

**UNIVERSITY OF WINCHESTER**

**‘Focussed-and-connected’: An exploration of Michael Moynagh’s view of  
contextual church in a multicultural church situation at the centre of a  
multicultural town.**

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Doctor of Theology and Practice

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This Thesis has been completed as a requirement for a postgraduate  
research degree of the University of Winchester.

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I am particularly grateful for the prayerful and practical support of all my fellow members at Abbey Baptist Church, Reading, without whom this research would not have been possible.

This work is dedicated to you all.

# UNIVERSITY OF WINCHESTER

## ABSTRACT

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This project revolves around issues raised by Moynagh's 'focussed-and-connected' view of contextual church as applied to a specific multicultural church situation, Abbey Baptist Church, at the centre of the multicultural town of Reading in the UK. I seek to discover what being 'focussed' means in the light of the *Missio Dei* and what priority the various churches meeting at Abbey give to the concept of being 'connected' and what this might look like. I seek to discover why these various churches established themselves in Reading; the reasons behind their reluctance to integrate; what their long-term vision for the future is; and how Abbey Baptist Church in particular could best offer radical hospitality to culture-specific groups.

Framed within the Pastoral Spiral, and employing a reflexive, contextual, qualitative methodology, I seek to allow the various churches to tell their story, listen carefully to their voices, and delve beneath the surface for the theological and social issues at the heart of this situation. By placing Moynagh's views at the heart of this project, and concentrating on the issues they raise in my context, the main focus of this research is contextual mission. At the same time I draw on the contribution of a number of scholars in various related fields of study relative to my project.

Despite the ever-increasing number of multicultural congregations throughout the UK, and the rapidly growing interest in intercultural church, the reality of an integrated, ethnically diverse church is either an impossible dream or a step too far. I engage with the variety of reasons why so many culture-specific churches choose to remain that way and whether the possibility of embracing a fluid 'focussed-and-connected' approach, rather than any kind of organic unity or amalgamation – radical welcome or generosity rather than coloniality – could offer a progressive way forward.

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## INTRODUCTION (Setting the Scene)

I am sitting with Michael Moynagh in the Jam Factory in Oxford discussing the fact I am writing my doctoral thesis on a theme triggered by a phrase in one of his books. He is intrigued by the subject of my thesis, amused by the fact that I have the audacity to critique him whilst he is still alive, but happy to be my conversation partner throughout this research. He knows I am considering reversing the order of his 'focussed-and-connected' view of contextual church; titillatingly implies that he is coming round to my way of thinking; tells me that he is writing a new book on ecclesiology that reflects this change of thinking (and promises to send me a draft copy).

### The 'Who' and the 'Why' of Michael Moynagh

Michael Moynagh is an Anglican minister, academic, Missiologist, and writer based at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford. A Consultant on Theology and Practice with the UK Fresh Expressions<sup>1</sup> team, he is also Executive Theologian and Researcher with the Centre for Pioneer Learning, Cambridge. He has written extensively on social issues and new forms of Christian community. A progressive thinker, his books introduce readers to a variety of other relevant authors, and encourage broader thought on race, ethnicity, and cultural identity as well as diverse cultural models of being and doing church.

This thesis revolves around issues raised by Moynagh's 'focussed-and-connected' view of contextual church (Moynagh, 2012:168-180) as I have applied it to a specific multicultural church situation, Abbey Baptist Church, at the centre of the multicultural town of Reading in the UK. By 'contextual church' I mean a church that, in terms of its ministry and mission, is relevant to the community in which it is situated and amongst the people it seeks to serve in Christ's name. Moynagh is particularly interested in new expressions of church 'springing up in many parts of the global north' (Moynagh, 2012:ix) which he delineates as 'new contextual churches' and uses as 'an umbrella term to describe the birth and growth of Christian communities that serve people mainly outside the church, belong to their culture, make discipleship a priority, and form a new church among the people they serve' (Moynagh, 2012: x). In contradistinction to a traditional Ph.D. (in which the researcher is essentially attempting to prove something), a D.Th. is more a journey of discovery. Consequently in this piece of research I am looking to discover if an amended version of Michael Moynagh's focused-and-connected view could actually work in a given situation. Hence my research

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<sup>1</sup> According to their Web Site 'Fresh Expressions is a growing movement of ordinary people across all denominations who are passionate about connecting with those who don't know Jesus and forming new communities of faith with the people they meet in the places where they meet them. From new housing to rural, urban to suburban, messy church and third age to forests, coffee shops, beaches, pubs, barns, online and even church buildings.' Available at: <https://freshexpressions.org.uk/> (Accessed 15.05.23).

question: **Could an amended version of Michael Moynagh’s ‘focussed-and-connected’ view of contextual church, in which Moynagh’s order is reversed to read ‘connected-yet-focussed’ offer a viable and constructive way forward for multicultural churches in multicultural urban communities?** My amendment suggests a reversal of Moynagh’s order in the belief that this provides a more workable approach in order to achieve the twin objectives of establishing meaningful connectivity within otherwise disparate groups whilst at the same time allowing for and enabling those same culturally distinctive groups to follow what they believe to be their own God-given focus. Developing culturally distinctive focus groups from the base of an already established but flexible church setup, and as an ongoing part of that established church, I suggest, is more feasible than attempting to draw together a number of previously established independent groups under some form of umbrella covering. The Abbey situation provides an ideal platform and opportunity to test and discover if an amended version of Moynagh’s view could work, and what new knowledge might be gathered in the process. I begin, however, describing the research context.

#### **Research Context: Abbey Baptist Church – A ‘New Contextual Church’ Situation?**

It may seem strange, given its 1640 foundation, to delineate Abbey Baptist Church as a ‘new contextual church’ but by stepping out of its comfort zone and engaging with three other very different culturally distinctive churches, as well as transitioning itself from a small, elderly, white-British church into a much larger multicultural church (where many of its members are new Christians or enquirers), Abbey has become effectively ‘a new contextual church.’ The Abbey situation is itself unusual with four very different churches sharing the same building, at the centre of a large multicultural town where 35% of its inhabitants come from outside the UK. Without imposing anything on either its tenant churches, or new members, Abbey has become a catalyst for change allowing the culturally distinctive churches and groups to retain their own focus whilst at the same time encouraging more meaningful connectivity between the various churches and groups.

#### **The Reflective Pastor: Positionality and the ‘Insider-Outsider’ Debate**

As someone who is both an active participant and objective observer in the Abbey situation I recognise a significant level of reflexivity is required on my part. Robert Elliott, et al., stress the importance of the researcher ‘owning one’s perspective’ by disclosing their values so that readers can take into consideration any assumptions that may have influenced the data analysis and consider possible alternatives (Elliott, 1999:221). Positioning, therefore, is very important. Andrew Holmes rightly suggests the importance for researchers ‘to identify and articulate their positionality’ and suggests this should include ‘reflexivity’ and something about the ‘insider-outsider’ debate’ (Holmes,

2020). Thus, I need to disclose that I am a seventy-nine-year-old white male (he/him), professing an active Christian faith since my mid-teens, a retired ordained and accredited Baptist Minister of over 50 years standing, married to Julia, another ordained and accredited Baptist Minister (somewhat younger than me) who is currently the Minister of Abbey Baptist Church. Rooted in evangelical reformed faith and Baptist ecclesiology my positioning needs to be clarified in as much as I am not what some would pigeon-hole as a 'dyed-in-the wool Baptist' (Sedgwick, 2017). Whilst I still regard myself as 'evangelical' I would describe myself these days as a 'radical' or 'progressive' evangelical thus distancing myself from the much narrower forms of evangelicalism prominent today. Equally Baptist ecclesiology, with its emphasis on a believers' church, a 'gathering of Christians called together to be in covenant commitment to each other' (Wright, 2016:4), where every member has a say, and is valued, rather than a hierarchical system, is very important to me. Similarly, whilst 'the Bible is a crucial text for us... We do not think that the Bible itself is the final authority in matters of belief and practice. That final Word is Jesus Christ who shares the life of God in Trinity' (Haymes, et al., 2009:7,8). Furthermore, as someone who has been involved in theological formation for many years, I am aware of the possibility of my views having been influenced by the 'parasitic... fusing together of Christianity and whiteness' (Jennings, 2018:27,28), and continue to question to what extent my own spiritual and theological formation has been/continues to be 'distorted' by the 'Western theological education' I have received/am continuing to receive (Jennings, 2020:5).

I am also aware of the inevitable tensions of the 'insider-outsider' debate unavoidable when researching a topic such as this. As an elderly British 'white, property owning, educated, male' (Rose, 2021:29) I unavoidably perceive things as somebody who is a member of the dominant, white British cultural class in the UK. If I belonged to a minority culture, particularly one that had been subjected to racism, or believed my own culture to be threatened, I would probably have a very different viewpoint on issues raised by this research. Moreover, I am a member of Abbey Baptist Church, which has almost entirely throughout its long history, been known as 'a white congregation that attracts white people' and which only in the last two years has transitioned into a genuine multicultural church. Inevitably this will have informed and shaped my interpretation of the situation and, more importantly, may have coloured at least some of the interview responses, not least because I happen to be married to the current Minister at Abbey. As a white-British male – part of a nation that colonised a great part of the globe at one time – I am an 'outsider' as far as the Sri Lankan, Ghanaian, Brazilian, Iranian and Hong Kongers are concerned, and therefore I understand those who suggest I have no right to investigate these issues. Conversely, as an elderly white-British, educated male, and an experienced Baptist Minister to boot, I am perfectly suited as an 'insider' to

investigate why a historic church like Abbey should retain its fixation with remaining a white enclave in the midst of a multicultural community for year after year even if it meant the church eventually having to close.

### **Motivation: Reasons for Engaging in This Research**

This thesis forms part of a Professional Doctorate in Theology and Practice, which is designed to 'stimulate intellectual, personal and professional development in addition to the creation of knowledge and expertise that will better inform and underpin professional practise' (Lee, 2009:10). Thrust into this unusual situation in 2018 (when my wife accepted the call to Abbey Baptist Church), and slowly but surely drawn into the possibilities and potential of this unique situation, I soon became aware of how ill-equipped I was to even comprehend the situation. Unimpressed by much of what I saw around me in terms of grappling with the multicultural/intercultural church situation in Reading, I recognised the need to undertake this research to become better equipped to contribute to both the intercultural work emerging at Abbey and add something of value to the wider work being undertaken in this particular field.

### **Road Map: Directions for the Journey**

In Chapter 1, I begin with the Research Design because I want to show the key themes, the main tools, that are contained within the conceptual framework. In Chapter 2, I recall the Anecdote/Experience in order to acquaint the reader with the particular period in the long history of Abbey Baptist Church at the heart of this research. In Chapter 3, I engage with an initial Exploration of the questions and concerns arising from these events at Abbey in order to help the reader to understand the story. In Chapter 4, I begin to engage with the Data Analysis by endeavouring to listen to the voices of the various participants in this research – What did they say? In Chapter 5, I continue with this Data Analysis by attempting to interpret the gathered data – What did they mean? In Chapter 6, I examine the gathered data through the lens of Theological Reflection in order to evaluate the relative merit and worth of the various contributions. In Chapter 7, recognising there needs to be a positive Response to this research, I suggest various ways forward.

### **Summary**

In this introduction I have briefly introduced Michael Moynagh and his 'Focussed-and-Connected' view of contextual church central to my thesis; emphasised the essence of my research question; provided a glimpse of the culturally mixed community centred around Abbey Baptist Church and hinted at some of the issues central to this research; introduced myself as the researcher and

clarified my position both as an elderly white-British Christian, a Baptist Minister of many years standing, rooted in radical evangelical faith, Baptist ecclesiology, and ongoing theological education; and explained something of my motivation for engaging with this research project.

## **[1] RESEARCH DESIGN (Outlining the Conceptual Framework )**

### **Introduction**

Seeking to find a solution to the seeming intractability of the situation I found at Abbey when I arrived, this thesis emerges from my critical reading around subjects such as race, ethnicity, cultural identity, and various models of being and doing church. I describe the overall design and implementation of the research, induced by my overriding purpose and shaped by my evaluation of the critical literature, followed by an analytical account of my chosen methodology for engagement with practise. These methodological components directed my research providing a bridge linking my purpose with the gathered data, analysis, theological reflection, and response.

### **1.1 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

My initial aim was to discover the reasons why four culturally distinctive churches sharing the same space at Abbey, despite professing the same Christian faith, maintained clear distance between each other. I also wanted to find ways to enable these churches to become more meaningfully connected in order to enable spiritual and numerical growth, facilitate meaningful engagement, and model genuine reconciliation within the wider community.

#### **1.1.1 Critical Literature Review**

An essential component of any kind of research at this level is the Critical Literature Review, an analysis and evaluation of existing literature relating to the particular subject or question under consideration. It necessitates a critical reading of the relevant literature; an honest assessment of the arguments, methodologies, and evidence presented by the various authors; and a clear identification of the strengths and weaknesses of the arguments and findings presented. With a Ph.D. it is normal to include this as one of the chapters but with a Professional Doctorate (certainly with this particular course at the University of Winchester) the critical literature review is presented as a separate module and marked independently (see Appendix 1). At the suggestion of my supervisors, in order to provide greater coherence to this thesis, I allude to it here since it provided the basis for the conceptual framework shaping this research. I began my Critical Literature Review by questioning the validity of Moynagh's 'focussed-and-connected' understanding of contextual church given the multicultural character and diversity of cultural models of church in Reading. It was in response to that question, having surveyed the relevant literature, that I framed my original research question in the belief subsequent research on my part could make an original contribution.

There is a dearth in critiques of Moynagh's work despite the fact that he has authored several books. Perhaps this is because his work is currently not widely known outside of the Fresh Expressions network. It may well be that I am one of the few people to critique certain aspects of Moynagh's work particularly his 'focussed-and-connected' ecclesiology where I suggest that connection should come before focus – a view that Moynagh himself now accepts.<sup>2</sup> In one sense Moynagh himself is the chief critic of his own work. Correspondence with Moynagh suggests that he was not entirely satisfied with *Church for Every Context* (2012), in particular with its treatment of emergence, which is why he wrote *Church in Life* (2017) which he hoped would become a replacement textbook for *Church for Every Context*.<sup>3</sup> In *Church in Life* Moynagh revisits and seeks to improve some of the theological and practical material, including the Homogeneous Unit Principle material which Moynagh hopes will 'help practitioners understand and work with the dynamics that give rise to these new communities' (Moynagh, 2017:8). Moynagh's journey to his 'focussed-and-connected' view traverses what Moynagh describes as McGavran's 'missional goal' (McGavran, 1980), Newbigin's 'missional first step' (Newbigin, 1977) and Davison and Milbank's 'missional no-go' (Davison, 2010) views in the process. First set out in *Church for Every Context* (Moynagh, 2012:168-171), Moynagh's journey is repeated in both *Church in Life* (2017:219-236) and *Giving the Church* (2024:165-198) being progressively developed and strengthened in each case. Intriguingly, in both cases, Moynagh stops short of advocating his 'focussed-and-connected' view although in *Church in Life* he concludes the relevant section by suggesting:

Might God be calling us to a different approach? Might we be being led to combine both Newbigin's and Davison and Milbank's concern for unity with McGavran's groping towards an ecclesiology that makes sociological sense – one that comes to terms with the role of different-looking groups in society? (Moynagh, 2017:222).

Moynagh appears to have replaced his previous emphasis on the need for churches to be both 'focussed-and-connected' with an emphasis on what he calls 'affinity group theology' (Moynagh, 2017:219-236). For Moynagh:

This 'affinity group theology' differs from McGavran by giving diversity and unity equal weight; connecting up is as important as being culture-specific. It differs from Newbigin by being more positive about affinity-based communities; provided they're connected to other churches, they are not stepping stones to something better but expressed the Kingdom in their own right. It differs from Davison and Milbank by allowing affinity groups to be more than components of a local church or congregation; they can be churches and congregations themselves (Moynagh, 2017:235).

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<sup>2</sup> Email correspondence dated 21.12.23 (used with permission).

<sup>3</sup> Email correspondence dated 20.12.23 (used with permission).

Personally I think this is disappointing, although I understand Moynagh's belief that the emphasis has shifted from the need for meaningful connectivity to a need for meaningful affinity groups rather than just homogeneous units – 'groups to which people to a greater or lesser extent choose to belong' because (in Moynagh's view) 'in today's society church organised round affinity groups is essential for the catholicity of the church and its unity' (Moynagh, 2017:219). Moynagh's revised view may stem from that fact that he is an Anglican and his renewed conviction that 'it is within the mixed economy that he now sees the still vitally important new contextual churches to be situated' (Walker, 2021:13). John Walker (writing in 2014) citing Moynagh (2012:432) finds it heartening that:

Michael Moynagh's views appear to have moderated over time. Ardent critic of 'inherited church' in his championing of emerging church a decade or so, we now find him 'pleading for contextual churches to be brought to birth within the mixed economy,' a phrase that he sees as expressing 'the idea of bringing Christian communities to birth in different ways for different people, but as far as possible within existing denominations and churches.' (Walker, 2014:230).

Certainly, Abbey Baptist Church's experience in seeking to set up various Focus Groups for its Iranian and Hong Kong members in the last two years underlines the need for these groups to become meaningful Affinity Groups and not simply connect groups connecting at a shallow level.

Walker is currently the only scholar I have come across offering a published meaningful critique of Moynagh's work, although the Dutch scholar Rein den Hertog's recently submitted PhD thesis (unpublished at the time of writing) contains a substantial section which focuses on the innovation theme in *Church in Life* (Hertog, 2023:221-257).<sup>4</sup> Walker's book, *Testing Fresh Expressions: Identity and Transformation* (2021) is primarily a critique of Fresh Expressions rather than Moynagh but although critical of Fresh Expressions, Walker is generally positive about Moynagh's contribution seeing him as one of the more positive voices within the movement. Walker, however, believes Moynagh's 'argument for homogeneity... remains deficient both sociologically and theologically' driven primarily by 'consumerism' rather than seriously taking into consideration 'the many complexities of human development, culture and relationships' (Walker, 2014:212). For Walker, Moynagh had failed to address the somewhat crude application in *Mission-shaped Church* (Cray, 2004) of the homogeneous unit principle to the multi-faceted sub-cultural lives that marks in our liquid, technocratic 21<sup>st</sup> century society. Walker is also hesitant about Moynagh's suggestion that 'groups shaped by different affinities... contain within themselves the means of eventually making wider connections' believing himself that 'it seems unlikely that such connections will lead to a

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<sup>4</sup> Reinier Gabriël den Hertog's recent PhD thesis *Sharing the Body of Christ: Towards an Ecumenically Informed Reformed Theology of Ministry from a Missionary Perspective* (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 19.12.2023).



genuine diversity' (Walker, 2021:37). For Walker, Moynagh's work lacks a convincing explanation for a dynamic mechanism by which local/affinity groups could avoid being somewhat hermetically sealed. Walker could see how affinity, or homogeneity even, could serve mission, but could not see how it could break out from being fundamentally about consumption nor how homogenous groups fulfilled the Gospel imperative to break barriers down.<sup>5</sup> Is Moynagh, however, being too positive in his expectations of diversity groups, or is Walker being too negative?<sup>6</sup>

Recognising the need to understand the church context within a much wider historical and social setting, I began to research the cultural, social and political context of the various churches and groups meeting at Abbey, how Reading became a multicultural town, and what histories of racism, colonialism and migration resulted in these churches forming distinct communities and contributed to their reluctance to integrate (Reading Museum, 2021; Olusoga, 2021). I needed to learn more about race, ethnicity, and cultural identity, recognising that I knew comparatively very little about these areas apart from a somewhat trite surface knowledge. Words such as race, ethnicity and culture and the like, are all extremely familiar and are repeatedly used in daily conversation, but what do they actually mean? Are they simply alternative expressions, or do they imply very diverse dimensions within the social order? (Ballard, 2002:1). Engaging with the relevant literature helped resolve many of these issues and enabled me to engage more knowingly with the research (Carter, 2008; Kivisto, 2012; Spencer, 2014; Storry, 2017; Wade, 2002). Also relevant were insights gleaned from the history surrounding 'multiculturalism' (Carter, 2008; Jennings, 2010) as a political ideal and a framework for government policy, including the current emphasis on 'integration' (Modood, 2007, 2013; McGhee, 2008; Clyne, 2011; Sewell, 2021). I began to engage critically with black and post-colonial theology (Gerloff, 2010; Keller, 2004; Jagessar, 2007; Reddie, 2012) in order to connect from this body of work to my research context. Of particular interest was the literature on the various cultural models of being and doing church ranging from the monocultural church model, whose numbers Harvey Kwiyani believes will continue to increase (Kwiyani, 2017:24), through the multiethnic church model (Patten, 2015), the multicultural church model (Koo, 2019), to the intercultural church model (Marzouk, 2019).

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<sup>5</sup> Email correspondence between Walker and Moynagh dated February 2016. Used with permission.

<sup>6</sup> Following the publication of *Church in Life* (2017), Walker subsequently feels Moynagh has allayed several of his previous concerns. In particular the interplay Moynagh develops and maintains in his chapter on Affinity Group Theology (2017:219-236) between diversity and unity, in which each facilitates the other while losing none of its own identity, Walker finds extremely convincing, as he does Moynagh's idea of social bridging, producing a social mechanism by which groups might maintain a balance between sustenance and growth and foster a more dynamic unity (Email correspondence between Walker and Moynagh dated September 2017. Used with permission).

Having surveyed the relevant literature, and investigated various cultural models of being and doing church, I felt much more informed with regard to the issues of ethnicity and culture but none-the-wiser as to the most effective way of being and doing church in a multicultural situation. Subliminally I felt drawn to the intercultural model advocated by Safwat Marzouk (Marzouk, 2019), Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Jann Aldredge-Clanton (Kim, 2017), and others, but felt this model remained at the theoretical stage in the UK. The various monocultural, multiethnic, and multicultural models of church on display in Reading I found underwhelming (exasperating the problem rather than resolving it), and the one or two attempted intercultural models in Reading frustrating (assimilating the various cultures rather than developing them). I was attracted to Moynagh's 'focussed-and-connected' concept of contextual church (Moynagh, 2012) and felt essentially this was the way to go. I concluded that there was still a major gap in the field, and that the Abbey situation offered a unique opportunity for subsequent research and practice to make an original contribution.

### **1.1.2 Reflexivity and Positioning**

Every researcher needs to acknowledge the latent danger of bias and presumption within their research. This highlights the importance of reflexivity – the continuing questioning and awareness of one's own opinions, findings, and responses throughout the research process; how these may affect the research; and what is done with this information – at every phase in the qualitative research process. It also underlines the importance of researcher positionality – the self-declaration by the researcher as to 'where the researcher is coming from' (Holmes, 2020:1). Reflexivity – the process of recognising the two-way relationship between researcher and research – informs positionality. For Kirsti Malterud:

[Reflexivity starts by] identifying preconceptions brought into the project by the researcher, representing previous personal and professional experiences, pre-study beliefs about how things are and what is to be investigated, motivation and qualifications for exploring of the field, and perspectives and theoretical foundations related to education and interests (Malterud, 2001:483-488).

Positionality, however, is never entirely fixed, and to some degree or other is always situation and context dependent. Ongoing reflexivity, therefore, is an essential process for informing developing and shaping positionality (Holmes, 2020:2). Positionality, at its simplest, indicates where a researcher is coming from in terms of values and beliefs that may affect the way they view the subject under investigation, the research participants, and the research context and process. Positionality requires that both acceptance and allowance are made by the researcher in locating their views, values and beliefs regarding research design, conduct, and output (Holmes, 2020:2).

### **1.1.3 The Co-Production of Knowledge**

Early observational research, coupled with my extended reading around the issues, quickly led me towards the view that whereas any idea of the various churches amalgamating would not be possible, some form of connectedness was worth pursuing. Throughout the research I wanted to allow the various churches/groups to tell their story (and be listened to); to look beneath the surface for the main issues. I recognised that the research needed to be firmly grounded in the framework of the cultural, communal and political histories of the various churches and groups meeting at Abbey and sought to discover what histories of racism, colonialism and migration have resulted in these various culturally distinctive groups meeting in the same building. In particular I endeavoured to engage in the coproduction of knowledge because as a researcher I do not see myself as someone who is simply observing but as someone who is part of a cooperative, creative enterprise. I therefore shaped both the research questions, and the way in which I engaged with my research base in a way that would mitigate against the problematic traditional researcher/researchee binary. I did not assume the upshot of my research to merely confirm any normal bias, considerations, views, opinions, and reservations I might have had to begin with, and learned to appreciate the challenging surprises and unexpected *kairos* moments – moments of pivotal critical revelation or understanding – that arose during the course of this research.

### **1.1.4 Lived Experience and Lived Theology**

For Edward Farley ‘the everyday contemporary experience of ordinary people has theological meaning and significance’ (Farley, 2000:118) and for this reason alone the practical theologian must pay close attention to the particular experiences or situations under scrutiny. Lived experience references those experiences which give the person concerned a certain knowledge or understanding that others who have only heard about such experiences do not have. Theology is not just concerned with interpreting the past, or texts from the past, but also with lived experience. For Knut Tveitereid, ‘Lived theology is the scholarly attempt to bracket and study theology and theologizing shaped by ordinary people’s experience in everyday life’ (Tveitereid, 2022:67). This, I would suggest, is especially so when considered in the corporate context. According to Sarah Azaransky, ‘the patterns and practices of religious communities [in particular] offer rich and generative material for theological inquiry’ (Azaransky, 2017:102). A religious community’s collective self-understanding also reveal ‘modes of divine presence’ (Fulkerson, 2017:129,133). Lived theology is an effort to make everyday life meaningful theologically, and transversally make theology meaningful in everyday life, particularly so when seeking to show the relevance of theology to initiatives in public conversations about such things as civic responsibility and social justice (Marsh,

2017; Müller, 2021). For Helen Cameron, *et al.*, espoused theology (the theology embedded within a group's articulation of its beliefs) and operant theology (the theology embedded within the actual practices of a group) are as important as normative theology (the theology found in the Scriptures, Creeds, Liturgies and official church teaching) and formal theology (the theology of the theologians and thinkers) (Cameron, 2010:53-56).

#### **1.1.5 The Pastoral Cycle/Spiral**

Prominent in the whole field of practical theology, and central to this thesis is what has become known as the 'pastoral cycle' (or 'pastoral spiral'). For Ward, 'The pastoral cycle is so common in the teaching of practical theology that it has in many ways come to define the whole field' (Ward, 2017:96). There are numerous forms of the cycle, but each attempts to guide a practitioner to work through a pastoral situation by proposing a series of phases that shape the reflection. In this thesis, I employed a flexible version of 'the classic pastoral cycle in a new format' (Thompson, 2019:58,59) which emphasises the importance of paying attention to the situation; asking the critical questions; engaging in dialogue with Christian tradition; and following this through in reflective action so the cycle moves on to a new situation in what is effectively a spiral (Thompson, 2019:59). An example of this is Laurie Green's 'reflective spiral' where, in contradistinction to a number of versions of the pastoral cycle, Green suggests that the practitioner always returns to the cycle's starting point to begin again having transitioned into a different new starting point, a spiral that moves through time rather than just a repeated cycle (Green, 2018:95). At the same time I have also drawn on further insights such as Emmanuel Lartey's five-phase cycle and Stephen Pattison's critical conversation model. As Angie Pears correctly observes, 'For Lartey ... like Pattison, theology and in particular practical theology is not static or fixed but rather is changing with human experience' (Pears, 2010:40).

### **1.2 FIELD WORK**

Fieldwork is a method of observation and data collection applied to people, cultures or natural environments, involving a variety of well-defined methods such as direct observation, sharing in the life of a group, corporate discussions, scrutinising relevant documents produced within the group, informal interviews, and so on.

#### **1.2.1 Qualitative Research**

Qualitative research seemed the most natural choice for field research because it 'begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems

inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem' (Creswell, 2007:37). Employing non-statistical methods enables new knowledge to emerge from the analysis of interview transcripts requiring a relatively small number of participants. This approach can generate high levels of trust between the researcher and the interviewees eliciting the sharing of sensitive, personal information providing a 'way in which we can begin to look behind the veil of "normality" and see what is actually going on' (Swinton, 2006:vi).

Qualitative research explores and interprets the meanings and experiences of people in real-world settings. It is, however, not without its critics, who suggest qualitative research is prone to unreliability in that it is affected by uncontrolled factors that make the gathered data inconsistent and difficult to verify; disposed to subjectivity in that it is dependent on the researcher's analysis and interpretation of the gathered data (which may contain bias or error); and suffers from a lack of statistical representation in that it does not provide numerical or measurable data that can necessarily be comprehended as applicable to a larger group of people (Creswell, 2007:201-211). According to Ward there is an ongoing uneasy relationship between theology and qualitative research. For Ward this is something of a false dichotomy in the light of the fact that many issues facing the church (and society) today are in many senses as much cultural as they are spiritual or theological (Ward, 1997).

### **1.2.2 Phenomenology, Ethnography, and Congregational Studies**

In simple terms, phenomenology can be defined as an approach to research that seeks to describe the substance of a phenomenon by investigating it from the perspective of those who have experienced it. It allows the researcher 'access into the inner experiences of research subjects' (Swinton, 2006:105). The objective of phenomenology is to describe the meaning of such experience both in terms of what was experienced and how it was experienced. For Swinton and Mowat phenomenology is 'a philosophy of experience that attempts to understand the ways in which meaning is constructed in and through human experience' (Swinton, 2006:106). Ethnography, on the other hand, involves immersing oneself in a particular community or organization to observe their behaviour and interactions up close. It is an attempt to uncover the truth about a situation by inhabiting that situation and acquiring deep understanding from within (Swinton, 2006:166). Whilst congregational studies have no simple defining feature they still fit the description of a well-organized method of investigating a congregation holistically using a variety of methods instead of relying on arbitrary instincts and perceptions, in a systematic investigation of a group's activity, both

the observable and the concealed, in ways that correctly echo the interface of constituent features whilst also perceiving overall patterns and structures (Nieman, 2014:133).

Ethnography enabled me to study the four culturally distinctive churches and groups that met at Abbey and discover something of their obvious and acquired patterns of behaviour, conventions, and habits (Creswell, 2007). Congregational study allowed me to examine each congregation holistically in a disciplined way in order to uncover more about what actually happens in these churches, both the obvious and the hidden, in a way that accurately reflected the interaction of component features whilst also noticing overall patterns and structures rather than relying on random intuitions and impressions (Nieman, 2014). By giving scope for the Churches to tell their stories I was able to discover more about the relationship between people's espoused and operant theology (Cameron, 2010), potential areas of conflict that I had begun to discern from my Practical Project data. At the same time, however, I tried to remain aware of both the global and historical aspects of my research and ensure that it was firmly rooted in both these elements.

### **1.2.3 Empirical Research**

Empirical research uses evidence that can be verified by observation or experience rather than theory or so-called logic. David Silverman has identified four main components to this kind of research: observation, analysing texts and documents, interviewing, and recording and transcription (Silverman, 2020:46-48).

**Observation** involves participation not simply watching from distance (Ward, 2017:158). I was able to spend quality time with each of the culturally distinctive churches and groups meeting at Abbey in order to observe, listen and consult. The reward of observational research is that it facilitates the ability to see the bigger picture by observing things in their usual setting, often providing powerful insights. This is particularly so when research participants demonstrate a conscious or unconscious predisposition towards displaying their best side to the researcher or looking to impress others. There are, however, disadvantages to observational research in as much as researchers have virtually no control over the situation which means any knowledge garnered may not be of any ultimate value. There is also significant potential for subjective bias in that the researcher may without thinking look to see something that is actually not there such as an attitude, or dogmatic teaching. Thus, making use of additional methods for gathering data that eliminates bias are essential.

**Analysing texts and documents** also play an important part since, as Ward suggests, ‘in a church context a whole range of materials can reveal how the community works’ and from this material important information can be gathered providing a detailed account of the activities that shaped the life of a church over a particular period of time (Ward, 2017:158,159). Access to Abbey Baptist Church’s Deacons’ Meeting and Church Meeting minutes proved to be a mine of information, as did access to the webpages, Facebook accounts, and publicity handouts of all four culturally specific churches based at Abbey. By carefully reading through these I was able to observe the cultural and theological history of the various communities. Documentary sources, however, are not substitutes for other kinds of data. Written records alone do not necessarily reveal how an organisation actually operates day by day.

**Interviewing** is one of the most common methods used in qualitative research for gathering data, and central to my approach for gathering firsthand data. I chose to employ a variety of thorough semi-structured interviews with key participants judiciously selected from across the various culturally distinctive groups at Abbey to ensure a balanced variety of opinions. Eight of the participants interviewed attend Abbey Baptist Church, three Peniel Church, two Zion Church of God, and one Living Streams International. This is roughly in approximation to the numerical strength of the respective churches. Abbey Baptist Church participation is somewhat nebulous in that two participants have been members for over 30 years, six were comparatively new, one had been in membership for four years whilst the remaining five for just over a year, and out of that five, four were recent refugees/immigrants to the UK. The pre-planned interview questions were carefully chosen, based on the anticipated issues, topics and answers expected in response to the research topic (see appendix 3).

**Recording and transcription** are also a key elements in the research process. The purpose of recording is not simply to recall what happened in the interview but to look for patterns in the observation and the researcher’s own immediate reaction or response to what has been revealed. These patterns may not be immediately evident, so the recordings enable the researcher to look back at the interview and start to formulate an analysis (Ward, 2017:159). Detailed transcripts of recordings allow the researcher to inspect ‘sequences of utterances’ and make sense of the conversation as they reflect thoughtfully on what took place rather than rely on memory and immediate reaction responses (Silverman, 2020:253-356). All my interviews with the participants were recorded and transcribed (with their permission) in this way, and formed a vital part of gathering essential data from which key themes relating to the research topic eventually emerged.

#### **1.2.4 Data Analysis and Evaluation**

Data analysis is the process of refocussing the raw interviews into evidence-based explanations. It involves classifying, comparing, evaluating, and blending data from the interviews to obtain meaning and implications, reveal patterns, or draw together various accounts of events, in order to create a coherent narrative that reflect what the participants have said and answer the research question (Rubin, 2005:201). This was the process I followed in this piece of research. I then coded my findings in order to identify similar responses and common areas of interest or concern, from which key themes emerged. Although the analysis was based on views expressed by the interviewees, the interpretations and conclusions are those of the researcher. By comparing concepts and themes across the interviews, or combining separate events to frame a picture of the situation, I looked to find answers to the research question in ways allowing me to draw broader theoretical conclusions.

#### **1.2.5 Ethical Implications and Procedures**

Mindful of the ethical implications of my research I ensured everyone taking part understood the nature of my research, provided signed consent, knew that their anonymity would be preserved, that they had the right to withdraw within a set time limit, and that the recorded data would both be securely stored and eventually deleted following the thesis submission (see Appendix 2). All the relevant material was submitted to the university for ethics approval. Having gained ethics approval from the University of Winchester, I was then able to proceed with contacting the participants, gaining their consent, arranging interview dates, and proceeding with the interviews.

### **1.3 THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION**

A whole chapter is devoted to this aspect later, but it is important to show here that theological reflection is also an essential part of the research design. The researcher's task is not simply to record the findings drawn from the recorded data but 'weave a theological narrative' (Moschella, 2008:271). It is to concentrate more clearly on the theological significance of the data and how that can advance an understanding of the research situation and emergent practices, extracting the implicit and explicit theological dimensions of the situation, scrutinising the data and investigating the ways in which they complement or challenge one another 'searching for authentic revelation in a spirit of critical faithfulness and chastened optimism' (Swinton, 2006:96).

#### **1.3.1 Models of Theological Reflection**

Theological reflection needs to be clearly defined and described, and its relationship to the pastoral cycle or spiral shown. Whilst some people understand the term loosely to cover any kind of reflective



process attempting to make connections between belief and behaviour, others use the term almost synonymously with practical theology itself in an attempt to correlate theological concerns and understandings with current social matters and activity. Yet others use the term to describe 'a much more precise, disciplined activity, undertaken methodically and rigorously by [those]... seeking, consciously and deliberately, to integrate belief and practice' (Thompson, 2019:8). Known as 'progressive theological reflection' in order to distinguish it from purely theological reflection:

This activity relates insights and resources from a theological tradition, specifically, and carefully, to contemporary situations, and vice versa, so that a mutually enlightening reappraisal may result. Pointers are sought to action which leads to a response which is more authentically true to the faith tradition on which it is based (Thompson 2019:8).

### **1.3.2 Limitations of Theological Reflection**

Recent research, however, suggests that theological reflection's currency may be of less value than originally believed (Pattison, 2003). Roger Walton suggests that theological reflection is often weak in its use of traditional Christian resources, for example, 'how the Bible and Christian tradition are used in theological reflection' (Walton, 2015:135). It has also been suggested that there can be an over emphasis on the 'analysis of local contexts and socio-economic factors' at the expense of 'engagement with Church history, doctrine and Bible' (Graham, 2009:7), and even that theological reflection is simply a 'contemporary novelty... a concession to fashionable theories of student-centred learning... unrelated to the processes of theological formation in the classic Christian tradition' (Graham, 2009:7,8). For Graham, et al, these negatives can be overcome if 'theologians and educators started to teach their biblical criticism, their historical and systematic theology contextually... if all theology were seen as practical theology' (Graham, 2009:8). Graham, Walton and Ward argue for a more holistic approach theologically so that biblical, historical and systematic theology can be presented and embraced contextually and incorporated with theological reflection at every stage (Graham *et al.*, 2005).

### **1.3.3 Lenses Used in Theological Reflection**

What are the various lenses a researcher uses to view the data? Where does one begin? With scripture, reason, tradition, experience or with the data, the context, the experience, the community? Swinton and Mowat suggest Practical Theology is positioned within the uncomfortable but essential tension found between 'the script of revelation given to us in Christ and formulated historically within scripture, doctrine and tradition' and the on-going pioneering presentation of the Gospel as it is 'embodied and enacted in the life and practices of the Church as they interact with the life and practices of the world' (Swinton, 2006:5). For Cameron, *et al.*, it is something of a balancing act between the Four Voices of Theology: Normative Theology (Scripture, Creeds, Official Church

Teaching, Liturgies); Formal Theology (Theology of the Theologians, Dialogue with Other Disciplines); Espoused Theology (Theology embedded within a group's articulation of its beliefs); and Operant Theology (Theology embedded within the actual practices of the group) (Cameron, 2010:53-56). I would suggest it does not matter where one begins as long as all the facets of theological reflection are incorporated.

For example, John Wesley, the 18<sup>th</sup> century leader of the Methodist movement, made use of four distinct sources in arriving at theological conclusions: Scripture, tradition, reason, and Christian experience. Wesley believed that the kernel of the Christian faith was revealed in Scripture as the single foundational source. Doctrine, however, had to be in keeping with orthodox Christian tradition, and faith was more than an acknowledgment of academic ideas and must therefore be experiential faith. Moreover, every doctrine must be able to be defended rationally. Tradition, experience, and reason, for Wesley were always subject to Scripture which is primary (Thorsen, 2018). Graham McFarlane has recently developed the Wesleyan Quadrilateral as an Evangelical Quintilateral adding community to Scripture, tradition, reason and experience as a fifth dimension in the belief that there is a synergy about doing these things together rather than in isolation (McFarlane, 2020). Rooted in progressive evangelical faith and Baptist ecclesiology I start by bringing the data to scripture and scripture to the data, but before I do I want to qualify this approach.

#### **1.3.4 Theological Reflection and the Bible**

Indicative of a growing interest in the way in which the Bible is used in both theological reflection and in the pastoral cycle, Thompson devotes a whole section of her book *Theological Reflection* to exploring the place of scripture in theological reflection (Thompson, 2019:75-101) in recognition of the fact that 'for Christians the Bible carries special authority that is part of what, for them, makes such reflection theological' (Thompson, 2019:97). As someone whose roots are in evangelical and reformed faith, I have to acknowledge that all too often evangelical faith has focussed on a rather narrow, limited hermeneutic where 'the Bible [is treated] as some kind of literary pope that utters holy truth without regard for circumstance or context' and where the person concerned simply resorts to 'proof-texting' ignoring 'the very idea of the word or the speaking of God carries the invitation to engage in conversation that can lead somewhere quite new' (Oliver, 2006:43,44).

Recognising the 'conundrum in the relation between revelation and normativity' in ethnography, Fiddes, citing the four voices of theology (see Cameron et al., 2018:1-4), suggests that 'the normative voice will always tend to trump the other three [voices]' since the espoused, operant, and formal

theological voices remain untried and untested in comparison to the traditional, authorised view already legitimised (and strengthened by a claim to revelation) (Fiddes, 2022:121,122). Fiddes' theological roots, like mine, are in evangelical Baptist faith and ecclesiology, and he therefore probably has in mind the emphasis on a particular conservative biblical hermeneutic. Fiddes takes this a step further acknowledging:

[Whilst] Baptists have been confident about the reverential power of the words of scripture, to inform us about the reality of human life and alert us to the ways of God in the world... Baptists have sometimes been too confident about this (Fiddes, 2003:2).

In the light of this Fiddes calls for a reconstruction of norms and the place of revelation which, whilst recognising the need to give significant place to the 'continuous process in the lived-experience of the church' alongside the normative theological voice of the church (Scripture, Creeds, Official Church Teaching, Liturgies, etc.), seeks to centre the whole process of theological ethnography in the Person of Jesus Christ: 'Divine revelation] is not a disclosure by God of concepts, doctrines, and propositions, but the self-unveiling of the very being of God ... [and] one particular event of divine self-disclosure, the embodied presence of God in Christ' (Fiddes, 2022:122, 123).

### **1.3.5 Reflexive, Contextual, Qualitative Methodology**

From the mass of methodological research material I chose elements I felt most appropriate for the research situation in which I found myself. I describe the design covering critical issues of reflexivity; positioning; the co-production of knowledge; lived experience and lived theology; use of the pastoral cycle/spiral; qualitative research; phenomenology, ethnography and congregational studies; empirical research; data analysis and evaluation as 'a reflexive, contextual, qualitative methodology.' I do so in the belief that this is the best way to capture what is a rather complex situation, but which also incorporates remaining true to tried and tested theological and ecclesiological fundamentals, whilst doing research that takes seriously the first-hand lived experience of people. I would suggest that this kind of approach has been missing from Baptist Missiology and ecclesiology in research. Much of Baptist research in this area has been binary – an either/or approach rather than a both/and approach – perfectly illustrated by the current debate within the Baptist Union over human sexuality where there is a clear polarisation of views emerging.

### **Summary**

This chapter outlines the conceptual framework shaped by my research question and the critical literature I engaged with. I describe the overall design covering crucial areas such as reflexivity and positioning, the co-production of knowledge, lived experience and lived theology, before justifying my use of the pastoral cycle/spiral to frame my thesis. I explain my use of field work justifying my

engagement with qualitative research and outlining my use of phenomenology, ethnography, and congregational studies, empirical research, data analysis and evaluation, before moving on to ethical implications and procedures. I concluded by defining my approach to my theological reflection on the gathered data – the various models, limitations, and lenses used – justifying my reasons for emphasising on the use of Scripture in theological reflection – and advocating the use of what I call my ‘reflexive, contextual, qualitative methodology.’

## [2] EXPERIENCE/ANECDOTE (Telling the Story)

### Introduction

In the previous chapter I outlined the conceptual framework (shaped by my research question and the critical literature I engaged with) to describe my overall research design. I covered crucial areas such as reflexivity and positioning, the co-production of knowledge, lived experience and lived theology, before justifying my use of the pastoral cycle/spiral to frame my thesis. I explained my use of field work, justifying my engagement with qualitative research and outlining my use of its various components before moving on to ethical implications and procedures. I clarified my approach to my theological reflection on the gathered data – the various models, limitations, and lenses used – especially my reasons for emphasising on the use of Scripture in theological reflection, and underlined my reasoning behind using the reflexive, contextual, qualitative methodologies. In this chapter I simply tell a significant part of the Abbey Story central to my thesis.

Story is really important not least as a source of theological knowledge. People love stories. Most of the Bible is in narrative form. Jesus told great stories (we call them ‘Parables’) that always had a point. In making room for stories ‘pastoral theologians provide a gracious space wherein the Spirit moves upon the teller of the tale as well as the listener. Together, we are transformed as we follow the path of God’s plot that unfolds chapter by chapter’ (Abraham, 2016). This episode in the Abbey Story is effectively in two phases: the period between 2018-2020 after my wife Julia and I arrived in Reading up to the outbreak of Covid and the subsequent lockdown; and the period from 2020 to the present day, covering the significant changes that have taken place at Abbey subsequently.

### 2.1 PHASE 1: A DOOR THAT STANDS OPEN BEFORE YOU

There are many reasons why researchers pick a topic, and then within that topic decide a research question (Rubin, 2005:41-45). For me, it arose directly as a result of moving to Reading in the autumn of 2018, and vicariously to Abbey Baptist Church, situated in the centre of the town. Reading is the biggest town in the UK, an extensive urban conurbation with a population of 350,214, (World Population Review, 2023), 35% of whom come from outside the UK, and where 150 different languages are spoken (Blake, 2010). Intriguingly, after centuries of white-British ethnic exclusivity – a period where Abbey’s doors were reminiscent of the overgrown, long unopened door in Holman Hunt’s painting, *The Light of the World* – Abbey had opened its doors to three other very different culturally distinctive churches believing that God had ‘set before [them] an open door which no one is able to shut’ (Revelation 3:8).

### **2.1.1 A Challenging Call from Above and a Curious Response from Below**

In 2011 the Baptist Union issued a call for Baptist Churches in multicultural areas, to develop as 'multiethnic churches' in order to 'reach multi-ethnic communities with the love of God' (Patten, 2011). In response to this call, Abbey Baptist Church opened its doors to the first of three culturally distinctive churches who wished to worship in their own heart-languages, and in ways that resonated with those cultures. The Baptist Union clearly had in mind existing Baptist Churches evolving into multiethnic, multicultural congregations... Abbey Baptist Church interpreted this differently, seeing the approach from these various churches as divine provision affording the Church – which up until this point had seriously considered closing – a *raison d'être* for its continued existence.

First to arrive, in February 2011, was Kingdom Citizens Church – now called Living Streams International (LSI) – a Ghanaian, Akan-speaking, evangelical, charismatic church based in Harringay, London. They were followed, in March 2014, by Zion Church of God, a Sri Lankan, Tamil-speaking, Pentecostal church based in Tooting. In June 2017, the third culturally distinctive church to arrive was Peniel Church, a Portuguese-speaking church with its roots in American Pentecostalism. In reality there were four culturally distinctive churches meeting at Abbey, the fourth being Abbey Baptist Church itself, a numerically small, mostly elderly, educated, home-owning, middle-class, white-British people, traditional in its approach to worship and liberal/progressive evangelical in its theology. The records suggest Abbey hoped this move would lead possibly to either eventual 'amalgamation' or, at the very least, inspire some form of numerical growth for Abbey itself. In 10+ years, however, all four churches have had very little to do with each other, largely maintaining a fierce independence. Throughout this period Abbey maintained a clear host-tenant distance with these other churches. Abbey owns the building, rented out (rather than donated) space to these other churches, and somewhat proudly remained the dominant culture.

Founded in 1640, Abbey Baptist Church' size and influence has fluctuated hugely during that time. Once the centre of nonconformist life in Reading, Abbey haemorrhaged numerically in recent decades. In the late 1970s Kings Road Baptist Church (as it was then known) sold its cavernous, crumbling Victorian barn of a building in the Kings Road, and downsized to a much smaller new build in nearby Abbey Square. What seemed an eminently sensible move at the time, given their declining numbers and the fact that a new through-road would enable the church to retain a prominent main road frontage, turned into something of a nightmare. The proposed new road scheme was cancelled, and Abbey Baptist Church found itself in a nice modern building... but completely off the beaten track, marooned in a sea of glass-fronted office blocks, with no residents whatsoever living nearby.

Forty years later, with a numerically small, ageing, declining congregation, a lack of vision, and without a Minister for three years, the church was at a very low ebb. The only plusses were, having sold off the Kings Road site and car park, the church now owned a modern debt-free building, had a considerable amount of money in the bank, and had found a *raison d'être* in opening their doors to these various independent culturally distinctive churches.

### **2.1.2 Tell Me the Old, Old Story**

In 2018 my wife Julia (an ordained and accredited Baptist Minister) was approached to see if she would be interested in taking on the pastorate of Abbey Baptist Church. At that time, she was the Minister of Knaphill Baptist Church, Woking, and (although beyond retirement age) I was the non-stipendiary Community Minister. Despite the problems presented by the Abbey situation, we felt drawn towards the place, the town as much as the church. In summary, the whole process came together very quickly. Julia was appointed as the Minister of Abbey Baptist Church at the end of August 2018 and we moved to Reading.

The declared purpose of Abbey Baptist Church is to be, '*A Place of Prayer; A Place of Discovery; and A place of Refuge*'. This strapline dates from the church's relocation to Abbey Square, in the centre of Reading's historic Abbey Quarter, the site of the former Reading Abbey founded by Henry I in 1121. The strapline, a brainchild of a former Minister, was intended to reflect those virtues espoused by that original monastic community which 900 years before constituted the beating heart of Reading itself. Sadly, along with many other virtues associated with Abbey Baptist Church's liturgical past, the strapline had become a form of words with little meaning or understanding. This was all to change, however, and in ways and as a result of circumstances that none of us could have predicted at the time. With Julia's appointment the church slowly began to stabilise and re-affirm its pledge to 'seeking the welfare of the city' (Jeremiah 29:7) in realising the *Missio Dei* for the Church today, and being 'a house of prayer for all nations' (Isaiah 56:7, Mark 11:17). Despite their strapline and prominent banners, proclaiming their allegiance to 'seeking the welfare of the city' and 'being a house of prayer for all nations', displayed in the Sanctuary, Abbey Baptist Church had become a very inward looking, downward looking, group of people. Even with three other culturally distinctive churches now using the same building, there remained little awareness of, or practical engagement with, the amazing, vibrant, wider multicultural society all around them.

