underwood does not directly address Troeltsch's own preference for 'Baptist Free Churches' and suggests that the 'sect-type' defines the 'essential, fundamental ideas of Christianity' (Underwood, 1947, p.19). Underwood may simply be idealising this form of Christian gathering rather than being too concerned with the label applied to it, particularly given his brief discussion of four alternatives to 'sect-type', namely group-type, voluntary, gathered, and confessional (*Ibid*, p.18).

⁴ Niebuhr is to be distinguished from Troeltsch in that he generally uses 'denomination' in place of Troeltsch's 'Free church'. These are the same phenomenon.

⁵ Niebuhr believed that the horizontal class-based divisions from the European old world took on vertical fault lines in the American new world. In that context, the fault lines were geographical (north-south and east-west), underlying political and economic differences, and ethnic (between black and white North Americans and heterogeneous immigrants).

analysis is valuable for its attention to denominational structure and theology. He refers to the work of Harrison⁶ by making the observation (*Ibid*, p.107) that in

...most denominations the national structures have not been adequately integrated with the formal polity and comprehended in the normal ecclesiology. The dilemma is most acute within the denominations which share the congregational heritage.

Roozen and Nieman (2005, pp.648-651) suggest that the alleged lack of ecclesiological attention to national structures is not the real issue. They argue that denominations should be assessed on the basis of what they do rather than what they allegedly are. The denomination's role is to preserve and generate 'identity narratives', including the telling of uncomfortable narratives of failure, restoring previously marginalised minority narratives, and locating its own narratives in an ecumenical economy. However, in diagnosing the denominational challenge of the late twentieth century, Bacher and Innskeep (2005, p.58) highlight a concern with the analyses offered by authors such as Roozen and Nieman, by advancing the view that they have become 'caught in a history that has never come to grips with the twin values of efficiency and a heartfelt faith. ...the structures of mainline denominations are caught between identity and mission.'

Denominational attention to mission is not uncommonly associated with the desire for reform and renewal. Martin Marty pressed the importance of these elements for denominational health. 'Built into those denominations that stand the best chance of enduring and surviving are mechanisms and impulses for reform and renewal' (Marty, 2001, p.190). In an earlier generation, historian Sidney E. Mead (1954. Cited in Richey, 1977, pp.70, 105) had understood denominations as channels for mission and revivalism, being generally hostile to Enlightenment values, and legitimating religious competition.

⁶ See Paul M. Harrison (1959), *Authority and Power in the Free Church Tradition: A Social Case Study of the American Baptist Convention*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

There are certainly elements of this discussion that are of importance to understanding denominational identity and practice among British Baptists. However, two cautions should be noted. Firstly, a majority of the discussion of the denomination has been carried out in the context of the USA and the unique experience of the USA does not always explain everything that a careful study of denominations in the British Isles would wish to discuss. Secondly, there are some differences in the respective approaches taken by North American and British sociologists of religion. For example, British sociologist Bryan Wilson (1959) offered a definition of denomination as ‘a voluntary association’ that ‘accepts adherents without imposition of traditional prerequisites of entry’ such as belonging to a particular ethnic or national group, or sectarian testimonies of spiritual regeneration. He added that breadth and tolerance are emphasized, self-conception is unclear, its doctrinal position is unstressed, it accepts itself as one movement among many, does not require individual commitment to be very intense; the denomination accepts the standards and values of the prevailing secular society and the state.

Whilst American sociologists might view the larger Baptist groups in America as denominations, it would be difficult for Wilson to be understood unambiguously to be saying whether he considered the Baptist Union to be a denomination or a sect. The Baptist Union’s *Declaration of Principle*⁷ makes reference to ‘those who have professed repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ....’ and there are few Baptist Union congregations who would not normally expect or assume a ‘testimony of spiritual regeneration’. Equally, there are certainly Baptists who do not accept that it is enough to accept the prevailing standards and values of the secular

⁷ The Union’s *Declaration of Principle* was revised in 1938 and contains three short paragraphs outlining the Basis of the Union. This makes the section quoted here all the more significant, given the desire on the part of those responsible for drafting the initial and revised forms of the Declaration to be both concise and precise. For a fuller discussion of the origin of the Declaration of Principle and its subsequent revisions, see Kidd (1996, pp.17-24).

society and state.⁸ Clearly the use of the term ‘denomination’ within the context of the Baptist Union must then be understood more widely with reference to issues of self-description and self-identity and not merely to a sociological discourse.

4.2 Denominational discourse in the Baptist Union

In 1702, Presbyterian, Congregational, and Baptist ministers in London formed ‘the body of the Dissenting Ministers of the Three Denominations in and about the City of London.’ ‘Denomination’ was used as the preferred self-description by these dissenting groups, in place of the pejorative term ‘sect’ used of them by others (Swatos, 1998).⁹ Its usage has not been unproblematic, however, in a Union of autonomous congregations.

Particular attention was drawn above (pp.37-43) to the tenures of J.H. Shakespeare and E.A. Payne as periods during which the denominational identity of the Baptist Union was much enhanced. The latter period is of particular interest for the investigation of contemporary church membership materials that follows shortly. A content analysis of these reveals that there is a frequent and direct reliance on materials published by the Baptist Union during the period of office of E.A. Payne. In 1953 John O. Barrett wrote *For the Baptist minister: a denominational guide* which contains a copy of the Declaration of Principle, guidance related to the General Superintendent, the Association, ministerial terms of appointment, and pension and taxation matters. Despite the title, Barrett (1953, pp.4-5) suggests, somewhat disingenuously, that the ‘Baptist Union is not to be thought of in terms of organization so much as the expression of our spiritual solidarity of our Baptist Churches and the organ of their united endeavours for the Kingdom of God...’

⁸ The first of the Baptist Union’s *Five Core Values* that attempted to express what it meant to be a Baptist at the beginning of the twenty first century was expressed as being a ‘Prophetic community’. This meant ‘following Jesus in confronting evil, injustice and hypocrisy. Challenging worldly concepts of power, wealth, status and security.’ (Blyth, 1998, p.5).

A *Denominational Guide* is detailed and concise and is principally concerned to offer a standard for the governance and practice of Baptist churches in membership of the Union. Barrett (c.1960-1) was also responsible for a small pocket-size set of guidelines issued to visitors responsible for interviewing prospective church members.¹⁰

It is likely that Barrett's work was intended to replace an earlier version by Irene Morris (1953, pp.19,21) written in a more pietistic style with phrases such as 'those purchased by the blood of Christ'. It describes the church as a family, stresses the bond of union, the experience of being joined in heart, refers to the church as a community, and states that,

For the full enrichment of our inner life we need human, Christian love. To enter into the inner life of the Church is to enter into the family life of the children of God, to learn something of the Great Family Spirit who works within the heart of Christian people...

In her second section, Morris (1953, p.26) describes the church members as 'shareholders of a company' when it comes to describing their financial support which should consist of taking 'a sitting, and... pay[ing] a regular contribution'. This understanding is unlikely to have been favoured by Payne who encouraged the development of a more rigorous theological approach to the understanding of membership within the framework of a member's responsibilities to a local

⁹ Although Briggs (2005, p.14, esp. fn.40) suggests that the earliest use of 'denomination' to describe a religious group seems to have been of mid- to late-eighteenth century coinage, dating it to an appearance in the Oxford English Dictionary 1746-47.

¹⁰ Published with the title *Church membership: suggestions for visitors to candidates* by Carey Kingsgate. The date of publication is not given but is probably late 1960 or 1961 given the marginal markings, library stamps, and references within the text to several organisations. Visitors were to enquire into the sincere belief 'in the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ' on the part of the prospective members. The link between personal discipleship and church membership is expressed clearly. Fellowship and sharing of faith are mentioned as benefits to membership. Baptism is assumed to be the normal route into membership though allowance is made for communicant membership. The wider body into which the church members enters is described in the following way, 'In joining the Church it is not only the local Church of which we become members, but the universal Church of Christ throughout the world.' (Barrett, c.1960-1, p.3).

congregation and the 'living organisms' of the Union and the Associations, of which the local church was 'a vital part' (*Baptist Church Rules*, 1960, p.7).

In the Addendum to *Baptist Church Rules* the purpose of the Union and Associations is described as the promotion of fellowship and evangelistic endeavour. These latter two are also stressed as the 'Responsibilities of a Church Member' (*Ibid*, p.1). Implicitly, the Baptist Union, in its publication of *Baptist Church Rules*, appears to claim that the responsibilities of a church member are certainly fulfilled through active participation in the local church, but that moreover these can also be fulfilled through the life and programmes of the denominational structures.¹¹ The subtle relationship between denominational and congregational self-understandings is to be seen in the manner in which Morris West urges attendance at the local church meeting (1975, p.14) during this period, 'A Baptist church without a regular, well-attended church meeting becomes something other than a true Baptist church.'

West implies that a true Baptist church is one that mirrors the practice of the other churches in membership of the Union. This can be the only meaning one may draw from West's insistence, if Alistair Campbell (1987, p.10) is indeed correct in countering such a claim with the statement that 'it is being urged upon us that the preservation of the Church Meeting is the *sine qua non* of being called a Baptist. [Yet] The Church Meeting is not required by the Declaration of Principle.'

More recently, Baptist theologians have consistently urged local congregations to transcend church meetings that are heavily business-like, and parliamentarian in style.¹² The tendency among Baptist theologians of the later twentieth century was to take more care with the use of denominational discourse. Paul Fiddes (2000, p.7) quotes Leonard Champion saying in 1979 that he believed 'that if as a denomination

¹¹ Briggs (2005, p17) notes that the 1974 change of title from *Baptist Handbook* to *Baptist Union Directory* suggests 'a confusion of vision: to confuse the denomination with the structures of the Union.'

¹² Including Alistair Campbell (1987), Steve Finamore (2002), Paul Beasley-Murray (1992) and the authors of the *Nature of the Assembly and the Council of the Baptist Union* (1994).

we are to fashion new structures of church life... we need a clearer, more coherent and more widely accepted theology... bringing new vitality and form to the denomination.'

However, Fiddes's own contribution to the development of that theology reveals great care and an obvious preference for using terms such as 'the Union', 'Baptist Union', 'our Union of churches', or 'Baptist churches' in place of either 'denomination' or 'denominational' (*Ibid*, pp.7-9). His preference is an attempt to avoid the assumption that to talk of the denomination implies the prior theological and ecclesiological authority of the central institutions of a denomination over the local Baptist congregations that together comprise the Baptist Union.

It would be futile to attempt to reference the frequency with which occurrences of 'denomination' occur in popular usage to describe national and collective Baptist action and existence. It is commonplace to hear it used on the stage of the annual Baptist Assembly, whilst in very many Baptist congregations it is used when making reference to national Baptist identity and activity. Similarly, it is not unusual to hear the term 'Union' being used to refer to the offices of the Baptist Union in Didcot, Oxfordshire when in fact it is more properly descriptive of the type and quality of relationship that exists between Baptist congregations.¹³

It has been noted above (pp.36-45) that Peter Shepherd situates the making of the modern Baptist denomination within the period 1898 to 1924, the dates during which J.H. Shakespeare was General Secretary. However, it was not until he had stepped down from that office that the Baptist Times masthead adopted, on the 10th September 1925, the strap-line 'The official Journal of the Baptist Denomination'. A slight

¹³ At the Baptist Assembly Sunday evening service at which newly accredited Baptist ministers are welcomed and presented, the General Secretary, Jonathan Edwards, several times referred to the 'denomination' in his sermon and throughout other parts of the evening programme (Personal notes. Bournemouth, 3rd May 2009). Equally, it is not uncommon for the Church Secretary of a local Baptist congregation to speak about 'Baptist *headquarters*' in reference to the Baptist Union office in Didcot. The Didcot staff was discouraged from using the term 'headquarters' as it gave the impression that it was at the pinnacle of Baptist life in England and Wales, directing and controlling it (Personal recollections, Didcot, 1996-2003).

modification to the strap-line on the 26th November 1959 saw the word 'official' dropped. According to the editorial that week, 'official' was dropped because it was seen as rather pretentious, confusing, and open to various interpretations (*The Baptist Times*, 26th November 1959, p.5). The strap-line was finally removed in its entirety on the 4th February 1971; two years after David Russell had entered office as General Secretary of the Baptist Union during a period of growing tensions over Baptist identity focused on evangelical concerns over ecumenism.¹⁴ In June 1969 Russell had sent a letter to all Baptist Union ministers allaying fears of centralising tendencies. The dropping of the strap-line makes sense against the background of this combination of agitation and concern.

However, over the following two decades, the discourse of denomination retained its value for various purposes. For example, in 1983 the Baptist Union published a report on the pastoral care of its smaller churches, with the title *Half the Denomination*. In September 1996, the Baptist Union gathered together approximately three hundred Baptists for a 'Denominational Consultation' out of which the General Secretary, David Coffey, 'hoped to gain a sense of the unifying factor in the changes within the Union.' (Randall, 2005, pp.487-8). Coffey's search for a uniting vision was in large part a search for Baptist identity, framed with reference to the demands of mission. It proved difficult to articulate a common vision, even of this type, without it being seen by some as a vision for a more centralised denomination.¹⁵

4.3 Contemporary Baptist church membership documents

A majority of Baptist congregations has printed materials available to new and intending members. During September 2000, for the purposes of this research, letters

¹⁴ See Randall (2005, pp.333-337) for further details of this period.

¹⁵ In personal conversation with both Peter Shepherd and David Coffey, it was apparent that each believed that there were parallels being drawn between the respective periods of office held by J.H. Shakespeare and Coffey.

were sent to three hundred Baptist churches.¹⁶ One hundred and twenty returned samples of materials. These are often the only written material that enquirers will read about membership. Consequently, their content and the style of presentation can be considered an important source of data that reveals how membership is intended to be understood and practised within a local congregation. To state this is to acknowledge that they cannot be ignored as a data source and that the level of attention given (or not given) to them by church members and adherents becomes itself a further valuable source of data.

Membership materials available to new and intending members might require formal assent, might lay out the subsequent responsibilities of membership and might serve the purpose of defining who is, and who is not, a member. These documents thus help to delineate the boundaries of the local Baptist community, at least in terms of formal membership.

4.3.1 The sample

Just over 90% of churches sampled had material available for intending members with only ten churches (8.3%) replying that they had nothing. It is clear that some churches make a greater use of this type of material than do others, with at least one adding an apologetic marginal note, 'Sorry, this is all we have!' It was possible to discern two distinct styles. Some material was of a more constitutional nature, often simply titled 'Church Rules' or 'Church Constitution'. One hundred of the sets of documents supplied (83.5% of the sample) contained a church constitution or church rules. Generally, the more constitutionally focussed was the literature, the more dated it appeared to be.¹⁷ The less constitutional literature was usually more contemporary in style and presentation, with content being popular rather than technical. However,

¹⁶ See *Appendix Three* for a list of the Churches that returned documents and a brief analysis of the content of each set of documents. The three hundred churches were selected from a stratified random sample and this technique is explained fully in *Appendix Three*.

¹⁷ As evidenced by dates printed, age of paper, whether typed or word-processed, and the state of bindings and staples.

despite this distinction, some highly contemporary literature was also accompanied by the standardised and theologically shaped 'Statement of Faith' of the Evangelical Alliance.¹⁸ Twenty two sets of documents (18.3% of the sample) contained a church covenant and ten (8.3%) contained a statement or basis of faith.

4.3.2 Application and reception into membership

In addition to regularising the organisational and spiritual life of a local Baptist congregation, the documents supplied are obviously intended to play a significant role in the process by which intending members are received into membership. In fact, in this regard, the documents rarely depart from the practice suggested in *Baptist Church Rules*.¹⁹ The following process can be detailed from the documents supplied,²⁰ despite the many minor modifications that have been introduced over the intervening forty five years:

- a. The intending members make an initial approach to the minister,²¹ an elder²² or a deacon.²³ In larger churches, this may be in writing, often directed in the first instance to the church secretary.²⁴
- b. In most cases, the minister and deacons²⁵ then appoint two visitors to meet and interview the candidates for membership.²⁶ In some instances the church meeting

¹⁸ Woodley B.C. *Considering Church Membership*, p.14.

¹⁹ Section II(b) of the 'Baptist Church Rules' states, 'Those desirous of joining the Church shall apply to the Minister or to the Church Secretary or any of the Deacons; their names shall be proposed at a regular Church Meeting, and after visitation and a satisfactory report by the Minister and/or two members of the Church, shall be voted upon at the next convenient Church Meeting and, if elected, receive with prayer the right hand of fellowship at the Lord's Table on the first convenient Communion Sunday.' (1960, pp.2-3).

²⁰ Generally the references made to church membership documents refer to the church constitution or rules and indicate the clause being cited. B.C. indicates 'Baptist Church'.

²¹ Slough B.C., clause 2.a).

²² Napier Road Christian Fellowship, Ashford Common, clause 2.

²³ Belgrave Union, clause 6.(a).

²⁴ Leckhampton B.C. Cheltenham, clause 3.(c).

²⁵ Worcester B.C., clause 4(c).

²⁶ Bourton-on-the-Water B.C., clause 3.2. Lindsay Park B.C. Kenton, clause 3.

considers the request for membership and appoints the visitors.²⁷ In a much smaller number of instances, the minister and elders are empowered by the church rules to conduct the interviews.²⁸ Several churches supply their nominated visitors with pro-forma questionnaires for completion,²⁹ occasionally supplemented by a booklet³⁰ or letter³¹ providing guidelines for the interview.³² Most visitors are required to satisfy themselves of the Christian profession of the applicants,³³ inquire about their baptism, previous or existing church membership(s),³⁴ and in some cases check that they are willing to enter into a covenant with the church³⁵ or that they assent to a statement of faith.³⁶

- c. Following interview the visitors typically make a verbal or written report to the next church meeting,³⁷ or in a small number of cases to the Deacons.³⁸ At this meeting the members are then invited to receive the applicants into membership, usually by formal vote.³⁹ In one church a candidate professing faith through baptism, with the approval of the elders, does not require a vote by a church meeting to become a member.⁴⁰ In at least two instances it is the church leaders who extend the

²⁷ Trinity B.C. Falmouth, clause 3.2. Slough B.C., clause 2.b).

²⁸ Trinity B.C. Bacup, clause 4.2.

²⁹ Queens Road B.C. Broadstairs, *Guidelines for visiting new applicants for membership*.

³⁰ Eltham Park B.C., *Notes for Visitors to Applicants for Church Membership*.

³¹ Woodley B.C. prepares its visitors to members with a letter outlining their responsibilities.

³² Silver Street B.C. Taunton, clause B.10.

³³ Trinity B.C. Falmouth, clause 3.2.

³⁴ Croyde B.C., clause 3.3. Gillingham B.C., clause 2.3. At Acomb B.C., (clause II d), applicants from another church are interviewed by the church leaders, not the members.

³⁵ Grove Lane B.C. Cheadle Hulme, clause 2. Burgh B.C., clause 1.a.

³⁶ Beacon B.C. Arnold, clause 4.a). Woodley B.C., visitors' letter.

³⁷ Surbiton B.C., clause 4.2.

³⁸ Beaumont B.C. clause 'Baptism and Church membership'(c).

³⁹ Pollards Hill B.C. Mitcham, clause 2.(b). Dinas Powys B.C., clause 1.

⁴⁰ Hillingdon Park B.C., clause 2.

invitation.⁴¹ In some instances there exists the opportunity for existing church members to lodge objections to a newly admitted member.⁴²

- d. The new members are then informed verbally or by letter and are normally received into membership at the next communion service.⁴³ This may involve a short liturgy, testimony from the applicants, the extending of the 'right hand of fellowship' with prayer,⁴⁴ and the signing of a covenant or membership roll.⁴⁵ Some new members are then presented with a membership certificate and, or, an inscribed copy of the church covenant and rules.⁴⁶
- e. A small, though significant, number of churches stressed the importance of new members signing the church covenant.⁴⁷ Of these, the greater majority also held an annual covenant service⁴⁸ with at least two of these requiring members to sign the covenant in order to remain in active membership.⁴⁹

Payne undoubtedly intended the text of *Baptist Church Rules* to elevate and standardise the practice of interviewing and electing new church members. In practice, it appears that its ubiquity in many contemporary church constitutions has also tended to limit innovation in the constitutional and liturgical practice of receiving people into church membership.

⁴¹ Burgh B.C., clause 1.a.

⁴² Cambray B.C. Cheltenham, clause 1.(c). Burgh B.C., clause 1.a.

⁴³ Tottenham B.C., clause C.3. Barton B.C. Cambridge, clause 2.(b).

⁴⁴ Pill Union, clause II(b). Gillingham B.C., clause 2.2. Chester Street B.C. Wrexham, clause 3.(b).

⁴⁵ Slough B.C., clause 2.b). Bourton-on-the-Water B.C., clause 3.3.

⁴⁶ South Oxhey B.C., clause 3)c). Napier Road Christian Fellowship, Ashford Common.

⁴⁷ Trinity B.C. Falmouth, clause 3.4.

⁴⁸ Grove Lane B.C. Cheadle Hulme, clause 2. Abbey B.C. Reading, and Malvern B.C. hold annual covenant services in January.

⁴⁹ Christ the Cornerstone, Milton Keynes, has an annual dedication service. The act of holding an annual covenant service ought, in theory, to aid the process of church members internalising the practise, and possibly the theology, of covenant-making. By pointing back to initial entry into membership as well as to those with whom one has covenanted, it has a certain performative value and function.

4.3.3 The nature and purpose of Church membership

The nature and purpose of membership is described with surprisingly little coherence across the sample. Whereas *Baptist Church Rules* supplies suggested text for electing members, or describing the responsibilities of members, it is of little help to a local congregation trying to frame a rationale for church membership.⁵⁰ The relatively high degree of uniformity that can be seen, for example, in the process of interviewing new church members or the election of church leaders is lacking in theological or pragmatic statements of the nature and purpose of membership.⁵¹ However, certain themes do emerge from a careful scrutiny of the texts and these may be harmonised in the following ways:

A significant number cite spiritual incorporation into the body of Christ at the point of Christian conversion as the reason for taking up membership of a tangible and local expression of the church universal.⁵² Some suggest that church membership is a natural step to take after believers' baptism.⁵³ If baptism demonstrates a responsible approach to Christian faith, then church membership is the subsequent step of loyal commitment to God and his people.⁵⁴ There is no uniform practice regarding the appropriate proximity of baptism and reception into membership.

⁵⁰ In this respect, the work of Beasley-Murray (1992) is helpful, though only one church in our sample cited Beasley-Murray's book as useful in instructing new church members.

⁵¹ In fact, only twelve churches (10% of the sample) offered introductory material in the attempt to explain the theological or biblical basis for church membership. Most statements were rather more pragmatic and focussed on the demands of the immediate.

⁵² See Totteridge Baptist Church, p.1, for example, 'To know God is to belong to His family, and to be part of the Christian community, described as 'the body of Christ' ...the Church is the living community of believers, and the local church is the expression of this community in one place. This community is entered as we individually enter into a covenant relationship with the Lord...'

⁵³ Ebenezer B.C. Netherton.

⁵⁴ West Leigh B.C., *Is Church membership Necessary?*

A significant number of churches clearly expect church membership to regularise attendance at Sunday worship,⁵⁵ particularly the communion service, and the support of mission and ministry by and on behalf of the local congregation.⁵⁶ They tended to stress statements such as 'All of us have a part to play and God has gifts for us to use in His service.'⁵⁷ For some, church membership affords greater involvement in prayer for the world and for one another.⁵⁸

Many documents indicate that the governance of the local congregation is a requisite function of an effective church membership.⁵⁹ Membership enables one to attend church meetings and vote on important matters,⁶⁰ including the election of other members. In at least one instance, church membership delineates the 'boundary of who counts as a believer', avoiding the danger of a church meeting being compromised by the presence of those who do not belong to the believing community.⁶¹ A certain tension, even contradiction, exists across the corpus of the documents when considering the function of a church member as a voter in contrast with their status as a believing member of the body of Christ. In quite a number of churches a person under the age of eighteen may be considered a believer and thus be elected a member, yet not be eligible to vote at church meetings, presumably because of the perceived legal function of a vote.⁶²

⁵⁵ North Hanwell B.C., clause II.(e). is typical in linking a review of membership with absence from regular involvement in church activity or regular communion.

⁵⁶ Tywyn B.C. *Members Booklet*, p.12.

⁵⁷ Torrington B.C. *Church Membership: Belonging Together*, p.6.

⁵⁸ West Croydon B.C. *Church Membership Application Form*.

⁵⁹ Hillhead B.C. *Church Handbook*, p.7, clause 3.

⁶⁰ Brentford Free Church, *Church Membership*.

⁶¹ West Croydon B.C. *Church Membership at West Croydon Baptist Church*.

⁶² Burgh B.C., clause 3.b.ii) stresses the importance of seeing the church meeting as a theocracy not a democracy but then limits its members aged under 18 from voting (without explaining why this is a necessary aspect of theocratic governance). Dinas Powys B.C. sets a minimum age of 16 years for reception into membership.

In some instances the dominant emphasis given to spiritual or practical 'gift discovery' surveys, and lengthy descriptions of the ways in which financial contributions (or tithes) can be made, suggest that church members are treated as little more than resources to sustain the ministry and mission of the local congregation.⁶³ This perception may be enhanced where a version of the 'Responsibilities of Church Members' has been included in the church constitution.

Perhaps to avoid giving this impression, some documents emphasise the benefits to members.⁶⁴ These may include feeling more secure within one's Christian faith, feeling more involved in the Christian community, experiencing the corporate love of a Christian community in a more intense manner, or receiving the spiritual nurture and counsel of the church leaders.⁶⁵ Amplifying these pastoral concerns, one document states, 'It is simply a method of recognising that CBC is your spiritual home.'⁶⁶ Attention to relational aspects of membership is noticeable in more recently drafted documents.⁶⁷

A more mature theological reflection is shown by those churches that state, for example, 'The nature of membership is assumed to be response rather than choice,'⁶⁸ and, 'membership is a functional reality rather than a legal status',⁶⁹ or, 'membership is of the body of Christ, as such it is identified not bestowed.'⁷⁰ However, this level of

⁶³ See Southcourt Baptist Church, whose set of documents included papers on 'Tithing', 'Giving and vision', 'Serving Together Course', a 'Talents and Skills' checklist, and a paper about the Baptist Missionary Society 'Birthday Scheme'. The Constitution and Rules accompany these.

⁶⁴ Sandown B.C. gives its new members a small booklet titled *Count Your Blessings* which lists these benefits.

⁶⁵ West Croydon B.C. *Church membership Application Form*.

⁶⁶ Chichester B.C. *Becoming a church member*.

⁶⁷ Westbourne Park, London, titles its welcome to membership material *Love God: Love People*.

⁶⁸ Eldon Road B.C. *Why become a Church Member?*

⁶⁹ Hill Street B.C. Swadlincote, *Principles of Membership*.

⁷⁰ Queens Road B.C. Broadstairs, *Church Membership (for discussion at the next deacon's meeting) Draft version*, clause 1.

theological sophistication is unusual; most documentation supplied was rather formulaic and repetitive.

This becomes most evident when one examines the range of theological images and terminology used to describe the church. It is quite limited. Two images are repeatedly used to describe the church; 'the body of Christ'⁷¹ and, 'the family of God'.⁷² A third trails at some distance; 'the gathered community of believers in covenant relationship'.⁷³ Sole instances include; 'a divinely instituted community', 'the *ekklesia*',⁷⁴ 'a bride', 'an army', and 'a spiritual building'.⁷⁵ The latter three are all found within the same document.

Stephen Winward's text 'Responsibilities of Church Members'⁷⁶ is arguably the most pervasive evidence of the influence of denominational efforts to standardise church membership and other constitutional documents. In our sample of 120 sets of papers, thirty-seven (31%) reflect Winward's text closely, with nine (7.5%) of these reproducing it exactly. The most numerous modifications are little more than attempts to update or clarify the language of his original. A smaller number have attempted to expand or add clauses that were clearly felt by particular congregations to have been lacking in the original.⁷⁷ Intriguingly there appears to be a small family of texts that vary significantly from the Winward version and which bear evidence of having relied upon an original drafted by the same, unknown author.⁷⁸ Presumably those churches

⁷¹ Bethel B.C., Sandy Lane, *Belonging to All*, p.2.

⁷² Brixington B.C. Welcome letter for new members.

⁷³ West Croydon B.C., *Church Membership at West Croydon Baptist Church*.

⁷⁴ Kilmington B.C. *Church Membership*.

⁷⁵ Ormesby B.C., *Church Membership Study Sheet*.

⁷⁶ For this, see above at p.42.

⁷⁷ For example, Lydbrook B.C., *Church Rules and Constitution*, p.1.

⁷⁸ Including those at Croyde, North Devon, Preston Baptist Church, Paignton, and Hillfield Baptist Church, Bristol. Additionally there is a typescript leaflet authored by Frank Cooke used in two churches (Brentwood, Sandown) in our sample, a copy of which is in the possession of the author. However, publication details are not indicated.

that incorporated his text into their constitution were doing so as a response to Union initiatives.⁷⁹

By setting this text in their constitutional documents and church rules these churches, wittingly or unwittingly, conferred a regulatory status upon what was expected of members. In fact many constitutions single out failure to attend a church meeting for the period of a year,⁸⁰ or an unchristian lifestyle,⁸¹ as reasons for discipline and ultimately removal from membership.⁸²

Of course, all churches are legal entities in addition to being spiritual communities. In this regard a certain regulatory function is perhaps to be expected. Here, further denominational traces can be seen in references to the *Declaration of Principle* of the Baptist Union,⁸³ trust deeds held by a Union trustee body, or the description of documents as 'Church Rules'.

When dealing with legal requirements, some standardisation is inevitable. Child protection guidelines, for example, appear more frequently in documents drafted after the mid 1990s.⁸⁴ Similarly, responses to changes in charity law trusteeship and other legal changes bearing on churches reflect advice from lawyers, and other experts, given through the Baptist Union.⁸⁵ One church took the step of placing all material

⁷⁹ Winward's text has been criticised for lacking any reference to covenant. See, for example, Beasley-Murray (1992, pp.55-56) Beasley-Murray argues that the absence of covenantal relationships produces rule-centred rather than people-centred lists of responsibilities. An October 2000 revision of the church rules *The Way Forward – Year 2000* for Ebenezer B.C., Netherton, makes reference to church meetings by stating, 'As per a Baptist Union edict of 1948.'

⁸⁰ Old Lodge Lane B.C. Purley, *Church Rules*, clause 3.7.1b).

⁸¹ *Ibid*, clause 3.6.

⁸² Though the language of excommunication is no longer used and, in my experience, these sanctions are rarely applied solely for repeated absence from communion, particularly where Sunday worship attendance is otherwise reasonably regular.

⁸³ Beaumont B.C. Woodbridge, *Constitution (Issue 4 – November, 1994)*. Chester Street B.C. Wrexham, gives every new member a copy of the *Declaration of Principle*.

⁸⁴ See, for example, Andover B.C. *Policy Statement on Children, Young People and the Church*.

⁸⁵ Winchmore Hill B.C. explains the legal status of its 1920 Trust Deed and the provisions of charity law in general to its membership of the Baptist Union.

drafted in response to 'legal' requirements as an addendum to its church rules.⁸⁶ This was partly to mitigate constantly having to update church rules every time the law changed, but partly to reflect the essential difference between the nature of church rules and the nature of codified responses to government legislation.

In examining this sample of church membership documents it has been extremely difficult to find coherent and consistent patterns that run across the sample. The sheer diversity of the sample stands as the chief observation. The only consistency relates to the reasonably standard protocol for initiating and welcoming new members. To a lesser extent, the governance of the congregation, including the appointment of new ministers and of new deacons, is dealt with in a reasonably consistent fashion. In both aspects, the documentation reflects the attempts of Payne and others to arrive at a denominational standardisation during the 1960s.⁸⁷

In other regards the documents resist neat categorisation, whether of content or of a more general theological influence. Traces of covenantal discourse are likely to be overlaid with forms of denominational discourse. Only in one or two more recent sets of documents is relational discourse used with reference to understanding what is at the heart of membership. These documents bear signs of careful revision accompanied by a willingness to experiment with new approaches to membership.

Despite these necessary and careful qualifications, it is argued here that in the majority of instances it is the denominational discourse, crafted and supplied from the mid 1950s onwards and throughout the 1960s, that has had most impact on contemporary church membership documentation and, therefore, the theology and

⁸⁶ Malvern B.C.

⁸⁷ Already evidenced by the publication of Baptist Church Rules (Baptist Union, 1960) and also in Baptist publications such as Barrett's *For the Baptist Minister: A Denominational Guide*, published in 1953 by the Carey Kingsgate Press. Barrett (1953, p.3) sets out to offer 'guidance on a number of denominational matters' including superintendency, ministerial recognition and settlement, the Associations, the Home Work Fund, church governance, marriage and funeral services, and taxation matters.

practice they espouse. For this reason, Baptists who readily talk of post-denominational identity must necessarily assume a prior denominational identity.

That denominational discourse is preferred to covenantal discourse leads in one or two possible directions. It may be that the legal and constitutional nature of Church membership documents militates against their too frequent revision. Consequently it might be argued that the theological rediscovery of covenant discourse from the mid 1970s onwards is still too recent for it to be reflected in the documents collected. It also remains the case that there exists no 'standard template' for drafting a church constitution and/or governance documents that is crafted in the theological discourse of covenant. The only available 'template' of this sort lies embedded in the documents of existing congregations and these still owe much to the denominational discourse of Payne and Winward. The only means of testing these theses will be, of course, to gather a further collection of documents in 2015, for example, in order to judge whether covenantal discourse or relational discourse is much more in evidence in the constitutional and membership documents of the Union's churches.

4.4 Putting the documents in context

4.4.1 Membership and attendance statistics: Baptist Union Annual Returns 1948-2005

The denominational discourse present in the sample of church membership materials suggests a denominational concern for standardising governance in the local congregations of the Union. A similar denominational concern for the overall health of the Union is reflected in the annual census of baptisms, church members, ministers, and congregations.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Extensive membership and baptismal records are available in the annual Directory of the Baptist Union from the mid nineteenth century onwards.

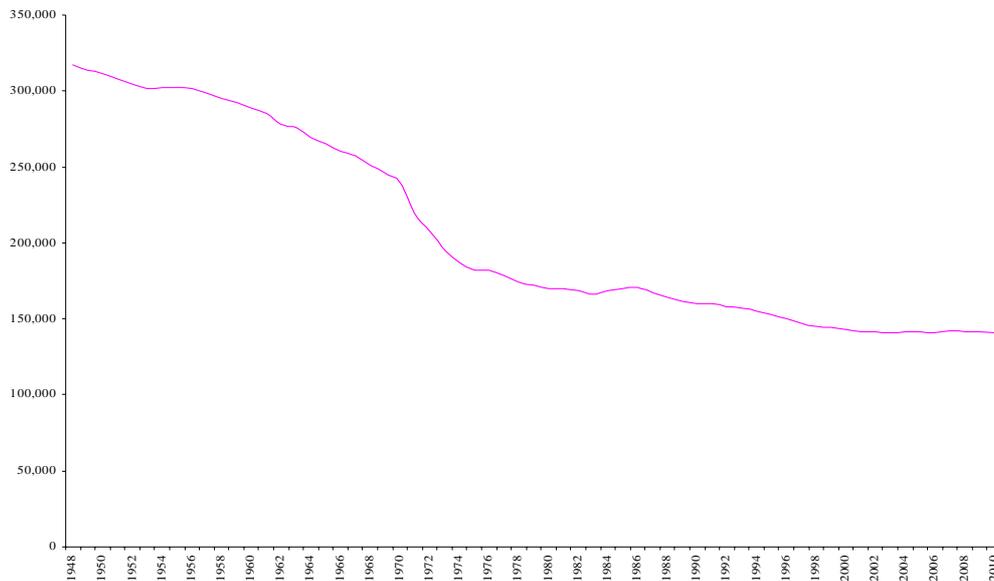


Figure 2: Baptist church members in England, Wales, the Isle of Man, and the Channel Islands 1948-2010 (projected) Source: Baptist Union Annual Directories 1948-2005

Plotting the membership statistics recorded in successive *Annual Directories* of the Baptist Union shows clearly that for the period 1948 to 2010 (projected) the number of church members will have more than halved, declining from 317,000 to a projected total of 141,000.⁸⁹ Noting an eleven percent decline in Baptist church membership between 1991 and 2000, Coffey (2006, p.8) nevertheless pointed to the increases in regular attendance at worship and in the numbers of baptisms performed. These increased by 20% and 26% respectively between 1998 and 2003 prompting him to comment that ‘It would seem it is our inability to attract a committed membership to the local church that is the most challenging statistic.’

⁸⁹ The steepest decline for Baptist churches was experienced during the 1970s. Randall (2005, p.414) considers that the figures are distorted due to a decision taken in 1972 to no longer include churches that were not in the Union. During the controversies of the early 1970s (see above at p.56) there was a loss of approximately fifty churches and an accompanying loss of 6,120 church members according to Randall.

Type of worshippers present in Baptist churches: Sunday 5th December 1999

Male members u14 ⁹⁰	2,313	14,397	Male adherents u14
Male members 14-21	1,409	3,735	Male adherents 14-21
Male members 22-50	15,252	7,088	Male adherents 22-50
Male members 50-65	10,311	3,739	Male adherents 50-65
Male members 65+	8,849	3,407	Male adherents 65+
Female members u14	2,648	17,746	Female adherents u14
Female members 14-21	1,984	4,867	Female adherents 14-21
Female members 22-50	20,359	10,313	Female adherents 22-50
Female members 50-65	16,212	5,786	Female adherents 50-65
Female members 65+	17,932	6,912	Female adherents 65+
Members total	97,242	78,010	Adherents total
Members 14yrs & over	92,308	45,847	Adherents 14yrs & over

On Sunday December 5th 1999 there were 175,251 worshippers present at the larger of the Sunday services in BUGB churches.

