

Chapter Six:

Conclusion and Suggestions for Immediate Action.

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6.0 A thesis supported by evidence from multiple perspectives

The three arguments of this thesis are that:

- Not all fresh expressions are true fresh expressions, in that they lack ecclesial intent.
- The Methodist construct of membership creates an unequal power balance between fresh expressions and their parent churches, such that the ecclesial formation of the fresh expression is inhibited. Thus, the prospect of achieving a mixed economy, whereby fresh expressions can grow and co-exist alongside inherited churches, is proving difficult within Methodism.
- Rather than gifting fresh expressions with a freedom in which they will flourish, the light touch risks destabilising fresh expressions. Instead, more, rather than less legislation is required to safeguard their development.

6.0.1 Lacking ecclesial intent

This has been a small-scale piece of research. I am not proposing that all of these arguments are valid for every church and circuit, but that further investigation is warranted. One immediate observation is that the Church needs to be careful in its use of language. According to the Statistics Office, only one fresh expression has formed itself as a 'church' in the Methodist-legal sense. Meanwhile, Faith and Order state that, 'A small but significant number of fresh expressions have become a church of the circuit in which they reside.'³⁵³ Herein, either the Statistics Office is wrong, or the word 'church' is being used figuratively. At a deeper level, these findings suggest that Methodist ecclesiology, and in particular its standing orders in relation to ecclesial formation, are inhibiting rather than enabling fresh expressions to become self-governing, and mature further.

³⁵³ Nicola Price-Tebbit, "Report of the Faith and Order Committee"

Previously, the suggestion that not all fresh expressions possessed ecclesial identity or intent was anecdotal. My research has now evidenced this empirically, examined the dynamics that are present, and suggests why this might be the case. The majority of parent churches were saying yes to 'fresh', yes to 'creative', yes to 'cultural sensitivity', yes to 'newcomers', yes to 'new forms of church' (since they could interpret the word 'form' to fit their own context), but 'no' to new churches. Thus, whilst Fresh expressions leaders became uneasy when I talked about the prospect of their project becoming 'church', they responded positively to the idea of forming a new congregation. Fresh expressions projects exist in a symbiotic relationship with their parent church who provide accommodation and funding, and allow their ministers to devote their time work, sometimes at the detriment of other church activities. Meanwhile local churches are able to count fresh expressions as part of their mission. Fresh expressions leaders were wary of disrupting this balance.

6.0.1.1 When is a fresh expression not a fresh expression?

Three presbyters; a Chair of District, a Deputy Chair of District and a superintendent used the terms 'fresh expressions of *worship*' and 'fresh expressions of *mission*.' Whilst these were not independent of the parent church, they had been a significant force in helping them refocus and reenergise. This research suggests that fresh expressions are engaging with people who are on the fringes of the church, and who struggle to connect through traditional worship. Should presbyters be concerned about this? Is my own understanding of fresh expressions too narrow? I believe not. Whilst Fresh expressions admit that:

a phrase like 'fresh expression of church' can be vague and unclear. Sometimes the label is used to cover almost anything - even a new church noticeboard! But the important thing is intention: When a new mission project or group begins, what is the intention?³⁵⁴

³⁵⁴ "What is a Fresh Expression?" Fresh Expressions Website.

They also state:

A fresh expression of church is not:

- an old outreach with a new name ('rebranded' or 'freshened up');
- a bridge project, to which people belong for a while before going to 'proper' church - some people do end up moving into a more traditional church, others see the fresh expression as their church, while others again have a foot in both.

And:

If the intention is to work towards establishing a new community or congregation especially for those who have never been involved in church (un-churched) or once were, but left for whatever reason (de-churched), then it is a fresh expression of church in the making.

If...the intention is to do mission better or more imaginatively in order to attract people to an existing church, it isn't a fresh expression (although doing that is always an excellent idea). The aim of a fresh expression is not to provide a stepping stone into existing church, but to form a new church in its own right.

It would therefore seem that for something to be called a fresh expression, it has to be journeying towards becoming a new church.

6.0.1.2 Ecclesial intent and the limits of Methodist process

In the literature review I evidenced how Fresh Expressions were firm in their presentation of what constitutes 'Church', but weak on encouraging denominational affiliation. There is, within MSM, an expectation that the new forms of ecclesiology that arise from fresh expressions will be embraced by the wider denomination. This is echoed by the independent VentureFX review that recognises how the ecclesiology of VentureFX communities was *still emerging*. I maintain that one reason why there has been such a low uptake of circuit fresh expressions becoming Methodist churches is that there is mismatch of ecclesiology between what is emerging in local projects, and what the Methodist Church demands. Ecclesiology is not simply a matter of church structure, discipline and process. It is

concerned with who holds authority, how power is mediated, and how informal authority is in operation. On the one hand fresh expressions are being encouraged to develop their own rhythms of life, structures and processes, but on the other they are being asked to constrain this within what CPD will permit. The argument that fresh expressions should receive holy communion from those who have a more regular presence, and therefore a deeper pastoral connection, rather than an itinerant presbyter, is a case in point.

Accountability to the parent church undermines their ecclesial development:

Fresh expressions are accountable to the parent church. However, in order to become self-financing, self-replicating, and self-theologising, they need to be self-governing, or be afforded considerable freedom. The advantage of fresh expressions being part of the parent church is that they are able to avoid immediate questions of finance and accommodation, and focus on the task of becoming 'church'. The disadvantage is that they may be viewed as no more than self-interest groups for people who are searching for an alternative style of worship, and find themselves ranked alongside the Women's Fellowship or the Men's Breakfast. This is doubly dangerous not only because it devalues fresh expressions, but *because these activities are intended as a stepping stone to Sunday worship*. Messy churches who meet monthly are faced with an additional challenge, in that unless they make efforts to create a distinctive church community in the interim, they leave a vacuum in which newcomers drift towards the parent church, and the fresh expression does not fulfil its potential. The situation is complicated further by the fact that in order for fresh expressions practitioners to gain credibility and social capital within the parent church, they have to commit to both communities.