Whilst I have no 'official' role within the leadership of the church, as a retired ordained and accredited Baptist Minister with 50 years of significant experience and standing behind me, I was

recognised, albeit somewhat subliminally, by the church. In our first year at Abbey Julia and I spent getting to know the members of the congregation at Abbey Baptist Church, the leaders of the other culturally distinctive churches based at Abbey, the staff of Circles UK,<sup>7</sup> a charitable organisation who rent most of the top floor of the building, and members of the various user groups. We also sought to restore or reinvigorate some of the approaches and practices of being and doing church that had been at the heart of Abbey Baptist Church's worship, ministry and mission in happier days. Things that reflected Abbey's unique contribution to the Christian scene and the life and well-being of Reading itself in days gone by. Things that remained part of Abbey's DNA but had to some degree been either neglected, fallen into a state of disrepair, or even lost altogether. Abbey's liberal or progressive evangelical theological approach; a lively liturgical style of worship; a commitment to good preaching and teaching – scholarly, biblical, Christ-centred, winsome; a holistic or integral approach to ministry and mission in which social action as well as evangelism played an important part; a commitment to being a place of corporate prayer praying for both the Church and the world. We also made a determined effort to get Abbey back on the map by establishing personal links with various prominent church and charitable organisations, political and corporate institutions that operate in Reading. Whilst Julia concentrated on strengthening and building up the small congregation at Abbey, I concentrated on building bridges between Abbey and the other three churches sharing the premises.

### **2.1.3 Face to Face or Side by Side?**

Although opening its doors to these various culturally distinctive churches had been sold to us as a positive, the reality was that even after a good number of years, all four churches still had very little to do with each other. Rather than criticise the situation I tried to find positive ways to bring all four churches together in some form of cohesive venture. Conversations with the social services and the tenant churches led to the idea of creating an English Language Conversation Café at Abbey. The steady inflow of immigrants into Reading has resulted in many positives for the town and its churches, but a lack of basic English within many immigrant families remains a major problem. This inability to speak English was equally a problem for each of the tenant churches at Abbey. Establishing an English Language Conversation Café was, therefore, an initiative that could be of benefit to both the various churches at Abbey and the town itself. The approach adopted to facilitate this shared project was based on principles outlined in the 2008 Department for

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<sup>7</sup> Circles UK are an innovative and successful community contribution to reducing sex offending, working in close partnership with criminal justice agencies. Available at: <https://circles-uk.org.uk/> (Accessed 27.06.23).



Communities and Local Government document *Face to Face and Side by Side*<sup>8</sup> produced with the objective of improving interfaith relationships, although we chose to reverse the order in the belief that working together could be a productive way forward. The initial response from all four churches was promising, however, progressing the venture was curtailed due to the outbreak of Covid and the subsequent lockdown measures between March 2020 and December 2021.

#### **2.1.4 Change! Change! Who Said Anything About Change?**

Despite the warmth of Abbey Baptist Church's welcome the blunt reality, as one outside observer put it, was, 'What you and Julia inherited, was a fairly solid, entrenched, group of holy Baptists, who on the whole wanted absolutely nothing to change whatsoever.' In reality little had changed since the church had relocated to Abbey Square in 1979. Although the situation we inherited at Abbey in 2018 was not quite so dire – the Moderator had done an excellent job helping the church see its need for change – it still required something extraordinary to facilitate a platform for change. The church knew it needed to change – it didn't know how to change.

Amongst the remaining vestiges of the past that limited progress and change were two bulwarks of Baptist Church life – the Deacons' Meeting and the Church Members Meeting. Sadly, at Abbey, both of these had become moribund in a mass of institutionalism, lost in a sea of cliquishness. Church Members Meetings were poorly attended, very formal, lacking in vision and inspiration, and frankly really boring. Deacons' Meetings agendas were equally mundane and dominated by certain individuals. Despite this Julia managed to push through certain key changes – opening up the building (alongside some other churches in Reading) during the coldest winter months of 2019 to provide overnight accommodation for the homeless; creating a number of 'teams' to cover areas such as finance, fabric, pastoral care, and so on, involving the wider membership of the church (thus reducing the power of the Diaconate to influence and control everything); the relocation of a raft of gloomy portraits of previous Ministers (the first thing to greet you on entering the building) to the downstairs hall (as part of an attractive Church Heritage display) and their replacement with beautifully designed new banners reflecting the church's declared purpose to be, '*A Place of Prayer; A Place of Discovery; and A Place of Refuge*'. Despite these modifications an inherent subliminal resistance to change remained. Although we were praying and working hard for that change no one could have predicted the outbreak of the Corona virus, the months of lockdown that would follow, and the way God would use that to bring about those extraordinary changes that were necessary.

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<sup>8</sup> '*Face to Face and Side by Side: a framework for partnership in a multifaith society*' is published by Faith-based Regeneration Network, 21.7.2008 which provides a precis version of the larger document.

## **2.2 PHASE 2: A DECISION TO TRANSITION**

The extended period of lockdown followed the outbreak of Covid in March 2020 meant Abbey folk could no longer meet corporately on the premises. This necessitated a new approach to gathering together for worship, prayer, Bible study, Deacons' Meetings, Church Members' Meetings, and so on. Zoom meetings online became a way of life, and Abbey began to produce written Order of Service sheets – incorporating prayers, songs, Bible readings, a precis of the sermon, and so on, that were distributed either by email (or via the letterbox for those not online) enabling everyone to share in a time of corporate worship either on Zoom or in spirit on Sunday mornings. This seemed a heavy chore but was ultimately to prove to be of much greater significance than recognised at the time. When eventually the rules and regulations covering lockdown were relaxed, one of the first things Abbey Baptist Church decided, in advance of returning to the building, was that the whole building should be 'deep cleaned'. This also provided a wonderful opportunity to reorder much of the interior of the building, including the Sanctuary.

### **2.2.1 Engaging with the Community and Entering into Meaningful Partnerships**

Opening up the building as a night shelter for the homeless during the previous winter had put Abbey Baptist Church back on the map locally. For the churches and charities of Reading, Abbey had finally emerged from its self-imposed period of exile. Consequently, when Reading Red Kitchen<sup>9</sup> a secular, solidarity focused project, doing an amazing work feeding the countless numbers of refugees currently living in Reading, needed help they were recommended to approach Abbey. They had been distributing food to refugees outside St Lawrence Church near Reading Town Hall but had encountered hostility and verbal abuse. They needed somewhere to store the food, somewhere a little more off the beaten track, to continue with their distribution. At that time the only thing Abbey had to offer was storage space (a result of the re-ordering) and access to the church patio area at the rear of the church building for food distribution. Julia was able to drive this through the Deacons' Meeting and the Church Members' Meeting without major opposition (conducting these meetings via Zoom seemed to make taking decisions easier). Furthermore, the Church agreed to allow this use of the building free of charge. Shortly afterwards Abbey was approached by Care4Calais<sup>10</sup> a charity also dedicated to helping the refugees in Reading by providing clothes, counselling and advice, and once again the church responded positively to this practical need. Abbey received a lot of criticism

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<sup>9</sup> A solidarity focused project who use food to bring people together and help people in food poverty. Reading Red Kitchen are not a charity but believe in working with people, without bureaucracy or hierarchy. Available at: <https://opencollective.com/readingredkitchen> (Accessed 19.01.21).

<sup>10</sup> A volunteer-run charity working with refugees in the UK, France and Belgium with a strong presence in Berkshire. Available at: <https://care4calais.org/> (Accessed 20.06.22).

from certain quarters – including some fellow Baptist Churches – for partnering with secular, non-Christian, organisations in this way. For some evangelical and charismatic Christians this confirmed their suspicions that Abbey remained a ‘liberal’ church that only preached a ‘social gospel’. As far as Abbey were concerned they were simply partnering with people who were doing what Jesus himself would have done in the light of the Nazareth Manifesto (Luke 4:14-22), and what Abbey folk themselves were physically unable to do because of age, infirmity, and lack of numbers.

### **2.2.2 A Church Vision Day and a Unanimous Decision to Step into the Unknown**

One of the first things Abbey did after lockdown, early in September 2021, was to have a Vision Day, gathering as a church one Saturday to prayerfully talk through the way forward. At the end of a really good day together the church committed itself unanimously to transitioning from what it was into an ‘international, intercultural church and prayer centre’. No one really knew exactly what this meant at the time, nor what it would involve, but nevertheless believed this was where God wanted Abbey to go, and what he wanted Abbey to become. The following day 20 or so chairs were put out in anticipation of the usual regular Sunday morning congregation and eight Iranian refugees and one new white-British person walked in as well! Surely this was God’s ‘Amen!’ to the prayer of commitment the members of Abbey Baptist Church had prayed the day before. Abbey’s partnership with Reading Red Kitchen and Care4Calais, whilst primarily focussing on the practical needs of the many refugees sent to Reading, also had the additional effect of introducing the refugees to Abbey Baptist Church. A number of these Iranians had been forced to flee the country of their birth as a result of religious persecution by the Islamic State following their conversion to Christ. Over the next few weeks an increasing number of Iranians began to attend Abbey (not all Christians) as well as one or two of the ‘helpers’ linked to Reading Red Kitchen and Care4Calais attracted by the church’s openness to helping refugees.

### **2.2.3 Abbey iCaf: English Language Conversation Café**

One of the downsides of lockdown had been that plans to establish the English Language Conversation Café at Abbey had had to be shelved. Although the three tenant churches based at Abbey had been broadly sympathetic to the idea, they all now felt that rather than it being a shared venture between all four churches, Abbey Baptist Church should go it alone with the café. With lockdown suspended, and people cleared to enter the building, it was now potentially possible to launch this much-heralded venture. Since the three other culturally distinctive churches had now opted out Abbey was left with the choice of either forgetting the project completely, doing it all on their own, or seeking other partners in the venture. Two church members who run a language school

in Reading, suggested Abbey contact a Christian organisation called *2:19 Teach to Reach*<sup>11</sup> who are passionate about churches reaching out to speakers of other languages in their communities. Marina Swainton-Harris, one of 2:19 lead coordinators, met with a small group of people from Abbey (interested in the Language Café idea) and it was agreed to partner with 2:19 in this new venture. Marina (who lives in Reading herself) was more than happy to come along and guide Abbey through the first few sessions of the Café. But this still did not answer the question: Where were we going to find our customers for the Café? Abbey's new Iranian friends would come... but would anybody else?

Through our wider Christian links in Reading, Julia and I had come across Siew Yin Chan, the Chinese Chaplain at the University of Reading and Pastor of the Chinese Church meeting in the town. Abbey had already signed up to the 'Welcome Churches' network in the UK (designed to link up churches across the UK who were willing to welcome refugees), and we were aware that a large number of Hong Kong British Nationals (Overseas) were due to arrive in the UK very shortly. Siew Yin suggested the Abbey iCaf (as the English Language Conversation Café was now called) would be ideal for these new arrivals. She already had a list of names and addresses and would sign them up for us. When the first Abbey iCaf was finally launched (in September 2021) over 40 people attended.

The Café has now been operating in six-week terms (with breaks for school holidays) continually since then, with never less than 30 people present every time. The concept has now also been 'exported' to other churches in Reading and wider afield. After a couple of weeks Julia and I took over running the Café with Julia leading the bulk of the sessions and myself as a 'helper' on one of the tables. Although not overtly 'evangelistic' I always closed each session with what I called a pre-evangelistic 'thought for the day' and an invitation to come along to Abbey Baptist Church on a Sunday morning (if they didn't already go to church elsewhere). Scores of people started to come and within a few months our Sunday morning congregation grew from around 15-20 predominantly elderly, white British, to 100-120 people of various nationalities and ages. The printed weekly Orders of Service, that were such a chore to produce and distribute initially during lockdown, now came into their own. They continued to be produced on a weekly basis after lockdown ended, and even though everything also appears (mainly in English) on a big screen, at the touch of a button (with the help of Google Translate) we can produce these Orders of Service in a variety of languages – English, Cantonese, Farsi, Spanish, French, Italian, whatever. Our new friends love this, and often sit with the English translation in one hand and the translation from their own heart language in the other. They

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<sup>11</sup> A reference to Ephesians 2:19: 'Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household.' Available at: <https://www.twonineteen.org.uk/> (Accessed 11.05.23).

see it as a good way to learn English as well as understand and enjoy worship. Spare copies are often taken by attendees and circulated amongst their friends and contacts.

#### **2.2.4 Transitioning into an International, Intercultural Church**

Over the last 12-18 months at Abbey Baptist Church a number of these new friends have been baptised and come into church membership. A number of geographically based Connect Groups have been established to enable members of the church and congregation to get to know one another cross-culturally. New ventures have been established such as a flourishing Sunday School, Youth Club, Toddlers Group, Abbey Renew Café (where it is OK not to be OK), a Welcome Course (for people new to the UK), an Alpha Course (for those who want to explore the Christian Faith), Bible Study Groups (for those whose first language is not English), and geographically based Connect Groups. Virtually every member of the church and congregation is now linked through a flourishing WhatsApp Group (with new friends are joining on a weekly basis). A number of new members have joined the existing Church Teams (referred to earlier) and new Church Teams (such as an Audio-Visual Team) and a Church Choir/Singing Group have been established. Many of these new friends already participate in Sunday Worship through music, Bible Reading, Prayers for the Church and the World, taking up the offering, serving at Communion, and making the all-important after-Service coffee. The church finances have increased as a result of the additional giving from many of these new friends. Although the Diaconate still consists mainly of elderly, white people there have been a number of progressive key changes in the course of 2023 with some current Deacons standing down, three new Deacons being elected including one Hong Konger and two new white British members, and a new Church Secretary and new Church Treasurer appointed. The monthly Church (Business) Meetings now take place on Sundays after worship, over a buffet lunch, with a more inspirational, timed agenda, and are well attended.

By and large 'the old Abbeyites' (as they refer to themselves) have coped well with the extraordinary changes that have taken place over a comparatively short space of time. Only one church member left as a result of the influx of new people and, for the most part, the long-established church members are pleased to see so many newcomers joining the church and beginning to play an active part in its life, ministry and mission. Although continuing to struggle with certain aspects instigated by this sudden change – the hubbub of lots of people and children gathering for worship on a Sunday morning; the rustling of Orders of Service sheets and murmur of conversation during the Service as the less-than-fluent English speakers try and make sense of what is going on; the reality that Abbey originals are now very much in the minority; the fact that church news is now shared mostly by email

or on WhatsApp rather than by word of mouth amongst the select few – it would appear that the old Abbeyites are accepting that constant change is here to stay, and that there is now no going back to what was. They are delighted to see the church full again on a Sunday morning and believe that Abbey Baptist Church now genuinely has an exciting future ahead of it. People have arrived that they can now hand the baton on to with confidence.

### **Summary**

In this chapter I recounted the absorbing contextual situation emerging from Abbey's decision in 2011 to open its doors to culturally distinctive churches, and its own subsequent transition into an international, intercultural church as a result of a major influx of new people into the church, primarily from the refugee and immigrant community following the end of lockdown in 2021. I identified two distinct, although interlinked, stages to the Abbey story beginning with Phase 1, Abbey's somewhat *off-piste* response to the Baptist Union's call for Baptist Churches to transition into multicultural congregations, by renting out space to three very different culturally specific churches. Tracing my own involvement in this story I outlined something of the reasoning behind Abbey's decision, the positives and negatives of this move, the self-imposed long-term problems Abbey had created for itself, and the various ideas Julia (as the Minister) and myself (as her husband) initiated in an attempt to find Abbey a future. I then outlined the extraordinary renaissance that took place in Phase 2 at Abbey, stemming from the outbreak of Covid in 2020 and the subsequent lockdown, that finally broke the mould at Abbey, paved the way for the church to partner effectively with various secular and sacred organisations, that occasioned the church eventually taking a brave decision to deliberately transition into becoming an international, intercultural church – a decision which has resulted in astonishing numerical and spiritual growth which continues to this day. Both phases of the Abbey story, however, raise a host of intriguing questions and concerns, some of which I will clarify in the next chapter and delve into in more detail in the rest of this thesis.

## **[3] EXPLORATION (Understanding the Story)**

### **Introduction**

In the previous chapter I recounted the intriguing contextual situation emerging from Abbey Baptist Church's decision in 2011 to open its doors to the first of three culturally distinctive churches, and its own subsequent transition into an international, intercultural church a decade later. Whilst both phases of the Abbey story have much to commend them, in reality the Abbey situation raises a significant number of questions, and in this chapter I highlight some of the key issues and questions raised by the story.

In its original form the Pastoral Cycle invites the practitioner, having recounted the experience under investigation, to reflect back through the story to see 'what values are, or are not, operating, and in what direction the whole issue seems to be heading' (Green, 2018:21). These initial conclusions may not be entirely accurate, and certainly need to be subjected to far more stringent methods of analysis, but this kind of 'gut reaction' analysis may indicate potential problems, issues or questions, arising from the situation. They also act as a catalyst to encourage further informed reading around the issues, and formulate the questions that need to be put to interviewees in due course.

### **3.1 PHASE 1: OPENING THE CREAKING ABBEY DOORS**

The first phase of the Abbey story left me feeling disturbed, although I was not at all sure exactly why. I needed to explore the story thoughtfully and prayerfully and ask myself, 'What are the key issues and questions raised by the story?'

#### **3.1.1 Misinterpreting the Directive from On High?**

When Abbey Baptist Church embarked on this 'multicultural journey' by renting space to the first of three very different culturally distinctive churches, it was in response to an initiative by the Baptist Union. It would appear that the Baptist Union meant existing congregations transitioning into multicultural congregations themselves rather than renting out space to separate churches. Abbey, however, chose to interpret this mandate differently, seeing the approach from these various churches as divine provision offering the Church a *raison d'être* for its continued existence. Whilst some at Abbey viewed this move simply in commercial terms, the majority probably saw it as helping fellow Christians to worship in their own heart languages and reach out to others within their own communities. Some hoped that it would lead to some form of amalgamation or, at the very least, 'prime the pump' and inspire some form of numerical growth at Abbey itself. A decade later and all that had happened was Abbey remained a numerically small, elderly, exclusively white-British church

sharing a building with three other equally numerically small tenant churches, none of whom seemed to have any desire whatever to have anything to do with each other.

### **3.1.2 You in Your Small Corner**

There is an old Sunday School chorus with the refrain ‘You in your small corner and I in mine’<sup>12</sup> which aptly described the relationship between the various churches when we arrived in Reading. Why did these culturally distinctive churches (including Abbey) wish to remain isolated and not connect with each other? Over the next few months I became increasingly disturbed at the static multiethnic church approach embraced by Abbey. Given the multicultural nature of Reading this seemed ‘wrong’. The Rubin’s suggest when an issue ‘concerns the culture of an organisation or group, figuring out the research problem can take a while’ (Rubin, 2005:46) so rather than jump to conclusions, I sought to examine the overall culture, significance, and values that undergirded what was happening.

Looking for a way to make a significant contribution to Abbey without treading on Julia’s toes, intrigued by the potential of the multicultural facet of the situation, I started joining the various other churches occasionally for worship, learning something of their ways, talking with their people, getting to know their leaders, collecting their stories and analysing them. From this I uncovered a variety of assumptions, procedures, beliefs, theologies, traditions, systems, fears that contributed to this isolationist approach. For example, Zion, LSI, and Peniel, all Pentecostal churches, were suspicious of getting too involved with Abbey because it was assumed Abbey was not Pentecostal. Intriguingly they were also suspicious of each other because although all Pentecostal, the other churches practised the wrong form of Pentecostalism. Abbey kept their distance because these other churches were considered to be far too enthusiastic.

### **3.1.3 A Question of Conviviality**

It appeared that the situation at Abbey had become a classic example of ‘convivial culture’ where a number of diverse culturally distinctive groups, despite the various tensions that existed, nonetheless explored a convivial working relationship as long as it was not too demanding. So within the same space there was convergence, but it was convivial and it is continually evolving. Culture is never static; it never has been. It is wet cement; it is continually on the move. In a way, what is happening in that space, is an exploration of a convivial culture where there is this – it is beyond a mosaic – rubbing together taking place (Gilroy, 2004).

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<sup>12</sup> *Jesus Bids Us Shine* is a children’s hymn with words written by Susan Bogert Warner (1819-1885) an American Presbyterian writer. Based on Psalm 145 it was first published in 1868 in a children’s magazine, and is now in the public domain.



### **3.1.4 An Appropriate Contextual Model of Church for Today**

Questioning various assumptions, beliefs and behaviours, opened up both the topic and the research question especially when certain norms or values seemed contradictory. Research puzzles also emerged when I thought about the opposites of what I was hearing or seeing. I tried to think about what had not occurred when I expected certain things to happen. For me, a key rhetorical question that every church needs to regularly ask of itself is: Is our church reflective of, and responsive to, the community in which it is located? This determines a particular church's relevancy within that community and how it approaches and practises its ministry and mission. As already noted, for Moynagh, 'contextualising the church is the attempt to be church in ways that are both faithful to Jesus and appropriate to the people the church serves' (Moynagh, 2012:151). The four churches based at Abbey, however, appeared to have no concept whatsoever of being a 'contextual church' or if they did, they understood 'appropriate to the people the church serves' in terms of simply engaging with their own kind. Why were they all so insular? Why not more outward looking?

### **3.1.5 Culture, Language and Commonality**

Through observing, listening and reflecting I began to understand why heart language, culture, style of worship, ways of being and doing church, and simply being with your own kind of people, were so important to these culturally distinctive churches. I am aware that I see things through the eyes of someone who belongs to a dominant, white, British, ethnic, cultural group. If I was new to the UK, finding everything strange, really struggling with the language, feeling terribly homesick, attending a monocultural church attuned to my own culture might well appear to be a more sensible and rational way to worship God and form a Christian community. Moynagh appears to understand this, answering his own question: 'Are Culture-specific Churches Legitimate?' by acknowledging that 'one of the most fruitful ways for a church to be contextual is to relate to a specific culture' (Moynagh, 2012:168, 179). Although this understanding answered one particular question, it also raised others. Was the acceptance of numerous culturally distinctive churches really the best way forward?

A sense of cultural identity is important for good and bad reasons. Positively, cultural awareness provides a sense of being rooted in a particular social background. Negatively, immersing oneself in a distinctive ethnic culture to the exclusion of other cultures can trap an individual so that they cease to flourish or grow holistically. The Egyptian scholar, Safwat Marzouk poignantly asks, 'Are these [immigrant] communities isolating themselves from the surrounding society and churches in order to maintain their cultural identity?' (Marzouk, 2019:1,2).

### **3.1.6 Cliques, Clubbiness and Coloniality**

As a member of Abbey, I could easily fall into the same trap of viewing these other churches as 'culturally distinctive' in contrast to Abbey, the culturally correct church, the *primus inter pares*, the benchmark church, instead of seeing itself just as another expression of culturally distinctive church. Sandiford suggests that the ongoing resistance to accepting black and minority ethnic (BME) representation in leadership in mainstream churches in the UK is in part down to a 'sense of clubbiness [that] can develop in church' (Sandiford, 2010:10). Sadly, I suspect my own church, Abbey Baptist Church, very much fitted this description at that time. Prior to 2021 it was almost entirely made up of a small, compact, group of elderly, educated, home owning, middle-class, white-British, people who all knew each other well, felt comfortable with each other, spent a lot of time together, and never made any decision unless everyone was in total agreement. This affected the way Abbey did church, their style of worship, their unwillingness to get too close to their tenants, and their tendency to introspection.

Viewed from Moynagh's premise that 'one of the most fruitful ways for a church to be contextual is to relate to a specific culture' (Moynagh, 2012:179) this approach is understandable, and no different to the stance taken by the other churches sharing the building. Given the multicultural nature of Reading, however, coupled with the 'reserved' attitude of many of the old Abbeyites to the presence of these other culturally distinctive churches, it smacks of coloniality. Abbey Baptist Church could not remain a white-British enclave surrounded by a larger territory whose inhabitants are culturally and ethnically distinct and hope to survive. It would be wrong to simply point the finger at Abbey. This same sense of 'clubbiness' is also apparent within the other culturally distinctive churches meeting at Abbey.

### **3.1.7 Walking the Walk**

Since Reading is a large multicultural town another pressing question for me was: 'What are the four churches meeting at Abbey modelling for the rest of the community?' A somewhat hackneyed idiom suggests 'We need to walk the walk, as well as talk the talk!' It still makes a valid point, especially in church circles where verbal dexterity and largesse has become an art form. In terms of the 'ministry of reconciliation entrusted to us' (2 Corinthians 5:11-20), what were the four churches modelling for the community? Whilst, for some, the multiethnic approach taken by Abbey Baptist Church was heralded as progressive, others saw it as negative, fuelling the racially divisive climate of our times.

Despite the scriptural imperative for the Church to engage in ‘seeking the welfare of the city’ (Jeremiah 29:7) and be ‘a house of prayer for all nations’ (Isaiah 56:7, Mark 11:17) there is little evidence of the Christian Church in Reading engaging with this in a serious way. There are a few encouraging signs with some local churches (in the wake of Covid lockdown) clustering together to form community hubs to help alleviate distress and inspire community action and enterprise. By and large, however, the majority of local churches remain isolated and defensive of their own cultural independence. The multiethnic approach taken at Abbey is in many ways a microcosm of a much larger problem. It poses challenging question as to what the Church in the UK is modelling for the rest of humanity in terms of social and racial justice, unity, and reconciliation. It raises deeper issues such as discrimination, bias, microaggression, ‘whiteness’, and coloniality. A possible resolution of the puzzle, however, could lie in the direction of a re-working of Moynagh’s suggestion of a ‘focussed-and-connected’ view.

### **3.2 PHASE 2: TRANSITIONING INTO AN INTERNATIONAL, INTERCULTURAL CHURCH**

The outbreak of Covid and the subsequent lockdown in 2020 proved to be very difficult time for many, including many churches. For Abbey Baptist Church, however, it proved to be a major turning point in the life and direction of the church. It finally broke the mould – the pattern of events, the set way of doing things – that had dominated Abbey Baptist Church for many years. The key event, however, in September 2021, was the decision to hold a Vision Day for the whole church to prayerfully seek the way forward after lockdown, and the unanimous decision by the church members to transition into an international, intercultural church taken that day became the catalyst for an extraordinary period of transformational change in the life of Abbey Baptist Church. The sudden influx of new people, predominantly from Iran and Hong Kong, not only increased the number of regular worshippers from around 20 (March 2020) to around 140+ (September 2022) , but also radically changed the cultural distinctive from predominantly elderly white-British to a more international spread. It radically reduced the age demographic, challenged the church to re-think its approach to worship, way of being church, approach to decision making, and so on. In other words it created a whole new host of questions arising from this latest chapter in the Abbey Story.

#### **3.2.1 Radical Welcome or Coloniality?**

In opening its doors to other culturally distinctive churches, and to refugees and immigrants, Abbey believed it was demonstrating the Christian virtue of hospitality but were they in fact actually demonstrating ‘coloniality’ rather than offering a ‘radical welcome’?

'Radical welcome' is a term used in a church context to describe the practice of welcoming people from all walks of life, regardless of their background, race, gender, or sexual orientation. It is a spiritual practice that seeks to merge a Christian ministry of welcome and hospitality (Romans 12:13; Hebrews 13:2; 1 Peter 4:9) with a faithful commitment to doing the theological, spiritual, and systemic work required to eliminate historic, systemic barriers that restrict the genuine embrace of groups oftentimes marginalised in many mainstream churches. The term describes an open-hearted approach that goes beyond being inclusive, to being radically welcoming. For a church to offer a radical welcome is more than simply being inclusive or inviting. It is about making room for, sharing power with, and learning from those who have been defined by Miroslav Volf as 'the other' (Volf, 2001:140-145) in the church. Radically welcoming churches endeavour to offer 'a gracious, warm space to all people, especially those who have been defined as "Other," systematically disempowered and oppressed, pushed to the margins' (Spellers, 2006:15).

'Coloniality' is a term used to describe the ongoing impact of the practices and legacies of European colonialism on the cultures, societies, and educational systems of the colonised peoples. Emerging from the liberation theology of Latin America in the 1960s, its socio-economic analyses, engagement with social concern for the poor, political liberation for the oppressed peoples and other forms of inequality, such as race or caste, its impact is now world-wide. Ramón Grosfoguel differentiates between colonialism and coloniality in that colonialism refers to 'the presence of colonial administrative structures' while coloniality refers to 'the continuity of colonial forms of domination after the end of colonial administrations' produced by colonial cultures and structures in the modern/colonial capitalist world-system (Grosfoguel, 2002:205,206). Thus coloniality is not only a historical phenomenon, but also something that continues to shape society and affect relationships between different groups of people today. For Walter D Mignolo it is 'The darker side of western modernity' (Mignolo, 2011:1). Coloniality is another way of referring to the 'colonial matrix of power' or the 'coloniality of power' (Quijano, 2024), a concept that describes the structure of domination and exploitation that emerged from European colonialism and persists in today's world. Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano suggests that the colonial matrix of power is based on a racial classification of people and an imposition of a Eurocentric worldview, that marginalises and mutes other forms of knowledge and expression (Quijano, 2000:533-580). Mignolo believes that essentially the colonial matrix of power is made up of 'four interrelated domains: control of the economy... control of authority... control of gender and sexuality... and control of subjectivity and knowledge' (Mignolo, 2007:156). As such it was the basis and justification for the exploitation of various parts of the world and their resources by European colonial systems of domination, and is foundational for

colonialism, imperialism, capitalism, nationalism and modernity enfranchising all of these approaches, making them appear universal and inevitable.

Thus coloniality can understandably be seen as the controlling intellectual ideology of the contemporary world-system from the 16<sup>th</sup> century to the present day. As such it is primarily the spirit or attitude, prevalent in historic colonialism which (despite the alleged demise of historic colonialism) remains very much alive and active today. Mignolo likens coloniality to a 'virus' that, invisible to the naked eye, subtly 'infects our minds and makes us "see" what the rhetoric of Western modernity wants us to see' (Mignolo, 2017:2). The virus metaphor, however, is not without its problems and limitations, not least reinforcing the binary opposition between the West and the rest of the world and overlooking the diversity and complexity of colonial and decolonial experiences and practices. Katrine Smiet's article, *Rethinking or delinking? Said and Mignolo on humanism and the question of the human* (Smiet, 2022:73-88) is also an intriguing introduction to these issues. Nevertheless, I would suggest that coloniality has infiltrated and permeated all levels of society and subjectivity in the modern world-system, including gender, sexuality and identity. Coloniality refers to a set of attitudes, values, ways of knowing, and power structures upheld as normative by western capitalist society in its attempt to rationalize and perpetuate western dominance.

Coloniality and hegemony are both terms that describe forms of domination, influence, or authority over others, however they have different meanings and implications. Coloniality is a specific concept that refers to the ongoing effects of colonialism, which was a historical process of exploitation, dispossession, and subjugation of non-European peoples by European powers and implies an imposed dominance. Hegemony, however, is a more general concept that can apply to any situation where one group, class, nation, or ideology has a dominant position over others but that dominance is obtained consensually through intellectual and emotional persuasion or charismatic leadership. Coloniality is more difficult to overcome, as it involves a deep-rooted system of knowledge, power, and culture that shapes worldviews and identities of both colonisers and colonised. Hegemony, however, can be challenged or resisted by alternative ideas, movements, or counter-hegemonies that seek to expose or undermine the dominant norms and values. Mignolo argues that modernity is a European narrative that conceals its violent and oppressive nature by imposing its own epistemology and worldview on the rest of the world, and argues for the need to delink from the colonial matrix of power and to engage in epistemic disobedience and decolonial thinking and doing thus challenging the hegemony of western knowledge and creating alternative forms of understanding and living in today's world (Mignolo, 2011:ix,x). As Joseph Drexler-Dreis suggests, 'Decolonial thinking starts from

the colonial difference. It is a theoretical practise of resistance and re-existence from sites of border-thinking' (Drexler-Dreis, 2019:28).

It is evident from the records that the original decision to rent part of its building to a Ghanaian church in 2011 was far from clear cut. It would appear that although certain of the Deacons saw this move in terms of providing a base where these Ghanaians could worship in their own heart language and in ways appropriate to their own culture, other Deacons saw this simply as another commercial venture akin to the church's existing policy of renting space to the U3A, Reading Historical Society, the Coin Club, and so on. Over time however, especially given that renting out space to these three tenant churches has proved financially rewarding for Abbey, this policy has assumed a mantle of pious respectability. Old Abbeyites in general tend to speak virtuously of showing 'Christian hospitality' to these other culturally distinctive churches without questioning why Abbey charge significant rent for the privilege, whilst allowing secular organisations (albeit organisations engaged in frontline charitable work amongst the many refugees in Reading) such as Reading Red Kitchen and Care4Calais, to use the premises for free. At the same time I suspect the tenant churches are demonstrating conviviality by being too polite and not actually saying what they really think. This is possibly because they are aware that they are in a host-tenant relationship with Abbey, and also that finding other suitable premises in Reading is nigh on impossible. At least one of the Abbey Deacons feels that Abbey have actually made a mistake in 'monetising the relationship' with these culturally distinctive churches.

The advent of a major influx of new people from other cultures into Abbey Baptist Church, however, has exposed the hidden problem of coloniality, changed the culturally distinctive white-British dominance of Abbey (probably for ever), and challenged Abbey (and vicariously the other churches) to face up to the true nature of generosity and radical hospitality – generosity in terms of the church giving itself away instead of seeming exploitative. As Moynagh suggests:

Generosity is central to the Christian faith. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are revealed as givers – in the gift of life in creation, in Christ's self-giving to save creation, in the gift of the Spirit to bring creation to perfection under Christ's rule, and in Christ's gift of the kingdom to the Father when God's reign is complete. From beginning to end, generosity is the story of God. In which case, might we not expect generosity to be the focus of Christian thinking about the church? Might we not suppose the church to be more than an institution, a communion and so on? Might not the church as Christ's body be an embodiment of his generosity? (Moynagh, 2024:3).

For Ryan Dunn, radical hospitality is to be understood in terms of ‘a fundamental shift from a simple practice of offering welcome to an outward movement to stand with others – particularly those who are at society’s margins’ (Dunn, 2019:2).

### **3.2.2 Culturally Distinctive or International and Intercultural?**

Another question Abbey’s transition has posed is, Why have the new arrivals at Abbey chosen to join an international, intercultural church rather than a culturally distinctive church akin to their own cultures? There are a host of very different culturally distinctive churches in and around Reading but only a handful who appear to be making the effort to be truly international. Even those who claim to be ‘international’ appear merely to assimilate their members into an already existing way of being church, rather than preserving cultural distinctives and encouraging meaningful connectivity. Initial reaction at Abbey suggests that whilst some refugees and immigrants, especially those who struggle with learning English, seek out culturally distinctive churches akin to their own culture, those who are committing to Abbey Baptist Church appear to be doing so, not just because they are internationalists, but because they recognise that Abbey is seeking to create a level playing field in which no culture is dominant but where genuine cultural focus is preserved but meaningful connectivity is established.

### **3.2.3 The Hubris of Mission**

Jennings, commenting on the story of the Apostle Paul’s eventful sea journey to Rome involving storm and shipwreck, and all the rest (Acts 27) observes:

There is a proper hubris in this story that the church should remember. It is the hubris of a mission filled with hope and guided by faith that announces our life within the life of God. It is a hubris that dares to speak at the site of despair and chaos, saying God lives and so too will we live. Paul is the witness who will not give in to fear, and he invites these wayward sea workers to take hold of his faith (Jennings, 2017:237).

As a progressive evangelical one of my concerns is the way we evangelicals have over-emphasised personal salvation and all too often reduced the missional task to simply evangelism as a result, rather than recognise and rejoice in the holistic nature of the *Missio Dei*. As Mary Peter’s suggests in her hymn, *Through the love of God our Saviour*, ‘Ours is such a *full* salvation’ (emphasis mine).<sup>13</sup> Thus, another question posed by this latter phase in the Abbey Story is, Does the recent renaissance of Abbey Baptist Church have something to say about the importance of incarnational and integral

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<sup>13</sup> *Through the Love of God our Saviour* is a hymn written by Mary Peters (1813-1856) the British hymn writer in 1847. Peters (nee Bowly or Bowley) was brought up as a Quaker, but her Christian faith was somewhat eclectic with connections to the Brethren, the Anglican Church, and latterly non-denominational. The hymn is now in the public domain.

mission? When Jesus said, 'As the Father has sent me, so I send you' (John 20:21) what did he exactly have in mind? Reading is a centre of evangelicalism in all its many splendored colours – everything from conservative fundamentalism to extreme charismatic. It is home to the influential Greyfriars Anglican Church, which in style and approach would identify with the 'West London Bow Wave... steaming backwards out of Holy Trinity, Brompton' (Logan, 2022:1) and also to The Gate, an influential Baptist Church responsible for launching *The Turning*, a prescribed method of street outreach imported from the USA (Lennie, 2018:1-3). Despite its incredible record of church planting since the 1640s (admittedly not much so since the Victorian era) Abbey Baptist Church has been viewed as somewhat suspect by evangelicals in Reading, not least by some of its fellow Baptist Churches (some of which Abbey actually founded) and openly accused of being 'theologically liberal' and 'social gospel'. It has come as rather a surprise, therefore, for many of these churches to witness Abbey's steady numerical growth in recent years, with regular baptismal services and a growing reputation as 'the church to go to if you need help' in the town. To be clear, Abbey has always adhered to evangelical faith, albeit radical or progressive evangelical faith, but interprets the commission of Christ in John 20:21 in terms of incarnational and integral mission and not simply evangelism. For Rob O'Callaghan:

[Incarnational mission] is a commitment to be with people, to embody the good news we preach, and through the Spirit to mediate the presence of Christ wherever He is needed. As the body of Christ, we are the continuation of His ministry; we are His presence on earth. We are the salt of the earth, the light of the world (O'Callaghan, 2009:5).

## Summary

In this chapter I have sought to engage with lived experience and lived theology as I have reflected on the two distinct phases of this particular period in the Abbey story recounted in chapter two: firstly, opening the Abbey door to other culturally distinctive churches, and then secondly, deliberately transitioning into an international, intercultural church. I have attempted to identify some of the key issues and questions raised by both phases of the story and provide some background/perceived insights surrounding these concerns. Was renting out space in the building to culturally distinctive churches what the Baptist Union had in mind when encouraging churches like Abbey to become more multicultural? Why did these culturally distinctive churches wish to remain culturally distinctive and not link with existing churches in the town, or even with the other churches meeting at Abbey? What part did conviviality have to play in all this? To what extent was/is Abbey Baptist Church itself culturally distinctive? Given that Reading is a large multicultural town with a number of associated social problems what are the four churches meeting at Abbey modelling? In opening its doors to other culturally distinctive churches, and to refugees and immigrants, Abbey



Baptist Church believed it was demonstrating the Christian virtue of hospitality... but were they in fact demonstrating 'coloniality' rather than offering a 'radical welcome'? Why have the new arrivals at Abbey chosen to join an international, intercultural church rather than a culturally distinctive church akin to their own cultures? Does the recent renaissance of Abbey Baptist Church have something significant to say about the importance of incarnational and integral mission?

## 04 ANALYSIS 1 (Listening to the Voices)

### Introduction

In the previous chapter I engaged with the lived experience contained within the two distinct phases in a particular period in Abbey Story: firstly, opening the Abbey doors to other culturally distinctive churches, and secondly, taking the decision to transition into an international, intercultural church. I identified some of the questions raised by both phases of the story, which I acknowledged may not be entirely accurate but suggested that this kind of 'gut reaction' analysis did have value in that it indicated suspected problems or issues arising from the situation, and acted as a catalyst to pursue wider investigation of these issues and formulate the interview questions that needed to be asked.

In this chapter, part one of my data analysis, I concentrate on listening to the participants voices. One of the canons of qualitative research is the stress on hearing the participants' own words as generative of knowledge and meaning (Rubin, 2005:79-107). The reality is that it is not always easy to hear the actual voices of research participants in the welter of transcribed words and researcher opinion. In this chapter I endeavour to let the range of culturally distinctive voices speak. What did I expect the voices to say? What did they actually say? And where were the surprises?

### 4.1. QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWING

A key tool of qualitative research is the semi-structured interview involving asking open-ended questions of participants about their opinions, feelings, experiences, or stories on a certain subject. It is a flexible and personal form of interaction that allows for follow-up questions and discussion. It is prominent in qualitative research to gather useful data which can then be sensibly analysed to identify the key issues at the heart of the topic being researched. The Rubins liken qualitative interviews to wearing 'night goggles, permitting us to see that which is not ordinarily on view and examine that which is often looked at but seldom seen' (Rubin, 2005:vii). Interviews are 'concentrated human encounters that take place between the researcher who is seeking knowledge and the research participant who is willing to share their experiences and knowledge' (Swinton, 2006:63). Often conversational in style they are designed to enable the researcher to comprehend the distinctive meanings, interpretations and perspectives that the participant finds in the experience, situation or story. Interviews of this kind are not the same as counselling and it is important that the researcher – especially if, like me, they are involved in some form of pastoral ministry – resists the temptation to slip into the role of counsellor. It is also important to see myself not simply as an observer but as an equal partner in a joint cooperative, creative enterprise involving all four churches.

#### **4.1.1 Interview Design and Practice**

Building on my prior knowledge of the situation, and relationships formed, I approached a number of members of the various churches and ethnic groups associated with Abbey Baptist Church to ascertain if they would be willing to participate. I carefully chose a complete cross-section of people, in terms of gender and age as well as ethnicity, in order to ensure as far as possible a generosity of views both across, and within, each church or group (Cameron, 2013:98). Eventually I ended up with 14 participants: four were white-British, three Brazilian, two Hong Kongers, two Iranian, two Sri Lankan, and one Ghanaian, the ratio chosen roughly in proportion to the numerical size of the respective churches and ethnic groupings. I also deliberately bypassed the prescriptive leadership of some of the churches to invite participants who would offer honest opinions and not just the 'official' view of their church thereby generating useful data (Rubin, 2005:64).

#### **4.1.2 Interview Questions**

Interviews are constructed around a balance of main questions, follow-up questions, and probes. Main questions extract the overall experiences and opinions of the interviewee but may not elicit the required depth to answer the research question. Follow-up questions develop what the interviewee has said to get a clearer, deeper understanding of what has been said. Probes help to clarify ambiguous statements, fill in missing stages, and keep the conversation focussed (Rubin, 2005:152,164).

These main questions 'provides the scaffolding' for the interview (Rubin,2005:153) and therefore how the researcher devises main questions is extremely important. The Rubins suggest researchers usually arrive at these questions in one of two ways. The first approach – which is to be avoided at all costs – is where the researcher believes they already know the answer to the research question, and therefore the questions are geared up to provide the responses the researcher is looking for in order to simply confirm their pre-determined view. The second approach – which the Rubins suggest researchers follow – also has the research puzzle in mind, but the researcher is not yet sure what specific information will help to resolve it. The researcher knows in general what is happening in the research setting, is perhaps aware of certain issues, but has not resolved the riddle. The researcher devises main questions to encourage the interviewee to discuss the various aspects, issues and questions raised by the research question, listens for information in the responses that address the research question, and works out follow-up questions to garner the information needed to solve the research puzzle (Rubin, 2005:152-172).

In my case the interview questions were carefully chosen, based on my knowledge of the Abbey situation and the potential issues and concerns initially arising from the Abbey Story highlighted in the previous chapter. Whilst these questions anticipated certain possible responses, I expected a number of twists and turns and hopefully *kairos* moments, to be forthcoming. My approach was outwardly conversational, semi-structured in style, and for the most part conducted person-to-person in a neutral environment. A minority of interviews were conducted online, and two interviews were in written form (because of language difficulties). The interviews were designed to last around an hour. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed so that the gathered data could be eventually coded and analysed thematically. But what did I expect the participants to say?

## **4.2 ANTICIPATED ANSWERS**

Based on my knowledge of the situation, the participants, initial issues raised by the Abbey Story, and above all the riddle posed by my research question, inevitably the questions anticipated certain responses. I endeavoured to ask the questions in a disciplined yet relaxed manner in order to allow participants to speak and so that I could genuinely hear what they had to say. I expected some answers to confirm anticipated responses, others to contradict those expected responses, some surprises and hopefully some *kairos* moments. So, what did I expect the participants to say?

### **4.2.1 Positive Approach to Being in Reading**

Although my initial question inviting participants to share something of their story culminating in their arrival in Reading was designed to ease them into the process, I hoped each of them would have something positive to say about being in the town. Follow-up questions were designed to elicit how they felt about being in Reading and, since all were professing Christians, if they saw the hand of God in them being here or simply happenstance? I hoped they would be able to testify (even if they did not initially see it that way) to God having brought them to Reading for a purpose.

### **4.2.2 Clarification of Differences**

My second question, inviting participants to share something of their personal faith journey and reasons for their particular church affiliation, was designed to clarify certain things about the various churches such as numerical strength, ecclesiology, theology, and so on. I anticipated significant differences between Abbey and its tenant churches in terms of core beliefs and ways of doing/being church. Traditionally Abbey is a progressive/liberal evangelical church with a more formal approach to worship and ways of being/doing church, whilst the other churches were more conservative

evangelical/Pentecostal churches where structure and order in worship and being/doing church did not necessarily apply.

#### **4.2.3 Waxing Lyrical About the Home Church**

My next question invited participants to share what they liked about their particular church – what attracted them there in the first place, what they considered its strong points, and what others might find attractive. I anticipated the tenant churches saying something similar in terms of ethnic culture and heart language but also – since they all subscribed to a form of hierarchical church governance – to wax eloquent about the Pastor’s preaching, style of worship, and so on. I anticipated Abbey – since it considered itself to be a more ‘intellectual’ church – to adopt a more conservative, critical approach.

#### **4.2.4 Support for Homogeneous Unit Principle**

The next question, inviting opinions on the homogeneous unit principles Moynagh alludes to in connection with his ‘focussed-and-connected’ view of contextual church. The Homogeneous Unit Principle (HUP) is a concept in church growth theory that refers to a sector of society where all the members have some characteristic in common, such as geographical, ethnic, linguistic, social, educational, vocational, or economic, or a combination of some of these. Associated with Donald McGavran, the Missiologist and church growth specialist, the homogeneous unit principle is used to identify and reach out to people who share similar characteristics and (in McGavran’s view) are more likely to respond positively to the gospel message. McGavran himself defined a homogeneous unit as ‘a section of society in which all members have some characteristic in common’ (McGavran, 1990:81). According to Moynagh, McGavran argues that people are more likely to come to faith if they are reached within their own culture (Moynagh, 2012:168). I anticipated that strong support for the homogeneous unit principle would be forthcoming from all three tenant churches. The response from Abbey folk I considered to be more unpredictable. Prior to 2021 I would have expected the old Abbeyites – as largely elderly, white-British – to also support the homogeneous unit principle. They were every bit a culturally distinct clan as Zion, LSI and Peniel. They knew what they liked and liked what they knew. With the influx of new people – people who had chosen to join an international, intercultural church rather than one akin to their own ethnic cultures – I was no longer quite so sure.

#### **4.2.5 Ignorance of the Other Churches Sharing the Building**

I was sure, however, that that the universal response to my next question, reflecting on the presence of the various other culturally distinct churches sharing the building at Abbey, would sadly

demonstrate complete ignorance. My conviction was that the various churches were so self-absorbed that they would know virtually nothing of the other churches, neither their names nor even their cultural ethnicity. I hoped that I would be proved wrong, but I doubted it.

#### **4.2.6 Greater Awareness About Discrimination**

For my next set of questions I attempted to focus on more universal matters such as discrimination and bias, our colonial legacy and coloniality. My expectation was that especially those whose roots lay outside the UK would have a lot to say about these issues. I anticipated hearing a number of negative stories from these friends, and even an acknowledgment from the old Abbeyites in particular, of the unfavourable nature of British history in this respect.

#### **4.2.7 Strong Reaction to Colonialism/Colonial Legacy**

In much the same way I anticipated the response to my supplemental question inviting participants to share their thoughts about colonialism, their colonial legacy, and experience of ongoing coloniality to trigger a major reaction. I expected those who had come to the UK from countries that had experienced colonialism to be particularly vocal, and even those white-British participants from Abbey to, at the very least, acknowledge the many negatives stemming from colonialism.

#### **4.2.8 Meaningful Connectivity**

My next question, reflecting on the other side of Moynagh's 'focussed-and-connected' equation, sought to elicit response to the idea of the various churches sharing the building at Abbey embracing Moynagh's idea of becoming more meaningfully connected with one another. Previous experience suggested that the negative side of conviviality would come to the fore, however. No one would say anything against the idea, indeed there may even be a number of suggestions as to how this concept might be advanced, but the reality would be that nothing concrete would come from it.

#### **4.2.9 Importance of Hospitality**

My penultimate question covered the area of offering a warm welcome, hospitality, generosity to one another. For Christine Pohl, 'Hospitality is a way of life fundamental to Christian identity' (Pohl, 1999:x). It is certainly very biblical with numerous New Testament examples – from Jesus' Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Matthew 25:36-46) illustrating extending hospitality to others as being vicariously hospitality extended to Jesus himself; through the stories of Zaccheus (Luke 19:1-10) who welcomed Jesus into his house, and Lydia (Acts 16:14,15) who opened her heart and her home to Paul and his companions; to the Apostolic exhortations of both Paul (Romans 12:13) and Peter (1

Peter 4:9) to 'show hospitality.' Best known of all, perhaps, is the Writer to the Hebrews intriguing exhortation/observation, 'Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it' (Hebrews 13:2) with its link to the Old Testament story of Abraham (Genesis 18:1-16) where the 'three men' Abraham gives hospitality to are clearly more than simply 'men' (v.13) and, as F F Bruce suggests, most probably 'the angel of the Lord [and] his two angelic companions' (Bruce, 1964:390,391). According to Debi Nixon, 'The word *hospitality* means the generous and friendly treatment of visitors and guests. Hospitality matters in the church. As the church, we are called to love the visitors and guests, the stranger' (Gentile, 2020:14). For Pohl, 'Hospitality is not optional for Christians, nor is it limited to those who are specially gifted for it. It is, instead, a necessary practise in the community of faith.' (Pohl, 1999:31). According to Lucy Moore, 'Hospitality is where it's at. Hospitality is where God's at. It's the key that opens the door to the Kingdom.' (Moore, 2016:7). Despite this emphasis on hospitality a number of scholars believe it to be a somewhat neglected virtue in Christian circles today. In her book *Making Room*, Christine Pohl calls for the recovering of hospitality as a Christian tradition (Pohl, 1999), and Henri Nouwen suggests that 'if there is any concept worth restoring to its original depth and evocative potential, it is the concept of hospitality' (Nouwen, 1975:66).

