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RECLAIMING LOST GROUND: THE CASE FOR AND PRACTICE OF REVITALISING DYING CHURCHES¹

Matt Graham

Although church planting is all the rage these days, it is not the only way to pursue gospel growth, particularly in the Church of England with its countless struggling congregations. This article gives an argument for revitalising churches as part of our strategy for gospel growth, and then highlights some theological convictions and good practice from those who are working in these areas.

Introduction

There is renewed debate amongst Anglican evangelicals as to our place in the Church of England today.² One contributing factor is the changing nature of the Church of England as exemplified in the General Synod vote to consecrate women to the Episcopate, and the decision by the House of Bishops to lift the moratorium on clergy in civil partnerships being considered as candidates for the episcopacy. Another factor is that church planting is at the heart of discussion and strategy for minimising a maintenance mode in churches, and maximising a missional mindset, appropriate for, and required by an emerging post-Christendom secular culture.

¹ This article was originally submitted as a post-graduate level research project for Oak Hill College, under the title: 'A comparative study and theological evaluation of evangelical Anglican approaches to church revitalising from non-evangelical to evangelical.' I am grateful to the Production Editor for his help in preparing it for publication in *Churchman*. Since the dissertation was written in Spring 2013, it has also been a huge encouragement to hear of church revitalising receiving greater attention recently among evangelical Anglicans. E.g. The ReNew Commitment, among other key areas, stresses a focus on pioneering healthy local Anglican churches through revitalising as well as planting.

² Two examples of people who have voiced opinions in this long-running discussion are Bishop J.C. Ryle, who wrote about the temptation to secede from the Church of England in 1877, and J.I. Packer who wrote to a young man wavering on his decision about ordination. Cf. J.C. Ryle, *Knots Untied: Being Plain Statements on Disputed Points in Religion* (London: Hunt, 1885), pp. 185–187, as cited in Sandy Grant, 'When to Jump Ship,' *The Briefing* 402 (November–December 2012): p. 9; and J.I. Packer, *A Kind of Noah's Ark? The Anglican Commitment to Comprehensiveness* (Oxford: Latimer House, 1981).

However, the same biblical reasoning which legitimates and even urges evangelicals to remain within the structures of the Church of England also commits evangelicals at least to consider pursuing ministries of church revitalising, reflecting the commitment of the Lord Jesus seen in Revelation, to ‘strengthen what remains and is about to die.’³

The New Testament makes space to record the sometimes dramatic shortcomings of local churches which have strayed dangerously from the apostolic gospel. Rather than simply plant new next door, strategic gospel energy and limited resources are poured into bringing these wayward churches back. Such churches, to use the language of the 39 Articles, are erring, yet if right doctrine can be proclaimed afresh from the pulpit then there is, by God’s grace, the hope of restoration and renewed gospel witness, both to the local church and to the glory to God.

To revitalise is to re-evangelise; it is to remove false gospel witness, and replace it with the truth. Such churches need to have the cross of Christ and the urgency of salvation returned to their core, for the sake of those inside and outside the church. Alongside planting new, the biblical model of apostolic ministry at least includes revitalising dying churches, thus reclaiming lost ground.

Plant New or Revitalise the Old?

The Anglican interest in church planting, like the interest of other denominations, is rooted at least in part in the pragmatic thinking made famous by Dr. C. Peter Wagner,⁴ who wrote in 1990, ‘substantiated by research over the past two or three decades: the single most effective evangelistic methodology under heaven is planting new churches.’⁵

³ Revelation 3:2. The risen Lord Jesus, when he addressed the wayward churches in Revelation, did not write them off as failures. Instead he called them to repent of sin; to remember the gospel, and return to what they had first loved and first done. See Revelation 2:5, 16, 21–22; 3:3. All scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are taken from the *English Standard Version*. Cf. Mike Dodson and Ed Stetzer, *Comeback Churches* (Nashville: B&H, 2007), p. 11.

⁴ Dr Wagner was a prominent writer, along with Robert Schuller who was influential over the Church growth movement of the 1970s and 1980s. The movement has also been influential on church planting practice. Cf. Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centred Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), pp. 14, 16.

⁵ Peter Wagner, *Church Planting for a Greater Harvest* (California: Regal Books, 1990), p. 7. In the Anglican context, Bob Hopkins, as editor for *Planting New Churches* (a compilation of presentations from the fourth national day conference on Church Planting in the Church of England) begins his Foreword saying ‘The fact that many believe church planting to be the most effective form of evangelism

In the context of concerns about the effectiveness of the parish system in an increasingly fragmented network society,⁶ the Church of England has accepted church planting as a strategy for advancing the mission of the church in a changing culture.⁷ The 1994 report *Breaking New Ground* was positive about the inclusion of planting new congregations, ‘even across the boundaries of parishes, deaneries and dioceses,’⁸ as ‘a supplementary strategy that enhances the essential thrust of the parish principle.’⁹

Interest and increased focus on church planting as a strategy decision for effective mission within the Church of England took a major step forward with the publication of the best-selling General Synod report *Mission-shaped Church*.¹⁰ The report states that ‘Church planting and fresh expressions of church offer important ways forward in mission.’¹¹

This church planting trend has also been enthusiastically adopted by many conservatives within the Church of England.¹² The London-based

is cited by more than one of the contributors to this book.’ Bob Hopkins, ed., *Planting New Churches* (Surrey: Eagle, 1991), p. 9.

⁶ Mark Chapman commenting on recent developments in Anglican history notes how the Church of England Report *Mission-shaped Church* ‘questions the relevance of the traditional geographical parochial system in a “post-modern” context.’ Mark Chapman, *Anglicanism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 74. Cf. Rt. Revd Graham Cray, ed., *Mission-Shaped Church* (London: Church House, 2004), p. 35.

⁷ Following concerns about church plants which crossed parish boundaries and proceeded without diocesan consent, the Bishops Standing Committee set up a working party in 1991 which returned its report, Rt. Revd Patrick Harris, ed., *Breaking New Ground: Church Planting in the Church of England* (London: Church House, 1994), p. v. Cf. Cray, *Mission-Shaped Church*, p. 17.

⁸ Harris, *Breaking New Ground*, p. v.

⁹ Harris, *Breaking New Ground*, p. vi.

¹⁰ In two separate publications Paul Bayes, at the time the national mission and evangelism adviser for the Archbishops’ Council, heralded the significance of the report and speaking of its warm welcome in the churches. Cf. P. Bayes, *Mission-shaped Church: Missionary Values, Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of Church* (G.Ev. 67; Cambridge: Grove, 2004), p. 3. Paul Bayes and Tim Sledge, *Mission-shaped Parish: Traditional Church in a Changing Context* (London: Church House, 2006), p. viii.

¹¹ Cray, *Mission-Shaped Church*, p. 34.