The need to review the processes by which the Methodist Church forms new churches:

Despite Fresh Expressions call to plant *new forms* of church, the Methodist Church has made no comment on how this might be legally possible. New churches can be formed only when twelve, locally resident Methodist members unite. This research exposed two difficulties. First, whilst it might be possible to initiate newcomers into faith and discipleship, making church members was an additional and much more challenging step. Progress towards membership was slow (in many cases the question of membership was not even being raised), and *those newcomers who did become members became a member of the parent church*. Second, Methodism's one member, one society rule prevents fresh expressions leaders from being a member of the parent church whilst establishing a new one. Strikingly this question has also surfaced in the *Baptist Times* in an article entitled. 'Church membership: why so rigid?' Here, Michael Shaw, a Baptist minister, asks whether there might be circumstances when Baptists could become members of different churches at the same time. He states:

When we think of membership with regard to churches, we are much more solid in our thinking. We are a member of one church, which we go to on a Sunday. We serve it and it serves us. If we get fed up, feel called somewhere else, move, fall out with the leader, then we leave that church and eventually either join another or transfer our membership. However, it strikes me there is little thought or provision made to the idea that we could be members of different churches for different reasons.

And also:

Why do we see membership as so inflexible? Why can we only be a member of one church at one time? Why can't we become part of different churches at the same time? Because they can serve different purposes. Maybe we could be part of mid-week house group near our work, go to a local small church in the morning to serve and support, and

then to a bigger church in the evening to get some input. Why have we made membership so inflexible, so limited?³⁵⁵

Currently, there is an exception to the one member, one society rule in Methodism, in cases where a member of the Church spends half of the year in one location, the remainder in another, and wishes to belong to both churches. However, this rule cannot be faithfully applied in settings where one *local* leader wishes to take up membership of two *local* churches. At the same time, members of other denominations may take up dual membership with the Methodist Church. Moreover, whilst a member of one church can serve on the church council of another – a move that is used to support declining churches or churches who lack expertise in key areas – they remain members of their sending church. The one-member, one-society rule therefore forces practitioners to choose between whether they should retain their membership of the parent church or relinquish this, so that they can plant a new one. To draw from our contemporary political scene in the United Kingdom, the current legislation forces the equivalent of a Brexit vote. In order to achieve a greater level of self-determination, fresh expressions are forced into a debate about whether they should stay or leave.

The church councils that I observed within this research were not expecting their fresh expressions to strive towards independence. Indeed, such a move was beyond their collective experience. The Statistics Office have stated that the primary means by which local churches are formed is via the amalgamation of declining congregations, or by establishing Local Ecumenical Partnerships.

Historically, the Circuit Meeting has coordinated this work, rather than local churches, who are inexperienced and underprepared for the task of helping fresh expressions to become new churches. It was simply not in the psyche of churches or church councils which featured in this research. Fresh expressions were not held back simply by *what* people thought of them, they were held back by *how* people thought of them.

³⁵⁵ http://www.baptist.org.uk/Articles/421770/Church_membership_why.aspx

6.0.2 Questioning the Methodist membership construct

Whilst within church councils, the power-balance between fresh expressions and their parent churches was weighted strongly towards the latter. Membership is the crux issue. Only members of the church are entitled to vote at General Church Meetings, serve on church councils and take up office. The challenges of making new members within fresh expressions projects, and the fact that their locus for worship and fellowship was one step removed from the local church, made it difficult for the two engage in dialogue.

Membership is also a fundamental concern for the Salvation Army, the United Reformed Church, and the Church of Scotland (three of the other five Fresh Expressions National Church Partners). Membership is not a feature of the Church of England apart from in the sense of communicants being made members of the Parochial Church Council (PCC), the governing body of a parish church. Mission Shaped Ministry's lack of attention to the importance of denominational affiliation is arguably a reflection of Fresh Expression's Anglo-centrism. The language of membership is absent from much of the Anglican literature intended to encourage newcomers. I could find only one Anglican province that responded to a question about taking up membership. It appeared on the Diocese of Toronto's website. The Church states:

A person becomes a member of the Anglican Church of Canada ("an Anglican") by regularly attending a local Anglican church and contributing to its life and work (its "ministry"). It really is as simple as that.³⁵⁶

For the other Free Churches, membership has a greater part in conferring belonging. It is important to differentiate between two distinct, but interlinked concepts. The first is that of membership as it appears in scripture, whereby all believers are part of the Body of Christ, and are *members* of that

³⁵⁶ "Becoming and Anglican," Diocese of Toronto Website, 2016. <http://www.toronto.anglican.ca/about-the-diocese/being-anglican/becoming-an-anglican/>

Body, by virtue of their baptism.³⁵⁷ The second is what, I would term, ‘the Methodist construct of membership’, whereby any believer can affirm their commitment to a local Methodist Church.

The Church’s Faith and Order Committee has scrutinised membership on three occasions. In 1938 after Conference had raised questions about how membership was being practised, they stated:

...the regulations of the conference are not observed, and sometimes not even known. Members are frequently admitted or excluded from membership [by the minister] without any reference to the Leader’s Meeting [which would now be known as the Church Council]. The care of the membership of the Church’ is not even considered.³⁵⁸

Faith and Order stressed that membership was open to ‘all who desire (sic.) to be saved from their sins’, reasserted the legal status and role of the leaders meeting, and insisted that newcomers who request membership be given membership classes. Arguably, the phrase ‘all who desire’; is significant in that it reflects early Methodism’s openness. Meadows contribution is of value here; Methodist societies were inclusive and welcoming to anyone who wished to seek salvation and ‘flee the wrath that is to come.’³⁵⁹ Meanwhile, as their level of commitment deepened, members progressed from classes to bands. Also, membership in early Methodism was uncomplicated by the Anglican rite of confirmation.

Faith and Order returned to membership in 1961 in response to questions about how children were recognised and incorporated into the life of the Church. They considered that Junior Membership, offered to children at the age of twelve, was inadequate; ‘the very people we are preparing are lost

³⁵⁷ I Corinthians 12:12-27.