Table 1: Worshippers present in Baptist Union churches on Sunday 5th December 1999 - displayed by age, gender and affiliation status. (Source: Baptist Union Annual returns, 1999 (Jackson, 2001))

In 2002, Peter Brierley (2003, p.2-24) of Christian Research projected an increase of 3% in Sunday attendance at English Baptist churches for the fifteen year period 1990 to 2005. This followed an actual 2% increase for the equivalent period from 1985 to 2000 and contrasted markedly with the total loss of 1.4 million church attenders for all Churches in England between 1980 and 2005. Although the Baptist Union had collected Sunday attendance statistics since 1992, the data collected did not discriminate between church members and regularly attending adherents who were present at worship on the census Sunday.⁹¹ It was proving difficult to determine with confidence whether the decreasing lack of conviction concerning church membership

⁹⁰ It is difficult to know how to interpret this return. In most Baptist churches it would be unusual, though not unknown (Paul Martin, Leavesdon Rd., Watford, 3rd March 2002. Personal conversation), to receive young people under the age of eighteen into membership. In Martin's church, under-18s were members, could participate in church discussions but could not vote.

⁹¹ It did so by recording the numbers of those present at the larger of the Sunday services on the first Sunday in December. Numbers were recorded by age and gender.

was a symptom or a cause of the increasing participation of regular adherents in many Baptist churches.

In 1999 annual 'Return' Union churches were asked to record separately the numbers of attending non-members and members present at worship on the 5th December.⁹² This return indicated that 92,308 church members and 45,847 non-members aged fourteen or over were present at worship on Sunday 5th December, a ratio of two to one.⁹³ This exceeded the anecdotal evidence that suggested only 15 to 20% of an average Sunday congregation was made up of non-members (see Table 1 above).

Comparison of members and adherents present at Sunday worship in the English Churches Census, 1989, and BU Annual Returns, 1999

English Churches Census 1989	
Members at worship	103,650
Adherents at worship	71,850
Total worshippers on Census Sunday	175,500
Members absent from worship	46,500
BUGB Annual returns 1999	
Members at worship	92,450
Adherents at worship	74,150
Total worshippers on Census Sunday	166,600
Members absent from worship	44,500
Increase in adherents at worship 1989-1999	3.2%

Table 2: Comparison of members and adherents present at Sunday worship in the English Churches Census 1989 and BUGB Annual Returns 1999 (Source: Brierley (1991), p57, Table 23. Also Table 1 above)

If the Baptist Union 1999 Annual returns are adjusted so that only England is accounted for *and* if the 1989 English Churches Census returns are adjusted to take account of members not present at worship, the 1999 Annual Returns are comparable

⁹² This decision followed close consultation with the then President of the Baptist Union, the Revd Michael Bochenski, and a decision of the General Purposes and Finance Committee of the Baptist Union taken in December 1998.

⁹³ Excluding the returns for under fourteen year olds eliminates a possible distortion as only a small minority of churches receive under fourteen year olds into church membership.

with those reported by Peter Brierley for the 1989 English Churches Census (see Table 2 above). If all returns for those below twenty one years of age are excluded, the percentage of regularly attending adherents is 30%.⁹⁴

The results of the 2001 Annual Returns for the Baptist Union were published in 2002. A total of 1,784 churches made a return, 84% of the 2,125 churches then in membership of the Baptist Union. To support this current research, several supplementary questions were included that dealt with admission into membership. Over 67% of churches stated that they received baptised persons into church membership either in the same service or at the next convenient communion service.⁹⁵ Only 32% of the churches sampled had a closed membership, where candidates for membership are required to have been baptised as believers. Of the open membership churches, 90% stated that they are able to admit a Christian from another tradition into membership following a profession of faith, without the requirement for baptism as a believer. Associate membership schemes were operated in 28% of the total sample although it was not clear how these were spread across the open and closed membership churches.

Further supplementary questions in the 2002 Annual Returns probed the additions to membership and deletions from membership during the year ending 31st December 2002 (see Table 3 above). What these returns demonstrate clearly is that only 58% of those baptised during 2002 were received into membership during 2002. This contradicts somewhat the claim from the 2001 Annual Returns that 67% of churches

⁹⁴ The 1999 BUGB Annual Return highlights the absence from worship on that particular Sunday of a further 52,000 church members. Further research attempting to explain for the absence of members at worship on any given Sunday is required to comment adequately on what one suspects is a fairly common phenomenon. For a fuller account see Jackson (2001, p.5).

⁹⁵ Christopher Ellis (1999, p.21) uses data from the 1996 Annual returns in *Baptist Worship Today* and offers a figure of 63%. However, Ellis is unclear about how to interpret nil returns. Nil returns are compensated for here in a more useful statistical manner.

received people into membership either in the same service as the baptism itself or at the next convenient communion service.⁹⁶

Extract from the Annual Returns for the year ending December 2002

Additions to membership:	
...after baptism	2,706
...following profession of faith	2,600
...after transfer from a Baptist church	1,913
...after transfer from a church of another denomination	1,619
Total additions	10,064
Deletions from membership:	
...after transfer to a Baptist church	1,556
...after transfer to a church of another denomination	1,651
...following revision of membership roll	3,240
...following death of a member	2,395
Other reason for deletion	1,336
Total deletions	10,021
Baptisms in 2002	4,660
Professions of faith in 2002	3,930

Table 3: Additions to membership and deletions from membership during the year ending 31st December 2002 for the Baptist Union of Great Britain (Source: Jackson, 2003a)⁹⁷

During 2002 there were a total of 8,590 people attending Baptist churches who made a profession of faith. Of these, 4,660 were baptised. Of those who were baptised, 2,706 were received into membership, although figures relating to professions of faith and subsequent reception into church membership require careful interpretation.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Presumably these churches meant to imply that this was their normal practice. However, it is difficult to be definitive about this.

⁹⁷ Figures are calculated for all 2,125 churches in membership of the Baptist Union. The actual count by the year end of churches that had completed a return was 1,785.

⁹⁸ The apparently higher percentage of non-baptised individuals received into membership following a profession of faith, than for those who were received into membership following

4.4.2 The Baptist Union's Membership Roundtable 1999-2004

During 2003 the Union's Membership Roundtable⁹⁹ commissioned a research report *Bucking the Trend* which it included in the *Membership* material. 465 open-ended questionnaires were summarised and analysed.¹⁰⁰ No coherent view concerning the meaning, value, practice, or function of church membership emerges, nor as to who was, or was not, a church member, and how one became a member.

In response to the question, 'How do I know I belong?' relational concepts were mentioned by 67% of respondents.¹⁰¹ Feeling a sense of responsibility for the congregation was mentioned by 72 people (15%). These prompted the conclusion (Bucking the Trend, 2004, p.3) that

What is overwhelmingly clear is that if relationships are so central to our sense of belonging, then the structures which we choose to operate must be such that foster and create these relationships. The crucial factor is not being a member, but being in relationship.

In answering the question, 'Why I belong to this local Church?' respondents most frequently indicated, 'commitment to the local fellowship,' as the most important. Seventy people (15%) indicated that the doctrinal position of the congregation was necessary for them to feel they could belong to it; this was particularly the case among the older age groups. Only 20% made a strong connection between baptism and

baptism, requires some care in interpretation. This is because the wording of the question in the Annual Return questionnaire does not discriminate between an individual who is received into membership following a profession of faith *during 2002 in that congregation*, and an individual who is newly arrived in the congregation but has previously made a public profession of faith in *another* church. A church secretary is able to reply to the question where somebody attending the church makes a first profession of Christian faith but decides to leave their baptism to a later point. Equally, he or she, can also reply where a Christian from a paedobaptist tradition arrives at the church and asks to become a member. In an open membership church the formula that allows entry into membership would involve a profession of faith (and not necessarily involve a technical 'transfer' from another church). It is possible for a church secretary to have one or both of these scenarios in mind when completing this item of information. Caution with this data is necessary and prompts the need for a further revision of the survey tool.

⁹⁹ For a fuller account of the establishing of the Membership Roundtable, see below at Appendix Five, pp.270-275.

¹⁰⁰ A copy of the questionnaire is included at Appendix Five.

¹⁰¹ Possible responses included 'family', 'friendship', 'love', and 'support'.

church membership; in other words they belonged because they had been baptised as a believer.¹⁰² Those who expressed the view that denominational loyalty was important were in single figures. 'Denominational identity is not a major factor...' and the 'main focus is the local fellowship' rather than the universal.¹⁰³

For the non-members the importance of relational concepts was just as strong. Non-members occasionally reported the pain they felt on being excluded as a consequence of having been baptised as infants and being ineligible for membership of closed-membership churches.

Commitment to church membership necessarily raises the issue of boundaries; some will accept the responsibility of commitment, others choose not to. The report (*Ibid*, 2004, p.6) argues that, 'Jesus calls for a radical inclusivity.' It goes on to suggest that,

...there are congregations... for whom the emphasis on inclusivity means a challenge to the historic concepts of membership... [and] ...there are congregations... for whom... radical discontinuity with prevailing positions means that a harder-edged boundary is an important witness and challenge.

These two positions contain the germ of the current dilemma in which many Baptist churches currently find themselves over membership. It is difficult to imagine how two such radically opposed positions might be reconciled. Both, presumably, represent attempts to respond to the same contextual realities.

A careful reading of *Bucking the Trend* against the background of chapter two of this dissertation reveals some stark contrasts. Traces of the historical development of church membership practice, and the standardisation of it during Payne's period in office, are barely seen in the reported responses of contemporary church members. The authors of *Bucking the Trend* (2004, p.12) suggest that instead 'At the heart of the

¹⁰² On this point see the discussion above at p.117, where it is suggested that the connection between membership and baptism is generally reported as being at a higher level than here. Interestingly, the responses classified by age did not reveal any significant differences on this point. Young people were no less likely than older people to make the connection between baptism and membership.

¹⁰³ See *Bucking The Trend* (2004, pp.8,9).

reflections we have heard, from members and non-members alike, we hear words about relationship, participation, responsibility, and commitment.’ They suggest that these rather ‘secular’ concepts can be located within the domain of ‘covenant’, ‘We want to suggest that these words might come together in the term covenant.’ (*Ibid*, 2004, p.12) Why this should be is not immediately self-evident as the only use of the word ‘covenant’ on the completed questionnaires appeared on those returned by ministers. However *Bucking the Trend* does highlight the importance of considering the contribution of relational and covenantal discourses to a contemporary theology and practice of membership and belonging.

4.4.3 Previous church background and denominational identity

During April 2001, almost 108,000 adult churchgoers from 2,000 English churches completed a *Church Life Profile* questionnaire inviting them to express opinions and record experiences concerning the life of their churches.¹⁰⁴ Churches of all denominations participated and almost 10,200 Baptist churchgoers were among the sample, totalling just over four percent (4.1%) of all Baptist churchgoers in England and Wales.¹⁰⁵ A total of sixty questions was asked, including several that probed the strength of belonging to the local congregation. Tabulations of the *Profile* data were secured for this dissertation and permit an investigation of the impact of previous denominational background (See below in Appendix Two, pp.209-218).

In response to the question, ‘Do you have a strong sense of belonging to this particular church?’ an average of 79% of Baptist churchgoers responded affirmatively, stating that they had either a growing sense of belonging or that it had remained at the

¹⁰⁴ Directed by Escott and Gelder (2000), this author represented the Baptist Union as a Director of Churches Information for Mission, the charitable company that oversaw Escott and Gelder’s work.

¹⁰⁵ The random sample of one hundred and forty churches, from which these churchgoers were drawn, was stratified by church size and church location to ensure a more widely representative selection.

same level as the previous year.¹⁰⁶ When analysed by previous church background, 81.5% of Baptist churchgoers who had transferred from another Baptist church were more likely than the average to feel a sense of belonging to their local congregation. The figures for those from a Local Ecumenical Project or an Anglican Parish were 81.8% and 80.8% respectively. Former Pentecostals and Charismatics from the New and House Churches, taken collectively, were a full six percentage points (72.8%) below the average of those feeling either a growing or a consistent sense of belonging.

Percentage of Baptist churchgoers that sees the denomination as the primary or an important framework for their Christian faith, ranked by previous church attendance

Church type previously attended	
Another Baptist church	66.2%
Not attending any church	65.5%
A Church of Scotland	62.8%
Society of Friends	62.2%
Average	58.5%
Church type previously attended	
An Anglican Church	53.4%
A Pentecostal church	48.4%
An Independent Evangelical church	42.7%
A New or House Church	34.8%

Table 4: The percentage of Baptist churchgoers that sees the denomination of their local church as a primary or important framework for their Christian faith, ranked by previous church attendance. (Source: Appendix Two, Table A2.3, p.211).

When asked about the value of the denomination of their local church, 59% stated that it provided either the primary or an important framework for their Christian faith. This contrasts with 84% who find the preaching helpful and 78% who find their spiritual

¹⁰⁶ Escott and Gelder (2002, p.17, Table 5.1).

needs are being met. Escott and Gelder (2002, p.7) note that ‘This suggests that while... the style of worship, [or] the nature of fellowship is proving attractive, this quality is not something that respondents see as ‘Baptist’.’

For those who have very similar experiences of preaching, worship and fellowship in other denominations, this is indeed likely to be the case. The ‘liturgies’ and songbooks of Renewal have crossed the denominational divides with ease and have tended to diminish former denominational distinctions. Against such a background it is difficult, if not impossible, to sustain the argument that one’s style of worship or preaching is in some sense ‘Baptist’. One can argue that the label over the door is becoming irrelevant; it is no longer the signifier it once was.¹⁰⁷

Baptist churchgoers ranked according to previous church background

Church type previously attended		
Another (or this) Baptist church	2,822	30.1%
Anglican	1,694	18.1%
Not attending any church	1,385	14.8%
Evangelical	734	7.8%
Methodist	699	7.4%
All Pentecostal and New or House church	648	6.9%
United Reformed Church, Church of Scotland, and Presbyterian	414	4.4%
Congregational	231	2.5%
Society of Friends	154	1.7%
Roman Catholics	128	1.4%
Others	458	4.9%
Totals	9,367	100%

Table 5: Baptist churchgoers ranked according to their stated previous church background expressed by count and as a percentage of the sample (n=9,367). (Source: Church Life Profile 2001 tabulations).

The Church Life Profile tabulations (Table A2.3, p.211) make it possible to rank the importance attached to the denomination according to the previous church, determined by responses to the question, 'Before you started coming here, were you participating in another church?' Those who had previously been attending a Baptist congregation, the Church of Scotland or who had no previous church background attributed the highest levels of importance to the denomination. Those who had previously been Pentecostals, Independent Evangelicals, or the New and House Churches were the least likely to attribute importance or significance to the denomination. Indeed, the former New and House Church respondents (29.2%) were more than twice as likely as the average respondent (12.4%) to state that the denomination was of little significance. This is not surprising given the strong anti-denominational emphasis that Walker (1998, p.173) notes within the New and House Churches during the 1970s and 80s.¹⁰⁸

Escott and Gelder (2002, p.7) noted that Baptist churchgoers were much more likely than those of other denominations to have switched from another, non-Baptist, denomination. Sixteen per cent of Baptist churchgoers had arrived from a church of another denomination in the previous five year period. If one counts arrivals at any previous point, over two thirds (69.9%) had been attending a church of another denomination immediately prior to attending their current Baptist church. Only 5% stated that they had been attending that particular local congregation for all or most of their lives. A further 26% had transferred from a previous Baptist church. Only 15% had no previous church background.

¹⁰⁷ Some local congregations obviously consider the name 'Baptist' to have already become irrelevant, substituting it with 'community', 'fellowship,' or a similar generic title.

¹⁰⁸ And see the fuller discussion at pp.52-53 above.

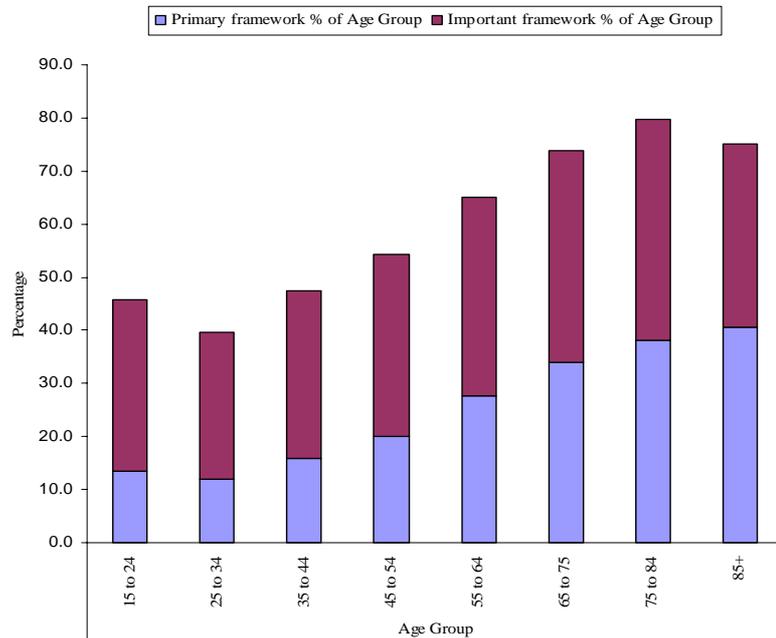


Figure 3: The importance of denomination by age, expressed as a percentage of all respondents of similar age. (Source: Church Life Profile 2001 tabulations)

There were significant variations by age when denominational importance was measured. Generally the trend is for older churchgoers to ascribe greater significance or importance to the denominational framework for their Christian faith. The twenty-five to thirty-four year old churchgoers find it to be of least significance.

4.5 Interim conclusions

The denomination has been of interest to sociologists of religion since the work of Troeltsch in the late nineteenth century. No consensus regarding a definition of the denomination has yet emerged among sociologists, a difficulty exacerbated by differences of approach between North American and European sociologists.

The sample of 120 sets of documents shows a particular reliance on denominational resources developed during the 1950s and 60s, a period when the Baptist Union encouraged a more self-conscious denominational identity through its publications,

newspaper, and other activities. The enduring quality of the discourse is seen most clearly in the calling of a 'Denominational Consultation' in 1996. The denominational discourse of these documents remains an evidential feature of the sample. These materials are important to our discussion because they will be, in many instances, the only literature on church membership that applicant church members receive.¹⁰⁹

The quantitative data reviewed in this chapter demonstrates, however, that members and attenders value the relationships that they find, or hope to find, in the congregation more than they appreciate the denominational identity of the congregation. This is particularly true for the increasing number of individuals who opt for regular attendance without formal membership. In this respect a person's previous experience of a local congregation, particularly of another denomination or Church tradition has an impact upon their decision. Those from former Restoration and Charismatic churches are least favourably disposed towards the denominational identity of the congregation. The research findings of the Membership Roundtable underline the need for careful attention to the interview data gathered for this dissertation, particularly with regards to the relative lack of denominational discourse and the apparent preference for relational discourse.

¹⁰⁹ A point with which the authors of *On Being the Church* appear to agree. They state that 'membership is profoundly shaped by what we might call a constitutional model – that is, to belong is to conform to a series of processes and rules, and to have a variety of rights and responsibilities which are defined by those rules...' For more see Haymes, *et al* (2008, p.89).

Chapter 5: The relational discourse of contemporary Baptist membership and belonging

5.1 Introduction: interviews with members and attenders

The principal aim of this dissertation has been to investigate the manner in which historical and contextual resources are being used by members and attenders to understand and reflexively respond to their experiences of membership and belonging. This is an under-investigated area of Baptist polity and theology in contrast with, for example, studies of the practice of baptism.¹ This is possibly due to the theological assessment that membership in a local congregation is a practice that is derivative of the normative Christian experience of mystical incorporation into the Body of Christ through baptism.²

The relative lack of theoretical and theological investigations of the practice of membership and belonging has a number of implications for the manner in which the current research has been conducted. It meant that quantitative research methods such as surveys or questionnaires were not adopted. The strength of quantitative approaches lies in their ability to capture efficiently a relatively limited range of data in order to test particular hypotheses.³ In this instance there has been a general lack of theorising about membership that might otherwise have been suited to quantitative investigation. Secondly, following extensive personal conversation and informal investigation, it became clear that quantitative methods would not have easily teased out the nuanced range of meanings that people attribute to, and derive from,

¹ See, for example, Gilmore (1959), White (1960), Beasley-Murray (1966), Cross (2000), and Fowler (2002). These works represent historical and theological approaches, rather than a sociological or anthropological approach, to the subject of baptism and those baptised.

² Personal conversation, Myra Blyth, 12th November 2002, Didcot.

³ Although it should be noted that quantitative methods have been used in gathering and presenting supporting data in chapter four.

membership and attendance. Observing subtleties of meaning is a particular strength of qualitative methodologies.⁴

The analysis of this interview data represents a preliminary attempt to theorise about the usage that affiliates of Baptist churches make, if at all, whether consciously or otherwise, of historical, biblical, contextual, or other discourses. The frequency with which each discourse was used is of less interest than the manner of usage. The research also represents a unique attempt to capture a small, though reasonably representative, sample of the demotic discourse describing belonging and church membership in contemporary Baptist congregations.

***5.2 Inductively derived, orienting hypotheses for the research?*⁵**

Silverman (2000, pp.78,79) indicates that in much qualitative research there may be no hypothesis at the outset. Hypotheses in qualitative research are often produced (or induced) during its early stages. This research was an iterative process in which data began to emerge during the early stages. This suggested a number of hypotheses for testing during the later stages of the research. Those that seemed most pertinent and testable were then formulated in the following fashion:

- a. Careful attention to 'belonging' is likely to offer a more satisfactory elucidation of membership and attendance than concentrating solely on either institutional structures or the symbolic construction of boundaries.*
- b. By emphasising 'belonging', members and attenders are able to lessen the constitutional or formal distinctions that exist between them.*
- c. The reproduction of structured formal membership 'resources' (a consequence of structural qualities inherent in the social system) is important but the production of new*

⁴ See, for example, Hammersley (1992, pp.160-172), Silverman (2000, p.8), Glesne (1999, pp.4-6), and Swinton and Mowat (2006, pp.44-50).

⁵ The four orienting hypotheses outlined here arose out of initial reflection on early interview data as well as on theoretical and theological literature. For a fuller account of this process and the way in which the hypotheses took shape, see Appendix section 4.2.

understandings of membership and belonging (a consequence of reflexive social action) is likely to prove at least as important to the ongoing communicative construction of membership and belonging within the Baptist Union and its member churches.

d. The use of relational discourse, reflecting contextual factors, is more significant in the communicative construction of contemporary Baptist congregational communities than are historical or biblical discourses.

5.3 Analysis of the interview data

5.3.1 Introduction

The BUGB *Membership* research section *Bucking the Trend* demonstrates that a relational discourse of belonging was central to many people's experience of affiliating with a Baptist congregation.⁶ Whilst it can be shown that their data triangulates with the interview data presented here, what remained unclear was the manner in which the discourse of 'membership', 'belonging', and 'relationality' is used by members, attenders, and church leaders and the inter-related nature of the three discourses. The interview data presented here is an attempt to fill this gap in present understandings of how affiliates use and relate these various discourses. The interview data made it possible to compare the discourse of affiliates with the presence of denominational discourse in membership documents and covenantal discourse in theological texts.

On several occasions interviewees' disclosures included comments such as 'I've never thought about that before' or 'maybe we should change the way we do it here.' Giddens (1984, p.281) alerts social researchers to the nature of this type of enquiry and argues that posing a question to an interviewee may force an examination of practical consciousness. This results in a rationalisation of conduct which, in turn, leads to the discursive offering of reasons to the interviewer.

⁶ See above at pp.117-119 for a fuller account of the results of this survey.

5.3.2 Interpreting the interview data

Marjorie has been a regular adherent at her local Baptist church for almost two years. A greater involvement in the leadership of a women's group prompted her to seek formal membership of the church. She had been welcomed into membership just a few months prior to interviewing her. Investigating her experiences of becoming a member, the conversation proceeded as follows:

DRJ: ...did you feel that in any way, anything ...changed once you became an associate member from the moment that you had spent worshipping here regularly? Did anything change for you?

MAR: Not really, because I felt a member of this church, I'd been coming for quite a long time [...] I felt very much at home here. Um, I didn't really feel any different after becoming a member because, um, we felt it was like being family and you're already a family member, aren't you? Um, sort of having someone confirm it, like put their hand on you and say, 'Right now you are a member!' doesn't really, um, make much difference because you already [feel] the warmth, and the fellowship and the warmth was already there.⁷

Marjorie is a retired former missionary and was formally welcomed into membership by the senior minister, an occasion she describes as '...special, because you're just singled out and, and prayed for, which is rather nice.'⁸ However, the value of Marjorie's response lies in the complex, even paradoxical, overlay of meanings at work in her references to membership. The previous two years she had spent at the church, as an adherent, are formulated by her as being the same as membership, precisely because she feels no different following her formal reception into membership. Marjorie self-validates this sense of being a member with reference to her earlier experience; an experience of warmth and fellowship that is best described as belonging to a family, as being a family member.

Her answer reveals precisely the contours that shape the discussion in which we have to engage if we are to understand more clearly the contemporary discourses of 'membership', 'belonging', and 'relationality' as they are being used within Baptist

⁷ Transcript BBC1b, lines 65-72.

⁸ *Ibid*, line 64.

congregations. The discourse of 'membership' is frequently used with two quite distinctive meanings, illustrated so well by Marjorie. One of these, the 'primary' discourse, reflects the practice of membership commonly described in the church constitutions and rulebooks of our sample. The 'secondary' discourse appears on first reading to provide an alternative way of understanding membership. A more careful reading, however, suggests that the discourse of 'belonging' provides the real alternative to the primary discourse of membership. The secondary discourse of membership used by the sample of interviewees can only be fully explicated if understood to be *embedded within* the validating framework provided by the discourse of belonging. The discourse of belonging attenuates the manner in which the secondary membership discourse is used, as will be made clear below.

5.3.2.1 The primary discourse of membership

Unsurprisingly, the interview data draws attention to the formal processes by which a person becomes a formal member of a Baptist congregation. Their accounts are consistent with the characteristic description of reception into church membership that can be found in the sample of church membership documents.⁹ That sample contains examples of introductory materials that are intended to be given to individuals enquiring about membership.¹⁰ In the interviews, several people mentioned receiving introductory literature from the congregation; 'I was given the church members' introductory booklet.'¹¹ Some were required to attend preparation classes.¹² Typically the candidate for membership is then interviewed by the deacons or leaders of the

⁹ This process is outlined on pp.102-105.

¹⁰ Church Membership Documentation: Slough Baptist Church.

¹¹ Transcript EDBC5c, line 80.

¹² Transcript EDBC7c, line 158.

congregation¹³ and, after a vote at a church meeting, will be welcomed into membership at a Sunday service, normally a communion service.¹⁴

For some people, such as Kevin, this process demands that careful consideration be given to becoming a church member. Thinking carefully before becoming a member appears to have removed any sense of uncertainty that Kevin belonged to his church congregation;

DRJ: And in what sort of ways do you feel you benefit by being a member?

KEV: Well the main thing is that sense of belonging. You know. If you're a member, full stop, you can attend the meetings and you can become involved and I think that's good. Rather than being on the outside looking in, almost.

DRJ: Was there any sense of belonging before you went into membership...?

KEV: Not really, but it's the sort of thing, [...] being a new church, 'cause at the time you don't sort of jump in immediately, you want to be sort of fairly sure that you feel comfortable with the church you're in and that you are prepared to give it that commitment.¹⁵

Others pointed to the fact that membership not only relied upon a sense of being comfortable with the other members, but it also offered a sense of togetherness and support.¹⁶

Stephen is the minister of one of the four churches selected for the interviews. He acknowledges the stability that formal membership confers on some of the church members. At the same time he also points to an alternative discourse for understanding how people identify with the church community that he pastors;

STE: Baptist churches [...] have this [...] settled notion of membership and it has great strength in terms of giving churches stability and, um, giving the core of the church a sense of commitment to each other and ownership of what the church is doing. But the great weakness of it is that it might not actually reflect the whole of the group who feel a

¹³ Transcript BBC5, line 145.

¹⁴ Transcript BBC1, lines 55-58, BBC5, lines 51-56.

¹⁵ Transcript EDBC5c, lines 32-34.

¹⁶ Transcript BBC4b, lines 189 & 242.

very deep sense of belonging to the community that is [Name] Baptist Church.¹⁷

Stephen points to the possibility that a deep sense of belonging to a local Baptist community does not necessarily lead to an application for membership in every instance. He suggests that age might be correlated to this phenomenon; 'I think the younger people are, the less important it [membership] is.'¹⁸ Alistair, a twenty-two year old member from Stephen's church describes his personal struggle with becoming a member;

ALI: ...the following Sunday, I was given membership, um, it was part of something I didn't particularly agree with, this having a membership structure [...] I always struggled. I've got to grips with it now in the sense that I've just got used to it...¹⁹

He describes his being welcomed into membership as being 'given' membership but more significantly, it is clear that his struggle with the membership 'structure' is that it excludes some Sunday attenders who are very committed but cannot be members because they are not baptised according to a Baptist rite, and yet at the same time the membership includes some members who are less active than he feels is appropriate for members.²⁰ A similar point is echoed by others in the interview sample.²¹ The discourse of membership that is being described here rests upon a distinguishing diagnostic contained in the simple question, 'Have you been received into membership?' The individual who can reply, 'Yes!' to this question indicates a certain distinction of status. Membership distinguishes between the outside and the inside, the member and the non-member.

¹⁷ Transcript BBC6a, lines 348-352.

¹⁸ Transcript BBC6a, line 10.

¹⁹ Transcript BBC3b, lines 54-56.

²⁰ Transcript BBC3b, lines 56-64.

²¹ Transcript BBC4b, lines 137-139.

5.3.2.2 The primary discourse of belonging

Roger is involved in leadership within the Boys' Brigade attached to the Baptist church and is a regular worshipper on Sundays. However, unhappy experiences in two previous churches have left him unwilling to commit to membership in his current congregation, '...twice bitten, twice shy, I suppose, really. I, I'm not rushing into membership again.'²² His unwillingness to commit to membership reflects a certain desire to avoid relinquishing the control he has over his time commitments. When asked about the benefits of his decision, he responds with a note of humour, 'I've got more free time in the evening without going to members' meetings.'²³ However, despite this, he still describes his relationship with the congregation of the church in quite an intimate manner;

DRJ: And how does it work here, where you're involved in the 'Friends of [Name] Baptist Church'?

ROG: You feel accepted, it's great, um, there's nothing formal, you know, [...] all of a sudden [...] we're in there [the Church Handbook] as well. 'Hey, this is good.' It gives you a sense of belonging, [...] that I think is good. I think it's a good thing, from that point of view. Um, and for me it works, more probably than membership would.²⁴

Roger carefully locates 'belonging' within the domain of experience rather than in the domain of membership. This experiential sense of belonging is frequently nurtured by participation in small groups. Stephen, the minister, comments,

'So, for various reasons I think, um, people don't necessarily feel a sense of belonging to the institution but they do feel a sense of belonging to groups within it.'²⁵

His pastoral insight is matched by the frequent comments made by other interviewees.

George revealed that,

GEO: ...at my age, we were brought up to think of the church, as you know, that there building. Erm, but as I've gone on in life, you know,

²² Transcript BBC2b, line 34.

²³ *Ibid*, line 36.

²⁴ *Ibid*, lines 302-308.

²⁵ Transcript BBC6a, lines 62-63.

I've learnt to appreciate the fact that the church is not that there building. It's the people in it. And, I mean, it's the quality of the people in it as well that makes all the difference.

The other people who make up the congregation can make all the difference to this sense of belonging, often described theologically as fellowship. Joan suggested that '...there's got to be some kind of togetherness,' and '....fellowship is important.' Another member of that congregation, Helen, stressed the importance of mutuality in feeling wanted and being available to the others, particularly at the house-group,

HEL: I'm quite happy to worship God at home, alone, but it is nice to go and meet with other people and worship together. 'Cause you just get... it... it feels slightly different, doesn't it? You get something from each other and you give to each other as well.²⁶

Marjorie underlines this by commenting that, 'You belong to it and they belong to you and you know that there's a concern about you.'²⁷ Alistair develops the relational dimension of his sense of belonging and draws on domestic imagery to describe his sense of belonging,

ALI: I think I feel very supported. [...] You have this where you build relationships, [...] through activities in the church and that's made me feel very at home.²⁸

Alistair's reflection on the domestic nature of the congregation is given its fullest expression by the interviewees when they attempt to describe the way that they belong to it. Sam, a primary head-teacher in his early forties, is still in the process of moving towards becoming a member, although this does not prevent him from explaining that he already feels like he is a member, '...probably because of being a part of the church family.'²⁹ Alistair adds that '...it's supposed to feel like a family.'³⁰ Sally, a mother of two young boys, replies that she *sometimes* experiences church as a family. She emphasises the domestic and relational in her response,

²⁶ Transcript EDBC 3c, lines 183-185.

²⁷ Transcript BBC1b, line 128.

²⁸ Transcript BBC 3c, lines 39-43.

²⁹ Transcript EDBC4c, line 78.

³⁰ Transcript EDBC3d, line 135.

SAL: When I walk into church, I feel like I'm at home. It's all familiar, and I kind of, know people, and [...] relationships are important to me...³¹

Ruth has been attending her local congregation for many years although she is not a member. The attraction for her remains, despite her non-membership, the fact that the congregation is '...one big family.' She continues,

RUT: I value them for the people they are. [...] It was just a whole sense of being together, I think, you know, helping one another out, the things we organised.³²

Marjorie's emphasis upon the congregation as a family is further developed through her references to the church as a 'spiritual home', a place where she feels 'warmth', where she receives 'spiritual feeding', both on Sundays and in her house-group.³³

The sense of belonging to the local congregation as a consequence of strong relationships with others in the congregations is a consistent theme throughout the interview data. However, the prior relationship is that which is understood to exist between the individual and God, typically described as 'knowing the Lord' or 'being a Christian'. Marjorie places her relationship to God at the centre of her belonging,

MAR: I think belonging, knowing the Lord, is the first thing and that is the most important.³⁴

Responding to a question about the suitability of candidates for church involvement in her congregation, Sally points to the distinctive status that Christian faith confers on those who might claim to belong to the congregation;

DRJ: What kind of people do you think would, in principle, be unsuitable to become part of this body?

SAL: Well, the obvious one is that really, they ought to have some kind of Christian faith that is being practised.³⁵

³¹ Transcript KRBC2 (28'20'' – 29'05'')

³² Transcript LBC2 (6'45''-8'19'')

³³ Transcript BBC1b, lines 68-72, 78-80, 127-130, and BBC1c, line 24.

³⁴ Transcript BBC1b, lines 158-159.

³⁵ Transcript KRBC2, (11'06''-11'36'')

The expectation that others will share the Christian faith of those who are already members is underlined by Roger's response to a careful probing of his reasons for attending a Baptist church,

ROG: The fact that I go to a Baptist church is almost coincidental to the fact that I'm a Christian.³⁶

The widespread manner in which this is reported points to the essentially evangelical nature of the greater majority of Baptist congregations in the United Kingdom, already outlined above (pp.48-55). George, referring to the numerous churches that he and his family have attended prior to the current Baptist congregation, reported that 'They were mainly either evangelical or charismatic, or a mixture of the two.'³⁷

George's minister, David, sums up for the whole of his membership in the following way,

DAV: I think that the majority would say that they were Christian. Um, most of them, if they were to use theological language, would probably identify with evangelicalism. Um, I think it would be fair to say that the very strong majority of the church would be basically evangelical.³⁸

The evangelical emphasis on conversionism places a personal relationship with Christ at the centre of evangelical experience and spirituality.³⁹ This relationship appears to be paradigmatic for the relationships of fellowship that are then assumed to be at the heart of the experience of belonging to the church congregation and its small groups; 'Christ is the link whatever church you're at. Christ is the link.'⁴⁰ Yet, in practice, this was not quite enough for some of the interviewees. For them, belonging was perceived to rely upon more than being in relationship with Christ; it also depended upon being in close relationship to others in the congregation. Sally's congregation

³⁶ Transcript BBC2b, lines 222-231.

³⁷ Transcript EDBC1c, lines 12-13.

³⁸ Transcript EDBC7c, lines 57-65.

³⁹ See Bebbington (1989, pp.5-10) for a full discussion of the so-called 'Bebbington quadrilateral', a short-hand way of referring to what he considers the essential elements of evangelicalism; conversionism, activism, Biblicism and crucicentrism.

⁴⁰ Transcript BBC1c, lines 22-23.

abandoned its formal membership scheme four years ago as part of its attempts to reduce the insider-outsider distinctions. Conscious of this, she nevertheless attempted to articulate a concept of 'core' and 'edge' as she referred to a hypothetical case where a couple might be considered to be 'on the edge' of the congregation. She framed this with reference to the limited amount of time they seemed willing to invest in becoming involved in the network of relationships that exists within the congregation;

SAL: I know that people who are on the edge, if you like, [...] there's probably a reason why they're on the edge anyway, which could potentially pull them in, but could potentially push them out.

DRJ: ...Your language, 'On the edge' suggests they're on the edge of something, which is this group of people that you call [*name of church*] and then there are people outside of that who are the community. But membership isn't the edge, in a sense it's this network of relationships...

SAL: Yes I can think of quite a few people who often come every week [...] on a Sunday morning but they sit at the back and as soon as the service is finished they leave. So., there's never that opportunity to talk to them. [...] they're kind of there, but they're not members because they're not involved [...] they dabble...⁴¹

Sally's husband, Richard, believes that the size of their congregation, varying between 120-150 regular worshippers, militates against him feeling that he either belongs there or that it functions in any sense as a family. In fact he suggested that the implicit recruitment slogan of the church, of which he was a deacon, might best be summed up as an encouragement to be involved rather than to belong.⁴² Despite his misgivings, when asked to describe what he believes the alternative to be, he offers the following:

RIC: ...accountability [...] you have to get that through a group of fellow believers somehow, [...] I wouldn't see it as institution centered [...] I would want that accountability to be peer accountability, rather than a structural accountability. So, between a group of people who are on the faith journey together. A regular, weekly peer accountability can only be done on a small scale. I think it's primarily that..., what I see in Scripture, both in the Old Testament, even with the formality of

⁴¹ Transcript KRBC2 (22'30-25'12'')

⁴² Transcript KRBC1 (8'35''-9'15'')

the Law, I think you see a very holistic relationship centered interaction with God. In the New Testament you see a very strong relationship model in the gospels and in the early church. [...] It's about, once you get big, you can't actually relate meaningfully...⁴³

Richard seeks mutual accountability located in a highly relational and small group of journeying believers. His frustrations with the current experience of church find their counterpoint in his imagined alternative; an alternative that the early Baptists from Porton Down might well have articulated in different (covenantal) language but one towards which they aspired in equal measure.

