A Practical Theology of Decision-making in the Context of Church Closures

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2024

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Abstract

This thesis explores the theology involved in decision-making in the context of church closures. It is essentially a conversation between three partners: two case studies of Methodist churches which were closing; a literature review of closing churches which identified death/dying as the predominant language; and a theological exploration of baptism.

I argue that using the language of death/dying in this context is a lazy metaphor. The language is often based more on secular understandings of death/dying than on theological ones, while the case studies highlight a dislike of the death/dying metaphor and an absence of articulated theology in the decision-making processes. Taking all this into consideration I argue that death/dying language is not helpful in this context unless it is used in relation to participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In light of the absence of articulated theology from the case studies, I explore Methodist approaches to theological reflection and what this might look like in order to help in decision-making. In response to the death/dying metaphor I suggest that renewed attention be paid to the sacraments of the church in order to reappropriate the language of death/dying, with particular attention being paid to Baptism as participation in the death and resurrection of Christ. I argue that this would improve theological decision-making specifically, and give a pattern for discipleship generally. The example that Christ sets is one of self-denial and self-emptying, of embodying the dynamic of dying **and** rising in the whole of life and therefore provides a basis on which to make decisions theologically and collectively about the church's future. Thus, moving the conversation of church closure away from the usual factors of decision-making: finance, the condition of the building, people, and the lack of mission, in order to challenge the idea of what closing a church "well" might look like from a theological perspective which is embodied in the life of the church and is a lived expression of discipleship.

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Abbreviations

BEM World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry,* Faith and Order paper no. 111, (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982)

BoO *The Book of Offices,* (London: Methodist Publishing House, 1936)

CLP *Called to Love and Praise: A Methodist Conference Statement on the Church,* (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 1999)

MSB *The Methodist Service Book*, (London: Methodist Publishing House, 1975)

MWB *The Methodist Worship Book, (*Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 1999)

Notes Wesley, John *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, (London: Epworth Press, 1976)

Methodist Faith and Order Reports: The following all accessed from: https://www.methodist.org.uk/our-faith/reflecting-on-faith/faith-and-order/faith-and-order-statements/ [accessed 16/10/2019]:

Memorandum Memorandum on infant Baptism, (1936), 31-32

Statement Statement on Holy Baptism, (1952), 33-38

Initiation Christian Initiation, (1987), 63-101

Note on Quotations:

All words in *italics* or **bold** found in quotations are as in the original unless otherwise stated.

Statement of Copyright

Acknowledgments

I wish to record my gratitude to the following for their assistance in the completion of this research: the Methodist Church in Britain for granting me a Higher Education Award to fund my studies; and the Liverpool District of the Methodist Church for their financial support. I am grateful to Wesley House, Cambridge for the use of their library, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic.

I am indebted to my supervisors: Dr Jocelyn Bryan who has patiently seen me through this entire project, along with Revd Prof. David Wilkinson and, in the early stages, Revd Dr David Goodhew. Thank you.

This research would not have been possible without the willing participation of the Ministers/Superintendents, congregations, and interviewees of 'Hope Street' and 'Mercy Lane' Methodist Churches. I am particularly grateful for their generosity of time and interest in this research during what was a difficult time for each of these congregations. This gratitude extends to the District Chairs and District Missioner who were also willing interviewees. You all know who you are: thank you.

My thanks must also go to my friends and colleagues who have borne with me through this project, those who have shown an interest in it, and those who have allowed me to talk incessantly (at times) about my research. Talking about it helped to clarify my thoughts and your encouragement has kept me going. I am also grateful to Hayley James for drawing two of the images in chapter 9.

Last, but not least, I express my deep gratitude to my family. Particularly to Sylvester: I could not have done this without you.

Thank you to you all.

Jesu, we follow Thee,
In all Thy footsteps tread,
And pant for full conformity
To our exalted Head;
We would, we would partake
Thy every state below,
And suffer all things for Thy sake,
And to Thy glory do.

We in Thy birth are born,
Sustain Thy grief and loss,
Share in Thy want, and shame, and scorn,
And die upon Thy cross.
Baptized into Thy death
We sink into Thy grave,
Till Thou the quickening Spirit breathe,
And to the utmost save.

Thou said'st, 'Where'er I am
There shall My servant be';
Master, the welcome word we claim
And die to live with Thee.
To us who share Thy pain,
Thy joy shall soon be given,
And we shall in Thy glory reign,
For Thou art now in heaven.

Charles Wesley

#130 – *Hymns on the Lord's Supper*
Section 5: Concerning the Sacrifice of our Persons[1]

[1] J. Ernest Rattenbury, *The Eucharistic Hymns Of John and Charles Wesley* (London: Epworth Press, 1948).

Part 1

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background

This research is located within the British Methodist Church for two reasons. Firstly, this is the denomination within which I have grown up, where I am spiritually 'at home' and remain by choice and conviction having served as a presbyter since 1999. It is the denomination with which I am most familiar and have most concern for. Secondly, the issue of closing churches is an ongoing challenge for the denomination, especially in light of continually declining membership figures[2] and the implications these have for local churches, circuits, and the Connexion as a whole.

In many ways closed churches form the backdrop of my childhood. It was not unheard of, on family outings, to observe "*that looks like an old church!*" when passing buildings that may have been repurposed churches. My mother told us stories about churches she had preached in as a young Local Preacher which often ended: "*but now it's closed!*" And in the small East Yorkshire town where I grew up, there were once four Methodist Churches; when we moved there in 1986 only two were left: one had become a lawnmower shop and the site of another had been redeveloped for housing.

What stands out in this autobiographical reflection is my awareness that churches close, and it did not seem to be something unusual. However, over the years I have realised that this is not always the case, and that not everyone wants to talk about the possibility of closure: if anything, it is avoided. In 2017 I attended the closing service of another of those Methodist churches in that Yorkshire town and I wonder what the nature of the conversation would be if the remaining one were ever to consider closing.

Church closure has also been a theme running through my ordained ministry. For my probationary appointment I had oversight of four churches each with their own challenges, including large premises for small, declining congregations; aging memberships; and a general reluctance to engage in mission activities. I vividly recall a conversation with one church steward who told me in response to a new Methodist

[2] See Appendix 1.

initiative: “We’ve tried everything, but nothing changes, so what’s the point?” In 2015 I was not surprised to receive an invitation to celebrate the life of two of these churches as they closed. A third church has also since closed. A later appointment in a circuit of 18 churches, with 5 presbyters and similar declining and aging congregations, raised questions about the viability of the circuit. There was general agreement across the circuit that there were too many buildings in a relatively small geographical area and that some ought to close. However, the frequent refrain from church members of “but as long as ours doesn’t close” and from colleagues that “I didn’t come into ministry to close churches,” somehow combined to prevent honest conversations about the situation and any planning for the future. And so, eventually, one by one churches began to close: one closed before I left the circuit, and a further five have closed since.

Eventually I moved to a wider role as a District Missioner.[3] Part of this role was to help churches think about their future, or whether they had a future, with the continuing backdrop of aging and declining congregations, along with staffing and financial difficulties. Due to the nature of my role, I would engage in these conversations from the starting point of the mission of the church which they thought could or would “save” them. But it often felt as though we were talking different languages: congregations would talk of “how things used to be” and I would talk about “how things could be” while ignoring the realities of the present. Communities around the church buildings had changed, but there was generally no real understanding of the nature of those changes and therefore no effective engagement with them. Usually, the conversations ended up in the air, the congregations continued to just drift along, and I was left feeling that this was most unsatisfactory. I was not unduly worried whether they decided to close or to stay open as I did not believe that closure was inherently wrong, but I was concerned about how and why they made their decisions, and about their resistance to even talk about the possibility of closure when the graphs of their membership and attendance at Sunday worship, and their finances all appeared to make them unviable as self-sustaining congregations. I could not find any helpful resources to aid congregations think through and engage with these challenges, particularly from the perspective of their faith.

[3] A generic term given to those who are either employed or appointed by a District to help the District engage in mission and evangelism.

Therefore, I embarked on this research wanting to understand these situations better and to seek a way to have Godly conversations about the future of churches such as these, and to help them make decisions theologically rather than expediently or as a last resort.

1.2 The Context of the Methodist Church

While these issues are not necessarily unique to the Methodist Church, they are particularly challenging in light of its history. Following John Wesley's death in 1791 the Methodist movement began to fragment, resulting in many towns and even villages having several different Methodist churches. The small Yorkshire town described above serves as a not uncommon example of this: it had a Wesleyan Methodist presence, established prior to 1813, which went on to plant a 'mission room' in 1879 at the other end of the town (closed in 2017); a Primitive Methodist chapel was opened in 1827 (the lawnmower shop); and a United Methodist Free Church in 1863 (housing). All of this in a town whose population at the 1861 census was 1,625[4] and which also had in the nineteenth century two Anglican churches and a congregational church (and later a Catholic church). The population of the town in the 2021 census was 15,486[5] with one Methodist, one Anglican, and one Catholic church remaining.

Nationally, the Methodist New Connexion joined with the Bible Christians and the United Methodist Free Church to become the United Methodist Church in 1907. The United Methodist Church, the Wesleyan and the Primitive Methodist Churches then joined together in 1932 to form what is now the Methodist Church of Great Britain.[6] This union, and the conversations leading to it, highlighted a number of challenges which included the issue of competition between the Free Churches which, up until 1932, would have included the differing Methodist denominations which were now expected to work together. This competition had led to expansion 'far beyond their capacity to fill chapels'[7] and left the Methodists in the twentieth century with 'an abundance of financially precarious and little-used chapels.'[8] Currie describes the 'comparatively mild case' in

[4] Dates and figures from the town's Local History Society webpages: information not given to preserve its anonymity.
[5] https://censusdata.uk [accessed 30/03/2023].
[6] www.methodistheritage.org.uk/history-familytree.htm [accessed 31/12/2020].
[7] Robin Gill, *The 'Empty' Church Revisited* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2003), 91.
[8] Gill, 99.

Durham of a 'characteristic pre-union situation: thirteen competing circuits, belonging to three denominations, consisting of about 200 rather more than half-empty small chapels inside a square eighteen miles by eighteen miles.'[9] He gives more extreme examples in West Yorkshire and Cornwall.

One concern was the 'problem' of chapel officials which a correspondent to the *Methodist Recorder* expressed succinctly:

> On the one side of our Chapel within a hundred yards is a Free Methodist Chapel; on the other side is a Primitive Methodist Chapel about the same distance away. In each of these chapels are a band of eager, enthusiastic officials who have had a life-long connection with their Chapel, and sphere of work. Supposing, through Union, you close two of these chapels, what is going to become of these various officials?[10]

Practical issues seemed to preoccupy the minds and decision-making of the three denominations, even though some suggest that the purpose of Union was evangelism and growth: 'a means of increasing the numbers of Methodists.'[11] For Currie, the practical and the evangelistic were intimately related:

> If union was to make Methodism 'a greater evangelistic force throughout the country', the rationalization consequent upon closure of overlapping chapels was essential. On the other hand, if they advocated closure of chapels as the main plank of their programme, the union movement was doomed […] The purpose of union was to close the chapels; the price of union was to keep them open.[12]

This relationship between the practical and evangelistic is also recognised in the wider contemporary church context by the likes of Jackson who suggests that 'management of decline must increasingly involve the planned closure of many thousands of buildings.'[13]

While local amalgamations were seen as essential in a united Methodist Church, Currie quotes a United Methodist minister who pointed out that 'a serious omission' in the union scheme was 'the absence of any provision for the guidance and, when necessary,

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[9] Robert Currie, *Methodism Divided* (London: Faber & Faber, 1968), 198-199.
[10] *Methodist Recorder,* 16 September 1926, p.4 quoted in Currie, 197.
[11] J.M. Turner, 'Methodism in England 1900-1932, in Rupert Davies, A. Raymond George and Gordon Rupp (eds), *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain Volume 3* (London: Epworth Press, 1983), 309-361, 334.
[12] Currie, 197-8.
[13] Bob Jackson, *Hope for the Church* (London: Church House Publishing, 2002), 4.

the compulsion of local unions or amalgamations by Conference.'[14] This implies that a central strategy for rationalising the number of buildings had not been put in place. Rather, promises were made by the various Conferences that chapels would not be closed 'over the heads of the local trustees and authorities.'[15] If there was no plan, neither does there appear to have been any guidance for 'local trustees and authorities' to make these decisions on the ground and realise the desired outcome of rationalization. The lasting effects of this is hinted at by Davies as he reflects on ministers entering circuit ministry in the 1950s,

> with all kinds of plans for an enterprising future, only to find that they were forced, on weekdays as well as Sundays, to serve chapels that ought to have been closed long ago, and that no amount of argument about the misuse of manpower and the needs of the Gospel would shift trustees who were determined to keep 'their' chapel open.[16]

Writing in 1983, Davies adds: 'and the problem rumbles on.'[17] While it appears that the issue of rationalising buildings seems to have been resolved in my small Yorkshire town by 1973, albeit still forty years after Union, with the former Primitive, United Methodist and one of the Wesleyan churches coming together in one building, this legacy of Methodist Union is still evident in some places over ninety years later.

Perhaps the backdrop of gradual amalgamations and closures over the years since 1932 has sensitised a generation of now 'senior' Methodist members against closure. A strength of the circuit system is that there is usually another Methodist Church relatively close to move to: however, they are increasingly further apart with many having less allegiance to 'the circuit'. Given the challenges facing the church today, there continues to be an urgent need for guidance to help churches talk about these issues and to make appropriate decisions which are going to get increasingly more difficult, particularly if yours is the only Methodist presence left in town.

In order for a Methodist church to close, it requires a decision of the Managing Trustees which is usually the church council. Chaired by either the superintendent or the minister

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[14] Currie, 192. Quoting *Methodist Recorder* 21 July 1932, 4.
[15] Currie, 198.
[16] Rupert Davies, 'Since 1932' in Davies *et al* (eds), *History of the Methodist Church,* Volume 3, 362-390, 364.
[17] *Ibid*, 364.

in pastoral charge, the church council is made up of specified church office holders, representatives of the congregation either elected by the General Church Meeting or appointed by the council all of whom are members of the church, and a circuit steward.[18] This decision is then taken as a recommendation to the circuit meeting (the Managing Trustees of the circuit), and from the circuit meeting to the District Policy Committee (the Managing Trustees of the district) so that final permission to close can be given by the District Synod.[19] However, if the number of locally resident members falls below twelve for four successive quarters the circuit meeting can close the church.[20] This is the only situation in which a body external to the church can make the decision.

It is important to note that no one person can make the decision to close any church – not even the superintendent, the Chair of District or the President of the Conference. The decision is made by the body with Trustee responsibility and is therefore always a collective decision, which is why the decision-making is very often difficult, contentious, or avoided, and why some guidance is needed.

1.3 Focus and Structure of the Thesis

My research question started out as: how can we make sense of what is happening theologically when a church closes and how is this embedded in the church? However, due to the data gathered in two cases studies of closing churches, the research question has become: what theology might help a church to make decisions when facing closure, and how might this be embedded in the church? What I am not doing in this thesis is producing a theology of closing churches or seeking to understand what God might be saying to the church through church closures, neither am I exploring *why* churches are closing. Rather, what I am seeking to do is provide a theological framework to help churches make decisions about their future in the context of whether they should or should not close their building. I am ambivalent over whether the closing of a church is a good or bad thing: it depends on the reasons *why* it is closing or remaining open.

[18] S.O.610: Constitution of the Church Council, *The Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church Volume* 2 (London: The Methodist Conference, 2023), 530.
[19] *Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church,* S.O.942: Closure of Chapels, 669.
[20] *Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church*, S.O.605A: Cessation and Merger, 526.

Appropriate decision-making is vital and will be the focus of this thesis. This thesis is divided into four parts:

Part one is an introductory section which includes the present introduction and chapter two which will outline both the theological methodology of this thesis, drawing on Whitehead and Whitehead's theological method,[21] and the empirical research methodology.

Part two comprises chapters three to eight and 'attends' to the three conversation partners of this method. Chapters three and four are the voice of personal experience: introducing the case studies and the analysis of the data respectively. Chapters five and six represent the voice of the surrounding culture: chapter five being the literature review of closing churches and chapter six a response to the metaphor of death/dying arising from the literature. Chapters seven and eight form the voice of the Christian tradition: chapter seven focuses on baptism in response to chapters five and six; and chapter eight explores approaches to Methodist theology in response to issues raised by the data regarding the lack of articulated theology in the decision-making, which leads into the theological framework in chapter nine.

Part three (chapter nine) forms the 'asserting' stage of the method in which the three conversation partners come together in dialogue. This involves the construction of a theological framework for decision-making which will focus on baptism, death/dying, and discipleship.

Part four (chapter ten) is 'the pastoral response' where I will consider, in the form of recommendations, what I believe needs paying attention to if the suggested framework is to be constructed within the Methodist Church.

[21] James D. Whitehead and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead, *Method in Ministry: Theological Reflection and Christian Ministry,* revised edition (Lanham: Sheed and Ward, 1995).

Chapter 2: Methodology

A church can be deemed to have closed 'well' from an institutional or human perspective, but what does it mean to close 'well' from a theological perspective? The 'methodological challenge' of this thesis is well expressed by Ward who asks, 'how do we think about practice theologically in a way that sheds light on and then makes a difference to the ongoing life of the church?'[22] 'The church' in the present context is both the local church and the denominational Church: I shall use the example of two churches to help other churches and the denominational Church think theologically about its decision-making in the context of church closures. The theological challenge of this thesis therefore requires a robust yet flexible approach in order to get to the heart of the matter.

2.1 The Theological Method

My approach is a form of a mutual critical correlation method of Practical Theology which as, described by Swinton and Mowat, generally seeks to be 'hermeneutical, correlational, critical and theological.'[23] It draws on a conversational model of theological reflection, based on Whitehead and Whitehead's theological method. Their three-stage method begins with 'attending', which involves careful listening without judgement[24] to seek 'out the information that is available'[25] within each of three conversation partners: personal experience; the religious tradition; and the surrounding culture. In this thesis these conversation partners will be: two case studies of closing churches (personal experience); Baptism (religious tradition); and a literature review which brings to light the theme of death/dying (surrounding culture). Although this is not technically about the 'surrounding culture' per se, it brings a third dimension to the model to which wider questions concerning the secular context will be added.

Stage two, 'assertion' brings these partners into 'assertive dialogue'[26] as they 'clarify, challenge, and purify the insights and limits'[27] of each conversation partner, in order 'to

[22] Pete Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 96.
[23] John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research,* 2nd edition (London: SCM, 2016), 73.
[24] Whitehead, 14.
[25] Whitehead, 13.
[26] Whitehead, 5.
[27] Whitehead, x.

expand and enrich religious insight.'[28] At the heart of this approach is a conversation described by the Whiteheads as a 'crucible' which 'suggests the transformation that often occurs at this stage.'[29] I find the crucible to be an unhelpful metaphor as it conjures the image of the three partners being melted down into one new whole so that the contributions of each become indistinguishable. I prefer to liken the process to a cooking pot of rich stew. It does not become a 'mush' such that it is unclear what is being eaten, rather the ingredients remain distinguishable with each taking the flavour of the other as they truly 'expand and enrich' the whole. Not all ingredients can be added at the same time, but the wisdom of the chef is required to know when to add each. Like a good African stew, it cannot be cooked in a hurry.

I will engage the three partners together to create a theological framework for decision-making. This, along with the metaphor of the cooking pot, gives the 'asserting' stage a clear focus rather than it becoming an open-ended conversation which reaches no conclusions. This focused conversation will help to address two weaknesses of this method: either the data each partner brings is so substantial that it leads to an unwieldy conversation; or, in order to make it manageable, the partners do not give sufficient depth resulting in a superficial conversation. The Whiteheads themselves recognise that it can be 'less controllable'[30] than other theological approaches, and can become overly complex if it is not handled carefully. I suggest the conversation needs 'careful handling' rather than 'controlling' as control can imply that someone is guiding the conversation to their own ends, potentially not allowing every voice to be fully or equally heard, instead of letting the conversation direct the destination. Careful handling of the material is required as the researcher becomes the chef who knows how to skilfully handle the delicate ingredients so that each may release their full flavour.

This conversation happens at two levels: firstly, the researcher is a facilitator; facilitating the process and the conversation between the three partners, using the model as envisaged by the Whiteheads. This prioritises their theological skills and wisdom. Secondly, in gathering and analysing the empirical data, the researcher also engages in a similar process

[28] Whitehead, 13.
[29] Whitehead, 15.
[30] Whitehead, 4.

themselves: interpreting the data as they go along in light of the surrounding culture, the religious tradition, and their own personal experience while remaining objective and thinking about, for example, how the interviewee may be doing the same. This prioritises their research skills in handling the empirical data. The researcher needs to be aware that they may be making presumptions about what they are hearing or observing, and must have the wisdom to know when to seek clarification.

Given the absence of examples of closing churches in scripture and other aspects of the religious tradition, it was not obvious at the start of the research process what this conversation partner would contribute. Therefore, the initial hope of the empirical research was to uncover what theology was used by churches in their decision-making and to move outwards from there. As no articulated theology was uncovered, it was through listening to the voices of the case studies in initial conversation with the literature review that baptism was identified and given a place in the conversation. It could therefore be said that some 'assertive dialogue' had taken place between these two partners before the 'religious tradition' joined the full conversation. Also added to the "pot" at the start of the 'asserting dialogue' stage (part 3) was a contextual consideration of the secular age, forming part of the 'surrounding culture's' voice in the conversation.

The danger of any model is that it implies a neat and tidy conversation that can reach a solution which is not always realistic. If the conversation the Whiteheads envisage really '*is* our life together' rather than 'to settle the matter once and for all and be done with the need for such engagement',[31] then the use of the model in this way, bringing in conversation partners when necessary, is more reflective of the complexities of everyday life and enables a more meaningful conversation to occur. It is the difference between a chef slavishly following a recipe (the model); and a chef having understanding and confidence in their knowledge and culinary instincts to improvise with the recipe, in response to the uniqueness of each ingredient.

As the nature of the whole conversation was theological I anticipated that each partner would contribute something theological, thus not restricting the theological input to be solely from the 'religious tradition'. This required the voice of the 'religious tradition' to wait

[31] Whitehead, 4.

patiently to hear what the other partners would bring and to engage with them rather than to lead (or dominate) the conversation.

Collins is critical of methods of theological reflection which privilege the 'present' and 'critical incidents'[32] and proposes what she calls a 'Scriptural Cycle' which privileges Scripture as the starting point of theological reflection,[33] the purpose being to 'facilitate an encounter with the person of Jesus Christ.'[34] This approach would not have worked in the present context because, as stated above, it was not clear what Scriptural/theological resources were needed in this research. For similar reasons I dismissed a suggestion early on of undertaking an Action Research approach: preaching a sermon in the closing churches and reflecting on it with the congregation. This approach may have been suitable for a church that was thinking about closure to help with the decision-making; however, the churches concerned had made a decision I could not change, and I was researching a retrospective decision. Although Collins argues for the necessity of starting with Scripture, in reality her method also begins with an issue, or a reason, for undertaking it, which is clear in her case study examples.[35] What Collins describes as 'context' is essentially answering the question 'Why are we doing this?'

Collins continues that a 'Christian eschatological vision therefore makes the prioritizing of the present experience unnecessary and illogical' with the present being 'important and significant as the bridge between the past tradition and the future hope, but it cannot and must not be privileged over against them.'[36] While agreeing with the importance of connecting with both the past tradition and the future hope, my concern is: how *does* a church or an individual connect with either? This depends on the context in which any method for reflection is used and the nature of any critical incident, as well as the presuppositions of the researcher rather than the method itself. Sometimes it is right and necessary to prioritise the present, to face up to the realities of the present and to focus on 'this moment with these people' as Root and Bertrand recognise in responding to the

[32] Helen Collins, *Reordering Theological Reflection* (London: SCM, 2020), Kindle Version, chapter 2.
[33] *Ibid*, chapter 6.
[34] *Ibid*, chapter 6.
[35] *Ibid*, chapter 7.
[36] *Ibid*, chapter 2.

challenges of the secular age,[37] and as I noted as a District Missioner in Chapter 1. Therefore, the issue is not where to start, but where to end: who has the final word? Here, Swinton and Mowat's definition of Practical Theology is helpful:

> Practical Theology is critical, theological reflection on the practices of the Church as they interact with the practices of the world, with a view to ensuring and enabling faithful participation in God's redemptive practices in, to and for the world.[38]

Their starting point is 'the practices of the Church' but their end is 'God's redemptive practices.' If there is no transformation between the two, if it has not led to renewed understanding and revelation, it begs the question: what actually is meant by 'theological reflection'? Perhaps the term 'theological reflection' is the issue in this context as one can give thought or consideration to something without being changed by it. The strength of Collins' approach are the issues she raises regarding how Scripture is handled within Practical Theology. However, she appears to imply that God only speaks through Scripture.

The importance of the present, be it expressed as a practice, a concern, a challenge, or a critical incident, adds a fifth dimension to Swinton and Mowat's identification of the 'hermeneutical, correlational, critical and theological' in Practical Theology: the incarnational. If Collins, and also Root who makes the case for 'the central place of divine action in practical theology',[39] are concerned with encountering the divine, then the question: how is God brought into (incarnated in) the present conversation? has to be taken seriously and is at the heart of my research.

Root suggests that Practical Theology may:

> give critical and constructive assistance as individuals and communities make sense of their encounters with the living Jesus, with the moments and episodes of the Spirit descending upon them.[40]

However, it is not always obvious what those encounters are, or if research participants or congregations as I discovered in these cases studies, have even had such encounters. Root's emphasis on divine action derives from a desire to honour 'the lived experience of concrete

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[37] Andrew Root and Blair D. Bertrand, *When Church Stops Working* (Grand Rapids: Brazos press, 2023), Kindle Version, 55.
[38] Swinton and Mowat, 7.
[39] Andrew Root, *Christopraxis* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), ix.
[40] *Ibid,* 36.

people'[41] which he recognises is often omitted in Practical Theology. However, Root also appears to limit divine action, in his case to ministry, as it is in ministry that the 'human being participates in the life of God through Jesus Christ.'[42] He suggests that 'practical theology as Christopraxis is a form of human *ministerial* action that, by reflecting and acting in ministry, attends to the very being of God through God's own ministerial action.'[43] In this thesis I will suggest a third way of encountering God alongside Scripture (Collins' approach) and ministry (Root): the sacraments of the Church.

In developing this, Root helpfully argues that his 'Practical Theology of the Cross' happens: 'only through a death-to-life, life-through-death paradigm of divine action':

> We participate in Jesus, are called disciples, because we have died with Christ, and we are now given life through Christ's ministry of cross and resurrection (this is Christopraxis). Through the cross, through death (a reality bound fully in time but nevertheless shared in by the eternal God), we are ushered into the life of Godself, a life where death is overcome in the eternal love of Father to Son.[44]

Here Root speaks to Collins' issue regarding an eschatological vision: locating experience, through the cross, firmly in the present as well as within God's eternity (our past and future). He goes on to connect this with the 'practices of faith' which 'can only be a means of grace if they too bear the death-to-life, life-out-of-death paradigm (a core sense of transformation through justification) as both baptism and communion do!'[45] An incarnational approach to Practical Theology speaks of the God who is outside of time breaking into time, and therefore into the present rather than the past or the future. It faces up to the reality of the present while allowing for, even expecting, the possibility of God breaking in through, for example, Scripture, ministry, or the sacraments to bring something new to birth. This is an aspect which Collins seems to neglect by dismissing the significance of beginning with the present, while Root sees the 'breaking of eternity into time' as being at the heart of practical theology.[46]

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[41] Root, *Christopraxis,* 51.
[42] *Ibid,* 73.
[43] *ibid,* 96.
[44] *Ibid,* 73.
[45] *Ibid,* 74.
[46] *Ibid,* 131.

The final stage of the Whiteheads' model, arising out of 'assertion', is the 'pastoral response' which moves the process to a conclusion with 'decision and action. Discerning how to respond; planning what to do; evaluating how we have done.'[47] This will be the final chapter, setting out the conclusions and practical outcomes of this thesis.

Collins suggests that theological models are not neutral,[48] whereas I want to suggest that the model *is* neutral. A model is a tool, or a recipe, to aid theological reflection, and just as there are different tools for different jobs which are used in different situations, so different models serve different purposes. It can be used for the purpose it was designed for, in the way it was designed to do so, or used creatively. I may not share the philosophy behind the creation of a particular model, and may not use it wholly in the way its creators intended, but it is, none-the-less, a helpful tool. It is in this light that I am therefore using this particular model to enable a creative conversation for my own purposes in producing this thesis.

2.2 The Researcher

While the method may be neutral, the theologian/researcher is *not* neutral and uses the method based on their own presuppositions, understandings, and experience of God and of the theological task at hand. As such, I am aware that I am not neutral in this research. I am an ordained Christian minister, whose theology is shaped by the Wesleyan tradition of the Methodist Church, and who believes at the outset of this research that the closure of a church is not something to be afraid of.

Mindful of Fiddes' belief that 'the researcher who is using empirical methods in the service of ecclesiology needs a theological conviction about the way God acts in the world',[49] I can say that my theological conviction is influenced by my own experience of God who speaks and acts in my life. I therefore expect God to speak and act in the world and in other people's lives, especially, but not exclusively, in the lives of those who are Christians and members of the Church; meaning in this present context those who have been baptised and formally received as church members, usually by confirmation. My experience tells me that

[47] Whitehead, 13.
[48] Helen Collins, chapter 2.
[49] Paul S. Fiddes, 'Ecclesiology and Ethnography: Two Disciplines, Two Worlds?' in Ward, (ed), *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 13-35, 33.

God is a God of goodness and grace, faithfulness and love, truth and hope who works within and among all creation to renew, transform and make whole: including the Church. This remains the grounds for my hope and optimism in the face of the monumental decline of the Methodist Church since 1932, and this will necessarily influence my approach to this research as well as to Practical Theology more generally.

The issue of neutrality extends beyond the use of the theological model. I am conscious that I am both an 'insider' and an 'outsider' in this research.[50] As a Methodist doing research within the Methodist Church, I am an 'insider'. But in the congregations where my research is located, I am also an 'outsider': I am neither a member of either congregation nor have any responsibility for them, and they are both located in an area which I am unfamiliar with. I am conscious that I am in these contexts for only short periods of time, and as I do not have a shared history with them I am dependent on what I observe and what participants tell me about what I observe and what is going on. Therefore, I have tried not to interpret this based on my own experience of the wider Church. As a Methodist presbyter, I am aware of the difference in perceived power and responsibility between myself and congregation members which may be balanced by the reality that I was significantly younger than almost all of the congregations, and all but one of the interviewees in the case studies.

When interviewing presbyters, I am more of an 'insider' in that we share the same ministry, but I am also aware that we have different responsibilities, experiences and expectations, and view and address the challenges of ministry differently. There may be some shared understanding of what it means to have responsibility for a congregation or a circuit, and even of closing a church, as well as the difficulties of ministering in a denomination in the context of decline. But their experience is not my experience; and their context is not my context.

I was conscious that as I do not see this kind of conversation as negative, threatening, or to be avoided, I needed to listen carefully to those voices that may see it this way and seek to understand their perspectives, and not to make any assumptions based on my own experience. I was also conscious that as a presbyter I am called to an itinerant ministry: serving in six different locations in twenty-five years of such ministry, so I need to balance

[50] Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, *Successful Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide for Beginners* (London: SAGE Publications, 2013), Kindle Version, chapter 1.

this by paying close attention to the perspectives of those who are rooted in the communities in which they live and worship, and who have had a long attachment with the closing church.

2.3 A Case Study Methodology

The case study is described as 'the study of a specific 'bounded system' – e.g., a person or an institution.'[51] This makes it an ideal approach for this research in seeing churches as 'bounded systems' and therefore identifiable, limited, and definable communities. Meyer suggests that the case study can 'guide the research and analysis of data' whereas other methods, such as grounded theory or ethnography, presuppose 'that theoretical perspectives are grounded in and emerge from first-hand data.'[52] It was important in this research to be guided by the churches themselves and as I was researching a decision that had already been taken, and the implications of it, I was dependent on the participants' understanding and perception of what had happened, therefore I have no first-hand data of the decision to close.

2.4 Defining The Research Setting

The objects of my research are Methodist churches that were closing. The first decision to make was, at what point should I engage with a closing church: as they made the decision to close or afterwards? I decided to form case studies with churches that had already decided to close and to engage with them as soon as possible after that decision was made.

While there would have been advantages in observing a church council making the decision to close, this was not wholly practical. Firstly, my presence in such a meeting may have been seen as influencing the decision-making in the minds of some people. Secondly, although I might have been present at the actual meeting that voted to close the church, that does not mean that I would gain more information about the decision-making process. Often the issue has rumbled on for many years before the decision is made. At what point would I have needed to begin engaging with a church to observe the whole decision-making

[51] Adrian Holliday, *Doing & Writing Qualitative Research*, 3rd edition (London: SAGE, 2016), 13; referencing R.E. Stake, 'Qualitative case studies' in N.K. Denzin and Y.S. Lincoln (eds), *Handbook of Qualitative Research,* 3rd edition (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005), 443-46, 444.
[52] Christine Benedichte Meyer, 'A Case in Case Study Methodology', *Field Methods,* Vol.13, No. 4 (November 2001), 329-352, 331.

process? This was confirmed by the District Missioner who shared with me the requests for closure made to the District Synod between 2013-2020: many of these churches had been considering, or actively avoiding, closure for a number of years previously.

I therefore sought to engage with churches as soon as possible after the church council had made the decision to close which gave a comparable point of entry into both churches. In order to find them, I contacted Chairs of Methodist Districts within a reasonable travelling distance for me and also, if those districts had one, their District Missioner. I was then introduced to the Superintendent via email, and proceeded to make contact from there.

A limiting factor of my research was always going to be whether churches would be closing in the 'right' places at the 'right' time. While I had initially hoped to develop three case studies, in the end only two churches fitted my research timeframe who shall be known as 'Hope Street Methodist Church' and 'Mercy Lane Methodist Church'. My hunch, arising from my experience of local churches, was that no two churches would approach closure in the same way, so I ideally needed more than one case study if I was to draw any robust conclusions beyond one church's experience. Both churches were located in the same Methodist District, but in different circuits.

2.5 Empirical Research Methods

Braun and Clarke offer a helpful description of the nature of this research when they suggest that at its core, qualitative research is about:

> capturing some aspect of the social and psychological world. It records the messiness of real life, puts an organising framework around it and interprets it in some way.[53]

To this I would add 'capturing some aspect of the social and psychological and *spiritual* world' when such research is undertaken in the context of Practical Theology. The longitudinal nature (two years) of my research and involvement at Hope Street particularly revealed the complexity and the messiness of decision-making in this context. While in contrast, Mercy Lane closed very quickly and had its own issues. Both case studies were developed using a mixed methods approach with a variety of methods employed to collect

[53] Braun and Clarke, chapter 2.

both quantitative and qualitative data. However, the majority would be qualitative rather than quantitative because my primary concern was to find meaning,[54] and to answer 'how' and 'why' questions about church closure. This reflects Baxter and Jack's view that a qualitative case study approach to research:

> facilitates exploration of a phenomenon within its context using a variety of data sources. This ensures that the issue is not explored through one lens, but rather a variety of lenses which allows for multiple facets of the phenomenon to be revealed and understood.[55]

2.5.1 Quantitative Data

This was collected in two ways: firstly, in relation to statistics. Each year the Methodist Church requires congregations to count their members and those who attend worship. This began with John Wesley in the early days of the Methodist movement, therefore it is possible, in theory, to track the membership growth of the whole Church from the mid-eighteenth century; and that of each local church for as long as it has been in existence.

I was particularly interested in the figures post 1932 (Methodist Union) as it highlights the challenge facing the Church today. This data[56] was gathered through my own research of the *Annual Minutes of Conference* between 1932-2022, and the Methodist Church's website. Figures prior to 1932 are more complicated to gather due to the different branches of Methodism joining together in 1932, and smaller amalgamations prior to 1932.

These figures are often used as a blunt instrument in churches and circuits to make assessments on the viability of individual churches. It is very easy to use quantitative measures in this way, without necessarily asking 'what' is happening and 'why'. A research project approached primarily from this perspective raises the question of how closing a church differs from, for example, the closure of a local branch of a national retail outlet on the High Street. There should be more to the decision-making of a church than an income versus expenditure versus footfall calculation. This in turn questions: 'why the things that are done by Christians are done, and what their relationship is to the things done by non-

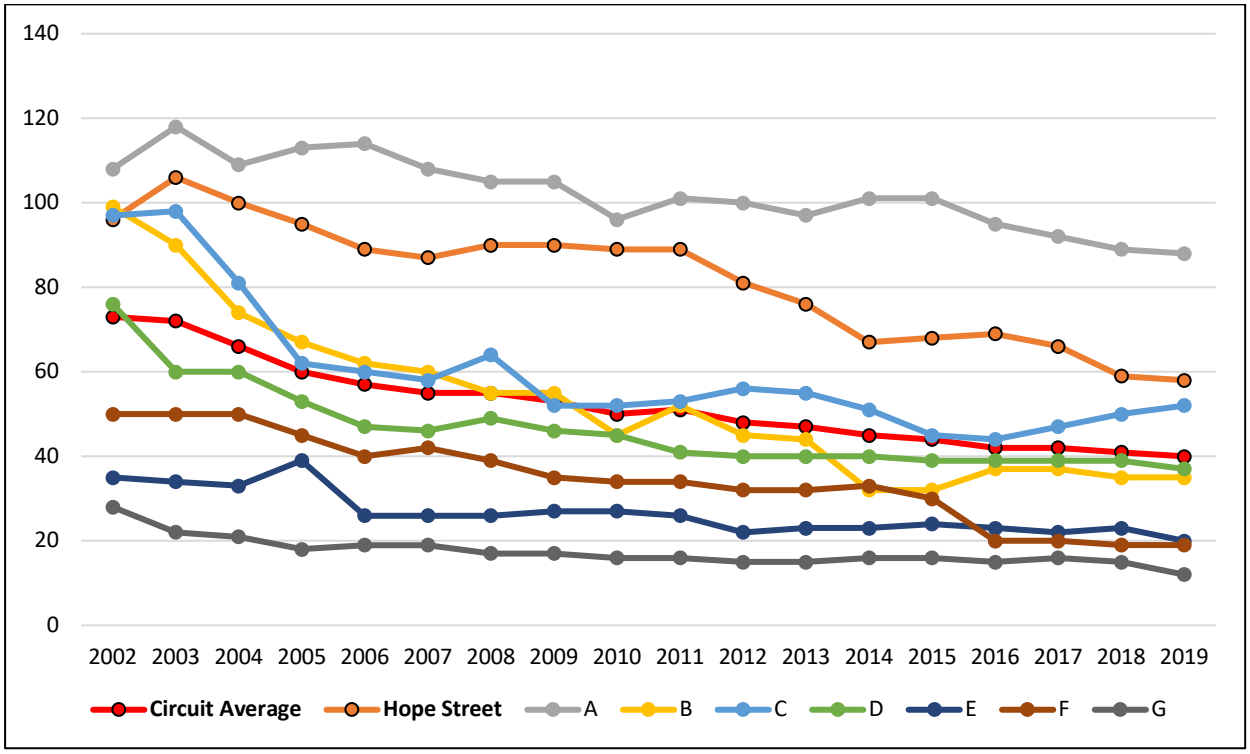
[54] Braun and Clarke, chapter 2.
[55] Pamela Baxter and Susan Jack, 'Qualitative Case Study Methodology: Study Design and Implementation for Novice Researchers', *The Qualitative Report,* 13(4), 544-559, 544.
[56] See Appendix 1.

Christians.'[57] How the human actions of the church in decision-making both 'participate in and fall short of the purposes of God' and how God's work is made explicit by those who 'profess belief and adhere to membership of the church.'[58] The *way* a church closes is important if the church is to fulfil its task to '"bear witness" to the truth of the gospel'[59] and find ways to be countercultural, showing 'to the world what it would look like if Christianity was in fact true.'[60] Much popular secularization theory is reliant on statistics with statistics of membership, church attendance, baptisms, or church weddings offered to explain decline across the board; while Gill uses seating and churchgoing statistics to prove 'the origins of the empty church.'[61] Figures and statistics are important and should not be excluded, but must be interpreted in the light of other data and particularly through theological lenses to get a fuller perspective.

A recuring question in some of the interviews and church meetings at Hope Street, and on one of the questionnaires from Mercy Lane was: "Why are we closing when there are churches in the circuit that are smaller [numerically by membership] than us: why don't they close and join us?" The graph below shows the membership of the churches in Hope Street's circuit between 2002-2019.[62] While Hope Street's membership was only 58 in 2019, they had the second highest membership in the circuit which was higher than the circuit average. From a purely statistical perspective, closure made little sense.

[57] Alastair Campbell 'The Nature of Practical Theology,' in James Woodward and Stephen Pattison (eds), *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 77-88, 83.
[58] Alastair Campbell, 83.
[59] John Swinton, '"Where is Your Church?" Moving toward a Hospitable and Sanctified Ethnography' in Ward (ed) *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography,* 71-92, 72. Drawing on Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids: Brazos), 2001, 210.
[60] Swinton "Where is your church?", 72 referencing Hauerwas, *With the Grain*, 214.
[61] Gill, 24.
[62] Data from https://www.methodist.org.uk/for-churches/statistics-for-mission/methodist-church-advanced-map/ [accessed August 2020]. I was not able to obtain this data for Mercy Lane.

Figure 1: Membership Across All the Circuit Churches: Hope Street[63]



The second quantitative method was the use of a simple questionnaire[64] which was distributed to all the members of each congregation at an agreed Sunday morning service at the start of my involvement with each church. At the start of the service at Hope Street and at the end at Mercy Lane, I was given the opportunity to introduce myself and my research, and to explain the questionnaires.

The primary purpose of the questionnaire was as a tool to select a cross section of people to interview. Apart from basic information (gender; age group; length of time at the church; frequency of attendance at worship; involvement in the church decision-making process) participants were asked to select one statement from a choice of eight that best described their view about the decision to close the church, and to say in one sentence why they had chosen that particular statement. Space was given to indicate whether they were willing to be contacted for an interview and to provide contact details. Congregants were asked to complete them before they left the church which produced a high rate of return: just over 81% at Hope Street, and 100% at Mercy Lane with two additional forms taken for regular

[63] A-G represents the other seven churches in the circuit.
[64] See Appendix 2.

members who were not present which were returned the following week at the closing service. Its second purpose was to gain an overview of opinions in the congregations about the decision to close the church. This was useful data to balance comments and assumptions made in interviews or at meetings regarding the views and perceptions of others.

2.5.2 Qualitative Data Collection Methods

Qualitative data collection was focused in three areas: observation at church meetings, particularly church council meetings; sharing in Sunday morning worship; and semi-structured interviews. This was different in each church due to their different timeframes between deciding to close and actually closing, which can be seen in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Summary Timetable of the Data Gathering Process

	Hope Street Methodist Church	**Mercy Lane Methodist Church**
Decision to close made:	November 2018	August 2019
Start of data gathering:	17th January 2019	13th October 2019
Start attending worship:	17th March 2019 (questionnaires completed)	13th October 2019 (questionnaires completed)
Church closure:	25th October 2020 (Online service due to Covid-19 restrictions)	20th October 2019
1st interviews:	April-June 2019 (before the church closed)	October-November 2019 (after the church closed)
2nd interviews:	November 2020-January 2021 (after the church closed)	May-June 2020 (6 months after 1st interviews)

As a result, the data collected from Hope Street was much richer and went into more depth due to the longer timeframe of the study. As Mercy Lane closed just two months after making the decision, there were no church meetings to attend, and I was only able to share in worship on one Sunday before the closing service. I was able to talk with congregation members over refreshments after the service which revealed that not everyone was happy with the decision. The data I have from Mercy Lane is therefore restrictive, but the interview data collected confirms much of the data from Hope Street regarding the basis of their

decision-making and allows some comparison and contrast. In light of this, Hope Street is my primary case study.

2.5.3 Observation

At Hope Street I attended three church council meetings, a property meeting, a General Church Meeting, and a stewards' meeting. These meetings enabled me to get a balanced perspective between what was said in the interviews and what was said publicly during a meeting. They also gave me an insight into the collective processes of the church in implementing the decision to close and making subsequent decisions such as fixing the date of the final service. In these meetings I was a 'complete observer'[65] in that I did not contribute to the meetings: I was simply observing and eavesdropping on what was going on.

As I am used to playing a full and active part in church meetings, I wanted to sit slightly apart at the back as far as possible so that I could observe group dynamics and take unobtrusive notes, but also so that I was consciously not participating and not going to get confused as to my own role. I also wanted the meeting to forget that I was there. This became increasingly difficult the longer I was there: Hope Street began to see me as "one of us" and I was frequently encouraged to sit among them. Occasionally I was asked for my opinion, and I was also invited to preach at their "Ladies Sunday" anniversary: both of which I declined in order to avoid influencing my research in any way.

I also attended a number of other meetings within Hope Street's circuit: a meeting of the circuit leadership team and the circuit meeting, which helped me to understand the vision and strategy of the circuit in relation to dealing with the closure of the church. And I attended church council meetings at three of the smaller churches in this circuit. I had hoped to attend Sunday worship in some of these churches and to interview some of their members to see how they viewed the closure of Hope Street and to explore how its closure would impact them, but the Covid-19 pandemic put a halt to this.

[65] Christine Meyer, 340.

2.5.4 Sunday Worship

Given the theological nature of the research question, it was important for me to share in worship with the church. In this case I was a 'participant-as-observer'[66] by engaging fully in the worship: praying with them, participating in Holy Communion alongside them, and joining in their Covenant service. After the service I joined those who stayed for refreshments in the hall and chattered with those who remained. In total I attended 14 services at Hope Street between March 2019 and March 2020 when worship ceased in church buildings due to the Covid-19 pandemic. These occasions were largely determined by when I was able to attend, aiming for at least once a month, and trying to prioritise the Sunday after church council meetings in order to gauge reactions to any announcements in relation to decisions the church council may have made.

2.5.5 Interviews

Altogether I interviewed 17 church members across the two churches that were closing: 10 at Hope Street, and 7 at Mercy Lane. Ideally I wanted to interview a mix of ages (this was restricted by the predominantly retired demographics in both churches), genders, and both those who were members of the church council and those who were not, alongside a mix of views about the decision to close. In the end, I interviewed all those who indicated they were willing, except for three: one withdrew due to health concerns, and the other two because I was unable to make contact with them. The questionnaires revealed that those who were against closure were in the minority. Of those interviewed at Hope Street: two were against closure, five were in favour of closure, and three indicated it was inevitable, one of whom turned out to be against closure. At Mercy Lane: three were interviewed who were in favour of closure and four who said it was inevitable. Unfortunately, no-one who was against the closure was willing to be interviewed.[67]

I interviewed most people twice. At Mercy Lane the first interviews were immediately after the final service, and the second approximately six months later. At Hope Street, the first interviews were following the decision to close, and the second immediately after the final service. My original intention had been to interview each person at key points of the

[66] Christine Meyer, 340.
[67] See Appendix 3.

journey (immediately after the decision to close was made; immediately before closure; after closure; six months later). In the end, due to the realities of the two churches, it was only reasonable to undertake two interviews at slightly different stages due to the different timeframes of each church closing. I do not believe any more would have been gained by interviewing the same people further: it would have produced more data than I could have handled, and participants may have been less willing to participate to the end. Checking in with them after the Sunday service or at meetings made up for this to a degree.

All the first interviews were conducted face-to-face in fairly structured interviews. All agreed to the interview being recorded, which I later transcribed and anonymised. All were interviewed in their own homes which they suggested, and this seemed to put them at ease. All participants also said they were willing for me to contact them for a second interview at the appropriate time which, due to Covid-19 restrictions, were not able to be conducted face-to-face. However, only seven were interviewed from Hope Street: one participant chose to withdraw, one was uncontactable, and one had died. Five of these were interviewed via Zoom with agreement for the interview to be recorded, and two were interviewed on the telephone and unrecorded. All seven from Mercy Lane were interviewed a second time: similarly, three on Zoom and four on the telephone.

Each interview lasted approximately one hour. Their goal, as Meyer helpfully puts it was, 'to see the research topic from the perspective of the interviewee and to understand why he or she came to have this particular perspective.'[68] This included, given the theological nature of my research, to seek to understand how their view of closure related to their experience of God and/or their theological beliefs and practices.

The first interviews were divided into three sections: firstly, they were asked about their experience of the church and their own faith. This included information regarding their involvement in the church, what they valued, what they thought about the mission of the church; and questions about their own faith including their experience of God and their baptism. Section two explored their understanding of the church closure: their feelings, whether it could have been avoided, what they would miss; and how the closure related to their faith: could they relate what was happening to a story from the Bible? what did they

[68] Christine Meyer, 338.

think God was saying to the church? The final section looked to the future: what it would mean for the church to close well and what closing 'well' meant for them; their hopes and fears; and where they saw themselves in twelve months' time. They were also given the opportunity to add anything they thought was relevant at the end of each interview.[69]

The second interviews were adapted slightly due to the different timescales with the two churches, but were also grouped into three sections: I asked about how they had found the closure of churches during the Covid-19 lockdown; reflected with them on the final service (this was included in the first interviews at Mercy Lane); and asked about what they felt they had gained/lost, whether their hopes were being realised, had their views changed, follow-up questions about the bible, and whether they thought the church had closed well.[70]

Baxter and Jack talk of the use of propositions in interviewing which arise from literature, personal/professional experience, theories, and/or generalizations.[71] In the first interviews I did not put any propositions to the participants in terms of particular theories regarding closure because I wanted to see how they viewed what was going on, and as I was intending to interview them a second time I did not want to suggest anything that may affect their judgement. However, in the second interviews, knowing that this would mark the end of all data gathering, I included a question at the end regarding the proposition drawn from the literature regarding the metaphor of death/dying and whether this was helpful in talking about the closure of the church from their experience.