¹² Three examples will suffice:

1. The Parish church of Christ Church Fulwood, Sheffield is intentionally seeking opportunities to plant as set out in their Vision 2013. Cf. Fulwood Church, ‘Vision 2013,’ n.p. [cited 13th March 2013]. Online: <http://www.fulwoodchurch.co.uk/who-we-are/vision-2013>.
2. Second, the Anglican Co-Mission Initiative has, as they put it, a ‘rather ambitious “360 Vision”...to plant 360 congregations in London over 25

Co-Mission initiative, for example, highlights this in its strap line ‘A Passion...for Planting’.¹³

The need to reach millions who do not know Jesus in the UK, the need to engage effectively with an array of diverse cultures and the need to establish Christian witnesses in unchurched areas all mean church planting is a vital part of an effective gospel strategy.

However, one possible side effect of church planting is the neglect of dwindling and poorly taught congregations in parish churches up and down the country. Writing about the Bible’s burden for revitalising churches, Bobby Jamieson says of his fellow American pastors, ‘the sad thing is many evangelicals seem content to ignore such churches and simply start new ones.’¹⁴ The Church of England has more than 16,000 buildings in which congregations of various sizes meet week by week. Those congregations represent 1.7 million individuals who attend Anglican services every week.¹⁵

Does the current emphasis on planting amongst evangelicals result in a failure to show compassion and proper care for many who attend parish churches but who may not be believers, or who are languishing in

years.’ Richard Coekin, ‘We rejoice in the emergence of the Anglican Mission in England,’ n.p. [cited 13th March 2013]. Online: http://www.co-mission.org.uk/Groups/175156/Co_Mission/ABOUT_US/A_M_I/A_M_I.aspx.

3. Thirdly, St Helen’s Bishopsgate, also in London, lists under *Vision and Values*, their aim ‘to plant new churches in London and beyond.’ St Helen’s Bishopsgate, ‘Our Aim: Vision and Values,’ n.p. [cited 13th March 2013]. Online: <http://www.st-helens.org.uk/about/our-aim>.

Church planting has similarly become something of a benchmark for gospel-centred ministry amongst non-Anglican conservative evangelicals in the UK with flagship churches and organisations promoting it. A few such examples would be the Acts 29 West Europe planting network, including the Crowded House network of churches based in Sheffield and the Birmingham 2020 coalition of churches and organisations; and the collection of regional Gospel Partnerships including the North East, North West, South East and Yorkshire Gospel Partnerships, all of which have church planting as one of their stated objectives.

¹³ Co-Mission, ‘A Passion...For Planting...For London...For Christ,’ n.p. [cited 13th March 2013]. Online: <http://www.co-mission.org.uk>.

¹⁴ Bobby Jamieson, ‘The Bible’s Burden for Church Revitalization,’ n.p. [cited 22nd February 2013]. Online: <http://www.9marks.org/journal/bible%E2%80%99s-burden-church-revitalization>.

¹⁵ Church of England, ‘Facts and Stats,’ n.p. [cited 5th February 2013]. Online: <http://www.churchofengland.org/about-us/facts-stats.aspx>.

man-centred religion, left spiritually immature and impoverished without faithful word-centred, Jesus-focused pastoral ministry?¹⁶

The Biblical Burden for Revitalising

The aim of this section is to summarise the New Testament material relevant to church revitalisation.

A Matter of People

In 1 Peter 2:9–10, the church is described as chosen, and set-apart, made holy, royal and priestly, in order to belong to God as his possession, and for the purpose of proclaiming him to the watching world. It is easy to forget that the Church at Corinth is also addressed as holy.

Paul writes, ‘To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints.’¹⁷ The picture in the rest of 1 Corinthians is less than perfect, but that matches up to the expectation of the New Testament: until Christ’s return, the bride of Christ will be constantly beset with recurring sin,¹⁸ and riddled with false teachers.¹⁹ In 1 Corinthians 11:19 Paul’s expectation is that the presence of inevitable factions among the congregation show up those who are genuine. By implication then, the ‘church’ in Corinth is mixed; implicit in Paul’s reasoning is the presence of non-genuine people within the church.

Therefore the presence of factions, gross sexual sin and more, does not invalidate the church of God in Corinth. Paul does not write it off and plant a new one. So there is in the New Testament an apostolic concern

¹⁶ Although much attention is being directed to church planting, it would be unfair to suggest that revitalising is not on the evangelical agenda at all. Tim Keller in his influential book *Center Church*, although promoting the planting of new churches, is keen not ‘to demote all the other things we must be doing,’ including what he calls church renewal. Keller, *Center Church*, p. 365. One of the ministers I interviewed pointed me to the 9Marks e-Journal with nine articles under the heading ‘Why we Must Reclaim Dying Churches—and How.’ Jonathan Leeman, ‘Revitalize: Why We Must Reclaim Dying Churches—and How,’ n.p. [cited 21st February 2013]. Online: <http://www.9marks.org/journal/revitalize-why-we-must-reclaim-dying-churches-and-how>. In the UK context, an *Evangelicals Now* article has shared some of these American insights with a British audience. John Benton, ‘Revitalizing a Dying Church,’ n.p. [cited 15th January 2013]. Online: <http://www.e-n.org.uk/p-1447-Revitalizing-a-dying-church.htm>. In the UK and Anglican context a group of clergy met recently under the banner of the Proclamation Trust to share experiences and ideas for this work.

¹⁷ 1 Corinthians 1:2.

¹⁸ See e.g. 1 John 1:10.

¹⁹ See Matthew 10; 1 Timothy 4; 2 Timothy 3 and Titus 1:10.

for church reform and renewal. This concern is not only present in Paul's letters, but evident also in the day-to-day reality of his apostolic work.

The book of Acts is a primary source of biblical evidence for church planting strategy.²⁰ Yet in the book of Acts, and elsewhere, it is evident that despite his desire to reach virgin territory with the gospel,²¹ Paul consistently went out of his way to re-visit churches he had already established. The apostle had a burden to encourage and repair what was struggling and compromised.²² Paul's concern was not just to establish churches, but to build them. His strategy certainly did not stop short of making time to invest in wayward churches like the one in Corinth, to visit them, to write to them, and to some he had never visited,²³ to send key members of his team to them,²⁴ and to pray for them. Whatever his strategy, 'Paul is not a one-stop wonder.'²⁵ Paul the pioneer planter also invested considerable time and energy into reforming and strengthening churches.

A Matter of Witness

Secondly, revitalising captures a biblical burden not only for the people in struggling churches, but also for recipients of its witness.²⁶

Tim Keller argues that increasing the number of Christians in a city is the best achieved by increasing the number of churches. He also addresses the objection about overlooking the revitalising of existing churches, claiming, 'The answer is that planting a lot of new churches is one of the best ways to renew existing churches.'²⁷

²⁰ The Redeemer *Church Planter Manual* goes to Acts 16:9, 12 to answer the question 'Why plant churches?' Keller and Thompson, *Church Planter Manual*, p. 27. *Mission-Shaped Church* also goes to Acts to give 'the story of the young Church' as not just the story of mission but of church reproduction, the planting process. Cray, *Mission-Shaped Church*, pp. 94–5.