Richard's response appears to negate the thesis of this dissertation that interviewees consistently use a discourse of belonging in preference to using a discourse of membership. Nevertheless, it is maintained that his response actually points to a failure of the church Richard attends to deliver the relational accountability that, in reality, he longs for. One needs only to hypothesise that perhaps the other individuals who belong to his congregation are content with a lower threshold of belonging.

Summing up, the alternative discourse that has been described rests upon a distinguishing diagnostic contained in the multi-layered question, 'Do you know the Lord and do you feel you know us?' The individual who can reply 'Yes!' to this question indicates a certain distinction of status. Belonging distinguishes between the inside and the outside, between the network of relationships that carry the sense of belonging and those beyond its reach.

5.3.2.3 The secondary discourse of membership and the validating framework of 'belonging'

Adherents and members of Baptist churches who emphasise the discourse of belonging rather than the primary discourse of membership do, as a matter of fact, use a discourse of membership. This is referred to as a secondary discourse of membership, not because it is less important but because one must firstly refer to the primary discourse of belonging before it is possible to fully understand how this

⁴³ Transcript KRBC1, lines 6-19.

secondary discourse is being used. One might consider describing this secondary discourse as a transposition of membership discourse. It is membership that has been attenuated by its being embedded in a matrix of meaning whose primary frame of reference is provided by the discourse of belonging. Interview data is presented here in the attempt to support this claim.

To return to Marjorie, we have already seen that although she was formally welcomed into membership of her church congregation, she considered herself to have already been a member: 'I felt a member of this church.' (BBC1b, line 65.) She is far from alone in this respect. Joan expresses it equally forcefully,

JOA: I don't think you need to show that you are willing to be part of the church by [...] being a member, as such, and I can't find it anywhere where it says you have to sign on the dotted line, in the Bible. [...] I suppose it's, no... I just don't feel the need to be a..., what difference does it make to be a member as against a non-member? 'Cos I am a member, basically.

DRJ: In what sense would you say that you are a member?

JOA: Because I'm involved in the church [...] and interested in what it does and where it's going... so... I would have thought that's the same idea as... I mean even someone that's signed the membership...⁴⁴

Sam adds to this his own sense of being a member,

SAM: I feel I'm a member, probably because of being a part of the church family, knowing lots of people and being heavily involved with the children's' ministry and the music as I have been. [...] I've been asked by people, 'Would you consider doing this? Would you consider doing that?' and I think they must feel I'm part of the church, which helps me to feel more, part of the church membership...⁴⁵

Ruth has been a regular adherent for the previous five years, is not a member, but cannot make any distinction between this status and that of being a formal member,

DRJ: Can you possibly imagine feeling a deeper sense of belonging if you were a member?

RUT: No, I don't think it would make any difference to me [...] because I wouldn't feel any different, being made a member, because

⁴⁴ Transcript EDBC3c, lines 57-66.

⁴⁵ Transcript EDBC4c, lines 78-84.

as far as I'm concerned, I am a member. [...] I can't imagine feeling any more belonging than I already do.⁴⁶

Sam, Marjorie, Ruth and Joan locate their 'felt memberships' in the immediate context of the local congregation. Roger, in contrast, derives his sense of 'felt membership' from his theological understanding of being a member in the universal body of Christ which motivates his involvement 'possibly to a greater extent than some church members...'⁴⁷ Ruth's sense that she is already a member relies upon a deep feeling of belonging. It is precisely her sense of belonging that enables her to state without any hesitation that she *is* a member. It can be concluded from this and similar expressions of 'felt membership' that it is the sense of belonging that validates the use of membership discourse in this attenuated form; as though a traditional theme of Baptist ecclesiology was being transposed from a major to a minor key. It is very difficult, in practice, to distinguish between the sense of belonging felt by those who have been received formally into membership and the sense of belonging felt by those who are regular adherents. Stephen, minister of one of the churches, makes precisely this point in referring to the inadequacy of formal membership in that '...it might not actually reflect the whole of the group who feel a very deep sense of belonging to the community...'⁴⁸

Accompanying this inability, or unwillingness, to distinguish the quality of belonging felt by members and attenders respectively is the tendency to use discourse that reduces the distinctions that might be made between members and adherents in other ways. Attenders use the discourse as frequently as do the members. Marjorie, a member, suggests that the spiritual status of an individual is more important than the fact of being a church member,

⁴⁶ Transcript LBC2, lines 11-13.

⁴⁷ Transcript BBCb, lines 38-39.

⁴⁸ Transcript BBC6a, line 352.

MAR: ...you put someone off really by just saying, 'Would you become a member?' you know, because I don't think that is as important as where they are before the Lord.⁴⁹

Another form of distinction-reduction discourse contrasts the less than fully perfected lifestyle of the church member with the greater devotion of the non-member,

JOA: ...you can have members who are [...] carnal Christians who are not giving [...] and you can get somebody who isn't a member but who has, mm, a great spiritual strength...⁵⁰

This perspective from a life-long Baptist member merely mirrors that of an adherent in the same congregation, Helen, who points to the level of her involvement, despite being a non-member;

HEL: I'm in the music group. We obviously pray for [*the pastor and his wife*] and all that that entails and whatever else is going on, we try and get involved in it as much as possible,'

and then concludes her reflection with the comment:

HEL: ...no more or any less than whether we were members.⁵¹

Yet another form of distinction-reduction discourse can be seen in the manner in which formal membership is referred to as little more than signing on the dotted line; a paper exercise only. 'You can be just as committed, I feel, whether you've signed on the dotted line or not.'⁵² Greg, a long-standing member of his tightly-knit congregation, uses the discourse of regulation to describe membership and then relativises it by suggesting that 'being governed by a set of rules' is less important than 'being in relationship with Jesus'.⁵³

In some situations it suits the congregation, and its leadership, not to enquire too deeply into the status of those who attend. Alistair states,

⁴⁹ Transcript BBC1b, lines 167-168.

⁵⁰ Transcript EDBC2c, lines 254-256.

⁵¹ Transcript EDBC3c, lines 105-107.

⁵² Transcript EDBC3c, line 67.

⁵³ Transcript LBC3, line 3-4.

ALI: I'm pretty sure that you could ask a cross-section of the church about who was a member and who wasn't and no-one would really know, purely because there are a lot of people who don't have membership but have been there for such a long time.⁵⁴

He is not unique in his congregation. Stephen his minister adds his own observation that 'I actually don't know who is and who isn't a member.'⁵⁵ This congregation is also reasonably typical of many which have begun to canvass the views of non-members before taking a significant decision in the life of the church to a meeting of the Church members; such as appointing a new minister. Roger adds that,

ROG: I often weigh up and think, 'Well what am I missing out on?' Okay, I can't vote, but, you know, [...] people seem to still ask me my opinion from time to time, [...] I think it's a good way of doing it and, um, almost more than becoming a full-blown church member...⁵⁶

This approach is encouraged by Stephen, who insists that this

STE: ...process will feed into the discussion that we are having [...] members and non-members, members and attending friends. So in that sense those people will be having an involvement in the discussion about what we do with the church. Out of this whole process we are..., as well as of another process of change in the way that the leadership functions..., we've got a communications group that is looking at the way we talk to each other, basically, in our informal ways, and part of its remit is to see if we can include the widest possible number of people in determining how we move forward.⁵⁷

David, minister of another congregation, notes with a degree of pragmatic realism that,

DAV: I think that for a number of our people who've come into membership in the last few years, membership is seen as a sign of identification with the local church and its, um, its vision, its mission, but it's not seen in a sort of structural sense. [...] Many would adopt the basis that, 'Yes. We'll become members of the church and we will support it completely, but as far as we're concerned we'll leave the minister and elders and deacons to make the decisions and tell us what it's wanting us to do', rather than seeing any need to be directly involved.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Transcript BBC3c, lines 85-86.

⁵⁵ Transcript BBC6a, line 102.

⁵⁶ Transcript BBC2b, lines 311-315.

⁵⁷ Transcript BBC6a, lines 327-333.

5.4 Interim conclusions

The primary discourse of membership was principally a means of distinguishing between 'insiders' and 'outsiders' and establishing a 'Baptist – non-Baptist' duality. In its original usage within the discourse of covenant, it signified not only an ecclesial distinction but it also marked varying levels of rupture with the prevailing cultural, social, and political expectations of seventeenth-century England.

In its principal usage within the demotic discourse, membership is chiefly a means of distinguishing between two types of 'insider'. The duality now is that of the 'Member – member'. In other words, there are now Members (who can vote, attend members' meetings, and help 'run the Church') and there are members (who are not formally members, cannot vote at members' meetings, yet feel a deep sense of belonging and who, in many instances, feel that they *are* members, and in some instances may be allowed to attend members' meeting though without being able to vote). Wright's (2002, pp.79-80) distinction of 'covenantal' from 'communal' membership supports this analysis.

The cumulative effect of these various forms of distinction-reduction discourse is to suggest a secondary discourse of membership validated by a discourse of belonging that rests upon a distinguishing diagnostic contained in the question, 'Can you vote at a church meeting?' Answering, 'No!' to this question may not indicate any sense of not belonging and the Member may now be voting conscious of attenders who belong to the church but who do not wish to 'make the decisions'.⁵⁹ The outsider is now essentially the person who exists beyond the reach of the relational networks in which church 'belongers' thrive.

Further reflections on the interview data are in order which set our analysis of the discourse of membership and belonging within the wider demotic discourse by paying

⁵⁸ Transcript EDBC6c, lines 194-199.

⁵⁹ Transcript EDBC7c, line 197-199.

particular attention to the *nature* and *context* of this discourse, arguing for a relationship between *what* is said in the discourse of membership and belonging and *why* the discourse is shaped in the way that it is. This is the focus for what follows in Chapter six.

**PART THREE: THE FUTURES OF MEMBERSHIP AND
BELONGING**

Chapter Six: The nature of the demotic discourse

6.1 Four emergent lines of analysis

Reviewing the compiled data from the previous chapter led to a key question, 'To what can the emergence of a discourse of membership that is validated with reference to the experience of belonging be explained?' The theoretical concepts, or 'meta-codes', offered here are intended to suggest an analytical framework arising out of the interview data. In particular they reflect and build upon the 'clustering' of coding sequences within each of the pattern coding units.¹ Taken together, they make claims about the nature of the demotic discourse and its internal relationships.

6.2 Experientially-validated subjectivity

The manner in which several interviewees linked the 'leading of the Lord' with their decision-making processes reveals a tendency toward subjectivism within Baptist spirituality.² Roger, for example, has benefited from moving to his Church, leading him to interpret his decision to move there as the call of the Lord,

ROG: I feel the Lord's called me there because as I've seen, I've obviously had work to do for him there and as a consequence of going to that particular church there, I've been blessed, taught, built up...³

A majority of the interviewees was comfortable talking about being 'led by' or 'spoken to' by 'the Lord' to take a particular course of action; for example, to start attending this or that particular church. Their subjective experiences of divine interaction justified, or

¹ See *Table 2: Discourse codes and pattern coding units* on p.250 of Appendix Four below for further discussion of the way that the meta-codes were deduced from the transcripts.

² The pietistic followers of Phillip Spener (1635-1705) were, according to Brown (1988, p.516), accused by critics of 'a subjectivism which exalts self above God and derives religious norms from the experience of and needs of persons.'

³ Transcript BBC2b, lines 231-232.

validated, the decisions that they had made: 'We're talking about an individual one-to-one relationship with God. [...] It's between you and God.'⁴

Tim and his family have recently moved to a Baptist church after a long spell in leadership of an independent charismatic fellowship. He is waiting for the Lord to show them where he will lead next; into membership or to another church? As with many of the interviewees, discerning the Lord's 'leading' is surprisingly secular:

DRJ: How important has prayer been in that whole process of finding the place to go?

TIM: Well, probably a very unspiritual answer, but [pause] probably not a lot at the moment. Um, I mean I think that we, we originally came to [Name] Baptist because one of my son's friends, his, his family goes...⁵

Tim is aware that this answer may be unsatisfactory though it is disarmingly honest. George says that he and his wife were 'moved on by the Lord' and had consequently to choose a new church;

GEO: I'm not saying that it was, erm, blatant that the Lord blinded our eyes to the other place... nothing wrong with the other place but it was the wrong side of town for us...⁶

Whilst several of the interviewees believed that they had been 'led by the Lord' to their current Baptist church, not one expressed the view that the Lord had led them into church membership. George refers to several instances where he believes the Lord has spoken to him directly: 'And these things have, looking back afterwards... See how right that word from the Lord was.'⁷

Hindsight and the sheer convenience of the 'right' decision, it seems, often provide the validation required for the individual's sense that God has been leading directly. It also reinforces the sense of having a direct line to the mind of God and a sense of personal freedom and autonomy. Individuals thus convinced, brook relatively little interference

⁴ Transcript BBC2c, lines 21-23.

⁵ Transcript BBC4b, lines 172-173.

⁶ Transcript BBC1c, lines 199-200.

⁷ Transcript EDBC1c, lines 80-84.

from other perceived authorities, particularly the church and its leadership. George underlines this sense of resentment at other authority figures attempting to displace the Lord:

GEO: ...one thing I've found difficult, erm, in my Christian life is that too many Christians in, perhaps time past [...] have tried to make me into their mould.⁸

Helen embellishes her individualism with a hint of rebellion;

HEL: Well, if they want to give in a different way, that... that's up to them, isn't it? Um, it's just that I feel that's for me. [...] And I've... yes, I feel it might also be a bit to do with rebellion...⁹

Kevin appreciates the freedom he finds in the Baptist church,¹⁰ and Alistair refers to the other members and church leaders by pointing out that 'they don't actually have any control over the way I behave, [...] Because at the end of the day we're all individuals...'¹¹ Stephen, the minister at Alistair's church sums this up in the following way:

STE: I think we're struggling with a culture that's just very individualistic [...] It's all about me and my relationship with Jesus. Me and my gift. Me and my ministry. [...] one of the implications is that I will see my relationship with God as very personal and very individualistic and really having not a lot to do with the church.¹²

This type of individualism also affects the way that the biblical text is read. David, another minister, cites with approval the action of a recently arrived member of his congregation who '...started reading her Bible and, um, discovered that God was speaking to her through it.'¹³

The relatively infrequent appearance of biblical discourse during the course of the interviews means that examples such as that above are all the more significant. This

⁸ Transcript EDBC1c, lines 132-133.

⁹ Transcript EDBC3d, lines 31-36.

¹⁰ Transcript EDBC5d, lines 27-32.

¹¹ Transcript BBC 3b, lines 199-203.

¹² Transcript BBC6a, lines 161-182.

¹³ Transcript EDBC7c, lines 96-98.

way of reading the Bible has been characteristic of charismatic renewal and was always an element within popular evangelicalism (particularly in the Plymouth Brethren background of interviewees such as George). It emphasises the immediate communication of God to the believer through the text, often interpreted to be 'prophetic', and underplays the contribution that the biblical text can make to forms of theological and doctrinal construction. This may partly help to explain the difficulty that many interviewees had in responding to questions about biblical imagery and themes. When the following question was put to Roger, his reply turns into an exposition of a *song* drawn from the renewal tradition of the early 1980s;¹⁴

DRJ: What would you say for you were the most helpful images and phrases that you would call to mind to describe the church?

ROG: A body. As simple as that. It's, um, oh, it's like that song, 'An army of ordinary people'. We're just ordinary people but the fact of the matter is that we've all now got eternal life...¹⁵

Where biblical discourse is used, it has been effectively and largely dis-embedded from its original context. Consequently its interpretation is largely individualistic, emphasises immediacy of application, and is framed with reference to notions of freedom, the spiritual growth of the individual, and relationship. Taken together, they imply the transcendence of formalism. Some interviewees make this more explicit;

HEL: I can't find it anywhere where it says you have to sign on the dotted line, in the Bible. Baptist churches aren't as bad as some, but sometimes with their rules and regulations you wonder, 'Where's that in the Bible then? Where's it say that?'¹⁶

And,

ROG:...if someone tried that, show me a biblical warrant for it. You know, if it's not in the Bible, then why are trying to do it?¹⁷

It is precisely those individualistic traits of piety and freedom contributing to an awareness of the need for *personal* conversion that tend to undermine efforts on the

¹⁴ *An Army of Ordinary People* by Dave Bilborough (1983).

¹⁵ Transcript BBC2c, lines 321-326.

¹⁶ Transcript EDBC3c, lines 57-59.

part of Church leaders to develop a sense of community within their church congregations.¹⁸ Stephen suggests that the sense of ‘belonging’ felt by members and adherents may reflect an individualistic desire to benefit personally from the sense of belonging rather than it reflecting a desire to see the other ‘belongers’ benefit. Participation and involvement are generally mentioned as ‘helping me to feel that I belong’ (or ‘feel a member’) rather than ‘helping or serving others’;

STE: ...people have a sense of belonging to church in a way that it's about what church is doing for them and their relationship with God. It helps me to stay close to God to be with this group of people...¹⁹

It should not be surprising, therefore, to discover that experientially-validated individualism can equip an individual adherent to declare themselves to be a member because they *feel* a sense of belonging and therefore they *feel* they are a member. They have trusted their feelings before, God has not let them down, and so they can trust their feelings in this respect.

6.3 Post-denominationally conceived identity

Experience is remarkably portable. As a commodity it can confer immediate value and validity on a congregation that has been recently arrived at by new adherents. Most of those interviewed spoke of feeling at home in, or identifying with, a broadly evangelical or charismatic context. The commonalities of worship style, spirituality, and theological emphases that are shared by such churches make it easy for a person to identify with any one of these local congregations, irrespective of its denominational affiliation. Denominational distinctions have been largely eroded in a post-denominational period and barriers to denominational switching are barely noticeable. David suggests that,

DAV: ...it's quite hard to say to somebody who's come from, say, a committed evangelical Anglican church, um, 'Of course, that's all very

¹⁷ Transcript BBC2b, lines 210-211.

¹⁸ The discourse of individual freedom has a counterpart in the North American Baptist concept of ‘soul competency’, outlined by Norman (2005, pp.156-163).

¹⁹ Transcript BBC6a, lines 180-182.

well, but... this is the real church now and we expect you to change drastically.²⁰

However, this inclusive policy of ecumenical welcome carries its own tensions, hinted at by Stephen:

STE: ...people from Anglican backgrounds view membership very differently to people from Baptist backgrounds. [and] people from new church backgrounds where there has been no particular tradition of membership.²¹

Alistair notes his struggle with his church where people are,

ALI: ...involved in the church wholeheartedly, doing so much, but then because they weren't baptised, they couldn't become a member, [...] because they [...] had an Anglican baptism.²²

Rebecca has been at her Baptist church for two years but has only just begun to feel that she is settling in. She feels able to say that she goes to a Baptist church but is not sure what distinguishes it as a Baptist church from any of the other evangelical churches she has attended. She is very clear that her identity is principally 'Christian'. Referring to other denominations she describes the edges as 'blurred'.²³

Greg and Ruth describe themselves as 'baptistic' although not necessarily 'Baptist'. They have encountered this feature of Baptist churches in other denominations that they have attended and see the practice of believers' baptism to be more important than the label 'Baptist'.²⁴ Roger is reluctant to be labelled as a 'Baptist';

ROG: I'm one of these guys who goes to a Baptist church [...] but it doesn't mean I'm a Baptist [*laughs*], I'm a Christian first, um, the fact that I go to a Baptist church is very secondary and it's a long way down secondary as well.²⁵

This common response reveals a post-denominational identity that has either consciously or unconsciously deconstructed what it means to be a Baptist, derived

²⁰ Transcript EDBC7c, lines 79-81.

²¹ Transcript BBC6a, lines 79-81.

²² Transcript BBC3b, lines 56-59.

²³ Transcript KRBC4, (42'35"-47'20").

²⁴ Transcript LBC3 (38'15"-39'15"), Transcript LBC2 (49'00"-50'30").

from the normative theological understanding of being 'in Christ' or a 'Christian'. When true Christians are discovered in a bewildering range of church traditions, and many former members and adherents of other traditions are represented among the members and adherents of a typical Baptist church, it is hardly surprising that there is no consistent or common discourse of belonging or membership. The limited consensus that has emerged so far is that of a Christian identity rooted in the experience of belonging to a Christian family, an experience that promises a reward in direct proportion to the depth of belonging one feels in common with the congregation, its members, and its adherents.

6.4 De-structured relationality

The dominance of family discourse in the interview data suggests that a careful investigation of this feature is in order. Stephen makes the careful observation that church membership is

STE: ...a structured relationship between people. So it's not just that these people happen to inhabit the same space on occasions. But it is that there is a structure to the relationship between these people. We are in some senses accountable to each other. We are in some senses responsible for and to each other. [...] I wrote something along those lines reflecting on a few New Testament passages and saying this is what is happening when you are joining a Baptist church.²⁶

Within the structured relationships there would then be an appropriate place for authority figures; the minister, elders, and deacons, for example. Stephen argues that there is a particularly 'churchly' way for its members collectively to inhabit the same occasional space. It should be noted that it is also possible for the members of an extended family collectively to occupy occasional space in a similar manner. However, the relationships that exist between church members take shape in quite a different way than between members of the human family. Family hierarchies do not rely upon formal investiture to a position of authority. Decisions within the extended family are

²⁵ Transcript BBC2b, lines 222-224.

²⁶ Transcript BBC6a, lines 107-115.

far less likely to be mediated from a central authority and because they are informally arrived at, there is no *formal* means of applying censure for deviant behaviour.

Ruth speaks enthusiastically of the church she attends as an adherent;

RUT: You can talk to all of them. At the end of the day we're all one big family. And I think that's how I feel about [Name of Church]. Just what I think of them of, I value for them for the people they are. I mean they are still all individuals, aren't they?²⁷

Her sense of being 'one big happy family' is shared by Greg, a member, who describes the same congregation as 'warm', 'loving', and, 'like home, a spiritual home'.²⁸ The metaphor of the 'one big happy family' is quite distinct from the metaphor of the church as a body, each part with its place and function, directed by the head (1 Corinthians 12:12-27). It is quite difficult to perceive immediately the form and nature of the inter-relatedness of the first metaphor, however tangible the feelings it evokes. The body metaphor, in contrast, requires one to attribute co-ordination to it in order for it to be imagined functioning properly. The first metaphor is de-structured, the second is structured. The de-structured nature of Ruth's discourse is revealed by her giveaway at the end, '...they are all still individuals, aren't they?' Presumably if they are still individuals, they can relate within the family unit in an ever-fluid sequence of one-to-one relationships. One week they listen carefully to the authoritative suggestions of uncle about car maintenance, the next they draw on grandmother's experience of plucking chickens. In this scenario, relationality is purely functional and according to need. If the church is conceived as a body, relationality becomes more ontological and the mutuality of relationship is deepened through the reciprocal action and reaction of obligation and service. In short, the relationships have structural qualities.

The discourse of the extended family that is used by some adherents and members makes it much easier to dismiss the importance of wider Baptist sources and

²⁷ Transcript LBC2, lines 5-8.

²⁸ Transcript LBC2, lines 4-5.

'authorities'. Where these are other individuals, a regional minister for example, they are simply not recognised as family members. The best they can ever be are visitors or guests to the 'home'.

Families do not require a written text to constitute them. Where there are historical traditions, texts, or published Baptist Union resources, their immediate relevance is not often acknowledged. Families are biologically composed. In the interviews, nobody considered the church constitution to be important for the individual's sense of belonging. It was typically dismissed as unimportant, as nothing more than a 'set of rules' that were helpful when the annual general meeting came around. This might be seen as not only an example of de-structured relationality, but as an example of de-centred relationality.

The discourse of the family serves the purpose of preparing adherents and members for a form of belonging that justifies the giving of priority to individual comfort and security;

HEL: ...it feels like a place of peace [pause] and you feel safe and comfortable there [pause] ...trying to think... I think that to feel comfortable in a situation is a big thing, 'cause otherwise you're not relaxing and you can't worship God.²⁹

Helen's minister, David, reveals that he understands her motivation quite clearly;

DAV: ...we tend to find that the majority of people who come into the church fellowship, let alone membership, um, they don't necessarily come with denominational tags attached. They would approach it on the basis of, 'Is this a church of which we could belong with comfort?'³⁰

De-structured relationality will inevitably tend to erase any distinctions between the two categories of adherence and membership. In some instances this has meant having to use constitutional resources to formulate constitutional language that permits 'associate' membership or allows one to become a 'Friend' of the local

²⁹ Transcript EDBC3c, lines 154-156.

³⁰ Transcript EDBC7c, lines 64-65.

congregation where formal membership would otherwise require baptism by immersion.

This dilemma was faced by one of the churches in the sample and led to it abandoning the concept of formal membership. Legal and constitutional necessities dictate that the governance of the church has to remain essentially congregational for it to remain a church in membership of the Baptist Union. With no formal membership to debate and process key decisions in the life of the church, an alternative method of assessing who may take part in the debate and decision-making processes was required. Qualifying for participation at this level now relies upon being regularly involved in various activities and meetings of the church.

Conrad (1988) recorded and analysed the discourse used at church meetings in six Baptist churches in the United States. He noted five recurring themes in their discourse, the second of which described the congregation metaphorically as ‘an extended family of believers’. The unintended consequence of this discourse was that the members urged the church meeting to make its decisions in the same way that their own families would make decisions. Consequently, as Conrad (1988, p.350) notes, ‘the theme transformed the context for the decision from the church, in which the pastor held a dominant formal role, to the home in which the member was dominant.’ In practice, where responsibility for a building, finances, and other significant legal issues fall upon a group of Christians, it is decidedly difficult to function solely as a family, however compelling and authentic the vision seems.

6.5 Practical immediacy

Joan helps to lead a home Bible study and prayer group to which a family has become attached after their arrival in the village.

JOA: ...we've got this fellow [...] who's started coming to us [...] with a Pentecostal background [...] and his wife goes with their two little boys to St. Leonard's, but they were all there yesterday morning. [...] Now I would think that probably in the Lord's wonderful way,[...], he's getting to the point of really feeling a part of the fellowship and I imagine that he will be questioning, ... membership, although it hasn't really been,

mm, you know, he's in the early enough stages of being here, one to two years, to really push on that point.³¹

There is never any doubt in Joan's mind that Pentecostals and Anglicans are Christians in more or less the same way that she is; a life-long Baptist. They have been baptised as believers, participate regularly in the weekly Bible study and prayer home group, and are beginning to feel a part of the 'fellowship'. Joan assumes that the husband will become a formal member in the near future. The co-presence of non-Baptist Christians in the same social space was never seen as problematic. If Joan's male home-group attendee decided not to become a member, it is inconceivable that Joan would disbar him from group activity. If she was unable to lead and he was available, she would feel no anxiety about asking him to lead. His status as a non-member is not a problem because leadership is understood to be principally a question of *charism*, or gifting, rather than it being a component of structure or hierarchy.

For many of the interviewees, the immediacy and co-presence of non-Baptist Christians had forced a re-configuration of their practical theologies of affiliation.³² Joan's gradual accommodation to her Pentecostal friend is neither totally free nor totally constrained, but it *is* contextually determined.

In advancing a theory of 'practical immediacy' the attempt is made to place the focus upon individuals currently affiliated with Baptist congregations who have arrived from a wide range of denominational backgrounds. Whether they become members or opt for regular adherence, they and the existing members who make them welcome are not free in the majority of cases to abandon the Baptist practice of church membership.

³¹ Transcript EDBC2c, lines 130-142.

³² In using the term 'practical' a cue is taken from Giddens (1984) who uses it when describing the individual (or 'agent') who is situated in time and space, in other words within a social structure. In applying 'practical' as an adjective of 'immediacy' the suggestion is being made that members and adherents of Baptist churches act tacitly in the encounter with Christians from other traditions and, as Giddens (1979, p.55) might phrase it, monitor their own responses as a continuous flow of conduct rather than as a series of discrete acts. Giddens wishes to avoid purely psychological accounts of human motivation as well as purely pragmatic accounts.

Neither are they shackled by the requirement to apply it rigidly. In many instances, congregations have arrived at a rational accommodation between inherited membership practices and the co-presence of non-Baptists. Structured responses have included the introduction of 'associate' and 'non-voting' memberships or the category of 'Friends of the Church'. De-structured responses include the adoption of strategies and discourses, already discussed immediately above, which reduce the distinction between members and adherents and which expect the discourse of membership to be validated with reference to a discourse of belonging. Giddens would describe these actions as the 'reflexive activity' of knowledgeable agents. Tucker (1998, p.80) summarises this in the following way,

Because Giddens sees social activities as continually recreated by peoples' actions which then serve as the very means by which they express themselves, he argues that people invariably develop knowledge about why they engage in particular practices.

The interview data makes it quite clear that the knowledge developed by the interviewees is developed in a highly immediate and contextual fashion; here Giddens is surely correct to stress the importance of the social setting. The interviewees tended to de-contextualise their previous experience in other denominations and apply what they had learnt from those experiences to their new Baptist context. The high level of switching between churches that are evangelical and/or charismatic appears to be negotiated by the interviewees with reference to forms of pan-evangelical identity and tolerance that effectively reduces the ontological insecurity that they might otherwise feel as a consequence of the co-presence of non-Baptist congregants. This sense of evangelical family identity has in turn led to the structured and de-structured accommodations regarding membership and belonging mentioned above. Giddens argues that the effort to alleviate ontological insecurity is channelled into developing coping strategies, an activity that he describes as 'routinisation'.

One of the sampled churches was selected in the full awareness that it had abandoned its membership programme. In the period during which the interviews were conducted, there remained some confusion about who could be considered to be

a part of the church; about who was responsible for it. Rebecca expressed her uncertainty about whether she counts as a member or not, although she has attended regularly for two years,

REB: I'm very conscious that church leaders need the support of the membership, but we're in that position, we don't really know whether we are...³³

Her individual sense of ontological security was echoed by others in that congregation, including Simon and Harry. Harry had been a member before the scheme was abandoned and misses the benefits of formally interviewing prospective members and then welcoming them into church membership at a Sunday communion service. These included knowing who the members were (and conversely who the non-members were) as well as the very practical and public step of introducing the new people to the other members of the congregation.³⁴

The practical immediacy that has contributed to new discourses of membership and belonging is unconcerned with historical Baptist resources and shows little interest in Baptist resources developed in other places. For many interviewees, these resources are not a part of their Christian story, their individual or their collective memory, and there appears to be little energy on the part of those who are aware of these resources to point others to them. David clearly understands Baptist ecclesiology but does not think his members want, or need, to know;

DAV: I think for a number of people there is willingness to embrace, or be part of the local fellowship, but there are some who find belonging to a denomination, even one which is a union of churches like the Baptist Union.... To be quite honest, that is, for most people, splitting hairs far too finely. They do not make a distinction between a union of churches and a Denomination, and I'm not sure we should equip them to.³⁵

³³ Transcript KRBC4, lines 1-2.

³⁴ Transcript KRBC3, (22'50"-23'50").

³⁵ Transcript EDBC7c, lines 295-298.

Stephen, in response to a question, echoes a similar sentiment when he rejects the notion that he, as a minister accredited by the Baptist Union, is a guardian of Baptist denominationalism;

DRJ: So how far do you feel yourself to be of guardian of some kind of denominational tradition regarding membership?

STE: I don't really. I don't feel myself to be a guardian of a denominational tradition. Um, I do think that there are strengths to the way that Baptists have historically done things that it would be a pity for us not to continue.³⁶

David suggests that the attraction of his church to adherents and new members is the fact that it provides a place where fellowship can be experienced for Christians who live locally and Stephen underlines the value of the practices that Baptists have managed to hold on to. Both are cautious of denominational discourse and what it implies. Both seem aware that it has little resonance for their congregational members and adherents who derive greater meaning from the immediacy of encountering others in the course of Sunday and mid-week fellowship.

6.6 Interim conclusions

This field research chapter has been informed by earlier theological and empirical reflection on the nature of Baptist church membership. However, at a number of points it became clear that the data diverged significantly from the assumptions made by others. The most obvious of these has been the distance between the demotic discourse, that is primarily relational, and the clear preference that Baptist theologians and writers, from the later twentieth century onwards, show for covenantal discourse when writing about church membership.

Grenz and Olson (1996, pp.22-35) offer a useful reflection on several of the themes suggested by these interim research conclusions. Their work delineates five types of theology that lie on a spectrum; folk, lay, ministerial, professional, and academic. They

³⁶ Transcript BBC6a, lines 353-356.

discuss folk and academic theology briefly (*Ibid*, pp,27-29, 33-34) but reject each of them as being of little value in developing a theology that genuinely meets the needs of the people of God. Their primary interest (*Ibid*, pp.27-33) is in lay, ministerial, and professional theology. They concede that lay theology

may lack sophisticated tools of biblical languages, logic and historical consciousness, but it seeks with what means it has to bring Christian beliefs into a well-founded, coherent whole by questioning unfounded traditions and expunging blatant contradictions. (*Ibid*, 1999, pp.29-30)

However, they argue (*Ibid*, p.30) that lay theology, ministerial theology, and professional theology³⁷ 'are all necessary and beneficial, and they actually interpenetrate one another.' It is certainly the case that the demotic discourse laid bare in this and the previous chapter lapses into folk theology at places, yet at many points it is probably more appropriate to describe it as lay theology. They conclude (*Ibid*, p.34) that the

Christian church ...need[s] lay, ministerial and professional theology. Lay Christians who seek to increase the understanding of their faith and rise above the folk theology need the help of ministerial theologians who in turn use the tools, training and insight of professional theologians.

This has become clearer in the research data presented here. What it reveals is that despite careful attempts to probe the interviewees' awareness and usage of biblical, covenantal and denominational discourse, relational discourse is the dominant discourse.

The interview data also reveals the use of two forms of membership discourse, a primary form and a secondary form. The latter discourse is frequently rationalized within a discourse of belonging and it has been argued that it is the discourse of belonging that provides a validating framework for the secondary discourse of membership. In trying to understand why the discourse of membership and of

³⁷ Professional theologians are described as those who teach pastors in seminaries, serve the Christian community through a critical consciousness and who help it to think like Christ (Grenz and Olson, 1996, p.32). Ministerial theology is described as reflective, systematic, and usually aware of historical perspectives and biblical languages, for example (*Ibid*, p.31).

belonging is used by interviewees in this way, the interview transcripts were revisited and four lines of analysis were developed out of the interview data. Collectively the lines of analysis point to the central place that the congregational context plays in the development of these forms of discourse. Conclusions suggest that the congregation as a site for, and source of, theological production and reproduction requires further careful attention.

It is theorised that the Baptist congregation has the potential to become a site for a triological discursive activity. Bearing upon the congregation are the documentary resources of denominational discourse, the literary and theological resources of covenantal discourse, and the personally experienced resources of relational discourse. Grenz and Olson would doubtless wish to utilise these resources within their definitions of lay, ministerial and professional theology. Their vision of theological interpenetration is a theme of the final chapter of this dissertation and will be explored in more detail there.

Chapter Seven: A post-foundational theological proposal for membership and belonging in Baptist churches in contemporary Britain

7.1 The triadic elements of a post-foundational theology of membership and belonging

Studying contemporary Baptist congregations requires a theological approach able to account for the biblical, historical, and cultural elements of their practices and theologies of church membership. The post-foundational theological approach of Stanley Grenz was adopted at an early stage of enquiry as he develops it with regards to scripture, church tradition, and cultural context. In *Beyond Foundationalism* he and his co-author John Franke acknowledges the contribution made by other postmodern and post-foundational theologians (Grenz and Franke, 2001, pp.3-27), pursuing the central place that postmodern insights were already making to his theology and ethics (Grenz, 1996a). Post-liberal theologians, including George Lindbeck and Hans Frei are referred to frequently by Grenz.¹ The 'Yale School' of narrative theology that grew up around them also drew upon moral communitarian insights from Alisdair MacIntyre as well as the work of Clifford Geertz and Peter Berger on the nature of communities.² For this reason, Grenz's post-foundational theology is particularly suited to the study of congregations as discursive communities.³ Within a congregation it is possible to

¹ They are cited or quoted by Grenz and Franke (2001) on just over twenty pages. In particular we may note Lindbeck, G., (1984) *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, and Frei, H., (1980) *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative : A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

² See especially MacIntyre, A., (1985) *After Virtue: a study in moral theory*, 2nd ed., London: Duckworth; Geertz, C., (1974, 2000) *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, New York: Basic Books; Berger, P.L. and Luckmann, T., (1966) *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, New York: Anchor Books; and Berger, P., (1969) *The Social Reality of Religion*, London: Faber and Faber.

³ A feature paralleled in the use of post-liberal theologies, as well as the work of Grenz, by practitioners engaged in theological reflection within the emerging church movement and upon

discern several types of theological participants in the discursive activity that composes it, each engaged within the three types of discourse that have been outlined in chapters three to five of this dissertation. Three types of theological participant are discussed in detail by Grenz and Olson (1996) and are now discussed.

7.1.1 The interdependence of lay, ministerial and professional theologies⁴

Grenz and Olson (1996, pp.22-35) discuss the interdependence of three types of theology – lay, ministerial, and professional – which they consider to be of equal value without necessarily showing the same levels of skill in reflecting on Christian faith and its meaning. One of the few sites for theological discursive activity where their interdependent relationship is most evident is in Christian community, with its emphasis on the ‘individual-in-relationship’ (*Ibid*, p.117). Only there is it possible to imagine demotic theology drawing upon the ministerial theology of an individual trained and shaped by a professional theologian whose principal context for theological ‘thought and critical reflection’ (*Ibid*, p.34) is the congregation.