Alongside the interviews with church members, I interviewed the presbyter in pastoral charge of each church who, in both cases, was also the Superintendent of the Circuit. Because of the longer involvement with Hope Street, the presbyter was interviewed twice in the same timeframe as the members of the church. The presbyter of Mercy Lane was interviewed once at the end of the process.[72] I also interviewed the District Chair and District Missioner, along with a District Chair from another region to get a different perspective. The interviews with the Superintendents focused on the church and the decision-making process; how they made sense of the decision to close, especially

[69] See Appendix 4.1.
[70] See Appendix 4.2.
[71] Baxter and Jack, 551.
[72] See Appendix 4.3.

theologically; and looking to the future. Interviews with the District Chairs and Missioner followed the same themes but with the questions nuanced to reflect their different roles. They were also asked the question regarding the metaphor of death/dying.[73]

Church interviewees were also asked if they would be willing to keep a 'journal' to note things that occurred to them between the two interviews. I asked them particularly to take note of anything in a sermon, or Sunday worship generally, which triggered thoughts about what was going on; and to think further about a bible story that reflected their experience. All interviewees were willing to do this, and notebooks were supplied but most did not write anything in them and nothing significant came of this. Only two were returned.

2.6 Recording, Transcribing and Analysing the Data

Data from church meetings was recorded in the form of handwritten notes during the meeting and immediately afterwards, while interview data was gathered on a voice recorder and via recordings of Zoom conversations. Handwritten notes were also made during telephone interviews. I typed up all my notes as soon as possible afterwards and transcribed and anonymised all the data.

I chose not to use a software programme to analyse the data. Having transcribed the interviews verbatim I gained a good knowledge of it and quickly realised that it was going to be too complex to adequately code, as no clear themes seemed to emerge across all the transcripts. Also, I was not looking to identify key words but ideas which may have been expressed differently and not necessarily picked up by the software.

Starting with the first interviews from Hope Street, I created a spreadsheet using Microsoft Excel for each church with the key questions down one side and the responses from each participant in columns across the page. When this was printed off I began to look for patterns across the columns to analyse how the different interviewees answered the same questions. I then looked for patterns down the columns in relation to each person's views and responses. This revealed that for every view that was expressed there appeared to be an opposite view expressed by someone else, and while there appeared to be nothing in

[73] See Appendix 4.4.

common across the data for each question, there was an inner consistency and logic in each person's answer.

In order to cross-check this analysis, I identified four voices which were from the same age group (70-79), all members of the church council, all having different views of closure. Two had been at the church from being infants, and two had moved to the church from other churches. Having identified them, I listened to the conversation between them, adding other voices from the interviews as appropriate, and also adding questionnaire data. This also challenged assumptions that had arisen in some of the interviews:

Assumption 1: that closing the church **will be harder for those who have grown up in this church.** The two that had grown up in the church had opposing views. When put alongside the data from the questionnaires, six of these indicated that they had been attending that church all their life, but only one was clearly against closure.

Assumption 2: that closure **will be harder for the "elderly" who would want their funeral there.** No one, in any age group, mentioned their funeral. Of those aged over eighty who responded to the questionnaire (8 individuals), only two thought closure was wrong, and the two who were interviewed were clearly in favour of closure.

Mercy Lane's first interviews were then analysed in a similar way and put alongside Hope Street. Gradually I added the data from the second interviews, the meetings, worship and the presbyters, to get the fullest possible picture.

2.7 Validity of Data

As shown above, I was able to triangulate the data in the interviews with other forms of data collected, including my own observations. For example, one comment made in an interview was that "people who are most eager for the church to close tend to shout louder than most": this was not my experience in the meetings I attended. Some of the most vocal voices in the church council were the voices of those who wanted to postpone the closing service for as long as possible in order to keep the church open. The second interviews also gave an opportunity to remind people of what they had said previously and to check if they still felt the same or if anything had changed.

I sought to avoid any bias by asking open-ended questions as far as possible rather than leading questions or making suggestive statements. I gave the project the title: 'Methodist Churches Closing Well?' in all initial correspondence, and only explained my interest in the theological aspect of decision-making in the debriefing letter[74] as I was anxious not to give too much information so that, as far as possible, participants would not provide answers that were not genuinely their own views or were what they thought I wanted to hear. I did not, at any point, ask directly "where was the theology in the decision-making?" but asked more generally about how they made the decision to close and explored this with them in other, less direct, ways. This was also why I began the interviews by asking them about their own faith experience: as well as hoping to put them at ease, it gave me a means to interpret responses made later. I did not refer to any of the thoughts I was forming from the literature review or elsewhere until the very end of the final interviews. Neither did I explain why the questions I was asking were relevant to the research.

2.8 Ethics

Prior to the start of any data gathering, ethical approval was received from the department of Theology and Religion's ethics sub-committee at Durham University.

2.8.1 Informed Consent

I sought to protect the participants by gaining informed consent, both in the completion of the questionnaires and before commencing the interviews. An information sheet was distributed with each questionnaire which individuals were asked to read and take away, explaining what I was doing and what they were doing in completing the questionnaire.[75] I provided a box for completed questionnaires to be placed in rather than collecting them myself.

Everyone in the two churches was invited to be interviewed. I explained verbally in the context of Sunday worship what the research project was about, what it entailed (based on the information sheet) and asked for people to volunteer to be interviewed by giving their name and telephone number on the slip at the bottom of the questionnaire. I explained

[74] See Appendix 5.
[75] See Appendix 2.

that this would be removed from all forms prior to analysing the data. I did not ask anyone to be interviewed directly except for the presbyters. I was satisfied that this gave a cross-section of views from Hope Street, less so from Mercy Lane.

Initial contact was made with each potential participant by telephone from the contact details given on the questionnaire. These conversations were followed up in writing: giving my contact details, confirming the arrangements for the interview (date, time and place); giving the option to either rearrange or cancel the appointment; and the participants information sheet[76] and privacy notice. I went over this information with them before starting each interview, giving the opportunity to ask any questions. If they were happy to proceed we both signed two copies of the consent form, and each kept a copy.[77]

2.8.2 Protecting Privacy and Confidentiality

Transcriptions of all interviews were done by me, so no-one else had access to the raw data. The original interviews were deleted once I was satisfied with the transcripts, and all names were anonymised. Each interviewee was given a pseudonym, so all names have been changed, and no identifying data is given in connection with anything they may have said. All the names of presbyters interviewed have also been feminised in order to reduce the possibility of identification.

Following final interviews, I sent out a debriefing letter confirming that the process had finished, that all data collected had been anonymised and could not be traced back to them, and that all personal details would be destroyed.[78]

[76] See Appendix 6.
[77] See Appendix 7.
[78] See Appendix 5.

Part 2a: Attending to Personal Experience

Chapter 3: Introducing the Case Studies

3.1 Hope Street Methodist Church

Hope Street was formed in 1964 following the amalgamation of a former Wesleyan Methodist church and former United Methodist church which were located opposite each other. One of the buildings was knocked down and a new church built which became Hope Street's new home in 1972: the other building was eventually sold. In 1968 and 1975 two further churches within the circuit closed and amalgamated with Hope Street.

The congregation as I found it in early 2019 had a membership of 59 with an average attendance at Sunday worship of 41[79] in a building which seated circa 150 people. It is typical of 1970s church architecture which does not look like a church building from the outside, and with high windows it is not possible to see inside.

In the worship area there is a wide recess across two-thirds of the width of the church within which is the central communion table and a large, freestanding font; all enclosed by a narrow communion rail. A small pulpit protrudes to the left of the recess, next to a screen for a projector operated from the front row. There is a grand piano, but the singing is accompanied by an organ in the organ loft at the back. Seating is chairs, and the congregation is usually spread out across the whole space.

Adjoining the worship area is the church hall, which was the original Sunday school building dating back to the 1880s. This is where church meetings happen, and refreshments are served after the service; and it is hired out to generate an income. It can be accessed through a door at the front of the worship area or via a door off the car park. There are several smaller 'classrooms' off the hall, a good-sized kitchen, and a stage at one end: a lasting witness of many church shows, musical productions and pantomimes of which many members have fond memories. During the week there is a 'mums and

[79] Data from the circuit's annual 'Statistics for Mission' entry on the Methodist Church website.

toddlers' group and a coffee morning, with a fortnightly fellowship group hosting speakers on a variety of topics.

Hope Street is found in a suburban area in Northern England which grew rapidly during the industrial revolution but now the heavy industry has been replaced by housing. Many of the congregation commute to the church having either moved out of the area or come to Hope Street from another church.

The Road to Closure

The conscious story of Hope Street's closure begins in 2014 with what was described as a 'Healthy Church Review' led by the District Missioner. At the time there had been financial concerns, but these were resolved by the letting of the hall to a pre-school. The notes from this review suggest that this is 'a church that sees itself as weak in the more spiritual areas of its life, rather inward looking and unwilling or unable to change.'[80] This review is remembered by some interviewees because the District Missioner had suggested that the church should close.

The second chapter in the story of closure is the arrival of the current minister who, relatively soon after arriving, held a vision "Away Day" in January 2018. The SWOT[81] analysis of this day largely confirms the 2014 review report, but suggests that the church now had financial stability, even though the pre-school has now gone. The weaknesses of the church were summarised as:

> We are too comfortable with the way things are, and reluctant to change. We have an aging congregation, with a limited range of ages, and declining energy. We have struggled to find ways to grow. We are inward-looking. Our buildings are extensive, and not in the best position. The majority of the congregation do not live locally. We are invisible to the community where we exist. We are uncertain about our identity as a church. [82]

Chapter three begins in June 2018 when the circuit leadership presented a vision and development plan to the circuit, with material for church councils to discuss in the autumn. At the heart of this was the recognition that:

[80] Healthy Church Feedback report: September 2014.
[81] Strengths, Weakness, Opportunities, Threats.
[82] "Away Day" Findings, written up by the minister: 13/01/ 2018.

> As long as churches keep going exactly as they are, without attracting new people to faith, and without significant growth in numbers, then every church will continue to age and to decline in numbers, and in energy, until the critical point of viability is reached.[83]

However, in August 2018, before Hope Street had the opportunity to discuss this, a piece of masonry fell from the front of the church hall roof for which the church was not covered by their insurance, and which cost them in the region of £20,000 to repair. This prompted the church council on the 15th October to discuss the future of the church as it once again faced financial difficulties. It recognised that they were at a 'critical point' in their existence and asked, "do we carry on, or do we close?" In the light of this, the following proposal was drafted, voted on, and agreed by 'a large majority of the meeting':

> The Church Council, having considered all the relevant factors surrounding our church life, proposes to close [Hope Street] Methodist Church at a time to be agreed, following a timetable which has due regard to other parties who use our premises, and to all other responsibilities we hold.[84]

This decision was confirmed at a church council on 11th November by 16 votes in favour, 2 against, and 3 abstentions.[85]

What was not decided at this stage was the date for the closure, over which the church was divided. Some were of the view that now the decision to close had been made they should get on with it quickly; while others thought it did not mean that they had to close straight away. The main item of business of the church council on the 14th October 2019 was to fix the closing date. The 50th anniversary of the church in 2022 was suggested by those who wished to prolong closure. The church anniversary in February 2020 was proposed by those who wanted to get on with it. In the end after a lengthy, heated discussion, a compromise was agreed of the 3rd April 2021 which would be the 50th anniversary of the laying of the foundation stone.

However, the longer the thought of closure dragged on, the more restless the congregation became: some wanted to leave now, and others questioned what they were giving their offering to or fundraising for. In the meantime, the minister began to sow the

[83] Circuit discussion material for church councils: October 2018.
[84] Minutes of the church council: 15/10/2018.
[85] Minutes of the extra church council: 11/11/2018.

seeds of a fresh vision. The circuit ran a Foodbank at a small Methodist church in a deprived part of the circuit, which was largely staffed by volunteers from Hope Street. By the time of the next church council on 24th February 2020, four couples had indicated that they were willing to move their membership to the Foodbank church and the circuit committed to funding a lay worker to develop the work within that community. As a result, in a more amicable meeting, a unanimous vote moved the closing date forward to the 25th October 2020, helped along by finding dry rot in one of the classrooms. In the end, seventeen members moved their membership to the Foodbank church.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the national Lockdown, no-one realised that the final service in the building was on the 22nd March 2020. A special service to mark the closure was recorded by the minister in the building by herself and broadcast via YouTube on the 25th October 2020. Members of the congregation took part from their own homes and recorded messages were sent from former ministers.

3.2 Mercy Lane Methodist Church

There are many similarities between Hope Street and Mercy Lane in relation to their locations. Mercy Lane is also located in a suburban area in Northern England which grew due to the industrial revolution, eventually becoming an overspill for the nearby large towns and a commuter area.

The church opened in 1810 as a Wesleyan Methodist church, with a Sunday School building built across the road in 1877. The church building closed in 2011 and was sold to be converted into housing with the congregation moving into the Sunday School building which had become the church hall. The reason given for this closure was finance: the old building needed much work to bring it up to twenty-first century standards, including a new boiler, re-wiring, creating disabled access; there were problems with damp, and the general costs associated with running two buildings.

So, on Sunday mornings the hall is prepared for worship with chairs set out in rows; a lectern, communion table and font placed at the front; and tables set at the back to serve refreshments afterwards. Everything is projected onto a screen and singing is accompanied by a music box. Afterwards, everything is cleared away so the space can be used by community groups during the week.

Historically Mercy Lane had a tradition of having a strong youth club attached to the Methodist Association of Youth Clubs, as well as a football club, cricket team, concert party, and regular 'Guild' and Ladies meetings most of which no longer met. Everyone knew everyone else in what was described as 'a close-knit family community' that had simply grown old together.

The Road to Closure

The District Missioner had also facilitated a series of conversations with the churches of this circuit as part of a review process. She spoke of a split in opinion at Mercy Lane over its future, with 'what was said in the public meeting and what was said privately afterwards' being different. Rumblings of closure began around 2017, with the General Church Meeting (GCM) in 2018 being suspended and reconvened twice without a consensus about their future being reached. At the GCM in May 2019, the congregation passed a resolution saying to the church council that the church could not continue, and proposing that worship ceased at Mercy Lane.

On paper Mercy Lane had 60 members in November 2018, reduced from 140 in 2008, with average attendance at Sunday worship being 20-30.[86] The main factors in the decision to close were the age profile of the congregation with only five people under the age of 65 years and members being unwilling to take on responsibility or leadership; and finance as expenditure was considerably exceeding income. The circuit had offered a reduction in their assessment for a year to enable them to produce an action plan, but there was no enthusiasm to do this. Therefore, the church council in August 2019 voted unanimously to close, deciding that it was better to cease worship while there was still some money in the account that could be used for mission elsewhere in the circuit. A final service was fixed for the 20th October 2019, as they could see no reason to hang around and wanted to enable people to settle into new congregations before Christmas.

After its closure, the Managing Trusteeship of Mercy Lane was transferred to the circuit meeting. Their intention is to keep the building open for community use, with a Deacon being given the remit to look at new opportunities for worship and outreach.

[86] Report to the District Synod requesting closure: 04/09/2019.

Summary

While these are two distinct communities, there are commonalities between them beyond their geographical contexts. Firstly, their apparent numerical strength: neither was the smallest church in their circuit; secondly, both had previously moved buildings, albeit for different reasons; thirdly, the age range of the congregations was similarly limited; and fourthly, both had experienced the help of the District in thinking about their future through the involvement of the district Missioner. In the next chapter I will explore the data to paint a fuller picture of these churches.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis

Initially it was difficult to find any patterns or draw conclusions from the data from the two churches, both separately and together, which in some small way reflects the complexity of which Jinkins speaks when he says: 'one quickly discerns that the church possesses a complexity that defies easy answers and clear definitions.'[87] Despite this, as the analysis progressed I discovered a degree of coherence across the data. In this chapter I will outline these common findings and begin to explore the themes that emerged.

4.1 Decision-making

There was general agreement as to WHY the church was closing even if there was no agreement that the church should close.

A combination of a 'trinity' of reasons were given for closure: the building, especially the cost of maintenance; financial challenges; and people, in relation to declining numbers, aging congregations, or the lack of those willing to hold office. The issue of people was the most commonly mentioned factor in both churches, along with the property at Hope Street and finance at Mercy Lane.

In both churches, the decision-making focused on what the church lacked rather than what they had, or what they were doing. When asked if closure could have been avoided, Mercy Lane were virtually unanimous that closure could not have been avoided because of a lack of the people with "a mind to go out in mission", money, or "a plan." Hope Street were slightly more nuanced. Those against closure believed it could have been avoided if "someone", such as the circuit, connexion, or Methodist Insurance, provided what they were lacking or did something for them: "if we had received a grant or if the insurance had helped"; or "if it had been looked at earlier […] there could've been maybe other options"; or "if there had been an influx of young people coming in, if you've got families coming along and people taking responsibilities for things." While help had been given by the District Missioner and through the leadership of the minister, it does not seem to have been viewed as such. Those in favour of closure realistically recognised that it could only be avoided if "we drifted on, not paid attention to it and just waited for the day when we had 15 shillings in the bank."

[87] Michael Jinkins, *The Church Faces Death* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 5.

There was no response from anyone suggesting that "*closure might have been avoided if* we *had done something different…*" whether that was in terms of a different approach to mission, exploring a different way of being church, or addressed their spirituality in terms of prayer or bible study which were noticeable by their absence.

Hope Street

At Hope Street there did not appear to be anything positive that held the church together in its decision-making. The church appeared to be a collection of individuals who happened to be connected to the same Methodist church, some of whom had developed close friendships over the years, and others who said that they didn't really "feel at home" there or that the church was "a bit of a clique." However, while there was no collective coherence, there was an internal logic in each person's thinking about the church and the decision to close.

When asked about the mission of the church everyone had a different response, which included seeing it as: "to encourage each other"; "looking after the congregation"; "keeping the worship going"; "to serve the community and to serve ourselves"; "to keep the doors open". Others were not sure or didn't think the church had a mission. When their views about mission were put alongside their views of why they thought the church was closing, what they valued most about belonging to the church, and what they thought closing "well" would mean, a clearer picture of each person's internal logic began to emerge.

A good example of this is Carol whose decision-making appears to be guided by friendship. What she values most is that Hope Street is "such a caring church". She sees the mission of the church as "looking after the congregation and the wider [community]" meaning those who come to the coffee morning or the toddler group; and the importance of her faith is "knowing there's people there that care about you, apart from family." Carol doesn't see how a church can close well because "people are generally unhappy about it", but a "job well done" would mean that people go "their own ways and find somewhere that is suitable that they do feel happy at and comfortable" but "if you lose some of the other people, that's not very well done." What she fears with the closure is "the loss of the friendship." She does not think closure can be right because it is a threat to friendship.

It was not clear whether any of this 'internal logic' had been openly shared. This divergence of views possibly contributed to the contentiousness of the discussion at the church council in October 2019 to fix a date for the final service of the church.

Mercy Lane

This "internal logic" was less obvious in Mercy Lane's data, because they had arrived at the decision in a different way. A small group of office holders in the church, had talked together in advance of the church council meeting and agreed together what needed to happen. Therefore, the account of the decision-making was well rehearsed. However, when the voices from this group of office holders were put alongside the voices who had not been part of this small group, a similar pattern began to emerge. It would have been more helpful to have interviewed people with a larger cross-section of views.

Implications

Given that for every view expressed there is a contrary view, and that there is nothing holding them together by which to weigh-up their options, decision-making comes down to a matter of their own interpretation of the 'facts' that are before them. It is therefore no surprise that decision-making is difficult, if not divisive. It does not mean that everyone needs to agree, but there needs to be something that holds them together, such as a common purpose, which would help them to understand each other's perspectives and the purpose of the church within the mission of God. Just being members of the same Methodist church appears to be insufficient to do this.

4.2 The Nature of Mission

There was a general recognition that the churches had no real connection with their local community, or any effective understanding of mission.

When mission was mentioned it was in relation to its absence or a lack of interest in the church from the local community, such as: "We are no longer making an impact in the local community" or "Perhaps the mission of this congregation in this neighbourhood is no longer relevant or appropriate."

At Mercy Lane some admitted that this was their downfall because they didn't have a mission beyond maintaining the status quo and providing social activities tailored to those in the church. Hope Street certainly had a mission statement, but only Gladys mentioned it directly, saying:

> "In our mission statement I know we said we'd try to be a beacon to the community but try as we will, we can't get the community interested. So really, I suppose our mission is the circuit, and the people in the church really. I'm afraid it's come down to that. We have tried, tried all sorts to get them in but it's just hopeless."

While Irene recognised that: "we're supposed to be a beacon and we are anything but a beacon in the community".

Neither church had a vision for mission beyond occasional open-air services, leaflets through doors, and events such as flower festivals, fayres, and coffee mornings all with the aim of trying to get people into the building for worship. The role of the church was seen as being to serve the community rather than to evangelise in any form: 'evangelism' was not explicitly mentioned at all. Both churches saw mission in relation to people coming into the building, rather than about connecting with people and building relationships.

At Hope Street, many of the members did not live in the immediate community. When their minister arrived, she was excited about the mission possibilities that she could see, but the church itself did not seem to understand this. She felt that some initially supported what she was doing in the community because they wanted to support her "but they don't really get what it's about in terms of their community." In the end she focused her attention on opportunities with other churches in the circuit which some members of Hope Street were willing to support.

Implications

If they are held together, none of the interviewees' views of mission were wrong in and of themselves. On their own they are at best incomplete, and at worst inaccurate, as they are disconnected from any understanding of God's mission and purpose for the church. Therefore, their 'internal logic' for decision-making is based on insufficient views of the nature of God's mission in the world. Despite the District Missioner working with both churches, this had not led to a new imagination for mission, even out of a sense of

desperation to keep the church open. There was no sense of *'if only we could reach more people for Christ, or make more church members, then the church would not need to close…'* Mission appears to be seen as human effort, rather than a prompting of the Spirit, a response to God's work within the individual, or a sense of God's call.

4.3 God and Decision-making

4.3.1 Theology in the Decision-making

The decision to close appeared to be solely based on "logic" or put down to it being "inevitable" based on the trinity of property, finance, and people. I am not seeking to make a statement on the faith of individuals: I am in no position to make this judgment. However, what is clear is that those interviewed did not appear to have the language to articulate what was happening in the process of closure theologically, and neither was it expressed in the meetings I attended.

Frank (a member of the church council who has also been a member of the circuit meeting) expresses this for Hope Street:

> "I could see financially the way things were going, that the money would run out. And then I decided that was the way to play it because that was the level at which people would sit up and pay attention. On a spiritual level to say we're not fulfilling any kind of mission with the community wasn't really what they wanted to hear. But when you say, "the money runs out in three years" people are "Oh!" so that's the way I decided to play it because we had the discussions about three or four years ago and people said, "we're comfortable, we've got money.""

Irene's view was: "I can't in all honesty say that we're looking to God for guidance but that doesn't mean he isn't doing!" and that in a meeting "we all respond to the prayers that are being said but when we go our own separate ways, I'm not sure that we're doing that praying outside the group." How reflective this is of a wider reality is not clear. However, two interviewees did speak in relation to personal prayer: Alice spoke about the importance of prayer to her own faith and suggested that "I think we should all pray a lot more, but people don't seem to have the faith in prayer that I do."

In response to the question: "what do you think God might be saying through what is happening?", the basis for their claims of what God might be saying was not clear. Mostly

God appeared to be affirming that they were doing the right thing, and was in it with them: particularly for those who were in favour of closure. However, the responses of those who were against closure were more interesting:

Doreen thought that God was saying "that we are family," which was reflective of her internal logic: she valued "the people" most; understood mission as "to encourage each other"; closing well would mean "that everybody would remain friends"; and feared "the break-up of friendships."

Carol was realistic about closure, thinking that God was saying "well you're all getting older and its time something happened"; while Gladys thought God was "maybe" saying:

> ""you've done all you can in this area" because we have tried so it's time to perhaps try elsewhere and meet up with other people. I mean it's not fine fighting against him, it's not right is it, because he'll win in the end, won't he, because he always does."

Gladys spoke openly of "praying for a miracle" which would be Hope Street remaining open, while wondering whether God "has caused [the closure] to happen for a reason." At times she appeared to be conflicted between these two statements, while trying to understand what was happening.

However, when it came to fix a closing date at the church council, their sense of what God was saying was not evident in the discussion. Gladys, in particular, was among those arguing for the date to be fixed as late as possible. What was clear was that these things were not openly discussed. Faith was not talked about publicly in meetings and was only talked about in interviews in personal terms.

4.3.2 The Use of Scripture

In the first round of interviews, eight people (out of seventeen) were able to suggest a passage of scripture which related to their experience of closure. In the second interviews, having been asked to reflect on this, only four people (out of fourteen) could suggest something.

Three people mentioned the parable of the Prodigal Son,[88] relating the church to either the younger son: Enid, in terms of the "need to return because there is nothing where we are"; and Jack relating it to the need of forgiveness because "somethings have gone hopelessly wrong"; or to the elder son: Olwen saw the church "sitting there just expecting to get them back" and spoke of the need of the church to do something to "get them back." This could be interpreted as seeing closure from a human perspective, implying that closure was the church's fault.

Two people mentioned Jesus overturning the tables of the money lenders in the temple[89]: Irene mentioned the story and then thought that it was "a flippant answer" that would "reflect on the church not doing the right thing and that's not why we're closing the doors." There is a sense in which she does not see the church as culpable in its closure. Whereas Kate suggested that the passage was "telling people they're doing things in a traditional way that isn't right now. Where something needs to change." The use of this passage could be interpreted as seeing closure from a divine perspective, with God in some way causing the closure.

Alice spoke, on both occasions, about the Exodus and related it to the experience of closing and having to "up sticks and move on", recognising that like the Israelites "a lot of them didn't want to go, they certainly kicked up a lot of fuss about it all didn't they? I'm told there's a certain section at our church that doesn't want to close." In contrast Pam, who couldn't think of anything in either interview, said that "it wasn't really a journey like in the bible, especially the long journeys in the Old Testament, just moving from one place to another. There was no long trek." Ruth, having had time to think about it, talked about Jonah "in the sense of trusting God and you've chosen not to."

Neither congregation seemed to have reflected on what was happening in the light of scripture. None of the preachers, during the worship I participated in, referred to what was happening either in the sermon or in any of the prayers, including in the service the week before Mercy Lane closed. This highlights a lack of spiritual leadership from the pulpit, not just in the immediate context of closure but also in discipleship formation over the years

[88] Luke 15:11-32.
[89] E.g., Matthew 21:12-13.

which could have helped congregation members to reflect theologically on what was happening.

4.3.3 A Life Changing Experience of God[90]

Only two people spoke in terms of a time when they made a public commitment of faith. Enid recounted how as a teenager: "in the days of Billy Graham […] there was this appeal and all of a sudden, I got up and walked all the way down into church and nobody else did. And that was my commitment." Similarly, Olwen described "I'd given my heart to Jesus, in the early 60s, when Billy Graham came here," going on to recount "different times" throughout her life when she encountered God, particularly at significant moments.

Gladys spoke emotionally of having "always felt quite close to God" and recounted a recent occasion when she believed she "heard God's voice" which had put her "at ease." She reflected: "I never believed God would actually speak to me, and he has," and that it "probably has deepened my faith." Similarly, Pam recounted an experience of hearing God speak to her in a church service about a situation at work, while Alice gave examples of the importance of prayer throughout her life.

Most spoke of a general awareness of "something there" or God's presence being "always there", and spoke of faith in terms of what they believe rather than about a relationship with God, often using "something" or "it" rather than personal pronouns. Jack talked about the importance of "the message of love" and of forgiveness, and that if you treat people "as though they matter then you've done somebody some good." While Irene described herself as being "not very spiritual" and "not very good at this mission and faith and stuff", admitting that the "spiritual aspect of [the church] has never touched me." She said:

> "I think there are more people like me, who have, it's not a shallow faith, they love the church, and they believe in God but they're not religious and I think there are more people like that than not."

Irene's motivation for volunteering at the Foodbank was out of "Christian kindness," believing that the church is "a place that allows you to reflect on the goodness in the world."

[90] The question "have you ever had a life-changing experience of God?" was deliberately framed to allow interviewees to determine what they thought was a "life-changing experience of God."

There were no prayer meetings or bible study groups at either church. Jack reflected that Hope Street "is not the sort of place where a prayer meeting would go down well, you know, these things have been tried but they don't seem to stick." While Luke lamented that at Mercy Lane "there wasn't particularly any group in the church that I could attend that gave me any spiritual development."

It is not clear how these views about kindness, goodness, love, forgiveness, and the way to treat people differ from the same values held by non-Christians.

Implications

Given the absence of anything which could be described as articulated theology in the conversations around closure, the struggle of interviewees to articulate their own faith, the lack of bible study/prayer groups and the dependence on Sunday worship as the sole means of worship and discipleship formation, it is not surprising that there is a lack of mission or understanding of it.

The church does not appear to be a coming together of those who are seeking to understand their experience of God and/or deepen their faith; and if there is trust in God, it appears to be separate from any conscious experience of God. Neither does the church appear to be a witnessing community which seeks to enable others to experience the presence of God and come to know God. The churches are collections of individuals who may or may not believe the same thing about God. This raises questions about the nature of faith within the church and whether faith as it is currently found can enable decision-making that is determined by discernment of the will of God. If it cannot, how can such faith be nurtured and strengthened to enable this? It also requires opportunities for each to speak openly and honestly about their faith and experiences of God, to learn from and to understand each other. It is not clear, in the absence of activities for spiritual engagement how their Christian identity is formed and nurtured.

4.3.4 A Comment on the 'Absence of Theology' in the Decision-making

The attention to articulated theology and its absence, as opposed to the presence of implicit/operant theology, is significant to this research due to the context of corporate

decision-making. Articulation is necessary in order to arrive at a decision that is agreed, understood and owned by all those who are making it and for the decision to be appropriately communicated beyond the immediate decision-makers: particularly to the wider congregation and community, but also to those who are required to affirm the church council's decision (the circuit meeting, and the District Policy Committee and Synod.) The theological framework which will be offered in chapter 9 will seek to offer a way forward to enable the 'espoused theology' of the congregation to find its voice.

The work of Cameron *et al* recognises the 'complex view of theology' particularly in relation to Christian practice,[91] and identifies 'four voices' or sources of theology: beyond the 'formal theology' of academic discipline and the 'normative theology' of Scriptures, creeds, church teaching and liturgies, is added 'operant theology' which is 'embedded within the *actual practices of a group*', and 'espoused theology' which is 'embedded within *a group's articulation of its beliefs.'*[92] They note the importance of the relationship between these four voices, paying particular attention to the 'conversation' between them which results in the disclosure of 'authentic practical-theological insight.'[93] Astley's 'ordinary theology'[94] is a combination of the 'operant' and 'espoused' approaches to theology, and he cautions against 'imputing to people's practice a theology that they would not themselves claim to hold.'[95] Ward reflects that its focus on 'God-talk is important because it is hard to discern the theology that is implicit in what people do.'[96] Driven by the need to 'give an account of theology as it is lived and experienced'[97] and in response to the lived religion of David Hall, Meredith McGuire and Robert Orsi; Astley's ordinary theology; and the 'four voices', Ward himself speaks of 'lived theology' drawing on the insights of these three approaches to Practical Theology.[98] While Ward suggests that 'Every Christian community carries within it a vibrant lived theology',[99] this vibrancy was absent in my observations of Hope Street.

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[91] Helen Cameron et al, *Talking About God in Practice* (London: SCM, 2010), 53.
[92] Ibid, 54.
[93] Ibid, 56.
[94] Jeff Astley, *Ordinary Theology* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2002).
[95] Jeff Astley, 'Analysis, Investigation and Application of Ordinary Theology' in Jeff Astley and Leslie J. Francis (eds.) *Exploring Ordinary Theology: Everyday Christian Believing and the Church* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2013), chap. 1, 5-6, quoted in Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology,* 59.
[96] Ward, *Introducing,* 59.
[97] *ibid, 63.*
[98] *ibid,* 62-67.
[99] *ibid,* 65.

While acknowledging the presence in the data of some 'operant theology' particularly, for example, in the interviews by those who did speak of experiences of God and the importance of prayer; what is noted as significant is the lack of articulated theology in the decision-making of the two churches. This is consistent, as previously noted, with the findings of the *Church Life Survey* and the *Time to Talk of God* reports and remains an urgent task for the Methodist Church as a whole. The attention to articulated theology in this thesis is not intended to deny the importance of other forms of theology: ideally the operant and the articulated need to belong together, along with other theological voices.

4.4 Baptism

Baptism was the first of two issues arising from the literature that I raised in the interviews. Except for two who were baptised as adults, all interviewees said that they knew very little about their baptism, mostly only where and roughly when it happened; and that their baptism was either not significant to them or they had not given it any thought. For some it seemed to be important even if they were not able to articulate how:

> "I think it must've been [significant] because my parents had faith and they brought me in their faith to church to be christened, so I suppose it's just become part of me and the longer I live the stronger my faith seems to get. It must've been [significant] because I would hate to think that I hadn't been baptised." [Alice]

> "It's important to me in that my mother had me baptised but that's not the important bit. It's just a thing that happened that got me into Christianity basically and it grew from there." [Enid]

> "I don't think I've ever thought about it. I think I've thought it was there within me. But I felt it was important to have our children baptised so there must have been a follow through." [Kate]

There was a lack of understanding about baptism beyond it being a rite of passage into the church. There was no mention of it being a sacrament, and just as there was a lack of articulated theology in the decision-making, it was also absent in their articulation of baptism and its significance.

In contrast Ruth, as the youngest interviewee, spoke of the baptism of children as "a bit of an odd thing to do" and that "I don't really in some ways see the point of baptism." Ruth's

sense of belonging to the church was not linked to her baptism, but by her having grown up within the church family.

Implications

Ruth's observation of baptism as an "odd thing to do" along with the admission that most had not given it any thought is reflective of a sacrament that the church does not teach about.

A difficulty in seeing baptism as primarily a rite of initiation into the church is that it is seen as a stand-alone event rather than one of conscious, continuing significance in the ongoing life of those who are baptised.

4.5 The Language of Death/Dying

This was the second issue I explored arising from the literature which relates to the proposition referred to in chapter 2.5.5 above. The second round of interviews marked the conclusion of data gathering, six months after the closure of Mercy Lane; and immediately after the closure of Hope Street. The final question I asked each interviewee was: 'Is the language of death and dying helpful in talking about the closure of the church? (Why/why not?)' No one, in either church, found it helpful: it was too final, too negative, or even a shocking image. While there was a recognition that something had come to an end, it had not died. At Mercy Lane, Kate said we "stopped short of it being a death and the whole slant of closing was upon new beginnings"; and Maureen reflected that it closed "before we died or ran out of money." At Hope Street, Frank preferred to say that "the church is transforming" because to start talking of the church dying is "a downer" and therefore not useful. While saying it was a negative image, Enid recognised that "as long as you can have faith that there will be a resurrection it's all right." She was the only person to mention resurrection. Jack did not think Hope Street was dead but that if it carried on it would lose the life that was in it. People preferred to talk instead about "moving on"; "transforming"; "new beginnings"; "a different pathway"; "we've done our work here"; "new opportunities"; "closing not dying."

Ruth was the only one who could relate the closing to a death but only "emotionally" and spoke about feelings of grief at the closure, going on to say that:

> "it shouldn't be seen as the death of the faith I wouldn't want to think of it that way. I think my sense of grief was for the people and for the building and not for the church itself which isn't and shouldn't be in one place, it should be anywhere you go to."

Of the ministers, Sophie remembered using the language of death/dying "earlier on" but that "at the end of the day that didn't feel right at all", noting that she hadn't heard that language "from anybody" at Hope Street. She acknowledged that there was grief and sadness but "I don't see that as the predominant mood of the people, they're not sort of railing at God or at me or at anybody else, they just see the inevitability of it and while it hurts, they're ready to move on. So, I'm not convinced by the bereavement thing."

Theresa reflected theologically on death and resurrection "at the heart of our faith", recognising that:

> "we celebrate resurrection, but we are so scared about death, and also because part of our problem is we see resurrection in terms of post-Easter Sunday so we know what it's like we go with Christ to the cross knowing what's going to happen, and in some ways there's a sense in which I think we are kind of on that Saturday in terms of the building but also in terms of the people there as well."

Valerie suggested that as a metaphor "it might have something to offer" and that "there is clearly a profound sense of loss on the part of people, so it ought to figure I suppose." While Wendy wondered:

> "to what extent [this language] predetermines the outcome. That if you're saying the only way is death and resurrection then you are committed to a particular pathway. Whereas if you draw a different parabolic image then maybe you'll find a different way of being church. I have no problems with models of death and resurrection, I have no problem with the theology of death and resurrection. I draw on it often and I think in places it would be really useful. […] I wonder, is the story often one of death and resurrection or just of the death?"

She further reflected that the difficulty with death/dying language in this context would be:

> "where's the narrative of hope and resurrection and renewal and transformation? […] if it's just about the grief journey what that's sort of saying is that you've already lost sight of this being church. You're already saying that this is a mortal thing that dies and is done. Whereas church is the body of Christ, and the body of Christ always continues because it is an eternal and heavenly thing. The mystical body of Christ is the bread and wine that we share amongst each other, but we remain

> part of the real body of Christ that never ends so the problem you've got is that you're sort of mourning the death of something but it's still living."

Yvonne said that when talking with churches about closing, she often talks about:

> "possibilities of resurrection. That there is no resurrection without there being crucifixion. In one place the local minister took me to one side and said "do you know, we really shouldn't be talking about death and resurrection with people who are close to it. Talk about spring.""

She continued that "from a pastoral perspective the grief cycle is really important because there is a sense of bereavement for many people" but pointed out that:

> "[death] is only part of the story We need to look at the other part of the story. We're not Good Friday people, we're Easter people. And so, I'd always want to be looking for what God is saying to us in terms of building the kingdom hence forth."

4.5.1 "What Has Died?"

While absent in the data, the language of death/dying has been present in many conversations in the Methodist Church following the 2017 Conference's adoption of a Notice of Motion stating that the Conference 'encourages every Church Council annually to address and answer the question 'do you have a growth plan or an end-of-life plan?''[100] I noticed in my professional role as a District Missioner that churches did not want to talk about 'end-of-life.' Part of the problem is the language and the inability to answer the question, or the unwillingness to admit that something may have died.

The various responses to the question "what has died?" included: "the building", but can a building die?; "a relationship with a building"; "the congregation", but the members are alive/still there; "the church?", but can the church die and what is meant by 'the church'?; "faith'' or "what they thought was faith"; "a loss of purpose and direction"; "that whole way of life"; "their act of worship on a Sunday." Everyone used the metaphor of death/dying in a different way which is part of the difficulty with the language. These suggestions of "what has died" all came from the ministers. Just one of the church members, Ruth, reflected on this:

[100] https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/7183/counc_mc18-30-notice-of-motion-206_apr_2018.pdf [accessed 24/11/2022].

> "I think a little bit you could say that people's faith has died because I think if people's faith had been stronger, and we'd been more energetic then we'd have done more with the church and the church would never have closed. So, it could be a failure, or I think it is a failure of ourselves as a church, as a Christian community. So, I'm not grieving personally, I'm not grieving my faith that has transferred, but it's just the people and where you feel comfortable and the building, but I can see why other people would kind of go with it, there are fewer people going to church, then is the faith, is the Methodist Church, or other churches, is that dying out? I'd hope not."

When pressed, all the ministers reflected that the difficulty with this language is identifying what has died. And while they may not wholly like the language, there was a sense of working with it to try to make sense of what was happening.

Wendy admitted that in many places:

> "the theology's gone. There is no sense of what it means to be 'in Christ', there's no sense of what it means to be the body of Christ' and kept coming back to the question 'what does it mean to be 'in Christ?''

She concluded reflecting on the story of the healing of Jairus' daughter,[101] asking whether the church is dead or sleeping.

Implications

There is significant difference in the language in the data between the ministers and the members, as well as a marked contrast between the data and the literature as will be seen in the next chapter. Although some of the ministers talked about the death/resurrection of Christ, there was an uncertainty as to how they related to the church's closure. This will be the primary theme running through this thesis to be addressed and challenged.

4.6 Leadership

Both the ministers of Hope Street and Mercy Lane were also the Superintendents of their respective circuits. Theresa had only been in the circuit for one year before the question of closure was discussed; while Sophie was halfway through what became a six-year appointment.

[101] Luke 8:40-56.

Sophie reflected that closing a church requires strong leadership and admitted that "that's been quite a pressure", as there isn't a template "you just make it up as you go. But I think the key to it is being prayerful and connected and responding to things and just taking it one step at a time." It is not about saying "this is the timetable and we're going to manage this, then this, and then this, it's about asking what's the next step that we take and how do we do that?" It was after the decision to close had been made that the vision connected with the Foodbank church emerged at Hope Street (described in chapter 3).

After the closure of Hope Street, Sophie reflected on Jesus and Peter walking on water[102] in terms of what this story says about the role of leadership, seeing it as "an encouraging" role rather than an "instructing" role:

> "[People] needed the encouragement to actually step out of the boat and walk on the water and they floundered a lot but actually most of them are walking quite confidently in spite of what's gone before […] I do see that Christ's Spirit, working through where we've got to, has encouraged them forward into places they didn't know they could possibly walk. I don't think it's across the board, I mean some of them are elderly and will just go to a church because it's a church and they'll be fine there and they will love them and that's fine, but it's great that some of them are actually going to be doing and taking it seriously[103] and maybe in a stronger place faith-wise, who knows."

It is noteworthy that Sophie interprets the actions of the congregation in relation to 'faith' whereas the interviewees did not talk in these terms. We reflected together that if they had thought strategically at the start, they probably would not have arrived at this place. A strategic plan would probably have involved closing the smaller churches and keeping the larger churches open, as questioned by some in both churches (see chapter 2.5.1 above).

Despite the difficulties along the way, which included: people "shouting and bawling in a meeting," another "turning her head away every time she sees me," and still others "refusing to have conversations with me after a service", at the end of the process, Sophie was able to testify:

[102] Matthew 14:22-33.
[103] Referring to members of Hope Street who had transferred their membership to the Foodbank church.

> "You are surrounded by something much bigger that just takes it one step at a time. That's been an exciting part of this process. I've found the way forward because I'm not doing this on my own at all and that's been very reassuring."

Sophie's leadership approach is in contrast to that of the District Missioner who spoke consistently of the strategic approach of the district. Yvonne talked in terms of working on "how can the district be more strategic?" in getting churches to close; and the danger that if they are not more strategic "there's a real risk over the next few years of an avalanche of closures and we could end up with buildings being sold when they're in a really strategic location." This "strategic conversation" includes asking "where are the places where Methodism needs to go that it isn't at the moment? So how do we focus the resources of ministry around those places where actually it is key for mission?"

Yvonne worked with local authority development plans and organised conversations in relation to those plans and the mission opportunities they present to churches and circuits. The danger with this is that it risks replacing discernment with analysis of those plans, and does not take into account the people that are already present, however vulnerable they may seem to be. After Hope Street had closed, Sophie was invited to a District meeting about the Methodist Church's evangelism strategy. She talked about how she was told that what was happening at the Foodbank church was "not what we're talking about. We're talking about New Places for New People,[104] we're not talking about moving people from one place to another, we're looking at new and exciting initiatives, not small-scale stuff like you're doing."

Implications

This raises questions about what it means to be strategic in leadership, how 'strategic places' are identified, and how ministers can help congregations to discern what God may be saying to the church. Perhaps there is an assumption that if members have been in the church all their lives that they understand these things and do not need to be taught about them:

[104] Part of the Methodist Church's national 'God for All' strategy for evangelism, adopted by the Conference in 2020. https://www.methodist.org.uk/our-work/our-work-in-britain/evangelism-growth/explore-the-god-for-all-strategy/ [Accessed 22/11/2022].

whether that is about mission, applying the scriptures, baptism, or discernment. This is a weakness of itinerant leadership.

It also raises questions about whose responsibility is the lack of prayer meetings, bible studies or conscious discipleship formation in the church and what this says about leadership.

4.7 Moving on

Following the closures, most members of the churches transferred their membership to other churches, mainly Methodist. At Hope Street, many members had previously belonged to another church which had closed, with one interviewee now moving to their fourth church due to closures. There is nothing that I can see in the data that will change this pattern. Closing a church well is not just about enabling the congregation to move on, but requires the following question to be addressed: what needs to be done differently to break this cycle of closure?

4.8 Comment on the Data:

The demographics of both churches are typical of many Methodist churches and many of the churches I have worked with, in particular in relation to their size, age profile, their understanding of mission, and their difficulty in talking of God.

While there is little empirical evidence of the age profile of congregations connexionally, in 2018 some analysis of the then most recent statistics (covering 2013-2017) was presented to the Methodist Conference[105] which suggested that 'Methodism's membership profile tends towards the older end of the age spectrum' with 40% of Methodist members aged 70 or over.[106] This is consistent with the Case Study churches, and from my own experience, it is also consistent with the churches that are facing difficult decisions about their future.

The difficulty of these congregations in talking of God is reflected in a number of reports produced by the Methodist Church in the twenty-first century. The 2002 *Methodist Life Profile* revealed that Methodists 'reported themselves to be not very conscious of God's presence, not that keen on prayer groups (they are more likely to be found in a social group),

[105] https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/8615/infographics_2018_final.pdf [Accessed 12/08/2018].
[106] Based on an in-house membership survey 2011; Analysis of groups and outreach activities 2017.

not particularly aware of 'vision' in their church and reluctant to talk about their faith.'[107] It was out of this research that the Conference produced the 2005 report '*Time to Talk of God*' in the hope that it would encourage members to talk about God. A follow-on to this report produced in 2018[108] revealed that little had changed in this regard.

[107] Quoted in *Time to Talk of God* (Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes, 2005), 18.
[108] T*alking of God Together* (Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes, 2018).

Part 2b: Attending to The Surrounding Culture

Chapter 5: Literature Review

The primary concern of this is not *why* churches are closing such as: a decrease in clergy, lay office holders, church members or finances; or issues relating to the upkeep of a building, which are among the most commonly given reasons;[109] the changing cultural context[110] or a church's inability to adapt to it, which Anderson *et al* give as the main difference between 'congregations doomed to disband and congregations destined for revival';[111] churches' 'weak or non-existent links to their local communities';[112] patterns of immigration;[113] from a Catholic perspective, 'the liberalizing tendencies of the Second Vatican Council';[114] or any combination of the above. These are all reasons given in the literature regarding why churches close, with an unspoken assumption that if the church could do something about this, it may not have to close and all would be well. In contrast to these understandings, De Roest notes from his research in the Netherlands that 'members do not always understand why their church has to close down',[115] revealing a potential denial of reality by the churches; though I did not find this (see chapter 4.1 above). My primary concern is with *how* churches are closing and *how* they respond to the challenges they face.

5.1 Overview

Indicating the scale of the issue of church closures, Anderson *et al* identified the annual death rate of religious congregations in the United States as only 1% which they suggest is

[109] E.g. Lewis Burton, 'Church Closure and Membership Statistics: a Methodist Perspective', *Rural Theology*, 5(2), (2007), 125-136, 126f; Opal Easter, 'Pastoral Advice on Parish Closures and Mergers in an African American Community' *New Theology Review,* (August 2009), 25-35, 26; Carol Roberts and Leslie Francis, 'Church Closure and Membership Statistics: Trends in Four Rural Dioceses', *Rural Theology*, 4:1, (2006), 37-56, 39-41.
[110] E.g. Kevin D. Dougherty, Jared Maier and Brian Vander Lugt 'When the Final Bell Tolls: Patterns of Church Closings in Two Protestant Denominations' *Review of Religious Research*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (Sept. 2008) 49-73, 55; L. Gail Irwin, *Toward a Better Country: Church Closure and Resurrection* (Eugene Oregon: Resource Publications, 2014), 20.
[111] Shawna L. Anderson *et al*, 'Dearly Departed: How Often Do Congregations Close?' *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (June 2008) 321-328, 327.
[112] Paul Chambers, 'Economic Factors in Church Growth and Decline in South and Southwest Wales', in David Goodhew (ed) *Church Growth in Britain 1980 to the Present* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2012), 221-235, 223.
[113] Michael Weldon*, A Struggle for Holy Ground* (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2004), 10.
[114] Weldon, 2.
[115] Hendrik Pieter De Roest, '"Losing a Common Space to Connect": An Inquiry into Inside Perspectives on Church Closure Using Visual Methods' International Journal of Practical Theology, Vol. 17(2), (2013), 292-313, 294.

among the lowest rate ever observed for any type of organisation.[116] However this, they say, is not necessarily good news:

> It seems more likely that this low rate indicates an organizational population whose weakest members continue to live on in a weakened state rather than an organizational population that is unusually robust all the way down to its most vulnerable members.[117]

Roberts and Francis look at the closure rate of church buildings in the Church of England, noting a closure rate of 8% over a thirty-year period[118] which works out at, on average, well under 1% per year. In response, Burton gives a Methodist closure rate for the same period (1970-2000) of 34% (3,222 churches closed)[119] which is an average of just over 1% per year. In the same period Methodism lost 46% of its members, therefore losing members at a faster rate than closing churches.[120]

Of the literature reviewed, the following stand out as common factors. Firstly, the admission that not much has been published directly about church closures.[121] Beyond journal articles, authors are predominantly "ministers" of various denominations writing from their own experience of overseeing closing churches, often writing the book that they would have found helpful. Therefore, secondly, they are largely written from a pastoral perspective, with some reading as a 'how to close a church' guide. Church closures are not new, yet those who have led congregations through a closure speak of it being one of the hardest things they have ever had to do,[122] with little or no support. Thirdly, the literature is mostly written from a North American perspective, predominantly the United States but also Canada,[123] with just over a fifth of all the literature surveyed being non-North American: either

[116] Anderson *et al*, 325.
[117] *Ibid*, 327.
[118] Roberts and Francis, 38.
[119] Burton, 130.
[120] Burton, 130.
[121] In a personal email (04/02/2019) De Roest agrees that there is not a huge amount written on the subject and admits that the references in his article 'were – at that time – all I could find.'
[122] E.g. Sean O'Malley, 'This Painful Process of Closing Parishes', *Catholic News Service: Origins*, Vol. 34, Issue 24, (November 25, 2004); Elizabeth Dunning, 'A Good Death? Pastoral Reflections on Closing a Chapel' *Holiness: the Journal of Wesley House Cambridge,* Vol. 3 (2017) Issue 1, 95-105, 97.
[123] Michael K. Jones, *Empty Houses: A Pastoral Approach to Congregational Closures* (BookSurge.com, 2004); Barry Stephenson, '"I Have a Brick From That Building": The Deconsecration of Highgate United Church', *Practical Matters,* Issue 8, (April 2015), 5-15.