²¹ See Romans 15:20.

²² See e.g. 1 Corinthians 16:10–11; 2 Corinthians 12:18; Ephesians 6:21–22; Philippians 2:19–30; Colossians 4:7–9; 1 Thessalonians 3:1–6; Titus 3:12.

²³ See Colossians 2:1.

²⁴ See 1 Corinthians 16:10, 12.

²⁵ In a 'Preaching Matters' video from St Helen's Bishopsgate, William Taylor notes Paul's stress on the strengthening and encouragement of churches, going out of the way on his missionary journeys to do so. William Taylor, 'Church Building in Acts,' n.p. [cited 5th March 2013]. Online: <http://vimeo.com/60706904>.

²⁶ Mark Dever suggests that 'Bad churches are terribly effective anti-missionary forces.' Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2004), p. 13.

²⁷ Keller, *Center Church*, p. 360.

However, in the UK at least, it is not clear if this claim holds.²⁸ Keller's suggestion does not take into account the negative witness of an unhealthy church. Such churches are places without faithful teaching, where proud man-centred religion holds the keys of power, where Jesus' sheep are few in number, malnourished, mistreated and led by wolves. They not only fail to glorify God, but instead act at worst as a negative, anti-witness to Christ and his gospel.

Mark Dever, who has written extensively on the doctrine of the church and on growing healthy churches, sums up the sentiment here when he says, 'The church is the gospel made visible.'²⁹ As a strategy for gospel spread and proclamation, it seems imperative that church revitalising be considered alongside the establishing of new churches.

While some may regard this approach as unstrategic and inefficient, we would do well to consider the assumptions that underlie such an assessment. Lesslie Newbigin observes that the impossible possibility of salvation should guard against the notion which says, 'if we will adopt the proper techniques for evangelism, we can be assured of success.'³⁰ Salvation is possible, of course, but only because Jesus is building his church. Newbigin draws the implication: 'It ought to direct our minds away from our programs to the awesome reality of God whose sovereignty is manifest in what the world calls failure, and whose "folly" is wiser than the wisdom of the world.'³¹

Church revitalisation then would seem to offer a gospel hermeneutic two-for-one deal. The establishing or re-establishing of a gospel witness in a particular community and, the removal of a bad witness.³² Mike McKinley sums it up well; 'When a dying church comes back to life, the

²⁸ It has been very apparent reading American literature on turn-around, come-back or revitalised churches that the starting place is often very different from what we find in the UK. It is a very different thing to reinvigorate a dwindling congregation which lacks clear leadership and vision, but which is essentially committed to the gospel and evangelical by conviction. More often than not, Anglican churches in need of renewal are not evangelical. This is clear in Dodson and Stetzer's book when they limit the criteria of what kind of church they consider for revitalising. Cf. Dodson and Stetzer, *Comeback Churches*, Preface, p. x.

²⁹ Mark Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2012), p. xi.

³⁰ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (London: SPCK, 1989), p. 224.

³¹ Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, p. 224. Cf. 1 Corinthians 1:25.

³² McKinley, *Church Planting is for Wimps*, p. 35.

watching world sees a vibrant and dynamic witness for Christ where formerly there was only an anti-witness.³³

A Matter of Stewardship

Thirdly, revitalising is a matter of good stewardship. In 1 Corinthians 3, Paul highlights the importance of how you build on the foundation of Jesus Christ. Paul can say of the church in Corinth that it is God's temple, and 'If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him.'³⁴ Even where faith is fledgling, or immature, the implication is that it deserves careful nurture. In other words, there is a stewardship issue even when it comes to a sin-dogged messy church like Corinth.

That stewardship principle, primarily concerned for people, has been extended by some to the other resources represented by many of the struggling churches of which we might think.³⁵ McKinley, raising the issue of stewardship as a spur to consider revitalising, suggests the 'treasure trove of resources (land, money equipment) [can] be leveraged for the spread of the gospel.'³⁶ In our Anglican context, the 16,000 church buildings, often in key locations, not to mention the majority of the 1.7 million people, should give us cause to pause. Revitalisation, in our Anglican context, is not just about evangelism, it is a stewardship issue. Revitalising a church reclaims resources which were originally given for the purposes of gospel ministry.³⁷

³³ Mike McKinley, 'The Pros and Cons of Planting and Revitalising,' n.p. [cited 10th March 2013]. Online: <http://www.9marks.org/journal/pros-and-cons-planting-and-revitalizing>.

³⁴ 1 Corinthians 3:16.

³⁵ Mike McKinley captures this concern when he says 'Simply as a matter of good stewardship, evangelical churches interested in planting should consider revitalizing as well.' McKinley, *Church Planting is for Wimps*, p. 36. Cf. McKinley, 'The Pros and Cons of Planting and Revitalising,' n.p.; Matt Schmucker, 'Why Revitalize,' n.p. [cited 10th March 2013]. Online: <http://www.9marks.org/journal/why-revitalize>.; Lyle E. Schaller, *A Mainline Turnaround* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), p. 141. Dodson and Stetzer, *Comeback Churches*, p. 19.

³⁶ McKinley, *Church Planting is for Wimps*, p. 36.

³⁷ Cf. Matt Schmucker, 'Why Revitalize,' n.p..

Theological Convictions for Revitalising

The remainder of this article presents theological and practical lessons from a small selection of practitioners.³⁸ We begin by considering some of the theological convictions which stood out as foundational amongst those interviewed.

The Non-negotiables

The core convictions for revitalising a church proved to align with widely recognised classic evangelical priorities and essentials: the authority of Scripture, the uniqueness of Christ and salvation by grace alone.³⁹ In each case considered, every effort was made not only to teach from the Scriptures, but to explain and show how every change and decision was governed by the authority of God's word. Where the lectionary was used, the sermon was regularly from the gospel passage in order to hold Christ up to people. Decisions about robes, chasubles, manual actions at the Lord's Supper and issues such as the reserved sacrament, were treated according to what extent they were perceived to undermine Christ's completed and sufficient work on the cross. There was eager desire not to allow any elevation of the ministry of the sacrament above the ministry of the word.

³⁸ I am very grateful to the five Anglican ministers who gave up precious time in the midst of busy ministry lives to allow me to quiz them on their experiences of doing evangelical ministry in a non-evangelical context. I am also grateful for their openness and honesty, and was struck by their desire to give God the glory in each situation. Transcripts of the five interviews can be found in the Appendix at the end of the original project. At the request of several of the interviewees I have summarised some of the more sensitive details of the discussion, and in all cases have removed specific references to names and locations. Having been transcribed, the interview recordings have all been deleted. In the remainder of the article, a number of quotes are included from these interviews. For clear and consistent formatting reported speech quotations from the interviews are included in the following way: "The thing that changed was how the Bible was used."