In particular I was intrigued to know how Abbey's tenant churches felt about Abbey playing the host-tenant game, and even how Abbey folk felt about it? I wanted to know (as a member of Abbey) in what ways Abbey could be more welcoming and generous? Abbey Baptist Church's strapline stresses Abbey as 'a place of refuge' and the recent influx of refugees and immigrants from Iran and Hong Kong at Abbey has emphasised the importance of what we might call 'protective hospitality.' On various occasions both Iranians and Hongkongers have underlined the importance of Abbey as 'a safe place.' It has become clear over the last two years that many Iranians and Hong Kongers still feel very anxious and fearful after their experiences of oppression and persecution in their home countries. Thus for Hong Konger P.05 it is not only Abbey as a place where refugees and immigrants can hear the Gospel in 'their own language [in order] to worship [and] have more understanding' but it is also the 'sense of safety' she finds at Abbey. For P.05 '[these things are] very important especially for people in a foreign land.' One wonders how much these feelings are shared with the members of Abbey's three tenant churches, and just how effective Abbey is in extending protective hospitality to all? For Jayme Reaves 'the practice of hospitality... the taking in of others' is not simply about 'providing accommodation but also in providing protection, sanctuary or safe haven' (Reaves, 2016:54). To what extent do those who share the building at Abbey feel that sense of protection, sanctuary and safe haven?

I was especially interested to see what the reaction was to the concept of ‘radical hospitality’ as particularly favouring those on the margins? I introduced something of this aspect of hospitality earlier (at 3.2.1) but Dunn’s argument that ‘radical hospitality’ is best understood in terms of ‘a fundamental shift from a simple practice of offering welcome to an outward movement to stand with others – particularly those who are at society’s margins’ (Dunn, 2019:2) is worthy of deeper consideration. As an adjective, ‘radical’ means ‘to affect the fundamental nature of something’ (Oxford Dictionary of English), so offering hospitality in a radical way means offering hospitality in a fundamentally different way. For Dunn, this necessitates:

[Letting go of the] need to shape people into our own image. We extend radical hospitality when we include people within a community without an expectation that they will fully conform to it. We may even concede some of our community identity in order to be more hospitable to those who we welcome (Dunn, 2019:3).

In that sense Dunn’s view resonates with that of Melissa Fitzpatrick in that radical hospitality signifies ‘hospitality beyond borders’ and that for a church to offer radical hospitality means not simply ‘hosting the *stranger* (in the sense of a human other person)... [but] hosting the *strange* (in the sense of novelty, future, surprise, rupture, challenge, wonder, risk – the unpredictable)’ (Kearney, 2021:61). Radical hospitality sends a message beyond, ‘you are welcome to join us.’ Perhaps what best defines radical hospitality is when, in practice, the church says: ‘We want to become a part of your story more than we hope you will become a part of ours.’ It could be argued that Jesus Christ, himself, is the ultimate expression of radical hospitality. Christians believe God created our universe and that that same God who created the universe showed up in human history in the form of Jesus Christ – forsaking the God-experience to have a human experience. God entered our story instead of simply demanding that we enter God’s story (Dunn, 2019:3). As noted previously, offering radical hospitality is about making room for, sharing power with, and learning from those who have been defined by Miroslav Volf as ‘the other’ (Volf, 2001:140-145). Offering radical hospitality means offering ‘a gracious, warm space to all people, especially those who have been defined as “Other,” systematically disempowered and oppressed, pushed to the margins’ (Spellers, 2006:15). Yvonne Gentile implies that whilst many churches would describe their culture of hospitality positively in terms of being friendly, focussed on reaching out to others, making a difference in the community ‘most of us shape our culture passively’ (Gentile, 2020:95). Although churches genuinely *think* about offering radical hospitality, and *want* to offer radical hospitality, Gentile seriously questions if churches are *really* these things? Do the words and phrases we use regarding offering radical hospitality accurately describe our culture? For Gentile:



If we want radical hospitality to permeate the culture of our churches, every staff member, key leader, and volunteer needs to be demonstrating it in their ministry setting. Our leaders have to show radical hospitality to our congregants, and our congregants have to practise it with one another (Gentile, 2020:95).

Furthermore, it is vital to keep a vision of exercising radical hospitality repeatedly and consistently before a congregation as ‘a value of our church’ and train up new members so that they too will ‘buy into the culture’ of being a church that offers radical hospitality (Gentile, 2020:95,96).

I can honestly say that I had no real idea of what to expect from any of the various churches based at Abbey in response to these questions, other than an initial somewhat vague response about ‘having people round for a meal’ kind of thing.

#### **4.2.10 Mission as Evangelism**

My final question concluded by inviting participants to share their understanding of the *Missio Dei*, asking participants to share their understanding of what Jesus’ words ‘As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you’ (John 20:21) would be interpreted by their particular church. I anticipated that the response from Zion, LSI, and Peniel would be to understand the church’s missional task almost exclusively in terms of evangelism, but that Abbey’s response would be primarily in terms of holistic, integral, incarnational ministry and mission – evangelism would play a part but not exclusively so.

### **4.3 ACTUAL ANSWERS**

Carla Willig stresses that in any form of semi-structured interviewing it is vital that the researcher ‘hears the participant talk’ about those aspects of their lives and experiences that relate to the research question (Willig, 2008:24). For the Rubins it is important for the researcher to actually *listen* to what is being said rather than ‘imposing your own understanding’ on the participants reply (Rubin, 2005:157). So what did the participants actually say in response to the interview questions?

#### **4.3.1 ‘Whys’ and ‘Wherefores’ of Being in Reading**

A majority of the participants identified ‘work’ as a major reason for coming to Reading. Sri Lankan computer analyst P.14 came to Reading when his company secured a new long-term contract with the ‘Queen Alexandra Hospital [to] provide software for them.’ Brazilian courier P.09 moved to Reading when his company secured ‘a contract with Euro Car Parts.’ Others told similar stories but qualified ‘work’ with words such as ‘choice’ or ‘convenience’, or ‘beneficial’. Retired railway worker P.01 moved to Reading ‘with work 46 years ago’ because of ‘the convenience of my parents being nearby.’ For others the choice was pragmatic. P.06 chose Reading because it was ‘in the middle of

the train line' between where he and his wife worked, whilst for Brazilian P08 the choice to live in Reading was 'a compromise' because her husband is 'not fluent in English and attending a Portuguese-speaking church in the town was important for him.' For some participants 'work' was tangential. P.02 initially came to Reading 'to work as a doctor firstly, at the Royal Berks Hospital, and then as a GP' whilst P.07 came to Reading in 2010 in order to 'study for my PhD' and stayed on as 'a lecturer at the University'. Two of the participants, Sri Lankan P.13 and Brazilian P.11 came to Reading explicitly 'to plant churches.' Others are in Reading not by choice but as refugees. Hong Konger P.03 arrived in Reading in 2021 having been granted British National (Overseas) status because a friend 'recommended Reading' and Iranian refugee P.10 'had no choice in this matter' because 'this is where the government housed me.'

Few participants saw coming to Reading as God's plan for their lives, rather than happenstance. Here is the first of my 'surprises' in as much as, since all the participants are professing Christians, one would have anticipated a more 'God-centred' approach to life. Church planters P.11 and P.13 both felt 'a sense of call to Reading' (although not so strongly that they actually moved from London to live in Reading). The majority left God entirely out of the equation. Half indicated they planned to remain in Reading long-term, although an assortment of reasons was given for this. P.01 'did plan at one time to move, but the call of elderly parents kept us' and P.04 'would have moved down to Devon' but this was curtailed by her husband's serious illness. Several indicated remaining in Reading was 'dependent on jobs.' Others are clearly in Reading on a short-term basis. Ghanaian P.07 plans to remain in Reading for the immediate future 'because I have a young family, and they are in school' but struggles with 'the cost of living' and is seriously considering 'moving back to Ghana.' Yet others have what might be called 'a short-term mindset' thus Brazilian P.09 acknowledged 'I only plan to stay in UK for as long as it's needed to get my citizenship.' For some permanency is beyond their control. Iranian P.10 'would like to stay in Reading, but [it] is not in my hands... the decision-maker for me and my friends is the Home Office... I don't even know how long I will be in Reading... another year or tomorrow.'

More than half the participants were either immigrants or refugees, so it was of particular interest to discover to what extent participants were committed to 'seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf' (Jeremiah 29:7). Part of building an emerging picture from the data is found in making judgements about the gaps, silences, inconsistencies, and subjectivities, also appearing. Thus, despite living in Reading for nearly 50 years, P.01 revealed little awareness of various Reading's social needs or any sense of obligation as a permanent resident to

contribute even in a small way to help solve any of them. In contrast P.02 came to Reading 'to work as a doctor,' Ghanaian P.07 hopes 'to establish my own business that would enable me to... create jobs for others' and Brazilian P.08 'volunteers in a charity shop, and... [works with] the homeless.' Others were aware of the various needs of the town but confused as to how to respond. Thus Hong Konger P.05 spoke for many:

I think the support of the Council and Government is not enough... people are sleeping on the street... people are very poor... it shouldn't be like that... more Government support is needed instead of just the local church or community groups doing things.

#### **4.3.2 Similar but Different!**

On paper the various churches sharing the building at Abbey have much in common but at the same time appear very different. Peniel, Zion and LSI are all self-confessed conservative evangelical charismatic/Pentecostal churches. Despite being 'converted [as] a child in Assembly of God in Brazil' in the early 1980s, Brazilian P.11 describes himself as a 'more traditional, conservative evangelical' although he still retains a strong belief in the phenomena associated with historic Pentecostalism: 'I still believe in God's miracles... I believe God talks to me in my dreams... I believe in the Holy Spirit and what he can do!' He describes Peniel as a church where 'we share the Gospel [and] teach the Bible' (by which he means Peniel's particular slant on the gospel and biblical interpretation). This is clarified later when he expresses clear reluctance to connecting with the other churches on two grounds, 'One is the culture, the other one is theology.' Theology, however, is clearly the main stumbling block for P.11: 'I worry about how our people [will react] if taught something different... my Pastor teaches me this way about a subject, but this Pastor talks about it this way... that's the main thing I'm concerned about.' P.11 is not simply concerned about the assumed theological disparity between Peniel and Abbey (Peniel is a 'Pentecostal' Church and Abbey is deemed not 'Pentecostal'). He is also concerned that although both Zion and LSI are also 'Pentecostal' churches, theologically they both subscribe to different forms of Pentecostalism. Here is another 'surprise' to emerge from the data. I expected the other three tenant churches to be hesitant about Abbey – because of Abbey's perceived liberal theology and lack of Pentecostal zeal – but not quite so hesitant about each other. Fellow Brazilian P.09, however, would like to see Peniel adopt a more open stance theologically:

The leadership is quite tight in its control in a sense that does not develop enough and let others be developed. I don't know if it's a kind of fear to lose the position, to lose the control of the church... or if it is a kind of fear to not let other theological thought to be included within the community or to be taught in the church... We should let people discuss between themselves. Even in the Bible we see different viewpoints of theology. We have to let people develop themselves.

Another Brazilian, P.08, suggests that ecclesiology, as well as theology, is an issue that divides Peniel and Abbey: The structure of Peniel is 'all based around the Pastor... the Pastor decides everything... and that's not Baptist... [this] is the biggest issue that puts [the Pastor] off... the idea of having to decide with others.' This may also be an issue with Zion and LSI who also employ hierarchical methods of church governance. Both these churches also describe themselves as evangelical and Pentecostal. Sri Lankan P.13 repeatedly underlines Zion as 'a Bible-based church, Pentecostal, evangelical church' and connecting with other churches would only be a good thing if those 'other churches [are] Pentecostal, Evangelical Christians ... [connected to] the Evangelical Alliance.' Ghanaian P.07 describes LSI as 'a charismatic church [that] follows the charismatic doctrines and style of worship... involving prayer, sharing the Word [of God], some worship and prayers where people would also express their joy in the presence of the Lord.'

In contrast to these other churches Abbey Baptist Church is much broader in its theological outlook accommodating a range of views from conservative evangelical/charismatic to progressive/liberal. Historically Baptist-Christians have always espoused radical dissent or freedom of conscience right from their early beginnings in the 17<sup>th</sup> century when they (along with their fellow nonconformists) had to fight for their religious freedom (Wright, 2016). Traditionally Abbey Baptist Church has therefore happily encompassed a range of views and opinions as part of its theological DNA. Thus, P.01 considers himself as a 'traditional Baptist' and P.06 'would describe myself as a liberal Anglo-Catholic Baptist, theologically liberal, liturgically catholic (with a small 'c') and confessionally Baptist' whilst P.02's 'spiritual journey has embraced charismatic life and theology.' For Abbey folk this broad theological spread is evidence of spiritual maturity, loving acceptance of one another, and the grace of God, although for those of a more narrow evangelicalism it is probably anathema.

#### **4.3.3 Friendship and Fellowship**

In response to being asked for reasons why they attended their particular church, I was not expecting – and here is yet another of my 'surprises' – that all 14 participants would emphasise that friendship and fellowship were the supreme reasons for belonging to their churches and what supremely made their churches attractive to others. Traditional Baptist P.01 has 'always felt more at home in a Baptist Church, but it is finding friends and [having] things in common' at Abbey that keeps him there. P.04 initially came to Abbey because 'they needed an organist' but has remained because of 'the friendship and the love that is shown', friendships that enabled her to cope following the sad death of her husband some years ago: 'Without my friends I would never have coped... my friends got me through... my friends kept me going.' P.06 was initially 'drawn to' Abbey by the

preaching ministry but it is the sense of 'community' that has kept him there. For P.06 it is 'about community rather than theology... Abbey is very welcoming, a safe space to disagree in a way that doesn't break the community... theologically, it is a very diverse community... an open and welcoming community, not at all rigid.'

Comparative newcomer P.02, describes Abbey as 'very welcoming [and] increasingly becoming a community, in a very healthy way.' Another newcomer Hong Konger P.05, suggests Abbey is a 'different' kind of church where the 'approach' to worship and teaching is 'different... deep in the way people understand the Bible' but also 'a very closely knitted community who believe in God, and [where] you feel very much at home [and] the people here are very nice and welcoming.' For fellow Hong Konger P.03 'the most important thing [about Abbey] is that all the people here are very kind, and very helpful [because] we [Hong Kongers] wanted somewhere, some community, where they are genuine and caring.' Iranian P.12 'attends [Abbey] for spiritual growth!' but equally values the 'participation of all the church members' by which he means the way everyone shares in the life of the church rather than it being an autocracy: 'Abbey Baptist Church is a church that is different. It is not about the colour of your skin. It is about having true faith... and friendship.'

Participants from Peniel are also drawn to their church because of the fellowship. According to P.11, although 'most of the people are immigrants and join the church for different reasons' they remain because 'in our DNA we try to make sure everybody feels like it's your family.' Initially attracted to Peniel by 'the biblical teaching' it is the 'warm feeling of a family... [a real] strength of the church' that keeps P.09 there.' P.08 describes 'fellowship, friendship, communion, family feel' as Peniel's 'strong points' and suggests that probably because of their 'Brazilian culture... spending time together [is something they do] naturally.' Participants from Zion also emphasised the attractive nature of the church as a warm and welcoming community. The immediate word that came to mind for P.13 when asked to describe Zion was 'community' – a community 'based on the scripture, a Bible-based church, a Pentecostal evangelical church' – but essentially a community that 'reaches out to the people who are in need if they have problems.' For P.07 LSI is also undergirded by a strong sense of community. Initially drawn to the church because of its ecclesial DNA as 'a charismatic church [that] follows the charismatic doctrines and styles of worship [and] the spiritual food I'm fed there' P.07 also recognises that 'beyond the spiritual food... there is also the sense of community... belonging... people being there for you.'

#### 4.3.4 Homogeneous or Heterogeneous?

Participants from Abbey Baptist Church generally recognised that the current missional focus of the church was directed towards refugees but disagreed over the value of this initiative. P.01 remained unconvinced that ‘concentrating on refugees’ was correct and was sceptical about their presence at Abbey: ‘I think it might be difficult to actually be compatible and I ask myself where we will all be in a year’s time.’ He would prefer Abbey to revert to what it was prior to the influx of immigrants and refugees, a ‘fellowship [where we can] bond together with other people of similar interests to us... [where] I would be comfortable because it would give me the reassurance of being in my small group with a few people who I have things in common with [rather than] frightened off by all these huge numbers of other people.’ P.04 agrees Abbey’s focus ‘seems to be more Hong Kong orientated at the moment... which is understandable.’ She recognises McGavran’s approach – particularly his view that people ‘like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers (McGavran, 1980:223) – but takes issue with him in that ‘We have proof that it doesn’t have to be anything to do with an ethnic group... some of the Hong Kongers and Iranians [have] come to faith because they came to us. They have found faith [through] what’s being preached.’

For P.06 McGavran’s homogeneous unit principle ‘intuitively makes sense... I mean how many cultural barriers do you want to try and cross at once.’ In his opinion, however, Abbey have not deliberately focussed on one specific cultural group or ethnicity but rather ‘a number of different groups of people’ because the church ‘has responded to the needs that have presented themselves.’ For P.06 Abbey’s focus is not confined ‘to the people who come to church on Sunday’ but includes all ‘the people who come in and are fed by Reading Red Kitchen and Care 4 Calais... [the] whole group of charities, community groups [who] cater for people who need space or provision that we [are involved with].’ In other words Abbey has adopted a more heterogeneous approach. The heterogeneous unit principle is a concept that challenges the homogeneous unit principle suggesting that churches can also grow effectively when they are diverse and inclusive of people from different backgrounds, as long as they are united by their faith in Christ and their love for one another. Gary Corwin suggests that an example of this has been the success over many decades of International Churches in many of the world’s major cities, particularly in the Global South. For Corwin, these churches demonstrate the breadth of Christ’s Church, consisting as they do of a wide variety of people drawn from a variety of nations and cultures:

The often-overlooked phenomenon is that the members of these churches, as ethnically diverse as they usually are, also represent a unique people group themselves. They are a heterogeneous amalgam of people who share a significant common characteristic—they see themselves as internationals—people who have experienced and understand the culture

and ways of a globalized modernity. They are in effect a homogenous unit of ethnically heterogeneous peoples (Corwin, 2014:1).

In P.06's opinion Abbey seeks to be 'a church that in terms of congregation has groups within it from different cultures... [where] their culture is celebrated... taken seriously, but not exclusively so [because] there are other cultural flavours there.' For P.06 'having a town centre building allows us to do a lot of stuff in terms of outreach to the community that I want to see continued.' He 'wouldn't want us to push out all the other user groups because we're using [the premises] for church stuff all the time ... the fact that Circles are upstairs [and] we have different congregations coming into [the building]' is a good thing. P.06 believes that 'for inner-city churches to survive and thrive they will inevitably have to be able to appeal to across a broad range of cultural types.'

Hong Konger P.05 accepts that McGavran's argument has some validity, especially for people who need to hear 'their own language [in order] to worship... have more understanding... and a sense of safety... [these things are] very important especially for people in a foreign land.' At the same time she questions McGavran's view implying that the Gospel has a language and culture of its own: 'I think even if people speak different languages it is just like music ... if the Gospel is sung in an African language, it touches you, it makes you feel Jesus.' For P.05 response to the Gospel is not primarily about responding to words – whatever the language – but about genuine spiritual experience: 'You don't necessarily listen to the content of what they say, but you feel it.' She thinks Abbey has currently got the right focus and should 'stick to the multicultural line and still help those who are in need.' Fellow Hong Konger P.03 really appreciates the way in which 'the Orders of Service' are produced in the various languages represented in the congregation' but believes 'we need more races.' Iranian P.10 accepts that 'people mostly come to faith in their ethnic groups' and believes 'that it is related to understanding each other's conditions and having a connection with the mother tongue, which can better transfer their experiences and information to their fellow countrymen.' He suggests 'if I want to explain Christianity to an Iranian person, I can do it much better than a foreigner.' At the same time he appreciates Abbey's multicultural approach and that 'the church is a gathering of believing brothers and sisters of every race, ethnicity and nationality... worshipping God in the church and loving each other and loving other people regardless of race and ethnicity.'

Participants from Peniel Church accept that their focus is directed towards Portuguese-speaking people but disagree over the question of whether or not this approach is both right and/or appropriate. For P.11 Peniel Church's 'focus is people who speak Portuguese' because when 'as immigrants we arrive in the UK and start to attend Services in English... we understand nothing... so,

the Brazilians and the Portuguese they look for Portuguese speaking community where they feel more comfortable.’ He believes it to be understandable why ‘many people they now look for the church community who speaks their language... people feel more comfortable when among someone who speaks your language’ and sees nothing wrong with Peniel focussing on Portuguese-speaking people. P.09 agrees that ‘the focus is on the Portuguese speaking people’ but struggles with the limitations of this focus: ‘We are an evangelical church we are supposed to go out to reach all people. How are we going to do that? That’s the question?’ For P.09 ‘Peniel is quite restricted to our own niche and that’s not good because... Brazilians, they come and go, they come to stay for some years and then they move somewhere else [or] go back to Brazil.’ P.09 would like to see Peniel adopt a different focus and transition into a ‘thriving community with different languages... not fixed or caged to one particular method.’ P.08 agrees that at Peniel ‘the focus is to save Portuguese speaking people’ and concurs with P.09 in finding this approach extremely restricting in terms of the ministry and mission of Peniel: ‘we have little hope of saving other cultures because I don’t see [Peniel] reaching out to others outside of their own culture.’ For P.08 ‘Christ broke down the barriers of hostility between different cultures, and until [Peniel] explore that, they’re missing a big part of Christ.’

Participants from Zion accept that the church’s initial missional focus was on a specific group of people but disagree about whether this should change in the future. P.13 recognises that people are more likely to come to faith within their own culture because ‘they are more comfortable to worship in their own language, and... sharing their own cultural way of doing things, and freer to express their feelings and think thoughts they would like to share in their own way.’ He acknowledges that ‘when Zion started [it was] purely for Tamils from Sri Lanka’ but he now wants ‘the church to be open’ to other cultures and ethnicities: ‘We are hoping to do [Services] in English for everybody so anybody can join.’ P.14, however, does not want Zion to extend its missional focus beyond ‘Tamil-speaking Sri Lankans.’ He believes Zion have ‘created something... really good... [where] it is possible for people to come and worship in their own language’ as is, and sees Zion’s future as simply extending this by ‘reaching out to more people who... don’t know there’s a Tamil church in Reading.’

Participant P.07 admits that LSI primarily ‘has Ghanaians at the moment.’ but claims ‘we are really trying to aim towards becoming an international church.’ As a Ghanaian himself P.07 recognises ‘that often Ghanaians gravitate towards [Ghanaian] churches [rather] than any other church... simply because they can easily identify with those churches, their culture, their kind of music.’ He acknowledges that ‘sometimes our church struggles in attracting such people because... when they



come, they don't hear the kind of music they want to hear... because we have a more international outlook.' He believes that LSI is evolving as they now occasionally have 'people from Bangladesh... Indians... people from Kenya... and even some [white] British as well' coming to their services.

#### **4.3.5 'Who is My Neighbour? (Luke 10:29)**

Intriguingly even participants from Abbey Baptist Church, the host church, demonstrated a poor knowledge of the other churches sharing the premises with them. P.01 is 'aware that there are some other churches meeting [at Abbey]' but feels that they are all 'distanced from us.' P.04 attended a Baptismal Service at Peniel once but 'didn't understand what they were saying .' P.06 acknowledges he knows little about the other churches primarily because 'it's only really the Portuguese that are interacting' with Abbey. P.02 is most aware of Zion's presence 'because we fight over the Sunday School room... [and] I am often still in the building when the Africans arrive in the afternoon [but] I'm not so aware of Peniel in the evenings because we don't really interface.'

P.11 confesses Peniel 'don't know much about the other churches apart from Abbey Baptist Church' and what contacts Peniel do have are 'not deep.' P.09 is aware that other churches also use the building but 'apart from the Abbey Baptist Church congregation I haven't seen or joined any other services of the other churches... mainly because of the language.' Participants from Zion also know very little about the other churches. P.13 thinks sharing the building provides an opportunity for churches like Zion to 'get to know the other people, we can share our love with the other people of different languages, different cultures' but the reality is it just does not happen. P.14 is aware that other churches besides Zion use the building. He has witnessed 'Peniel Church of the Portuguese... just through the window seeing the worship... I really like it [but] I've never tried to go in... I don't know a single word of the language.' Ghanaian P.07 claims that LSI are 'aware of and know the churches that share the building with us, including Abbey Baptist, 'the mother church' but it is clear from his confusion about their respective ethnicities – referring to them as 'Bangladeshi' and 'Portuguese' – that he is not that knowledgeable.

#### **4.3.6 'A Blight on the Human Conscience' ~ Nelson Mandela (Mandela, 2011:323)**

P.01 believes that 'half the world's troubles are caused by prejudice' and regrets 'we can't all get alongside each other and learn a bit more about each other. He immediately cites what he calls 'the race issue' raising the matter of Lady Susan Hussey's resignation following her remarks to charity boss Ngozi Fulani which he describes as 'a bit of a knee jerk reaction to racism.' A staunch socialist P.01 tangentially finds a connection between 'the historic slave trade' and 'modern day slavery'

namely 'people being kept on less than minimum wage and being exploited on zero hours contracts.' Referring to the Windrush generation (1948-71) P.01 was 'not sure they would be excluded from the mainstream churches these days.' He suggests 'You have only got to look at the Anglican clergy and bishops to see what's happening' implying various appointments are due to 'positive discrimination' rather than merit. For P.01 this 'is alienating another section of the community.' P.04 acknowledges that for 'those of us who have been at Abbey for some time overcoming [racial discrimination] has been a bit of a struggle' and recognises that sadly 'there is a lot [of prejudice] around.' For P.06 amongst the most obvious examples of discrimination today are those highlighted by the 'Black Lives Matter, #MeToo' campaign, and admits it is easy to 'slide into prejudice, particularly in a multicultural place like Abbey.' P.06 acknowledges 'it is hard work talking to someone in a foreign language' but refusing to try and communicate with them might be down to 'prejudice [rather than] just comfort and ease.' He believes racial discrimination today is 'less overt... but that doesn't mean there is less of it.' He suggests what has changed is that 'it's become acceptable... because the current wave of right-wing identity politics that has swept Europe and America.' He believes racial discrimination still 'exists within a sub-set of British culture' even within the Church. He 'would like to think [being] aware of it [we] would be doing more about it [but recognises] things take time.' He is aware Abbey is wrestling with this: 'Prior to this current upsurge, how many ethnic minorities had we? We had the Nepalese for a while, but they were quite short-lived... it's [always been] a white congregation that largely attracted white people in the past.'

P.02 suggests discrimination exists because 'people don't have a right view of past' which will 'threaten the future if people don't get over it [and] keep on falling out.' She thinks 'people don't see people as people... they just see the problem, or the difference.' She illustrates this by referencing what she perceives as a 'struggle between the Iranians and the Hong Kongers' at Abbey. In her view this struggle to adapt to each other is because 'the Iranians are quite proud – I think they are representing their past – [whereas] the Hong Kongers are much more downtrodden.' P.02 extends this theory to the various culturally distinctive churches based at Abbey: 'This may be something to do with why we find it hard to relate with our three [other] congregations that meet in the church... They're coming with baggage that they don't even perhaps understand or know [exists] in them generally.' For P.02 racial discrimination in particular remains prevalent both in society and in the Church and 'we need to evolve out of it as fast we can.' She recognises 'it is hard to change habits and attitudes that subliminally have become part of us' and cites the reluctance of the old guard at Abbey 'to integrate new members from other cultures' as an example of this.

Hong Konger P.03 claims to have experienced 'more discrimination' back in Hong Kong where 'they discriminate more about your background ... your wealth' than here in the UK. Fellow Hong Konger P.05 is rather more astute and thinks 'racial discrimination does exist... people don't show it on their faces but it is still there in their hearts.' She believes 'everyone [is capable of] prejudice, no matter how good he or she is.' Her advice is:

You have to overcome it... you have to convert people's thinking ... that's what we need to do... We need to be having a good mindset to counter it because we are in the minority. We are not the major white British people here. So, what we can do is just take it easy and don't take it personally.

Brazilian P.08 believes 'everybody has prejudices' but 'they should never affect our decisions' particularly when it comes to 'writing a person off' as a result. She suggests racial discrimination is less likely to exist in a multicultural church where 'they are openly and actively seeking people of different cultures' rather than in a culturally distinctive church where 'it's very easy to fall into a racial prejudice if you're around people of the same culturalism.' Sadly P.08 illustrates this by referencing her own church: 'I see it sometimes in our church when I hear people speaking about someone else... they are this, this, this... but they don't know the person. I know it's because of their understanding of a specific country or culture.' Microaggression it would appear exists in Peniel as well as Abbey. P.08 cites the case of 'one boy who tries to be a regular comer, and he's English and he's coming because he is dating one of the Brazilian girls' but who is ostracised 'because the boy doesn't fit in' since he doesn't speak Portuguese.

P.13 cites the example of a London church Zion were hiring for their Services that 'increased their rent for no reason' and also 'restricted the time limits' simply because Zion had increased in numbers. Ghanian P.07 believes:

Prejudice is... not only wrong... it is against everything that our Lord stood for... it is harmful because it hurts people we are prejudiced against. It denies them opportunities just as it denies us... the opportunity to know people, embrace them, and enjoy the talents that they are gifted with and the potential they have.

For P.07 prejudice is at its 'most painful' when it 'harms a person so much that the damage done can't be corrected.' As a university lecturer working in this field he suggests discrimination 'hurts the person, and the hurt effects can go on and on.' P.07 has encountered 'people who have been subject to, and suffered from, prejudice and the fallout from discrimination.' For P.07 prejudice 'can even affect people's faith and belief in our Lord Saviour Jesus Christ' not just believers who have been on the receiving end of prejudice but believers who are themselves prejudiced, causing observers to

‘question whether God is indeed the God that we talk about [when] in our actions we can’t seem to demonstrate it.’

#### **4.3.7 Colonialism: ‘An Uncomfortable Truth’ (The Guardian, 12 March 2020)**

Participants from Abbey presented differing opinions relating to our colonial legacy. P.01 recalls that when he was in school:

[Sixty plus years ago] the atlas showed most of the world in red, and you were proud of the British Empire... [but] as you get older you realise... we set out to conquer [nations] in order to strip their assets... so the British Empire was not really something to be proud of.

For P.01 colonialism was ‘something that happened... [it] was probably wrong but at the same time we did it, and you can't turn the clocks back, you can't rewrite history.’ P.06 believes the ‘obsession between “was colonialism good or bad” is a stupid one. It was obviously incredibly bad for large parts of it, but to say that it was exclusively negative I think would be naïve.’ For P.06 the UK’s colonial legacy is ‘obviously and inevitably... mixed. I think on balance it’s probably been good for Britain and bad for the places that we stole all the wealth from.’ He acknowledges that colonialism cannot be ‘uniformly viewed always as negative... [and yet] I can’t believe that it was entirely a good experience.’ For P.06 ‘a more rounded assessment of our colonial past would be [of more value] rather than the pathetic tirades [against it].’ P.02 agrees, and thinks ‘you can't say it was all bad or it was all good ... [today] everybody's vilifying it [as] all bad but actually we bought an awful lot of good with it.’ She singles out the current ‘black African regimes’ to justify her view ‘because they haven't exactly made a huge success of running their countries post-colonialism have they?’

Intriguingly – and here was another of my ‘surprises’ – Hong Konger P.03 believes British colonialism ‘was good for Hong Kong... we really appreciate the colonial cultural influence for us.’ He thinks their colonial legacy has made ‘[Hong Kongers] more familiar with [UK] society... [and prepared us to be] part of this society.’ Whilst fellow Hong Konger P.05 agrees, she recognises the negative side of historic colonialism acknowledging ‘I’m a later generation so we don’t feel the exploitation... my ancestors [experienced].’ The heritage of British colonialism in Hong Kong gave her the ‘chance to know how the western world works’ and she believes ‘we experienced a good system of the colonial way’ compared to the colonialism experienced by her grandparents.

Brazilian P.11 is aware of historic colonialism in Brazil – ‘you look in history, you see in the colonies it happened’ – and that the main objective was to ‘take advantage’ of the native people rather than aid them. Intriguingly, however, he seems more concerned about the ‘modern colonisation of Brazil by America.’ He suggests that ‘in the past [Brazil had] a different economy and life and America for

Brazil was like a dream' but now 'they want to copy everything [American] because they think for success you have to do it this way as well.' P.11 is especially concerned about the 'big influence from the American church in Brazil' which he sees as 'not very healthy.' He sees that 'many churches in Brazil use the same ideology as the church from America... they think this is what we have to do to become a big church.' Fellow Brazilian P.09 agrees: There is 'the real physical colonialism where one government, more powerful than the other, goes there and dominates that country in terms of cultural, order, militarily, [things] like that' and then there are 'other types of colonialism like the influence of America within Brazil. P.11 also recognises that Brazilian culture is in part the product of their colonial legacy and sees a major problem stemming from this as being 'when you go to another country, another culture... [and] you want to impose your culture on them.' Referring to his own Brazilian culture he recognises that Brazilian Christians even 'bring this to the church' but maintains that at Peniel 'we don't want to bring Brazil to Reading... we must respect the other country and the other culture, not impose something [on other cultures].' P.08 both agrees and disagrees with P.11 in this respect. She recognises the way Peniel do church is very much shaped by their inherited 'Brazilian culture' but at the same time she believe it is restricted from developing as it could by that same 'deliberate emphasis of Portuguese language and culture'.

Sri Lankan P.13 acknowledges that 'Sri Lanka was colonised by the British people' but believes that this was a 'really good thing that the British people have done' for which he 'salutes them' because, 'That is how they were able to spread the Gospel to all other places... they have done wonderful thing... God has used the colonist... to spread the Gospel all over the world.' He recognises that 'there may be some negative things' about colonialism' but on the whole 'I would it take it as a positive thing.' He acknowledges that 'there was a political agenda' although he considers that a 'minority matter' compared to 'spreading the Gospel and love [of God] to people.' For P.13 colonised countries profited both spiritually and materially. Examples of this progress in Sri Lanka include 'the development the railway lines and the roads and federal system. This came about directly because of the rulership of British people, so we are really thankful.' P.13 is especially grateful for 'the gift of all things English... because if the British people did not colonise Sri Lanka, we wouldn't have known about the English language, English culture and English custom.' Fellow Sri Lankan P.14 also sees the colonisation of Sri Lanka by the British in a constructive light compared to other European colonising powers of the day: 'Sri Lanka was colonised by three countries: Portuguese, Holland and then British. The first two were aggressive... they destroyed Hindu temples... [but] when the British came [they] built schools and churches and hospitals.' P.14 sees Sri Lanka's colonial legacy as 'mixed' however, in that the British helped 'build the infrastructure' and

maintained 'a balance between the ethnic groups' in Sri Lanka... but when the British left 'the conflict started between the two ethnic groups and the minorities in Sri Lanka.'

Ghanaian P.07 recognises that 'the greatest spread of Christianity' in some countries can be traced back to colonial times and cites Ghana as an example of this:

When the missionaries came with the colonial forces they introduced Christianity, and spread it in the communities and villages, and that accounts for where Ghana is today in terms of the numbers of Christians. Ghana is about 75% Christian, and I think 20% Muslims, and the remaining 5% other religions.

He maintains that 'there were a lot of benefits Ghana derived from the church's role in the colonial project' and particularly cites the number of 'schools built by the church' and 'health facilities in remote rural communities' where the 'African political systems [of the day] would not dare to go.' At the same time he recognises that there are 'two views on [colonialism] arising from the experience of Ghana with the British colonial system' – the spiritual and the political – and too 'often we don't find the church's opposition of how colonialism happened, and the sort of things it did... we bundle the church and the political system together.' For P.07 this bundling together covers up some of the 'great injustices [of colonialism].' He thinks it important to 'de-link the church from the political organisation of the colonial system' in order to 'look at [this issue] from two angles.' Firstly, the many 'benefits Ghana derived from the church's role in the colonial project' such as 'schools [and] health facilities' need to be appreciated, but secondly, the 'great injustices [of colonialism] that shouldn't have happened ... that happened for a long period' need to be addressed. In P.07's mind 'now [colonialism] has happened and its gone, we need a frank conversation about it.' He understands 'it is quite a difficult subject to talk about... we all shy away from it, including the church... but we need to talk about it, because it was a great injustice that happened for a long period. We can't just sweep it under the carpet.'

#### **4.3.8 Meaningful Connectivity/Togetherness**

P.01 'understands what [Moynagh] is saying [about meaningful connectivity between the various churches meeting at Abbey]' but is sceptical about Abbey Baptist Church's ability to respond to such a challenge because 'at the moment we can't meaningfully connect to other churches of our own denomination.' P.04 thinks 'it would be lovely for us all to meet together but I can understand how they want to meet with their own... it's only natural.' P.04's personal preference is 'to have worship and fellowship with people of my own culture.' Indeed her concept of connectivity is that 'all the other churches come and join us.' P.06 believes that it is important for culturally distinctive churches to be meaningfully connected 'for two quite specific reasons.' He finds 'the cultural exchange is

interesting in and of itself' but for P.06 'It's not just about simply learning about the culture... it's about learning about spirituality through a cultural lens... because the reality is that the Bible is read culturally.' For P.06 'if you never encounter someone from a different context or different culture then when do you ever learn?' P.02 sees being meaningfully connected as 'a challenge.' Even within Abbey Baptist Church she 'feels that the groups... are not connecting at the moment.' She cites 'the one or two Nigerian families' who seemingly 'can't get in anywhere.' For Iranian P.10, however, 'the cooperation of our church with other churches [has to be] one of our goals as Christians.'

Brazilian P.11 'agrees' in principle with Moynagh's ideas on meaningful connectivity but thinks 'it's not very easy' primarily for two reasons, 'one is culture, the other is theology.' He recognises we are all 'going to be in the one place in the future' but is reluctant to embrace the need to meaningfully connect with other churches in the present. His major reservation, however, is not cultural but 'for me the main problem is the theology.' He questions the theological correctness of the other churches' teaching: 'Every Sunday Peniel people 'learn what we teach them, what we believe... we follow the Bible... and I worry about [if] our people are taught something different.' P.08 believes Peniel people do need to connect meaningfully with other churches but recognises that for many immigrants to the UK 'there's a comfort zone you don't have to really come out of' and that 'people have genuine fears' about stepping out from their comfort zone.' She suggests this reluctance, however, has little to do with encountering theological error but is actually seated in stubbornly 'not wanting to grow or wanting to change anything for any reason.' She acknowledges that 'this has to change.' P.09 'agrees 100% that we have to develop ourselves out of the box, especially when we are living in a country where with such a great history of Christianity, and we should bring all the ideas into our own world and to develop ourselves to see how we're going to grow as a church.'

Sri Lankan P.13 agrees that 'We've got to connect with the other churches' but immediately qualifies this adding 'anyone connected [to] the Evangelical Alliance.' P.14 disagrees and bluntly states 'I only want to be with the Tamil church and Sri Lankan culture.' He admitted that 'from time to time, I go to the Abbey Baptist Service' but 'the way they preach can be different, and some things I cannot accept.' Ghanaian P.07, agrees with Moynagh's emphasis on the importance of meaningful connectedness primarily 'because society has changed [and] if society changes that fast then we, as the Body of Christ, have to constantly assess our position... what it is that we find meaningful?' For P.07 as long 'as it is not a departure from the core process that Christ laid down for us to follow... we need to take a hard look in the way we conduct ourselves, the way we organise ourselves as a

church... and continue to move on ... the Church is a living organism, it must continue to grow, and must embrace changing times.'

In response to a follow-up question inviting ideas that could engender meaningful connectivity between the churches P.01 believes mixing with the other churches at Abbey 'could be something of a landmine [and] I don't think we are quite ready for it.' P.04 suggests perhaps 'we could all find ways to meet each other in the middle' and cites Abbey's Iranian members 'meeting together for Bible study but then [they] come and worship with us' as a pattern all four churches could follow. She also suggests some of the ideas previously used to try and forge deeper relationships such as the bi-annual 'Four Church Feasts could be reinstated.' P.06 agreed about the need for meaningful connection but isn't sure how far Abbey has progressed 'along [the road] on intercultural worship' with the various cultural groups now worshipping at Abbey itself, or 'even if we have got the skills set [as a church] to do intercultural church in a meaningful context' as yet. In the wider context P.06 advocates the various churches concentrating on 'doing something that impacts on wider society.' He recommends 'find something else to look at' and suggests the key question to ask is 'What do people want to do, *that isn't about growing their church.*' 'Aware that Peniel 'support some charity work back in Brazil' he suggests that since the 'Abbey congregation has a fairly broad interest across the globe, it wouldn't be out of our remit for us to be interested in that' as well.' For P.02, however, making a greater effort to be meaningfully connected with the three other churches at Abbey is 'a complete waste of time and energy... I don't think they want to come together.' Hong Konger P.05 suggests 'the Ministers cross over to do the sermons' and that the various different churches also get together sometimes to 'introduce more about their people.'

Brazilian P.11 suggests trialling having 'one Service all together, [perhaps] every first Sunday... [to see] what will work or not.' P.08 suggests Abbey should initiate a series of cross-cultural Services:

You could invite [our Pastor] to speak one Sunday morning and have translation... that could intrigue the Brazilian population to come because Pastor will probably advocate it and bring them... that might give them a chance to meet some of the English people.

P.09 suggests that in order for the various churches at Abbey to get to know each other better, '[We could] have meetings together... to discuss how we could develop a Service that would be proper for the different communities in terms of worship and preaching... and the language as well.' For P.09 'everything starts by talking... communicating with each other.' Sri Lankan P.13 'agrees' it would be 'definitely helpful if we worshipped together occasionally' recalling that 'we have done it in the past.' He thinks it would a good idea if Zion 'also invited others to come to our church as well.' Fellow Sri Lankan P.14, however, is not persuaded. For P.14 'There's the language barrier' and 'then



there's the culture barrier... and I'm not sure how much more?' He reluctantly suggests that maybe the various churches could get together 'perhaps in a Service' ... but 'not every Sunday Service' and then fortunately finds his get out of jail card, suggesting, 'I don't know if we have enough space in the building [to accommodate everyone] anyway.' Ghanaian P.07 suggests that the various churches should create 'opportunities for us to share our stories... what is working for us because at the end of the day we are all interested in the work Christ has called us to.' He also suggests the various churches could cooperate more in 'reaching out to others ... at the end of the day that is our mission [and] this is another reason for us to meaningfully connect together.'

#### **4.3.9 Radical Welcome**

Abbey member P.01 has always believed in 'offering the hospitality of our home' and sees this as 'an extension of [the church's hospitality].' For P.04 offering hospitality is simply 'opening our front door and saying, Come and have Sunday lunch!' She suggests offering hospitality is, however, more than that; it is about 'walking alongside each other ... being available, being there to listen ... being beside those who are struggling.' P.06 focusses on the corporate nature of offering hospitality and suggests that at Abbey 'I don't think we're expecting people to conform to our culture [but offer] hospitality that takes people as they are not who you want them to be and try and get them to conform... we allow people to be themselves.' P.02 'totally agrees' that offering hospitality to others, especially the stranger, is not an optional extra for Christians but thinks that 'on the whole, right across the church [with a few exceptions] we're much less good even at having Sunday lunch and asking people home' than Abbey folk think they are. Hong Konger P.03, however, thinks Abbey is 'actually quite good at it ... otherwise [he and his fellow Hong Kongers] wouldn't have known of Abbey [Baptist] Church.' Fellow Hong Konger P.05 sees offering hospitality as a virtue Christians acquire rather than automatically fall into because 'unless people have a certain level of understanding, they still want to protect their own place... they're reluctant to open up unless they feel comfortable and safe.' For Iranian P.12 hospitality involves 'Loving and serving the guest from the heart, kindness, serving and helping are part of hospitality.'

The response from Abbey's tenant churches was similar. For Brazilian P.11 offering hospitality 'starts when you open the door and receive everyone without any judgement.' Fellow Brazilian P.09 agrees and believes it is important for visitors to feel 'valued, [able to] talk... be yourself ... express your ideas [and share] your experience.' Sri Lankan P.13 links hospitality with evangelism, suggesting offering hospitality 'could be individually or church wise' citing Zion's work in London where they 'used our church minibus to go round the City of London at night and help with soup and bread in

the cold season ... that I would say is hospitality ... also we invite them to our church.’ For Sri Lankan P.14 offering hospitality means ‘welcoming the strangers... and sharing the Word with them!’

An initial attempt on my part to suggest that biblical hospitality implied something a bit more radical than simply having someone round for tea – going the second mile (Matthew 5:41) with people – was not enthusiastically embraced. On the whole Moynagh’s preferred term ‘generosity’ was more warmly welcomed than ‘radical hospitality’. Participants from Abbey found ‘generosity’ more understandable than ‘radical hospitality’ although P.04 ‘doesn’t know’ if there is any real difference. She prefers ‘generosity rather than radicalism’ because ‘generosity means giving.’ She also observed that both ‘can easily just be words!’ P.06 is not convinced by Moynagh’s preference, believing the Church needs to champion ‘co-production and mutuality’ as against largesse. P.02 does not believe Abbey’s decision to open its doors to these other churches had anything to do with hospitality or generosity: ‘I don't think it's even particularly come from a spirit of generosity. I think it's just, okay, it's expedient. You know, you want somewhere, we've got room, you'll give us some money, so why not.’ P.02 admits she ‘may be a bit jaundiced’ about this but believes her opinion is validated by Abbey’s lack of interest in these culturally distinctive churches: ‘I mean had anybody made much effort to befriend or get to know them... before you came along?’ Participants from the other churches had little to contribute on this matter. For Brazilian P.11 generosity means that ‘sometimes the church has to go outside to bring people in, not just waiting [for them to come to us].’ Sri Lankan P.13 likes the use of the word ‘generosity’ and ‘thinks of all the churches [Zion engages with] Abbey are most generous.’ He puts this down to Abbey ‘not being business minded’ by which he means materialistic: ‘I have seen Christian, Pentecostal, Evangelical churches that are just money minded. They want the money. They don’t care about the culture... about the facilities, whatever. That’s why I am so grateful [for Abbey Baptist Church].’

Elucidation on my part that ‘radical hospitality requires a fundamental shift from a simple practice of offering welcome to an outward movement to stand with others – particularly those who are at society’s margins’ (Dunn, 2019:2) initiated a number of interesting responses. Initially suspicious of the word ‘radical’ P.01 felt far more comfortable with the idea of Abbey Baptist Church ‘partnering with Reading Red Kitchen, Care4Calais, Bed4Night, etc.’ than opening up his own home to the marginalised. Brazilian P.09 ‘agrees’ that radical hospitality requires a fundamental shift in order to stand with others particularly those at society’s margins but ‘I don’t think [Peniel] are sharing much at this moment because of lack of personnel, lack of direction, and mainly also lack of resources.’ P.09 feels very torn: ‘how can you preach Christianity and the Gospel to someone who is hungry, and

needs shelter in this cold. We as a church aren't doing that because of lack of resources and lack of direction.' Sri Lankan P.13 recognise the difference between hospitality and radical hospitality, especially in terms of reaching out to society's marginalised, and suggests Abbey Baptist Church is already 'doing it ... I can see that because you open the doors for the refugees and other people from other countries.' He suggests 'we could probably meet with the other church leaders and get ideas from them in order to develop this.'

I was particularly intrigued to learn how the various churches saw the host-tenant relationship instigated in 2011 and still employed at Abbey today especially in the light of Abbey not charging rent for use of the building to Reading Red Kitchen and Care4Calais. As far as P.01 was concerned Abbey has 'given these churches somewhere to worship in their own language' and 'that's fine... we don't have to integrate with them.' He is more effusive about Abbey's welcome for the scores of refugees and immigrants over the past 18 months: 'It may not be to everyone's liking... but riding over that, it is successful because we are now seeing a full church again on a Sunday.' P.04 also believes Abbey's welcome has been valuable in that 'the people who attend the various churches have felt they can worship in their own language' but she is not convinced Abbey has done all that it could have done:

To a certain extent some of them have stood aloof from us, which... is a tragedy [but] perhaps we may have been at fault in expecting they should come to us, that they should join us [whereas] maybe we should go to them?

For P.06 it is not really about how Abbey assesses its own effectiveness but how the various ethnic churches and groups themselves assess Abbey's generosity? In particular he 'wonders [how] having monetised the relationship [with these culturally distinctive churches by charging them rent]... has changed the nature of the relationship' between them and Abbey? He suspects that since 'they're paying for a service, which they expect to get, actually means the moral obligation that they have towards Abbey has been paid off with money... so they no longer feel it.' P.06 contrasts the hesitancy of the culturally distinctive churches to connect with Abbey to that of the influx of people from other cultures, who have chosen, interestingly, not to form culturally distinctive churches but join an international church. For P.06 this is because here 'you have a community of people who want to integrate, so it's a vehicle for integration for them to a certain extent.' P.02, however, seriously questions whether Abbey, 'by offering [these culturally distinctive churches] somewhere, caused them to keep doing something that actually isn't the best?' She cites the number of Hong Kongers now attending Abbey to suggest culturally distinctive churches are founded on insecurity rather than the plan and purpose of God, and poses the rhetorical question: 'Why did so many the

Hong Kongers initially want to go to [the Cantonese-speaking church at] Trinity?' P.02 suggests the answer to her question is, 'because they're insecure' and questions the reasoning of the other culturally distinctive churches: 'Are [these other churches] aiming to integrate people into [UK] culture or... just providing [some kind of] security when they first arrive?'