The interview data presented in this dissertation suggests that professional theologians must consider carefully the relational discourse of the local congregation and its implications for the writing of covenantal theologies of membership and belonging that emphasise a relational content and purpose. In turn, ministerial theologians must be encouraged by professional theologians to discover ways to prepare constitutional, liturgical and pastoral resources for the congregation that nurture congregational relationships within a covenantal framework. Thirdly, lay

postliberal versions of evangelicalism. See, for example, Frost, M., (2006) *Exiles: Living Missionally in a Post-Christian Culture*, Peabody MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., and Murray, S., (2004) *Post-Christendom*, Carlisle: Paternoster Press. In the latter case, the work of post-liberal theologian and ethicist, Stanley Hauerwas, has been particularly influential, especially Hauerwas, S. and Willimon, W., (1991) *Resident Aliens: A provocative Christian assessment of culture and ministry for people who know that something is wrong*, Nashville: Abingdon Press.

⁴ Grenz and Olson describe their first type of theological participant as ‘lay’. Elsewhere in this dissertation it may be assumed that where reference is made to ‘demotic’ theology there exists a sufficient degree of conceptual overlap that the two may be used reasonably interchangeably.

theologians need the help of ministerial and professional theologians to reflect more critically on merely contextual or pragmatic assumptions about theologies of membership and belonging. They need support to reflect constructively and discursively on more mutualist theologies of membership and belonging in a way that results in more adequate narratives of the individual-in-relationship. Only within the congregational setting is it possible to conceive of a more satisfactory interdependent and holistic post-foundational theology.⁵

7.1.2 The norming norm, hermeneutical trajectory and embedding context of a post-foundational theology

Grenz and Olson's choice of the types of theology most likely to involve the local congregation – lay, ministerial and professional – reflects a triadic form that Grenz and Franke also favour for their post-foundational theology. Traces of this form emerge in Grenz and Olson (1996) although Grenz and Franke give it its fullest exposition (2001).⁶ They describe a dynamic and coherent post-foundational theology emerging from the intersection of three theological sources; Scripture as the 'norming norm', tradition providing a 'hermeneutical trajectory' for the theological re-interpretation of the biblical texts, and culture composing the 'embedding context' for the constructive theological task demanded by each new ethical and social challenge and opportunity that the Christian community encounters. With these sources in mind, Grenz (2000a, p.211) describes constructive theology as,

⁵ A theology that emerges out of a healthy, reflective congregation should be able to give equal attention to orthodoxy (right-belief), orthopraxis (right-living) and orthokardis (right-heartedness) in equal measure if it is able to demonstrate something of McClendon's vision of the local congregation as a 'convictional community'. See McClendon (1986, pp.21-45) for the manner in which the life, understanding, and ethics are transformed through the shared convictions of a Christian community.

⁶ For example, Grenz and Olson (1996, pp.87-102) describe three necessary tools for the doing of theology. The first tool, Scripture, is the 'norming function' for theology (1996, p.93) and one of its sources (*Ibid*, p.95). The theological heritage of the church is offered as the second source (*Ibid*, pp.95-98) that is described as a 'historical trajectory' (*Ibid*, p.96). Their third emphasis on contemporary culture points to the discovery of new truth (into which God leads the church) from within each and every new culture (*Ibid*, p.100).

...an ongoing conversation... [whose] overarching goal ...is to hear the Spirit's voice speaking to the faith community today, one important dimension of which is the task of delineating, articulating, and reflecting upon the Christian belief-mosaic.

The sequence is important, for he does not begin the theological task with reference to the cultural context.⁷ The norming norm is Scripture although Grenz and Franke are careful to guard against a naïve view that biblical exegesis is a value-free activity unencumbered by prior assumptions drawn from the cultural context and tradition.⁸ However, they also reject as misguided the view that there can be non-contextual theologies; for them all theology is contextual. The question is not whether theology should be contextual but whether it is good contextual theology.⁹ Equally importantly, 'scripture functions in an ongoing and dynamic relationship with the Christian tradition, as well as the cultural milieu from which particular readings of the text emerge.' (Grenz and Franke, p.112).¹⁰ Although Grenz and Franke seem to offer a sequentialist treatment of the three sources it is more accurate to describe their approach as 'coherentist' (Grenz and Franke, 2001, pp.38-42). Their account argues that the non-contradiction, interconnection, interdependence and integration of the sources lend to them their explanatory theological power.

Their epistemological concern avoids describing some theological sources as foundational, others as superstructural, and avoids abandoning the search for epistemological and theological certainty (2001, p.39). Thiel (1994, p.78) equates this

⁷ Although the interview data for this current work demonstrates the primary influence of context upon the demotic discourse of membership and belonging. Tradition and Scripture play very secondary roles in this respect. This may of course be a peculiarity of the practical theology of membership and belonging and in that regard it is necessary to exercise caution in extending a claim over other domains of theological activity.

⁸ They (Grenz and Franke, 2001, p.85) concur with Fowler (1989) that biblical exegesis is always interested, subjective, historically-bound, committed and thus political. Compare this with Grenz and Olson (1996, pp.109-112).

⁹ 'There is no such thing as a culturally disembodied theology. We cannot do otherwise than to read and interpret the Bible within the context in which we are living' (Grenz and Olson, 1996, p.108).

¹⁰ See also Grenz and Franke (2001, p.128) where they conclude that 'The Christian tradition provides a historically extended, socially embodied context in which to interpret, apply, and

search with a search for coherence, 'Whatever interpretive heuristic a theology invokes is appropriate to the degree that it assures the coherence of its reasoning from inference to inference.' Grenz (2000a, p.191) relates how coherence has been described as a web of belief, a nest of beliefs and a conceptual scheme.¹¹ Reliance on coherence within and across a multiplicity of sources of knowledge is portrayed as a reaction to foundationalist epistemologies that are generally held to have characterised Enlightenment paradigms.¹²

A further triad is to be found in the way that Grenz and Franke (2001, pp.57-168) line up three focal motifs for theology, a reflection of their conviction that central to theology is a constructive task.¹³ This leads them to offer a schema in which the Trinity serves as theology's *structural* motif, community provides theology's *integrative* motif, and eschatology is theology's *orienting* motif. Grenz outlined the constructed nature of trinitarian theology as early as 1996 (Grenz and Olson, 1996, pp.105-107) and its centrality to the Christian theological enterprise is acknowledged in what was intended to be the first of a six-volume systematic post-foundational theology, *The Social God and the Relational Self* (Grenz, 2001). In that work he integrates the trinitarian motif with anthropological insights and locates human beings, made in the *imago Dei*, in relational community; a community that he describes as a 'trinitarian communal ontology'. In the discussion of ecclesiology that follows, he commends the concept of the 'ecclesial self', a self formed with unique reference to a relational participation in the 'divine dynamic of love' (Grenz, 2001, pp.332-333).

live out the communally formed narratives contained in the canonical texts.' The language of 'historical extension' echoes that of Giddens' use of 'space-time' extension.

¹¹ Compare with Yandell (1984, p.274) who writes that 'a supposed system that lacks mutual coherence among its propositional constituents provides a poor explanation... or none at all, and... is a weak candidate for truth.'

¹² Foundational theologies have sought certain and incontestable bases for knowing truth in either the universal experience of human nature (liberalism) or the universal validity of the biblical text (conservatism). For a fuller treatment of this theme see Grenz and Franke (2001, pp.35-38) and Grenz (2000a, pp.185-190) and the description that follows there of non-foundational epistemologies and theologies (*Ibid*, pp.190-199).

The close relationship in which Grenz places trinitarian theology and ecclesiology is reflected here but also seen elsewhere in his attention to the believing community as a prime locus for the practice of theology (Grenz, 1996b, p.118; 2000b).

7.2 Revaluating the congregation

7.2.1 The internal dynamics of a demotic relational discourse

At this point in the dissertation the focus rests upon the 'lay' theology of the demotic discourse that emphasises a relational understanding of membership and belonging. The demotic discourse has been a hitherto under-examined aspect of the theology of membership and belonging.¹⁴ As outlined above in chapter three, a more recent professional theology of membership has been advanced that emphasises covenantal discourse. Recent professional theology has also paid close attention to the place of baptism in the process of Christian initiation and the question of entry into Church membership.¹⁵

However, a focus upon the demotic relational discourse allows an analytical comparison with the alternative covenantal and denominational discourses outlined in chapters three and four respectively. The congregation is the primary social system being researched in this present work and it is sensible that congregational voices should be listened to (though without privileging them in such a way that a revisioning of Baptist church membership becomes necessary or inevitable solely on the basis of a demotic discourse). Establishing the relational dynamic between *all three* discourses

¹³ See Grenz and Franke (2001, p.18) and compare this with Grenz and Olson (1996, pp.77-80; 104-108).

¹⁴ An absence that is underlined by the otherwise excellent and very helpful discussion of baptism and church membership in Haymes, *et al* (2008, pp.80-92). The Baptist Union's *Membership* pack (2004) contains a short section, 'Bucking the Trend', which is one of the only studies to have attempted to survey individuals about their views of membership.

¹⁵ See *Pushing at the Boundaries of Unity: Anglican and Baptists in Conversation* (2005), *Conversations Around the World 2000-2005: The Report of the International Conversations between the Anglican Communion and the Baptist World Alliance* (2005), Fiddes and Matthews (2005, pp.44-54), and Haymes, *et al* (2008, pp.57-100).

will be a step on the way to establishing a 'trialogue' of the discourses and a more adequate theological revisioning of membership and belonging. A brief review of conclusions regarding the demotic relational discourse will assist in clarifying its internal dynamics as well as its relationship to other discourses.¹⁶

Giddens' theoretical framework of structuration proposes a duality of social structure (see below at pp.229-231). Research attention has focused on structure and action within the social system of the congregation; upon its members as social actors and upon theological and denominational constraints as structural elements within the social system. A primary interest has been taken in the discursive action of members and attenders upon the structural elements of the congregation (and upon the Baptist Union to a lesser extent) as a social system, illustrating and making clear the purposive interests of this researcher.¹⁷

At an early stage of the research process it became clear that investigating the meanings attached to 'belonging' as a corollary to a discourse of membership was likely to prove profitable. This conviction was grounded in the theoretical framework, an evaluation of the early interview data, a re-reading of theoretical constructivist accounts of social structure and action, and a review of quantitative data. Pursuing this conviction made possible the formulation of four orienting hypotheses¹⁸ which led, in turn, to the discovery of the following elements of the demotic discourse:¹⁹ belonging was more significant to the demotic discourse than the symbolic construction of boundaries although it became evident that institutional structures

¹⁶ It should also be noted that the conclusions reached here reflect the theoretical framework and orienting hypotheses established at the outset. This underlines a purposive approach to the research data but it also serves to point to the fact that our analysis illustrates only the most significant pieces of interview data and does not discuss minor themes present in the interview transcripts. Judging what is 'significant' or 'minor' in this respect is only possible where a theoretical framework makes sense of, or offers a rationale for, such evaluations.

¹⁷ See appendix four, pp.262-263 for a description and defence of purposive sampling methods in qualitative research.

¹⁸ For a full description of these orienting hypotheses, see below at pp.237-243.

¹⁹ Appendix four (pp.236-237) explains the function and value, during the later stages, of orienting hypotheses that emerge inductively during the early stages of qualitative research.

were not being totally ignored (contrary to initial hypothesising); belonging was used by members and attenders alike as a way of softening the distinctions between the categories of membership and non-membership. Additionally, there was some evidence that new understandings of membership were being developed, with one church radically reconceptualising its membership and several individuals considering themselves 'members' without formal or due process.²⁰

The final hypothesis suggested that relational discourse would be more significant to the discursive construction of contemporary Baptist congregations than would historical or biblical discourses. Although the relational discourse within the interview data was considerably more frequent than either of the two alternatives mentioned here, it was not possible to prove this hypothesis directly from the interview data. Instead it was necessary to infer from the demotic nature of discursive activity that relational discourse is of primary significance.

The interview data suggests that careful attention to the relational discourse is important for understanding the way in which members and attenders reduce the distinction between formal membership and very regular and highly committed attenders who were, in some instances, described as members. The notion of belonging was used to validate this secondary form of the demotic discourse of membership. The shape of this discourse should alert us to its central features and the characteristic postures that we might expect its proponents to adopt. Understanding instinctive postures and assumptions are important to preparing for a meaningful dialogue, especially when they are rooted in a general post-denominational outlook, experientially-validated subjectivity, the immediate influence of the views of Christians from other denominations about membership, and the use of the biblical texts in a limited and disembedded fashion.

²⁰ The *Membership Pack* (2004) suggests that these types of experimentation might offer useful examples from which others could learn. See Section 3 'New approaches to church members' meetings' for example.

Post-denominationalists are unlikely to be impressed, for example, by appeals to the practice of John Smyth or Thomas Helwys. Individuals whose Christian faith is validated by experiential subjectivity will not be impressed by what they might judge to be theological speculations. Those who 'pick up' their theology from people they relate to closely and worship with week-by-week, are unlikely to trust immediately the theological input of a Baptist theologian or leader they do not know. Finally, neither can it be assumed that Baptists possess sufficient biblical literacy to develop a biblical discourse of membership with any degree of theological coherence.

These characteristics of the demotic discourse do not exactly fit it well for the triadialogue that must be undertaken if a post-foundational theology is to emerge that includes the participation of lay, ministerial, and professional theologians. However, it is not necessarily an impossible task and it is one that will be outlined below.

7.2.2 Covenantal, denominational and relational discourses in a trialectical tension

This dissertation has explored the three forms of discourse of most immediate importance for local Baptist congregations: covenantal, denominational and relational. Recent Baptist theological literature demonstrates the growing significance of covenantal discourse, reflecting a theological endeavour to apply biblical treatment of covenant to congregational and representative patterns of national Baptist gathering; an endeavour that dates back to the seventeenth century. The presence of denominational discourse is most apparent in the membership materials provided by local churches to new and potential members. The more standardised elements of these resources are a product of culturally informed attempts at patterning denominational life during the early to mid twentieth century. Within the interview data, the dominant discourse is relational. As the central demotic discourse, this reflects at least two facets of contemporary congregational life, namely a notional commitment to

the 'family' ecclesiology of Scripture and an instinctive acceptance of Christians entering Baptist churches from other Christian traditions.²¹

Each form of membership discourse thus tends to find its particular expression in either one of these three sources although, as has already been mentioned above, the three discourses are not to be thought of as exclusive categories. Within the interview data, for example, there is some integration of the discourses. Counterpoising them, without intending to obscure the continuities, is a methodological means of highlighting the particularities of each discourse and of drawing their trialectical inter-relationship in sharper contrast. A trialectical dynamism is implied by the respective postures that each discourse instinctively adopts towards the others and, more particularly, how it evaluates the alternative discourses.

Recent covenantal discourse is intended to address a denominational discourse that was perceived to have become overly pragmatic and possibly too secularised.²² Subsequent professional theological activity has sought to build consensus around a constructivist covenantal discourse intended to span the local congregation and the various expressions of the Baptist Union. Giddens would judge this activity to be an attempt at extending the time-space continuum of the social system along the axis of space.²³ Grenz and Olson (1996, pp.31-33,106) would add that professional theology, to be contextually constructive, must be undertaken with reference to the local congregations to whom it will be ultimately addressed. However, to the extent that it

²¹ This latter aspect may underline Giddens' theoretical treatment of the 'bounds to knowledgeability'. He theorises that there are bounds to what social agents will 'know' about the social system that they are a part of. Much of what they know involves implicit knowledge and is only rationalised when they are asked to talk discursively about what they do and why they do it. This assumption lies at the heart of social science research for Giddens. (1984, pp.281-288). It suggests that the unintended consequences of the social agent's limited knowledgeability may include a number of observed features of the demotic discourse, such as the tendency to reduce distinctions between members and attenders.

²² And perhaps too 'secular' in its reliance in the 1960s and 1970s on reports informed by economic rationalism and the drive for material efficiencies (see above at pp.73).

²³ The concept of space is used by Giddens in this sense to refer to the 'geographic extent and presence' of institutional forms of the social system. The broadest extensions in time and space are described by Giddens as 'social totalities' (1984, pp.162-165).

engages critically with pragmatic denominational discourse, a tension exists. Because the theme of covenant is largely absent from the demotic discourse there is a lack of congruence and thus the potential for tensions between professional theologians in the face of more pressing concerns, expressed within the demotic discourse and the lay theology of the congregation.

During the first half of the twentieth century, a period of denominational advance and consolidation and a time of growing ecumenical involvement, covenantal discourse was probably felt to be archaic whereas the discourse of 'denomination' was commonly understood.²⁴ Denominational discourse was one means of seeking consensus around 'structural' elements extending the time-space continuum of the social system along the axis of space and providing a rationale for the Baptist Union and its various expressions of national Baptist life and witness. The very limited reference that this discourse makes to covenant has been noted. It also has a tendency to address the individual with reference to responsibilities of membership framing individual commitment within the context of the denomination. In this sense, perhaps unconsciously, the denominational discourse that developed through the late nineteenth century, and first half of the twentieth, became an expression of Baptist Union policy and aspiration.²⁵

The demotic discourse tends to be dismissive of denominational discourse. There is little use of covenantal discourse; judged by some to be too abstract and disregarded by most. Within the demotic discourse, relational emphases emerged as the product of individual agency. Consequently, dissensus displaced consensus. Of all the discourses, the relational had the least extension on a time-space continuum and

²⁴ And even when relational language was used of the denomination, it was used only in the most general sense of institutional elements. Walter Bottoms's *Meet the Family* uses the language of family to describe a denominational structure composed of local churches with church meetings. In addition, Bottoms (1947, pp.33-36) includes the constitution of the Baptist Youth Movement and refers to formal involvement in the Baptist Missionary Society, the Baptist World Alliance and the ecumenical movement.

²⁵ This was a result of the co-ordinated activity of Baptist Church House, its publications, the *Baptist Times* and, to a lesser extent, the Baptist Union Council.

arose out of 'practical' social activity involving the routinisation of member-attender distinction-reductions that made it easier to consider Christians from a wide variety of non-Baptist backgrounds as members. As with the covenantal discourse, it may be appropriate to understand relational discourse as a reaction to the dominance of denominational discourse through much of the twentieth century.²⁶

The renewed emphasis being given by Baptist theologians to covenantal discourse may represent a theologically-grounded deconstruction of denominational discourse whilst the preference for relational discourse within the congregation may represent an experientially-grounded deconstruction of denominational discourse. Whether this adequately explains the current discursive dynamic within local congregations, what seems likely is that a subjective and relational dissensus is more prevalent here than either denominational or covenantal consensus. Consequently, uncertainty and contingency appear to typify many attempts by Baptist congregations to revise, adapt, or abandon their expectations of those they consider members. It is this factor that lends urgency to the task of delineating the contours of the trialectical tension and of moving towards a resolution, or amelioration, of some of the tensions.

Of course, in describing a trialectic of discourses, this dissertation takes its cue from the use of the term 'dialectic'.²⁷ From the discursive and creative (perhaps also deconstructive) energy of the trialectic emerges the potential for a synthesis that

²⁶ For this reason there may be some justification for describing the first discourse as 'neo-covenantal' although this proposal is offered tentatively and would require further explication for a proper defence of its use.

²⁷ Plato (see Jowett, B. M.A., 1911, *The Dialogues of Plato: Translated into English, with analyses and Introductions Vol.I*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons) discusses the dialectics of logic that involve a triad of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. Hegel (see Hegel, G.W.F., (1975). *Lectures on the philosophy of world history : introduction, reason in history (translated from the German edition of Johannes Hoffmeister from Hegel papers assembled by H. B. Nisbet)*, New York: Cambridge University Press) applied this in the nineteenth century to a philosophical analysis of the nation states and talked of the dialectical conflicts that provoked military action and reaction. Marx relied on Hegel but, arguing that the conflict was class-based, developed his distinctive materialist dialectics in order to change the world, not merely understand it. Kierkegaard also relied on Hegelian dialectics to develop his existential dialectical theology which discovered its deepest paradox in the conjunction of the infinite otherness of God with humanity in Jesus Christ. See Baxter (1988, pp.198-9) for a fuller discussion.

suggests discursive resolution for some aspects of the trialectic and closer discursive engagement for others. Discursive resolution and engagement involve a theological task that takes into account the multiple sites where contemporary theology is currently being produced and reproduced. One of these remains the local congregation, an 'integrating motif' for the post-foundational theology of Grenz and Franke.²⁸ Giddens (1984, pp.xxi,17) would consider the congregation to be a social system with the capacity to integrate and reproduce the time-space realities of the institution that we know as the Baptist Union. For the present purposes, the congregation can thus be understood as *both* theological source and integrating motif.

7.2.3 Re-positioning the congregation

Grenz (2001, pp.231-232) was committed to the task of doing theology in a congregational manner that emphasised its mission-focussed task of apologetic,

Christian theology speaks about the God known in the Christian community. Christian theology is the explication of the God witnessed to by the community that has come to know God through Christ by the Spirit.

Grenz (2001, p.233) detailed the discursive nature of the theological task, underlined its value to the Christian community as a means of understanding the totality of lived reality, and finally explained in more detail its contribution to what Grenz called 'convertive piety',²⁹

Christian theology, in sum, is an intellectual enterprise by and for the Christian community. Theology is in part the ongoing conversation among those whom the God of the Bible has encountered in Jesus Christ, who are attempting together to articulate, delineate, and clarify the mosaic of beliefs that comprise the interpretive framework of the community that this encounter has called forth. Viewed from this perspective, what is 'basic' for theology is not the church itself, but the specifically Christian-experience-facilitating interpretative framework, which in turn is connected to the biblical narrative.

²⁸ See above at p.167 for a fuller description.

²⁹ Grenz made a clear distinction between convertative piety and pietism. A transformative experience is constitutive of the Christian experience but it is more than individualistic. The interpretive framework that draws upon a convertative piety is far more than simply an individualistic or subjective way of interpreting reality. For more on this see Grenz (2000a, pp.44-47).

In arguing that the local congregation was the most appropriate site for the theological task he was not adopting an anti-intellectual or obscurantist position. In fact, Grenz (2001, p.233) believed that by locating the task of theology within the congregation it was possible to rescue it from the foundationalist alternatives of locating it in a theological prolegomena of either universal religious experience (as did the liberal theologians) or in bibliology (as did the conservative theologians). Grenz focused much of his attention on the transformative encounter of the human subject with the divine presence and suggested that this ought to be a characteristic of a congregation's experience. Grenz and Franke (2001, pp.165-166) describe the collective theological task of the congregation as it reflects on such experiences as 'meaning-making', an activity described by Giddens (1984, p.19) as the production and reproduction of resource within the social system by social actors.

Giddens' description of social systems, which would include church congregations, makes no reference to 'God' but he allows that such a conception of reality has the capacity for motivating imaginative and constructive activity by social agents. Lye (1995, p.1) summarises Giddens' understanding that 'human beings are social constructs and their institutions of all sorts are constructs upheld by humans acting according to their images of what reality is.'³⁰ The interview data suggests that the congregation is principally a site for lay theology, or 'practical' theology if one uses 'practical' in the sense that Giddens might use it when discussing practical

³⁰ Giddens rejects a structuralist understanding of the social system; he insists that the structural properties of social systems do not exist outside of human action but are repeatedly implicated in its production and reproduction. Equally he rejects functionalist understandings of the social system as inadequate because they are over-reliant on naturalistic interpretations of the social system that see it as naturally unfolding. He is not convinced that functionalist understandings adequately explain the evident capacity of social systems for reflexively monitored productivity (typical of the institution) nor that they pay adequate attention to the complexity of history and of the institution, particularly their capacity for innovation and revolution at the instigation of human agents. For a fuller discussion see Tucker (1998, pp.55-58).

consciousness.³¹ The practical, or lay, theology of interviewees was grounded in their experience of belonging, in the immediacy of their collectively experienced context.³² This appears to provide a re-configuring matrix to which they apply dis-embedded scriptural resources and their de-contextualised experience of previous denominations. The implication is that where adherents and non-members act 'as if' or 'feel like' they are members, they are utilising the same rules and resources that might normally be used to define a congregation's understanding and structuring of formal membership. Giddens (1984, p.19) offers a crucial reminder that the 'rules and resources drawn upon in the production and reproduction of social action are at the same time the means of system reproduction.'

Arguably, one of the tasks of ministerial theology is to equip members to develop a more discursive theology.³³ One might expect this to occur naturally within the context of Sunday worship and mid-week study, yet the ministers interviewed seemed reluctant to offer overly-directive advice in an area of congregational life and polity that an increasing number of attenders feel is of marginal importance. Consequently the practical theology of membership and belonging remains unexamined and reflexive activity takes place with reference only to the immediate context. Only a more discursive theology of membership and belonging will make possible an engagement of lay, ministerial and professional theologies of membership and belonging.

Grenz and Franke (2001) place the congregation at the intersection of three theological sources. The competing discourses of membership and belonging that are

³¹ Giddens' discussion of practical consciousness (1984, pp.xxii-xxiii, 41-45) refers to it as the knowledge that social actors apply to their normal, day-by-day, activities and which is made up of the knowledge that social actors have of what they do and why they do it.

³² The paucity of references in the interview data to resources available from Baptists living in other places or who have lived in earlier periods of history is a consequence of living in the immediate. It is also an indication that the practical theology emerging from Baptist congregations is frequently developed in isolation from important resources that the historical Baptist tradition has developed to address enduring and recurring themes.

³³ Giddens (1984, pp.41-45) discusses the way in which practical consciousness remains unexamined until questions are posed of the activity. At that point, in formulating an explanatory response, practical consciousness is replaced by discursive consciousness.

explored in this dissertation are only likely to find their resolution within the lived experience of a congregation in which lay, ministerial and professional theologies are valued equally. Grenz and Franke (2001, p.232) state that it is the most obvious site for the theological task, arguing that 'theology is by its nature communitarian' (Grenz and Franke, 2001, p.238) and that the 'church is a bridge to the communal focus of our theological method.' (*Ibid*, 2001, p.225).

However, a critical engagement with Grenz and Franke points to the need for a more positive treatment of the congregation as a potential source of theology. Although they identify culture as the embedding context from which theology can be sourced, they carefully avoid suggesting that the congregation itself may be considered a culturally embedding context from which theology can be sourced. There are doubtless good reasons for them doing this. Grenz and Franke (2001, pp.163-166) dismiss the suggestion that the church is a hermetically isolated cultural entity distinct from its surrounding cultures whilst conceding that the church might be a distinct social unit with its own particular culture, sharing symbols, and engaged in meaning-making connected to those symbols which 'involves lively conversation [and] intense discussion...' However, they prefer to illustrate the culturally embedded theological enterprise of the church with reference to its co-participation in cultural meaning-making with other human beings as its contribution to a wider discussion about what it means to be human. Their apparent reticence may reflect a desire to avoid implying that Scripture and church tradition are equally valuable as theological sources, a position rejected by the reformers with their emphasis on *sola Scriptura*.

Their metaphor of the trajectory is somewhat problematic for, presumably, it may be conceived of as being finally embedded or dynamically suspended in mid-arc. The metaphor leaves unanswered the questions, 'How is one to judge where a particular theologically constructive community is to be located? Is it at early launch, in mid-trajectory, or embedded?' and, 'How is one to judge the relative value of these alternative positions on the trajectory?' The metaphor cannot avoid questions of chronology and linearity. Grenz and Franke appear to distinguish the theological

activity of the contemporary congregation from the theological activity of the Christian tradition that determines the path of the hermeneutical trajectory. This seems to ignore that fact that tradition, whatever else it may imply³⁴, is the cumulative, constructive theological activity of local congregations situated across time and space. To privilege historical expressions of theological construction over and above those that contemporary local congregations might generate, requires a logic that the metaphor seems unable to supply, other than that of chronological priority on the trajectory.

Additionally, in referring to an 'embedding' context, Grenz has prematurely raised the spectre of closure, something he is clearly keen to avoid elsewhere in his discussion of constructive theology. Embedded trajectories evoke teleologies rather than histories. Culture encompasses the arc of the trajectory as well as its point of impact. The trajectory is passing through cultural space and time, not embedding itself in it.

Of course, there are dangers in imagining that the Christian community provides a theological source, particularly where the local context is privileged over and against the constants present in other contexts.³⁵ The Christian community can become so obsessed with context that it fails to see the deeper historical tradition addressing enduring issues,

Wishing to be witnesses to the Eternal within its own time and place, the disciple community may find itself the captive of currents and ever-changing trends within its host society. Because it seeks to respond concretely to these currents and trends it may lose sight of long-range questions to which its greater tradition tried to speak. A tendency to permit the issues of the historical moment to determine its witness may emerge. Then the theological community ceases to recognize, not only that these issues may be transient, but that matters of greater magnitude may be hidden by the surface concerns with which it has busied itself. Perhaps it will even go so far as to let its context, rather glibly conceptualized, become the touchstone for any kind of theological 'relevance,' so that it retains out of the long tradition only what seems pertinent to the moment, and disposes of the rest as being passé. (Hall, D.J., 1991, *Thinking the Faith: Christian Theology*

³⁴ The Eastern Christian Tradition uses 'Tradition' and 'tradition' in rather distinct senses. In using this word a conscious effort is being made to avoid using it in the sense of the 'Great Tradition' of the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Churches.

³⁵ For this phrase see Stephen Bevans (2004) *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today*.

in a North American Context, Minneapolis, Fortress Press. Cited in Grenz and Franke, 2001, p.57).

Giving appropriate attention to the congregation as a theological source whilst simultaneously guarding against the danger outlined by Hall requires a movement from 'experience to discursive theology' that is catholic, open-ended, avoids closure and remains emergent. In short it is possible to imagine the discursive theological construction of communities of belonging that are covenantal and structurally relational.

There are hints of Grenz's understanding of the need to maintain catholicity of the church in his defence of communitarian constructive theology when describing the 'Self-in-Community' (Grenz, 2001, pp.304-366). In this concluding chapter, he finishes (2001, p.305) with a discussion of the 'church as the ecclesial community called to reflect the character of the triune God in this penultimate era.' For Grenz, catholicity was ultimately to be discovered in the participation of the congregation in the inter-trinitarian divine life.³⁶

7.3 Conclusions: The basis and focus for a post-foundational theology of membership and belonging

7.3.1 Transforming congregational practice: triaology as the basis of a post-foundational theology of membership and belonging

The demotic discourse described in chapters five and six of this present work, however, barely addresses the central themes of Grenz's professional theology. We have argued that the relationality of the demotic discourse is largely a reflection of a form of evangelical catholicity but that this is little more than a parody of what might be a truly catholic demotic theology of membership and belonging. So, if the starting point within the demotic discourse is not the congregational participation in the inter-

³⁶ An insight he felt comfortable advancing in the company of a growing number of Protestant theologians, including Peter Adam and James Torrance (2001, p.325), and which was taken up by Paul Fiddes in his *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (2000).

trinitarian life of God, how can demotic theology be brought into dialogue with professional and ministerial theologies?

Before answering the question, it is essential to note that this dissertation opens with a discussion of congregational studies and missiology. This serves as a reminder that the thesis contained within it is primarily concerned with practical theology. It is not a systematic ecclesiology expounding a theology of membership and belonging but it is a practical, or applied, theology that emphasises the pragmatic task of theology. Doing so, it seeks an understanding of the *processes that may transform* a congregation's practice and theology of membership and belonging, particularly through the engagement of these with the trialectic of discourses outlined above. This insight, derived from Swinton and Mowat (2006, p.27), is expressed by them in the following manner,

Practical theology is critical, theological reflection on the practices of the church as they interact with practices of the world, with a view to ensuring and enabling faithful participation in God's redemptive practices in, to and for the world. The aim of practical theology is not simply to understand the world but also to change it.

If theology within the congregation is to draw upon the trialectic of discourses, it becomes necessary to conceive of a dialogue in which demotic, ministerial and professional theological participants will make their respective contributions. A post-foundational theology of membership and belonging can only be satisfactory if and where the three discourses are treated as equally important (though not necessarily of equal value).

Nudging a trialectic of discourses towards a dialogue can only proceed therefore as an expression of congregational transformation, a transformation that is theologically the work of a trinitarian God inviting persons in community to participate in the task.

Fiddes deepens this engagement, however, by suggesting that

Talk about personal relations in God is then ...the language of *participation*. The aim of a pastoral doctrine of God should therefore be to ask (a) *conceptually* what difference it makes to view pastoral issues from the perspective of engagement in God; and (b) *experimentally*, how our experience might be shaped by this engagement. (Fiddes, 2000b, p.33).

He outlines two key issues for a practical study of the trialectic of discourses. Firstly, viewing this particular pastoral issue as an engagement in God is likely to set the investigation in a qualitatively different setting whilst, secondly, it underlines the conviction that change and transformation are likely to accompany congregational engagement in God.

In *The Social God and The Relational Self*, Grenz (2001, pp.16, 332) argues that the congregation is a 'trinitarian communal ontology' whilst Haymes *et al* (2008, pp.32,35) argue that the congregation is ontologically the body of Christ defined in terms of the Trinity. Viewed collectively, these authors suggest that a discussion about the congregation in its engagement with God is as vital as a discussion of the congregation in its engagement with the other congregations of the Baptist Union. Engagement with God and engagement with other congregations hint at, respectively and in very broad terms, systematic and applied approaches to a theology of membership and belonging. The twin pattern of engagement lends to the congregation its own creative theological dynamic, arising out of the intersection of its participation in God and its participation in the 'Christian-experience-facilitating' matrix (Grenz and Franke, 2001, p.16).³⁷ It underscores the need for the Baptist Union to take the congregation more seriously as a *source* of theology (see pp.174-179 above) in addition to accepting it as an integrating motif for theology (Grenz and Franke, 2001, pp.203-238).³⁸ Taking the demotic discourse and theology more seriously argues for a reciprocal gesture on the part of congregations that they take collectivist and historical discourses more seriously. Equally, the trialectic envisaged here will only become more adequately post-foundational if it gains confidence in using biblical discourses of membership and belonging. The interview data suggests the need for a more

³⁷ A point emphasised by Fiddes' attention to the idea that covenant is actualised in the congregation as an expression of the communion in the eternal life of the triune God. 'Human covenant-making opens, in some mysterious and God-given way, a participation in God's own covenant commitments.' (Fiddes, 2002, p.6).

³⁸ David Cairns (1953, p.44) notes that 'It is the individual-in-the-community – rather than the community itself – that is in the image of God.' Cited in Grenz (2001, p.305).

adequate treatment of ‘body of Christ’ theology³⁹ and a more self-critical theology of ‘family of God’.⁴⁰

A triologue of theological discourses cannot be conceived of in isolation from the congregation. Equally, it has become clear that the congregation is ‘intended’ for participative engagement with God. It is therefore possible to imagine a triologue of theological discourses finding commonalities and continuities and a resolution of some disharmonies in a participative engagement at the intersection of the trinitarian life of God and of the wider Union of churches. For a variety of reasons, that will hopefully become clearer, it is envisaged that this engagement will involve a congregational discursive triologue that takes place with reference to identity and values, thus imagining an integration of covenantal and convictional understandings of the community.

7.3.2 Re-valuing congregational theology: identity and values as a focus for a post-foundational theology of membership and belonging

In what has so far been described of the trialectic of discourses, the covenantal and denominational discourses are largely external to the congregation whilst the relational discourse is largely absent in the extra-congregational discussion. Whilst this runs the

³⁹ Beasley-Murray (1962, pp.170ff, 279ff) gives extended attention to body language and elsewhere makes at least eight references to the ‘body of Christ’. He argues in an exposition of Gal 3:27 that the believer is baptised to a participation in the body (*Ibid*, p.170). He does not form the body, but joins it. Christ is the ‘inclusive personality’ of the body but he does not receive his nature from the members of the body (see also 1 Cor 12:13ff).’ He adds that ‘Baptism to Christ is baptism to the Church: it cannot be otherwise. For the Church is σωμα Χριστου, the body of Christ.’ (*Ibid*, p.279). Fiddes (2000b, pp.282,283) states that Christ is embodied in the gathering of the bodies of the members of the church.

⁴⁰ Scholars agree that the language of family is not widely used before Paul takes it up (possibly from the Roman concept of the household). Martin (1979, pp.123-125) suggests that church ‘reflects family life ... offering belonging to a social unit.’ His biblical references are sparse. Banks (1980, pp.52-61) has a rather more extended treatment but concedes that ‘body of Christ’ imagery is more prevalent in the New Testament. He emphasises ‘brotherhood’ as the archetypal Pauline reference to the family (Banks, 1980, p.55). In contrast, Howard-Brook (2001, pp.72) states that ‘there is no word for what we would call family in the Hebrew Scriptures, the Septuagint, or the New testament. The current movement to establish Christian “family values” as grounded in the Bible finds virtually no support.’ The relationship of the Christian *ekklesia* to the Roman *familia* remained ambiguous throughout the period of the NT.

risk of over-simplifying what are in reality a set of complex inter-relating discourses, the analysis is generally a helpful one. A discursive congregational theology that internalises all three discourses thus requires the creation of a discursive dialogue. Grenz's (2001, p.331) emphasis on the church as the 'prolepsis of the divine image' leads him (*Ibid*, p.332) to an 'understanding of identity [as] "ecclesial self"' and suggests, for our purposes, that a congregational discursive dialogue should take place with reference to identity and values.⁴¹ This implies a congregation discursively addressing the question, 'What are we called together to be and to do?' If Delanty is correct, this generates the possibility of discursively constructed patterns and forms of communal belonging.⁴² This points to a 'liberating discipline' of congregational meaning-making that reflects and resources identity aspiration within the ecclesial community. To identify followers of Jesus in aspirational terms is far from the terminology of 'rights and responsibilities' that typifies the membership documents in the sample supplied for this research.⁴³ Aspirations readily translate into a more 'heartfelt' language of prayer and liturgy, a fact acknowledged by Blyth and Ellis (2005, p.110) through their inclusion of *Five Core Values* material in *Gathering for Worship*.⁴⁴

It is proposed that a congregational discursive dialogue taking place with reference to identity and values might fruitfully begin with explicit reference to *Five Core Values*,

⁴¹ It is anticipated that this would be primarily a demotic activity in which the individual responses to questions such as 'What are we called together to be and to do?' are gathered and considered carefully by professional and ministerial theologians as a prior step to the Baptist Union offering its contribution to the discussion of what it considers the key issues of identity and values to be. This implies a congregational manner of doing theology as a pre-requisite for a more adequately post-foundational discursive theology.