³⁹ Cf. John Stott's description of essential evangelical convictions under a threefold trinitarian rubric: 'the revealing initiative of God the Father, the redeeming work of God the Son, and the transforming work of the Holy Spirit.' John Stott, *Evangelical Truth: A Personal Plea for Unity, Integrity and Faithfulness* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2005), p. 25. Stott intentionally builds on J.I. Packer, *The Evangelical Identity Problem: An Analysis* (Oxford: Latimer House: 1978), pp. 15–23 and David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1930s to the 1980s* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), pp. 2–3.

One comment sums up well the approach in all five cases; “Battle number one: get the Bible in front of them. Battle number two: sort out the doctrine.” With the Bible open each week and in place as authoritative, what happened in the service, what to keep, what to change and what to wear or not, was all decided according to what safeguarded sound doctrine. Interestingly different decisions were made on some, if not all, these issues. To some extent they proved negotiable. However, the uniqueness of Christ, his death, and salvation by grace alone were non-negotiable.

Paul Darlington suggests that justification by faith alone is the ‘constant foundation for assessing what to change and how to change it.’⁴⁰ This allows Darlington to acknowledge that there are no neat, easy answers. There are often times when different people will need treating and speaking to differently. What is held as theologically significant by some, to the point of being a denial of the gospel of grace alone and faith alone in Jesus alone, for many is likely just a received tradition without so much weight and deeply held conviction attached. Darlington again says, ‘given the different attitudes to the same object of practice within the church,’⁴¹ seeking to uphold the doctrine of justification by faith, whilst seeking not to upset others unnecessarily, seems a wise, even the necessary, pastoral approach.

The main theological question which came into sharper focus through the interviews was how theological differences were accounted. What enabled the interviewees to bear with the messiness that going to a non-evangelical church presented? Or, to put it in the negative: is a doctrinally mixed church a compromised church?

The ability to live with theological diversity, or as one person put it, “high tolerance of ambiguity and mess,” is key both to surviving to the end of the first week, and being able to stay long enough for God to work by his word. This issue in particular seemed to get to the heart of things in two key ways. First, it dealt with a more fundamental question of ecclesiology. In what sense could some of these situations be considered church, if the minister was going into a situation where they had little or no fellowship with the congregation?

Second, it played a major role in determining responses to problems, to differences of opinion and theology, and wrong or misplaced confidence in sacramental or other practice and tradition. In short, the ability to

⁴⁰ Paul Darlington, *Evangelical Ministry in a Non-Evangelical Parish* (UK: Church Society, 2009), p. 9.

⁴¹ Darlington, *Evangelical Ministry in a Non-Evangelical Parish*, p. 9.

resolve the issue of theological diversity, was the key to the decision making process involved in turning a church around from non-evangelical to evangelical.

Distinctives of Reformed Evangelical Anglican Ecclesiology

“[I]t is precisely because I am reformed that I can stay.”⁴²

Increasingly it has become apparent that the distinctly reformed nature of Anglican ecclesiology has been key to dealing with the inevitability of diversity and mess in church revitalising.⁴³ Two distinctives in particular are set out here, with a third implication.

Church as Covenant Family

“The church is those who are gathered around the word, but what that group look like, I don’t think is set down in scripture.”

In his book on evangelical Anglican ecclesiology, Tim Bradshaw traces out the covenantal nature of reformed Anglican ecclesiology. The covenant idea, he suggests, ‘serves as the structural key for reformed Anglican ecclesiology.’⁴⁴ Rooting his definition in Article XIX on the Church, he calls it ‘a visible community of faith, guided by the word of the Lord, sealed with the covenant signs.’⁴⁵ Implicit here is the reformation distinction between visible and invisible. That is, the distinction between the church as a visible community on earth, and gathered locally in various places, and the church as invisible or spiritual. Bradshaw says, the

⁴² It will not be commented on here, but a commitment to the revitalising and continual reforming of Anglican churches, indeed even to the ongoing reforming of the denomination itself, surely would be in keeping with the reformation roots of Anglicanism and the notion of ‘*Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*.’ Paul Avis, *The Anglican understanding of the Church: An Introduction* (London: SPCK, 2000), p. 4. Richard Turnbull comments on this same maxim which he suggests should motivate the Anglican evangelical. Richard Turnbull, *Anglican and Evangelical?* (London: Continuum, 2007), p. 113.

⁴³ As Paul Avis sums up in his useful introduction to an Anglican understanding of the church; ‘Anglicanism is a reformed faith.’ Anglican ecclesial identity follows from this. Avis, *The Anglican Understanding of the Church*, pp. 36, 40.

⁴⁴ Tim Bradshaw, *The Olive Branch: An Evangelical Anglican Doctrine of the Church* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1992), p. 141.

⁴⁵ Bradshaw, *The Olive Branch*, p. 131.

church ‘has a spiritual “heart,” her relationship to the invisible Lord.’⁴⁶ The body of Christ, that is all those joined to Christ, are united to him by the Spirit. The body is also catholic, in the sense of being made up of all those whom Christ indwells despite barriers of disagreement, or the divides of age, race, location etc.

This distinction is key since it opens up the possibility for the gathered congregation to be mixed. Elsewhere Bradshaw draws out the implication of his definition; ‘It is a community not an aggregation.’⁴⁷ It is not the sum whole of God’s people, but partial, and imperfect. The body is always visible in the congregation, but the true Spiritual heart, those united to Christ the head of the body, remains only a Spiritual and so invisible reality, this side of Jesus’ return.⁴⁸

For all those interviewed, the reformed framework of visible and invisible worked out in a concern not to seek to judge the hearts of men and women. One person referred to it as “the evangelical disease of not trying to read people’s hearts.”

The invisible, spiritual church is known only to God. Those who declare and practise their faith outwardly are presumed faithful members of the visible faithful community, until they show themselves to be otherwise. This distinguishing feature is referred to by one writer as ‘Charitable presumption’:⁴⁹ the presumption that those who are willing to confess the faith, and declare it publicly in the creeds, confessing their sins and identifying with Christ in his death in the participation in bread and wine, outwardly, are in fact spiritual people, part of the invisible church. Up to as and when they show themselves to be covenant breakers in life or doctrine, this presumption holds, and provides the impetus to call people to a deeper understanding of their faith, and to live out their faith. Hence a real focus on discipleship.

Interestingly, in light of the discussion above, one person pondered whether evangelical Anglicans would be so exclusively keen on church planting if they were as reformed and Anglican as the Articles.⁵⁰ The rest

⁴⁶ Bradshaw, *The Olive Branch*, p. 141.

⁴⁷ Bradshaw, *The Olive Branch*, p. 133.

⁴⁸ Cf. Bradshaw, *The Olive Branch*, p. 141.