Brazilian P.11 is 'really happy about the hospitality we find at Abbey... it's a blessing for us.' P.08 confesses initially she entertained 'hopes that Abbey and Peniel would merge, in the sense of deciding things together and sharing resources together' but now feels 'there's a structure clash which is why merging might not work.' Sri Lankan P.13 suggests Zion have been to a number of 'different churches, hired from different churches, and [Abbey] are one of the wonderful churches that we can get along with.' He has no problem personally with the host/tenant relationship between the two churches: 'Obviously, you've got to charge some rent... if we had our own building and you came to us... we would charge [you] a very small rent. That is acceptable. We are so grateful to you.' Ghanaian P.07 is philosophic: 'It is difficult to find anything else that Abbey could do [for LSI]... I am aware of the constraints within which we all operate... having four churches sharing a building is not easy to manage especially on a Sunday.'

#### **4.3.10 Missio Dei**

Traditional Baptist P.01 believes strongly Abbey 'should have a mission statement, clearly setting out what that mission is' and is 'not really sure what we are aiming for at the moment!' Heavily influenced by her many years as a member of Youth With A Mission,<sup>14</sup> P.02 follows the script and understands the missional task as essentially evangelistic: 'We believe everyone has the right to hear the good news about Jesus and our prayer is to see fellowships of believers worshipping and following Jesus in every nation, tribe and tongue.' She 'would love to be able to plant more Baptist churches in Reading' something she sees 'inherent in Abbey Baptist Church's DNA that needs to be rekindled.'<sup>15</sup> Intriguingly Abbey's immigrants and refugees, whilst retaining an evangelistic approach, adopted a softer line. Hong Konger P.03 thinks 'the most important thing is that all the people here are very kind... helpful... easy to communicate with... caring.' Similarly, P.05 does not feel the need to 'force [or] convince people... I just tell them Abbey is a different church with different cultures. The

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<sup>14</sup> Youth With A Mission (YWAM) is an international movement of Christians from many denominations dedicated to presenting Jesus personally to this and future generations, to mobilising as many as possible to help in this task, and to the training and equipping of believers for their part in fulfilling the Great Commission.' Available at: <https://ywam.org/about-us/values> (Accessed 15.05.23).

<sup>15</sup> Founded in 1640 Abbey Baptist Church has been responsible for planting in the region of 25 different churches in and around Reading especially during the first 300 years of its history. According to the Church Administrator, however, the last time Abbey was involved in any kind of church planting 'was in the Victorian era.'

focus is always on Jesus, and you can come and experience it. You may find it different, but it's up to personal choice.' Enigmatically she agrees with P.03 about the importance of friendship but also sees a danger in this approach: 'The focus should still be Jesus Christ... [the church] is not a community centre... you can't just facilitate people to mingle and communicate... [and] forget Jesus.' Iranian P.10 also underlines the importance of simple friendship central to the missional task: 'I have to say that our church is very simple and lovely with a friendly and very good environment without hypocrisy where you can feel God's presence and communicate with God.'

P.04 understands the missional task more holistically, reaching out to those 'who just want love... a caring hand... somebody to walk with them.' P.06 singles out 'a place of refuge' in Abbey's strapline to underline the church's holistic approach and intriguingly suggests that such 'a focus finds us rather than we find a focus.' Along with P.04 he believes that Abbey's ministry to refugees and immigrants is 'where the focus has been for quite a while, and that [in and of itself] is fairly broadly interpreted.' For P.06 the way to interpret what kind of mission God is calling a church to is to ask the question, 'Who is the church meant to be serving? And what do they need?' For P.06 a church like Abbey 'can't be a town centre church and pretend that it's like a rural parish.' He recognises it is 'complex at Abbey now because it's multicultural and ... lots of people are at different stages of faith which is quite challenging and tricky.' For P.06 the integral and incarnational nature of Abbey's understanding of the missional task is underlined by 'some of the things we've done' to help alleviate social needs in Reading particularly amongst the 'homeless people [and] the refugees.'

Participants from Peniel Church appear confused about the missional task with P.08, confessing that she 'does not know what her church's understanding of mission is.' Even church planter P.11 prevaricates somewhat when asked to define how Peniel understands the missional task: '[Although] we always talk about spiritual things... mission is something more practical... mission is to share what you receive... you have to go outside and meet people talking and helping... that's the mission.' P.09 claims Peniel is an 'evangelical' church that wants to 'spread' the Gospel to others in Reading but observes that 'even though the Pastor possesses this evangelical thinking of spreading the Gospel... I haven't seen that practically.' According to P.09 Peniel did have an evangelistic programme at one time but it foundered on the rock of language: 'I myself was the person in charge of evangelism in the church, but I felt quite constrained about that because the leadership wanted me to reach only the Portuguese-speaking people.' P.08 agrees and suggests that even reaching out to Portuguese-speaking people is limited to 'preaching at Peniel's Sunday Service' which, bizarrely for P.08, is 'spread through the medium of the internet back to Brazil' inexplicably prioritising media

programmes to Brazil over missional outreach to the people of Reading. She suggests Peniel 'hides behind... a small church mentality' to avoid facing up to the missional task but 'highly suspects it would only be for Portuguese speaking people if they did do something for the community.'

Participants from Zion Church of God also had diverse views. Describing Zion as 'a Pentecostal evangelical church' P.13 is keen to emphasise that Zion holistically 'reaches out to people who are in need' but nevertheless 'evangelism is the main strong thing!' He concedes that 'when [Zion] started it was purely for Tamils from Sri Lanka' but stresses he does not want Zion to remain exclusive and is 'hoping to do [church] in English for everybody so anybody who understands English can join.' P.14 sees Zion's missional task somewhat differently, bluntly stating, 'We don't explicitly have a mission to physical or mental needs of people... I don't think we try to accommodate everyone.' He understands the missional task primarily in terms of getting people to come to Zion on Sundays because they 'will hear the Word of God... be redeemed from any burden [they] are going through... [and] will see light at the end of the tunnel!' For P.14, on paper 'it's a very good thing, reaching out to people, all languages and all cultures [because it] is what Jesus did' but nevertheless he is 'very happy [with Zion] as it is' and doesn't really want it to expand in order to incorporate other cultures or adopt English as the main language at Zion, because 'the Tamil language is in my heart language!'

Ghanaian P.07 emphasises an integral approach. He believes that 'focussing on the individual' is 'at the heart of LSI and reflects in everything that we do.' For P.07 LSI 'are people oriented [and] focus on building up the individual to understand and know who they are in Christ, where the benefits are of being in Christ, what the responsibilities are of being in Christ.' According to P.07 LSI 'strongly encourage each and every one of [their members] to reach out' to others and are 'passionate about spreading the knowledge of God, or the knowledge of Christ and his glory that comes with it.' According to P.07 'In the last two years we've started some outreach programmes... we have targeted multicultural academic institutions and universities, [and] have been going into communities and on the streets to talk to people... the homeless and the immigrants.'

How do the various churches at Abbey responded to the suggestion that 'When we live into the principles of radical hospitality, we give people a taste of the kingdom of God... which is the first step in a life of faith. When hospitality is done well, it changes lives.' (Gentile, 2020:3). Participants from Abbey Baptist Church recognise that partnering with various social action agencies has played a significant part in the extraordinary numerical growth of the church. P.01 approves of Abbey Baptist Church being the venue for demonstrating radical hospitality: 'I think that this is the sort of thing

that we ought to be doing.' P.06 recognises that Abbey has 'a ministry towards people who don't come to church ... [and] I think we've done some really good things in terms of Bed4Night, Care4Calais that reflect the nature of what's going on amongst the homeless people and refugees here.' For P.06 'how do you deal with them... how you do something for them' is the true test of whether or not 'a church is on God's wavelength.' For P.02 Abbey's 'focus is to work out how to be multicultural' and in her opinion 'I think we are doing it the best in the town at the moment.' She thinks 'in terms of care of fellowship and acceptance' Abbey is doing a 'beautiful thing.' Hong Konger P.03 'thinks Abbey [Baptist] Church is doing the connecting people quite good. We have really connected with each other, with local people and with the Iranians for example.' Iranian refugee P.12 describes Abbey as 'a church that is different. It is not about the colour of your skin, it is about having true faith, cooperation, and friendship.' For P.12 'in the church, you can find good friends and answers to your questions... new challenges for your life, see what God has planned for you.'

Participants at Peniel Church see the link but struggle with the practicalities. For P.11 going the second or third mile with people means 'we have to be prepared to meet the needs around us in the community... find ways to do something for the others, not just for people coming to the church but people outside.' P.08 agrees, but does not think '[Peniel] are sharing much at this moment because of lack of personnel, lack of direction, and lack of resources. Peniel doesn't have the money to do that programme which I believe is very much part of the Church.' P.09 feels torn: 'how can you preach Christianity and the Gospels to someone who is hungry and needs shelter in this cold. We as a church aren't doing that because of lack of resources and lack of direction.'

Sri Lankan P.13 cites their own experience in London where 'we used our church minibus to go round the City of London at night and help with soup and bread in in the cold season... that I would say is hospitality... and also we invite them to our church to have soup or a meal.' For P.14 offering hospitality means 'welcoming the strangers' but he immediately qualifies this 'and share the word with them.' Ghanaian P07 recognises the importance of 'the relationship between the church and the refugees and other vulnerable groups' and would like LSI to emulate 'Abbey Baptist Church... in the way it has adopted a different strategy that has really been effective' in this direction. P.07 acknowledges:

We are learning from you because we clearly saw this as a transition that was really quite a tough one but it worked well. I think opening your doors to the kind of people you mentioned, considered as vulnerable migrants, refugees... is a wonderful decision because, if not for anything at all it gives them at least a place of refuge.

## **Summary**

In this chapter, part one of my data analysis, I acknowledged the reality that it is not always easy to hear the actual voices of research participants in the welter of transcribed words and researcher opinion. Therefore, having initially outlined the interview design and practice, and interview questions, associated with qualitative interviewing I employed I endeavoured to let the range of culturally distinctive voices speak. What did I expect the voices to say? What did they actually say? And where were the surprises?



## 05 ANALYSIS 2 (Interpreting the Data)

### Introduction

In the previous chapter I acknowledged that it is not always easy to hear the actual voices of participants in the welter of transcribed words and researcher opinion and therefore, having initially outlined the interview design and practice, and interview questions, associated with qualitative interviewing I employed, I endeavoured to let the range of culturally distinctive voices speak. What did I expect the voices to say? What did they actually say? And where were the surprises?

In this chapter I focus on interpreting the gathered data and identifying emerging themes relevant to the research question. This is what Osmer calls the 'interpretive task' in which the researcher not only attempts to discover any emerging patterns from the data but seeks to understand *why* such patterns and dynamics are occurring (Osmer, 2008:4). At its simplest 'data analysis is the process of bringing order, structure and meaning to the complicated mass of qualitative data that the researcher generates during the research process' (Swinton, 2006:57).

### 5.1 REFLEXIVE THEMATIC ANALYSIS

There are a variety of different methods associated with qualitative data analysis but I have chosen to use thematic analysis. It is one of the most straightforward analytical methods enabling the researcher to easily extract significant information from raw data which can then be processed into palatable synopses. It 'offers an accessible and robust method' of analysis because it proposes a clearcut method for 'developing, analysing and interpreting patterns across a qualitative data set, which involves systematic process is of data coding to develop themes – themes are your ultimate analytic purpose' (Braun, 2022:4). This method has its weaknesses. In a complex narrative, thematic analysis cannot always capture the true meaning of a text because it doesn't automatically take the context of the data into consideration. It is subjective and might draw conclusions that don't necessarily line up with actuality. For this reason, Braun and Clarke emphasise the importance of what they call 'reflexive thematic analysis' demanding 'a disciplined practise of critically interrogating what we do, how and why we do it, and the impact and influences of this on our research' on the part of the researcher (Braun, 2022:5-24).

#### 5.1.1 Data Gathering and Transcription

For Swinton and Mowat, analysing the data begins at the initial point of collecting the data (Swinton, 2006:57) and this requires 'theoretical sensitivity' (Corbin, 1990:42), the awareness to grasp the subtleties of meaning and pertinent insights found in the data, the capacity to understand and give

meaning to the data, and the capability to distinguish the pertinent from the rest. Interview questions were therefore refined as the sequence of interviews progressed and on the whole the questions elicited a good response, lively comment, and helpful data.

### **5.1.2 Coding**

All the interviews were recorded, transcribed and then coded. Coding is 'a way of organising the data around broad themes' (Ward, 2017:165). This necessitates categorizing, correlating, evaluating, and blending material from the various interviews in order to unearth meaning, reveal patterns, and uncover implications. From such analysis one can construct an educated, vibrant, nuanced, and comprehensive account that reflects the interviewees' response to the research questions. 'Coding', according to Kathy Charmaz, 'means naming segments of data with a label that simultaneously categorises, summarises, and accounts for each piece of data' (Charmaz, 2013:43). The Rubins distinguish between physically coding the interviews by hand or coding with a computer programme, such as NVivo. They suggest that the researcher begins 'by using common sense and looking at the explicit terms you asked about in your questions and include these on your coding list' (Rubin, 2005:210). I made use of both methods and then compared the results. The NVivo programme was helpful in that it provided a general overall picture across the whole range of interviewees however it also produced some anomalies and was incapable of recognising the subtleties of the inconsistencies, subjectivity, nuances, and silences also found in the data and revealed by physical coding.

Physically coding the interviews by hand was much more rewarding and useful, enabling me to collate the data into specific groups which in turn allowed me to see a condensed synopsis of the main ideas and general meanings recurrent across the data. I coded the interview texts and compared the concepts and themes that emerged to reach theoretical conclusions, thus reducing the danger of preconception and bias. Most prominent, and relevant, amongst these were: Church; People; Think; Know; Like; Abbey; Churches; One; Reading (the town); Baptist; Time; Difference; Time; Come; See; Good; Change; Go. Intriguingly, at first glance, areas that I thought would prove prominent such as Prejudice; Colonialism; Culture; Hospitality; Christian; and even God, came comparatively low down in the initial coding process.

### **5.1.3 Thematic Analysis**

Once all the interview transcripts had been coded, the next stage was to 'figure out what this coded data means... by clarifying and summarising concepts and themes, grouping information around

particular events or stories, or sorting information by groups of interviewees' (Rubin, 2005:224). Gathering items of data together in this way revealed patterns and connections between various concepts and themes that could be drawn together into a rich informative narrative. Having completed this task it was still necessary to step back in order to recognise the broader implications of what had been unearthed, understand core concepts, and discover themes that describe the situation under examination, so that I could put together a theory that answered the research question providing convincing evidence of the theoretical conclusions (Rubin,2005:245). Throughout this whole process I constantly kept in mind the 'big themes' suggested by the aims and objectives of my thesis: the validity of Moynagh's 'focussed-and-connected' view of contextual church in the context of a multicultural church situation at the centre of a multicultural town; what level of mutual understanding (if any) exists between the various culture-specific churches and groups that currently meet at Abbey Baptist Church; and what being 'focussed-and-connected' might mean, in the light of the *Missio Dei*.

Some of the emergent themes confirmed anticipated areas of common interest, and others were relegated to the back burner as clearly not that important to the participants as I had presupposed. What was important was that the emergent themes reflected the thoughts of the interviewees and not simply the preconceived ideas of the researcher. Some of these themes simply confirmed 'old knowledge' and therefore, though of value in that respect, were not necessarily to make a major contribution to my thesis, whereas other themes generated new knowledge, even possible *kairos* moments! Throughout the process, aware that this method of analysis can be subjective and reliant on personal judgment, I sought to reflect thoughtfully on my own opinions and interpretations to ensure that I didn't miss any nuances in the data, found things that were not actually there, or concealed things that were there and important.

#### **5.1.4 A Deductive Approach**

Having opted to use thematic analysis I also elected to adopt a deductive approach to analysing the data rather than an inductive approach. An inductive approach allows the data to determine emergent themes, whereas a deductive approach includes coming to the data with certain preconceived themes I anticipated finding there based on existing knowledge. I already knew a lot about the situation at Abbey, engaging with both participants and churches on a regular basis over the last four years, looked at their various web pages, watched some of their livestreaming, and having involved individuals from all four churches previously in similar qualitative research regarding the possibility of establishing an English Language Conversation Café at Abbey (TL8001 Practical

Project). Adopting a deductive approach, however, does not indicate a rejection of inductive insights. Whilst the data analysis confirmed certain anticipated topics and themes, it also revealed other topics and themes that I had not expected. In opting to use thematic analysis and electing to adopt a deductive approach rather than an inductive approach, I also chose to embrace a latent approach rather than a semantic approach to analysing the data. A semantic approach entails analysing the specific content of the data, whereas a latent approach includes recognising and incorporating the nuances, subtexts and assumptions underlying the data (Braun, 2022:10).

### 5.1.5 Emergent Themes

Braun and Clarke suggest that these codes, by themselves, are too narrow but they do identify patterns which may suggest emergent themes (Braun, 2022:75-79). Themes are normally broader than codes. Some codes contributed little of value in isolation, but by combining several codes into single themes I was able to create something relevant to what I was seeking to find out from this research. For example, to simply have 'church' as a theme did not accurately reflect the predominant theme of what all the interviewees, without exception, were saying about the church, namely their prime reason for attending their particular church – the friendship, companionship, fellowship of their fellow church members. Having assembled a final list of emergent themes that I felt genuinely reflected the gathered data I followed Braun and Clarke in coming up with a succinct and easily understandable name for each emergent theme. For example, naming one theme 'Koinōnia (Fellowship) – especially in the light of the meaning of **koinwni<a** in the New Testament – was a more accurate way of identifying the predominant reason why interviewees attended their church than any other ecclesial word. The data suggested five prominent emerging themes namely: Koinōnia (Fellowship); Connectivity; Coloniality; Generosity; and Mission.

## 5.2 KOINŌNIA (FELLOWSHIP)

There are many reasons why people start attending a particular church but the reason why they stay is because of friendship. According to the *Pew Research Centre*, having friends/family in the church is a huge deciding factor for many people choosing that church (Church Fuel:2019:1-4). Amongst the many things participants had to say about their churches, friendship/fellowship clearly emerged as the dominant reason why every participant, without exception, belonged to a particular church. I have chosen to use the word *koinōnia* to describe this because it embraces that unique fellowship, friendship, relationship, partnership, participation, sharing, communion, mutual love, indicated by the distinctive use of the Greek word *koinwni<a* to describe the embryonic Church (Acts 2:4).

### 5.2.1 Belonging Together

Christianity has a major variance that makes it different from other religious systems. That difference is relationship – fellowship with God, in Christ, within the fellowship of the Church. As the Apostle John tells us, ‘We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us... and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ’ (1 John 1:3).

Participants from all four churches started to attend their churches for a variety of reasons but stayed because of the friendship they found there. Thus although P.01 ‘always felt more at home in a Baptist Church than anywhere else’ it was ‘finding friends and [having] things in common’ at Abbey that has kept him there.’ P.04 came to Abbey to play the organ but stayed because of ‘the friendship and the love shown.’ P.06 was initially drawn to Abbey by ‘the preaching ministry’ but it is Abbey remaining a ‘very welcoming... theologically diverse... open community’ that keeps him there. Hong Konger P.03 also stressed belonging together as ‘very important’ because, coming to the UK as refugees from a traumatic situation in Hong Kong ‘we [Hong Kongers] wanted somewhere, some community, where they are genuine and caring.’ Likewise, Iranian P.12, having been forced to flee the brutal, repressive political regime in Iran, values the ‘participation of the church members,’ the way everyone shares equally in the life of the church at Abbey rather than it being an autocracy.

Brazilian P.11 was drawn to Peniel because it is church where ‘everybody feels like your family’ a sentiment shared by fellow Brazilian P.08 who describes the ‘fellowship, friendship, communion, family feel’ at Peniel as amongst the church’s ‘strong points.’ P.09, ‘initially attracted to the church by ‘the preaching [and] biblical teaching’ describes this ‘warm feeling of family’ at Peniel as a real ‘strength of the church that keeps him there.’ Although, over time, his confidence in ‘the leadership of the church’ has waned he retains a great affection for the ‘church community... the people... I love them all.’ P.09 worries Peniel is becoming ‘a dictatorship’ rather than ‘letting people discuss ... different viewpoints of theology.’ P.08 also admits to having ‘mixed feeling about Peniel’ and confesses to ‘going through a confused phase of questioning whether to stay or not.’ Although initially she found the church ‘very warm’ she now feels this warmth tends to be ‘within themselves.’ Although born in Brazil she was brought up in the UK and feels ostracised as one of the ‘few people [at Peniel] who have been raised more in England... [I feel] I’m a false Brazilian when I’m around them... like the black sheep’ of the family. So, in contrast to Abbey, there appear to be signs of potential fracture in the togetherness of Peniel. P.09 puts this down to ‘fear of [the leadership] losing control of the church ... and fear of other theological thought be taught in the church.’

Embracing a radically different ecclesiology, where authority is vested in congregational church government and freedom of thought valued, neither of these issues pose problems for Abbey.

P.08 also hints at tensions between herself and the Pastor. Although reluctant to bring this out into the open they clearly have differing views over a number of issues. Since he is an older man whilst she is a young woman, I wonder if this is an example of intersectionality. 'Intersectionality' a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in the late 1980's, indicates how race, class, gender, and other personal characteristics 'intersect' with one another and overlap (Crenshaw, 2022). What is increasingly clear within this research is that although I concentrated on ethnic cultural distinctiveness, cultural distinctiveness cuts both ways – vertically and horizontally – with age, sex, education, class, and so on also coming into play.

Similar tensions also seem to be emerging at Zion. Although Sri Lankan P.13 acknowledges Zion was planted to create a church 'purely for Tamils from Sri Lanka' it is not speaking a common language that binds Zion together but the fact that they are 'a community [that] reaches out to the people who are in need.' Recently this sense of community has been challenged 'because a lot of people from India joined us.' Fellow Sri Lankan P.14 hints at discord within the church, enigmatically describing Zion as being made up of 'two ethnic groups, Sri Lankan Tamils and Indian Tamils' adding that 'only the Sri Lankan Tamils are living in Reading... the rest are Indian Tamils' a comment implying tensions over perceived class differences existing between the two groups. P.13 would like to 'open up' the Zion family to 'people from other cultures' but P.14 is against 'any major changes' preferring Zion to 'stick to [Sri Lankan Tamils] otherwise we will have to open the door to all ethnic groups.' Here would appear to be another example of intersectionality.

### **5.2.2 Together as True Community**

In his book, *Models of the Church*, Cardinal Avery Dulles famously proposed various models of being church and showcases the strengths and weakness of each one before attempting to integrate their contributions (Dulles, 2002). For Dulles whatever model of church Christian people adhere to, that model will have its own peculiar strengths and weaknesses. Whilst each church, in its own way, sought to demonstrate something akin to the 'togetherness' exhibited by the New Testament church (Acts 2:44-46; 4:32-35) there appears to be a feeling amongst some participants that in order to be a true community something deeper than simply a sense of belonging is required.

Thus, the first thing to come to mind for Baptist P.01 when asked about church togetherness and community was to stress adherence to 'congregational government,' subliminally referencing the fact that Baptist congregations are self-governing in that the whole congregation is invited to seek the mind and will of God for the good of the church. For P.01 hierarchical systems of church governance inevitably undermine the concept of church as community. P.06, another Abbey stalwart, albeit with a more progressive approach, believes 'there's more to be done [at Abbey before it can be considered] to be properly a multicultural community [although it is] heading in the right direction.' Recognising the need to balance the spiritual and theological spread of the current community at Abbey, which incorporates 'a large number of [newcomers]... who are either not Christians or new Christians' and the old 'Abbey congregation most of whom have been Christians all their lives,' in a way 'that allows for both to grow?' he likens Abbey to being 'a primary school and a university in the same place.' P.02 recognises Abbey is 'evolving' but sees the 'ageing, white, leadership that still controls the church' as something that needs to change if the church is to 'grow into deeper togetherness in community' subliminally identifying possible microaggression (Sue, 2020). Microaggression is defined as 'a comment or action that subtly and often unconsciously or unintentionally expresses a prejudiced attitude towards a member of a marginalised group' (Merriam-Webster, 2023). Sadly, that was exactly what was happening at Abbey with dogged resistance, unconscious rather than deliberate, by the dominant white-British minority to relinquishing places on the Deaconate to new members from overseas.

Brazilian P.11 'wants [Peniel] to grow' numerically, but struggles to get beyond what 'we really enjoy feeling close... to have the same feeling with each other.' Invited to reflect further on this P.11 responded, 'It's difficult to talk about our church because we think we're a good one!' Fellow Brazilian P.08 sees the Peniel's emphasis on 'spending time together' as both one of its 'strong points' but also 'one of its great weaknesses' encouraging cliquishness. She also believes Peniel spends too much time 'thinking about how to improve less important things like the sound or projection [rather than] planning ahead to where they want to see the church in five or 10-years' time.' She believes if Peniel is to transition 'from feeling like a home group, to be able to evolve into an actual fully functioning sustainable church... they have a lot to decide for future generations.'

Although Sri Lankan P.13 defines Zion as 'a community... that reaches out to the people who are in need' he recognises that this sense of togetherness/community 'needs strengthening.' By this he means 'to love without discrimination, and also to reach out to the people who are in need, and to show the Saviour Jesus Christ is the only way.' P.14, however, prefers Zion 'as it is' and wants Zion to

‘stick to one [culture]’ rather than ‘open the door to all ethnic groups.’ For P.14 true community at Zion is retaining Sri Lankan culture: ‘If they [people from other cultures] can’t dance and preach [like we do]... there [are] other churches around that preaches the word in another culture’ that they can go to. I am reminded of Sue and Spanierman’s definition of microaggression as ‘a subtle form of prejudice that can be expressed through comments and actions’ (Sue, 2020).

### 5.2.3 Sharing Together

A *Smart Church Management* article poses the question: ‘Have you ever thought about what adjectives describe your church?’ When we describe events or practices, we typically use adjectives to paint a picture that clarifies the ‘culture’ of the church in question (as well as possibly saying something about the style of ‘leadership’ within that church) (Lotich, 2018:1-5). Luke’s description of a church ‘given shape... in the Spirit’ (Jennings, 2017:38) begins with ‘fellowship’ and concludes with ‘the Lord adding daily to their number those being saved.’ Central to the description is a community who made a ‘favourable impression’ on the society around them (Acts 2:42-47).

Participants from Abbey recognise the numerous facets of *koinōnia* realised at Abbey are the main reason why people are attracted to the church and why it is growing numerically. P.01 describes the church as ‘friendly... warm [and] welcoming’ and its worship as ‘enjoyable [and] moving’ but the predominant characteristic is ‘friendship and fellowship.’ P.04 sees Abbey as a place ‘where there is friendship, where there is a hearing ear.’ For P.06 Abbey it is all ‘about the community rather than about the theology.’ So ‘welcoming, growing, probably messy’ are the adjectives he uses to describe Abbey, ‘but welcoming would be the key bit.’ Comparative newcomer P.02, describes Abbey as a church that is ‘very welcoming [and] increasingly becoming a community’ whilst another newcomer Hong Konger P.05, suggests Abbey is a ‘different’ kind of church where the ‘approach’ to worship and teaching ‘is quite different... quite deep in the way people understand about the Bible’ but also ‘a very closely knitted community... [where] you feel very much at home [and] the people are very nice and welcoming.’ P.10, a refugee from Iran, is very effusive: ‘I have to say that our church is very simple and lovely with a friendly and very good environment without hypocrisy where you can definitely feel God’s presence and communicate with God.’ He especially ‘loves and enjoys the moments when we are all praying together in the church, or even when I look at the faces of others praying, I get a good sense of peace.’ Another Iranian refugee, P.12, is equally impressed: ‘Abbey Baptist Church is a church that is different. It is not about the colour of your skin. It is about having true faith... and friendship.’



For P.11 Peniel's stand out quality is its simplicity and accessibility: 'We're just doing it the easy way... we share the Gospel, we teach them the Bible... we try to make things simple and easy... accessible for everyone, not push [them] too much.' P.08 agrees emphasising that the 'teaching is biblical [and] Christ-centred' but particularly singles out 'communion, spending time together' as a 'huge, big [plus] point.' The immediate word that came to mind for P.13 when asked to describe Zion was 'community' but essentially a community that 'reaches out to the people who are in need if they have problems.' For P.07 LSI is a 'people oriented' church where the 'focus [is] on building up the individual to understand and know who they are in Christ, where the benefits are of being in Christ, [and] what the responsibilities are [of being] in Christ.'

### **5.3 CONNECTIVITY**

Moynagh understands the logic and legitimacy of culturally distinctive churches but underlines the importance of those churches meaningfully connecting with others in order to mature spiritually. He argues 'contextual churches should grow to maturity within the setting of a mixed-economy church, in which new forms of church and inherited church exist alongside each other in relationships of mutual support.' (Moynagh, 2012:xix).

#### **5.3.1 The Validity of Opening Abbey's Doors to Other Culturally Distinctive Churches?**

When Abbey invited the first of three very different culturally distinctive churches to share the building with them in 2011, Abbey itself was also a culturally distinctive church made up of small number of largely elderly, educated, middle-class, home-owning, white-British people. Subsequently Abbey has recently transitioned into a numerically much larger, younger, multiethnic church which, nevertheless, remains culturally distinctive in that its members have deliberately chosen to become part of something international and intercultural rather than join churches specific to their own ethnic cultures. How is Abbey's original decision to be assessed?

According to Abbey stalwart P.01 it depends on 'what did [Abbey] expect from it in the first place.' If Abbey 'expected a bit more revenue ... it has worked' but if Abbey 'expected closer working relationship... [then] it hasn't!' P.01 grudgingly acknowledges that if by opening the building to these other culturally distinctive churches 'it gives them somewhere to worship in their own language, that's fine... we don't have to integrate with them.' Whilst recognising 'letting out space [to these other churches] gives us [extra] income' he remains resentful towards them because 'one almost feels that they want to take the building over and they want to call the tune.' Once again we see the negative attitude towards stigmatised or culturally marginalised groups associated with

microaggression. Whilst microaggressions are often unconsciously or unintentionally expressed, usually by individuals, they can lead in time to macroaggressions which affect whole groups or classes of people and are therefore much more dangerous (Sue, 2022:xiv). For P.06 it is 'not whether Abbey thinks it's a success for Abbey' but whether the various churches themselves consider the move 'has been successful.' In P.06's view 'all we were looking to do was provide a place for them to be a church... we weren't looking for what Abbey could get out of it.' The motivation was 'here is a church community that are struggling with a place... if we give them a place, they might be a success as a church community of their own right.' He suggests all of these churches should be asking themselves, 'Have they been [successful]' in what they set out to achieve in coming to Abbey? 'How do they re-imagine it after ten years?' P.02 believes Zion 'have no interest in a relationship with us.' Outwardly 'they are friendly, but they want to do their own thing [and] they are culturally a long way away.' Subliminally P.02 appears to be suggesting that the relationship between Zion and Abbey is simply based on conviviality rather than anything deeper, implying that convenience is the primary reason for Zion being at Abbey. Moreover she 'doesn't know if I feel any different about the other [churches] really.'

Brazilian P.11 sees Abbey's decision as 'a benefit because if you don't have a place like Abbey to open the door and let us use the premises to run the Services, we can't do it.' Fellow Brazilian P.09 recognises it was an excellent idea not least because 'Abbey was in danger of losing the building because the congregation was dying [and]... if you lose that premises, we [Peniel also] lose the place.' P.09 is aware that Peniel 'have it in mind to find premises of their own' but would rather Peniel 'engaged more deeply with Abbey... as opposed to moving to another place' in Reading. For Sri Lankan P.13 the rapport with Abbey has worked well and he talks in glowing terms of the 'wonderful relationship [and] mutual understanding' Zion enjoys with Abbey. Whether this is genuine or another example of conviviality it is difficult to judge. For Ghanaian P.07 the decision 'to open the doors to us' at LSI 'is one of the best decisions Abbey Baptists ever took.' He highlights the number of testimonies of 'people who have benefitted from us being there... their stories, their backgrounds... the things they had been... and how these churches helped them overcome these challenges in their lives and now focus on Jesus, and be God centred.' For P.07 there are 'more advantages than negatives' about being at Abbey.

### **5.3.2 Awareness of the Other Churches Sharing the Premises at Abbey**

Edith Prescott is a character in Martha Ostenso's short story *Gardenias in Her Hair* of whom it was said: 'Edith was a little country bounded on the north, south, east and west by Edith' (Ostenso,

1937:84). To what extent are the various churches sharing the building at Abbey similarly insular? What do the participants know of the other churches that share the building with them? Or are they only aware of their own church?

Abbey member P.01 is vaguely 'aware that there are some other churches meeting [at Abbey]' and suggests that 'at one time there was hope of some sort of merger' but is 'not sure that will ever happen [because] there are too many cultural differences.' He also confesses 'I have no desire to do that.' P.06 acknowledges he knows little about the other churches and describes the interaction between the various ethnic groups at Abbey in terms of 'a sliding scale' with

The Hong Kong community [who have become an integral part of Abbey Baptist Church itself] increasingly well integrated, the Portuguese community less well integrated but [who do feel part of Abbey in a sense], and then the other ones [Sri Lankan and Ghanaian]... just kind drift across the premises.

Brazilian P.11 confesses that he, and probably all his fellow members at Peniel Church 'don't know much about the other churches apart from Abbey' and what contacts they do have are 'not deep.' P.09 think it 'important' that a number of different churches share the same building because 'the Church is [meant to be] catholic which means universal... we are supposed to worship the Lord together... Christ is the head of the One Church, not hundreds and thousands of different churches.'

### **5.3.3. Michael Moynagh and the Importance of Meaningful Connection**

I have offered up a critique of Moynagh, and his 'focussed-and-connected' ecclesiology previously (1.1.1) I would single out at this point Moynagh's own view that 'focussed-and-connected church reflects two human instincts. People naturally gravitate to affinity groups, but they also want to belong to a bigger whole.' (Moynagh, 2012:173).

As seen previously (in chapter 4) although Baptist P.01 claims to understand the reasoning behind Moynagh's emphasis on culturally distinctive churches (such as those meeting at Abbey) to find some form of meaningful connectivity he remains dubious about Abbey Baptist Church's ability to respond to such a challenge. Struggling with the limitations imposed by ill-health and old age, and tinged with the cynicism derived from no longer having a prominent place in Baptist circles, P.01 finds it hard to accept change. Equally fellow Baptist P.04's previously cited somewhat saccharine view that it would be 'lovely for us all to meet together' although 'understanding' why the other churches] want to meet with their own' has echoes of the coloniality Mignolo (Mignolo, 2017:2) and others write about, especially given P.04's acknowledgment that her own personal preference is to worship with those 'of my own culture.'

Baptist P.06 clarifies his earlier insightful suggestion that meaningful connectivity is essential, not least because it enables another avenue of learning from other cultures by looking at things through different cultural lenses. P.06 helpfully illustrates this by citing a Palestinian friend, whose observation when invited to comment on Psalm 121:1 'I lift my eyes to the hill, from whence comes my help' responded, 'When I 'lift my eyes to the hills' all I see is Israeli settlements!' P.02 believes the various ethnic churches sharing the building at Abbey 'are simply not connecting at the moment' suggesting that 'the Indians are further away, and the Africans even further away [although] I think the South Americans are probably closer on the whole.' Hong Konger P.05 intriguingly likens being meaningfully connected to the human brain: '[In] our brain... all the brain cells are connected with electrons or whatever which make us viable and energetic and able to think properly. If [something] blocks it or goes wrong – Alzheimer's or Parkinson's – we can't think properly. So to remain healthy [churches] we should be connected, just like our brain.'

Whilst, as noted previously, Brazilian P.11 agrees in principle with Moynagh's views on meaningful connectivity, he remains reluctant to embrace any form of meaningful connection between the various churches sharing the building at Abbey because he questions their theology: '[The] problem is [their] theology... that's the main thing I'm concerned about.' In contrast fellow Brazilian P.08 believes Peniel people do need to connect meaningfully with the other churches, and suggests any reluctance to do so has nothing to do with encountering theological error, but is actually about stubbornly 'not wanting to grow... or change anything for any reason.' P.09 agrees and believes it vital for Peniel people to get 'out of the box' they have created for themselves because 'if you don't... then eventually you will die.' He is clearly aware of the dangers of Peniel's tendency to introspection, a tendency shared with other culturally distinctive churches and groups. He fears that the propensity of immigrant people like himself to find solace in group introspection ultimately means that they do not find themselves at all. He cites the case of his own daughter who 'When she saw she wasn't being given the opportunity to develop her gifts [at Peniel], joined another church, with more opportunities, and enrolled in a course for developing [her] gifts' in order to realise her own potential.

#### **5.3.4 Strengthening 'the Ties that Bind' (John Fawcett)**

In his High Priestly Prayer (John 17) Jesus prayed that his disciples 'may be one, even as we [the Father and the Son are one]' (v.11). Commenting on this William Temple suggests:

The Lord is going away. In the whole world his cause will be represented by this little handful of disciples. If they fall apart, the cause is lost. What is most of all essential is that they be united ... So, the Lord's prayer was (and we cannot doubt still is) that his disciples may be one (Temple, 1947:319).

Baptist P.04 suggests reinstating some of the ideas previously used to try and forge deeper relationships, abandoned because of Covid, such as the 'Four Church Feasts' where the various churches would get together once or twice a year and have a shared meal.' P.06 recognises that Abbey is on a journey of discovery in this whole area of learning to do intercultural church and subliminally suggests Abbey needs to respond to our own culturally different people before fully engaging with the culturally distinctive churches based at Abbey. He poses some important questions such as, 'Where are the Hong Kongers [and Iranians] telling us how they would preach on a passage?' He acknowledges that 'We've got them starting to sing in their own language now' but it feels 'quite often they seem to be singing translations of British choruses instead singing their own songs which is not so good.' He would like to see Abbey 'increasingly integrate [these new] people in leading worship and preaching, contributing to church meetings, and also into church leadership.' Reflecting on the John 17 passage P.06 also believes the various churches at Abbey should make more effort to be meaningfully connected and suggests the way forward is to be found in the various 'churches doing something [together] that impacts on wider society... [rather than concentrating on] worshipping in a different language.' Aware that Abbey has previously attempted a 'side by side' (rather than 'face to face') approach over partnering in order to establish an English Language Conversation Café and that the other churches all opted out, P.06 thinks we now need 'the face-to-face thing' in order to find out just 'what Peniel's vision is, for example.' For P.06 such conversations between the various churches need to 'Start with something that isn't about church or church growth or numbers or theology.' He suggests that such a conversation might begin thus:

Here at Abbey we're really concerned about refugee and immigrant communities in Reading. These are really big problems. We're also concerned about some development issues ... that's why we support Christian Aid or BMS or whatever. How about you ... where do your interests lie?

Brazilian P.11 is open to the idea of having 'one Service all together, every first Sunday, perhaps to see 'what will work or not.' P.08 suggests that Abbey Baptist Church could 'invite [our Pastor] to speak' which she thinks would 'intrigue the Brazilian congregation to come... and give them a chance to meet some of the English people.' P.09 sees this as a two-way thing.' He believes Peniel has a significant contribution to bring to the Abbey churches table, both politically and spiritually. Politically, because 'in Brazil the Christians are standing up against communism, against corruption and against our dictatorship' and spiritually, because 'we have a tradition of Pentecostalism and the gifts of the Spirit which other Christians do not believe... we need to be together and bring these different kinds of faith and beliefs together as a body for us to grow.' For P.09 'everything starts by talking, by communicating with each other.' Because of his concerns about the restrictions imposed by 'Pastoral control' P.09 believes 'We should sit down together and discuss together with the

leadership ... not only with the Pastors ... but a meeting with senior members of both churches and the other churches, sitting together to discuss what needs to be done.’ Sri Lankan P.13 agrees it would be good for all four churches to worship together occasionally and also thinks it would a good idea if Zion ‘also invited others to come to our church as well.’ P.14, however, is not persuaded and reluctantly suggests maybe the various churches could get together ‘perhaps in a Service’ ... but ‘not every Sunday.’ Ghanaian P.07 suggests the various churches should create ‘opportunities for us to share our stories’ but also wants to shift the emphasis away from worship to outreach, suggesting the various churches could cooperate in ‘reaching out to others ... at the end of the day that is our mission... another reason for us to meaningfully connect together.’

## **5.4 COLONIALITY**

Colonialism is ‘the policy or practice of acquiring full or partial political control over another country, occupying it with settlers, and exploiting it economically’ and ‘coloniality (the reprehensible attitude spawned by colonialism)’ as ‘the set of attitudes, values, ways of knowing, and power structures upheld as normative by western colonizing societies and serving to rationalize and perpetuate western dominance; the conditions and/or logic that gave rise to colonialism.’ (Oxford Dictionary of English, 2010). For Walter D Mignolio it is ‘The darker side of western modernity’ (Mignolo, 2011:1). Thus coloniality is primarily the spirit or attitude, prevalent in historic colonialism which (despite the alleged demise of historic colonialism) remains very much alive and active today.

### **5.4.1 Prejudice, Discrimination, Microaggression and Bias**

Prejudice is not a word that is used too often in contemporary society regarding discrimination because it reduces behaviour to the individual rather than dealing with it being both psychological and structural discrimination. Today people talk about discrimination or oppression or structures, or microaggressions, or bias (in its various forms). According to Christopher Balcom et al., there is a clear link between racial prejudice and coloniality (Balcom, 2022). However it is described, it exists, and as Jennings says, ‘We who follow Jesus are working in wounds, working with wounds, and working through wounds.’ (Jennings, 2017:139).

Baptist P.01 believes ‘half the world's troubles are caused by prejudice.’ To illustrate this he cites ‘the race issue’ but as a staunch socialist P.01, somewhat obliquely, immediately finds a connection between ‘the historic slave trade’ and ‘modern day slavery’ namely ‘people being kept on less than minimum wage and being exploited on zero hours contracts.’ More troublesome is P.01’s assertion that various appointments amongst ‘the Anglican clergy and bishops’ of people of colour are due to

‘positive discrimination’ rather than merit, something, in P.01’s opinion that ‘is alienating another section of the community.’ P.06 suggests racial discrimination today may be ‘less overt... but that doesn’t mean there is less of it’ and what has changed is that it has ‘become acceptable’ which he attributes to ‘the current wave of right-wing identity politics that has swept Europe and America.’ He believes racial discrimination still ‘exists within a sub-set of British culture’ even within the Church. He is aware this is an area Abbey is wrestling with recognising that, until the last two years or so, ‘Abbey had [always been] a white congregation that largely attracted white people in the past.’

P.02 suggests that discrimination exists because ‘people don’t have a right view of past’ which will ‘threaten the future if people don’t get over it [and] keep on falling out’ and cites what she perceives as a ‘struggle between the Iranians and the Hong Kongers’ at Abbey to adapt to each other which she attributes to ‘the Iranians [being] quite proud [whereas] the Hong Kongers are much more downtrodden. For me this is a classic case of microaggression, stereotyping both Iranians and Hong Kongers without really knowing that much about either. A specific bias is often learned, absorbed subconsciously, and this, I would suggest, is the case with P.02 who has absorbed a number of ideas advanced by C Peter Wagner and others, over the years.<sup>16</sup> For P.02, prejudice and discrimination are rooted in the demonic rather than in human fallibility. She believes ‘people come with the strongholds of their culture’ and ‘they need breaking off from a colonial spirit.’ For P.02 this is ‘why we find it hard to relate with our three [other] congregations that meet in the church... They’re coming with baggage.’ Hong Konger P.03 claims to have experienced ‘more discrimination’ back in Hong Kong where ‘they discriminate more about your background ... your wealth’ than in the UK. I suspect he has not been in the UK long enough to make that kind of judgment call. If he had come to the UK back in the 1950s with the Windrush generation he might have a different view.

Particularly disturbing is Brazilian P.08’s concerns about the level of unconscious bias she feels exists within her own church, cited previously, relating to her own feeling of ostracization and the seeming exclusion of the ‘one [English] boy who tries to be a regular comer.’ It would be wrong, however, to single out Peniel alone for such criticism. Abbey was guilty of remaining a white-British clique for many years prior to 2020, and some old Abbeyites would welcome a return to those days. Zion also has members who want the church to remain exclusively for Tamil-speaking Sri Lankans. Jennings, reflecting on ‘Christians, Jews and Nationalism’ in response to the question, ‘Should disciples of

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<sup>16</sup> P.02 strongly believes in the influence of ‘deceiving spirits and things taught by demons’ (1 Timothy 4:1) on people today and is an advocate of the theory of ‘territorial spirits’ advanced by C Peter Wagner and others (see Wagner, 2012).

Jesus love their nation?’ suggests a question disciples of Jesus ought to ask, and answer by their lives:

How might we show the love of God for all peoples, a love that cannot be contained by any nation, a love that slices through borders and boundaries and reaches into every people group, every clan, every tribe, and every family? (Jennings, 2017:21,22).

#### **5.4.2 Understanding Historic Colonialism**

Colonialism is defined as ‘control by one power over a dependent area or people.’ It occurs when one nation subjugates another, conquering its population and exploiting it, often while forcing its own language and cultural values upon its people. By 1914, a large majority of the world's nations had been colonized by Europeans at some point (Blakemore, 2019). The impact of colonialism on the way people view their own history and heritage is highlighted by Barack Obama’s powerful statement that ‘The worst thing that colonialism did was to cloud our view of our past.’ (Obama, 2007:434).

The older participants from Abbey all expressed similar views on historic colonialism, aptly summed up by P.01, sixty years ago, the ‘British Empire was... something to be proud of [but] as you get older you realise... the British Empire was not something really to be proud of.’ Younger Abbey member P.06 believes ‘a more rounded assessment of our colonial past would be [of more value] rather than the pathetic tirades [against it].’ Intriguingly the numerous Hong Kongers in the Abbey congregation believe, along with P.03, that colonialism ‘was good for Hong Kong... we really appreciate the colonial cultural influence for us’ although fellow Hong Konger P.05 concedes that for her grandparents’ generation ‘there was discrimination.’

Although aware of the historic colonialism of Brazil by the Portuguese Brazilian P.11 is more concerned about the ‘modern colonisation of Brazil by America’ especially the ‘big influence from the American church in Brazil.’ He sees that ‘many churches in Brazil use the same ideology as the church from America... just because the church there have 10,000-15,000 people, they think this is what we have to do to become a big church.’ Sri Lankan participants also see historic colonisation by the British largely in a positive light. For P.13 ‘That is how [the British] were able to spread the Gospel to other places... they have done a wonderful thing... God has used the colonist... to spread the Gospel all over the world.’ Ghanaian academic P.07 is somewhat more astute. He recognises the many ‘benefits Ghana derived from the church’s role in the colonial project’ such as ‘schools [and] health facilities’ need to be appreciated, but at the same time is also very aware of the ‘great injustices [of colonialism] that shouldn’t have happened ... that happened for a long period.’ He



‘wants to de-link the colonial establishment from the church’ because he ‘knows the church played a role in facilitating that to some extent’ and thinks it important to ‘try to de-link the church from the political organisation of the colonial system’ in order to address the effects of colonialism properly.

### 5.4.3 Colonial Legacy and Decolonial Thinking

‘Decolonisation ... was half a success and half a failure, because [the] native elites who replaced the colonisers still clung on to and perpetuated the exact same structures of privilege and institutions of exploitation’ (Michael Tsang [citing Mignolo] in *Decolonising Modern Languages and Cultures*, Newcastle University, 21.01.21).

The general view of participants from Abbey Baptist Church on the question of the UK’s colonial legacy is best summed up by P.06 when he says, ‘I think on balance it’s probably been good for Britain and bad for the places that we stole all the wealth from.’ Citing the fact that the majority of ‘our Hong Kongers are quite appreciative of colonialism’ he acknowledges colonialism cannot be ‘uniformly viewed always as negative’ [yet] I can’t believe that it was entirely a good experience.’ Hong Konger P.03 thinks their colonial legacy has made ‘[Hong Kongers] more familiar with [UK] society... [and] that we should be part of this society.’ Fellow Hong Konger P.05 believes ‘[Britain’s colonial legacy] is good because it opened my eyes and my mind and shaped the person [I am].’

Brazilian P.11 recognises that the dominant Brazilian-Portuguese culture at Peniel is in part the product of their colonial legacy and, whilst he appreciates that culture personally, is aware of the danger that ‘when you go to another country, another culture... you want to impose your culture on them.’ P.09 also recognises the way Peniel do church is very much shaped by their inherited ‘Brazilian culture’ and she believe it is restricting Peniel from developing as it could because of the ‘deliberate emphasis on Portuguese language and culture’. Sri Lankan P.13 is particularly grateful for ‘the gift of all things English... the English language, English culture and English customs.’ Fellow Sri Lankan P.14, however, sees Sri Lanka’s colonial legacy as ‘mixed’ in that the British helped ‘build the infrastructure’ and ‘pacified [existing] cultural tensions.’ According to P.14 when Sri Lanka was a British colony ‘the [different] ethnic groups didn’t have any problem... they were separated and [the British maintained] the separate system there.’ For P.14 it was only when the British left that ‘the conflict started between the two ethnic groups and the minorities in Sri Lanka.’ P.14 feels strongly about this because ‘It affected my father and my grandfather because there were riots. In 1948 [after Sri Lanka gained independence] the first communal violence between the [Sinhalese and the Tamils] broke out and the minority [Tamils] got affected more.’ The most incisive contribution came

from Ghanaian P.07 who recognises 'there were a lot of benefits Ghana derived from the church's role in the colonial project' and particularly cites the number of 'schools built by the church' and 'health facilities in remote rural communities' where the 'African political systems [of the day] would not dare to go' but at the same time issues a clear call for both de-linking and realistic debate over Ghana's colonial legacy. P.07 wants to de-link the colonial establishment from the church because too often 'we don't find the church's opposition of how colonialism happened, and the sort of things it did... we bundle the church and the political system together' and this bundling together covers up to some degree the 'great injustices [of colonialism] that shouldn't have happened.' He understands 'it is quite a difficult subject to talk about... we all shy away from it, including the church... but we can't just sweep it under the carpet.' P.07 is 'not in favour of reparations but having a frank conversation about it would go a long way to [resolving issues].' According to P.07 'in Ghana today, there are some people who do not want to be Christians because they believe Christianity was used to perpetrate colonisation. How can something that did so much harm to us suddenly turn out to be good and we should all subscribe to it?' P.07 believes it is possible to 'separate the church from colonialism to some extent' but 'a frank conversation about it' is necessary.