Australian[124] or European.[125] Fourthly, they mostly speak about the closure of the church using the language of death and dying, grief and mourning.

What is largely absent is a coherent theology for understanding what is happening, therefore it is sometimes hard to see what the nature of any hope is for the church. The language of death/dying is generally accepted with little or no theological critique.[126] At best hope is either the hope to close "well", whatever "well" might mean in each context; or comes in the form of whatever legacy may be left, often in the setting up of endowments or donating assets to other ministries. Linked to this is a lack of a coherent ecclesiology for the twenty-first century, which takes seriously the landscape of closure and decline.

Different approaches are taken in the literature by: engaging with the physical building and attachment to it;[127] giving practical or pastoral advice;[128] exploring helpful rites following the decision to close;[129] research into the effects of closures on Ministers;[130] research into closure rates of churches and statistical analysis;[131] or from the perspective of the life cycle of a congregation where closure is seen as natural and to be expected.[132] The implication is that decision-making is primarily pragmatic and does not arise from an obvious theological perspective. For example, if the decline of churches is seen as primarily a sociological issue then it is natural to look for a sociological solution, as Chambers does by suggesting an approach to mission that is dependent on 'the careful auditing of needs among local populations, the setting of appropriate goals and a level of internal congregational resource capable of realising these goals'[133] and 'growing partnerships with both government and other local voluntary groups' as churches 'reinvent themselves for twenty-first century

[124] Jennifer Clark, '"This Special Shell": The Church Building and the Embodiment of Memory', *Journal of Religious History,* Vol. 31, No. 1, (March 2007), 59-77.
[125] The UK: Burton; Chambers, 'Economic Factors'; Dunning; Roberts and Francis; Jane Robson 'The Time has Come: Closing a Church Well in the Baptist Denomination'; The Netherlands: De Roest.
[126] Dunning offers a short theological reflection on her experience.
[127] E.g., Stephenson; de Roest.
[128] E.g., Easter; Dunning; Beth Ann Gaede (ed.) *Ending with Hope* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002) which is heavily drawn on in other literature; Irwin; Denominational manuals such as from the United Church of Christ.
[129] Weldon.
[130] Gail Cafferata, 'Respect, Challenges, and Stress Among Protestant Pastors Closing a Church: Structural and Identity Theory Perspectives', *Pastoral Psychol* (2017) 66: 311-333; Gail Cafferata, *The Last Pastor* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2020, Kindle Version).
[131] Anderson *et al;* Roberts and Francis; Burton.
[132] Alice Mann, *Can our Church Live?* (The Alban Institute, 1999); Dougherty, Maier and Lugt; Irwin, 118.
[133] Chambers 'Economic Factors', 223.

conditions.'[134] If faith groups have historically 'demonstrated a great capacity to adapt to social, cultural and economic change,'[135] it is not clear how they have adapted to spiritual change. Burton has a similar omission when he suggests that 'each church needs a variety of human resources for its continued existence'[136] with no mention of non-human resources. Is there an inability, or unwillingness, to articulate where God is in the context of church closures or is it an oversight and just assumed?

These unresolved questions leave one wondering how one balances the different perspectives and resulting tensions arising from closures and where the emphasis in decision-making should be. How does a theology of place/building/physical location sit alongside an ecclesiology of the body of Christ embracing the pastoral care of the congregation and its community as both, to differing degrees, are facing loss; as well as embodying an appropriate missiology, while seeking to discern what God is saying to the church?

5.2 The Nature of the Death of a Church

The predominance of the language of death/dying in the literature raises questions about its use in the context of a church, and whether it is appropriate language in this context. Is death part of God's plan or God's gift,[137] or is death a failure? And what are the implications of this for closing churches? Dunning notes that while closure often represents failure, Jesus' death is a 'triumph *because* of death not *in spite of* death.'[138] Can the 'death'/closure of a church be seen in the same way? Gaede talks about the need to 'rethink attitudes toward death',[139] while Gray and Dumond suggest that churches need help to develop a proper theology of death.[140] But as Kolin points out, 'until a community must face the

[134] Chambers 'Economic Factors', 233.
[135] *ibid,* 234.
[136] Burton, 131.
[137] Paul S. Fiddes, *Participating in God* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2000), 230. Here Fiddes suggests that the pastoral-theological questions this raises calls for a doctrine of God both as Creator of death and Redeemer from death.
[138] Dunning, 101.
[139] Gaede, vii.
[140] Stephen Gray and Franklin Dumond, *Legacy Churches* (St. Charles, IL: Church Smart Resources, 2009), 32.

question of whether and how to close, most congregations never consider that possibility.'[141] So how is this normalised in terms what it means to be the church?

Kübler-Ross is referred to by many authors and insights of the hospice movement and palliative care are frequently drawn on. This is most clearly expressed by one minister who states that, in the absence of resources, she turned to 'those who have worked with terminally ill individuals and extended their ideas to the congregation itself,' finding Kübler-Ross's *Stages of Dying* 'helpful in a very practical sense.'[142] Jones, alone, gives a note of caution and critique to drawing on Kübler-Ross,[143] highlighting that a theological response to either death and the possibility of resurrection or the hospice movement is absent. The nature of the death of a church is necessarily different to that of a person, but how it is different is not clear from the literature. It is as though the building is treated in an anthropomorphic way, with Stephenson going as far as to suggest that church buildings are not 'merely containers of worship services but may themselves be actors.'[144]

What does it mean for a church, closing or otherwise, to enter into the death and resurrection of Christ? If the body that is raised is different in nature to the body that has died, how is this reflected in a closing church? Where there is a continuation of ministry in the leaving of a legacy,[145] the legacy appears to be a perpetuation of the same kind of ministry through others in another place, rather than something radically different or "resurrected". That legacy may end up facing similar issues in the future, including closure, unless the circumstances, context and approach to that ministry are different. Otherwise, death appears to be final.

In order to give hope, the closure of a church needs to lead to something new or different rather than a perpetuation of that which led to the church closing in the first place. Roberts and Francis point towards the implications of this when they say:

[141]Lucy Kolin, 'The Value of Ritual: Making Meaning, Forging Hope', in Gaede, 135-147, 136.
[142] Tanya Stormo Rasmussen 'The Members' Experience', in Gaede, 43-54, 45.
[143] Jones, 86.
[144] Stephenson, 14.
[145] E.g., Gray and Dumond; United Church of Christ, *Living Legacy: Church Legacy & Closure Resource* (Cleveland, Ohio).

> If the view is correct that holding a series of services among small congregations provides less effective witness to the Christian faith than bringing three small congregations together in one larger act of worship, then closure of churches should be associated with greater church growth (or at least lower rate of decline).[146]

If the coming together is purely for pragmatic reasons relating to decline rather than with a clear theological vision then the closure will likely lead to more of the same rather than resurrection. Something fundamental needs to change but the literature is not clear on what this should be.

If, as Dolan points out, the church believes in a God 'in whom death does not have the final word',[147] what does this mean for a closing congregation and its embodied theology? Or is a 'theology of extinction'[148] needed? O'Malley refers to what unites Christians as the body of Christ through their baptism, emphasising that 'discipleship has always meant the cross.'[149] But it is not clear what this means in this context. Irwin also suggests that 'Christians can move forward in the confidence we receive from the cross of Christ: God is bigger than all deaths and endings, and God does not abandon us.'[150] If 'participating in the life of God' happens through 'sacramental baptism and Eucharist',[151] what does this mean in the face of closure? How does it help decision-making? Are churches that hold particular theologies of the cross more likely to close than others or does this affect how they close? How is this embodied in the church, and relate to its ongoing mission?

Easter suggests the need 'to reflect theologically on where the paschal mystery is in this' that there is death, but that there is also resurrection.[152] Easter goes on to quote Deacon Broussard of New Orleans that 'as Catholic Christians we should embrace these mergers and closings, as difficult as they may be, as opportunities to spread the Gospel by the way we move through these times.'[153] Dunning speaks, from her experience of closing a Methodist Church, of the need to use 'biblical narratives to inspire and inform our conversations as

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[146] Roberts and Francis, 46.
[147] Nancy Dolan, 'Even at the Risk of Losing its Life: Closing a Church Is Not God's Final Word', *The Presbyterian Outlook* (July 10, 2017).
[148] Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity* (New York: Harper One, 2008), 249.
[149] O'Malley.
[150] Irwin, 121.
[151] Weldon, 34.
[152] Easter, 32.
[153] Easter, 32.

fellowships of faith' as well as noting the resonance with Holy Week and Easter narratives.[154] Weldon similarly notes that:

> The story of the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus paints a picture of that new restored humanity created in a reconciled world. This image has great power in facilitating and giving meaning to that enterprise in a specific human situation like the conflicts around the restructuring of local church.[155]

However, none of these authors develop this line of thought, and how it relates to decision-making is not explored.

5.3 What Has Died?

Christian hope which includes the hope of bodily resurrection, entered into physically at death, is clearly not the same as is happening in 'the death of a church'. The resurrection of the human body is not immediate in this life. Therefore, how does one talk of the death of a church? Is the language of the death of a church appropriate? What does it mean to grieve for the loss of a church as those with hope? And what is the nature of hope? The resource *Necessary Endings* suggests that the decision to close 'can be a sign of spiritual health and fidelity to God'[156] but for this to be the case, it needs to be embedded in a theology that expresses this, rather than in a process which seems to have little or no relation to either, or is simply a vain, empty, hope. As noted in chapter 4.5 above, there is potential for confusion with the focus on death/dying, in that it is easy to lose sight of what is being closed or what has died. Yet this language is persistent throughout the literature without making clear what has died other than 'the church'.

Talking of the death of a church perpetuates confusion over what/who the church is: the building or the people? and what the appropriate relationship between the two should be. To say that the building is not important denies some rich truths of what it embodies and symbolises, resonating with a theology of incarnation, and a commitment to place. In the absence of an adequate theology, has the building become misplaced in its importance or significance to the people who are the church? Clarification of this relationship may help in

[154] Dunning, 99.
[155] Weldon, 22.
[156] United Church of Christ, *Necessary Endings: A Manual on Church Closure* (Pennsylvania Southeast Conference, Pottstown PA), 4.

terms of what is being mourned when a building closes, and a community of believers is disbanded so that appropriate care can be given and rites used.[157] As De Roest points out, 'a church closure does indeed threaten to destroy the fabric of the social and spiritual life of the congregation.'[158]

Clark writes of the church building being the embodiment of memory and its significance as the place of 'regeneration, restoration, and recognition of the Christian memory for both the community and the individual'[159] particularly 'the remembrance of Christ and human seeking after God.'[160] She points out that the church building 'constructed originally to remember God was constantly embellished with objects to help remember the faithful, or their loved ones and to embed the memory of the "great cloud of witnesses" into the fabric of the building itself.'[161] Jones recognises that while place is important, 'our relationship with God is more important',[162] so if that relationship is hindered by, or confused with, the place, then what are the implications of this?

Clark further points out that 'in order to advocate closure authorities must distance themselves from the building and deny the importance of place in theological terms, arguing that Christianity does not invest significance in the building itself'[163] and shifting to 'the theological placelessness of Christianity to justify sale and asset liquidation.'[164] This implies that the church's approach to its buildings changes in the face of decline and closure. At what point does the building cease to be important, or does it point to a lack of integrity on the part of leaders who make the decision to close or encourage closure? Clark argues that with closure 'congregational memory is truncated.'[165] However, there is a danger of confusing *what* is remembered with *the means* by which it is remembered: does the building itself hold the memory, or does that which the congregation participates in when they are present together within it hold the memory? Stephenson also addresses the issue of place and memory, rather than doctrine and belief, in his article seeking to understand

[157] Weldon's concern.
[158] De Roest, 313.
[159] Clark, 60.
[160] Clark, 61.
[161] Clark, 68.
[162] Jones, 19.
[163] Clark,71.
[164] Clark, 72.
[165] Clark, 73.

'the issues involved in the reuse and transformation of sacred sites.'[166] Suggesting that 'reactions to and handling of church closure is a window on to the nature and meaning of "place" to practicing, contemporary Christians.'[167] Clark also highlights the distinction between how the building is viewed by the congregation, which 'ties the place to experience, memory, and the life journey which includes spiritual life'; and that of church authorities who can be 'far more detached' and see the place 'less emotively, as an asset to be used and shared as a meeting place only, facilitating the dissemination of the theology – to hear the Word read and preached – by itself, devoid of greater significance.'[168]

This raises issues regarding who should make the decision to close, how and why; particularly if it is used 'by church authorities to put pressure on the members of the congregation to give up their resistance to closure.'[169] Zech and Miller, who make parallels between restructured parishes and blended families,[170] call for the participation of the congregation in the decision-making process: 'let that which touches all be approved by all';[171] similarly Jones suggests that the ideal is when the congregation can make its own decision,[172] otherwise long-term problems can develop.[173] Weldon frequently uses the language of trauma which, writing from a Catholic perspective, makes particular sense if the decision-making is out of the hands of the congregation; while Guthrie's recounting of a Catholic church that was closed makes a similar point.[174] In such cases, the role of the congregation is simply to accept the decision and work with it, not against it.

It is worth noting that while those whose decision-making in relation to closing churches is in the hands of individuals (usually bishops) advocate for it to be in the hands of the local congregations, the Methodist Conference agreed to explore ways in which it can be taken out of the hands of the local congregations and moved to other, more distant, bodies.[175]

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[166] Stephenson, 6.
[167] Stephenson, 6.
[168] Clark, 74.
[169] De Roest, 311.
[170] Charles E. Zech and Robert J. Miller, *Listening to the People of God* (New York: Paulist Press, 2008), 2.
[171] *Ibid,* 19.
[172] Jones, 32.
[173] Jones, 35.
[174] Julian Guthrie, *The Grace of Everyday Saints* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011).
[175] Amended Notice of Motion 2018/201, https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/8532/noms-yellow-new-2018-203-211.pdf [accessed 18/04/2019].

Summary

While noting the predominance of the metaphor of death/dying in the literature, the language of death/resurrection alongside the Paschal mystery is present but is not developed. This raises the question as to how the Church's beliefs about death/resurrection become embodied in the congregation and their decision-making, rather than depending on the likes of Kübler-Ross and the hospice movement, and their approach to death/dying. This theme and the questions it has raised will be explored further in the next chapter.

Chapter 6: Death and Dying as a Metaphor for Closing Churches

In chapter 5 death/dying was identified as the dominant theme or metaphor running through the literature review in relation to churches that were closing. Views included those such as Mann, who draws attention to the life cycle of a congregation and talks of death as part of the natural cycle for the church as a living organism,[176] to the minister who, in the absence of resources turned to 'those who have worked with terminally ill individuals and extended their ideas to the congregation itself.'[177] In response to the identification of this metaphor, this present chapter serves to critique and challenge the dominance of the image of death/dying in the literature as it appears to be taken for granted as the best, if not the only, metaphor to use, and explore whether the metaphor is appropriate or helpful in the context of closing churches.

6.1 Language and Metaphor

While there is a general avoidance of speaking of 'death' when a person dies, even within the church,[178] it is curious that many writers, including ministers, use this language to describe a situation where no-one physically dies. Davies points out that 'death' is ever the death of 'someone'[179] and warns that 'the potential for deploying 'bereavement' as a model for many kinds of loss can easily be over-done and weaken the real sense of the word.'[180] If 'death' does not mean the death of 'someone', but is treated as only 'one form of loss' as Mitchell and Anderson suggest,[181] there is a danger of death being subsumed under all 'loss.'[182] Its usage blurs the distinction between 'loss' generally and 'death' specifically, leading to the interchangeability of terms. While Mitchell and Anderson make an important point, it is not helpful to group all loss together without making necessary distinctions between different kinds of loss. While individuals may have emotional attachments to objects as they do to people, there is still a difference. Otherwise, it is easy to jump to the

[176] Mann, 1-9.
[177] Tanya Stormo Rasmussen 'The Members' Experience' in Beth Ann Gaede, (ed.), *Ending with Hope*, Rowman & Littlefield: Lanham, 2002, 43-54, 45.
[178] Fred Craddock, Dale Goldsmith and Joy V. Goldsmith *Speaking of Dying* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2012).
[179] Douglas Davies, *The Theology of Death* (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 43.
[180] *Ibid,* 47.
[181] Kenneth R. Mitchell and Herbert Anderson, *All our Losses, All our Griefs: Resources for Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), 10.
[182] Lucy Bregman, *Preaching Death: The Transformation of Christian Funeral Sermons* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2011), 157.

conclusion that the loss of a church is a death, and that death is therefore an appropriate metaphor to use without considering all the consequences, theological or otherwise, of making such an assertion.

Stairs, in recognising that talking of death is hard, encourages using the 'language of death and resurrection on a regular basis',[183] and uses the example of saying that 'the coal mine is dead' rather than that 'the coal mine has been shut down.'[184] The 'coal mine' could easily be replaced by 'the church' but does it mean the same? Stairs' encouragement of this use of language is primarily about 'recognising death as a part of the rhythm of life' in order to help 'us live as authentic spiritual beings'[185] and address the avoidance of death's reality. However, Stairs' approach achieves the opposite of what she means in terms of modelling 'truthfulness in speech about the journey of the soul' in a 'death-avoiding, death-denying, and crisis-addicted culture'.[186] It is another kind of avoidance of death, such that it becomes unclear when death is actually the death of someone, and when death is being used as a metaphor for another kind of loss. If nothing has really died, death loses its meaning and power, and encourages a pretence that death is not real. Stairs is encouraging a move from one extreme of avoiding death in speech, to another, leading to an over-familiarity with the language of death. It would be more helpful, and potentially achieve the 'truthfulness in speech' which Stairs desires, to have clear and consistent language which calls the death of someone 'death' and other kinds of loss, as significant as they may be, what they are. Such as, in the present context: the church has closed, or the church has dispersed; depending on whether the church as the building or as the people is being referred to.

Marris warns of the difficulties of using metaphors when seeking to understand 'unique relationships' because of 'particular ideological implications' we may wish to avoid.[187] While Marris writes in connection to attachment and human relationships, the same applies to death as a metaphor. The use of death as a metaphor does not explain what is really going on or what the language of death and dying is shorthand for. Even to switch to the language

[183] Jean Stairs, *Listening for the Soul: Pastoral Care and Spiritual Direction* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 86.
[184] Stairs, 85.
[185] Stairs, 86.
[186] Stairs, 86.
[187] Peter Marris, 'Attachment and Society', in Colin Murray Parkes & Joan Stevenson-Hinde (eds), *The Place of Attachment in Human Behavior* (London: Tavistock Pubs, 1982), 185-201, 190.

of 'loss' reveals similar issues, as the question remains: what is actually 'lost' when a church closes? While the building may be closed, it says nothing about what has happened to the church as a congregation and what they may have 'lost' in the process of closing, or what they may have gained.

As well as 'particular ideological implications', the use of language also has theological implications for understanding what is going on. Unforeseen complications can appear when applying literature referring to physical experiences of death/dying to situations where death/dying is used as a metaphor. Without clarity and honesty of language damage may be done to churches who are closing; who are considering closure; who may be unwilling to contemplate the possibility of closing; or to the wider Church's mission, because of what may be an unhelpful, inappropriate, or simply lazy metaphor. I will explore this further by looking at Kübler-Ross, given her prevalence in the literature.

6.2 Dealing with Kübler-Ross

6.2.1. Context

Bregman provides a helpful overview of the changing ways in which death has been spoken of within the church, and Kübler-Ross's place within that. Drawing attention to what she calls a 'momentous shift'[188] in the way Christians have spoken of death and dying, Bregman notes in the early twentieth century a move away from the language of previous generations of 'death is natural' to a period of 'silence and denial.' She identifies as factors in this change the falling rates of infant mortality with the consequences of this for 'religious messages about the universality, omnipresence, and unavoidability of death';[189] and the inability of the church to respond appropriately to the post-World War One era and the Great Depression. This period of 'silence and denial,' Bregman suggests, has been followed by

[188] Bregman, 4.
[189] Bregman, 9.

> a brand-new language, drawn from the modern death awareness movement, whose imagery and preoccupations were radically discontinuous with what Christians had once said so frequently and forcefully. This new language has continued to hold sway for approximately the past four decades. And the most amazing thing about this change: no one seemed to notice it.[190]

On the one hand there is much that is useful in Kübler-Ross, one of the early proponents of the death awareness movement, particularly in terms of breaking the 'silence and denial' around death by enabling patients, medical practitioners and theological students to talk about death and dying. On the other hand, Bregman suggests that 'very few Christian thinkers questioned whether [Kübler-Ross's] model of "death as a natural event" was truly in tune with what Christians had believed and still wanted to affirm.'[191] This appears to be the case in the way that the literature on closing churches draws on Kübler-Ross and related material without questioning the assumptions that lie underneath her approach, in particular what 'acceptance' of death means.

Writing much later than Kübler-Ross (1969), Craddock *et al* (2012) noted when studying ten churches whose pastors died in post that while the church is 'expert in dealing with *death*' it 'averts its attention when one of its members is dying',[192] including when the dying member is the pastor. This left them with the question: 'why can we not talk honestly and openly about dying, in our churches and in the surrounding world?'[193] They found that the stories of these ten pastors and their churches, for the most part, 'failed to locate their own unique and positive story in the larger narrative of the Christian faith' and identified Kübler-Ross's five-stage process as the general pattern in each story, with the exception that they did not find the fourth stage of depression, at least not publicly.[194] They conclude that Kübler-Ross's approach 'is not the language of faith.'[195]

In her own research, Kübler-Ross found little difference between religious and non-religious patients, admitting that she and her researchers had not clearly defined what a religious patient was:

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[190] Bregman, 4.
[191] Bregman, 6.
[192] Craddock *et al,* 2.
[193] *Ibid,* 2.
[194] *Ibid*, 45.
[195] *Ibid*, 45.

> We found very few truly religious people with an intrinsic faith [...] the majority of patients were in between, with some form of religious belief but not enough to relieve them of conflict and fear.[196]

It seems that Craddock *et al*'s findings here are consistent with Kübler-Ross's, and raises questions about the nature of the ten pastors' faith or belief. While their research shows the inability of churches to speak appropriately of dying, their reference to Kübler-Ross is largely clumsy, as though they are attempting to make their research fit to prove a point that could be made in a better way. The psychological responses that they identify in these situations of dying pastors raise more important questions about what these churches teach, and what these pastors believed, particularly about death/dying, than whether or not they fit a 'secular pattern'.

The effects of the pastors' deaths and the ways they were handled were devastating for the ongoing life of each congregation. The 'aftermath' for the congregations included: schism, drop in membership, and leadership instability with only one congregation recognising an eventual 'recovery and growth.'[197] Craddock *et al* suggest that the problem for the church is that 'theologies of dying are in reality theologies of death, which means they focus more on the resurrection and Christian hopes for the afterlife'[198] rather than the perspective of actually dying i.e. pre-death, which was the original context of Kübler-Ross's research.

The church is also in an era of 'silence and denial' when the metaphor is applied to closing churches. There is an inability to talk about what is happening and why, and an uncertainty as to what has died, as my own data shows: congregations did not use that language and said that they did not find it helpful; while ministers may rush to speak of resurrection rather than death/dying and were not confident in applying the language in this context.

6.2.2 The Larger Narrative of the Christian Faith

The primary concern with Kübler-Ross is not that her stages are inappropriate or unidentifiable, but that what she identifies is not interpreted or challenged within 'the larger narrative of the Christian faith', as we shall see with Brueggemann who finds commonalities

[196] Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1970), 237.
[197] Craddock *et al,* 14-15.
[198] *Ibid*, 49.

between Kübler-Ross's approach and lament in the Old Testament[199] while warning that: 'the easy alliance of biblical theology with her view in popular practice must be doubted.'[200] Brueggemann argues in favour of Kübler-Ross's approach in that she seeks to give form to the process of grief, her stages of grief playing a similar role to that which lament plays in Scripture, both to '*enhance* the experience so that dimensions of it are not lost and to limit the experience so that some dimensions are denied their legitimacy.'[201] Much that is written about Kübler-Ross, when applied to closing churches, focuses on the form, i.e. her stages of death/dying, not their function which Craddock *et al* is also in danger of doing.[202] Whereas Brueggemann explores the interaction between the form of lament/grief and its function.

While favouring Kübler-Ross's form, Brueggemann recognises that Israel and Kübler-Ross 'begin at very different places'[203] and end in different ways: 'while the modern resolution may or may not be affirmative, Israel's conclusion is characteristically praise. The doxology rests on the conviction that the griever has been heard and the matter has been decisively dealt with.'[204] The underlying theological context of Israel, is the covenant, which reveals the key differences between Brueggemann and Kübler-Ross. To understand grief for Israel, one has to understand the nature of their covenantal relationship with God. What Brueggemann finds in Kübler-Ross is only a 'yearning for covenant, rather than an affirmation of it',[205] similar to Craddock *et al*'s yearning to locate the churches' experiences of death/dying in the 'larger narrative of the Christian faith'.

Other significant differences which the context of the covenant makes include firstly, the place and involvement of a covenant partner. For Israel this 'is authoritatively Yahweh himself […] death is dealt with in relation to the sovereignty and fidelity of Yahweh,'[206] who can be 'confronted directly and with bold confidence.'[207] Whereas Kübler-Ross's responding

[199] Walter Brueggemann, 'The Formfulness of Grief' *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology,* Vol. 31, Issue 3 (July 1977), 263-275, 271.
[200] *Ibid*, 272.
[201] *Ibid*, 265.
[202] See also Rasmussen in Gaede, 48.
[203] Brueggemann, 'Formfulness of Grief', 268.
[204] *Ibid,* 270.
[205] *Ibid*, 272.
[206] *Ibid*, 273.
[207] *Ibid*, 266.

partner is 'a friend, relative, medical personnel' who 'cannot powerfully intrude to transform'[208] but who is required to help in the movement particularly between stages four and five: depression and acceptance. The goal and key issue for Kübler-Ross's approach is not transformation, but acceptance which raises the question as to whether or not churches expect transformation or even believe that transformation is possible.

Secondly, the covenant provides for Israel a 'community form' which is 'a form in movement, task oriented to rehabilitate members to a life world in which transforming intervention is a live option.'[209] Kübler-Ross's form 'has become an ideology which may serve well the interests of a death-denying production/consumption society',[210] but does not create community. Individuals facing death move through the stages in their own ways, at their own speed, according to their own beliefs in a way that is similar to the individual logic of the members of Hope Street in their decision-making and the lack of a 'community form' in relation to the decision to close: each moving to acceptance in their own way. Covenant creates community, gives identity, and has a role and a purpose which, in the context of church closures, encourages a community approach to decision-making which seeks 'transforming intervention.'

Thirdly, in the context of covenant 'the tone is triumphant at the end. It is not resignation or acceptance, but praise addressed to one who has made a difference. A decision has been made which alters Israel's situation',[211] whereas Kübler-Ross 'appears to be ambivalent on the last stage of acceptance. At times this appears to be triumphantly affirmative and at other times serenely resigned [...] Such lack of convinced clarity diminishes the power of the form.'[212] Thus there is little room for confidence for Kübler-Ross.

6.2.3. The Nature of Death

In pointing out that 'death for Genesis-Adam', i.e., the faith perspective from which Brueggemann speaks, 'is not the same as death for Genetic-Adam',[213] the secular medical perspective from which Kübler-Ross speaks, Davies frames the nature of death in two ways

[208] Brueggemann, 'Formfulness of Grief', 272.
[209] *Ibid*, 273.
[210] *Ibid*, 273.
[211] *ibid*, 273.
[212] *Ibid*, 272.
[213] Davies, *Theology of Death*, 7.

in what he calls 'a foundational paradox'. Either death can be framed as 'natural, albeit still fraught with grief and potential activity,' in which 'life and death become inevitable partners in life.'[214] Or, death can be framed as 'a supernatural evil to be countered by supernatural good',[215] which Davies calls 'the general voice of Christian theology following the Jewish narratives' which 'speaks of death as a disruptive evil whose enmity towards humanity lies close to the very heart of the divine engagement with mankind.'[216] Davies falls short of saying that death, or a form of death, was part of God's intention prior to the second creation story.[217] Fiddes points to a middle way in identifying two faces of death in the Old Testament: the enemy and the boundary marker. He suggests that there is no 'hint that the man and woman would not have died if they had not disobeyed God' in Genesis 3, therefore death is natural. However, 'the result of turning away from God's purpose is that death becomes an enemy to life' and death is now, in the experience of Israel, 'something natural, but a good thing spoilt',[218] and something other than what God intended. If death is not natural, or is not the form of death that God intended it to be, then simple acceptance does not make sense: why would anyone want to accept something that is not natural? However, if Fiddes' middle road were to be taken, then both responses are somehow necessary.

6.2.4 Hope and Acceptance

For Kübler-Ross hope 'usually persists through all these stages',[219] but she does not articulate the nature of hope and neither does Brueggemann address it. It seems that it is not hope in something or someone, but rather is linked with the movement through her stages: hope of the acceptance of death, and a peaceful death. Whatever hope she speaks of ends with and in death because death is the end. This lack of hope in something or someone else, beyond death, leads in Kübler-Ross's approach to an inevitability of the way things are and therefore the inevitability of death as a natural event. But acceptance is not the same as hope.

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[214] Davies, *Theology of Death*, 7.
[215] *Ibid*, 9.
[216] *Ibid*, 7.
[217] Genesis 2:4ff.
[218] Fiddes, *Participating in God*, 233-234.
[219] Kübler-Ross*, On Death and Dying,* 122.

Herbert differentiates hope from wishing, optimism, fighting spirit, and expectation; all of which could be characteristics of hope, but each in themselves fall short of adequately defining the nature of hope in its fullness, and are incompatible with the nature of acceptance of death which Kübler-Ross encourages. He goes on to define hope as 'the mysterious anticipation of the ultimate'[220] which is characterised by mystery, a sense of purpose, and a 'kind of *something other*' than the experience in which someone may find themselves.[221] He suggests, drawing on Moltmann, that as God alone is transcendent, only hope in God can transcend death.[222]

If hope is the same thing as the acceptance of death; what does this say about the nature of death itself? Branson points out that the Christian pastor and chaplain 'will accept death for what it is – the implacable foe, "the last enemy to be destroyed"'[223] and therefore it should not be simply accepted, suggesting a clash of 'the New Testament Christian perspective of death with that of Kübler-Ross.'[224] This fits with Craddock *et al*'s findings of a 'strange form' of acceptance in that 'the patient who fights valiantly receives a kind of acceptance and admiration for battling, for never giving up, for being courageous',[225] but it is unclear whether the 'battle' is with death itself or with the illness. Branson's issue with Kübler-Ross is that death, from a Christian perspective, is not something to be accepted, otherwise it is another form of denial of death. However, in his objection to Kübler-Ross, Branson misses her point. Death cannot be 'battled' because the fight ultimately cannot be won. Branson cannot accept death because it is the foe, the last enemy; but if death has truly been overcome by Christ, it does not need to be fought against by those who are dying but accepted in the light of what Christ has done and the hope of resurrection. Therefore, acceptance of death is not unchristian within the larger narrative of the Christian faith. Otherwise, each individual has to fight the same fight and defeat the same enemy all over again with each death and will always lose. Therefore, acceptance is given a different significance in the context of Covenant and Christian hope than Kübler-Ross affords it.

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[220] Herbert, *Living Hope: A Practical Theology of Hope for the Dying* (Peterborough: Epworth, 2006), 23.
[221] Herbert, 23.
[222] Herbert, 78.
[223] Branson, Roy "Is Acceptance a Denial of Death? Another Look at Kubler-Ross", *The Christian Century* (May 7, 1975), 464-468, section vi.
[224] Branson, section vi.
[225] Craddock *et al*, 45.

Kübler-Ross suggests that 'the more we are achieving advances in science, the more we seem to fear and deny the reality of death'[226] and death has become 'lonely and impersonal.'[227] Therefore the appropriate response to death, if it cannot be denied, is to 'attempt to master it';[228] and the only way to master death, says Kübler-Ross, is to accept it. Hence acceptance is the psychological state of mind towards which her whole premise in *On Death and Dying* moves.

Kübler-Ross's premise for acceptance is based, in part, on an inaccurate view, from a Christian perspective, of an afterlife which was 'to relieve people of their suffering and their pain' for which they would be rewarded in heaven.[229] In which case, suffering becomes meaningless, and if suffering is meaningless then there is no need for a reward. If there is no need for a reward, then there is no need for an afterlife. Therefore, she says, 'if we cannot anticipate life after death, then we have to consider death.'[230]

Acknowledging that Kübler-Ross is making a generalisation here about the purpose of religion, it does raise the question of whether the church has fully grappled with cultural changes in the understanding of death/dying. It is not so much that the church no longer gives meaning or hope or purpose, but whether that hope or meaning can stand up to death when it becomes a reality to individuals or the church community, as well as to 'threats' to the existence of the church if applied to closing churches. This raises concern about a church unquestioningly adopting Kübler-Ross's approach either in terms of pastoral care of the dying or in closing a church.

What Kübler-Ross calls her five stages (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance) are not stages in the conventional sense of a progression towards an end point, even though that is how they are presented, and is how she speaks of them while claiming that this is not how they are to be read. Rather, they are natural human psychological reactions to any kind of significant loss. It is important to understand the way Kübler-Ross uses them to show how the dying can achieve acceptance of death. Kübler-Ross's approach is misunderstood when these stages are seen as just that, psychological responses to loss, death & dying, and

[226] Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying,* 6.
[227] *Ibid*, 7.
[228] *Ibid*, 11.
[229] *Ibid*, 13.
[230] *ibid*, 14.

are separated from their function. The function of the stages for Kübler-Ross is to enable the mastering of death by acceptance of it, with her basic premise being: 'to attempt to conceive our own death and learn to face this tragic but inevitable happening with less irrationality and fear.'[231] Thus it is also in their function that Kübler-Ross's approach parts company with Christian faith and hope for death is not the 'end point' towards which the Christian moves, but rather resurrection beyond death is. Resurrection radically reframes death which Christ has defeated and thus 'enables people to integrate death into life in ways that are constructive, healing, and radically countercultural',[232] which is a very different approach to that of Kübler-Ross.

The issue is: at what point is acceptance found? Within the larger narrative of the Christian faith acceptance is important, but not as the final goal towards which human beings move. If we turn Kübler-Ross around and place 'acceptance' of death not as the goal towards which all of life moves but rather at the beginning of the Christian life, built into what it means to be a disciple of Christ and to be the church as the body of Christ, a forward movement from a starting position of acceptance of death begins, symbolised in the sacrament of baptism and sustained through the sacrament of Holy Communion. Therefore, one is always moving forwards in hope, even in the face of physical death, not because death is acceptable, to be avoided or denied, but because of the nature of death/dying that is at the heart of the larger narrative of the Christian faith: the death and resurrection of Christ, which not only reframes death, but also reframes life.

6.3 Baptism: A Response to Kübler-Ross

It is significant that much of the Christian literature on the nature of death/dying also refers to Baptism.[233] By focusing on baptism, we get a New Testament perspective on Brueggemann's objections to Kübler-Ross which places death/dying firmly within the larger narrative of the Christian faith. His summary of the function of the form of lament could also be applied to the function and form of baptism:

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[231] Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying,* 13.
[232] John Swinton 'Practising the Presence of God: Earthly Practices in Heavenly Perspective' in John Swinton and Richard Payne (eds), *Living Well and Dying Faithfully* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 3-16, 6.
[233] E.g.: Craddock *et al*; Davies, *Theology of Death;* Douglas J. Davies, *Death, Ritual and Belief,* 3rd Edition (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017); Allen Verhey, *The Christian Art of Dying* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011); Karl Rahner, *On the Theology of Death* (Herder and Herder: New York, 1972), translated by C. H. Henkey.

> 1. the community does a specific task which is rehabilitation of a member from a chaotic experience to a structured experience in this peculiar life-world.
>
> 2. [it] serves to maintain and reassert the life-world of Israel as a valid symbolic context in which experience can be healingly experienced. While the form is surely liturgic in some sense, it is to be sociologically understood. The community asserts that life in all its parts is formful and therefore meaningful.
>
> 3. [it] is inevitably theological. It constructs and presents a covenantal view of reality in which life is characterized by faithful hearing and speaking. The form itself defines theological reality.
>
> 4. This form with its societal power is likely not simply one form in a vast repertoire but is one of the constitutive forms of biblical faith. It affirms that the Holy God is moved by such address, that he is covenantally responsive to covenant claims laid on him and that Israel lives by his transforming word. He is not an apathetic God who is either silent or must be flattered.[234]

Baptism gives a New Testament formfulness to approaching matters of life and death as a symbolic entry into the new covenant: the baptised are to live in light of that form, in hope and anticipation of the resurrection from the dead through their participation in Christ's death and resurrection. Baptism addresses Davies' concern that 'despite death's centrality to the very structure of Christian history, liturgical practice, and ethical concerns', it has 'become marginalised in everyday conversation and regular Christian teaching.'[235] Thus baptism puts death centre stage, inseparably from the hope of resurrection.

6.4 Summary

This chapter set out to explore whether the metaphor of death/dying, raised in the literature and struggled with in the data, is appropriate in the context of closing churches. My conclusion is that it depends how the language is used and understood. It is easy to use this metaphor in a lazy and unhelpful way, as can be seen in the adoption of Kübler-Ross, without challenging its assumptions in the light of Christian theology, and without making clear what those writing on the closing of churches believe, or would perhaps wish to say, about dying or closure. Closure is seen as a natural movement from life to death as a church

[234] Brueggemann, 'Formfulness of Grief', 274.
[235] Davies, *Theology of Death*, 10.

is brought to birth (planted), it grows and when/if it declines and closes it dies.[236] This movement is reflected in the 2017 Methodist Conference's requirement that every church should have 'a growth plan or an end-of-life plan'. [237]

However, if the position of acceptance in Kübler-Ross's stages of grief and death/dying is reversed, such that there is acceptance of death/dying is at the beginning of discipleship rather than moved towards, it provides a theological foundation on which to build which may also help with decision-making theologically. In the larger narrative of the Christian faith the movement becomes an unnatural, spiritual movement of death to life which is particularly appropriate in relation to baptism.

Inspired by the idea of reversing the place of acceptance in Kübler-Ross and placing it at the start of the Christian life, I developed a hunch that baptism was an avenue to explore as a theological context for decision-making. It was in response to this hunch that led me to include questions about baptism in the first church interviews (see chapter 4.4) and that led me to begin to pay particular attention in my interactions with the case study churches as to whether they also used the language of death/dying.

I will explore this hunch in the next chapter where I will continue where this chapter has ended, in the discussion of baptism.

[236] Seen most clearly in Alice Mann's life-cycle of a congregation, *Can Our Church Live?,* 2.
[237] https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/7183/counc_mc18-30-notice-of-motion-206_apr_2018.pdf [accessed 24/11/2022].

Part 2c: Attending to The Religious Tradition

Chapter 7: Baptism

In response to Kübler-Ross specifically and to the language of death/dying in general, this chapter continues the thinking of chapters five and six, by exploring baptism to discover what it may (or may not) have to say to the church in the context of closure. In the sacrament of baptism, a forward movement of discipleship begins with an acceptance of death through participation in the death and resurrection of Christ and is sustained through the sacrament of Holy Communion. This focus on baptism will also address Davies' concern that 'despite death's centrality to the very structure of Christian history, liturgical practice, and ethical concerns, … death has become marginalised in everyday conversation and regular Christian teaching.'[238]

My focus is on baptism rather than Holy Communion in light of Davies' distinctions between the two from the perspective of social anthropology which understands baptism as 'a rite of passage' and Communion as a rite of 'intensification'.[239] His definition of a rite of passage being something which deals 'with events in which people pass from one social status to another with their social identity changing in the process.'[240] Therefore, I will begin with the issue of identity before moving to dying and rising with Christ, which is the link in the literature on death/dying (chapter 6) to baptism, before considering baptism as initiation into the church.

I will use the summary of baptism in the World Council of Churches report *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* as the context for this examination of baptism as it sets out succinctly the meaning of baptism as 'the sign of new life through Jesus Christ' which 'unites the one baptized with Christ and with his people'[241] and is 'unfolded' in five images drawn from the New Testament:

[238] Davies, *Theology of Death,* 10.
[239] *ibid,* 38.
[240] *Ibid,* 38.
[241] *BEM*, 2.

A. Participation in Christ's Death and Resurrection
B. Conversion, Pardoning and Cleansing
C. The Gift of the Spirit
D. Incorporation into the Body of Christ
E. The Sign of the Kingdom.[242]

It is not clear from the report itself whether the order of these images is significant, an issue which the Methodist Church's response to the report raises in terms of 'how these ideas relate to one another'.[243] However, I will go on to argue that it is significant.

7.1 Issues of Identity

Greggs suggests the 'profound crisis' facing the church in western Europe is that 'the church's relevance and reach to the communities of which it is a part seems to be ever reduced' resulting in either the church becoming indistinct from the culture or so separate from it that 'it stands against the world and is unable to relate to it in anything other than an oppositional, antagonistic, and condemnatory way.'[244] It seems that at the heart of this is an identity crisis which is not lost on Greggs as he states his hope 'to reorientate the discussion for the churches of what the church actually is', particularly as the church seems 'in certain quarters to face death.'[245] This 'profound crisis' is not new: it is one that the Church has had to grapple with throughout its history in working out its relationship with the culture it finds itself in. Since 2004 the Methodist Conference has made one of its priorities encouraging 'fresh ways of being church' in response to this, as well as to its own context of decline.[246]

However, this 'profound crisis' is not just a Methodist crisis. Both Newbigin and Bosch suggest that the Church needs to be radically different 'from that which controls our public life today'[247] or 'countercultural.'[248] Baptism epitomises this challenge as the Church seeks to redefine its relationships within its post-Christendom context. In the cultural context of Christendom, 'to be born into Christendom was to be born a Christian and to be born a

[242] *BEM*, 2-3.
[243] *British Methodist Response to the Lima Text,* Statements and Reports of the Methodist Church on Faith & Order, Vol. 2: 1984-2000, 1985, 412-429, 3.2; 419.
[244] Tom Greggs, *Dogmatic Ecclesiology* Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), xxiv.
[245] *Ibid,* xxiv. Greggs' use of 'death' in relation to the church is noteworthy in light of the present discussion of the use of this language.
[246] https://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/conf-priorities-for-the-MC-2004.pdf [accessed 04/09/2023].
[247] Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks* (London: SPCK, 1986), 132.
[248] David J. Bosch, *Believing in the Future* (Leominster: Gracewing, 1995), 56.

Christian was to be baptised as an infant'[249] which 'led to the view that, in a Christian country, every citizen is a Christian, and to the practice of universal infant baptism throughout Christendom.'[250] This resulted in the loss of some of the radical/countercultural aspects of baptism as it often became more of a way of conforming to the prevailing culture or a 'consecration of the status quo.'[251]

Therefore, the nature of this 'crisis' does not just concern the identity of the Church, but also the identity of those who are baptised. This was recognised in the 1952 Methodist *Statement on Holy Baptism* which acknowledges that the 'spread of unbelief, indifference to religion, and nominal Christianity in Western Europe has created a difficult situation in relation to the administration of Infant Baptism' giving rise to 'acute practical problems.'[252]

The natural response in contexts of crisis is to think about what the Church needs to *do*, for example: to pray more, evangelise more,[253] restructure,[254] repent.[255] The primary focus of the discussion, as Greggs recognises, needs to be on 'what the church actually is', rather than on what the church actually does or needs to do, or even believes. The same applies to baptismal theology: in light of the Christendom legacy of the relationship between baptism and the cultural context, fresh attention needs to be paid to the nature of baptism, starting with a consideration of what baptism 'is' rather than what baptism 'does'; or what 'happens'; or how the Church should 'do' baptism in terms of administration of the rite. Much of the Church's attention to baptism historically has concentrated on these issues rather than on the nature of baptism itself.

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[249] Neil Dixon, *Troubled Waters* (London: Epworth Press, 1979), 38.
[250] Dixon, 45. See also Dion A. Forster, 'Baptism and Ecclesiology', in Jonathan A. Powers (ed), *New Life in the Risen Christ* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2023), Kindle Version, chapter 12, who notes the effect this crisis has had on understanding baptism.
[251] Theodore Runyon, *Exploring the Range of Theology* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2012), 137. Clapp suggests that 'baptism was stripped of its political significance and subversive potential, because in that setting the church was no longer seen as a distinctive and challenging culture.' Rodney Clapp, *A Peculiar People* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1996), 100.
[252] *Statement,* 34.
[253] As can be seen in the Methodist Church's response in 'The Methodist Way of Life' and the 'God for All' Evangelism strategy.
[254] Doug Gay, *Reforming the Kirk* (Edinburgh: St. Andrew Press, 2017) focuses on changing patterns of ministry and the structures of the church.
[255] Jackson, 32, suggests that 'decline can be addressed by the repentance of the church'.

Greggs' chapter on baptism, begins with a statement of identity: '*In baptism, the believer receives her true identity as a member of the corporate priesthood of the church*' before summarising its significance:

> *In this rite is the signification of the believer's death to self and new birth in Christ by the Spirit: in baptism the believer visibly shows the world and the community that she actively participates in the body of Christ and – in this – marks her membership in the visible community of Christ's body.* [256]

As a rite of initiation, and recognising the 'already present' grace at work in the life of the baptised, he suggests that this is 'a radically changed and renewed identity which is brought about by participating through an event of the act of the Spirit in the death and resurrection of Christ.'[257] Therefore the 'primary identity' of the baptised is found 'in Christ' rather than in their 'individual identity' which 'now subsists' in Christ,[258] and therefore in relation to all who are also in Christ. The theme of identity in the context of baptism is missing in much of the literature, it is implied particularly in relation to baptism as 'pardoning and cleansing', but the emphasis is on the experience which gives the baptised 'a new ethical orientation'[259] rather than a new identity.

7.2 Baptism as Participation in Christ's Death and Resurrection

Little is written in the New Testament about baptism, however Jesus on occasion alludes to baptism in relation to death;[260] while the accounts of his own baptism emphasise the presence of the Holy Spirit and his identity which is revealed as the beloved son.[261] In the epistles a dominant image is of baptism as dying and rising with Christ.[262]

Gorman links Romans 6 and Galatians 2:15-21 as 'critical passages in Paul's theology and spirituality' revealing that 'Paul has a basic soteriology of dying and rising with Christ that he associates with both justification by faith/faithfulness (Gal. 2:15-21) and baptism (Rom. 6). In

[256] Greggs, *Dogmatic Ecclesiology,* 148. Forster in Powers, chapter 12, makes a similar point in suggesting that baptism helps us 'understand to whom we belong and who we truly are.'
[257] Greggs, *Dogmatic Ecclesiology,* 178.
[258] *ibid,* 178.
[259] *BEM*, 2.
[260] Mark 10:38-39; Luke 12:50.
[261] Matthew 3:16-17 and is consistent in all the synoptic gospels.
[262] Romans 6:1-14; Colossians 2:12.

each passage Paul speaks of co-crucifixion with the Messiah Jesus.'[263] This goes further than Davies who merely suggests that baptism 'mirrors' the death of Christ.[264]

Cushman puts a slightly different perspective on the nature of participation in suggesting that participation is with Christ in his baptism[265] which leads to a link between baptism and ministry:

> Jesus' ministry (*diakonia*) *was* baptism (*baptismos*) or was summed up in it; that is, it was the acceptance of the judgement of God upon sin and, or what is its obverse side, entire obedience to the Father's will. Baptism, thus, became the symbol of all that was overtly expounded in the substance of Jesus' ministry and was consummated in the cross. Baptism is, perhaps, the distinctive form or vehicle of the messianic consciousness of Jesus. But baptism points not directly to the cross but to the ministry which is fulfilled in the cross. If acceptance and obedience entailed rejection and death, then this also was an inherent part of the ministry; that is, part of the vocation of the elect of God […] baptism always meant to Jesus death to self-will in preference of God's will – the subordination of prerogative and privilege to radical obedience in service.[266]

Cushman draws on Mark 10:35-40 making the link with sharing Jesus' baptism and drinking from the same cup Jesus will drink from. There are some echoes here of Philippians 2:5-8 which also connects the nature of Jesus' ministry with obedience to the cross but without mention of baptism. In linking ministry with baptism, Cushman points to baptism being a way of life rather than a one-off event which therefore encompasses the nature of discipleship and requires life-long obedience. In this context of his baptism, at the outset of his public ministry, Cushman speaks of Jesus' acceptance and obedience 'to the Father's will' placing acceptance of death at the outset of his ministry and which therefore shapes all that follows and mirroring my suggestion of reversing Kübler-Ross's stages placing acceptance of death at the start. This leads to Jesus' question to James and John whether they can "drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?"[267] and indicates that the nature of this ministry is to be shared by his followers. I disagree that baptism does not point directly to the cross: if baptism is participation in the death and resurrection of Christ,

[263] Michael J. Gorman, *Participating in Christ* (Grand Rapids Baker Academic, 2019), 19.
[264] Davies, *Death, Ritual and Belief,* 170.
[265] Robert E. Cushman, 'Baptism and the Family of God' in Dow Kirkpatrick (ed.) *the Doctrine of the Church* (London: Epworth Press, 1964), 79-102, 94f.
[266] Cushman, 94.
[267] Mark 10:38.

it must point to the cross in order for it to lead to, and be consistent with, the ministry which entails. Baptism has to be 'co-crucifixion' with Christ, in order for the baptised to truly minister in the way that Cushman describes.