⁴⁹ Bradshaw points to a summary of this phrase, capturing the distinguishing feature of historic Anglican reformed ecclesiology in Paul Avis, *The Church in the Theology of the Reformers* (Basingstoke: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1981), ch.5, cited in Bradshaw, *The Olive Branch*, p. 143f.

⁵⁰ John Richardson made an interesting comment on this regarding conservative evangelical Anglicans and church planting. He said, ‘more consciously *conservative* evangelicals are increasingly uncertain of their place in the Church of England.’

of their comment sums up well the point being made here in terms of how a reformed Anglican understanding of what constitutes church allows for the mess that is many parish churches.⁵¹

If a reformed Anglican ecclesiology operates on the basis of charitable presumption, how is compromise to be avoided? What is to prevent the ‘church’ becoming so comprehensive, that anything goes, or as Packer called it, a doctrinal Noah’s ark? Unpacking the advantages of an ecclesiology which begins with the concept of family, Martyn Percy, writing about Richard Hooker, suggests ‘it permits pluralism and particularity.’⁵² Under the two headings below we will see plurality in terms of diversity and flexibility on secondary and cosmetic issues, but particularity on the gospel which guards against compromise.

A Centre-circumference Church

“What we are trying to do is not to draw the lines around the church too tightly, because the barrier to entry is high enough already, in a sense we don’t want to make it higher than we absolutely need to.”

Secondly then, in the context of a mixed congregation according to the visible-invisible distinction, it is key to remember that Anglicanism grounds the unity and catholicity of the visible church in the fundamental doctrines of the faith.⁵³

Bradshaw refers to this as a centre-circumference model.⁵⁴ The covenant community or family pictures above put the stress on *people* in Anglicanism, rather than structures: who is in and who is out of the church. However, it is not a focus on people to the neglect of truth. The comprehensiveness of the Anglican model in terms of a set up that allows

This is at least in part ‘because of their own growing emphasis on church planting.’ John P. Richardson, *A Strategy that Changes the Denomination* (Bishop Stortford: Lulu, Rayleigh, 2011), p. 20.

⁵¹ The following excerpt from the interviews captures this: “The view that we can legitimately have of church is one in which it is God alone who makes a call on people’s hearts, and therefore the space that gives in terms of the visible invisible distinction for there to be a whole range and mixture messiness of people in different places...faithfulness on our part is the proclamation of the scriptures into that setting with that whole mixture of people listening in.” Appendix, *Interview 4*, p. xliii.

⁵² Martyn Percy, *Introducing Richard Hooker and the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1999), p. 45.

⁵³ Packer, *Noah’s Ark*, p. 8.

⁵⁴ Cf. Bradshaw, *The Olive Branch*, pp. 137, 200.

anyone to come in and belong, does not equate to the kind of modern pluralistic comprehensiveness which says it doesn't matter what you believe.⁵⁵ As a church for the nation, as Packer suggests, it is right that the Church of England, 'seeking to embrace as many English Christians as possible while commending mainstream Christianity to all, should be as wide and tolerant in its embraces as the Christian revelation allows.'⁵⁶ With Scripture as their source of sufficient and absolute authority, the doctrine of the Thirty Nine Articles sets out what Packer goes on to call a 'sufficient minimum,' expressing 'doctrinal modesty but not doctrinal indifferentism.'⁵⁷ They exclude those who believe too little, leaving behind the necessary saving work of Christ, as well as excluding those who believe too much and compromise the uniqueness of Christ. The Anglican Church has a centre-circumference. It is to be centre-bound around the core fundamentals of the faith, 'to true faith, supremely in Christ by the Spirit,' as Bradshaw puts it. For exponents of the English reformation like Cranmer himself and Richard Hooker, that meant profession of the historic creeds, especially 'expounded in terms of justification by faith.'⁵⁸

Referring to the 39 Articles, a recent edition of Church Society's *CrossWay* magazine spoke of the reformers 'hand[ing] on to us a pattern of sound teaching and a system of doctrinal alarm bells...designed to ring as loudly as possible when grace is under threat.'⁵⁹ The comment by one person interviewed captures how this approach helped deal with diversity and with decisions about what things had to be changed, and what could wait a while. He spoke of "being very clear about what your core convictions are and then being willing to be very flexible on things which you think aren't core gospel issues."

The prioritising of grace and safeguarding it as core doctrine bears fruit in two ways. It enables an attitude of understanding and generosity, and a willingness to bear with the foibles and sins of others. In turn this attitude encourages a high tolerance of mess and facilitates evangelism. As one person said,

"We all have to have a high tolerance of mess—not just because we're in the Anglican Church, but mainly because we're flawed sinners saved by grace surrounded by flawed sinners saved by grace!...I need to increasingly

⁵⁵ What Packer calls 'vicious doctrinal pluralism.' Packer, *Noah's Ark*, p. 11.

⁵⁶ Packer, *Noah's Ark*, p. 8.

⁵⁷ Packer, *Noah's Ark*, p. 20-21.

⁵⁸ Packer, *Noah's Ark*, p. 8.

⁵⁹ James Crabtree and Lee Gatiss, 'Reformed Anglicanism, the Church of England, our New Director, Church Society and the Future,' *CrossWay* (Autumn 2012): p. 2.

learn to embrace mess—because if I can't, there's no way I can reach out to others who have messy lives which only Jesus can sort out.”

J.I. Packer sums up the principle here suggesting that Anglicanism ‘hold[s] the fundamentals of the faith and at the same time allow[s] for differences of opinion and of interpretation in secondary matters.’⁶⁰ If the covenantal understanding of church produces charitable presumption, then the centre-circumference church will also be a church with a ‘charitable circumference.’⁶¹

A Charitable-circumference Church

“It’s 1 Corinthians 9, not absolutising style, but absolutising gospel content.”

The breadth created by the acceptance of the visible-invisible distinction of a covenantal ecclesiology, opens up gospel opportunities for local parish churches. Bradshaw speaks of the accessibility produced by a ‘warm charitable-circumference.’⁶² A number of the interviewees recognised the evangelistic implications of having an open door to the community, thus making the gospel accessible to many lost people. They are able to come in at different stages, to belong, even if belief and profession of faith only follow some time later.⁶³

Similarly, an Anglican doctrinal commitment ‘to be positive where scripture is positive and reticent where it was not,’⁶⁴ as Packer suggests, allows for the maximum amount of flexibility and variety. One person spoke of this in terms of not absolutising form and style. With the content of the gospel fixed; flexibility in terms of rites, ceremonies, clothing, music, hymn book or service sheet, are much more up for grabs.

⁶⁰ Packer, *Noah’s Ark*, p. 21.

⁶¹ Bradshaw, *The Olive Branch*, p. 199.

⁶² Bradshaw, *The Olive Branch*, p. 199.