⁴² For a fuller discussion see Delanty (2003, pp.188-189) who argues that the 'vitality of community is above all due to its imagined capacity... in the search and desire for it. Community... has to be imagined and does not simply reproduce meaning but is productive of meaning... it is more about belonging than about boundaries.'

⁴³ A point exploited by Beasley-Murray (2006, pp.71-72) where he criticises lists of 'privileges and responsibilities' for omitting any reference to covenant, in the process tending towards a form of legalistic rather than liberative discipline.

⁴⁴ The five-fold pattern of the community is incorporated into a prayer to be used during the covenant service for a new church.

published by the Baptist Union in 1998.⁴⁵ The reason for doing so develops out of an ongoing reflection on the covenantal re-appropriation of the *Declaration of Principle* made by Kidd *et al.* In referring to it as the ‘basis for covenanting’ Kidd (1996, p.12) and his fellow authors substitute it for the historic Baptist confessions of faith understood by Fiddes (2003, p.47) to be more appropriately understood as the ‘context’ for covenant-making.

A post-foundational assessment of the theological sources would locate the normative vision for covenantally walking together in relationship to God in the Bible. It would describe both the historical confessions of faith and the *Declaration of Principle* as part of the hermeneutical trajectory for covenanting. The embedding context for covenanting would be considered to be the Christian community.⁴⁶ Identity and values would then be considered the post-foundational, theologically-shaped fruits of covenanting. Grenz would anticipate that a theological discussion of identity and value would demonstrate the coherence arising out of the three sources. In this fashion the historical, contextual and theological elements of a post-foundational theology of membership and belonging would be arrived at through the congregation’s discursive articulation of identity and values.

The congregational discussion of *Five Core Values* is useful for our purposes if references to community are pluralised, avoiding the perception that ‘community’ is meant to be understood as co-terminus with the Baptist Union. This would mean a slight re-formulation of the core values as: prophetic communities, inclusive communities, sacrificial communities, missionary communities, and worshipping

⁴⁵ As a response to the 1996 Denominational Consultation’s request to ‘reflect on what we learn about Christ and the call of God for us to “act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God” (Micah 6.8).’ (*Five Core Values*, 1998, p.1). The core values identified, however, have a much wider application.

⁴⁶ In contrast, Fiddes (2003, pp.45-46) would see confession as the context for covenanting whilst Hayden sees confession and covenant as historically ‘adjacent’. Beasley-Murray argues that covenant (common co-operation) requires confession (common commitment) (Cited in Fiddes, 2003, p.46, fn.98 although the reference to Beasley-Murray being quoted in Slater (1987) appears incorrect).

communities.⁴⁷ These more appropriately reflect an emphasis on local congregations and makes more likely the entry of these themes into the demotic discourse for, as Kidd (1996, p.16) correctly insists, 'we locate authority in community, not in hierarchy'. However this should not be misconstrued to imply independence of the local congregation for, as Kidd (*Ibid*, p.16) also insists, 'We are inter-dependents, not "independents".' The part played by tradition in a post-foundational theology points to a proper acknowledgement that Christians confess 'one holy, catholic and apostolic Church.' The core values listed here can properly be judged a reflection of the sacramental and apostolic nature and task of the church. However, there is little in them that directly addresses the requirement that the church be catholic. Conscious of the demotic discourse of the interviews, it is proposed that a sixth value be added to the five already enumerated. This might be defined in the following way:

Relational communities: following Jesus in... The company of other Gospel people committed to walking together in community for the sake of others and the whole of creation. Seeking the mutual exchange of strength and wisdom for the journey from sisters and brothers in every place and time.⁴⁸

It is not enough to be merely relational; the authors of *On Being the Church* recognise that the personal demands of covenant, a commitment to something more than the self, are the determining factors in how we relate (Haymes *et al*, p.92). This formulation of a sixth core value meets their relational requirements and, it is argued, fulfils the criteria of a catholic vision of the self and of the Baptist congregation.

⁴⁷ The original core values are formulated thus: 'A Prophetic community: *Following Jesus in... Confronting evil, injustice and hypocrisy. Challenging worldly concepts of power, wealth, status and security.* An inclusive community: *Following Jesus in... Transcending barriers of gender, language, race, class, age, and culture. Identifying with those who are rejected, deprived and powerless.* A sacrificial community: *Following Jesus in... Accepting vulnerability and the necessity of sacrifice. Seeking to reflect the generous, life-giving nature of God.* A missionary community: *Following Jesus in... Demonstrating in word and action God's forgiving and healing love. Calling and enabling people to experience the love of God for themselves.* A worshipping community: *Following Jesus in... Engaging in worship and prayer which inspire and undergird all we are and do. Exploring and expressing what it means to live together as the people of God, obeying his Word and following Christ in the whole of daily life.'* (*Five Core Values*, 1998, p.4).

Catholicity is implied by the second clause, especially in the language of ‘mutual exchange’ and ‘sisters and brothers in every place and time’. This reference creates the potential for a demotic exploration of the church of Christ across the extension of both time and space (or geography). It also demonstrates the manner in which an apparent trialectical tension can be internalised within the discursive construction of a congregational theology in a way that allows demotic, ministerial and professional theologians to engage in a dialogue investigating relational ecclesiology. Covenantal, biblical and institutional dimensions are alluded to. Institutional discourse is frequently denominational discourse and may require re-formulating in a way that emphasises catholic and structured relationality underlying mutual and complementary means and methods of resourcing and supporting Baptist congregations.

The sixth core value references the relational demotic discourse that, it is suggested, needs to incorporate a covenantal and communal experience as a way of nurturing and sustaining commitments to a collective counter-cultural and transformational discipleship-ethics that might normally be considered ‘alien’. It can only be practised together in covenant. Wright’s understanding of covenantal open-endedness to God and to each other articulates the catholicity of covenant although he emphasises covenantal membership in something of a contrast to communal membership (Wright, 2002b, pp.79-80).⁴⁹ It should be added that covenantal membership, by definition, is always a communal experience even though it might be important to state that the intended beneficiaries are others outside of the covenant community.⁵⁰ Nevertheless

⁴⁸ Of course, the term ‘Relational communities’ may be tautologous but this is arguably worth overlooking in the absence of a more appropriate term that implies ‘catholic’ without unnecessarily alienating Baptists who might be sensitive to such language.

⁴⁹ Wright (2002b) argues that members of the local Baptist community may not necessarily be members of the local Baptist covenant. Frost (2006, pp.108-129) offers a variation on this in his discussion of the distinctions to be made between community and *communitas*. He discusses the ultimate disillusionment of many with the Christian search for community in the 1980s ‘new church’ movement. A more satisfactory approach was to re-conceive this as a search for *communitas*, where the intended beneficiaries are outside of the persons forming the initial community.

⁵⁰ This is seen in the Baptist Union’s *Declaration of Principle* which refers to the ‘duty of every disciple to bear witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and to take part in the

the original core values affirm the conviction that the transformative power of God is most obviously at work in the covenanted community through the sacrificial lives that are lived for others.

According to Wright (*Ibid*, pp.79-80), covenant membership makes demands of time and commitment, offers few privileges, confers huge responsibilities, 'makes church happen', resources mission, and bequeaths the church to following generations. It might be added that it also demonstrates a quest for collective, radical discipleship in response to the question 'What is the church?' It is a denial of its character, according to *Five Core Values*, if it is experienced in anything less than fully and radically inclusive communities. In imagining the mutual nurture and support necessary to sustain this level of discipleship-ethic it becomes inevitable that the demotic discourse generates new forms and expressions of covenantal discourse.⁵¹ This underlines Delanty's insistence that the desire and impetus for new forms of community lie precisely in the capacity to imagine those new forms (see above, p.183).

No mention has yet been made of the way in which a congregational discursive dialogue referencing identity and values might make better sense of the demotic discourse of belonging that seeks to reduce the impact of the distinctions that exist between church members and non-members. Whilst a discussion of values and identity merely foregrounds aspiration and common purpose, leaving the discussion of membership and non-membership unresolved, this approach does at least permit the widest possible understanding of God's openness (Fiddes, 2003; Ellis, 2002; Wright, 2002; and Grenz, 2001). It thus creates space for the congregational and discursive discovery of multiple forms of 'belonging' some of which will doubtless necessitate

evangelization of the world.' This is also seen in the core value of being a missionary as well as a sacrificial community.

⁵¹ One example of which might be *Urban Expression*'s statement of shared values at <http://www.urbanexpression.org.uk/convictions/values>, which supply the key for everything that this urban church-planting movement aspires to be and to do in small communities of church-planters.

forms of covenantal membership and which generates the potential for a demotic (re)discovery of the value of covenantal membership.

Cross (Haymes et al, 2006, p.81) indicates that ‘the “terms of membership” have been perennially discussed by Baptists.’ His references point to the discussion of ‘open’ and ‘closed’ membership.⁵² However, it is fair to say that there has been little or no professional baptistic theology that incorporates the demotic experiences and discourses of membership and belonging.⁵³ Equally, precious little of the church membership material collected for this research makes reference to demotic discourse. This ought to be of concern to all who care about the future of the Baptist Union. A truly Union-wide comprehension of the theology and practice of membership and belonging points to the need to listen to, understand, and evaluate the collective theological activity of its congregations as well as its college communities, theological communities, and other institutions. A post-foundational theology of membership and belonging that draws on scriptural, historical, and contextual resources requires such a programme. It is important for, if Giddens is correct, congregational discourses constitute a reflexive, discursive theological activity with the capacity for transformation of the practice of Baptist church membership. His attention to the duality of structure is a reminder that if the practical theological activity that is to be observed in several local congregations of the Baptist Union is representative of others, then it cannot lightly be dismissed as being insignificant for the practice and theology of membership and belonging across the Baptist Union.

There are other important reasons for the Baptist Union to engage more intentionally in the discursive construction of communities of Baptist belonging. If it fails to do this, it is argued that the discourses of denomination and of covenant will cease to be of any relevance to the practical theology of membership and belonging in the greater

⁵² For which see his own extensive discussion of open and closed membership and communion (Cross, 2000, pp.414-426).

⁵³ Again, it is necessary to point to the exception of ‘Bucking the Trend’ in *Membership* (2004).

majority of the Union's member churches. Equally, other historical and biblical resources will be of decreasing relevance as the experientially-validated subjectivity and the relational immediacy of the de-structured Christian 'family' flatten out the relevance of other time-space objectivities and perpetuate a sense of an 'eternal now'. It is to be hoped that a more constructive engagement with discursive congregational theologies can be undertaken and the suspicion dispelled, at least for one interviewee, that 'It does seem to me, at the end of it, they sort of hold up their hands and say, "We don't know either"'.⁵⁴

7.4 The relevance of this work to other congregational studies and Baptist theological studies of baptism, church membership and initiation

This social scientific study of Baptist congregations contributes to the field of congregational studies in the UK. It has parallels with social scientific interest in other Christian traditions, particularly the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers). Baptists and Quakers remain essentially non-creedal, each values congregational governance, covenant has been important to their respective self-identities, and the declining significance of membership continues to be a common point of interest, particularly in the British context.⁵⁵ Parallels will be explored here and the implication of the current work to Quaker congregational studies will be considered briefly.

7.4.1 Quaker congregational studies

Recent Quaker interest in the theme of covenant includes that of Richmond (2005) and Gwyn (1995, reprinted 2006). Richmond (2005, p.197) expounds the biblical narrative of covenant, stressing the fact that 'participation in the community of

⁵⁴ Transcript EDBC7c, lines 372,373.

⁵⁵ Quaker missionary and scholar Johan Maurer reports that responses to a May/June 2009 survey 'seem to confirm the general impression I had that "belonging" and membership are not as important as they were a couple of generations ago' and that 'as far as "current debates" are concerned, there are probably more debates among British Friends than there are among Americans and others.' (Johan Maurer, Personal emails, 7th and 20th May, 2009).

salvation is voluntary under the new covenant'.⁵⁶ Gwyn's social-historical treatment of covenant (1995, rep. 2006) compares early Quaker witness to the inner 'covenant of light', through which community membership was attained, with the alternative understanding of it being attained by entering a contract with existing members. Gwyn argues that this secularisation of church membership became widespread with the second generation of Quakers from the late seventeenth century onwards. In commending Gwyn's work, Dandelion (2006) urged Quakers to 'recover a sense of covenant for the journey ahead.' Our work shows that where the Baptist Union has managed to recover and develop a discourse of covenant, it has resulted in the renewal of understanding and practice of congregational membership and has provided a theological rationale for shared decision-making, mission, and ministry (see pp.71-92). There is much here that might be instructive for Quaker practice.

Equally, Gwyn's analysis of the secularisation of Quaker membership is relevant for Baptists examining discourses of covenant, voluntary association, denomination and the degree to which each of these represents a form of secular contractualism. However, it should immediately be noted that the understanding of the essentially mystical and transformative nature of the individual's covenant relationship with God through Christ remains core to Baptist convictions.⁵⁷ What have undoubtedly changed, and experienced degrees of secularisation, are the patterns that have been used to understand how such individuals are to relate together within the body of Christ (as outlined in pp.21-61).

Quaker interest in the renewal of membership is seen in the decision of the Yearly Meeting to encourage experimentation with aspects of membership between 2001 and

⁵⁶ Historically, participation in the Quaker community followed 'convincement', a process that 'specifically involves the decision of the believer or convert that Friends faith, practice and fellowship are the best ways and the best place to live out this relationship. Often (and a few generations ago we would have said "normally") a person who experienced "convincement" would apply for membership.' (Medlin, 2003, pp.63).

⁵⁷ Reiterated in the Baptist Union's *Declaration of Principle*, where the guidance of the Holy Spirit is assumed and where Baptism is defined as 'the immersion... of those who have professed repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.'

2006.⁵⁸ The Yearly Meeting of May 2006 recommended a change in *Quaker faith and practice*⁵⁹ to reflect a shift in 'emphasis from the process of acquiring membership to a set of principles underlying this process'.⁶⁰ Maurer (2003, pp.171-172) discusses Quaker unity with reference to two alternatives; the first focussing on right doctrine whilst the second emphasises right practice, an observation reliant on the work of Pink Dandelion (1996).⁶¹ *Quaker faith and practice*, in the way that the material is arranged, shows the interdependence of right doctrine and right practice.⁶² The demotic nature of the narrative that forms *Quaker faith and practice*, and the manner in which its understanding of membership was revised between 2001 to 2006, suggest

⁵⁸ The 2001 Yearly Meeting encouraged nearly 500 Monthly Meetings to 'experiment with the application process within the spirit of Quaker faith and practice, allowing rather more freedom than the current wording about exceptional circumstances (section 11.21 in particular) allows.' In a further minute it affirmed its commitment to the notion of membership but asked the Quaker Life Central Committee to set up a Membership Procedures Group. See the 'Minutes 19 and 30 of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain Yearly Meeting, 28 July – 4 August 2001, Exeter University' that are appended to the 2004 *Membership Consultation Document*.
http://www.quaker.org.uk/Shared_ASP_Files/UploadedFiles/BE5831B7-12EE-4BD6-A9BC-AD6D8333F448_Membership_Consultation_Doc.pdf.

⁵⁹ '*Quaker faith and practice* is the core publication of Britain Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends. It is an attempt to express truth through the vital personal and corporate experience of Friends. It is largely composed of extracts from Friends' writings: a fitting way of expressing the breadth of Quaker theology. It also describes the current structures (church government) of Britain Yearly Meeting.' A fourth edition is currently in preparation to reflect the requested changes. <http://www.quaker.org.uk/Templates/Internal.asp?NodeID=89749>. Viewed 24th June 2009.

⁶⁰ Minute 23 of the 2006 Yearly Meeting, held in London at Friends House, 26 - 29 May 2006, welcomes the report of the Membership Procedures Group. That Group's recommendation was that 'the membership sections of Quaker faith *and* practice should be reorganised so as to shift the emphasis from the process of acquiring membership to a set of principles underlying this process. The procedures which monthly meetings establish for acquiring membership stem from these principles. This change allows for both flexibility and variation in practice and the retention of well-tested processes for acquiring membership.'
http://www.quaker.org.uk/Shared_ASP_Files/UploadedFiles/6410B6EC-A6BD-43CA-A2D4-96DB965A7057_YM2006Minutes23Memb.pdf.

⁶¹ Dandelion (1996) describes a Liberal Quakerism in which 'belief is relatively inconsequential', shared practices are important, theology has been replaced by ethics, and belief by ethos. He characterises this as a 'double-culture', features of which are the centrality of form and the marginality of belief. In contrast he is able to talk of a conservatism of form and a behavioural creed. Dandelion judges this to have been the impact of British Quakerism's decision to enter mainstream British Christianity around the year 1900 and the prevailing liberal ethos of early twentieth century Protestantism that it found there.

possibilities for arriving at a Baptist understanding of membership that incorporates the demotic discourse in a more satisfactory way.

Anthropologist Peter Collins (1994) outlined a Quaker demotic discourse, or 'vernacular' narrative, in his PhD. His work points to the interaction of three orders of narrative existing within Quaker meetings: the individual, the vernacular and the canonical, reflecting the existence of various horizons of legitimacy. He concluded that it was through the spinning of narrative threads that the meeting maintained both its existence and its identity. His work tends to assume coherence-seeking narrational activity despite his observation that Hopewell was naïve in searching for coherent, or archetypal, narratives within the congregation (2004, p.103). This dissertation describes demotic and denominational discourses and suggests the value of a comparative analysis of these alongside Collin's vernacular and canonical narratives. However, the present discussion of a trialectic of discourses points to a conviction underlying this present work that references to 'various horizons of legitimacy' should not be understood in a hierarchical sense. Degrees of legitimacy are normally conferred according to one's perspective; what is considered legitimate by a congregation may not be legitimate to the denomination. Collins's work, however, suggests that the interview data collated for our research might benefit from analysis that differentiates individual from vernacular narratives in a way that reveals further nuances within the demotic discourse.

Further questions raised by our conclusions address other areas of Quaker practice. For example, if the Quaker meeting can be described as a 'heterotopia',⁶³ what

⁶² In the foreword it is stated that 'matters of church government no longer stand alone, but are integrated with other material in order to encourage deeper understanding of the nature of our organisation as an expression of community.'

⁶³ Contemporary social scientific interest in the Quakers has identified the Quaker experience of heterotopia, described as a 'social space in which different forms of existence are nurtured to those outside of it.' Heterotopic Quaker meetings resource life in the non-utopian sphere beyond the meeting and heterotopic experience describes embodied social practices, particularly the 'bonds of intimate community'. (Woodhead, 2008, p.ix-x; Pilgrim, 2008, pp.53-69).

difference does it make to the resourcing of life in the non-utopian sphere beyond the meeting whether the individual is a member of, or merely a regular attendee at, the meeting? Does the heterotopic experience of socially embodied 'bonds of intimate practice' have its accompanying explanatory images and metaphors that function in a way similar to the Baptist use of biblical images and metaphors? Are these bonds a form of de-structured relationality and if so, how do Quakers describe their interconnectedness? Is a relational approach to interconnectedness in the Quaker meeting likely to prompt individuals to consider themselves to be members of a Quaker meeting without having formally sought membership? These and other questions are suggested by the research results presented here and their investigation would furnish a fascinating cross-denominational comparison of related phenomena.

7.4.2 Baptist theological discussions of baptism, church membership and initiation

Beasley-Murray (1962, pp.393-395) concluded his classic text on baptism with a call for the reform of credobaptist theology and practice by arguing that strenuous efforts should be made to make baptism integral to the gospel as well as to conversion and, thirdly, that 'there should be an endeavour to make baptism integral to church membership. ...our baptismal practice had tended to obscure the fact that New Testament baptism is at once to Christ and the Body.'⁶⁴ Taking up this argument from Beasley-Murray, Cross *et al* (2008, pp.58-59) respond to the divorce of baptism from its natural theological partners by emphasising the fact that 'this understanding of becoming a Christian as a process... is the key... to understanding baptism in the New Testament.... as conversion-initiation or... conversion-baptism.'

⁶⁴ Compare this with Kirk's insistence that church membership is integral to the Gospel (see above at pp.4-6). See also Beasley-Murray (1962, p.57), 'According to Matthew 28:19, baptism is... entering into the possession of the triune God and therefore becoming a member of the people of God.'

The value of demotic interview data to this discussion does not directly address Beasley-Murray's professional theological concerns, but it is not unrelated. Interview data suggests that memories of baptism are frequently vivid and readily recounted,

DRJ: What kind of things do you remember about your baptismal service? Or the actual event?

ROG: it came to the... baptismal service... So that was... it's one of those tingly sensations, it really is, you know, you think, 'Cor, yeah' It's interesting 'cause as I say you go in, you get dunked, you go out, and that's it. [It] that was a real buzz. Excellent! It was a real buzz [laughs] Yes, it was cool, you know.⁶⁵

To the contrary, memories of being received into church membership are typically hazy and difficult to recount,

DRJ: Um, when you were welcomed into membership of the previous church, do you remember anything about that service?

ROG: No [laughs]. Not a sausage. Um, I think it was probably, the usual thing about, oh it's, this is, um, shake you by the hands, blah de blah de blah, um, and, oh here's a ticket to heaven, sort of thing, usual gag. One of the usual string of gags that you've heard a million times over. I mean, yes, that was it, did the business, became church members. That was it.⁶⁶

It is our conviction that Beasley-Murray offers a useful guide to an overdue reform of baptismal and church membership practice. By more closely associating the moment of baptism with reception into church membership it is argued here that the existential and experiential elements frequently reported within the demotic discourse to be associated with baptism might thereby also come to be associated with ontological incorporation into the body of Christ.⁶⁷ Further research will be necessary to

⁶⁵ Transcript BBC2b, lines 266, 287-292.

⁶⁶ Transcript BBC2b, lines 293-299.

⁶⁷ This possibility is outlined by *Patterns and Prayers* where the opening paragraph of the section titled 'The Baptism of Believers and Reception into Membership' states that 'Believers' baptism, reception into membership at the Lord's Supper, and the laying on of hands, all relate to our one initiation into the Body of Christ.' It foresees these all taking place in one act of worship (*Patterns and Prayers for Christian Worship*, 1991, p.93). The later *Gathering for Worship* is more hesitant regarding the language of *one initiation* but sees the *communal* dimension of baptism leading to church membership. It adds that 'reception into church membership should follow immediately, or at least very soon after baptism.' (*Gathering for Worship*, 2005, p.65). The practice of not receiving newly baptised individuals into church membership is discouraged (*Ibid*, p.66) and the liturgical texts offered are designed

understand where the focus for the demotic discourse lies with regards to the concurrence of baptism and reception into church membership.

Pursuing the logic of Beasley-Murray's argument, Fiddes and others have worked consistently to develop an understanding of a baptistic pattern of Christian initiation in the context of the Baptist World Alliance and the Anglican World Communion conversations, conducted between 2000 and 2005 (Cameron and Cupit, 2005).⁶⁸ Fiddes's concession that baptism could be seen as a part of the beginning of the process of Christian initiation, rather than it comprising the whole story, enabled the conversation partners to welcome such an 'understanding [of] initiation as a process... as a helpful approach' (*Ibid*, p.45).⁶⁹ Aware of Fiddes's contribution to the conversations, Haymes, Gouldbourne and Cross (2008, pp.57-100) offer an extended discussion of the process by which a person becomes a Christian, including the hearing of the gospel, repentance, baptism, entrance into the church, and the receipt of the gift of the Spirit. They assert that the sequence of punctiliar events is less problematic where the journey into Christian faith is understood as a process of initiation.

Our interview data suggests there is little consensus of lay theology regarding the order or alignment of these various events. This reflects the diversity of practice across a broad range of evangelical congregations – both credobaptist and paedobaptist – to which many current members and attenders of Baptist churches have previously belonged. The demotic discourse tends to see this diversity of baptismal and membership polity as unproblematic. This suggests a contemporary Baptist identity that is tolerant of diversity in the ordering of punctiliar events within the

for use in a single service (*Ibid*, pp.78-80) or for use on more than one occasion (*Ibid*, pp.67-80).

⁶⁸ And compare with *Pushing at the Boundaries of Unity: Anglicans and Baptists in conversation* (Faith and Unity Executive of the Baptist Union of Great Britain and The Council for Christian Unity of the Church of England, 2005).

⁶⁹ Fiddes served as the Baptist Co-Chairman of the Continuation Committee and shared responsibility with five others for the final text (Cameron and Cupit, 2005, p.99).

process of initiation. Further research might explore this in greater detail, particularly whether there is potential for a broader concurrence of lay and professional theologies of Christian initiation. Further research might also furnish professional theological discussion with a wider comprehension of sacramental understandings of baptism within lay theology.

7.4.3 Concluding remarks

The demotic discourse of Baptist congregations has hitherto been an under-examined aspect of theological discussion relating to church membership and belonging. Our attempt to understand this important source of lay theology has persuaded us that the congregation is a source for theology as much as it is an integrating motif of theology. Describing the nature of community at the beginning of the twenty-first century, Delanty (2003, p.187) argues that

Contemporary community may be understood as a communication community based on new kinds of belonging. By this is meant a sense of belonging that is peculiar to the circumstances of modern life and which is expressed in unstable, fluid, very open, and highly individualized groups. The communities of today are less bounded than those of the very recent past.... It is in this world of plurality rather than of closure that the new kinds of community are emerging. The persistence of community consists in its ability to communicate new ways of belonging.

The invitation to belonging and membership of the body of Christ is an invitation to a conversation initiated at the interface between relationality and a plurality; between a relational community and a world of plurality. Only together can lay, ministerial and professional theologians better understand the manner in which these elements of social systems relate to the reflexive construal of Christian belonging. What also seems certain is that only a joint endeavour can lead to a wider appreciation of church membership as one of the liberating disciplines of Christian initiation.

Appendix One: Primary source documents

A1.1 Porton Baptist Church: Church Book 1655

Page 1

[...]

'Broughton [...] Amesbury, Stowford Chalk, also Porton and ye parts adjacent, mett together as a church of Jesus Christ and his beloved rule, accordingly declared their resolutions for ye future through Christ wch strengtheneth them soo to walke as becomes ye Saints according to ye Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, in all obedience of his commands & in love toward each other as brothers & sisters ptakers of ye same Grace through Jesus Christ our Lord. The same day were baptized by our brother Edward Bundy, nine disciples whose names follow...'

A1.2 Records of Minutes taken of the proceedings of the Church of Christ meeting at the Maze Pond Southwark: Engrossed from the Original Minutes, and examined by the Church, with Marginal References for the more easy finding any particular Case. Begun Anno Domini 1784 to 1821

Memoranda

To be annually read at the Meeting of the Church in the month of January agreeable to a resolution made at a Church-Meeting, October 18th 1779

LORD'S DAY Jan 9th 1742/3 The Church was desired to stop after the Public Service, in order to know their judgement upon the following question, viz. 'Whether a Person ought to be continued in the fellowship of the Church who shall receive the Sacrament in the Church of England, to qualify himself for Executing an Office of Trust or Profit; when at the same time he does not incur any Penalty if he refuses to accept the Place to which he is Elected?'

Resolved, nem. con. It is the Opinion of this Church that such a behaviour is A PROSTITUTION OF THE ORDINANCE OF CHRIST and that a person so acting ought not to be continued in the fellowship of the Church

January 24th 1742/3 The above resolution was Confirmed and a Letter from the ELDERS and DEPUTIES of the BAPTIZED CHURCHES in and about LONDON signed by their Chairman on the 14th instant relating to the Question of Occasional Conformity with the CHURCH OF ENGLAND, being read; it was Ordered that the said letter be transcribed into the Minutes of the Church.

Jan 24th 1743 Resolved, That an Assembly of the Members of this Church, (upon giving public notice after sermon) containing Seven Brethren at least, shall be esteemed and accounted a Regular Church-Meeting; That all Business transacted or Resolutions taken at such a Meeting shall bear the Authority of a Church Act, if confirmed at the next stated Church-Meeting by adjournment: and that everything said, or done, at a Meeting where a less number of Brethren than seven are present as before mentioned, or not Confirmed by a subsequent Church-Meeting as described, shall not be looked upon as bearing the sanction of the Church, or laying the Members under an obligation to regard it.

Resolved, that any Members of the Church neglecting his or her place at the Lord's Supper for three stated seasons at most, shall have Messengers sent to enquire after, and admonish them, unless some one present can give the Church satisfactory reasons for the Absence.

July 26th 1744 Whereas it was agreed at a Church-Meeting held on the 24th day of January 1742-3 that a lawful or regular Church-Meeting should be upon giving notice after Sermon etc. It is hereby declared, this Article of Agreement is by no means to be construed to be invalidating such Resolutions as are taken by occasional Stops in the Church, when such Stops are requested in the same public manner as aforesaid; and it is hereby covenanted and Agreed by this Church, for the better understanding a Regular Church Meeting, that all such Meetings are in other respects conformable to the agreement of the 14th January 1742-3 before referred to, whether held sooner or later than the stated Church-Meeting by adjournment shall bear the Authority of this Church, and everything transacted at such Meetings after being confirmed as provision is therein made, shall be esteemed lawful Acts of the Church; and it is further Agreed that the putting off Church Meetings on all such occasional Stops shall be looked upon as a Church Act.

February 17th 1755. Agreed. That for the future the Names of the Brethren present at Church-Meetings shall be taken down by the Pastor, or some other Person appointed by him, or the Brethren present, and that the Names thus inserted shall be sufficient, except when it shall be thought convenient by the Majority of the brethren present to sign their own Names as heretofore.

August 19th 1776 A Resolution of January 24th 1742-3 respecting any of the Members absenting themselves from the Lord's Supper for three states Seasons at most, being sent to and admonished unless sufficient reason are assigned for the Absence: having been read. Agreed. That the Said decent and necessary Order, be continued and that our Honoured Deacons take cognizance of all those who are missing at that Special Ordinance of Communion.

October 18th 1779. Agreed. That in future it shall be the first business of our Meeting after the engrossment of the Minutes, to read all those Memorandums so placed (as above) by Order of the Church, that they may be in constant view, and that the whole of any particular Article if required.

June 19th 1780. It appearing that some Members of church in the Country, who obtain leave to sit down with those in Town under the notion of a transient situation, have long continued in that State without any apparent necessity and neither return to the oversight of the Community to which they belong, nor put themselves under the Care of that by which they have been admitted for a Season, It was proposed, that whereas the Friendly admission of reputable Members of distant Sister Churches to the Lord's Table with us which is becoming and lawful, under particular circumstances may countenance habitual neglect of Gospel Orders; to the hurt of the Community and also of those who are indulged with this Liberty: the following Resolutions shall henceforth take place in this Church. viz.

First. That no persons shall sit down with us at the Supper of our Lord, more than two successive opportunities, without a recommendation from the Minister of the Church to which they belong and the consent of our own Community at one of her Discipline Meetings.

Second. That in case of no application for being admitted a Member of this Body after six months liberty of transient Communion, enquiry shall be made that the Church may be satisfied on the Person's continuance any longer in a state of Nonconformity to the Discipline of God's House.

Third. That for the better edification of those who may be thus admitted to a participation of the Ordinances with us, (except on extraordinary occasions upon notice to the contrary) they may be allowed and encouraged to attend and hear at our Church Meetings, on condition of not disclosing the transactions of the Community.

Agreed to postpone the consideration of the above Articles to our next Church Meeting by adjournment.

July 17th 1780. The Regulations proposed relative to Occasional and Transient Communion, were considered and Agreed on, as they now stand in our Last Minutes. Resolved that the said Regulations be inserted in the beginning of the Church Book, and be Annually read with the other Articles.

[A resolution relating to new trustees is inserted for Dec 14th 1789]

April 19th 1790. Of the Rules and Orders which are Annually read, that of June 18th 1759 which respects the previous Nomination of those Persons who desire to join this Church, being thought not sufficiently Explicit, Agreed to substitute the following Resolution in its stead.

That any Person who wishes to become a Member of this Church, shall be proposed at a previous Church Meeting unless the Person be well known to the Church.

[A clause relating to a new 60 year lease on the burial ground and premises is dated Nov 24th 1791. Clauses follow relating to various bequests made to the church and the re-registration of the Meeting Place]

The Memorandum of the Lord's Day January 9th 1742-3 respecting Occasional Conformity with the National Church, not being sufficiently expressive of the sense of the Church, the following Resolution was agreed to as an explanation of it.

February 19th 1798. Resolved. That it is the Opinion of this Church that any Protestant Dissenter qualifying for a Civil Office, by partaking of the Lord's Supper in the Church of England as by Law established, Acts in opposition to the genuine principles of the Nonconformity, Prostitutes a Divine Institution. And thus renders himself unworthy of Membership in the Church of Christ.

Resolved that this minute be incorporated with the Memorandums of the Church which are annually read.

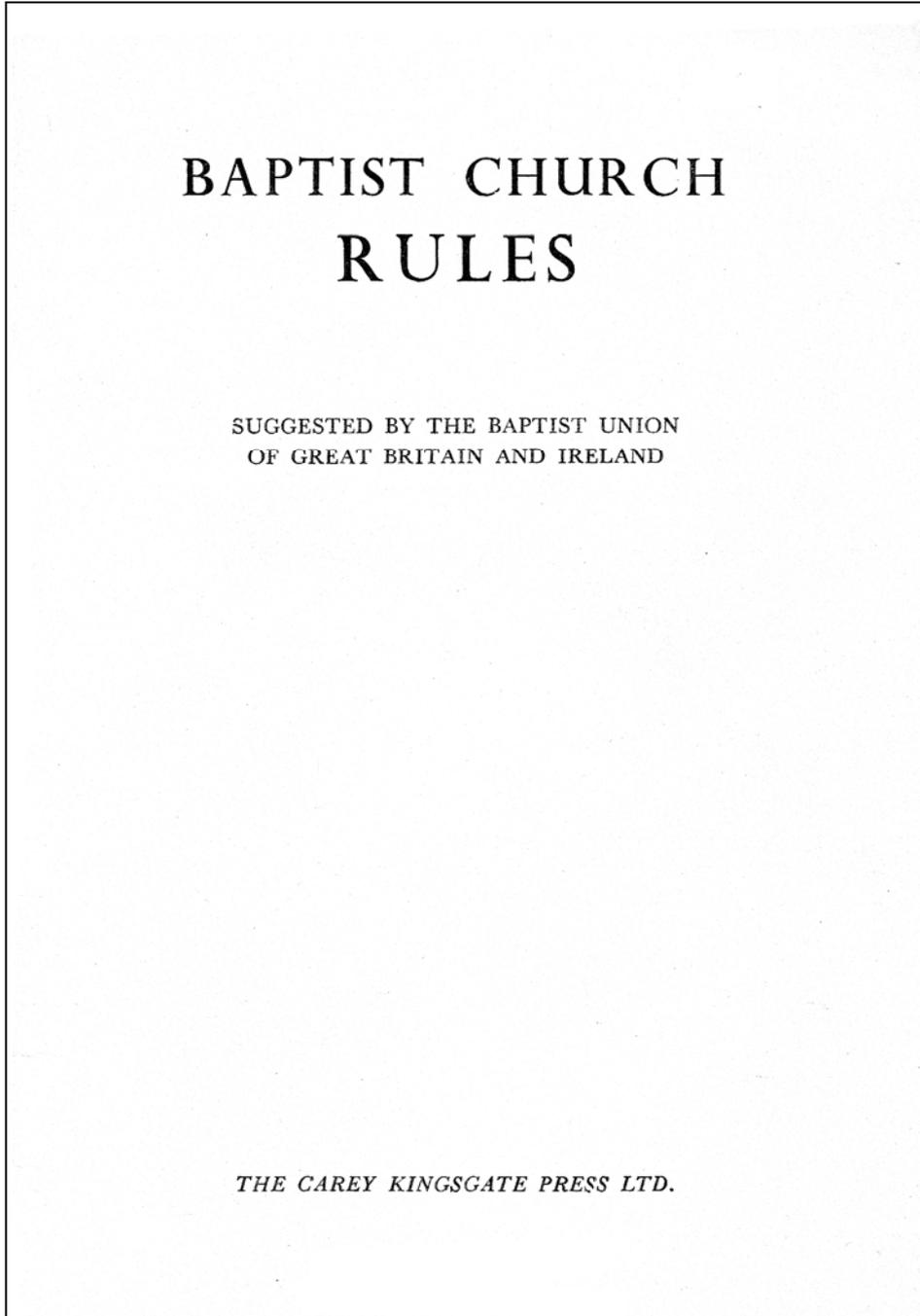
May 23rd 1813. It appearing to this Church that a difference of opinion of Baptism not to be a ban to the Lord's Table; Resolved, That we will, in [respect] to such opinion, manifest our Christian affection to all who love our Lord Christ, by admitting them as occasional communicants with us; such being members of Churches holding the more important doctrines of the Gospel, tho' they may differ from us to the subject of Baptism. Nb. To be annually read as per. Minute of the Church, July 10th 1814.

January 25th 1830. Resolved that with a view to maintain our sense of that integrity & uprightness which should distinguish the professing Christian in all his transactions in the world; it be henceforth the invariable rule of this Church to institute an inquiry by Messengers into the conduct of any member thereof who shall become avowedly insolvent.

15th April 1850. That difficulties [having] arisen in adequately [?] the Rules of the Church of July 26th 1744 and August 19th 1776; and with the view of making these more efficient; it be hereafter the practice of the Church that any Member absenting himself or herself from fellowship with us at the Lord's Table for six months successively without their communicating with the Pastor or Deacons, or the causes of their absence being well known & satisfactory, be considered to have thereby forfeited their Membership with the Church; providing always that notice of such intended excision be given at the previous Church Meeting, and also immediately to the parties coming under the operation of the Rule.