Dixon similarly speaks of baptism as participation in Christ's death and resurrection as the means 'by which the believer participates in the events by which God wrought mankind's salvation in Jesus Christ. In the act of baptism, the believer is identified with Christ's death and resurrection.'[268] Dixon draws on Schnackenburg's more dramatic visualisation of what happens in baptism with the baptised being 'drawn into the Christ event' accompanying the Lord 'through death to resurrection' such that 'everything that Christ went through for our salvation also happens to the baptizand' thus obtaining 'the fruit of Christ's dying':[269]

> *These statements* […] *are founded on a Semitic idea, according to which the founder of a people is inseparably bound up with those who are joined to him; he represents and takes the place of his followers, and these again share his identity.*[270]

Dixon suggests that this aspect of baptism also marks an 'absolute separation between one way of life and another'[271] which, like Schnackenburg, addresses the issue of identity which 'leads to a new life.'[272] An identity, as expressed above by Cushman, which is, and possibly always has been or at least was intended to be, countercultural by 'the subordination of prerogative and privilege to radical obedience in service.' This also draws on a Patristic understanding of baptism as 'radical transfer from one realm or allegiance to another.'[273] Wesley interprets this experience in Romans 6:3 as being 'ingrafted into Christ; and we draw new spiritual life from this new root, through His Spirit, who fashions us like unto Him, and particularly with regard to His death and resurrection.'[274]

Baptism's formfulness gives focus to whose death and dying the church participates in, and therefore gives clarity over how to face death. It is not about an individual, or a church dying as though it requires of each a sacrifice of themselves, but rather the individual and

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[268] Dixon, 17.
[269] Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Baptism in the Thought of St. Paul,* translated by G. R. Beasley-Murray (Basil Blackwell, 1964), p.205f, quoted in Dixon*, 17.*
[270] Schnackenburg, *Baptism in the Thought of St. Paul,* 205f, in Dixon*,* 17.
[271] Dixon*,* 19.
[272] Dixon*,* 20. And is consistent with Davies' definition of a rite of passage above.
[273] *Initiation,* 71.
[274] *Notes*, Romans 6:3, 540.

therefore the Church as the body of Christ, participating in the death and therefore also the resurrection of Christ. It is the death and resurrection of Christ which overcomes sin and death once and for all and gives hope at the ultimate point of our own physical or metaphorical deaths. It is the death of Christ that brings new life and hope, not our own death.

Gorman writes extensively on the theme of participation in the death and resurrection of Christ, suggesting that for Paul 'justification is an experience of participating in Christ's resurrection life that is effected by co-crucifixion with him.'[275] If baptism 'is a death'[276] it is clearly not the literal physical death of the one who is baptised, though it is their own. Rahner suggests that it is a mystical death, the effect of which is 'a sacramental assimilation to Christ's death'[277] in which Christ's death becomes visible.[278] Or, again drawing on a Patristic understanding, in both sacraments Christ's 'passion and resurrection are re-enacted so that the believer can participate in the action.'[279] This sharing in the death and resurrection of Christ in and through the waters of baptism is key to Gorman's understanding of what it means to be 'in Christ' or 'with Christ' – fulfilling the goal (*telos*) 'of human existence – union with God.'[280] Elsewhere Gorman explains how this is possible as baptism is a 'parabolic enactment of faith' expressing 'both the primary content of the faith – Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection – and the nature of faith as a sharing in, not merely an affirmation of, the narrative of Jesus.'[281]

7.2.1 The Methodist Liturgy

There is no mention of baptism as a sharing/participation in the death and resurrection of Christ in the current Methodist baptismal liturgies. Neither are the passages discussed above included: Matthew 28:18-20 and Acts 2:38-39 are the only ones used.

The idea of Baptism being "***into*** Christ" or "***into*** his death" is also absent. The liturgy talks of dying 'to sin' which is subtly different to dying 'with Christ'; and of being raised '*with* Christ'

[275] Michael J. Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 40.
[276] Craddock *et al*, 86.
[277] Rahner, 74.
[278] Rahner, 73.
[279] *Initiation,* 70.
[280] Gorman, *Inhabiting,* 4.
[281] Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 123.

which implies something other than being raised '*in* Christ'. Those who are baptised are planted 'into the Church of Christ',[282] not even into [the body of] Christ. The emphasis from the beginning of the liturgy is on what Christ has done 'for us' who are baptised rather than participating in Christ. This is the same in both the liturgies for young children and for those who are able to answer for themselves, and also in the newer liturgy for the 'Reaffirmation of Baptismal Faith Including the Use of Water' which was accepted by the Methodist Conference in 2015.[283]

LaBoy would say that this is the difference between justification and new birth in that 'Justification implies the change of the relationship that we have with God (God does something *for* us); whereas the [sic] in the New Birth there is a change in our spiritual condition in that God does something *in* us.'[284] Baptism, according to the liturgy, is primarily a celebration of justification: God's work for the baptised, which is summed up in the words spoken to the one to be baptised:

> For you Jesus Christ came into the world;
> for you he lived and showed God's love;
> for you he suffered death on the cross;
> for you he triumphed over death,
> rising to newness of life;
> for you he prays at God's right hand:
> all this for you,
> before you could know anything of it.
> In your Baptism,
> the word of Scripture is fulfilled:
> 'We love, because God first loved us.'[285]

Bruns points out the difficulty of an emphasis in the liturgy on prevenient grace, as '*all of humanity* receives prevenient grace' and therefore there is no difference between a baptised or unbaptised child. He suggests that 'the only difference is that the baptised child […] is now a member of a local congregation' and infant baptism becomes 'infant dedication with water.'[286]

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[282] *MWB*, 63.
[283] https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/1071/liturgy-for-reaffirmation-of-baptismal-faith-0416.pdf [accessed 28/08/2019].
[284] Felicia Howell LaBoy, *Table Matters: The Sacraments, Evangelism, and Social Justice* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2017), 51.
[285] *MWB,* 67.
[286] Steven D. Bruns, 'Baptism and Regeneration', in Powers, chapter 2.

LaBoy draws on Wesley's Sermon 'The Great Privilege of Those That are Born of God' which makes a distinction between justification and new birth in response to those who say that these were the same. Wesley's point is that while they are inseparable in time,

> they are easily distinguished as being not the same but things of a widely different nature. Justification implies a relative, the new birth a real, change. God in justifying us does something *for* us: in begetting us again he does the work *in* us.[287]

This raises the question of what is the emphasis in baptism: is it on God doing something *for* us or *in* us? If the emphasis is on participation this implies both, and requires a response not just in coming to baptism but also an ongoing response as the work of God transforms the baptised as they grow in grace. If the emphasis is on justification, the issue remains as to how that work of God is internalised such that it becomes participation at some later date: perhaps at either the 'new birth' or Confirmation. This would become something in addition to, rather than a part of, baptism and viewing baptism as a one-off event which carries no lasting significance in itself.

The one exception is in 'the Reaffirmation of Baptism' in the lesser used liturgy for an Easter Vigil which comes close to the language of dying and rising in Christ. Drawing on Romans 6:4 it begins:

> Sisters and brothers in Christ,
> Through the paschal mystery
> We have been buried with Christ in Baptism,
> So that we may rise with him to a new life.[288]

However, this implies a different understanding of baptism to the one being reaffirmed. Something similar occurs with the Confirmation liturgy where 'The Declaration' reminds the confirmees that in baptism 'we become God's people, the Church. In Confirmation we are strengthened by the Holy Spirit that we may remain **in Christ** for ever…'[289] The prayer which follows includes the line: 'may all who are baptized **into Christ**…' with a similar wording in the request for confirmation 'at your baptism **into Christ**…'[290] The baptism liturgies do not

[287] John Wesley 'The Great Privilege of those that are Born of God' in Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater, *John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 184-191, 184.
[288] *MWB*, 279. Note the absence of talk of 'having died' with Christ.
[289] *MWB*, 97-98. Emphasis added.
[290] *MWB*, 98. Emphasis added.

use this phrase about being 'baptized into Christ.' Instead, their identity is connected to the church as those who are planted 'into the Church of Christ';[291] 'born to new life in the family of your Church';[292] received 'into the Church';[293] encouraged to 'learn the way of Christ';[294] and nurtured 'in the Christian faith.'[295] There is a lack of consistency, which is significant for understanding Wesley in relation to baptism as well as his wider theology to which I now turn.

7.3 John Wesley and Baptism

One of the difficulties in understanding Wesley's view on baptism is that he seems to hold different views at different times. Maddox suggests that Wesley's understanding of baptism is 'complex and controversial'[296] and Brewer that Wesley left behind 'a great deal of confusion' and inconsistency for Methodism due to his attempt to hold together the Anglican sacramental doctrine of infant baptism and the evangelical doctrine of responsive adult baptism,[297] and 'the paucity of literature he left behind.'[298] I believe it is more likely that Wesley was treading a careful line, trying to hold together two traditions: the Anglican in which he was nurtured and belonged to; and the evangelical which he discovered through the Moravians and following his heart-warming experience. What is typical of Wesley's approach to theology generally, Brewer suggests of his theology of baptism in particular, the result of which is theology that is both 'intriguing and confusing, unique and dialectical.'[299] Other examples of this creative tension include between creation and new creation; the inward and outward aspects of a sacrament; the grace and freedom of God; human responsibility and personal holiness of life.[300] This, Felton suggests, results not in 'a conflict of elements, but in a creative synthesis.'[301] Because of this, Wesley's approach 'cannot be

[291] *MWB,* 77.
[292] *MWB,* 70.
[293] *MWB,* 81.
[294] *MWB,* 94.
[295] *MWB,* 95.
[296] Randy Maddox, 'John Wesley and Eastern Orthodoxy', *The Asbury Theological Journal* (Vol. 45, No. 2, 1990), 29-53, 41.
[297] Brian C. Brewer, 'Evangelical Anglicanism', *Evangelical Quarterly* (Vol, LXXXIII, No. 2, April 2011), 107-132, 129. See also Sarah Heaner Lancaster, 'Baptism and Justification: A Methodist Understanding', *Ecclesiology* 4 (2008) 289-307, 289.
[298] Brewer, 131.
[299] Brewer, 109.
[300] Gayle Carlton Felton, *This Gift of Water* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 48.
[301] *Ibid,* 48.

systematized or made wholly consistent in the interests of order and neatness',[302] but his dialectical approach shows that these are not opposing forces but part of a greater whole.

In order to understand Wesley's theology of baptism it is necessary to see it not just dialectically between his Anglicanism and evangelical experience, but within the wider perspective of his dialectical understanding of salvation as his sacramental theology is rooted in his soteriology,[303] his holding together the 'juridical concerns central to the Western Christian traditions within a larger therapeutic emphasis like that characteristic of Eastern Orthodoxy':[304] i.e., justification and sanctification. Bruns argues that Wesley understood infant baptism as the means of regeneration,[305] while Borgen points out that regeneration and new birth are used synonymously by Wesley and mark the beginning of the process of sanctification, but suggests that regeneration and New Birth 'should never be made to include justification.'[306] Gorman puts a different emphasis on the nature of salvation and justification when he suggests that for Paul 'there is *one* soteriological model: justification is by crucifixion, specifically co-crucifixion, understood as participation in Christ's act of covenant fulfilment.'[307] I do not believe this contradicts Wesley's view as both Wesley and Gorman, in their own ways, emphasise the participatory, or experiential, nature of salvation and its ongoing impact; whereas the Methodist liturgy emphasises justification at the expense of participation. Therefore, the nature of salvation is not just something done 'for' us, it is also the work of God 'in' us, as we participate with and in God.

Wesley sees baptism as both event and process,[308] and as covering 'the whole of the Christian life: justification, regeneration and sanctification.'[309] Borgen also suggests that for Wesley: 'Baptism is the "gate" into the entering seal of the covenant' involving 'a union with Christ' as well as 'becoming a member of the church as an institution',[310] another tension to

[302] John R. Parris, *John Wesley's Doctrine of the Sacraments* (London: Epworth Press, 1963), 60.
[303] Brewer, 129.
[304] Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 142.
[305] Bruns, in Powers, chapter 2.
[306] Ole E. Borgen, *John Wesley on the Sacraments* (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury Press, 1972), 148.
[307] Gorman, *Inhabiting*, 43.
[308] John Chongnahm Cho, 'John Wesley's View on Baptism', *Wesleyan Theological Journal* (Vol. 7, Spring 1972), 60-73,, 66; see also Ole E. Borgen 'No end without the means', *The Asbury theological journal* (Vol. 46, no.1, Spring 1991), 63-85, 65.
[309] Cho, 66.
[310] Borgen, 'No end without the means', *75.*

be held together. What appears to hold this dialectic approach to baptism together is Wesley's comment in the middle of his treatise *On Baptism* that:

> *Baptism doth now save us* if we live answerable thereto – if we repent, believe and obey the gospel – supposing this as it admits us into the Church here, so into glory hereafter.[311]

This, put alongside Wesley's *Notes* on the key baptismal passages in the New Testament, begins to give a fuller picture and reveal the importance Wesley places on the 'inner witness of the Holy Spirit' and the 'fruits of the Spirit' rather than 'finding assurance in the objective sign' of baptism.[312] Parris argues that Wesley's treatment of Baptism was due to his 'alarm at the complacency of the Anglicans who relied too much on the act of Baptism, usually performed in infancy, as a guarantee of their status in the sight of God' leading him to put the stress largely 'on the need for the appropriation of its benefits'.[313] Similarly, Holland suggests that Wesley's softening of his view on baptismal regeneration in the *Sunday Service* for the use of Methodists in America was due to Wesley coming to see that 'the unconverted trusted in it too completely' and therefore did not see the need for a 'second re-birth as adults.'[314]

If Wesley's approach is taken apart with each part examined individually, it will appear confusing and conflicting, and runs the risk of seeing baptism as an event in one moment of time with the issue of regeneration becoming a barrier that is hard to navigate round, which is perhaps why this became a big concern for nineteenth century Methodists, or leading to conflict between adult and infant baptism. It is only in examining baptism within the wider context of Wesley's theology, in particular his perspective on salvation, rather than focussing solely on his limited writings on baptism that his baptismal theology begins to make sense, or at least the tensions can be seen for what they are. While the nature of baptism remains constant, there cannot easily be a one-size-fits-all approach to faith or baptism. A person's experience of Christ, and therefore their ongoing relationship with Christ, is the key to unlock

[311] John Wesley *On Baptism,* in Albert Outler (ed.), *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 317-332, 323.
[312] Borgen, *John Wesley on the Sacraments,* 156.
[313] Parris, 98.
[314] Bernard G. Holland, *Baptism in Early Methodism* (London: Epworth Press, 1970), 135.

this and make sense of it. It becomes an issue if there is no experience of Christ or relationship with Christ.

It seems that the Methodist liturgy has resolved Wesley's dialectical tension by omitting participation in the death and resurrection of Christ, and focussing on justification and initiation into the church. This is a reminder that baptism should not be separated from other aspects of theology, in unpacking what it means for the baptised to live as one who participates "in Christ." Perhaps the Church would do well to recognise that baptism could be the event in the life of the church and faith which holds all things together and shapes everything, reminding the church of its identity and purpose. As Brewer suggests:

> How one sees the place, proper time, mode, importance and meaning of baptism will at least indirectly influence the rest of one's theology. A tradition's soteriology, concepts of providence and predestination, and ecclesiology can all be affected by a particular stance on baptism.[315]

7.4 Baptism and Faith

Consistent with Wesley, Greggs makes clear, in the context of the New Testament language of being "in Christ", that 'it is as we share and participate in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ – as we are "in Christ" – that we as human beings share in salvation and the benefits of Christ, receiving subjectively the objective justification and sanctification of Christ for all humanity.'[316] He suggests that understanding 'salvation as taking place *in* Christ has profound implications for accounts of salvation, the church, and Christian life.'[317] Thus baptism becomes not just about a response of faith in the act of baptism itself, but has implications for the life of faith. This implies that it is more than sharing in the death and resurrection of Christ in one moment in time, but is also about the whole of life and living in Christ. Therefore, baptism has to be more than a response to justification if it is to be transformative in every sense. Dixon suggests that the teaching:

[315] Brewer, 108.
[316] Greggs, *Dogmatic Ecclesiology,* 84.
[317] *Ibid,* 84.

> which asserts that a man is forgiven and received into God's family by means of a response of faith to God's grace, is so important in Pauline thought that some commentators have been inclined to play down Paul's teaching about baptism as a means of incorporation into Christ and as participation in Christ's death and resurrection.'[318]

This may go some way to explain the neglect of Romans 6 in the baptismal liturgies and the emphasis on the need of faith before baptism, either of the baptised or their parents, in response to justification. *Christian Initiation* suggests that most problems regarding baptism involve:

> the difficulty of keeping in balance the divine re-creative act of grace and the human response; overemphasis on the first can produce a mechanical or magical view, overemphasis on the second can produce too moralistic and individual an emphasis.[319]

Gorman draws attention to the New Testament passages that have traditionally supported the emphasis of the human response of faith,[320] suggesting that to say someone can be justified through 'faith in Jesus Christ' can also be translated as being justified 'through the faith [or faithfulness] of Jesus Christ'.[321] According to Hooker, the former translation has dominated protestant exegesis for the last four centuries, dominated by Luther's understanding[322] such that the alternative is only a footnote in some translations of the New Testament.

The implications of Gorman's argument are that 'Christ's obedient death is also his act of faith, and that believers' faith is a sharing in the faith of Christ that was expressed on the cross. Faith, in other words, is cruciform from start to finish'[323] and is therefore also participatory from start to finish. Gorman notes Dunn's objection to this alternative translation because of the 'ambiguity of the term "faith of Christ" and what it means.'[324] This ambiguity is similar to Wesley's dialectical approach: if both interpretations are possible, it could be that the original wording was deliberately chosen to hold two emphases

[318] Dixon, 26.
[319] *Initiation*, 73.
[320] Particularly: Galatians 2:6, 2:20, 3:22; Romans 3: 22,26; Philippians 3:9.
[321] Gorman, *Cruciformity,* 110-113.
[322] Morna D. Hooker, 'Another Look at Pistis Christou', *Scottish Journal of Theology,* 69(1), (2016), 46-62, 50.
[323] Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 121.
[324] *Ibid,* 119f. Gorman quotes James D. G. Dunn "Once More, PISTIS CHRISTOU" in E. Elizabeth Johnson and David B. Hays, eds., *Pauline Theology*, vol. 4: *Looking Back, Pressing On* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 16-81.

together which could not be otherwise held together without preventing one becoming more dominant than the other. Hooker suggests thinking of it:

> not as a polarized expression, which suggests antithesis, but as a *concentric* expression, which begins, always, from the faith of Christ himself, but which includes, necessarily, the answering faith of believers, who claim that faith as their own.[325]

Concluding, in her revised treatment of the subject, that it could mean both.[326]

Therefore the faith of the baptised can be understood as being expressed through sharing in the faithfulness of Christ in baptism, such that what follows baptism is of as much importance as that which precedes it; and as the visible/tangible/sacramental way in which a person enters into the faithfulness of Christ. This would sit well alongside Romans 6 and other such passages noted regarding participation in the death and resurrection of Christ; as well as emphasising a baptised life as being a shared identity and ministry with Christ.

Helping to grasp these implications, Gorman suggests that 'the cross is not only the definitive revelation of Christ and of God, but also the definitive revelation of what humans and the church are to be.'[327] The question is *how* then do individuals/the church enter into the experience of the cross and all that it represents, if not symbolically by baptism? Gorman continues that, for Paul, justification and baptism are two sides of the same coin: the coin of initial participation or conversion[328] with 'Paul's understanding of life in Christ, from beginning to end' being 'an experience of death and resurrection.'[329] A superficial reading of this seems to be pointing to a form of baptismal regeneration, however Gorman distinguishes between 'the internal confession of faith' and 'the external confirmation of that faith in baptism' but the reality is the same: 'co-crucifixion and co-resurrection *with* Christ that means transfer *into* Christ and thus new life *in* him, which means also in his body, the *ekklēsia*.'[330] He suggests this is why Paul can say '"I have been crucified with the

[325] Morna D. Hooker, *From Adam to Christ* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 184.
[326] Hooker, 'Another look at Pistis Christou', 62.
[327] Gorman, *Participating,* 10.
[328] *Ibid,* 19.
[329] *Ibid,* 20.
[330] *Ibid, 19.*

Messiah" (Gal. 2:19) using the perfect tense; it is a reality with an initial starting point that continues into the present.'[331] Such that:

> Christ's story is also the church's story; the church is the community of those who are baptized - immersed - into the story of Jesus. Or to be more precise, the church is the community of those who are immersed into Jesus, who is definitively narrated in that story of death and resurrection.
>
> This immersion, though it begins in faith/baptism, does not end there. It is enacted daily, and it is remembered regularly in the celebration of the Lord's supper.[332]

The implication is that those who are baptised are immersed into the *whole* story of Jesus. Sharing in Jesus' death and resurrection makes it possible, but it is not the goal of the baptised's life: just the beginning of it as the baptised move towards its fulfilment into the future. Gorman is not speaking here of imitation or a simple retelling or remembrance of the story of Christ in an objective sense, but rather if the community is 'in Christ' it 'experiences the present activity of Father, Son and Spirit', which is transformative.[333] It is not about imitating Christ, but inhabiting Christ such that 'the Spirit of God is actively reshaping the Christian into the likeness of Christ'[334] as Gorman echoes elsewhere:

> *Paul conceives of identification with and participation in the death of Jesus as the believer's fundamental experience of Christ* […] For Paul, this intimate identification with Christ symbolised in baptism is not merely a one-time event but an experience of *ongoing* death, of *ongoing* crucifixion.[335]

Hooker suggests that to only translate 'Pistis Christou' as 'faith in Christ', diminishes 'the close relationship of the Christian to Christ: the believing response of the Christian to the gospel involves not only faith in the resurrection, and confession of Christ's lordship, but conformity to the death and resurrection of Christ, and obedience to his rule.'[336] This brings, along with Gorman, dimensions to baptism that are missing in the present liturgical practice

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[331] Gorman, *Participating,* 19.
[332] *ibid,* 20.
[333] Gorman, *Inhabiting, 32.*
[334] Douglas A. Campbell, *The Quest for Paul's Gospel: A Suggested Strategy* (London/New York: Clark, 2005), 93, Quoted in Gorman, *Inhabiting, 71.*
[335] Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 32.
[336] Hooker, *From Adam to Christ,* 167.

of the Methodist Church, which impacts not just the identity of the individuals baptised, but also the identity of the church:

> The *ekklēsia*, then, is not for Paul an optional supplement to a private spirituality of dying and rising with Christ. Rather, the *ekklēsia* is what God is up to in the world: re-creating a people whose corporate life tells the world what the death and resurrection of the Messiah is all about. This people, the "Church," lives the story, embodies the story, tells the story. It is the living exegesis of God's master story of faith, love, power, and hope.[337]

The foundation of the church is the same as the foundation of the way of life of the disciple, that of dying and rising with Christ as the community of the baptized. However, the question for the church is: what does this mean for the church 'to be a *living* exegesis of the gospel of the crucified and resurrected Lord'?[338] Watkins calls for something similar when she speaks of 'Living Baptism': 'We don't so much need better management, better PR, better marketing in the Christian community, so much as we need faithful and vibrant living of the mystery of baptism'[339] which sees baptism as participating in:

> that hidden mystery of God which is, nonetheless, glimpsed, and lived out in our own time and space in the person of Jesus […] By making us participate *in Jesus,* as risen and crucified, our baptism draws us, here and now, into that future which is God's own, into his own ends and purposes, 'which he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time.' (Eph. 1:9-10)[340]

'Living exegesis', 'living baptism', or 'baptismal spirituality'[341] could be regarded as relating to the process of sanctification and therefore separate from justification and baptism. But this would be to separate what should be held together and loses the dialectic nature of baptism. Gorman suggests that 'Paul sees baptism, justification, and even sanctification as theologically coterminous';[342] while Hooker argues that one of the implications of this alternative translation is 'a greater unity between justification and sanctification than has often been supposed'[343] both of which are similar to Wesley's approach.. Therefore, it

[337] Gorman, *Cruciformity,* 367.
[338] Gorman, *Participating,* 25.
[339] Clare Watkins, *Living Baptism* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2006), 14.
[340] Watkins, 37.
[341] Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation,* Revised and Expanded Edition (Collegeville Minnesota: Pueblo, 2007), 451. Meadows, *Remembering Our Baptism,* also sees baptism as a way of life.
[342] Gorman, *Inhabiting,* 79.
[343] Hooker, *From Adam to Christ,* 185.

enables a way of speaking about the nature of baptism that is more satisfactory and wholistic as it holds together baptism as both an event and a life-long process which shapes the nature of discipleship.

7.5 Baptism as Initiation into the Church

The primary image of baptism given in the *MWB*, is that of initiation into the church: the preamble to the baptismal liturgies states that 'Baptism marks entry into the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, of which the Methodist Church is part', is 'commanded by Christ as the divinely appointed means of initiation into the Christian community'[344] and marks 'a new relationship with the Church of Christ. It is a rite of initiation, the ritual of a journey of faith.'[345] It is not clear what the basis is for the claim that baptism is the 'divinely appointed means of initiation into the Christian community' as no scriptural warrant for this is given. From the liturgy itself, if the use of Matthew 28:18-20 is taken as the basis for this claim, 'go and make disciples' is clearly not the same as 'initiate into the Christian community.'

This is confirmed in the Conference Statement on Ecclesiology (*CLP*), written around the same time as *MWB,* which has very little to say about baptism other than stating: firstly, Paul's understanding of baptism as a dying with Christ (Romans 6.1-11) in connection with the suffering of the church;[346] secondly, that Methodists 'recognize the centrality of the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist' in the context of the essential characteristics of the church;[347] thirdly, that baptism is a sign of being incorporated into Christ and his people in the context of 'The Relationship of the Individual to the Church Community in Methodism';[348] and a short section on infant baptism discussing the 'primacy of grace' and 'the response of faith.'[349] Within the context of infant baptism, the report says, 'This practice recognizes that all that baptism signifies need not be present in the ritual moment. It is, after all, a rite of initiation.'[350] This may be the justification for omitting reference to

[344] *MWB,* 60.
[345] *MWB,* 61.
[346] *CLP*, 2.3.12.
[347] *CLP,* 2.4.8; quoting the response of the Methodist Church of Great Britain and Ireland to *BEM* (*Churches Respond to BEM,* WCC 1986, Volume. II, 215). Also, 3.1.11.
[348] *CLP,* 4.4.3.
[349] *CLP,* 4.4.3 – 4.4.4.
[350] *CLP,* 4.4.4.

participation in the death and resurrection of Christ, but I would argue that this significantly changes the meaning of the ritual, and minimalises its significance as dying and rising with Christ gives baptism its primary and distinctive meaning. The final reference to baptism in *CLP* is the recognition that all are priestly by virtue of their baptism.[351]

This emphasis follows in other Methodist reports on baptism post-1932. The 1936 *Memorandum* begins by stating that 'Baptism was the Sacrament by which believers were received into the Christian Community', both in the New Testament and continuing to 'this day.'[352] And was also the emphasis in the 1952 *Statement* which suggests that both the order for those of 'Riper Years' and that for 'Infants', are 'services of reception into the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.'[353] However, what follows in the section 'The New Testament Doctrine of Baptism and its Vital Connexion with Justifying Faith' is noteworthy. It begins by saying that 'From the Day of Pentecost onwards Baptism was the symbol of entry into the Church of Christ'[354] referencing Acts 2:38 which is the other reading in the current baptism liturgy. This verse relates baptism to repentance, the forgiveness of sins and reception of the Holy Spirit with no mention of entry into the Church or any other form of Christian community. Significantly the *Statement* then suggests that Jesus' own Baptism 'was the example of Christian Baptism' as it 'became to Him the symbol of His suffering and death, and of His triumph over death'[355] and goes on to link this with Romans 6:3-7 and Galatians 3:26-27:

> With the baptism, death and resurrection of Jesus in mind, St Paul sets forth Christian Baptism, which is also by water and the Spirit, as signifying our dying to sin and our rising again to the life of righteousness through communion with Christ. At the same time he closely connects it with the sonship of God which is ours because we are in Christ. In the same way St. John relates it to the birth from above through which we become sons of God by the activity of the Holy Spirit. Baptism is an active expression of the Gospel of Grace. By our incorporation into Christ we become members of His Body, which is the Church, and inherit the powers of the New Age which He inaugurated; and Baptism is the sign of that incorporation.[356]

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[351] *CLP*, 4.5.6.
[352] *Memorandum*, 31.
[353] *Statement,* 33.
[354] *Statement,* 34.
[355] *Statement,* 34.
[356] *Statement,* 35. Referencing 1 Corinthians 12-13 in relation to Baptism as the sign of that incorporation.

It also stresses that it is 'God's action which is primary.' And that 'what He accomplished once for all in the death and resurrection of Christ is more and more realised in the life of those who increasingly make the divine gift their own.'[357]

Towards the end of the following section headed 'Infant Baptism and the Grace of God' it states that 'Baptism proclaims the death and burial of the old self with Christ, and our rising again with Him to a new life in which we ever look forward to His final manifestation in glory. This promise is not only for those who are of riper years. It is also for little children'[358] - thus making no distinction between infant and adult baptism. This is not the case in the baptismal liturgies of that time. The readings set in 'The Order of service for the Baptism of Such as Are of Riper Years' in the 1936 liturgy include Romans 6:2,4,5;[359] however, this reading is omitted in the liturgy for the 'Baptism of infants.' Likewise, the 1975 liturgy for 'The Baptism of those who are able to answer for themselves' includes Romans 6:3-11[360] but it is not in the liturgy for 'The Baptism of Infants.'[361] The choice of readings therefore implies that the nature of baptism was not seen as the same in both liturgies. The reading from Romans is omitted altogether in all the 1999 liturgies, but at least the readings are the same in all liturgies: Matthew 28:18-20 and Acts 2:38-39.[362]

Initiation also regards baptism as 'the sacrament of initiation into the life of Christ and his people' and suggests that 'membership means incorporation into Christ.'[363] However, it is not clear how these differ or what this means theologically. It calls for 'a much closer correspondence between the meanings affirmed and the elements and actions by which they are expressed'[364] in relation to the symbolism of the water. And yet it concludes that:

[357] *Statement,* 35.
[358] *Statement,* 36.
[359] *BoO*, 41.
[360] *MSB*, A30. And also includes: Ezekiel 36:25-28 ; John 3:1-7. *MSB* also hints at dying and rising with Christ it in an initial prayer and pre-amble to the baptism, but it is not clear whether sharing in Christ's death and resurrection is in the context of baptism or at some future point. *MSB,* A30, A33.
[361] The given readings are Mark 1:9-11; Mark 10:13-16; Matthew 28:18-20.
[362] *MWB*, 62-113.
[363] *Initiation,* 65.
[364] *Initiation*, 89.

> at the moment of baptism, whenever we receive it, we are all infants in Christ, and the baptismal life means growth until we come personally and in the fellowship of believers to the measure of the stature of his fullness. Nor should the other drastic image of the New Testament be forgotten that we are baptised into Christ's **death**; through that alone does our new birth come. And our baptism, which does not celebrate our human life but our regeneration, is into the whole Christ, incarnate, ministering, crucified, risen, ascended and to come. Into what then are we initiated in baptism? Into Christ and the new life which he came to bring, which is expressed by membership of his Body, sometimes in homely, inconspicuous ways, of caring and friendship, 'nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and of love', often, by work for a better social order and a refusal to acquiesce in any compromise with evil or admission that it will prevail. The baptised carry on Christ's victory, witness in life and death to the triumph of his Cross, know him in the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings, and work and pray for the acknowledgement of his rule in all the earth. But the baptismal life extends beyond time and this world together.[365]

This is the richest statement on a Methodist theology of baptism that I have found, but it is not fully articulated at all in any of the post-1932 liturgies, and not at all in the current ones as we have seen above, and neither is the theology of participation in the death and resurrection of Christ developed. Of particular significance in this statement is firstly, the reference to regeneration: Methodism has had a difficult relationship with this in terms of understanding Wesley's teaching on it, and in the nineteenth-century it was divided by arguments over it[366] such that 'early twentieth-century Methodism, in all its major forms, wrote little about [baptism] at all.'[367] Though it needs to be noted that it does not talk about 'baptismal regeneration' but rather celebrates 'our regeneration.' Secondly: baptism is into the fullness of Christ, reflecting some of what Cushman noted above, and therefore enables the beginning of the nurture and growth of the baptised into that same fullness. Thirdly: it sees baptism as transformative, which LaBoy initially questioned and set out to explore,[368] and was 'one of Wesley's constant themes and interests'.[369] Wainwright explains that 'the most characteristic Christian rituals are […] predominantly transformative in character,

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[365] *Initiation,* 97.
[366] Martyn D. Atkins, *The liturgies and theology of Baptism, and their relationship with the issues of membership and Christian initiation, in the Methodist Church denominations in the British Isles in the period 1875-1975,* A thesis submitted to the University of Manchester for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Theology, 1990, 2.
[367] *Ibid*, 147.
[368] LaBoy, xiii.
[369] Kenneth J. Collins, *The Scripture Way of Salvation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 129.

actions that signify divine grace coming to begin and continue the shaping of active recipients into the people God is calling them to become.'[370] And fourthly: a vision for baptism is presented that has no end as it extends 'beyond time and this world altogether', therefore it is more than "just" initiation which finishes at the point of confirmation. It seeks a 'Wesleyan approach' to baptism which shows 'how baptism relates positively to our living the new life in Christ' and 'does not stand alone but is part of a larger process of Christian initiation which includes participation in a community of discipline and love.'[371]

Therefore, while dying and rising with Christ is currently absent in the liturgies, it has never been totally absent in Methodist theology of baptism. This implies that the Methodist Church is at best inconsistent over baptism, at worst confused, or has subtly changed its theology over time and is no longer clear. It seems to have tried to remove the tensions rather than live with them, and explains why *CLP* can say that 'all that baptism signifies need not be present in the ritual moment'. To focus on baptism as entry into the church is to focus on the function of baptism, what it 'does', and therefore has little to say about identity.

7.6 Baptism and Ecclesiology

Returning to the issue of the order of the images of baptism in *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry;* this can be helped by considering whether baptismal theology is derivative of ecclesiology or vice versa. Greggs addresses the question of derivation by placing ecclesiology within a dogmatic topography. He argues that ecclesiology is derivative of economic pneumatology, the doctrine of the works of the Holy Spirit, as the church is 'created by an act of the event of God, more particularly of God the Holy Spirit' and must therefore attend to 'categories of being and the order of being.'[372] In this he recognises that ecclesiology is:

[370] Geoffrey Wainwright, *Doxology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 121.
[371] Henry H. III Knight, 'The Significance of Baptism for the Christian Life: Wesley's Pattern of Christian Initiation,' *Worship* (Vol. 63, March 1989), 133-142, 142.
[372] Greggs, *Dogmatic Ecclesiology,* xxxi.

> a doctrine which exists formally a long way downstream from more foundational areas of dogmatic enquiry. But unless the highly derivative nature of ecclesiology is understood, accounts of the church will be offered which do not recognise that the community of God is fundamentally different from all other communities in the world, and that the church's existence depends on the sovereignty of God and God's unnecessary and gracious acts within the world in creating community.[373]

So where does baptismal theology fit in relation to both pneumatology and ecclesiology: is it also derivative of dogmatic pneumatology or of ecclesiology? As the Methodist baptismal liturgies declare at the outset that 'Baptism is a gift of God'[374] and not a gift of the Church, the implication is that baptism must be derivative of an act of God, rather than an act of the Church. Greggs makes clear that it is by the Spirit that the believer 'actively participates in the body of Christ, which becomes the believer's primary identity' sharing in the 'same Spirit who rested fully on Christ.'[375] He goes on to define this further as not just participation in the body of Christ but as 'a symbol of the baptism of the Holy Spirit, who enables us to participate in Christ's death and resurrection and to seek to live in love of and obedience to the Father, who loves creation, and to live in Christ by the Holy Spirit's act for the creation, which is beloved of the Father.'[376] What the Church 'is' should precede what the Church 'does', hence why the order of being precedes the order of knowing, with the 'better response', says Greggs, being to ask: 'what it is that *God* intends in creating a people in the world who are called together to live in the life of the church. This question is an attempt to understand what the Church is and why it is important and what its purpose is – questions necessary before we ask questions of form.'[377]

CLP was adopted following recognition of the 'very different situation of the Church in the 1990s',[378] the previous Statement having been adopted in 1937, which includes a changed, and changing, cultural context.[379] The difficulty with *CLP*, in light of Greggs' topography, is that there is no connection between the teaching of the Church on the nature of the church

[373] Greggs, *Dogmatic Ecclesiology,* xxxi.
[374] E.G. *MWB,* 63. All the liturgies for both 'those able to answer' and young children begin the same way. This was absent in both the previous *BoO* and *MSB.*
[375] Greggs, *Dogmatic Ecclesiology,* 92.
[376] *Ibid,* 179.
[377] *ibid,* xxix.
[378] *CLP,* 1.1.1.
[379] *CLP,* 1.2.1 – 1.2.5.

and the teaching of the Church regarding baptism. As a result, both are the poorer for it. *CLP* has a weak pneumatology seeing the Church as primarily 'Christ-centred'[380] with the Spirit enabling the Church 'to share in God's mission'[381] and 'deriving its very existence and purpose from God's reign and mission, exemplified and established by Jesus.'[382] Thus reducing the role of the Holy Spirit in baptism to being at work in the prevenient grace of God, acknowledged in the prayer over the water:

> Pour out your Holy Spirit
> that those baptized in this water
> may die to sin,
> be raised with Christ,
> and be born to new life in the family of your Church.
> We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**[383]

Prayer for the receiving of the Holy Spirit is relegated to the service of Confirmation.

In maintaining the significance of baptism as 'a rite of initiation',[384] *CLP* implies that baptism is derivative of ecclesiology and that baptism is, along with participation in the Lord's Supper, a sign of 'the individual's response to God of belief in Christ for salvation' which 'means being incorporated in Christ and his people.'[385] *CLP* also focuses more on the function of the church than the nature of its being, therefore, it is not adequately able to help the church to understand its identity as the community of the baptised, or to join in the discussion which Greggs calls for (above 8.1) in terms of 'what the church actually is' as it 'in certain quarters faces death.'[386]

Colyer claims that John and Charles Wesley 'reclaimed the doctrine of the Trinity and the Trinitarian dimension of vital Christian faith and practice'[387] in a time of heated debate and controversy over the nature of the Trinity. This emphasis, suggests Colyer, gave the Wesleys their 'participatory, evangelical, doxological, economic approach to the Trinity'[388] but it could also be argued that it gave them such an approach towards their whole ministry. John

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[380] *CLP,* 2.1.7.
[381] *CLP,* 2.1.7.
[382] *CLP,* 2.1.8.
[383] *MWB,* 66.
[384] *CLP,* 4.4.4.
[385] *CLP,* 4.4.3.
[386] Greggs, *Dogmatic Ecclesiology,* xxiv.
[387] Elmer M. Colyer, *The Trinitarian Dimension of John Wesley's Theology* (Nashville: New Room Books, 2019), 2.
[388] Colyer, 2.

Wesley emphasises the work of the Spirit in baptism and the church in his treatise '*On Baptism',* particularly in terms of the 'benefits' of baptism: stating that it is by the one Spirit that all are baptized into one body[389] 'from which spiritual, vital union with him proceeds the influence of his grace on those that are baptized.'[390] Colyer remarks that here Wesley made clear 'not only that the participatory Trinitarian character of the divine activity is the real heart of baptism but also that this activity entails union and communion with Christ through the Holy Spirit so that we are united to Christ and one another, and thereby constitutes the church.'[391] Colyer perhaps reads too much into Wesley here, but the point re communion with Christ being through the Holy Spirit is no less made.

If the identity of the church is essentially the community of those who are baptised into Christ, it would follow that ecclesiology is derivative of baptism. If baptism is 'just' seen as initiation into the church and has no real significance beyond this, then baptism would be derivative of ecclesiology which would explain why the Church has given little attention either to the theology of baptism or teaching the significance of baptism. Atkins says of the church in the early twentieth century that 'it cannot be said that baptism was important to Methodism' for although it 'declared to be admission to the visible Church, ensuing pastoral care, Christian teaching, later faith experiences, and admission into Methodist membership were not, for most Methodists, positively connected or related to baptism in any meaningful way.'[392] Atkins here echoes Holland's concluding comments when he speaks of a 'baptismal impotence'[393] in the church due to its neglect, pointing out that while the meaning of baptism may have been explained to parents of those bringing their children for baptism and to the congregation who receive them, it is the baptised themselves who have largely 'been left uninstructed about the wider implications' for themselves of their own baptism.[394] Both suggest that part of the problem is down to either Wesley's 'ambiguous doctrine[395] or his 'insistence that everyone must be converted.'[396] But this is not an adequate conclusion. If Wesley is not clear on everything, he is at least clear on the need for nurture, growth and

[389] 1 Corinthians 12:13.
[390] Wesley, 'On Baptism' in Outler, *John Wesley,* 158.
[391] Colyer*,* 255.
[392] Atkins, *The liturgies and theology of Baptism,* 2.
[393] Holland, 148.
[394] Holland, 159.
[395] Atkins, *The liturgies and theology of Baptism,* 2.
[396] Holland, 149.

the importance of bearing fruit. Ramsden, speaking of the church at the beginning of the twenty-first century suggests that 'people are not engaged by the church's approach to baptism in a way that encourages them to treasure their own baptism and to see it as something with spiritual value in their own lives',[397] but rather as a means to an end in terms of belonging to the church.

7.7 A Community of Sacrament?

In contrast to *CLP,* the previous statement on ecclesiology, *The Nature of the Christian Church,* does make the connection between ecclesiology and the two sacraments, recognising that 'If the Church is the body of Christ, it will bear the marks of the dying of Jesus that the life of Jesus may be manifested in that Body' and that:

> it is this intimate communion between Christ and His people that gives fullness of meaning to the two sacraments. Baptism is for St Paul a symbol that believers have entered into communion with Christ in His death and resurrection. The Lord's Supper is a symbol of the continuance and renewal of this communion, and a proclamation of the Lord's death 'until He come.'[398]

This maintains Davies' understanding of the sacraments seen at the beginning of this chapter.

This also goes some way to help understand what Greggs means when he speaks of the church as '*a community of sacrament* and not a community which possesses sacraments'[399] in that, as he argues, they should be understood 'in relation to the church's activity of seeking to be a community for God and for others, as it seeks to be led by an event of the act of the Holy Spirit of God simultaneously to the world.'[400] Taking seriously the significance of this for the identity of the church, enables the church to then consider its witness in the particular context it finds itself. Unfortunately, *The Nature of the Christian Church* does not specifically unpack this or the nature of the sacraments any further, and is confused by later statements on the Church and baptism in *CLP* and *MWB.* Being a 'community of sacrament'

[397] Martin Francis Ramsden, *Heeding the great commission: The significance of Matthew's gospel for Baptismal Theology and practice in a post-Christian age* (Durham theses, Durham University, 2006), 4.
[398] *The Nature of the Christian Church According to the teaching of the Methodists,* Statement Approved by the Methodist Conference Bradford July 1937 (London: Methodist Publishing House, 1937), 17.
[399] Greggs, *Dogmatic Ecclesiology,* 149.
[400] *Ibid,* 149.

rather than possessing the sacraments is a statement of identity: who the Church *is* before what the Church *has* (possesses) and what the Church *does* with what it has.

Johnson reminds that 'the Eucharist itself is both the culmination and *repeatable* portion of the rites of Christian initiation' therefore its focus is not 'the Eucharistic *culmination* of initiation but the very *beginnings* of that initiation in the sacrament of baptism' with baptism being 'the liturgical and sacramental center out of which we live.'[401] This is in contrast to *CLP* which states that 'The Eucharist, in particular, focusses and expresses both the ongoing and the future life of the Church.'[402]

While the 1987 report, *Christian Initiation,* suggested that church membership is 'the living of the baptismal life through its supreme expression in the eucharist,'[403] the 2003 Report *His Presence Makes the Feast* only makes reference to baptism in relation to admittance to Communion,[404] and in a reference to 1 Corinthians 12:13 that 'the one Spirit by whom we are all baptised into the one body is the same Spirit who unites us in and with the body of Christ in Holy Communion.'[405] This implies that baptism is just a means to an end, with the focus throughout the report being on the link of Holy Communion to Passover rather than to Baptism. Once again the emphasis of the remembrance is on what Christ has done, justification, rather than participation and the identity of those who are baptised in Christ:

> *Anamnesis* is about renewed contact with the original source of blessing – the God who saves through the Exodus in the Passover and who saves through the death and resurrection of Christ in Holy Communion.[406]

According to Gorman, the church is 'the community of those who are baptised – immersed into the story of Jesus', which is a story of death and resurrection, and goes on to say that 'this immersion, though it begins in faith/baptism, does not end there. It is enacted daily, and it is remembered regularly in the celebration of the Lord's Supper.'[407] Tripp goes further, saying that 'the receiving of the Lord's Supper *is* the renewal of the vows of

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[401] Johnson*,* 451.
[402] *CLP*, 2.4.8.
[403] *Initiation*, 83.
[404] *His Presence Makes the feast*, The Faith and Order Report to the Methodist Conference (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 2003), 76: 33; 81: 34; 112: 45.
[405] *Ibid,* 180: 69.
[406] *His Presence Makes the feast,* 157: 62.
[407] Gorman, *Participating,* 20.

baptism.'[408] The Methodist liturgies for Holy Communion do not make this link: the only reference to baptism is the occasional mention in the Prayer of Thanksgiving to Jesus' baptism[409] or in response to a version of the peace which reminds that '**In the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body.**'[410] It is clear that there is no link between Baptism and Holy Communion in either set of liturgies which raises the question as to how this connection can be better made or nurtured, especially when there is no mention of baptism being 'into Christ's death' in the baptismal liturgies.

Tripp makes the case for the Methodist Covenant to be a renewal of baptism, suggesting that Wesley would have understood that the 'Covenant *was* the one made at Baptism';[411] as Wesley makes a strong connection between baptism and the entering into a covenant with God.[412] However that connection is not visible in the liturgy of the service. Tripp suggests that 'the Covenant Service should never be revised in a vacuum, but in close association with Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharist.'[413]

7.8 Summary

What is emerging is an inconsistency in Methodist statements on the Church, baptism and initiation; and the liturgy. While participation in the death and resurrection of Christ is absent in the current baptismal liturgies, it has not always been totally missing but was only present through inclusion of the Romans 6 reading in some previous liturgies. This gives the impression of it being a neglected emphasis rather than alien to Methodist theology. It also seems that ecclesiology and sacramental theology have become disconnected from each other. Therefore, it could be said that the Methodist Church is 'a community which possesses sacraments' rather than 'a community of sacrament.'

A difficulty of seeing baptism primarily as a rite of 'incorporation into the body of Christ' is that it can be interpreted as an individualistic rite in terms of belonging to the church as an

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[408] David Tripp, *The Renewal of the Covenant in the Methodist Tradition* (London: Epworth Press, 1969), 7. See also R. Matthew Sigler, 'Baptism and Eucharist' in Powers, chapter 13; and Meadows, *Remembering Our Baptism, Chapter 5.*
[409] *MWB,* liturgies for 'Pentecost and Times of Renewal', 180; and 'Ordinary Season (1)', 192.
[410] *MWB,* liturgies for 'Pentecost and Times of Renewal', 177; and 'Ordinary Season (1)', 189.
[411] Tripp*,* 153.
[412] Wesley, 'On Baptism' in Outler, *John Wesley,* 317-332.
[413] Tripp*,* 162.

institution, rather than as a communal act and relating to a mystical body; as Pannenberg suggests:

> Without the eucharist, baptismal piety could degenerate into some individualistic mysticism, but the connection of the eucharistic remembrance with the commemoration of our baptism clarifies that it is only in Christ that we can properly celebrate the eucharist, as it is only in Christ – outside ourselves – that the members of the congregation are united through the eucharistic communion, together with all other Christians of all generations in the one body of Christ.[414]

He speaks of 'identity' coming from being 'in Christ', and from being in relation to others who are also 'in Christ'. Similarly, *BEM* states that 'Through baptism, Christians are brought into union with Christ, with each other and with the church of every time and place.'[415] If this emphasis is not clear either in the Church's theology or liturgy, it is no longer clear what the appropriate relationship is between the members of the Church, or what gives them a clear identity given the starting premise of this chapter that Holy Communion is not a rite of passage.