³⁵⁸ *Statements of the Methodist Church on Faith and Order 1933-1985* (London: Methodist Publishing House, 1984), 68-72. 70.

³⁵⁹ Philip Roger Meadows, "Conference Notes: D.N.A of Methodist Discipleship

to us four years earlier.’³⁶⁰ Conversations with the supernumerary focus group gave rise to a fuller explanation. During this period, Methodist families were being lost to local Anglican Churches who could offer parents better educational prospects for their children. In response, the Methodist Church produced an *Order of Service for Members in Training* to try and retain family commitment to local Methodism.

Faith and Order’s most recent intervention on the subject of membership came through *Called to Love and Praise* (2008). In part, it was published in response to the following 1991 Minute of Conference:

The Medway Towns (4/20) Circuit Meeting (Present 49. Vote 42 for, 1 against, 6 neutral) requests that a review be made of the Church’s policy and Standing Orders concerning membership (Reception into Full Membership), considering: 1. the importance of baptism as being ‘received into the congregation of Christ’s flock’; 2. the contemporary understanding of the term ‘membership’ and the searching questions posed by non-Methodist Christians participating in our acts of worship; 3. the bearing of office and voting rights; 4. the importance of ecumenical co-operation and emphases (e.g. inclusion of members of other Christian denominations without ‘transfer’; 5. the questionable use of membership as a basis for statistics, assessments, finance, etc.; 6. that sharing in the Lord’s Supper (with counts and averages if need be) and/or baptism (with certification) would be more appropriate possible criteria.³⁶¹

Called to Love and Praise rightly recognises that the central issue is how the Church understands membership and its practical consequences.³⁶² Whilst outlining why confirmed members of other denominations should become members, *Called to Love and Praise* states that the word ‘membership’ means, in effect, ‘committed membership.’³⁶³ The report also stresses how

³⁶⁰ *Statements of*, 68-88.

³⁶¹ *Called to Love*, 4. 1.3.3.

³⁶² *Called to Love*, 5. 1.4.5.

³⁶³ *Called to Love*, 23. 4.4.3.

membership and pastoral care are linked intrinsically, since church members are allocated to classes, each class being under the oversight of a class-leader.

This research suggests that membership is a troublesome issue for fresh expressions practitioners. Three key questions are apparent. First, how can the Methodist Church mediate belonging, and is the current system of membership classes, the membership service, and pastoral care, fit for purpose? Second, should the Church separate membership from confirmation, given the stringent declarations of faith that are required? ('Do you turn away from evil and all that denies God?' and 'Do you turn to God, trusting in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, and in the Holy Spirit as Helper and Guide?')³⁶⁴ Was early Methodist membership more seeker-friendly? What is the difference between these faith assertions, and the '*desire* to be saved from one's sins through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ'?³⁶⁵ Could the church mediate belonging more effectively by making membership more inclusive, and mediate belief through confirmation classes? Third, if membership were to be abolished, how would the Methodist Church fulfil its trusteeship obligations under charity law? The link between membership and trusteeship is not explored at any depth within *Called to Love and Praise*. Here the focus is on how the Methodist Conference, which sets out the constitution, practices and disciplines of the Church, has legal authority. In recent years, the church has brought clarity to the difference between membership and trusteeship, stressing that all members of church council are trustees.³⁶⁶ Hypothetically, the system could be changed by giving the circuit greater powers. If, for arguments sake, membership was to be abolished, the Church would have to develop an alternative system of trusteeship. Whilst the Anglican PCC model might be one source of

³⁶⁴ *The Methodist Worship Book*, 99.

³⁶⁵ *Statements of*, 70.

³⁶⁶ See "The Role of a Trustee in the Methodist Church," Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes, 2009. http://www.methodist.org.uk/static/rm/role_of_a_trustee_A5.pdf

inspiration, it is open only to confirmed communicants, and as is the case with Methodist church councils, its members are voted into office by the mainstream.

Horsley asserts that the problem is not so much with membership, but how membership is communicated.³⁶⁷ Methodism may well benefit from a series of resources which demonstrate how an individual can fulfil the obligations of Methodist membership through their commitment to a fresh expression. The deeper question however, is why are people not attracted by the prospect of membership? Is this a question of faith, or is it a resistance towards associating in the way that is offered? How is membership perceived within wider society? It seems odd that whilst beyond the Church people are willing to take up membership in a variety of forms; as members of health or sports clubs, through loyalty cards, or through political affiliation, fresh expressions are struggling to incorporate Methodist Church membership. Since September 2014 (the Day of the Scottish Independence Referendum), the Scottish National Party membership has quadrupled to over 100,000 members.³⁶⁸ Similarly, despite internal divisions within the Labour Party, its membership has grown to 450,000, with 60,000 new people registering to have their say in the future leadership election.³⁶⁹ In these cases, membership is empowerment; an opportunity to align oneself with a vision, and to have a part in delivering it by being entitled to vote. Yet, within fresh expressions, this similar institutional construct is viewed less favourably. Is it that Methodist membership is an assertion of both association and of faith, and that newcomers are struggling with this faith aspect? This research would suggest not; faith was clearly evident in Animate and messy church. Could it be

³⁶⁷ In conversation with the author. 13th July 2016.

³⁶⁸ “Boost for SNP as membership hits 100,000 mark.” The Scotsman, 22nd March, 2015. <http://www.scotsman.com/news/uk/boost-for-snp-as-membership-hits-100-000-mark-1-3725308>

³⁶⁹ “Labour Party gains 60,000 new members in one week following attempted coup against Corbyn,” The Independent, 30th June 2016. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/labour-party-gains-60000-new-members-following-attempted-coup-against-corbyn-a7112336.html>

that Church membership demands a commitment that is not required in other contexts? This is plausible; whilst membership of a political party or a sports club provides opportunity, a deeper level of commitment, such as weekly attendance is not required. Here, membership is association at a distance. Alternatively, does the inherited Methodist Church simply lack credibility? Has Fresh Expressions become a victim of its own negative rhetoric about the church's inability to break free from structures, practices and disciplines that are outmoded? How can newcomers trust a Church whose recent history is of rapid decline in both membership and attendance? Finally, what has been the impact of the Past Cases Review? This uncovered 1,885 past cases, which included sexual, physical, emotional and domestic abuse, as well as neglect. Granted, not all of these occurred within the life of the Church. Shockingly however, in a quarter of these cases the perpetrators or alleged perpetrators were church ministers or lay employees. In sixty-one cases there was contact with the police, and when the review was published, there were six ongoing police investigations.³⁷⁰ Has this have a negative impact on people's view of the Church? Much more research is needed to investigate the factors that might inhibit people from becoming members, but for the moment, this research suggests that people are saying yes to Jesus, but no to the offer of membership, or being only partially open to it, such that conversations to encourage it are hard work.