A1.3 Baptist Church Rules 1960

The Baptist Union published this short booklet circa 1960. No copy appears to exist in the Archive of the Baptist Union at the Angus Library, Regent's Park College, Oxford. For this reason, a copy of the booklet is included here as access is otherwise likely to prove difficult for interested scholars.



NOTES

(a) These suggested Church Rules have been drawn up as a guide. It will be noticed that there are a number of points which should be decided as local circumstances suggest. Particular care should be taken to ensure that the Church Rules do not conflict with the provision of the Church's Trust Deed. Where the model Trust Deed of the Baptist Union (known as the Fuller Trust—it is expected that a revision to be known as the Fairbairn Trust will be available for adoption in 1962 under the Baptist and Congregational Trusts Act, 1951) have been adopted, these should be carefully studied. Particular attention should be paid to Clause 16 of the Fuller Trust, which provides for the constitution and meetings of the Church.

(b) It is recommended that all church property should be vested in the Baptist Union Corporation Limited, or one of the other denominational Trust Corporations recognized under the Baptist and Congregational Trust Act, 1951. Further information and advice may be obtained from the Baptist Union's Property and Trust Deed Department.

CHURCH RULES

PREFACE

The Responsibilities of a Church Member

- I. To live a life consistent with the Gospel and worthy of our high calling in Christ.
- II. To spend some time every day in prayer and reading the Scriptures.
- III. To share each Lord's Day, unless unavoidably prevented, in the corporate worship of the Church, and to be regular and faithful in observance of the Lord's Supper.
- IV. To fulfil the ministry of intercession both privately, and by being present, whenever possible, at meetings for corporate prayer.
- V. To live in loyal love and fellowship with all the other members of the Church.
- VI. To take some part in the work of the Church, according to our calling, gifts and opportunities.
- VII. To accept personal responsibility for the government of the local Church, by being present, whenever possible, at the Church Meeting.
- VIII. To set aside and give a sum of money every Lord's Day for the work of God's Kingdom at home and overseas.
- IX. To attempt, by personal invitation, hospitality and visitation, to introduce and bring others to the Church.
- X. To witness to the Lord Jesus Christ by word and deed, and to take part in the evangelization of the world.

I. NAME OF CHURCH

The Church shall be known as
It shall be affiliated to the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland, and the local Association, and shall consist of those individuals who have become members in the manner hereinafter set forth.

II. MEMBERSHIP

(a) The membership shall be open to all who profess repentance toward God and who hold the Deity of our Lord Jesus Christ and profess faith in Him, whose lives bear evidence of their Christian profession and who have confessed this faith in the ordinance of Believers' Baptism.

(For open membership Churches the following should be substituted :—

The membership shall be open to all who profess repentance toward God and who hold the Deity of our Lord Jesus Christ and profess faith in Him, whose lives bear evidence of their Christian profession. Members are usually received after baptism by immersion. All applicants shall be asked earnestly to consider the New Testament teaching on Baptism, but the Church welcomes to full membership all who conscientiously follow our Lord Jesus Christ.)

(b) Those desirous of joining the Church shall apply to the Minister or to the Church Secretary or any of the Deacons; their names shall be proposed at a regular Church Meeting, and after visitation and a satisfactory report by the Minister and/or two members of the Church, shall be voted upon at the next convenient Church Meeting and, if elected, receive with prayer the right hand of fellowship at

the Lord's Table on the first convenient Communion Sunday.

(c) Members shall be received from other Christian Churches by letter of transfer, such applications to be voted upon, as set forth in the foregoing rule.

NOTE: Where a membership is not open to all Christians, a Roll of Communicants should be kept upon which should be inscribed the names of those who may desire to join in fellowship with the Church, but have not been baptized by immersion. The Church must decide what, if any, powers shall be accorded to Communicants, it being understood that such powers cannot be extended to voting upon such matters as are covered by the Trust Deed.

(d) Applicants for a transfer from the Church shall be dealt with by the Church Meeting and a letter of transfer or commendation shall be sent by the Church Secretary.

(e) A Members' Roll shall be kept by the Church Secretary and shall be signed by each Member on the occasion of admission to membership, and shall be revised annually.

III. ORDINANCES

(a) The Ordinance of the Lord's Supper will be observed on..... to which all Christian people are invited. Members should do their utmost to be present at the Communion service, for it is a great and sacred privilege to do so. Names of those absent for..... consecutive months, without reasonable excuse, may, after due notice, be removed from the Roll of Membership.

(b) The Ordinance of Believers' Baptism shall be administered as required. All believers in the Lord Jesus Christ

are admitted to this Ordinance, whether or not such candidates desire Church membership.

IV. CHURCH OFFICERS

(a) *The Minister.*—In making or considering a call to a Minister, the procedure for the time being recommended by the Baptist Union shall be observed. (A leaflet setting out this procedure may be obtained from the Baptist Church House and is entitled *Suggestions for Churches seeking Ministers.*)

(b) *The Diaconate.*—(1) The Deacons, together with the Minister, shall together be responsible for the spiritual leadership, oversight and administration of the Church.

(2) brethren and sisters, above the age of 21, shall be elected from amongst members of not less than six months' standing, for a period of years, to retire..... and are eligible for re-election, if willing.

(NOTES : (a) It is customary for one-third of the diaconate to retire annually. In some Churches the whole diaconate is elected for a period of three years. In some Churches retiring members are not eligible for re-election until one, two or three years have elapsed.

(b) When the Church has open membership, it is usual for a majority of deacons to be baptized members.)

(3) Nominations for the office of Deacon shall be made to the Church Secretary not later than 21 days before the Church Meeting. Nominations must be submitted in writing with the signature of two Church Members. Consent of the person nominated shall have been obtained previously. No member may nominate for election more persons than there are places vacant. A list of those so

nominated shall be either read at public worship on the two Sundays preceding the election or displayed in some public place within the Church; the names obtaining the highest number of votes at the election shall be deemed elected.

(c) *Executive Officers.*—A treasurer and secretary (both of whom shall be deacons) shall be elected annually at the Church Meeting, by ballot or otherwise, as the Church may determine.

A statement of the Church accounts duly audited by two Members appointed by the Church Meeting shall be presented annually at a Church Meeting.

V. CHURCH MEETINGS

(a) The Church shall meet for Christian fellowship and for the transaction of the business of the Church once a

Due notice of all Church Meetings shall be given at Public Worship.

(b) A special Church Meeting may be called at the discretion of the Minister and a majority of the deacons, or at the written request of members. Notice of such meetings shall be given at both services on the two preceding Sundays.

(c) Members shall be entitled to vote at Church Meetings, and the business shall be transacted under such rules as ordinarily govern the conduct of public meetings. (Some Churches limit voting to members of over six months' standing.)

(d) A quorum shall constitute% of the total membership.

VI. GENERAL

(a) The Minister shall be *ex-officio* President of all Societies and ordinarily shall preside at all meetings, both of the Church and its constituent societies.

(b) Applications for meetings shall be made to the Church Secretary. No meetings shall be held on the Church premises without the permission of the Minister and/or Deacons and upon such conditions as they may decide.

(c) The appointment of all Church officers shall be vested in the Church. (It is sometimes ruled that officers of all societies must be Church members.)

(d) Each Church organization shall be required to submit rules defining its purpose and governing its procedure. Such rules shall be operative only after they have been sanctioned by the Diaconate and/or Church Meeting, and cannot be changed without consent.

(e) Every such organization shall present to the Church Treasurer on or before in each year a statement of its accounts, duly audited for the preceding financial year.

VII. ALTERATION OF RULES

The foregoing Rules, a copy of which shall be given to each Church member, may be altered only at the Annual Business Meeting, or at a special meeting called for the purpose. A majority of two-thirds of those present shall be required for this purpose.

ADDENDUM

It is important that newly-constituted Churches should make early application for membership, both to the Baptist Union and the Local Association. The Union and the Associations make up living organisms whose function is to promote the fellowship of Christ's people and to encourage them in evangelistic endeavours. The local church is a vital part of the organism.

Appendix Two: Statistical tabulations

The *Church Life Profile 2001* (CLP2001) was a joint research venture of *Churches Information for Mission* (CIM), composed of representatives of member churches of Churches Together in England. The Baptist Union of Great Britain was represented on the Board of CIM by the author. Almost 108,000 adult churchgoers in England and Wales completed a CLP2001 questionnaire. The Baptist sample was just under 10,200 (see above at pp.119-124). Some of the data was published as *Church Life Profile 2001: Denominational Results for the Baptist Union* (Escott and Gelder, 2001). However, much of the data has never been released or published. The tabulations listed in this appendix support several of the conclusions reached in this dissertation about the impact of previous denominational background and age on an individual's evaluation of the usefulness of denominational resources. It also illustrates the manner in which the age of respondents correlates with feelings of belonging to a local congregation as well as to levels of participation. This previously unpublished data is included here for the sake of completeness and to serve future academic research in this area.

Table A2.1: Response to CLP2001 question A3. ‘How long have you been going to church services at this particular local church?’ tabulated by age cohort

		How long coming here								
		< 1 year	1-2 years	3-5 years	6-10 years	11-20 years	> 20 years	Visiting from other	Visiting, no other	Total
		Count	Count	Count	Count	Count	Count	Count	Count	Count
Age Group	15 to 24	126	119	120	104	234	37	21	5	766
	25 to 34	190	178	212	168	97	106	30	14	995
	35 to 44	188	219	312	355	387	261	30	10	1762
	45 to 54	101	179	234	285	508	431	28	5	1771
	55 to 64	57	112	148	208	345	664	29	2	1565
	65 to 74	41	84	150	162	249	768	24	2	1480
	75 to 84	19	38	77	110	209	532	6	1	992
	85+	6	14	32	40	47	206	4	4	353
	Total	728	943	1285	1432	2076	3005	172	43	9684

Possible responses to Question A3, ‘How long have you been going to church services at this particular local church?’ were:

- 1) Less than 1 year
- 2) 1-2 years
- 3) 3-5 years
- 4) 6-10 years
- 5) 11-20 years
- 6) More than 20 years
- 7) None, I am a visitor and normally attend another church service
- 8) None, I am a visitor and do not attend any place of worship.

Table A2.2 Response to CLP2001 question A6. 'Do you have a strong sense of belonging to this congregation?' tabulated by age cohort

		Sense of belonging						
		Yes, growing	Yes, about same	Yes, declining	No, but new	No, wishing	No, but happy	Total
		Count	Count	Count	Count	Count	Count	Count
Age Group	15 to 24	298	180	80	46	39	47	690
	25 to 34	473	224	93	75	27	28	920
	35 to 44	762	506	210	72	76	59	1685
	45 to 54	783	551	231	40	61	47	1713
	55 to 64	737	492	196	17	24	40	1506
	65 to 74	725	473	143	16	23	35	1415
	75 to 84	501	315	89	11	9	43	968
	85+	180	106	26	5	1	14	332
	Total	4459	2847	1068	282	260	313	9229

Possible responses to question A6 'Do you have a strong sense of belonging to this congregation?' were:

- 1) Yes, and growing
- 2) Yes, and about the same as a year ago
- 3) Yes, but declining
- 4) No, I am new here
- 5) No, and I wish I did
- 6) No, and I am happy about that

Table A2.3 Response to CLP2001 question A6. ‘Do you have a strong sense of belonging to this congregation?’ cross tabulated by previous denomination.

		Sense of belonging						
		Yes, growing	Yes, about same	Yes, declining	No, but new	No, wishing	No, but happy	Total
		Count	Count	Count	Count	Count	Count	Count
Prior congregation type	Combined/LEP	22	14	6	1	1	0	44
	Anglican	834	491	148	58	46	62	1639
	Baptist	1351	894	313	67	61	68	2754
	Methodist	310	229	81	17	18	33	688
	URC	79	76	21	1	10	9	196
	Catholic	61	26	7	8	8	12	122
	SA	33	18	0	2	1	2	56
	Ind Evangelical	201	119	47	18	24	18	427
	Other Evangelical	142	82	28	7	12	11	282
	C of S	48	31	18	5	2	8	112
	Other Presb	43	18	22	3	4	2	92
	Pent (AOG)	80	37	15	14	3	5	154
	Pent (Elim)	62	30	12	8	5	7	124
	Pent (Other)	78	31	22	10	10	6	157
	New or House	88	42	24	12	12	3	181
	Congregational	111	72	28	6	1	10	228
	Friends	74	34	25	4	3	8	148
	Other	165	88	47	17	12	11	340
	None	620	462	190	22	22	36	1352
Total	4402	2794	1054	280	255	311	9096	

See Table A.2.2 for possible responses to question A6

Prior congregational types include (where abbreviations are used):

- Combined/LEP = Local Ecumenical Project
- Anglican = Church of England
- Baptist = Baptist Union of Great Britain (England and Wales only)
- Catholic = Roman Catholic
- URC = United Reformed Church
- SA = Salvation Army
- Ind Evangelical = Independent Evangelical
- C of S = Church of Scotland
- Other Presb = Other Presbyterian
- Pent (AOG) = Assemblies of God
- Pent (Elim) = Elim Pentecostal
- Pent (Other) = Pentecostal (Other)
- New or House = New or House Church
- Friends = Religious Society of Friends ('Quakers')

Table A2.4 Response to CLP2001 question A14. 'Before you started coming here what type of church did you attend?' tabulated by age cohort.

		Age Group								Total
		15 to 24	25 to 34	35 to 44	45 to 54	55 to 64	65 to 74	75 to 84	85+	
		Count	Count	Count	Count	Count	Count	Count	Count	
Prior congregation type	Combined/LEP	2	2	13	10	6	9	1	1	44
	Anglican	97	177	332	317	265	276	169	60	1693
	Baptist	156	264	459	508	500	476	332	124	2819
	Methodist	36	51	101	112	122	111	117	45	695
	URC	4	14	30	43	47	35	25	7	205
	Catholic	12	19	32	28	16	9	9	1	126
	SA	2	5	13	8	13	13	6	3	63
	Ind Evangelical	37	48	79	115	72	55	29	5	440
	Other Evangelical	21	37	69	59	50	32	16	7	291
	C of S	9	10	20	21	21	16	14	3	114
	Other Presb	7	19	15	12	10	16	16	2	97
	Pent (AOG)	6	21	32	30	24	18	17	10	158
	Pent (Elim)	4	17	22	39	18	21	9	1	131
	Pent (Other)	19	28	39	27	33	9	11	2	168
	New or House	10	20	68	44	19	16	8	3	188
	Congregational	10	17	32	37	33	44	43	11	227
	Friends	12	16	28	32	24	23	12	6	153
	Other	41	55	83	63	46	43	16	7	354
None	257	144	249	218	183	181	88	39	1359	
Total	742	964	1716	1723	1502	1403	938	337	9325	

Prior congregational types include (where abbreviations are used):

- Combined/LEP = Local Ecumenical Project
- Anglican = Church of England
- Baptist = Baptist Union of Great Britain (England and Wales only)
- Catholic = Roman Catholic
- URC = United Reformed Church
- SA = Salvation Army
- Ind Evangelical = Independent Evangelical
- Other evangelic = Other evangelical
- C of S = Church of Scotland
- Other Presb = Other Presbyterian
- Pent (AOG) = Assemblies of God
- Pent (Elim) = Elim Pentecostal
- Pent (Other) = Pentecostal (Other)
- New or House = New or House Church
- Friends = Religious Society of Friends ('Quakers')

Table A2.5 Response to CLP2001 question A20. ‘Which best describes your involvement in the making of important decisions in this local church?’ tabulated by age cohort and gender.

				Involvement in congregational decisions					
				Often participate	Occasionally involved	Not usually involved	No opportunity - fine	No opportunity - not happy	Total
				Count	Count	Count	Count	Count	Count
Gender	Female	Age Group	15 to 24	27	73	88	192	31	411
			25 to 34	111	146	129	141	10	537
			35 to 44	229	324	212	201	32	998
			45 to 54	363	288	173	135	29	988
			55 to 64	337	248	158	119	18	880
			65 to 74	267	260	179	137	18	861
			75 to 84	133	159	204	93	12	601
			85+	36	53	74	48	3	214
			Total	1503	1551	1217	1066	153	5490
	Male	Age Group	15 to 24	30	41	62	159	24	316
			25 to 34	76	105	91	103	15	390
			35 to 44	184	174	165	117	17	657
			45 to 54	277	164	128	89	24	682
			55 to 64	266	111	97	67	19	560
			65 to 74	209	103	84	59	17	472
			75 to 84	84	63	68	34	6	255
			85+	12	11	24	15	2	64
			Total	1138	772	719	643	124	3396
	Total	Age Group	15 to 24	57	114	150	351	55	727
			25 to 34	187	251	220	244	25	927
			35 to 44	413	498	377	318	49	1655
			45 to 54	640	452	301	224	53	1670
			55 to 64	603	359	255	186	37	1440
			65 to 74	476	363	263	196	35	1333
			75 to 84	217	222	272	127	18	856
			85+	48	64	98	63	5	278
			Total	2641	2323	1936	1709	277	8886

Possible responses to question A20. ‘Which best describes your involvement in the making of important decisions in this local church?’

- 1) I often participate in making decisions in this congregation
- 2) I am occasionally involved in the decision making in this congregation
- 3) I am not usually involved in the decision making in this congregation
- 4) I have no opportunity to be involved in the decision making in this congregation, but I would like to.
- 5) I have no opportunity to be involved in the decision making in this congregation, but I am happy with that.

Table A2.6 Responses to CLP2001 question A22. 'The Denomination of this local church is...' tabulated by age cohort

		Importance of denomination					
		Primary framework	Important framework	One factor among others	Of little significance	Mostly unhelpful	Total
		Count	Count	Count	Count	Count	Count
Age Group	15 to 24	97	233	230	146	15	721
	25 to 34	115	262	318	252	3	950
	35 to 44	267	535	586	300	4	1692
	45 to 54	338	577	541	224	7	1687
	55 to 64	408	554	402	104	9	1477
	65 to 74	461	544	291	59	5	1360
	75 to 84	346	379	144	28	12	909
	85+	122	103	52	12	11	300
	Total	2154	3187	2564	1125	66	9096

Possible responses to question A22, 'The Denomination of this local church is:'

- 1) The primary framework for my Christian life
- 2) An important framework for my Christian life
- 3) One factor among others
- 4) Of little significance
- 5) Mostly unhelpful

Table A2.7 Response to CLP2001 question A22. ‘The Denomination of this local church is...’ cross-tabulated by previous denomination

		Importance of denomination					
		Primary framework	Important framework	One factor among others	Of little significance	Mostly unhelpful	Total
		Count	Count	Count	Count	Count	Count
Prior congregation type	Combined/LEP	3	16	16	8	0	43
	Anglican	309	555	484	253	17	1618
	Baptist	793	1012	696	214	11	2726
	Methodist	120	253	207	70	7	657
	URC	35	72	59	30	1	197
	Catholic	16	46	38	17	0	117
	SA	18	17	19	7	0	61
	Ind Evangelical	58	121	138	96	6	419
	Other Evangelica	58	96	79	40	2	275
	C of S	21	50	33	9	0	113
	Other Presb	25	29	25	10	1	90
	Pent (AOG)	25	51	52	26	1	155
	Pent (Elim)	19	42	45	16	1	123
	Pent (Other)	26	46	48	34	1	155
	New or House	18	44	62	52	2	178
	Congregational	59	70	65	20	1	215
	Friends	35	57	40	15	1	148
	Other	60	100	112	70	1	343
None	407	460	320	120	16	1323	
Total	2105	3137	2538	1107	69	8956	

Prior congregational types include (where abbreviations are used):

- Combined/LEP = Local Ecumenical Project
- Anglican = Church of England
- Baptist = Baptist Union of Great Britain (England and Wales only)
- Catholic = Roman Catholic
- URC = United Reformed Church
- SA = Salvation Army
- Ind Evangelical = Independent Evangelical
- Other evangelic = Other evangelical
- C of S = Church of Scotland
- Other Presb = Other Presbyterian
- Pent (AOG) = Assemblies of God
- Pent (Elim) = Elim Pentecostal
- Pent (Other) = Pentecostal (Other)
- New or House = New or House Church
- Friends = Religious Society of Friends ('Quakers')

Table A2.8 Response to CLP2001 question A13. 'Before you started coming here, were you participating in another church?' cross-tabulated by previous denomination

		Prior congregational involvement				
		No, all/most of my life	No, not for several years	No, never	Yes	Total
		Count	Count	Count	Count	Count
Prior congregation type	Combined/LEP	1	2	2	39	44
	Anglican	58	381	126	1129	1694
	Baptist	128	205	53	2436	2822
	Methodist	42	115	31	511	699
	URC	7	29	10	159	205
	Catholic	7	46	13	62	128
	SA	2	10	1	48	61
	Ind Evangelical	10	23	8	400	441
	Other Evangelical	5	23	5	260	293
	C of S	8	20	5	82	115
	Other Presb	12	13	2	67	94
	Pent (AOG)	13	11	2	135	161
	Pent (Elim)	1	10	3	117	131
	Pent (Other)	13	24	12	121	170
	New or House	5	12	1	168	186
	Congregational	32	39	12	148	231
	Friends	18	16	8	112	154
	Other	26	43	9	275	353
	None	779	167	432	7	1385
	Total	1167	1189	735	6276	9367

Possible responses to question A13., 'Before you started coming here, were you participating in another church?':

- 1) No, I have been coming here for all or most of my life
- 2) No, I have been coming here for several years
- 3) No, I have never been to another congregation
- 4) Yes, before attending here I was attending another congregation.

Table A2.9 Affirmative responses ('Yes and have done so in the last 12 months') to CLP2001 question A44. 'Would you be happy to invite others to a Sunday service at this church?' cross-tabulated by previous church participation

		Inviting to worship					Total Count
		Yes, in last 12 months	Yes, not in last 12 months	Don't know	No, probably not	No, definitely not	
		Count	Count	Count	Count	Count	
Prior congregational involvement	No, all/most of my life	399	576	141	129	16	1261
	No, not for several years	478	487	139	79	12	1195
	No, never	292	282	105	79	5	763
	Yes	2449	2748	556	415	64	6232
	Total	3618	4093	941	702	97	9451

Possible answers to the question A44, 'Would you be happy to invite others to a Sunday service at this church?'

- 1) Yes, and I have in the last 12 months
- 2) Yes, but not in the last 12 months
- 3) Don't know
- 4) No, and I probably would not.
- 5) No, and I would definitely not

Appendix Three: The sample of Church membership documents

During September 2000, 300 Baptist church secretaries in England and Wales received a request to return copies of the materials they would normally make available to new or potential members. Just over one hundred and twenty Baptist churches returned samples of their membership materials, a response rate of 40%.

The churches were selected using a stratified random sample technique. All of the Baptist Union's churches are allocated a unique identification, or ID, number for database and census purposes. Churches were stratified according to size of membership (0-50, 51-100, 101-150, 151-200, 200+) and location (rural, rural village, small town, suburban, urban). Information about the size of membership and location is gathered annually for the Union's Annual Returns. The stratification by both size and location resulted in the ID numbers of just over 2,100 churches being allocated to one of twenty five 'cells' in a grid measuring five by five cells (*Figure 1*).

Size Location	0-50	51-100	101-150	151-200	200+
Rural					
Rural village					
Small town					
Suburban					
Urban					

Figure 1: Illustration of the grid constructed to assist the stratified random sampling of Baptist Union Churches.

Once allocated, a random selection of twelve ID numbers was drawn from each of the twenty five cells, giving a total sample of 300. The randomisation of the sample of 12 ID numbers from each cell was achieved by using online random number generators

(see www.random.org for example). A stratified random sample is an effective way to ensure a reasonably representative sample of churches supplied their materials. A cross-check was made to ensure that the return of 120 sets of material was also reasonably representative. All categories (by size *and* location) returned some materials although one or two of the smaller congregations indicated that they had nothing available.

Table 1: Availability and distribution of membership material categorised by type and by church.

	Introductory letter	Intro: membership	Giving	Gift survey	Church constitution	Membership course	Covenant	Intro to church	YP policy	Certificate or card	Intro: Baptism	Intro: church life	Interviewers' guidelines	Application form	Baptist Basics	Who'd be a Baptist?	Affirmation form	Members' directory	Mission statement	Church newsletter	Doctrinal statement
Abbey, Reading							1														
Albany Rd, Cardiff					1																
Altrincham		1																			
Andover	1		1		1			1	1	1											
Ash St, Bootle		1																			
Barton, Cambridge					1																
Beacon, Arnold					1																
Beaumont, Woodbridge	1	1			1			1													
Beechen Grove																					
Belgrave, Leicester					1																
Bethel, Sandy Lane		1																			
Birkby, Huddersfield					1																
Bloxham					1				1				1		1	1					1
Brentford		1			1										1						
Brentwood		1			1																
Brixington Community church	1		1	1	1	1															
Burford		1													1						
Burgh, Skegness					1		1														1
Burlington, Ipswich	1		1	1											1	1		1		1	
Burton-on-the-Water					1																
Cambray, Cheltenham					1					1											1
Chelmsford																					
Chichester		1		1	1			1			1	1	1								
Christ the Cornerstone	1						1							1							
Coedpenmaen, Pontypridd					1																
Croyde					1																
Cullompton															1						
Deer Pk, Tenby					1																
Dereham					1																

	Introductory letter	Intro: membership	Giving	Gift survey	Church constitution	Membership course	Covenant	Intro to church	YP policy	Certificate or card	Intro: Baptism	Intro: church life	Interviewers' guidelines	Application form	Baptist Basics	Who'd be a Baptist?	Affirmation form	Members' directory	Mission statement	Church newsletter	Doctrinal statement	
Dereham Road					1		1															
Didcot		1		1									1									
Dinas Powys					1		1															
Downs, Brighton					1								1									
Duckpool Rd, Newport		1					1			1												
Ebenezer, Netherton																						
Eldon Road, London		1			1																	
Eltham Park		1			1								1									
Eythorne					1																	
Fishponds, Bristol	1				1																	1
Gilgal, Porthcawl														1								
Gillingham					1		1	1					1									
Glebe Farm, Birmingham					1																	
Grove Lane, Cheadle Hulme																						
Harrogate		1																				
Harston, Cambridge					1																	
Heaton, Bradford															1							
Heywood					1		1						1									
High St, Tring		1			1								1									
Hillhead, Glasgow		1			1			1										1		1		
Hillingdon Park					1																	
Histon, Cambridge					1																	
Hope, Caerau																1						
John Bunyan, Kingston	1	1	1					1							1							
Kay St, Rawtenstall		1																				
Kidderminster					1		1															
Kilmington		1						1														
Kings Cross		1						1														
Leckhampton					1																	
Lindsey Park		1			1						1											
Littleover		1					1															
Llandrindod Wells					1		1															1
London Rd, Lowestoft					1																	
Lydbrook					1																	
Maidstone					1																	
Malvern					1		1															
Marston Green																						
Napier Rd, Ashford Common					1										1							
Nether Heyford					1																	
Newcastle-u-Lyme		1			1		1												1			
North Hanwell					1																	
Norton																						
Old Lodge, Purley					1																	

	Introductory letter	Intro: membership	Giving	Gift survey	Church constitution	Membership course	Covenant	Intro to church	YP policy	Certificate or card	Intro: Baptism	Intro: church life	Interviewers' guidelines	Application form	Baptist Basics	Who'd be a Baptist?	Affirmation form	Members' directory	Mission statement	Church newsletter	Doctrinal statement	
Ormesby		1					1															
Pill					1																	
Pinhoe		1			1														1			1
Pollards Hill	1		1		1		1				1	1										
Potter St, Harlow		1			1		1	1	1									1				
Preston, Paignton					1																	
Queens Rd, Broadstairs		1			1		1						1									
Queens Rd, Wimbledon		1												1								
Radford Semele					1																	
Robert Hall, Leicester		1																				
Rugby			1																			
Sandown		1			1																	1
Sherborne					1																	1
Serpentine Rd, Wallasey		1																				
Siloam, Upper Cwmbran																						
Silver St, Taunton			1	1	1																	
Sittingbourne		1					1															
Slough	1	1		1	1			1						1	1	1						
South Oxhey					1																	
South St, Exeter																						
Southcourt	1		1	1	1								1	1								
Stanmore		1																				
Surbiton					1																	
Swadlincote		1																				
Swarcliffe, Leeds										1												
Tilehouse St, Hitchin					1																	
Tonyfelin, Caerffili																						
Torrington		1																				1
Tottenham					1																	
Totteridge Rd, Enfield		1			1																	
Trinity, Bacup					1																	
Tywyn		1			1		1													1	1	
Trinity, Falmouth							1															
UPC, Moss Side																						
Waterlooville							1								1	1	1	1	1			
West Croyden		1												1								
West Leigh		1	1		1																	
West St, Rochdale		1																				
Whetstone	1	1	1		1													1				
Winchmore Hill					1																	
Woodley, Reading		1			1								1									1
Worcester					1																	
Worle																						
Wrexham					1		1															
Totals	11	42	10	7	73	1	22	10	3	4	3	2	10	7	11	4	1	5	5	2	10	

In order to arrive at the tabulation in *Table 1* the membership ‘packs’ or sets of material were categorised by the type of item in each set of material; as follows: an introductory letter, an Introduction to membership, instructions for financial giving to the church, a survey of spiritual gifts, a copy of the church constitution, details of a membership course, a copy of the church covenant, an introduction to the church, a copy of a youth policy, a membership certificate or card, an introduction to baptism, an introduction to life in the church fellowship, guidelines for the visit of membership interviewers, an application form for church membership, excerpts of material from *Baptist Basics*, a copy of *Who'd be a Baptist?*, a copy of an affirmation form, a copy of the church members' directory, a copy of the church mission statement, a sample copy of the church newsletter, and a copy of the church's doctrinal statement.

There were twenty-one categories in total. In practice, an ‘item’ might well be bound together with several others. So, within one membership booklet it would not be uncommon to find a copy of the church constitution, a copy of the church covenant and a copy of the church's doctrinal statement.

Some of these items were unique to only one congregation in the sample. Others were found in the majority of instances. The most commonly occurring item was a copy of the church constitution. The frequency with which each item appeared in the total sample is indicated in *Table 2*, featured below:

**Membership documentation samples
collected from 121 Baptist churches**
Collected September 2000

Church constitution	73
Introduction to membership	42
Church covenant	22
Introductory letter	11
Baptist Basics	11
Giving / financial support directions	10
Introduction to the church	10
Interviewers' guidelines	10
Doctrinal statement	10
Spiritual gift survey	7
A membership application form	7
Members' directory	5
Church mission statement	5
Membership certificate or card	4
Who'd be a Baptist?	4
Youth policy	3
Introduction to Baptism	3
Introduction to church life	2
Church newsletter	2
Affirmation form	1
Membership course	1

Table 2: Total number of types of membership material supplied by 121 Baptist churches.

Appendix Four: Designing and Implementing the Field Research

A4.1 Introduction: The research process in general

A4.1.1 What is research supposed to achieve?

Giddens (2006, p.78) suggests that there are four essential questions to be asked in social research; factual questions (What happens?), comparative questions (Does this happen elsewhere?), developmental questions (Has this happened over time?) and theoretical questions (What underlies this phenomenon?). In the research programme incorporated into this current piece of work, these questions inform the interview design, the statistical presentation, the collection and collation of church membership materials, and the review of Baptist and baptistic theological and historical literature.

A further aspect of the research task is enumerated by Ritchie and Lewis (2003, p.57. Cited in Swinton and Mowat (2006), p.51-52) who classify the functions of social research in the following way; its contextual function (involving a description of the social phenomena being researched), its explanatory function (proposing reasons for and associations between the phenomena being observed), its evaluative function (assessing how effective are the phenomena being observed) and its generative function (developing theories, strategies and actions).

Hammersley (1995) offers an almost identical classification, describing them as research outcomes, of description, explanation, evaluation, and theorising. He also adds a cautionary note about prioritising some research outcomes over others, for example elevating the theorising above other outcomes of ethnographic research, such as description (*Ibid*, pp.62-63). Giddens cannot go quite this far, however, and states that although factual research shows *how* things happen, sociological research

is interested in *why* things happen.¹ In order to understand *why* we have to construct explanatory theories because complex social systems require theorising to illuminate and explain factual evidence. Yet Giddens is also keen to overcome the false duality between factual research and theories. For him, developing valid theoretical approaches requires factual research (Giddens, 2006, pp.8-10).

The reason that research questions are asked in the first place is generally because a particular problem, puzzle, dilemma, or anomaly has been observed and has prompted the initial questions. Social research begins typically with a research problem that generates initial and relatively unsophisticated questions. These in turn may prompt further reading, thinking and discussion which in their turn generate the research questions that are the basis of the research investigation or experimentation (Swinton and Mowat, 2006, pp.52-53)

A4.1.2 Stating the research problem and framing initial research questions

This current research was motivated by an attempt to understand why membership in the Baptist Union had decreased from 170,318 in 1985 to 142,636 in 2000, a period in which regular Sunday attendance at the Union's churches had increased by 2% to just over 232,000 (Brierley, 2000, p.39).

Initial investigation focused on more accurately describing the statistical patterns by refining questions inserted in the Baptist Union's annual return questionnaire.² Beyond that an attempt was made to explain some of the reasons for the pattern, including contributions made by this author to several *Baptist Times* articles (2nd December 1999, p.1; 16th/23rd December 1999, p.1) reporting on the annual returns and Christian Research UK Church census data. Reference was made to the preference for

¹ We may account for this difference of emphasis in the fact that Hamersley writes as an ethnographer whilst Giddens is a sociologist with an interest in the classical grand theories of sociology such as functionalism, conflict theories, symbolic interactionism and his own theory of structuration. For more see Giddens (2005, pp.8-25; 100-123) and compare with Hammersley and Atkinson (1995, pp.239-287).

believing without belonging³ and a general reluctance to commit to membership in the wider society.⁴ However it was also noted that an emphasis on church planting, evangelistic confidence, and the presence of younger families were characteristics of many Baptist congregations in comparison with congregations of other denominations.⁵

However, with wider reading, consultation, discussion and reflection, the focus for this current research gradually shifted to a focus on what church members and regular church attenders understood these respective practices to mean. Anecdotal evidence suggested at an early stage that the increasing diversity of opinions about membership and belonging within the churches of the Baptist Union did not necessarily reflect what was contained in the greater majority of church membership documents and constitutions, nor what was being written theologically about membership.

A4.1.3 Establishing a theoretical framework

The Baptist Union of Great Britain, its national offices, local churches, colleges, Council and Assembly is a relatively complex social system. To explain certain strands of factual evidence embedded within it requires explanatory theorising. Silverman (2000, p.78. Citing Gubrium, personal correspondence) underlines the importance of a theoretical framework to the research task by insisting that ‘theory provides both a framework for critically understanding phenomena [and a] basis for considering how what is unknown might be organized.’ He further demonstrates (*Ibid*, 2000, p.78) that

² Initial research questions should identify questions that probe a gap in knowledge and more importantly any gaps in understanding according to Swinton and Mowat (2006, pp.53-54).

³ Reflecting the subtitle of Grace Davies’ book *Religion in Modern Britain since 1945* written in 1994.

⁴ A position being given some support at that time by pre-publication interest in Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone: the Collapse and Revival of American Community* in which he charted the decline of membership organisations in the USA and the consequent decline in ‘social capital’.

⁵ Compare this with a more extended reflection in Jackson (2003b, p.19).

'theories are developed and modified by good research and direct us to look at phenomena in various ways. They cannot be disproved, merely found to be more or less useful.' So, a theoretical framework is essential if the factual evidence is to be analysed with any degree of systematisation. There may be other ways to organise and arrange the data, but the value of the theoretical perspective is that it makes obvious the priorities and interests that inform the ordering and ultimately the analysis. This is an important aspect of establishing reliability and, as Silverman (*Ibid*, pp.288-289) insists, 'without [their] active employment... we are bound to lapse into ad hoc use of common-sense interpretations.'

Reliability and validity are of particular concern to all qualitative researchers and developing a theoretical framework establishes a basis by which the claims of validity for a particular piece of qualitative research may be extended to other settings. Coffey and Atkinson (1996, p.14. Cited in Glesne, 1999, p.22) suggest that 'it is important to be able to go beyond the local settings of the research and to engage with formal ideas at a more general level' and Glesne (1999, p.22) continues that 'it is only the theoretical framework that makes this possible. Sim (1998, p.350. Cited in Swinton and Mowat, 2006, p.48) extends similar claims, insisting that

Theoretical frameworks also offer the possibility that data gained from a particular study provide theoretical insights which possess a sufficient degree of generality or universality to allow their projection to other contexts or situations which are comparable to that of the original study.

It is important to stress this at this point in the description of the research component of this dissertation for, as Hammersley (1995, pp.58,60) notes, 'qualitative researchers... seem almost to reject the very idea of theory in favour of description....' and urges qualitative researchers to appreciate the value of a theoretical framework because

one cannot exhaust the description of a setting, there must always be selection; and this will be based... on theoretical assumptions. Many pictures are possible of any set of phenomena and none is universally privileged. Their relative value depends on our purposes.

The purpose of the current research gradually came to clearer focus on the attempt to understand the main discourses of church membership and belonging embedded in the contemporary discursive activity and publications of the Baptist Union of Great Britain, its national offices, local churches, theological colleges, Council, Assembly, and the theologians and writers whose intended audience includes the churches and individual church members of the Baptist Union. Of primary interest within this setting was the manner in which these discourses shaped (if at all) the theology and practice of membership and belonging in the local congregations of the Baptist Union.

Social science has shown an enduring interest in social action and social structure (Haralambos and Holborn, 2007, pp.855-863, 874-878, especially 887-890. Compare with Giddens, 2006, p.106-108). The attempt to understand and analyse membership and belonging in the setting of the Baptist Union and the local congregation pointed towards the potential value of theoretical perspectives that paid attention to the issues of social action and social structure where individual church members and attenders were the likely agents implicated by attention to social action and where the Baptist Union, in all its many expressions, and the local congregation were component parts of the social structure in which there was a significant research interest.