If the primary focus of baptism is on participation in the death and resurrection of Christ it cannot be individualistic, it is this identity and commitment to Christ which holds the Church together as the community of the baptized. Baptism and not Holy Communion is the primary act of unity for the church, of which the church is reminded in every celebration of Holy Communion, therefore baptismal theology should determine ecclesiology not vice versa.

Returning, in conclusion, to the issue of the images of baptism,[416] Wesley's dialectical approach enables the images of baptism to be understood in relation to and in tension with each other. However, the order is significant regarding what is primary. If 'conversion, pardoning and cleansing' is the primary image it opens up issues of baptismal regeneration which predominated in the baptism debates of the nineteenth-century, and debilitated the debate around baptism in the twentieth century, focussing on what does or does not "happen" in baptism. Maddox suggests that it is possible that in his approach to baptism

[414] Wolfhart Pannenberg, 'Baptism as Remembered 'Ecstatic' Identity', in David Brown and Ann Loades (eds.) *Christ the Sacramental Word* (London: SPCK, 1996), 77-88, 87.
[415] *BEM,* 3.
[416] *BEM,* 2-3.

Wesley 'intentionally refocused attention from the water per se to the *act* of baptism as the means by which grace is conveyed.'[417] It is the Holy Spirit who enables conversion, pardoning and cleansing, or regeneration, not the water of baptism itself as though it possesses some magical quality, through the work of Christ. Therefore, baptism as 'participation in Christ's death and resurrection' along with 'the Gift of the Spirit' should be primary and from which all else follows, including the identity of the baptised and of the church. This focus enables continuity beyond the act of baptism through giving a foundation and shape to discipleship and joining together the whole work of God.

It was noted in the data that this foundation has been neglected in the case study churches and their identity was primarily tied up with the building, as was their faith, mission and worship. Therefore, by pulling at that one strand of church life (in the decision to close) it seems that everything else unravelled. When the building closes the members of the church are transferred to other churches potentially with the same understanding of what it means to be church and where the same will eventually happen again when the churches they move to face similar issues.

[417] Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 222.

Chapter 8: Methodist Theology

When the reasons for and against closure were rehearsed at a church council meeting at Hope Street,[418] God was not mentioned except for one lone voice who said: "God leads you to the place where you are and stays with you." Unfortunately, it was not elaborated on and nothing more was said. This was the exception at all the meetings I attended[419] as well as in the interviews with members of the congregation. The decision-making was rehearsed, and the story told with no reference to God, or their faith, or any sense of what they believed.

In response to the lack of articulated theology, or talk of God, this chapter explores some preliminary questions regarding doing theology in the Methodist tradition. Its purpose is to act as a bridge between the data and the chapters on death/dying and baptism, and the theological framework that will be formed in chapter 9. In this chapter I will explore the distinctive emphases of ways of doing theology in the Methodist tradition which will inform the framework and help enable a 'Methodist' way of decision-making in this context. Here I will focus on two issues: 1) How Methodists 'do' theology; and 2) unpacking what is going on theologically in the decision-making process.7.1 Methodist Approaches to Theology

8.1.1 An Underlying Principle

Historically, all that was needed for a person to join a Methodist society was 'a desire to flee from the wrath to come, to be saved from their sins.'[420] To remain, no further test was needed except that 'they should continue to evidence their desire of salvation.'[421] Wesley describes the nature of these societies as:

> No other than 'a company of men "having the form, and seeking the power of godliness", united in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they may help each other to work out their salvation.'[422]

[418] 17/01/2019.
[419] Not including the opening devotions led by the minister.
[420] John Wesley, 'The Nature, Design and General Rules of the United Societies' (1743) in Rupert E. Davies, (ed.) *The Works of John Wesley, Vol 9: The Methodist Societies, History, Nature, and Design* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988), 68-75, 70.
[421] *Ibid*, 70.
[422] *Ibid,* 69.

Wesley is not suggesting that salvation is earned in any way, but reveals his two-fold understanding of salvation: holding together both justification and sanctification. A year previously, he had stated that a Methodist:

> Is not to be distinguished by laying the *whole stress* of religion on any *single part* of it. If you say, 'Yes he is: for he thinks *we are saved by faith alone.'* I answer, 'You do not understand the terms. By *salvation* he means holiness of heart and life. And this he affirms to spring from true *faith alone.'*[423]

Working out one's salvation meant growing in holiness of heart and life, in continuing what God has begun.

What is important to note is the importance to Wesley and the early Methodist movement of an underlying principle. Maddox argues that such an underlying principle can give 'consistency' particularly for 'those seeking to relate theology more integrally to Christian life and practice'[424] which is pertinent to the current discussion regarding the relationship between theology and decision-making. Such an 'underlying principle' was not evident in the discussions at Hope Street's church council meetings: as noted in chapter 4, each person had their own, but there was no shared principle shared by the church/church council. These individual underlying principles could be understood as implicit or an operant theology, as they contained what could be understood as theological themes: such as, for example, "family" (the example used in 4.1). However it was not clear, and was not articulated, how their understanding of "family" related to their faith or how it differed from an understanding of "family" held by people of other faiths or of no faith.

At Mercy Lane, the decision was not made on the basis of anything resembling a plan or principle other than an inability to reduce the deficit of their income over expenditure. Therefore: what underlying principle would help churches in their decision-making when faced with closure?

Beck asks whether there is 'an organising principle, a connecting thread, behind current British Methodist theology'. His own answer is worth quoting in full:

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[423] John Wesley, 'The Character of a Methodist' (1742) in Davies, *Works of John Wesley*, 30-46, §4: 35.
[424] Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1998), 18.

> If one surveys what is characteristic of Methodist theology it is difficult to get away from the fact that its focus is still, as it was in the eighteenth century and again in the doctrinal clause of the 1932 Deed of Union, on God's gracious work of salvation, experienced as personal and corporate, unlimited in its reach and possibilities. It is the unlimited character of God's grace that drives both the sense of mission and the emphasis on an inclusive church. All have worth, for Christ died for all; all share in ministry, for the Spirit is given to all; all are called to renewal of life, for there is no limit to the possibilities of transforming grace. Salvation is neither simply done for us nor simply achieved by us but is a work of grace eliciting the response that makes transformation possible. The transformation is corporate because we are restored to one another as well as to God. That is not to say that other doctrines (the Trinity, for example) are of no concern. We hold them in common with the wider church, but we are likely to approach them from that salvation perspective.[425]

Here Beck summarizes a broader interpretation of Wesley's 'underlying principle,' but is consistent with Wesley in recognising that what, at least in theory, has remained constant in distinguishing the Methodist movement is the 'salvation perspective.' It is specific while being broad enough to encompass each individual's experience of 'salvation' and response to God's grace, and therefore able to be inclusive in nature. What is missing is a sense of the identity of those who experience, and who are seeking to work out, their salvation; though there is an emphasis on transformation. Wesley addresses this in his *Character of a Methodist*, answering the question 'Who is a Methodist?' by drawing on Scripture and the fulfilment of the promises of God found therein, including the statement:

> For 'he that believeth hath the witness' of this 'in himself'; being now 'the son of God' by FAITH, 'because he is a son, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into his heart, crying out Abba, Father.' And 'the Spirit itself beareth witness with his spirit that he is a child of God.[426]

Perhaps the current underlying principle of the Methodist Church would be regarded as 'Our Calling':

> The calling of the Methodist Church is to respond to the gospel of God's love in Christ and to live out its discipleship in worship and mission.[427]

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[425] Brian Beck, *Methodist Heritage and Identity* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 123.
[426] Wesley, 'The Character of a Methodist', in Davies, *Works of John Wesley,* §6: 36. Note the similarity with Jesus' identity revealed at his baptism.
[427] https://www.methodist.org.uk/about-us/the-methodist-church/our-calling/ [accessed 05/05/2021].

In comparison to either Wesley's description of early Methodism or Beck's summary, it is bland, says very little, and contains nothing distinctive which could hold the church together in its decision-making. It has become a statement on its purpose, i.e., what it 'does', that is divorced from its distinctive theology, and lacks the ability to inspire. It says nothing about who Methodists are or desire to be. There is no wonder that Methodist churches struggle to articulate theology and are without a clear sense of identity to help determine what they are to do. This is also a problem with many church mission statements. Peel observes something similar from a United Reformed perspective, noting that this is not a uniquely Methodist issue:

> Methodist theology, like all the theologies of the mainstream churches, has largely failed to provide the churches with an account of the Gospel which their members can own with such a degree of confidence that it becomes the most natural thing in the world to want to share it with others.[428]

Therefore Wesley's underlying principle governs everything that he does and what he expects of the Methodist movement, as well as being a means to decide what to do.

8.1.2 Class Meetings and the Means of Grace

Another aspect Beck picks up from Wesley's approach is that it is corporate rather than individualistic as salvation includes being 'restored to one another as well as to God.' The foundation of the Methodist movement and the outworking of Wesley's 'underlying principle' was best seen in the Class Meeting which, as the movement grew, became the natural place through which Methodists worked out their salvation.[429] Knight suggests, that the key features of these were accountability as members were 'accountable to one another for their discipleship', and responsibility in that 'they were mutually responsible for one another: they helped each other work out their salvation.'[430]

As they did this, Wesley encouraged the Methodists to avail themselves of the means of grace, which were particularly significant in navigating the religious pressures which came in

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[428] David R. Peel, 'Uniting in Response: A United Reformed Church Perspective' in Clive Marsh *et al* (eds), *Unmasking Methodist Theology* (London: Continuum, 2004), 192-197, 193.
[429] Wesley, 'The Nature, Design and General Rules of the United Societies' (1743) in Davies, *Works of John Wesley,* 69.
[430] Henry H. Knight, III, *The Presence of God in the Christian Life* (Metuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press, 1992), 97.

the form of Anglican formalism, and enthusiasm which was associated with religious groups such as the Moravians. Knight explores these twin dangers, describing Anglican formalism as:

> the God who is present becomes identified with the means of grace and the institutional church. Although grace is described as mediated through the church, this mediation implies an indirect relationship with a distant God. Grace is received mechanically and automatically, and our relationship is not with God but with the institution entrusted by God to mediate grace.[431]

He links formalism with what Wesley called 'Dissipation', or forgetfulness of God. In his sermon *On Dissipation,* Wesley suggests that dissipation, or 'distraction', is 'the uncentring of the soul from God' such that 'whoever is habitually inattentive to the presence and will of his Creator, he is a 'dissipated' man.'[432] One wonders whether the absence of theology or talk of God in the decision-making processes of the churches, is a sign of dissipation: of a formalism similar to that which Wesley found within the Anglican Church which depended on the institution rather than on God, such that God is forgotten. This was Wesley's fear for the Methodists, that they would have 'the form of religion without the power.'[433]

The second danger of 'enthusiasm' Knight describes as confusing 'God's activity with having certain experience or feelings'[434] such that one has no need for the means of grace. This danger raised the issue of 'how to experience the particular character and history of God which enables us to know God as God is.'[435] This is related to the understanding of 'experience' within Wesleyan theology which I shall come to shortly.

Wesley viewed both of these dangers as having 'minimal expectations for the Christian life'[436] with the formalist seeking assurance from the institution, and the enthusiast in their experiences. Therefore, Wesley's means of addressing the challenges that both these extremes presented was by his emphasis on, and use of, the means of grace, believing that:

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[431] Knight, *Presence of God,* 11.
[432] John Wesley, 'On Dissipation', Sermon 79: in Albert C. Outler, (ed.) *The Works of John Wesley*, Volume 3: Sermons III (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), 116-125, 120.
[433] John Wesley, *Thoughts on Methodism* (1786) quoted in Angela Shier-Jones, 'Growth in Grace and Holiness' in Luke Curran and Angela Shier-Jones (eds.) *Methodist Present Potential* (London: Epworth Press, 2009), 186-202, 186.
[434] Knight, *Presence of God,* 12.
[435] *Ibid,* 12.
[436] *Ibid,* 12.

> The presence of God can only be perceived by faith, and faith is both received and maintained in a community whose participants were encouraged and enabled to see themselves and the world before God.[437]

8.1.3 The Move From Being a Society to Becoming a Church

When Methodism became a church rather than a society within the Church of England, it began to face the question of membership in a new light. Initially membership of the society was simply translated to membership of the church, with the same basic underlying principle:

> All persons are welcomed into membership who sincerely desire to be saved from their sins through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and evidence the same in their life and conduct, and who seek to have fellowship with Christ Himself and His people by taking up the duties and privileges of the Methodist Church.[438]

Over time, it was recognised that the 'intention' of 'the Service for the Public Reception of New Members' was widely thought of as 'a service for the confirmation (properly understood) of members of the Methodist Church.'[439] A report adopted by the Conference the following year on '*The Use of the Term 'Confirmation"* clarified this further, stating that the following 'should be the foreword, printed in italics at the head of the Order of Service':

> In this Service those who desire to be saved from their sins through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and who evidence the same in their life and conduct, and desire to have fellowship with the Methodist people, having been baptized and having been approved by a Leaders' Meeting, are publicly received into full membership, with all its duties and privileges, of the Methodist Church, which is within the Holy Catholic Church. As they commit themselves to Jesus Christ their Lord and Saviour, prayer is made that the Holy Spirit may strengthen them by confirming the gifts which He has given.[440]

A sign of this move to being a Church rather than a Society or movement is , Shier-Jones points out, the change in 1993 from 'being non-confessional but clearly anticipatory' to being

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[437] Knight, *Presence of God,* 12.
[438] Deed of Union, *CPD*, 266; quoted in the 'Report on Church Membership' presented to the Methodist Conference 1961, *Statements and Reports of the Methodist Church on Faith and Order,* vol. 1: 1933-1983 (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 2000), 55-66, 58.
[439] 'Report on Church Membership', 64.
[440] 'The Use of the Term 'Confirmation'', presented to the Methodist Conference 1962, *Statements and Reports of the Methodist Church on Faith and Order,* vol. 1, 67-68, 68. It is no longer required to be printed.

'undeniably confessional'[441] with the inclusion of the following, becoming the basis of membership of the Methodist Church:

> All those who confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour and accept the obligation to serve him in the life of the church and the world are welcome as members of the Methodist Church.[442]

This changes the nature of Methodism, as Shier-Jones suggests that being a Methodist has always been 'a response to a calling to a particular way of life rather than an agreement to a particular set of beliefs'.[443] This is less specific than the original underlying principle of Wesley's Methodism, as well as Beck's articulation for current British Methodism. The removal of any reference to 'salvation', means that there is nothing to 'desire', nothing to grow into, it appears to weaken Methodism's sense of its own identity, and therefore leaves the Church without help in decision-making. I am not sure that Wesley would wholly agree with Shier-Jones but would rather hold the two together, with beliefs giving shape to the way of life as it is grown.

8.1.4 The Methodist Quadrilateral and Other Theological Methods

In my view the clearest statement of a Methodist approach to theology is the following:

> For Methodists, theology often arises from reflection on practice rather than beginning with 'abstract' theories. John Wesley's *method* of 'practical theology' is still central to Methodism, which is at heart a method of responding to God's gracious offer of salvation and holiness. In order to know what Methodists believe it is necessary to look at what they do, for they are truest to themselves when they express, transmit and modify their beliefs in the context of the worshipping, learning, serving and witnessing life of the faith community – in the Church and in the wider world.[444]

However it assumes an awareness or experience of salvation and holiness in order to respond to, both of which are to be desired and grown into. This is largely absent in the data.

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[441] Angela Shier-Jones, *A Work in Progress: Methodists Doing Theology* (Peterborough: Epworth, 2005), 242.
[442] Deed of Union, clause 8(a), (b), (c) quoted in *A Catechism for the use of the People called Methodists*, 42.
[443] Shier-Jones, 4.
[444] *His Presence Makes the Feast: Holy Communion In the Methodist Church*, The Faith and Order Report to the Methodist Conference (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 2003), B14: 10.

It is also noteworthy that this sets out a communal approach to 'practical theology' while being vague as to whether this is in the context of small groups (the equivalents of Wesley's class meetings) or in the larger congregational setting. The Methodist Church continues to emphasise the importance of small groups as one of the 'distinctive emphases'[445] in Methodist ecclesiology, even though they no longer have a formal place in the structure of the church and have largely diminished. Such 'small groups' are now viewed as being 'for fellowship and shared discipline'[446] thus losing their Methodist distinctiveness of Methodists working out their salvation. There are some signs of seeking to reinvent this for the current age through the *Methodist Way of Life,*[447] although the focus of this, drawn from '*Our Calling*',[448] is on Christian practices and what Methodists should 'do' rather than 'believe' or 'be' in relation to their identity.

In contrast, in what was described above as 'Wesley's method of practical theology', the 'lived theology' of the early Methodist tradition has given way to a fixed method of doing theology: the 'Methodist Quadrilateral'. For anything resembling a Methodist theological 'method' today, one needs to pay attention to the Quadrilateral of Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience which was first identified and expressed by Albert Outler.[449] Over the years this has had more intentional significance for the United Methodist Church (UMC) than for the British Methodist Church, as the UMC *Book of Discipline* sets out the church's theological task which offers as 'Theological Guidelines: Sources and Criteria' Scripture, Tradition, Experience, and Reason[450] but refrains from calling them 'the quadrilateral.'

However, the 'Quadrilateral' is the theological method that has been used in the training of British Local Preachers since the early 1990s and continues to be taught to preachers and worship leaders in the current connexional *Worship: Leading and Preaching* course. It states that:

[445] *CLP,* 4.7.1.
[446] *CLP*, 4.7.1.
[447] Roger L. Walton, *Finding the Way* (Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes, 2020).
[448] https://www.methodist.org.uk/about-us/the-methodist-church/our-calling/ [accessed 05/05/2021].
[449] William J. Abraham, *Waking from Doctrinal Amnesia* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 58.
[450] *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), Paragraph 105; Section 4; 80-88.

> When trying to make theological sense of something, or when trying to decide what action to take when presented with a new challenge or situation, Wesley would look to each of these [Scripture, Tradition, Reason, Experience] to see what could be gained, to help him and the Methodist movement.[451]

This in itself is misleading as Wesley does not use these sources of theology in the way which *Worship: Leading and Preaching* implies. While stating that Wesley 'nowhere gave his people an actual paradigm for their theologizing',[452] Outler suggests that:

> We can see in Wesley a distinctive theological method, with Scripture as its preeminent norm but interfaced with tradition, reason and Christian experience as dynamic and interactive aids in the interpretation of the Word of God in Scripture.[453]

Worship: Leading and Preaching teaches students to use the Quadrilateral as a formalised theological method in the context of planning worship, encouraging them to choose a theme for a service and work through the following questions:

- **Scripture –** what Bible stories or passages might you draw on?
- **Tradition** – what response has the Church made to this theme in the past, and today?
- **Experience** – what is your experience, and that of others in your community? And what is the wider context of this theme in the life of our nation and the world at the moment?
- **Reason** – what are the key questions to wrestle with for our times?[454]

Having done this, they are to choose one resource from each of the four elements of the Quadrilateral and 'explain how you would use it in the service.'[455] In contrast to the means of grace, the Quadrilateral is presented as an academic exercise rather than a means of seeking revelation and experience of/encounter with God or as a response to such

[451] *Worship: Leading & Preaching,* Module 1.2 (Encountering God: Introduction to theology: Learn), [accessed 23/02/2021].
[452] Albert Outler, 'The Wesleyan Quadrilateral in Wesley', *Wesleyan Theological Journal* (Vol.20, No.1, Spring 1985), 7-18, 11.
[453] *Ibid*, 9.
[454] *Worship: Leading & Preaching,* Module 1.2 (Encountering God: Introduction to theology: Project Brief), [accessed 23/02/2021].
[455] *Ibid.*

experience. This way of using the Quadrilateral is precisely why Abraham suggests that it is unworkable:

> What it suggests is that we should tackle every theological problem by working through all the relevant evidence to be culled from the sources of scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. This is an impossible feat for any finite mind to carry out with any degree of seriousness. In many cases there is potentially a vast array of evidence which would have to be worked through before one could reach any conclusion.[456]

It is possible that the Quadrilateral could be used to confirm views that are already held, to justify someone's own position or the point that is wanted to be made. No guidance appears to be given to assist the students in how to handle the 'conversation' that arises from using the Quadrilateral in this way, or as, Abraham suggests, how to 'resolve potential conflicts between the various sources', suggesting that 'the history of modern theology shows all too clearly that reason and experience will win every time over against scripture and tradition.'[457] Similarly, Meadows argues that what the Quadrilateral effectively does is to split theology and practice by 'subordinating these particularities as "sources and criteria" to be read and interpreted by our independently rational selves' which 'effectively usurps the truly transcendent otherness of God as the means and end of our theological life.'[458]

While Abraham is scathing of this method, Greggs is more positive given his recognition that it is 'accepted and taught on almost all introductory courses in theology and in almost all textbooks, though often without any recognition of its Methodist origins.'[459] Greggs also adds to how the model can be used:

> Theological method is not, for Methodism, about identifying what Scripture, then tradition, then reason, then experience may say about a given topic, and then coming to some judgement…

Although, this is precisely the way *Worship: Leading and Preaching* encourages its students to use the method in the project described above. Greggs continues:

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[456] Abraham, *Waking from Doctrinal Amnesia*, 63.
[457] *Ibid,* 63.
[458] Philip R. Meadows, 'On Taking the Method Out of Methodism', *Quarterly Review* (Vol. 21, No. 3, Fall 2001), 292-305, 300f
[459] Tom Greggs, 'On the Nature, Task and Method of Theology: A Very Methodist Account', *International Journal of Systematic Theology*(Volume 20, Number 3, July 2018), 309-334. 310.

> …Theological method is about what each source of theological data says in relation and in conversation with the other.[460]

Greggs demonstrates this by taking the simple, one dimensional model of the Quadrilateral found in *Worship: Leading and Preaching* and visualises the four sources as 'four sides to the one quadrilateral', suggesting that theology should rather be thought of as 'a multidimensional hexadecahedron:[461] an expression of the sources and norms of theology variously interrelated to one another in complex and multidimensional ways.'[462] Describing his revised, complex model of the Quadrilateral and the different possible arrangements of it, Greggs makes the point that it will 'produce different theological emphases and descriptions' and suggests it can be used to tackle 'a theme from several different angles, one by one, building an argument in a non-competitive but also non-irreducible way.'[463] The complexity of Greggs' use of the method proves Abraham's point that it is an unworkable model, at least for the average Preacher or Worship Leader, and certainly for any church council seeking something to help in their decision-making. Greggs concludes by recognising that such is the nature of God and the task of theology that:

> for all eternity, believers shall move within God's movement of grace as they journey ever deeper into the God whose infinite life requires all eternity in all its multidimensionality to be explored.[464]

Such is Greggs' vision for theology that one is left wondering whether he gives this unworkable example to make his point that the nature of theology is complex and will 'require all eternity as we seek to adore the infinity of the glory of God.'[465] Perhaps all that any theological method can really do is to enable the process of 'doing theology' be manageable, otherwise, the 'infinity of the glory of God' would be so overwhelming that the task would never begin.

Having suggested that Greggs' interpretation of the Quadrilateral may be beyond most church councils, I do wonder whether any variation of the Quadrilateral would help the church in their decision-making. What was clear in the discussions at the church meetings

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[460] Greggs, 'On the Nature, Task and Method of Theology', 326.
[461] An irregular polyhedron with 16 faces https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hexadecahedron [accessed 05/05/2021].
[462] Greggs, 'On the Nature', 326.
[463] *Ibid*, 327.
[464] *Ibid*, 333.
[465] *Ibid*, 328.

was that there was no underlying principle or vision governing their decision-making or holding them together, with closure seen as inevitable. What is missed, and is key to Wesley's approach to Practical Theology as described above, is that its beginning is as a *response* to 'God's gracious offer of salvation and holiness'. Therefore it starts with experience, specifically experience of God; scripture becomes the primary interpretative tool of that experience, drawing on tradition and reason, with this 'method' being a means of discernment and understanding. This work was largely informally done within the class meeting which held together theology/beliefs and experience/practice as Methodists worked out their salvation.

One of the strengths of any theological 'method' is that it encourages conversation. For conversation to be most productive it requires partners, and healthy conversation involves those one might not necessarily agree with. The strength of Wesley's 'method' of theology in the Class Meeting is that it involved conversation from the beginning as members articulated their experience of God, sought to understand that experience, encouraged one another in their journey of aspiring to perfect love, and held one another to account alongside reading the scriptures, participating in the means of grace, serving the poor, and more.

In contrast, in the case studies there was no context for ongoing conversation or reflection: no prayer meetings, no bible study or house groups, no conversation after the service about what they had heard, no theological discussion at the church meetings. If we were to loosely apply the Quadrilateral to the decision-making of the case studies: scripture is absent; tradition does not relate to the tradition of the Church but rather to the way things have always done things here; and experience is their experience of maintaining the church rather than any experience of, or encounter with, God. Somewhere along the way the transcendent otherness of God seems to have been usurped, therefore the majority deem it 'reasonable' to close.

It was noted in the data that most people struggled to answer questions about the nature of faith and experience of God. Given that most of these had spent their whole lives within a church, all except two were aged between 60-90, and all were, or had been, very active within the church one can only imagine, for example, how many thousands of sermons they must have heard over the years. Their inability to think in these terms echoes Wesley's

observation that 'without conversation, people can hear sermons for years and still not get it':[466]

> As great as this labour of private instruction is, it is absolutely necessary. For, after all our preaching, many of our people are almost as ignorant as if they had never heard the gospel […] I have found by experience, that one of these has learned more from an hour's close discourse, than from ten years' public preaching.[467]

This highlights the importance of Wesley's emphasis on the means of grace as theological reflection and how they impact each other, especially in light of Wesley's underlying principle. Particularly noticeable here is the significance of what Wesley called 'Christian conference' which includes both 'the fellowship of believers and rightly ordered conversations which minister grace to hearers,'[468] alongside public worship; which would include preaching, hearing the scriptures, and prayer; and meeting in a class. If one of these means of grace is removed, then much is lost as George Whitefield realised:

> My brother Wesley acted wisely. The souls that were awakened under his ministry he joined in class and thus preserved the fruits of his labours. This I neglected, and my people are a rope of sand.[469]

The difference between what is happening in the early Methodist movement and a theological 'method', such as the Quadrilateral, is helpfully articulated by Lartey who suggests that Practical Theology can offer *'a way of 'doing theology' and being theologians*'[470] but notes that it only does this when it is a form of theological engagement, rather than simply as a 'branch of theological knowledge' or as a 'process' with the emphasis laid on method.[471] He also seeks to pay attention to the communal dimension of Practical Theology seeing it is a 'collaborative endeavour which listens to many different voices'[472] as

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[466] George Hunter III, *Radical Outreach* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 194.
[467] John Wesley, "Minutes of Several Conversations," *Works* 8:303, quoted in Hunter, 194.
[468] Knight, *Presence of God,* 5.
[469] Stephen Tompkins, *John Wesley: A Biography* (Oxford: Lion, 2003), 128. Quote unattributed to George Whitefield. See also Philip R. Meadows, *Remembering Our Baptism* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2017), Kindle Version, Chapter 7, who attributes it as being recorded in Adam Clarke, *The Miscellaneous Works of Adam Clarke* (Tegg & Son, 1836), 257-8 noting that 'there is some dispute about the accuracy of this account.' He states that Wesley makes a similar point in his Journal entry for 25th August 1763.
[470] Emmanuel Lartey, 'Practical Theology as a Theological Form' (1996) in David Willows & John Swinton (eds), *Spiritual Dimensions of Pastoral Care* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2000), E-Book, 72-77, 74.
[471] *Ibid*, 72.
[472] *Ibid,* 75.

people are 'formed and shaped' through communities.[473] However, Lartey fails to adequately address how, as communal creatures, the theological exercise is undertaken in and by communities.

There is a strong argument, from the example of the Class Meeting, that theology needs to be thoroughly communal if the church is to find a collective response to what it means to be a community of Christian faith in the present age. The communal nature of many Practical Theology methods appears to be temporary, for the purpose of a particular exercise rather than giving an example of how 'doing theology' can be embedded into the ongoing life of the church community. Wesley's vision for his 'class system' seems to do this even though, according to Goodhead, the classes declined within Wesley's own lifetime and was only a one generational meeting.[474] Perhaps this was due to their initial nature as an evangelistic tool for those fleeing 'from the wrath to come', and their inability to adapt as a tool for ongoing nurture and growth. For the next generation of Methodists who had grown up within the movement, the class meeting was not helpful and so over time this, combined with an increased 'respectability' that Methodism gained,[475] led to the larger society taking 'precedence over the smaller class.'[476] Niebuhr recognises this challenge of the next generation, suggesting that the 'sectarian type of organization is valid for only one generation'[477] due to the nurture of the children within it whose experience is different to the previous generation. Sects, for which he uses early Methodism as one example, demand 'some definite religious experience' for membership and are exclusive in character.[478] In contrast, churches are 'inclusive institutions' emphasising the 'universalism of the gospel' with membership carrying 'no special requirements.'[479] This raises issues regarding the nature of the church.

It is not surprising, therefore, that there is no articulated theology in the decision-making if churches find themselves in a place where they need to articulate what they are not used to

[473] Emmanuel Y. Lartey, *Pastoral Theology in an Intercultural World* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2006)*, 17.*
[474] Andrew Goodhead, *A Crown and A Cross* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2010), xxi.
[475] Goodhead, 241.
[476] Goodhead, 243.
[477] H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (Cleveland, Ohio: Meridian Books, 1957), 19.
[478] Niebuhr, 18.
[479] Niebuhr, 18f.

articulating at the point of having to make a decision: it is too late. The conversation needs to find a beginning, perhaps in the form of a similar or shared experience, and is grown into.

8.1.5 Experience

Experience became central for Wesley in light of his own experience at Aldersgate Street in 1738 and is essential to understanding his way of doing theology, though it is often misunderstood. McGrath raises concerns about experience as 'a foundational resource for Christian theology' due to the lack of empirical evidence for a '"common core experience" throughout human history and culture'[480] of the transcendent. To suggest experience as a resource for Christian theology does not assume that such an experience is the same for every person. However, it does assume that God can be experienced and known, as well as known about. Lartey argues that theology:

> is not merely about doctrines and propositions but is also about how we understand and live in the world as it is. At its heart, theology has to do with an explanation of how we understand and experience God as well as what is ultimately real and true in essence about the world.[481]

While he does not fully develop this in his theological method, Lartey is clear that experience relates to experience of God rather than general experience which is closer to Wesley's view.

McGrath suggests that the role of experience in theology as 'an interpretative framework within which human experience may be interpreted'[482] has been the dominant theme within Christian theology. This is the predominant way which many Practical Theology methods use experience, including in the Methodist *Worship: Leading and Preaching* course, as it treats it as human experience in general rather than experience of God or revelation specifically. Root identifies this aspect of Practical Theology as being 'deficient' in terms of 'articulating divine action at the same depth' as human action, and suggesting that 'this disinterest in the possibility of a divine or transcendent reality has made it harder for practical theology to attend to the theological.'[483] In contrast, his own approach seeks to show:

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[480] Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2001), 192.
[481] Lartey, *Pastoral Theology in an Intercultural World,* 6.
[482] McGrath, *Christian Theology,* 191.
[483] Root, *Christopraxis*, x.

> that divine action itself is not impractical, but rather is a deeply practical and lived reality, that people do have distinct experience with God that they believe are concrete, lived, and *real*. These very experiences direct their lives in formative ways, moving them to do one thing or another in their embodied practical life.[484]

Besides the Quadrilateral, *Worship: Leading and Preaching* also draws on the theological lens of the 'four voices'[485] which is helpful in identifying 'where theology is located' whether that is in what people do; what they say about what they do; the Christian tradition or formal academic theology.[486] However, this approach is used similarly to the way the Quadrilateral is taught and is not intentional in paying attention to the place of experience of God or revelation and what part this may or may not play in terms of enabling interpretation of a given situation.

Given the predominance of a broader, general sense of experience, it is not surprising that Shier-Jones observes that:

> The proclamation of a general 'revelation' can be thought to lend support to the idea that people do not need to attend church, or personally make use of the means of grace to 'know' God. The knowledge of God and God's will is revealed in the good works and fellowship of friends and neighbours as well as in the Scriptures and in the teachings of the Church. The Church has revealed God's love as unconditional, factual and uncontroversial. The particular revelation, the 'knowledge' of God that results from a regular or singular personal encounter with God, whether or not it engenders a 'conversion' experience is seemingly no longer emphasized as being necessary to be a Christian.'[487]

In contrast, Runyon refers to the kind of experience intended by Wesley as 'Orthopathy', defining it, alongside orthodoxy (right belief) and orthopraxy (right practice), as 'the new sensitivity to and participation in spiritual reality that mark genuine faith,'[488] which is more than a religious feeling as it includes the interpretation of such feeling.[489] While Runyon is not seeking to develop a theological method, these "orthos" sit alongside the 'four voices':

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[484] Root, *Christopraxis*, x.
[485] Helen Cameron and Catherine Duce, *Researching Practice in Ministry and Mission: A Companion* (London: SCM Press, 2017), xxx.
[486] *Ibid,* 45.
[487] Shier-Jones, 44.
[488] Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 149.
[489] Runyon, *The New Creation,* 152.

right practice alongside the espoused and operant voices; and right belief alongside normative and formal voices; then broadening them out to give space for a distinct kind of Christian experience.

'Orthopathy' is experience of God which explains why the Church, or a Christian does what they do and believes what they believes; while beliefs and practices also help to interpret experience. It raises the question as to what or who forms those beliefs and decides what are right practices, i.e., what is theologically normative in its broadest sense? The three "orthos" are inseparable, existing together in a kind of trinitarian dance, and perhaps suggesting a need for a 'fifth voice' of theology related to divine experience or 'Orthopathy.' This may be what McGrath alludes to when he writes that:

> The key to avoiding reducing theology to a "language of habit, practice, and virtue" lies not in denying the practical outworking of theology, but upon a recovery of its roots in the Christian tradition of life, thought, and worship — and above all by allowing ourselves to be shaped and inhabited by this distinctively Christian "map of meaning."[490]

Root's attention to experience resonates with the experience of Wesley and early Methodism, similar to the way Wesley understood the means of grace to mediate God's presence. He holds that practices 'like prayer and baptism are first and foremost encounters with the divine being, with God's being as minister'.[491] In recognising or discerning what is experience of God, Root suggests that it has form and shape, and its own logic which is:

> the very form of Jesus Christ, the very form of the divine being as ministry. This inner logic is the *theologia crucis*; it is the logic of moving from death (impossibility) to life. While formal logic rests itself squarely in the empirical fact of nature that all moves from life into death, the inner logic of the cross, the foolishness of the gospel, asserts the opposite: that from death comes life.[492]

He sees this as a 'death-to-life, life-out-of-death paradigm' which is 'simultaneously an epistemological structure embedded in an ontological reality.'[493] It is therefore unable to separate theology as knowledge about God (the 'epistemological structure') with God's being

[490] McGrath, 'The Cultivation of Theological Vision', in Ward (ed.), *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and* Ethnography, 107-123, 123.
[491] Root, *Christopraxis,* 149.
[492] *Ibid,* 104.
[493] *Ibid,* 104.

('ontological reality') and our encounter with it, as in the dance of the three "orthos" above. This emphasises the importance of similarly holding together who the church *is*, what the church *believes*, and, in the light of both of these, what the church *does* in response to encountering God's grace and in doing so to reflect the reality that is God. While Root's vital contribution to Practical Theology is in paying attention to revelation and divine experience, one of its weaknesses is that it appears to be an individualistic approach. However, given Root's continual emphasis on 'participation in God's being'[494] perhaps more is implied about doing theology in community, as one cannot truly participate in God's being in isolation from the wider body of Christ: but this is not stated and needs embedding in a robust ecclesiology.

Root states that his approach begins and ends with revelation;[495] which could also be said of Wesley's theology. To see this, we turn to Stacey and his emphasis on 'theology as disclosure.'[496] Rather than using a quadrilateral, he outlines three areas: Revelation, encompassing Jesus Christ as '*the* revelation for Christians', Scripture, and Tradition;[497] Reason, functioning as Organizing, Making clear and explaining, Criticizing, and Leading to the truth;[498] and Religious experience, in both its 'broader view' of interpretation of lived experience and its 'narrow view' of 'the experience of God as [God] meets with [people] in Jesus Christ.'[499] For Stacey the starting point for doing theology does not matter, but suggests that 'revelation and experience, theology and living have to be brought together and kept together.'[500]

Ward's approach to Practical Theology is embedded in the ecclesial community and speaks of a sharing in 'an ongoing conversation about God.'[501] He allows for an experience of God by placing Practical Theology as a 'commitment both to the practice of faith and to theoretical reasoning' within the context 'of spiritual life and prayer.'[502] In offering five practices: remembering, absorbing, noticing, selecting/editing, and expressing to explore Practical

[494] Root, *Christopraxis,* 151.
[495] *Ibid,* 88.
[496] John Stacey, *Groundwork of Theology,* Revised Edition (London: Epworth Press, 1984), 29.
[497] *Ibid*, 34-37.
[498] *Ibid*, 43-45.
[499] *Ibid*, 47-49.
[500] *Ibid*, 79.
[501] Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology,* 14.
[502] *Ibid,* 28.

Theology 'in the everyday life of the church,'[503] Ward suggests that 'Christians are already practical theologians simply because they are "in the middle" of the celebration, communication, and critical conversation that are characteristic of Christian community.'[504] What Ward does not address is the issue of intentionality: it appears a somewhat passive approach to Practical Theology, and without a foundation it will be difficult to interpret what the theologian is "in the middle" of. And is also lacking in terms of divine experience/revelation.

In defining absorbed theology as 'theology that has made the shift from something that is external and expressed by others to something that is part of us,'[505] experience, is understood as the practices of the church:

> We take in theology through our participation in the life of the Christian community, through fellowship, preaching, missional action in the world, singing songs, and the sacraments; as we do so, this sharing takes us up into the life of God. Absorbed theology in this sense is the most basic and ordinary form of practical theology. We live out of our absorbed theology. Practical theology in all of its manifestations starts from this residue within us that has been shaped by the life of the Christian community.[506]

But how does this 'shift from something that is external' become 'part of us'? There is a danger with absorbed theology of suggesting that faith is irresistible, which Wesley would not countenance as it would cancel out free will. The 'absorbed theology' needs to be balanced with a conscious consideration of, or participation in, what is absorbed.

Ward is describing experience here as 'doing' (Orthopraxy) rather than 'Orthopathy' (experience). Though the two are not necessarily unrelated, the experience of the case study churches show, that one can participate in these practices over many years without necessarily experiencing God, at least not in a conscious or life-changing way. Their inability to think/reflect theologically or to speak of God/faith does not make a strong case for 'absorbed theology'.

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[503] Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology,* 14.
[504] *ibid,* 14.
[505] *Ibid,* 16.
[506] *Ibid,* 17.

8.2 Theology and Decision-making

In starting out on the research, I was not sure what I was looking for in relation to theology and decision-making: whether it was the way people talk about God or their faith, their experience of God, what they believe or their way of life. In the meetings I attended none of these were explicitly evident. Even taking it at its most basic, theology as words about God was noticeable in its absence.

In some ways, these descriptions of what I may have been looking for can be used interchangeably, with differing degrees of overlap in their meaning with "theology" as an overarching term of which faith; belief/doctrine; and discipleship are all a part. The classic relationship between faith and theology in the definition of theology by St. Anselm as 'faith seeking understanding'[507] puts the emphasis on theology as being a more cerebral or potentially theoretical activity, depending on the nature of the faith which is seeking understanding. This is also reflected by Greggs who argues that theology is an expression of what it means 'to love God with our minds.'[508] If theology is only seen as an exercise of the mind there is the danger or relegating theology to academic activity, with some seeing it as beyond them: being seen as the preserve of those who have been trained, such as academic theologians, or ministers and local preachers, and theology as 'belief' being separated from theology as a conscious 'way of life'. It is therefore not surprising that Methodists have difficulties in even talking about God.[509]

Greggs locates the task of theology within the doctrine of sanctification and suggests that theology arises from 'the renewing of the mind and takes place in the transformation of the believer which begins de facto in this life.'[510] If Wesley's broad view of salvation, which I shall return to in chapter 8, holds together both justification and sanctification, theology is also located in justification in the seeking after what Christ has done *for* us, as well as what God is doing *in* us. As both St. Anselm's and Greggs' definitions presuppose some activity of God to which an individual or community seeks to respond, theology also leads to the renewing of the mind, as well as arising from the renewing of the mind as Greggs suggests. This would fit

[507] Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology*, 28.
[508] Greggs, 'On the Nature', 311.
[509] *Time to Talk of God* (Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes, 2005), 18.
[510] Greggs, 'On the Nature', 310.

with the 'underlying principle' of Wesley's vision for the early Methodist societies of both seeking and working out salvation.

In contrast, Walton makes the connection between theology and discipleship. In suggesting that 'discipleship is largely a lived form of theology,' he seeks to explore the relationship between belief and actions in wondering 'whether it is possible to identify what people believe separate from their actions.'[511] This moves away from theology that is purely cerebral and raises the question: how and why do people, in this context Methodists, act in the way that they do? Meadows makes a similar argument regarding the place of discipleship in relation to how Methodists understand theology. He suggests that the church might learn from Wesley 'to understand theological reflection as church practice – that the early Methodist commitment to disciplined discipleship was *itself* the very mode and character of their theological competency.'[512]

This tension between these different approaches to theology can be seen in questions of exegesis. Not just in the traditional questions which ask of the text: 'what did it mean?' and 'what does it mean?' which are questions of understanding and of the mind, but also in a third question which Gorman encourages. Gorman calls it the 'ultimate' exegetical question, falling more into the realm of discipleship as envisaged by Walton and Meadows, and which Gorman calls 'living exegesis': 'if readers took the message of this text seriously, how would their lives be different?'[513]

Meadows goes further than Walton in drawing on Wesley to hold faith and practice together, in a similar way to Ward's practice of 'Expressing'. Taking exception to theological reflection undertaken with the Quadrilateral as method, he draws on Wesley to maintain 'the integrity of discipline, theology, and practice'[514] and suggests that:

[511] Roger Walton, 'Ordinary Discipleship', in Jeff Astley & Leslie J. Francis (eds) *Exploring Ordinary Theology* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), E-book, 179-188, 179.
[512] Meadows, 'On Taking the Method', 295.
[513] Michael J. Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2001), 131.
[514] Meadows, 'On Taking the Method', 301.

> In these terms, we are not first called to *do* theological reflection (i.e., *on* and *for* our practice); instead, we are called to *be* theological reflections of God's word uttered to the world (i.e., *in* and *through* our practice). […] Christians rightly *handle* theological texts, however, to the end that their very lives *become* theological texts. The development of theological competency lies not in a transcending mystery of multiple sources but in a transforming participation in Christ's call to common discipleship.[515]

This draws a third dimension into the discussion: the theme of 'identity' as theology is not just about what the Church or an individual believes or does, it is also about who they are or are becoming and raises questions regarding how the Church sees and understands itself. This would require a fourth exegetical question which goes beyond understanding and how we live, including what we do in relation to the practices of the church. I suggest that this question needs to be: in light of this passage, what is our identity in Christ? This is important because firstly, it enables a more grounded answer to the questions: "Why do you do this?" Or "Why do you believe that?" which springs from our identity in Christ. Secondly, it enables 'belief' to be held together with 'doing' and 'being'/identity rather than seeing them in opposition to each other. Thirdly, it enables a holding together of what Christ has done *for* someone and what Christ is doing *in* someone, in terms of participation 'in Christ.' And therefore, a firmer understanding of identity would give a stronger foundation on which to make decisions.

8.3 Summary

A Methodist way of doing Practical Theology would seek to hold these exegetical questions together:

1. What did it mean?
2. What does it mean?
3. In the light of this, what is our identity 'in Christ'?
4. In light of this, how will our lives be different?[516]

[515] Meadows, 'On Taking the Method', 301.
[516] Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis*, 131. "Our" I take to mean both individual lives and the corporate life of the church.

What we can learn from John Wesley, and therefore what I would call a "Methodist way" of doing theology, is an approach that embodies what Gorman calls 'living exegesis' using these four exegetical questions.

These questions can (and should) be asked of divine experience, as well as of Christian/Church tradition and scripture. The task is one of interpretation: to discern what God may be saying to God's people, as well as seeking understanding. Therefore, a Methodist approach to theological reflection moving forward could be defined as: seeking to understand and to articulate one's experience of God and identity in Christ; and to grow into the fullness thereof.

Having listened to each of the conversation partners, the next chapter moves to the 'asserting' stage of the theological method and the construction of a theological framework for decision-making which will focus on the emerging issues of baptism, death/dying, and discipleship.

Part 3: Asserting

Chapter 9: Towards a Theological Framework

9.1 Introduction

What is clear from the data is that the churches were not thinking theologically, not just in terms of their decision-making to close but also in their life together before this decision was made. If decision-making is based on building, money, and/or people, the sense of inevitability at closure is no surprise as these are finite resources; and neither is the stark lack of hope, as hope was also connected to these resources.

Butler would describe this scenario as the difference between a 'theology of scarcity' and a 'theology of abundance.' She suggests that in the face of institutional church decline 'we have begun to think and act with a theology of scarcity rather than God's economy built on abundance, possibility, and constant re-creation' and that 'until we adjust the theological lens through which we see our institutional lives we will not be able to find our way into the hopeful future God imagines for us.'[517] What Butler is calling a 'theology of scarcity' could also be described as a 'theology of immanence' in the sense of a dependence on one's own resources rather than external resources including, in the case of a church, God.

I acknowledge the difficulties of using this term due to it carrying other theological meanings. In this chapter I am using the term 'immanence' in relation to Taylor and Root's (drawing on Taylor) understanding to indicate a world in which God/transcendence appears to be absent. Paradoxically, Taylor's meaning of 'immanence' is the opposite of 'incarnation', and he uses 'transcendence' as its opposite adding to the difficulty of these terms. In the present context it is used as a negative term: describing what 'is not' rather than what 'is'. Theologically, the immanence of God is kept alive in a community by people experiencing and encountering God and making the God whom they have encountered known. When that ceases, the church is left with an increasingly distant memory and the closing of the 'immanent frame'. It can be re-opened when the church rediscovers a theology of

[517] Amy Butler 'Invested Faith: Shifting How We See' in Dustin D. Benac and Erin Weber-Johnson (eds), *Crisis and Care: Meditations on Faith and Philanthropy* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2021), Kindle Version, chapter 12.

incarnation and recognises the presence of God in the midst of life. I will develop this further later in the chapter.

Both case study churches could be described as living within a framework of a theology of scarcity, which Butler describes further as a framework which:

> causes us to shut down, hoard what we have, and turn inward, often at the expense of the most vulnerable among us. We're afraid of losing what has seemed familiar for most of our lives, and we long for an experience of the divine that is perpetually unchanging.[518]

Butler's description of a longing for 'an experience of the divine' does not entirely match the data, as no sense of a longing for an experience of the divine was expressed. Rather there seemed to be a lack of any expectation that God would intervene or have something to say, and to those who described a life changing experience of God it seemed surprising and unexpected.

In contrast, Butler describes a 'biblical theology of abundance' as:

> sitting on the edge of your seat and holding your breath with anticipation for what God is planning next. Looking at the world with a lens of abundance means always allowing the possibility for new winds of the Holy Spirit. It is the belief that there is enough for everyone to thrive. It is not a belief that all our congregations have enough resources to sustain themselves, but that, through abundance, we are able to both innovate and *give away to our neighbors* […] [and] allows us to live, not with a fear of death, but rather boldly and with resurrection hope.[519]

This is a description of something that appeared to be non-existent in the case studies. Therefore, the framework that needs to be put in place is not just to support churches in their decision-making, but also to help them to begin to think theologically more generally to counter a 'theology of scarcity.' Otherwise, decision-making will continue to be based on the pragmatic, physical/tangible aspects of the church and continue to leave the church bereft of hope. This raises the question of how a church can move from scarcity to abundance, and from immanence to incarnation. It is with this in mind that this chapter sets out a theological framework for decision-making.

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[518] Butler, chapter 12.
[519] *Ibid*.

9.1.1 Breaking a Cycle of Closure

Giving a church which is already at the point of closure a framework may be too little too late to prevent closure. However, what I have discovered is that it is not just about how to make decisions well, but also about breaking a cycle of closure. Often when a church closes, the members usually disperse to other churches, only for it to be a matter of time before the church they have moved to finds itself addressing the issue of its closure. This was particularly noticeable at Hope Street where many of the members had come from other churches that had closed. Four out of the ten interviewed at Hope Street had come from churches that closed and for one, Hope Street was the third church to close that they had belonged to. And, according to the Circuit website, the Foodbank church closed on 22/05/2022, though it is not clear what the reasons for its closure were.[520] As the resources of Methodist churches decrease, this may well become an increasingly common issue: something is needed to break this cycle.

There does not appear to have been, in either church, a serious examination of why the church was running out of money; why there was a lack of people; or whether there was a better place for the church to meet than in tired, old, or expensive to run buildings despite, in the case of Hope Street, at least two church reviews in recent years. These concerns seem to be accepted by the congregations as signs of the times and changes in the community. Without an honest examination of the faith and theology of the church, the inevitable will continue to happen.