6.0.3 The Light Touch

The third argument, that presbyters adopt a light-touch to implementing Methodist discipline and practice has also gained further traction, firstly, through the case studies, and secondly through the consultation. The most challenging reflection is derived by logic. If standing orders are fit for purpose why is a 'light touch' required? This research suggests that *for the inherited church*, some standing orders, particularly in relation to ecclesial formation and decline are already unworkable or unhelpful. Why then, should the Church expect them to be workable within fresh expressions?

³⁷⁰ Church issues 'full and unreserved apology', Methodist Church website.

Moreover, whilst a permissive and light-touch approach might seem appealing on first inspection, this research found that it places too much emphasis on the personal view of the presbyter with oversight. Differences in policy become apparent when superintendent and presbyter have different views, or when one presbyter replaces another. Oversight, therefore, becomes less collegial and more parochial, contradicting the principle of it being corporate in the first instance and then delegated to individuals *who are supported by other bodies within the connexion*. The difficulty rests not so much with the suspension of standing orders or the introduction of a novel approach, but with how this is discerned between the parties involved, how local discretion is authorised, and how the rationale for this can be incorporated into wider Church reflection. Innovation requires openness, experimentation, and adaptability. More legislation, rather than less, is required to enable this.

6.0.4 In search of a fair and equitable assessment of Fresh Expressions

This research has uncovered a range of concerns from those who are wary of fresh expressions, much of it written from the standpoint that what the Church offers currently is safe, workable and productive, and what Fresh Expressions offers is new and risky. To its credit, *Fresh Expressions and the Mission of the Church* has rebuffed an array significant reservations. However, at the same time, it calls fresh expressions to conform to the ecclesiology of their respective parent churches, rather than considering properly how fresh expressions challenge it. The ease at which practitioners' concerns are dismissed, and the lack of transparency about what practices and disciplines are proving questionable, is disappointing. The statement that 'there is no need to relax ecclesial discipline'³⁷¹ (in context, the word 'relax' could also be taken to mean change), is unconvincing.

³⁷¹ JAMWPEEC. *Fresh Expressions*, 184.

Lings' argument, that the way in which the two Churches are assessing fresh expressions is prejudicial, in that it rates practices over relationships, is a fair one.

One difficulty for fresh expressions' opponents is that their theological criticisms often point both ways; when the wider Church questions whether fresh expressions are church-shaped-mission, one riposte might be to question whether the church has been too focused on mission and has neglected the call to evangelism as a dimension of it. In fact, the Methodist Conference, through its priorities, has already recognised that some church members lack the capacity to speak of God and share their faith.³⁷² In response to the question a whether Fresh Expressions are a liberal attack on tradition, many a fresh expression practitioner might feel that their freedom was being inhibited by a brand of fundamental Christian conservatism. Whilst questions might be raised about whether fresh expressions enable reconciliation, in the sense of being a force for encouraging diversity and unity, fresh expressions may point to the fact that they are bringing a sense of fellowship and healing to individuals who have felt excluded from their church owing to their having experienced prejudice or discrimination. To those who suggest that fresh expressions are a rejection of the Christian tradition, fresh expressions' practitioners would argue that tradition is never static. In response to the argument that without communion, fresh expressions are not 'proper' church, practitioners might argue that this is (quite literally) in the hands of presbyters who could, if they wished, share communion in much the same way as they would share it by a hospital bedside or at a nursing home. I should add that not everyone who raises a criticism against Fresh Expressions is wholly unsupportive of the movement, but my point still stands.

³⁷² Priorities for the Methodist Church.

6.0.5 Espoused and Operant Theology and Practice

There is, in all of this, a separation between the espoused and operant theologies³⁷³ of the Methodist Conference and local Methodist churches, and between Fresh Expressions and local fresh expressions projects. A more nuanced presentation of this is recognise a contrast between espoused theology and operant *practice*. Here, I take the view that practice is always an embodiment of theology, irrespective of whether it has been properly appraised. It is important to note that not all of these observations are new, and that it would be unfair to suggest that the Methodist Conference is unaware of these issues. The Methodist Conference is in itself a forum for the prophetic voice, which by definition identifies what is wrong in the church, and seeks to put it right. However, the following tensions became sharply evident through this research.

Methodist Conference and local Methodist Churches:

The espoused theology of the Methodist Conference (as the most senior leadership 'group' within the Church) is that it needs to return to its roots as a 'discipleship movement shaped for mission'. The central question is whether the Church can be both an institution and a movement at the same time, balancing the spirit and fluidity of early societal Methodism, with the permanence of today's Methodist Church. A multitude of conference documents on mission and fresh expressions act as a centrifugal witness, encouraging practitioners to develop new work. Meanwhile, this espoused theology has yet to impact the normative theology of the church to the extent that it results in changes to normative practice. This is evident locally where the unchallenged and operant ecclesiology results in a centripetal inertia that inhibits fresh expressions.

³⁷³ See Helen Cameron et al., *Talking about God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology* (London, SCM Press, 2010), 54.

The espoused theology of the Methodist Conference is that Fresh Expressions has enabled the development of new churches, whereas the operant theology was one of developing new forms of worship and new forms of mission.

The espoused theology of Methodist membership is that membership is a means by which people affirm their commitment to Christ, to the Methodist Church nationally, and work out their discipleship through a local church. The operant theology of membership in inherited congregations was one where commitment to the local Church was greater than commitment to the circuit, evidenced by a shift towards congregationalism.