⁶³ “You have to take a view of the stance you are going to take to the surrounding community. Is the church going to take a castle inside a moat view of its relationship to the village, and you cross over the moat when you definitely know *Two Ways to Live* or produce a profession of faith which is very clear? Or do you take a much more open stance to the village and say come in and begin to belong and then we will begin to teach what it is to begin to believe and we will come out to where you belong rather than just you coming in, and we will invite you to belong, invite you to a social? And I am very much of the second way of proceeding.”

⁶⁴ Packer, *Noah’s Ark*, p. 21.

This missional flexibility reminiscent of 1 Corinthians 9 captures something of the essence of the reformation in England. The Cranmerian approach was to make haste slowly so as to be sensitive to unbelievers in the church, without abandoning the eventual goal of reform.⁶⁵ Cranmer's logic for discarding some and keeping other ceremonies and practices during the English Reformation is set out in the preface to the Book of Common Prayer. He reflects on the freedom there is under Christ's gospel. The ceremonies Cranmer did keep, he saw as best serving decent order, godly discipline and such things that were useful to stir up the dull mind of man to remember his duty to God and be edified.⁶⁶ Love for the lost, inside the church and outside, must mean that whilst being immovable on the non-negotiable essentials of the gospel, we are flexible and movable on anything else we can be.

Good Practice for Revitalisation

Building on those theological convictions, we now turn to the experience and wisdom of some who are in the midst of evangelical ministry in non-evangelical parishes.

The Priority of Preaching

“I think it was Luther who said ‘I just sat back and watched the word do the work.’ ”⁶⁷

In terms of strategy, each of the men interviewed expressed similar approaches and in each case the priority of preaching rose to the top as utterly essential. Even when very little was different in the look and feel of services, in each case, from day one a major change was made. As one person put it, “The thing that changed was how the Bible was used.”⁶⁷

Consistently, where the Bible had previously been closed, it was opened at every opportunity; in PCC meetings, with Wardens, on Sundays, mid-week, from the pulpit and one-to-one. The conviction that God works when his word is heard is borne out in history: ‘Great revivals

⁶⁵ Darlington, *Evangelical Ministry in a Non-Evangelical Parish*, p. 14.

⁶⁶ The Church of England, *The Book of Common Prayer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. v–vii.

⁶⁷ Ed Stetzer confirms this key point when he observes that in the 300 Comeback churches he researched, it was preaching which ‘undergirded the entire change process.’ Dodson and Stetzer, *Comeback Churches*, p. 94.

in the church have most often been associated with a fresh commitment to the faithful proclamation of the Scriptures.⁶⁸ Mark Dever, writing with a concern for the growth of healthy churches explains why he understands this to be the case; ‘you have in place the single most important aspect of the church’s life, and growing health is virtually assured, because God has decided to act by His Spirit through His Word.’⁶⁹

Establishing the priority of the Word then is the first change, both principally and in practice.⁷⁰ Paul Darlington who has written on evangelical ministry in a non-evangelical parish sets out the logic; ‘It is from this one change that all meaningful change comes.’⁷¹

Not only is God’s word the primary agent of change and renewal, but it sets the agenda for all subsequent change, as Darlington again suggests; ‘Both the changes called for and the grounds for calling them are out in the open from the pulpit.’⁷²

Mike McKinley, who has written on revitalising churches, recognises the wealth of potential ministry tasks which present themselves to the leader. When considering what should take top priority, he suggests having ‘God’s word preached in a clear, systematic, and compelling way.’⁷³

⁶⁸ Nicholas Okoh, Vinay Samuel, and Chris Sugden, eds., *A Faithful Church Today* (London: Latimer Trust, 2011), p. 42.

⁶⁹ Dever expands on this point elsewhere, helpfully linking church growth inextricably with the transformation of individuals: ‘the preaching of the Word must be absolutely central...It shouldn’t surprise you to hear that sound, expository preaching is often the fountain head of growth in a church...Watch hungry people have their lives transformed as the living God speaks to them through the power of His Word.’ Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, pp. 39, 54.

⁷⁰ Edmund Clowney captures this succinctly when he writes, ‘In every task of the church, the ministry of the word of God is central.’ Edmund Clowney, *The Church* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1995), p. 47.

⁷¹ One person interviewed put it as strongly as this, that to begin without the Word of God in place, is to hamstring a ministry. Darlington, *Evangelical Ministry in a Non-Evangelical Parish*, p. 4.

⁷² Darlington, *Evangelical Ministry in a Non-Evangelical Parish*, p. 5.

⁷³ Much more could be said under this heading. One person commented on word ministry saying “‘you can’t see what is happening for a long time. You have to trust that the parable of the sower is true.’” So whilst it often looked as if little was happening, decisions like getting bibles in pews or passages printed in the service sheet, shifting to an expository style of preaching, guarding the pulpit and guaranteeing consistent, consecutive and Christ-centred preaching with clear applications obviously from the text was a crucial starting place and platform for subsequent change. A number of people spoke about leading by preaching and giving reasons from scripture for every change. McKinley, *Church Planting is for Wimps*, p. 47. See e.g. 1 Timothy 4:13; 2 Timothy 4:1–2.

The Prominence of Prayer

“Prayer and dependence on God is probably the most important thing in all of this.”

If opening up God’s word was one of few visible changes early on, prayer was consistently an unseen but crucial factor.⁷⁴

Prioritising prayer recognises that just as biblical leadership is always by means of supernatural power,⁷⁵ so is change.⁷⁶ Consistently these busy pastors with varied responsibilities gave prayer more time in the midst of the pressures of revitalising.⁷⁷

The Patience of the Pastor

“People have seen that I am not just trying to rush things.”

All the people interviewed spoke of how essential having patience is to sustaining a gospel effort contentedly in the midst of the messy, imperfect environment that is church revitalising, bearing with people.⁷⁸ Several of the men interviewed made a point at their interview of saying that initially they would listen, observe, and not make major changes besides cosmetic things, for the first year. The wisdom of this approach seems two-fold. Firstly, it is relationally wise: changes could have been made in that first year, but the cost relationally would be high.⁷⁹ Waiting

⁷⁴ More than one person reflected on the fact that early on there was no one for them to pray with. The role of a faithful, godly and prayerful wife in the background shone through here. The significance of corporate prayer in the longer-term was also acknowledged. The use of a simple monthly prayer diary to get the whole congregation praying was one example of this.

⁷⁵ Hence Stetzer’s plea for leaders to ‘pray and get right with the Lord first.’ Dodson and Stetzer, *Comeback Churches*, pp. 29, 37.

⁷⁶ Ed Stetzer sums this up when he says, ‘It is God that changes churches.’ He also joins the dots between prayer and the change God affects when he says of prayer, ‘comeback leaders, by praying strategically for themselves, their church families and their communities, set the tone so that the churches can experience revitalization.’ Dodson and Stetzer, *Comeback Churches*, pp. 54, 70.

⁷⁷ Cf. Acts 6 and Dodson and Stetzer, *Comeback Churches*, p. 44.