Restructuring is not a real solution: doing the same thing in a more economical way, whether that be in relation to saving money, peoples' time, or other material resources, will just delay the inevitable. This is Gay's solution from the perspective of the Church of Scotland: focusing less on buildings, as closing buildings and merging parishes is 'unpopular',[521] and more on changing patterns of ministry and the structures of the church. The Methodist Church is no stranger to restructuring. There has been no shortage of new initiatives or resources to address some of these issues, but these have had little or no visible effect when measured alongside church membership figures.[522] Recently, these have

[520] Circuit website [accessed 03/04/2023].
[521] Gay, 134.
[522] See appendix 1.

included: 'Team Focus' (2005), reviewing the connexional team; 'Regrouping for Mission' (2007), looking at circuit and district boundaries; and currently 'Oversight and Trusteeship' (2022) is a further review of church governance structures. It states that the first consideration driving the report 'has been the Church's numerical decline' which is to be addressed through the church's 'God for All' evangelism strategy.[523] Restructuring is usually a rearranging of finite resources, and therefore does not move the church from scarcity to abundance. Root suggests that in the context of decline, the church has 'become obsessed with the church' with many churches/organisations succumbing 'to the temptation to make themselves the star of their own story. They've made themselves their own idol by holding their own survival (or growth – really the same thing) as their deepest longing.'[524] This he argues is a result of the church losing 'the kenotic (self-emptying) nature that conforms the church to the crucified Christ, who has been raised from the dead and acts even now in the whole world through the Spirit.'[525]

Through restructuring, the church continues to emphasise what it needs to *do*, rather than first addressing who the church needs to *be* to underpin what it does and why. Whatever the shape of church structures, the mission and ministry of the church (locally and nationally) essentially carries on in the same way and the fundamental premise of what it means to be a Methodist Church, or a Methodist member, remains the same. The church's first response to decline or church closure must not be about what to do, including for example, in the *Methodist Way of Life*[526] as this risks placing the emphasis on the church's own actions in a 'theology of scarcity'. Rather, it needs to first of all address issues of identity: remembering who the church *is* and who the church needs to *become* in order to know how to live and respond to the circumstances it finds itself in. This re-orientates the church back to a 'theology of abundance' as it reconnects with the God who calls the church into being, gives it its identity, and is a counter-intuitive approach. Gorman contends that the apostle Paul, 'wanted the communities he addressed not merely to *believe* the gospel

[523] 'Oversight and Trusteeship', report to the Methodist Conference 2022, para.2. Other considerations are: 'different forms and patterns of leadership' required (para 3) and 'the need to respond to different statutory provisions' (para. 4).
[524] Andrew Root, *Churches and the Crisis of Decline* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022), Kindle Version, 89.
[525] *Ibid,* 89.
[526] https://www.methodist.org.uk/our-faith/a-methodist-way-of-life/ [accessed 06/09/2023]

but to *become* the gospel and thereby to *advance* the gospel.'[527] This means that 'they were to participate in the very life and mission of God' and become 'a living exegesis of the gospel.'[528] Becoming (being) is before advancing (doing), while being inseparable from each other.

Therefore, priority needs to be given to re-examining the church's identity and theology from which changing patterns and structures, doing new things and everything else flows, rather than vice-versa. Roxburgh and Robinson put it as needing 'an imagination that will move away from agendas to fix the church.'[529] But where does that imagination come from? To answer this, I turn to Brueggemann who suggests, drawing on the tradition of the Old Testament prophets, that:

> The church will not have power to act or believe until it recovers its tradition of faith and permits that tradition to be the primal way out of enculturation. This is not a cry for traditionalism but rather a judgement that the church has no business more pressing than the reappropriation of its memory in its full power and authenticity.[530]

The purpose of that imagination needs to cause a revolution. Not a revolution of the kind that overthrows and destroys everything, then rebuilds a new system from the ground upwards. But rather something more akin to a Copernican revolution that shifts or refocuses the focus of the church. The purpose of the theological framework is to enable that revolution, so that the church can reimagine its identity and be better placed to make Godly decisions about its future. My primary concern is to give churches a theological narrative that will help with decision-making. I will do this by helping them to remember and therefore to reappropriate the theological narrative of the Church by drawing on the sacrament of baptism. This framework will help churches to understand and navigate better the environment they find themselves in; bring unity to decision-making processes; and build confidence in the church's identity.

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[527] Michael J. Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 297.
[528] Gorman, *Becoming, 297.*
[529] Alan J. Roxburgh and Martin Robinson, *Practices for the Refounding of God's People* (New York: Church Publishing, 2018), 5.
[530] Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001, 2nd Edition), 2.

9.1.2 An Immanent Frame

The first thing that this framework needs to give is a shared 'frame of reference',[531] similar to the 'underlying principle' of chapter 8. It was significant in the data from Hope Street that while each individual had their own frame of reference for understanding the decision to close, there was no *shared* frame of reference by which to make decisions. Root suggests that the frame of reference is a 'device that culture gives us' for understanding almost all our relationships in life.[532] I suggest that the unspoken frame of reference of the churches in their decision-making was that of an immanent frame, as I have hinted at with reference to Butler above. Seeking to interpret Charles Taylor's work, Smith succinctly defines the immanent frame as 'a constructed social space that frames our lives entirely within a natural (rather than supernatural) order. It is the circumscribed space of the modern social imaginary that precludes transcendence.'[533] Butler's 'theology of scarcity' does not preclude transcendence, but reduces the worldview of the church to that which is immanent and within the control of the congregation, in particular the physical building and the bank statement, which become the main bases for decision-making.

Root goes on to state that 'we live in a secular age – our secular is set at 3[534] – because the frame of reference we inherit from our Western culture(s) is a fully immanent one (i.e., a world closed off from transcendence.)'[535] This reading of 'secular three' is not a wholly accurate understanding of Taylor. Taylor suggests that 'secular' can be understood in three ways: 'secular one' reflects the absence of the religious (or transcendent) in public spaces resulting in secular space and sacred space, and the separation of church and state; 'secular two' refers to the 'falling off of religious belief and practice'[536] as seen, for example, in fewer people belonging to the church; while 'secular three' is about 'conditions of belief' consisting of 'a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace.'[537] Taylor's thesis is that a belief in the transcendent

[531] A term used by Root, *Churches and the Crisis*, 9.
[532] Root, *Churches and the Crisis,* 10.
[533] James K.A. Smith, *How (Not) to be Secular* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 141.
[534] Secular 3 refers to Charles *A* Taylor*, Secular Age* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 2007), 3.
[535] Root, *Churches and the Crisis,* 10.
[536] Taylor*,* 2.
[537] Taylor*,* 3.

is one belief among many. It may no longer be the dominant cultural frame of reference in the West,[538] but it is accepted as 'one human possibility among others.'[539] He is describing how it is possible to view the world rather than how anyone is compelled to see the world.[540] In other words, 'the difference between our modern, "secular" age and past ages is not necessarily the catalogue of available beliefs but rather the default assumptions about what is believable.'[541]

Root suggests that we all 'inherit a frame of reference that sees the relationships of life as mostly (if not completely) immanent.'[542] However, if there is no one general over-riding worldview, Christian or otherwise, and believing in the transcendent is just one option among many, it cannot be argued that Western culture (inherited or otherwise) is a 'fully immanent one.' Immanence may be a more dominant view of the world in the West, but it is not exclusively so, and it does not preclude transcendence – it is just not a given. It could also be argued that it is more appropriate to talk of 'immanent frames' rather than 'THE immanent frame' in relation to what immanence means from person to person. Taylor acknowledges this when he talks of the immanent frame being lived as either 'open to something beyond' or 'closed'[543] and in talking of there being 'a constellation of [immanent] orders, cosmic, social and moral.'[544]

This fragmentation of belief is also possible within the church as seen clearly in the individual frames of reference for decision-making at Hope Street which is a good example of what Taylor describes as 'cross pressures', which could also be seen as doubt or uncertainty:

[538] By the 'West' I am referring to North America/Western Europe, acknowledging that the 'West' is not a homogeneous unit.
[539] Taylor, 3.
[540] Taylor, 550.
[541] Smith, 19.
[542] Root, *Churches and the Crisis,* 11.
[543] Taylor, 544.
[544] Taylor, 543.

> The salient feature of Western societies is not so much a decline of religious faith and practice, though there has been lots of that, more in some societies than in others, but rather a mutual fragilization of different religious positions, as well as the outlooks both of belief and unbelief. The whole culture experiences cross pressures, between the draw of the narratives of closed immanence on one side, and the sense of their inadequacy on the other, strengthened by encounter with existing milieux of religious practice, or just by some intimations of the transcendent. The cross pressures are experienced more acutely by some people and in some milieux than others, but over the whole culture, we can see them reflected in a number of middle positions, which have drawn from both sides.[545]

It is Root's use of the word 'inherit' which is not helpful as it does not necessarily follow that an immanent frame of reference is inherited unless, for example, this is the frame of reference within which children are nurtured by the views and choices of their parents in their formative years or are influenced by school curricula and other factors. The issue is about choice, 'even if it may not seem like a choice',[546] rather than inheritance. The concept of an 'immanent frame' that at one extreme excludes the transcendent altogether and at the other extreme limits it, may have the strongest pull for many, and it may make it harder for people to believe or accept what the church teaches about God, but it is not automatic, and neither is it inevitable that those who accept an immanent frame are not open to God.

One problem is that the church has not fully understood the nature of the society in which it is located. The decline in numbers of church members, attendance at Sunday worship, baptisms and church weddings (all 'secular 2' indicators) may indicate a change in beliefs or attitudes towards the church; that the church is not something people have thought about; or they have found it to be wanting. 'Secular three' is more of a marketplace where anyone can believe anything on offer or invent their own belief if they don't like what is on offer. In the Christendom context, society revolved around the church, making it hard not to believe in God/transcendence as all of life was affected by such beliefs in some way, at least nominally. But once the Christendom universe is reconceived, and alternative views are accepted as being at the centre of a belief system, the Christian worldview is no longer all-pervasive, leading to a variety of worldviews without one being seen as the 'default' in the way that Christendom once was. Taylor's 'secular three', helps the church to realise that not

[545] Taylor, 595.
[546] Taylor, 600.

everyone is within the gravitational pull of the church, and not everything revolves around the church and what it represents. This should have a bearing on the church's mission and how the church engages with its communities rather than just trying to get people into church without giving them a reason to come within its influence. The methods of mission used by both case study churches may have worked in a Christendom context, but do not in 'secular three.' The church is to bear witness to the presence of a transcendent, yet incarnate, living God who can be experienced in the present.

9.1.3 An Immanent Theology?

The data shows that this is also the case within the church itself. There is a spectrum of views, especially about God, rather than fixed positions. In between the two extremes individuals may hope that God will intervene but have no, or little, experience of this. It does not necessarily mean that members of the church no longer believe in God: the question is, who is the God they confess to believe in and in whom they put their trust; and where does their knowledge of God come from?

While there is no data to determine where any of the interviewees may be on this spectrum, the data begins to give an indication of whether or not Taylor's concept of 'the immanent frame' pervades the mindset of the churches and therefore their decision-making, resulting in what I am calling an 'immanent theology.' From the way interviewees spoke about their faith, there was more of a sense of immanence than transcendence. This is seen in the recounting of the journey to close; the feelings of 'inevitability' of the closure; the lack of an ability to talk about God and their faith; the inability to discern God's presence and to articulate what God might be saying to them. Occasionally there were chinks in this theology/frame: when the importance of prayer was mentioned; by those who related their experience in some small way to scripture; and by the few who spoke clearly of having had some kind of life-changing experience of God. However, these were exceptions rather than a general pattern; individual rather than corporate; and spoken of in the past tense rather than the present.

In worship, the faith of the church was affirmed in the liturgy, the occasional reciting of the creeds, and the singing of hymns; all of which spoke of transcendence. And while many interviewees expressed a sense of God being with them, most were unable to articulate

what this meant or how the God of whom they spoke impacted their lives. At least three spoke of the 'Christian philosophy' or 'Christian ethic'; while Jack emphasised that Christianity is about 'the message of love' and that all religions are 'concerned with loving your fellow man.' Mission was largely about serving the non-spiritual needs of the community, with only Barry seeing it as 'keeping the worship going.' At least half of Hope Street interviewees reflected that their faith did not help them make sense of the decision to close, with Gladys the only one who spoke of God having any involvement in its closure: 'Maybe [God] has caused it for a reason.' Nothing spiritual was given in terms of what they valued most about the church.

Root links Practical Theology, starting with Schleiermacher, with the immanent frame, and suggests that, with its later link with the methods of 'the social sciences and their empirical pursuits,' this makes 'discussions of transcendence (and therefore theology) more difficult.'[547] He writes his own Practical Theology in response to this seeming 'inability to discuss divine action' and to show that 'divine action' is 'a deeply practical and lived reality, that people do have distinct experiences with God that they believe are concrete, lived, and *real*.'[548] If this is a problem in Practical Theology, my data indicates that it is an even greater problem in the life of the church. Root goes on to suggest that 'it may be that practical theology is to give critical and constructive assistance as individuals and communities make sense of their encounters with the living Jesus, with the moments and episodes of the Spirit descending upon them.'[549] However, this requires individuals to recognise that they have had such an encounter, whereas the interviewees of Hope Street and Mercy Lane mostly do not believe that they have. Therefore, the challenge is to open up the possibility of divine encounter in the first place.

If there has been no recognised experience of the presence of God, individually or corporately, how is God to be spoken of, more fully understood, or recognised? Without this possibility, the decision to close the church can only be a consideration of immanent factors; mission can only be concerned with improving people's lives in the present; and baptism is only initiation into the institution of the church. The most pressing question for the church

[547] Andrew Root, 'Regulating the Empirical in Practical Theology' in Kenda Creasy Dean, *et al* (eds) *Consensus and Conflict* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2019), Kindle Version, 166.
[548] Root, *Christopraxis*, x.
[549] *ibid,* 36.

becomes, how can it rediscover its confidence in the presence of God so that it can make appropriate decisions? And Practical Theology's purpose becomes to enable individuals and communities to recognise it.

Had the churches left it too late to do anything other than to close? From the perspective of the 'immanent frame' yes, they had. They had, or were about to, run out of money or struggled to pay their share of the circuit assessment; the building was not necessarily fit for purpose; they had no new people to take on responsibilities in the church, or those who held office were tired. In the context of immanence or a 'theology of scarcity', closure will always be inevitable and viewed as good stewardship. However, from a transcendent or 'theology of abundance' perspective, closure is 'not necessarily' too late or inevitable as it includes God and God's resources in the equation. It questions the nature of the church and what is required of it in these times, and reiterates the need for the church not so much to '*do* something as to *be* something'[550]. I would qualify this further and suggest it is also not for the church to simply be 'better' but to be 'different.' Is the church to bear witness to the reality and inevitability of death, or to bear witness to victory over death and the possibility and hope of resurrection? What needs to change to enable faith in a transcendent God to be reawakened within the community of faith?

This resonates with the discussion in chapter 8 regarding the underlying principle of John Wesley. Wesley's emphasis on salvation was firmly planted in his divine worldview, notably in the midst of the age of Enlightenment and the early days of the Industrial Revolution, when worldviews were changing/diversifying. While, as noted, this emphasis is still the focus of the Church, any sense of this is lacking in the data, and in current statements of the Methodist Church. One wonders if this is due to a change in the possibilities of experiencing God or is viewed as unfashionable language? As an outworking of the Deed of Union, 'Our Calling'[551] does not give the church a shared frame of reference or an underlying principle; and the transformation it envisages is not necessarily the work of an outside or transcendent agent (God's work) but is through the church's own actions, reinforced currently by the 'Methodist Way of Life.'[552] It is significant that there is no mention in either of the

[550] Root, *Churches and the Crisis,* 161.
[551] https://www.methodist.org.uk/about-us/the-methodist-church/our-calling/ [accessed 02/02/2023].
[552] https://www.methodist.org.uk/our-faith/a-methodist-way-of-life/ [accessed 09/02/2023].

sacraments. For effective decision-making, there needs to be a shared frame of reference that brings people together to explore their different views and experiences, and to recognise the presence of God.

Pannenberg suggests, in a similar way to Root, that 'answers must be given to the question of how human persons in the climate of a secularized culture can become aware of the divine reality that not only transcends, but embraces and penetrates our life and all finite reality.'[553] His answer is that in such a context, 'churches and their members might seek recourse again to the spiritual resources that are preserved in the sacraments of the Church' recovering 'the forgotten spiritual treasures of our own tradition' and warning that 'we have to overcome the superficial way of administering and attending the liturgy and the sacraments as if they were merely ancient forms of ritual.'[554]

9.1.4 Experiencing the Transcendent

In light of the 'immanent frame' and 'immanent theology', how is God to be experienced and talked of? Root speaks of a great chasm between the orthodox statements of the church on one side, and the practical life of the congregation on the other, suggesting that the chasm is 'so wide because the practical life of the congregation has been driven by the assumption, thanks to the immanent frame, that resources sustain life',[555] resources such as money, buildings, and people. Root goes on to suggest that what is needed to bridge this chasm is to 'pursue the more difficult task of exploring how, even though inextricably resting inside modernity and its immanent frame, the church might return to transcendence, finding its life in revelation itself.'[556] This includes the need:

> to embrace crisis as both the *context* and the *manner* in which we encounter the living God. The church's only purpose is to proclaim to the world that God (the prime subject in the story) acts in the world (the other subject of the story) for the sake of the world's salvation. God seeks salvation for the world, not for the church.[557]

[553] Pannenberg, 79.
[554] Pannenberg, 88.
[555] Root, *Churches and the Crisis,* 16.
[556] *Ibid,* 18.
[557] *Ibid,* 104.

This brings in the importance of experience: not an unspecified religious experience or a sociological experience, but an experience of, or an encounter with, the presence of God.

In contrast, Dunn observes that while traditionally Christianity 'found its unity in creed, ministry and liturgy', religious experience '*was a factor of fundamental importance in the beginnings of Christianity* – that many of the distinctive features of first-century Christianity grew out of and were shaped by the religious experience of the leading participants.'[558] And that it was these experiences that were important in drawing the first Christians 'together into *unity* and *community.*'[559] Once belonging to the church is reduced to beliefs rather than experience, it opens the way for an 'immanent theology' to creep in and the closing of the immanent frame. The God in the creeds and liturgy becomes the God who was only encountered in the past and if no one can give testimony of their experience of God, it is not difficult to conclude that God no longer acts in the world or even in the church, with faithfulness becoming faithfulness to the liturgy or the tradition rather than to a God who is living and active.

As Dunn points to John Wesley's heart-warming experience on 24th May 1738 as key to the beginnings of Methodism,[560] Root also makes the link between Christian experience and the beginnings of the church, stating that the 'experiential is central to Paul; faith cannot be divided from your own (or someone else's testimony of) encountering the living Christ. To be "in Christ" is to be taken into this realm through your very experience.'[561] It is out of this perspective that his own Practical Theology of the cross offers a distinct perspective to Practical Theology in seeking to 'hold divine and human action together.'[562] In particular, Root explores 'how the human agent encounters and participates ontologically in the divine life,'[563] arguing that the form of this participation 'happens only through a death-to-life, life-through-death paradigm of divine action.'[564] Therefore it is essentially cross shaped.

One of the weaknesses of Root's approach is that he does not clearly define the nature of this revelation, therefore, there is a gap between theology and experience/revelation. This is

[558] James D.G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament,* 2nd edition (London: SCM Press, 1990), 199.
[559] Dunn, 199.
[560] Dunn, 175.
[561] Andrew Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 136.
[562] Root, *Christopraxis*, 87.
[563] *Ibid,* 87.
[564] *Ibid,* 73.

also the challenge in the church, especially in a context where people do not expect to have a revelation or experience of God. If Practical Theology is to help in decision-making, it needs something to help understand and interpret experiences of God, and what they mean for ongoing discipleship; and to remind the church of the nature of the God who calls the church into being and gives the church its identity.

9.1.5 Introducing the Theological Framework

I have identified above a number of tasks this framework needs to serve. In summary, the theological framework needs to enable the church to put itself in the way of the Spirit so that the church both experiences and is able to speak of God; and to enable an imagination of a renewed identity and the possibility of a different way of being church,[565] which will specifically help with decision-making. McGrath suggests that, if the church is to grow 'it needs to tend the vision of God which stands at its heart, and ultimately underlies worship, mission and theology.' It is about appreciating the 'big picture' of the Christian faith 'in all its fullness':

> We need to be captivated by its comprehensiveness, by its richness, by its capacity to make sense of things and offer hope and transformation. It discloses a glorious, loving and righteous God, who creates a world that goes wrong, and then acts gloriously and wondrously in order to renew and redirect it, before finally bringing it to its fulfilment.[566]

It seems that neither case study church has tended to such a vision of God and neither has their life together enabled it to be tended. One of the District Chairs interviewed, made a similar observation in suggesting that there is a need for leaders

> "who can tell a bigger story, one that proceeds the current moment and one that is beyond the current moment, that because of that can take seriously the present moment, you need a pastor who loves people, a pastor who can tell a new story in the midst of what people are experiencing."

The 'vision of God' drawn from the data appears to be a distant memory of a God who did things in the past and does not appear to act very often, if at all today, yet whose memory needs preserving even if it is not clear why this memory needs preserving. There is a

[565] Root attempts something similar in *Churches and the Crisis* using a fictitious example to make his point.
[566] Alister McGrath, 'Theology, Eschatology and Church Growth' in David Goodhew (ed.) *Towards a Theology of Church Growth* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 93-106, 94.

dissonance between the reality and the theology of the church which is professed in worship, particularly hymns and liturgies.

Where does this vision come from or begin? McGrath argues that this is one of the tasks of theology, but that does not answer the question. How does someone enter into it such that this vision, can be recognised and the 'glorious, loving and righteous God' experienced in all of God's fullness such that one can also grow into all of God's fullness? Ideally such a vision/conversation would not begin at a point of crisis when the church is faced with having to decide whether or not to close.

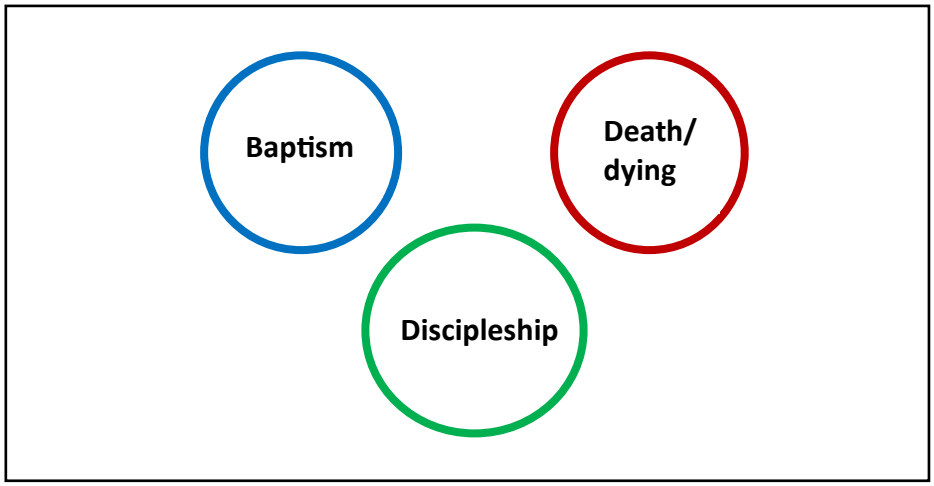
Brueggemann holds in tension the need for prophetic ministry to address 'the dominant crisis that is enduring and resilient, of having our alternative vocation co-opted and domesticated' while also responding to the 'specific public crises' or 'concrete issues'[567] (e.g., the close of a church). The task of this framework is to 'nurture an alternative consciousness'[568] that is critical of the existing consciousness which says, "closure is inevitable", or "everything is immanent", in order to 'dismantle it', whether that consciousness comes from within the church itself or from its surrounding cultural context or both. The task is also to '*energize'* both 'persons and communities by its promise of another time and situation toward which the community of faith may move.'[569] In this way, the framework can address both the 'big picture' as well as 'concrete issues'/'specific crises'; help the church to recover its tradition of faith; and bring a fragmented community together so it can find a way out of the crisis it now finds itself in and begin to change the narrative of church closures.

The framework will have three foci identified from the data: baptism, death/dying, and discipleship. The interviewees may not share the same beliefs about God, or have had life-changing experiences of God that they can speak of, but they have all been baptised, therefore the starting point is this shared experience. It will move to challenge the language of death/dying which is present in the literature but disliked by the interviewees; and then address discipleship as its practical outworking.

[567] Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination,* 3.
[568] *Ibid,* 3.
[569] *Ibid,* 3.

As I start to assemble this framework, I note that as far as the data is concerned, these foci appear to be unrelated to each other (as in **figure 3** below) as well as unrelated to the decision-making to close. My intention through this framework is to show how they relate to one another and how they can be helpful in decision-making.

Figure 3



9.2. Baptism

The purpose of beginning with baptism is to connect the shared experience of the interviewees with what has already been said about baptism, and to enable the framework as a whole to explore further the 'living of the mystery of baptism.'[570]

As noted above in chapter 4.4, those who had been baptised as infants did not see their baptism as being significant or something that they had given any thought to, even though most had grown up in a church.[571] Most spoke in terms of it being 'expected,' 'taken for granted', 'just something that happened' or 'wasn't anything special'.

9.2.1 Baptism: As a Prophetic Symbol

While recognising that baptism is more than a symbol, it is offered here as an appropriate symbol in the context of the prophetic of which Brueggemann speaks. He suggests there are three parts to the task of the prophetic imagination, the first of which is:

[570] Watkins, 14.
[571] 15 interviewees had been baptised as infants: 13 in Methodist Churches; 1 Anglican and 1 Catholic; of which 14 had grown up in a church.

> To *offer symbols* that are adequate to confront the horror and massiveness of the experience that evokes numbness and requires denial. The prophet provides a way in which the cover-up and the stonewalling can be ended. This does not mean that symbols are to be invented, for that would be too thin. Rather, it means that the prophet is to reactivate out of our historical past symbols that always have been vehicles for redemptive honesty.[572]

Firstly, we note that baptism is not 'invented' but already exists within the experience of the church and its own articulation of faith and hope. Brueggemann suggests that effective symbols are 'those that have grown out of the history of the community' and are therefore 'speaking not of universal myths but of symbolization appropriate to a peculiar history.'[573] Baptism has a unique possibility of speaking both universally, of a shared experience of the whole people of God, while also speaking to each person's 'peculiar history.' While Brueggemann warns of 'a danger in symbols that provide continuity, for they may lessen the reality of the discontinuity,'[574] the neglect of baptism in both the lives of those baptised and the church reduces this danger as the link with its significance appears to have been broken. Instead of lessening its reality, it exposes discontinuity with regard to the nature of baptism as participation in the dying and rising of Christ: an understanding that, as noted in chapter 7, is absent from the Methodist liturgies.

By addressing this, and because it is already a part of the lives of the members of the church, baptism provides a shared framework within which to begin to explore identity and belonging; how it relates to what is going on in the life of the church; and to make decisions that relate to their identity as those who are 'in Christ.' In contrast to Lifton's research in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in which he concluded 'we have no adequate way to relate to death's reality and potential, so we deny it with numbness,'[575] the church does have in baptism an 'adequate' symbol to relate to death's reality and potential and I argue that it is a symbol that is 'deep and strong enough to match the terror of the reality'[576] whatever that terror may be: either physical death or metaphorical death in the form of a church closing, while at the same time giving hope beyond the immediate situation.

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[572] Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination,* 45.
[573] *Ibid*, 137, Footnote 5.
[574] *Ibid*, 138.
[575] Robert Jay Lifton and Eric Olson, *Living and Dying* (New York: Praeger, 1974), 137 quoted in Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination,* 43.
[576] Brueggemann, *Prophetic* Imagination, 43.

Secondly, by embracing baptism as an appropriate symbol there is the 'reactivation' of a 'historic past symbol'; serving, in this context, the purpose of recovering the church's tradition of faith and reappropriating its memory.[577] The strength of baptism as a symbol in the context of church closures is that it faces up to death/dying and loss in the context of the death and resurrection of Christ. However, Baptism's weakness, or inadequacy, in its current Methodist understanding, is the absence of death and resurrection of Christ in the liturgy. Brueggemann states that 'what takes place when symbols are inadequate, and things may not be brought to public expression is that the experience will not be experienced.'[578]

Williams, speaking of a 'baptized identity',[579] also links baptism to the prophetic in two ways. Firstly, in the sense of the Old Testament prophets, he connects those who are baptised with those who called 'the people of Israel back to their own essential truth and identity' and who 'act and speak for the sake of a community's integrity, its faithfulness to who it is really meant to be.'[580] And secondly, to the prophetic role of Jesus:

> The baptized person, reflecting the prophetic role of Jesus Christ, is a person who needs to be critical, who needs to be a questioner. The baptized person looks around at the Church and may quite often be prompted to say, 'have you forgotten what you're here for?'; 'Have you forgotten the gift God gave you?'[581]

However, the baptised can only truly ask these questions if they have been given an understanding of the significance of their baptism. This prophetic role is the responsibility of all who are baptised, not any particular person, leader, or office holder. It points those who have been baptised, i.e. the whole church, 'back to the beginning, back to where it all comes from':[582] to the call of God, to God's founding of a people and the identity that comes with that and therefore reappropriating its theological narrative. Brueggemann helps to understand what needs to be done, and Williams gives a glimpse of how baptism may fulfil Brueggemann's vision.

That this was not happening in the churches suggests that the neglect of baptism is significant for those who are baptised and for the life of the church. I did not ask the

[577] Brueggemann, *Prophetic* Imagination*,* 2.
[578] *Ibid*, 43.
[579] Rowan Williams, *Being Christian* (London: SPCK, 2014), Kindle Version, 11.
[580] *ibid,* 12.
[581] *Ibid*, 12.
[582] *Ibid,* 13.

ordained ministers how they viewed their own baptism. However, it is not an unreasonable conclusion to draw that if church members have neglected their baptism, ministers, over a considerable period of time, have enabled that neglect and not seen it as something to dwell on.[583] A reawakening of baptism may enable the leader(s) of the church, however 'leader' is determined, either formally or informally, to fulfil Brueggemann's second task of the prophetic imagination of bringing '*to public expression those very fears and terrors* that have been denied so long and suppressed so deeply that we do not know they are there.'[584]

9.2.2 Baptism and Holy Communion

Another beginning that baptism represents is the beginning of a sacramental life. By focussing here on baptism, I am not negating the importance of Holy Communion but as Communion generally receives more attention than baptism, I am seeking to restore the balance, seeing baptism not in isolation to Communion, or as a means to an end in receiving Communion, but in order to see it more clearly in relation to Communion: holding the two sacraments together as of ongoing significance in the life of disciples and the church. If the church is a sacramental community, with its identity coming from both its sacraments, then the two must be held together, as Williams explains:

> To share eucharistic communion with someone unbaptised, or committed to another story, or system is odd – not because the sacrament is 'profaned', or because grace cannot be given to those outside the household, but because the symbolic integrity of the Eucharist depends upon its being celebrated by those who both commit themselves to the paradigm of Jesus' death and resurrection.[585]

If baptism is more than initiation into the church, and is a participation in Christ's death and resurrection then it indicates a commitment to the 'paradigm of Jesus' death and resurrection' which necessarily precedes participating in Communion. Therefore, every time a communicant comes to Communion, they are not just remembering the death and resurrection of Christ but also their participation in it due to their baptism and a renewal of it

[583] Reflecting on my own ministry, I include myself here.
[584] Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination,* 45.
[585] Rowan Williams, *Resurrection* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1982), 68. See also Sigler, in Powers, chapter 13.

in their ongoing commitment to 'the paradigm of Jesus' death and resurrection' in discipleship.

If someone has neglected their baptism, or views it as not significant, or if reference to participation in Christ's death and resurrection has been removed from it, what does this mean in relation to a commitment to the 'paradigm of Jesus' death and resurrection'? If baptism is just a means to an end, whether that end is entry into the church or to the Communion table, then it has no great significance, and Communion is a remembrance of Christ's death and resurrection for us rather than a participation in it, expressing a belief rather than also celebrating an identity, and therefore minimising a commitment to this paradigm in their ongoing discipleship. It could be interpreted as being like those who have *not* been baptised receiving Communion, in Williams' understanding, as there is no commitment to 'the paradigm of Jesus' death and resurrection.' Commitment is significant: understanding Christ's death and resurrection in the context of baptism as something 'won for us' does not necessarily require a commitment to the paradigm of Christ's death and resurrection. I may accept it, but that doesn't require me to live it by participating in it: in other words, Christ did it for me, so I don't have to do it. At the very least it questions what is happening in either sacrament, what participants understand about what they are doing, and the relationship between the two. What is the 'story', to use Williams' language, to which they are committed if not Christ's death and resurrection? Participation in Communion by 'someone unbaptised, or committed to another story,' Williams suggests, is thus 'anomalous: it is hard to see the meaning of what is being done.'[586] A renewed focus on baptism enables these issues to be thought through and responded to.

The significance given here to the sacrament of baptism is its link to the identity of the believer in Christ as well as to the sacrament of Holy Communion. Helpfully articulating this identity, Williams says:

[586] Williams, *Resurrection,* 68.

> What the believer says is, 'I live because of Jesus, in Jesus. The person I am cannot be understood apart from Jesus. I am baptized: I receive my name, my identity, in the process of immersion in the Easter event.' Thus the believer's life is a testimony to the risen-ness of Jesus: he or she demonstrates that Jesus is not dead by living a life in which Jesus is the never-failing source of affirmation, challenge, enrichment and enlargement – a pattern, a dance, intelligible *as* a pattern only when its pivot and heart become manifest. The believer shows Jesus as the centre of his or her life. And because that life is shared, because it is essentially, not accidentally, a life of mutuality, that system of relationships which makes up the community of the baptized testifies equally to the presence of Christ.[587]

Here Williams beautifully expresses the ongoing nature of baptism in the life of the believer, as well as reminding of the shared implication of this sacrament in terms of the *community* of the baptised which 'testifies equally to the presence of Christ.' Thus, this community is counter-cultural in an individualistic society, as well as witnessing to transcendent reality and encounter in an immanent frame as 'the believing community manifests the risen Christ: it does not simply talk about him, or even 'celebrate' him. It is the place where he is shown.'[588] And when this is expressed in baptism, Communion becomes 'the appropriate sign of the baptized life.'[589]

This connection between baptism and identity is also brought out in *Common Worship* suggesting that baptism is increasingly seen 'as a sacrament of significance in its own right that points Christians to their true identity, character and calling within the body of Christ.'[590] However, I disagree with the suggestion of seeing baptism as 'a sacrament of significance in its own right': both sacraments only truly make sense when they are held appropriately together. While the focus on baptism in this thesis runs the risk of suggesting that baptism is more important than Holy Communion or is to be seen in its own right, it is only space and the limitations of this thesis that prevent me saying more on Communion. I am focussing on baptism due to its neglect and the suggestion that it is 'too little appreciated.'[591] Also, due to Brueggemann's warning that there is a 'danger in symbols that provide continuity, for they

[587] Williams, *Resurrection,* 62.
[588] *Ibid,* 63.
[589] Williams, *Being Christian*, 57.
[590] *On the Way: Towards an integrated approach to Christian Initiation,* (Church House Publishing, 1995), 63-64. Quoted in *Common Worship* (London: Church House Publishing, 2006), 315.
[591] Pannenberg, 82.

may lessen the reality of the discontinuity,'[592] focusing on Communion as a prophetic symbol in this context would not be appropriate due to its frequency which limits its effectiveness here. Pannenberg helpfully continues, echoing Williams, that

> Without the eucharist, baptismal piety could degenerate into some individualistic mysticism, but the connection of the eucharistic remembrance with the commemoration of our baptism clarifies that it is only in Christ that we can properly celebrate the eucharist, as it is only in Christ - outside ourselves – that the members of the congregation are united through the eucharistic communion, together with all other Christians of all generations in the one body of Christ.[593]

While Colwell goes further to suggest that:

> Whenever the Church's sacramental life is belittled there is immediately the danger that the gospel will be heard without being indwelt, that faith will be reduced to mere believism, that the community of the Church will be reduced to a series of merely secular social functions.[594]

This is a plausible explanation for what was found in the data. While baptism may have been taken seriously at the time it happened, does the church 'belittle' it by its subsequent neglect and its separation from Communion? I did not ask interviewees about the significance of Communion, but no one mentioned it when asked about the church and their faith. Similarly, at Hope Street's "Away Day", when asked 'What is important to us in worship?' and 'What things bring us closer to God?' No one mentioned Holy Communion.[595] While 'belittling' may not be the most appropriate word to describe what is happening, there is certainly a minimizing or neglect of the significance of the sacraments by some, or a lack of understanding of them.

Thus, baptism is more than entry into the church. It is an identity changing sacrament: the baptised are 'in Christ', and to be 'in Christ' means that the baptised die and rise in Christ. It is, in Williams' words a commitment 'to the paradigm of Jesus' death and resurrection', of which the baptised are reminded each time they come to the Communion table. Similarly, the celebration of Communion is not simply a remembrance *of* Christ, his death and resurrection; or a sharing *with* Christ; but also a sharing (and a reminder that we share) *IN*

[592] Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 138, Footnote 5.
[593] Pannenberg, 87.
[594] John E. Colwell, *Living the Christian Story* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001), 161.
[595] Hope Street "Away Day" SWOT Analysis; January 2018.

Christ and in his death and resurrection, and are committed to this paradigm. When it is celebrated as such the link between the two sacraments is reinforced as the sacraments, Greggs reminds us, 'are given as visible expressions of the invisible reality of the church's participation in Christ's body by the Holy Spirit'.[596] Unfortunately, *CLP* states that it is the Eucharist that 'strengthens, and, in a sense, makes the Church':[597] whereas I am arguing that it is Baptism AND the Eucharist that strengthen and make the Church.

9.3. Death/Dying

If baptism addresses the 'how' of bringing '*to public expression those very fears and terrors* that have been denied so long and suppressed,'[598] I now turn to the 'fears and terror' by examining the language of death/dying and exploring how the issues around church closure can be faced up to rather than denied or suppressed so that appropriate decisions can made.

Here I bring the data, which did not find the language of death/dying helpful, into dialogue with the literature which used this imagery more than any other, and with what has been said previously about baptism in order to suggest a way forward.

9.3.1 Interpreting the Language

What does a resistance to death/dying language say about these churches? It can be interpreted in at least three ways: firstly, as a denial of death. To return to the language of 'scarcity' and 'abundance,' Brueggemann suggests that 'What we know in the secret recesses of our hearts is that the story of scarcity is a tale of death.'[599] Therefore, if the decision-making is out of a 'theology of scarcity', the death metaphor is the one that makes the most sense. The reality that it is not used in the case studies fits with a cultural avoidance or denial of death.

Secondly, it can be interpreted as a cultural issue, given that most of the literature using the language is of North American origin. I did wonder whether some of this language is melodramatic, but the alternative, the other extreme is to be much more matter of fact,

[596] Greggs, *Dogmatic Ecclesiology,* 153.
[597] *CLP,* paragraph 2.4.8, 12.
[598] Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination,* 45.
[599] Walter Brueggemann, 'The Liturgy of Abundance, the Myth of Scarcity', *Christian Century* (March 24-31, 1999, 342-347), 344.

even clinical, about what is happening, which could be interpreted as saying that closure is of no real significance. Death/dying appeals to the emotions; while the opposite results in denial: there was no death, we are still alive, nothing needs to change, we just move on.

Thirdly, it can be interpreted as a struggle to articulate a reality that they are unable to put into words: i.e., "we know the church cannot die, but look at what is happening. How do we make sense of it? How do we understand the purposes of God when this ('our') church is closing?" Unfortunately, neither congregation appeared to have the theological language or resources to wrestle with these questions or even to ask them.

9.3.2 What is a 'Dying Church'?

Is it possible to talk of a dying church? In order to answer this question, we must define what we mean by a 'dying church'. We can speak of a 'dying church' in three ways: firstly, as a human institution within an immanent frame. Just like any institution it can come to an end and cease to exist. Not a literal death, but a metaphor for closure, a loss of something that is tangible but not literally alive. Within a closed immanent frame there is no hope of resurrection.

Secondly, a 'dying church' is one whose members have lost their faith. Once again it is being used as a metaphor, but this time for something that is not tangible. A church that has perhaps been 'reduced to a series of merely secular social functions'[600] as noted above. It is a favourite theme for those who write about revival or renewal in the church, often writing of churches who have lost their vision.[601] Is the solution as simple as 'choosing life over death'[602] when this is not usually possible in reality? Others, in books with similarly provocative titles,[603] also suggest actions that can be taken to turn the church around. The emphasis is mostly on what the church needs to do, as though the solution is in their own hands.

[600] Colwell, 161.
[601] Thom S. Rainer, *Autopsy of a Deceased Church* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2014), 4.
[602] Paul Nixon, *I Refuse to Lead a Dying Church!* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2006), 27.
[603] E.G., Chuck Meyer, *Dying Church, Living God* (Kelowna BC: Northstone Publishing, 2000); Anna B. Olson, *Claiming Resurrection in the Dying Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016); Mike Regele, *Death of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

Thirdly, we could speak of a 'dying church' as one that participates in the death of Christ. A church that is faithful and obedient as Christ was 'to death – even death on a cross'[604] and speaks of a frame of mind or an attitude towards life. This humble obedience enables the possibility of resurrection, which becomes possible when the church is open to the transcendent in this Christ-like way. In this context, to say that the church is not dying, or the church can never die is not a denial of death but a statement of theological truth. If the church is the body of Christ, it is made up of members who have died and been raised with Christ in their baptism. Christ has overcome and conquered death once and for all, therefore the church as the body of Christ shares in that work of Christ's faithfulness in its baptism, and bears witness to that reality in its discipleship. While the church continues to do this, the church cannot die as its members are 'in Christ'; but neither can they truly be disciples of Christ unless they are willing to 'deny themselves and take up their cross and follow' Christ.[605] This is not a literal physical death, but dying and rising with Christ in baptism is both a way of life and a prelude to the promise and hope of rising with Christ in glory after physical death. It is this use of death/dying language which I will consider further in what follows.

9.3.3 Reappropriating the Language

Among the ministers, Theresa identified the challenge for the church regarding the use of this language: "at the heart of our faith is death and resurrection, we celebrate resurrection, but we are so scared about death." This raises the questions: is the church doing justice to the death of Christ in its teaching and preaching, and in its life together? How does it talk about death generally, and how does it speak of death in relation to the death of Christ specifically?

Looking through the lens of baptism gives both a shared starting point and a shared language with which to talk about death/dying. Baptism enables the conversation to move away from the death of the church whether that is the building, the people, its mission, faith, or anything else the church does; and turns the focus instead to the death of Christ. It moves the conversation away from merely a metaphor and concretises it in a theological reality by

[604] Philippians 2:8.
[605] Mark 8:34.

focusing on that which the symbol (in Brueggemann's sense) of baptism represents. I shall develop this idea of concretising the metaphor when I come to 'Discipleship'.

Here I return to the issue of topography. As noted in chapter 8.6, ecclesiology is derivative of baptism and not vice-versa. Now I need to ask the question: what is baptism itself derivative of? What is the nature, or event, of God from which it is derived? If this theological framework is to be consistent with Greggs' topography,[606] it does not begin with baptism, but rather begins with that which baptism theologically expresses and embodies. It starts with the vision of God which baptism begins to reveal and enables the baptised to enter into, and, with the gift of the Holy Spirit, brings the baptised into the Church as the body of Christ. This is in contrast to the current liturgy and practice of the Methodist Church which, as I have already noted, implies that baptism is derivative of ecclesiology as 'a rite of initiation'[607] into the church. If ecclesiology is derivative of baptism it ceases to be primarily a rite of admission into the church and begins to reveal and point towards a vision of God within which those who are baptised participate, and from which a vision of the church is eventually derived.

This pushes the question of derivation back further, before Christ's resurrection, to the crucifixion; making the answer to the question: baptism is derivative of the cross and the doctrine of atonement. Therefore, the theological framework I offer here needs to reappropriate the language of death/dying by focusing on the death and resurrection of Christ, and is therefore cruciform in shape. Thus reinforcing the order of the images in *BEM.*[608] Baptism ceases to be *primarily* a rite of admission into the church but primarily a sign of participation in the death and resurrection of Christ which begins to 'tend to the vision of God which stands at [the church's] heart.'[609]

This participation ensures that the church remains 'fundamentally different from all other communities in the world' as noted above.[610] This means that any decision-making about the church needs to start from a different premise than the decision-making of other organisations or businesses, which it will only do when it depends 'on the sovereignty of God

[606] Greggs, *Dogmatic Ecclesiology,* xxxi.
[607] *CLP,* paragraph 4.4.4, 40.
[608] *BEM,* 2-3.
[609] McGrath, 'Theology, Eschatology and Church Growth,' 94.
[610] Greggs, *Dogmatic Ecclesiology,* xxxi.

and God's unnecessary and gracious acts.'[611] Decision-making on the trinity of money, buildings, and people does not reflect the sovereignty of God as, following our baptism, 'we are reborn into our vocations and family relationships. We are no longer determined by our possessions.'[612]

This has implications not just for the lives and faith of the individuals baptised and their discipleship, but also for the nature of the church as the community of the body of Christ. If the cross is 'the source ***and*** shape' of 'our salvation,'[613] it follows that it is also the source *and* shape of discipleship and of the ongoing life of the community of faith as the body of Christ into which each member is baptised and therefore joined together. Therefore, it must be more than a commitment made at a particular point in time with initiation into the Christian life as its source, but must also continue in giving ongoing shape. The link with the cross in the baptism liturgy is most obvious after the actual baptism when the minister 'makes the sign of the cross on the forehead' saying: 'I sign you with the cross, the sign of Christ.'[614] The implication is that the baptised belong to Christ because of what Christ has done for them rather than their participation in Christ's death and resurrection.

Gorman argues that what is 'often lacking' in models of the atonement 'is any application of the model to actual life', suggesting that 'Paul cannot talk for long, if at all, about the cross without connecting it to life in Christ, and he cannot speak of life in Christ for long, if at all, without linking it to Christ crucified.'[615] The arguments for a 'baptismal ecclesiology'[616] or 'baptismal spirituality'[617] arise from a similar place. However, I suggest that what is needed is not a 'baptismal ecclesiology' but rather an ecclesiology based on what baptism represents: the dying and rising with Christ, therefore a cruciform ecclesiology. Thus soteriology informs sacramental theology which informs ecclesiology. Brewer argues that

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[611] Greggs, *Dogmatic Ecclesiology,* xxxi.
[612] Craddock *et al,* 89.
[613] Michael J. Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 585; Also, Gorman, *Participating,* 12; and Gorman, *The Death of the Messiah and the Birth of the New Covenant* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2014), 4. Emphasis added.
[614] *MWB*, 68.
[615] Gorman, *Participating, 12.*
[616] Watkins, 14; also Philip Tovey, *Of Water and the Spirit* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2015), 12. Tovey lacks the vision of Watkins to creatively rethink the church's approach to baptism and instead appears to simply seek to make existing baptismal practices more missional.
[617] Johnson, 110f. See also Davies, *Theology of Death,* 53, who sees 'ongoing dying with Christ and living in the Spirit as the basis for Christian spirituality rooted in the Synoptic Gospel tradition of discipleship.'

Wesley's sacramental is 'rooted in his soteriology, particularly given that salvation plays such a key role in Wesley's preaching'[618] to which I would add that salvation plays a key role in all of Wesley's thinking as his underlying principle. This begins to address Brueggemann's third aspect of prophetic imagination, the need:

> To *speak metaphorically but concretely about the real deathliness that hovers over us and gnaws within us,* and to speak neither in rage nor with cheap grace, but with the candor born of anguish and passion. The deathliness among us is not the death of a long life well lived but the death introduced in that royal garden of Genesis 2-3 […] That death is manifested in alienation, loss of patrimony, and questing for new satiations that can never satisfy, and we are driven to the ultimate consumerism of consuming each other.[619]

Only the cross can speak to this 'real deathliness' once and for all and deal with the fear of death spoken of by Theresa above.

Brueggemann goes on to suggest that the proper idiom for the prophet is *'the language of grief,* the rhetoric that engages the community in mourning for a funeral they do not want to admit. It is indeed their own funeral.'[620] However, the current context is not Genesis 2-3 but the context of covenant,[621] which leads to the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ as the cross 'gives birth to the new covenant.'[622] The metaphor of dying and rising with Christ in baptism is a metaphor of a new relationship with Christ and therefore with others who are baptised into Christ, an acceptance of death at the outset of the Christian journey; and an assurance of the hope of physical resurrection which Christ promises. Gorman argues that:

> the ultimate purpose of Jesus' death was to create a transformed people, a (new) people living out a (new) covenant relationship together. Moreover, this people will not simply *believe in* the atonement and the one who died, they will eat and drink it, they will be baptized into it/him, they will be drawn to him and into it. That is, they will so identify with the crucified savior that words like "embrace" and "participation," more than "belief" or even "acceptance," best describe the proper response to this death.[623]

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[618] Brewer, 110.
[619] Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination,* 45.
[620] *Ibid,* 46.
[621] Brueggemann, 'Formfulness of Grief', 272.
[622] Gorman, *Death of the Messiah*, 32.
[623] *ibid,* 3.