The espoused theology of the Methodist Church is that the circuit is the principle driver for mission, whereas this research suggests that it is the local churches who hold the power, since they provide the finance and the resources (through people and buildings) required, and hold the circuit stewards to account.

The espoused theology of Methodist mission is that leaders and churches should be open to risk. The operant theology was more risk averse. Perhaps one of the most resonant observations within this research was how presbyters were withholding both baptism and communion from fresh expressions (or more precisely insisting that these would be conducted at the principal Sunday Service), because they did not want to devalue the rite or give newcomers a warped understanding of what it was to be 'church'. However, without the opportunity to conduct baptisms for example, fresh expressions would never have the opportunity to take responsibility and reach maturity.

The espoused theology of Methodist practice and discipline is that it should be used permissively. A summary of this might be that the spirit of the law was more important than the letter of the law. The operant theology however was one in which opponents of fresh expressions used CPD as a means of justifying their argument and hindering new work.

Cocklington's contribution in regard to the role of Methodist superintendents is important. The espoused theology of superintendency is that the superintendent relates local churches to the circuit and vice-versa, preach around their circuits rather than simply within their own churches, and care pastorally for their staff. The operant theology is that the link between conference and circuit is often weak, and that owing to pressures in their own churches, superintendents are unable to preach across the circuit, or care for their staff as they would wish. These differences illustrate the difficulty that the Church is experiencing in fulfilling its own oversight obligations within inherited settings. At the same time the Church is demanding fresh expressions to conform to standing orders unquestionably.

The espoused theology of the Methodist Church is that 'there is little evidence to suggest that relaxing ecclesial discipline would in fact facilitate Christian mission'. The operant theology was that change was needed on several fronts. On this point there may be some latitude, since *Fresh Expressions and the Mission of the Church* was received but not adopted by Conference. Even, so this work illustrates that there has been or remains a component of Methodist leadership, involved in reviewing the mission of the Church, that sees no need for change.

Espoused and operant theologies within Fresh Expressions

The espoused theology of Fresh Expressions is one of unity with the Church Catholic, but locally, the operant theology is one where preserving the unity of the Church by emphasising the importance of membership within Free Church contexts, is underplayed. This research exposed how the operant theology was, at times, one of encouraging practitioners to draw inspiration from the discipline and practices from a wide-range of denominations, but to underplay the importance of denominational affiliation. Given the number of Free Churches and parachurch organisations that have affiliated to Fresh Expressions, this is an area requiring urgent review.

The espoused theology of Fresh Expressions is that local projects are not intended as a bridge back to inherited Church. This research exposed examples of operant theology where this was indeed what members of the parent church hoped for, and a lack of assertion to develop a locus of opportunities for fellowship that were networked with the fresh expressions community, rather than the wider church.

The espoused theology of Fresh Expressions is that they should be missional, serving those who are outside the church. This research success that the operant theology was that fresh expressions were serving a mix of both insiders and outsiders, but performing a vital function in providing a focus for developing lay ministry, and retaining engagement with church members and adherents who otherwise would have struggled to find their place in the life of the Methodist Church.

The espoused theology of Fresh Expressions is that they could be contextual, listening to people and entering their context. In contrast, this research found limited evidence of fresh expressions taking place outside of Church buildings; in general, the *modus operandi* remained one of 'you come to us' rather than 'we'll come to you.' The exceptions to this were a successful Breakfast Church (and its associated Tea Church), and a messy church which was piloted (unsuccessfully) in a village hall.

In local fresh expressions contexts, there was very little evidence of an espoused theology in terms of *articulation of beliefs* about the *purpose* of their project. In general, participants referred to their project as a church activity, organised by the parent church, and intended as an alternative to Sunday Worship. Here, the espoused theology matched the operant, but it contrasted sharply with Fresh Expression's normative voice.

6.1 Returning to culture: a deeper analysis

My methodology acknowledged how the Whiteheads' method requires practitioners to explore the impact of experience, tradition, *and culture*. However, it postponed a more academic analysis of what cultural theory might have to offer until the end of the research. Culture as a theme was never disregarded during the research, to scrutinise Church Tradition or Fresh Expressions is to, in effect, identify contrasting cultural perspectives and to become embroiled in its arguments. This research examined how these arguments surfaced in practice. I now turn to Organisational Culture for insights that may explain what is happening at a deeper level.

Martin defines organisational culture as, 'The way we do things around here'.³⁷⁴ I would sharpen this latter definition in relation to the dynamics that were at work between the fresh expressions and their parent churches. The culture of the inherited church was one of, 'The way we do things round here...*properly*'. It was a blend of normative theology, translated into operant theology. Occasionally it was betrayed by the espoused; 'When are we going to see these people some to church?'

Cameron has suggested that Methodist Churches may be understood, to some extent, as voluntary associations.³⁷⁵ This is an important observation and one that I would support. Whilst members of the Church are not bound, as they would be in an organisation, by contract, they are bound to each other through a corporate spiritual commitment. However, as the supernumerary focus group shared, not everyone views this commitment in the same way. In the workplace, employees are obliged to develop operant practices that enable the normative, and if they fail in this, they are dismissed. The Church, however, being comprised in the main of volunteers, cannot operate in this way. Deviation from the normative is difficult to regulate, and the espoused voice can be louder.

³⁷⁴ Bower, *The Will to Manage*.

³⁷⁵ Helen Cameron, *Resourcing Mission : Practical Theology for Changing Churches* (London: SCM Press, 2010), 56.

Martin states that when an idea is presented that does not conform to the underlying assumptions of an organisation, it can be rejected outright without any thought or debate.³⁷⁶ This, he asserts, 'can be accompanied by resistance, fear and sometimes irrational behaviour.' In the churches studied, these underlying assumptions were reflected in operant practices, but did not become espoused until they were challenged by fresh expressions. Martin also relates the likelihood of change occurring to the 'climate' of the organisation - the feelings of those who are present. For the Methodist Church, the climate has been, arguably, poor. The Church is experiencing numerical decline, chapels are closing, and finding volunteers to support the inherited church can be difficult. These tensions have the potential to force an 'either-or' debate rather than a 'both-and' debate in respect of the inherited church, independent fresh expressions and the mixed economy.