The unitive approach to social action and social structure advocated by Anthony Giddens provided a theoretical approach to the sociological study of people and organisations as well as a theoretical framework for research design within the social sciences. In the face of sociological approaches that either stress the creative components of human behaviour or that stress the constraint that social influence has upon our actions, Giddens (1984, p.xvi-xvii) developed his 'structurationist' model of social theory,

to encompass issues... to do with the nature of human action and the acting self; with how action should be conceptualised and its relationship to institutions... The main concern of social theory is... the illumination of concrete processes of social life.

He theorises that action and structure are related and describes a 'duality of structure'. This means that all social action presumes the existence of structure whilst social

structure presumes action. 'Social structure' refers to the regularities and patterns of social behaviour and relationships. It does not exist independently of human activity (like a building) and is constructed by it, although it can constrain human activity. Giddens describes a monetary system, arguing that 'social institutions do precede the existence of any given individual and exert constrain over us.' (Giddens, 2006, p.107) They constrain but do not determine what we do – a person can opt out of the monetary system irrespective of the likely hardships they will face. At the same time, it depends on people behaving and relating in regular and predictable ways. (*Ibid*, 2006, pp.108-109)

At the heart of structuration theory is a conviction that people are 'reflexive actors'; competent and knowledgeable agents with an innate capacity to act upon the organisations to which they belong and thus effect change within it. Rejecting the view that institutional organisations are an inevitable and singular constraint acting upon their members, Giddens argues that this underestimates the capacity of human actors, individually or collectively, to reproduce and transform the institutes to which they belong. He also disputes the claim that organisations are merely the expression of a collective will and reiterates his view that organisations, particularly where they have an institutional character, possess 'structural qualities' which ensure their existence across time and space.

His sensitivity to the time-space constitution of social life implies a plea for attention to disciplinary insights from historiography and geography. This has been an essential aspect of understanding the meaning attached to congregational affiliation. Giddens (1984, p.286) writes that

Analyzing the time-space co-ordination of social activities means studying the contextual features of locales through which actors move in their daily paths and the regionalization of locales stretching away across time-space.

He (1984, p.328) insists that fundamental to social science is the identification of the bounds of an actor's knowledgeability in the shifting contexts of time and space. In other words, what do they know about the situation in which they are located and in

what ways is that knowledge bounded? He adds (1984, p.289) that the careful researcher avoids impoverished accounts of the actor's knowledgeability. Investigating what the actor already knows requires careful study of practical consciousness⁶ and requires familiarity with the hermeneutical assumptions embedded in the institutional or social milieu.⁷

Giddens' theory of structuration relies on certain theoretical concepts and those that proved most appropriate to this research can be summarised as the 'co-presence of reflexive actors implicated in the reproduction and transformation of institutional organisations set in a time-space extension'.

His theory of structuration (Giddens, 2006, pp.25-26) also closely connects microsociology, the study of everyday social action in situations of face-to-face interaction, with macrosociology, the analysis of large-scale social systems. This innovation is important for a more adequate understanding of the phenomenon of membership and belonging within the Baptist Union, reflecting as it does the ways in which people living their everyday lives are affected greatly by the broader institutional framework.

In sum, Giddens' structuration theory encourages us to pay particular attention to practical consciousness and reflexive social action in the social system, the structural elements and constraints present in the social system, and the duality of structure that might be anticipated within the social system being investigated.

A4.1.4 Research methodology

In broadly defined terms this present research has a qualitative methodology and is reliant on a structurationist theoretical framework. A qualitative methodology was

⁶ What Giddens describes as the practical, rarely propositional or discursive, knowledge that sustains the flow of day to day life. See Giddens (1984, pp.281-2).

⁷ Where the researcher and the actor inhabit the same institutional or social milieu, the hermeneutical assumptions may remain latent yet this must not allow the researcher to lose sight of the fact that these may well prove to be explanatory and enter into the formulation of the research. Giddens adopts the terminology of, 'hermeneutical elucidation'. (*Ibid*, p.328).

developed as these are generally better suited to small samples where in-depth analysis is sought. Given our theoretical framework, reflexivity within a social system may be assumed to contribute to the manner in which a local congregation defines and maintains itself as a community. This would be discovered, for example, in the discursive construction of a community's identity and calls for careful attention to discourse and dialogue. A qualitative methodology enabled a deeper level of interaction with formal documentation supplied to applicants for Baptist church membership as well as with the individual 'social actors' (or church members). Survey questionnaires providing statistical analysis would have elicited a broader and more representative range of response but with insufficient detail (Giddens, 2006, p.87). Equally, the research was principally concerned with generating new insights into the manner in which individuals construe their sense of membership and belonging to Baptist churches. The collection of qualitative data was not intended to lead to its quantification via statistical techniques or quantitative content analysis.

This is not to deny the value of statistical data however; some of that is used here to illustrate the phenomena under scrutiny and to reinforce the significance of particular lines of investigation during the semi-structured interviews. In fact, Giddens (1984, p.333) tries to overcome the dualism inherent in stressing *either* qualitative *or* quantitative approaches to field research. He regards this as a false dichotomy, arguing that the collection and interpretation of quantitative data requires the same skills as those for the gathering of qualitative data. It is self-evident that all observed data in the social sciences are qualitative in origin, even where they are capable of being rendered in a quantitative fashion.⁸

This present research relies upon statistical evidence at several key points, an effective indication of the value of Giddens' equal treatment of macrosociological and microsociological elements in the social system being studied. At the macro- level this

implies a better knowledge and understanding of the way that the Union, its theologians, and its congregations establish and sustain practices and theologies of membership and belonging. This necessitated a research methodology that allowed a careful investigation of the discourse of membership and belonging through a critical review of theological literature, through the collection and analysis of a sample of church membership packs, and the gathering and analysis of several sets of statistical data drawn from churches and individuals within the Baptist Union. At the micro- level, this implied a knowledge and understanding of the understanding and behaviour of church members, regular attenders, and ministers through the use of semi-structured interviews (including their development, piloting, revision, deployment, transcription, coding, and analysis).

A4.2. Developing the orienting hypotheses

A4.2.1 Familiarity and the social researcher: insider-outsider considerations

Giddens (1984, p.3) is not unique in recognising the explicatory or orienting capacity of prior assumptions about the field of study,⁹ particularly on the part of a social researcher who shares the hermeneutical assumptions of the social actors he or she intends to research;

In structuration theory a hermeneutic starting-point is accepted in so far as it is acknowledged that the description of human activities demands a familiarity with the forms of life expressed in those actions.

His chief contribution is to recognise that the researcher may be located in the hermeneutical framework from within which it is intended to elucidate the subject under study and that this may be advantageous. Miles and Huberman (1994, p.17)

⁸ For example, the intensity with which satisfaction or anger is felt can be converted into a Lickert-scale type response, or having a flushed, ruddy face can be converted into a temperature reading. See also Miles and Huberman (1994, p.9).

⁹ Swinton and Mowatt (2006, pp.34-36) prefer to describe these as 'prior interpretive paradigms'.

agree that 'Any researcher, no matter how unstructured or inductive, comes to fieldwork with some orienting ideas.' They add (1994, p.23) 'We believe that better research happens when you make your framework and associated choices of research questions, cases, sampling, and instrumentation – explicit, rather than claiming inductive "purity".'

The sociological discussion of 'insider-outsider' issues raised here by Giddens follows a well trodden path. Eppley (2006, p.3) notes that 'conversations among social science researchers examining the researcher-participant dyad first emerged in the 1970's' and shows how researchers, who position themselves 'as "insider" or "outsider," ...attempt to stabilize and make coherent that which is tenuous and discursively constituted.' Dandelion's (2004, pp.226-235) valuable discussion of the significance of 'insider-outsider' issues to Quaker studies highlights the tendency on the part of academic colleagues to present research findings that 'say as much about their authors as their subjects.' This is a stabilizing activity inasmuch as it allows a coherent presentation from within the personal perspective of the author.¹⁰ Dandelion (2004, p.228) concedes that a reflexive methodology critiques the classical 'insider-outsider' dualism.

This researcher is a Baptist minister, a fact that was known to some of the interviewees (though not the majority). Whilst he had formerly been a staff member of the Baptist Union's national offices in Didcot, at the time of the interviews he was working for another employer. Introductory letters introduced him as a doctoral student of Birmingham University. His previous experience located him as an 'insider' with respect of the hermeneutical starting point mentioned by Giddens, yet at the same time, according to Eppley (2006, p.8) '...there is othering in the very act of studying,...' As a fellow Christian, the researcher was aware that he was being treated as an insider when the disclosures of interviewees assumed shared understandings.

¹⁰ Indeed, Dandelion suggests that Quaker authors presented their research findings very much as 'pivot-points on [their] spiritual journey.' (Dandelion, 2004, p.226).

However, with interviewees who felt themselves to be atypical members of an atypical Baptist church, there appeared to be an assumption that the researcher was a typical Baptist and thus not as they were. This merely served to underline an observation made by Alcoff (1995, p.106) that 'location and positionality should not be conceived as one-dimensional or static but as multiple and with varying degrees of mobility.'

As Giddens appreciates, the advantage of the shared hermeneutical starting point was that the researcher had a relatively advanced knowledge of the social systems he was studying and had some prior assumptions about them. The disadvantages have also been widely reported (Maykovitch, 1977; Deutsch, 1981; Kanuha, 1990; O'Connor, 2004) and include the threat to objectivity, restraint in probing information with which the researcher is already too familiar, and allowing a general empathy with an interviewee to constrain the careful unpacking of particularities that are *not* shared by the researcher and interviewee.

The need to separate the researcher, and his own predispositions towards the research subject, from the research interviewees was an important methodological lesson. 'Well you know what I mean?' was not always followed up, for example, because the researcher believed that they did indeed know what the interviewee meant. However, the formal interview context and the introduction of the researcher as a student helped to maintain the perception of the researcher as an 'outsider'. Interviewees volunteered snippets of information to the researcher that they would not have volunteered had they realised that the researcher's previous employment background and experiences meant that he was well aware of these miscellaneous snippets of information.

The 'insider-outsider' debate has come to recognise the heterogeneous nature of most social systems and the constantly negotiated sense of who is counted 'inside' or 'outside' at any particular moment within that social system (O'Connor, 2004). As Eppley (2006, p.8) concludes, 'Researchers, then, can be neither Insider nor Outsider; they are instead temporarily and precariously positioned within a continuum.'

A4.2.2 The purpose of orienting hypotheses

As already indicated, qualitative research does not set out to prove or disprove the theoretical framework that informs methodology and research priorities. The gathering of factual material from the social system is, however, intended to prove or disprove one or more research hypotheses. Unlike theories, hypotheses are tested in research (Silverman, 2000, p.78).¹¹

However, in most qualitative research programmes these are not clear at the outset. Orienting hypotheses are frequently formulated that provide 'an educated guess at what is going on' (Giddens, 2006, p.80). Silverman (2000, pp.78-79) agrees that there may be no hypothesis at the outset; hypotheses in qualitative research are often produced (or induced) during its early stages. Glesne (1999, 2nd ed., p.22) reports that 'Glaser and Strauss (1967) proposed an inductive strategy whereby the researcher discovers concepts and hypotheses through constant comparative analysis.' Hammersley and Atkinson (1995, 2nd ed., p.29) state that 'the aim in the pre-fieldwork states of data collection is to turn the foreshadowed problems into a set of questions to which an answer can be given... [in] a more abstract theoretical formulation.' Swinton and Mowat argue that,

Unlike quantitative approaches, qualitative research begins with a general field rather than a specific hypothesis. As the research process progresses, material for the development of hypotheses begins to emerge. However, they tend to emerge from the data rather than be imposed on it by the researcher. Qualitative methods are... at their most useful when little is understood or known about a situation (2006, p.52).

Having established an early research interest in the main discourses of membership and belonging that were shaping the theology and practice of local congregations,

¹¹ According to Montgomery (1999, p.5) where a sociological study 'is a theoretical study as opposed to a descriptive or purely exploratory study, the selected variables are presented initially in their supposed relationships, and then data to support or refute the theory or supposition are systematically presented. This approach is in contrast to a typical historical study in which a list of generalizations or "reasons" for a phenomenon are placed at the end of a descriptive study, if at all. Thus, the sociological theory may appear to be presented prematurely or to be superficial, according to the perspective of other disciplines, especially those that rely heavily on detailed description, as in historical studies.

attention turned to treatments of related aspects in books and journal articles. This was ongoing during the first stages of interviewing and data analysis. One theme that was considered important enough to investigate further was that of 'community' and this was to prove a particularly fruitful way of trying to hypothesise about the collective nature of the congregation. The way in which the research progressed closely mirrored the pattern described by Glesne who explains that,

Researchers often use empirical generalisation and formal theory to help form initial questions and working hypotheses during the beginning stages of data collections. As they begin to focus on data analysis, researchers may seek out yet other theories to help them examine their data from different perspectives. (1999, p.23).¹²

A4.2.3 Hypothesis one

An investigation of community was fruitful because social science interest in community reveals a particular interest in the bounded nature of communities as well as the ways in which they are constituted. One of the most important recent treatments of community from within the social sciences has been Anthony Cohen's *The Symbolic Construction of Community*. In symbolically constructed communities, membership is a symbolic form of boundary construction and, because 'symbolism itself does not so much carry meaning as allow people to impute meaning to it' (Cohen, 1985, p.71) his approach allows for the persistence of a form of church membership and belonging whilst permitting a spatial or chronological transformation in its meaning.¹³ Thus far his work has the potential to explain early interview data suggesting that a variety of meanings were being attached to membership and attendance.

¹² And see also Swinton and Mowat (2006, p.54) who add that 'The formal research question may change through the life of the research because of the iterative and developing nature of the knowledge gained from the data collection.'

¹³ Cohen (1985, p.55) argues that symbolic form has only a loose relation to its content and that 'people can participate in the same "ritual" yet find quite different meanings for it.' Compare with Delanty (2003, p.46) who offers a useful summary and critique of Cohen's work.

However, early interview data indicated that Cohen's (1985, pp.12,13) juxtaposition of community signification over and against a communal 'other' was of less concern to my interviewees. Of greater concern to them was the desire to develop a Christian identity in common with churches of other denominations. Most were unwilling to articulate a distinct sense of Baptist identity. Boundary construction, symbolic or otherwise, was not a pressing concern for interviewees, even when such themes were pursued in the interviews.¹⁴

In the early interview data there was a clear preference for avoiding closure as to who might potentially belong to the congregation; a tendency that was characterised by a reluctance to define the boundaries. Closely allied with these views was a resistance to 'official' or 'constitutional' definitions of membership. Similarly there was an emerging preference for using the discourse of 'relationality' to describe membership and belonging. Whilst this is certainly a strand in Cohen's work, it became clear that a theoretical approach that had a more nuanced and extended account of relationality would be required. To arrive at a more satisfactory theoretical account of community the work of other social scientists was examined. The most helpful accounts stressed the discursive, or communicative, construction of community.

Delanty (2003, p.187) argues that a contemporary search for community is an expression of the contemporary desire for 'communicative belonging in an insecure world.'¹⁵ His attention to the discursive construction of 'belonging' is extremely valuable because he can therefore claim that communities express a new sense of belonging 'that is peculiar to the circumstances of modern life and which is expressed in unstable, fluid, very open and highly individualised groups.'¹⁶ Indeed, he argues

¹⁴ This is a perspective shared by Delanty in his critique of Cohen's work, when he argues that Cohen overemphasises 'the exclusive nature of community'. (*Ibid*, p.48).

¹⁵ Delanty's reference to 'insecurity' owes much to Bauman's development of this theme in his own work on community. See Baumann (2001, pp.39-49).

¹⁶ See also Jurgen Habermas (1984, pp.83-84; 94-110) for whom communication is the central strand of social action. Because communication is an open-ended process it therefore follows that communicative social action always resists closure and if communities are constructed

(2003, pp.188-189) that ‘the differences between groups are becoming more and more diffuse and overlapping.’

By turning the focus away from symbolic meaning and towards discursive belonging, Delanty theorises that ‘community, as belonging, is constructed in communicative processes rather than in institutional structures, spaces, or even in symbolic forms of meaning.’ (*Ibid*, p.187). Finally, and most problematically for symbolist approaches, Delanty suggests that the real social utility and energy of community lies in its imagined capacity; namely that community can be discovered in the search for it. Community has to be imagined and is therefore implicated in the production of meaning, not merely its reproduction.¹⁷

Delanty’s modelling of community made it possible to begin theorising with an appropriate level of confidence about the nature of the interview data. If membership and belonging are constructed discursively then one might anticipate the locale of the discursive activity being the social space known as either the ‘local congregation’ and/or the ‘church building’. The Baptist Union as a social totality, the local congregation as a collective community, and individual reflexive actors (members and attenders) are together involved in a complex matrix of productive and reproductive activity that is focused on membership and belonging. It should be possible, following Giddens, to attribute structural qualities to this matrix and remain alert to its ongoing susceptibility to the reflexive action of members and attenders.

One might also expect that the symbolic construction of membership boundaries does not have the potency that might otherwise be imagined. Members and attenders are likely to use discourse that decreases the significance of the distinction between their congregation and other congregations, whether Baptist or of a different denomination.

communicatively it can be theorised that they are always emergent; they are ‘projects’ rather than ‘structures’.

¹⁷ In contrast, Giddens tends to emphasise only the reproduction of resource by reflexive actors and his account of the production of new, imagined, resource is by no means as well developed as that of Delanty and other discursive theorists.

There ought to be fewer instances of denominational discourse and one might also expect to meet relatively infrequent references to church membership documents, church constitutions, or 'Baptist Union Guidelines'.

This allows the formulation of the first orienting hypothesis: *Careful attention to the congregational discourse of membership and belonging is likely to offer a more satisfactory elucidation of membership and belonging than concentrating solely on either institutional structures or the symbolic construction of boundaries.*

A4.2.4 Hypothesis two

If this hypothesis is correct then members and attenders ought to be discovered using discourse that lessens the distinction between members and attenders or which attempts to remove the distinction altogether. It might be anticipated that the discourse of membership will be applied to, or claimed by, those who are not actually members according to a church constitution. If Giddens is correct, this will apply at the level of the practical consciousness of interviewees. One might then expect the discursive consciousness of interviewees to reveal a problematic when the researcher probes the meaning given to the attempts to lessen member/attender distinctions in the face of institutional obstacles.

Bauman's insistence that the aspiration for community represents a desire for safety in an insecure world¹⁸ suggests that within the discourse of belonging it ought to be possible to discover references to security-related concepts such as 'warmth', 'welcome', 'trust', 'help', 'care', 'share', and 'safe'. If Bauman (2001) is correct that the security of belonging (communal) and exhilaration of freedom (individual) are rarely to be found together, then one might suppose that interviewees ought to report a certain level of willingness to forego individual freedoms.

Both Bauman and Giddens prioritise the individual within the collective of the community, albeit from different theoretical accounts of the individual. Bauman (2001,

p.145) theorises that the individual 'other' embodies the insecurity haunting each one of us. Giddens' use of the term 'co-presence' suggests an awareness of other social actors within a social system. Individual identity remains central to Giddens' conceptualisation, however, and it is this feature that has led others to draw attention to what they perceive as a weakness in his account of community. Delanty (2003, pp.125-130) points to the criticism of Giddens' expressivist individualism by authors such as Nicholas Lash, who have characterised this as either cultural narcissism or cynicism. Whilst it is possible to suspend judgement about which of these alternative accounts of the individual is the more useful theoretical assessment, it will nevertheless be vital to pay careful attention to the discourse of individual relationality where used in close proximity to that of belonging.

This leads to the second orienting hypothesis: *By emphasising 'belonging', members and attenders are able to lessen the constitutional or formal distinctions that exist between them in order that each of them will experience the security that the church community offers.*

A4.2.5 Hypothesis three

For many Baptist churches it is a legal and charitable requirement that membership be retained as a normative aspect of congregational governance.¹⁹ The reproduction of the social system of the congregation, in which membership is embedded, is a factor of historic common practices that have become enshrined in charity law and thereby, following Giddens, demonstrate structural qualities. However, if community is

¹⁸ He writes that 'We miss community because we miss security.' See Baumann (2001, p.144).

¹⁹ Typically, a Baptist church has two documents that deal directly with membership and its requirements. The property trust documents may stipulate conditions for membership, as explained by the Baptist Union Corporation (*BUC Guidelines: B1 Church Trusts, Model Trusts and property trustees (9/2007)*, p.2). The constitution is likely to deal in more detail with issues of membership (*BUC Guidelines: C24 Church Constitutions (05/2008)*, pp.2-3). From the 1st October 2008, Baptist churches with an income of over £100,000 per annum are required to register with the Charity Commissioners and this is likely to prompt the need to adopt what is being styled an *Approved Governing Document* that may either replace or supplement any existing constitution (*BUC Guidelines: C25 Using the Approved Governing Document (08/2008)*).

discursively constructed then one ought to discover interviewees, particularly attenders, who act reflexively in contributing to the production of new forms of belonging. For example, we may anticipate congregations or individuals who have circumvented the need to constantly make the distinction between members and attenders in the course of week-by-week activity. Describing and understanding the manner in which the structural qualities of the congregation interact with the reflexive action of members and attenders remains a central focus for this dissertation.

This helps to formulate the third orienting hypothesis: The reproduction of structured formal membership 'resources' (a consequence of structural qualities inherent in the social system) is important but the production of new understandings of membership and belonging (a consequence of reflexive social action) is likely to prove at least as important to the ongoing communicative construction of membership and belonging within the Baptist Union and its member churches.

A4.2.6 Hypothesis four

The early research interviews revealed that theologies and practices of membership and belonging were being constructed from the most immediate of resources, namely the contextual. The centring of relationality erodes the distinction that may have formerly existed, for example, between the levels of participation, involvement, and financial commitment shown by members and adherents respectively. This can also be derived from the theoretical proposals regarding the discursive construction of membership and belonging.

The production of theological and historical literary resources appears to have had little or limited impact on the practical consciousness of either church members or attenders. The contextual discourse of 'relationality' is likely to be of more concern to interviewees than discourses that reflect either the Baptist historical tradition or the biblical text.

This leads to the fourth orienting hypothesis: *The use of relational discourse, reflecting contextual factors, is more significant in the communicative construction of*

contemporary Baptist congregational communities than either historical or biblical discourses.

A4.3 Research method

Research method is the choice of research tool, or tools, that are best suited to the efficient gathering and analysis of the qualitative data being investigated. An appropriately chosen research method will also offer a way to prove or disprove the hypotheses orienting the research.

It has already been shown (pp.62-68) above that library research suggested close attention to two reasonably distinct means of framing the contemporary discourse of Baptist church membership and belonging; namely, covenantal discourse and denominational discourse. A review of personal correspondence, editorial letters in the *Baptist Times*, and informal conversations with ministerial and theological colleagues suggested that it would be worthwhile to investigate an additional, third category of relational discourse.²⁰ Selecting a suitable research method was thus determined by a research interest in investigating the various discourses of church membership and belonging most commonly used by members and adherents who were regularly attending a local Baptist congregation. Silverman (2000, p.76) considers that the choice of research method should be determined by the intention of the research. In order to discover meaning and perception embedded in discourse. He suggests that the semi-structured interview is the most appropriate method for obtaining this type of data.²¹

²⁰ The same point is also highlighted by the contributions of Rob Warner to the Baptist Union's Membership Roundtable and is ultimately a part of that Roundtable's *Membership* pack, published in 2004.

²¹ Glesne (1999, p.31) also argues that the semi-structured interview is highly suited to this type of research interest. See Swinton and Mowat (2006, pp.62-64) for the use of the interview as a tool of social scientific enquiry.

A4.3.1 Evaluating the denominational discourse of membership materials

However, to test hypothesis three it was necessary to devise a research method that allowed closer examination of the structural qualities of the congregation and the Baptist Union. This necessitated a sampling and review of the denominational discourse to be found in the church membership packs made available to new or potential church members. The method of sampling and analysis has already been outlined in appendix three and makes an important contribution to the discussion of the triangulation of data below (see pp.260-263).

A4.3.2 First-stage interviews

An initial set of twenty questions was devised and tested with two volunteers from a congregation known to the researcher. The questions were subsequently revised and a list of thirty questions was drawn up as a guide for further interviews.²² A first sample of seven individuals was then selected from a church in rural Devon with a membership of approximately one hundred and fifty. The minister was invited to select two long-standing members, two people who had recently become church members and two long-standing attenders who were not members. Each of the six was interviewed as was the minister. Prior to the interview, each interviewee was asked to complete a participant's release form, a demographic questionnaire with questions probing involvement in their present and any previous church congregations. These were used to gain knowledge about the interviewee's previous experience and to maximise the time available for each interview.

²² Interview questions were formulated that invited respondents to describe their experiences and understanding of; belonging to their congregation, the congregation as a community, their experiences of being a church member (or attender), whether symbolic resources have contributed to constructing and sustaining a sense of belonging, the boundaries to belonging, church membership and other patterns of social affiliation, the contribution of active participation to a sense of belonging, and, finally, whether denominational discourse nurtures and sustains membership and belonging.

Each interview began with a general introduction to the purpose of the research and an assurance of anonymity with respect to the publishing of interview data in the final doctoral dissertation. Each interview was digitally recorded and up-loaded to the researcher's laptop. The full consent of each interviewee was required for this and no interviewee withdrew their consent at any stage.

During the course of each interview supplementary questions were used to probe the responses of interviewees in more depth. Several of the more significant of the spontaneous supplementary questions were noted down during the course of the first two or three interviews and some of these were then incorporated into the version that was used with the remainder of the first stage of the interviews.

A version of this was also used with the minister of each church in which the most appropriate questions were complemented by an exploration of how the issues of membership and adherence, being discussed with other interviewees, were viewed by the minister.

After each interview had been recorded, full transcripts were made of the first fourteen interviews. On the advice of the researcher's doctoral supervisor, the last six were only partially transcribed. Transcripts and transcribed excerpts were posted or emailed to the respective interviewee who each had a cooling-off period during which they could withdraw from participation. No interviewee exercised this right. Transcripts were then used for coding purposes.

A4.3.3 The early use of 'prompt' cards

With the first twelve interviews of members and attenders I was interested to explore the extent to which various modes of discourse, as suggested by the library research, had become a part of either the practical or discursive consciousness of the interviewees. This was viewed as an important tool for improving the efficiency of the questions asked and anticipating the data subsequently generated in the later interviews.

Sixty-two index cards were prepared, each one containing a word or short phrase that seemed to relate most closely to membership and attendance. When the semi-structured interview of forty-five to fifty minutes had ended, the interviewee was then invited, in up to fifteen minutes, to outline their experience and involvement in the life of their local congregation with reference to any of the words on the index cards. Despite the apparently daunting task, with only one exception, all of the interviewees tackled this task successfully, albeit in different ways. Whilst one interviewee used all of the sixty cards, each of the others used only a smaller selection. The chief outcome of this exploratory exercise was a growing sense that the majority of interviewees were using a relatively limited range of discourse and that there was remarkable overlap in the range of discourse used by each interviewee in response to this exercise.

The range of cards used was:

Fellowship	Individual	Cell Group	Leadership	Ministry	Pressure
Partnership	Attendance	Expectations	Duty	Ownership	Member
Responsibility	Unity	Holy Spirit	Baptist	Freedom	Community
Mission	Worship	Christian	Exclusive	Family	Disciple
Church meeting	Discipline	Body	Giving	Nurture	Signing up
Identify with	Belonging	Participation	Sharing	Devotion	Supporting
Transformation	Loyalty	Membership	Inclusive	Joining	Mutual
Journey	Voluntary	Spiritual home	Bride	Commitment	Covenant
Church	Affiliation	Stakeholder	Baptism	Voting rights	Relationship
Together	Communion	Sheep	Housegroup	Audience	Gathered
Congregational	Believing	Constitution	Love	Servant	Trust

The decision was taken at this stage of the research to limit the scope of the data collection to semi-structured interview questions. The index card exercise was judged successful in indicating which potential avenues of theological enquiry were likely to

prove of little value if included in the second stage of the research. The outcome of this particular exercise also fed directly into the formulation of the hypotheses stated at sections A4.2.1 to A4.2.4 above, in particular the conviction outlined in the fourth hypothesis that the use of relational discourse by interviewees is more significant than the use of historical or biblical discourses.

A4.3.4 Second-stage interviews

All interviews from stage one were digitally recorded and transcribed in full. During the interviews, an interview log was kept and particular points made by interviewees were noted that seemed to be of particular importance. Additionally a research log recording impressions immediately following each interview was kept. This was subsequently revisited when reviewing the interview scripts.

Additionally, during stage one of the interviews each participating congregation had been asked to circulate three questions to each person attending the Sunday services held in the week of the researcher's visit. These yielded valuable information about gender and age of both members and attenders of the congregation. This allowed a check to be made as to how each participating congregation measured against the average age, gender, and membership breakdown of a national sample, conducted in 2001, of almost 11,000 Baptist churchgoers.²³

In the second-stage interviews careful attention was paid to the manner that relational discourse was being used by the interviewees to reinforce the variety of ways they identify with their local Baptist church, with particular reference to the two options of either being a church member or of being an attender.

By the conclusion of the interview phase of the research, a total of twenty informants from four church congregations had been interviewed.

²³ See Escott and Gelder (2002, p.3). See also CLP 2001 tabulations at Appendix Two.

A4.3.5 Transcript coding and analysis

The interview transcripts were manually coded and referenced line-by-line in Microsoft Word. The first coding used fairly common-sense categories that were developed in order to describe fairly closely what was recorded in the transcript. At one or two points the coding contains an element of researcher interpretation; for example the use of language such as ‘The Lord led me..’ was coded as ‘individual piety’ even though the interviewee did not use the words ‘individual’ or ‘piety’. The codes were then cross-tabulated against each of the transcripts. A copy of the list of codes used at this point and the cross-tabulation is included here at *Table A4.1*. The abbreviations ‘ED’ and ‘BB’ refer respectively, to transcripts supplied by members (numbered from 1 to 7) of East Dartmoor and Bromley Baptist Churches. The use of only these two churches is intended to be illustrative of the method used and transcript data from the other two churches was also used for this purpose.

Table A4.1 Interview codes arising from initial manual coding of the transcripts

TRANSCRIPT	ED	BB	BB	BB	BB	BB	BB						
CODE	1	2	3	4	5	7	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Adherent advantages	y		y	y		y		y					
Age	y				y	y		y	y	y	y	y	
Aspiration						y							
Attendance	y							y				y	
Baptism	y			y	y	y		y	y	y	y	y	
Baptism and membership					y	y						y	
Baptist membership		y		y		y		y			y	y	
Becoming a member		y		y	y	y	y	y	y		y		
Belief	y	y		y		y	y			y			
Belonging						y	y	y	y	y		y	
Biblical discourse		y	y		y	y		y	y				
Borders										y			
Commitment					y	y	y	y		y			
Community						y			y			y	
Conflict								y	y	y			
Decision to join					y					y	y		
Denominational resource						y							
Denominational switching	y		y	y		y			y	y			
Different to the others					y								

Don't consider myself a member									y			
Duty			y		y	y						
Ecumenical		y				y		y	y			
Employment			y									
External pressures					y				y			
Family	y				y	y		y	y	y	y	
Feel a member		y	y			y	y				y	
Formalism			y		y			y	y			y
Freedom				y				y				
Growth into church			y				y					
Healing	y						y		y			
Historical denomination		y	y		y		y					y
House-groups				y		y	y		y			y
Identity - Baptist					y		y	y			y	
Identity - Christian					y	y	y	y				
Identity - Evangelical					y							
Individualism			y	y			y	y				y
Institutional			y	y	y	y		y		y		y
Interdenominational		y			y	y						
Leaders		y		y	y		y	y	y			
Legal and Constitutional					y			y				
Local congregation		y		y	y	y						
Maturity					y							
Members' meetings		y		y	y	y	y				y	y
Membership advantages		y		y				y				y
Membership/adherence distinction reduction		y			y	y	y	y			y	y
Multi-ethnicity											y	
Multiple denominational impact	y		y		y		y					
Newcomers welcomed			y		y	y	y		y	y	y	
Other member org		y	y				y					
Others					y			y	y			
Participation	y	y	y	y	y	y	y	y	y	y	y	y
Partnership	y	y			y							
Personal reasons					y	y	y		y			
Piety	y	y					y	y		y		
Place of one's home			y		y							
Previous Baptist impact		y			y		y	y			y	
Previous denominational impact	y	y	y	y	y	y	y	y	y	y	y	
Previous/newcomer divide		y	y									
Reflexion		y	y									
Relational discourse	y	y	y	y	y		y	y	y	y	y	y
Reproduction		y			y			y				
Resource production			y		y				y	y	y	
Security			y				y			y		y
Sense of reward										y		
Spiritual experience at baptism	y	y	y		y			y	y			
Spiritual family							y		y	y		
Spiritual feeding							y			y		y

Spiritual home					y		y		y			
Spiritual journey										y		
Support other organisation			y			y						
University				y							y	
Vision and purpose						y						
Witness	Y	y	y	y		y	y			y	y	
Worship	y	y	y		y	y		y		y	y	
Borders absent											y	

A4.3.6 Refining the coding and transcript analysis

Following the common-sense coding of the transcripts, a review of the coding enabled the generation of a second set of codes that were ultimately grouped into ‘pattern codes’. These are the higher level codes that shape the presentation of the transcript material in chapters five and six of this dissertation. This stage of the coding was informed by the need to test the orienting hypotheses outlined in section A4.2.1 to A4.2.4. This suggested that pattern codes should be grouped with reference to; biblical discourse, structural (or denominational) Baptist discourse, contextual (including relational) discourse, symbolic boundary discourse, and constructivist discourse. The discourse and pattern codes are featured here as *Table 2: Discourse codes and pattern coding units*.

Table 2: Discourse codes and pattern coding units

PATTERN CODE	CODE
1. Biblical discourse (BIB)	(BIB-GEN) Biblical discourse alluded to
	(MET-BOD) Metaphor of the Body of Christ
	(MET-FAM) Metaphor of the family
	(MET-HAV) Metaphor of the haven
2. Structural Baptist discourse (BAP)	(BAP-GEN) Baptism experience - general
	(BAP-SPI) Spiritual experience at baptism
	(BAP-MEM) Baptism & membership received together
	(MEM-BAC) Being & becoming a Baptist member
	(DEN-HIS) Historical denominational discourse
	(DEN-INS) Institutional, Legal & Constitutional
	(DEN-RES) Denominational resource
	(BA-PRE) Impact of previous Baptist experience
3. Contextual discourse (CON)	(REL-DIS) Relational discourse

	(REL-COM) Relational - Community
	(REL-BEL) Relational - Belonging
	(REL-PAR) Relational - Partnership
	(WHY-JOI) What prompted decision to join?
	(WHY-CON) Why join – the Local congregation
	(WHY-FAM) Why join – Family reasons
	(WHY-LEA) Why join – Church Leaders
	(WHY-WEL) Why join - Newcomers welcomed
	(WHY-HGP) Why join – House-groups
	(WHY-BEL) Why join - Belief & conversion
	(WHY-WOR) Why join - worship
4. Symbolic boundary discourse (SYM)	(SYM-BOR) Symbolic borders
	(SYM-OTH) Symbolic 'Others'
	(BOR-NO) Borders absent
	(DEN-SWI) Denominational switching
	(DEN-PRE) Previous or other denominational impact
5. Constructivist discourse (CON)	(MEM-MTG) Members' meetings
	(MEM-ADV) Membership advantages
	(ADH-ADV) Adherent advantages
	(ATT) Attendance
	(MEM_ADH) Membership/adherence distinctions reduced
	(MEM-FOR) Membership as mere formalism
	(FRE-PIE) Freedom, pietism & personal individualism
	(REF-PRO) Reflexive production & reproduction
	(PAR-DUT) Participation, duty & commitment
	(MEM-FEE) 'I feel I am a member'
	(MEM-NOT) 'I don't think of myself as a member'
	(IDY-BAP) Baptist Identity
	(IDY-CHR) Christian identity
	(IDY-EVL) Evangelical identity
	(DIS-AGE) Distinctives due to age

Relying on this coding pattern it was then possible to begin extracting coded sections of the transcripts to evaluate the variety of ways that similar discourse was being used across the interview sample. As coding proceeded the various coding categories were saturated with data in order to build a more comprehensive understanding of the range of ways that the various discourses were being used. Two examples of the ways in which transcript data was extracted and compiled are included here. The first, *Sample Coding Sheet: Example 1*, compiles evidence for the presence of structural (denominational) discourse and the manner in which the discourse of becoming a

formal member is being used. The second, *Sample Coding Sheet: Example 2*, compiles evidence for the presence of constructivist discourse that points to a secondary discourse of membership predicated on the basis of being in relationship with others in the congregation who *are* formal members.

Sample Coding Sheet: Example 1

CODE: MEM-BAC Being and becoming a Baptist member:

“Descriptions and accounts of becoming or being in formal membership of a Baptist congregation.”