⁷⁸ Cf. John Folmar, ‘What Makes a Church Reform Possible,’ n.p. [cited 13th March 2013]. Online: <http://www.9marks.org/journal/what-makes-church-reform-possible>.

⁷⁹ Eddie Gibbs in *Church Next* quotes Andrew Grove who suggests that ‘People who have no emotional stake in a decision can see what needs to be done sooner.’

and listening builds trust as well as an increased range of options.⁸⁰ What seems painfully slow initially, produces a net gain in the long run.⁸¹

The Prerequisites for Change

“Don’t just dive in and make changes.”

A number of themes emerged regarding change and creating a climate conducive for it. Admitting that no one likes change is a key starting place to managing it well, but desire for change can be encouraged. At least two examples emerged from the interviews. First, by encouraging an outward focus and the expectation that outsiders would be present, one person said

“We live with a level of expectancy that God will bring people. We don’t know where they come from but they just turn up. And if you do that you have got people who are new to the gospel, to the bible, to the church, and that creates a climate in which you need to make other changes to welcome them appropriately.”

At the other end of the spectrum, the reality of needing change and growth in order to survive breeds a vested interest in change.

Taking time over change is key as indicated by the need for patience. Time particularly allows for questions to be asked and answered, for significant people to be spoken to, for initial shock to dampen. Time also

Ian Coffey and Eddie Gibbs, *Church Next: Quantum Changes in Christian Ministry* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press 2000), p. 38.

⁸⁰ This quote highlights this point. “I have been patient and waited, partly God has given me clarity in my own mind as to what to do. People have seen that I am not just trying to rush things and force things through, and the way forward has become clear.” Appendix, *Interview 4*, p. xxxvi.

⁸¹ In his chapter entitled *The Cost of Change*, Henry Falls, writing in *10 Changing Churches*, observed, ‘Things that can be achieved after a lengthy period of time are different from the limited range of choices that seem fitting in the midst of pressure.’ Rowdon, *Ten Changing Churches*, p. 13. Lyle Schaller in *Parish Planning* similarly commends this kind of approach which avoids the temptation to overload the agenda with scores of contentious issues. The patient, long-game perspective, he suggests, is more fruitful: ‘In five years this approach can revitalise the life of a parish.’ Lyle E. Schaller, *Parish Planning: How to Get Things Done in Your Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978), p. 121. As one person put it, “Over a 15 year horizon we got to a very different place to where we began.”

enables momentum to build, as individuals and groups own the idea until it becomes unstoppable.

Finally, careful, biblically grounded, honest and persuasive explanations are also needed as part of casting a vision towards which the change will move them. Ed Stetzer helpfully recognises that ‘[a]nytime we call people to commit to a strategy, we must cast vision. It is essential in revitalization.’⁸²

The Paradoxes of Character

Having considered some aspects of character which would seem to suit an individual to a revitalising ministry, the interviews brought into focus a set of apparently paradoxical traits common in the five men. To a greater and lesser extent in individuals, all the men interviewed combined the following gifts and personalities in tension.

Patient but Purposeful

“Having a 20 year perspective helps me think I can live with this for five years.”

Perhaps the first and most striking paradox was the combination of drive and patience. The need for patience has already been considered, but in each of the interviews, it was clear that patience can in no way be equated with lack of ambition, purpose and vision. If anything, the high level of drive, a desire to see changes wrought, preceded patience, and, with God’s grace, precipitated the patience to bear with mess and frustration in the shorter term.

This dynamic also accounts for the almost contradictory reality of change. In one sense for many of the men external change seemed to be at a snail’s pace. However, at the same time the way was being paved for significant changes by the hard work of sermon preparation and preaching, the work of prayer, the building of relationships, discipleship of wardens and PCC members and the positioning of key people in key roles. Not much of that is very visible, but it takes lots of motivation to stick at.

Radical but Relational

“It is not just about theological purity, it’s about loving people.”

⁸² Dodson and Stetzer, *Comeback Churches*, p. 46.

Secondly, the kinds of radical intention to bring about a change of direction in the life of a church, however gradually, in the secular world might most naturally require the steely, business-like will of someone thick-skinned who can get the job done, and implement a programme of change despite the people impacted by the changes. However that was far from true. Even when appointments were made with the expectation of significant changes, in each case the warmth of character, relationality and love for people shone through despite radical intentions. Congregations were not viewed as part of a problem to be solved, but family members to be loved, won over, pitied in some instances and befriended. The need for radical changes did not come at the expense of bearing with people who had not been exposed to good teaching. In many ways their situation was ‘not entirely their fault.’ Love for people meant trying to understand them and hear where they were coming from, maintaining a level of compassion for the poor way they have been disciplined in the past.⁸³ Having intentions to make big changes did not allow winning the argument to overrule winning a person, even if that took years.⁸⁴ Indeed, the building of trust and credibility is widely recognised as a key factor in effecting change.⁸⁵

The concern to be relational in the way big changes are made means consultation is key. One minister spoke of concentric-circles of consultation. Being relationally strategic means that by getting to know the significant people in a congregation, those sitting on PCC’s or standing committees, and others, as an idea builds momentum, it can be expressed as the shared view of the vicar plus key individuals and groups: the

⁸³ One person backed this up biblically saying, “‘One of the guiding principles for me has been 1 Timothy 5:1, to treat ‘older men as a father, younger men as brothers, older women like mothers and younger women like sisters in all purity.’ That has been my guiding principle, I am going to relate to these people personally and pastorally and therefore theologically.”

⁸⁴ This comment shows that investing in people and planning change are not mutually exclusive. “‘I am unlikely to overturn either a conviction or a practice at the first time I encounter it. I am more likely to think ok where is that coming from? Why do they think that? Who has taught them that? Have they just dipped into that? Have they seen it on the TV? What is the origin of it? What in the situation can I affirm as a way of travelling from where we are to where we need to be?’”

⁸⁵ Earning the trust of people is key to being able to make changes. Lyle Schaller lists a widely trusted leader as his number one strategy for change. Lyle E. Schaller, *Strategies for Change* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), pp. 20, 53. Elsewhere Schaller bemoans the lack of trust amongst Christians and congregational leaders, and highlights it as a top priority for a change of direction congregationally and denominationally. Cf. Lyle Schaller, *Tattered Trust: Is There Hope For your Denomination?* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), pp. 81, 98.

wardens and the PCC. This can win a hearing for suggested changes and garner significant support rather than outright opposition.

Pragmatic but Pastoral

“[I]t would be pastorally disastrous not to tackle that for that particular person.”

When deep theological convictions were not present, a certain amount of pragmatism surrounded decisions about what to change or keep. Compromises had to be made in many areas given that the ministries were not starting from scratch. However, pragmatism in order to get on and do ministry, did not override pastoral concern for individuals or the church. One person said, “If I thought that it was a matter of deep theological conviction for people, I would be much more concerned about it.”