Gorman, like Greggs, emphasizes the nature of the new, fundamentally different community formed by God in Christ, reconciling the world to himself.[624]

Holding the two together (dying and rising with Christ, and baptism) enables each to be enhanced by the other and enables both to be better understood and applied to life. This would require a revision of Methodist baptismal liturgies, but if those arguing for such a baptismal ecclesiology or spirituality are from traditions that have maintained such a link (Watkins from a Catholic and Tovey from an Anglican perspective), simply strengthening the link with the baptismal liturgy is not enough in itself. It requires the integrity of the life of the church to hold together what the church believes, what the church does, and who the church is, as the community of the baptised. Baptism, therefore, becomes the linchpin rather than the starting point to help understand theologically what it means to belong to Christ/be in Christ and to be the church. It points us to the issue of identity in Christ first rather than seeking after 'what do we need to do?' and in this context: 'what do we need to do to prevent the church from closing?' The attention to identity is important in order to recognise who we are in relation to the vision of God into which we are baptised, and to be faithful to God's work in us. 'What we need to do' or 'how we need to live' thus spring from that identity and relationship with God, and as a response to God's work within us and within God's world.

The implications of this, Gorman suggests, are that:

> *Paul conceives of identification with and participation in the death of Jesus as the believer's fundamental experience of Christ.* […] For Paul, this intimate identification with Christ symbolized in baptism is not merely a one-time event but an experience of *ongoing* death, of *ongoing* crucifixion.[625]

Therefore, as believers 'have identified completely with the identity of Christ at their baptism into his name'[626] they should continue to identify completely with the identity of Christ in their ongoing discipleship and relationships with one another, including their decision-making. This requires humility to accept and receive what has been done for the baptised, to accept their identity in Christ, and to be willing to do whatever is necessary in light of who

[624] 2 Corinthians 5:19.
[625] Gorman, *Cruciformity,* 32.
[626] Gorman, *Participating,* 13.

they now are in Christ: including obedience 'to death - even death on a cross.'[627] If this is a Christ-like death, it is a death for the sake of bringing about God's will as Christ recognised in his prayer in Gethsemane,[628] and a death for the sake of bringing new life to others.

Drawing on Philippians 2:5-11 in what Gorman calls 'Paul's master-story,'[629] the example of kenosis found there can be interpreted as an outworking of the dying and rising movement of Christ and that which the church is called to embody in baptism. In decision-making in relation to whether or not to close the church, it prompts questions such as: What might the church be called to empty itself of? To let go of? What does it mean for the church to become obedient to death such that new life/resurrection may become a reality? Wright equates this with holiness, suggesting that 'throughout Paul's writings, genuine holiness is seen in terms of dying and rising with Christ.'[630] Whereas Gorman focuses on Philippians 2, Wright suggests that it is most clearly expressed in 2 Corinthians where Paul 'grapples with a community that has failed to grasp the significance of the gospel in terms of its own life.' Paul thus demonstrates 'both in what he says and how he says it that the cross and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah really are the centre and driving force of the life of the renewed humanity.'[631] Wright argues that the death and resurrection of Christ are 'not, for Paul, merely events in the past, they are the foundation of his, and the church's, daily existence',[632] and helpfully articulates what this participation, without using this word, might look like when he says:

> The gospel of God today and tomorrow as in Paul's day must become, as it did in Jesus, flesh and blood. That which was unveiled before an unprepared world in Jesus Christ must be unveiled again and again, as those who believe in Jesus Christ live by the Spirit and, in life as well as in word, announce the gospel to the world.[633]

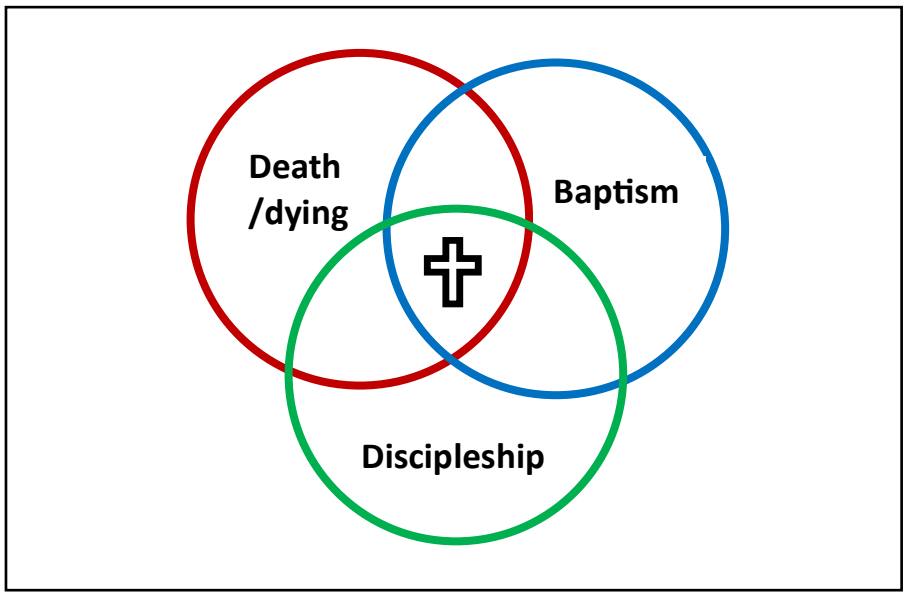
If the Church is to be renewed 'in order to respond more deeply and appropriately to the contemporary world', Watkins argues its life must be rooted in 'baptismal vocation and

[627] Philippians 2:8.
[628] Matthew 26:39-42.
[629] Gorman, *Cruciformity,* 88.
[630] Tom Wright, *What St. Paul Really Said* (Oxford: Lion, 1997), 145.
[631] *ibid*, 145.
[632] *ibid,* 145.
[633] *Ibid, 165.*

theology.'[634] This, she argues, is a 'vocation to the cross,'[635] a vocation 'to *be* the body of Christ' which is nurtured in the Eucharist;[636] and a '*missionary* way of living […] turned out from itself, to serve the life the life of the whole world as Christ to that world.'[637]

Thus, this framework becomes a lived theology of the cross rather than of baptism. And what we are beginning to see is the coming together of the three themes of the framework such that they overlap, as in **figure 4,** with the cross at the centre, holding it together.

Figure 4



9.3.4 Death/Dying or Resurrection?

Before moving to consider 'Discipleship', I want to deal with the issue of whether death/ dying is the right metaphor to use or whether the focus should be on resurrection. In responding to Gorman's "Cruciform" approach, Boakye suggests that a "Resurrectiform" approach to 'evaluations of how Paul interpreted the 'Christ event''[638] is more appropriate. While both approaches seek to hold crucifixion and resurrection together, Boakye's argument is on which should be given primary focus. 'After all,' he argues, 'whilst a resurrection requires a death, the reverse is not true'[639] and sets out to explore 'whether the

[634] Watkins, 14.
[635] Watkins, 67.
[636] Watkins, 101.
[637] Watkins, 102.
[638] Andrew Boakye, 'Inhabiting the "Resurrectiform" God', *The Expository Times* (Vol. 128(2), 2016), 53-62, 53.
[639] Boakye, 54.

ministry of Paul and the lives of the rectified are actually resurrection shaped.'[640] The basis of Boakye's argument seems to be the same as Yvonne's in the data when she says, "We're not Good Friday people, we're Easter people!" While agreeing with 'much of the substance' of what Boakye says, Gorman maintains that Paul does privilege the cross.[641] Gorman's argument is more nuanced than on whether crucifixion or resurrection should be given primary focus. It is not a choice between the two, as Boakye's argument suggests based on a misrepresentation of Gorman's argument and a false assumption. Boakye leaves a number of unexplored issues: What shape is 'resurrectiform'? How is 'resurrectiform' different to life before death? What distinguishes it? It risks seeking to live a resurrection life without dying or to be 'Easter People' without also being 'Good Friday people.' Whereas a 'cruciform' approach that is faithful to Paul's teaching is necessarily also 'resurrectiform.' For Paul, what Boakye calls 'resurrectiform' takes a 'cruciform' shape as the risen Christ is eternally crucified and always bears the marks of the cross in his resurrection glory. The result of focusing primarily on the resurrection is what Baker and Green suggest Western theology is guilty of in stripping 'the faith of an important aspect of the New Testament portrayal of Jesus – the one who joins us in our suffering. "The crucified one is the living one," […] but the living one is also the crucified one.'[642]

A false distinction between death and resurrection is similar to a false distinction between Baptism and Holy Communion. The one needs the other to be complete and in order to discover the fullness of what it means to be 'in Christ.' There is a need to die with Christ in order to rise with Christ, and those who rise with Christ will bear the marks of the cross as Jesus implies with the addition of 'daily' when he calls his disciples in Luke's gospel to 'take up their cross daily and follow me.'[643]

If, in giving primary focus to resurrection, death is not given due attention, for example by being denied, avoided, ignored, skated over, or simply implied, it is not helpful for renewed conversations about identity, discipleship or mission, especially in the context of decision-making. There is no escaping the reality of death as the end of something: new and old

[640] Boakye, 55.
[641] Gorman, *Participating*, 57.
[642] Mark D. Baker and Joel B. Green, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross,* 2nd Edition (Downers Grove: IVP, 2011), Kindle Version, 36.
[643] Luke 9:23-24.

cannot exist together in this context. To focus on resurrection without death is like moving on without anything changing. It will not break the cycle of church closure because it does not change the imagination if what it means to be church remains the same. Death needs to be faced and participated in if resurrection and new life are to be a reality. Whereas in privileging the cross we are reminded that the one who is raised bears the marks of the cross and is eternally shaped by it. It cannot be just assumed or implied as only necessary to enable the future life, but rather it becomes the identity of the one who has died and shapes whatever new life follows. Boakye's argument that 'a resurrection requires a death, [but] the reverse is not true' is unconvincing because of the context of the death and resurrection in question. His argument that a death does not require a resurrection is only true in the natural way of life without faith or hope in Christ or within an immanent frame. It is only Christ's death which overcomes death and, as death could not hold him, his death required resurrection. Therefore, it is only by dying with Christ, participating in his death, that we are raised with Christ. Williams resolves this when he suggests that 'the grammar of salvation is the cross and resurrection.'[644] Death in Christ requires resurrection: otherwise, there is no hope.

The use of death/dying language in relation to closure must not be shied away from, but it must be used with care. If, as Davies suggests, death has become 'marginalised in everyday conversation and regular Christian teaching,'[645] the issue is how to give it due focus and attention. Davies' concern that understandings of life and death must seek 'to make sense of each other'[646] is something which Kara Root enables in the context of her congregation, suggesting to them that 'we trust that by facing death instead of fearing it, we are also part of something that is bigger and truer than we can realize.'[647] Root goes on to make the connection with baptism as 'an enactment of dying and rising';[648] both an enactment of sharing in Christ's dying and rising, and an enactment of our own. She points out that all of Jesus' temptations 'would try to claim and shape his identity. […] but when he comes up out of that water and hears spoken his true identity, he is already freed from these

[644] Williams, *Resurrection,* 68.
[645] Davies, *Theology of Death,* 10.
[646] *Ibid,* 15.
[647] Kara K. Root, *The Deepest Belonging* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2021), Kindle Version, 67.
[648] *Ibid*, 171.

temptations'[649] as they are 'part of what he's prepared by his baptism to let go', showing that in baptism 'we trust that God […] now becomes the source of our identity.' [650] Thus indicating what a baptismal spirituality in facing decisions about the future might begin to look like in practice, in stark contrast to Craddock *et al*'s research where there was avoidance of speaking about what was happening. Marty's story, a terminally ill member of Root's congregation commissioned to 'a ministry of dying'[651] illustrates what Craddock can only hope for in terms of preparing and equipping congregations for the many different types of loss that will follow, ultimately physical death.[652] Marty says: '"I know I am supposed to be showing people how to die, but I feel like I am showing people how to live."'[653] The experience proves to be a powerful witness not just to the congregation but also to those outside of the church, whereas the effect of the pastors' deaths in Craddock *et al*'s research and the ways they were handled were devastating for the ongoing life of each congregation.[654] These examples highlight what is lost if death is removed from the conversation, denied or ignored, and what is diminished in terms of understandings of life and resurrection. As Wendy put it in her interview, it's about having "a sense of something beyond, not simply resignation to something, but the possibility of something." That possibility opens up in baptism as participation in the death and resurrection of Christ.

9.4. Discipleship

Dying and rising with Christ in the context of baptism is clearly a metaphor of disciples' relationship with Christ. It becomes more than a metaphor when Christ is visibly embodied, 'concretised', in the life of his disciples. Noting that the language of discipleship was absent in the data, this final section of the framework takes what I have already considered, addresses how this is lived out, and asks in relation to church closures: how is this situation

[649] Kara Root, 172.
[650] *Ibid*, 172.
[651] *Ibid*, 70.
[652] Craddock *et al,* 85.
[653] Kara Root, 176.
[654] Craddock *et al,* 14-15.

in particular 'reinterpreted through this powerful and paradoxical lens of the cross'[655] such that 'our ways of interpreting events and people in our lives change and expand'?[656]

9.4.1 The Response of Discipleship:

If 'God's resurrection life came – and comes – through the power of the cross', as 'Christ's resurrection life comes through lives of cruciformity',[657] it is always both Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Neither is an experience to go through once and then leave behind, rather the experience of the cross is to be carried, and learnt from, through the whole of life as disciples follow and learn from the crucified and risen Christ. In the same way baptism is not simply a one-off event, but is to shape the life of the one baptised in all that follows, giving, to borrow Brueggemann's language, both a form and a function to Christian discipleship. Its form is the cross in dying and rising with Christ; and its function is to give an identity and thereby a pattern by which to live: the 'paradigm of Jesus' death and resurrection.'[658] The taking up of their cross and following Christ is an 'intentional practice' for disciples, 'of re-living [Jesus'] story in new ways in their own situations.'[659]

While baptism as a dying and rising with Christ is not referred to in the Gospels, although Jesus alludes to his own death as a baptism,[660] it is developed post-resurrection, reflecting a pattern of discipleship emerging from the Gospels of self-denial, taking up one's own cross and following Christ.[661] Gorman also makes a connection between Paul's writing of the cross and the language of the passion in the gospels, suggesting that 'Paul characterizes the apostolic life of suffering in the same language of deliverance that Jesus uses in Mark to describe his passion.'[662] This theme is developed in his epistles, especially Philippians 2:5-11 with the themes of self-emptying, obedience to death, and service being presented as an attitude or mindset Christ's disciples should have. It thus begins to address Craddock *et al*'s

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[655] Laura Reece Hogan, *I Live, No Longer I: Paul's Spirituality of Suffering, Transformation, and Joy* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2017), Kindle Version, 1.
[656] Hogan, 4.
[657] Michael J. Gorman in the forward to Timothy G. Gombis, *Power in Weakness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021), Kindle Version, 10.
[658] Williams, *Resurrection,* 68. See also Jonathan A. Powers, 'Baptism and Discipleship', in Powers (ed), chapter 6, where he describes baptism as primarily 'both initiation and conversion into the death and resurrected life of Jesus Christ.'
[659] Gorman, *Death of the Messiah, 88.* See also Philip R. Meadows, *Remembering Our Baptism,* Introduction.
[660] Mark 10:38; Luke 12:50.
[661] Davies, *Theology of Death*, 53.
[662] Gorman, *Death of the Messiah*, 89.

question, that if the cross is the shape of Christian life 'should not dying play a bigger role in the way we think of ourselves than it typically does?'[663] This is not a by-passing of death to move straight to resurrection, but reveals a way of living which enables the two to be held together. The cross, therefore, is both a 'summons to discipleship' [664] and also a pattern for discipleship,[665] because the cross 'reveals the way God works now, not just the way he achieved salvation in the past.'[666] Meadows similarly argues that baptism is a pattern for both discipleship and mission. However, the difficulty with his thesis is that because 'remembering our baptism' means different things in each chapter, one loses sight of what is most important. I am arguing that baptism as participating in the death and resurrection of Christ is what is most important from which everything else follows and is given meaning, including all the important points which Meadows argues 'remembering our baptism' means.

9.4.2 Cruciform Discipleship

In the passion predictions of Mark's gospel, Gorman identifies three aspects of cruciform discipleship: self-denial in witness to the gospel, hospitality to the weak and marginalized, and service to others: 'all with the possibility of suffering.'[667] Gorman goes on to connect this pattern of discipleship to 'covenant faithfulness' in the conversation between Jesus and the rich man[668] as it demonstrates an embodying and fulfilling of the Law.[669] Here the man is called to deny himself of his wealth, by selling all he has; to show hospitality to the marginalized, by giving to the poor; and to a life of service by fulfilling Jesus' call: 'follow me'. Jesus goes on to speak of his forthcoming death with his disciples[670] and makes clear that the call to follow is a call to serve, just as 'the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'[671] Gorman suggests that Jesus' audience is

[663] Craddock *et al*, 81.
[664] Gorman, *Death of the Messiah*, 33.
[665] Meadows, *Remembering Our Baptism*.
[666] Graham Tomlin, *The Power of the Cross* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1999), 100. Quoted in Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 300.
[667] Gorman, *Death of the Messiah,* 33.
[668] Mark 10:17-21.
[669] Gorman, *Death of the Messiah,* 34.
[670] Mark 10:32-45.
[671] Mark 10:45.

'more than likely overwhelmed by the cost of being part of the people of the covenant reconstituted around Jesus,' concluding that:

> upon hearing the words of Jesus at the Last Supper – "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many" (14:24) – the audience can breathe a sigh of relief. Why? Because Jesus' imminent death will create the covenant community that the entire gospel narrative has described: a community of missional, self-giving, loyal-to-God disciples who are able and willing to suffer and die for their commitment. To be sure, Jesus' death will not create such a community apart from the resurrection (which Jesus has also predicted three times), but it is Jesus' death that is the covenant-creating and community-creating act.[672]

In following Christ's pattern of self-denial, hospitality and service and sustained in the power of the Holy Spirit, disciples continue to reveal the presence of God in ways which have always been counter-cultural as it is, in every generation, a call to 'abandon the attachments of this world.'[673] Baker and Green argue:

> In Paul's argument with the Corinthians the cross does not have the appearance of "good news" but of absurdity. The message of the cross calls for a worldview shift of colossal proportions because it subverts conventional, taken-for-granted ways of thinking, feeling, believing and behaving. [674]

The inevitability of churches closing reveals that such a worldview shift has not occurred, and such attachments have not been abandoned. It appears to buy into 'conventional, taken-for-granted ways' that say that if you have no money, a building that is not fit for purpose, or a lack of people to hold office then the only response is closure. This is the logical response if the church does not have any interpretative tools to use other than conventional wisdom.

We see the importance of connecting baptism and Holy Communion as, together, they form and sustain the ongoing life of the covenant community and begin to reveal what a 'Christian way of life' is and what a Methodist way of life ought to be. It also challenges the church to consider its corporate life of discipleship in terms of how, together, it lives out this pattern of self-denial, hospitality, and service in order to reveal God's kingdom, and the presence and power of God, when it follows and embodies Christ's example of self-denial, hospitality, and service. Not for its own sake, but because it is the work of God and the cross is 'the norm for

[672] Gorman, *Death of the Messiah,* 34.
[673] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (London: SCM Press), 1959, 79.
[674] Baker and Green, 32f. See 1 Corinthians 1:18-31.

adjudicating the ongoing work of God's Spirit, the presence of whom is the sign of the new covenant.'[675] Cruciform discipleship cannot be a spectator sport, it can only be participatory: participation 'in the event that brought about the new covenant and created the new-covenant people'[676] that is a dying and rising with Christ in baptism; and a 're-living of [Jesus'] story in new ways' in disciples' own situations:[677] a daily living out of their baptism by daily taking up of their own cross and following Christ.[678]

Self-denial:

The significance of self-denial in this pattern requires particular attention as the order of the pattern which Gorman has identified is significant: self-denial, hospitality, service. It is possible to exercise hospitality and service without self-denial, just as it is possible to engage in worship and mission in the life of the church without self-denial of the kind that it exemplified by Christ and expected of his disciples. Perhaps this was what was going on at Hope Street or why whatever they did appeared to 'make no difference'. Christians do not have a monopoly on hospitality to the marginalised or service, but what IS unique is the way Christ calls them to do these: by way of the cross as a community 'grounded in the cross.'[679]

This way of discipleship has been strongly expressed: for example, Marcus has called it a 'living death',[680] and Bonhoeffer states that 'When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die',[681] going on to suggest that:

> In fact every command of Jesus is a call to die, with all our affections and lusts. But we do not want to die, and therefore Jesus Christ and his call are necessarily our death as well as our life. The call to discipleship, the baptism in the name of Jesus Christ means both death and life. The call of Christ, his baptism, sets the Christian in the middle of the daily arena against sin and the devil. Every day he encounters new temptations, and every day he must suffer anew for Jesus Christ's sake.[682]

He goes as far as to suggest that if disciples 'refuse' to take up their cross and to 'submit to suffering and rejection' at the hands of others, 'we forfeit our fellowship with Christ and have

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[675] Gorman, *Death of the Messiah,* 56.
[676] *Ibid,* 77.
[677] *Ibid,* 88.
[678] Luke 9:23.
[679] Gorman, *Death of the Messiah,* 56.
[680] Joel Marcus, *Mark 8-16.* AB 27a. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 624, quoted in Gorman, *Death of the Messiah,* 88.
[681] Bonhoeffer, 79.
[682] Bonhoeffer, 79.

ceased to follow him.'[683] Similarly, Williams suggests that baptism should come with 'some health warnings attached to it: 'If you take this step, if you go into these depths, it will be transfiguring, exhilarating, life-giving and very, very dangerous.''[684]

Jinkins identifies in both meanings of denial a 'handing over to death': denial as self-denial is understood as 'putting aside one's own interests in order to follow the messiah'; while denial as betrayal is understood as 'putting one's interest in survival above one's loyalty to and love for the messiah' (as in Bonhoeffer's refusal of disciples to take up their cross). Therefore death is both the 'crucible of discipleship [and] the paradox of redemption', referencing Mark 8:34-35 and suggesting that:

> The rendering of our lives toward death as the loss of existence is the supreme test of existence as disciples, those called to follow the messiah. The disciple is the one who looks death in the face.[685]

He goes on to paint a vivid picture of the effect of baptism and its relationship with death:

> We are soaked to the skin in the death of Christ. Our union with Christ drips from us. We never "get over" this immersion; this drowning in Christ's death marks us daily; it marks us out, "names" us to the world and to one another as "children of God"; we are shipwrecked, run aground on the death of Christ; we trail wet footprints of this drenching wherever we go; we never dry off.[686]

Jinkins argues that this baptismal drenching in the death of Christ is not just individual but also corporate, as the church 'we' participate together in the death of Christ as the church's own 'vocation issues from the baptismal fount':[687] marking the beginning of a new life (its function); and also revealing its form. Again, this emphasises the need of self-denial: the only way the church can live together truly as the body of Christ is as each member of the body considers the needs of others and puts their interests before their own.

[683] Bonhoeffer, 80.
[684] Williams, *Being Christian*, 8.
[685] Jinkins, 15-16.
[686] Jinkins, 23.
[687] Jinkins, 30.

kenosis:

Gorman argues that in 1 Corinthians 1, Paul is 'reconstructing the meaning of God's essential attributes and thus the meaning of divinity itself' and that he does something 'very similar' in Philippians 2:

> Like the wisdom of God and the power of God, so the very form of God is displayed for Paul on the cross by the one who was and is equal to God. The story of Christ in [Philippians] 2:6-8 show us that kenosis – specifically cruciform kenosis, or cruciformity – is the essential attribute of God while at the same time, paradoxically, being the expression of divine freedom (parallel to Paul and his apostleship/kenosis/freedom, according to 1 Thessalonians 2 and 1 Corinthians 9).[688]

Gorman argues that kenosis 'does not mean Christ's emptying himself of his divinity (or of anything else), but rather is Christ's *exercising* his divinity, his equality with God.'[689] Jesus remains divine and reveals it in his emptying, as a leaving behind: a letting go and revealing of the nature of God which is one of humility. He also argues that 'cruciformity is the character of God' as 'God's will and person are known through the cross of Jesus the Messiah and Lord.'[690] It is important to note the distinction between 'cruciform' and 'crucified': Paul knew a cruciform God, not a crucified God.[691]

It is hard to be humble when you are afraid of losing something, or letting go of something, especially if this is somehow tied to your identity. In his example, Christ had nothing to fear for in him all things were created and hold together.[692] In Christ, through baptism, disciples have nothing to fear in letting go of, or losing, something (in this context closing a church) because their primary identity is in Christ, not a building. Therefore, disciples who follow the example of Christ reveal their identity as those who are 'in Christ' when they do the same; and if this is the way Christ reveals the nature of God, it is the way disciples do too.

Hogan also points to Philippians 2:6-11 suggesting that 'Paul came to construe the very life of Jesus Christ as a form or pattern of life'[693] and describes this pattern as one 'motion' in three parts which are 'expressive of the loving relationship between God and us': self-emptying or

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[688] Gorman, *Inhabiting*, 27.
[689] *Ibid,* 28.
[690] Gorman, *Cruciformity,* 18. See also *Inhabiting,* 1f.
[691] *Gorman, Cruciformity,* 17.
[692] Colossians 1:16-17.
[693] Hogan, 4.

kenosis [1]*;* Christ-with-us or *enosis* [2]; and transformative divine unity or *theosis* [3].[694] Similar to Gorman, Hogan sees this passage as providing a 'fundamental key to understanding all Christian experience, and a critical lens of interpretation for all aspects of life',[695] considering this as 'shorthand for these kinds of moments we share with God: emptying or suffering moments; experience of God-with-us in creation and people; and moments of experience of unity with the divine.'[696] Hogan's three-part motion seems more abstract and reflective of God's action in Christ, linked more specifically to a spirituality of suffering rather than the general pattern of discipleship that is seen in Gorman, and therefore less helpful regarding decision-making. However, alongside Gorman's model Hogan gives a *telos* for discipleship: the movement of 'transformative divine unity' or *theosis,* which is less obvious in Gorman's pattern.

9.4.3 The Form and Function of Discipleship

Returning to Brueggemann's exploring of the relationship between form and function, he suggests that the form of the 'regularized speech activity' of the Psalms of Lament both enhances and limits the experience of those that suffer.[697] Similarly, the form of baptism enhances and limits the experience of baptism: enhancing the experience 'so that dimensions of it are not lost' and limiting it 'so that some dimensions are denied their legitimacy.'[698] Therefore, argues Brueggemann, the 'function of the form is definitional' as it 'tells the experiencer the shape of the experience which it is legitimate to experience.'[699] One difference between the Psalms and baptism is that the definitional form of baptism is expressed not just in the words of the liturgy but also in its drama, with both needing to work together to fully recognise its form and function.[700] Brueggemann goes on to suggest that the function of the form is:

[694] Hogan*,* 35.
[695] Hogan, 4.
[696] Hogan, 36.
[697] Brueggemann, 'Formfulness of Grief', 265.
[698] *Ibid*, 265.
[699] *Ibid*, 265.
[700] This is a challenge with infant and non-immersive baptism: how is dying and rising with Christ reflected in the drama of the liturgy as well as its words?

> (a) to give a new definition to the situation and (b) to get some action which is hoped for because of this peculiar definitional world. The form not only describes what is, but articulates what is expected and insisted upon.[701]

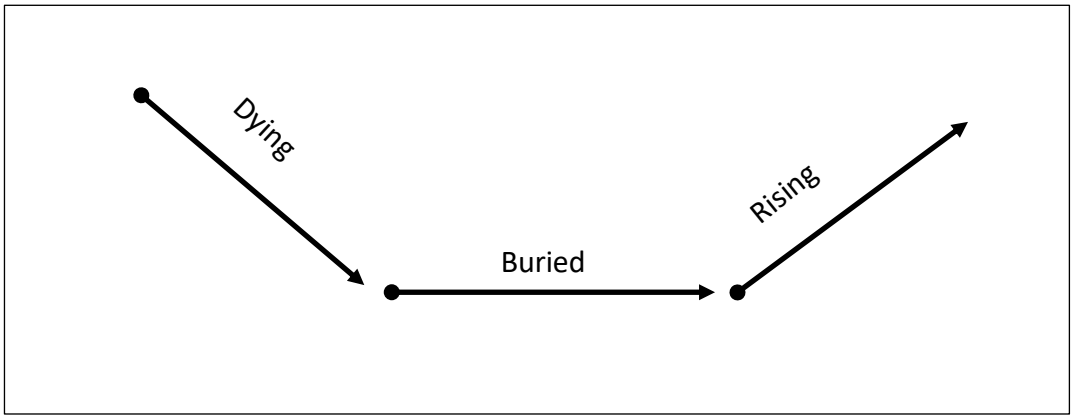
Bonhoeffer speaks of 'form' in relation to baptism, suggesting that in 'baptism the form of Christ's death is impressed upon his own' which results in also sharing 'the glory of his resurrection.'[702] If the 'source and the shape of our salvation'[703] is the cross, and if baptism is derivative of Christ's work on the cross, it follows that the 'source and shape' of discipleship given in baptism is the form of the movement of dying and rising with Christ. Therefore, its function is to define the identity of those who are baptised, as well as the collective identity of the church as the community of those who live in Christ. It also serves to help the baptised navigate the world from the perspective of being 'in Christ', defining a distinctive alternative perspective of the world from that of the secular age, and the way the baptised are to live in the world: that which is 'expected and insisted upon' by Christ in what it means to follow him.

9.4.4 The Shape of Discipleship

As noted in the previous chapter, this form is distinctively cruciform: it cannot avoid death/dying as it is derivative of the cross and the doctrine of atonement. However, if discipleship takes the form of baptism it is also distinctively resurrectiform: embracing resurrection equally alongside death/dying as symbolic of the new life of the baptised. Therefore, the resulting shape of discipleship and the ministry of the church is both cross **and** resurrection always held together, symbolised in baptism by the movement of going into, under, and rising from the water; and most clearly expressed in baptism by the movement shown in **figure 5** below.[704]

[701] Brueggemann, 'Formfulness of Grief', 266.
[702] Bonhoeffer, 273.
[703] Gorman, *Apostle*, 585.
[704] This is in contrast to Anderson's use of baptism to recover 'a framework for a Christian ethic and a pattern of Christian discipleship' which is shaped by the baptismal renunciations and affirmations. Anderson, E. Byron 'Apotaxis and Ethics', *Studia Liturgica 42* (2012) 197-216, 197.

Figure 5: The Movement of Baptism



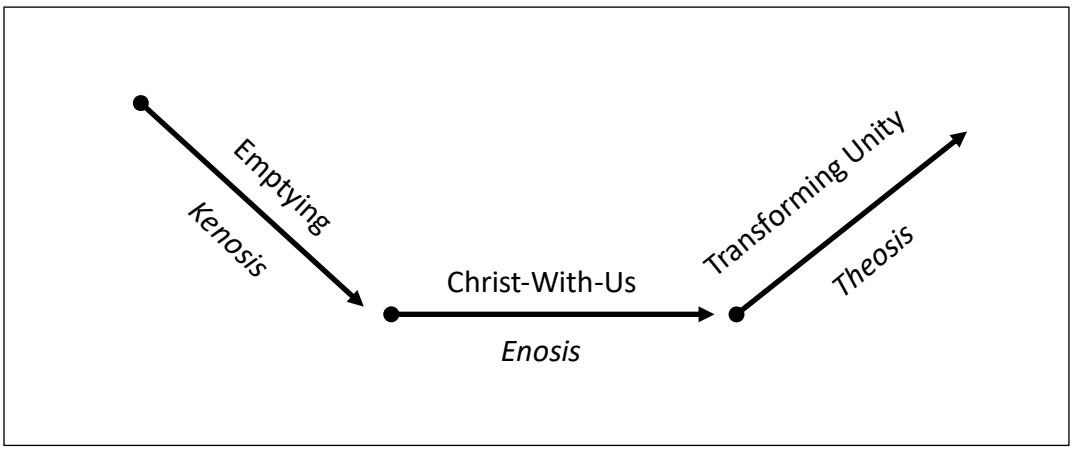
To focus solely on the cruciform would be no different to Kübler-Ross's movement towards acceptance of death/dying, with death being the end and nothing beyond. Baptism places dying in and with Christ firmly at the start of the Christian life which is carried through into resurrection in this life as well as resurrection as an eschatological hope.

I have struggled to find an appropriate term to describe this *movement* of death **and** resurrection. Plass goes some way to express this when he talks of 'the death and resurrection of Jesus as a living, divine, working mechanism in our own lives.'[705] However, while 'working mechanism' describes well the movement of dying and rising, holding them together; it is not the most helpful language as it implies something that is mechanical and therefore potentially formulaic.

Hogan illustrates the same 'motion' which she finds in Philippians 2:6-11. This movement describes the incarnational moment, of God breaking into the present in the coming of Christ, with death and resurrection implied in the central 'Christ-With-Us' section as seen in **figure 6** below.

[705] Adrian Plass, *Bacon Sandwiches and Salvation: An A-Z of the Christian Life*,(London: Authentic Media, 2007), 164f. Quoted in Tom Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (London: SPCK, 2007), 208.

Figure 6: Hogan's Movement From Philippians 2:6-11[706]



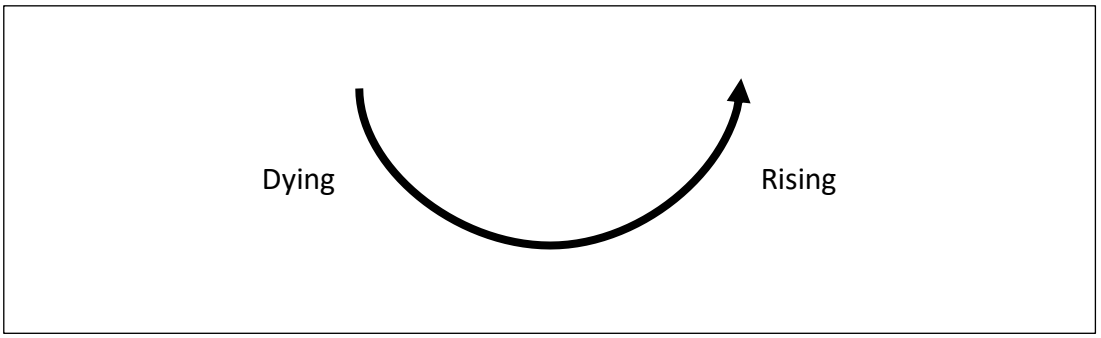
This is mindful of what Christ has done *for* those who are baptised which is echoed in the pre-baptism words in the Methodist liturgy.[707] Like Hogan's model, these words are essentially imitatory rather than participatory, with the stress of imitation being on the baptised's love imitating God's love based on 1 John 4:19, rather than on dying/rising with Christ.

Just as Christ shares our human nature in the incarnational movement; in the baptismal movement (**figure 5**) those who are baptised become 'like Christ' in his death and resurrection. It represents an encounter with God, places the baptised into God's kingdom, and is a movement which the 'dominant culture' seeks to avoid in the embracing of death.

However, in describing the stages of baptism, **figure 5** draws attention to the negative connotations of a 'mechanism' as something taken apart to examine the parts individually. While I have paid attention to death/dying as separate to resurrection, they also need to be seen as a whole, for this movement only comes when death and resurrection are held together. In putting them back together I see a fluid movement which emphasises the continuous momentum of dying **and** rising, represented in **figure 7** below.

[706] Hogan, 35.
[707] *MWB,* 67. See chapter 7.2.1.

Figure 7: The Fluid Movement of Baptism



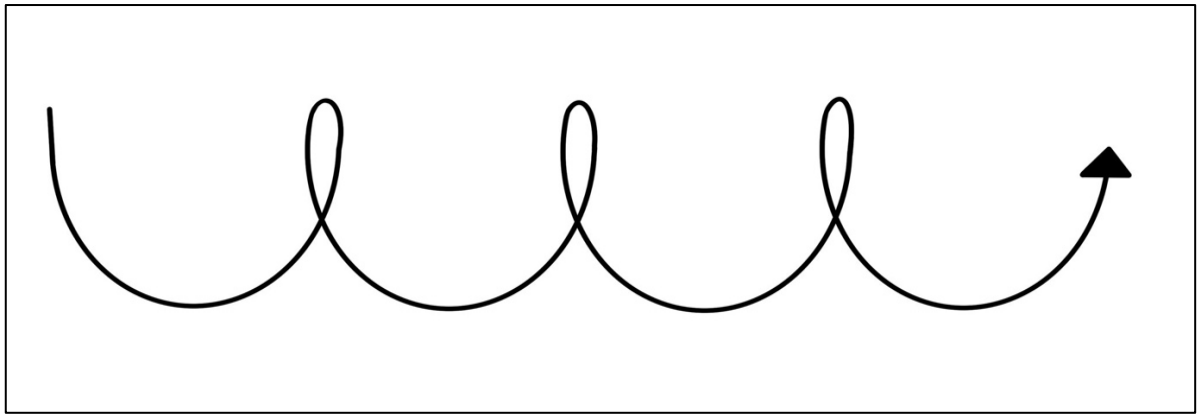
Once the baptised die with Christ, they also rise with Christ: the two are inseparable in a counter-cultural movement which is the same movement of selling all you have, giving to the poor and following Christ.[708] Bonhoeffer connects the "follow me" call of Jesus in the gospels with baptism in Paul's epistles,[709] suggesting that following Jesus was 'no less final and unrepeatable' during his earthly life than the act of baptism:

> when [people] followed him they died to their previous life. That is why he expected them to leave all that they had. The irrevocable nature of the decision was thus put beyond all doubt. But it also showed how complete and entire was the gift they had received from their Lord.[710]

Therefore, this fluid movement of baptism also becomes the movement and shape of discipleship and ministry. However, it is still unsatisfactory. After the definitional experience at baptism, it becomes a perpetual movement of dying and rising, of sacrifice and self-denial, which is reflective of daily taking up one's cross and following Christ.[711] While Hogan suggests an upward 'helix or spiral' as the shape of her movement,[712] I have given it a forward movement representing a movement of time rather than an upwards movement into space symbolic of a rise to heaven, as seen in **Figure 8** below.

[708] Mark 10:17-21.
[709] Bonhoeffer, 206
[710] Bonhoeffer, 210.
[711] Luke 9:23.
[712] Hogan, 42.

Figure 8: The Forward Movement of Discipleship[713]



Brueggemann speaks of the hard 'work of relinquishment',[714] recognising that our context is an immanent culture that 'endlessly reminds us "Be very afraid." Be afraid of relinquishing this failed world, because there is no other', whereas 'honest lament … knows that relinquishment positions us to receive.'[715] In dying with Christ, life is relinquished in order to receive [new, abundant, eternal] life. Just as the rich man[716] was called to relinquish his earthly wealth in order to inherit eternal 'wealth' by following Christ, the daily taking up of one's cross is reflected in the many relinquishments that are made in order to live and reveal the counter-cultural life of the kingdom of God, expressed by the repeated pattern of dying and rising in **Figure 8** above.

This 'form' is hard to see and relate to in the predominance of infant baptism: hard to see as water is administered rather than immersed in; hard to relate to as it is unrememberable for the baptised due to age. It is dependent upon these children being actively nurtured within the shape of their baptism, which requires the life of the church to be also shaped by this movement so that it can nurture both children and their parents in this way of life. Re-connecting the two sacraments of baptism and Communion may go some way to help.[717] Just as dying and rising need to be held together, the two sacraments also need to be held together as part of a greater whole with this pattern of dying and rising with Christ being remembered at the celebration of Communion. Paying attention to confession and

[713] Image created by Hayley James.
[714] Walter Brueggemann, *Reality, Grief, Hope* (*G*rand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 88.
[715] *Ibid,* 88.
[716] Mark 10:17-21.
[717] Bonhoeffer, 215.

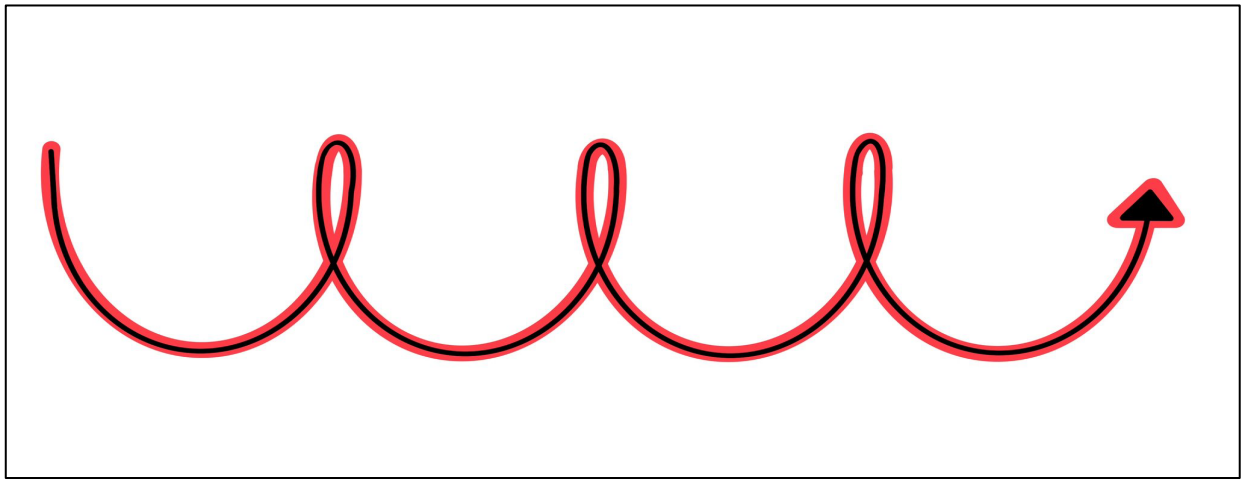
absolution in the liturgy is another expression of this movement with confession symbolising the relinquishment of sin, enabling the receiving of forgiveness and the taking up of a new beginning.

Perhaps a better term to describe this movement of dying and rising and what it represents is 'theotic', from Gorman's definition of theosis:

> Theosis is transformative participation in the kenotic, cruciform character of God through Spirit-enabled conformity to the incarnate, cruciform, and resurrected/glorified Christ.[718]

Gorman here combines both the baptism movement (**figure 5**) and Hogan's model (**figure 6**), noting that for Gorman theosis encompasses the whole of Hogan's three movements rather than just one part of it. Baptism, along with Communion, gives this theotic way of life or 'theotic spirituality' its distinct form which is thoroughly participative, and which is best depicted in the fifth model in **figure 9** below.

Figure 9: The Theotic Forward Movement of Discipleship[719]



Building on **figure 8**, the addition of the red line indicates Christ's dying and rising which the baptised participate in (symbolised by the black line) and the ongoing presence of Christ in the ongoing dying and rising of discipleship. This does not mean that Christ dies over and over, just as the baptised are not baptised over and over, but rather indicates Christ's promise to be present with his disciples[720] as they live out this movement in their daily

[718] Gorman, *Inhabiting*, 7.
[719] Image created by Hayley James.
[720] For example, John 14:3 and Matthew 28:20.

discipleship which started, symbolically, at baptism (the first loop). Another way of depicting this could be to use a double helix. However, the twisting ladder of this helix implies that the life of the baptised and of Christ are in parallel to each other, joined only at the fixed rungs.

9.5 A Framework for Decision-making

In the closing of a church there is a parallel to the story of the rich man[721] in the movement of self-denial/emptying, hospitality and service. The man is sad 'because he had great wealth' and Jesus recognises how hard it is 'for the rich to enter the kingdom of God.'[722] This finds some resonance with the resistance to close churches which could be seen as representing the man's wealth as both (building and wealth) are resources of immanence. The rich man's story reminds us that acceptance of loss, of 'selling everything', is the beginning of Christian discipleship not something that is worked towards; just as dying and rising with Christ in baptism symbolises an acceptance of death/dying at the beginning of new life in Christ (in contrast to Kübler-Ross). The neglect of the emphasis of dying and rising with Christ in the baptismal liturgy therefore continues to do the church, as well as baptised individuals, a disservice in that it fails to provide a framework for them to face loss, embrace a counter-cultural way of life,[723] and enable encounter with God. In contrast I have argued participation in the death and resurrection of Christ is the shape and framework for discipleship, and therefore it is also the framework for decision-making.

How then is the integrity of the life of the baptised to be maintained in its decision-making? Gorman suggests a pattern based on 'Paul's master story of the cross'[724] in Philippians 2:6-11, arguing that:

[721] Mark 10:17-27.
[722] Mark 10:22-23.
[723] Meadows, *Remembering our Baptism,* Chapter 2: suggests that in a post-Christendom world, remembering our baptism involves adopting a way of life that is 'increasingly at odds with the prevailing culture.'
[724] Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 88. Gorman acknowledges that this hymn 'is possibly not Paul's original work but his adaptation of an early hymn.'

> The patterns of the cross narrated in this hymn are reflected in – and seem in fact to have shaped – his understanding of faith, hope, power, and especially love, though none of these terms appears in the text of the hymn. Paul not only sees Jesus in this foundational hymnic text, he sees also himself and every believing individual and community. *For Paul, to be in Christ is to be a living exegesis of this narrative of Christ, a new performance of the original drama of exaltation following humiliation, of humiliation as the voluntary renunciation of rights and selfish gain in order to serve and obey*.[725]

In particular, Gorman identifies a pattern in verses 6-8 which 'involves the possession of status ("though being in the form of God," v6a); *renunciation*, or refusal to exploit the status for selfish gain ("did not consider his equality with God as something to be exploited for his own advantage," v.6b); and *abasement*, or voluntary self-humbling ("emptied himself by taking the form of a slave […] humbled himself" vv7-8a)'[726] which he abbreviates as 'a kind of formula', expressed in the following ways:

> Although [*x*], not [*y*] but [*z*]
>
> Although [*status*], not [*selfishness*] but [*self-abasement/slavery*].
>
> Although [*equal with God*], not [*selfish exploitation*] but [*self-emptying slavery in incarnation and self-humbling obedience in death*.][727]

Gorman sees this as not just a formula of Christ's participation with us, but also a model on which 'our' participation in Christ is dependent and from which it derives[728] and argues that 'the patterns of the cross found in this hymn echo throughout Philippians and the entire Pauline corpus.'[729] Gorman's 'formula' finds similarity in Root's 'practical theology of the cross' which is formed around the framework of 'possibility-through-nothingness'[730] as participation in Christ happens 'only through a death-to-life, life-through-death paradigm of divine action.'[731] Root suggests that:

[725]Gorman, *Cruciformity,* 92.
[726] *Ibid,* 90f.
[727] *Ibid,* 91.
[728] Gorman, 'Participation and Ministerial Integrity in the Letters of Paul', in Presian R. Burroughs (ed.), *Practicing with Paul* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2008), 1-14, 3.
[729] Gorman, *Cruciformity,* 91.
[730] Root, *Christopraxis*, 148.
[731] *Ibid,* 73.

> From the level of the theology of the cross, from its very foolishness, we can see that all practice, all forms of action, that do not go through death possess no transformative (soteriological) power. Practice itself must take on this paradigm (hence the reason baptism and communion remain central for Paul and Luther, as they are practices that exist in death-to-life paradigm.)[732]

Root describes the heart of his work as reframing Osmer's 'normative' question of '*what ought to be happening?'*[733] in a revelatory rather than an ethical frame, which asks:

> *What ought to be happening (what ways should we perceive of reality, ourselves, the church, our practice, and conceptions of God) now that God has encountered us? What ought to happen now that we have experienced the event of God's encounter?*[734]

This also points to the additional exegetical questions in chapter 7.3 above. If the purpose of Paul's letters generally 'is not to teach theology but to mould behaviour, to affirm – or more often – to alter patterns of living, patterns of experience',[735] how might this 'formula' help shape the pattern of behaviour and decision-making of a church? Firstly, this 'formula' can be applied to individual discipleship, as given in the example of the rich man:

> Although *rich* [x: status]
>
> Not *keeping his wealth* [not y: selfishness]
>
> But *selling all he has and following Christ* [but z: self-emptying slavery in incarnation and self-humbling obedience in death.]

If the experience of Christ is one in which the baptised community is to share, the 'formula' could also be applied as follows in the context of shared discipleship and collective decision-making:

---

[732] Root, *Christopraxis,* 33. Pannenberg says, that 'it has been said that Luther's theology of baptism was the concrete form of his doctrine on justification by faith.' Pannenberg, 82.
[733] Richard R. Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 4.
[734] Root, *Christopraxis,* 26.
[735] Gorman, *Cruciformity,* 4.

> Although *members (of the church council and trustees of the church)* [x: status],
>
> not *seeking to keep the church open for our own benefit* [not y: selfishness]
>
> but rather *selling everything we have in order to follow and serve Christ*[736] [but z: self-emptying slavery in incarnation and self-humbling obedience in death.]
>
> or:
>
> but rather *willing to inconvenience ourselves for the sake of enabling others to find Christ.* [but z: self-emptying]

Either way, this movement requires humility and obedience, for

> the church is the community of sacrament only and strictly in obedience to Christ, who is its head, and in participation in His body by the event of the act of the Holy Spirit, and only insofar as its *whole* life is a dominically ordained sign to the world of the gospel of Christ.[737]

It requires a confidence in one's identity 'in Christ' in order for the trinity of decision-making (money, buildings and people), to be seen in their appropriate place: confidence both in their identity as the church and their identity as disciples. It requires trust in the apparent 'foolishness' and 'weakness' of God:[738] a trust that as someone/the church descends, God will raise them up; and it requires a desiring of the will of God that, in self-emptying, self-humbling obedience, there is a fulfilling of God's purposes and not one's own. It is a dying that cannot plan for its own resurrection, which is the ultimate expression of trust in God.