#### **5.4.4 Ongoing Coloniality Today**

For Grosfoguel 'Coloniality [is the] colonial form of domination after the end of colonial administrations, produced by colonial cultures and structures in modern colonial capitalist world system' (Grosfoguel, 2008:605-622). The end of colonial administrations was not the end of coloniality, and the same set of attitudes, values, ways of knowing, and power structures upheld as normative by western colonizing societies and serving to rationalize and perpetuate western dominance, continues to this day.

Abbey member P.01 believes that colonialism no longer exists: 'I don't see any desire on our behalf to go out and reconquer the world.' At the same time he personally demonstrates the ongoing nature of coloniality suggesting:

With these Chinese people coming to us, what we say is, they should integrate into our way of life... as the old saying has it, 'When in Rome, do what the Romans do!' and personally I don't have a problem with that.

Abbey's Hong Kongers would be horrified at the thought of being called 'these Chinese people' as congregational members believe there is 'a great gulf fixed' (Luke 16:26) between Hong Kongers and Chinese because of the political situation. Although P.01 speaks of 'integration' he doesn't really want to see these Hong Kongers integrated into Abbey: 'In Reading there are already a couple of Chinese churches where they can go and where the Service will be in Chinese, et cetera, et cetera.'

Hong Kongers who 'wish to learn English can... come into our Services... to learn English, *and the way we do things*' [italics mine]. For P.01 this is 'integration... I don't see it as colonialism. I don't see it as racism. I see it as common sense.' P.01 justifies his view as being 'something that's inbred into us.' In saying this he reveals what Sue and Spanierman identify as the 'invisibility of unintentional biases: I'm not a racist' pattern (Sue, 2020:69,70).

Younger Abbey member P.06 recognises that coloniality exists but believes it to be:

An emergent thing rather than a conscious thing. It is about the fact we are a more comfortable in a culture that we have grown up in all of our lives, and therefore the expectation that everyone should conform to that particular culture because it's comfortable.

For P.06 coloniality is 'kind of understandable [but] comes across as prejudice or unthinking,' an attitude that is 'institutional, an inbuilt assumption that we've always done it this way... so it must be right.' In reality our attitude towards immigrants and refugees should be governed not by us 'being comfortable' but 'about them' feeling comfortable.

P.02 recognises that coloniality still exists today, even within churches, and suggests 'the bigger the church, the more established it is, the more traditional... the more likely that is to be true.' She thinks this is because a 'large proportion of people are just sitting on the pews... consumers... [whose] security lays in never being challenged.' For P.02 such people 'find it very hard to realise that in order to embrace variety, diversity, you must move into something that's constantly becoming fresh and different.' Reflecting on the current situation at Abbey P.02 suggests, 'you can either think that it is awful, or you can think it's exciting... depending on your mindset, your personality.' Without perhaps realising it P.02 (revealing another side of her complex nature) is engaging with decolonial thinking, even decolonial theology. As Drexler-Dreis suggests, 'Decolonial thinking starts from the colonial difference. It is a theoretical practise of resistance and re-existence from sites of border-thinking' (Drexler-Dreis, 2019:28). Hong Konger P.03 accepts coloniality exists in the UK but 'regards this as quite normal [since] everyone has the same tendency to want others to be like ourselves.' P.05 sees the UK as 'a kind of melting pot [where] people all melt together [if] we are open to different things, instead of [trying to] be same as we've always been.'

Participants from Peniel recognise the subtle temptations of coloniality 'to either abandon our cultural roots or impose our cultural ways on others.' For P.11 'We live in UK and... you have to do things in different ways because that is the how the system works here, it's not like in Brazil.' At the same time when Brazilians come to the UK 'we bring our culture [with us], you never leave that.' He

sees a danger in this, however, because ‘in Peniel we are very close in our habits from Portugal and Brazil... are very similar in talking and behaviour and so on.’ P.09. recognises the cultural attributes that a church like Peniel possesses, gifts that Peniel could and should bring to a more ecumenical table but feels that the current approach taken by the leadership of the church is more restrictive than constructive. He sees Peniel’s approach as a kind of coloniality in its own right:

I think there is [coloniality at Peniel] because the leadership has its own point of view in terms of how church should be led. I would like to sit down to discuss these points with them because as church we should develop our talents, our gifts. Church shouldn’t be a monocratic way of viewing things.

On the whole Sri Lankan P.13 sees coloniality – especially the ‘knowledge of the English language, English culture and English customs’ that came with it – positively. Without coloniality he thinks ‘We would have still been provincial... because when the British came, they established us like Britain, so we learn quite a lot of things from the British side.’ He acknowledges that ‘on the other side [of the equation] some of the values that Tamil culture had may have gone out of the window’ and singles out ‘respect for others’ and ‘family values’ as two such examples. One senses P.13 secretly worries British coloniality today could erode the kind of values inherent in Tamil culture. Ghanaian P.07 recognises coloniality in certain ‘sectors of society... in academia, in my department for example.’ This necessitated P.07, ‘together with a small team’ to lead ‘a process of de-colonising, the way we do things in our department, the curriculum we teach... we believe academia needs to be decolonised. So, we have been working on some of these things in academia.’

## 5.5 GENEROSITY

The Reverend Altagracia Perez suggests (cited by Sephanie Spellers):

It's time to bring a different set of questions. Not just how do we get more people, but how do we share power, how do you create a culture that is flexible and fluid enough to be open, constantly a valuating and re organising based on the reality around you?’ (Spellers, 2006:11).

For Moynagh:

Generosity is central to the Christian faith. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are revealed as givers – in the gift of life in creation, in Christ’s self-giving to save creation, in the gift of the Spirit to bring creation to perfection under Christ’s rule, and in Christ’s gift of the kingdom to the Father when God’s reign is complete. From beginning to end, generosity is the story of God (Moynagh, 2024:2).

For Moynagh this means that such ‘generosity’ ought to be more prominent in Christian thinking about the church. The church, as Christ’s body, is meant to be more than an institution, a community – an embodiment of his generosity – a gift that all these other descriptions point to.

### 5.5.1 The Biblical Injunction to 'Offer Hospitality'

'Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it' (Hebrews 13:2). 'Hospitality is not optional for Christians, nor is it limited to those who are specially gifted for it. It is, instead, a necessary practise in the community of faith.' (Pohl, 1999:31). According to Lucy Moore, 'Hospitality is where it's at. Hospitality is where God's at. It's the key that opens the door to the Kingdom.' (Moore, 2016:7). Having previously considered what is meant by hospitality, radical hospitality, and radical welcome (3.2.1 and 4.2.9) this section attempts to understand and interpret the response of the participants.

Whilst several participants from Abbey Baptist Church understood the biblical injunction to 'offer hospitality' in terms of 'offering the hospitality of our home' P.04's contribution was more incisive suggesting 'hospitality isn't just opening up your home [but is also about] walking alongside each other... being available, being there when you are wanted... there to listen ... there to be beside those who are really struggling.' Equally P.06's emphasis on the corporate nature of hospitality is welcome, particularly his stress on 'allowing people to be themselves within Abbey [rather than] expecting people to conform to our culture... a hospitality that takes people as they are, not who you want them to be.' He illustrates this saying, 'we're not telling all Hong Kongers they need to be white Brits, [we are telling the] Iranians you can still be Iranian.' As a recipient of Abbey 'offering hospitality to the stranger' Hong Konger P.03 contribution is especially of value. He sees offering hospitality as 'a very important, very helpful, very valuable' not only for him but for his fellow Hong Kongers. Much the same could be said for Abbey's Iranian recipients. P.12 speaks from personal experience when suggesting offering hospitality involves 'Loving and serving the guest from the heart, kindness and serving and helping are part of hospitality.' Hong Konger P.05 may be reflecting how many of Iranians and Hong Kongers feel at the moment when, without actually saying it, she exposes the very real fear many Hong Kongers and Iranians still have, even though they are now in the UK, as a result of what happened to them in their home countries:

People are still skeptical of others knowing their background. You have to understand and feel safe ... then you will open up. If you don't know the person, you imagine all the bad things. If people are refugees, or they come from persecution, that may enlarge all the negative thinking.

Several Iranian refugees as well as a number of Hong Kong immigrants at Abbey remain reluctant to confide in anyone (apart from the Pastor) because they fear reprisals from their home countries even though they are in the UK.

Although the participants from Abbey's tenant churches also interpreted the various biblical injunctions to 'offer hospitality' in terms of 'offering the hospitality of your home' they also added some valuable insights. For Brazilian P.11 offering hospitality is also about 'receiving everyone without any judgement' and being able 'to help, encourage, be a friend, learn to grow together.' For fellow Brazilian P.09 offering hospitality is about place making – creating a space where even the stranger can feel 'valued, [able to] talk to different people and be yourself ... where you can express your ideas [and share] your experience.' For Sri Lankan P.13 offering hospitality 'could be individually or church wise' again citing Zion's work in London where 'we used our church minibus to go round the City of London at night and help with soup and bread in in the cold season ... that I would say is hospitality ... and also we invite them to our church.'

### **5.5.2 The Difference Between 'Hospitality' and 'Radical Hospitality'**

According to Dunn, 'Radical hospitality requires a fundamental shift from a simple practice of offering welcome to an outward movement to stand with others – particularly those who are at society's margins' (Dunn, 2019:2). For Richard Kearney and Melissa Fitzpatrick 'radical hospitality happens by opening oneself... to someone or something other than ourselves' (Kearney, 2021:13).

The more conservative participants from Abbey Baptist Church initially struggled with this suggested distinction. P.01 recognised that 'to be radical is to be different, or different from the mainstream' but remained unsure as to 'what radical hospitality means?' Somewhat suspicious of what it might entail for him personally he was more comfortable with the idea of Abbey Baptist Church being the venue for demonstrating radical hospitality rather than his own home. For P.01 '[Partnering with Reading Red Kitchen, Care4Calais, Bed4Night, etc.] is the sort of thing that we ought to be doing.' In addition to the above he suggests:

We should be offering our church building as a warm place ... have [the church] open and have some games there and get the newspapers in. I always argued that when we were doing our rebuilding downstairs, we should have put a shower in down there so that Bed4Night people could have a shower. We've got a lovely kitchen so we could cook breakfast for them.

He acknowledges that 'if that's radical hospitality, it is a completely different thing to what I'm talking about... opening our home to people. It's opening the church premises and being willing to go down and spend time there.' He questions whether Abbey 'have the resources to do [all this]' on their own and suggests that Abbey needs 'to involve other churches' but also recognises that 'if they're not going to cooperate or help, you're stymied.' P.04 acknowledges that she needs to 'think through' any difference between offering hospitality and radical hospitality. She believes that the

onus is on the established white British churches to offer radical hospitality particularly to those who are at society's margins, however, 'I think the onus is on every single person in the country – whatever your beliefs, gender, whatever – the onus is on everybody in the world... to walk alongside those who, for whatever reason' are on the margins.

Participants from Abbey's tenant churches had comparatively little to contribute on this issue other than generalities. Intriguingly, however, Peniel's P.09 whilst acknowledging that radical hospitality requires a fundamental shift from a simple practice of offering welcome to an outward movement to stand with others particularly those that are at society's margins, suggested Peniel were not engaging with this 'much at this moment because of lack of personnel, lack of direction, and mainly also lack of resources... Peniel doesn't have the money.' According to P.09 'we need more transparency, more visibility, of what is going on with the church's accounts. We give our offerings we pay our tithes, but we want to know where the money's going.' He suggests:

Some money is going to a mission in Brazil. We help a church in the poor area of a town in north Brazil. [But] in terms of transparency, we've not seen where that money is going. So, in order to happily contribute we want to see that.

Sri Lankan P.13 recognises the difference between offering hospitality and radical hospitality, especially in terms of reaching out to society's marginalised, and suggests that Abbey Baptist Church is already 'doing it ... I can see that because you open the doors for the refugees and other people from other countries.' It comes across as conviviality but hopefully not just that since he suggests we 'could probably meet with the other church leaders and get ideas from them in order to develop this ... not only for Christmas but [throughout the year].'

### **5.5.3 Radical Hospitality or Generosity**

Moynagh prefers the term 'generosity' to 'radical hospitality' with regard to the church's mission:

[M]issional horizons of generosity are not by definition constrained, as with the hospitality model (hosts control the gift and guests fit in); a giving model by nature has no such constraints (there are no limits to generosity and gifts are released). Above all, the heart of mission may best be summarised not by sending (as in *Missio Dei*, the sending of God), but by mutual generosity (as in Christ's self-giving that evokes a giving response). Mission is a series of gift exchanges that can gradually bring the church and the world together – less *Missio Dei* perhaps and more *liberalitas Dei*.' (Moynagh, 2024: Part 2:31,32)

On the whole participants from Abbey found 'generosity' a more understandable term than 'radical hospitality' although P.04 rightly recognised that both 'can easily just be words!' P.06 was not convinced by Moynagh's preference, believing that the church needs to champion co-production

and mutuality as against largesse. Drawing on past experience working with various development agencies he ‘translates... the generous versus radical hospitality debate... into development speak’ and suggests that ‘generous development aid is what we’ve tried to do which is to give lots of money without ever questioning why we have all the money and all of the power, and they don’t... we’ll maintain the hierarchy as it is, but we’ll be a bit more generous.’ According to P.06 ‘all the development agencies are [working on] how do we devolve power down, so the generosity is no longer necessary [and] it’s’ more of a partnership.’ For P.06 this illustrates the two very different approaches: ‘One that maintains the status quo, let’s be generous to all the nice people coming in, as opposed to one that actually welcomes them on their own terms.’ He implies that ‘In development we got to one via the other’ and ponders if generosity might also be ‘a steppingstone.’ Participants from Abbey’s tenant churches again had little to contribute, although Brazilian P.08 thinks he has ‘seen a sign of generosity between Abbey and Peniel in terms that I’ve heard that our Pastor was offered a salary, and also to be a part of [the ministry team] at Abbey.’

#### 5.5.4 Abbey Baptist Church and a Duty of Care

Lucy Moore suggests:

Hospitality comes from the Latin *hospitalitas* (friendliness to guests), which is related to *hospes* meaning ‘host’ or ‘guest’. A hospital originally provided shelter for the needy before the word started to mean a place to heal the sick. The Latin for an inn *hospitium*, is related to it as is our word ‘hostel’. Host, meaning someone who entertains others, is also related to the root-word *hospes*. The same word in English, but from a different Latin root, means ‘sacrifice’ (Moore, 2016:9).

For Moynagh:

‘Giving the church’s self to others through the Spirit should be more than one task among many. Except where the self is too fragile to be offered, it should be the nucleus of the church’s generosity, a launchpad for love toward people round about. This sharpens the focus of not just outreach, but the entirety of the church’s life’ (Moynagh, 2024, Part 2:2).

‘Duty of care’ is a legal obligation that requires an individual or organization to take reasonable steps to avoid harm to another person or party. Whilst Abbey Baptist Church has no legal requirement to care for the other churches that share the premises surely it has a moral and spiritual obligation (as the ‘host’ Church) to show radical hospitality/generosity to its ‘tenant’ Churches.

In the light of this how did the various churches see the host-tenant relationship instigated in 2011 and still employed at Abbey today especially in the light of Abbey not charging rent for use of the building to Reading Red Kitchen and Care4Calais. Generally speaking, participants from Abbey believed they had fulfilled any obligation having ‘given these churches somewhere to worship in their own language.’ P.01 probably sums up the attitude of many of the old Abbeyites in saying this, adding and ‘that’s fine... we don’t have to integrate with them.’ P.04 agrees Abbey’s welcome has



been valuable in that ‘the people who attend the various churches have felt they can worship in their own language’ but she is not convinced Abbey has done all that it could have done, a sentiment she feels is confirmed by the fact that ‘To a certain extent some of them have stood aloof from us.’ An intriguing corollary P.06 introduces, however, is the question of how much being ‘tenants’ of Abbey Baptist Church rather than ‘guests’ – paying rent rather than sharing the costs as equal partners – contributes to this and affects their relationship with Abbey. Citing Michael Sandel’s views about how money distorts ethical systems (Sandel, 2012), P.06 wonders:

If there’s an interesting [parallel here] because we have monetised the relationship [with these culture-specific churches]. They’re paying for a service, which they expect to get. Actually, that means any moral obligation that they have towards us has been paid off with money ... they no longer feel [the need for a closer relationship].

Jayne Reaves rightly argues the case for ‘protective hospitality’ and cites Rigoberta Menchú Tum:

[T]o leave one’s country in search of refuge, to save one’s family, one’s community, meant facing the unknown, and not knowing what would happen tomorrow or whether the place one had chosen as temporary refuge would open its doors and warmly welcome those fleeing terror and death (Reaves, 2016:129).

## **5.6 MISSION**

Amongst the proposals the 1985 *Faith in the City* report called for was for urgent and radical action to be taken ‘to strengthen the Church’s presence and promote the Christian witness in the urban priority areas’ (General Synod, 1985, p.363). ‘What do we mean by mission?’ Stefan Pass answers his own question by suggesting that to be missional ‘points towards attempts to establish meaningful contact with other people with the purpose of influencing their lives’ for good and for God (Paas, 2019:5). For Christians, it is engaging with the missional task entrusted to them by Jesus himself, ‘as the Father has sent me, so I am sending you’ (John 20:21).

### **5.6.1 Faith and the City**

According to Christopher Ives and Andre Van Eymeren:

Religious faith is deeply ingrained in the way cities look and function. In the past, cities were often built with places of worship at their centre, and today you can find markers of faith dotted across every city in the world... Faith also serves a social purpose, bringing city dwellers together to mourn, celebrate, remember, reflect and to help others (Ives, 2017:1).

In the light of this, since all the participants were professing Christians as well as ‘city dwellers’, did they feel any sense of God-given purpose in them being in Reading or did they simply see it as happenstance? Did the Biblical exhortation to ‘Seek the welfare of the city to which I have sent you

as exiles' (Jeremiah 29:7) have any meaning for them? How did they understand the words of Jesus, 'as the Father has sent me, so I am sending you' (John 20:21)?

A majority of the participants identified 'work' as a major reason for initially coming to Reading. Few participants, however, saw their arrival in Reading as part of God's plan for their lives, and rather than simply a matter of happenstance. Church planters P.11 and P.13 felt a sense of call to Reading (although not so strongly that they were actually prepared to leave London and come and actually live in Reading), but the majority of participants left God entirely out of the equation. Some have what might be called 'a short-term mindset' thus Brazilian P.09 openly acknowledges he only 'plans to stay in UK for as long as it's needed to get my citizenship.' Given that over half the participants were either refugees or immigrants themselves, it was of particular interest to discover if any of the participants were committed to 'seeking the welfare of the city *where I have sent you into exile*,<sup>17</sup> and pray to the Lord on its behalf' (Jeremiah 29:7).

### 5.6.2 Understanding the Missional Task

According to Stefan Paas:

[A]lthough nowadays increasing attention is being paid to the missionary nature of the church, at the same time much theological criticism with regard to mission exists... Whatever we may have against particular instances of mission, Christian theology will have to maintain that there is no turning away from Christianity's missionary nature (Paas, 2019:18,19).

To what extent, therefore, did participants understand and engage with the missional task? Some participants, aware of the various social and economic needs of the town, saw the solution purely in terms of evangelism. Thus Sri Lankan P.09 wants 'to develop [a] Christian community in Reading' whilst Brazilian P.13 believes Reading is an 'absolutely a wonderful place for evangelism.' This raises the issue of how the various churches at Abbey understand the missional Task: as holistic, purely evangelistic, incarnational or integral? Participants offered a variety of opinions in the light of Jesus directive 'As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you' (John 20:21).

Confessing to 'being a bit evangelistic' Baptist P.01 defines the missional task as 'spreading the Word' although he never explains what he actually means by 'the Word'. He recalls 'some time ago [being] deeply involved in [house-to-house] evangelism... knocking doors and talking to people' but prefers the more informal approach of 'gossiping the Gospel.' Heavily influenced by her many years as a member of Youth With A Mission P.02 understands the missional task as essentially evangelistic citing the YWAM mantra: 'We believe everyone has the right to hear the good news about Jesus and

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<sup>17</sup> Italics mine.

our prayer is to see fellowships of believers worshipping and following Jesus in every nation, tribe and tongue.’ Enigmatically Abbey’s Hong Kongers and Iranians, whilst also maintaining an evangelistic approach, espoused a softer line. Thus Hong Konger P.05 does not attempt to ‘force [or] convince people... I just tell them Abbey is a different church with different cultures [where] the focus is always on Jesus, and you can come and experience it [for yourself].’ Iranian P.10 underlines the importance of simple friendship central to the missional task: ‘I have to say that our church is very simple and lovely with a friendly environment without hypocrisy where you can feel God’s presence and communicate with God.’ On the other hand, P.06 singles out ‘a place of refuge’ in Abbey’s strapline to underline the church’s holistic approach and intriguingly suggests that such ‘a focus finds us rather than we find a focus.’

Participants from Peniel appear somewhat confused with Brazilian P.08, confessing ignorance concerning her ‘church’s understanding of the missional task.’ P.09 contends that Peniel is indeed an ‘evangelical’ church that wants to ‘spread’ the Gospel to others in Reading but acknowledges ‘I haven’t seen that practically.’ According to P.09 Peniel did have an evangelistic programme at one time but it foundered on the rock of language:

I felt quite constrained... because the leadership wanted me to reach only the Portuguese-speaking people... I felt tied up... How am I going to do that? Am I going on the streets with a Brazilian or Portuguese flag trying to reach these people?

Sri Lankan P.13 is keen to emphasise that Zion holistically ‘reaches out to people who are in need’ but nevertheless ‘evangelism is the main strong thing’ whilst Ghanaian P.07 also underlines an integral approach.

### **5.6.3 Focus of the Missional Task**

McGavran’s homogeneous unit principle appears to be enjoying some kind of renaissance today with the Anglican *Mission-Shaped Church* report seemingly supporting the view that planting a church for only one sort of people can be justified, not least because ‘when two cultures are together in a social context, a healthy heterogeneous mixture does not result – one tends to dominate the other’ (Cray, 2009:108, 109). This raises the question as to whether the various churches meeting at Abbey focussed on a particular group of people.

Participants from Abbey Baptist Church generally recognised that the current missional focus of the church was directed towards refugees and immigrants but disagreed over the value of this initiative, polarised by the differing view of Abbey participants P.01 and P.06. P.01 sees Abbey as being in somewhat of ‘a state of flux at the moment’ chiefly because ‘we’re concentrating on refugees who

this time next year may not be with us.’ When P.01 returned to Abbey in 2018 (after many years worshipping elsewhere) he came back to a numerically small group of largely elderly, white British people – the homogeneous unit who had formed the core of Abbey for many years. He ‘came back home to Abbey’ transferring his membership from a church which had become very multicultural with a black Pastor, wistfully recalling ‘the fellowship and friendship when I first went [to Abbey].’ Like George Bowling in George Orwell’s novel *Coming Up for Air*, P.01 longs nostalgically for days long gone, and a situation that no longer exists, when he wistfully recalls the halcyon days of ‘Coffee Pot Club ... walks on a Saturday ... get together in the Manse’ 30+ years ago. By ‘refugees’ P.01 means ‘all these Hong Kong Chinese being in Abbey’ and also the growing number of Iranians coming to Abbey. He is unconvinced that ‘concentrating on refugees’ is correct and is sceptical about their presence at Abbey: ‘If somebody had said a few years ago this was going to be a vision or a target they would have been laughed out of court... I do ask myself where we will all be in a year’s time.’ P.01 believes ‘the Iranians may well have been moved on’ by the government and thinks, since the Hong Kongers ‘don’t have, what I call, Baptist principles’ they may also ultimately move away from Abbey. He would prefer Abbey to revert to what it was prior to the major influx of these new people:

[A] fellowship [where we can] bond together with other people of similar interests to us... [where] I would be comfortable because it would give me the reassurance of being in my small group with a few people who I have things in common with [rather than] frightened off by all these huge numbers of other people.

Fellow Baptist P.06 takes a somewhat different view. For him, McGavran’s homogeneous unit principle ‘intuitively makes sense’ but as a scientist P.06 ‘would be fascinated to know if there’s any evidence of it... what does the data say... and then I’ll tell you whether or not it’s believable.’ For P.06, Abbey have not deliberately focussed on one specific cultural group or ethnicity but rather ‘a number of different groups of people.’ He believes this is because Abbey’s focus has been ‘needs driven’ rather than ‘ethnicity driven’ in that ‘we have responded to the needs that have presented themselves.’ For P.06 Abbey’s focus is not confined ‘to the people who come to church on Sunday’ but includes all ‘the people who come in and are fed by *Reading Red Kitchen* and *Care 4 Calais*... [the] whole group of charities, community groups [who] cater for people who need space or provision that we [are involved in].’ In P.06’s opinion Abbey seeks to be ‘a church that in terms of congregation has groups within it from different cultures... [where] their culture is celebrated... taken seriously, but not exclusively so [because] there are other cultural flavours there.’ Although a long-term associate of Abbey Baptist Church P.06’s outlook is very different to a number of the old Abbeyites. Rather than wishing to regress, he recognises that the old Abbey Baptist Church is gone and sees Abbey transitioning:

[Into] a place that inevitably contains a number of different sub-cultures, different groups of people. If you look at the demographic trends there are fewer and fewer white people who are Christian and more and more immigrants who are Christian. Churches that survive and thrive will inevitably be able to appeal across a broad range of cultural types.

Participants from Peniel Church agree that the church has a specific missional focus directed towards Portuguese-speaking people but disagree over the validity of this approach. For P.11 Peniel's 'focus is on people who speak Portuguese' and he sees nothing wrong with this. P.09 reluctantly agrees that 'the focus is on Portuguese speaking people' but struggles with the limitations of this focus: 'Peniel is restricted to our own niche and that's not good because... Brazilians, they come and go, they come to stay for some years and then they move somewhere else [or] go back to Brazil.' P.09 would like to see Peniel adopt a different focus transitioning into a 'thriving community... not fixed or caged' to one particular approach. Sri Lankan P.13 acknowledges that 'when Zion started [it was] purely for Tamils from Sri Lanka' but now he wants 'the church to be open' to other cultures and ethnicities, 'to do [Services] in English for everybody so anybody can join who can understand English can join.' Fellow Sri Lankan P.14, however, does not want Zion to extend its missional focus beyond 'Tamil-speaking Sri Lankans.' Similarly Ghanaian P.07 admits that LSI primarily 'has Ghanaians at the moment' but claims 'we are really trying to aim towards becoming an international church' and believes LSI is evolving as they now occasionally have 'people from Bangladesh... Indians... people from Kenya... and even some [white] British as well' coming to their services.

In her typically blunt way Baptist P.02 points to the elephant in the room by asking, 'Have we, by offering [Abbey's tenant churches] somewhere, caused them to keep doing something that actually isn't the best? That's the bottom line really?' For Paas 'we will have to develop an intercultural missiology... mission is increasingly a matter of "mission from everywhere to everywhere" ... mission is not a one directional movement anymore; it has become intercultural' (Paas, 2019:8-11). To what degree, therefore, does the various approaches taken by the various churches sharing the building at Abbey enhance or deny an intercultural missional approach?

#### **5.6.4 Radical Hospitality and the Missional Task**

Yvonne Gentile and Debi Nixon link radical hospitality to the missional task suggesting, 'When we live into the principles of radical hospitality, we give people a taste of the kingdom of God' (Gentile, 2020:1) To what extent do the various churches at Abbey agree with this?

Participants from Abbey Baptist Church recognise that although Abbey's decision to partner with various social action agencies was taken simply to help those in need and not with any underlying

evangelistic motive, it has nevertheless played a significant part in the extraordinary numerical growth of the church. P.01 approves of Abbey Baptist Church being the venue for demonstrating radical hospitality: 'I think that [partnering with Reading Red Kitchen, Care4Calais, Bed4Night, etc.] is the sort of thing that we ought to be doing.' P.06 recognises that, as well as caring for its own, Abbey has 'a ministry towards the people who don't come to church ... [and] I think we've done some really good things there in terms of Bed for a Night, Care 4 Calais, etc.' For P.06 'some of the things we've done ... reflect the nature of what's going on in Reading amongst the homeless people and refugees here.' For P.06 'how do you deal with them... how you do something for them' is the true test of whether or not a church is on God's wavelength. For P.02 Abbey's 'focus is to work out how to be multicultural' and in her opinion 'I would honestly say, I think we are doing it the best in the town at the moment.' She thinks 'in terms of care of fellowship and acceptance, and all of that' Abbey is doing a 'beautiful thing.' Hong Konger P.03 'thinks Abbey [Baptist] Church is doing the connecting people – this part is quite good – we have really connected with each other, with local people and with the Iranians for example.' Iranian refugee P.12 describes Abbey Baptist Church as 'a church that is different. It is not about the colour of your skin, it is about having true faith, cooperation, and friendship of all the members in the work.' For P.12 'in the church, you can find good friends and find answers to your questions... new challenges for your life, see what God has planned for you.'

Participants at Peniel Church see the link but struggle with the practicalities.' P.09 'agrees' that radical hospitality requires a fundamental shift from a simple practice of offering welcome to an outward movement to stand with others particularly those that are at society's margins:

[But] I don't think [Peniel] are sharing much at this moment because of lack of personnel, lack of direction, and mainly also lack of resources. Peniel doesn't have the money to do that programme which I believe is very much part of the church.

Participants from Zion Church of God also acknowledge the importance of this facet of mission, and P.13 cites the use of their church minibus 'to go round the City of London at night and help with soup and bread in in the cold season [coupled with an] invitation to our church to have soup or a meal' as an example of the link between radical hospitality and the church's missional task. P.13 recognises that Abbey Baptist Church is already 'doing it... I can see that because you open the doors for the refugees and other people from other countries.' P.14 also recognises how effective this outreach work has been:

[Because] you would come up from the meeting down below... I would guess like three or four years ago... you would come up, you would look through the door, you would see a handful of people in there, and think has this church got a future? Now, when people come up, you look through the door and see it's packed.

Ghanaian P07 realises the importance of ‘the relationship between the church and the refugees and other vulnerable groups’ and would like LSI to emulate ‘Abbey Baptist Church... in the way it has adopted a different strategy that has really been effective’ in this direction. P.07 acknowledges:

We are learning from you because we clearly saw this as a transition that was really quite a tough one but it worked well. I think opening your doors to the kind of people you mentioned, considered as vulnerable migrants, refugees... is a wonderful decision because, if not for anything at all it gives them at least a place of refuge.

### **Summary**

In this chapter I focussed on interpreting the gathered data and identifying emerging themes relevant to the research question. I began by outlining the various facets I employed in my use of reflexive thematic analysis before identifying the emergent themes arising from the gathered data, namely: Koinōnia (Fellowship); Connectivity; Coloniality; Generosity; and Mission. I then attempted to interpret each of these themes looking not only at what the participants said but endeavouring to discern why they said what they said – what was the meaning behind their observations and opinions. As a result certain issues emerged, for example, although ‘fellowship’ was the predominant theme, in whom or what was that fellow rooted? Is theological difference really an insurmountable barrier to meaningful connectivity? What is it about coloniality that means it continues to exercise such negative power, even within Christian communities, still today? Is it time for Abbey Baptist Church to abandon its long-term host-tenant relationship with the other churches in favour of something more generous? Is the age-old division between the so-called ‘evangelistic’ gospel and ‘social’ gospel rearing its ugly head once again? These and other emerging issues still need further reflection and I am going to tackle them in the next chapter.

## 06 REFLECTION (Looking at the Theology)

### Introduction

In the previous chapter I focussed on interpreting the gathered data and identifying emerging themes relevant to the research question. I outlined the various facets employed in my use of reflexive thematic analysis and then identified the emergent themes arising from the gathered data, namely: Koinōnia (Fellowship); Connectivity; Coloniality; Generosity; and Mission. I attempted to interpret each of these themes looking not only at *what* the participants said, but endeavouring to discern *why* they said what they said. What was the thinking behind their observations and opinions?

In this chapter I reflect theologically on the particular themes emerging from the data in order to ascertain the truth, merit, value, perhaps even a sense of redirection, found there. For clarity I have reclassified the emergent themes into five new headings, namely: *Fellowship of Believers; Focussed and Connected; Coloniality and Power; Radical Welcome; and Faith in the City*. I have also endeavoured to keep my thesis/research question at the forefront throughout. Moynagh champions the concept of church as contextual church. The context of a church relates to where it is located and determines its relevancy in the community and the methods of mission and ministry that it employs. A church's context should dictate the distinctive strategy it adopts to meaningfully engage with the surrounding community as 'salt' and 'light' and 'yeast' (Matthew 5:13-16; 13:33). As Dietrich Bonhoeffer rightly suggests, 'The Church is the Church only when it exists for others... not dominating, but helping and serving. It must tell men (sic) of every calling what it means to live for Christ, to exist for others' (Bonhoeffer, 1997:382).

### 6.1 FELLOWSHIP OF BELIEVERS

The most prominent theme to emerge from the collected data was fellowship/friendship. This was overwhelmingly the reason the vast majority of participants gave for attending their particular church. But what did they mean by 'fellowship?' For the most part they seemed to be indicating the relationship, friendship, they enjoyed with their fellow church members. Were they right to give fellowship such prominence? What does reflecting theologically on this reveal, especially in the light of my suggestion that what we have here is not simply an emergent theme but possibly a major or meta theme emerging as a transcending or overarching theme throughout the data analysis.

According to Haymes, Gouldbourne and Cross:

Fellowship, *koinōnia*, is not simply about meeting together and sharing certain occasions together and developing friendships, but involves an ontological "union" because we are one



“in Christ”. It is a mutual and reciprocal relationship between members of the body of Christ – local, translocal, national and international (Haymes, 2008:38).

For Fiddes, ‘if a local church is under the direct rule of Christ as King, then it is *necessarily* drawn into fellowship with all those who are under Christ’s rule, and so part of his Body’ (Fiddes, 1999:70). The covenantal nature of being a Christian shows that all Christians are not simply in a covenant relationship with God but also with each other.

### **6.1.1 Fellowship (*Koinōnia*): a *Kairos* Moment?**

For Swinton and Mowat, ‘A good piece of qualitative research is like a detective story without a fixed ending’ (Swinton, 2006:30). Consequently, I did not expect the data to simply confirm my original thoughts, views, opinions, and suspicions but anticipated that challenging surprises and unexpected *kairos* moments would also emerge. One of those *kairos* moments for me was the totally unexpected way in which friendship/fellowship clearly emerged as the main reason why every participant without exception belonged to their church and the greatest virtue, they considered their church displayed. Participant P.01 could be speaking for every other participant when saying about his church, it was ‘the fellowship and friendship [why] I first went there... that fellowship and friendship that is still there today.’ The interview data is littered with words such as ‘fellowship’, ‘friendship’, ‘community’, ‘communion’, ‘family’, ‘partnership’, ‘sharing’, and so on, as participants search for a whole gamut of words to describe their church. Although ‘Fellowship’ (with a capital ‘F’) is often used statically to refer informally to a particular Church Fellowship as a place, it is best understood dynamically in terms of a communal way of life. Whilst few, if any, of the participants were familiar with the Greek word *koinōnia*, the adjectives used clearly echo the many faceted meaning associated with the unique fellowship, friendship, relationship, partnership, participation, sharing, communion, mutual love, indicated by the distinctive use of *koinōnia* to describe the embryonic church (Acts 2:4).

Given that ‘*koinōnia*, “communal form of life,” is the first way that Luke names the Christian church in Acts... [and that] *koinōnia* and the other designations undoubtedly preserve names employed by early Christians before they became fully aware of themselves as “church.”’ (Fitzmyer, 1998:269) perhaps it is not surprising after all that (albeit subliminally) friendship/fellowship clearly emerged as both the dominant reason why participants attended their particular church, and its greatest virtue. Although other anticipated reasons were highlighted by various participants – ‘preaching... biblical teaching... worship... language... culture... opportunity to serve... mission’ – none of these achieved

the universal support and emphasis friendship/fellowship did. It would appear from the data that 'the word *koinōnia* means something' (Willimon, 1988:41) to these participants.

### 6.1.2 Fellowship with God

For many commentators 'fellowship' (Acts 2:42) signifies 'the common life of the church' (Stott, 1991:082), 'mutual association' (Calvin, 1995:85), 'the great quality of togetherness' (Barclay, 1955:26). This is overwhelmingly how the various participants appear to understand fellowship. P.04 understands the fellowship she enjoys at her church in terms of 'deep friendship' whilst P.09 enthuses over 'the family feeling around the church'. Undoubtedly this is a key facet of fellowship but is it the only one, or even the place to begin a discussion as to what is at the heart of *koinōnia*?

According to William Willimon:

The church is in *fellowship*. The Spirit has produced *koinōnia*. Some have remarked that the real miracle of Pentecost is to be found here – that from so diverse assemblage of people 'from every nation under heaven' (2:5) a uniformed body of believers is formed... [but] this *koinōnia* cannot be some merely warm-hearted *animorum concordia*, human-initiated brotherly and sisterly love (Willimon, 1988:41).

For John Stott whilst *koinōnia* 'bears witness to the common life of the church... it expresses [that] what we share together... is God himself, for "our fellowship is with the father and with his Son, Jesus Christ (1 John 1:3)."' As David Wright bluntly puts it 'Koinonia with one another is entailed by our koinonia with God in Christ' (Wright, 1988:372). Bruce Milne recognises:

There is no doubt that when we use the notion of fellowship in Christian contexts the ground of our mutual association is implicit... but *koinōnia* in its narrower meaning is a good point at which to begin, because it draws explicit attention to that which lies at the basis of all true Christian fellowship [our] common participation in what God has done for us in Christ (Milne, 1978:25).

Thus, to truly embrace *koinōnia* one must begin with fellowship with God himself, and only then embrace any idea of fellowship with one another.

### 6.1.3 Fellowship With One Another

Emphasising the primacy of fellowship with God does not negate the place of fellowship with one another within the Body of Christ, however. For Stott, '*koinōnia* also expresses what we share... together' (Stott, 1990:83) and Willimon penetratingly suggests that 'The Spirit has produced *koinōnia*... the real miracle of Pentecost is to be found here – that from so diverse assemblage of people "from every nation under heaven" (2:5) a uniformed body of believers is formed' (Willimon, 1988:41). At its best, therefore, such fellowship within a Christian community can be very rewarding and beneficial to its members. It is not surprising therefore that many participants speak with feeling

of experiences within their own church fellowship. P.04 speaks movingly of the deep ‘friendship’ she has found and how important that was when her husband died. For P.06 it is the sense of security that stems from being ‘embedded in a community’ a community that is ‘welcoming and not straight jacketed... a place to be who you want to be and not feel that you are wrong... a safe space.’ For P.11 his church is a place where ‘immigrants arriving in the UK’ can find ‘a community [where] they feel more comfortable’ and P.03, after all the trauma of having to leave Hong Kong in difficult circumstances, speaks of finding ‘people who are very kind and helpful... very easy to communicate with ... very caring’ in his church even though ‘we don’t know each other’ very well.’ For Willimon, as noted previously, this *koinōnia* is much, much deeper than ‘merely warm-hearted *animorum concordia*, human-initiated brotherly and sisterly love.’ (Willimon, 1988:40,41). For Jennings this newfound sense of community is created by the Holy Spirit:

[A]t this moment they were together and ‘had all things in common’ (*kai eichon hapanta koina*, v.44). The space of this common was where life stories, life projects, plans, and purposes were being intercepted by a new orientation. This common is created by the Spirit. How could the things they held dear not be drawn toward the common, this new gathering, this *ekklēsia*? (Jennings, 2017:39).

#### **6.1.4 Fellowship: An Idea Whose Hour Has Come**

When Milne wrote *We Belong Together: The Meaning of Fellowship* (Milne, 1978), he concluded his opening chapter (in which he set out his stall for the rest of the book) suggesting that ‘these introductory comments... have hopefully served to show that in exploring the theme of fellowship we are addressing an area of urgent contemporary significance. We are confronting an idea whose hour has come’ (Milne, 1978:9-16). If that was true in 1978 when Milne wrote these words, I would suggest that it is even more true today, not least because of the validity of Moynagh’s contention that today’s church needs to be both ‘focussed-and-connected’ (Moynagh, 2012:168-180).

## **6.2 FOCUSED AND CONNECTED**

Connectivity was another prominent theme that emerged from the gathered data. Every participant had something to say about issues raised by Moynagh’s focussed-and-connected view of contextual church although, in contrast to ‘fellowship’, opinions differed considerably both concerning the focus of their particular church and the need/desirability for meaningful connection. Personal opinions galore abounded but what does the theology have to say?

### **6.2.1 McGavran’s Homogeneous Unit Principle**

Moynagh suggests that ‘if a church is to be contextual, it must start and grow within a specific culture. Only then can it serve that culture’ (Moynagh, 2012:168). This highly controversial idea is

associated with Donald McGavran's homogeneous unit principle. Eddie Gibbs defines a homogeneous unit as 'a group in which all the members have some characteristic in common' (Gibbs, 1981:116). Although this has a broader application than ethnic cultures – age or shared interest for example – I am relating it specifically to culture-specific churches. This is not to ignore the relevance of intersectionality but simply to position the research at this particular juncture. McGavran formulated this principle because he was concerned about how to reach people most effectively with the Gospel. His conclusion was that people 'like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers' (McGavran, 1980:163) arguing that people are more likely to become Christians within their own culture.

Moynagh's 'focussed-and-connected' ecclesiology is similar to McGavran's 'homogeneous unit principle' in that he broadly agrees with McGavran that people are 'helped to become Christians if they are disciple within the group they already belong to' (Moynagh, 2012:168) and that therefore 'being contextual will mean focussing on specific cultures' (Moynagh, 2012:xix). Moynagh differs from McGavran, however, in that he believes (along with Lesslie Newbigin) that whilst 'homogeneous congregations are a necessary first step in mission [that] should not be the last one' (Moynagh, 2012:169). Equally, Moynagh recognises that there is merit in Andrew Davison and Alison Milbank's call for 'the creation of heterogeneous congregations' (Davison, 2020), and that 'culturally mixed churches are part of the very nature of the church' (Moynagh, 2012:169). Thus Moynagh's 'focussed-an-connected' view reflects a transitional journey in his developing ecclesiology:

[Moynagh's] focused-and-connected view differs from McGavran's by giving homogeneity and heterogeneity equal weight; connecting up is as important as being culture specific. It differs from Newbigin by being more positive about homogeneous churches; they are not stepping stones to something better but desirable in their own right, so long as they have ties to culturally different churches. It differs from Davison and Milbank by allowing individual churches to be homogeneous rather than limiting homogeneity to groups within a church (Moynagh, 2012:171).

More generally, Moynagh's discussion of the homogeneous unit principle is set within a broader argument for new types of congregation, in which he presents a framework for the innovation involved. This framework in turn is set within Jürgen Moltmann's theology of hope (Moltmann, 2021) although nowhere does he elaborate extensively on its substance. New Christian communities are anticipations of the kingdom, brought into the world by the Holy Spirit from the future. While endorsing Moynagh's broad approach, Rein den Hertog questions if every form of innovation can be identified as an expression of God's coming kingdom or whether a social-scientific concept of innovation can be equated with a theological of God's kingdom at all (Hertog, 2023:230), and

criticises the fact that Moynagh is so focussed on the creation of Christian communities that he hardly gives any attention to the individual formation of Christians as disciples (Hertog, 2023:256). Hertog does not directly address the homogeneous unit principle, but one might ask whether he could extend aspects of his criticism to his chapter on Moynagh's reflections on church leadership and ecclesial ministry (Hertog, 2023:221-2257). In the context of his overall argument, does Moynagh equate the organisational implications of affinity church too closely with the kingdom, or at least fail to be explicit about their distance from the divine reign?

Participants from the various churches based at Abbey displayed a variety of contrasting views on this question, often differing with each other even within the same church. Thus at Abbey, Iranian P.10 believes 'understanding each other's conditions and having a connection with the mother tongue [enables him and his fellow Iranian Christians] to better transfer their experiences and information to their fellow countrymen.' White-British P.04, however, doesn't believe this to necessarily be the case pointing to 'the number of Iranian and Hong Kong people who have come to faith and been baptised at Abbey' over the last two years. Much contemporary thinking acknowledges that the HUP 'has been deeply influential in both mission and ministry' in the past but that the time has now come to 'lay the HUP to rest' (Williams, 2021, Part 4). According to Thom Rainer 'the old homogeneous unit principle implied, "We attract people who are like us"' a principle that has been a point of contention for decades primarily over the issue of 'whether it is descriptive (a reality observed) or prescriptive (a strategy pursued)?' (Rainer, 2018:1). For Moynagh, however, the HUP retains value as 'a missional goal' as long as it is seen as 'a missional first step [and] not the last one' (Moynagh, 2012:168).

Williams is probably not alone in suggesting time has proved that 'HUP is neither homogeneous, nor a principle' and therefore he poses the rhetorical question, 'Why are we still talking about it over 60 years later?' Williams answer is, 'The reason we are still talking about it is because it works. People do prefer to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic or class barriers. But just because it works, that doesn't make it right.' (Williams, 2021, Part 3). In particular Williams abhors the 'pragmatism' of the HUP approach, something he sees as having been 'deeply influential in both mission and ministry' much wider afield:

The mission world has a long track record of embracing strategies because they work without thinking through the theological and missiological issues that might be at stake... prioritising speed [in terms of number of conversions] at the expense of blurring central theological categories (Williams, 2021, Part 4).

### 6.2.2 Are 'Culture-Specific Churches' Legitimate?

Whilst Moynagh recognises many churches continue to 'serve significant segments of society' today, he also believes the majority act 'as if nothing has changed outside their doors [despite the] cultural blizzard [that] has transformed the landscape' over the last half century or more (Moynagh, 2012:151). For Moynagh the solution is the creation of a variety of contextual culturally distinctive churches in recognition of the fact that 'the more a Christian community focuses on the needs and longings of a single context... the better it will serve people in that setting' (Moynagh, 2012:179). The key question for Moynagh, however, is 'Are Culture-Specific Churches Legitimate?' (Moynagh, 2012:168-180).<sup>18</sup>

It is Moynagh's belief that 'if a church is to be contextual... it must start and grow within a specific culture... only then can it serve that culture' (Moynagh, 2012:168). But is that belief justifiable? Whilst Williams and Rainer, as we saw in the previous section, think not others take the opposite view. Harvey Kwiyani suggests there are 'many valid reasons' for the continued existence of culturally distinctive churches today not least because 'most first-generation migrants find mastering a new language difficult [and]... they need space to worship in a language they can understand' (Kwiyani, 2018:3). According to Kwiyani a number of Pastors are also only interested in reaching people from their own culture. Kwiyani is probably correct in suggesting culturally distinctive churches in the UK are 'here to stay' because 'they are safe, convenient, and comfortable' (Kwiyani, 2018:3). Chuck Warnock welcomes the emphasis on establishing multicultural churches and believes this 'long-overdue trend is welcome because God is the God of diversity [and] in light of God's call to reconciliation, churches ought to reflect the diversity of their neighbourhoods.' At the same time, however, he maintains 'we still need monocultural churches, particularly among newly arrived immigrant populations.' A number of participants from all four churches at Abbey agree broadly with Kwiyani and Warnock, summed up by Brazilian P.11 who recognises that in his church 'most of the people are immigrants... when we arrive in UK... at the beginning it is difficult, it is a new place, everything you have to learn and it helps' being in 'a Portuguese-speaking community [where] you feel more comfortable.'

Warnock lists a number of reasons justifying why, in his opinion, certain culturally distinctive churches remain necessary:

Firstly, monocultural churches can provide a safe haven for minorities within a dominant majority culture; secondly, monocultural churches allow for minority perspectives to develop

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<sup>18</sup> I have shied away from using Moynagh's term 'culture-specific' in favour of 'culturally distinctive' which I believe conveys what is in mind more positively and broadly.

and be heard; thirdly, monocultural churches can provide a connection to home, customs, language, ritual and power structures that generations of immigrants wish to retain; fourthly, monocultural churches can become points of transition, assisting newcomers [to a new country] as they navigate their new culture; and finally, monocultural churches help resist the marginalisation of minority groups (Warner, 2013:1,2).

Warnock's reasons have considerable merit, and his final point is particularly intriguing in as much as he appears to be implying that the homogeneous unit principle 'was a fabricated construct designed to side-line certain cultures because people (usually white) found it easier to be with people like them' (Warnock, 2013:3).

### **6.2.3 Focussed-and-Connected Churches**

Moynagh understands the logic and legitimacy of culture-specific churches but argues that such churches only 'grow to maturity within the setting of a mixed-economy church, in which new forms of church and inherited church... exist alongside each other in relationships of mutual support.' (Moynagh, 2012:xix). A 'mixed economy church' describes a church situation that embraces both traditional and new forms of worship and ministry co-existing and complementing each other, reaching out to different groups of people and contexts. But is Moynagh correct to place such an emphasis on the importance of connectivity?

According to Marzouk some culture-specific churches only pay lip service to this ideal:

[Such churches] actively seek to preserve a particular culture by trying to exclude external influences and by silencing insiders who are seeking change. Thus, differences and change seem to be a threat; relations with outsiders are minimal or non-existent. In some cases, congregations assume a dominant culture, and while others might be welcomed to join in, they are expected to assimilate into that dominant culture (Marzouk, 2019:14).

Hence, in the Abbey situation P.11 suggests that Peniel Church are reluctant about forging a deeper relationship with Abbey Baptist Church 'for theological reasons' whilst P.13 is equally hesitant because he feels associating with British Christians would 'undermine Sri Lankan Tamil ethical and moral standards.' Sandiford finds this phenomenon understandable and sees it firmly rooted in the racial discrimination experienced by people from the Caribbean, Africa and Asia following the large post-war immigration to the UK following WWII. According to Sandiford a number of these migrants were Christians, but 'on arriving in Britain they sought out their local church to worship... But the mainstream denominations... found it difficult to accept the newcomers as fellow Christians. There was rejection' (Sandiford, 2010:4-6). The response to rejection was that some people left to join or form black churches, and the subsequent spin off has been the flourishing growth of culturally distinctive churches. According to Sandiford although many white-British churches have become

considerably more multicultural/intercultural in recent years 'we do not see similar levels of BME representation among the leadership of mainstream Christian churches' (Sandiford, 2010:3).