Firm but Flexible

“I think probably I do have high tolerance of ambiguity and mess.”

Many comments like this were made, yet in all the interviews there were firmly held theological convictions.⁸⁶ This would be a typical comment, “I have tried to keep Christ at the centre of my life and my thinking. My tendency would be to look at what is absolutely essential at the core of what we believe.” As discussed above, this theological firmness around a tight core of gospel convictions was complemented by a willingness to be flexible on peripheral and secondary issues. Holding in tension non-negotiable gospel truths without demanding that everyone agrees with you on other matters of indifference is crucial for coping with theological diversity whilst not compromising the gospel message.

Teacher but Teachable

“[W]e often think there is nothing to be learned the other way.”

Another interesting paradox was the willingness of the teacher to listen and learn. This could have come as another aspect under the relational heading, linking with it as an expression of loving people well.

⁸⁶ A number of people also made comments like this, “You need real discernment on what is a gospel issue and what isn’t.”

For one person, this flowed from his reformed ecclesiology, which has been considered above. He said,

“An objective view of the visible church opens that door to be a listener as well as a teacher because it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that they will have something useful to say. That is being teachable as the vicar. If you give the impression that you are un-teachable when you arrive in this kind of context that is not going to go well. You just won’t engage with the questions they ask you and give the impression that you are not interested in the questions they are asking. And that comes back to not being interested in the person and not loving them.”

Another aspect of being teachable and willing to hear what others have to say was visible in a willingness to involve people in decision making. Again this is rooted in an underlying relationality; as one person said, “I think one of the things I have tried to show is that I need the church as much as they need me...it is good when a church realises that their vicar needs them.”

Some Surprising Observations

Many of the points mentioned above were to a large extent expected. The regularity and prominence of their occurrence in the various interviews confirmed their significance. The points below highlight some areas which were not expected but stood out in the interviews.

The Providence of God

“In God’s providence...”

Approaching the interviews, the intention was to delve into the decision making process which lay behind determining which battles to fight, when, and why to fight them. I had assumed that detailed strategic planning would be a key and well-utilised weapon in the church revitaliser’s armoury.

Over the course of the interviews, it became apparent that time after time, it was not the best-made plans of men but the sovereign hand of God which opened up doors of opportunity and led to significant changes being introduced and steps forward taken in the ministry. Realism about the impossibility of “fight[ing] all battles on all fronts all the time,”

was combined with an openness to see the hand of God at work and confidence to act and take opportunities when they came.

The Pain of Change

“It’s not the doctrine, it’s the emotional trauma of change.”

One very helpful insight has been the realisation that commonly expressed aversion to change is not always caused by deeply held theological convictions. I had expected to hear of clashes stemming from entrenched liberal or Anglo-catholic positions. However, for people who have been in church all of their lives, the kinds of changes that biblical ministry demand implicitly suggests they have been wrong,⁸⁷ for up to six or seven decades of church life.⁸⁸ As one person summarised, “Emotionally that’s a big thing and you have to be very sensitive to that.”

It was also striking to hear firsthand of the personal cost, to the vicar, and his family, of this kind of ministry. The lack of fellowship and resulting isolation and loneliness was considerable.

The Prayer Book Anglican

One final example here is the opportunity afforded by what a couple of people spoke of in terms of being able to out ‘Anglicanise’ the congregation. By appealing particularly to the Book of Common Prayer, many doctrinal issues surrounding the sacraments, and robes could be easily resolved. Being able to say that the Prayer Book forbids certain things, actions, clothes, was a very useful way to deflect contentious issues and make changes sooner.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ As have their previous ministers whom they value highly.

⁸⁸ As one person observed, “You can’t expect people to deal with that kind of emotional upheaval overnight.”

⁸⁹ Another opportunity of Anglicanism that can be mentioned here is that of appointment. In a couple of instances, appointment to a post by a Bishop was helpful in that it produced an expectation that change was on the cards. The sense of appointment to a post helped with the difficulty of having very little in common in terms of churchmanship with a congregation.

Conclusion

If the UK is to be reached for Christ, church plants are needed.⁹⁰ However, this article has argued that evangelical Anglicans should passionately adopt the Church of England's current 'mixed economy model' of both planting and revitalising.⁹¹ One interviewee said, "There are many more places where you could never plant a church than there are where you could plant a church." In many parts of the country, the local *parish* church *is* the local church, and a key player in community life. Existing churches up and down the country provide a great opportunity to allow God to work by his word.

If parishes which have been denied faithful gospel preaching had the gospel planted in them by prayerful, patient men, prepared to preach the powerful and transforming word of God, then, by God's grace destructive false witnesses could be transformed into God-glorifying gospel communities which shine forth and show forth the good news of Jesus to those around them.

Local churches are God's evangelism strategy,⁹² whether newly planted or planted hundreds of years ago. To 'preach and pray, love

⁹⁰ There are undoubtedly geographical gaps and cultural gaps which are not well served by the parish system that need to be filled. These gaps are particularly focused in urban centres, which *Breaking New Ground* describes as 'community exist[ing] in networks of relationships and not just in territorial closeness.' Harris (Chairman), *Breaking New Ground*, p. 3. This is similarly a key premise of *Mission-shaped Church*, which promotes its church planting initiative based on fundamental changes to the way that society now structures itself, what the report calls 'network society'. Cray, *Mission-Shaped Church*, p. 4.

⁹¹ This idea stretches back as least as far as *Breaking New Ground*, which speaks of church planting as 'a *supplementary* strategy which enhances the essential thrust of the parish principle.' Harris, *Breaking New Ground*, p. vi, author's italics. It has also been reiterated by Rowan Williams in his first presidential address to the General Synod in 2003 when he said 'In all kinds of places, the parochial system is working remarkably.' Williams was speaking eight months before *Mission-Shaped Church* was published, and makes similar remarks in his foreword there. Dr. Rowan Williams, 'Archbishop's Presidential Address—General Synod, York, July 2003,' n.p. [cited 13th February 2013]. Online: <http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/1826/archbishops-presidential-address-general-synod-york-july-2003>, as cited in Paul Bayes and Tim Sledge, *Mission-shaped Parish: Traditional Church in a Changing Context* (London: Church House, 2006), p. ix. Cf. Cray, *Mission-Shaped Church*, p. vii.

⁹² Cf. Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, p. 15.

and stay’;⁹³ the strategy observed in the interviews,⁹⁴ is surely only what ministers of the apostolic gospel and under-shepherds to the great chief shepherd of the sheep are called to do.⁹⁵

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⁹³ Mark Dever’s comment is cited but not referenced in McKinley, *Church Planting is for Wimps*, p. 106. Although not commented on in the article, the need for longevity was recognised; “Sometimes places like this need long term ministry to establish change.”

⁹⁴ As one minister said, “I said I would teach the bible, say my prayers and try and love people.”

⁹⁵ Cf. John 10:1–21; Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1–5.