In connecting this kenotic, self-emptying, nature with Jesus' baptism, Peterson argues that 'all Christian baptisms are eschatological' in the 'willingness of Christians to offer their lives back to God in service to God's kingdom.'[739] He goes on to suggest that:

> All baptisms are a drowning and death to an idolatrous self. This mindset opens persons up to ministry in the church for the sake of the world, not offering comfortable or calculated compassion, but rather a willingness to lay down one's life in love and service to others, especially the lost, broken, and marginalized.[740]

---

[736] Echoing Jesus' instruction to his disciples in Mark 8:34-35.
[737] Greggs, *Dogmatic Ecclesiology,* 149.
[738] 1 Corinthians 1:21-31.
[739] Brent D. Peterson, 'Baptism and Eschatology', in Powers (ed.), chapter 14.
[740] *Ibid.*

This enables the baptised to 'live in the eschatological tension of the *already* present kingdom while also anticipating the kingdom of God *that will come* in fullness.'[741]

9.5.1 The Framework in Practice

Applying the theological framework in this way, begins to address the 'implications' in the case study data analysis, chapter 4 above. The framework itself addresses the issues raised regarding the understanding of baptism (4.4) and the language of death/dying (4.5). The application of and engagement with the framework addresses: the implications related to decision-making (4.1) in holding the church together even (or especially) when there are contrary views and providing a means to weigh up decisions through the underlying principle of baptism and dying/rising with Christ; the lack of articulated theology (4.3) by giving a starting point and context for people to talk about God, the nature of faith and their own experience of God, and to (re)discover their identity as the church and as disciples; and mission (4.2) as in light of the above an understanding of God's mission and their/the church's involvement in it should follow in response.

This is all dependent on the nature of leadership (4.6) to work creatively and sensitively with the framework and congregations. It will necessitate teaching, preaching, bible study, and honest conversation so the whole church can understand baptism and its significance; and therefore the nature of discipleship. And it requires two specific tasks: firstly, just getting the congregation talking about baptism; and secondly, reflecting more deeply on it in order to embody it and live it.

9.5.2 A Practical Theology of Decision-Making

A starting point would be to begin with experience and focus on the first two of the exegetical questions from chapter 7.3:

1. What did it mean: that I was brought to the church to be baptised?
2. What does it mean: that I have been baptised?

Another starting point for the conversation could be the positioning of the font in the church: Why is it where it is? What does its location or its size say about the importance of baptism to the church? What if it were moved to a more prominent location? Could it be placed

[741] Peterson, in Powers (ed.), chapter 14.

centrally so that everything has to be navigated around it? What is its relationship with the Communion table?

Further questions to be explored include:

3. In the light of my baptism, how do I understand who I am/*who we are* as the church in this place?
4. If I/*we* took my/*our* baptism seriously, how would my life/*our life together* be different?

Turning to scripture and the tradition of the church, additional questions include: [742]

5. What did baptism mean: in the New Testament?
6. What does baptism mean: in the liturgy and life of the church today?
7. What is baptism revealing about the nature of God, God's mission and God's involvement in your life/the church/the world?

In the light of this,

8. What is our identity 'in Christ'?
9. What does it mean to be a disciple of Christ?
10. How will our lives be different?

Similarly, Meadows suggests that remembering our baptism in relation to renewal and mission means beginning with discipleship so that we are driven by different questions rather than starting with questions of church structures in relation to renewal and questions of strategy in relation to mission. He suggests that if we start with discipleship, the questions we are driven with are:

> What kind of people do we want to be?
> What kind of witnesses do we want to be?[743]

However, starting with these questions without a context, continues the status-quo of decision-making without anything to hold together the responses. The questions that need to be asked are:

11. What kind of people is *God calling* us to be?
12. What kind of witnesses does *God need* us to be?

[742] In some contexts, this second set of questions beginning with scripture could be explored first.
[743] Meadows, *Remembering our Baptism,* chapter 10.

Framed in this way, these questions remind that this is a prayerful task as it is one of discernment: not discerning what the right or most reasonable thing is to do, but discerning what God is calling 'us' to do at this time in this place.

Once these questions have been satisfactorily explored, it provides a context to ask the further questions:

13. What are the implications for the church in this place?
14. How do we approach the future of this church?
15. What decisions do we need to make about the future of the building?

I envisage this whole conversation taking place alongside teaching and reflection on Philippians 2:6-8 and the application of Gorman's 'formula' above (9.5) and Mark 10:17-45.[744]

These questions are not meant to be exhaustive but demonstrate a starting point in the absence of theology in the decision-making of a church. If Stookey is right in his belief that the renewal and recovery of baptism 'is nothing less than the work of total theological renewal',[745] such an exploration of baptism will enable the tending of the vision of God in all its fullness, noted above in 9.1.5, whatever the church decides to do. On one level, reflecting on baptism has nothing to do with any decision-making, but becomes a natural part of church life and discipleship which may include regular use of a liturgy for the renewal or reaffirmation of baptism.

Chapter 4.7 asked the question 'what needs to be done differently to break this cycle of closure?' As well as bringing theology into the forefront of decision-making, this framework enables hope to be given to the church of a new life beyond church closure, should that be the decision that is reached. The questions should lead to a living-out of baptism and therefore enable a different way of being church, whether that is in the existing building, a new place of worship, or a new context for mission and to enable a church closure to open up possibilities of new life in the future.

[744] Other helpful passages include Matthew 3:13-17; Matthew 26:36-46;; Luke 9:21-26.
[745] Laurence Hull Stookey, *Baptism: Christ's Act in the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982), 135.

Similarly, focussing on baptism in the way I am proposing moves away from decision-making being primarily about what the individual or church needs to 'do' which has been the emphasis of Methodist discipleship expressed in the *Methodist Way of Life* and *Our Calling,* and focuses instead on who they need to 'become' and 'be' which must then follow through, to maintain integrity, into what needs to be done through wholistic discipleship: it is not either/or. This is also in contrast to Atkins' short publication on discipleship[746] which reads as helping the church think about its future institutional shape with discipleship as secondary, rather than discipleship driving the institutional shape, and talks of what 'we' want to see in the church rather than focusing on what God has called/is calling the church to be.

As set out above, this conversation is not one to be hurried, therefore to have it before the need to make urgent decisions about the building would be preferable. It is a conversation that I would hope will help in all its decision-making in different ways as it enables the church to have a shared basis for decision-making arising out of a shared experience, as well as in its thinking through what it means to be disciples of Christ today. At the very least it may enable difficult conversations around closure to be less contentious.

9.6 In Conclusion

Root focuses on the divine action in the lived experiences of people and seeks to honour these as 'real encounters with the Spirit of Jesus Christ' which Practical Theology has not always done.[747] These experiences of 'divine action' articulated by those he interviewed are the basis for his 'practical theology of the cross' while acknowledging that not all people have such experiences of the divine. Although most of my interviewees claimed never to have had a 'life changing experience of God,' each one had the experience of encountering the 'divine action' in baptism, at whatever age it occurred, whether realised or not. Therefore, by focusing on the divine action in the lived experience of baptism and how this shapes, or could shape if taken seriously, the lives of the baptised and the life of the Church, it gives a starting-point for conversations, a shared frame of reference, the possibility of being counter-cultural and a context to begin to expect to experience God's presence.

[746] Martyn Atkins, *Discipleship… and the People Called Methodists* (Peterborough: Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes, 2010).
[747] Root, *Christopraxis,* 51.

Thereby enabling 'faithful participation in God's redemptive practices in, to and for the world.'[748] However, this approach is challenging in a materialistic culture as well as for prosperity theology.

This framework is not an immediate solution or a quick fix to help churches in their decision-making about their future. It is a journey which will only make sense and have meaning if the Church takes baptism seriously and seeks to live in the light of it in the whole of its life. It moves the conversation in the first place away from the trinity of building, money, and people, and towards the identity of the people of God that arises out of their dying and rising with Christ, which continues as they follow Christ daily. Using Gorman's formula from Philippians 2 will only make sense in the wider context of cruciform discipleship and decision-making that is not in isolation from how the church now sees and understands itself in the light of their dying and rising with Christ.

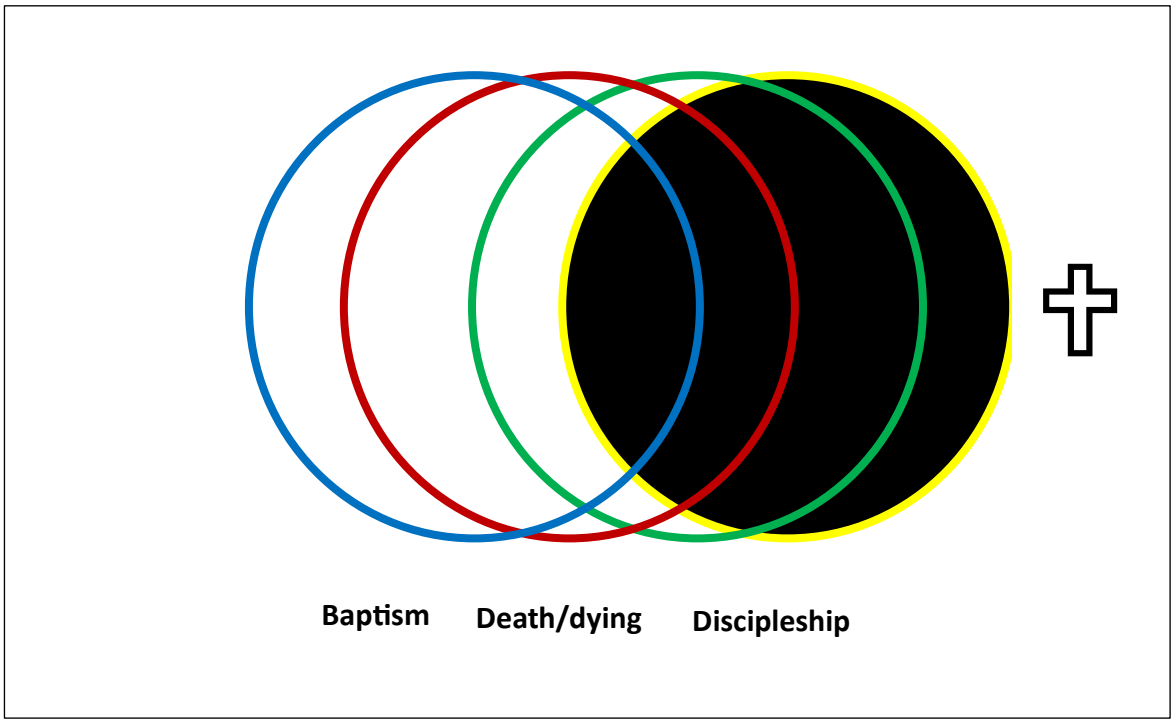
If the ongoing significance of baptism throughout life is taken seriously, rather than as a one-off experience focused on entry into the church, it will have implications for: i) all that the church *is* in terms of its identity; ii) All that the church *does* particularly in terms of its 'way of life': including mission, discipleship, and worship and begins to give the church a language to speak of God and their experience of God; iii) how the church *functions*, including how the church makes decisions. This will also enable the church to become the prophetic people of which Williams speaks, asking of itself: ''Have you forgotten what you're here for?'; 'Have you forgotten the gift God gave you?''[749] I would hope that paying attention to a renewed vision of baptism may give every church member the confidence to ask these questions and to enable each other to more closely follow Christ.

Figure 4 above, with the cross at the centre of the Venn diagram is not wholly satisfactory in describing where I have arrived at as it implies that there are parts of the framework which the cross is not a part of and therefore has no influence over. **Figure 10**, below, describes the journey of discipleship in which all things are working towards being aligned with each other, with Christ represented by the yellow circle which is coloured black to indicate that there is more beyond: the fullness of God therein. But even **Figure 10** is inadequate. While I have identified three different foci to this framework, they are one and the same as baptism,

[748] Swinton and Mowat, 7.
[749] Williams, *Being Christian*, 12.

death/dying, and discipleship are inseparable. In reality it is not so much a framework, but a way or pattern of life shaped by the cross and lived in the power of the resurrection.

Figure 10



Part 4: The Pastoral Response

Chapter 10: Recommendations

In this final chapter, I will suggest steps that the church could take in response to the 'assertive dialogue' of the previous chapter.

Root and Bertrand suggest that the 'cure' for the church's 'crisis' of decline needs to be 'a cure that doesn't depend on the secular age'[750] as they diagnose this crisis as coming from the secular age.[751] Therefore, the first challenge that they suggest for the church is to 'change your mindset.'[752] This is essentially what I am seeking to do in the theological framework and resulting movement of discipleship, by seeing baptism as a counter-cultural response to the context that churches find themselves in and a move from scarcity to abundance; from immanence to transcendence. Focussing on baptism, death/dying and discipleship as they are currently understood, with the same mindset, will not affect change. Unless these three dimensions of the framework, and the framework as a whole, are viewed from a different perspective that is not dependent on cultural expectations or an immanent theology, they will not make a difference. Just as Brueggemann suggests that the recovery of the Psalms of Lament is an 'urgent pastoral task'[753] as it is countercultural in the context of denial of death;[754] the recovery of baptism is a similar urgent pastoral task in the context of decline.

It is with this in mind, that I believe the Methodist Church needs to pay attention to the following in order to develop the 'theotic spirituality' which is expressed in the movement of discipleship.

10.1 A Re-examination of Methodist Sacramental Liturgies

I have suggested that the baptismal movement of dying and rising with Christ represents a countercultural response which provides a contrast between the life and identity of the

[750] Root and Bertrand, 13.
[751] *Ibid*, 6.
[752] *Ibid*, 8.
[753] Brueggemann, *Reality, Grief, Hope,* 84.
[754] *Ibid*, 79.

church, and the dominant cultural context. However, for this to be realised work needs to be done on the church's understanding and practice of baptism in the current context/age, which may require drawing more on the understanding and practice of the first century church rather than that of the post-Constantine era.

The Church needs to re-examine its liturgy in light of the absence of participation in the death and resurrection of Christ in its current baptismal liturgy and practice. I have argued that the emphasis in the current baptismal liturgy is on what God has done *for* us rather than what God is doing *in* us. Owens reminds us that the Methodist revival of the Wesley's was sacramental as much as it was evangelical,[755] with sacramental in that context referring to Communion rather than baptism. However, it seems that the Church's understanding and theology of baptism is still wedded to the context of Christendom and has led to the Church neglecting its significance as well as isolating it from Communion. In a changed and changing context, the Church needs to reconsider Baptism.

Alongside the review of the baptismal liturgy, I suggest that a review of the Communion liturgies needs to follow in light of changes to the baptismal liturgy. If the sacramental is to be taken seriously, both sacraments need to belong together and any liturgy for Communion needs to consider its connection with the sacrament of baptism and vice-versa, making this more explicit and remembering it more intentionally. This will also require a similar review of Confirmation liturgy and practice; a review of the 'Reaffirmation of Baptism' liturgy within the Easter Vigil; the liturgy for 'The Reaffirmation of Baptismal Faith; and a consideration of the meaning of membership.

I believe that this renewed focus will help to challenge the secular mindset in the church and to reset the church's understanding of itself by addressing issues of identity, including: 1) the identity of the baptised as members of the body of Christ; 2) the identity of the church collectively as the body of Christ; 3) how then the people of God are to live and maintain their identity in a secular world while being not of it. This goes some way to describe how the church can begin to become a 'living exegesis of the Gospel,'[756] as Gorman suggests:

[755] L. Roger Owens, *The Shape of Participation* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2010), Kindle Version, 6.
[756] Gorman, *Becoming*, 297.

> the message and the people, the gospel and the church, are inseparable; the witness to the reality of transformation through death and resurrection is the existence of a transformed and being-transformed people.[757]

The lack of an appropriate sacramental foundation puts the church's distinctiveness at risk in relation to other communities, as noted in chapter 7. It also denies individuals, and the church as a community, of some of the vocabulary necessary to help them talk about their faith and experience of God. However, addressing the sacramental foundation of the church will require a re-examination of that which is built upon it, as previously noted.[758]

10.2 An Underlying Principle

Alongside a renewal of its sacramental liturgies, the church needs to consider the implications of a sacramental way of life for its whole life of discipleship and ministry as derived from what I have termed a 'theotic spirituality' which includes the church considering its 'underlying principle.' Such a principle, and all it represents as articulated in this thesis, will help to examine, evaluate, and give focus to all that the church is and does, including its decision-making and planning for the future.

This would include reviewing the *Methodist Way of Life* and *Our Calling*. As noted, the *Methodist Way of Life* does not refer to the sacraments. The section on worship makes no mention of sacramental worship, speaking only of 'reading the bible, participating in prayer, and singing and saying words together.'[759] I am not suggesting that the *Methodist Way of Life* needs to simply slip the sacraments in, adding them alongside the 'twelve things' that the church does both individually and together[760] to make thirteen. Rather, discipleship as dying and rising with Christ as articulated here needs to be the underlying principle that makes sense of all twelve themes, and makes sense of all that the church is, does, and seeks to be as it follows Christ.

It needs to infiltrate every aspect of church life, leading to questions similar to question 13 asked in chapter 9.5.2 such as: what does dying and rising with Christ mean in this finance meeting? this property meeting? How does it shape our pastoral care? Affect the stationing

[757] Gorman, *Becoming,* 299.
[758] Stookey, 135.
[759] https://www.methodist.org.uk/our-faith/a-methodist-way-of-life/worship/ [accessed 17/05/2023].
[760] https://www.methodist.org.uk/our-faith/a-methodist-way-of-life/ [accessed 17/05/2023].

of ministers? Influence the church's evangelism strategies? Addressing these kinds of questions may also enable 'business' meetings to become transformative 'means of grace'.

10.3 Improving Theological Literacy and Reflection

Seeking to discern the theology in the decision-making of these churches and finding none has raised the challenge of how churches can be enabled to engage in theological reflection to help not just with church closure, but to discern the presence of God and to be the body of Christ in a changing context. Re-examining the liturgy alone is not sufficient. A sacramental approach to theological reflection might offer churches like Hope Street and Mercy Lane an opportunity to bring theology into the decision-making process to help them discern what God is saying to them. It addresses Collins' criticism of theological models which privilege present and 'critical incidents' failing to connect with the 'eschatological vision of the church'.[761] A sacramental approach would enable the congregation to connect with both the past tradition of the church and its future hope, giving it a framework within which to do so, and to grow their faith and develop their relationship with God in the present. I have illustrated one way in which this might happen in chapter 9.5.2 above.

Attention in particular needs to be paid to resources for appropriate baptismal preparation, follow-up and nurture, not in isolation but as a part of whole-life discipleship; seeing baptism not simply a means to an end, even if those ends are confirmation, membership of the church, or participation in Communion, but as important in and of itself. It will require the church to teach regularly about the meaning and purpose, the form and function, of both sacraments, so that the baptised continue to grow into all the fullness of God, and the church can fulfil its baptismal promise as well as supporting parents and godparents in fulfilling theirs. It also needs to be given significant attention in church membership/confirmation classes.

The conversation about baptism is not just for church members, but also for ministers with their congregations, as well as in staff meetings and similar ministerial groups.

[761] Helen Collins, chapter 2.

10.4 Reinventing the Class Meeting

A reinvention of the class meeting for a new generation of Methodists would provide a context for the improvement of theological literacy and reflection described in 10.3.

The purpose of Wesley's original class meeting was for members to 'watch over one another in love, lest they should make shipwreck of their faith.'[762] On this basis, the original concept of the class meeting is not comparable to most contemporary house groups. The emphasis of the class meeting was corporate accountability: holding one another to account for their faith and for how they work out their salvation in daily life. This included accountability for engaging in the means of grace such as, for example, what they had read or heard in the Scriptures since they last met, whether they had received Holy Communion, and anything that needed to be confessed. In contrast, the emphasis of many contemporary house groups is on bible study and individual spiritual growth which happens to take place in a corporate context.

Connected by a renewed 'underlying principle', reinvented class meetings could be groups in which people can begin to explore their baptism together using the questions in the theological framework, and beyond this to provide a context in which they can continue to explore their experience of God, holding each other to account as disciples of Christ seeking to live out their baptism. This would be more in keeping with Wesley's original purpose of the class meeting and enable members of such groups to begin to articulate their faith and theology. These groups would be open to any who seek to understand and participate in the theotic way of life as articulated in 9.4.4 above and while their primary purpose would not be bible study, such groups may give confidence to, and inspire, those who would not naturally choose to engage in bible study to do so.

The groups will require sensitive leaders who understand the vision for these groups and will ensure that they do not lose their purpose or drift into groups with a different purpose or agenda, who are able to articulate their own experience of God and are seeking to know God more, and who are able to nurture others spiritually. Potentially, these could become the most significant groups within the life of the church.

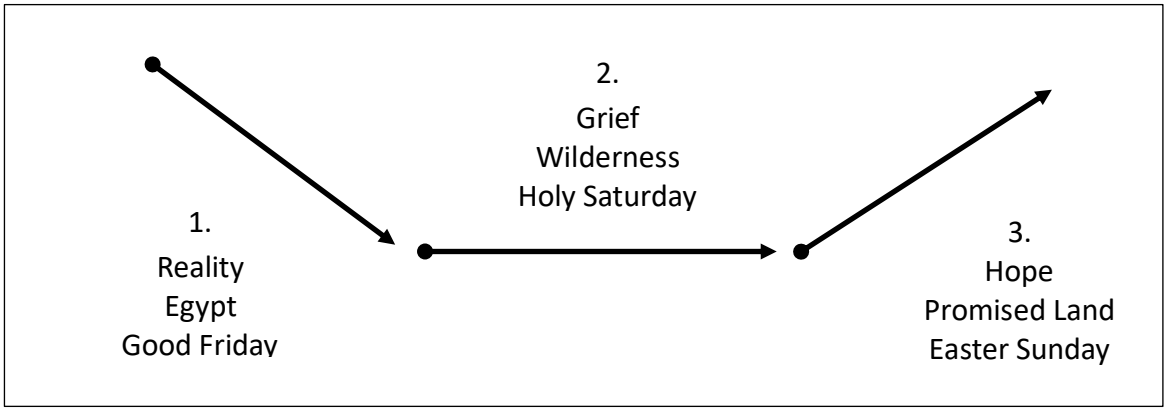
[762] David Lowes Watson, *The Early Class Methodist Class Meeting* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock,1985), 144.

10.5 The Nature of Leadership

The Whiteheads suggest that 'in every age the community of faith must discover the shape of its ministry.'[763] The Methodist Church needs to consider the form and function of the leadership it needs in order to address the issues of decline and church closures; and what shape of ministry is needed for the present age. While leadership shares the same nature as discipleship, the Church needs to ask: what are the characteristics of leaders, both lay and ordained, that will enable disciples to die and rise with Christ? It will require ministers to set the example and, rather than avoid the issue of closure saying, "I didn't come into ministry to close churches", to embrace the issue as they would any other. Focusing on enabling disciples to die and rise with Christ gives a clear focus and aim for leadership, with forming congregations in their discipleship becoming the priority for leadership.

Drawing on Brueggemann, the Church requires prophetic leadership which will help it to embrace its prophetic ministry as noted above.[764] Such leadership will include: helping the church to renew both its baptismal identity and its hope, communicating vision in the midst of despair; inspiring and journeying with the church, energising it and its communities with the 'promise of another time and situation toward which the community of faith may move.'[765] This will require leaders who are confident in their own baptismal identity; clear of what they are working towards; and recognise the nature of their calling to lead in a time of decline and change. The form and function of this leadership is shown in **figure 11**.

Figure 11: The Movement of Leadership



[763] Whitehead, 3.
[764] Chapter 9.1.5 and 9.2.1.
[765] Brueggemann*, Prophetic Imagination,* 3.

Brueggemann's 'three urgent prophetic tasks': reality, grief and hope[766] give focus to the nature of leadership needed, which are reflective of the movement of baptism (**figure 5**). It is leadership that needs to help congregations: face reality, deal with their grief in terms of that which they need to let go of; and find hope. This will require a recovery of biblical/spiritual models of leadership which will open the immanent frame and enable the transcendent to break in; and a questioning of the underlying cultural assumptions in models of leadership borrowed from the world of business. This shape of leadership finds echoes in scripture in the Exodus and the Passion Narratives, as well as in what has been previously said regarding Philippians 2, all of which give leadership examples to be explored further in order to find a new imagination of leadership.

Therefore, it requires leaders who can lead the congregations through this pattern; who are willing to journey with the congregation for as long as it takes; and who are willing to die and rise with Christ with the congregation as this pattern becomes a repeated theotic forward movement of leadership echoing **figure 9**. It will require leaders who will, pastorally and lovingly, bear patiently with congregations through the difficulties of decision-making.

As well as prophetic leadership, it requires collaborative leadership. It is too big a task for one person in a traditional pastoral model of ministry. This was noticeable in Cafferata's research regarding the language of failure used by many of the pastors she interviewed following the closure of a church, particularly in their use of "I": for example, "what "I" failed to do."[767] It, appropriately, requires leaders to ask: what do I need to relinquish in order to receive a collaborative way of leadership? It will require the congregation to similarly ask in relation to their expectations of church leaders: what do we need to relinquish in order to receive a different form of leadership to that which we are used to?

Resurrection cannot be planned for but requires intentionally journeying forwards in trust that God will raise the church. If, as Bolsinger argues, leadership is '*learned in the doing and by reflecting on the doing*',[768] and ministers are avoiding closure, then leadership is not being developed to face the crises which decline and closure bring. All they are doing is managing the situation rather than focussing on 'what *can be* or what *must be.*'[769] Leaders

[766] In Brueggemann, *Reality, Grief, Hope.*
[767] Cafferata, *Last Pastor,* E.G. chapter 8.
[768] Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2015), Kindle Version, 22.
[769] Bolsinger, 21.

need support and training to enable them to understand the cultural context and the nature of the secular age, and to face up to the issues of decline and closure; and they need support in following through with difficult conversations. More will be said about ministerial training in the next section; however this is not just about initial ministerial training but about ongoing training, particularly as ministers change appointments and/or face specific new challenges. For ordained leaders, it also raises issues around stationing and the nature of itinerancy: the current 'crisis' facing the church may require more stable, long-term leadership.

Therefore, attention needs to be paid to the wider issue of leadership: what kind of leaders does the church need? To the practical aspects of leadership: what does the church require of its leaders (both lay and ordained) in the current context of decline? And to the pastoral aspects of leadership: how do we support and resource the leadership the church needs at this time?

It is vital that this movement of leadership is embraced and modelled not just by local church leaders but by all leaders across the whole of the Connexion.

10.6 Training for Ministry

Finally, all of the above will have a bearing on the nature of training for the recognised ministries of the church, in particular ministerial training, but also that of local preachers, worship leaders and local lay pastors. I suggest that just as a new imagination is needed for discipleship and leadership, so there is a need for a new imagination of training for ministry which pays attention in particular to: the nature of the sacraments and issues of identity; the key priorities of leadership, discipleship and mission; the nature of collaborative and prophetic ministry; and the spiritual and emotional resources needed for ministers to function in the contexts they find themselves in. It will require an integrated approach to the curriculum, including as Greggs has raised the issue of derivation, so that subjects are taught in relation to each other. This will also necessitate ensuring that the practicalities of ministry are not divorced from the theology and traditions of the church and vice versa; so ministers are deeply rooted and trained in the skills needed to use theology practically.

All of this needs to be set within the context of a changing world, decline, and the possibility of churches closing: not just the immediate community of the individual congregations. This

will require significant and intentional inclusion of the theology of church closure within the curriculum, and its implications for leadership, discipleship and mission in particular; as well as its impact on subjects such as ecclesiology and in church history. An argument could be made for a module on the theology of church closure to complement a theology of church growth within a course on mission.

Training needs to be realistic to and honest about the contextual reality of the present while at the same time equipping ministers to have the confidence, the theological understanding, and the tools to address these issues not just pragmatically but theologically and hopefully.

Postscript

When I started out on this journey I did not imagine that it would take me to baptism. Along the way it has caused me to reflect on my own baptism, and my own approach to the practice of baptism as an ordained minister which I now believe has been woefully inadequate.

There is space for further research to follow on from this thesis such as: a piece of action research which explores baptism with a congregation to test out my theory concerning baptism and decision-making in the context of closure; an investigation of growing churches to explore how they are growing in the wider context of decline and what attention they pay to baptism; and further work on the nature of ministry and leadership is needed.

I end (adapting Brueggemann) by suggesting that:

> In the end, the matter [of closing churches] *is* a theological one that concerns what kind of will and purpose governs the life of the *church.*[770]

[770] Brueggemann, *Reality, Grief, Hope,* 162. The original quote: 'In the end, however, the matter is a theological one that concerns what kind of will and purpose governs the life of the world.' Emphases added.

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Abbreviations:

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BoO *The Book of Offices* (London: Methodist Publishing House, 1936)

CLP *Called to Love and Praise: A Methodist Conference Statement on the Church* (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 1999)

MSB *The Methodist Service Book* (London: Methodist Publishing House, 1975)

MWB *The Methodist Worship Book (*Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House), 1999,

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The United Methodist Hymnal: Book of United Methodist Worship (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1989)

The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), https://www.cokesbury.com/book-of-discipline-book-of-resolutions-free-versions, [accessed 03/05/2021]

Church of England Liturgical Resources:

The Book of Common Prayer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004)

The Alternative Service Book 1980 (Oxford: Oxford University Press and A. R. Mowbray & Co Ltd, 1980)

Common Worship (London: Church House Publishing, 2006)

Common Worship Christian Initiation (London: Church House Publishing, 2006)

Online resources:

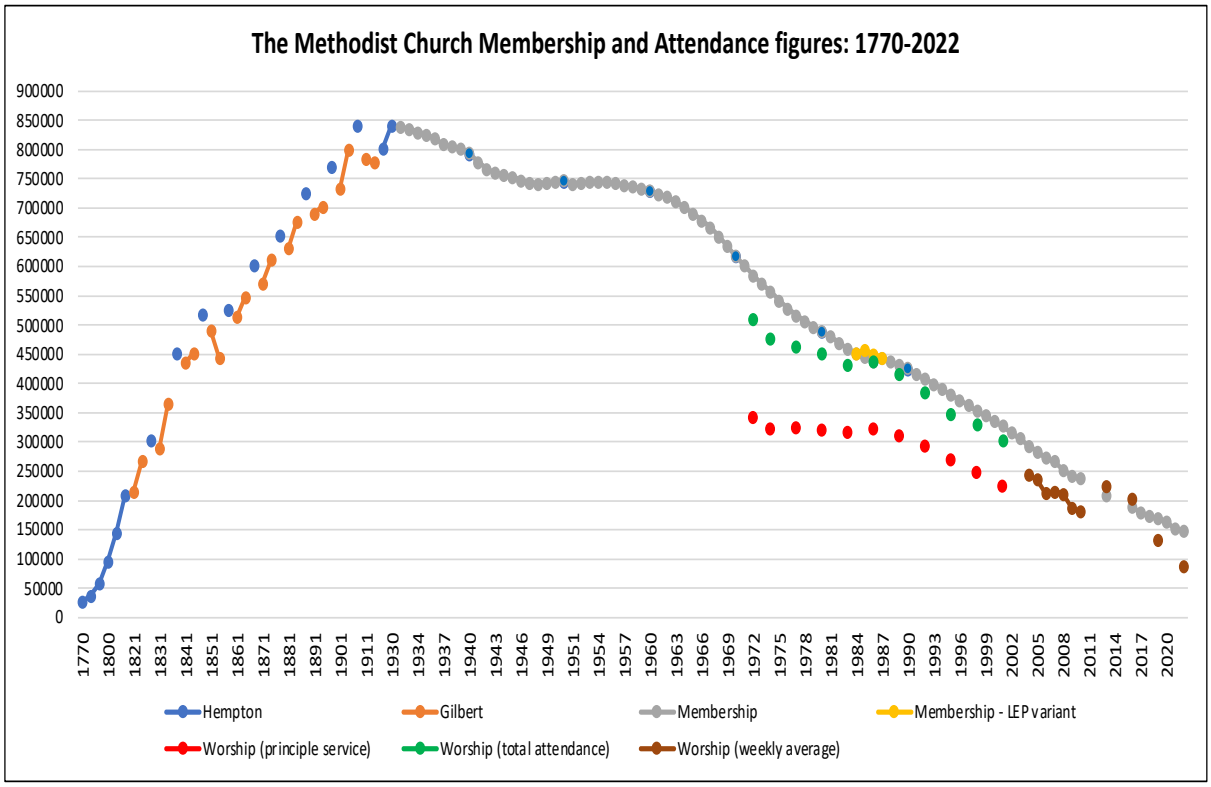
‘Legacy ministries to dying churches give congregations a way to end well’ [https://faithandleadership.com/legacy-ministries-dying-churches-give-congregations-way-end-well?utm_source=albanweekly&utm_medium=content&utm_campaign=faithleadership [accessed 18/09/2017].

‘Major initiatives fact sheet: the Nehemiah project’, the Florida Conference of the United Methodist Church] http://www.flumc.org/nehemiahprojectfactsheet [accessed 18/09/2017]

‘Creating a Hospice Ministry for Churches’, Christianity Today, https://churchleaders.com/outreach-missions/outreach-missions-articles/176393-ed-stetzer-creating-a-hospice-ministry-for-churches.html [accessed 18/09/2-17]

‘Angry response to parish reorganisation gives Commissioners pause’, Church Times https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2022/28-january/news/uk/angry-response-to-parish-reorganisation-gives-commissioners-pause [accessed January 2022]

Appendix 1: The Methodist Church Membership and Attendance Figures 1770-2022



1932-1949: Membership figures reported as of March in the given year.
1949-1973: Membership figures reported as of December in the given year.
(Note: Two figures given for 1949 – for March then for December)

1974 onwards: Membership figures reported as of 1st November in the given year.
(Note: 1974 figures are therefore for eleven months)

1985 & 1986: Change in counting membership of LEPs
(see the higher figure in yellow) – the continuous line is given for direct comparison over the 3 years as if the exceptional increase due to LEPs had not been included.

Sources:

A.D. Gilbert *Religion and Society in Industrial England*, (London: Longman, 1976,) 31.

David Hempton *Methodism – Empire of the Spirit,* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 214.

The Minutes of the Methodist Conference, Methodist Publishing House, 1932-2020.

https://www.methodist.org.uk/for-churches/statistics-for-mission/

43. There is Room: Triennial Membership Returns 2019-2022 The Agenda of the Methodist Conference 2023, https://www.methodist.org.uk/media/29514/conf-23-pc-43-there-is-room-triennial-membership-returns-2019-2022.pdf [accessed 02/07/2023] [Note: these are the membership figures adjusted for missing data.

Appendix 2: Questionnaire Information Sheet and Questionnaire

Questionnaire Information Sheet: Version 1 - November 2018
Project Title: Methodist Churches Closing Well?
Researcher: Rachel Deigh
Contact Details:

Supervisor's name:
Supervisor's contact details:

You are invited to take part in a study that I am conducting as part of my studies for the Doctorate in Theology and Ministry (Dthm) at Durham University. This study has received ethical approval from the Department of Theology and Religion of Durham University. Outside of my studies, I am a Presbyter in the Liverpool Methodist District where I currently serve as the District Mission and Evangelism Facilitator.

Before you decide whether to agree to take part it is important for you to understand the purpose of the research and what is involved as a participant. Please read the following information carefully. Please contact me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

What is the purpose of the study?

- The aim of this research is to study Methodist Churches that have decided to close in order to understand what is happening and why, and to discover what can be learnt from how churches close.
- This study has arisen out of my own personal interest and experience as a Methodist Minister. While I am grateful to the Methodist Church for a connexional Continuing Development in Ministry grant and also to the Liverpool Methodist District for financial support, I have not been asked to undertake this study by the Methodist Church or by any other body. It has been my own decision and choice to undertake this study, and it is on that basis that I am now inviting you to take part in it.
- I hope to complete this study by September 2022 when it will be submitted as an academic thesis to Durham University.

Why have I been invited to take part?
You have been invited to take part because you belong to a church where the Church Council has made the decision that the church is to close, and I am interested in what you think and feel about this decision.

The questionnaire:
Attached to this information sheet is a questionnaire. The purpose of the questionnaire is to get an initial sense of the range of views in the congregation about the decision to close the church. I will be the only person who will read these questionnaires and I simply ask that you answer the questions honestly. Please omit any question you would prefer not to answer. Once my research is completed, they will all be destroyed (this includes any personal data given.)

You can complete this questionnaire anonymously. However, if you would be willing to be interviewed as part of this project, I ask that you complete the slip at the bottom of the questionnaire giving me your name and contact details. This will be removed from your questionnaire so that analysis of the questionnaires can be anonymous. I will then contact you with further information about the interview process and what it may involve. When you have completed the questionnaire, please detach this sheet and keep it for reference, then place the completed questionnaire in the box provided.

I hope you will feel able to complete the attached questionnaire. By completing it you are giving your consent for the information given to be used in this research project.

If you have any questions or require further information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Rachel Deigh

Questionnaire

Please indicate your responses by putting a cross in all the appropriate boxes and answering the relevant questions in the spaces provided: **X**

1. Gender: _____

2. I am aged: ☐ 18-29; ☐ 30-39; ☐ 40-49; ☐ 50-59; ☐ 60-69; ☐ 70-79; ☐ 80+

3. How long have you belonged to this church?

4. How frequently do you usually attend worship here?

☐ weekly; ☐ fortnightly; ☐ monthly; ☐ less frequently.

5. I am: ☐ A church member
☐ A member of the church council
☐ Neither of the above

6. Which statement below best describes your view about the decision to close this church: (please select <u>one</u> option only)

☐ **1.** I think that it is an exciting decision for the church to make.

☐ **2.** I think that it is the right decision and that it should have been made sooner.

☐ **3.** I think that it is the right decision and that now was the right time to make it.

☐ **4.** I think that the decision was inevitable.

☐ **5.** I think that it is the wrong decision but can understand why the decision was made.

☐ **6.** I think that it is the wrong decision and do not understand why it was made.

☐ **7.** I think that this is a disastrous decision for the church to make.

☐ **8.** I don't have an opinion one way or another.

Please say, in one sentence, why you have chosen this statement:

If you are willing to be contacted for an interview, please give your name and contact details. (See the *Information Sheet* for more information). Otherwise please leave this section blank.

Name: _____ **Telephone**

Appendix 3: Questionnaire results

Hope Street:	
Number of responses to each statement:	**Interview statements:**
0	**1.** I think that it is an exciting decision for the church to make.
2	**2.** I think that it is the right decision and that it should have been made sooner.
10	**3.** I think that it is the right decision and that now was the right time to make it.
11	**4.** I think that the decision was inevitable.
2	**5.** I think that it is the wrong decision but can understand why the decision was made.
0	**6.** I think that it is the wrong decision and do not understand why it was made.
3	**7.** I think that this is a disastrous decision for the church to make.
1	**8.** I don't have an opinion one way or another.

Mercy Lane:	
Number of responses to each statement:	Interview statements:
0	**1.** I think that it is an exciting decision for the church to make.
1	**2.** I think that it is the right decision and that it should have been made sooner.
4	**3.** I think that it is the right decision and that now was the right time to make it.
13	**4.** I think that the decision was inevitable.
3	**5.** I think that it is the wrong decision but can understand why the decision was made.
0	**6.** I think that it is the wrong decision and do not understand why it was made.
1	**7.** I think that this is a disastrous decision for the church to make.
0	**8.** I don't have an opinion one way or another.

Appendix 4: Interview Schedules

4.1: Church Interview Schedule for 1st Interviews

Section 1: Involvement at this Church / Your Own Faith

1. How long have you been at this church? How did you come to be here?
   What is your involvement at the church?
   What do you value most about belonging to the church?
2. What do you think the mission of the church is?
   How does the church relate to the community?
3. Where did your journey of faith begin?
4. Have you had a life changing experience of God? Tell me about it.
5. When were you baptised? Tell me about your baptism and its significance.

Section 2: Your Understanding of the Decision to Close

1. Why do you think the church is closing?
   What do you think was the main reason for closing?
2. How do you feel about the fact that the church closing?
3. When did you start talking about closure? What prompted it?
4. Do you think closure have been avoided/how?
5. How do you make sense of what is happening?
6. Is there a bible story/passage of scripture that you think to what is happening?
7. What do you think God is saying through what is happening?

Section 3: The Final Service [for Mercy Lane]

1. How did you find the final service? What particularly spoke to you?
2. How has it helped you to adjust to the closure of the church
3. Where will your membership be transferred to? How do you feel about this?

Section 4: The Future

1. If the church closes "well" what would "well" mean?
2. What do you think will sustain you?
3. Is there anything you fear about the church closing?
4. What do you hope for?
5. Where do you see the church / yourself in 12 months' time?

Is there anything you think it might be helpful for me to know?
Is there anything you wish you'd said or you want to add?

4.2: Church Interview Schedule for 2nd interviews

Section 1: Context

1. How has not being able to go to church for worship during the lockdown been for you? What have you learnt from this? What have you missed most? What has surprised you?
2. [for Hope Street] How do you reflect on not being able to be in the church building for the final service?
3. [for Mercy Lane] how have you found the experience of settling into a different church? What have you gained/lost?

Section 2: the Final Service [for Hope Street]

4. How did you find the final service? What particularly spoke to you?
5. How has it helped you to adjust to the closure of the church
6. Where will your membership be transferred to? How do you feel about this?

Section 3: Decision-making

1. Have your views on the closure of the church changed?
2. [for Hope Street] Has the timescale made a difference? How do you reflect on the change of date at the church council in February?
3. How would you describe the experience of the church closing?
4. Is there a bible story/passage of scripture that you think to what is happening?
5. Is the language of death/dying helpful in talking about the closure of the church? Why/why not?
6. Do you think the church has closed well? Why/why not?

Anything else you want to say about the experience?

4.3: Circuit Ministers' Interview Schedule

Section 1: The Church and the Decision-making Process

1. Tell me about your understanding of why/how the church closed.
2. What is/was the mission of the church? How does/did it relate to the community?
3. How do you reflect on the timescale?
4. Could closure have been avoided?

Section 2: Making Sense of What is Happening

1. How do you understand the closure theologically? Is there a bible passage or an image/metaphor you think that describes what has happened and makes sense of it theologically?
2. What do you think God is saying through what is happening?
3. Is the language of death/dying helpful in talking about the closure of the church? Why/why not? What do you think has died?

Section 3: Looking to the Future

1. Would you say it's closed well or not? What does "well" mean?
2. What do you think would help you and other ministers have conversations about closure?
3. What is the circuit's vision for the future?
4. What changes would you make to the Church's decision-making process?

Anything you want to add?

Anything you think it's important for me to know from your experience?

4.4: District Ministers' Interview Schedule

Section 1: Your Experience

1. What is your experience of closing churches?
2. Are there any you would say closed "well"? What does "well" mean from your perspective?
3. What do you think are the main reasons that prevent churches discussing closure?
4. How proactive has the district been?

Section 2: Making Sense of Churches Closing

1. What have you preached on at closing services?
2. What scripture/theology/metaphors are helpful to talk about closing churches?
3. Is the language of death/dying helpful in talking about the closure of the church? Why/why not?
4. What would your response be to a minister who says "I didn't come into ministry to close churches"?
5. How do we equip ministers to close churches?

Section 3: Looking to the Future

1. What is the district's vision for the future?
2. What are the main challenges for churches/the district over the next 10 years?
3. What changes would you make to the Church's decision-making process?

Anything you want to add?

Anything you think it's important for me to know from your experience?

Appendix 5: Debrief Letter

Debriefing Sheet

Project title: Methodist Churches Closing Well?

Thank you for taking part in this study.

While churches close for all kinds of reasons, very often pragmatic concerns (for example regarding finance, membership, or the building) overshadow theological concerns. My hope in this research is to try to make sense of what is happening theologically when a church closes and to ultimately help enable churches and ministers to have confidence to deal with theological issues as well as pragmatic ones.

The data you have provided is automatically anonymised and cannot be traced back to your identity. Now that this part of the study is completed all personal details will be destroyed.

If you would like further information about the study or would like to know about what my findings are when all the data have been collected and analysed then please contact me on [*email address*]. I cannot however provide you with your individual results.

My thesis is due for submission in September 2022 and any findings will be available sometime after that.

Once again, thank you - I am most grateful for the time you have given to this project.

Rachel Deigh.

Appendix 6: Interview Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet:

Version 1: November 2018

Project Title: Methodist Churches Closing Well?
Researcher: Rachel Deigh
Contact Details:
Supervisor's name:
Supervisor's contact details:

You are invited to take part in a study that I am conducting as part of my studies for the Doctorate in Theology and Ministry (Dthm) at Durham University. This study has received ethical approval from the Department of Theology and Religion of Durham University.

Outside of my studies, I am a Presbyter in the Liverpool Methodist District where I currently serve as the District Mission and Evangelism Facilitator.

Before you decide whether to agree to take part it is important for you to understand the purpose of the research and what is involved as a participant. Please read the following information carefully. Please contact me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

What is the purpose of the study?

- The aim of this research is to study Methodist Churches that have decided to close in order to understand what is happening and why, and to discover what can be learnt from how churches close.
- This study has arisen out of my own personal interest and experience as a Methodist Minister. While I am grateful to the Methodist Church for a connexional Continuing Development in Ministry grant and also to the Liverpool Methodist District for financial support, I have not been asked to undertake this study by the Methodist Church or by any other body. It has been my own decision and choice to undertake this study, and it is on that basis that I am now inviting you to take part in it.
- I hope to complete this study by September 2022 when it will be submitted as an academic thesis to Durham University.

Why have I been invited to take part?
You have been invited to take part because you belong to a church where the Church Council has made the decision that the church is to close, and I am interested in what you think and feel about this decision.

Do I have to take part?
Your participation is voluntary, and you do not have to agree to take part. If you do agree to take part, you can withdraw at any time, without giving a reason. Your rights in relation to withdrawing any data that is identifiable to you are explained in the accompanying Privacy Notice.

What will happen to me if I take part?
This research has a number of components to it. If you agree to take part in the study, these will include:

- **A series of interviews**: these will be undertaken by myself at a time and place that are mutually agreed. It is hoped that I will undertake these interviews at key points in the life of the church: after the decision to close the church has been made; just before and/or after the church has closed; 6-12months after the church has been closed (i.e. no more than 4 interviews.) Each interview will last no longer than one hour
- **Keeping a journal**: you will be asked if you would be willing to keep a simple journal to note your thoughts/feelings during the process of the closing of the church. If willing, you will be provided with a small notebook for this purpose.
- Worshipping with the church from time to time, and attending any church meetings/events, as appropriate, that will help me to get to know the church and journey with the church through the experience of closing

Are there any potential risks involved?
The risks to you in taking part in this research are extremely minimal. All data collected through interviews or the journal will be anonymised and kept confidentially, so no one except myself will know what you have said or what you think – or that you have participated in it unless you choose to make it known.

I would hope to interview people with differing views about the closure of the church and I hope that this study, when completed, may help other churches faced with closure.

Will my data be kept confidential?
All information obtained during the study will be treated confidentially and all data collected will be anonymised – this means that if any data is published it will not be identifiable as yours.

All data (including personal contact details, audio recordings and transcripts of interviews, journals, completed questionnaires) will be kept securely either on a password protected computer or in a locked cupboard. I will be only person with access to this data.

Full details are included in the accompanying Privacy Notice.

What will happen to the results of the project?
Durham University is committed to sharing the results of its world-class research for public benefit. As part of this commitment the University has established an online repository for all

Durham University Higher Degree theses which provides access to the full text of freely available theses. The study in which you are invited to participate will be written up as a thesis. On successful submission of the thesis, it will be deposited both in print and online in the University archives, to facilitate its use in future research. The thesis will be published open access.

The learning from this study may be shared in other forms if appropriate. No personal data will be shared, however anonymised (i.e. not identifiable) data may be used in publications, reports, presentations, web pages and other research outputs. At the end of the project, anonymised data may be archived and shared with others for legitimate research purposes. All research data and records needed to validate the research findings will be stored for 10 years after the submission of the thesis (currently due for submission in September 2022.)

Who do I contact if I have any questions or concerns about this study?
If you have any further questions or concerns about this study, please speak to the researcher or their supervisor. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please submit a complaint via the University's Complaints Process.
[https://www.dur.ac.uk/ges/3rdpartycomplaints/]

Thank you for reading this information and considering taking part in this study.

Rachel Deigh.

Amendment to the information Sheet in light of Covid-19:

The information sheet was re-issued to participants prior to the second interview with the following amendment:

Changes in light of Covid-19:
In the light of Covid-19 and the inability to conduct interviews face-to-face, further interviews will be conducted either through Zoom or a telephone conversation, whichever is most convenient for you.

Your data will be kept confidential in the same way as in face-to-face interviews. Where possible, the interview will be recorded. Recordings will be saved on my recording devise or password protected computer, not in any remote storage such as the Cloud/Dropbox. It will be kept until it has been transcribed and anonymised, then it will be deleted. I will be the only one with access to this data.

Your participation continues to be voluntary, if you no longer wish to participate owing to this change, or for any other reason, you are free to withdraw. If you do agree to take part, you continue to be able to withdraw at any time without giving a reason. Your rights in relation to withdrawing any data that is identifiable to you are explained in the accompanying Privacy Notice.

Appendix 7: Consent form

Consent Form

Project title: Methodist Churches Closing Well?

Researcher(s): Rachel Deigh
Department: Theology and Religion
Contact details:

Supervisor name:
Supervisor contact details

This form is to confirm that you understand the purposes of the project, what is involved and that you are happy to take part. Please initial each box to indicate your agreement:

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated November 2018 and the privacy notice for the above project.	
I have had sufficient time to consider the information and ask any questions I might have, and I am satisfied with the answers I have been given.	
I understand who will have access to personal data provided, how the data will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.	
I consent to being audio recorded and understand how recordings will be used in research outputs.	
I understand that my words may be quoted in publications, reports, and other research outputs and that my real name will not be used.	
I agree to take part in the above project.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.	

Participant's Signature_____ Date_____

(NAME IN BLOCK LETTERS)_____

Researcher's Signature_____ Date_____

(NAME IN BLOCK LETTERS)_____