Whilst some participants are hesitant about connectivity others are very keen to explore this whole area more positively. Thus P.04 would like to see all four churches at Abbey being 'meaningfully connected... worshiping together' because 'we worship the same God... who is not the God of our [particular] culture' and P.09 would actually like Peniel Church to 'affiliate... with Abbey Baptist Church.' Moynagh roots his 'focussed-and-connected church' view in his understanding of 'Paul's approach to church planting' (Moynagh, 2012:3) and 'how the Jerusalem, Antioch, Corinthian and Ephesian churches combined house-based homogeneous gatherings, called church, with larger, probably town-wide assemblies (also called church), which drew these gatherings together' (Moynagh, 2012:171). These culturally focused churches then met together as 'the whole church' (1 Corinthians 14:23) from time to time' (Moynagh, 2012:171).

Moynagh's appeal to Scripture resonates with my own Baptist convictions but this is not to exclude tradition, reason, experience and community but to recognise with the Methodist John Wesley, that whilst tradition, reason and experience are really important they must always be subject to 'the primacy of Scripture' (Thorsen, 2018:41-50). Although final authority in Baptist Churches is seated in Jesus Christ as revealed in the Holy Scriptures, and not simply in the Scriptures themselves, community is very much part of this discernment process. The Baptist Union Declaration of Principle states:

That our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, God manifest in the flesh, is the sole and absolute authority in all matters pertaining to faith and practice, as revealed in the Holy Scriptures, and that each Church has liberty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret and administer His Laws (Baptist Directory, 2012:339).

Indeed for Fiddes, the distinctive thing about Baptist theology is not found essentially in certain convictions associated with Baptist beliefs but that 'Baptists have *held these convictions together*' (Fiddes, 2003:12). Community has, therefore, always been really important for Baptist-Christians. Whilst Baptists believe that each congregation is independent, and free to make its own decisions under God, Baptists also stress the importance of 'interdependence, because we need each other and each church needs other churches' (Wright, 2016:4).

A Baptist understanding of connectivity, however, should not be seen as purely exclusive. In the late 1990s, the Baptist Union Council set itself the task of restructuring the way member churches associated together regionally and proposed scrapping the old grouping of Baptist churches at district level and replacing them with local clusters of churches. A Report by the Task Group on Associating



(issued in January 1998 for presentation to the Baptist Union Council in March 1998: sections 3.4 and 3.8) recognised that ‘supportive clusters or networks’ had spontaneously grown up over the last few years and that these ‘often cross denominational boundaries’ and Council wanted this to continue (Baptist Union, 1998). Commenting on this Fiddes suggests that ‘not just in the UK but in many places, ecumenism begins with local clusters of churches engaged in theological education, or with mission, or with chaplaincies to hospitals, prisons, education and industry, or with the sharing of buildings, over the local campaign against injustice, or with participation in inter-faith dialogue’ (Fiddes, 2003:194). This, I would suggest, resonates very much with Moynagh’s ‘focused-and-connected’ church.

#### **6.2.4 What Might Being Meaningfully Connected Look Like?**

As previously seen Moynagh suggests that his ‘Focussed-and-connected church reflects two human instincts. People naturally gravitate to affinity groups, but they also want to belong to a bigger whole.’ (Moynagh, 2012:173). The data suggests that the various culturally distinctive churches meeting at Abbey see this, but still struggle with it. Outwardly the hesitation/reluctance about connectivity revolves around things like nostalgia, culture, language, theological orthodoxy, but the reality is that it is more probably about fears of amalgamation, being absorbed into the bigger whole, losing control. P.01 is pleased to see ‘so many new people coming to the church’ but at the same time longs for the old days when ‘we were just a group of familiar friends meeting together’ and fears that Abbey Baptist Church is ‘being taken over by the Chinese’. Participants from Peniel, Zion and LSI all mention ‘culture’ and ‘language’ as ‘barriers’ to closer connection between the various churches. P.13 fears an erosion of ‘Sri Lankan Tamil cultural standards’ and P.11 an undermining of Brazilian ‘biblical and theological evangelical teaching’.

Jennings, reflecting on the anguish displayed by Jewish-Christian diaspora in Jerusalem following Paul’s arrival in the city (Acts 21:17-26) finds resonances between the fears of diaspora people then and now: ‘We who live on the other side of Christian colonialism have watched the emergence of a soul-killing, people-destroying expansionism that forced people into a Christian sameness... that has numbed the minds of many and presented the faith as exquisite subjugation’ (Jennings, 2017:200). For Jennings, however, ‘Like James and the elders we must see the Spirit who enters lives without destroying lives... draw[ing] us into that newness where people do not lose themselves but find themselves through the addition of others’ (Jennings, 2017:200). Understandably sceptical about the success of getting the four churches at Abbey to meet together for the ‘Four Church Feasts’ and disappointed at the lack of participation by Peniel, Zion and LSI in establishing the Abbey iCaf English Conversation Café, but inspired by the positive response from these churches both to Abbey Baptist Church’s work amongst the refugees and immigrants and encouraged by the enthusiasm from all

four churches to my doctoral research, Abbey Baptist Church recently launched a new initiative with encouraging results. On the Saturday before Pentecost Sunday this year (2023), a spur-of-the-moment inspirational idea by Abbey's Minister, resulted in over 60 people from all four churches meeting together for a joint time of worship and prayer together. It was very much a 'level playing field' event in which, although the Abbey Minister convened the event all the leaders and members of the various churches played significant parts. Just like the Day of Pentecost itself there was prayer in a multitude of languages and even though the languages were unknown the passion of the praying was felt. At Pentecost the gift of a common tongue (lost at Babel, Genesis 11:1-9) was not restored but the gift of 'understanding' was given in its place (Acts 2:1-11). The 'Hour of Power Gathering' at Abbey was significant in and of itself and suggested a growing understanding of the importance and place of connectivity was at long last being embraced. Subsequent response was very positive and plans are afoot for further gatherings built around further joint prayer and worship events, combined outreach activity, and regular wider church leadership meetings to find ways of progressing our shared connectivity.

#### **6.2.5 Koinōnia and Connection**

Whilst understandable fear of connectivity exists within all four churches meeting at Abbey – a phobia which has frustrated any form of meaningful connection between the churches for a decade now – the gathered data from this research suggests that *koinōnia* may offer a way forward where other initiatives have failed. If Jeremias is correct in asserting that the various elements – 'the apostles' teaching... the breaking of bread and prayer' – found in Acts 2:42 'describe the sequence of an early Christian worship service' and are all different facets of *koinōnia* fellowship (Jeremias, 1966:118-121) then that shifts the ground of connection away from the purely social to the devotional. As Hong Konger P.05 astutely observes about her church: 'This is not a community centre. You can't just facilitate people to mingle and communicate... and forget Jesus.' The evidence of the 'Hour of Power Gathering' at Abbey suggests that P.05 is correct and that what the various members of the four churches value, and are drawn together by, is not simply social activity but something that also has a spiritual depth and content to it. As Fiddes affirms, speaking of the vertical and horizontal dimensions of covenant relationship with God in the Church, 'the New Testament concept of *koinonia* implicitly joins both dimensions' (Fiddes, 2003:76).

### **6.3 COLONIALITY AND POWER**

Another prominent theme emerging from the gathered data revolved around colonialism and coloniality with mixed views from the participants on the merits of historic colonialism and the

existence of coloniality today. Most accepted the damage colonialism has done although some recognised a number of benefits stemming from colonialism. Intriguingly a number of participants, particularly those from churches with a more hierarchical form of church government, expressed concern at the autocratic level of ‘power and control’ of the leadership in their churches, reflecting the matrix of power associated with historic colonialism and often continuing on today in coloniality.

### **6.3.1 Colonialism, Coloniality and ‘The Great Emergence’**

Grosfoguel differentiates between colonialism and coloniality in that colonialism refers to ‘the presence of colonial administrative structures’ while coloniality refers to ‘the continuity of colonial forms of domination after the end of colonial administrations’ produced by colonial cultures and structures in modern/colonial capitalist world-system (Grosfoguel, 2002:205,206).

Colonialism is associated with the great European expansion from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, when many countries in Africa, Asia, and the Americas were colonised by the major European powers. The Meriam-Webster Dictionary suggests colonialism is largely viewed negatively today as a ‘policy or practice of acquiring full or partial political control over another country, occupying it with settlers, and exploiting it economically’ (Meriam-Webster, 2023) although others believe colonialism did have positive, as well as negative effects, on some colonised countries, depending on perspective and context. For the most part white-British participants saw British colonialism as something they had accepted unquestionably in their youth but in hindsight recognise ‘as something not really to be proud of.’ Hong Konger P.03, however, believes British colonialism ‘was good for Hong Kong... we really appreciate the colonial cultural influence for us.’ Intriguingly Ghanaian P.07 agrees with P.01. Despite the positives that came to Ghana via colonialism he recognises the numerous negatives and ‘knows the church played a role in facilitating that to some extent’ and thinks it important to ‘de-link the church from the political organisation of the colonial system.’ Jennings is particularly scathing about ‘Christian missionaries [who] began teaching the faith and translating the Scriptures into the mother tongues of peoples’ – potentially a wonderful gift for these peoples – but who ‘did not handle that power well’ (Jennings, 2020:7).

‘Coloniality’ is better understood as the same governing attitude of heart and mind that was the basis and justification for the historic exploitation of much of the world and its resources by European systems of colonialism. It continues to permeate all levels of society and subjectivity in the modern world-system including gender, sexuality and identity (Mignolo, 2011). Participants were largely confused by the word ‘coloniality’ although it was certainly demonstrated in some their

responses, not just from the white-British speaking disparagingly of the Nepalis as ‘very rural’, and dismissing the Iranians as ‘quite proud’ but from the other culturally distinctive churches also. For example, the Sri Lankan Tamils dismissing the South Indian Tamils because ‘they don’t live in Reading’ but in more affluent areas.

Moynagh suggests, however, that many today think that the church is on a new threshold, and citing what Phyllis Tickle calls ‘The Great Emergence’ (Tickle, 2008:13), the latest in a series of seismic transitions that (according to Tickle) occur roughly every 500 years:

[Marked out by] a new, more vital form of Christianity... a more pure and less ossified expression of its former self... a brand-new expression of its faith and praxis... [together with a spreading of the faith] dramatically into new geographical and demographic areas, thereby increasing exponentially the range and depth of Christianity’s reach (Tickle, 2008:17).

Moynagh links this to the suggestion by the Roman Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner, that the church has entered a new *theological* era (Rahner, 1979:722), a more theologically decisive transition than in the past. Moynagh suggests that a ‘double de-centering’ of the church within the West, especially Europe, is taking place with the dominance of the Western church being eroded coupled with the church’s expansion in the South and ‘post-colonial calls to unshackle the church from its colonial legacy’ (Moynagh, 2024:13,14). For Moynagh this transition is ‘as radical as when the Jewish Christians admitted the Gentiles’ with ‘the church inherited within and from Europe... losing its central position’ and Christians for whom Christendom and colonial models of church are alien ‘starting to reshape the Body’ (Moynagh, 2024:15).

### **6.3.2 Discrimination, Microaggression and Bias**

The historical root of the concept of coloniality was first articulated by Aníbal Quijano in his 1989 essay ‘Coloniality, Modernity/Rationality’ (Quijano, 2007:168-178) but the ethical root is found in our human propensity to sin, an inner attitude of heart, and mind and will that works its way out in things such as discrimination, microaggression and bias. According to Amnesty International:

Discrimination strikes at the very heart of being human. It is harming someone’s rights simply because of who they are or what they believe. Discrimination is harmful and perpetuates inequality. We all have the right to be treated equally, regardless of our race, ethnicity, nationality, class, caste, religion, belief, sex, gender, language, sexual orientation, gender identity, sex characteristics, age, health or other status. Yet all too often we hear heartbreaking stories of people who suffer cruelty simply for belonging to a ‘different’ group from those in positions of privilege or power. Discrimination occurs when a person is unable to enjoy his or her human rights or other legal rights on an equal basis with others because of an unjustified distinction made in policy, law or treatment (Amnesty International, 2019:1).

Discrimination is bad enough when it is found in society but perhaps even worse when it is found in the church. Thus white-British P.01 is correct in recognising that discrimination is rooted in 'man's inhumanity to man' demonstrated by the ability to 'turn a blind eye to certain wrongs.' The antidote, I would suggest, is not to be found in so-called 'deliverance ministry' advocated by P.02 – reminiscent of Malcolm Muggeridge's observation that 'we human beings have a wonderful faculty for snatching fantasy from the jaws of truth' (Chester, 2003:223) – but in Hong Konger P.05's determination to 'have a good mindset to counter it.' As Timothy Chester suggests:

Spiritual warfare is not about naming territorial spirits, claiming the ground, or binding demons. It is all about the gospel. It is to live a gospel life, to preserve gospel unity, and proclaim gospel truth. It is to do this in the face of a hostile world, deceptive enemy, and our own sinful natures... Advance comes through godliness, unity, proclamation and prayer (Chester, 2003:231).

I would suggest that it is not so much 'deliverance ministry' that is needed as the need to be 'transformed by the renewing of our minds' (Romans 12:2).

The vast majority of Christian denominations (on paper at least) claim to oppose discrimination although some would question this claim: 'The denial of racial discrimination is common because quite simply it *can* be denied due to its invisibility' (Solomos, 2003:77). Jennings, reflecting on the theological implications of story of Philip and the Ethiopian (Acts 8:26-40), suggests that in recent years, the eunuch has become a focal point for seeing sexual and racial difference: 'Both forms of consideration are appropriate and highlight a crucial question that the church has struggled to answer – what does it mean to embrace those different from us for the sake of the gospel?' (Jennings, 2017:85). For Jennings, 'faith in Jesus of Nazareth... draws us to a new way of life, a shared life that disrupts old patterns of living and breaks open cultural, familial, and tribal alliances and allegiances.' (Jennings, 2017:86). Jennings recognises that 'the history of modern colonialism is inside this history of modern Christianity, and we cannot escape its legacies' but is also adamant that 'we can end its trajectories' (Jennings, 2017:86).

Part of this renewal process is to be aware of the subtlety of things like microaggression and bias. According to Sue and Spanierman 'microaggressions [like] toxic rain [are] here, there, and everywhere' (Sue, 2020:3). They hide behind a multitude of seemingly reasonable justifications: 'You are just being hypersensitive and misreading the situation!' 'I'm not a racist!' 'Don't make a mountain out of a molehill!' (Sue, 2020:59-79). For Sue and Spanierman the remedy, the way forward, begins by 'making the invisible visible.' This is 'the first step toward combating unconscious

and unintentional racism, sexism, heterosexism, and other forms of bigotry' (Sue, 2020:26,29). And how is this to be done? Sue and Spanierman make a number of helpful suggestions:

[D]escribe and make visible microaggressions; explain the dynamic psychological interplay between perpetrators and targets; depict the individual and societal consequences of microaggressions and macroaggressions; reveal how microaggressions create maximal harm; recommend individual, institutional, and societal strategies – micro interventions – that will ameliorate the harms aimed towards members of marginalised groups (Sue, 2022:29,30).

It would appear that not only do Christians need to be 'transformed by the renewal of your minds' (Romans 12:2) but also need to heed James' exhortation to tame the tongue (James 3:1-12).

### **6.3.3 Coloniality and Power**

According to Robert Heaney the post-colonial years did not necessarily bring about the end of coloniality. Using Kenya as an example, he shows that the link between coloniality and power continued after independence, and continues to this day in many places. Kenya was established as a colony in 1920. There was a time Kenya's history, even before it became part of a so-called British protectorate in 1895, when people experienced subjugation and oppression. After it gained independence in 1963, however, many Kenyans continued to experience marginalisation and subjugation under nationalist leadership (Heaney, 2019:69). This, I would suggest, is just one example of the residual effects of colonialism. Whether or not that same tendency was already there within local tribalism – as Ghanaian P.07 implies about his own country prior to its own colonialisation – I cannot judge. Most certainly, however, British colonialists in Kenya did not set a good example. For Heaney, this 'highlights the relationship of theology with exercises of power amidst the ongoing effects of colonialism, inner colonialism, and or neo colonialism' whilst at the same time 'points to the need for deeper critical awareness, especially from those in dominant cultures' (Heaney, 2019:69). A major concern to emerge from the gathered data, particularly from within those churches with a more hierarchical form of church government, was the level of control and power demonstrated by the dominant leadership of those churches. As one prominent black church leader shared with me earlier in 2023, 'It is all about power, control, and the theology of doing church the right way!' Thus for P.08, 'the structure of [his church] is all based around the Pastor and the Pastor is the one who decides everything... everything that's decided has to be passed by the Pastor.' For P.08 this raises serious questions about 'safeguarding issues' because 'the church have no policies written down', and for P.09 it raises serious questions about financial matters because 'although we give money nobody knows what happens with it?' Needless to say this model of leadership is completely foreign to the Baptist model where power is seated, under God, not in the

Pastor or Minister or any individual in a church but in the corporate voice of the gathered church meeting together to prayerfully discern the mind of Christ. Tom Marshall suggests:

All leaders handle power. In a sense power goes with the job... but power is as dangerous as unstable dynamite, not only to those it is used on but to those who exercise it. Lord Acton the British statesman is remembered for his famous dictum, 'All power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely' (Marshall, 1991:42).

For Marshall the redemption of power is to be found in responding to what he understands the New Testament speaks about repeatedly:

[The New Testament speaks about] a new kind of leader and a new kind of leadership radically different from anything previously in existence. In one sweep Jesus cancels out all worldly concepts of leadership and styles of leadership, no matter how culturally determined. He says, 'Not so with you.' 'Jesus called them together and said, you know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave' (Matthew 20:25-26) (Marshall, 1991:55,56).

#### **6.3.4 Decolonial Thinking, Decolonial Theology, and De-Linking**

For Drexler-Dreis decolonial thinking begins by recognising colonial difference (Drexler-Dreis, 2019:28), a term used in postcolonial theory to describe the ways in which colonialism has shaped the world we live in today. It refers to how colonialism has created differences between people and cultures that continue to exist today. The colonial difference works in two directions: rearticulating the interior borders linked to imperial conflicts and rearticulating the exterior borders by giving new meanings to the colonial difference. For Ghanian P.07 it is really important for the church in Ghana to delink from the British colonial system primarily because of a sense of guilt by association that damages the Christian testimony in Ghana:

In Ghana today, there are some people who would not want to be Christians because they believe Christianity was used to perpetrate colonisation. So, how can something that did so much harm to us, be all of a sudden turn out to be good and we should all subscribe to it. That is also another difficulty that the church struggles to deal with in Ghana currently. If you do a bit of study, you will know that you can separate a church from its to some extent. We just need to have a frank conversation about it.

According to Mignolo, coloniality is the darker side of Western modernity but this cycle of coloniality is coming to an end. Two main forces are challenging Western leadership in the early twenty-first century. One of these is de-westernisation, which Mignolo sees as an irreversible shift to the East in struggles over knowledge, economics, and politics. The second force is decoloniality which Mignolo explains requires delinking from the colonial matrix of power underlying Western modernity in order to imagine and build global futures in which human beings and the natural world are no longer

exploited in the relentless quest for wealth accumulation (Mignolo, 2012). Drexler-Dreis connects all this to decolonial theologies and suggests that there is a long tradition of theological reflection, some of the earliest of which is found in scriptures that contest empire. For example Jesus' response to Pilate (representative of the Roman Empire) in John 18:36: 'My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world' (Drexler-Dreis, 2019:28). The kingdom Jesus promotes does not have its origin in this world, defined by C K Barrett as 'the field in which humanity and the spiritual world are organised over against God' (Barrett, 1978:536), but is something wholly other to the kingdoms and empires humanity covets and clings to.

### **6.3.5 Coloniality, Conviviality and Koinōnia**

Heaney believes that post-colonial theology has not yet gone far enough in solving the ongoing problem of coloniality and alleges that 'scholars... in the field of post-colonialism, have been guilty of disappearing and silencing embodied religious experience and voice' (Heaney, 2019:87). He advocates what he calls 'a conversional process that turns toward the colonised Christ' because inevitably 'to turn toward the colonised Christ is to turn toward the crucified Christ' citing James Cone:

When one resists evil, suffering is an inevitable consequence of that resistance. To avoid suffering is to avoid resistance, and that leaves evil unchallenged. [Martin Luther] King challenge the power structures of evil. That was why he was killed. King's suffering, and that of freedom fighters around the world, is redemptive when, like Jesus is cross, it inspires us to resist evil, knowing that suffering is the consequence. To resist evil is to participate in God's redemption of the world (Cone, 1997:xviii).

Part of the problem in the UK at least is what is termed 'convivial culture' where various diverse culturally distinctive groups, despite the various tensions that exist between them, nevertheless manage to achieve some kind of genial, cordial, convivial working relationship. Paul Gilroy argues that British society, with regard to issues of race and cultural difference, is one of the best in Western Europe at developing convivial structures which means things aren't perfect but they work (Gilroy, 2004). Culture is never static – it never has been – it is wet cement, continually on the move, and what is happening at Abbey is an exploration of a convivial culture where there is some kind of a mosaic being assembled, a rubbing together taking place, a jigsaw puzzle (with no picture on the box) being assembled. The problem with convivial culture, however, is that although it implies a certain level of cooperation and gives off an aroma of pleasantness, it can remain a veneer. It does not actually go very deep. This is certainly the concern of Hong Konger P.05 who feels that a number of the Hong Kongers coming to Abbey do so 'simply in order to meet with their friends rather than



meet with Jesus' and P.08 who also feels that a number of her fellow church members attend primarily 'to meet with their friends' rather than 'follow the Lord'.

Genuine fellowship with God – *koinōnia* in its truest sense – would change this *laissez-faire* approach to many things, not least conviviality and coloniality. Bearing in mind Heaney and Cone's comments regarding suffering and coloniality it is perhaps helpful to note Milne's recognition that true *koinōnia* is also linked to suffering, when in reference to the thought that as Christians we are called to share in 'the fellowship of [Christ's] sufferings' (Philippians 3:10) he suggests:

Fellowship in the New Testament sense, i.e. a fellowship linked to the suffering of the Lord, is not simply to be equated with the happy bubbly chumminess which masquerades under the name of fellowship in certain circles. True Christian fellowship has a vein of steel in it. It is a fellowship which rises out of the passion of Jesus and something of the costliness and elemental moral reality of the cross will always characterise it (Milne, 1978:37).

## **6.4 RADICAL WELCOME**

Another prominent theme to emerge from the data was to do with issues surrounding what we might collectively label 'radical welcome.' There were a variety of views reflected by the participants ranging from extending hospitality to tenant churches to being made to feel welcome by the host church at Abbey, from offering radical hospitality to the many refugees housed in Reading by the Home Office to the responsibilities that come with a moral duty of care. For Stephanie Spellers:

When I describe a church as 'radically welcoming,' it means the community seeks to welcome the voices, presence and power of many groups – especially those who have been defined as The Other, pushed to the margins, cast out, silenced, and closeted – in order to help shape the congregation's common life and mission (Spellers, 2006:15).

### **6.4.1 Offering Hospitality**

A number of the participants understood the biblical injunction to 'offer hospitality' purely in personal rather corporate terms. Thus P.01 speaks of 'opening our home and inviting people for a meal.' Somewhat reticent about extending such hospitality too far P.01 was somewhat relieved to realise that the question was ultimately geared to elicit views on corporate church hospitality. Although none of the various biblical passages explicitly mention corporate hospitality the implication is that this 'offering hospitality' is obligatory for all Christians and not just for a few. Commenting on Romans 12:13 Tom Wright observes, 'Some, more than others, will be in a position to exercise generous hospitality. But all Christians should expect to do [this] most of the time' (Wright, 2004:77). Of particular interest is the extension of hospitality 'to strangers' (Titus 1:7,8; Hebrews 13:1,2) clearly extending the scope of hospitality beyond that of simply fellow church members. 'Stranger' (*ze'enoj*) denotes 'foreigner' or 'alien' and although F. F. Bruce wants to limit

this to 'strangers belonging to the Christian brotherhood' (Bruce, 1964:389) I would suggest that Spellers is more correct in suggesting that the church is called to be a 'radically welcoming community... that seeks to offer a gracious, warm space to all people, especially to those who have been defined as "Other," systematically disempowered and oppressed, pushed to the margins' (Spellers, 2006:15). She is also probably correct in implying that this kind of ministry is more effective when shared corporately than simply exercised in isolation – there is a kind of synergy that come into play when shared corporately. For Christine Pohl, 'hospitality is not optional for Christians, nor is it limited to those who are specially gifted for it. It is, instead, unnecessary practise in the community of faith' (Pohl, 1999:31).

#### **6.4.2 Radical Hospitality**

According to Dunn (as noted earlier), there is a major difference between hospitality and radical hospitality in as much as radical hospitality requires a fundamental shift from a simple practice of offering welcome to an outward movement to stand with others – particularly those who are at society's margins. For Dunn the adjective 'radical' means 'to affect the fundamental nature of something' (Dunn, 2019:3) so offering hospitality in a radical way means offering hospitality in a fundamentally different way. Dunn suggests that in order to offer radical hospitality as church, it is essential:

We let go of a need to shape people into our own image. We extend radical hospitality when we include people within a community without an expectation that they will fully conform to it. We may even concede some of our community identity in order to be more hospitable to those who we welcome. Radical hospitality sends a message beyond, "you are welcome to join us." It says, "we see you and want to join you, wherever you are." In short, radical hospitality doesn't just ask "do you want to be with us?" It says, "how can we be with you?" (Dunn, 2019:1-3).

Dunn sees this approach as rooted in the life and example of Jesus Christ 'the ultimate expression of radical hospitality' in as much as in the Incarnation 'God entered our story instead of simply demanding that we entered God's story.' For Dunn, this is what best defines radical hospitality – when a church can say we want to become a part of your story rather than we hope you will become a part of ours (Dunn, 2019:1-3).

Older participants from Abbey Baptist Church, weaned on Abbey's radical, progressive, liberal theological approach tended to agree with this. According to P.01 'I think that [partnering with Reading Red Kitchen, Care4Calais, Bed4Night, etc.] is the sort of thing that we ought to be doing' and P.04 agreed that 'the onus is on the established white British churches to offer radical hospitality particularly to those who are at society's margins.' Comparative newcomer to Abbey P.02, however,

held a somewhat different view. An avowed 'charismatic evangelical' with an almost single-minded passion 'to see people saved' she sees little point in the church engaging with social activity 'unless there is a direct route through to an evangelistic opportunity.'

A classic example of Jesus advocating radical hospitality is found in the aptly named Nazareth Manifesto (Luke 4:18,19) in which Jesus encourages a number of principles (drawn from Isaiah 61:1,2) that constitutes something of the radical agenda Jesus came to institute. Inspired by this passage, Sam Wells influential book *A Nazareth Manifesto: Being with God* (Wells, 2015) extends a call to rethink Christian witness and mission and questions the effectiveness of the current trend of intervention as a means of fixing the problems of people in distressed and disadvantaged circumstances. Wells argues that Jesus spent 90% of his life simply being among the people of Nazareth, sharing their hopes and struggles, and suggests therefore Christians should place a similar emphasis on simply being alongside people in need, rather than hastening to impose solutions on them. Richard Kearney and Melissa Fitzpatrick, in their aptly titled book *Radical Hospitality: From Thought to Action* (Kearney, 2021), suggest that radical hospitality happens by opening oneself in narrative exchange to someone or something other than ourselves – by crossing borders, whether literal or figurative. It is call for boldness and bravery – to step away from the safety and security of our particular comfort zone and engage with our contemporary world of border anxiety, refugee crisis, and ecological catastrophe. For Kearney and Fitzpatrick this inevitably brings its own reward. They conclude their book suggesting:

[This] always begins by first listening to and then being willing to exchange with, the other: the widow, the orphan, the alien, the nonhuman, or the narrative stranger we cannot even imagine... We are who we are by virtue of hosting others, and the only way back to the self is through the other who hosts us in turn – showing us, through both word and touch, what we cannot see ourselves (Kearney, 2021:110).

### **6.4.3 Generosity**

Moynagh prefers the term 'generosity' to 'radical hospitality'. In his latest (as yet unpublished at the time of writing) book *Giving the Church: Re-imagining God's People*, he justifies this view by suggesting that when mission is understood purely in terms of service it can seem rather joyless, whereas the reality is that mission is more celebratory, as when gifts are exchanged at a party. Missional horizons of generosity are not by definition constrained, as with the hospitality model where the host control the gift and the guests fit in. A giving model by nature has no such constraints – there are no limits to generosity and gifts are released. Above all, for Moynagh, the heart of mission is best summarised not by sending (as in *Missio Dei*, the sending of God), but by mutual generosity (as in Christ's self-giving that evokes a giving response). Mission is a series of gift

exchanges that can gradually bring the church and the world together – less *Missio Dei* perhaps and more *liberalitas Dei* (Moynagh, 2024:Part 2:31,32).

Participants generally found ‘generosity’ a more understandable term than ‘radical hospitality’ but not exclusively so. P.04 preferred ‘generosity rather than radical hospitality’ because ‘generosity means giving.’ P.06, however, remained unconvinced by Moynagh’s preference, believing that the church needs to champion ‘co-production and mutuality as against largesse.’ Somewhat cynically P.02 does not believe Abbey’s original decision to open its doors to the various culturally distinctive churches had anything to do with either hospitality or generosity but was simply business: ‘You want somewhere, we’ve got room, you’ll give us some money, so why not.’ Sri Lankan P.13 likes the use of the word ‘generosity’ and ‘thinks of all the churches [Zion engages with] Abbey are most generous.’ In contrast to P.02, P.13 puts this down to Abbey ‘not being business minded’ (by which he means materialistic) in contrast to other churches Zion have had to deal with.

According to the biblical record God is extremely generous with his resources. The Psalmist, for example, describes God’s abundant provision for his creation, including humanity, watering the earth, providing food for the animals, and blessing men and women as well (Psalm 104:10-18). James Mays comments on the traditional (if somewhat unexpected) association of this Psalm with the Day of Pentecost to underline the connection between ‘God’s gift of our physical life alongside the gift of our spiritual life... both the work of the Spirit of God’ in order to emphasise the generosity of God in providing ‘life in every sense that the word “life” can have’ (Mays, 1994:337). God’s most generous act, however, was to give us his Son as our Saviour (John 3:16,17), the extent of which is underlined by Baptist scholar George Beasley-Murray’s observation (reflecting on this passage) that, ‘the incarnation, death, and resurrection of the son of God were directed to the salvation of all humanity, not a segment of it’ (Beasley-Murray, 1999:51). Such generosity on God’s part, however, is to be reciprocated by his believing people. When Jesus sends out the Twelve (Matthew 10) on a preaching and healing mission, he reminds them that ‘freely you have received, freely give’ (v.8). Reflecting on this Leon Morris comments:

Until now the verbs have all been present tense, but now we have two aorists. “You received” points back to what God has already given to them; *give* points forward to their own act of giving... the way God has treated them is the way they are to treat others... [as the Revised English Bible translation has it] “you received without cost; give without charge” (Morris, 1992:247).

Here is exhortation to what Spellers calls:

[L]iving with arms wide open... [what] starts with God's embrace of each and every one of us... manifest and deepens with our embrace and welcome of our brothers and sisters, especially those whom the mainline churches have found it hardest to see, hardest to touch, hardest to love (Spellers, 2006:41).

#### **6.4.4 Radical Welcome**

The word 'radical' literally means 'getting down to the roots' and when allied with 'welcome' brings together all the various facets suggested by offering hospitality, radical hospitality, and generosity. 'Radical welcome' is a phrase I have unashamedly appropriated from Stephanie Spellers' book of the same name. For Spellers the label 'radical' as used in 'radical welcome' should never imply the unreasonable, undisciplined action some people associate with the term. Instead 'radical amplifies the welcome, broadening and deepening and launching it to the next level. It also indicates a deep, fierce, urgent commitment to some core ideal' (Spellers, 2006:13) in this case welcoming both friend and stranger. Offering a radical welcome is not about assimilation, or reverse discrimination, or even political correctness. Still less is it about a church growth strategy designed to make the church feel good about itself. To the contrary, Spellers suggests, radical welcome is about the church being hospitable, offering a gracious warm space to all but perhaps especially the marginalised; being connected, meaningfully linking to those God has placed within their orbit; being clearly centred, unapologetically holding to their Christian identity and to the God-given dream they have discerned in the light of Scripture, tradition, reason and their context; being open to genuine change and transformation as the church engages with, listens to, learns from groups who have been silenced, closeted, and disempowered; being intentional in their engagement with these groups in training, research, active listening, and so on; being comprehensive in the sense that the church does not pass the buck to so-called 'specialists' but recognises being welcoming is a way of being; by becoming, recognising that this journey the church is on is never finished; by understanding that radical welcome is beyond diversity in that it is not merely about evangelistic outreach, multiculturalism, inclusion, or getting things right; being faithful, not changing for the sake of change, or a misplaced sense of guilt or adopting a new kind of church growth strategy, but because as church they are saying 'yes' to God's gracious invitation to welcome as Christ welcomes; being compassionate, creating 'space for grace' in the sense of establishing a varied environment in which people can develop and grow; being real, a people of whom it can truly be said 'what you see is what you get' (Spellers, 2006:15-17).

#### **6.4.5 Duty of Care and Koinōnia**

Whilst Abbey Baptist Church, as the host church, may not have a legal duty of care for its tenant churches, I would suggest that it most certainly has a moral one... which is why offering hospitality,

even radical hospitality, generosity and a radical welcome can never be an optional extra. I would also suggest that all these facets are equally true of each of the four culturally distinctive churches that share the building at Abbey with respect of their own congregations whether they be long-term regulars or first-time visitors. As a member of Abbey Baptist Church I despair at the attitude of some at Abbey who, if the opinions of P.01 and P.02 are anything to go by, does not really feel any sense of obligation or responsibility towards these tenant churches, and who would rather Abbey Baptist Church did not share the building with these other churches anyway. If, however, Abbey Baptist Church does have a moral duty of care for these tenant churches, as I believe, how is this best achieved? I would suggest that a more vigorous understanding and application of *koinōnia* could be the best way forward. Reflecting on its use in Acts 2:42-47 Willimon observes:

What is more, this *koinōnia* cannot be some merely warm-hearted *animorum concordia*, human-initiated brotherly and sisterly love. It is a fellowship which produces astounding “wonders and signs” (2:43), not the least of which was that “all who believed were together and had all things in common,” selling their possessions and distributing them to all (2:44-45). Later commentators seem intent on showing such claims to be an idealised and romanticised creation of the later church. Their interpretations testify more to the loss of the church’s confidence in the ability of the resurrection faith to overturn all material and social arrangements. That Luke later speaks of the generosity of Barnabas in 4:36-37 suggests that this early communal sharing was somewhat exceptional within the community. Yet the commonality of goods is set forth as concrete testimony that something unsettling, specific, and substantial has happened to these people. Deuteronomy 15:4-5 promised a land free of poverty. That land now takes visible shape within a fellowship that goes beyond the bounds of conventional friendship. In Luke 19:8 a little man is confronted by the gospel and responds by parting with material goods (cf. Luke 12:13-34). Now a whole community does the same. Furthermore, the spirituality described here is considerably more than some ethereal outburst. Everything they once held has been set free so that the word *koinōnia* means something. (Willimon, 1988:40,41).

## **6.5 FAITH AND THE CITY**

A final major emergent theme from the gathered data was mission... but what is mission? Every participant saw ‘mission’ as an essential part of their particular church’s DNA... but there were a variety of different views as to what this involved. Even within the various churches there were conflicting opinions. According to Christopher Wright, ‘the community God seeks for the sake of his mission is to be a community shaped by his own ethical character, with specific attention to righteousness and justice in a world filled with oppression and injustice (Wright, 2010:93,94).

### **6.5.1 A Missional People**

*Missio Dei* is a Latin Christian theological term often translated as the ‘mission of God’, or the ‘sending of God’ and is a concept which has become progressively significant in missiology, and in understanding the mission of the church, since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. One of its key

advocates David Bosch, suggests 'We have to distinguish between *mission* (singular) and *missions* (plural). The first refers to the *Missio Dei* (God's mission), God's self-revelation as the one who loves the world, God's involvement in and with the world, the nature and activity of God, which embraces both the church and the world, and in which the church is privileged to participate [whereas] *missions* (the *missiones ecclesiae*: the missionary ventures of the church), refer to particular forms, related to specific times, places, or needs, of participation in the *Missio Dei*.' (Bosch, 2005:10). Mission is not primarily something the church does for God but something God is already engaged in, in the world, that he invites his people to share in with him. This is an important distinction to grasp because although the mission of God is essentially unchanging from generation to generation, 'the mission of the church needs constantly to be renewed and reconceived. (Bosch, 2005:519).

What then is this mission God invites his people to share in with him? John records that, following his resurrection, Jesus appeared to his disciples on one occasion and (amongst other things) said to them 'As the Father has sent me so I am sending you!' (John 20:21). As Bishop Westcott perceived many years ago, 'The apostles were commissioned to carry on Christ's work, and not to begin a new one' (Westcott, 1898:294). So what was Christ's mission? Mark tells us that 'After John [the Baptist] was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"' (Mark 1:14,15). At its simplest Jesus' mission was to declare good news from God; the kingdom of God was now present in a tangible way in the world of men and women (in the person of Jesus); call men and women to align themselves with that kingdom; turn to God, his ways, his plans, his purposes; to meaningfully engage with God and partner with him in the *Missio Dei*.

Baptist-Christians have always been a missional people, it is an essential part of their DNA. In 1996 a special Task Group was set up by the Baptist Union to reflect on what could be learned about God's call to 'act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God' (Micah 6:8). The *Five Core Values for a Gospel People* (Baptist Union, 1997) was the result of the work of that Task Group. The fourth of those five core values is that each Baptist Church is called to be:

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. Corporately and individually we are obliged to seek to bring other people to a personal experience of God's saving love and to a faith-relationship with him and to demonstrate in our words and actions God's forgiving and healing love.' (Baptist Union, 1997:2).

### 6.5.2 Evangelistic Mission

John Stott was one of the most influential evangelical Christian intellectuals of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, so it came as a great surprise when, after three decades as a preacher and church leader, he actually changed his mind about the mission of the Church. At the 1966 Berlin World Congress on Evangelism he bluntly stated that ‘The commission of the Church, therefore, is not to reform society, but to preach the Gospel... the primary task of the members of Christ’s Church is to be Gospel heralds, not social reformers’ (Stott, 2015:29). Eight years later, however, at the 1974 Lausanne International Congress on World Evangelisation, Stott revealed that he had changed his mind:

Christ sends us into the world to serve. For he came to serve. Not just to seek and to save, not just to preach, but more generally to serve... Now he tells us that as the Father sent him into the world, so he sends us. Our mission, like his, is to be one of service... [it is in that servant role] that we find the right synthesis of evangelism and social action (Stott, 2015:29).

Stott later acknowledged:

The older traditional view [was] to equate mission and evangelism... in its extreme form this older view of mission [consisted] exclusively of evangelism’ but worryingly goes on to suggest that ‘this traditional view is far from being dead and buried... this unbiblical concept of mission as consisting of evangelism alone (Stott, 2015:16,17).

Although Stott recorded this latter observation a number of years ago now, I would suggest that, despite the belief that Lausanne in 1974 had resolved the age-old division between so-called ‘social gospel’ and ‘evangelistic gospel’ the older traditional view equating mission and evangelism is once again rearing its ugly head in evangelical circles. A number of participants indicated that this was the understanding of mission that was most prominently held in their own churches. Thus Sri Lankan P.13 speaks of ‘reaching out to people [by] doing Saturday evangelism in Reading, despite the weather’ by which he means going out into the town centre, preaching at people on the streets and engaging them in personal conversation about their need of salvation. Even at Abbey Baptist Church, steeped in a broad progressive, liberal evangelical tradition, there are those who would follow a similar line. P.02 has little time for any activity that ‘doesn’t have a clear pathway through to Jesus’ and rarely hesitates when spotting an opportunity to ‘share Jesus’ with someone. This is not to suggest Baptist-Christians are opposed to evangelism. Indeed 3.1 of the Baptist Union Declaration of Principle declares ‘That it is the duty of every disciple to bear personal witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ, and to take part in the evangelization of the world.’ The vast majority of British Baptists would differentiate between ‘mission’ and ‘evangelism’ and understand mission in more holistic terms. Despite its confessed preference for a holistic interpretation of the Gospel – a positioning that drawn criticism from some ‘evangelical’ churches, even some Baptist Churches, in Reading, accusing Abbey



of being 'social gospel' – Abbey has seen a number of conversions and baptisms over the last two years, more so than some of their critics.

One final thing that definitely needs saying – especially in the light of what I see as a certain intensity about those who have an almost obsessive blinkered view about evangelism that often makes other Christians feel guilty failures – is that being an evangelist is a gift (Ephesians 4:11) that not all Christians have. Although we are all called to be 'witnesses' of Jesus (Acts 1:8) we are not all called to be evangelists!

### 6.5.3 Integral Mission

'Integral mission' or 'holistic mission' are terms used to describe an understanding of Christian mission that embraces both evangelism and social responsibility. Rooted in the liberation theology of South America the word 'integral' (the Spanish word indicates bread made from wholemeal flour where nothing is left out) indicates the 'wholeness' of the missional task. Popularised around the world as a result of the 1974 Lausanne Conference advocates have sought to emphasise the extensiveness of the Gospel and Christian mission, and resolve the dichotomy between evangelism and social involvement. Proponents argue that the concept is nothing new but rooted in Scripture and exemplified in Jesus' own ministry.

Ronald J Sider cites the words of Jesus:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour' (Luke 4:18-19)

as one of several passages to support his argument that 'one of the central biblical doctrines is that God is on the side of the poor and the oppressed' (Sider, 1980:130-132).

Richard Stearns (World Vision) agrees: 'Proclaiming the whole gospel then, means much more than evangelism in the hopes that people will hear and respond to the good news of salvation by faith in Christ. It also encompasses tangible compassion for the sick and the poor, as well as biblical justice, efforts to right the wrongs that are so prevalent in our world' (Stearns, 2019:9). For Wright it is a huge error to divide the evangelistic and social elements of the Gospel and the *Missio Dei*:

Two interpretive options fall short of a holistic missional hermeneutic... One is to concentrate on its spiritual significance and marginalise the political, economic and social dimensions... The other is to concentrate so much on its political, economic and social dimensions that the spiritual dimension is lost from sight... Both approaches may be accused of putting asunder

what God has joined together, when what we need to do is to hold together the integrated totality (Wright, 2006:276).

In contrast to the other culturally distinctive churches sharing the premises, Abbey Baptist Church has historically followed the integral or holistic understanding of both the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the mission of God entrusted to his church. In part, this may be due to Abbey's historic progressive or liberal evangelical stance in contrast to the conservative evangelical/Pentecostal/charismatic stance of the other three churches. In the last two years in particular Abbey has engaged in a variety of social action projects, even partnering with secular groups at times, such as Bed4Night, Reading Red Kitchen, Care4Calais, 2:19 Teach-to-Reach. Whilst the aim and objective in each case was not evangelistic – it was to provide accommodation for the homeless, food and clothing for the refugee, English language classes for the immigrant – a number of new people have come to faith as a result which, given the dire straits Abbey was in just a few years ago, caused longtime Abbey Member P.04 to respond:

Amazing, absolutely amazing. The way the Lord has moved. I think it has done us a world of good, those of us who have been there for some years. I know some people who've been there for longer than I have really struggled, and some are deeply unhappy, but I think it's amazing. Utterly amazing. It's left me a bit breathless at times.

#### **6.5.4 Incarnational Mission**

'Incarnational mission' is a term used in Christian theology that refers to the concept of Christians being the embodiment of Christ in the world. It is a way of understanding mission as being present with people in their context, rather than simply preaching at them from a distance. The concept is that Christians are called to be like Jesus, who became Incarnate, came to earth and lived among people, gave himself up to people, rather than simply telling them what to do from afar. For Wells, the essence of the incarnation is God 'being with us' which Wells links to us, as Jesus' disciples, 'being with' various other people – the lapsed, seekers, those with no professed faith, those of other faiths, the hostile, neighbours, the excluded – as well as being with organisations, institutions, government. For Wells 'being with' can also be a refrain that runs through our efforts at mission in that he 'considers five kinds of unbelievers in the first five chapters' of his book (Wells, 2018:18) and advocates simply 'being with' them, albeit in a real and meaningful way, as a means of mission. For example, when Wells talks about 'Being with Seekers' he suggests that 'presence[can] turn into partnership' and that when this genuinely happens oftentimes 'the seeker realises this isn't an instrumental relationship – that they're not a head to be counted, a trophy to be held aloft, a conquest to be boasted of' – and that this in turn could lead to genuine faith and commitment to Christ (Wells, 2018:43-56). Wells recognises that ultimately salvation is God's business but Christian

disciples can play a part, not by persuading people but by simply being there for them – as salt and light and yeast (Matthew 5:13-16; 13:33):

You can't change people's lives for them; but you can walk alongside them and give them trust, challenge, and encouragement while they find resources and strength to make those changes for themselves. That's the power of the word together. Alone, there's nothing any of us can do. Together there's no limit (Wells, 2018:234).

This resonates with the experience of Iranian P.10 – a good example because the language difficulties initially made *verbal* communication virtually impossible – who was baptised at Abbey and became a church member last year:

If I want to explain about the church, I have to say that our church is very simple and lovely with a friendly and very good environment without hypocrisy where you can definitely feel God's presence and communicate with God. And I love and enjoy the moments when we are all praying together in the church, or even when I look at the faces of others praying, I get a good sense of peace.

#### **6.5.5 Koinōnia and Mission**

Intriguingly Haymes, et al., in their book outlining Baptist identity (referred to previously) link *koinōnia* and mission (Haymes, 2008:138,139). For Haymes, et al. the culmination of effectual mission is seen in a response that leads not only to commitment to Jesus Christ but to baptism, communion, and admittance to the membership of a church or fellowship. I want to conclude this section of this chapter by reversing that order in the sense that I believe *koinōnia*, properly understood and practiced, links all the above facets of mission – partnering God in the *Missio Dei*, being effective witnesses, engaging integral or holistic mission, practicing Incarnational mission – and suggests a different kind of attitude or approach to mission. One of the many root meanings of *koinōnia* is 'friendship' and perhaps this aspect and understanding needs a renaissance in terms of mission. 'Friendship Evangelism' is by no means a new approach – I recall it being advocated in my youth more than 60 years ago – although it seems to have fallen out of fashion since and been overtaken by *Alpha*, *The Turning*, and other such schemes.

Friendship evangelism was never really a 'scheme' as such. Friendship evangelism was simply reaching people for Christ by genuinely befriending people. It of course needs qualifying in as much as it is important to see people as people and not as 'conversion fodder.' Phil Knox, in his book *The Best of Friends* suggests that friendship matters for evangelism and implies that the most significant human relationship in someone becoming a Christian is a friend. For Knox, 'We do not become friends with people in order to convert them' (Knox, 2023:117) but we recognise that through this connection, the Kingdom grows exponentially. Friendship matters for unity. One of the beautiful

facets of the church is that it unites people of every age, ethnicity, background and story. The gospel calls us to be friends with those who are different to us. This is a powerful antidote and witness to the fractured world around us. Friendship matters for leaders. In a volatile and unstable world, leading is increasingly challenging. Leaders who are isolated are more likely to struggle, burn out and fall. Leaders who are surrounded with friends can thrive, fight discouragement more easily and last the course, serving the church and flourishing where God has placed them. Friendship is a beautiful paradigm for the good news. 'Once we were enemies of God' (Romans 5:10), but because of the cross and resurrection of Jesus, 'we have been reconciled to him' (2 Corinthians 5:18). Moreover Jesus calls his disciples friends (John 15:15) and demonstrated personally the depths of true friendship: 'Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends' (John 15:13).

### **Summary**

In this chapter I reflected theologically on the particular themes emergent from the data in order to ascertain the truth, merit, value, perhaps even a sense of redirection, found there. I looked firstly at the most prominent theme, an understanding of the Fellowship of Believers as the preferred understanding of the nature of the local church and the fact that it appeared to be rooted primarily in human friendship rather than stemming from fellowship with God. I looked at the response of the various churches to Moynagh's Focussed-and-Connected view of contextual church and pondered what being meaningfully connected might look like for all four churches, particularly if true *koinōnia* was applied to the situation. I considered Coloniality and Power, the link between the two, and the influence of more subtle elements such as microaggression and bias, and how the application of *koinōnia* might positively influence the presence of conviviality and coloniality. I pondered the theme of Radical Welcome, especially how recognising a shared *koinōnia* might enable a greater spirit of generosity and radically alter the host-tenant relationship between Abbey and its guest churches. I concluded by considering the theme of Faith and the City and how the various churches might meaningfully 'share together' (another meaning of *koinōnia*) in fulfilling the missional task in Reading (and further afield). In the next chapter I will think through what an appropriate response or responses to what has emerged could possibly be.

## 07 RESPONSE (Finding a Way Forward)

### Introduction

In the previous chapter I reflected theologically on the particular themes emerging from the data in order to ascertain the truth, merit, value, even a sense of redirection, found there. I looked firstly at the most prominent theme, an understanding of the Fellowship of Believers as the preferred understanding of the nature of the local church. I looked at the response of the various churches to Moynagh's Focussed-and-Connected view of contextual church; Coloniality and Power and the link between the two; and Radical Welcome, before concluding by considering the theme of Faith and the City and how the various churches understood what was meant by being a missional people.

In this final chapter I seek to answer the question, on the basis of all that this whole exercise has revealed, 'Where do we go from here?' This whole process, if correctly carried through, needs to be more than a cerebral academic exercise but should lead up to the crucial question, What should our response be? as the final stage of the pragmatic task. In the light of all that has emerged from evaluating the story of what has been happening at Abbey, gathering the data from the various churches, analysing the data to discern the key issues that have emerged, and then reflecting theologically on these issues, should lead not just to a deeper understanding of the issues or one another, but to the creation of specific pastoral strategies that grow out of the preceding stages that will make a positive difference to the original situation. For Ballard and Pritchard the end product of the Pastoral Cycle must be 'Action that comes out of the whole process on the basis of informed decisions and appropriate initiatives' (Ballard, 1996:85,86).