Interview	Excerpt	Line
EDBC2	[DRJ] Why are you a member of East Dartmoor? What do you feel are the reasons and benefits for being a member? Mm, well first of all I think that, mm, having become a Christian, mm, and reading the Scriptures, that I would be a member of a local church, mm, and, mm, as my experience in the past has been in the Baptist fold coming to Bovey Tracey led me to East Dartmoor Baptist Church.	c3-7
EDBC2	I think we used to sometimes get back for mid-week house-groups and things like that. Mm, mm, and of course when we had a holiday, mm, and anything like that, mm, and of course was in close contact with, mm, with the people, mm, so, mm, we may not have been very good members in the sense of, mm, you know, very much contact. I should think they must have forgiven us quite a lot. I don't know that we would [laughs] even have been at communion every month, or anything like that, but, mm, mm, very much in touch with the people, very much in touch with Lustleigh,	c38-43
EDBC2	I used to belong, say when I was converted, just for the short time at Upton Vale Baptist Church. I know it's largish members but it's one fellowship and we don't, I don't feel that we're one fellowship, even though we're.., in the same way that we used to be.	c86-88
EDBC2	I don't think at this point, I would question the fact of remaining in membership and I certainly haven't thought of going anywhere else, mm, no, no, mm [laughs]. Is it, is it, I'm more interested in resolving the, the questions that I'm raising rather than, mm, you know, turning my back on them.	c126-128
EDBC2	He's getting to the point of, of really feeling a part of the fellowship and I imagine that he will be questioning, well he is questioning, membership, although it hasn't really been, mm, you know, he's in early, early enough stages of here, one to two years, to really kind of push on that point.	c140-142
EDBC4	There are issues to do with believers' baptism which I am considering, um, but I know I need to be baptised as a believer before I can become a member. And so faith got sort of intertwined. But that isn't something I'd thought about until I became a member of a Baptist congregation having been through all sorts of different denominations before.	c31-33
EDBC4	It would be very easy just to sign up. On the questionnaire you can see I'm involved in all sorts of different things. I'm sort of an active person in the church, but, it would be very easy to say, "Yes, I'll become a member", and go along to meetings and, but to actually	c48-51

	profess my faith in front of other people, in the form of baptism, is a much bigger step.	
EDBC4	The Baptist church has been very different, um, to previous... my previous experiences. If I'd been baptised as a believer at a Baptist church and stayed at a Baptist church I may have felt membership would have come easily, but, it's, it's, different, so, if that's out of my box, if you like, I'm happy to.	c151-153
EDBC5	We liked the feeling of the church, and the people. There was a nice feeling of warmth and, um, [pause] I always feel if you're going stay with a church, um, why not become a member? Why not go the whole way rather than half way?	c9-11
EDBC5	Well the main thing is that sense of belonging. You know. If you're a member, full stop, you can attend the meetings and you can become involved and I think that's good. Rather than being on the outside looking in, almost.	c32-34
EDBC5	I was given, um, the church members' introductory booklet, and what have you, which I was asked to read, which was happy to do, um, but I didn't attend courses as such and I think, um, probably 'cause I was not a new Christian, whereas I'm sure most people, um, they tend to get baptised with... certainly within the Baptist church, soon after they become a Christian.	c80-83
EDBC7	We had one couple who came to the church, um, from, um, a Brethren Independent Evangelical background who, um, quite honestly weren't even interested in exploring the possibility of, um, anything to do with membership because they had a fairly closed agenda, um, you know, 'Church membership is not something with which we agree. Full stop.' Um, slightly sad that they weren't at least willing to come and meet other new-coming Christians, um, perhaps raises one or two questions about the, um, reality of their maturity as opposed to their perceived maturity.	c144-149
EDBC7	Um, in some cases there's been quite a time lag, um, I mean, we're just processing one membership application from somebody who went through Newcomers' Group probably, nearly eighteen months ago.	c157-158
EDBC7	One or two of the Baptist churches in this country, um, again have a fairly strong, um, programme of induction for new members. Um, we've seen examples, I think from Didcot and also from, um, Morden in South London. Um, and they're quite comprehensive, um, packages, um, which are presented on the basis of requiring people to be a part of this, um, sometimes for as long as six weeks. I'm... I'm not entirely convinced, um, that that would be appropriate here.	c187-190
EDBC7	I think that for a number of our people who've come into membership in the last few years, membership is seen as a sign of identification with the local church and its, um, its vision, its mission, but it's not seen in a sort of structural sense.	c195-196
EDBC7	There are some, um, who see membership as a divisive issue, um, an exclusive one, um, so that, you know, um, you know, almost an accusation could be that, you know, you're making us feel second class Christians because we won't become members, in that formal sense.	c222-224
EDBC7	Membership and belonging in a formal sense, um, is in decline generally, whether it's political parties, Women's Institute, or whatever. Um, I think, yes, um, I saw some figures recently, um, which said that the only institutions that are growing are the National Trust and the RSPB. Um, both of which exist to give benefits to their members rather than make demands on them other than of a small financial nature.	c303-307
BBC1	I've recently become a member. I've been coming to the church for about two years. Um, I've become the secretary of the Women's	b5-6

	Evening Fellowship and it seemed good, um, to be a member as well.	
BBC1	If I'm working in a church and I can do something to help them it's right to be a member of that church, I think.	b36-37
BBC1	I think that being a member of a local church is that you, you are saying 'yes', that you agree to what they're doing and you want to support that ministry whether its, um, financially, with your time, and, you know, with, with your efforts to, to reach out to other people.	b45-47
BBC1	If a person came to the church [pause] either they come as a non-Christian or they've already had an experience of conversion somewhere else. Then they belong to another church somewhere else. So, it's difficult to know the whole background on a person. You'd have to know the person really, much more before you started talking about membership, wouldn't you?	b159-162
BBC2	[DRJ] Any tensions as a result of your former experiences? Um twice bitten, twice shy, I suppose, really. I, I'm not rushing into membership again. DRJ: Are there things you miss about it? No! No, I've got more free time in the evening without going to Members' Meetings [laughs].	b33-36
BBC3	I think the following Sunday, I was given membership, um, it was part of something I didn't particularly agree with, this having a membership structure and the whole sort of... I always struggled. I've got to grips with it now in the sense that I've just got used to it.	b54-56
BBC4	To me, being a member of a church isn't about turning up on Sunday for an hour and a half then going home and turning up next Sunday. It's about, um, it's about commitment. So yes, ultimately we would like to, you know, obviously find out whether there are opportunities to use our skills or talents.	b137-139
BBC4	A couple of things have come to mind. I mean, I think, I think the sense of, um, togetherness that, that membership of, um, a church offers. I mean, you know, as, as a Christian in the UK these days you feel, to be honest, that you're part of a minority sect because you know, to be Christianity is not, not, to be a Christian is not cool, um [pause] the, the numbers of people who go to church is very, very low.	b189-191
BBC4	I think the church should be a support to its members because, um, [long pause] you know, I think, you know, everyone goes through difficult phases in life. And I, I think, you know, um, even those people that give a lot, they might, they will on occasions need, need help. Everybody needs help from time to time, so I think that's important.	b242-245
BBC5	The way it works at our church is that you've got to get baptised to be a member.	b4-5
BBC5	I wasn't really too clear on, like, what is to be a member. Um, I'd heard like, my parents were members, for instance, and in general I knew members were allowed to vote on sort, like sort of pastoral issues and come to meetings on a Wednesday. Um, give your view basically, and, um, I think, they don't force you to become a member, 'cause once you get baptised...	b36-38
BBC5	It was still hard for me to feel like I was a member because, it's funny, sometimes for me, I feel like to be a mem... for me to feel like a member, I need to vote on something, because I've got my own say. But really just turning up to meetings, um, to me, did help me feel more like a member...	b41-43
BBC5	You're brought to the front and you're sort of ushered in, and you're also given a brown envelope, which contains, to make it official, that you're a member, that's what's inside, and also it's a way of showing your face to the whole congregation, um and saying that you've made this decision to become a member and also I think it's just another	b51-56

	good way of showing your face to people who may not have been able to make it to your baptism even though they do know who you are. And that's, that's how I got introduced as a member officially.	
BBC5	The second to last classes mention about membership and do we know that once we get baptised we can become members. Basically, once again, you can ask any question you may have about being a member. The last session, um, you ask whether you want to take up membership and depending on the answer, a few weeks after you get baptised you'll get introduced to the congregation as a member and if you don't get, if you, if you don't, if you decide for some reason you don't want to be a member, just, whenever you feel the time is right you can go to [name] and tell him, 'I want to become a member.'	b131-137
BBC5	You're interviewed and you're also given this sort of, um, this questionnaire about membership and what qualities and things you can bring to the congregation. How, how do you think, um, the gifts you may have can help in any aspect of the church.	b145-147
BBC5	And so any questions I had about membership was asked in the interview mainly and also from the amount of information we get about it anyway, there was no shadow of doubt that I didn't know what it meant.	b150-152
BBC5	I would say it's not about a piece of paper because, um, becoming a member means that, well it opens certain doors. So as a member you're given the opportunity to more than you would have if you weren't a member. Like, for instance, turn up to meetings, um, that you probably wouldn't have known was going on. It also gives you inside info, to a certain extent, 'cause you, you're kind of getting to know the church a lot more than you did when you weren't a member 'cause, um, certain issues are discussed that you may not have even known about ...certain meetings that only members, only members can go to because there's a vote, there's a vote or whatever,...	b170-180
BBC5	So in a certain extent, I think peoples' eyes are on you a bit more, because by becoming a member it means you agree to abide by all the rules by, of the church. And also it means that when you're outside church, you're still representing Bromley Baptist.	b188-190
BBC6	We have, um, church members who've been members for a very, very long time at Bromley Baptist, and they'll tell you that. Um, they will tell you very proudly that they're first or third, or whatever, on the list and that clearly means something to them. Whereas I think the younger people are the less important it is.	a7-10
BBC6	There are a lot of people who are members who are not very involved in the church. Um, they come enough to mean that they're not... they don't become part of the process of removing them from the roll.	a20-22
BBC6	And that approving candidates for baptism they're approving them for membership. So, it all happens at once. They are incorporated into the body of Christ through baptism and they're given a membership card, as they come out of the pool, of this particular manifestation of the body that they have chosen to walk with.	a230-232
BBC6	It's the members who own and run the church and therefore major things, particularly which have financial implications need to be sorted only by the members.	a311-321
BBC6	I think one of the [...] struggles that Baptist churches have is that we,... have this very, um, set and settled notion of membership and it has great strength in terms of giving churches stability and, um, giving the core of the church a sense of commitment to each other and ownership of what the church is doing. But the great weakness of its is that it might not actually reflect, um, the, the whole of the group who feel a very deep sense of belonging to the community that is Bromley Baptist Church.	a348-352

BBC6	One of the challenges that I gave to the Elders when I first met them, the very, very first meeting I had, was whether they were prepared for the day to come when there would be members, fully functioning members of Bromley Baptist Church who never come on a Sunday.	a360-362
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Sample Coding Sheet: Example 2

CODE: MEM-FEE Feeling a member:

“Descriptions and accounts of belonging that suggest that the adherent feel themselves to be a member although they are not formally a member in the technical sense.”

Interview	Excerpt	Location
EDBC2	I did at one time, mm, attend, the, mm, an evangelical Anglican church for a while but having my membership actually at East Dartmoor.	c19-20
EDBC2	DRJ: When you were, mm, worshipping at the church in Sidmouth and, mm, retained membership at Bovey, in what sense, if any, mm, were you able to give, mm, adequate expression to being a member of Bovey? Mm, well we came back when we could. [...] I think we used to sometimes get back for mid-week house-groups and things like that, and of course when we had a holiday, mm, [...] and of course was in close contact with the people, so, we may not have been very good members in the sense of, mm, you know, very much contact. I should think they must have forgiven us quite a lot. I don't know that we would [laughs] even have been at communion every month, or anything like that, but very much in touch with the people, very much in touch with Lustleigh, because we had the cottage there. So, mm, we were back and forth, mm, mm, but other than personal contact I should think that, mm, and personal joining in when we were there for house-groups.	c36-45
EDBC2	I used to know everybody in Bovey Tracey. Mm, mm, I don't by any means know people now, mm, in the same way. And you, mm, I mean that's good, because a lot of new people are coming in but they're not coming in in the same way so, mm and again, we're not meeting in the same way as, mm, mm, mm, the times when we all used to come together on Sunday evenings. So what is a church?	c82-85
EDBC3	I don't think you need to show that you are willing to be part of the church by having a... being a member, as such... [pause] and I can't find it anywhere where it says you have to sign on the dotted line, in the Bible. [...] I suppose it's no... I just don't feel the need to be a... what difference does it make to be a member as against a non-member? Cos I am a member, basically. DRJ: In what sense would you say that you are a member? Because I'm involved in the church... DRJ: uhum... ...and interested in what it does and where it's going... so... I would have thought that's the same idea as... I mean even someone that's signed the membership cannot bother to turn up and not do anything, they've just got their names on there. So you can be just as committed, I feel, whether you've signed on the dotted line or not.	c57-67
EDBC3	DRJ: Do you feel there are benefits to just being a regular attender, as opposed to a member? No. I wouldn't have thought so. Why? DRJ: Well you might feel, for example, there's a greater degree of freedom, or flexibility, or you don't quite have the same obligations as members do. No, because I feel as committed. I feel committed to the, Bovey Baptists, or East Dartmoor whether I was a full member or whether I..., I do feel as though I'm a member of the church.	c92-98
EDBC4	I feel I'm a member, probably because of being a part of the church family, knowing lots of people and being heavily involved with the children's ministry and the music as I have been. [...] Um, I've been asked by people, 'Would you consider doing this? Would you consider doing that?' and I think they must feel I'm part of the church, which helps me to feel more, part of the church membership.	c78-84

BBC1	DRJ: I wonder, did you feel that in any way, anything had changed once you became an associate member from the moment that you had spent worshipping here regularly? Did anything change for you? Not really, because I felt a member of this church, I'd been coming for quite a long time and even before I moved to London I, whenever I visited my sister, I would come to the Baptist church with her and, um, it was really, I felt very much at home here. Um, I didn't really feel any different after becoming a member because, um, we felt it was like being family and you're already a family member	b65-72
BBC2	I'm in a situation now where I'm involved possibly to more extent than some church members are. But, I see my membership more now as being a member of the Body of Christ.	b38-39
BBC2	I got given a church handbook. [...] It gives you a sense of belonging, [...] I think it's a good thing, [...] and for me it works, more probably than membership would.	b305-310
BBC3	It was still hard for me to feel like I was a member because, it's funny, sometimes for me, I feel like to be a mem... for me to feel like a member, I need to vote on something, because I've got my own say. But really just turning up to meetings, um, to me, did help me feel more like a member	b42-43
BBC6	We want them to feel as though they belong in that vague sense.	a34
BBC6	One of the struggles that Baptist churches have is that we, we have this very, um, set and settled notion of membership and it has great strength in terms of giving churches stability and, [...] a sense of commitment to each other and ownership of what the church is doing. But the great weakness of its is that it [pause] might not actually reflect, um, the, the whole of the group who feel a very deep sense of belonging to the community that is Bromley Baptist Church.	a348-352

A4.3.7 Clustering codes into 'meta-codes' to develop an analytical framework

The pattern codes displayed above in *Table 2* reflect the marshalling of interview data to prove (or disprove) the four orienting hypotheses that were formulated deductively from the early stages of the research. The interview data presented in chapter five demonstrates the value of the orienting hypotheses. Although there were elements of interview data that constituted 'minority reports', these were unable to falsify the hypotheses completely given that they had been written to take account of interview data reported by a minority of interviewees.

A further level of abstraction became necessary to develop an analytical framework, or 'meta-codes' making clearer the inter-relationships and patterns within the interview data and its discourses of membership, belonging, and relationality. These 'meta-codes' did not necessarily represent the immediately recorded discourse of the transcripts. Rather they represent the theorising of the researcher about the patterns

and inter-relationships that emerged from the interview data. Four were induced from the clustering of between five to eight codes in each case.²⁴

'Experientially-validated subjectivity' drew on eight codes from the constructivist discourse; 'adherent advantages', 'attendance', 'membership/adherence distinctions reduced', 'membership as mere formalism', 'freedom, pietism and personal individualism', 'reflexive production and reproduction', 'participation, duty and commitment', and 'I feel I am a member'.

The meta-code of 'Post-denominationally conceived identity' drew on eight codes from the structural Baptist discourses and constructivist discourses; 'being and becoming a Baptist member', 'historical denominational discourse', 'institutional, legal and constitutional', 'denominational resource', 'impact of previous Baptist experience', 'Baptist identity', 'Christian identity', and 'Evangelical identity'.

'De-structured relationality' drew on seven codes from the biblical and contextual discourses; 'metaphor of the body of Christ', 'metaphor of the family', 'metaphor of the haven', 'relational discourse', 'relational – community', 'relational – belonging', and 'relational – partnership'.

Finally, 'practical immediacy' drew on five codes from the symbolic boundary discourse; 'symbolic borders', 'symbolic others', 'borders absent', 'denominational switching', and 'previous or other denominational impact'.

Taken together, these four aspects form an analytical framework for describing and understanding the nature of the demotic discourse, a discourse that is characterised for the purposes of this dissertation as, above all, a relational discourse. The rationale

²⁴ Miles and Huberman (1994, p.7) note that 'most analysis is done with words. The words can be assembled, sub-clustered, broken in to semiotic segments. They can be organized to permit the researcher to contrast, compare, analyze, and bestow patterns upon them.'

for this lies in the fact that the category of 'relationality' is capable of being saturated by a greater majority of the others.²⁵

A4.4 Establishing the validity of research data

Establishing the validity of qualitative research data is absolutely necessary if the claims of qualitative research are to be substantiated and trusted. Miles and Huberman (1994, p.262) state clearly that the qualitative researcher cannot avoid the necessity of proper care to issues of validity, often taken to include representativeness, reliability, and replicability. A certain methodological modesty is nevertheless in order when reporting qualitative research data and analysis for, as Tucker (1998, p.59) correctly states, 'Social science investigates a pre-interpreted social world that is lacking in natural science. This hermeneutic experience makes social scientific generalizations more cautious and context-dependent than in the natural sciences.'

The claim that one cannot generalise qualitative data in any meaningful empirical fashion is a serious charge and deserves a response. The problem is well known among qualitative researchers (Swinton and Mowat, 2006, pp.48-49; Silverman, 2000, pp.104-105). Sim (1998, p.350) argues that establishing the validity and representativeness of analysis requires this to be done from within an explicit theoretical framework. Bryman (1988, p.90) agrees suggesting that '...the issue should be couched in terms of the generalizability of cases to theoretical propositions rather than to populations or universes.' In order to arrive at a more systematic means of assessing research quality and validity, social scientists have adopted the concept of triangulation.

²⁵ 'Saturating' is a technique that allows themes and patterns to emerge inductively from qualitative research data. It is first described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as part of their analytical approach known as 'grounded theory'. It has since become a reasonably common

A4.4.1 Triangulation

Denzin and Lincoln (2000, p.5) are widely cited in respect of triangulation.²⁶ They suggest that

The use of multiple methods, or triangulation, reflects an attempt to secure in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question. Triangulation is not a tool... of validation, but an alternative to validation... the combination of multiple methodological practices, empirical materials, perspectives and observers in a single study is best understood, then, as a strategy that adds rigor, breadth, complexity, richness and depth to any enquiry.

The use of multiple data sources proved a useful resource for triangulation. Interview data, membership documentation, statistical data, and other primary and secondary materials were available to the researcher and extensive use was made of these. Anonymised interview research data and the researcher's developing understanding of that data were checked with church leaders, members and Baptist theologians on a regular basis.²⁷ The use of multiple researchers was not feasible for this particular research study but copies of interview transcripts were sent to all interviewees, making it possible for them to check that they were being reported accurately. In no instance did an interviewee ask for their transcript to be amended or withdrawn.

Silverman (2000, p.98) acknowledges that it is established practice to use multiple methods as a means of ensuring validity, of triangulation. He adds a note of caution about misplaced confidence in such assumptions, suggesting that (*Ibid*, p.99) 'It is usually far better to celebrate the partiality of your data and delight in the particular phenomena that it allows you to inspect (hopefully in detail).'

technique for the analysis of interview and documentary data, for example in the analytical approach known as 'frameworking'.

²⁶ For example, Miles and Huberman (1994, p.266) point to Denzin's classic formulation of triangulation that highlights the importance of relying on multiple kinds of data sources, multiple research methods, multiple researchers, and multiple theoretical perspectives. Swinton and Mowatt (2006, pp.50-51) also refer to Denzin and Lincoln's work on triangulation.

²⁷ Papers based on the research were presented at the *Baptists Doing Theology in Context* conferences at Northern College, Manchester, August 2001 and at Regent's Park College, Oxford, during August 2003.

This current work triangulates its interpretation and analysis of interview data with reference to an explicitly stated and rigorously applied theoretical framework (structuration), its inductive generation of four orienting hypotheses, a clear account of the research methodology chosen, a full explanation of interview coding, and a rich description of the interview data. Fielding and Fielding (1986. Cited in Silverman, 2000, p.99) suggest that 'triangulation should operate according to the following ground rules: Always begin from a theoretical perspective and choose methods and data which will give you an account of structure and meaning from within that perspective.' Fielding and Fielding point to the need for systematic consistency relative to a theoretical framework and the fact that a systematic description of the research at all stages is a necessary requirement for triangulating the research.

A4.4.2 Size of interview sample

A particular criticism levelled at qualitative research that relies upon interviews relates to the sample size. This current research relies upon interview data from only twenty informants? Clearly one must exercise caution when claiming representativeness or generalizability from a small sample of only twenty interviews. However, this interview data is more than merely self-referential and self-explicable. The data and conclusions presented here, particularly in the way that they are analysed within a theoretical framework, are potentially of diagnostic and explicatory value for Baptist congregations in other parts of the United Kingdom. This is frequently misunderstood by novice researchers more familiar with the empirical nature of quantitative statistical data.

In a simple review of sixteen peer-reviewed research papers reliant upon semi-structured interviews, nine had sample sizes of fewer than twenty whilst another three used samples between twenty and thirty. The nine papers included Bartošová (2008) who studied the privatisation of religion among eight young people. McCorkle, Bohn, Hughes *et al* (2005) interviewed nine individuals who had been offered treatment to overcome anxiety. Bungay, Malchy, Buxton *et al* (2006) carried out research among

twelve methamphetamine users to determine their 'street-involvement'. Valentine (2008) interviewed fifteen educators to determine their self-perception after experiencing 'burn-out'. Claussen and Wong (2004) studied fifteen Jewish 'congregants' in order to explore Jewish identity. Gane (2007) carried out semi-structured interviews among seventeen young adults to investigate their perceptions of sibling rivalry. Nee and Farman (2005) interviewed nineteen female prisoners with borderline personality disorders. In each case, the theoretical framework provided the perspective from which generalisations about their discoveries were made.

A4.4.3 Selection of sample

According to Silverman (2000, p.105), sampling in qualitative research is theoretically grounded, it is neither statistical nor personal. His use of the term 'purposive sampling' points to the theoretical parameters that were used to select congregations for this current research. Denzin and Lincoln (1994, p.202) refer to the qualitative researcher seeking out settings and individuals where the processes being studied are most likely to occur. The selection of church congregations in the case of this current research was reliant on an attempt to approximate to the relative locational spread of Baptist churches across England and Wales. This researcher's reports for the Baptist Union (Jackson, 2001) show that churches in membership of the Union are most likely to be located in the four following locations: the 'Small Town' (29.6%), 'Suburban' (24.7%), 'Rural' (22.1%) and the 'Rural Village' (14.6%). Consequently four congregations were identified that were willing to co-operate on the basis of their location and size. These were a large suburban congregation of just over 400 members (Bromley), a small rural congregation with 20 members (Lydbrook), a large rural congregation with 150 members (Bovey Tracey), and a housing estate congregation located on the edge of a small city (Gloucester) with just over 100 members.

An attempt was also made to ensure representativeness among interviewees. Ministers were asked to select six interviewees; two long-term members, two new members, and two regular attenders. The sample of interviewees closely mirrored the

male-female ratio across the Baptist Union and it reflected the respective percentages of members and attendants normally present at Sunday worship. This type of sample avoids the danger of selection bias cautioned against by Giddens (2006, p.80).

A4.4.4 Summary

Glesne (1999, pp.151-152) includes among her list of requirements for ensuring validity in qualitative research several that were a feature of this present research. Among these are a prolonged engagement with the research context and the research data, the use of multiple research methods (questionnaires, documentary analysis, and semi-structured interviews) that help to triangulate the research findings, peer review of research results in order to check that they accord with the perceptions of others with some knowledge of the issues,²⁸ checking the interview transcripts with the interviewees, and the external audit of coding, transcribing, research journals, and analyses by the dissertation supervisor, Professor Martin Stringer.

Giddens (2006, p.81) makes the important point that eliminating observer bias can be difficult, perhaps even impossible. Glesne (1999, p.152) urges the clarification of researcher bias. In the case of this particular research, the researcher was surprised that his prior belief that the Baptist Union was providing an effective and uniting vision for its local congregations was only shared by a minority of his interviewees. However, he was not surprised that his convictions regarding the value of theological concepts such as covenant were not shared by many of his interviewees. Being aware of prior convictions, even biases, was a necessary way of avoiding obsessive attention to such matters during the semi-structured interviews, yet, at the same time, it did sensitise the researcher to significant data that was omitted by interviews and whose omission was important enough to note. This reflects the difficult line to hold between

²⁸ Including the Revd Simon Jones, author of *Why Bother with Church?*, the Revd Myra Blyth, former convenor of the Membership Roundtable, Dr. Stuart Murray-Williams, former member of the Membership Roundtable, and colleagues and friends at two of the *Baptists Doing Theology in Context* conferences.

being aware of personal bias and sharing the hermeneutical assumptions of the interviewees.

A4.5 Specimen letter to Churches participating in the field research

The Revd Darrell Jackson
X XXXXXXXXXX XXXXX
XXXXXXX
Gloucester
XXXX XXX

[Date]

Dear [.....]

Thank you for being willing to consider allowing me to interview several of your regular church attenders and members as a part of my doctoral research. For several years now I have been examining issues relating to belonging and how this influences understandings of church membership. The interviews I have been able to complete to date have been invaluable in helping me understand this increasingly difficult area of church life.

To give you some further information about the research programme I am attaching a copy of the interview questions I will ask each interviewee.

When I visit you, I would like to interview (ideally)

- a. You, in your role as the Minister of the church.
- b. Two of your newest church members.
- c. One of your long-standing members
- d. One of your newest church attenders
- e. Two long-standing church attenders who show no signs of becoming members

I am happy to leave you to identify those that you feel would make the most forthcoming interviewees! I am not looking for theological experts, simply people who can talk comfortably about their experience of church.

I will require each interviewee to complete a short questionnaire at home, before I meet them; I will supply these by mail. I will need approximately one hour with each of the seven people. Each interviewee will also be asked to sign a form that explains how their interviews will be used.

For the interview I would require a quiet room in a house where there were no disturbances or extraneous noises – I will be tape recording the interview.

I would also like to ask you to circulate a copy of a short questionnaire to each attender at church on the Sunday previous to my visit. This has three questions (to be completed anonymously):

- a. I am a member of this church (tick 'yes' or 'no')
- b. I have been coming to this church for [] years (write in the number. If less than one, write '0')
- c. Before I started coming to this church, the denomination of the church I attended was:

Typically, churches have circulated these at the beginning of the service and collected them at the end of the service. The cards need not be distributed to first-time visitors. I will post copies of these to you. The main reason for this is to compare Heywood BC with the typical congregational demographic for the rest of the BU.

I think it would be easier for me to carry out the interviews over a long weekend. I have two such weekends in [*insert possible dates*]. It would be great if you were able to line up a number of people over Friday evening and Saturday of one of those weekends.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.

Warm regards,
Darrell Jackson

A4.6 Specimen Participants' Release Form

Birmingham University

Project title: Baptist Church Membership in the social context of 21st century Britain

Researcher: The Revd Darrell Jackson

I agree to take part in the above research project. I have had the project explained to me, and I have read the Explanatory Statement which I keep for my records.

I understand that agreeing to take part means that I am willing to:

- + Be interviewed by the researcher,
- + allow the interview to be audio recorded,
- + and, complete the questionnaire asking me about my belonging to [Name] Baptist Church.

I understand that there is a cooling off period of up to five days from the time I have given my consent; and that I can withdraw at any stage whilst participating and withdraw my data up to one month after the data has been collected.

I understand that the researcher will protect my identity from being made public by referring to any comments that I make under a pseudonym.

I understand that I have given approval for the name of [Name] Baptist Church to be used in connection with my data in the final report of the project and future publications.

I understand that I will be given a transcript of any data concerning me for my approval before it is included in the write up of the research.

I understand that the results of the project will be reported in a thesis for University purposes and as published articles.

Participant's signature:

Date:

Address:

Email address:

A4.7 Interview questions

For Chapter Eight of the thesis I interviewed twenty individuals attending a variety of Baptist churches. I conducted several initial interviews and in the light of these results I revised my research tool and adopted the following semi-structured interview questions.

What follows is a specimen of the interview script that I followed. Not all questions were appropriate in every case and unscripted supplementary questions were used to probe and explore the initial answers that were given in response to the scripted interview questions.

'Tell me about a moment when you felt that you really belonged to this church or congregation.'

'Tell me about the things that other people in this church or congregation have done or said that have particularly encouraged you to feel that you belong here?'

'Can you think of any particularly helpful words that you have used or heard others use that describe your sense of belonging here? Can you remember the context in which they were said?'

'I'm going to ask you about your satisfaction and dissatisfaction with your belonging to this church or congregation. What gives you particular satisfaction in belonging to this church? And what are the ways in which it is dissatisfying for you to belong to this church?'

'Thinking of all the people in this congregation; with what proportion or percentage would you say you enjoy a close friendship?'

'When you think of the other people in this congregation or church; what words would you use to describe the congregation?'

'If you are a church member here, can you remember your main reasons for applying for membership?'

'If you were not a church member, do you imagine you would feel a greater or a lesser sense of belonging? Can you say why that might be the case?'

'If you are not a church member here, can you remember your main reasons for deciding not to apply for membership?'

'If you were a church member, do you imagine you would feel a greater or a lesser sense of belonging? Can you say why that might be the case?'

'What has particularly helped you to feel a sense of belonging to this church or congregation?'

'Can you remember a service or sermon where the theme was that of belonging to this church?'

'Are there any ways in which you have found the Church Constitution or other literature helpful to your sense of belonging here?'

'Are there any ways in which you have found the denominational framework of this church or congregation helpful to your sense of belonging here?'

'Are there any ways in which you have found the Sunday Service helpful to your sense of belonging here?'

'Are there any biblical passages or verses that have particularly helped you develop in your sense of belonging?'

'What advice would you give to somebody who felt that they were losing a sense of belonging to this church or congregation?'

'Have you ever found yourself having to offer this kind of advice? What can you tell me about that incident?'

'What advice would you give to somebody considering joining this church or congregation?'

'What do you consider to be the chief benefits of being a part of this church or congregation?'

'Can you recall a time when somebody, wholly unsuitable, attempted to become a part of this church or congregation? Do you remember the outcome?'

'Are there other organisations or groups of people to which you feel you have a deeper sense of belonging?'

'If there are other groups with whom you feel a closer sense of belonging, are you able to explain why this is so? Can you tell me about a moment when you felt especially a part of that other group?'

'Could you briefly describe the ways in which you are actively involved in the life of this church or congregation?'

'What difference, if any, would you say that being actively involved here has had upon your feeling a part of this congregation or church?'

'What impact does playing an active part of this church or congregation have upon your ability to benefit from other groups or activities?'

'Can you tell me about any period in your life when you were pleased to belong to a Baptist Church?'

'What do you consider to be the most important lessons from Baptist church history or tradition when you think about belonging to this church or congregation?'

'If you feel that being a member of a genuine Christian Church is more important than being a member of a Baptist Church, are you able to say what you think the differences are?'

'For what reasons would you want to retain the title 'Baptist' in the name of this congregation?'

Appendix Five: The Membership Roundtable, the 'Bucking the trend' membership survey and accompanying letter, 2000-2004

In 2004 the Baptist Union published *Membership*. This arose out of an initiative following a letter addressed by the Revd Lewis Misselbrook to this researcher, in his role as Mission Adviser with the Baptist Union, and the *Baptist Times* during 1999. Outlining the situation in his local Baptist church, a situation common in many other congregations, he wrote,

We have... 25 members and 50 adherents who are very much part of us but do not wish to become members. The reasons they give are varied:

They are part of us and feel formalities are unnecessary.

They are not Baptists by background or conviction. They... do not want to be members of a particular denomination.

They love the services but do not want to be in Church Meetings.

They wish to remain free and uncommitted and do not think formal membership is of any importance whatever.²⁹

A subsequent proposal to establish a working group addressing issues of church membership and attendance, outlining a number of initial questions for discussion, was submitted to David Coffey.³⁰ A first Membership Roundtable was convened in June 2000 by the then Head of Mission, the Revd Derek Allen.³¹ Later the Deputy General Secretary of the Union, the Revd Myra Blyth, took over this role and gave the process extra momentum. Contextual, ecclesial, missional, historical, pastoral and legal aspects were considered, though not necessarily in equal measure.

²⁹ Letter to the author, 22nd January 1999.

³⁰ Proposed by this author, by email dated 22nd January 1999, to members of the Senior Management Team of the Baptist Union.

³¹ Members of the Roundtable were the Revds Derek Allen, Myra Blyth, Jenny Few, Ruth Gouldbourne, Darrell Jackson, Simon Jones, Vivienne Lassetter, Derek Tidball, Rob Warner, Mr Peter Clark, Mrs Janet Ruddick, and Mrs Hilary Treavis (nee Bradshaw).

Misselbrook's letter conveys something of the purpose and motivation for the Membership Roundtable. It points to the perceived crisis that membership practice was increasingly facing. The perception had been informed in part by the statistical work reported immediately above. At the same time, Baptist ministers and church leaders were reporting on instances of resistance towards church membership among their church attenders.³² Whilst many of these were attending regularly, were supporting the church financially, and were serving in positions of leadership, membership was increasingly seen as outmoded, formalised, burdensome, or a denial of earlier Christian experience.

In its work the Roundtable tried to address these issues in a contextual framework and to propose new biblical and theological possibilities for the contemporary practice of church membership. Its work concluded with the publication in 2004 of *Membership*. Addressed to ministers and church leaders this analyses the contemporary context, examines the historical experience of Baptists, suggests theological and biblical resources and, thirdly, suggests practical ways forward, including attending to various legal requirements.

Included in the pack was a section titled 'Bucking the Trend' containing the analysis of responses to a questionnaire circulated by the Roundtable with the intention of listening more closely to a representative sample of Baptist individuals. The survey is included immediately below.

³² In personal conversation with the author and through a trickle of letters to the *Baptist Times*.

SURVEY FORM

Today, the way people want to belong to the church is changing. The Membership Round Table is a cross-departmental group from the Baptist Union who are researching into ways of belonging and membership with the intention of publishing material for churches who are considering their attitudes to membership to study.

We want to gain an understanding of what belonging to the church means to different people, hence this questionnaire, which is being circulated to people in selected churches from each Association.

We would be very grateful if you could complete it as fully as you can. The first section gives us (if you are willing) some statistics and points of reference, the second is the more important part and is unstructured to allow your own experience to come through.

It would be helpful if you could write clearly or use block CAPITALS in answering the questions.

When you have finished the questionnaire, please return it to Ruth Gouldbourne in the pre-paid envelope provided by the end of July.

On behalf of the group, thank you for your time and participation.

Ruth Gouldbourne, Convener, Membership Round Table

1 **NAME:-**
(optional)

2 **AGE:-**
(please tick one box)
16-21 22-35 36-50 51-65 66+

3 **Are you a member of a Baptist church?**

Yes No

If yes, which one? (optional)

4 **Have you been baptised as a believer?**

Yes No

5 **If yes, was it in the church you now attend?**

Yes No

Please describe what it means to you to be part of the church.

We want to know such things as:-

- > Why are you a member of this church?
- > Why are you not a member?
- > What makes you feel like you belong?

- > How does someone attending your church become a member?
- > Are there any decisions that only members can make?

But these are only guidelines! We are interested in all kinds of membership experience and want you to express your situation however you feel able.

Please do try and keep to this one sheet of paper however.

Dear

'A particular church gathered and completely organised according to the mind of Christ, consists of officers and members.'

(Second London Confession, Chapter 26, section 8)

'Autonomous post-modern individuals are reluctant joiners, unwilling to identify lifelong with a particular denomination, which seems an anachronistic and unnecessary tradition, obsolete in an age of ecumenism 'from below'.

(Rob Warner, *Shaping Tomorrow's Church. Mission in the Twenty-first Century*, Hertfordshire Baptist Association, 1999, p 8)

The coming together of these two statements poses something of a problem for Baptists as they enter the 21st century. Even if the Second London Confession is not the basis on which we organise our church life, still our inherited cultural and legal structure is dependent on the notion of *membership*. We encourage those who are regularly part of our congregations, and who are living to some extent a life of discipleship to *join*. We often limit service in various capacities within the church to those who are *members*. We calculate the health and nature of our churches and of our denomination on the basis of the number of *members* that we have and so on. Our legal existence, as enshrined in our trusts and constitutions also use the notion of *membership* as fundamental, especially in consideration of matters of finance and decisions about buildings and ministry – these decisions are taken in church meeting and church meeting is open to – and only to – members, according to many of our trusts.

The Membership Round Table has drawn together people from various aspects of Baptist life to think and discuss together concepts of membership and belonging in today's Baptist churches. Our intention is to produce a set of papers, suitable for use in home groups, to enable churches to think through what their attitude is to belonging and membership.

As an integral part of this process, we want to hear the experience of those in churches today - from those who are in 'formal' membership of a church and those who have chosen not to be, from churches who adhere to the traditional pattern of membership structures and those who have adopted another way. We want to hear from ministers and church leaders how they see their role in advocating belonging and membership (or not), and from 'ordinary' people as to why they feel they belong.

Your church is being asked to be part of this process. Enclosed with this letter you will find ten questionnaires, in ten pre-paid return envelopes. We would be very grateful if you could distribute these around your congregation, keeping one for yourself. It would be helpful if you could select a mix of people in terms of age, gender, length of time attached to the church, and include if possible some who come to the church but are not 'members' in the formal sense.

Whilst some statistical information is asked for on the questionnaire, people can remain anonymous if they wish. Our main purpose is collect stories and experiences, which will be helpful to illustrate the pack of papers the Round Table group is producing. Please be assured that we will not reveal individual's names or church affiliation.

It would be helpful if all forms could be returned in the pre-paid envelopes by 31 July.

If you are willing to help us in this exercise, we would be very grateful.

With best wishes

Ruth Gouldbourne
Convenor
Round Table on Membership

Myra Blyth
Deputy General Secretary
The Baptist Union of Great Britain

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