Deal and Kennedy's description of Process Culture³⁷⁷, Handy's description of Role Culture³⁷⁸, Cameron & Quinn's description of four cultural hierarchies³⁷⁹, and Schein's three levels of artefacts, espoused values, and underlying assumptions³⁸⁰, all provide useful ways of understanding the relationship and contrasting *modus operandi* between fresh expressions and the wider church/Church. Parent churches frequently exhibited the markers of a process culture that sought comfort and security, and minimised risk. Formally or informally, local churches exhibited hierarchical patterns of leadership, applying the same processes (through CPD) across all churches.

³⁷⁶ M. Jason Martin, "'That's the Way We Do Things around Here': An Overview of Organizational Culture," *Electronic Journal of Academic and Special Librarianship* 7, no. 1 (2006).

³⁷⁷ Terrence E. Deal and Allan A. Kennedy, *The New Corporate Cultures : Revitalizing the Workplace after Downsizing, Mergers, and Reengineering* (Reading, Mass.: Perseus Books, 1999).

³⁷⁸ Charles B. Handy, *Gods of Management: The Changing Work of Organizations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 21.

³⁷⁹ Kim S. Cameron and Robert E. Quinn, *Diagnosing and Changing Organizational Culture : Based on the Competing Values Framework*, Third edition. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011). See also "The Competing Values Framework," *Changing Works*, http://changingminds.org/explanations/culture/competing_values.htm.

³⁸⁰ Edgar H. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 4th ed., (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010).

Schein's treatment would suggest that because fresh expressions are new they carry less tacit assumptions and unspoken rules. They develop rituals that are useful to them, rather than what has been valued by the wider church.³⁸¹ This is a helpful observation. The foremost tensions between fresh expressions and members of the wider church did not concern rites of passage or theology; they centred on unspoken rules about where worship took place, when it happened, who had access to the kitchen, and who should have the ascendancy. The intensity and locality of fresh expressions – something that the Church wants to preserve – became the basis of difference and a quiet unease amongst members of the wider church. Schein also argues that the tacit assumptions of an organisation may surface in such a way that appear to run counter to mission statements and operational creeds. In other words, what is espoused is different from what is operant. Crucially, then, whilst churches might give permission for fresh expressions to develop, once its deeper traditions come under threat, support waivers. Thus, churches say 'yes' to fresh expressions, but, will hope that eventually, newcomers will support the parent church.

Handy's approach has led me to view fresh expressions as a blend of task culture and power culture. In a task culture, the focus on outreach through mission will have greater energy and focus. In power culture, greater autonomy rests with a small group or core leaders who are able to make rapid decisions, and who keep bureaucracy to a minimum. Meanwhile, Cameron and Quinn's work on competing values and hierarchies is evident within fresh expressions as blend of clan culture (where leaders were closely involved in the nurture of newcomers) and adhocracy (where innovation and dynamism are championed). This clashes with a wider church culture that is 'hierarchical' (having a more traditional structure and a chain of command and respects policies, processes and procedures), and a 'market' culture in which participants are ever mindful of 'transaction cost'. In commercial terms, market cultures are outward looking but look to engage with minimal cost and

³⁸¹ Schein uses the term ritual, as does Kirby in his Pitsmoor Cycle.

delay. Whilst some of Handy's competitive and profit focused aspects of market culture were alien to the churches studied, other facets, such as a focus on what the members want (who could be similarly termed stakeholders) and questions of future finance, do reflect themes that are characteristic of market thinking.³⁸² A market culture was also evident in the tendency to look for tried-and-tested short, achievable, and low-cost means of engaging through outreach. Back to Church Sunday (now Invitation Sunday), Alpha and Christian Aid activities were three such examples. Significantly, a brief examination of the parent churches suggested that they were operating in a hierarchy model, whereas the fresh expression mirrored the clan model. Importantly, Cameron and Quinn suggest that organisations are more limited by weaknesses than propelled forward by their strengths.

Whilst these models are helpful in terms of identifying why tensions exist, the fundamental question is one of how cultures can change? Shein states:

The bottom-line for leaders is that if they do not become conscious of the cultures with which they are embedded, those cultures will manage them. Cultural understanding is desirable for all of us but essential to leaders if they are to lead.³⁸³

Shein suggests that for change to happen at a core, cognitive level, leaders need to oversee 'a process of unfreezing' or 'disequilibrium'. First, people need to feel 'serious discomfort' about a state of affairs. Second, they must understand that they could make a difference if they wanted (to the point of generating anxiety or guilt). Finally, they must believe that they can solve the issue without compromising their own identity or integrity. One difficult aspect of this transformation is that of unlearning deeply embedded and constantly reinforced inherited values. Another is the presence of both Survival Anxiety (the conviction that change is bad because it threatens role or

³⁸² "The Competing Values Framework," *Changing Works*, http://changingminds.org/explanations/culture/competing_values.htm.

³⁸³ Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*. 22.

identity), and Learning Anxiety (a feeling of lostness or incompetence as a new approach is embraced). Survival anxiety (which practitioners may experience as 'change resistance') is rooted in fear; about loss of power or position, of being exposed as incompetent, of being punished, of losing one's personal identity or loss of group membership. The implications for presbyters is that however unwelcome the news, they must ensure that leaders, church councils, and congregations, are all exposed to the data of disequilibrium. Local churches must discuss their own state of decline, and their lack of diversity, rather than ignore the reality of their situation. Whilst the need to generate anxiety or guilt seems unpalatable, at the same time presbyters are encouraged to help congregations recognise that their actions can make a difference. Meanwhile, the solution to power struggles rests in reassuring the parent church that their own identity and traditions are not under threat, that in supporting a fresh expression they will gain credibility, and that they will benefit from mutual learning.