### 7.1 KOINŌNIA: AN IDEA WHOSE HOUR HAS COME

In the theological analysis chapter I suggested that when Milne wrote his book *We Belong Together: The Meaning of Fellowship* 45 years ago he suggested that the biblical concept of 'fellowship' was 'an idea whose hour had come' (Milne, 1978:9-16). Milne, of course, was thinking of the multi-faceted meaning of the Greek word *koinōnia* and not simply just human friendship. That sentiment I unashamedly repeat here in the response chapter because as I said previously If that was the case in 1978 when Milne wrote these words, I would suggest that it is even more true today, not least because of what I argue is the validity of Moynagh's contention that today's church needs to be both 'focussed-and-connected' (Moynagh, 2012:168-180). Amongst the several reasons why Milne's proposition rings true, let me single out two indicative of ways the Abbey churches could move forward.

### **7.1.1 Koinōnia Fellowship Centres Us On God Rather Than Ourselves**

*Koinōnia* fellowship, as we have seen, *begins* with ‘fellowship with God’ (1 John 1:1-4) rather than fellowship with each other. The overwhelming evidence stemming from the gathered data was that the participants tended to understand fellowship purely in terms of convivial human friendship. Although understandable it was not necessarily healthy and led to criticisms that in some cases it led to cliquishness and ostracization. Certainly attempts to get the four churches together purely on a social basis – the so-called ‘Four Church Feasts’ – had been a failure. They had been difficult to organise, oftentimes certain churches just did not turn up, and when they did attendees sat in their own filial groups and ate their own food. When a spontaneous ‘Hour of Power’ event was arranged on Pentecost Saturday this year – an opportunity to worship and pray together lots of people from all four churches attended and it proved to be an inspiring time, leading to requests from all four churches that this kind of prayer fellowship be repeated regularly.

### **7.1.2 Koinōnia Fellowship Indicates a More Humane Way of Being Church**

*Koinōnia* fellowship is also ‘fellowship with one another’ in the Body of Christ (Acts 2:42-47) but this kind of fellowship is more than friendship with like-minded people. The Greek word *koinōnia* implies a Spirit-inspired filial relationship (as at Pentecost) that cuts through racial, class and gender barriers and builds bridges between peoples separated by difference. It is in many ways a kinder, more humane way of being church where *agapē* love is at the heart than is often the norm. A number of participants either hinted at, or bluntly expressed, concern at the top-down leadership style of their churches with one participant describing his church as ‘a dictatorship’. This is not to suggest that Abbey Baptist Church’s congregational approach to church government is in and of itself the solution. Brian Haymes, et al., (citing Henry Wheeler Robinson) recognise ‘the Baptists’ strength is also often their weakness’ and ‘in practice Baptist life [can also be] dominated by powerful individuals or groups who have held sway.’ According to Haymes, et al., Wheeler Robinson goes on to suggest that ‘as far as the church meeting is concerned, it is *not* a democracy, but a theocracy, and the purpose of the coming together of members is, through listening to the scriptures, prayer and listening to one another, to discern the mind of Christ’ (Haymes, 2009:41). When correctly practised, ‘the communion of saints’ within a Baptist Church – where ‘no one thinks more highly of themselves than they ought’ (Romans 12:3) and ‘everyone esteems others as better than themselves’ (Romans 13:1) – can serve as a model for other Christian communities of true *koinōnia* fellowship.

## **7.2 UNITY IN DIVERSITY**

At one time or another all three tenant churches at Abbey have considered affiliating with the Baptist Union and, certainly in the case of Peniel, amalgamation with Abbey Baptist Church has been voiced. All three tenant churches have subsequently appeared to harden their attitude in this direction, but although any possibility of amalgamation is now highly unlikely I would suggest some form of meaningful connectivity is well worth pursuing. My research has already helped to break down various barriers and I have received a warm response from all the churches to my suggestion that in the autumn we trial a primary leaders symposium to discuss a corporate way forward. The various churches already share various items of equipment ranging from the use of musical instruments and sound/visual equipment to kitchen and office facilities. Plans are also afoot for further combined prayer evenings, cross-over worship events, and shared outreach activities. The key appears to be following a relational approach rather than an institutional one. Finding unity in diversity along Moynagh's line that today's church needs to be both 'focussed-and-connected.'

## **7.3 A KINDLIER WAY OF BEING CHURCH**

In 1946 William Ralph Inge wrote a collection of essays on Christianity and the Church of England entitled *A Kinder Church*. The book was published after World War II and was written in response to the changes that were taking place in the Church of England at that time. Critical of the Church's traditionalism Inge called for a more liberal and inclusive approach to Christianity. In the light of all that was unearthed regarding on going coloniality, microaggression, bias, and the like, I would suggest a kindlier approach to one another is something that needs to be taken all round. As with true *koinōnia* fellowship, the onus is on Abbey Baptist Church not only as the host church but as a church whom the other churches are beginning to look up to, can serve as a model for other Christian communities at Abbey. It is important that Abbey do not do this in a colonial way but in a way that follows the pattern of 'servant leadership' and in a spirit co-production – learning and growing together – in which 'no one thinks more highly of themselves than they ought' (Romans 12:3) and 'everyone esteems others as better than themselves' (Romans 13:1). As Milne reminds us, as far as true fellowship goes, 'love [is at] the heart of the matter' (Milne, 1978:39-49).

## **7.4 A GIVING CHURCH**

As previously noted Moynagh prefers the term 'generosity' to 'radical hospitality'. In his latest (as yet unpublished) book *Giving the Church: Re-imagining God's People*, the essence is a call for the Church to give itself away. For Moynagh missional horizons of generosity 'are not by definition constrained, as with the hospitality model where the host controls the gift and the guests fit in. A giving model by

nature has no such constraints – there are no limits to generosity and gifts are released.’ (Moynagh, 2024:Part 2:31,32). For Moynagh

Generosity is central to the Christian faith. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are revealed as givers - in the gift of life in creation, in Christ’s self-giving to save creation, in the gift of the Spirit to bring creation to perfection under Christ’s rule, and in Christ’s gift of the kingdom to the Father when God’s reign is complete. From beginning to end, generosity is the story of God. In which case, might we not expect generosity to be the focus of Christian thinking about the church? Might we not suppose the church to be more than an institution, a communion and so on? Might not the church as Christ’s body be an embodiment of his generosity – a gift that all these other descriptions point to? (Moynagh, 2024:2).

Has the time come for Abbey to abandon the ‘host-tenant’ relationship in favour of something more akin to a ‘shared partnership’ (another possible interpretation of *koinwni*) replacing the ‘monetising’ of Abbey’s relationship with the other churches with something more communal, for example?

## **7.5 A RE-BAPTISING OF MISSIOLOGY**

In our consideration of the missional task entrusted by Jesus to his Church, the general air of confusion as to what Jesus meant by ‘as the Father has sent me, so I am sending you’ (John 20:21), and the subsequent lack of meaningful activity on this front, came to the fore. As noted at the time Stefan Paas suggests that a ‘search for an intercultural missiology’ is overdue and calls for a ‘rebaptising of missiology’ (Paas, 2019:8-11). Since all four churches at Abbey practice ‘believers’ baptism by total immersion’ Paas’ analogy has a particular resonance – our missiology needs an outrageous drenching rather than a respectable sprinkling, I would suggest. Paas poses a number of questions Abbey folk need to also face up to. ‘Has mission become so suspect that we need to get rid of it altogether? Has it become so entangled with a problematic history that mission is now merely a source of shame and embarrassment? Has conversion become a dirty word?’ Paas response to these questions is that ‘we have to develop an intercultural missiology’ because we now live in a post-colonial era in which Western Christians have to realise that they are no longer (and never were) the guardians of mission, and today mission is increasingly a matter of ‘mission from everywhere to everywhere.’ (Paas, 2019:10). The situation as Abbey, I would suggest, provides a great opportunity to work this through in a significant way.

## **7.6 A CALL TO ACTION**

No research of this nature is complete without some kind of action plan; it cannot end simply with the formulation of theory. For Ballard and Pritchard:



A list must be produced of what has to be done, in general outline... the next stage is the formulation of a specific plan, taking into account the areas of necessary action... the plan is implemented according to [an] agreed timeframe and by designated people (Ballard, 2006:174).

Thus, in August 2023, I was invited by the Deacons at Abbey to lead a 'Vision Day' for the leadership team at Abbey where a number of the outcomes emerging from my research were discussed, and measures to implement some of them were commenced. This could only be a first phase in an ongoing action plan because at this stage the leaders of the other churches were not involved. Amongst the potential 'actions' under consideration are the following.

### **7.6.1 Partnership with CommuniCare**

Having learned of our work with refugees and immigrants Abbey have been approached by CommuniCare, a local volunteer led charity:

[Dedicated to] help people in Reading meet their complete needs through offering information, advice and support... always acting in the best interests of the people we help, working with people not issues, empowering people in their situation and thereby building independence... being flexible in our approach and linking people to communities where appropriate.<sup>19</sup>

A meeting is planned for the autumn of 2023 to discuss the exciting possibility of partnering with them.

### **7.6.2 Planning for Numerical and Spiritual Growth**

The increasing numbers of both Iranians and Hong Kongers attending Abbey – with more Iranian refugees arriving almost daily in Reading and the next wave of immigrants from Hong Kong due soon – has necessitated serious thought about either planting a new congregation in Green Park (where about 20 members of the congregation already live) or running a second Service on a Sunday morning. With the horizontal and vertical aspects of intersectionality in mind these two Services would be very different, one traditional and the other more contemporary, although built around the same theme. Ideally, they would run consecutively rather than concurrently (with a break for coffee/change over in the middle). In addition to this Focus Groups are also being set up to enable homogeneous units to develop harmoniously and progressively. It was also recognised that although Abbey's aim is to be an international, intercultural church perhaps Abbey's calling (certainly currently) is especially to Iranians and Hong Kongers.

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<sup>19</sup> CommuniCare is a charitable organisation helping people in Reading by offering information, advice, and support. Found at <https://www.communicare.org.uk/about/> Last accessed 20.07.23.

### **7.6.3 Cross-Cultural Leadership and Church Gatherings**

One of the spinoff results of my research has been an enthusiasm shown by the primary leadership in each of the four churches to meet up on a regular basis simply to pray, share, grow, and get to know one another better. Now that I am about to submit my thesis I can progress this beginning in autumn 2023 once everyone has returned from their holidays. After the success of the united churches 'Hour of Power' worship and prayer meeting at Pentecost there is also great enthusiasm amongst the various churches for this to be repeated on a regular basis. It is also Abbey's intention to invite the Pastors/tenant churches to take Services at Abbey (in their own style) in order to introduce themselves to Abbey and enable some form of cross-fertilisation of koinōnia.

### **7.6.4 Progressing the Leadership at Abbey**

With their Pastor Julia, due to retire in May 2024, discussions are underway as to where Abbey Baptist Church goes from here. The suggestion is that she stays on as Senior Minister (possibly for another two years at least) and that in the meantime Abbey begin the quest for her successor. The thought is that an Associate Minister be appointed as soon as possible, that she/he be a 'person of colour' who would work alongside Julia for a period of time before eventually taking over as Senior Minister. A church profile is currently being drawn up. There is also some discussion as to the possibility of also appointing a Youth Pastor to develop the work with our growing number of children and young people.

### **7.6.5 A Relational Rather Than an Institutional Approach**

One of the downsides of the Baptist emphasis on congregational government in church life is that everything can become very institutional. As we have seen this was certainly the case at Abbey when Julia and I first arrived. This has all changed considerably over the last few years, and the arrival of so many new people (whose first language is not English) has hastened the transition to a more relational rather than institutional approach to church life. Church Meetings are now more relaxed, with short lively agendas, following on from Sunday Morning Worship every couple of months. Applications for church membership are responded to in a more friendly, informal way rather than the previous 'formal interview and report' approach of yesteryear. Could this more relational approach also be equally applied to Abbey's relationship with its tenant churches?

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I considered what an appropriate response to all that has emerged from this research might be. What are the ways forward for both Abbey and the other churches that share the building?

I looked at the theoretical responses: the relevance of koinōnia as an idea whose hour has come as the basis for individual and collective progress; the suggestion that (in line with Moynagh's 'focussed-and-connected' view) seeking a unity in diversity could be a progressive way forward in that it avoids any whiff of amalgamation or coloniality; that by taking koinōnia seriously all four churches could embrace a kindlier way of being church; that Abbey could/should be brave enough to model what being (in Moynagh's language) a 'giving church' by generously abandoning its host-tenant approach in favour of something more generous; and that each of the four churches should be willing to submit their current missional strategies to 're-baptism' in search of an intercultural Missiology. I also outlined a number of various actions being taken by Abbey in response to the findings of this research (which hopefully will overspill to the other churches), namely: partnering with CommuniCare in ministering to the practical needs of the local community; practical plans for numerical and spiritual growth; developments covering cross-cultural leadership and church meetings; plans for progressing Ministerial oversight at Abbey in the light of Julia's impending retirement; and the possibility of extending Abbey's relational rather than institutional approach in practical ways to cover all who share the building.

## **CONCLUSION (Reflecting on the Journey)**

I began this thesis with a road map for the journey. In Chapter 1 I outlined the Research Design in order to reveal the key themes, the main tools, contained within the conceptual framework. In Chapter 2 I shared an Anecdote/Experience concerning a particular period in the Abbey Story, in order to acquaint the reader with what lay at the heart of this research. In Chapter 3 I considered the questions and concerns emerging from an initial Exploration of the events emerging from this particular chapter in the Abbey Story. In Chapter 4 I began to engage with the Data Analysis endeavouring to listen to the voices of the various participants in this research, and In Chapter 5 I continue with this by attempting to interpret the gathered data. In Chapter 6 I looked at the gathered data through the lens of Theological Reflection in order to evaluate the relative merit and worth of the various contributions. In Chapter 7 recognising there needed to be a positive Response to this research, I suggested various ways all the churches at Abbey could move forward positively as a result of this research.

Ballard and Pritchard suggest any research needs to end with a review of some kind or other that 'represents the first stage of a new run-through of the learning cycle... [because] vital lessons are there to be learned... which will refine and improve the project [and without which] history will repeat itself' (Ballard, 2006:174). Whilst more often than not this means reviewing the findings the data analysis and theological reflection has revealed, it is equally important for the researcher to also conclude reviewing what they have learned personally in the process of this journey. In my own case, this research, I suspect has indelibly changed me in a number of ways... ways in which I suspect I have not fully realised as yet. Prior to this research I was too critical of the various churches sharing the building at Abbey, including Abbey Baptist Church itself. I still have a number of questions, reservations, and (I believe) valid criticisms but I have come to understand these people much more sympathetically as a result of not just listening to their voices, but hearing what they are saying. At the same time the binary approach taken by many Christians in evaluating situations, often polarising between adopting an 'anything goes' approach and an officious 'the Bible says...' approach, has made me more determined than ever to embrace a considered balance between Cameron's Four Voices of Theology, and Fiddes, in making Jesus Christ the plumb line to judge things by. In my heart of hearts I also still long for the impossible dream – an integrated, ethnically diverse church. I began this research playing around with reversing the order of Moynagh's 'focussed-and-connected' view of contextual church as a way in which this impossible dream might be achieved. I conclude encouraged that Moynagh himself, although remaining enthusiastic about the need to continue planting homogeneous churches, also recognises that these congregations are more likely to 'grow to

maturity within the setting of an [existing] mixed-economy church, in which new forms of church and inherited church (churches with inherited structures and patterns of life) exist alongside each other in relationships of mutual support.'

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1: Critical Literature Review

University of Winchester

Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences

Professional Doctorate in Theology and Practice (DTh) Assignment Cover Sheet

#### Part 1: Student to complete

Name: James Binney Student No. 1709226

Year of Course 2017

I confirm that I have read and understood the Programme regulations and penalties regarding plagiarism and cheating, and that this piece of work complies with the requirements of those Regulations.

Signature: James Binney

Module Code: TL8006 Module Title: Literature Review

Assignment Title/Task: Critical Literature Review

Marking Tutor's Name: Prof Neil Messer Date due: 26.3.21

Date of submission: 26.3.21

#### Part 2 : Marking Tutor to complete

*Marking Tutors should enter comments against the applicable Learning Outcomes for the module being assessed, and delete the tables of Learning Outcomes which do not apply.*

<b>TL8006: Literature Review</b>	
<i>Learning Outcome</i>	<i>Comments</i>
a) Conceptualise in outline a research problem or area of the development of practice at the forefront of your field of work	This Assignment carefully outlines the research questions within the framework of an understanding practical theology.
b) Identify in outline appropriate methodologies for addressing the research problem or implementing the development of practice identified.	The methodology is clearly expressed and outlined Within the confines of the assignment.
c) Relate the research problem or practical development you have identified to existing knowledge, understanding and/or practice in the field by means of a critical literature review.	There is a generative and insightful relationship between theory and practice that runs through the analysis of literature and its implications for the context.

d) Demonstrate with reference to the literature surveyed, how the proposed research or practice has the potential to make an original contribution to its field	This project has real potential to make an original contribution to the field and practical theology and the student indicates the areas where that might take place.
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### Part 3 : Comments

This is impressive and well-organised piece of work. There is a quality to the analysis of the literature and some of the core concepts contained within it. It is applied into the context with care and skill. The assignment is to be commended for its ambition and scope. The student indicates where it has real generativity for a contribution to the original knowledge. While there may have been some further work to be done in the area of the limitations and critiques of Moynagh and his work the engagement with some of the core concepts and arguments is impressive. The student understands some of the challenges relating to describing the context within which the church in Reading engages in the wider culture. In this process defining key concepts and the limitations of claims for knowledge and new knowledge and practical theology it is important.

The student is to be commended for the development of skill and understanding demonstrated in this assignment.

**Signed:** James Woodward. **Date:** 11 April 2021 **Result:** Pass

### Second Marker's Comments

This literature review is carefully and thoughtfully executed, interesting, reflective, and appropriately critical. I agree that it meets the criteria for this assignment, successfully identifying a research topic, positioning it in relation to the field and demonstrating its potential for originality. I have made a few comments on the text highlighting ways in which the work could be strengthened, and points to be aware of as you develop your project. In particular: (1) a more critical eye for the agendas at work in the various discourses about race, immigration, multiculturalism etc. may stand you in good stead; (2) The methodology section could make it a little clearer what you are hoping to do in your research.

The literature review itself engages well and critically with a wide range of literature. One body of literature not discussed as a body is Black theology, though you do engage with Black theology authors such as Andrews, Carter and Jennings. Of course, a literature review assignment with a tight word limit cannot cover everything, but you might find Black theologians (including British Black theologians such as Robert Beckford, Kate Coleman and Anthony Reddie) to be another important group of conversation partners for your project.

**Signed:** Neil Messer **Date:** 15.04.2021 **Result:** Pass (*delete as appropriate*)

**Agreed Internal Result:** Pass (*delete as appropriate*)

**How valid is Moynagh's 'focussed-and-connected' view of contextual church, in the light of the multicultural nature, and the variety of cultural models of church, in Reading?**

## **Outline**

### **1. Introduction**

- 1.1 Overview and Plan
- 1.2 Background

### **2. Research Problem: Solving the Puzzle**

- 2.1 An Unsettling Experiment
- 2.2 A Possible Resolution

### **3. Methodology: Mapping the Journey**

- 3.1 Reflexivity
- 3.2 Phenomenology, Ethnography, and Congregational Studies

### **4. Critical Literature Review: Finding a Gap in the Field**

- 4.1 A (Brief) Conversation with Michael Moynagh
  - 4.1.1 'Church for Every Context'
  - 4.1.2 'Are Culture-Specific Churches Legitimate?'
  - 4.1.3 'Focussed-and-Connected' View
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    - 4.2 Race, Ethnicity and Cultural Identity
      - 4.2.1 Race and Ethnicity
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    - 4.3 Cultural Models of Being/Doing Church
      - 4.3.1 Monocultural Church
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      - 4.3.3 Multicultural Church
      - 4.3.4 Intercultural Church
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### **5. Original Contribution: Filling the Gap in the Field**

- 5.1 Causal Arrows
- 5.2 Carpe Diem

### **6. Bibliography**

#### **1. Introduction**

##### **1.1 Overview and Plan**

Culture itself is something of an umbrella term covering 'the characteristics and knowledge of a particular group of people, encompassing language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music and arts.' (Zimmermann, 2017). According to the Centre for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition, culture is 'the shared patterns of behaviour and interactions, cognitive constructs, and affective understanding that are learned through a process of socialisation. These shared patterns identify the



members of a culture group while also distinguishing those of another group.' (CARLA). For Cristina De Rossi, the concept of culture is huge: 'Culture encompasses religion, food, what we wear, how we wear it, our language, marriage, music, what we believe is right or wrong, how we sit at the table, how we greet visitors, how we behave with loved ones, and a million other things' moreover, it is inevitable that culture will change: 'Culture is no longer fixed ... it is essentially fluid and constantly in motion.' (Zimmermann 2017). Thus, it is virtually impossible to define culture in only one way. I intend, therefore, to limit the scope of this literature review to the place of cultural identity within the field of race, ethnicity, and culture, and focus on four specific cultural models of being and doing church, in the light of Michael Moynagh's focussed-and-connected view of contextual church

## 1.2 Background

There are many reasons why researchers pick a topic, and then within that topic determine a research question (Rubin, 2005, pp. 41-45). In my case it emerged from moving to Reading in 2018 and finding myself in the context of a multiethnic Church in a multiethnic town.<sup>20</sup> Reading is the largest town in the UK, a sizeable urban conurbation with a population of 344,810 (World Population Review, 2021) where 35% of its population comes from outside the UK, and over 150 different languages are spoken (Blake, 2010). During my first 12 months in Reading, I became increasingly disturbed by what I saw as the monocultural nature of the multiethnic church approach embraced by Abbey Baptist Church. Despite the church's prominent strapline proclaiming it to be 'A Place of Prayer, A Place of Discovery, A Place of Refuge', and its commitment to 'seeking the welfare of the city' (Jeremiah 29:7) in fulfilling the *Missio dei* for the Church today, and in being 'a house of prayer for all nations' (Isaiah 56:7, Mark 11:17), four totally independent, culture-specific churches, occupy the same building but have extraordinarily little to do with one another,<sup>21</sup> thus modelling something very negative given the fractured multiculturalism of Reading. At the heart of my research, therefore, is the question of what the most appropriate contextual cultural model of doing and being church is today, particularly in the midst of a multicultural society.<sup>22</sup>

## 2. IDENTIFYING THE RESEARCH PROBLEM: Solving the Puzzle

'Choosing a good topic and formulating a viable research question can take weeks or months, as both the topic and question emerge iteratively ... For the topic to turn into a research project, you need to find a puzzle or a problem that you can solve or answer. This puzzle is your research question' (Rubin, 2005, pp. 41,45). Experiencing an aggravating situation can be iteratively turned into a research project.

### 2.1 An Unsettling Experiment

My initial response to the situation I found myself in was to engage in a process of empirical qualitative research for my Practical Project exploring the issues in the hope of finding a positive way forward revolving around setting up a joint English Language Café as a means by which all four churches could come together in a meaningful working partnership.<sup>23</sup> Despite an outwardly positive

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<sup>20</sup> My wife accepted a call to the Pastorate of Abbey Baptist Church in the town centre at the end of 2018.

<sup>21</sup> Abbey Baptist Church (white British), Zion Church of God (Sri Lankan/South Indian), Living Streams International (black African/Ghanaian), and Peniel Church (Brazilian/Portuguese).

<sup>22</sup> This is with a view to initiating a practical project transitioning from the current monocultural multiethnic model of church existing at Abbey Baptist Church, Reading, to an international intercultural model of church, thus providing a true model of reconciliation for differing cultures in society in the process.

<sup>23</sup> See my unpublished Practical Project and Critical Evaluation: *From Babel to Pentecost: The Process of Creating an English Language Café in the Context of a Multi-Ethnic Church in a Multi-Ethnic Town* (University of Winchester, 2020).

response the research revealed deep flaws in the multiethnic church model employed at Abbey with the current approach, albeit unintentionally, actually modelling racism, encouraging ongoing division between Christians, and stifling the valuable flourishing of genuine ethnic cultures.

The problem, however, is larger than this. According to Elizabeth Grice, Reading's ethnic mix is 'either a cause for celebration, a practical disadvantage, or an imminent threat to the social and economic fabric' of the town, and 'the relentless flow of immigrants to Reading has produced a sense of dislocation, even resentment, among some who have lived in the town for years' (Grice, 2010, p.2). For Rob Wilson (until recently the Conservative MP for East Reading), 'the pace and scale of immigration has caused great concern in recent years ... resulting in enormous pressure on some local schools, housing, medical and public services generally' (Grice, 2010, p.3). Wilson's assessment of the situation in Reading is probably accurate and, if anything, attitudes have hardened with the arrival of an increasing number of refugees in the town.<sup>24</sup> <sup>25</sup> Unease is not limited to one side of the political spectrum, however. Wilson's successor, Matt Rodda (the Labour MP for East Reading), has also recently expressed similar concerns regarding the ongoing racial tensions in Reading. In response to Reading University's Black Lives Matter student group Rodda affirms 'I am strongly opposed to racism and I believe that black and minority ethnic people deserve fairness, justice and equality' but goes on to acknowledge that such tensions 'follow a number of troubling developments in Britain in recent years, such as the Windrush scandal<sup>26</sup>, the Grenfell disaster and more recently the greater number of deaths from coronavirus among black and minority ethnic residents.' He confirms that 'people in our community have been discriminated against' and that he is working 'with counsellors and other community campaigners to take up cases, challenge wrongful decisions and call for compensation paid to those who have been mistreated.' Rodda acknowledges that 'searching questions need to be asked' and calls for further efforts to be made to improve 'peoples understanding of inequality ... black history and world history ... [and] raise awareness among the community as a whole.' (RUSU, 2020).

Despite the scriptural imperative for the whole Church (not just Abbey Baptist Church) to engage in 'seeking the welfare of the city' (Jeremiah 29:7) and being 'a house of prayer for all nations' (Isaiah 56:7, Mark 11:17), alluded to earlier, there seems to be little evidence of the Christian Church in Reading engaging with this in a serious way. There are some encouraging signs with some local churches clustering together to form community hubs to help alleviate the distresses caused by Covid-19 and lockdown, and there are pockets of inspiring community action and enterprise. By and large, however, the majority of local churches remain isolated and defend their own cultural independence.

## **2.2 A Possible Resolution?**

For me, the puzzle that I am seeking to solve is much larger than simply resolving the current situation at Abbey Baptist Church. That situation is a type of Pandora's Box that opens up the much

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<sup>24</sup> Reading Refugee Support Group have been 'helping refugees and people seeking asylum ... from more than 50 countries, who have escaped war, violence, persecution and modern slavery ... been victims of human trafficking ... have no recourse to public funds ... have been tortured' (Reading Refugee Support Group).

<sup>25</sup> The recent arrival of a large number of refugees from Syria and Iran (housed by the Government in a local hotel) has exacerbated the situation with a number of these refugees being abused and threatened on the streets not only by white members of the general public but by members of existing migrant communities (who see these refugees as illegals) and people from the homeless community (who see these refugees as having been given preferential treatment).

<sup>26</sup> Rodda is referring here to the 2018 political scandal concerning people who were wrongly detained, denied their legal rights, and threatened with deportation (or in some cases actually deported).

larger problem of the validity, or otherwise, of the various cultural models of being and doing church, particularly in multicultural towns or areas such as Reading, especially in the light of ongoing tensions between the various ethnicities. It opens up the complex areas of race, ethnicity, and cultural identity that underpin, or undermine, the validity of the various cultural models of church. It asks the challenging question as to what the church in the UK is modelling for the rest of humanity in terms of social and racial justice, unity, and reconciliation. It raises deeper issues such as racism and 'whiteness', and the subtle reasoning behind such thinking today like 'folk belief' and microaggression, as well as the growing influence of movements such as the Emerging Church Movement, Fresh Expressions, Mission-Shaped Church, the creation of 'mixed-economy' churches, and the like. A possible resolution of the puzzle, however, could lie in the direction of a re-working of Moynagh's suggestion of a 'focussed-and-connected' view.

### **3. METHODOLOGY: Mapping the Journey**

Whilst a full account of the methodology is not required at this stage, an outline sketch of the proposed methodologies is helpful. I propose to set my thesis within the framework of the pastoral spiral in some form or other, in as much as it offers a sensible structural way to present the research. Primarily, however, the appropriate methodology for addressing the research problem identified above, and realizing any possible practical outcomes, involves engaging with the variety of methods and approaches associated with qualitative research.

#### **3.1 Reflexivity**

In any kind of research, it is important that the researcher recognises the potential danger of bias and preconception within their research. This underlines the importance of reflexivity – the ongoing examination and self-awareness of one's own beliefs, judgments, and practices during the research process; how these may influence the research; and what is done with this knowledge – at every stage in process of qualitative research process. Therefore, however thorough I may believe my original research regarding the thorny issue of race, ethnicity, and cultural identity, or the validity (or otherwise) of the various cultural models of being and doing church in Reading to have been, I need to revisit these areas and research them more thoroughly in order to ensure a workable practical project and a sound academic thesis.

#### **3.2 Phenomenology, Ethnography, and Congregational Studies**

My intention is to concentrate on phenomenology and ethnography in congregational studies.<sup>27</sup> Whilst it may be true that congregational studies have 'no simple defining feature' it can perhaps still be described as 'the disciplined process for examining a congregation holistically [using] multiple research methods, [rather than] random intuitions and impressions, [in] an orderly exploration of what actually happens in a group, both the obvious and the hidden, in a way that accurately reflects the interaction of component features whilst also noticing overall patterns and structures' (Miller-McLemore, 2014, p. 133). For me, this involves primarily observational research, first-hand data collection, and careful analysis. I also intend to engage in a variety of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the relevant people and make use of focus groups where appropriate. The collected data will be effectively analysed using computer programming as and when required.

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<sup>27</sup> A phenomenological study describes the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or a phenomenon, for example a fact or situation that is observed to exist or happen, especially one whose cause or explanation is in question. Ethnography is a description and analysis of a cultural or social group or system in which the researcher examines the group's discernible and learned patterns of behaviour, customs, and ways of life. (Creswell, 1998, pp. 55, 56).

#### **4. The Critical Literature Review: Finding a Gap in the Field**

In this literature review I will critically engage with matters concerning race, ethnicity and cultural identity, together with various current cultural models of church, in the light of Moynagh's 'focussed-and-connected' view of contextual church. I will critique Moynagh's view in the hope of identifying a gap in the existing knowledge.

##### **4.1 A (Brief) Conversation with Michael Moynagh**

The initial idea for my thesis was inspired by Moynagh suggested 'focused-and-connected' view of contextual church (Moynagh, 2012, p.168). Moynagh, an ordained Anglican priest, academic, Missiologist, and writer based at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, is a consultant on theology and practise to Fresh Expressions, who has written extensively on social issues and new forms of Christian community.<sup>28</sup> A progressive thinker, whose writings introduce his readers to a variety of other relevant authors, his views encourage wider thought on matters of race, ethnicity, and cultural identity as well as different cultural models of being and doing church. I intend to concentrate on Moynagh's 'focussed-and-connected' premise, to question the validity of this model, and investigate Moynagh's views with openness, rigour and robustness.

##### **4.1.1 'Church for Every Context'**

Moynagh's seminal book, *Church for Every Context: An Introduction to Theology and Practice* (Moynagh, 2012) seeks to explain the development, significance, and viability of what has become known as the Emerging Church Movement. He does this by firstly, seeking to introduce and critique the theology and practise of new contextual churches, drawing on recent British experience, and secondly, contributing to the ongoing process of reflection on the practice of contextual churches. Moynagh argues that 'we should affirm the God-given role of the church as a visible community in all the contexts of life, that methodology is for practising this are beginning to emerge, and that the denominations should make new contextual church a priority' (Moynagh, 2012, p.xix).

Essentially *Church for Every Context* is in four sections. Firstly, Moynagh puts new contextual churches into a historical and contemporary context in an attempt to show how they are both rooted in the past yet remain socially significant. Secondly, he offers some theological foundations for contextual church, arguing that 'being contextual will mean focussing on specific cultures ... [and] that this is consistent with the New Testament vision of a diverse but united church' (Moynagh, 2012, pp.168-193). Thirdly, Moynagh builds on the theology of the earlier chapters to argue that engaging with the *Missio dei* necessitates the church taking 'communal form in the many settings of society ... gathering a mission community ... [and] engaging with potential partners' (Moynagh, 2012, p.xix). Finally, he lays down various pathways to maturity arguing that 'contextual churches should grow to maturity within the setting of a mixed-economy church, in which new forms of church and inherited church (churches with inherited structures and patterns of life) exist alongside each other in relationships of mutual support' (Moynagh, 2012, p.xix).

##### **4.1.2 'Are Culture-Specific Churches Legitimate?'**

For Moynagh, whilst many churches 'serve significant segments of society', the majority act 'as if nothing has changed outside their doors [despite the] cultural blizzard [that] has transformed the landscape' over the last half century or more (Moynagh, 2012, p.151).<sup>29</sup> Thus Moynagh calls for the

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<sup>28</sup> Moynagh has authored, or been lead author, of over 15 books, most recently *Church in Life: Innovation, Mission and Ecclesiology* (Moynagh, 2017).

<sup>29</sup> Moynagh defines this cultural blizzard as 'a multiplicity of ethnic groups as more people move across the globe, an ever-widening range of ages as individuals live longer, more rungs on the income ladder as the top

creation of a variety of contextual monocultural churches: 'The more a Christian community focuses on the needs and longings of a single context ... the better it will serve people in that setting' (Moynagh, 2012, p.179).<sup>30</sup>

The key question for Moynagh is 'Are Culture-Specific Churches Legitimate?' (Moynagh, 2012, pp.168-180). In Moynagh's view, 'if a church is to be contextual ... it must start and grow within a specific culture ... only then can it serve that culture' (Moynagh, 2012, p.168). Moynagh critiques three approaches to the idea of culture specific churches and argues for a fourth approach – a focussed-and-connected view (Moynagh, 2012, pp.1678-180).

The first approach Moynagh critiques is what he calls the 'missional goal' view, an approach for example, espoused by Donald McGavran. In this view the emphasis is on Christians seeking 'to evangelise others with whom they have a cultural affinity' in the belief that in this way 'the gospel will spread across the cultural unit' (Moynagh, 2012, p.168). The weakness of this for Moynagh is that it only pays lip service to any attempt to build bridges between different cultural congregations and is more interested in 'establishing homogeneous congregations than linking them up' (Moynagh, 2012, p.168).<sup>31</sup>

The second approach Moynagh critiques is what he calls the 'missional first step' view in which homogenous congregations are seen as 'a necessary first step but should not be the last one' (Moynagh, 2012, p.161). Moynagh cites Lesslie Newbigin as someone who holds this particular view: 'The existence of separate congregations in the same geographical area on the basis of language and culture may have to be accepted as a necessary, but provisional, measure for the sake of the fulfilment of Christ's mission' (Newbigin, 1977, pp.115-128).<sup>32</sup> For Moynagh, Newbigin is far too 'downbeat about culturally diverse expressions of church' and he clearly feels (citing Peter Wagner) that such efforts to bridge any cultural gap will only result in one or other cultural 'group identity [being] wiped out' (Moynagh, 2012, p.169).

The third approach Moynagh critiques is what he calls the 'missional no-go' view which calls for 'the creation of heterogeneous congregations' (Moynagh, 2012, p.169). Moynagh cites Andrew Davison and Alison Milbank as examples of people who argue that culturally mixed churches are part of the very nature of the Church: 'From the very beginning, the Church stood against the segregation and sanctification of society in the ancient world. The Church was perhaps the only place in the Roman Empire where slaves mixed equally with the freeborn, men with women, the old with the young, the

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pulls further from the bottom, and myriad subcultures generated by pre-recession economic growth, increased consumer choice, more fluid identity's and better communications' (Moynagh, 2012, p.151).

<sup>30</sup> For Moynagh, 'A church cannot be contextual in general. When a church seeks to be present in several cultures, it finds it harder to be committed to each of these cultures'

<sup>31</sup> Equally there is little or no evidence of the church modelling 'a unifying society' for the wider community (McGavran, 1980, pp.242-244). For Moynagh 'This one-sided emphasis is difficult to square with the New Testament vision of Jesus tearing down barriers between people and creating a new single humanity. Surely the church is to be a foretaste of this? Is reconciliation not fundamental to the church's Mission?' (Moynagh, 2012, p. 169).

<sup>32</sup> For Newbigin, wherever the context requires separation, such separation must never be final. Rather, today's church must embrace Paul's vision for objective reconciliation (between Jew and Gentile) by developing 'structures which are explicitly designed to promote the growth in unity of those who are provisionally separated' (Newbigin, 1977, p.125). In Newbigin's view culture-specific congregations are regrettable because they are potentially divisive and wherever they exist, regional and national structures should make every effort to draw these different gatherings together.

educated with the uneducated, the poor with the rich' (Davison, 2010, p. 66).<sup>33</sup> For Moynagh such a view 'overlooks the social dynamics at work in the local church [stemming from] ... people from different ethnic backgrounds with a variety of interests' (Moynagh, 2012, p.170). Davison and Milbank 'romanticise the heterogeneity' of the multicultural church model by failing to accept the blunt fact of the matter that culture-specific churches 'give the congregation its identity, and identity by definition includes some people and excludes others' thus blunting the evangelistic edge of the local church by compromising the homogenous unit principle and creating a missional no-go situation (Moynagh, 2012, p.170).

#### **4.1.3 'Focussed-and-Connected' View**

Reflecting on the above models of culture-specific churches, Moynagh finds significant negatives in each view, but is inspired by David Wells' suggestion that many of the early church's problems arose from the first converts being together despite their diversity (Wells, 2009, p.253). Wells' perceived inability to explain exactly how the early church endeavoured to tackle this issue encouraged Moynagh to re-visit the biblical record in an attempt to discover if there was a distinct pattern as to 'how the Jerusalem, Antioch, Corinthian and Ephesian churches combined house-based homogeneous gatherings, called church, with larger, probably town-wide assemblies (also called church), which drew these gatherings together' (Moynagh, 2012, p.171). Moynagh's research suggested that there was a model the early church developed, a fourth approach to effectively garnering the diverse cultural nature of God's people, the focussed-and-connected view, which contextual churches today can also follow, in which churches can 'focus on a specific culture but also connect up ... homogeneity and heterogeneity can be held together' (Moynagh, 2012, p. 171). Thus, culturally distinct contextual churches might join with other churches in their locality to collaborate on mission or discipleship, etc. Churches from different backgrounds could come together in activities organised by a national network sharing a common spiritual tradition.

Moynagh's focus-and-connected view differs from McGavran's by giving homogeneity and heterogeneity equal weight – connecting up is as important as being culture specific. It differs from Newbigin by being more positive about homogeneous churches – culture specific churches are not simply stepping-stones to something better but desirable in their own right, as long as they have ties to culturally different churches. It differs from Davidson and Milbank by allowing individual churches to be homogeneous rather than limiting homogeneity to groups within a church (Moynagh, 2012, p.171).

#### **4.1.4 Conclusions and Questions**

Moynagh is to be commended for championing 'pluralist congregations [that] try to facilitate rather than fail to recognise or suppress diversity' (Marti, 2014, p.34),<sup>34</sup> and for his emphasis on the need for some form of inter-connection between, blanket-covering over, culture-specific churches (Moynagh, 2012, p.169). Nevertheless a number of questions remain.

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<sup>33</sup> Although Davidson and Milbank except that cultural diversity is a creation ordinance, they claim that the local church should not be organised on this basis. A church can recognise the benefit of cultural difference by making space for cultural distinctives amongst its members ... but these groups should be drawn together into a church that reflects the social diversity of its locality. Only in this way will church do justice to the reconciling vision of the New Testament (Davison, 2010, pp.76-78).

<sup>34</sup> Moynagh rightly draws attention to both the strong possibility that individuals are more likely to be 'helped to become Christians if they are disciplined within the [cultural identity] group they already belong to' and the danger that genuine social and spiritual needs relevant to a specific culture can be neglected or lost if that culture gets subsumed by a more dominant culture in a multicultural context or church setting (Moynagh, 2012, pp. 168, 177-179).

It should be noted that Moynagh is a key figure in the Fresh Expressions movement, and therefore writes as an insider who has 'a stake in justifying the congregations and various manifestations of church' (Ganiel, 2013) that form part of the Emerging Church Movement. This immediately raises the question of reflexivity. Is Moynagh capable of reflecting objectively on the issues he raises? There is no reference whatsoever to 'reflexivity' in *Church for Every Context* (Moynagh, 2012), and although *Church in Life* (Moynagh, 2017) contains a number of references to reflexivity they are primarily about the need of 'a more reflexive society' (Moynagh, 2017, pp.130-133) rather than Moynagh himself being more reflexive.

Despite recognising McGavran's emphasis on evangelism as '*the* missional priority' as a 'weakness' (Moynagh, 2012, p. 169),<sup>35</sup> Moynagh likes the term 'missional' or 'mission' and often uses it in his writing. He is obviously familiar with the concept of the *Missio Dei* in the sense that he correctly 'roots the church's mission in God's mission' and (citing Christopher Wright) recognises that 'mission is first and foremost ... an activity of God' (Moynagh, 2012, p.144 cf. Wright, 2006, pp.64-68). Unlike Wright, however, Moynagh does not clarify the holistic nature of this mission. Moynagh clearly understands that to be 'missional' means more than simply being evangelistic, nevertheless, his understanding appears heavily weighted towards such an interpretation given his emphasis on establishing culture-specific churches with the primary aim of 'helping people to become Christians' within their existing homogenous unit (Moynagh, 2012, p. 168) rather than holistic or incarnational.

The Catholic moral theologian Meghan Clark suggests that 'maintaining intellectual humility' is essential in theological analysis (Clark, 2014, p.1). Is Moynagh correct, therefore, to dismiss the 'missional first step' and 'missional no-go' views espoused firstly, by Newbigin, and secondly, by Davison and Milbank, with almost equal alacrity? Is there not considerable merit in Newbigin's view that whilst homogenous congregations may be 'a necessary first step in mission' (Moynagh, 2012, p. 169) mission cannot stop there? The conviction that today's church must model Paul's exhortation, not simply to 'be reconciled to God in Christ' but, to deliberately engage in 'the ministry of reconciliation' (2 Corinthians 5:18) by actively promoting the unification of those initially separated. Equally, is there not considerable value in Davison and Milbank's contention that, whilst still recognising that cultural diversity is a creation ordinance, a local church can recognise the goodness of cultural difference by making space for distinct cultural groups within its membership whilst at the same time preserving the unity of the local church without allowing those various distinct cultures to be swamped by a dominant culture (Moynagh, 2012, pp.169,170)? Moynagh appears to subliminally recognise this by suggesting a fourth view – his focussed-and-connected church view.

Is Moynagh correct to give the Emerging Church Movement such prominence? According to Marti and Ganiel, 'Many academics assume the ECM is a fad, a marginal movement that will stay on the margins or simply fade away' (Marti, 2014, p. 162). For Brett McCracken it is merely 'a reform movement within evangelicalism, a 'hipster' Christianity that masks a conservative, orthodox evangelicalism with coffee, candles, and horn-rimmed glasses' (McCracken, 2010). Others claim it as 'rehashed Liberal Protestantism' or simply something that 'appeals to a niche market of disaffected Christian consumers, those who belong to a certain demographic: primarily young, highly educated,

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<sup>35</sup> It should be noted that the same imbalance is perpetuated by Cray in *Mission-Shaped Church* (Cray, 2004, pp. 108,109) and that Moynagh himself appears to subscribe to the same view at times. Thus, Marti and Ganiel, in their critique of the Emerging Church Movement, understand the initiative behind such reports as a belief that 'traditional forms of church are failing to reach people in largely secularised Britain – hence the emphasis on mission' and see mission as the major theme of Moynagh's *Church for Every Context* (Marti, 2014, p.21).

middle class, and white' (Marti, 2014, p. 162). In contrast to this, and to alleged statements from within the Emerging Church Movement itself 'that the emerging church is dead', Marti and Ganiel 'see the ECM as a distinct response to the wider social, political, economic, and religious forces that have shaped modernity' (Marti, 2014, p.162).

How committed is Moynagh to mixed economy church? Contextualisation is foundational in Moynagh's thinking: 'If the church is to serve people ... it must connect with them. If it is to connect with them, it must be contextual' (Moynagh, 2012, p. 166). Emerging churches, however, see themselves as fluid and somewhat unpredictable and contrast themselves with what has gone before by referring to traditional church as 'inherited church' (Moynagh, 2012, p. xix).<sup>36</sup> Conversely Ganiel sees a mixed economy of churches simply as an 'empirical fact', despite observing that 'new contextual churches often critique existing churches, arguing that they should change their ways [and that] the older churches are often wary to engage with what they perceive as these transient, upstart critics' (Ganiel, 2013, p.4). Moynagh, however, seeks 'to go beyond empiricism and make a case for why [despite the mutual suspicion] a mixed economy is better for the kingdom of God' (Ganiel, 2013, p. 4). Davison and Milbank remain less convinced suggesting that 'if the church is moulded like plasticine into different shapes to fit different contexts, it will lose the capacity to form new believers in the Christian story ... unhitch itself from practises that have been honed over the centuries [and] have become intrinsic to the story and have proved fruitful vehicles for the Spirit [and as a result] ... the gospel will become like flotsam, lacking substantive form' (Davison, 2010, pp.28-40).

Moynagh, however, appears to be on a journey with his ideas evolving over time. Ian Paul indicates that at the turn of the century Moynagh saw little or no future for the inherited or traditional church in the UK (Paul, 2014, p.5). In response Moynagh acknowledges that at that time he was 'very pessimistic about the existing church' but goes on to say that (15 years later) 'we now have lots of evidence that the "mixed economy" can thrive, with new and older types of church existing alongside each other in mutual support' (Paul, 2014, p.8).<sup>37</sup>

## **4.2 Race, Ethnicity, and Cultural Identity**

'Race is a hot topic no less today than any period since the late Middle Ages' (Andrews, 2014, p.401). But what do we mean by race? Are race, ethnicity, and cultural identity simply different names for the same thing? Or are they terms that we often confuse and think mean the same thing when they are actually quite different? Or are they different facets of the same thing – different aspects that actually help us to see the central issue in a more positive light?

### **4.2.1 Race and Ethnicity**

'Race and ethnicity are used to categorise certain sections of the population. In basic terms, race describes physical traits, and ethnicity refers to cultural identification. Race may also be identified as

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<sup>36</sup> The term 'mixed economy churches' is credited to Rowan Williams, during his time as Archbishop of Wales (Muller, 2019, p.251), who first used it to refer to 'fresh expressions' and 'inherited' forms of church existing alongside each other in relationships of mutual respect and support within the Church in Wales. 'We may discern signs of hope ... These may be found particularly in the development of a mixed economy of Church life ... there are ways of being church alongside the inherited parochial pattern.' (Cited by Muller, 2019, p.251).

<sup>37</sup> Moynagh still appears to see this mixed economy of inherited or traditional churches and fresh expressions of church (of which culture-specific churches are one example) as existing *across* the various churches, whereas Paul sees them existing *within* churches (Paul, 2008, p. 5). Thus, Paul reflects the views of Newbigin, and Davison and Milbank, rather than Moynagh's focused-and-connected view. Moynagh's later writings, however, suggest that his thinking in this direction is continuing to evolve.



something you inherit while ethnicity is something you learn ... race and ethnicity are typically misunderstood as most people often don't fit into [the] neat categories' that are offered to us every ten years on the national census forms (Morin, 2020).<sup>38</sup> According to Werner Sollors the word 'ethnicity' only came into common usage in the 1930s in an attempt to combat the racist language and ideologies of Nazi Germany (Sollors, 1986, see Kivisto, 2012, pp.7,8). Thus 'social scientists today prefer the term ethnicity in speaking of people of colour, and others with distinctive cultural heritages' (University of Minnesota, 2010) because of the numerous problems associated with the use of the word race.<sup>39</sup>

Scholars in a variety of disciplines increasingly hold that race is a cultural invention that bears no intrinsic relationship to actual human physical variations but reflects social meanings imposed upon these variations. For Audrey Smedley, 'race as a mechanism of social stratification and as a form of human identity is a recent concept in human history. Historical records show that neither the idea nor ideologies associated with race existed before the 17th century' (Smedley, 1999, p.690, cf. Takezawa, 2004, 2020, p.1). For Peter Kivisto and Paul Croll, 'Race and ethnicity have, during the centuries ... profoundly shaped the social, cultural, economic, and political character of much of the globe ... [and these divisions] remain a salient feature of contemporary social life in the 21st century' (Kivisto, 2012, p.1).<sup>40</sup>

Because of the profound residual effect the concept of 'race' continues to have today<sup>41</sup> the term itself needs to be retained, academically at least, because of the historicity and understanding it provides both with regard to the ongoing social problem of 'racism', and the understandable resentment many people of colour continue to feel today, as well as providing insight into contemporary research on related topics such as 'critical race theory'<sup>42</sup> (Crenshaw, 1996), the

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<sup>38</sup> For Morin 'race is usually associated with biology and linked with physical characteristics, such as hair texture or skin colour and covers a relative a relatively narrow range of opinions ... Ethnicity is a broader term than race ... used to categorise groups of people according to their cultural expression and identification. Commonalities such as racial, national, tribal, religious, linguistic, or cultural origin may be used to describe someone's ethnicity' (Morin, 2020).

<sup>39</sup> 'Sociology uses and critiques the concepts of race and ethnicity, connecting them to the idea of majority and minority groups and social structures of inequality, power, and stratification. "Race" refers to physical differences that groups and cultures consider socially significant, while "ethnicity" refers to shared culture, such as language, ancestry, practices, and beliefs. The sociological perspective explores how race and ethnicity are socially constructed and how individuals identify with one or more. Research demonstrates how they are linked to social position and to political and policy debates about issues such as immigration, identity formation, and inter-group relations (including racism).' (American Sociological Association, 2021).