6.2 Returning to the Nature of Oversight

Where exactly does the balance lie between empowering and encouraging creativity in the Church, with the need for unity and order? The *Nature of Oversight* makes two significant statements. First, the Church should develop structures that are appropriate to God's mission. Second, the principle of subsidiarity requires a means by which local practitioners' can incorporate their insights into the learning cycle of the wider church.³⁸⁴ Yet, the literature review, the case studies, and the consultation all suggest that some of those who call for change within the Church are often left feeling more like troublesome dissenters who are defying connexional authority, rather than valued contributors. Returning to the statement made within *Fresh Expressions in the Mission of the Church*:

A number of voices, frustrated with what they perceive to be unnecessarily restrictive controls, argue that it is desirable in the case of fresh expressions to relax normal ecclesiastical discipline concerning the conduct of worship, preaching, and the

³⁸⁴ "The Nature of Oversight," 72. Point 1.14.19.

celebration of the sacraments. Appeal is often made to ‘missiological reasons’ though these might not necessarily be stated. There is a regrettable tendency to imagine that ‘the needs of Christian mission’ justify almost any development. However there is little evidence to suggest that relaxing ecclesiological discipline would in fact facilitate Christian mission. On the contrary, there is good reason to support that such a move would impair mission.³⁸⁵

The tone of this statement does not appear to be one of grace and mutuality but superiority.

Moreover, it illustrates what Leach would term a silent, or even silenced voice in the scenario, owing to a lack of transparency and how the statement generalises what has been said (which could be used to add weight to an argument that is based on weak evidence).

It is difficult to see how creativity, innovation, and experimentation can take place within the Methodist Church outside of limited environments such as VFX. Whilst some might argue that presbyters can view CPD as a permission-giving document, it does not permit experimentation through the temporary suspension of its standing orders. Indeed, experimentation is a rare word within Methodism, and to date only has prominence through the work of Bell.³⁸⁶ Rather than developing appropriate safeguards and trialling changes to ecclesiastical discipline and process³⁸⁷, the default position seems to be one where the Church is wary of experimentation and prefers theoretical and abstract reflection. Returning to my earlier reflections on culture, I submit that a power struggle is at work between hierarchical and adhoc practices within Methodism, in which hierarchical survival anxiety resists any form of local experimentation on the fear that this could not be managed or undone, without compromising the wider mission of the Church. Yet it seems incongruous that whilst the wider church is calling for an attitude of *Holiness and Risk*, and for presbyters to exercise a ‘light touch’ with respect to ecclesial discipline, it cannot relax standing

³⁸⁵ JAMWPEEC, *Fresh Expressions*, 184. Paragraph 7.72.

³⁸⁶ As the current coordinator of VFX.

³⁸⁷ Whilst the church does engage in pilot projects, for example in developing new courses, I refer here to trailing changes in standing orders.

orders in such a way that permits experimentation. Whilst the insights generated by VFX will prove significant, its workers are situated in a different context, adopt a different style of leadership, and have greater freedoms than presbyters who serve circuits.

An additional concern – linked to the need for subsidiarity to be balanced by corporate reflection - is the length of time it takes for the Methodist Church to process suggestions for change. For local churches and Districts, the Methodist learning cycle operates on an annual basis, with requests for reflection and changes to discipline surfacing as memorials to Conference. If the Conference deems further exploration necessary, this takes place during the following connexional year, meaning that the minimum time required for a statement or changes to standing orders is some fifteen months.³⁸⁸

This research cites examples of how questions about lay presidency at communion, worship leading and local church pastors required much more immediate responses than the connexion were able to deliver. One important question is who, in the interim, gives permission for innovation to take place?

³⁸⁸ Based on the dates published for submission to the 2015 June-July Methodist Conference, requiring memorials are submitted by the end of March 2015.

6.3 Conclusion: Six suggestions for immediate action

1. Despite the early adoption of Fresh Expressions by presbyters and key leaders in the church, this research suggests that practitioners need to establish and reinforce the vision of Fresh Expressions in local congregations. Whilst few of the projects investigated here demonstrated ecclesial intent, there are, at present no criteria by which circuits and local churches can discern those fresh expressions that have ecclesial intent, and those who do not. In reply to my questions about the numbers of fresh expression that had become church in the legal sense, the Statistics Office stated:

For the 2014 Statistics Round, churches identified 2,705 out of 25,583 reported groups and outreach activities as “Fresh Expressions”. If definite criteria were developed to identify Fresh Expressions, as opposed to this system of self-reporting, we would expect numbers to be much smaller (arguably, many of the groups and outreach activities which churches currently list under “Fresh Expressions” are refreshed expressions of “traditional” church). The other deficiency of the current system is that if a Fresh Expression develops to the point of independence from a parent church, and yet does not elect to constitute itself as an authentic CPD Methodist Church, there is in theory no facility to report it. We have just addressed this issue, so that for the upcoming 2015 statistics round Circuit entities that are not fully constituted Methodist Churches will have the facility to be reported. These will include some larger Methodist Fresh Expressions, of which some will be “non-member” Circuit entities.

Whilst this does not quite address the issue – such ‘churches’ may still be more missional than ecclesial - it will identify fresh expressions that are seeking autonomy. I would suggest that the Church offers material to help churches assess and review their fresh expressions as part of the October count; the process by which the Church gathers data on its membership and attendance. Also, churches should be encouraged to incorporate more fresh expressions leaders on to church councils. All too often, the constituency of church councils and the place occupied by fresh expressions on agendas of meetings, signalled that these projects were subsidiary activities of the wider church rather than serious attempts at evangelism and community building.

2. The Methodist Church might explore whether the concerns raised about the appeal of membership within this research are indeed present elsewhere. To this end, the Methodist Church would benefit from a deeper conversation about the nature and place of membership, examining at depth the difference between the admission criteria for early Methodist societies, and present requirements. The Church may wish to examine other models by which people can affirm their faith and develop a sense of belonging and covenant relationship, within any given fresh expression.

This research suggests that there is a need to separate the legal requirements of membership from the inherited expectations of local churches, and to show how it might be possible for newcomers to fulfil the requirements of membership by attending a fresh expression. If membership remains as the only route by which the wider Methodist Church can mediate belonging and the right to stand for office, a resource intended to inform and support those who are transferring membership from another denomination to the Methodist Church, outlining Methodism's distinctive theology and contrasting practices, would be helpful.

3. Fresh expressions development might be encouraged and safeguarded by conferring a special status on those fresh expressions that are intent on forming a new church; that of being a Fresh Expressions Mission Church (FEMC). FEM Churches would live under the discipline of a Fresh Expressions Mission Order (FEMO).³⁸⁹ They would remain under local church and circuit oversight,

³⁸⁹ Within the Church of England, a Bishop's Mission Order is used 'to promote or further the mission of the Church through fostering or developing a distinctive Christian community.' Examples include establishing a new network congregation for young adults across a town or city, revitalisation of an existing congregation in a socially and economically deprived part of a city which enables structured partnership between two or more parishes and the drawing in of new resources, the ecumenical appointment of a schools worker to three local secondary schools with the intention of creating a Christian community, a congregation which primarily serves the needs of a particular ethnic group that seeks affiliation with the Church of England, collaborative work between three parishes and the Methodist Circuit to engender a missional Christian community in an area of new housing development. See "Working text reproduction of House of Bishops' Code of Practice on Bishops' Mission Orders," The Church of England, <https://www.churchofengland.org/media/1499290/workingtextbmocop.doc>. Point 1.2.12 & 1.2.13.

but would benefit from the support of a District Mission Team. The option for a circuit, rather than a church, to nurture a fresh expression, would remain. Standing Order 051 would be expanded to allow Methodist members to take up dual membership of both an inherited church, and a fresh expression with FEMC status. This would enable fresh expressions to constitute themselves as churches with greater ease, and at an earlier point. The Mission Team would be authorised to suspend standing orders on pastoral or missional grounds. Nevertheless, the broader aims of Methodist oversight would be honoured. This more corporate outworking of the 'light touch' would allow the Methodist Church to explore alternative ways of achieving this. It would also mediate against any unhelpful local personal episcopé and help retain connexional accountability.

4. The Methodist Church might explore further how presbyters view and apply CPD. In terms of the call for leaders to exercise a 'light touch' in the interpretation of Church discipline, the Church needs to guard against a view that CPD offers guidelines or principles rather than formal requirements. This research has identified the need for further work on how presbyters are applying Standing Order 605 in forming new churches, and how this relates to fresh expressions, and Standing Order 607(4), which requires churches who are in a state of sustained decline to become a class of another church. Conversely, in situations of decline, in how many cases are circuits involved in appointing additional representatives to the local church council? What are the pastoral or mission considerations that presbyters or superintendents are making in applying or resisting the standing order? What examples exist of churches who have converted to class and retained or expanded their mission? This suggestion may link coherently with ongoing questions about how the requirement for churches to convert to a class is hampering mission:

Is the number of members too low? Are the periods of time involved too long? What are the implications of increasing the minimum number of members that can trigger such processes (recognising that many parts of the Connexion have very many very small Local Churches)? And because we can all think of very small congregations which are potent witnesses to the gospel, and/or occupying premises that are critically important to a local community; and equally think of quite large churches that appear devoid of fruitfulness over lengthy periods, is a minimum number of members too blunt an instrument? And if it is, what is a sharper instrument, or what a better 'toolbox'? ³⁹⁰

5. The potential for fresh expressions projects to be properly authorised through an approved lay ministry programme is significant. However, the process of connexional consultation that Methodism offers appears slow and out-of-step with the needs of presbyters who, at times need to act rapidly. This is an example of where the Chair of District, in consultation with superintendents, could be given permission to take initiative (or suspend standing orders) on the grounds that delay would undermine the local mission of the church. This would have the effect of decreasing the influence of the superintendent and increasing the influence of the Chair. At present, superintendents are the final authority in circuits. Such a move might strengthen connexionalism at a point where the call for freedom at a local level might weaken it.

6. The quality of preaching surfaced as a particularly deep cause for concern. Fresh expressions may well require considerable skill on the part of the preacher and superintendents may wish to reflect on how they allow fresh expressions to receive ministry from a select group of local preachers, thereby safeguarding quality of teaching and consistency. Whilst this is permissible under CPD, it may well run counter to the culture of preaching in some circuits, where preachers are expected to minister across the whole. Similarly, the new training course for worship leaders and preaching will

³⁹⁰ Martyn Atkins, "Contemporary Methodism," (Methodist Conference, 2011), 8.
<http://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/intra-contemporary-methodism-280611.pdf>.

be undoubtedly be kept under review as it is implemented across the connexion. However, two questions remain. Firstly, further guidance is required on the difference between what it is to preach, and what it is to lead worship; the current definition of preaching as being where someone 'takes a text and expounds it'³⁹¹, has its limitations. To what extent can a worship leader expound based on their own experience of how a text has spoken to them? Second, whilst the new course will encourage more diverse approaches to worship, the Church (which assesses candidates both locally and centrally) might wish to reflect on the extent to which traditional worship is the baseline from which experimentation can take place. If this is the case, how might traditional worship be the spur to further creativity? My personal experience of attending three different Local Preachers Meetings has been that whilst the majority are keen to offer something different, only a minority have direct experience of alternate worship such as café, contemporary or Celtic-reflective. How might the church educate such people – not only those who are in initial training? (At the time of writing, the new course is not fully accessible). Finally, whilst in theory, it might be possible for worship leaders to offer to serve exclusively within a fresh expressions environment, how would this be received locally? This is a fundamental question, as it is with the wider issue of Fresh Expressions. Whilst the conference can prioritise the need for more appropriate and inclusive worship, one difficulty is how this is communicated and enacted in local settings. The ultimate arbiter in many situations is the Local Preachers Meeting. Fundamentally, Methodism is a grass roots movement and the challenge for its leaders is one of catalysing and managing a change of culture.

³⁹¹ Cited by Nicola Price-Tebbit, the convenor of the Faith and Order Committee of the Methodist Church, at the 2015 Methodist Conference.