<sup>40</sup> Moreover 'to categorise people in everyday conversations along the lines of racial or ethnic group affiliations is commonplace' today both in the USA and the UK (Kivisto, 2012, p.1; cf. University of Minnesota, 2010, p.1).

<sup>41</sup> For Smedley race has served as 'the main form of human identity' and 'eroded and superseded older forms of human identity' (Smedley, 1999, p.1).

<sup>42</sup> 'In the last few years Critical Race Theory ... has grown in influence in the UK and elsewhere ... [w]hile CRT has no 'canonical set of doctrines or methodologies to which all subscribe' (Crenshaw 1995: xiii) several key unifying interests have been identified [to achieve its primary purpose, i.e.] to understand how a regime of white supremacy and its subordination of people of colour have been created and maintained'. (Spencer, 2014, p.160).

distortions wrought by ‘whiteness’<sup>43</sup> (Jennings, 2010; Jennings, 2020) on one hand, and reactive ‘microaggression’<sup>44</sup> in the face of perceived subtle racism (Sue, 2020; Spencer, 2014).

Race and ethnicity would perhaps not be such controversial issues if it were just a matter of classification. The historical use of these terms, however, exposes that categorising people in such a way inevitably means placing them in ‘a hierarchy that defines groups in terms of whether they are to be favoured or not, privileged or not, empowered or not, economically advantaged or not’ (Kivisto, 2012, p.2). Brutally exposing where travelling down this road takes us, Kivisto and Croll, bluntly state:

‘History ... reveals that dividing people along racial and ethnic lines has generated forms of intra-group conflict, coercion, and violence, including in the most extreme forms of conflict attempts to exterminate an entire group. The genocidal campaigns that the world has witnessed during the past century, from the Armenian genocide after World War One to the ghastly attempt by the Nazi regime to destroy European Jewry, through to the campaign of extermination that the Hutus undertook against the Tutsis in Rwanda, and the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia that sought to kill off the territory’s Muslim community, reveal the continual threat of barbarism in the modern world’ (Kivisto, 2012, pp. 2,3).

Such a record suggests it should be a priority for everyone to do all they can to eliminate or redefine such racial and ethnic definitions. Unfortunately, this does not appear to be the case. A recent report by Amnesty International UK suggests that ‘racism in the UK appears to be growing’<sup>45</sup> (Valdez-Symonds, 2020, pp.1,2). The Oxford English Dictionary defines ‘racism’ as, ‘prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism directed against someone of a different race based on the belief that one’s own race is superior’. This however is a simplified explanation of a complex issue. For Dale Andrews, ‘racism stems from an entangled evolution of social, political, and economic dynamics’ (Miller-McLemore, 2014, p.401).

For Francis Bridger, race and racism is rooted in ‘the folk or everyday concept’ of race, rather than any genuine ‘analytical or scientific sense’ (Bridger, 1995, pp.716, 717). By this he means values and attitudes rooted essentially in the genre of folk tales (stories originating in popular culture typically passed on by word of mouth), folk beliefs, myths, doctrines, even folk religion. Widely accepted assumptions that may, or may not, have some kind of validity are largely based on what is known as ‘the illusory truth effect’ – the idea that if something is repeated often enough, people will slowly start to believe it to be true (Association for Psychological Science, 2020). For J Kameron Carter a major lack in this whole debate is the absence of clear theological thinking. In the contemporary

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<sup>43</sup> ‘The development of ‘White’ studies is an interesting phenomenon in that it recognises and scrutinises ‘whiteness’ in an attempt to reveal what is typically rendered invisible and normative. The unearned privilege accorded to ‘white’ people in our societies operates in a comparable way to other markers of power in society. Similarly, young, male, able-bodied, heterosexual, middle-class people may reap the benefits of special privileges simply by accident of birth.’ (Spencer, 2014, p.23)

<sup>44</sup> ‘Microaggression is a term used for brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative attitudes toward stigmatized or culturally marginalized groups.’ Thus, even though Rosa Park’s famous comment – ‘I believe in only one race, the human race’ – was uttered by a person of colour herself, the sentiment is seen by some other people of colour as microaggressive because it ‘denies the significance of a person of colour’s racial/ethnic experience and history’ (Sue, 2010, p. xvi).

<sup>45</sup> The report questions whether or not this trend will continue and concludes that ‘what is certain is that real and lasting change will depend on how far the reach and impact of racism is recognised throughout society and its various institutions, laws, and practices.

academic landscape, he suggests, there have been a wide range of discourses about race in the social sciences and humanities, but not in theology (Carter, 2008, p.3).

Identifying people by race and ethnicity, however, 'have not simply been a source of conflict but have often been a more positive source of personal identity and group affiliation, offering people a way to create a meaningful life. A shared history and culture can provide people with a source of strength that can help them meet various challenges collectively ... [and] the challenge is to better understand [race and ethnicity] in order to promote that which is positive while combatting the negative' (Kivisto, 2012, p.3). Recent research suggests that 'the sense of identity many people gain from belonging to an ethnic group is important for reasons both good and bad' (University of Minnesota, 2010, p.4). One of the most important roles of ethnic groups is to provide its members with a sense of identity, a sense of belonging, a sense of self-worth, and the recognition of the importance of their cultural background.<sup>46</sup>

#### **4.2.2 Cultural Identity**

'The words race, ethnicity and culture and their various derivatives are all very familiar: indeed the terms race and culture, if not ethnicity, are regularly used in everyday speech. Yet just what do they actually mean? Are they merely synonyms for one another, or do they point to very different dimensions of the social order?' (Ballard, 2002, p.1). For Ballard, 'Whilst 'race' ... is best understood as an aspect of a person's biological and hence genetic heritage' and the use of the term 'ethnicity' is seen as some form of ethical 'construction to maintain cultural boundaries ... 'culture' is best understood as 'the set of ideas, values and understandings which people deploy within a specific network of social relationships used as a means of ordering their interpersonal interactions ... to generate ties of reciprocity between themselves ... [and] provide the principle basis on which human beings give meaning and purpose to their lives' (Ballard, 2002, pp.1,11,27). Whether culture is taken to mean a whole way of life or indicative of expansive practises through which control is generated, it is integral both to the lived realities of race and the construction of boundaries. Race, from a culturalist perspective is a succession of ever-changing and uncompleted points of identification. Thus, far from being 'fixed', cultural identity although in one sense seemingly an 'accepted and patterned way of behaviour of a given people' (Brown, 1963) is also something, which in the eyes of many sociologists, is transmitted from one generation to another. In other words cultural identity is something that is learned rather than something inherent in our racial/ethnic DNA (cf. Smith, 2008).

Of particular interest are Alberto Bisin and Thierry Verdier's findings that 'the cultural transmission of ethnic and religious traits is often studied, somewhat indirectly, focusing on the theology of the behaviour of immigrants' and that countless ethnographic studies, from the late 1950s and 1960s onwards, have 'discredited the view that immigrants naturally assimilate in a melting pot, and focus instead on their struggles to socialise children to their ethnic and religious traits' (Benhabib, 2011, 3.3.2). If our cultural identity is learned, then it can evolve, be cultivated, developed, grown, or even changed where necessary.

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<sup>46</sup> In a recent general social survey conducted by the University of Minnesota, more than three quarters of those interviewed, in response to the question, 'How close do you feel to your ethnic or racial group?' said that they felt close or very close (University of Minnesota, 2010, p.4). The same survey also suggested that ethnic group membership plays a vital role in the socialisation of millions of people across the world today.

### 4.2.3 Christ and Culture

Kivisto and Croll's recognition of 'the Janus face' of race and ethnicity and 'the challenge ... to better understand them in order to promote [the] positive while combatting the negative' (Kivisto, 2012, p.3), suggests the same is equally true for cultural identity.

There are a wide variety of interpretive views of the Babel-Pentecost narratives, with some commentators seeing the language episode at Pentecost as a reversal of the Babel narrative (Genesis 11:1-9) at one end of the scale,<sup>47</sup> and others seeing Pentecost as a continuation, a development, an advancing of that process of social evolution initiated at Babel at the other end of the scale.<sup>48</sup> What is clear, is that a careful reading of the Babel-Pentecost narrative (Genesis 11; Acts 2) suggests that a diversity of languages/cultures are part of God's plan for human communities (including churches). When God investigates what the people are building at Babel (Genesis 11:5) his evaluation of the situation is that their sameness, rather than making them truly fruitful, has in fact become detrimental (Genesis 11:6). 'Having one language limits the scope of cultural innovation' (Marzouk, 2019, p. 122) so that the people are no longer capable of thinking beyond the hive mind even if that mind is no longer 'the mind of Christ' (Philippians 2:5). So God intervenes (Genesis 11:7-9). He expands his initial policy of preserving sameness, in order to encompass cultural innovation and restore humankind to his initial intent in the Creation narrative, to 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and exercise stewardship over it' (Genesis 1:28).<sup>49</sup>

For Trevin Wax, Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* (Niebuhr, 1951, 2001) remains 'one of the most significant theological and Missiological works of the 20th century, offering a memorable categorisation of the ways Christians have related to culture throughout history' (Wax, 2015, p.1). In recent years Niebuhr's definitive treatment of the ways in which Christianity and culture interact has attracted a revival of interest<sup>50</sup> with a number of books critiquing Niebuhr's views (Hauerwas and Willimon, 1989; Carter, 2006; Carson, 2008).

In his classic work Niebuhr defines culture as 'an artificial, secondary environment' that humanity 'superimposes on the natural' comprising of such things as 'language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, social organisation, inherited artefacts, technical process is, and values' (Niebuhr, 1951, p.32). For Niebuhr this 'social heritage' is what the New Testament writers 'frequently had in mind when they spoke of "the world"' (Niebuhr, 1951, p. 32) hence the need for culture to be transformed.

Niebuhr's inventory correctly suggests both the richness and the complexity of culture but questions to what extent different cultures should be integrated and to what extent diversity should be allowed. In *Christ and Culture* Niebuhr looks at this issue in terms of the relationship between Christ and culture. He suggests five ways of looking at this: Christ Against Culture (pp. 45-82); The Christ of Culture (pp. 83-115); Christ Above Culture (pp. 83-115); Christ and Culture in Paradox (pp. 149-189); and Christ the Transformer of Culture (pp. 190-229).

In this latter view Niebuhr suggests that Christ is at work, through his Church, to transform culture. This view is most closely represented by people like Augustine, John Calvin and F D Maurice.

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<sup>47</sup> Ranging from John Calvin (Calvin, 1995, p.51) to C K Barrett (Barrett, 1994-2006, p.112) and William Willimon (Willimon, 1988, p.32).

<sup>48</sup> Walter Brueggemann (Brueggemann, 1982, p.98) and Matt Lynch (Lynch, 2016).

<sup>49</sup> One cannot help but wonder if this was God's intention right from the beginning, part of a process of social evolution, rather than a sign of judgment, reprimand, and estrangement (Brueggemann, 1982, p.99).

<sup>50</sup> A 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition of *Christ and Culture* was republished in 2001 (with additional material).

According to this view, all of culture is under the judgement of God, and yet culture is also under God's sovereign rule. Therefore, 'the Christian must carry on cultural work in obedience to the Lord' (Niebuhr, 1951, p. 191). Emphasising the goodness of creation those who hold this view, 'affirm what can be affirmed and seek to transform what is corrupted by sin and selfishness' (Wax, 2015, p. 5). It is this view Niebuhr allies himself most closely with, though he is at pains to say in his conclusion (Niebuhr, 1951, pp. 230-256) that it would be dangerous to pretend to have arrived at the Christian answer on the question of Christ and culture, and points to the strengths and weaknesses of all five positions. Nevertheless, what he is advocating here is the need for all aspects of culture/cultural identity, to be submitted to God in Christ, so that that which is good and godly can be affirmed and that which is not can be purged or transformed.

For Hauerwas and Willimon, Niebuhr's 'Christ Transforming Culture' view achieves neither one thing nor the other but simply endorses 'a Constantinian social strategy' in which culture becomes 'a blanket to underwrite Christian involvement with the world without providing any discriminating modes for discerning how Christians should see the good or the bad in "culture"' (Hauerwas, 1989, p.40).<sup>51</sup> Rather than truly discern the rights and wrongs of a culture, Niebuhr's favoured view 'merely justified what was already there – a church that had ceased to ask the right questions as it went about congratulating itself for transforming the world, not noticing, that in fact the world had tamed the church' (Hauerwas, 1989, p.41).

For Craig Carter Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* needs to be rethought: 'we must move from a Christendom to a post-Christendom way of thinking about the Christ and culture problem' (Carter, 2006, p.7). In particular Carter singles out two fundamental problems affecting not just Niebuhr, but the majority of West Western Christians – the Church's embrace of Christendom, and its unblinking support for state violence (Carter, 2006, pp. 199-2012).

Despite the validity of these criticisms, the value of Niebuhr's transforming model is that it acknowledges the imperfections within all culture, without implying that God is not already (albeit faintly at times) visible through it. If God is indeed the author of cultural difference it is helpful to look for ways in which God may be able to take the various elements of any given culture and make them what they could be, rather than implying that they need to be abandoned before God's purpose can be fulfilled.

#### **4.3 Cultural Models of Being/Doing Church**

In a few powerful sentences, Harvey Kwiyani,<sup>52</sup> sums up the current Church situation in the UK: 'We are living in a multicultural world. Indeed, some places are more multicultural than others, but there is more cultural and racial variety in the UK today than there was one generation ago. If the trends hold, cultural diversity will continue to increase. However, it is still painfully true that 11:00 a.m. on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour of the week. Christian communities ... lag behind wider society on issues of diversity. While we might celebrate the rise of world Christianity, it is the expectation of many that these world Christians will congregate in their own cultural groups or

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<sup>51</sup> Niebuhr is correct in recognising that all too often 'our politics determines our theology' and that nevertheless 'Christians cannot reject "culture"', but 'his call to Christians to accept "culture" ... and politics in the name of the unity of God's creating and redeeming activity' undermines rather than clarifies the issues.

<sup>52</sup> 'Originally from Malawi, Harvey Kwiyani has lived in Europe and North America for many years, working both as an academic (teaching theology, missions and leadership), and also as a mission practitioner and church planter. He currently teaches at Liverpool Hope University while leading Missio Africanus' (Kwiyani, 2017).

those based on national identity. As such, it becomes acceptable for African churches and British churches to use the same premises but not see the need to be together' (Kwiyani, 2017, p.24).

In the wider Church there are a variety of cultural models of church, everything from monocultural, multiethnic, multicultural, to intercultural church. But which model, if any, is most appropriate, most helpful, in today's multicultural society? And which approach serves as the best model of reconciliation and intercultural harmony for society? For Kwiyani, 'Many churches' responses to cultural diversity have been shaped mostly by assimilation (at congregation level) and cultural pluralism (for denominations). Both assimilation and pluralism make it difficult for the different Christian cultures to mix. Since minorities and immigrants are naturally expected to adopt the western shaped Christian culture and church, assimilation entails letting go of whatever beliefs and practices – or theologies – that the dominant culture finds strange, and cultural pluralism means that the gatherings of migrants in those churches are of secondary status as minority fellowships. Often there is no link between these minority fellowships and the life of the congregation, exposing the patronising sentiments that sometimes get such fellowship started' (Kwiyani, 2017, p.24).

#### **4.3.1 Monocultural Church**

According to Marzouk, 'the monocultural model the church actively seeks to preserve a particular culture by trying to exclude external influences and by silencing insiders who are seeking change. Thus, differences and change seem to be a threat; relations with outsiders are minimal or non-existent. In some cases, congregations assume a dominant culture, and while others might be welcomed to join in, they are expected to assimilate into that dominant culture' (Marzouk, 2019, p.14). Delbert Sandiford finds this phenomenon firmly rooted in the racial discrimination experienced by people from the Caribbean, Africa and Asia following the large post-war immigration to the UK following WWII. According to Sandiford a number of these migrants were Christians, but 'on arriving in Britain they sought out their local church to worship ... But the mainstream denominations – Church of England, Roman Catholic, Methodist and Congregational churches – found it difficult to accept the newcomers as fellow Christians. There was rejection' (Sandiford, 2010, pp. 4-6). The response to rejection was that some people left to join or form black churches, and the subsequent spin off has been the flourishing growth of monocultural churches.

Kwiyani suggests that there are 'many valid reasons for the existence of monocultural churches'. Firstly, 'most first-generation migrants find that mastering a new language is quite difficult [and] ... they need space to worship in a language they can understand, and this will generally be in a monocultural church' (Kwiyani, 2018, p.3). Secondly, some immigrants find themselves in rural towns and villages where 'racial diversity is non-existent'. Thirdly, because of the growing emphasis on monocultural church being more effective missionally than other models of church. And finally, because a number of pastors and evangelists are only interested in reaching people from their own culture (Kwiyani, 2018, p.3). Just how 'valid' some of these reasons actually are, is debatable, but Kwiyani is probably correct when he suggests that monocultural churches in the UK are 'here to stay' because 'they are safe, convenient, and comfortable' (Kwiyani, 2018, p.3). Chuck Warnock concurs, suggesting monocultural churches 'provide a safe haven for minorities within a dominant majority culture; allow for minority perspectives to develop and be heard; provide a connexion to home, customs, language, ritual and power structures that generations of immigrants wish to retain;

become points of transition, assisting newcomers ... as they navigate their new culture; [and] help resist the marginalisation of minority groups' (Warnock, 2013, pp.2,3).<sup>53</sup>

#### **4.3.2 Multiethnic Church**

Almost a decade ago the Baptist Union were actively encouraging Baptist Churches to develop 'multi-ethnic churches' in order to 'reach multi-ethnic communities with the love of God' (Patten, 2015). It is clear from associated material (Baptist Union Faith and Society Files, 2012) that whilst the intention was good there was also a lot of confusion. Terms such as 'multicultural' and 'multiethnic' were used interchangeably, and by developing multiethnic churches the Baptist Union meant existing congregations evolving into a multiethnic, multicultural congregations themselves rather than renting out space to what Mark Naylor calls 'multiethnic monocultural churches' (Naylor), that is, churches who make use of an existing church's premises but remain totally independent of the host church whilst actively seeking to preserve a particular culture.

In 2015 the Baptist Union Faith and Society Team produced a six-week course for small groups intended 'to help develop healthy, integrated churches' written by Malcolm Patten (Senior Pastor of Blackhorse Road Baptist Church, Walthamstow). In the forward to this course Wale Hudson-Roberts (a Racial Justice Networker for the Baptist Union) wrote about the sense of compulsion many Baptist Churches in the UK were feeling at that time 'to cultivate churches where culture and ethnicity matters, and where each culture and ethnic group is fully affirmed' and went on to recommend this resource 'as an aid to assist growth in this challenging area of cultivating congregations which desire to reflect the richness and diversity of the Kingdom of God' (Patten, 2015, p.2). Whilst there is much of value in this course, it is clear from the outset that Patten is sharing 'a vision for building healthy multicultural churches' (Patten, 2015, pp. 5-8). He repeatedly uses the word 'multicultural' rather than 'multiethnic' and, in fact went on to write a very helpful book entitled 'Leading a Multi-Cultural Church' (Patten, 2016). What is clearly not in mind is the type of monocultural, multiethnic church, that has developed at Abbey Baptist Church, Reading where various independent, culturally different churches, share the same buildings but actually have very little (if anything) to do with one another. The kind of situation Harvey Kwiyani envisaged, where 'it becomes acceptable for African churches and British churches to use the same premises but not see the need to be together' (Kwiyani, 2017, p.24).

Examples of healthy multiethnic model churches do exist, and both Mark Deymaz (Deymaz, 2007) and Linbert Spencer (Spencer, 2007) have written of their own experiences of building healthy multiethnic churches, but they are healthy because they espouse the principles emphasised by the Baptist Union a decade ago in their desire to see existing Baptist Churches (particularly those in multiracial areas) evolve into multi-ethnic, multi-cultural congregations. In that sense they are more akin to the multiracial or intercultural church model than to the multiethnic monocultural church model that exists at Abbey Baptist Church.

#### **4.3.3 Multicultural Church**

The multicultural model of church 'celebrates racial, ethnic, theological, and cultural differences' in which people 'stand alongside one another but without influencing or being influenced by one

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<sup>53</sup> I am aware that I see things through the eyes of someone who belongs to a dominant, white, British, ethnic, cultural group. If I belonged to a minority culture, one that had experienced racism, one that felt its own culture to be under threat, I might well see things very differently. Monocultural church might well appear to be a more sensible and rational way to worship God and form a Christian community.

another' (Marzouk, 2019, p.14). It believes in the 'peaceful co-existence of different cultural communities in a one nation state [but] with neither intention nor vision of interaction to create a larger community of bonding' (Brazal, 2015, pp.47,48).

Outwardly, the multicultural model of church appears to have a lot to offer and is not too dissimilar to the intercultural model of church, but the reality is that all too often this model flatters to deceive. One way of reading the Babel-Pentecost narratives suggests God's vision for human communities is to move from being monocultural to multicultural and multilinguistic communities. However, being multicultural or multilinguistic church or community is not the end goal. Although multiculturalism is a positive step towards embracing cultural and linguistic difference, it can lead to people forming islands within the same community or church and avoiding deep engagement with one another. Multicultural communities and churches need to create space in which people can interact with one another, get to know each other, be transformed together. Multilinguistic communities need the gift of interpretation so that communication and knowledge can be possible. There are a number of helpful books worth consulting on this subject (Patten, 2016; Koo, 2019).

#### **4.3.4 Intercultural Church**

Of late there has been a growing interest in what has become known as the intercultural model of church. In this model 'members come from a variety of different cultural, racial, and ethnic backgrounds but enter into covenant with one another to worship and fellowship together, to serve one another, and witness to the world about God's reconciling mission in a broken world that longs for peace, justice and unity' (Marzouk, 2019, p.15). Marzouk's book, *Intercultural Church: A Biblical Vision for an Age of Migration* offers a biblical vision of a church that 'fosters justice and diversity, integrates different cultural articulations of faith and worship, and embodies an alternative to the politics of assimilation and segregation. In a time of political polarisation around global migration, this biblical vision affirms cultural, linguistic, racial, and ethnic differences as gifts from God that can enrich the churches worship, deepen its sense of fellowship, and broaden its witness to God's reconciling mission in the world' (Marzouk, 2019).

There is no dominant culture dictating the way things should be to the rest but a genuine desire to be truly international. For Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Jann Aldredge-Clanton:

'Intercultural churches and ministries bring people of various cultures together to learn from one another, giving equal value and power to each culture, preserving cultural differences, and celebrating the variety of cultural traditions. Intercultural churches and ministries are defined by justice, mutuality, respect, equality, understanding, acceptance, freedom, peace-making, and celebration. In intercultural churches people must be willing to leave the comfort zones of their own separate traditions. They must be willing to embrace difference styles of worship. As people from different cultures interact with one another and build relationships, they grow together and become transformed' (Kim, 2017, p.x).

#### **4.3.5 Church as a Model**

Patten suggests that 'developing healthy multicultural churches is not an end in itself but is intended to enable the local church to better fulfil its mission in the world' and goes on to clarify that by mission he means 'establishing the Kingdom of God in its broadest sense, with the conviction, that multicultural churches have a unique opportunity at this point in the history of humankind' (Patten, 2016, p.135). Patten sees this unique opportunity in terms enabling, enhancing, and modelling the holistic mission of the Church in four particular ways: 'expressing the transforming love of God



through unity, advocating for justice, facilitating both personal and church renewal, and enabling church growth in the context of multicultural communities' (Patten, 2016, pp.135-148). Patten concludes that 'to become a healthy, growing, multicultural church is not an end in itself; its purpose is to serve the Kingdom of God, in these changing times, more effectively' (Patten, 2016, p.150). For Stephanie Spellers, 'ultimately, churches primary mission, identity and ministry are not wrapped up in those of us who are already inside. It is not primarily about our comfort and sense of peace ... our sense of belonging ... doing good deeds or maintaining a cultural heritage. All those priorities, valid as they are, must be a means to serve our primary call: aligning our will with Gods, loving as God loves, welcoming as God welcomes' (Spellers. 2006, p.163).

Thus it is important that the local church needs to not only find a way of being church that enables it to genuinely grow and flourish in the ways God wants it to, but it also to model something good, helpful, and significant for the surrounding community. Christians are not only called to be both 'salt' and 'light' (Matthew 5:13-16), but also 'yeast' (Matthew 13:33). The Church has a vital role to play in helping the surrounding community to 'rise' just as yeast causes dough to rise.

Reflecting on the multicultural nature of UK today, Kwiyani concludes that, 'even though we ... live in ethnically shaped communities ... it is somewhat accepted for churches to be segregated, even in multiethnic communities ... we have accepted this to be the norm' (Kwiyani, 2017, p. 25). What a contrast to the kind of church the Apostle Paul envisages when he exhorts Christians not only to be reconciled to God in Christ, but to go out into society and exercise a God-given ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:11-21). For Sam Wells, incarnational ministry lies at the heart of Christian mission: 'I ... want to recover the term "incarnational ministry" as not simply or primarily an approach to mission for the few, but as a sustained understanding of ministry for the many' (Wells, 2017, p.20). It is in the light of God's call to incarnational mission that Rowan Williams' observations enable us to understand the way in which the Church can model something significant in today's multicultural society: 'the Christian faith is not a matter of vague philosophy but of unremitting challenge to what we think we know about human beings and their destiny ... Forget 'multiculturalism' as some sort of prescription; begin from the multicultural fact. We are already neighbours and fellow citizens; what we need is neither the ghetto nor the reassertion of a fictionally unified past, but ordinary intelligence, sympathy and curiosity in the face of difference' (Williams, 2012, pp.2,112).

## **5. ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTION: Filling the Gap in the Field**

I began this critical literature review by asking the question 'How valid is Moynagh's 'focussed-and-connected' view of contextual church, in the light of the multicultural nature, and the variety of cultural models of church, in Reading?' The question that now needs answering is, having surveyed the relevant literature, how can any subsequent research or practice on my part make an original contribution to the field?

### **5.1 Causal Arrows**

The Rubins suggest that one way for the researcher to move a puzzling problem to something that you can attempt to resolve, or answer is to 'read publish reports and ask yourself if it is possible that the author got the direction of the causal arrows wrong' (Rubin, 2005, p.45). My original research, regarding the possibility of establishing an English Language Café at Abbey Baptist Church as a joint venture between all four churches centred there was based on a variation of the principles outlined in the 2008 document *Face to Face and Side by Side*: produced by the Department for Communities

and Local Government.<sup>54</sup> Critics of this approach, however, suggest the basic premise is the wrong way round. Rather than begin with 'Face to Face' (which invites confrontation over contradictory beliefs) the process should begin with 'Side by Side' (which encourages cooperation in agreed aims and projects).<sup>55</sup> I would suggest something similar with Moynagh's 'connected-and-focussed' approach. Although Moynagh is correct in his belief that the church needs to be both culturally contextual, and at the same broadly connected cross-culturally, a 'connected-yet-focussed' way of being church may possibly be a better way of looking at it. Rather than a variety of culture-specific churches being broadly connected by some vague umbrella structure (as with the 'focussed-and-connected' view) a 'connected-yet-focussed' church shifts the emphasis away from independence to interdependence as the focus of mission and ministry.

As we have been shown Moynagh, in his own journey, appears to have been won over (at least to some degree) to the idea of a 'mixed economy' church.<sup>56</sup> Moynagh acknowledges the significant part played by Rowan Williams in bridging the gap between Fresh Expressions and Inherited Church by introducing the concept of 'a mixed economy church ... in which current and new forms of church would exist alongside one another in mutual support, each with their own distinctive ministries, and neither better than the other' (Moynagh, 2017, p.109).<sup>57</sup> On the surface this looks to be an insightful compromise, and without doubt Williams himself is 'concerned to promote a genuinely Missiological engagement in which gospel, tradition, and culture are brought together to address some fundamental questions' (Drane, 2008, p.48). In many respects it is not too far away from Moynagh's own 'focussed-and-connected' view (which may be part of the reason why he appears to now be supportive of it) or the 'multicultural' model of church considered earlier. Indeed they could well be considered as different facets of the same thing. And herein, for me, lays the weakness of each of these models. Despite Williams eloquent appeal for mutual recognition, the reality is that whilst outwardly they celebrate 'racial, ethnic, theological, and cultural differences ... people stand alongside one another, but without influencing or being influenced by one another' (Marzouk, 2019, p.14). The overriding motive appears to be a 'policy of peaceful coexistence of different cultural communities ... with neither intention nor vision of interaction to create a larger community of

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<sup>54</sup> This lengthy document 'aims to create more local opportunities both for face-to-face dialogue which supports a greater understanding of shared values as well as an appreciation of distinctiveness; and for side-by-side collaborative social action where people come together and share their time, energy and skills to improve their local neighbourhood.' Produced with the clear objective of improving inter-faith relationships, there is much here that is equally applicable to the situation at Abbey (Baptist) Church Centre where the four very different Christian churches share the same space but are clearly divided by language, culture, race, and certain aspects of doctrine and belief.

<sup>55</sup> The former Chief Rabbi, Sir Jonathan Sacks (credited in the original 2008 Document with coming up with the original soundbite) appears to have taken this on board when in a BBC Radio *Thought for the Day* in November 2012 for Interfaith Week, acknowledged that 'We need side by side dialogue, not just face to face'. See <https://rabbisacks.org/tag/writings-and-speeches/> Last accessed 20.4.2020

<sup>56</sup> Referring to what he calls the 'emerging fresh expression narrative' Moynagh recognises the existence of 'a political struggle for control of the narrative' within (primarily) the Church of England and the Methodist Church, with 'advocates of fresh expressions ... seeking a theology that would give the movement impetus [and] critics offering a theological defence [for maintaining both 'fresh expressions' and 'inherited church'] with an emphasis on practising the current [way of doing] church better (Moynagh, 2017, pp.108,109).

<sup>57</sup> In Moynagh's view the discussion has moved on from fresh expressions versus traditional forms of church: 'whereas at the beginning, all the talk was about starting fresh expressions, now the goal is more about supporting the mixed economy, with conferences on themes like "blended church"' (Moynagh, 2017, p.109).

bonding' (Brazal, 2015, pp.47,48). It would appear that outward appearance is all too often more important than inward reality.<sup>58</sup>

Whilst the Moynagh/Williams/multicultural approach is to be commended for seeking to find a practical way a cohesive independence and corporate togetherness can be maintained in today's Church, what is really needed is something more reflective of the views expressed by Newbigin on one hand, and Davison and Milbank on the other. Something akin to the concept of a 'mixed economy' church, but a model that take things further, possibly in a completely new direction, beyond that of Moynagh or even Newbigin, or Davison and Milbank.

## 5.2 Carpe Diem

Brazal and De Guzman's criticism of multiculturalism (which also applies to Moynagh's 'focussed-and-connected' view, and William's 'mixed economy' approach) is balanced by their advocating of interculturalism which 'not only respects difference but creates space for the interaction of diverse cultural groups within a society' (Brazal, 2015, pp.47,48). Thus (as previously noted) intercultural churches 'bring people of various cultures together to learn from one another, giving equal value and power to each culture, preserving cultural differences, and celebrating the variety of cultural traditions [moreover, they are] defined justice, mutuality, respect, equality, understanding, acceptance, freedom, peacemaking, and celebration' (Kim, 2017, p.x).

Quintessentially, the intercultural model of church resonates with Moynagh's 'focussed-and-connected' church model, but reverses the order, suggesting a 'connected-yet-focussed' way of being and doing church. A 'connected-yet-focussed' church is connected in as much as it is truly one church with a common membership and a common leadership, yet at the same time, there is freedom for each ethnic group (within the now united church) to focus on their own God-given vision in terms of ministry and mission to their own ethnicity (if they so wish), supported by the rest of the church. It is this approach that I wish to pursue in my own thesis. A possible working title could be 'Connected-yet-Focussed: The benefits and blessings, problems and potential, of establishing an Intercultural Church in a Multicultural Town'. There is a growing interest in Intercultural Church in the UK today.<sup>59</sup> Given the current multiethnic church situation at Abbey, the multiracial nature of Reading itself, and my own commissioning by Abbey Baptist Church to progress intercultural relationships, I believe that I am in an ideal position for any subsequent research or practice on my part make an original contribution to this particular field of study.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Fresh Expressions themselves acknowledged (only fairly recently) that 'inherited churches and fresh expressions have their separate identities; they are different. But they too can be greatly involved with each other as they share resources, pray for one another and rejoice in each other's strengths. *This will allow people outside the church to say, "They are one"*' (Fresh Expressions, 2017, italics mine).

<sup>59</sup> A plethora of books and articles are being written (see bibliography), organisations such as the Intercultural Churches Network (ICP Network UK) springing up, and intercultural mission workshops (SIM UK) being planned.

<sup>60</sup> I am currently in discussion with the Pastors of the Portuguese-speaking Peniel Church, and have been for some months, regarding the possibility of commencing a regular united international, intercultural worship service at Abbey in the near future. In addition, some discussion around the possibility of eventual amalgamation between Abbey Baptist Church and Peniel Church is also taking place.

In addition to the four culture-specific churches already using the building, Abbey Baptist Church has signed up to be a 'Hong Kong Ready Church' (UKHK Church Network).<sup>61</sup> The Church is a member of the Welcome Churches Network (whose vision is for every refugee to the UK to be welcomed by a local church) and during lockdown has found itself heavily involved in the front line of supporting the large number of refugees already in Reading. As such we are already partnering with Reading Red Kitchen and the Care4Calais Refugee Crisis Charity, Reading Refugee Support Group, and the Reading branch of Amnesty International UK.<sup>62</sup> Whilst several of these groups are not necessarily Christian, mindful of Rowan Williams challenge to the Church to 'model something significant in today's multicultural society' (referred to earlier) Abbey Baptist Church has taken the deliberate decision to partner with anyone who shares the church's commitment to 'seeking the welfare of the city' (Jeremiah 29:7) and being 'a house of prayer for all nations' (Isaiah 56:7; Mark 11:17).<sup>63</sup> For Abbey Baptist Church this is seen as engaging with the incarnational ministry and mission rooted in the *Missio Dei*. In doing this Abbey is not unique in as much as the current Covid-19 crisis is driving local churches to work together across denominations with the creation of cross-denominational 'community hubs' coming together to serve the local community.<sup>64</sup> In addition, both personally and via the church, I am involved with both Churches Together in Reading, and Transform Reading<sup>65</sup> which provides me with considerable access to churches and charities across Reading.

Taking all these additional factors in to consideration provides fertile ground for ongoing research (as suggested above) in as much as it not only opens up a number of larger concerns to do with race, ethnicity and cultural identity, together with the validity (or otherwise) of the various cultural models of being and doing church in multicultural areas such as Reading, but it also present an opportunity to 'seize the day': to grasp the issues at stake, to understand the reasoning behind different approaches, to tackle the problems, to come up with possible workable solutions, to contribute to the ongoing research in this particular field of study and make an original contribution in this field. At the same time the situation offers a unique opportunity to both gather specific personal data and test out my thesis practically by engaging in establishing some form of international, intercultural church in the hope that, in this way, Abbey might itself model a way forward for other local churches and contribute something of value to the wider community in terms of modelling intercultural relationships, unity, social and racial justice, and reconciliation.

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<sup>61</sup> 130,000 people expected to migrate to the UK from Hong Kong later in 2021, with several hundred of these coming to Reading.

<sup>62</sup> Links to all these organisations/charities are provided in the Bibliography.

<sup>63</sup> Although none of this support work has been overtly evangelistic it has resulted in the church being held in high esteem both by these partners and within the wider community, some of the refugees starting to attend church and even seek baptism, and compassionate care being shown to the needy.

<sup>64</sup> There are already three such community hubs in different parts of Reading with the possibility of a fourth hub being established in and around Reading's Abbey Quarter.

<sup>65</sup> A significant cross-denominational church/charity organisation that has been meeting weekly to pray for/serve the people of Reading for more than 20 years.

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## Appendix 2: Ethics Materials



### Invitation to Participate in an Interview

Dear

I am writing to you officially to invite you to participate in a personal, one-to-one interview with myself as part of a thesis for a Professional Doctorate in Theology and Practice I am undertaking with the University of Winchester.

As part of the ethics approval procedure of the University I need to outline to you the basis of the project, what the research will involve and considerations around the issues of data protection and anonymity. Please find attached a Participation Information Sheet. I hope that this document will explain it all clearly but please contact me if you have any further queries.

If you agree to participate, are clear about the purpose of the project and about the use of the data, please indicate your agreement by initialling the boxes on the attached Consent to Participate form. Please return this to me by e-mail. If you decide not to take part, please be assured there will be no adverse consequences that would be detrimental in any way to our ongoing relationship.

Thank you for reading this and for considering this invitation to participate in my research.

Kind regards,

**Jim Binney**

E-mail address: [J.Binney.17@unimail.winchester.ac.uk](mailto:J.Binney.17@unimail.winchester.ac.uk)



## Participant Information Sheet - Interview

### 1. Research Project Title

‘Focussed-and-connected’: An exploration of Michael Moynagh’s view of contextual church in a multicultural church situation at the centre of a multicultural town.

### 2. Invitation

You are being invited to take part in this research because either a) you have been recommended to me by the primary leaders of your church, or b) you appear to me to be, someone who would be interested in this area of research. Please take time to read the following information. Thank you.

### 3. Aim of the Project

The thesis is based around the desire of Abbey Baptist Church to understand what it really means to be a multicultural church at the centre of a multicultural town. The main aim is to discover what level of mutual understanding exist between the various culture-specific churches and groups that currently meet at Abbey Baptist Church, Reading, as to what being ‘focussed-and-connected’ might mean, in the light of the *Missio Dei*. Other related sub-aims that arise include: To investigate the cultural, social, political and historical context of the various churches and groups that meet at Abbey; what histories of racism, colonialism and migration have resulted in them meeting in the same building; why certain distinct church communities have formed; and the reasons behind any apparent reluctance to integrate. To encourage a process of mutual reflective mirroring to ascertain the level of awareness within each church/group of the diverse cultural models of church, such as monocultural, multiethnic, multicultural, and intercultural. To explore, with the various culture-specific churches, ethnicities and groups now meeting at Abbey Baptist Church, the extent to which ‘connectedness’ could be perceived as colonialist or understood as an expression of radical hospitality. To facilitate a process of potential cross-cultural shared activity among the various churches/groups on a ‘side-by-side and face-to-face’ basis involving shared practical service in the community as well as debate and discussion in order to stimulate a greater sense of mutual understanding, appreciation, and commonality.

### 4. Requirements of research participants

You are being asked to take part in a one-to-one interview between us. It will be a semi-structured conversation with some prepared questions but may develop more informally with further follow up questions. The interview will be booked for a mutually convenient time and should not last longer than an hour and a half. The interviews will be conducted either on the church premises (Abbey Baptist Church, Abbey Square, Reading, RG1 3BE) or by remote online interview whichever is best for you.

### 5. Taking Part

Your participation in the project is entirely voluntary and confidential. You will be identifiable only to me. You will not be referred to (in quotes or extracts) by name anywhere in the thesis. The interview will be recorded. I will write up the notes and store them on my computer in my home office in password encrypted files. I will send you a copy of what I write up. I will not be holding any information about you that is not pertinent to this project. The thesis will be written based on the information I glean from the research and will be examined by University of Winchester staff and external examiners.

## **6. Risks of taking part**

From the questions and topics raised, you will be encouraged to share something of your faith journey. Questions will also be aimed at discovering more about your personality and preferences, cultural identity, denominational history, theology, spirituality and discipleship. This might prove to be a sensitive area for you and potentially evoke distressing memories and issues from the past. Please see the information at the end of this sheet for further support away from the local church and independent of me as the researcher.

## **7. Data retention**

Consent forms will be destroyed immediately upon completion of the thesis. The recorded transcript of our interview (data) will be kept for a maximum of a year after the completion of the project in case the data is needed for subsequent publications. It will then be deleted. However, the thesis could be used for future publications arising from the research.

## **8. Your choice**

Please do not feel obliged to take part in this research. It is entirely your choice. If you do decide to participate, please keep a copy of this information sheet and indicate your agreement by initialling the boxes on the attached consent form. Please return this to me by e-mail.

## **9. Opting out**

You can withdraw at any time up to two weeks following the interview or until the data has been anonymised. Please contact me by e-mail and let me know of your desire to opt out of the research. You do not have to give a reason. Any data from you will be deleted and not included in the written thesis.

## **10. Ethics approval**

This project has been ethically approval by the University of Winchester RKE Research Ethics Committee. If you have any concerns, please contact [ethics@winchester.ac.uk](mailto:ethics@winchester.ac.uk). The ethics reference code for this project is RKEEC220901\_Binney.17

## **18. Contacts for further information**

Stephen Dowell, Data Protection Officer at The University of Winchester;  
[Stephen.Dowell@winchester.ac.uk](mailto:Stephen.Dowell@winchester.ac.uk).

Professor Robert Beckford, Director of the Winchester Institute for Climate and Social Justice,  
University of Winchester

[Robert.Beckford@winchester.ac.uk](mailto:Robert.Beckford@winchester.ac.uk).

## **20. Examples of further support**

You are advised to contact your GP or NHS 111 if you are concerned about any specific issues or symptoms around mental illness that may have been identified through the discussions and that concern you. Also, Community Mental Health Team – 0300 365 0300; Samaritans, Reading – 0330 094 5717.

Any safeguarding concerns will be reported immediately to Mary Brockington, Abbey Baptist Church Safeguarding Officer and/or to Joy Cheang, Southern Counties Baptist Association Safeguarding Officer. See Baptists Together Recognising, Responding to and Reporting Abuse. [www.baptist.org.uk](http://www.baptist.org.uk).

## Consent to Participate in an Interview

Dear Jim,

I am writing to you to confirm my consent to participate in an interview for your DTh thesis entitled:

**‘Focussed-and-connected’: An exploration of Michael Moynagh’s view of contextual church in a multicultural church situation at the centre of a multicultural town.**

**I have initialled in the box provided to show that I agree to the following:**

	Initials
To meet with yourself, as the researcher, either in person or individually remotely online to discuss issues pertinent to this project.	
That I am willing to allow my responses to questions and additional contributions in discussion to be included anonymously in the thesis and any publications arising from this research.	
That the researcher can record our interview.	
That the researcher can type up the interview and I will be shown a copy.	
That the researcher can use my words anonymously in the thesis which will be assessed by university staff and external examiners and could be used in any publications arising from this research.	
That the researcher will keep the recorded interviews and transcripts in password encrypted files for a maximum of a year after the completion of the thesis. After that they will be deleted.	

**I have initialled in the box provided to confirm my understanding that my participation is completely: -**

Voluntary. I do not have to participate if I do not want to and if I wish to withdraw, I may do so at any time up to two weeks following the interview or until the data has been anonymised without any disadvantage to myself. If I do withdraw, any data from me will not be used in the thesis.	
Confidential. However, I accept the proviso that if any potential harm to myself or others or any illegal activity is made known during the interview, the researcher may need to report it to someone else.	
Anonymous. Real names will not be used in the thesis, or any reference be made to identify me.	

**Signed:**

**Name:**

**Date:**

## Appendix 3: Participant Questionnaire

### PROJECT QUESTIONNAIRE

#### **'FOCUSED-AND-CONNECTED': AN EXPLORATION OF MICHAEL MOYNAGH'S VIEW OF CONTEXTUAL CHURCH IN A MULTICULTURAL CHURCH SITUATION AT THE CENTRE OF A MULTICULTURAL TOWN**

##### **PREAMBLE**

Thank you for agreeing to help me with this project. You are here because you are someone I thought would be able to make a valuable contribution to this piece of research.

This research is essentially an exploration of Oxford academic, Michael Moynagh's view that in order for a church to be both faithful to Jesus and appropriate for the people it seeks to serve, it may well initially focus on a specific culture ... but in order to mature spiritually it also needs to step away from its comfort zone and meaningfully connect more broadly with other churches or groups who, although sharing the same Christian faith may belong to a different culture.

This research is thought to be especially relevant given the fact that over the last decade Abbey Baptist Church has become the home of various culture-specific churches and groups (like your own) and that Reading itself is a large multicultural town with 35% of its population originating from outside the UK and where there are over 150 different languages groups.

This interview should last about an hour and hopefully will prove to be fairly relaxed and conversational in style. You don't have to answer any question you don't want to. Is there anything you would like to ask me before we begin?

##### **QUESTIONS AND SUB-QUESTIONS**

- 1. We all love a good story. My wife and I have lived in Reading for over four years. How we arrived here is an interesting story in and of itself (which I won't bore you with now). Perhaps you could tell me a little of your story?**
  - Your name? Age? Place of origin? How you came to be in Reading in the first place? What you think of Reading?
  - What are your hopes and dreams for the future?
  - If you could be anywhere in the world right now ... where would that be?
  
- 2. There are currently four totally independent churches which meet at the Abbey Baptist Church Centre on a Sunday (Zion, LSI, Peniel, and Abbey Baptist Church itself). Which of these various churches do you belong?**
  - How long have you been attending? What is it about your church that particularly appeals to you?
  - How many people attend? How many members of the congregation actually live in Reading?
  - Tell me something about your own spiritual journey. Describe your own spiritual/theological approach to life?
  - Would you describe yourself as traditional/evangelical/conservative/charismatic/liberal/progressive ... or what?
  
- 3. How would you describe your church? What would you say are its strong points?**
  - How much do you know about your church's history? When was it planted? Why was it planted?
  - What reason(s) would you give someone (who showed an interest) for coming to your church?
  - Are there any areas of church life you think need to be strengthened?

4. **Michael Moynagh alludes to the fact that some writers (e.g. Donald McGavran, Graham Cray) put more emphasis on establishing homogenous congregations (in which all the members have some characteristic in common, e.g. ethnicity) than in linking them up because people are more likely to come to faith within their own culture. Do you agree with this view?**
- Does your church have a particular group of people in mind in terms of its ministry/mission? Who?
  - Moynagh also talks about the importance of a church having a ‘focus’ i.e. a clear vision, purpose, objective. What do you think the focus/vision/purpose/*raison d’être* of your church is?
  - How do you see the future for your church/group? How would you like to see your church/group develop?
5. **A decade ago Abbey Baptist Church began to open its doors to other independent, culture-specific churches who wished to worship in their own heart languages. Can you tell me anything about these other churches?**
- Have you ever attended any of their meetings? For what reason? What were your impressions?
  - How would you assess Abbey Baptist Church’s decision to open its doors to other culture-specific churches in this way? Is it important? Has it been of benefit? Has it been detrimental? In what ways?
  - At the moment your church shares the Abbey Baptist Church building. How do you feel about that? About renting the space; contributing to its upkeep; eventually moving to a building of your own?
6. **Prejudice is an assumption or an opinion about someone simply based on that person's membership of a particular group (e.g., someone of a different ethnicity, gender, or religion). How do you feel about prejudice?**
- How do you feel in particular about *racial* prejudice? In UK society today?
  - Does racial prejudice (or any other kind of prejudice) exist in the Church today?
  - Do you think you, or your church (albeit unwittingly), is prejudiced in any way?
7. **In its heyday the UK was one of the great European colonial powers influencing and affecting a significant part of the world. What does the word ‘colonialism’ mean for you?**
- How do you feel about your colonial legacy? Was there anything good about it? What was not so good?
  - Has this colonial legacy impacted you personally? In what ways?
  - Historic colonialism has generally been seen negatively as ‘the policy or practice of acquiring full or partial political control over another country, occupying it with settlers, and exploiting it economically’. What is your reaction?
  - Do you see any signs of ongoing ‘coloniality’ (the attitude/logic/approach that gave rise to historic colonialism) in society or the church today? Can you give me some examples?
8. **Michael Moynagh also talks about the importance of culture-specific churches meaningfully ‘connecting’ with other churches or groups in order to mature spiritually. Do you agree with this view?**
- Are there any churches/networks/groups you feel your church could meaningfully connect with today?
  - In the light of Jesus’ prayer that his disciples ‘may be one, even as we (the Father and the Son) are one’ (John 17:11), should the four culture-specific churches currently meeting at the Abbey Centre make a greater effort to be ‘meaningfully connected’? What would/could this look like?
  - What do you think the barriers to such cross-cultural connectedness might be?

- What could be done to enable the various culture-specific churches and groups meeting at Abbey to get to know each other/work together more effectively?
9. **The New Testament exhorts us in a number of places to ‘offer hospitality to one another’ especially to ‘strangers’ (1 Peter 4:8-10; Titus 1:7,8; Hebrews 13:1,2 etc., etc.). What does ‘offering hospitality’ mean to you?**
- Biblical hospitality, it is suggested, is more than ‘the friendly and generous reception and entertainment of guests and visitors’ ... it means offering ‘radical hospitality’ ... going the second or third mile with others. What do you think this might entail?
  - Michael Moynagh prefers the term ‘generosity’ to ‘radical hospitality’. What do you think he means by this?
  - In what ways does Abbey Baptist Church (as the host church) offer radical hospitality/generosity to its tenant churches? Could this be improved in any way?
10. **Mission (the *Missio Dei*) is not primarily something we do for God but something God is already doing in the world, something God invites us to share in with him (John 20:21). Do you agree?**
- How does your church understand the *Missio Dei*? As holistic and integral mission (ministering to the physical, mental, social, emotional, environmental needs of others, as well as the spiritual) or simply in terms of evangelism?
  - In the last 12/18 months Abbey Baptist Church has transitioned into a numerically much larger international, intercultural church, essentially as a result of its outreach (oftentimes in partnership with others) to refugees/migrants/immigrants to the UK. How would you assess this?
  - Radical hospitality, it is suggested, is more than simply offering a welcome ... it is deliberate outward looking movement to stand with those at society’s margins – the refugee, the migrant, the homeless, etc. Do you agree?
  - What does/could your church do practically to offer radical hospitality to those at the margins in Reading: the immigrants, the migrants, the refugees, and so on? Could we achieve more in partnership together than as independent churches? In what ways?
11. **Are there any areas I have not covered in this interview that you think I should include in this research?**

### **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

That has been great, and you have given me a lot to think about. Thank you for your time.

